

Summary of the Mid-Term Review of project:
A new green line: mainstreaming biodiversity conservation objectives and practices into China’s water resources management policy and planning.
GEF ID 5665 - FAO ID GCP/CPR/057/GFF

1. Background/Context

The people’s Republic of China has 20% of the global population but only 7% of the world’s freshwater resources. The growth in demand for these water resources together with the rise in anthropogenic events has increased China’s water stress to the medium-high level (World Resources Institute). The project responds to these developments by addressing the gaps in the application of the “*Three Red Lines*” on water resource management (regulating water demand, water efficiency and pollution loading) by proposing, a fourth “*Green Line*” that guarantees the conservation of river biodiversity and environmental flow (e-flow).

The project’s objective is to mainstream biodiversity conservation objectives and practices into China’s water resources management (WRM) policy and planning. To achieve this, the project was designed around three main components and centres on four pilot river sites in Yunnan Province: Buma & Enle River (Zhenyuan County) and Chuan River (Jingdong County); and in Chongqing Municipality: Wubu River (Banan District) and Tang River (Jiangjin District). FAO and the Ministry of Water Resources (MWR) signed an Operational Partner’s Agreement establishing MWR’s International Economic and Technical Cooperation and Exchange Centre (MWR/IETCEC) as the project’s executing agency. Implementation of the project was delegated to IETCEC staff assigned to a project management office (PMO) operating at the national, provincial/municipal and local levels of government under the authority and guidance of the Project Steering Committee (PSC).

COMPONENT 1: “Changing the framework”	COMPONENT 2: “Enhancing implementation”	COMPONENT 3: “Improving Information”
Institutional and planning framework for mainstreaming biodiversity into water resources management at national, provincial and local levels.	Demonstrate on-the-ground activities for mainstreaming biodiversity in pilot rivers in Chongqing and Yunnan Provinces.	Creation of improved information systems and capability to use these systems to inform better and continuously improving water management practices serving enhanced conservation of river biodiversity.
Mainstreaming a landscape approach to river biodiversity conservation into policies, development plans, laws and regulations as well as WRM at the national, provincial/municipality, prefecture, and county/district level.	Design and piloting of concrete BD conservation activities (implementing e-flow by adjusting flow alterations, connectivity and habitat improvement, etc.) using improved information (C3) and providing feedback to policy mainstreaming (C1).	Designing and piloting of improved information systems (e-flow analysis, water accounting, BD monitoring, etc.) which will provide better information for the policy mainstreaming efforts (C1) and the implementation of on-the-ground activities (C2).

2. Terms of Reference (MTR purpose, team, scope, methodology, limitations)

The MTR’s main purpose is to assesses the project’s progress in meeting its objectives and outcomes (results) and to make recommendations on how to improve project performance to achieve these outcomes/objectives. The MTR team comprised a lead international consultant and a national consultant and the scope of the MTR covers all activities implemented between the project’s start date on 29 September 2016 to 31 March 2020. The work methodology included stakeholder analysis, a desk review of main documents, construction of a Theory of Change with the PMO and FAO stakeholders and elaboration of an Evaluation Matrix to guide semi-structured interviews with a wide a sample of stakeholders at all levels. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the field mission was cancelled and all interviews performed online via video-conferencing.

3. Main findings and conclusions - achievements and shortcomings

Relevance: The project continues to have a high level of strategic relevance within the MWR and is highly supportive of both national and GEF/FAO priorities and objectives. A major achievement of the project's design centres on the project's commitment to enhance institutional capacity and understanding on the inextricable link between the conservation of aquatic biodiversity and the protection of ecological flow (e-flow) in the country's small and medium-sized rivers. In addition, the project facilitates participation of the pilot rivers in President Xi's "*Beautiful Rivers and Lakes Initiative*" and responds to his call in 2019 to step up "*ecological civilisation*". The project's commitment to enhancing project ownership through its support to the development and expansion of the "River Chief system" in Yunnan Province and Chongqing Municipality was also found to be highly popular among provincial and local stakeholders interviewed. The main shortcoming concerns inadequate attention given to establishing inter-institutional coordination to support and sustain effective WRM over the long-term.

Effectiveness: The project's implementation is around 18 months behind schedule and highly unlikely to meet its objectives by the 31 May 2020. Nonetheless, it is delivering some important outcomes. These include: the introduction of plans to protect water resources and water use in Yunnan Province; the testing of an e-flow control plan (at the Wubu River) that can be applied in other small and medium-sized rivers in Chongqing Municipality; the adoption of a new tiered approach to the River and Lake Chief System in partnership with civil society in both pilot provinces; and the adoption of new technical guidelines for River/Lake Health Assessments (R/LHAs) that include a new protocol to assess biological integrity and which MWR is committed to applying as its chosen alternative to the "Greenline Scorecard" given R/LHAs have been in operation since 2010. In addition, the project has successfully implemented on-the-ground activities that have engaged over 28 000 locals in clean-up campaigns, restoration of over 53 ha of wetland habitats and the release of one million fingerlings of endemic fish. Shortcomings mainly concern the slow development of aquatic biodiversity monitoring and data management capacity, which is not aided by the absence of cross-sector coordination and a long-term training programme to establish the national aquatic biodiversity information system, which is crucial to support planning and reporting on national/international targets/goals.



Efficiency: At the end of 2019, the project's physical and financial advance stood at 40% and 21.7% respectively. In general, the project has experienced difficulties in converting its resources into results, especially in the period 2017-2018, but this improved in 2019 following the contracting of The Nature Conservancy, the recruitment of a chief technical officer, the appointment of full-time staff to the PMO. In addition, MWR/IETCEC confirmed indirect execution of the project (based on the OPA) has enhanced its ownership of the project, although difficulties in the application of *ad hoc* conditions applied in the OPA to mitigate fiduciary risks (in particular assurance) remains a problem, given there is no budget to fund them in the Project Document.



Sustainability: There are positive signs the project's main activities and results will be sustained well beyond the project (assuming it is extended). Socio-political, institutional, financial and fiduciary risks are low to low-medium indicating the executing partner will be able to consolidate biodiversity mainstreaming and protection of e-flow. MWR is committed to consolidating the new River Chief System engaging civil society, applying R/LHAs incorporating biological integrity and establish a national monitoring system for aquatic biodiversity. Nonetheless, the project does not have an exit strategy and there is inadequate cross-sector coordination in the river catchments covering planning and management of anthropogenic and natural risks that impact on habitats and biodiversity.

Factors affecting performance: The Project Document has some design faults that have not been addressed to date. Some outputs, such as the Green Line Scorecard are no longer valid following the adoption of the development of the new R/LHA. In addition, some of the targets in the Results Matrix need to be reassessed, especially relating to biodiversity monitoring. The MTR also found the current approach to internal monitoring and evaluation is mainly geared to meeting FAO/GEF's heavy progress reporting requirements rather than to facilitate learning and knowledge exchange on lessons learned and good practices. This situation has also impeded the application of an effective communication strategy through which key findings, achievements gaps, good practices, etc. target different audiences to gain support for biodiversity mainstreaming and the protection of e-flow.

Cross-cutting dimensions (gender, environmental and social concerns): The Project Document does not include a gender strategy, or apply GEF/FAO guidelines on gender or ethnic minorities. Instead, it mainly focuses on participation rates of women and ethnic minorities in its on-the-ground activities in the four pilot rivers, although this is not systematically reported and updated in the progress reports. Similarly, no updates have been provided on the environmental and social safeguards (ESS) assessed in 2016, although the MTR found the project continues to comply with these standards.

Overall GEF rating on project performance and achievements so far: moderately satisfactory

4. Recommendations of the MTR

1. Grant an extension of two years (accounting for the impact of COVID-19), with three conditions: (i) adopt the theory of change to clarify vision and mission of the project and its exit strategy; (ii) update the Results Matrix and; (iii) develop an internal M&E system geared to learning.
2. Establish an intra and inter-institutional coordination mechanism to establish effective decision-making on WRM in areas of mutual interest, particularly at the provincial level (ensuring it has a secretariat to implement decisions and monitor progress).
3. Identify and apply an effective communication strategy guided by an expert in communications.
4. Establish a communication mechanism within FAO to ensure all key services are brought together to ensure all GEF-funded projects are correctly designed, funded and implemented in accordance with MS-701/OPIM (November 2016) and resolve outstanding funding gaps.
5. Improve reporting on women's participation, ensuring data includes women participating in decision-making roles, how far the project is targeting access of vulnerable women, etc.