

REFLECTIONS

LESSONS FROM EVALUATIONS: UNDP ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT SUPPORT TO COUNTRIES IN CRISIS

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global crisis of our time, with devastating social, economic, and political consequences worldwide, and a tragic loss of life. As a central actor in the United Nations Development System, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is playing an important role in shaping and driving the United Nations response to the crisis.

To support the UNDP response to COVID-19, the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) has undertaken a review of lessons from past evaluations of UNDP's work in crisis contexts. The purpose is to provide evidence-based advice to UNDP country offices that are responding to requests to help prepare for, respond to, and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing particularly on the most vulnerable.

This paper focuses on environment and natural resource management interventions and is one in a series of knowledge products from the IEO focusing on important areas of UNDP support to countries in crisis.

METHODOLOGY

This is a rapid evidence assessment,¹ designed to provide a synthesis of evaluative evidence posted to the [UNDP Evaluation Resource Centre](#) over the past decade. Country-level and thematic evaluations conducted by the IEO were an important source, given their independence and high credibility. Additionally, high-quality decentralized evaluations commissioned by country offices were considered. Within each review, the emphasis was on identifying consistent findings, conclusions and recommendations that capture relevant lessons for UNDP. The analysis seeks to offer practical and timely insights to support UNDP decision-makers for effective crisis response. It is not a comprehensive study of the general and scientific literature on crisis support.

CONTEXT

This paper focuses on UNDP's environmental interventions in crisis contexts, and the lessons provided here have been distilled from findings, conclusions and recommendations across a wide selection of UNDP evaluations of UNDP programming and interventions related to disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and management of natural resources. These are crucial issues to consider at a time of global social and economic upheaval due to the twin effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and a warming planet.

Protecting and managing the environment to sustain the health and livelihoods of the world’s population necessitates actions to support biodiversity and water resources, and UNDP has long experience working with governments, regional bodies and the wider stakeholder community to implement projects and programmes covering these issues. UNDP is a leading provider of environmental services globally, with projects in 170 countries, and a founding implementing agency for the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and Green Climate Fund. It is important to note that some important environmental services are not taken up in this paper. Lessons from UNDP’s work on the disposal of ozone depleting substances, the management and disposal of persistent organic pollutants, and energy efficiency will be considered in subsequent papers.

AT A GLANCE – LESSONS LEARNED

<p>1 Environment projects benefit from broad stakeholder engagement to manage expectations, utilize local knowledge, and integrate rights and culture of local populations.</p>	<p>2 Engaging the private sector with attention to conflict of interest creates opportunity for long-term sustainability of environmental interventions.</p>	<p>3 Building effective crisis management and recovery systems requires an integrated and targeted approach to capacity and institutional strengthening.</p>
<p>4 Environment and natural resources programmes taking a value chain approach, including encompassing ecotourism benefits, are likely to achieve more sustainable results.</p>	<p>5 Adopting context-sensitive gender approaches and strengthening the resilience of women are crucial, especially in the aftermath of crises.</p>	<p>6 Leveraging national and local resources and capacities is important for the success of disaster risk management and climate change adaptation interventions in crisis contexts.</p>
	<p>7 Addressing global and regional environmental issues requires a multi-country and multi-sectoral approach with high-level coordination and management.</p>	

LESSONS LEARNED

1

Environment projects benefit from broad stakeholder engagement to manage expectations, utilize local knowledge, and integrate rights and culture of local populations.

The broad stakeholder involvement in UNDP’s environmental interventions has long been stressed as of critical importance for successful interventions, from concept to finalization through a well-managed stakeholder engagement that does not over promise deliverables.² Evaluation lessons from regions experiencing previous crisis indicate that there is still room for further improvement in stakeholder engagement. Local communities’ knowledge to address climate change impacts, disaster risk reduction and natural resources management needs to be adopted in interventions to promote ownership and achieve results (e.g. **Bangladesh, China, Syria, Indonesia, Chad**).³ Evaluations emphasized the need to be sensitive to ethnic minorities, and to the rights, culture and knowledge of indigenous people in the design and implementation of environmental projects (**China, Guatemala**).⁴ Strong political

and senior government support, together with private sector and community involvement, is essential, especially where policy reforms are required (e.g. **Iraq, Mali, Guatemala**).⁵ Effective stakeholder engagement has multiple benefits including, but not limited to, creating space for flexible approaches to better respond to needs and circumstances related to the country context,⁶ and to facilitate implementation even in situations of instability and fragile ecosystem (**Mali**).⁷ Overall, the need for strong stakeholder involvement to strengthen national/local ownership and long-term sustainability of project interventions is confirmed by multiple evaluations (**Philippines, Iraq, Burkina Faso, Haiti, Mali, Mozambique, etc.**).⁸

2 Engaging the private sector with attention to conflict of interests creates opportunity for long-term sustainability of environmental interventions.

The private sector has a critical role in assuring the long-term sustainability of environmental interventions (e.g. **China, Timor Leste, Guatemala**, UNDP/GEF LME projects⁹ etc.). In **Guatemala**, an evaluation highlighted the involvement of the private sector in an ecotourism programme which increases the chances of sustainability of actions initiated as the private sector applies them in practice and is less affected by political changes.¹⁰ In **China**, partnership with private sector actors, including those commercially dependent on clean water, helped to leverage conservation and social development finance needed to ensure the sustainability of the project in a global context where biodiversity conservation projects often face financial crunch after the external funding stops.¹¹ An evaluation in **Timor Leste** highlighted the importance of enhanced technical and operational capacities of private sector actors alongside the Government for the phased transfer from external implementation of projects to national responsibilities.¹² There might be potential negative effects from the involvement of the private sector linked to conflict of interests (e.g. **Bosnia and Herzegovina**)¹³ that require careful analysis and management.

3 Building effective crisis management and recovery systems requires an integrated and targeted approach to capacity and institutional strengthening with attention to the long-term sustainability of these acquired skills.

UNDP has long experience of implementing ecosystem and natural resources management projects in crisis-prone regions that have institutional and individual capacity-building at their heart, usually supported by extensive awareness-raising and education activities (e.g. **Burkina Faso, Mali, Guatemala, Mozambique, Honduras, etc.**).¹⁴ Examples in post-crisis regions include capacity-building of national and local institutions in charge of disaster risk reduction and resilience-building (**Burkina Faso, Guatemala, Mozambique**)¹⁵ and managing and analysing information on climate events – e.g. floods and droughts-- (**Mali, Nepal, Timor Leste**).¹⁶ Experience from **South Sudan**¹⁷ indicated the importance of tailoring capacity-building to existing capabilities. Experience also shows that targeted technical training is essential in areas such as post-disaster needs assessments,¹⁸ environmental monitoring and enforcement (**Palestine, Philippines**),¹⁹ borehole maintenance (**South Sudan**),²⁰ and hazardous waste management (**Honduras**).²¹ It is beneficial to complement technical capacity-building with focused training to help translate ‘science to policy’ (**Philippines**)²² and strengthen individuals and institutions engaged in decision-making (**Mali**).²³ Experience from **Sri Lanka**²⁴ and **Burkina Faso**²⁵ also showed that capacity-building could not be limited to training and technical assistance, and that more attention should be paid to developing enabling systems and adequate institutional capacity. In **Burkina Faso**, UNDP helped to strengthen capacities of the National Council for Emergency Relief, but the lack of mechanisms to assess the level of adoption of disaster management techniques made it impossible to assess UNDP’s contribution to disaster management in the country, demonstrating weak uptake.²⁶ Individual and institutional capacity strengthening are considered to be the enabling conditions to achieve long-term sustainability of projects interventions and results.

4

Environment and natural resources management programmes taking a value chain approach, including encompassing ecotourism benefits, while sensitive to socio-economic inequalities, are likely to achieve more sustainable results.

Livelihoods activities in environmental and natural resource management interventions are critical in many contexts and can help to change practices and achieve results (e.g. **Haiti, Afghanistan, Ethiopia**).²⁷ UNDP has implemented multiple projects in post-crisis regions where improving the environment and livelihoods have been closely integrated. Lessons from **Haiti**²⁸ have emphasized the importance of job creation linked with natural resource management. In **Ethiopia**, an evaluation highlighted that alternative livelihoods are an integral part of any conservation programmes to provide the basis for restricting unsustainable traditional practices (fuelwood cutting, charcoal production, open grazing pressures on watersheds, etc.). It was observed that where land-use restrictions are imposed and support to livelihoods is not available, some of the restricted practices move to adjacent areas.²⁹

In addition, an example from **Eritrea** showed that increasing productivity should be accompanied by enhancing marketing components³⁰ which was also identified as critical in other contexts (e.g. **Burkina Faso**).³¹ In **Mozambique**,³² the lack of appropriate value chains in community development initiatives jeopardizes their potential to generate income and promote food security. UNDP also has experience in supporting the development of tourism as an alternative livelihood source for local communities through biodiversity conservation projects (**Egypt, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda**, etc.).³³ In **Uganda**, UNDP supported a community-based organization, the Kibale Association for Rural and Environmental Development, to develop ecotourism enterprise around the protected area, generating income that allowed communities to build schools, support scholars and undertake other projects.³⁴ The evaluation highlighted that geographical and socio-economic status affect the extent to which different groups benefit from alternative livelihood opportunities. Individuals who had a higher economic status and educational level tended to be in a better position to exploit opportunities than others. Also, community members who benefited from GEF-support and other donor interventions were able to leverage this support in their tourism enterprises, while members of the communities without initial resources were not able to take advantage of the tourism influx.³⁵ Although tourism is an alternative livelihood source for communities, it requires high-level management to ensure that the biodiversity conservation objective is pursued.³⁶

As noted in **Nepal**,³⁷ not all livelihood interventions bring conservation benefits. Care should also be exercised not to over-estimate the benefits of alternative livelihood community-scale programmes with respect to reducing ecosystem resource pressure³⁸ as the lack of economic opportunity of communities and groups whose activities have a negative impact on environment contributes to a persistent illegal exploitation of natural resources (**Chad**).³⁹ On the livelihood activities, experience from **Niger**⁴⁰ showed that in-kind support to develop economic activities in the environmental sector proved to be more effective than financial support in some cases. For sustainability of livelihood interventions, attention should be paid to expectations generated in communities about potential economic and environmental benefits.

5

Adopting context-sensitive gender approaches and strengthening the resilience of women to negative impacts on ecosystems are crucial to the success of environmental programming, especially in the aftermath of crises.

Gender equality is a critical issue in the environmental sector as women remain the most affected by climate events and disasters. UNDP has a wealth of experience through projects linking environment and gender, including in regions impacted by crisis. Much of this work is directed at enhancing quality of life and livelihood opportunities by strengthening the resilience of women to negative impacts on ecosystems. The UNDP Disaster Risk Resilient Livelihoods project in **Mozambique**⁴¹ changed the lives of the targeted population by empowering community groups, especially women through active engagement in the project interventions such as the disaster risk

management committees, agriculture and small livestock keeping. Experience has shown that women's involvement should be context adapted. In a UNDP project in **Afghanistan**,⁴² women in remote areas were not allowed to meet project staff. UNDP adapted its strategy by training women to train other women in the remote areas and found women generally showed more responsibility in income generation activities than men. Critical for the achievement of results, women should be identified as direct beneficiaries (**Eritrea, Nepal**).⁴³ In **Niger**⁴⁴ the evaluation lessons emphasized the important role of women in the decision-making process and not only in participating in activities. In **Guatemala**⁴⁵ successful integration of gender aspects in interventions at the local and institutional levels helped monitor the implementation of the national environment gender policy and the development of a course with the inclusion of gender considerations for sustainable forest management. Through this work, important messages were conveyed about the role of women and men in the sustainable management of natural resources.

6 Leveraging national and local resources and capacities is important for the success of disaster risk management and climate change adaptation interventions in crisis contexts.

UNDP has extensive experience in addressing environmental issues in crisis-prone regions (e.g. **Burkina Faso, Bangladesh, Mozambique, Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Somalia, Mali, Niger**).⁴⁶ UNDP disaster risk management support to governments focuses on policy and legislative support and disaster risk management planning at national and subnational levels.⁴⁷ This support includes providing operational frameworks and mechanisms (e.g. early warning systems and climate-related data collection and dissemination mechanisms) in many countries including **Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, North Macedonia, Niger, Mali**, etc.⁴⁸ Successful examples were found in countries where UNDP was able to leverage available technical resources and local capacities to adapt. In **North Macedonia**⁴⁹ UNDP worked with the faculty of Computer Science of the University of Skopje to develop a mobile application to present citizens with real-time information on natural disasters (floods and droughts). This application has been replicated in **Kosovo**⁵⁰ and is being considered as a regional platform for risk management. In **Mali**⁵¹ the meteorological agency has designed a low-tech rain gauge in collaboration with local manufacturers combined with training of local farmers on reading and recording rainfall data. These experiences were evaluated as successful. An important lesson in **Niger**,⁵² where the use of mobile phones to gather information on weather data was being explored, is that the illiteracy of the farmers observing rain gauges was a barrier, and the weakness of telephone coverage in certain project intervention areas was also a major constraint. In **Burkina Faso**,⁵³ the lack of partner coordination led to failure in the establishment of an effective mechanism aiming at collecting and disseminating climate information to the most vulnerable.

Moreover, disaster risk reduction should be addressed as a cross-cutting issue in development programming (**Philippines**).⁵⁴ This requires closer coordination with poverty reduction and environment programmes and new partnerships with different government agencies and stakeholders.⁵⁵

7 Addressing global, regional and transboundary environmental issues requires a multi-country and multisectoral approach with high-level coordination and management.

UNDP has been responsible for multiple global, regional and transboundary projects addressing environmental problems including GEF International Waters projects. It is recognized (**Bangladesh**)⁵⁶ that UNDP should play an important role in promoting regional cooperation on environmental and disaster management programmes. Environment projects require multidisciplinary/multisectoral approaches (**Chad, Mali, Niger, Guatemala**).⁵⁷ Inter-ministerial cooperation must be integrated into multisectoral policies (to sustain resilience/livelihoods) (**Haiti**).⁵⁸ Regional projects, in particular on transboundary or shared water resources, offer advantages for countries to *jointly* address common problems within rivers/lakes, Large Marine Ecosystems (LMEs) and groundwaters (aquifers). River

projects have assisted regional bodies to be strengthened to address pollution and floods/droughts (e.g. Danube and Amazon Rivers). In LMEs, multiple countries (including SIDS⁵⁹) are working to reduce illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing to reduce pressure on the living natural resources (e.g. UNDP projects in the East Asia Sea – PEMSEA⁶⁰ and Caribbean Sea⁶¹) and to establish coordination mechanisms between the countries and other actors in the region. The PEMSEA project identified key lessons from execution including: inclusive, multi-level partnerships; active stakeholder participation sustained through appropriate incentive mechanisms; science-based management support, etc. The four countries (**Chad, Egypt, Libya and Sudan**) dependent on the ‘hidden’ water resources of the Nubian Aquifer (a non-replenished groundwater) project, were trying to strengthen a ‘Joint Authority’ to manage the resources, but recognize that further effort is needed to establish a coordination mechanism. The UNDP/GEF Nubian project⁶² demonstrated that the development of an aquifer model served as a useful instrument to bring countries together. This led to the countries agreeing on data and scientific approaches that can minimize management conflicts among countries sharing water resources.

The management of regional projects is necessarily more complex⁶³ and transboundary project management must be backed by enough financial resources to allow adequate administration and management.⁶⁴ Viable transboundary water projects can take decades before necessary structures, policies and practices are in place.⁶⁵ Regional and transboundary interventions addressing complex issues have a clear role in helping countries work together to reduce tension to address ecosystem and resource management problems.

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¹ Rapid evidence assessment (REA) is a process of bringing together information and knowledge from a range of sources to inform debates and urgent policy decisions on specific issues. Like better-known systematic reviews, REAs synthesize the findings of single studies following a standard protocol but do not analyse the full literature on a topic: REAs make concessions in relation to the breadth, depth and comprehensiveness of the search to produce a quicker result.

² [Expansion and Strengthening of Mali’s Protected Area System 2018; Final Evaluation Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biodiversity in Coastal and Marine Protected Areas \(MPAS\) 2018.](#)

³ [GEF Terminal Evaluation-Coastal and Wetland Biodiversity Management at Cox’s Bazar and Hakaluki Haor 2012; Final Evaluation for Qinghai Protected Areas Project 2017; Terminal Evaluation for Biodiversity Conservation and Protected Area Management Project 2014; 00068398 Strategic Planning and Action to Climate Resilience \(SPARC\) GEF Terminal Evaluation 2019; Conservation et Utilisation Durable de la Biodiversité dans le Moyen-Chari 2016.](#)

⁴ [Final Evaluation for Payment for Watershed Services in the Chishui River Basin 2019; ICPE Guatemala 2018.](#)

⁵ [Terminal Evaluation of Catalysing the Use of Solar Photovoltaic Energy Project 2020; Project on Sustainable Management of Forests and Multiple Global Environmental Benefits 2018.](#)

⁶ [Final evaluation of Institutionalization of Disaster Risk Reduction Processes and Tools in Central America project 2015.](#)

⁷ [Enhancing Adaptive Capacity and Resilience to Climate Change in the Agricultural Sector in Mali 2017.](#)

⁸ [Project Climate Twin Phoenix - Resilience and Preparedness toward Inclusive Development \(PCTP-RAPID\) Project Terminal Evaluation 2019; Terminal Evaluation of Catalysing the Use of Solar Photovoltaic Energy Project 2020; ICPE Burkina Faso 2019; Evaluation Finale du Projet Restauration et Gestion des Ressources Naturelles Transfrontières: Phase I Bassins Versants des Rivières Massacre et Pedernales 2014; Final Evaluation of Projet Fonds Climat à Kita 2020; Expansion and Strengthening of Mali’s Protected Area System 2018; Terminal Evaluation: Enhancing Adaptive Capacity and Resilience to Climate Change in the Agricultural Sector in Mali 2016; Joint Programme on Environmental Mainstreaming and Adaptation to Climate Change in Mozambique - Final Evaluation 2012.](#)

⁹ [Terminal Evaluation for the Agulhas and Somali Current Large Marine Ecosystem \(LME\) project 2013.](#)

¹⁰ [TERMINAL EVALUATION REPORT PROMOTING ECOTOURISM TO STRENGTHEN THE FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY OF THE GUATEMALAN PROTECTED AREAS SYSTEM \(SIGAP\) 2017.](#)

¹¹ [Final Evaluation for Payment for Watershed Services in the Chishui River Basin 2019.](#)

¹² [Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Timor Leste 2018.](#)

¹³ [Mainstreaming Karst Peatlands Conservation into Key Economic Sectors 2013.](#)

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- ¹⁵ [ICPE Burkina Faso 2019](#); [ICPE Mali 2019](#); [ICPE Guatemala 2018](#); [ICPE Mozambique 2019](#).
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ABOUT THE INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OFFICE

By generating objective evidence, the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) supports UNDP to achieve greater accountability and facilitates improved learning from experience. The IEO enhances UNDP's development effectiveness through its programmatic and thematic evaluations and contributes to organizational transparency.

ABOUT REFLECTIONS

The IEO's *Reflections* series looks into past evaluations and captures lessons learned from UNDP's work across its programmes. It mobilizes evaluative knowledge to provide valuable insights for improved decision-making and better development results. This edition highlights lessons from evaluations of UNDP's work in crisis settings.

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