

Land Degradation Focal Area Study



Nearly 15 years since the establishment of land degradation as a focal area, this comprehensive IEO study examines GEF support to combating land degradation and desertification.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Highly relevant. The LDFA's gradual alignment with the land degradation neutrality (LDN) framework supports the strategic plans of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) toward a land degradation-neutral world by 2030. The Africa region has the largest number of LDFA projects and the most funding, a reflection of the focal area's relevance to country needs. The LDFA, more than other GEF focal areas, concentrates on addressing the local socioeconomic drivers of land degradation.

2. Effective in producing GEBs. The VFM analysis shows there have been important reductions in landscape fragmentation and forest cover loss, and an increase in vegetation productivity. LDFA projects increased the Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) by 0.03 percent and reduced forest loss by 1.3 percent. The highest returns begin about 4.5–5.5 years after projects

begin, suggesting the need for longer time horizons to observe benefits. The estimated carbon sequestered was 43.52 tons of carbon per ha.

3. Greater scope leads to greater benefits. Multifocal area projects generally provide more GEBs than single focal area projects. Case studies demonstrate that projects that target the entire production chain, improving socioeconomic outcomes as well, provide greater sustainability in environmental outcomes. Results from completed projects also show a correlation between project funding and the subsequent project outcome and sustainability ratings. Projects with total funding ranging between \$10 and \$20 million consistently outperformed others.

4. Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tools could be strengthened. Development of the Portfolio Monitoring and Assessment Tool (PMAT) is still recent (from GEF-5) and needs further

PURPOSE AND METHODS: The land degradation focal area (LDFA) combines the principles of a landscape approach and integrated ecosystem management to maximize the global environmental benefits (GEBs) of combating land degradation. This study aims to inform the GEF-7 replenishment process by evaluating the Global Environment Facility's (GEF's) LDFA based on evidence gathered. It covers 618 LDFA projects through an analysis of the results of completed projects, quality at entry assessments, and 20 key informant interviews. It also includes a value for money (VFM) analysis of LDFA projects to understand the impacts of GEF investments in this focal area.

WEB PAGE: www.gefio.org/evaluations/land-degradation-focal-area-ldfa-study

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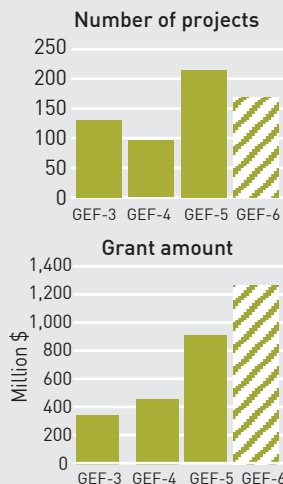
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PORTFOLIO HIGHLIGHTS

618
projects

\$3.4 billion
in grant funding

\$20.4 billion
in cofinancing



Top 3 Agencies

United Nations Development Programme: 40% of projects (245); 32% of financing (\$977 million)

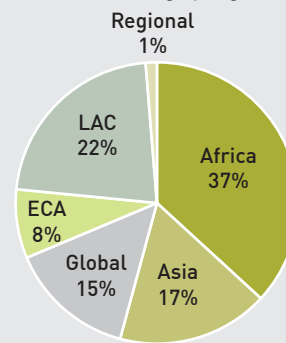
World Bank: 17% of projects (103); 22% of financing (\$664 million)

United Nations Environment Programme: 16% of projects (97); 7% of financing (\$260 million)

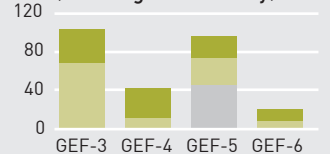
Multi-Agency: 45% of projects (27); 19% of financing (\$619 million)

SOURCE: GEF Project Management Information System as of March 2017, excluding canceled/dropped projects and including both LDFA and multifocal projects with a land degradation component.

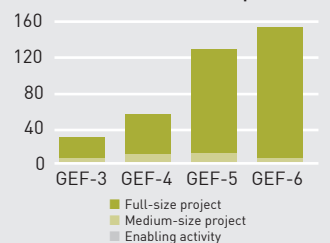
Total GEF funding by region



Number of projects by modality (land degradation only)



Number of projects by modality (multifocal with LD component)



improvement, though it is less cumbersome now compared to its original form. This development does not address the fundamental problem, which is to track long-term project outcomes. Often, these long-term outcomes would occur many years after the completion of a project—such as reforestation, an inherently long process. This is likely to hinder the GEF's ability to capture and disseminate lessons and good practices to countries and development partners.

BACKGROUND

From the GEF's inception to GEF-3 in 2002, land degradation was viewed as a "linkage activity" cutting across the climate change, biodiversity, and international waters focal areas. To actively combat land degradation, the LDFA was introduced in GEF-3 with almost \$385 million in GEF investment and roughly \$1.5 billion in cofinancing. GEF-4 later saw the LDFA expand with over \$500 million in investment and \$3.2 billion in cofinancing, shifting from land degradation projects focused at the national level to more regional/multicountry projects. There was also a shift from stand-alone land degradation projects to more programmatic approaches during GEF-4. During GEF-5, the LDFA was directly linked

to the UNCCD's 10-year strategy as one of the financing mechanisms for the UNCCD. The LDFA has steadily increased its number of lead Agencies from 6 in GEF-3 to 18 in GEF-6.

So far in GEF-6, the LDFA has trended toward using a multifocal area approach in project design. Newer projects target the entire value chain, addressing areas such as improved market access, policy reforms, private sector engagement, and knowledge generation to promote sustainability and resilience in food value chains. Consistent with findings from the VFM analysis, targeting the entire value chain tends to be a more efficient investment. The LDFA Strategy in GEF-6 is gradually responding to the LDN framework, which the UNCCD Secretariat sees as essential to its post-2018 development strategy.

RESULTS

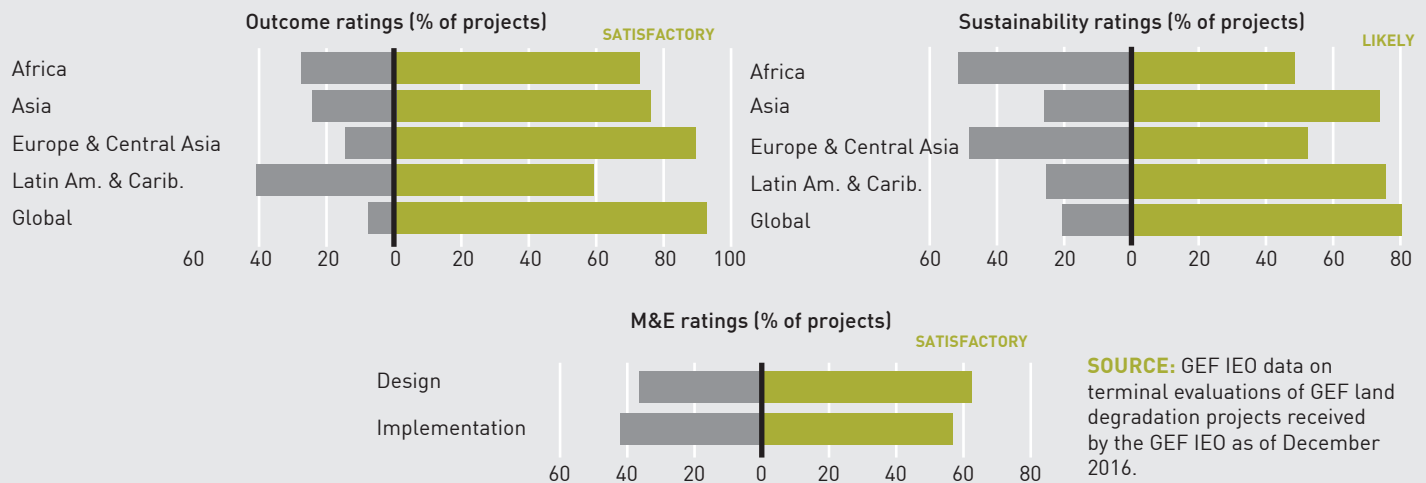
Performance. Terminal evaluations have been completed for 116 land degradation-related projects, all of which were initiated during GEF-3 or GEF-4. Of these, 67 percent are land degradation stand-alone projects, and 49 are multifocal area projects with a land degradation component. Overall, 76 percent of land degradation-related projects had satisfactory outcome

ratings; this is slightly less than the overall GEF average of 82 percent, but there was improvement between GEF-3 and GEF-4. The majority of projects have been rated as satisfactory for execution quality. LDFA projects generally have higher environmental, institutional, and political sustainability ratings as compared with financial sustainability ratings.

Effectiveness. Larger projects and programmatic approaches with sustained presence are more likely to be effective. Enhancing the entire production chain and improving market access and the productive capabilities of project beneficiaries improve environmental, social, and economic outcomes. Improved incomes from sustainable land management (SLM) is an important motivator for the local population to continue to reduce land degradation even beyond the project timeline.

Value for money. A VFM analysis was carried out to better understand the effectiveness of LDFA investments. The analysis found that projects had a positive impacts on reducing forest loss and forest fragmentation and increasing forest productivity. Additional key findings revealed that the greatest project returns begin 4.5–5.5 years after project inception and that LDFA projects with access to electricity had greater impact.

PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS



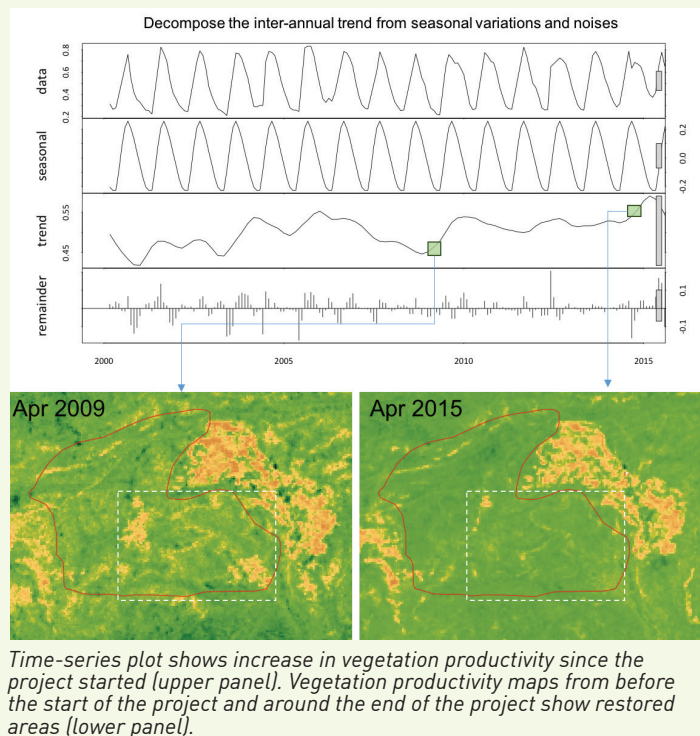
CASE STUDY: INDIA'S SUSTAINABLE LAND AND ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT COUNTRY PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM (SLEM-CCP)

Launched in 2009, the \$327.8 million SLEM-CCP comprised six subprojects located in the dryland zone vulnerable to the degradation of land, water, and forest resources and likely to be intensified by climate change. Program objectives included enhancing institutional and local adaptive capacity to improve land and ecosystem resilience; reversing and controlling biodiversity loss while taking into account climate risks; and mainstreaming and scaling-up SLEM.

One of the subprojects was implemented in five districts of Madhya Pradesh, covering 15,000 ha of degraded bamboo forest. The area faced soil erosion and moisture retention issues. People depended on traditional subsistence agriculture; productivity was low, leading to rural migration.

The main project intervention involved allotting 20 ha for four years (5 ha/year) to each beneficiary family residing near degraded forests. Families received approximately \$40 a month for weeding, clearing, and other tasks aimed at rehabilitation. Supporting activities included vermicomposting, water management, and the use of mesh for moisture retention. Occupational training and support was provided for livelihood diversification (e.g., establishing vegetable gardens and making furniture from bamboo and *lantana*, an invasive species).

Results indicate that the area's vegetation cover improved over the project period. The average NDVI for the driest month (April 2015) increased about 10 percent compared to 2009 levels. The vegetation significantly improved inside the project area compared to areas outside. Field visits and stakeholder perspectives corroborate that SLEM interventions improved land management and helped in the regeneration of bamboo forests. Other positive outcomes included establishing decentralized decision-making and planning processes, and enhancing community participation in managing and rehabilitating the degraded forests. However, while the initiative helped build local skills and diversify income-generating opportunities, the majority of project beneficiaries noted that it had had only "some" impact on their incomes.



The dollar return, considering only one ecosystem service—i.e., carbon sequestration—is \$1.08 per dollar invested.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Combating the underlying drivers of land degradation is constrained by current conceptualizations.

The LDFA needs to do more to combat the underlying drivers of land degradation but is constrained by the need to deliver GEBs as currently conceptualized. Certain drivers of land degradation, such as land tenure issues, are rarely targeted by GEF projects because they are not ostensibly global or environmental. Still, analysis shows that underlying socioeconomic drivers of land degradation are less frequently targeted than the natural proximate causes, and it is often the socioeconomic benefits that generate the greatest environmental outcomes and sustainability.

2. LDN. With only 10 percent of LDFA projects focusing on rehabilitating productive lands, and the rest of the projects having no restoration component or focus on restoration of forested lands, the LDFA will need to make a major shift toward LDN to remain relevant to the UNCCD.

3. M&E system. The fundamental issue in the M&E system of not tracking the long-term project outcomes beyond the project timeline negatively affects the GEF's ability to gain insights to further update and improve LDFA projects. An analysis of completed projects highlights this problem, as the long-term benefits still have yet to be observed for recently completed projects.

The PMAT made available during GEF-5 to track the GEBs of LDFA projects cannot track projects that started

before then. Moreover, difficulty in using the PMAT has discouraged project managers from using it. Gathering additional data, such as quantifying the local and human benefits of LDFA projects, remains a challenge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Implement LDN with an appropriate mix of interventions.** While being cognizant of cost-effectiveness, context, and country priorities, the LDFA should consider restoration activities along with SLM. SLM practices are intended to help avoid and reduce land degradation, while ecosystem restoration will help reverse the process. Newer projects in GEF-6 increasingly focus on achieving LDN and therefore would benefit from distinguishing between the two complementary pathways—SLM and ecosystem restoration—to be able to measure progress toward LDN.
- **Give due consideration to complex contextual factors within an integrated approach framework.** While the LDFA's strategic focus has appropriately moved toward integrated approaches, complex contextual factors including drought, food insecurity, and migration should be given due consideration during project design. The LDFA is highly relevant to areas with land degradation—including Africa, particularly with its distressed emigration hotspots. While neither land degradation nor drought are the primary drivers, they increase food insecurity and vulnerability and therefore may exacerbate the risk of conflict or migration.

- **Assess climate risks to LDFA initiatives and design adaptive management responses to such risks.** Unsustainable land management practices, which the GEF LDFA strategies aim to ameliorate, have a direct and clear linkage to climate change. The effects of climate change are likely to affect many land-based activities including ecosystem functions and services. Broader application of the Resilience Adaptation Pathways and Transformational Assessment (RAPTA) framework is encouraged.
- **Strengthen M&E tools and methods of knowledge dissemination.** The development and continued improvement of the tracking tool is a step in the right direction but will be inadequate to assess project impacts in the long run. The tracking tool should include additional biophysical indicators, increasingly available through geospatial data, to set baselines and measure progress of land productivity to track both GEBs and LDN targets. Precise geospatial information on project locations is imperative for carrying out accurate M&E of land degradation projects. The LDFA should consider integrating the indicators proposed by the UNCCD's LDN framework. The benefits and impacts of sustained SLM practices and restoration measures are not fully accounted for in the current M&E system. Recognition therefore should be given to the fact that it might be necessary to set a sufficiently longer time frame in monitoring projects striving to achieve LDN. ■

