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**UNDP evaluation**

**Evaluation of UNDP support to ecosystem  
management and biodiversity conservation**

**Executive summary**

*Summary*

The report summarizes the evaluation of UNDP support to ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation. It considers UNDP strategies and programming aimed at accelerating the implementation of global, national and local measures to promote healthy ecosystems and biodiversity, and covers support provided in the two most recent UNDP Strategic Plan periods, 2018-2021 and 2022-2025. The evaluation found that UNDP has played an important role in the protection, restoration and sustainable use of ecosystems and the conservation of biological diversity. UNDP support enabled governments and local stakeholders to adopt a range of initiatives that had dual benefits for the environment and development. However, delivering the ambitious UNDP Nature Pledge will require further efforts. Given the continued decline in biodiversity, the action plan for the pledge must focus on addressing the drivers of biodiversity loss and on scaling up successful ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation practices that have been successful.

*Elements of a decision*

The Executive Board may wish to: (a) take note of the evaluation of UNDP support to ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation and the recommendations therein; and (b) request UNDP management to address the issues raised in the report and its recommendations.



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## I. Introduction

1. This is the first global evaluation of UNDP environmental support since 2011, and the first report of the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) with an in-depth focus on the organization's support for terrestrial ecosystems and biodiversity. The evaluation covers support provided in the two most recent UNDP Strategic Plan periods, 2018-2021 and 2022-2025. It examines UNDP strategies and programmes designed to speed up the implementation of global, national and local measures to promote healthy ecosystems and biodiversity.

2. The evaluation provides an overarching set of findings and conclusions on UNDP support for the protection, restoration and sustainable use of ecosystems, and conservation of biological diversity. It provides recommendations to strengthen the work of UNDP, build on successes, and improve its contribution to sustainable development. The evaluation is part of UNDP accountability towards the Executive Board, development partners and local populations by assessing the relevance and results of support.

## II. Context

3. The diversity of biological species, and the natural processes within ecosystems, provide essential services to human life. They provide clean water, nutritious food, and medicines, regulate diseases, pollinate crops, support soil formation, and offer cultural, recreational, and spiritual benefits. Certain areas of the planet hold critical importance to the world and would be extremely difficult to recover if lost. Thirty-six regions with unique and irreplaceable endemic plant populations are designated as biodiversity hotspots and have already lost at least 70 per cent of their primary native vegetation. The pace and scale of ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss have accelerated over the past decades. One third of all freshwater species face the threat of extinction while freshwater itself is becoming a scarce commodity.

4. At the tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2010, Governments agreed on 20 Aichi Biodiversity Targets, all of which were missed by 2020. In the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, adopted in 2022, Governments committed to another set of targets to be achieved by 2030. There have been successes in restoring areas to ecological health, protecting intact areas, increasing levels of certain species, and in technological advances for ecosystem management. The financial resources available to protect and improve biodiversity increased between 2010 and 2020, though not to the levels required for conservation at the scale required. Moreover, this increase was vastly overshadowed by support for activities detrimental to biodiversity.

5. The number of protected areas for controlling ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss increased in the past decade and nearly half of all freshwater, terrestrial, and mountain biodiversity areas are afforded some form of legal protection. However, less than a quarter of all protected land areas have adequate staffing and budget. Estimates show indigenous peoples safeguard 80 per cent of the Earth's remaining biodiversity and manage lands that contain over 33 per cent of the planet's irrecoverable carbon stores. In many countries, indigenous peoples and local communities are not afforded land rights and experience a range of negative impacts from the continued expansion of non-indigenous developments into their ancestral territories.

6. Faced with major drivers of ecosystem destruction, conservation initiatives on their own are no longer considered sufficient to prevent the decline in biodiversity levels before 2050. Change in land use remains the leading cause of loss, mostly driven by agro-industrial activity and the conversion of forests for large-scale cropping or

livestock production. Global economic systems have encouraged over-consumption and excessive waste and externalized the cost of pollution and the decline of natural resources. The international production, transport and wastage of food, for example, is responsible for 70 per cent of biodiversity loss on land and 50 per cent in fresh water. The impacts of climate change, which disrupt habitats, breeding, and migratory patterns, are projected to become the most significant cause of biodiversity loss within this century. Considering these major threats to planetary and human health, environmental organizations call for more transformative changes to address the underlying causes and value systems that drive destruction and degradation.

### **UNDP response**

7. The UNDP Biodiversity and Ecosystems Global Framework 2012-2020 guided the organization's approach until 2023 under the overall objective to "maintain and enhance the goods and services provided by biodiversity and ecosystems to secure livelihoods, food, water, and health, enhance resilience, conserve threatened species and their habitats, and increase carbon storage and sequestration."<sup>1</sup> It encompassed three signature programmes: (a) integrating biodiversity into development; (b) unlocking the potential of protected area; and (c) mitigating and adapting to the effects of climate change.

8. In October 2023, UNDP launched its Nature Pledge to accelerate support to countries to meet and implement their nature and biodiversity targets under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. The pledge continues UNDP intention to catalyse policy, economic, and social shifts that are beneficial to the environment promote ecosystem management and biodiversity approaches within a broader environment objective and offer support for communities at every level.

9. The UNDP ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation portfolio during the assessment period was delivered through 602 projects with a total expenditure of over \$1.5 billion across 134 countries. The largest number of interventions and the highest expenditure were in Africa (25 per cent), followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (24 per cent), and Asia and the Pacific (17 per cent). Fewer projects were delivered in the Arab States (7 per cent) and Europe (6 per cent). Headquarters teams delivered 22 per cent of the overall expenditure, over 80 per cent of which was expenditure through the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Small Grants Programme.

10. Sixty-two per cent of funding for UNDP support to ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation during the assessment period came from vertical trust funds, of which more than 90 per cent came from the GEF. Other government and multilateral contributions made up 18 per cent of UNDP funding in this area. National government contribution and UNDP regular resources made up four per cent.

### **III. About the evaluation**

11. The evaluation was guided by five overarching questions aligned to standard international evaluation criteria of relevance, coherence, effectiveness and sustainability.<sup>2</sup> It combined methods to answer the questions (see table 1) and test the assumptions underpinning main strategies of UNDP for ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Development Programme (2012) *The Future We Want: Biodiversity and Ecosystems—Driving Sustainable Development*. United Nations Development Programme Biodiversity and Ecosystems Global Framework 2012-2020. New York.

<sup>2</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Development Assistance Committee.

**Table 1. Evaluation questions grouped by criterion and data collection methods**

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Data collection tool</b>
Relevance	How relevant was UNDP support in addressing the most pressing environmental and development challenges at the global, national and local levels?	Statistical analysis of the relationship between UNDP programming size and contextual variables.  640 people were consulted during the evaluation: 170 UNDP staff; 233 UNDP partners, 47 non-partners and 190 community members.  13 case studies assessing UNDP work in relation to the ecology of their respective national and/or transboundary contexts.  Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping of UNDP support in key environmental and economic areas.  Meta-analysis of 641 IEO evaluations and decentralized evaluations.
Coherence	How coherently did UNDP use its strategies, resources, corporate tools, and processes to promote ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation, and development planning?	
Effectiveness	How effective was UNDP support in enabling governments and other stakeholders to protect, manage and value ecosystems and biodiversity?  To what extent has UNDP support led to improvements in the natural environment?	
Sustainability	To what extent has UNDP contributed to institutional capacities and mechanisms that are likely to sustain ecosystems and biodiversity gains in the medium to long term?	

## IV. Key findings

### A. Strategic positioning of UNDP

12. In 2012 UNDP took a strategic shift towards emphasizing the opportunities that biodiversity and natural ecosystems offered to human well-being. This positive approach enabled governments and local stakeholders to adopt a range of initiatives that resulted in dual benefits for the environment and development. UNDP support stood out for providing practical solutions for the implementation of approaches that combined ecosystems and development priorities, which leveraged the organization's broader portfolio in sustainable development, governance, planning, institutional strengthening, and non-governmental participation.

13. The **signature programme 1** (Integrating biodiversity into development) was highly relevant for moving ecosystems and biodiversity beyond an environmental or forestry silo to a cross-government consideration. A key strategic success was the evolution of UNDP financing support from a focus on individual protected areas to landscape and national financing. Beyond prominent and early-stage national engagements on palm oil, beef, and soy production, UNDP did not have effective strategies to incentivize the private sector and or to widely replace harmful practices. UNDP did not widely draw on its organizational strengths in health, inclusive growth, social protection, energy, and gender equality to enhance the development impacts from ecosystem management.

14. Through **signature programme 2** (Unlocking the potential of protected areas), UNDP worked towards the principles of leaving no one behind and enabled important gains in the recognition of indigenous peoples and local communities in ecosystem management, which remain critical as countries work towards the Global Biodiversity Framework targets. UNDP broadened the concept of protected areas, demonstrating that human development and ecological protection can be symbiotic in the buffer zones of conservation areas. This transition supported a shift from a species-centric focus to multi-functional ecological services and management, such as addressing issues related to water availability.

15. **Signature programme 3** (Mitigating and adapting to the effects of climate change) focused on the urgent need for improved approaches to ecosystems and climate change. These became increasingly urgent in the past decade as critical ecological zones, and the populations dependent on them, experienced extreme weather events. UNDP adaptation and mitigation portfolio extensively promoted the use of natural assets for disaster mitigation and/or carbon sequestration and supported global knowledge on ecosystem-based adaptation. UNDP field projects were important for establishing local relevance where other organizations did not promote the approach, though only in a small number of countries has UNDP made use of its comparative advantage to support national integration of ecosystem-based adaptation, and there was slow uptake by governments. The UNDP Climate Promise has yet to draw on organizational biodiversity approaches and vice-versa - a missed opportunity to increase the levels of climate finance that reaches indigenous peoples and community-led conservation work, and to promote the perspectives and knowledge of these groups within national adaptation and mitigation planning.

16. UNDP work in financing was relevant to barriers in the sector and has delivered two major strategic successes. The first came in supporting governments to publish their levels of biodiversity financing, allowing global expenditures and deficits to be calculated for the first time. Second, UNDP identified harmful subsidies driving biodiversity loss in many countries, and is now working with a sub-set of them to repurpose the subsidies.

17. The combined offer of UNDP finance and capacities, while important, was not enough to promote comprehensive approaches to ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation. Despite being a key objective since 2012, UNDP support to generate adequate and predictable funding for conservation was insufficiently catalytic to bridge the finance gap, and its support remained heavily dependent on channelling project-based official development assistance through GEF and the United Nations Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (UN-REDD+) mechanism, in which improved biodiversity is only a possible co-benefit. Only a few country offices attempted to support governments with alternative and domestic biodiversity financing models – which, if successful, could have generated more sustainable and substantive funding for conservation. Projects developed innovative solutions with national and local governments and indigenous communities, but effective engagement with the private sector was rare, with mixed success in generating sustainable financial flows to the local level.

18. UNDP work to strengthen capacities for environmental governance increased the range of stakeholders that participate in ecosystem management. It also supported national government legislation and enforcement. Linking ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation with national governance agendas and conflict resolution, leveraged stronger political backing than traditional biodiversity work with ministries of environment. UNDP succeeded in supporting a broader set of capacities than those used in environmental governance by promoting knowledge on a range of technical areas, and to large audiences, through global platforms such as the Learning for Nature online course and the Nature for Life Hub. A significant proportion of UNDP support

since 2018 built the capacity to use specific conservation management tools. This enabled governments to tailor global science and international protocols to the ecological conditions of their countries, though paid less attention to institutional capacities required to sustain practices.

19. While UNDP projects alleviate localized pressures on ecosystems, the organization did not engage in modelling scenarios to identify plausible pathways to alter the broader trend of biodiversity loss, despite these being well established in climate policy. The greatest opportunities for UNDP to support a significant shift away from harmful drivers came through changes in international trade policies, to which UNDP responded well but only in certain contexts. The organization has not had a strategy to seek out or to encourage similar transformative policies and to expand the number of countries in which it supports local preparedness. Few country offices attempted to comprehensively engage on these issues, and several expressed the need for support and regional action.

20. UNDP covered a large array of ecological areas and a diversity of animal and plant species, including within difficult operating contexts. UNDP project design, combined with technical input from regional bureaux and Headquarters, ensured local relevance and, overall, effectiveness in meeting minimum restoration targets, though with regional variation. While UNDP conducted limited global mapping of its initiatives to ecologically important areas *per se*, the majority of its initiatives were aligned with GEF benefits index for biodiversity. UNDP provided analytical innovations to help countries identify the most critical ecosystem services for human life. However, UNDP did not widely use these to target its ecosystem and biodiversity support to areas of acute poverty or environmental degradation. In several areas, UNDP is working to reduce population pressures on small remaining areas of high-value biodiversity areas rather than the source of the problem in much larger degraded lands. UNDP involvement in ecosystem and biodiversity issue within urban areas and their surrounding watersheds or coastal zones was limited.

## **B. Governance frameworks and mechanisms**

21. UNDP provided widespread support to governments in preparation of national biodiversity strategies and action plans (NBSAPs) and pioneered the localization of the plans at the subnational level in Asia. UNDP supported 64 countries in preparing their sixth national reports under the Convention on Biological Diversity, and early action support for the Global Biodiversity Framework was implemented in 138 countries. UNDP-GEF projects were designed to establish viable options aligned with policy reforms led by sector ministries. While levels of buy-in to NBSAPs varied, numerous successful examples focused on landscape planning demonstrated their effectiveness. Only 36 per cent of UNDP-GEF-supported countries took an intended “whole-of-government” approach. Governments generally did not incorporate gender considerations into their strategies and action plans.

22. UNDP supported the development of environment laws in the vast majority of countries in which it operates, providing support for forest management, biodiversity conservation, chemical regulation, land use, the rights of indigenous communities, and aligning biodiversity with the Sustainable Development Goals. UNDP successfully supported governments to expand areas under legal protection. UNDP played an important role in reviewing strengths and weaknesses of national protected area systems, and enhanced the systems in many countries. UNDP did not emphasize the legal weakening of protected areas, a trend that has significantly increased since 2000, primarily propelled by industrial resource extraction and development. A smaller group of UNDP countries worked with traditional community-based conservation systems to

recognize Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures as de facto components of protected area networks.

23. Since 2018, UNDP supported the improved management of 2.3 million hectares through GEF initiatives alone. Although an important contribution, the proportion of land designated as protected areas fell below the Aichi target 11 for 2020 and remains far from the increased ambition of the Global Biodiversity Framework, which called for 30 per cent of national territories to be protected by 2030. Mapping the protected status of various ecoregions in which UNDP already has environmental interventions suggested a need for UNDP to improve targeting of protected areas support, especially in Central America, the Mekong River basin, and the Malay Archipelago.

24. UNDP provided notable support for governance mechanisms that enabled landscape initiatives and improved connectivity between ecologically important areas. Its support was effective for the transboundary management of water resources and species protection. UNDP acted as a convenor in ambitious projects striving for collaborative governance of biodiversity corridors, with examples in Bhutan, China, Colombia, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, and Myanmar. There were also many examples of support for community management of corridors through the Small Grants Programme. Such support typically involved complex convening of stakeholders at multiple levels and developing funding models for collaborative governance of biodiversity corridors. The initiatives involved technical complexity and high transaction costs from working across multiple subnational contexts with multiple partners.

25. Between 2018 and 2023, UNDP supported 17 national and transboundary ecosystems and engaged approximately 20 countries in such cooperation initiatives. Country offices with shared ecosystems coordinated in science diplomacy to foster areas for collaboration, even between countries that had unresolved disputes. While these national and transboundary water and biodiversity conservation initiatives are important, there was a strong need for an increased focus on integrated ecosystem management. The design of these initiatives is often complex, and so is their effective management and implementation. Yet building these capacities remains critical to the long-term sustainability of these ecoregions.

26. UNDP made important contributions at the national level towards action against the illegal wildlife trade, though it did not fully leverage its governance expertise or its global presence to challenge persistent demand for illegal goods, nor did it successfully address issues of corruption that undermined enforcement. UNDP was the largest implementor under the Global Wildlife Program, funded by GEF, through which UNDP supported 20 projects in 18 countries, with a total budget of \$117.2 million. These projects enabled various forms of action against illegal wildlife trade and promoted wildlife-based economies for resilient development. Although overseen by GEF and the World Bank, UNDP, as a significant implementer, had a presence in key countries in illegal wildlife supply chains, which could have potentially mitigated the isolated country focus of the Global Wildlife Program.

### **C. Effective management of ecosystems and biodiversity**

27. UNDP employed a suite of measures to increase the management effectiveness of protected areas. Globally, UNDP helped introduce a range of capacities, innovations, and finance models to strengthen protected area management. National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans progressively became accepted as a lens for measuring country performance to enhance protected area management and species monitoring. However, there were capacity gaps and financial constraints at the subnational level, which negatively impacted the sustainability of these interventions. While efforts at the national level showed promise, persistent capacity gaps and financial constraints at the



subnational level would undoubtedly potentially undermine the sustainability of these endeavours.

28. UNDP created a significant public good by producing 200 country reports with comprehensive insights into each country's progress and challenges in conserving ecosystems and biodiversity. The recommendations of these were not consistently reflected within UNDP country portfolios or the organization's broader strategic framework. Where country offices built substantial ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation technical capacity through long-term engagement with government, this work influenced regional and global agreements. In many cases, however, post-project funding and capacity-building was not available.

29. UNDP supported reversing and stabilizing mammal decline through well-informed and equipped anti-poaching task groups and by including communities, women, and indigenous peoples in patrolling efforts. The sustainability of these endeavours depended on effective ownership to maintain specialized equipment and local interest, and not enough has been done to promote their use at the scale needed.

30. Through the UN Biodiversity Lab, UNDP provided users with access to rich global and national spatial datasets for conservation and sustainable development. UNDP distinctive strength in its partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme and the secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity lies in its 'maps of hope' approach. This method involves bringing together national stakeholders to connect data with their country's foremost environmental policies and identify ecosystems crucial for human sustenance. Despite the significance of these initiatives, they were, thus far, implemented in a select group of pilot countries, with limited utilization of this capacity in UNDP country offices.

31. UNDP projects supported the use of digital technologies for environmental management in over 40 countries, promoting a diverse set of uses and results that ranged from increased evidence of environmental issues to improved environmental management. UNDP projects generally helped government departments in adopting digital innovation used in other countries, and, in some cases, laid the foundational infrastructure for digital capacity.

#### **D. Empowerment and inclusion**

32. UNDP supported important advances in promoting indigenous and community conserved areas as an alternative to government or private sector-led conservation. UNDP support in the creation of indigenous and community conserved areas registry was a notable global achievement, increasing the potential for indigenous areas to be recognised as Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures and cover important areas outside protected areas. UNDP provided technical support to strengthen the indigenous and community conserved areas registry as a viable global mechanism and enabled indigenous peoples and local community groups to achieve registration. However, establishing effective regularized payment for ecosystem services models presented challenges for many countries.

33. UNDP landscape projects successfully engaged local communities around alternative livelihoods but ensuring the sustainability of the results of these projects was difficult. Many successful components offered livelihood opportunities for poor and marginalized communities in neighbouring protected areas. In areas with no or limited enforcement of land tenure and other resource rights, community livelihoods remained vulnerable even when improved by project initiatives. Insecure land tenure was also the most prevalent barrier to community stewardship. UNDP has attempted to displace practices that infringed on community rights by helping governments convene partnerships with businesses willing to engage with more sustainable ecosystem

management and biodiversity conservation practices. The “Promoting Responsible Business Practices through Regional Partnerships” project in seven countries in Asia was a promising example.

34. Since 2018, UNDP supported at least 30 countries to comply with the Nagoya Protocol and the formulation of legal and policy frameworks for the access and benefit-sharing of genetic resources, which delivered benefits to local communities. The premise underlying the access and benefit-sharing was that the conservation of biodiversity hinged on the assumptions that: (a) recognizing the economic value of biodiversity was enough to direct economic benefits from access and benefit-sharing towards conservation efforts; and (b) the establishment of incentives fostering conservation depended on negotiating individual bilateral agreements. Given significant policy and technical challenges there were only a few demonstrable biodiversity benefits from UNDP access and benefit-sharing initiatives.

35. UNDP took steps to incorporate gender strategies within its ecosystem and biodiversity programming. This did not result in substantive empowerment or gender equality gains, as most of the projects were confined to women’s participation in projects rather than designed to be gender transformative. Almost 40 per cent of UNDP gender-related results related to the engagement of women as participants in project activities, and 25 per cent took a further step in responding to differentiated needs of men and women participating in these activities. Only a few UNDP projects contributed to altering the conditions perpetuating gender disparities. UNDP deployed innovations that expanded gender considerations in environmental support over the years. A project of note was the initiative to reclaim urban biodiversity corridors as spaces free from gender-based violence in Costa Rica, and support for female rangers in Guinea-Bissau, Indonesia, and Kyrgyzstan.

36. The most consistent examples of UNDP supporting indigenous women roles in ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation were in the Small Grants Programme. In Peru and Panama, UNDP opened space for participative consultation on women’s unequal access to land and enabled women’s participation in the formulation of the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan.

## **E. Financing, valuing nature, and disinvestment**

37. The Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN) was highly successful and was showing growth potential to reach 132 countries in 2024. BIOFIN was scaled up using a standardized process that allowed ministries of finance to choose the most relevant tools for their contexts. Countries showed particular interest in innovative funding mechanisms such as green bonds, and at least four countries in Asia developed tiger ecosystem bonds. Debt-for-nature swaps were also gaining prominence due to post-COVID-19 sovereign debt distress and biodiversity degradation. While biodiversity bond finance remained a small but growing component of green bond finance, UNDP played a valuable advisory role to governments and introduced innovations in sovereign and municipal bonds. To date, the majority of BIOFIN solutions are primarily focused on public rather than private sector financing.

38. BIOFIN succeeded in identifying harmful subsidies as drivers of biodiversity loss in many countries and was working on repurposing the subsidies in a subgroup of projects. Initially, programme countries hesitated to address subsidies, viewing them as an issue primarily for industrialized nations. However, upon receiving technical evidence demonstrating that current subsidies were failing to achieve their intended objectives, ministries of finance became involved in exploring opportunities to repurpose them. UNDP became a leading voice in the emerging practice of disinvestment from environmentally harmful subsidies.

39. The most prominent UNDP engagement with private businesses occurred through landscape projects that involved community-based businesses in areas surrounding protected areas. UNDP helped establish the Indonesia Palm Oil Platform and facilitated stakeholder dialogue, which led to the development of a national and six regional action plans. This initiative created a space for the private sector and the Ministry of Agriculture to address sensitive issues collaboratively. In 2020, UNDP helped create the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures, a leading forum for facilitating a positive shift in the behaviour of companies and financial institutions through portfolio risk management and mainstream corporate reporting.

## **F. Integrating ecosystems and biodiversity into development planning**

40. UNDP support resulted in the integration of National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans into national medium-term development plans. This integration did not translate into a systematic integration of ecosystems and biodiversity into funded sector plans. There was a tendency for sectoral ministries that implemented the strategies and action plans to work in silos, rather than engage in cross-sectoral work required to mainstream biodiversity conservation into national development planning. This constrained implementation and created challenges even where policies were supportive, particularly where different levels of government administration were involved. Linkage with finance options, and the integration of indigenous and community conserved areas, strengthened national and subnational landscape level development plans. Challenges persisted due to weak subnational government capacity, inadequate sectoral coordination, and uncertainties regarding the sustainability and replication of projects.

41. UNDP landscape-level projects had components that supported subnational development planning. These were valuable components of large, complex projects that entailed a decade or more of investment to build context-specific solutions. There were examples of highly successful subnational landscape-level projects incorporating protected areas and surrounding areas with subnational land use planning components. UNDP demonstrated a strong record of working with a complex mix of stakeholders over multiple project cycles at national, subnational and community levels to make this possible. These projects drew on technical teams with expertise in environment, governance, and socio-economic skills. They facilitated the identification of ecosystem and livelihood benefits, which motivated partners and enabled effective work from national to community levels. Attempting to scale up initiatives through the addition of successor projects has slowed the momentum of replication.

42. UNDP made partial use of its wider portfolio on green growth, mainstreaming the Sustainable Development Goals, and crisis recovery to enable more comprehensive approaches for improving ecosystems and biodiversity. There was considerable potential to incorporate ecosystem services and biodiversity into green economy action plans, though a lack of practical examples, combined with measurement challenges and siloed funding- streams, meant UNDP support to governments did not enable further integration. There was a missed opportunity for UNDP to encourage the systematic use of ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation in climate action plans.

43. UNDP facilitated the adoption of national targets for restoring degraded and abandoned lands in nearly 130 countries. Despite an increase in support, UNDP had a comparatively small portfolio of sustainable land management projects addressing land degradation. A lack of a strategic partnership between UNDP, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the International Fund for Agricultural Development at the country level hindered the mainstreaming of biodiversity and development into agriculture, and, at a global level, reduced the opportunities to offer consolidated

solutions for scaling up support towards the 4.5 billion hectares of land that the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification estimates needs to be replenished.

## **G. UNDP institutional arrangements**

44. The most significant UNDP achievements developed over a series of projects. Approximately 80 per cent of UNDP ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation support was provided through interventions with expenditure under \$3 million, commensurate with the UNDP model of policy support combined with field-level demonstrations. Though there were many instances of follow-on projects, and initiatives sustained through national budgets, the overall trend was for single projects with uncertain sustainability. Lack of resources posed a serious constraint to post-project follow-on capacity-building and knowledge management. Gaps between successive projects resulted in a loss of institutional memory and reduced momentum, and undermined the efficiency and effectiveness of policy reform processes initiated by UNDP. In certain countries, UNDP overcame this issue by establishing a policy support facility that provided partner governments with regular analysis.

45. UNDP put in place mechanisms for collaboration with international financial institutions (IFIs) on climate action but not specific initiatives for ecosystems and biodiversity. The work of these institutions had high relevance as complementary activities to the support UNDP offered to governments and vice versa. Additional involvement of the private sector was necessary due to its significant role in driving biodiversity loss and its potential as a major source of funding to address this issue. However, there were legitimate concerns regarding the reputational risk to UNDP associated with greenwashing. Civil society organisation provided a range of crucial support to UNDP initiatives and were partners in most countries. Breaks between projects were also associated with civil society partners losing the trust of local communities when implementation ceased.

46. Since 2015 there was positive progress in the use of UNDP Social and Environmental Standards in projects, but it was difficult to apply them consistently. The application of standards was stronger for vertical-fund projects, and monitoring compliance was easier for these initiatives because of the strength of their management systems. A review of completed assessments indicated several knowledge gaps and procedural ambiguity in the application of the Social and Environmental Screening Procedure. Social screenings included local context, gender analysis, and consideration for indigenous peoples and local communities' rights and their participation in the projects. The design phase of projects reflected an effort to engage with local communities, but very few projects updated their safeguards during implementation.

## **V. Conclusions**

**Conclusion 1. UNDP provided national partners with relevant support to protect and enhance a diverse range of ecosystems and biodiversity. There was strong evidence of the value that UNDP technical expertise, capacity to convene and integrate from national to community levels, innovative solutions, and alignment with sustainable development as well as support to government planning and international agreements, held for ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation.**

47. Having established a strong track record supporting the creation of protected areas, UNDP successfully broadened its offer to address gaps in the biodiversity and human development nexus that were not substantially supported by other organizations. UNDP expanded its focus beyond protected areas to landscapes, establishing links with the governance agenda to increase and formalize recognition of the role of indigenous

peoples and local communities in area-based management, and engaging ministries of finance in biodiversity planning. Making use of its regional presence, UNDP successfully supported transboundary ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation initiatives in all regions.

**Conclusion 2. Systematic cross-sectoral integration of ecosystems and biodiversity into funded development plans remained an ongoing challenge, though UNDP was expanding its engagement beyond its traditional partners in the ministries of environment. UNDP could have incorporated ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation objectives into its wider portfolio more effectively through climate action plans, green growth agendas, and crisis recovery plans.**

48. Mainstreaming biodiversity conservation into national development planning required cross-sectoral collaboration but there was a tendency for sectoral ministries that implemented NBSAPs to work in silos. There were examples of successful UNDP engagement beyond ministries of environment (such as economy, finance, or planning ministries), especially in BIOFIN work.

49. Despite some successful examples of incorporation of ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation in climate action plans, it was not identified as a priority for climate action. Within the portfolio there was little consideration of the ramifications of climate change on the sustainability of UNDP ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation initiatives. Likewise, UNDP had difficulty in situating ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation prominently within the green growth agendas. UNDP support to governments in this area (including extensive work in green agriculture) did not lead to a higher profile for ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation in national planning. There was unrealized potential to integrate ecosystem services and biodiversity in green agriculture, sustainable tourism, waste management, green cities, and green economy action plans. Promising examples of a coordinated portfolio in Ecuador and Liberia illustrated a potential pathway to integrate ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation in national climate and green growth agendas.

**Conclusion 3. UNDP had considerable experience in innovative subnational ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation work and had a comparative advantage in this area. UNDP contributed to strengthened capacity in the ‘missing middle’, which historically hampered the implementation of national policies and prevented scale-up of field-level innovations in many countries.**

50. The evaluation showcased UNDP strengths in this domain, highlighting several positive examples in Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean. These deserved more attention due to their success in localizing National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans, establishing indigenous and community conserved areas, and integrating biodiversity into village planning and local development plans, despite the numerous challenges associated with working at multiple levels. Working in multiple districts and with subnational institutions required a deep understanding of context, strong technical skills, and an ability to convene stakeholders at all levels, a strength that UNDP has demonstrated over other development partners. Targeting key capacity gaps at the local government level that undermined environmental progress presented an opportunity for UNDP. Nonetheless, progress at the ‘missing middle’ level was slower than at the national level and would have affected the pace of achieving the Nature Pledge targets and the Global Biodiversity Framework goals.

**Conclusion 4. The positive returns from biodiversity and ecosystem services were not consistently realized at a sufficient scale to incentivize a comprehensive and sustainable conservation effort in many countries. UNDP was successful in increasing funding for ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation, but**

**national and community budgets remained dependent on official development assistance, and questions remained over the sustainable management of new capacities.**

51. UNDP landscape projects delivered high quality results in biodiversity conservation but often required sequential projects to see results and scaling and replication in new landscapes. Though typical for the sector, the pace of change was out of sync with the urgency of biodiversity loss. Landscape projects funded by UNDP-GEF and the Green Climate Fund offered countries additional resources for conservation but were seldomly combined with more catalytic financing or effective routes to scaling and sustainable finance. In this context, it was essential for ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation to have a central role in green growth and climate change planning to meet the Nature Pledge target of supporting at least 140 countries to integrate nature into their national and sectoral plans and practices.

52. UNDP support through the Small Grants Programme made a significant contribution to local financing and was an important mechanism for building awareness of indigenous peoples and local communities capacities and threats in government and private sector processes. In some regions, sustainable land use benefits derived by communities were often too low to adequately compensate for lost livelihood opportunities. UNDP internal challenges in working with the private sector limited its ability to encourage businesses to invest in value chains that incorporated local livelihoods in these areas.

**Conclusion 5. UNDP support to governance frameworks for terrestrial and freshwater conservation improved planning and enhanced enforcement but was insufficient to address core drivers of ecosystem degradation. Recent action on harmful national subsidies and international financial disclosures offered an excellent platform for UNDP to strengthen its action against the underlying causes.**

53. The severe negative impacts of land use change, resource extraction and pollution driven by industrial activity significantly outweighed the ability of conservation and enforcement initiatives to protect ecosystems and biodiversity, especially when combined with other drivers from invasive species, climate change, and population pressure. UNDP limited attention on harmful drivers lessened the strength of the organization's response to locally-focused projects and reduced its ability to engage with international regulations and market demand. Although at an early stage, BIOFIN work was particularly important, as harmful subsidies remained the biggest contributor to the global biodiversity financing gap. UNDP was one of the few major players to directly target this tipping point.

54. UNDP had comparatively limited engagement in agricultural and urban ecosystems facing planning and policy challenges from climate change. There were more recent examples of effective partnerships with the FAO that produced innovative approaches to address agricultural land use, but these only reached a small part of the ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation portfolio. Regarding the private sector, most country offices were concerned about navigating reputational risks and lacked guidance and streamlined processes. UNDP needed to invest in specialist capacity, make better use of existing private sector expertise within the organization, and partner with IFIs to improve the offer to private sector investors in ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation.

**Conclusion 6. Biodiversity continues to rapidly decline, and the remainder of the current decade is marked by ambitious global targets in areas that the international community has previously failed to achieve. UNDP embarked on a more transformative approach through its Nature Pledge and could draw on**

**tangible examples of field level improvements to ensure quality environmental outcomes are achieved in efforts to meet quantitative goals.**

55. The Global Biodiversity Framework target to protect 30 per cent of global territories by 2030 illustrates the challenge. UNDP support to protected areas produced notable successes; however, overall, supported countries remained significantly off-track amid serious questions about the quality of existing protection. There was a risk that the 2030 achievements remain at the level of intermediary outcomes rather than a reduction in harmful drivers and environmental and social improvements. The Nature Pledge vision was to catalyze three transformational shifts around values, economic and finance, and policies and practices, provides a very useful framework within which to scale UNDP ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation work. To fulfil this vision, UNDP must move beyond merely implementing pilots and focus on rapidly scaling up successful work and promising initiatives.

56. BIOFIN phase 1 was a promising model for UNDP because its scaling was very efficient with its combination of a template for identifying drivers and funding sources, working with ministries of finance, and support for locally-owned solutions. Community engagement was a cornerstone of ecosystem preservation, conservation, and management, with local populations serving as both beneficiaries and custodians of biodiversity and ecosystem services. Scaling UNDP existing successful work combined with a new financing approach and capacity-building of the organizations working with indigenous peoples and local communities increased the hectares of priority ecosystems under indigenous land tenure. This could not be ensured in all cases, and viable pathways and targets to reverse the trend of biodiversity loss remained a significant gap. UNDP did not have a track record of consistently monitoring drivers and ecosystem health and/or adequately promoting knowledge-sharing at the ecosystem level. An area that needs further attention is integrating stakeholders and decision-makers from multiple sectors to explore trade-offs and pathways.

## VI. Recommendations

**Recommendation 1. UNDP should prioritize building ownership of the Nature Pledge in regional bureaux and country offices and enhance collaboration with key partners. Given the continued decline in biodiversity, the action plan for the pledge must intently focus on strategies for scaling and replication of ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation practices that have proven to be successful and include milestones to assess projections periodically.**

57. The Nature Pledge has the potential to galvanize collective efforts needed to address global and local drivers of the biodiversity decline and sustain comprehensive conservation. Internally, regional bureaux and country offices should integrate the pledge's three shifts around values, economic and finance, and policies and practices, into their respective regional strategies and country programme documents and contextualize its principles and priorities. At the headquarters, UNDP should consider the development of a 'nature seal' that guides and recognizes substantive efforts by regional bureaux and country offices to incorporate environmental and development priorities. The pledge action plan should include mid-term milestones and targets to systematically assess the likely contribution of different approaches used by UNDP towards the achievement of its goals and revisit these projections periodically. Externally, UNDP should use the pledge to build on the system and IFI work through issue-based coalitions, and provide a clear statement of UNDP intent and capacity vis-à-vis bilateral, philanthropic, and other donors. While ecosystem and biodiversity are highly context-specific, it is imperative for UNDP headquarters to strengthen and share learning on what works and in which contexts.

**Recommendation 2. UNDP senior leadership should create a global taskforce to target the drivers of biodiversity loss. The taskforce would galvanize a whole-of-UNDP response to fill a critical gap and bolster country office support to economic transitions.**

58. Despite the threat to human development, there are no significant initiatives that aim to shift the international demand and supply processes that drive biodiversity loss and ensure countries are ready to benefit from such transitions. UNDP has demonstrated it can do this as it did by responding to changes in international trade policy for palm oil, for example. A taskforce led by the UNDP Executive Office should formalize this experience into a UNDP approach and focus on creating opportunities across key sectors and in a greater number of countries. This will require further engagement at global and regional levels with organizations that can incentivize change in private sector behaviour in programme countries and coordinated support to country offices on environmental governance and harmful subsidies (see recommendation 3). The taskforce should draw together various parts of the organization with relevant expertise in governance, environment, food systems, climate, chemicals and waste management, inclusive growth, and gender equality. It should dovetail with external initiatives to identify plausible pathways to reverse the trend of biodiversity loss, such as the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services modelling, scenarios employed by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification under the Global Land Outlook, and the UNEP-led Global Environment Outlook 7.

**Recommendation 3. UNDP should intently promote harmful subsidy reform as a key organizational offer.**

59. UNDP is a key player in this emerging space and its relationships with governments could unlock a significant amount of national financing that is currently working against biodiversity and sustainable development. As successful examples of subsidy reduction are demonstrated, UNDP headquarters and regional bureaux should publicize them widely to encourage replication. Sectoral subsidies, such as in agriculture or infrastructure, will require specialized agencies and partners, and UNDP holds the convening power to bring these into discussion with governments. As harmful subsidies are removed, UNDP should work with governments to channel the resources towards sustainable development, thus helping to alleviate shortfalls from official development assistance and growing sovereign debt.

**Recommendation 4. UNDP should develop a list of priority geographic areas for addressing the environmental and poverty nexus, and work with country offices in the most at-risk areas to create context-specific strategies.**

60. This would enable UNDP to better target support to areas where poverty is being deepened by environmental stress, and would complement targeting criteria used in the environmental sector. UNDP should make use of the ‘maps of hope’ and essential life support areas approach to identify the most impactful and at-risk areas to intervene within the national context. This may involve targeting already degraded lands that have a higher value to poorer groups and thereby reducing downstream pressures on more ecologically rich areas, or critical areas for water security. Earlier stage capacity-building may be required for least developed countries and conflict contexts. To expand targeting criteria, UNDP needs to mobilize resources to complement vertical funding that prioritizes environmental criteria and/or embed environmental criteria into criteria for financing non-vertical fund projects.



**Recommendation 5. UNDP should engage with the current reshaping of international finance mechanisms to develop a combined UNDP and IFI offer to support governments in the area of ecosystems and biodiversity. This will require coordinated actions between headquarters and the country level.**

61. UNDP headquarters should seek to tailor partnerships on ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation with IFIs and create additional opportunities for country-level collaboration (such as delivery of different project outputs) as well as better integration of UNDP project-scaling and IFI-lending. This will help to accelerate the implementation of government policy on biodiversity and strengthen the sustainability of outcomes achieved. IFIs can provide types and scale of finance that UNDP cannot, including key components for UNDP-supported processes, such as debt-for-nature swaps. The institutional partnership between UNDP and the IFIs should aim to streamline their respective administrative processes, so they do not slow joint delivery at the country level.

**Recommendation 6. UNDP should develop guidance and invest in human resources capacity development at the regional and country levels to enable country offices to offer governments integrated support for ecosystems, biodiversity, climate, and green growth agendas.**

62. Standalone biodiversity and ecosystem projects are too often seen as positive actions on their own, without making the case for broader approaches. By providing governments with integrated support across multiple sectors to address national priorities, UNDP can provide a sustainable approach to integrating biodiversity and ecosystems into inclusive growth and climate agendas. UNDP should maintain its emphasis on tailoring its approach to specific contexts, utilizing various combinations of tools that facilitate better integration with governance, green growth, and climate agendas. This should be accompanied by fostering new and stronger partnerships with other United Nations organizations and the IFIs, as well as enhancing subnational and private sector engagement to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness. There is an opportunity for UNDP to promote an integrated approach as it rolls out the portfolio approach, and to support this will require investment in human resources capacity at the regional bureau level and potentially in the country offices.

**Recommendation 7. UNDP has the opportunity to build on its comparative advantage with subnational governments and seek opportunities to reduce transaction costs and barriers to scaling.**

63. Subnational work is critical to delivering improved ecosystems and biodiversity at scale but often presents the most difficult challenges as capacity is spread thinly, there are many stakeholders and perceived investment risks are high. Many organizations cannot work effectively in this context, but UNDP has demonstrated important strengths. Working with partners at scale to harmonize subnational regulatory frameworks and build institutional capacity will be required. UNDP should collect and share its experience in this area and identify other countries that may offer quicker wins through ongoing decentralization processes. In its global engagements, UNDP should promote the value of working at the subnational level for ecosystem services and seek to develop new funding lines.

**Recommendation 8. UNDP country offices and regional bureaux should undertake more systematic capacity-building of indigenous peoples and community institutions, rural communities, and ethnic minority groups. This provides an opportunity to support women and minority-led groups to advocate for their needs and rights and to be able to effectively participate in relevant negotiation spaces.**

64. UNDP should identify opportunities to progressively build the leadership skills and capacity of groups representing indigenous peoples and local communities, rural and local institutions, and ethnic minority groups, to monitor and effectively address threats, advocate for their needs and rights, participate in negotiations and manage larger amounts of funding. Locally-led financing models and incentives help direct resources to the field level and motivate stakeholders to invest in the long-term health of ecosystems. To reinforce this, UNDP should provide leadership on the steps that remain to fully integrate indigenous peoples and local communities into area-based conservation measures and collate lessons on approaches that contribute meaningfully to biodiversity conservation.

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