

## **Executive Summary**

**IKI Mid-Term Evaluation of the project  
Living Lakes Biodiversity and Climate Project  
Project number: 22\_IV\_109\_Global\_A\_Living Lakes**

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## Executive Summary

### Project background

The **Living Lakes Biodiversity and Climate Project (LLBCP)** (22\_IV\_109\_Global\_A\_Living Lakes) promotes nature-based, integrated approaches to wetland conservation and climate resilience in Africa, Latin America and Asia. It combines restoration and biodiversity protection with the promotion of sustainable livelihoods and engages three core stakeholder groups to make beneficiaries become more resilient to climate change. The target groups included in the analysis are the Implementing Partners (IPs) as beneficiaries of knowledge and capacity-building activities; lake managers, including young lake managers and political partners. The affected populations are the communities and final beneficiaries (individual fishers, farmers, small business including women).

The project's Theory of Change (ToC) follows a holistic approach that operates across multiple spatial and thematic levels. It links local action – through community-based capacity building and practical implementation of Frontrunner Initiatives (FI) – with national and global engagement, including the improvement of policy frameworks and international knowledge exchange.

The ultimate outcome the LLBCP aims to achieve is: “Successful practices and strategies for sustainable wetland management are implemented, documented and mainstreamed by local communities and organisations in ten project countries and beyond.”

The LLBCP is coordinated by the Global Nature Fund (GNF, Germany) and implemented in cooperation with the two Consortium Partners (CPs), Lake Constance Foundation (LCF, Germany) and Fundación Global Nature (FGN, Spain) as well as 11 IPs in ten countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America. The official implementation began on 15 August 2022 and will run for five years.

### Evaluation background

**Background:** FAKT Consult was commissioned by Zukunft – Umwelt – Gesellschaft gGmbH (ZUG) to carry out the mid-term evaluation (MTE) of the project, which was carried out between January and September 2025.

**Purpose:** The main purpose of the MTE is to promote learning, enhance accountability and improve decision-making among stakeholders. Its results allow adjustments to be made while there is still time to improve performance. For implementing organisations, MTEs offer a chance to reflect on project strategies and outputs, while for commissioning ministries and ZUG, they assess whether the project is on track. The latter use the results for knowledge management, program development and political oversight.

**Design:** The evaluation criteria are based on the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criteria (Relevance, Planning, Steering and Coherence, Effectiveness and Transformative Change and Sustainability). In addition, the evaluation considers the criteria of Social & Environmental Safeguards as well as IKI standard indicators and two learning questions (“Does the project foster gender equality in wetland management activities?” and “Does the project foster youth involvement in wetland management activities?”).

The MTE covers the entire LLBCP. To enhance evaluability and ensure a focused analysis, however, ZUG, GNF and the responsible German Ministry agreed in advance that this MTE would concentrate on activities in Cambodia, the Philippines and Rwanda, as well as on the project's cross-cutting (global) components.

The evaluation follows a theory-based, mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative elements. With the available resources, elements of a contribution analysis were considered

the most appropriate way to ensure credible and robust results, centring on the project's ToC as the analytical backbone. Elements of grounded theory were also applied to inductively identify recurring patterns and insights across stakeholder perspectives. Data collection methods included document analysis, online surveys among project teams of all IPs and different groups of beneficiaries, as well as workshops, interviews and focus group discussions, either virtual or on-site during the field visits (Cambodia, the Philippines, Rwanda) and with a broad range of different stakeholders on all levels. This data was complemented by non-participatory observation during field visits.

## **Evaluation results**

**Relevance:** The LLBCP demonstrates high relevance in addressing both global environmental challenges and the specific needs of its partner countries and communities. It is well aligned with key policy frameworks, including Germany's environmental strategy, the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, and relevant national development and environmental strategies across the ten partner countries. Strong cooperation with authorities at local and national levels has been a critical success factor, with case studies from Cambodia, Rwanda and the Philippines illustrating effective collaboration and political engagement. In some countries there might be structural gaps in the stakeholder maps relating to the private sector and scientific institutions.

The project addresses the core issue of accelerating wetland degradation, though full-scale impact at the international level remains a challenge. Nonetheless, LLBCP makes meaningful contributions at local and national levels, where environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and socio-economic vulnerability intersect. A key strength lies in linking conservation goals with sustainable livelihood development, such as promoting ecotourism, climate-resilient agriculture and capacity building for local actors.

Direct and indirect target groups – including, lake managers, local communities and IPs – benefit from tailored capacity development, knowledge sharing and an inclusive project design. The project is responsive to local needs, with evidence of successful community engagement and conflict resolution. Furthermore, LLBCP supports youth engagement and professional development through the Living Lakes Academy (LLA) and other training formats.

At the global level, the project aligns with major frameworks, including the Paris Agreement, the Ramsar Convention and the CBD. While LLBCP contributes to several SDGs, the breadth of its SDG alignment may be overextended in some country contexts.

**Planning, steering & coherence:** The planning, steering and coherence of the LLBCP were overall positively evaluated: the project shows a solid conceptual foundation, a cooperative planning process and functioning coordination mechanisms. At the same time, there is room for improvement regarding indicators, strategic steering and regional coordination.

Project planning was conducted cooperatively and involved all IPs. The design was mainly based on existing partnerships and tailored to the specific needs of the participating lake regions. Planning was described as adaptable and country-specific, but some unclear aspects were noted in certain work packages and terminology – such as the definition of “Lake Manager” as compared to “Young Lake Manager”.

Content-wise, the project follows a holistic approach and includes a variety of interconnected work packages at local, regional and global levels. However, the concept of Frontrunner Initiatives (FIs) and their replication by partner organisations presents operational challenges. The current one-to-one model for Replication Projects (RP) is administratively demanding and limited in effectiveness. A more flexible approach, with fewer but more strongly scaled RPs, could increase impact and use resources more efficiently. The establishment of regional subnetworks and the creation of a global expert pool have so far not achieved the desired effects.

The project's results chain is coherent, but a ToC workshop identified gaps between activities and outputs, particularly the lack of defined intermediate goals. Output and outcome indicators are only partially suitable, as many are not SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound). This complicates consistent measurement of project progress, especially at the national level. The causal link between training activities and actual skills acquisition or application remains unclear.

The project timeline appears generally too short to achieve cross-country goals. While some countries (e.g. Rwanda) are already in the handover phase, delays exist elsewhere. In Cambodia and the Philippines, important components risk being completed too late to feed into replication processes or learning cycles.

Operational steering is led by GNF, supported by LCF and FGN. Regular reporting, structured monitoring tools and bi-monthly project management meetings form the pillars of coordination. GNF fulfils its role as coordinator and quality assurer and is easily accessible to the IPs. However, steering is more reactive and process-oriented, with limited evidence of strategic guidance and South-South collaboration.

At the country level, steering structures are generally functional. Many IPs show flexibility in implementation and often build on existing networks and strengthen them through formal cooperation agreements. In Cambodia, Rwanda and the Philippines, solid structures involving government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local actors have been demonstrated. At the international level, GNF, LCF and FGN act as central hubs for both administrative and technical matters. Peer-to-peer cooperation between IPs is emerging but could be further strengthened.

Synergies with other initiatives are evident at both national and global levels. In some countries, overlaps with government strategies or other development projects were deliberately leveraged—for example, in Malawi, India and Cambodia. The connection to the existing Living Lakes Network (LLN) is consciously used, even though the boundary between LLN and LLBCP sometimes blurs. This, however, also brings advantages such as broader knowledge dissemination and greater visibility of successful approaches.

**Effectiveness:** The LLBCP's ToC remains valid and provides a logical, goal-oriented framework linking diverse work packages to sustainable wetland management outcomes. However, the ToC omits several intermediate elements—such as the role of community contributions, livelihood support and communication pathways—which are crucial for understanding how local actions translate into broader project goals.

Risks at the country level (e.g. waste issues in Cambodia, climate change impacts in the Philippines) may affect delivery and challenge the assumed causal chains. In contrast, the Rwanda case study demonstrates strong integration of conservation and development, although some interventions (e.g. youth training) lack follow-up to ensure outcomes.

Intermediate results show mixed progress. While the Living Lakes Academy (LLA) has been established to enable young lake managers to increase their capacity, other cross-cutting components like the international exchange platform are delayed. Still, the IPs have delivered most activities, and early ecological and livelihood co-benefits are visible (e.g. increased fish stocks in Cambodia, improved water quality in the Philippines, erosion control in Rwanda).

Regarding outputs, indicators suggest that Outputs 1 and 4 are likely to be achieved, while others lag behind. Some underperformance is due to time lags or unclear indicators, especially in Output III (Alumni Network) and V (knowledge exchange). However, a beneficiary survey, conducted as part of the MTE shows clear successes and confirms that training has increased knowledge (89%) and led to active knowledge sharing in communities. Also, the case studies provide evidence of significant ecological and socio-economic co-benefits.

As for the outcome, achievement within project countries is likely. Beyond them, evidence is limited. Outcome indicators show uneven progress—Indicator O1 (adoption by local governments) may be met,

but O2 (young lake managers supporting implementation) and O3 (implementation by lake management organisations) are problematic due to unclear definitions and difficult verification.

Activities and outputs overall plausibly contribute to the intended outcome. The integration of conservation and development measures, strong local engagement and cooperation with authorities form a credible pathway. However, some components (e.g. citizen science, youth empowerment) remain underutilized. IPs generally value the global structure for learning and visibility, though administrative burdens (e.g. reporting) reduce the efficiency of the consortium structure.

**Transformational Impact and Sustainability:** The LLBCP has already delivered measurable ecological and biodiversity-related results in partner countries, such as increased fish stocks in Cambodia, perceived decrease of erosion in Rwanda and improved water quality in the Philippines. Similar achievements are reported elsewhere, in some cases surpassing expectations. While external risks remain for long-term success, beneficiaries' recognition of livelihood improvements increases the probability of sustaining these gains.

Projects also generate significant social and economic co-benefits. Examples include more productive and sustainable farming in Colombia and Mexico, reduced input costs in Malawi and solar lighting in Sri Lanka. In Rwanda and the Philippines, activities have improved nutrition, reduced conflict, and strengthened social cohesion through new community-based institutions. Positive unintended effects, such as land retention and eco-tourism opportunities, further underline the added value. No major negative effects have been observed, though risks (e.g. regarding repayment of micro-finance) exist.

Transformative change is evident at local and national levels. Project teams work with or establish institutions that enable systemic change, supported by inclusive approaches, political ownership, targeted capacity development and innovative wetland management. In the Philippines for example work on new wetland legislation exemplifies the potential for lasting structural change. However, while aligned with global frameworks such as the Paris Agreement and CBD, the LLBCP's scale limits its capacity to drive transformation at the global level.

The multi-layered project design supports a shift from short-term to systemic outcomes, combining ecological restoration with education, knowledge exchange, governance reforms and financial mechanisms. Examples include micro-credits, eco-tourism revenue-sharing and local ordinances funding conservation. Sustaining these results beyond the project cycle will depend on continued external support, as many institutions lack resources to carry them forward independently.

**Social and Environmental Safeguards:** The LLBCP is classified as Category C under IKI's safeguard system, implying a low-risk profile. However, the evaluation found no evidence of a country-specific safeguards risk matrix, which appears implausible given the social and ecological complexity of the programme. Moreover, awareness of the IKI grievance mechanism was very low among beneficiaries and no visible reference or alternative complaint channels existed. Online tools alone are unlikely to be effective; locally adapted communication would be needed to make safeguards meaningful in practice.

The plausibility of the risk categorisation could not be assessed due to a lack of documentation. Still, the evaluation highlights that some risks should have been formally considered in the project proposal under IFC Performance Standards, particularly regarding community health, safety and security (PS4) and land use changes with potential impacts on beneficiaries (PS5).

No significant negative impacts on people or the environment were observed, but several risks emerged. In Cambodia, patrol activities in cooperation with police expose community members to potential dangers when confronting illegal fishers, and growing fish stocks attract migration, putting pressure on resources. In the Philippines, increased land speculation around the Paligui Wetlands poses risks, though beneficiaries currently resist selling their land. In Rwanda, early tensions over terracing created challenges, though these were largely resolved through consultation and oversight. While the IP in Rwanda and other IPs apply high internal standards, these practices are not embedded in a formalised risk management system aligned with IKI safeguards.

**Learning Questions:** The LLBCP demonstrates strong awareness of gender equality and youth involvement, though implementation varies across countries. In Rwanda, gender is treated as a cross-cutting issue, with balanced participation in local community organisations, leading to women’s empowerment, financial autonomy and leadership roles. In Cambodia, women contribute significantly to project delivery but remain underrepresented in decision-making structures and often silent in meetings. In the Philippines, women actively participate in training, capacity building and leadership within partner institutions.

Youth involvement is promoted mainly through the LLA, Sustainable Future Trainings and traineeships, which equips young people with skills and certification in lake management. While 35 participants have benefitted from the LLA so far, recruitment for traineeships remains challenging, and local young lake managers call for more continuous support e.g. in Rwanda. Beyond these structures, youth engagement is uneven, with only a few IPs reporting broader activities. Positive examples exist, such as youth-focused initiatives in Mexico or Sri Lanka.

## **Recommendations**

### **Cross-cutting recommendations:**

- Review indicators and monitoring: wherever possible, add more SMARTness to indicators and also a layer of indicators reflecting the “Intermediate Output” level in the reconstructed ToC in order to reflect delivery in partner countries.
- Review the ToC again to include missing steps in particular the role of communities in the delivery and the role that the creation of livelihoods plays as an intermediate output.
- Strengthen the regional networks where this is deemed helpful to increase knowledge exchange. Consider establishing thematic networks if IPs have a preference for this.
- Encourage interaction between IPs where networks are currently weak by establishing the reasons (using the network analysis as starting point) and by discussing potential benefits of network exchanges with the related partners. **All IPs should:**
  - revisit country level stakeholder maps and identify whether academic institutions and private sector (identified as gaps in stakeholder contacts by IPs) are adequately integrated;
  - design and agree activities to ensure trained young lake managers have a pathway to contribute to the Outcome, e.g. by offering long-term mentoring. This recommendation needs to be implemented by each IP with input from one of the CPs for example by facilitating a brainstorming or workshop.

### **Recommendations to focus countries of the MTE:**

- For Cambodia: (1) Enhance inclusion of women in decision-making processes on the local level and (2) prepare action plans on project level to deal with external risks to ensure positive outcomes.
- For the Philippines: (1) Further strengthen collaboration with local governments in specific project regions and (2) enhance scientific monitoring and evaluation of conservation impact.
- For Rwanda: (1) Develop a concept that ensures continuous youth commitment through participation and ownership and (2) set up community enterprises to sustain tree nurseries beyond project funding.