Mid-term review of the project: Accelerating the Global Transition to Sustainable Agriculture (P 03770)

Final report – March 2024

Table of contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Glossary

Agricultural biodiversity (Agrobiodiversity): 'All components of biological diversity of relevance to food and agriculture and that constitute an agroecosystem: the variety and variability of animals, plants and microorganisms, at the genetic, species and ecosystem levels, which are necessary to sustain key functions of the agroecosystem' (CBD, 2000).

Agricultural ecosystems (Agroecosystem): 'Communities of plants and animals interacting with their physical and chemical environments that have been modified by people to produce food, fiber, fuel and other products for human consumption and processing' (Altieri, 2002).

Below-ground biodiversity: the diversity of the soil biota

Biotic structure: the living organisms that shape the environment

Ecosystem functions: 'Ecosystem functioning reflects the collective life activities of plants, animals, and microbes and the effects these activities (e.g., feeding, growing, moving, excreting waste) have on the physical and chemical conditions of their environment. Ecosystem functions (sometimes also referred to as ecosystem processes or ecological processes) are an integral part of biodiversity, and can thus be broadly defined as the biological, geochemical and physical processes that take place or occur within an ecosystem' (GEOBON)

Ecosystem services: 'The set of ecosystem functions that are useful to humans' (Kremen, 2005). According to the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA), ecosystem services can be divided into four categories: provisioning services like food, fiber and fuel; supporting services such as nutrient cycling, soil formation and habitat provision; regulating services including climate regulation, water, and disease and pest control; and cultural services such as aesthetic, spiritual or recreational experiences (MEA, 2005).

Land health: 'The capacity of land, relative to its potential, to sustain delivery of ecosystem services' (Shepherd et al., 2015).

Nature-based Solution: activities undertaken to protect, sustainably manage and restore natural and modified ecosystems to simultaneously benefit people and nature.

Planned biodiversity: Biodiversity voluntarily introduced by the farmer **/** land manager

Sustainable Agriculture (SA):

There is no universally agreed-upon definition of SA.

A relatively straightforward one is*:* "The goal of sustainable agriculture is to meet society's food and textile needs in the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs[1]".

According to IUCN, the drivers towards Sustainable Agriculture are[2] :

- Prioritise soil and landscape biodiversity for food and nature.
- Wide adoption of agro-ecological approaches for managing agricultural landscapes
- Establish targets and indicators at national and global levels for sustainable agriculture.
- Reward farmers for ecosystem services provided through sustainable farming.
- Promote change throughout the global food system to enhance sustainability.
- Build consensus on environmental stewardship in the agricultural sector.

[1] https://sarep.ucdavis.edu/sustainable-ag

[2] https://www.iucn.org/our-work/topic/agriculture-and-soil-biodiversity

List of acronyms and Signification

	English	Français	Español
AFOLU	Agriculture, Forest and other Land Uses	Agriculture, Forêts et autres Utilisations des Terres	Agricultura, Selvas y Otros Usos de las Tierras
AGTSA	Accelerating the Global Transition to Sustainable Agriculture	Accélérer la transition mondiale vers une agriculture durable	Acelerar la transicion mundial hacia la Agricultura Sostenible
ALH	Agriculture and Land health (initiative)	Agriculture et Santé des Terres	Agricultura y Salud de las Tierras
CAD/OCDE	Development Aid Committee / OECD	Comité de l'aide au développement de l'OCDE	Comité de ayuda al desarrollo de la OCED
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity	Convention sur la Diversité Biologique	Convención sobre la Diversidad Biológica
CC	Climate Change	Changement Climatique	Cambio Climatico
CFS	Committee on World Food Security	Comité de la Sécurité Alimentaire Mondiale	
CSA	Climate-smart Agriculture	Agriculture Climato-resiliente	ACI = Agricultura climaticamente inteligente (ref: FAO)
CSO	Civil Society Organization	Organisation de la Société Civile	Organización de la Sociedad Civil
DG	Chief Executive officer- CEO	Directeur Général	Director General
EU	European Union	Union Européenne – UE	Union Europea – UE
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation	Organisation des Nations Unies pour l'Agriculture et l'Alimentation- OAA	Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la agricultura y la alimentacion -OAA
GCF	Green Climate Fund	Fond Vert pour le Climat	Fondo Verde para el Clima
GEF	Global Environmental Fund	Fond pour l'Environnement Mondial - FEM	Fondo Mundial para el Medio ambiente
GMO	Gentrically Modified Organisms	Organisme Génétiquement Modifié - OGM	Organismo Genéticamente Modificado,_ OGM
IA	Internal Agreement	Accord interne	Acuerdo interno
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development	Fond International pour le Développement Agricole - FIDA	Fondo Internacional para el Desarrollo Agricola- FIDA
IFI	International Financing Institution	Institution Internationale de Financement	Institución Internacional de Financiamiento

IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature	Union Internationale pour la Conservation de la Nature -UICN	Union Internacional para la Conservacion de la Naturaleza- UICN-
MEA	Millennium Ecosystem Assessment	Évaluation des écosystèmes pour le millénaire	Evaluación de los Ecosistemas para el Millenio
MTR	Mid-Term Review	Évaluation intermédiaire	Evaluación intermedia
NbS	Nature-based Solutions	Solutions fondées sur la Nature -SfN	Soluciones basadas en la naturaleza -SbN
ODA	Official Development Aid	Aide Officielle au Développement	Ayuda Oficial al desarrollo
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.	Organisation pour la Cooperation et le Développement Economique = OCDE	Organizacion de Cooperacion para el Desarrollo Economico - OCDE
PO	Producer Organization	Organisation de Producteurs	Organizaciones de Productores
RO	Regional Office	Bureau Régional	Oficina Regional
SA	Sustainable Agriculture	Agriculture durable	Agricultura Sostenible
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal	Objectifs de Développement Durable - ODD	Objetivos del Desarrollo Sostenible
SLM	Sustainable Landscape Management	Gestion durable des paysages	Gestion sostenible de los paisajes
ToC	Theory of Change	Théorie du changement	Teoria del Cambio
ToR	Terms of reference	Termes de Référence	Terminos de Referencia
WB	World Bank	Banque Mondiale – BM	Banco Mundial – BM

Executive Summary

In the past decades, agricultural intensification has made amazing advances in terms of productivity, production, and food security for many. However, this has been achieved at the expense of increasingly negative impacts on soil, water and air pollution and eventually on biodiversity and human health. Indeed, the current dominant "industrialized" agricultural model, based on a massive use of synthesized inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, GMOs, ...), together with the expansion of the agricultural frontier (the other source of the significant global production increases) are largely participating to the major drivers of biodiversity losses such as: destruction/degradation of the habitat of wild animal and vegetal species, pollution, over-exploitation of resources, … Average yields have increased up to the 1990s but have been stagnating and even decreasing in some parts of the world since. As demand for food is growing, the environmental footprint of agriculture is expected to increase with it.

Facing this situation, IUCN recently operated a fundamental strategic shift by acknowledging that the agriculture sector could be turned into an ally rather than an adversary, through a shared quest for the sustainability of food systems. Consequently, IUCN now advocates for "Nature-based solutions", in order to contribute to the transition to a "sustainable" agriculture (SA). This is leading IUCN towards a constructive engagement with other actors in the agriculture sector (governments, businesses, and farmers) in order to promote policies and practices that conserve biodiversity on farms and farming landscapes, and eventually at national, regional, global levels.

For that purpose, IUCN has mustered the support of partners – among them prominently the IKEA Foundation - to fund and implement 3 years (2022-2024) / 3 Mio € multi-country project called: "Accelerating the Global Transition to Sustainable Agriculture" (further designated as AGTSA). After 1 ½ year of implementation of AGTSA, the TERO cooperative consulting firm was commissioned to carry out its "Mid-Term evaluation/Review" – (MTR), an exercise meant to serve both learning and accountability purposes.

The project execution and financial structure is summarized below. Specific Deliverables have been assigned to three levels of project management (central, regional, country). within IUCN:

Project Cost source	***Description***	***Amount, €*** *(% of total)*
Component 1:	**Mobilising the operational and convening capacity of IUCN**	**689 000** 22%
Component 2:	**Providing and communicating scientific evidence,** on the multiple benefits of sustainable agriculture	**860 000** 28 %
Component 3:	-. Supporting the **development of a portfolio of sustainable agroecological projects**	**916 000** 29.6 %
Project "direct costs"		223 500
Overheads (15%)		403 275
GRAND TOTAL		**3 091 775**

The methodology for this MTR has been described in detail in our inception report (11/2023); it is based on documents review, a questionnaire/survey and a number of interviews with the project implementors at different levels (IUCN's Headquarters, Regional Offices, Country teams). Field visits were not possible, which constitute a limitation to the exercise with an absence of ground-proofing.

On the basis of this analysis, the project at this stage has been synthetically assessed with regard to the evaluation criteria, as follows:

Evaluation criterion	*Assessment mark*	*Meaning (the +/- sign indicates a nuance)*
Relevance	**B +**	Satisfactory (in line with expectations)
Coherence	**B -**	
Effectiveness	**B -**	
Efficiency	**C+**	Implementation problems to be solved
Other specific IUCN concerns	**C+**	

It must be underscored that these ratings are (i) inevitably subjective to some extent, (ii) proposed at a stage when the project is still far from being completed. Therefore, for criteria such as effectiveness, efficiency and some of the specific concerns, ratings may be improved at later implementation stages.

A SWOT analysis is also proposed (p. 54), which helped in formulating recommendations for the future.

Eventually, the overall conclusion of the MTR is proposed as:

The AGTSA project - although it could have been more efficient - is indeed supporting the coming into force of IUCN's Agriculture and Land Health Program. However, IUCN needs to dedicate additional resources, more institutional commitment to this initiative, as well as focus on expanding and nurturing its dialogue with stakeholders - in particular the farmers organizations - in order to internalize this paradigm shift into its long-term operational plans.

In the short term, an increased experimentation in the field will help materializing the expected outputs-and therefore the outcomes. In parallel, a full-fledged Logical Framework and corresponding Evaluation Matrix are needed, to be made instrumental via a proper MEL system for the project, currently missing.

Besides, a further analysis of the desired change process should at the same time aim at better determining where the IUCN's added value lies - in the context of a collaborative effort by many actors to promote S.A.

Eventually, the MTR led to a number of recommendations, namely:

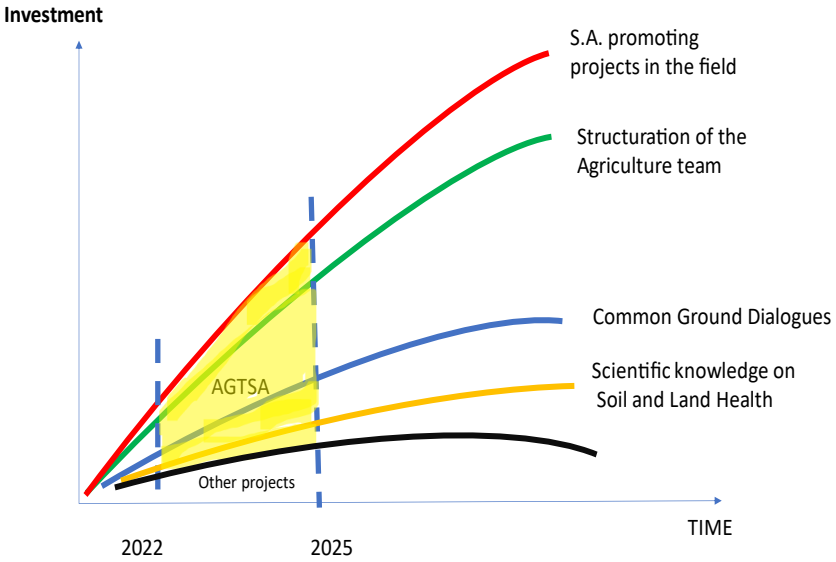
A. Strategic[3] Recommendations

R1. Consolidate the Theory of Change and Logical Framework: a) for the whole Agriculture Program, and b) for AGTSA. On that basis, raise more funding for upscaling.

The IUCN initiative and Agriculture Program need a well spelled-out ToC, and AGTSA's ToC in turn needs to be clearly delineated as part of it. The expected transformation is bound to be a long process, and even after AGTSA will have been completed, there will still be a long way ahead which has to be anticipated – and financed (Figure below). Indeed, resource mobilization for pursuing the transformation engaged with AGTSA is key to its impact.

Overall, the AGTSA project is to be viewed within the framework of a "time-slice" programming of IUCN involvement for Sustainable Agriculture, whereby this project contributes to some of the lines of action of the Agriculture Program during a determined period of time.

[3] By "strategic" we here mean that these recommendations aim at providing an estimated best match between IUCN's ambitions and means.



R2. Better connect with the intended final beneficiaries.

As part of the dialogue with the sector stakeholders, it is mandatory that IUCN country teams intensify their partnership with farmers and their organisations, who are the front-line beneficiaries. In the future, the farmers organizations should be included as co-designers of operational aspects, stimulating their deeper appropriation of the proposed land health and Nature-based Solutions in a more user-friendly form. The specific needs of women farmers (in terms of access to resources and knowledge) will have to be fully internalized in the communications and training plans.

R3. Incorporate findings from countries where intensive agriculture dominates.

In countries where intensive artificialized agriculture by far dominates – such as the EU, USA and Canada, Australia - or is well established in terms of area (e.g. in the BRICS), the need to advocate for- and shift to - a more sustainable path to the perennity of food systems is strikingly acute.

IUCN could play a greater role in alerting the public at large in those countries about the environmental co-benefits that a more sustainable agriculture would provide and join efforts with other whistle-blowers. A careful reflection has to be made as to whether or not additional countries can still be incorporated into the present AGTSA project; yet it is necessary to envisage the enlargement – in the next future - of the representativity of the current sample of countries.

R4. Reinforce HR to support IUCN involvement in the agricultural sector.

The "agriculture team "is currently concentrated at HQ level and its mandate still seems not to be radiating enough within IUCN. Incidentally, IUCN staffing in each regional office should include at least one dedicated full-time agriculture specialist.

B. Recommendations for the implementation of AGTSA project

R5. Work out a No-cost extension of AGTSA by 6 months.

The financial resources suffice to extend the project until mid-2025 in order to obtain the finalization of the expected outputs and in particular more results from the tools tests, a potential real added value at country/regional level. This requires securing additional Internal Agreements (IAs) for about a year, reshuffling some budget resources from HQ expenses to the countries.

R6. Set up a proper MEL system for the project and for the agriculture program as a whole.

A proper MEL system for the deployment of the agriculture program, to be overseen and informed by regional and national IUCN teams must be structured. For the AGTSA project in particular, there is a need for process-oriented and qualitative indicators.

R7. Be able to follow up on AGTSA outcomes in order to materialize their effects and potential impact.

In particular, the approval process of the proposed SA-promoting projects will need close follow-up after AGTSA 's official closure. The dialogue process with the various stakeholders in the agriculture sector will need be continued, broadened and deepened (see R2).

R8. Design and plan follow-up activities and an institutional set-up for the dialogues to continue.

Consolidate the dialogues at regional and country levels, further explore concrete and organizational ways and means for a reinforced collaboration with the stakeholders, leading to common actions. Again, the AGTSA project makes sense in as much as it leads to more meaningful involvement by IUCN in the agriculture sector, not only through implementing the investment projects but also through maintaining and nurturing a fruitful policy dialogue with stakeholders from all the sector spectrum: farmers, agri-businesses, governments (local, national), NGOs, …

A. Background and Introduction to the project

IUCN has mustered the support of partners – among them prominently the IKEA Foundation - to fund and implement the 3 years (2022-2024) / 3 Mio € multi-country project called: "Accelerating the Global Transition to Sustainable Agriculture" (from now on designated as AGTSA). After 1 ½ year of implementation, IUCN commissioned the TERO cooperative consulting firm to carry out a "Mid-Term Evaluation/Review – MTR ".

This exercise is meant to serve both learning and accountability purposes. It seeks to include a comprehensive analysis of the different country sub-projects – managed at national and regional levels - as well as of the "umbrella" project managed at HQ level.

A.1 The IUCN DG's initiative

In 2021, IUCN' s DG launched a special initiative – labelled "Agriculture and Land Health" – in order to "build commitments for accelerated action towards sustainable agriculture that secures land health as a Nature-based Solution to address major societal challenges (food security, climate change, biodiversity loss…)".

The IUCN thereby acknowledges that the solutions for sustainable agriculture – like agroecological approaches and regenerative agriculture – are well known, and already practiced on a considerable scale in some countries. The initiative therefore aims at strengthening awareness, build consensus for action, and provide tools and methodologies to support the scaling up and mainstreaming of sustainable agriculture.

The initiative strives to install a regular dialogue between actors from historically adversarial sectors (e.g. conservationists and agriculture stakeholders) to discuss ambitious commitments, identify areas of consensus, and consider how to address the opportunities and barriers on the way to the sustainability of the agrifood systems.
The" Accelerating the Global Transition to Sustainable Agriculture" (AGTSA) project under review was designed with the specific aim to support IUCN in the implementation of this initiative.

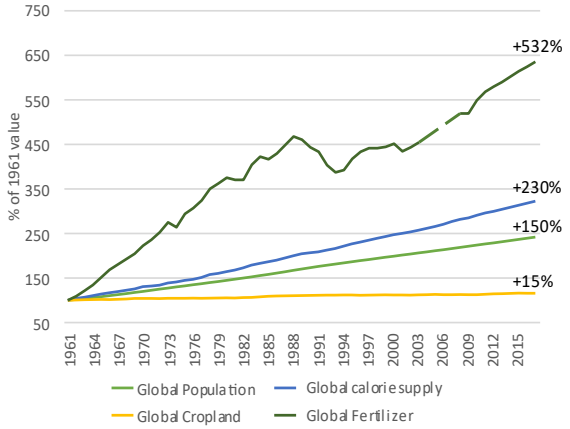
A 1.1 Rationale for the initiative

Agricultural intensification in the past decades (sometimes coined as the "green revolution") has made amazing advances in terms of productivity, production, and food security for many (in spite of not yet tackling considerable post-harvest losses and food accessibility failures), but this has been achieved at the expense of increasingly negative impacts on soil, water and air pollution and eventually on biodiversity and human health. Average yields have increased up to the 1990s but have been stagnating and even decreasing in some parts of the world since. Future demand for food will increase as the human population grows, and the environmental footprint of agriculture is expected to increase with it (Fig. 1).

"The dominant agricultural development paradigm has considered agriculture as any other industrial activity with standardized processes, ignored the dependence of agriculture on soil and ecosystems, and as a result has depleted soil fertility, degraded soil biodiversity, and undermined the resilience and the long-term viability of farming" (ref: AGTSA project proposal, p.4). Overuse of inputs – exacerbated by inappropriate policies - is harming the long-term viability of farming, because it damages soils, reduces biodiversity and ultimately impairs our capacity to feed the world's growing population. According to FAO, more than 25% of arable soils worldwide are degraded, and the equivalent of a soccer pitch of soil is eroded every five seconds. A recent OECD report on agriculture showed that more than half of directly transferred subsidies to farmers (summing up USD 780 billion in 2019) negatively impact productivity and environmental outcomes.

IUCN WORLD CONSERVATION CONGRESS Marseille 2020

Sustainably feeding 9 billion people



Fifty years of agricultural intensification:

- Tripling of food production with 15% increase in land area
- Major increases in fertiliser, machinery, irrigation, pesticides and improved varieties
- Significant decline in food insecurity, major growth in obesity
- 30% of all production is lost or wasted
- Global inequalities

FIGURE 1: AGRICULTURAL INTENSIFICATION RELIED ON INCREASED SYNTHETIC INPUTS USE (SOURCE: IUCN @WCC)

Indeed, the conventional intensification of agriculture, based on a massive use of synthesized inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, GMOs, ...), together with the expansion of the agricultural frontier (the other origin of the significant production increases) are largely participating to the major drivers of biodiversity losses such as: habitat destruction/degradation of wild animal and vegetal species, pollution, over-exploitation of resources, … (Fig.2)

Legend: = Driver of concern to the IUCN agriculture initiative and project

Figure extracted from IPBES 2018 Assessment report on Land Degradation and Restoration

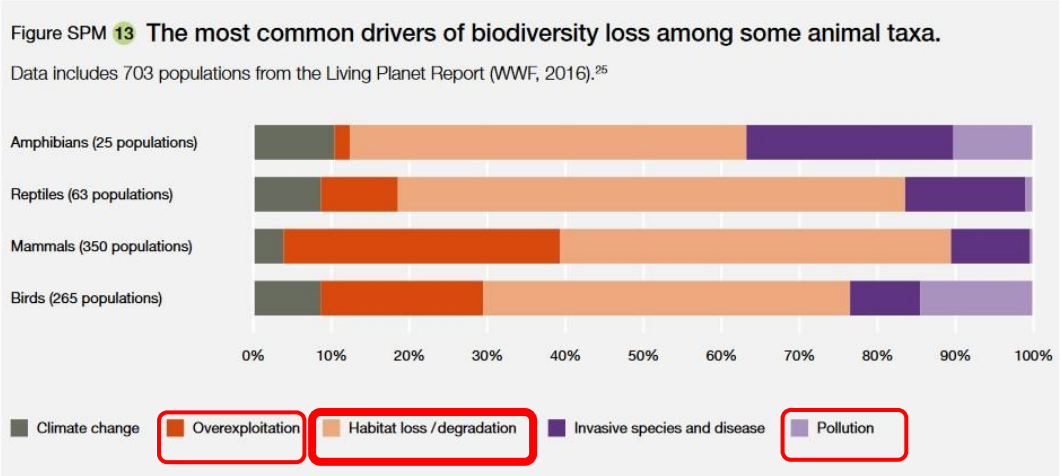


FIGURE 2: THE DRIVERS OF BIODIVERSITY (SOURCE: IPBES); THEY ARE CLEARLY IMPACTED BY AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES.

Consequently, conservationists have long considered agriculture as a sector essentially detrimental to their purpose (Fig. 3):

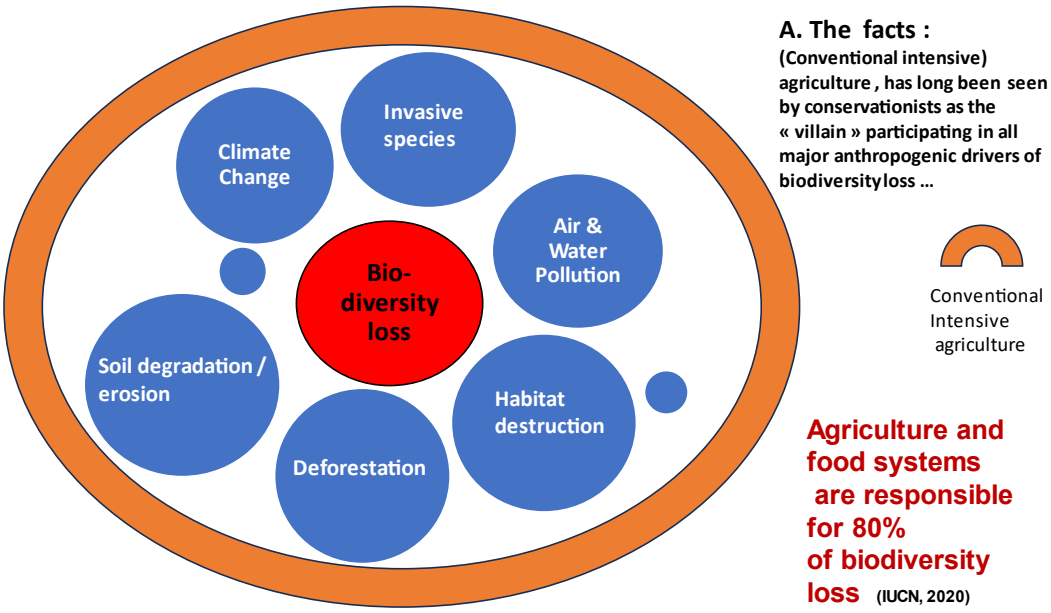


FIGURE 3: PRESENT-DAY AGRICULTURAL INTENSIFICATION FUELS THE DRIVERS OF BIODIVERSITY LOSS.

With the DG's initiative, IUCN operated a fundamental strategic shift, realizing that the agriculture sector could be turned into an ally, through a shared quest for the sustainability of food systems. This quest must necessarily be associated with a conscious and resolute conservation - even restoration whenever possible - of biodiversity: both in soils (the soil must be viewed as a community of living organisms) and in landscapes (allowing the restoration / continuity of habitats). This is leading IUCN away from its historical adversarial approach to agriculture and towards a constructive engagement with actors committed to agriculture (governments, businesses, and farmers) in order to promote policies and practices that conserve biodiversity on farms and in farming landscapes and eventually at national, regional, global levels.

Consequently IUCN – Like other prominent international institutions (FAO, IFAD, GEF, GCF …) now advocates for "Nature-based solutions", opposed to the current artificial- inputs-based intensification of agriculture, in order to contribute to the transition to a "sustainable" agriculture (Fig. 4).

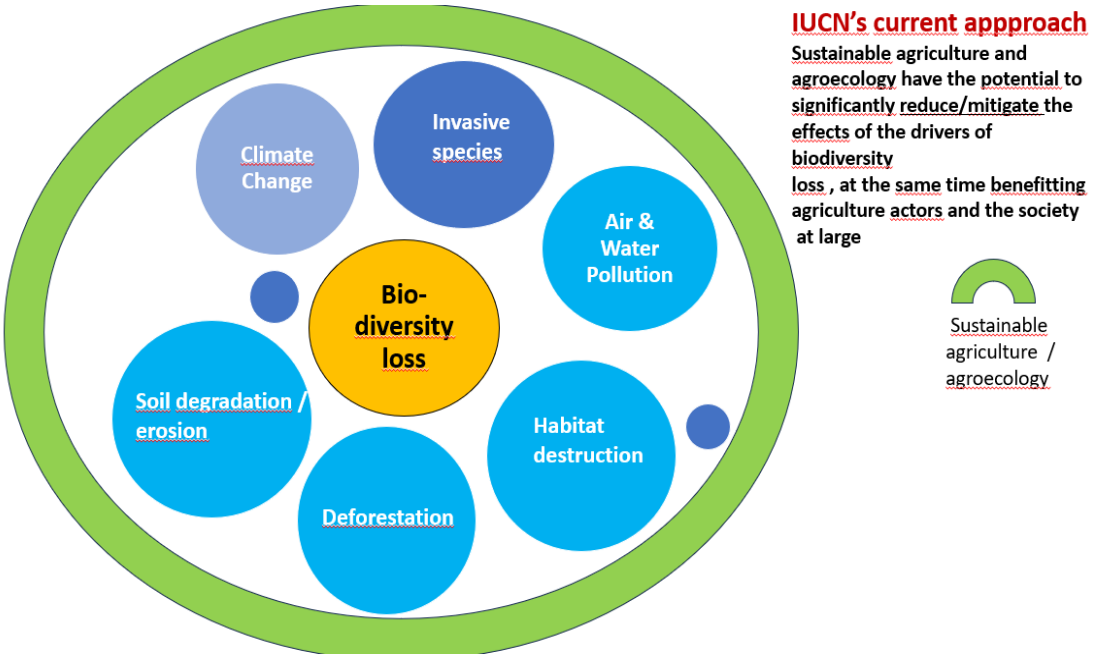


FIGURE 4: SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE (RELYING ON NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS) HAS THE POTENTIAL TO COUNTERACT THE DRIVERS OF BIODIVERSITY LOSS, THUS GRADUALLY MITIGATE THEIR IMPACT (*SOURCE: AUTHORS*)

IUCN's 2020 report "Common Ground: restoring land health for sustainable agriculture" seeks to demonstrate that a sustainable agriculture boosts on-farm biodiversity, conserves off-farm biodiversity in agricultural landscapes, and safeguards against habitat loss by maintaining the long-term viability and productivity of existing land.
Nevertheless, and considering the recent switch in IUCN vision regarding agriculture, it is necessary to reinforce the capacities of the organization to promote this view through improving its internal coordination, outreach, visibility in the field, and coherent messaging.

The "Agriculture and land Health" initiative, from which the referred project originates, hence aims first at reinforcing IUCN's capacity to:

(i) consolidate this approach with existing and additional hard data, and
(ii) broadly communicate and build partnerships based on the claimed "Common Ground" shared by the conservation and agriculture sectors. (Fig.5).

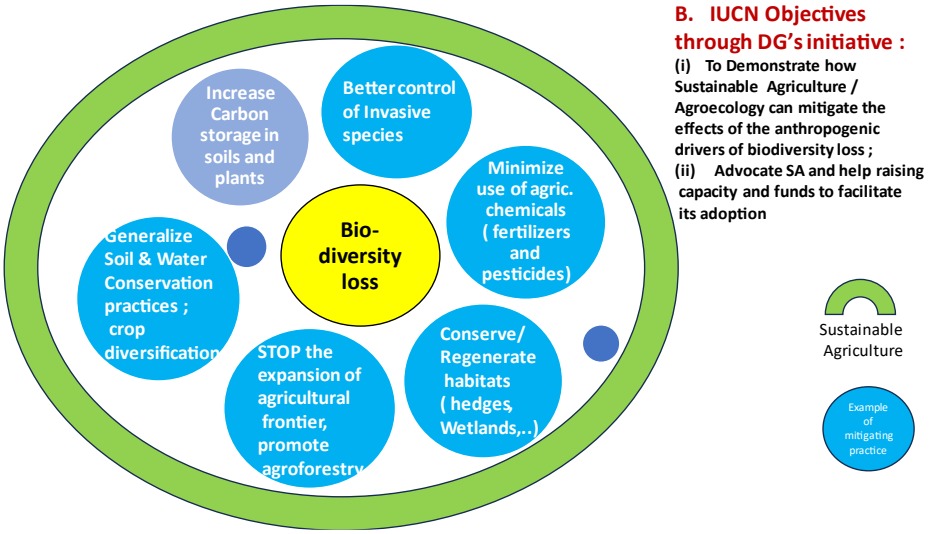
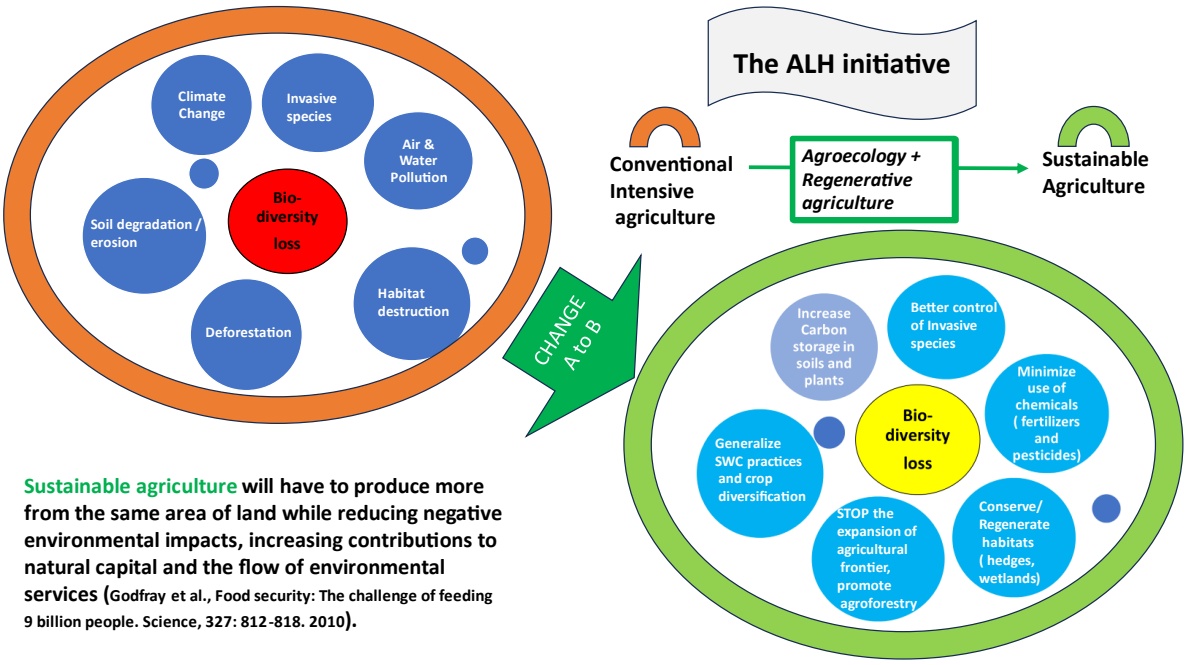


FIGURE 5: EACH DRIVER OF BIODIVERSITY LOSS CAN BE DEFEATED THROUGH A SERIES OF S.A. AND AGROECOLOGY PRACTICES (SOURCE: AUTHORS)

In a nutshell, the IUCN DG's initiative ambitions to facilitate the transition from situation A (current) to B (desired) i.e. to one where Sustainable Agriculture is the preferred approach (Fig. 6):



Sustainable agriculture will have to produce more from the same area of land while reducing negative environmental impacts, increasing contributions to natural capital and the flow of environmental services (Godfray et al., Food security: The challenge of feeding 9 billion people. Science, 327: 812-818. 2010).

FIGURE 6: ACCELERATING THE GLOBAL TRANSITION TO SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE: THE IUCN VIEW (SOURCE: AUTHORS)

A.2 The "Accelerating the Global Transition towards Sustainable Agriculture" project within the framework of the IUCN initiative for "Agriculture and Land Health" – ALH:

In order to start implementing its ALH initiative, IUCN – with the funding and support of the IKEA Foundation – has designed the "Accelerating the Global Transition towards Sustainable Agriculture" - AGTSA, here under review at about mid-term of its implementation. "The project will provide tools and support partnership-building to capitalise on emerging consensus by developing a pipeline of investment deals between like-minded actors in the public and private sectors. The tool will ensure consistency in approach and alignment with the Nature-based Solutions standard and principles of agroecology. By developing such projects with relevant partners, IUCN will be able to demonstrate the level of support for these approaches and principles and will catalyse additional momentum for large scale system transformation" (Source: IUCN's Project description). In order to assist in pursuing the long-term goal of the IUCN initiative for agriculture, the AGTSA project primarily aims at reinforcing IUCN in building a strong Agriculture Program through the strengthening of IUCN's capacity in coordination, communication, and partnership building in relation with the Sustainable Agriculture -biodiversity nexus (Fig. 7).

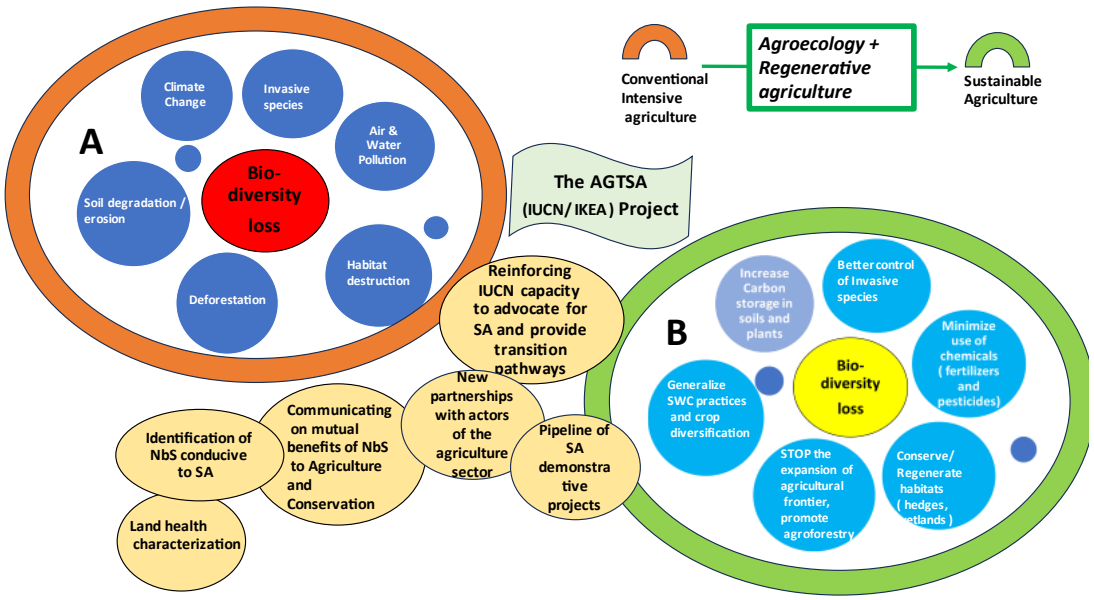


FIGURE 7: ACCELERATING THE GLOBAL TRANSITION TO SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE: THE AGTSA PROJECT COMES IN SUPPORT TO THE IUCN AGRICULTURE PROGRAM (SOURCE: AUTHORS)

Box 1: What is SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE all about?

Practitioners of sustainable agriculture seek to integrate three main objectives into their work: **a healthy environment, economic profitability, and social and economic equity**. Every person involved in the food system—growers, food processors, distributors, retailers, consumers, and waste managers—can play a role in ensuring a sustainable agricultural system.

There are many practices commonly used by people working in sustainable agriculture and sustainable food systems. Growers may use methods to promote soil health, minimize water use, and lower pollution levels on the farm. Consumers and retailers concerned with sustainability can look for "value-based" foods that are grown using methods promoting farmworker wellbeing, that are environmentally friendly, or that strengthen the local economy. And researchers in sustainable agriculture often cross disciplinary lines with their work: combining biology, economics, engineering, chemistry, community development, and many others. However, sustainable agriculture is more than a collection of practices. It is also a process of negotiation: a push and pull between the sometimes-competing interests of an individual farmer or of people in a community as they work to solve complex problems about how we grow our food and fiber.

Source: Cornell U.: https://sarep.ucdavis.edu/sustainable-ag. For a description of the different approaches to SA, also see: https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2020-017-En.pdf

As emphasized before, halting land degradation by agriculture– a result of habitat destruction and/or soil, water and air pollution, generated by present-day agriculture – and restoring "land health", is at the heart of the challenge. IUCN's evidence-based conviction is that increased land health (Fig. 8) indirectly generates wider societal benefits (e.g., by restoring ecosystems, contributing to climate regulation, water supply, risk reduction, protection of cultural and aesthetic values, and stimulating several other ecosystem services).

Moreover, IUCN's view is that mainstreaming Nature-based Solutions (NbS) applied to agriculture are indispensable to improve land health, thus make agriculture more sustainable, and contribute to the necessary transition towards a generalized SA approach. Central to the concept of NbS is the need to work to reinforce ecosystems, rather than rely on conventional, narrowly focused, engineered solutions which too often tend to weaken them. NbS in agriculture encompass a range of management practices and restoration actions that use agroecological approaches and regeneration techniques to reintroduce natural functionality into agroecosystems, promoting diversity and recycling, reducing the use of synthetic inputs while responding to multiple societal challenges (Fig.8).

FIGURE 8: THE LAND HEALTH CONCEPT IS CENTRAL TO IUCN'S PERSPECTIVE FOR AGRICULTURE (SOURCE: IUCN 2030)

In summary, the IUCN Agriculture Program as a whole, the ALH and the AGTSA project in particular, aim at firmly establishing a durable dialogue between conservationists and the agriculture sector with a shared perspective of promoting Sustainable Agriculture. AGTSA aims at temporarily supporting a significant share of the ALH initiative, therefore inscribing itself as an integral part of the current IUCN strategical momentum (Fig.9). In addition – and contribution – to its advocacy effort, it undertakes to provide adequate tools to better apprehend the soil and land health at different scales (plot, farm, landscapes, …).

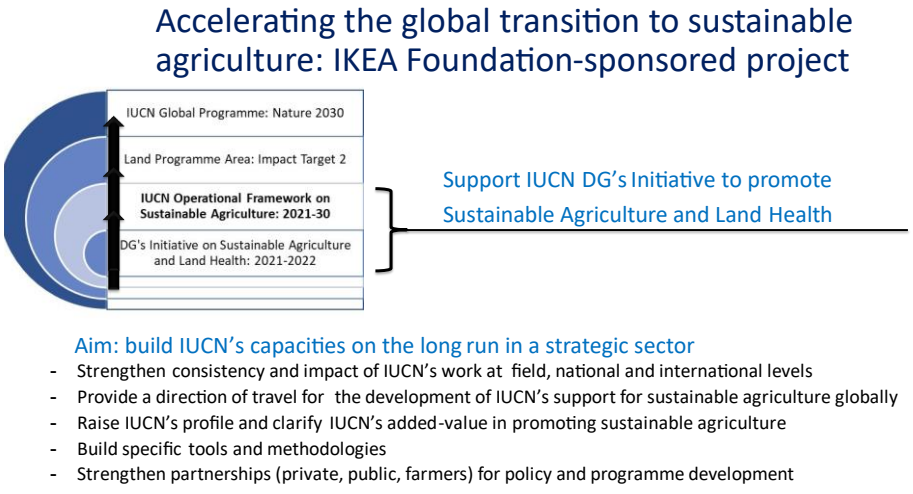


FIGURE 9: AGTSA COMES IN SUPPORT OF THE IUCN DG'S AGRICULTURE INITIATIVE (SOURCE: UICN/ AGTSA PROJECT PRESENTATION)

A 2.1 The initial Theory of Change

The IUCN DG's initiative has been based on a very simple "Theory of change "(ToC) summarized in Table 1 (source: IUCN):

Problems set	Response ("solutions")
• Low level of ambition of countries to scale-up to S.A. / agro-ecological pilot initiatives	**POLICY advocacy and dialogues**
• Lack of agreement on the value and suitability of S.A. / Weak consensus over data and metrics	**Enrich scientific KNOWLEDGE and monitoring tools**
• Low level of investments in countries to scale-up agroecological approaches	**SA Investments PORTFOLIO development**

TABLE 1: SIMPLIFIED TOC OF THE IUCN DG'S INITIATIVE ON SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE (ALH)

On this basis, the AGTSA project derived its own logic and ToC, quickly enunciated in the project document and translated by the Consultant into the diagram below (Fig. 10 and ANNEX 4).

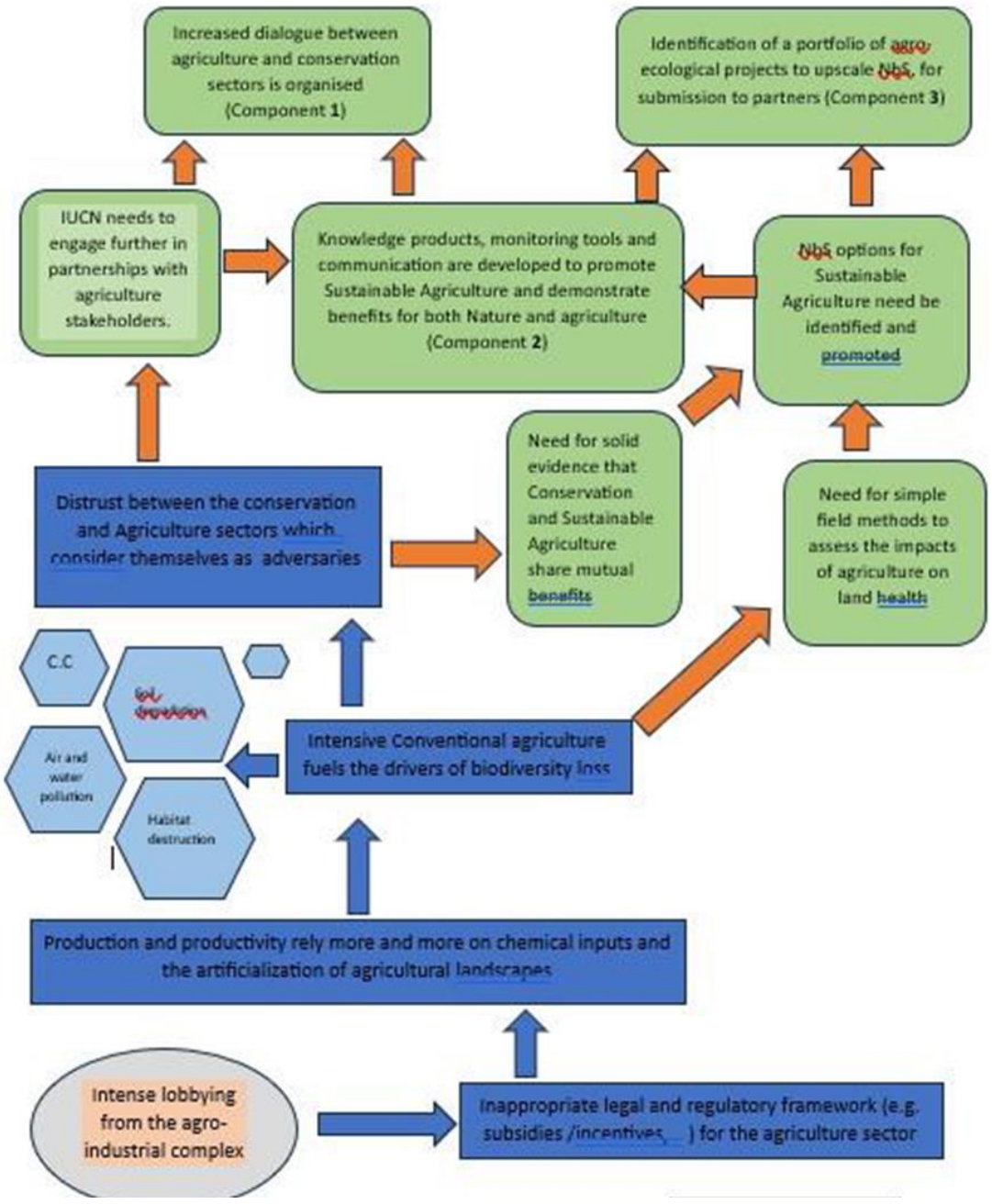


Table 2 below (excerpt from 2018 IPBES report on Land Degradation and Restoration) highlights the areas where IUCN is already anchored and those where, although engaged, the organisation, from now on, ambitions to be increasingly active.

Table SPM 2 **Aspirations for addressing land degradation and possible actions and pathways.**

The appropriateness and relevance of different aspirations varies from place to place, depending on regional and national contexts. The lists of actions are indicative, non-exhaustive and non-exclusive.

AMBITION	STRATEGY
SAFEGUARDED BIODIVERSITY	Greater protection of biodiversity through enlarged and more effective protected area systems, halting conversion of natural land, large-scale restoration of degraded land, biodiversity offsetting where land transformation is unavoidable
LOW-CONSUMPTION LIFESTYLES	Lower per-capita consumption patterns, including the adoption of less land-degrading diets, such as more vegetable-based diets, and low- and renewable-energy-based housing, transportation and industrial systems
GLOBAL HUMAN POPULATION AT NEAR-ZERO GROWTH	Improving gender equality and moving towards improved access to education, voluntary family-planning, and social-welfare for ageing populations
CIRCULAR ECONOMY	Reduced food loss and waste, sustainable waste and sanitation management systems, reuse and recycling of materials
LOW-INPUT PRODUCTION SYSTEMS AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT	More land-, energy-, water-, and material-efficient and low-emission production systems for food, fiber, bioenergy, mining, and other commodities
SUSTAINABLE LAND MANAGEMENT	Sustainable land management practices in croplands, rangelands, forestry, water systems, human settlements, and their surrounding landscapes, specifically directed at avoiding, reducing and reversing land degradation

TABLE 2: POSSIBLE ACTIONS FOR ADDRESSING LAND DEGRADATION (MODIFIED AFTER IPBES 2018)

Legend:

Area of desirable increased IUCN influence

Area of currently established IUCN influence

A 2.2 The parties to the project

Four principal types of actors are to be engaged in the project, due to their important potential role in the design and implementation of its activities (ref: project proposal):

• Governments – Policymakers often lack information on the cost and benefits of sustainable agricultural practices and their alignment to international development objectives, also in part because of their distance with farmers and other relevant stakeholders.

• Farmers, landowners, communities and practitioners – People working the land have a decisive role in the use and status of natural resources and have the most at stake when land is poorly managed. They

must be engaged as true partners and be given the rights, information, finance and technical support needed to take decisions and action to reduce land degradation and improve its health.

• Private finance and public sector investors – Accelerating and upscaling agroecological approaches require scaled up and customized financing for the development of a pipeline of projects. Policy and economic incentives are still not sufficient for private sector financiers to invest in agroecological practices at scale, mainly due to the lack of tools and mechanisms that support the assessment and management of the associated risks, and the deficit of scientific-based evidence and robust models for investments.

• Businesses – Private sector businesses can determine the trajectory of food production and contribute to improve land health on farms and in agricultural landscapes: as investors in agroecology value chains; as active land management actors interested in reducing their environmental footprint; and as commercial actors that heavily depend on an increasingly demanding market for responsible goods and services.

A 2.3 The project structure

On the basis of the above-mentioned interpretation of the Theory of Change and expected results as they currently appear in the project documentation, the Consultant proposes (ANNEX 4 B) a "reconstructed" Logical Framework for the project as it stands, that is: with a strong "IUCN institutional capacity building" perspective. Such narrative framework allows to assemble in parallel not only the outcomes and results but also some suggested "Objectively Verifiable Indicators", their potential sources, and ideally some hypotheses underlying the proposed approach.

The project execution and financial structure is summarized in Table 3 below. Specific Deliverables have been assigned to three levels of project management within IUCN (HQ, regional, country) in Table 4.

Project Cost source	***Description***	***Amount, €*** *(% of total)*
Component 1:	**Mobilising the operational and convening capacity of IUCN** so countries include international commitments to sustainable agriculture in their national adaptation and conservation plans and commit to the implementation of those plans.	**689 000** 22%
Component 2:	Developing, **providing and communicating scientific evidence, on** the multiple benefits of sustainable agriculture through the design and application of monitoring tools for the sustainable management of agricultural landscapes	**860 000** 28 % sum
Component 3:	-. Supporting the **development of a portfolio of sustainable agroecological projects** that include the use of the monitoring tools, focusing in particular in the innovation of blended funding mechanisms that involve public-private partnerships	**916 000** 29.6 %
Project "direct costs"		223 500
Overheads (15%)		403 275
GRAND TOTAL		**3 091 775**

TABLE 3: PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION AND FINANCIAL STRUCTURE

Centrally (HQ)- produced deliverables	*Deliverables by IUCN Regional Offices*	*Country-produced deliverables*
(2) Global Common Ground Dialogues, new partnerships	(4) Regional CGD	(6) National CGD New local partnerships
NBS Agri guidance		Testing and Examples of use of the NbS Agri-Guidance
Land Health Monitoring framework (publication)		Testing and Examples of use of the Land Health Monitoring Framework
Land Health Monitoring Tool		
Flagship report on Sustainable Agriculture and Biodiversity		Case studies (Success stories) of IUCN projects in Agriculture
Improvement of Knowledge on soil species (prevalence and classification)		----
Legal review of agricultural policies promoting SA		----
Contribution to Nature Platform		Contribution to Nature platform
Global Communication campaign;	Regional Communication campaign;	National communication campaign
Training tools on Agriculture Program and AGTSA results		Training of local stakeholders into the use of tools for SA promotion
Engagement in international fora (events, meetings at COPs and other fora)		
Engagement of IUCN members (IUCN Regional Conservation Fora and World Conservation Congress)		
New partnerships		
Project pipeline		Proposed NbS-proofed SA projects

TABLE 4: AGTSA PROJECT: EXPECTED RESULTS BY CENTRE OF ACTIVITIES

B. The Mid-term Review (MTR): Purpose and method

This MTR has been commissioned by IUCN for the purpose of learning and reflection on the project management and early results. It has been carried out in conformity with IUCN evaluation policy (2023). In a nutshell, it is meant to answer the following questions:

(i) is the project doing the right things? why and how?
(ii) is the project doing things right? why and how?
(iii) is it desirable – or necessary - to recalibrate some of the dimensions of the project (timeframe, spatial influence, resources, expected results …)?

B.1 Assessment criteria and matrix

While the ToRs for the MTR explicitly refer to the OECD/DAC Evaluation criteria, namely: **Relevance, Coherence, Effectiveness** and **Efficiency**, the MTR team has been requested to give insights on the limitations of the approach adopted and suggest possible ways and means that could increase efficiency and efficacy, and how to inflect the implementation of the project in its remaining year of implementation (2024). Two other OECD/ DAC criteria were rightly omitted by the ToR, namely: Impact, and Sustainability, as it is considered too soon to assess the project under those criteria. Yet, the concern for these essential dimensions should have been borne in mind from the design stage and then by the project managers when making implementation decisions. That is why they have nonetheless been touched upon in the evaluative questionnaire.

Referring to the template provided in the ToRs (ANNEX 1) the Consultant elaborated further an "Evaluation Matrix" (re: MTR Inception report and ANNEX 5A) displaying the evaluation questions related to the requested IUCN evaluation criteria and lines of enquiry, completed with some preliminary suggestions of their respective indicators - based on the Consultant's understanding of the project.

B.2 The data collection and analysis methods

B.2.1 Limitations of the present MTR exercise

A first limitation of this MTR is the scarcity of allocated time and lack of access to the field for the Consultant. This was justified by the high costs of travel and the assumption that remotely conducted interviews can indeed provide substantial information, particularly as the project beneficiaries were considered to be primarily IUCN staff. Yet not being able to confront documentation and opinions with actual data collected in the field is a significant shortcoming; inevitably, distance creates distortion.

Another limitation comes from the timing of this exercise: although the project is - timewise - beyond its mid-term (after roughly 22 months of implementation), about every essential output is still a work in progress (with exception of the regional and national dialogues). Most importantly: the tools testing and the case studies are still at their inception stage in 5 of the 6 countries, with no available result to be assessed. The remaining 12 months of implementation actually leave little room for changes, be they on the strategy or on implementation approaches, as almost all activities are sort of "locked" into a prescribed path.

Consequently, we do not actually benefit from the "fore and aft perspective" normally enjoyed by a full-fledged MTR, when a significant number of activities and results have been obtained and it is indeed worthwhile to re-examine the logic and the strategy (i.e. the policy orientation as well as the ways and means to enforce it) of the project.

B.2.2 The MTR tools and process

In accordance with Tero's technical offer, the MTR workplan is summarized and illustrated in Fig 10.

The methodology has been described in detail in the MTR inception report (11/2023); it is based on documents review, a questionnaire/survey and a number of interviews with the project implementors at different levels (HQ, ROs, IUCN Country teams). ANNEXES 5B and 2 present the questionnaire and list of informants respectively.

Unlike initially been contemplated, time and resources constraints impeded to include third parties (e.g. government officials, PO representatives, NGOs, Private sector operators) into the sample of informants. As a matter of fact, the project is still at too early a stage to allow a meaningful assessment of the degree of commitment of the various stakeholders other than IUCN itself. Yet, this important aspect should be investigated at the time of a final evaluation of AGTSA.

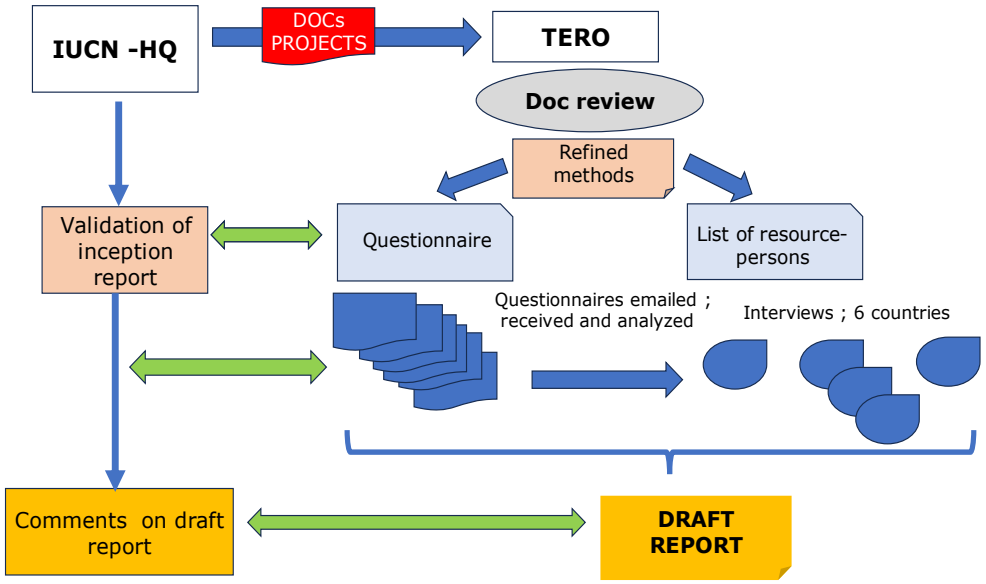


FIGURE 10: THE MTR PROCESS AND TOOLS

The MTR process has so far comprised three phases:

(i) The production of a draft inception report (validated after incorporation of IUCN's comments) dealing with the initial stages (phase 1) of the MTR study and submitting preliminary considerations and tools (in particular the questionnaire survey) to the IUCN evaluation team.

(ii) The second phase has been essentially concerned with the interviews and analyses of answers to the questionnaires, following a methodology detailed in the MTR Inception report (nov.2023).

(iii) The third phase has been the elaboration of the present final report, with its synthesis aiming at practical recommendations in order to gain effectiveness and efficiency, while keeping the compass oriented towards the expected effects and long-term impact even though they cannot materialize yet.

C. The Project: description of main features

C.1 Institutional setup of the implementation

The project under review is managed from IUCN-HQ by members of the newly created agriculture team currently under the Centre for Economy and Finance (previously hosted by the Water and Land department).

Several project deliverables have been assigned to the relevant departments of IUCN, namely:

- The "Flagship report", as a main strategic piece of work, has been jointly commissioned to the Economics and Science departments.

- The SA policy inventory, assigned to the Environmental Law Centre;

- The "Soil biodiversity extinction risk assessment ": to the Biodiversity assessment and knowledge team;

- The "Guidelines on soil and land health" to the HQ Agriculture team;

- The "NbS in agriculture guidance" (based on IUCN global standard for NbS) to the HQ agriculture team;

- The "Contribution for Nature platform" to the Science team assisted by the Enterprise and investment team.

On the other hand, the country-based activities have been arranged with the respective IUCN Regional Offices, and with six (6) country teams of varying sizes. These arrangements (for resources transfers against expected outputs and deadlines) have been settled through so-called Internal Agreements (IA),

Each country team was assigned to (Tables 4 & 5):

Organise Inception workshop(s) (Country level)
Organize (at least one) National and a Regional "Common Ground dialogues"
Develop a short case study on IUCN's previous work in the agriculture sector
Convene conservation and agriculture actors (Country level)
Test IUCN's land health indicator in the project landscapes (Country level)
Evaluate the NbS-Agriculture 'project design and assessment tool' (Country level)
Report the on-going IUCN project under IUCN's Contributions for Nature platform (Country level)
Use the NbS-Agriculture design for new funding (Country level)
Train stakeholder groups (Country level)

TABLE 5: COUNTRIES ASSIGNMENTS FOR AGTSA

C.2 The "Case studies"

The AGTSA project endeavours to reinforce its advocacy for the adoption of NbS in agriculture thanks to evidence gathered from "case studies" reported from on-going IUCN-implemented "agriculture-related" interventions / projects in a sample of countries. As a matter of fact, the availability of such past or ongoing projects from which to draw field data was a major criterion in the selection of the project's participating countries. Another consideration of importance in the selection of countries was the donor's focus on some (India, Rwanda ...).

In addition, as a separate deliverable, the proposed tools have to be tested in the field, thus providing different "case studies" of their application in each country. In particular, the NbS for agriculture framework is expected to be validated through the formulation of (at least one) SA-promotion project to be submitted for donors financing.

C.3 The portfolio of SA promoting projects

Component 3 is focusing on the preparation of (at least one per country) SA promoting investment projects to be proposed for financing by interested donors. These projects are meant to be designed in accordance with the NbS for agriculture tool and demonstrate the IUCN approach to soil and land health and eventually SA.

The full project design entails: conceptualization of ToC, identification and consultation with local and national stakeholders, co-construction of LF ; safeguard assessment (ESMS, including FPIC with indigenous communities when relevant , participatory workshops /negotiation with potential partners at the Governmental and grassroot organizations; ....), feasibility study including technical/economic/financial/social analysis, then the design of the entire document in line with the prospected donor specific requirement.

D. Key findings of the MTR

As mentioned before (subchapter B.2), surveys and interviews have been conducted with the project country teams as well as with some IUCN officials in charge of the participating departments; available progress reports have been reviewed. Although the countries obviously are at different achievement stages, the results have been cumulated and synthesized as follows, using a qualitative scale that tries to relate the current status to the expected one.

D.1 Results: levels of achievement

D.1.1 Project Outcome #1:

Outcome 1: International commitments to sustainable agriculture are put forward and monitored through dialogue between conservation and agriculture actors

Deliverable
1. Engagement and dialogue between conservation and agriculture actors => Build the common ground
2. Develop a common roadmap and charter between key conservation and agriculture actors => mobilize IUCN as a Union
3. Conduct a legal review of sustainable agriculture policies => Review enabling frameworks and national best policies
4. Companies and organisations document their contribution towards global goals for nature => support agriculture and food sector actors commitment to action
5. Global communication campaign => Disseminate case -studies and IUCN messages

Status of Deliverable[4]	1	2	3	4	5
1.1					
1.2					
1.3					
1.4					
1.5					

[4] On a scale of 5 , with 1 = not started , 2 = incipient , 3 = in progress , 4 = well advanced , 5 = completed as expected

D.1.2 Project Outcome #2:

Outcome 2: Scientific evidence of the multiple benefits of sustainable agriculture is communicated widely

Deliverable
1. Develop land health monitoring framework => Assess and monitor biodiversity in agriculture landscapes
2. Publication on red listing soil biodiversity / new IUCN Commission on soils => Conserve soil biodiversity and raise IUCN expertise
3. IUCN Flagship on conservation and agriculture report => Review knowledge - Advocate for public and private investments
4. International partnership on sustainable agriculture => Disseminate IUCN's positions, tools and metrics

Status of Deliverable[5]	1	2	3	4	5
2.1					
2.2					
2.3					
2.4					

D.1.3 Project Outcome # 3:

Outcome 3: A portfolio of sustainable Agroecological projects is developed

Deliverable
1. Develop an agroecology projects design and assessment tool => Provide sectoral guidance for using the IUCN Global standard for NBS
2. Use the design tool to evaluate and enhance existing investments and processes => test the tool on IUCN projects and build partnerships
3. Increased capacity and engagement of key stakeholder groups => Build capacities to use the tool

Status of Deliverable[6]	1	2	3	4	5
3.1					
3.2					
3.3					

[5] On a scale of 5 , with 1 = not started , 2 = incipient , 3 = in progress , 4 = well advanced , 5 = completed

[6] Id.

D.2 The project execution timeline

As already mentioned, the project suffered substantial initial delays, essentially caused by : (i) bureaucratic constraints in settling the agreements with the different units, ROs and countries involved in its implementation , (ii) delays in preparing the "guidance notes" , particularly those on soil and land health and on the NbS standard for S.A., (iii) turnover among IUCN HQ staff and the creation / institutional positioning of IUCN's Agriculture Team .

With currently one year (till 31/12/2024) ahead, beyond the kickstarting events of the CGDs at national/regional/global levels, few of the expected results are yet secured; however, all activities have been initiated as shown above. Regarding the countries (sub)projects specifically, Table 7 summarizes the present state of affairs:

DELIVERABLES ***COUNTRY***		**National Inception workshop**	**National Common Ground Dialogue**	**Selection of case studies**	**Case study report**	**Test IUCN Land Health Monitoring Framework**	**Test IUCN guidance for use of NbS Standard in agriculture**	**Regional Common Ground Dialogue**	**Proposals for SA Investment projects**	**Report on IUCN's Contribution to nature Platform**	**Training**	**Remarks**
INDIA		NOV 22	DEC 23	ITC project	Q1 (ongoing	Q1 (ongoing)	Q1 (ongoing)	MAR 2024	Q1 (ongoing)	Q1 (ongoing)	Q1 (ongoing)	
VIET NAM		JUN 2023	OCT 23	Mekong Delta	Q1 (ongoing	Q1 (ongoing)	Q1 (ongoing)	MAR 2024	Q1 (ongoing)	Q1 (ongoing)	Q1 (ongoing)	
RWANDA		DEC 22	APR 23	TREPA Rusizi watershed	Q1 (ongoing	Q1 (ongoing)	Q1 (ongoing)	OCT 23	Q1 (ongoing)	Q1 (ongoing)	Q1 (ongoing)	CGD in Malawi with other funds
TANZANIA		FEB 23	FEB 23	Kilombero	Q1 (ongoing	Q1 (ongoing)	Q1 (ongoing)	OCT 23	Q1 (ongoing)	Q1 (ongoing)	Q1 (ongoing)	Alignment with SUSTAIN Pro project
BURKINA FASO		DEC 22	JUNE 23	LOGME project	Q1 (ongoing	Q1 (ongoing)	Q1 (ongoing)	NOV 23	Q1 (ongoing)	Q1 (ongoing)	Q1 (ongoing)	CGD in Niger and Ghana

												with other funds
GUATEMALA		OCT 22	nov-23	3 cases Proj. « Altiplano Resiliente (GCF)	Q1 (ongoing	Completed	Completed	NOV 23	Q1 (ongoing)	YES (1)	Completed	

TABLE 6: SUMMARY OF LEVELS OF ACHIEVEMENTS IN PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES (SOURCE: JUNE 23 REPORT TO IKEA FOUNDATION, INTERVIEWS AND SURVEY RESULTS)

D.3. Scores of the evaluation criteria

Scores of the evaluation criteria have been established on the bases of implementors' feedback and complementary analyses by the MTR reviewers. The informants have been confronted to the "evaluative questions" - mentioned in the ToRs and captured in the "Evaluation Matrix[7]" then further developed into the survey/questionnaire (re: ANNEX 5 A and B). Their answers (to the questionnaire and/or interview) are summarized in Tables 8.1 to 8.5 and commented by the reviewers.

In addition, each evaluation criterion is rated (by the MTR consultant) according to the following scale (sometimes a "+/-" notation adds a nuance)

A	Very satisfactory (better than initially expected)
B	Satisfactory (in line with expectations)
C	Implementation problems to be solved
D	Conceptual issues possibly jeopardizing the existence or durability of expected effects
?	Unable to qualify at this stage

Complementing each Table and specifying the comments further, there are additional precisions and analyses of findings.

[7] The "evaluation matrix" is a useful tool putting together evaluative questions, respective indicators of achievement, data to be collected, and the corresponding sources of information. It is similar in structure to a LF, substituting objectives by evaluative questions.

D.3.1 The RELEVANCE of the project (or: how appropriate is the project approach and intervention logic in terms of objectives and expected outcomes within the global context?)

Informants' summarized opinions	Comments by the MTR reviewers	MTR Rating
- The project is perceived by several informants as pursuing too many objectives and diverse deliverables/results at the same time, with too few means – in terms of timeframe, and with a striking deficit of field experimentation on the other hand: (i) The timeframe only allows to initiate contacts throughout the large spectrum of relevant stakeholders (from governmental agencies to farmers POs and involved private sector operators). It will take more time and efforts to stimulate, secure and consolidate partnerships and actual commitments to SA. (ii) Likewise, all participating country teams underscored that the field tests will be too few and too short, given – among others – the time and resources constraints, which do not allow sufficient field work. "The project does not have on-the-ground activities to reach out to local people ". (iii) The project is also perceived (at least by some of the informants) as being too inward-oriented, aiming essentially at capacity-building inside IUCN, seeming to largely "rely on the assumption that IUCN already knows what is good for agriculture, and doesn't need external outputs from other organizations[8]".	The development of a portfolio of SA projects all the way till its approval by the financiers also requires longer follow-up than the project timeframe foresees. In spite of some shortcomings in the design, all informants agree on the high relevance of the ALH initiative and of the AGTSA project to support it.	B +

D.3.1.1 The selection of countries

Fig.11-B shows the location of the countries currently involved in AGTSA, namely (from East to West): Viet nam, India, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burkina Faso and Guatemala. The criteria that led to their selection have not been clearly spelled out in the project documentation, though during the first interviews with IUCN HQ team they were explained to have followed organizational criteria, such as the availability of IUCN staff, the presence of already implemented projects, … all factors facilitating the AGTSA project launch in these countries (see Fig. 11-A).

All selected countries belong to the developing "South" where artificial-inputs-intensive agriculture has expanded in the recent decades (e.g. India has been the pioneer of the "green revolution" in developing countries ; in Africa, though its initial level was quite low, the use of synthetic inputs is on a high rise- see Fig.12-, and the soil fertility of agricultural soils is noticeably falling) - but there also are countries where traditional agriculture still retains a significant share of the food system. One can notice the absence of (i) countries of the global "North" where intensive agriculture is hegemonic (Europe, USA, Russia) as well as (ii) countries where the agriculture-induced deforestation is most intense (e.g. Brazil, Indonesia, Madagascar). Those two specific groups are of high relevance in terms of their share in the global agriculture-driven biodiversity loss – as well as SA promotion needs - and could be taken into account in potential future phases of – or follow-up to - the AGTSA project.

Obviously, the project could only cover a limited sample and not address the whole variety of contexts, however in a second phase, the representativity of the sample in relation to the scale of the biodiversity issue and the global threat posed by chemistry-based agriculture could now be better considered.

[8] e.g. from FAO, IPBES, or existing significant initiatives such as the "natural farming " in India , etc..

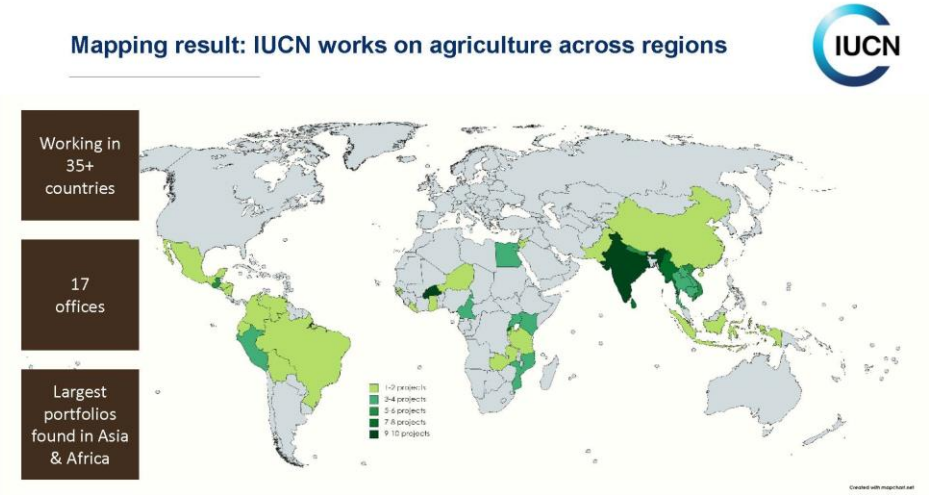
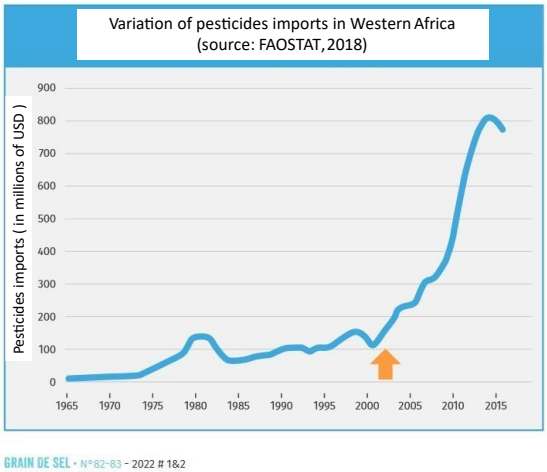


FIGURE 11 A&B: AGTSA CURRENTLY PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES ARE MOSTLY THOSE WHERE IUCN HAS AGRICULTURE-RELATED PROJECTS /INTERVENTIONS



GRAIN DE SEL • N°82-83 - 2022 # 1&2

FIGURE 12: AFRICAN COUNTRIES HAVE A HISTORICALLY LOW– BUT RECENTLY EXPLODING - LEVEL OF USE OF SYNTHETIC AGROCHEMICALS

D.3.2 The COHERENCE of the project (or: how well does the project fit in its context ? In particular: does the project align with other IUCN projects, knowledge products and stakeholders engagement process?)

Informants' summarized opinions	Comments by the MTR reviewers	MTR Rating
- Potential partners (IUCN departments, country offices, or final beneficiaries of projects) were not consulted at the design stage. - In all participating countries, other on-going IUCN projects have contributed to AGTSA outputs - mainly through supporting the "case studies" and sometimes engaging partners (ex: ITC in India, indigenous communities in Guatemala, …). At HQ level, the Agriculture team has proactively sought collaboration with other teams in order to guarantee coherence. - Co-financing of some activities in the field as well as at HQ level was obtained from other projects, as a result of mutual reinforcement. - According to several informants- the farmers focus/involvement has not been given enough weight at this stage	– The coherence of AGTSA is largely related to the continuity of the efforts made to consolidate the "(Sustainable)Agriculture Program" within IUCN. Rather than being a self-contained project, AGTSA needs to have interfaces with a number of adjacent interventions. - There appears to be a latent confusion with respect to whom should be the beneficiaries of the project: IUCN as an institution? the farmers? environment and the society at large? Actually, all of these - but the respective focus/concern on each category of potential beneficiaries is unclear and apparently not similarly perceived by the implementors.	**B -**

Further comments by the reviewers are:

D.3.2.1 The Theory of change -ToC

The connection between the project ToC - actually a subset of the ToC that triggered the IUCN's ALH initiative (Fig. 13), is not made explicit enough - in the Consultant's opinion, and based on interviews whereby informants underscored that they have been involved in the AGTSA project only at a relatively late stage of its implementation .More specifically, it would have seemed important to better emphasize at design stage that this (short) project is the kickstart of a longer-term approach, the continuity of which is a condition for its impact. In other words, that the AGTSA project makes sense to the extent that it will not remain as a stand-alone exercise but its objectives will be further pursued.

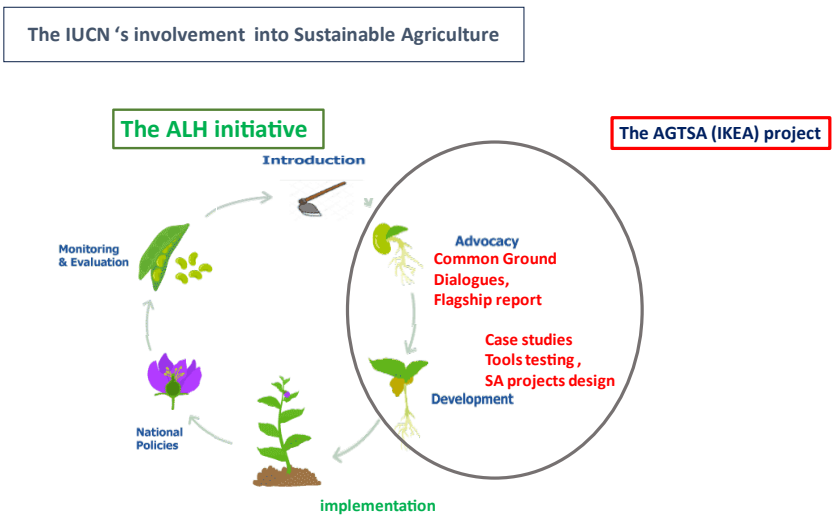


FIGURE 13: THE AGTSA PROJECT WITHIN THE GENERAL TOC OF IUCN 'S ALH INITIIATIVE

D.3.2.2 The project beneficiaries and their participation

Although the final beneficiaries of the Agriculture Initiative within IUCN and its following sub-projects are meant to be the farmers, who are the direct actors in the field, the AGTSA project is for the moment engaged in an approach that can be qualified as rather "top-down", as in its design, its beneficiaries are meant to be the IUCN internal team. Additionally, its advocacy efforts have focused in the first place on the high-levels of governments, assuming that IUCN's new argumentation in favour of an agricultural transition towards more sustainability for the sake of both conservation and societal benefits, will translate into strategic options (combining enabling policies and appropriate means and resources) which will facilitate the uptake of appropriate NbS-based SA practices by the farmers. Although the "Common Ground Dialogues" did muster a few professional organizations and NGOs active in the agriculture sector, their primary target audience were the governmental administrations (i.e., (i) the Ministries of Environment – traditionally the counterparts of IUCN country offices, (ii) the Ministries of Agriculture - identified as new potential partners).

There is no doubt that the approach "from the top" is useful and even unavoidable at some stage. However, experience also has demonstrated that a "bottom-up" dynamics is a condition for efficiency and effectiveness in transformation. Here and there, smallholders' movements do anticipate the necessary transition in spite of their government's passivity (sometimes hostility). Both approaches are actually forced to co-exist and the crucial question to be resolved is: where does the interface between both (the top-down and bottom-up) approaches occur? through which mechanisms?

There clearly is a long way to make the reconciliation of conservation and productive concerns "trickle down" to those farmers (currently a large majority?) who think they cannot afford this transition in the present economic context. Farmers organizations and pioneer farmers– in some cases assisted by experienced NGOs – are the best vectors to transmit the message to their members and beyond, thanks to peer-to-peer exchanges, and at the same time convey to the politicians the feedback and expectations of their constituents. For the moment, the AGTSA project has not so much explored this path. To take better account of these issues, it could improve collaboration with other IUCN projects which have a more "farmer-centric" approach and should continue creating a working interface (the "dialogues") in order to firmly anchor and nurture the dialogues at both ends of the stakeholders spectrum.

D.3.3 The EFFECTIVENESS of the project (or: to what extent has the project delivered on its outputs and outcomes?)

Informants' summarized opinions	Comments by the MTR reviewers	MTR Rating
- Little interaction and interchanges between the teams, in particular between the IUCN thematic departments (which have very specific outputs to produce) and the country teams. "I did not know that field tests were taking place in the countries". The project is reported to have noticeably facilitated the dialogue between the Ministries of Environment and of Agriculture. - The process of collaboration and training of would-be partners is still at a quite incipient stage in the countries (with exception of Viet Nam and Burkina Faso where the IUCN has a longer history of involvement in agriculture with a variety of partners). Proper training (beyond simple information) and actual capacity-building of would-be partners has to wait for the proposed tools to be further identified and tested. In particular, the IUCN NbS standard is not very user-friendly. The IUCN wants it to be fully in line with its already adopted Global NbS Standard but at the same time is conscious that its adaptation to the agriculture sector may require a good deal of simplification. A number of new project proposals have been identified (in Viet Nam with GCF and the WB; in Guatemala with GCF and GEF; in India with ITC; in Burkina Faso with GCF) and very recently formulated; they are so far restricted to one agro-ecological zone in each country at stake. The MEL system has been currently limited to three "Key Performance Indicators", with no intermediate process or result indicator.	The Common Ground Dialogues-CGDs have satisfactorily taken place at the three (national / regional/ global) levels, and have been reported, with limited dissemination through IUCN website However, these events so far are the major – if not only- manifestation of contact and interchange with sectoral stakeholders. In general, the participation of CSOs and farmers POs has so far lower than desirable. Closer contacts with these stakeholders are required to extend outreach and later effects. The proposed (soil and land health) assessment tools are based on scientific knowledge and IUCN expertise. They need to be confronted/adapted with local knowledge. There seems to have been no search to assess which of already existing NbS-for-agriculture framework (FAO, WB, …) could be used or improved, or at least no reference is made to them (unlike for the Soil and Land health framework, which is a presentation of existing tools developed by other operators). The third expected outcome are likely to require at least 18 to 24 months to mature (i.e.so that projects enter an approval pipeline, then get funding), way beyond AGTSA's current timeframe. The project reporting requirements, established for each RO by the IAs, were well defined but not rigorously followed and respected in terms of timing by all project teams. Consequently, at this stage, a number of lessons learnt from the project implementation are not yet either apparent or readily available.	**B**

The above-mentioned observations are supported and further explicated by the following:

D 3.3.1 The Common Ground Dialogues

The project managing team has issued guidelines for conducting regional and national "Common Ground Dialogues" aligned with the global "Common Ground" IUCN document of 2020 (See bibliography in Annex 2). The project commissioned the country teams to organize and implement these "dialogues" – actually seminars - whereby conservationists and agriculture stakeholders were invited to exchange views on their understanding of Sustainable Agriculture and identify where they converge as well as ways and means for future collaboration.

The CGDs have been quite successfully planned, organized (at the end of 2023, one CDG at regional level in four (4) regions: ARO, ESARO, ORMAC, PACO - and one national CDG in each participating country have taken place, as well as one global event – see Table 7), and reportedly gathered a variety of stakeholders. However, farmers representatives were few (totalling at best 10% of participants). These events are quite recent, so that it is too early to assess the solidity of the commitments pledged by the partners on these occasions, as no formal financial commitments have not yet been signed.

In addition to these Dialogues, another important component of the advocacy work at global level has been the participation of IUCN to the COP28 where 2 events have been organized (on Common Ground and on NbS in Agriculture). Furthermore, IUCN participated to an event organized on NbS in Agriculture at the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) international meeting.

Multi-countries CGDs		National CGDs	
ESARO (Eastern & Southern Africa)	18/09/23	***India***	11/23
ORMAC (Meso America)	13-17/11/23	***Viet nam***	12-13/10/23
ARO (Asia)	03/24	***Guatemala***	11/23
PACO (West Africa)	30/11-01/12/23	***Rwanda***	04/23
Global 1:	event organized during the COP28	***Tanzania***	02/23
Global 2		***Burkina Faso***	30/11-01/12/23

TABLE 7: DIALOGUES ORGANIZED IN THE FRAMEWORK OF AGTSA

D 3.3.2 The flagship report

A "flagship report" on "Agriculture and Conservation" (#2 in the "Nature in a Globalized World" IUCN series) has been commissioned by the AGTSA project. It presently is under finalization (expected in October 2024, as it suffered some delays) and is meant as a landmark, which will "put IUCN on the map" as regards mainstreaming conservation into agriculture-related political and economic decision-making, with a global perspective. Being a challenging multidisciplinary piece of work, it mobilizes both the IUCN Economics team (focusing on ecosystem accounting) and Science team. Though a key output of the AGTSA project, it is not explicitly related to the country activities of the project and expects no real input from them. Its target audience obviously is the high-level decision makers in governments and possibly in the corporate sector[9].

D 3.3.3 The legal (SA policies inventory) report

A review of present-day government policies meant to promote/favour sustainable agriculture has been entrusted to the Environmental Law Centre of the IUCN. A draft report has been submitted, which is still under review and has not yet been communicated to the Consultant.

At first sight, the most prominent set of policies towards more sustainable food systems is likely to be that of the agriculture section of the EU's "Green Deal" in 2019.

[9] There is an ongoing EU/IUCN project on the ecosystem foorprint of major corporations to have it included in their financial reporting.

Yet even these bold declarations strive to become legally binding commitments and seem to be gradually emptied of much of their substance and targets: the recent extension – just issued by the European Commission - for 10 more years of use of the glyphosate herbicide unfortunately seems revealing of this loss of impulse.

D 3.3.4 The communication channels

A note was issued to the countries regarding the conduct of the Common Ground Dialogues (CGD) at regional and national levels. The recommended actions were:

1 Post social media advertisement before CGD.

2 Provide photography and/or videography during the CGD.

3 Disseminate Opinion Articles on Sustainable Agriculture.

4 Post dialogue articles on digital sites, including IUCN's.

The IUCN website includes a number of thematic subsites as well as an Open Project Portal, used to disseminate findings and achievements. The Portal is however not updated with respect to AGTSA

Reports and stories from the AGTSA project are available in particular at:

https://www.iucn.org/our-work/topic/agriculture-and-soil-biodiversity

https://www.iucn.org/search?f%5B0%5D=topic%3A1151

Recently, the foundations for more impactful communication have been set (eg initiating of a collaboration with the Knowledge Management Team, restructuring of the team webpage, mailing list compilation, social media presence...).

The assessment tools (Component 2):

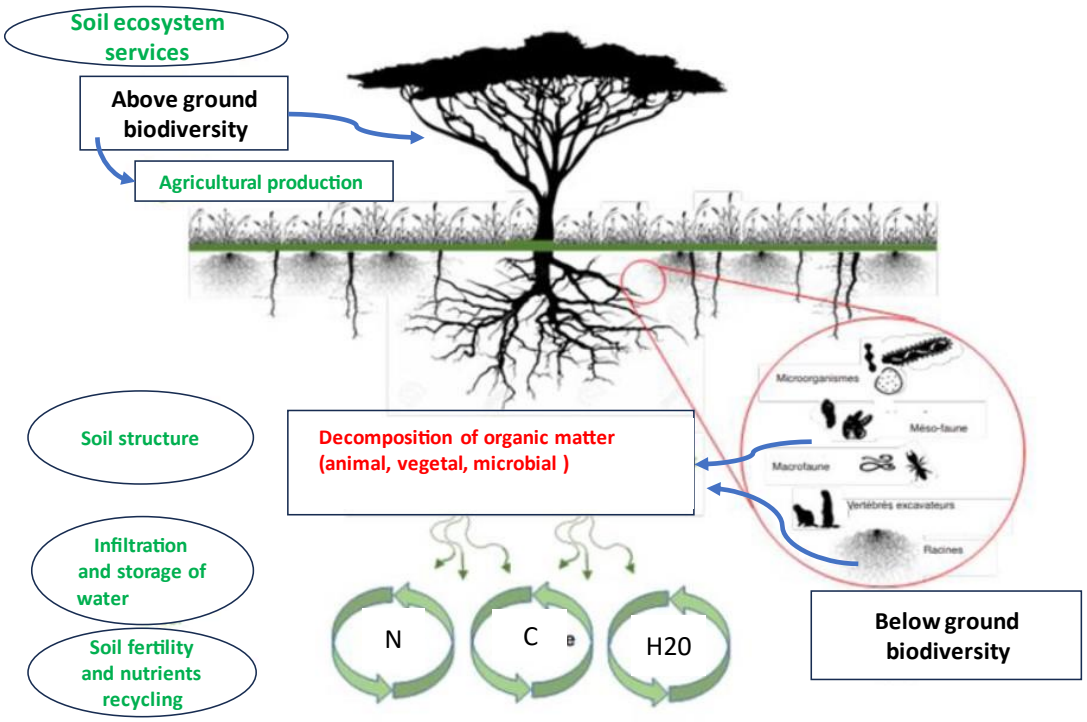
D.3.3.5 The soil and land health indicator(s) framework

As part of the AGTSA project, an extensive review of current "soil and land health indicators", proposed by a variety of development operators and scientific organisations, has been carried out. It showed that very few of them were taking into account biodiversity parameters (see Annex 6 A), as such parameters remain quite difficult to measure. This fact is exacerbated as far as soil health is concerned – with the soil biodiversity knowledge and data base indeed very scarce everywhere...; and next to nil in tropical countries, due to the lack of research and the complexity of the studies.

The existing tools have thus been inventoried in a set of guidelines forwarded to the country implementers of the AGTSA project, who have then engaged in the process of testing the suitability of some of the existing tools in their specific environmental/institutional/cultural context. As earlier underscored, this process has been hampered by the delayed (august 2023) submission by IUCN-HQ of the corresponding guidelines. Such delay is not too surprising in view of the magnitude of the challenge.

A further source of delay has been the fact that the subsequent actual selection and field testing of the tools has been contracted out to local experts/consultants – a process which suffered administrative constraints associated with the tendering.

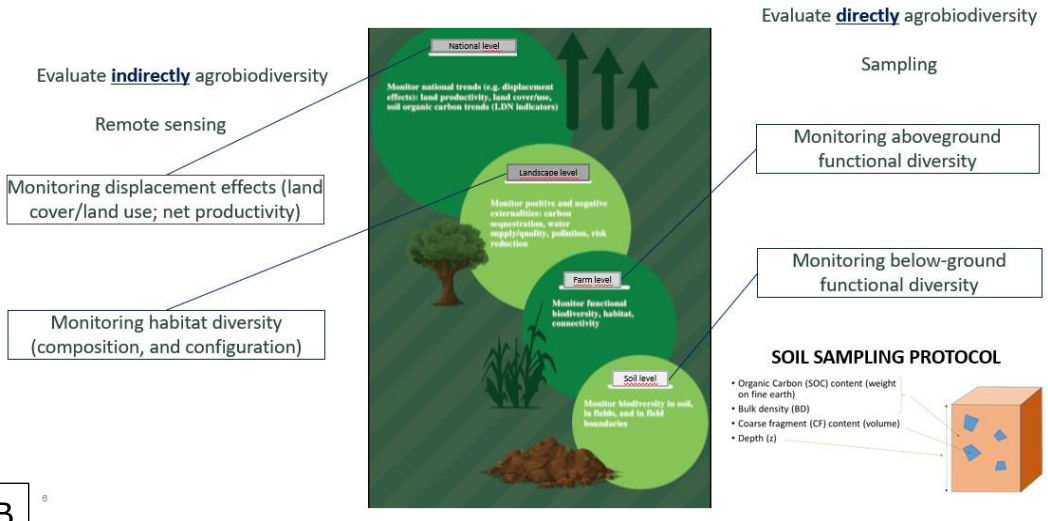
A



Adapted from *(Laban et al., 2018)*

IUCN

Land health guidance : 4 levels of monitoring



B

FIGURE 14 A: LAND HEALTH AT PLOT/FARM LEVEL: THE RELATED "ABOVE GROUND" AND "BELOW GROUND" BIODIVERSITY; 14 B: THE FOUR LEVELS OF LAND HEALTH ASSESSMENT

The "Soil and Land health assessment guidance" was issued by IUCN HQ in August 2023 and actually only provides a framework, stressing that a land health status needs to be assessed at the plot, farm, and landscape (from local to regional…) levels which, therefore, must be continuously monitored at different scales (Fig. 14 B). The guidance refers to a vast array of already existing tools (see ANNEX 6A) and requests the country teams to select the indicator they found most useful at each of the four scales (field/soil level, farm, landscape, national – re: Fig 14 B). The tools are currently still being tested - or about to be- in the context of selected "case studies". Understandably, none of the countries at the time of this report has a definite answer as to which tool is best suited as well as user-friendly enough for farmers to adopt and make a regular use of, in order to monitor soil and land health.

Preliminary findings (e.g. in Viet Nam and Guatemala) suggest/confirm that characterizing the above-ground diversity at the plot/farm level can be more accessible to practitioners, for instance through the counting and identification of arthropods (spiders, insects, crustaceans, mites, that live on the soil surface or on the wild and cultivated plants). Qualitatively and quantitatively assessing below-ground biodiversity is far more difficult, particularly in tropical soils where there is a huge knowledge gap (compared to the soils of temperate regions, nonetheless only slightly more investigated in this respect).

The soil organic matter/carbon content (SOC) is one possible proxy for the soil biodiversity and is also an indicator of quite a few other key characteristics such as soil fertility, resistance to rain erosivity, soil structure, soil water retention capacity, etc…; carrying out a soil analysis is however out of reach for farmers in most contexts. Yet, differences in SOC between different soils can to some extent be felt and seen so they can be used as a criterion to rank different soils in terms of their suitability as a substrate for below-ground biodiversity. It is already well established that reversing land degradation and increasing soil organic carbon provides one of the surest and lowest-cost multiples-wins: climate change mitigation and and adaptation, conservation of biodiversity, and increased food production[10]

What is needed for practical purposes is a good proxy – for instance a wild plant or animal or a combination of those, the presence of which is a reliable indicator of a good soil health status. Such proxy may of course differ from one agro-ecological zone to another.

D.3.3.6 The Nature-based solutions framework for Sustainable Agriculture

Nature-based Solutions (NbS) are "activities undertaken to protect, sustainably manage and restore natural and modified ecosystems to simultaneously benefit people and nature".

NbS are now acknowledged as critical to addressing challenges like climate change, food security, water security, disaster risk, human health, and social and economic development. IUCN has issued its own NbS definition and principles, captured in a "Global Standard for NbS™" (Fig. 15 B). Within the framework of the AGTSA project, IUCN developed a "NbS agri guidance", which has been proposed to the country teams with a view to systematically reinforce the promotion of SA concepts in project design and execution. This "agri-guidance" elaborates on each of the 8 criteria of the Global Standard for NbS and their respective indicators, providing explanations and examples of what they entail when applied to the agricultural sector. Case studies are also presented in order to provide concrete examples of NbS agricultural interventions.

The 8 criteria are listed below and presented with more detail in ANNEX 6 B:

1. NbS effectively address societal challenges,
2. Design of NbS is informed by scale,
3. NbS result in a net gain to biodiversity and ecosystem integrity,
4. NbS are economically viable,
5. NbS are based on inclusive, transparent and empowering governance processes,
6. NbS equitably balance trade-offs between the achievement of their primary goal(s) and the continued provision of multiple benefits,
7. NbS are managed adaptively, based on evidence,
8. NbS are sustainable and mainstreamed within an appropriate jurisdictional context.

[10] In : https://www.iucn.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/land_degradation_issues_brief_cop21_031215.pdf

A

B

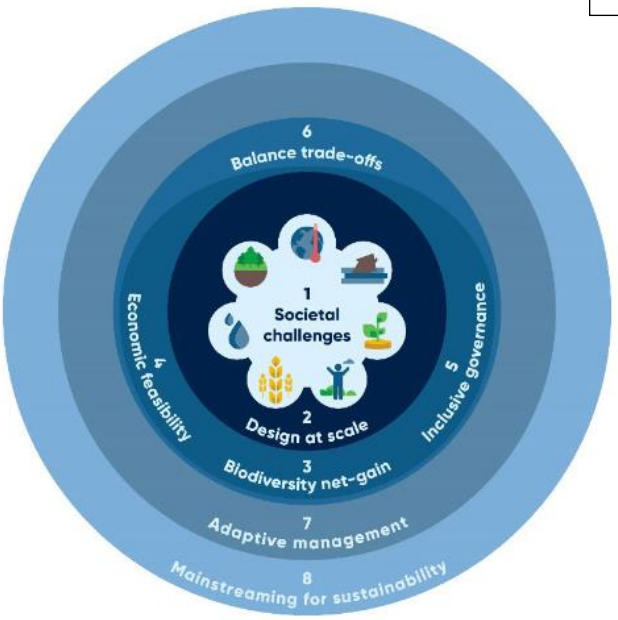


FIGURE 15 A: NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS (A.K.A : ECOSYSTEM-BASED APPROACHES ; 15 B: THE EIGHT (8) CRITERIA OF IUCN GLOBAL STANDARD (SOURCE: IUCN WEBSITE)

The "NbS agri-guidance" proposed by the project management to the country teams, is meant to clarify how the NbS Global Standard can be applied in sustainable agriculture interventions and provide project managers and practitioners with concrete recommendations and examples on how to proceed in order to determine whether or not a planned or ongoing intervention in that sector can be characterized as a NbS. Other organisations, particularly FAO (Table 6), also have their recommended approach for appropriate NbS to enhance the resilience and sustainability of food systems. It is now widely acknowledged that when correctly implemented, NbS applied to agricultural landscapes can also clearly contribute to climate mitigation and adaptation while offering important benefits for biodiversity, food security and human well-being.

Forested lands	Croplands	Wetlands
AVOIDED FOREST CONVERSION; REFORESTATION. NATURAL FOREST MANAGEMENT. MAINTAINING RIVERINE ECOSYSTEMS AS NATURAL FLOOD DEFENCES. IMPROVED PLANTATIONS. FIRE MANAGEMENT. AVOIDED WOODFUEL HARVEST. AVOIDED GRASSLAND CONVERSION. BIOCHAR	CROPLAND NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT. CONSERVATION AGRICULTURE. TREES IN CROPLANDS. GRAZING – OPTIMAL INTENSITY. GRAZING -LEGUMES IN PASTURES. GRAZING – IMPROVED FEED. GRAZING – ANIMAL MANAGEMENT. IMPROVED RICE CULTIVATION	AVOIDED COASTAL WETLAND IMPACTS. AVOIDED PEATLAND IMPACTS. COASTAL WETLAND RESTORATION. PEATLAND RESTORATION.

TABLE 8: FAO'S LIST OF NBS FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE[11]

[11] See detailed descriptions in : Miralles-Wilhelm, F. 2021. Nature-based solutions in agriculture – Sustainable management and conservation of land, water, and biodiversity. Virginia. FAO and The Nature Conservancy. https://doi.org/10.4060/cb3140en

NbS are particularly important for land-intensive sectors which have an outsize role in generating land-based emissions, and high vulnerability to the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss.

Globally, forests and agriculture account for 31% and 38% of total land area, respectively. Because of the sheer physical scale of the AFOLU sector (agriculture accounts for half of the world's habitable area), not to mention its importance to the economy and millions of livelihoods across the world, the land sector serves as a distinct entry point for NbS implementation. Ambitious and rapid scaling-up of NbS requires a long-term look at their impacts on carbon storage, biodiversity and Sustainable Development Goals. To contribute effectively to the world's climate and nature targets, NbS must be created and implemented with longevity in mind and accompanied by other decarbonisation and carbon storage forms[12].

The AGTSA project, through its focus on land health and NbS, ambitions to contribute to the transition from the dominant agriculture paradigm to that of "agro ecology" (Fig. 16), a multi-faceted concept, that is more and more acknowledged as the foundation for Sustainable Agriculture systems but faces a number of resistances. Whereas there is nevertheless a growing consensus that the shift to agro ecology is a necessary condition for sustainability of our food systems, there remains the question of whether or not it is sufficient for that purpose. Hence the far-reaching acceptance of what "agroecology" encompasses for some of its supporters who extend its meaning far beyond "technical" aspects.

Here too, as the guidance was only issued in July 2023; it is just starting to be used and not enough results are yet ready for a synthetic assessment. The IUCN Global Standard is meant to be adapted (simplified?) to support the design of SA agriculture interventions. Though undoubtedly useful, the framework/standard is seen for the moment as not very user-friendly (by informants and the consultants). The most advanced example of its use at present seems to be that of Viet Nam, where the NbS for SA has been tested for submitting a SA project concept note to the GCF (Annex 7.A). Likewise, in Burkina Faso, an ongoing project (LOGME) has been scrutinized under the NbS framework and found eligible .

ANNEX 7 provides a detailed assessment of the Mekong Delta case study, the most documented and advanced of the NbS cases assessed by the AGTSA project.

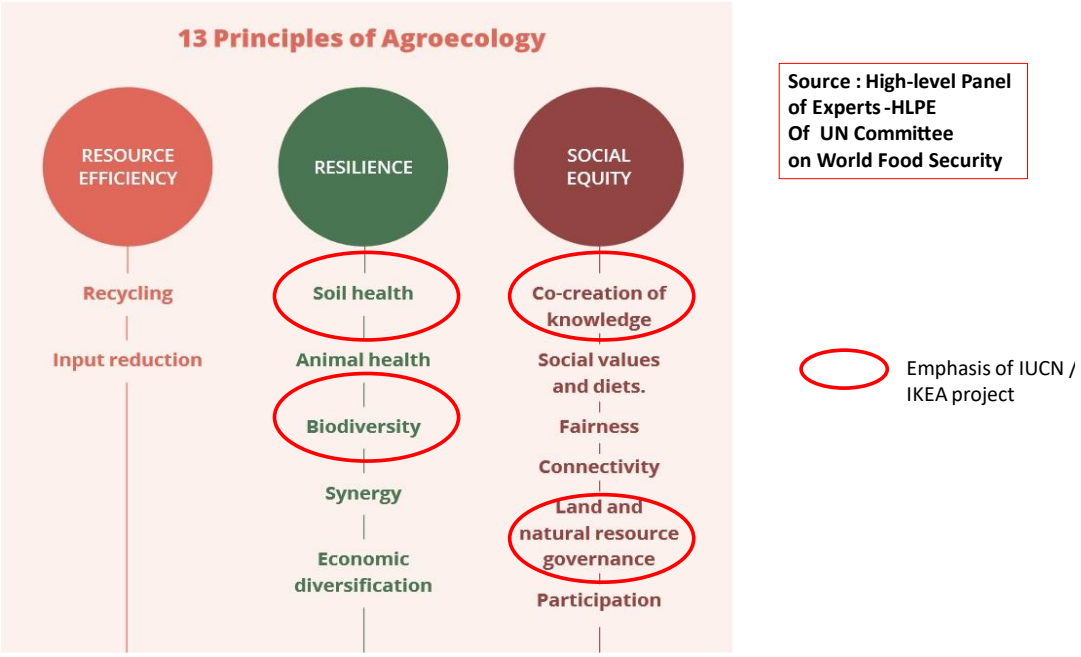


FIGURE 16: THE AGROECOLOGY APPROACH COMBINES MANY ELEMENTS, REASSEMBLED IN THREE PILLARS BY THE UN HLPE

[12] Meyer, K., and Hessenberger, D. (2022). Prototype database of international Nature-based Solutions case studies: supplementary report to the CCICED special policy study on value assessment of Nature-based Solutions. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN

D 3.3.7 The formulation and funding

Currently, Viet Nam, Burkina Faso and Guatemala each have a SA project concept note for submission to GCF. India, Rwanda and Tanzania are in the preparation phase.

Potential funding sources for the SA projects portfolio greatly depend on the country: donors' presence and their previous association with IUCN, government level of involvement, existing pipeline of agricultural projects, … The major prospects are GEF and GCF (IUCN is an "executing agency" for both IFIS specializing in environment protection) but also the WB, IFAD and Regional Development Banks among the multilaterals; as well as GIZ, SIDA, and other locally involved bilateral ODA agencies (AFD ?).

It is important to remind that – particularly with the IFIs - the maturation time of an investment project (from initial concept note to formal approval then to implementation start) generally is of two years or more. The implementation of the projects in the expected portfolio (Outcome 3) is likely – for those given the green light – to start in 2 to 3 years from the presentation of the concept note. It is thus important for the IUCN to maintain in the meantime a close contact with the project promotor (officially the ministry in charge of agriculture) and intended final beneficiaries (the farming communities and their organizations) so as to keep the momentum alive.

D 3.3.8 The Contribution for Nature Platform

Another set of expected products from the project consists of inputs to the "Contributions for Nature Platform", a tool IUCN launched in 2022 with the aim to report initiatives for conservation and restoration.

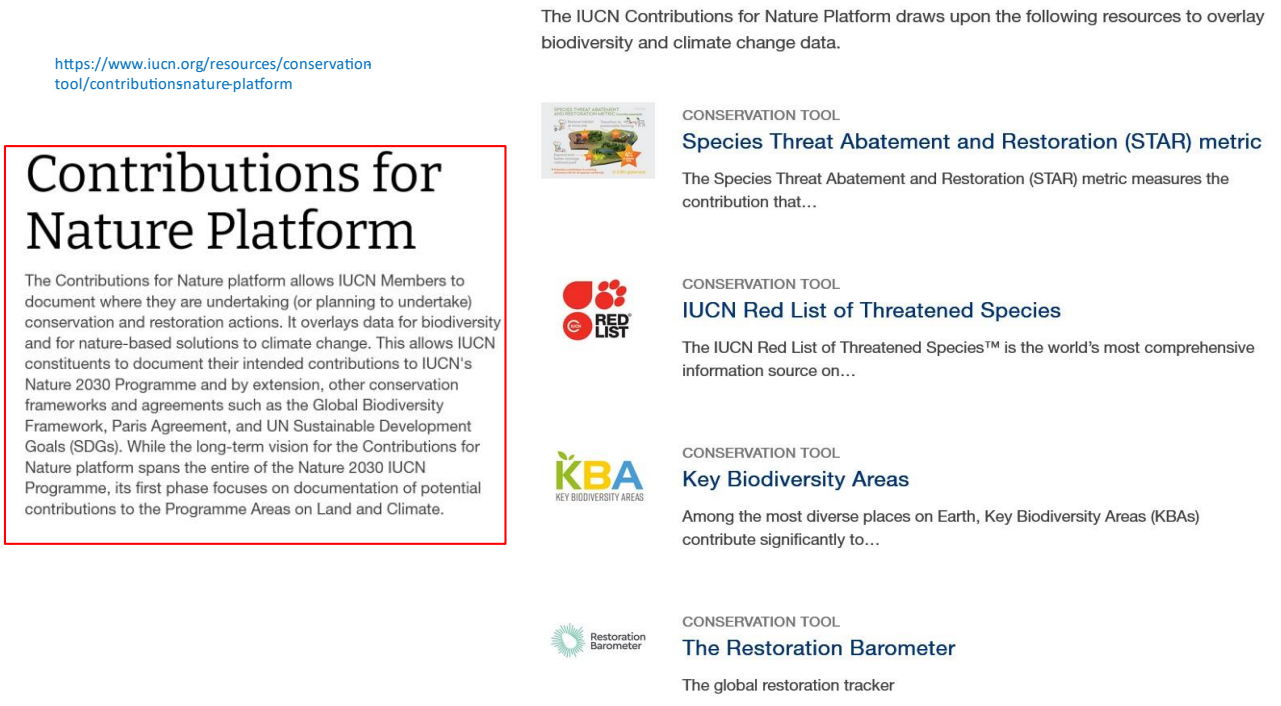


FIGURE 17: THE CONTRIBUTION FOR NATURE PLATFORM IS A NEW (2020) IUCN INSTRUMENT USING AN ARRAY OF IUCN TOOLS AND DATA BASES

So far, AGTSA has contributed very little to the Platform; an excerpt of the only input (actually somewhat misplaced) is displayed after Table 9 below:

Participating Country	Burkina - Faso	Guatemala	India	Rwanda	Tanzania	Viet Nam
Number of contributions by AGTSA as of 15/02/24	0	1	0	0	0	0

TABLE 9: CURRENT CONTRIBUTIONS OF AGTSA PROJECT TO THE CONTRIBUTION FOR NATURE PLATFORM

Examples of AGTSA's inputs to the CONTRIBUTION FOR NATURE PLATFORM

Country	Study	Authors:
Guatemala	Study case- bases for monitoring biodiversity at the farm level	Escobedo, Mejía, Cardona y Fernández

General Considerations:
The results of this evaluation show that **insects and their ecological metrics can be used as indicators of biodiversity gains at the farm level**. Pollinating insects respond to local conditions related to management, such as the abundance and diversity of semi-natural vegetation. However, **it is also advisable to include other types of ecological interactions as estimators of ecological functionality in farms**. Therefore, it is recommended to include observations of ecological interactions other than floral visits to improve information about ecological processes in farms and test their performance as indicators.

Additionally, **it is essential to emphasize that the success of using the indicators used in this work to describe and detect biodiversity gains based on farm management in the studied farms depends largely on the training of personnel responsible for data collection**. Furthermore, the support of trained taxonomists is necessary, as the performance of the analyses used here depends to a large extent on the correct identification and classification of specimens.

D.3.4 The EFFICIENCY of the project (or: has the design and management approach led to the most effective use of the resources, cost savings and economies of scale in the provision of coordination and technical support?)

Informants' summarized opinions	Comments by the MTR reviewers	MTR Rating
- Changes in the human resources *and institutional line of command* have affected the continuity and efficiency of the project management in the first 1½ years, as the IUCN Agriculture Team has for a while been understaffed and unstable. - The signing of a dozen of (short-term) Internal Agreements for money and responsibilities transfer between HQ, the Regional Offices, various IUCN units and the country offices, has been a tedious process causing significant delays. - Because they lack specialized HR, IUCN country offices had to competitively outsource the field work – another source of bureaucratic obstacles and delays - Likewise, the production of the "guidances" for the assessment tools (Land and Soil Health, NbS for agriculture) has been significantly delayed (till 08/23).	- The knowledge products (esp. the "frameworks" for tools to be tested i.e. (i) Soil and Land health indicators, (ii) NbS for SA) were provided by HQ departments in isolation and with significant delays - The accumulation of delays *(as well as an underestimation of the time required for field investigations)* made the extension of the IAs necessary in all 6 countries. - slightly less than 1/3 of the project budget has so far been allocated to the field work in participating countries and regions. - Internal procedures make financial management and reporting complicated: Country teams however do not complain about a lack of transparency. There has been numerous virtual meetings in the last year, improving internal communication with the project management.	**C +**

D.3.4.1 The project timeframe

As already mentioned in D 3.1, the timeframe is unanimously judged as too tight, particularly in the participating countries. First of all, the time required to carry out the testing of the proposed tools was underestimated at design stage, resulting in the signed IAs being of short duration (18 months at best). Secondly, most IUCN country teams do not have the expert resources needed to carry out the tool testing in the field and are forced to contract this work out to consultants, adding the burden and delays of the tendering process. All countries have had to request a time extension to be able to deliver their expected outputs; eventually they all have obtained a 3- or 6-months extension, which in most cases will have to be renewed.

D.3.4.2 The project resources.

D.3.4.2.1 Human resources

The country teams state that they have adequately been reinforced. The major shortcoming has been the considerable delays in getting the (sub)projects started at country level because of the bureaucratic constraints associated with the signing of the Internal Agreements (IAs).

The next source of delays has been the late delivery (by mid-2023) of the two guidance notes [(i) land and soil health, (ii) NbS for Agriculture]. Then came in addition the cumbersome tendering process to recruit consultants for the field work. Some of the countries (e.g. Viet Nam, Guatemala) were in a position to go ahead faster because they already had at least one long-standing relevant ongoing field project at the time of the launching of AGTSA and closer relationships with sector stakeholders and operators.

D 3.4.2.2 Institutional resources

IUCN-HQ (project management) is reported by the country teams to have provided adequate support, in particular through quarterly virtual meetings and frequent communication. On the other hand, the various IUCN departments involved in the project seem to have worked rather in isolation from one another. The link between the specialized departments and the country (sub)projects appears to be very tenuous – in spite of a number of virtual meetings -, a situation that is not surprising in view of the quite different working environments of the various teams and of the different nature of expected outputs – though there is a definite degree of interdependency between the deliverables.

This is a consequence of the design, which puts in the same "project" a number of deliverables that require very different types of expertise and scales of concern, making difficult the creation of the sense of a common goal.

D 3.4.2.3 Financial resources: the cost structure and disbursement rate

The current project duration is 01/10/21 to 31/12/24, with an initial budget structure displayed in ANNEX 8 A. The project take-off has been slow. At the end of 2022, after 15 (out of 39) months of operation, the overall disbursement rate was 16% while the rate for the staff line alone was 41%.

After more than two (2) years of operation (70% of initially planned duration), the overall disbursement is now at 55%. However, the project has engaged 93 % of its provision for staff salaries and only 33% of external professional services (reflecting the still low level of field work, which is essentially carried out by consultants)- and as a whole engaged 73n% of its budget (Table 10). The above-mentioned administrative delays mostly explain this situation.

This state of affairs leaves room for a no-cost extension of the execution period of the project – ideally by at least 6 months, and to include an additional allocation to the participating countries for them to better finalize their outputs.

Additional countries might also be considered in the present project framework– see F.1 Strategic Recommendations - but only in as much as they have readily available data (from "case studies") that can enrich the advocacy corpus of evidence.

Annex 3 b. UPDATED TOTAL PROJECT BUDGET DATE: 31/01/2024

Budget line	Planned	Engaged to date	Disbursed to date	Remarks	
				Engaged / planned	Disbursed / planned
1. Staff	1,531,734.00	1,420,470.23	1,004,344.09		
2. Consultancy and Professional Services	561,011.00	225,096.04	180,378.04	92.7 %	66.0 %
3. Travel, Hospitality and Conferences	304,111.00	271,484.25	252,039.25	40.1 %	32.2 %
4. Training	173,200.00	6,646.00	6,646.00	89.3 %	82.9 %
5. Vehicle and Equipment Costs		6,957.72	6,957.72	3.8 %	3.8 %
6. Office and G&A		6,430.06	6,052.06		
7.Communications and Publications	118,444.00	18,411.82	18,009.82	15.5 %	15.2 %
8. Overhead	403,275.00	293,324.42	221,164.05	72,7 %	54.8 %
Total uses	(1) 3,091,775.00	(2) 2,248,820.54	(3) 1,695,591.03	**72,7 %**	**54.8 %**

AGTSA's overall Balance @ 31/01/24:

- **to be disbursed** [(1) – (3)]: € **1,396,184** **of which € 553,229 [(2) -(3)] is already engaged, mostly (75%) in on-going IAs**
- **still to be alloted /not yet engaged** [(1) – (2)]: € **842,955** over the period **02/24 to 30/06/25 ?**

TABLE 10: SUMMARY OF THE OVERALL AGTSA BUDGET AND CURRENT DISBURSEMENT RATE (31/01/24)- SOURCE: IUCN FINANCIAL REPORTS

NB: "engagement" in Table 10 means that a formal commitment has been made that needs a provision for it to be fulfilled (ex: a contract that was signed but not yet paid for …) , whereas "disbursement" means that payment has been

finalized The distinction between both is useful in as much as the gap between what is engaged and what is disbursed to some extent reflects the degree of actual implementation.

Overall, about 1/3 of the AGTSA budget was originally allocated to the country sub-projects, each country receiving approximately 160,000 €. Originally the countries budgets were broken down in relation to the tasks to be performed. This was changed as it did not allow a proper financial monitoring; Table 11 below displays the currently structured typical budget of a country (sub)project -here the Viet Nam case, shared between the country and the regional division of IUCN (Asia Regional Office-ARO) and mirroring the overall budget (staff time, consultancies and overheads combined make 83% of the total). Table 12 displays the current state of expenditures for Guatemala (the only country which provided the Consultant team with expenditures data at national level), while Table 13 provides cumulated data for both Rwanda and Tanzania, jointly managed by ESARO representation in Kigali (NB: Logistics expenses in Africa are exceptionally high, compared to other regions).

Table 14 presents the project financial situation as of 31/12/23, according to IUCN Financial Department.

In the Consultant's opinion, the overall cost structure should have given more weight to the countries works (50% or more) for the benefit of better carrying out more field work over a longer period of time.

Item	ARO budget (€)	Vietnam budget (€)	Total VN + ARO (€)	Percentage of total
Staff time	12,519	49,274	61,793	39%
Travel		10,000	10,000	6%
Publication(s)/policy briefs	2,212		2,212	1%
Meeting logistics	885	12,000	12,885	8%
Consultancies	700	47,850	48,550	31%
External Audit		2,950	2,950	2%
Overhead	2,447	17,869	20,316	13%
TOTAL	**€ 18,763**	**€ 139,943**	**158,706**	100%

TABLE 11: AGTSA BUDGET FOR OPERATIONS IN VIET NAM

Item	Budgeted (€)	% item/total	Disbursed to date (€)	Disbursed / Budgeted
1. Staff	46,325	31,5 %	37,995	82%
2. Consultancy services	40,220	27%	24,442	61%
3. Travel, logistics and meetings	20,041	13,6%	15,984	79,8 %
4. Training	1,794	0	1769	99%
5. Vehicles and equipment	0	0	0	
6. Office supplies	0	0	0	
7.Comunications and publications	17,625	12%	10,430	59%
8. Overhead	21,200	14,4 %	13,681	64,5%
TOTAL	**147,205**		**104,305**	**70,8%**

TABLE 12: STATE OF EXPENDITURES FOR AGTSA (SUB)PROJECT IN GUATEMALA AS OF 11/23

Item	Budgeted (€)	% item/total	Disbursed to date (€)	Disbursed / Budgeted

1. Staff	51, 993	16.3 %	36,278	**70 %**
2. Consultancy services	87,770	27.6 %	24,450	27.8 %
3. Travel and logistics and meetings	117,532	36.8%	107,589	91.5 %
4. Training	15,000	4.7 %	-	0 %
5. Vehicles and equipment	6,000		2,364	15.3 %
6. Administration and office supplies	2,000		2,005	100 %
7.Comunications and publications	2,000		1,675	84 %
8. Overhead	36,698	11.5 %	8,135	22 %
TOTAL	**318,993**		**182,496**	**57 %**

TABLE 13: BUDGET AND CURRENT STATE OF AGTSA EXPENDITURES FOR ESARO (RWANDA AND TANZANIA) AS OF 11/23

Regional Office (RO)	**ARO**		**ESARO**		**PACO**	**ORMAC**
	India	Viet Nam	Rwanda	Tanzania	Burkina faso	Guatemala
Budget so far	158,700	158,700	318,993		162,533	162,533
Actual expenses	42,650	98,503	292,961		121,229	141,659
IA Balance	116,050	60,197	26,032		41,304	20,874

IUCN Dept.	**UKO** (Soil Species)	**USA** (Flagship Report)	**MED** Spain (Soil and Land Health framework)	**ELC** Germany (Laws & Policies report)	**IUCN HQ**	**TOTAL**
Budget so far	81,075	247,250	23,010		1,769,420	
Actual expenses	82,942	100,581	23,995		1,637,175	
	1,867	146,668	- 986	19,870	132,245	

TABLE 14: BUDGET AND CURRENT STATE OF IA EXPENDITURES AND BALANCES AT THE END OF YEAR 2023

D.3.4.3 The project MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation and learning) system

The project MEL is currently reduced to three "Key Performance Indicators (KPI)", each corresponding to an expected project outcome, namely:

KPI 1 =# of international and national partners engaged and supported by IUCN to promote and adopt sustainable land-based production systems and agroecological approaches.

KPI 2 = # of IUCN peer reviewed tools, analyses and publications on sustainable land-use and land-based activities as a NbS.
KPI 3 = # of IUCN portfolio projects that focus on sustainable agriculture and land health.

These KPIs are essentially quantitative and do not internalize any qualitative consideration. For instance, the "number" of new partners does not inform on the extent – depth and breadth - of this partnership; the "number" of new SA projects does not qualify their significance with respect to the issue at stake. Definitely, proper characterization of the expected outcomes is a serious challenge, but which has to be addressed to the extent possible.

Beyond these KPIs, or rather: anterior to them, there is no traced process indicator – be it qualitative or quantitative. Granted, the project has a number of clearly identified outputs (deliverables) and straightforward steps, yet it would have been useful to record some intermediate feedback. Such feedback can still be recorded on not-yet-initiated activities such as the training in relation with the NbS and use of the land and soil health tools. In Annex 4 B, the Consultant proposes a "reconstructed" Logical Framework of AGTSA project that includes a number of possible intermediate indicators of the process and its results. This LF needs be amended/refined by the project implementors themselves.

D.3.5 ON SPECIFIC IUCN CONCERNS

Specific concern	Informants' Comments	MTR Rating
• **One Programme Approach**: To what extent did the project engage all constituents of the Union in its design or implementation so far?	Governments have been mobilized and new contacts initiated – in particular with Agriculture ministries, which are not usual IUCN counterparts. Other constituents (Academics, research institutions, SCOs, NGOs, private sector..,) have been associated in varying degrees depending on the country and the history of IUCN local implantation. At HQ level, working relations with IUCN Commissions and members are still limited**.** "IUCN should have earlier consulted some of its members more experienced in dealing with the agricultural sector "	**B**
• **Science/policy/action interface**: To what extent is the knowledge or science produced or disseminated by the Project likely to influence policy or actions in the future?	The testing of the proposed tools (soil/land health indicators, agricultural NbS standard) as well as the results of the thematic investigations are not yet at a stage and on a scale that allow their dissemination. The scientific documents (flagship report, report on soil species diversity and status) or the report on SA promoting policies and legal/regulations framework, are not completed yet; it is therefore difficult to anticipate at this stage what their influence will be.	**?**
• **Gender concerns**: To what extent has gender been taken into account in the design and implementation so far?	**The design included no specific concern for gender issues**, – although a very high -sometimes the majority- of de facto small-scale farmers (aren't they the final intended beneficiaries of IUCN Agriculture program?) are women (often illiterate as in Guatemala, Burkina Faso, India …; which will have a bearing on the future training methods).	**C-**

D 3.6 The overall rating

In a very synthetic summary, the project is therefore at this stage assessed as follows:

Relevance	**B +**
Coherence	**B -**
Effectiveness	**B**
Efficiency	**C+**
Other specific IUCN concerns(One Program approach, gender, …)	**C+**

It must be underscored that these ratings cannot eliminate some degree of subjectivity and are proposed at a moment when the project is far from being completed. Therefore, criteria such as Effectiveness, Efficiency and some Specific Concerns may be improved at later implementation stages. To that effect, a full-fledged Logical Framework and subsequent Evaluation Matrix are needed, to be made instrumental via a proper MEL system, currently missing. The annexes to this report make proposals for such tools, which need be further developed by the project implementors themselves.

E. Conclusion

E 1. A proposed SWOT analysis of the AGTSA project

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
A potentially fruitful dialogue has been initiated – in the participating countries at least - with stakeholders the IUCN was not yet familiar with (Ministries of Agriculture, farmers organisations, private agrifood operators)	The target audience at this stage was multistakeholder (government, farmer unions, NGOs…). Some confusion remains as to who are the project beneficiaries and what their respective benefits are or should be. The project comprises too many different tasks requiring different types of expertise, aiming at very different audiences, thus making adequate monitoring and guidance difficult.	Some farmers organisations did participate, that type of outreach needs be broadened and deepened.	If IUCN does not raise more resources - external or of its own – to keep the dialogue alive and nurture it, there is a high risk of rapid neglect of the dialogue
Landmark documents of global interest (e.g. the Flagship report) produced that will raise the status of IUCN as a potential partner in the transition to SA.	Evidence-based science is lacking in developing countries, especially as far as soil biodiversity loss and its impacts are concerned. To enrich the database will require substantial efforts.	IUCN should reinforce and diversify its partnership with specialized agriculture-focused agencies such as FAO, IFAD as well as selected research organisations.	IUCN's interest in collaborating with the agricultural sector rather than combatting it may be perceived as opportunistic. Partnerships need be concretized through common actions.
New SA projects have been proposed for IFI funding (GEF, GCF, WB, …) with government support.	National financial commitment is the actual yardstick of governmental support, not just agreement on project promotion. The extent of participation of the intended beneficiaries into the design of the proposed SA promotion projects is unclear.	Bilateral ODA agencies may locally be more reactive and agile and should be better targeted, also because they often are more responsive than multilaterals in support of experimental initiatives.	The IFIs' approval process is long and cumbersome. In the meantime, IUCN must maintain the acquired momentum – which otherwise is at risk of dropping quickly
Appropriate communication and training material (especially on characterizing land and soil health) are expected outputs of interest to a large audience.	The NBS framework for SA (Agri guidance) is perceived as too conceptual, not enough "hands on". The representativity of participating countries (and indeed regions within these countries -re: India) may be felt by IUCN audiences and partners as insufficient, given the global magnitude of the issue.	Besides India, at least another country with massive industrial agriculture (e.g. Brazil?) could be investigated in terms of its potential adoption of NbS for SA, for AGTSA project and more broadly for the IUCN Agriculture portfolio.	

E 2. Overall assessment

Eventually the reviewers propose a concise assessment of the project in the following terms:

The AGTSA project - although it could have been more efficient - is indeed supporting the coming into force of IUCN's Agriculture and Land Health initiative. However IUCN needs to dedicate additional resources, institutional commitment to this initiative, as well as focus on expanding and nurturing its dialogue with stakeholders- in particular farmers organizations - in order to internalize this paradigm shift into its long-term operational plans and to share the new insights it comprises with its shareholders, as well as feed this shift from the insights those shareholders can provide from their own experience. In the short term, an increased field experimentation will help materialize the expected outputs and therefor the outcomes.

Furthermore, on a longer term, a full-fledged Logical Framework and subsequent Evaluation Matrix would be needed, and be made instrumental via a proper MEL system for the project, currently missing. The annexes to this report make proposals for such tools (see ANNEXES 4), which need be further developed by the project implementors themselves.

The following three practical questions had also been raised in the ToRs and are addressed as follows:

(i) Is the IUCN setting the right foundations for facilitating collaboration among its teams (at HQ/region/country levels)?

- The MTR Consultants 'opinion is that they are not familiar enough with the internal functioning of the IUCN (i.e. WITH vs. WITHOUT the project) so as to be able to come up with an evidence-based answer. Their feeling however is that there is significant room for improvement in articulating the three levels, particularly the HQ with ROs; a proxy indicator of this state of affairs has been the cumbersome processing of the IAs.

(ii) Was the choice of (subproject) countries strategically adequate? In which countries should IUCN intensify the work for the final year of the project?

- Strategically, it would seem useful to widen the spectrum of sampled situations by incorporating countries or areas where intensive/chemistry-based agriculture is heavily dominant, so as to better assess the stress and threats posed on soil health and biodiversity by such practices. With one year currently left for implementation, such move seems out of reach. Besides, IUCN had until recently no or very little involvement in agriculture interventions in such context, resulting in the absence of "case studies" ready for presentation.

(iii) What can be done to ensure there is a strong Agriculture team and a portfolio of "NbS for Sustainable Agriculture" initiatives in IUCN at the end of this project?

- Clearly, the agriculture team needs to be reinforced with additional human resources, at least at HQ and ROs level. As to the strategic positioning and anchoring of the agriculture team within the organization at large, this is an issue that needs more reflection and proactivity by IUCN constituents and management.
- As a matter of fact, all countries need more time and resources – particularly in the field- to be able to deliver on the tools and SA promotion projects formulation. It will also be important to take into account that the proposals will take time to be refined and appraised by the potential financiers and that IUCN will have to ensure a close follow-up of that time-consuming process.

F. Recommendations and way forward

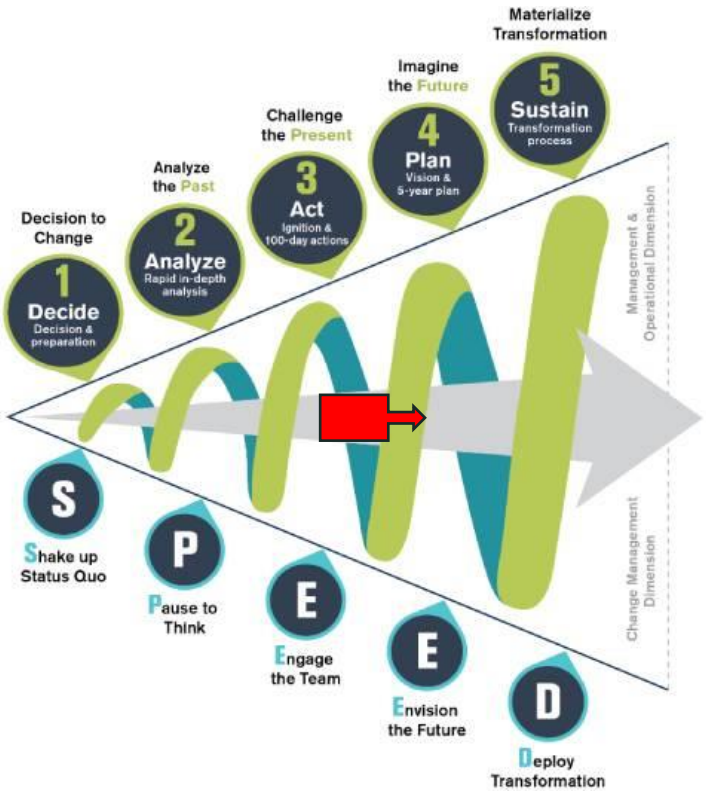
F 1. Strategic Recommendations

By "strategic" we here mean that these recommendations relate to both the policy underlying them and to the means proposed to make this policy materialize (isn't a strategy nothing but an estimated best match between ambitions and means?).

R1. Reconstruct a ToC and Logical Framework: a) for the whole initiative, and b) for AGTSA. On that basis, raise more funding for upscaling

The IUCN agriculture program needs a well spelled-out ToC and AGTSA's ToC in turn needs to be clearly delineated as part of it (re: Fig.10). The expected transformation is bound to be a long process (Fig.18) and even after AGTSA will have been completed, there will still be a long way ahead which has to be anticipated – and financed. Indeed, fundraising for pursuing the engaged transformation must start now.

In particular, the analysis of the desired change process should at the same time strive to clearly determine where does the IUCN's added value stand in the diagram below (as part of a collaborative effort of many actors to promote Sustainable Agriculture).



AGTSA position?

FIGURE 18: PROMOTING CHANGE, WHERE DOES AGTSA STAND?

Overall, the AGTSA project is to be viewed within the framework of a "time-slice" programming, whereby this project contributes to some of the lines of action of the agriculture program during a determined period of time but must be completed by – and interface with – other investments (in money, time, HR dedication, etc…)

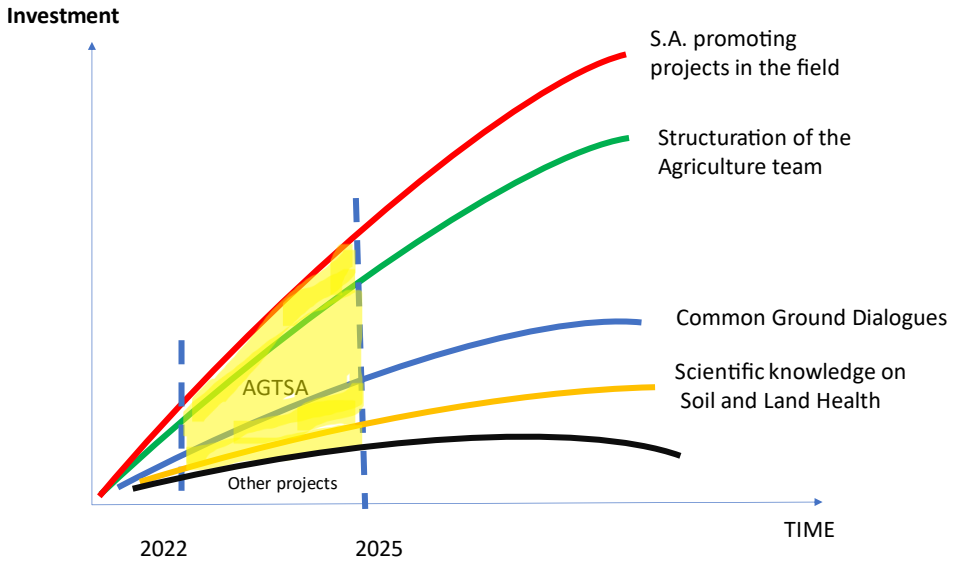


FIGURE 19: AGTSA AS A TIME-SLICE PIECE IN THE IUCN'S AGRICULTURE PROGRAM

R2. Better connect with intended final beneficiaries.

As part of the dialogue with stakeholders, it is mandatory that IUCN country teams intensify their partnership with farmers organisations. Indeed, even though farmers may be of course influenced by prevailing policies – above all incentives of all kinds (subsidies, prices, taxes, …), they remain the final decision-makers at the farm level. In the future, the farmers organizations should be included as co-designers of operational aspects, stimulating their deeper appropriation of the land health and even NbS approaches in a more user-friendly form.

In particular, the specificities of women farmers (as regards their access to resources and knowledge) will have to be carefully internalized into the communication and training approaches adopted.

R3. Incorporate findings from countries where intensive agriculture dominates.

In countries where intensive artificialized agriculture by far dominates – such as the EU, USA and Canada, Australia - or is well established in terms of surface (e.g. in the BRICS), the need to advocate for- and shift to - a more sustainable path to the perennity of food systems is strikingly acute. Although a number of CSOs are mobilized and more and more farmers are sensitized, the impact of the agrifood system in terms of pollution, biodiversity loss, depletion of water resources, etc... is getting critical and the governments are lukewarm at best – sometimes hostile – vis-à-vis policies that would aim at a reduction of synthetic inputs and – in their views – of agricultural production and productivity.

IUCN could play a greater role in alerting the public at large in those countries about the environmental co-benefits that a more sustainable agriculture would provide and join efforts with

other whistle-blowers. It seems adequate for the AGTSA project to incorporate at least one such country; Brazil could be a good candidate, where interesting past or ongoing experiences of land health recovery can be easily found while the damages caused by intensive monoculture (e.g. soybean) on deforested land are so alarming.

Similarly, the Mediterranean area is totally missing in the AGTSA sample of countries, in spite of the critical status of agriculture there. Currently, IUCN seems to be present in the agriculture sector only in Egypt (Fig. 11 A). Eventually, one could also think of countries which are biodiversity hotspots heavily endangered by agriculture, such as Madagascar or Indonesia.

A careful reflection has to be made as to whether or not additional countries can still be incorporated into the present AGTSA project (assuming an IA could quickly be settled …); yet it is necessary to envisage the enlargement – in the next future - of the representativity of the current sample of countries.

R4. Reinforce HR to support IUCN involvement in the agricultural sector.

The "agriculture team "currently is concentrated at HQ level and its mandate still seems not to be radiating enough within IUCN. Incidentally, IUCN staffing in each regional office should include at least one dedicated full-time agriculture specialist.

F 2. Recommendations for Implementation

R5. Work out a No-cost extension of AGTSA by 6 months.

The financial resources suffice to extend the project until mid-2025 in order to obtain the finalization of the expected outputs and in particular more results from the tools tests, a potential real added value at country level. This requires securing additional IAs for about a year, reshuffling some budget resources from HQ expenses to the countries.

NB: Even with this one more half a year, it may prove too late and difficult to meaningly add at this stage one more participating country to the current pool of six (6). This can be envisaged in the framework of a further phase aiming at more representativity of the country sample (e.g. there are already ongoing discussions with the EU).

As far as the soil and land health assessment is concerned, an alternative may be to mobilize AGTSA resources to critically scrutinize - in one of the currently participating countries- the soil and land status in areas where regenerative agriculture has been ongoing for a long while. A case in point may be that of the so-called "Natural Farming"[13] in Andhra Pradesh, India).

R6. Set up a proper MEL system for the project and for the agriculture program as a whole.

Set up a proper MEL system for the deployment of the agriculture program, to be overseen and informed by regional and national IUCN teams. For the AGTSA project in particular, there is a need for process-oriented and qualitative indicators.

R7. Raise funds in order to be able to follow up on AGTSA outcomes (especially the dialogues and the portfolio of SA projects) in order to materialize their effects and potential impact.

The approval process of the proposed SA-promoting projects will need close follow-up after AGTSA 's official closure. The dialogue process will need be continued, broadened and deepened (see R2).

[13] APCNF = Andhra Pradesh Community -managed Natural Farming – see ANNEX 6

R8. Design and plan follow-up activities and institutional set-up for the dialogues to continue.

Based on lessons learnt from the CGDs, consolidate the dialogues at regional and country levels, further explore concrete and organizational ways and means for a reinforced collaboration with the stakeholders, leading to common actions. As previously stated in this report, the AGTSA project makes sense in as much as it leads to more involvement by IUCN in the agriculture sector, not only through implementing the investment projects but also through maintaining and nurturing a fruitful policy dialogue with stakeholders from all the sector spectrum: farmers, agri-businesses, governments (local, national), NGOs, …