



Mid-term evaluation of the project "Integrated management of marine and coastal areas of high value for biodiversity in continental Ecuador"

Executive summary

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"Integrated management of marine
and coastal areas of high value for
biodiversity in continental Ecuador"**

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AOP	Annual operating plan
CI-Ecuador	Conservación Internacional Ecuador
ET	Evaluation team
GEF	Global Environment Facility
HIVOS	Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries
IMC	integrated management of coastal areas
MAE	Ministry of Environment of Ecuador
MCP	Integrated Management of Marine and Coastal Areas of High Value for Biodiversity in Continental Ecuador
MINEPDED	Ministry of Environment, Nature Protection and Sustainable Development
PMA	Protected marine areas
PMC	Project Management Committee
PSC	Project Steering Committee
RMB	Rights-based management plans

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Introduction

1. This document presents the findings and conclusions of the Mid-term Evaluation of the project "Integrated Management of Marine and Coastal Areas of High Value for Biodiversity in Continental Ecuador" (MCP), a joint effort between the Ministry of Environment of Ecuador (MAE), Conservación Internacional Ecuador (CI-Ecuador), Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (HIVOS) and other local agents to strengthen the conservation of coastal areas of high value for biodiversity. It is funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). This Evaluation was performed to report to the donor (GEF), the MAE, FAO and other counterparts on project results and implementation. It also has a learning purpose as it enables an assessment of the progress made towards accomplishing stated project objectives and outcomes up to the date of the evaluation mission.

Main observations

2. The evaluation found that the MCP is of high relevance for the global and national environmental issue and that it is aligned with national as well as local social and environmental priorities. The project has achieved a constructive collaboration with local beneficiaries (communities that depend on marine and coastal resources, and officials from protected areas) and included them in consultation processes for designing the project as well as in the implementation of project activities. However, collaboration with local governments and governmental agencies from sectors other than the environmental sector (fishery, tourism) has scarcely been developed. The project is well aligned with other conservation initiatives in the marine and coastal region: it was built on previous initiatives, achieved reciprocity and avoided the duplication of efforts with similar initiatives in progress.
3. The evaluation team (ET) concluded that the project faces several great challenges in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, and considers its implementation so far "moderately unsatisfactory". The two main factors are:
 - i. The impossibility of achieving outcomes and the lack of adaptive management. Due to a drastic change in the national context related to the drop in the price of oil (before beginning the project) which led to the government reducing its budget and the MAE's decision not to create new protected areas and not to accept new areas in the "Socio Bosque" programme of financial incentives for conservation. These two decisions removed the institutional basis underlying the environmental objective ("...by means of the establishment of conservation areas, strengthening of mangrove concessions...") of one of the four project outcomes (four new coastal and marine areas are managed in an integrated and efficient manner) and of one output for another outcome (financial mechanism for mangroves). Although the project knew about this situation from the outset, it was only two years later that it began to develop alternative actions to the outputs and outcomes that could not be achieved. In addition, the ET considers this strategy partially inappropriate.

- ii. Tense inter-institutional relationship. As a result of a lack of experience, from all the organisations involved, with the management model and the institutional arrangement applied in the MCP, certain administrative challenges arose from the outset, which have not been handled efficiently. This has meant that during the whole project, the inter-institutional relationship has not been very constructive, inhibiting efficient operation and fluid communication. This situation directly affected decision-making in the project, efficiency in the implementation of the actions and the generation of outputs. After two years of implementation and having observed substantial under-execution, the MAE, as president of the Project Steering Committee, requested changes in the project management model. In response to this request more human resources have been assigned to the Project Technical Team and an additional role has been entrusted to FAO in relation to the management of funds. These changes improved the efficiency and effectiveness of the MCP but did not help to strengthen the inter-institutional environment.
4. Without an alternative strategy given the impossibility of creating new protected areas and the inclusion of the integrated management of coastal areas (IMC) approach in coastal management by local governments, the MCP is not heading in the right direction to fully achieve its environmental objective (the development of an integrated management approach for the use and conservation of coastal and marine areas of high value for biodiversity). However, due to the development of fishery management plans and productive development projects, the MCP is heading in the right direction to achieve its development objective (improving the livelihoods of people who depend on marine and coastal resources).
5. The MCP has made little progress towards outcome 1.1 (four new marine and coastal areas are managed in an integrated and efficient manner) because the strategy that began as an alternative to the impossibility to create new protected areas in the national system consists in emerging actions that in some aspects help the conservation of turtle nesting beaches. These do not contribute to an IMC approach in new conservation areas. In addition, actions to support the technical and organisational capacities of the communities, fishery resources management plans and the development of productive projects have contributed considerably towards outcome 1.2 (conservation of biodiversity integrated into the management of at least 96 000 ha of mangroves under concession to community groups). The ET believes that the alternative strategy to the financial mechanism in mangroves (productive projects) is appropriate and has potential.
6. The project generated the baselines with substantial delay and it is preparing fishery rights-based management plans (RBM). These outputs contribute to achieving outcome 2.1 (sustainable fishery management, RBM implemented in PMA) but have still not made progress with the effective implementation and monitoring of management plans. The project's contribution to outcome 3.1 (regulatory frameworks for mangrove concessions, for fisheries in protected marine areas and for managing municipal coastal areas) is uncertain. Although the MCP is making progress in terms of incorporating mangrove conservation measures and fishery management in protected marine areas (PMA) in regulatory processes at national level, there has been little progress at inter-institutional and local level due to the lack of collaboration with local governments and other governmental sectors with direct competences.

7. The project is managed with low efficiency. The lack of appropriate response to changes in the situation and challenges in administrative processes as well as inter-institutional collaboration have meant that many outputs are generated with substantial delay. This caused a constant under-execution of the budget (50 percent to 65 percent of the annual operating plan [AOP]). In the case of this project, the handling of the management model, so through an operational partner, contributed to lower effectiveness in terms of implementation. Another factor that affects the efficiency and effectiveness of the project is its design, which poses challenges as regards feasibility, logic, outputs, outcomes, and budget. Although the project was implemented in a normal period for these types of GEF projects (two years), the period between its approval and its beginning was very long (20 months).
8. Although the project does not examine the topic of gender equality, young people and other vulnerable groups in its design and conceptualisation, it has effectively included different aspects of gender equality, young people and other vulnerable groups in its activities. In addition, it is achieving equal participation by applying strategies geared towards increasing the participation and leadership of women, young people and seniors. However, the little progress made towards the outcomes means it is not possible to assess whether they have been effective. No negative effects on women were observed.
9. The project's design has an appropriate strategy for monitoring and supervision, the same that was detailed after starting the project. However, its application has been deficient: there has been no responsible party, it has not been used for adaptive efficient management, and it has led to differentiated progress reports and poor risk management. Despite a lack of inclusion of gender equality strategies or indicators, in practice, the project internalised social equality in terms of gender, ethnicity and age. In the first two years, the project did not apply an effective communication strategy and, generally, it is not well known. It does not have an accessible knowledge management system.
10. The sustainability of the project outcomes is moderately unlikely because many outputs (management plans, municipal orders, productive projects) will only be generated just before the project finishes, which means technical accompaniment will not be possible during their implementation and monitoring. Although the appropriation of the project by local beneficiaries and by the MAE is good, these have little operating and financial capacity to make the outcomes sustainable in the future. In addition, appropriation is lacking on the part of local governments and other sectors. Financial sustainability is a challenge, as the public budget geared towards environmental matters is decreasing and all institutions (public and private) that are partners of the project continue to depend on external funds. Fortunately, it has been confirmed several initiatives are contributing with new funds.

Recommendations

11. On the basis of the evaluation's findings and conclusions, the ET prepared a series of recommendations to improve the possibility to achieve outcomes and make progress towards objectives, achieve the sustainability of outputs and outcomes of the MCP, and strengthen the inter-institutional relationship.

Recommendation 1. To adapt the project to changes in the national context and correct some shortcomings in its design, the MCP must consider the changes to the project logical framework this evaluation proposes (Appendix 4), as soon as possible. To this end, **FAO** must seek prior

approval from GEF, the **PMC** must agree to the proposal, the **PSC** must give its approval and **FAO** must announce the decision in the next PIR.

Suggestions:

- i. Meanwhile, the **PMC** must adapt the 2019 AOP to the changes in the logical framework. With the implementation of the AOP, the PTT must focus solely on the prioritised areas and implement the activities strictly related to the outputs that are crucial to achieving the outcomes.
- ii. To ensure alignment with the environmental objective and the additionality of the project, the **PMC** must immediately select the prioritised areas for the creation of conservation areas, outside of current protected areas, based on scientific (abundance and distribution of species and ecosystems, analysis of hazards) and practical (feasibility with respect to achieving the outcomes) criteria.
- iii. To assess and visualise the achievements relating to equality and inclusion, the PTT must consider including indicators that make it possible to measure gender equality or the empowerment of women and/or vulnerable groups.

Recommendation 2: In order to rely on realistic time to generate outputs, **FAO** could consider extending the project by 10 months. Before this possible extension request, efficiency and the inter-institutional relationship should be improved (see relevant recommendations) and the **PMC** must produce an AOP for the entire remaining period. The AOP must be realistic, feasible and present clear commitments. In requesting the extension, it must be considered that the proportion of expenses for human resources cannot be increased at the expense of activities in the field. It must also be ensured that the extension does not involve undue additional costs for any of the partners.

Recommendation 3: To strengthen the possibility of local adoption of plans to manage conservation areas, create and implement IMC systems and increase the effectiveness and control of fishery management plans, the **PTT** needs to establish multidisciplinary processes that enable an ongoing and constructive relationship with the DAGs and institutions from other relevant sectors (fishery, tourism). This must be started immediately with the inception of the new authorities and in collaboration with other organisations and initiatives present in the areas of work.

12. To achieve the sustainability of outputs and outcomes of the MCP, the ET prepared the following recommendations:

Recommendation 4: The project must focus on fulfilling actions and generating outputs as well as on the sustainability of outputs and outcomes. This is why, once the MTE report has been approved; the **PTT** must develop a sustainability strategy for the project outcomes within 30 days. This strategy must identify the likely state of progress of the outputs and outcomes at the end of the implementation of the project. Based on this and on a detailed assessment of the sustainability risks and opportunities, the PTT must define a strategy with actions, managers, partners and budget, for each output and outcome. The implementation of this strategy must be monitored as part of the system for monitoring & evaluation of the the project execution, with a view to mainstreaming adaptive management (continuous adjustments based on new progress, new understandings or changes in situation).

Recommendation 5: Half a year before closing the project, the **PTT** must complement the sustainability strategy with an exit plan identifying responsible person, budget and date for each of the necessary actions. Once the exit strategy has been agreed upon, the **PMC** must ensure specific agreements for the implementation of each of the sustainability actions included in the strategy, based on feasible and measurable commitments. The **PSC** must review and, where applicable, approve the sustainability strategy.

Recommendation 6: From now on, the **MAE** and **CI** must, in the new initiatives under their control (PMA Network project, CFI and GCF mangroves), identify the opportunities to give continuity to key activities and to contribute to the sustainability of the MCP outcomes as well as ensure their alignment in the respective AOP in order to implement such possibilities. In addition, they should reach out to the initiatives of other institutions with similar activities (GIZ, Heifer), as well as academic and research institutions to strengthen the inter-institutional links and seek greater alignment for the sustainability of outcomes.

13. To increase efficiency and the inter-institutional relationship, the ET prepared the following recommendations:

Recommendation 7: The partner organisations of the project (**FAO, MAE, CI and HIVOS**) must create a positive and constructive relationship among them.

Suggestions:

- i. It is proposed that the **MAE** call and chair a special meeting of the PMC, with all of the relevant technical and administrative personnel as observers, to identify all queries, possible inconsistencies and other challenges relating to the operation and administration of the project, in order to clarify and agree on the route to take for the rest of the project. Once all of the queries and lack of clarity have been resolved, the PMC must agree on a series of actions that can improve operational and administrative efficiency.
- ii. Taking into consideration the context in which the project is implemented at field level, the actions to improve administration can be guided by the principle of "applying the greatest efficiency and flexibility possible within the fiduciary rules" instead of "applying the fiduciary rules as carefully as possible".

Recommendation 8: To achieve greater effectiveness in decision-making, the periodic meetings of the project's governing committees (Project Steering Committee [**PSC**] and Project Management Committee [**PMC**]) must solely consist of official delegates and only invite other people as guests and observers when it is relevant. Members of the PSC do not participate in the PMC and vice versa. The **PSC** meetings must focus on their fundamental tasks and avoid discussions and decision-making on the completion of activities, and delegate said discussions and decisions to the PMC. If the unresolved questions and other open questions in the PSC or PMC meetings involve the delay or postponement of activities, these must be monitored immediately (via virtual meetings or voting by email) so as not to have to wait until the next meeting.

14. Other recommendations:

Recommendation 9: To improve the information for the public in the project implementation sites and in the country in general, with the support and involvement of the **MAE** and the other MCP partners, the **PTT** must immediately increase its efforts to distribute communication material. This distribution of information should not be limited to the official channels and instead make the most of the distribution channels available in the four organisations. To this end, active collaboration is required between the partners' communication teams.

Recommendation 10: To ensure the access of the beneficiaries, interested parties and the public in general, to the information and outputs generated by the project, the **PTT** must establish a system for handling knowledge, located on a website so that it is accessible to everyone. This system must be accompanied by a manual for its handling, monitoring and sustainability.

Recommendation 11: Taking into account that the IRS has not made progress with the VAT reimbursement to CI and HIVOS, creating accounting challenges, before the next financial reporting period, **FAO** must make a decision about VAT accounting. The recommendation is to assess the eligibility of expenses for VAT payment and to create a clause for the use of the funds in the event there is a reimbursement in the final year of the project.

Summary of the general classifications of this evaluation

GEF criteria/subcriteria	Rating ¹
Overall rating of the project	MU
A. Relevance	
1. Strategic relevance	S
B. Effectiveness	
2. Evaluation of the project outcomes	MU
2.1 Component 1 - Outcome 1.1	MU
2.2 Component 1 - Outcome 1.2	MS
2.3 Component 2	MS
2.4 Component 3	MU
C. Efficiency	
3. Efficiency	U
D. Factors affecting the achievement of outcomes	
4. Project design	MU
5. Quality of the implementation of the project (supervision of the project: FAO, PSC, PTF, etc.)	MS
6. Quality of implementation (implementation agencies, project management and delivery arrangements)	MU
7. Co-financing	MS
8. Scheme and effectiveness of the system of collaboration between project partners	U
9. Inclusion of key agents	MS
10. Communication and management of knowledge	MU
11. General quality of the M&E	MS
E. Cross-cutting topics	
12. Gender equality	S
F. Sustainability of the project outcomes	
13. General likelihood of risks to sustainability	MU

¹ The criteria (with the exception of sustainability) were rated on a scale of six classifications (Highly Satisfactory [HS], Satisfactory [S], Moderately Satisfactory [MS], Moderately Unsatisfactory [MU], Unsatisfactory [U], Highly Unsatisfactory [HU]). The sustainability criterion was rated on a scale of four classifications (likely, moderately likely, moderately unlikely, unlikely).

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