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THE NATURE CONSERVATION PROGRAMME NCP IN NORTH-MACEDONIA

Final external Evaluation of the three phases 2012-2023

Final report – 06.05.2024



Evaluation Report for NCP in North Macedonia

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Photo cover page (Christoph Dürr):

Gold crocus (*Crocus flavus*) in the Maleshevo Protected Area - indication of spring 2024 and emblematic of the large number of successful project activities in the 11 years of the Nature Conservation Programme (NCP) in North Macedonia.

Table of Content

Acronyms and abbreviations

Acknowledgements

Executive summary 5

1	Introduction.....	7
2	Summary description of the programme	8
3	Findings.....	9
3.1	Relevance and Coherence	9
3.2	Effectiveness.....	12
3.3	Efficiency	13
3.4	Impact.....	14
3.5	Sustainability	16
4	Conclusions.....	17
5	Recommendations and lessons learnt	18
6	Annexes	19
	Annex 6.1 Terms of reference	20
	Annex 6.2 Assessment Grid – OECD DAC Criteria	37
	Annex 6.3 Complete list of stakeholders and others consulted and interviewed	44
	Annex 6.4 Detailed description of the scoping and evaluation process, including data sources and possible methodological weaknesses and limitations	47
	Annex 6.5 Analysis of the intervention logframe NCP: extent of achievements	49
	Annex 6.6 List of documents reviewed	66

Acronyms and abbreviations

BRBMP - Bregalnica River Basin Management Project
CBD - Convention on Biological Diversity
CSO – Civil Society Organisation
DAC - Development Assistance Committee
EBRD - European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EIB - European Investment Bank
LFMWB - Landscape Fire Management in the Western Balkans
MAFWE - Ministry of Agriculture, Forests and Water economy
MoEPP - Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning
MP - Management Plan
NBSAP - National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
OECD - Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PEMF - Public Enterprise Macedonian Forest
PES - Payment for Ecosystem Services
RFDP - Regional Forest Development Plan
SDC – Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation

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Executive summary

The “Nature Conservation Programme” (NCP) was initiated in 2012 by the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC) via the Swiss Embassy in Skopje and was carried out during 11 years and three successive phases (2012-2023), with financial assistance by the Swiss Government.

At the end of the Exit Phase in 2023, the Swiss Embassy issued an invitation to tender for an evaluation of NCP with the objectives to:

- conduct the final evaluation of the three phases of the Nature Conservation Programme, including recommendations on fields in nature and biodiversity protection, and/ or ecosystems resilience for which continued support will be critical;
- Build on the recommendations of the evaluation and the insights gained, to develop in a first stage, a few potential intervention options in the field of improving biodiversity and ecosystems’ resilience, and then, in a second stage, for the selected option(s), to develop a concept for a new programme in North Macedonia.

The present evaluation report covers the assessment of the 11 years - 2012-2023 - with a focus on the last phase. The evaluation team, after the desk study, prepared a questionnaire for interviews with all relevant stakeholders (based on a list provided by SDC). The Team carried out 28 interviews during a field mission from 26.02. to 01.03.2024 in Skopje and in the East Planning Region, following the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criteria. In addition, they visited in a separate field tour both of the protected areas, guided by the staff of the Public Enterprise Macedonian Forest (PEMF) responsible for their management and monitoring. The preliminary summary of the evaluation and recommendations for potential future interventions were presented and discussed at the Swiss Embassy on 01.03.2024. A further debriefing along with the Swiss Embassy took place on 4.3.2024 with the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning (MoEPP).

Most interview partners were highly satisfied with the NCP, with a minority expressing dissatisfaction over specific issues. The coordination team composed of Farmahem - Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation - functioned effectively and smoothly. Farmahem has proved to be a very good and reliable project implementer. and is very highly considered in the region. Helvetas had the backstopping role for the planning, monitoring and for ad hoc technical inputs. Also the engagement of the Bern University Zollikofen for the scientific exchange was very much appreciated. At national level the expertise of the Macedonian Ecological Society (MES) was crucial for the robust scientific foundations for developing new schemes such as payments for ecosystem services (PES), the gap analysis on biodiversity hotspots for spatial planning or the documentation on Natura 2000 sites.

In summary, the evaluation team considers the selection of the project area adequate, since little emphasis is given to this poorer part of the country and it has great potential for enhancing biodiversity conservation while linking it to sustainable livelihoods. The emphasis and support for biodiversity conservation and ecosystem resilience is relevant for North Macedonia in order to support its preparation for EU accession.

NCP has carried out the interventions efficiently, with a transparent and flexible management approach. The focus on capacity building, awareness raising at national, regional and local level as well as at the level of government institutions, municipalities, NGOs, civil society and businesses has been appreciated by all stakeholders. NCP has also achieved most of the objectives, outcomes and outputs effectively. Results and procedures are well documented.

However, some of the activities such as for example, PES have only recently been established and still need a few years to be fully functional. Similarly, the implementation of the Regional Forest Plan needs further experiences and monitoring. Final inclusion of these procedures in the legislation will guarantee the sustainable support by the government and its regular financing. Another example is the Regional Spatial Plan where a lot of valuable expertise and support was provided by NCP in

technical knowhow, in data management and in creating awareness in the municipalities about the role of nature protection – however the plan is also after 4 years pending formal adoption by the parliament.

One of the main achievements during the last years of NCP is the proclamation of the two protected areas, Osogovo Mountains and Maleshevo, where the scientific preparation as well as the awareness raising campaigns led to a positive attitude of the majority of the local population towards protection of nature. With the appointment of the managing body and the implementing agency (PEMF) as well as approved management plans, a good basis for implementation is in place. The evaluation team is of the view that further capacity building is necessary to ensure effective implementation of the management plans, especially on monitoring biodiversity, implementing conservation measures and measuring their impacts. This requires a long-term, regular budget.

The small grants scheme which supported mainly the municipalities was very important for trust building at local level in the beginning of the programme. However, only a few of them were directly related to enhancing biodiversity conservation, instead focussing on energy saving or general environmental issues. These activities were also binding a lot of operational resources in project management.

As an only aspect of the NCP that was assessed unsatisfactory was the long-term management and financing of some of the successful interventions. In case of further support this part would need to be prioritised.

Supporting the efforts of North Macedonia in biodiversity conservation and ecosystem resilience has still a great potential. In conclusion, the evaluation team recommends to focus and to consolidate the most successful interventions and further work on finding ways to sustainably finance these in the context of the capability of North Macedonia.

1 Introduction

Situated in the biodiverse rich Balkan Peninsula, North Macedonia is recognised as a European “Biodiversity Hotspot”. Yet, until recently there was limited data on biodiversity and few structures and mechanisms in place to conserve and manage it effectively. Direct causes of biodiversity loss in North Macedonia include subsistence agriculture/livestock rearing and ecosystem fragmentation. Root causes of biodiversity loss include poverty in rural areas; limited economic alternatives for rural poor in remote and economically marginalised areas; low levels of environmental awareness; unsustainable land use; poor/no conservation management of protected areas except for the three national parks; lack of integrated spatial land use planning on regional and local levels; poor enforcement of Law on Nature Protection; and insufficient government commitment to biodiversity conservation in view of other priorities.

Switzerland has been supporting work in North Macedonia since 1992 and started engaging in the environmental sector in 1994 with an emphasis on the management of protected areas, water and nature protection (wastewater treatment), improved water supply and sewage systems, monitoring rivers and river restoration. More generally, key principles of the Swiss cooperation strategy with North Macedonia¹ are: 1. joint implementation with donor partners in order to generate synergies; 2. shift from project-funding towards contributions to grassroots-based organisations and processes; 3, favouring a more regional approach making optimum use of trans-boundary development opportunities, and 4. creating synergies among different Swiss interventions.

A recent Environmental Performance Review for North Macedonia (UNECE, 2019) by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), characterised the situation before the start of the programme as having weak ministries and overlaps between the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning (MoEPP) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forests and Water Economy (MAFWE), lack of capacity (staff and funding) in the agency responsible for nature protection, decentralisation without empowerment (including capacity and funding) at the level of municipalities, lack of spatial planning, unresolved tenure issues, outdated strategic sectoral documents, gaps in biodiversity data and unknown status of ecological and legal status of protected areas. The country faces several challenges when it comes to nature conservation, notably limited application of the institutional framework, lack of, or limited, monitoring and reporting, ongoing loss of biodiversity, lack of funding for protected areas, and a lack of inter-sectoral collaboration between the Ministry and other relevant sectors.

To address the country's nature conservation priorities, in 2012 the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC) via the Swiss Embassy in Skopje initiated and funded the 11 year “Nature Conservation Programme” (NCP) that was carried out over three successive phases. The East Planning Region which is the focus of the programme covers large parts of the River Bregalnica water catchment which includes 100 villages and 13 municipalities for a total population of about 200,000 (70% of whom are rural). The area under protection in this watershed is particularly low which justifies the choice of priority site.

At the end of the Exit Phase (end of 2023) an evaluation was initiated with the objectives to:

- conduct the final evaluation of the three phases of the Nature Conservation Programme, including recommendations on fields in nature and biodiversity protection, and/ or ecosystems resilience for which continued support will be critical;
- Build on the recommendations of the evaluation and the insights gained, to develop in a first stage, a few potential intervention options in the field of improving biodiversity and ecosystems' resilience, and then, in a second stage, for the selected option(s), to develop a concept for a new programme in North Macedonia.

¹ Project Document NCP phase I (2012-2016) in chapter 2.7, on page 4.

The evaluation team consists of two international consultants: Christoph Dürr (team leader) and Stephanie Mansourian and a national consultant: Bojana Stanojevska Pecurovska (see Terms of References in Annex 6.1). The evaluation took place between January 2024 and April 2024 and included a mission from 26.02. to 01.03.2024 to North Macedonia. The project documents were made available to the team by SDC according to the TORs of the mandate. 28 Interviews were held with representatives of national, regional and local authorities, as well as businesses, scientists and NGOs. A full list of interviewees and the schedule of the mission can be found in Annex 6.3.

2 Summary description of the programme

The Nature Conservation Programme (NCP) was led by a programme coordination team made up of a local company, Farmahem, and Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation that were responsible for designing, facilitating, supervising, coordinating and monitoring activities. In the first phase, Helvetas took the lead, while in the second and final phases Farmahem led the programme, with Helvetas backstopping. Technical support was provided at the national level by the Macedonian Ecological Society (MES) and at an international level by the Bern University of Applied Sciences (HAFL) in Zollikofen.

NCP worked at local, regional and national levels. At national level it focused on the national policy and legal frameworks, and supported national policy dialogue. At the regional level it focused on the East Planning region (one of 8 planning regions set up in 2007 by the government) in the east of the country. At the local level, it supported pilot initiatives, local planning, implementation of local initiatives, awareness raising, and contributed to linking local initiatives and challenges with regional and national policy discussions and debates.

The goal of the project's first phase was: *"The main stakeholders on national, regional and local level effectively conserve the natural resources of the Bregalnica Region, integrating up to date conservation approaches with the principles of sustainable natural resources management and the local economic development agenda."* For the second phase, starting in January 2017, the overall goal was *"Bregalnica region safeguards its natural values and promotes socio-economic development that is sustainable and inclusive"*. The same goal was kept for the 3-year exit phase (from February 2021 to January 2024).

The first phase focused on filling knowledge gaps. It carried out ecological surveys, brought stakeholders together and developed a number of strategic maps and planning tools, such as the National Strategy for Nature Protection, a Draft Spatial Plan for the East Planning Region as well as a Tourism Development Strategy for the East Planning Region. The second phase consolidated some of the outputs of the first phase and emphasised capacity building (especially at local and regional levels). The exit phase sought to strengthen ownership of the project by partners.

Some key project results include:

- Designation of two category V protected areas: Osogovo Mountains and Maleshevo
- Designation by the MoEPP of 5 sites in the Bregalnica region as natural rarities;
- Identification of 3 Natura 2000 sites in the Bregalnica region
- Reforestation of at least 6 ha of riparian vegetation along the lower part of the river Bregalnica
- Introduction of payment for ecosystem services (PES) schemes in Vevcani municipality
- Increased capacity of the Centre for Development of the East Planning Region (CDEPR)

- Improved public awareness on local to national level about the values of Bregalnica's¹ nature, its sustainable use and associated benefits for socio-economic development
- Mapping and assessing the condition of ecosystems on national level and the ecosystem services that they provide
- Development of a Regional Forest Development Plan (RFDP) with an action plan for Maleshevo region through a participatory approach
- Mainstreaming of biodiversity in the curriculum of the Faculty of Forestry
- Training of several people on environment-friendly tourism
- Establishment of two core groups "Honey East" and "Rice tiller" to support sustainable rice and honey production
- Establishment of an education centre In Negrevo

3 Findings

The findings of the evaluation are separated in the sections below, following the grid of the OECD DAC (see also Annex 6.2).

3.1 Relevance and Coherence

a) Relevance

In this section we assess the extent to which the intervention responds to beneficiaries' needs and priorities, as well as alignment with national priorities and policies and those of Swiss development aid in the country.

The theory of change for the NCP was outlined in the second phase of the project as follows:

"If facilitation and support is provided properly, the required information basis is provided, and if national, regional and local stakeholders are committed to gain, assume and further develop ownership of the processes induced by the three outcomes, organizational capacities will be in place and institutions on local, regional and national level will be able to provide effective, continuous and efficient action for nature conservation." In this respect, the programme provided a substantial amount of data and knowledge (maps, plans, improved biodiversity data) and built up some organisational capacities (particularly those of Public Enterprise National Forest). More remains to be done in this respect, but the project laid solid foundations.

The ultimate beneficiaries identified for the project were the population of the Bregalnica watershed (~200,000 people). In addition, beneficiaries were identified at all three levels of intervention: at the local level, local communities, farmers, forest owners and other users of the forest; at the regional level, the regional development centre, civil society organisations, and associations of forest owners, tourism, and other businesses; at the national level, the MoEPP, the MAFWE and the Ministry of Economy. The first needs of beneficiaries were for improved data, planning tools and capacity. The project supported all three of these areas, albeit with more remaining to be done, particularly with respect to strengthening capacity. This support was most evident at the regional and local levels, where few other donors are investing. For example, study visits were held to other countries (such as Slovenia and Bulgaria). The project supported several biodiversity surveys and mapping of biodiversity hotspots. Many tools, including plans such as the regional spatial plan or the regional forest plan, were developed jointly with stakeholders to enable the long-term sustainable management of the region's natural capital. The programme has invested in local municipalities in the East Planning Region, as well as the East Planning Regional Development

¹ We use the terms Bregalnica, Bregalnica Region, Bregalnica watershed and East Planning Region interchangeably in this report due to their significant overlap.

Centre to raise their awareness and build their capacities to be in a position to better integrate nature conservation in their activities. At the national level, the most important contribution of the project has been to support improvements in policy documents (e.g., the National Strategy for Nature Protection) and raise awareness among national policymakers. For example, engagement of national level policymakers in the design of a payments for ecosystem services (PES) scheme has been high and this is an area which raised significant interest and promise for future development. Also, the draft National Strategy for Nature Protection was developed, responding to a need by the MoEPP. At the regional level, an increase in the knowledge base on the East Planning region's biodiversity, provides an important contribution to the national database and a baseline for all nature conservation activities in the region.

By working at different spatial levels, the programme aimed to tackle multiple levels of challenges, from the national legal framework, down to local awareness and capacity. In this way, the project acknowledged the multiple levels of impact on nature and provided a good introduction to these challenges as well as a first assessment of what needs to be done to effectively conserve the valuable nature of the Bregalnica watershed. The portfolio of activities generally adds up with national level framework conditions being supported, including support for the revision both of the National Strategy for Nature Protection and of the National Law on Nature Protection; regional level activities being supported such as the regional tourism plan, the regional spatial plan and an overview of biodiversity hotspots in the region; and finally, local level actions being supported, particularly in terms of raising awareness and building capacity. Some local level actions were less directly relevant to the primary aim of the project, such as for example, improvements in insulation of municipal buildings. Nevertheless, these activities may have provided a "calling card" for the project, and have been a way of engaging with key local level actors.

The intervention responded very clearly to the local Municipalities' needs by developing and strengthening the role of nature in their strategies and plans. Before NCP, nature was not an integral priority for the Municipalities in the Bregalnica watershed. Now, however, staff from the Municipalities and other local civil society groups as well as private operators (such as hotel or restaurant managers) have a better understanding of the value of their natural environment and the need to manage it sustainably for it to provide revenue and valuable services into the future. Local businesses (e.g., restaurants or forest owners) see the potential that nature-based tourism could offer to the development of their region. At the regional planning level, the project aimed to develop plans and surveys that were of benefit to the entire region.

The East Planning Region remains a convenient planning level, but with limited executive power. In this respect both the local and national levels carry much more importance. Nevertheless, in terms of ecosystem functioning, this intermediate spatial level makes sense and provides a convenient opportunity to map the (ecological) landscape. There was a logical progression from the regional spatial planning process that led to the regional forestry plan and eventually the establishment of the two protected areas. At the national level, the project was able to influence the development of a national legislation and strategies on nature protection, although they remain to be fully endorsed and implemented. Resistance from the MoEPP to the project reflects the lack of decentralisation in the country and conflicts of interest between local authorities and national ones.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that both power dynamics and potentially overlapping roles have affected the delivery of some outputs. For example, the MAFWE did not take full ownership for future development of (non-legally binding) regional forestry plans, although this was considered as a useful planning tool at the local level to begin to engage with the different stakeholders (particularly local authorities and private forest owners). Also the MoEPP was not supportive of some of the new planning tools, and they did not value the role of national-level NGOs (such as the Macedonian Ecological Society and others) in collecting data and leading on some components of the project. Instead, MoEPP felt that they should have played a larger role in this area. These frictions are not surprising or rare, reflecting the agility of the non-governmental sector to advance

in projects such as these and the institutional weight of public sector organisations that function at a different speed and with many constraints. In this respect, the choice of implementers was appropriate.

Although significant progress can be reported, more remains to be done, with for example the management plans of the two protected areas having to be effectively implemented. The institutional set up at the national, regional and local levels is not sufficiently strong to conserve nature. The MoEPP for example, has limited input into the management of the two protected areas. While these are being managed by the Public Enterprise National Forests, their staff are having to change their management approach and are insufficiently trained to tackle biodiversity conservation (especially in Maleshevo). There is a need for additional capacity to effectively manage these protected areas in the long term.

North Macedonia's desire to join the European Union entails a number of requirements on biodiversity and nature conservation, including increasing the area under nature protection. In this respect, the designation of 59,000 ha (48,000ha for Osogovo and 11,000 ha for Maleshevo) is a major contribution to the country's EU aspirations. Also the project's support to the identification of potential Natura 2000 sites, and the development of plans for three of these, is a direct contribution to strengthening the environmental credentials of North Macedonia vis-à-vis its eventual EU accession.

Overall the project's relevance was satisfactory as it partially addressed the needs of beneficiaries.

b) Coherence

The project responds to SDC's environmental priorities in North Macedonia (under its framework strategic components on climate-resilient development and sustainable management of natural resources within its cooperation strategy) and its broader efforts to support a region that is neglected by other donors (East Planning region) and by the government. The Landscape Fire Management project in the Western Balkans (LFMWB) also supported by SDC was started in part based on experience from the NCP and needs identified through NCP. Its overall goal is to "*increase resilience of Western Balkan forests and landscapes against fires to benefit the people who depend on these landscapes for their livelihoods and socio-economic development*" using a participatory approach that includes the local population in the processes, promotes gender equality, and further strengthens public awareness of the importance of safeguarding natural resources. It is also aligned with SDC's programme to empower local municipalities as well as that to enhance civil society organisations as both of these groups of actors are critical to implementing nature conservation in the East Planning region. The project is aligned with the EU supported project "Improving Capacities for Natura 2000 and CITES" as it has contributed to identifying Natura 2000 sites and developing management plans for three of them.

The project has had close cooperation with SECO on water-related projects that were carried out in the same region, particularly as many of the same key stakeholders were involved. Strengthening public utilities (through SECO) was perceived as a complementary set of activities to support nature protection (through SDC). There was also an exchange of experiences through meetings and events. Notably, data from the SECO-supported Bregalnica River Basin Management Project (BRBMP) were used in the preparation of the draft spatial plan for the East Planning Region.

Overall the project was highly satisfactory in both its internal and external coherence.

3.2 Effectiveness

To evaluate the effectiveness, we assess the extent to which approaches/strategies during implementation are adequate to achieve the intended results.

The integrated holistic approach during all three phases was adequate. The focus on capacity building, stakeholder inclusion and sharing experiences was appropriate. The support of national and international expertise was highly appreciated.

Communication of results and capitalisation of experiences was adequate.

The achievements concerning the approaches/strategies for implementation are highly satisfactory.

We also assess the extent to which the intervention achieved or is expected to achieve its intended objectives (outputs and outcomes).

The outcomes 1-3 have been achieved (and in some cases surpassed):

1. Implementing PES for the protected area “Vevcani springs” – The scheme was established in September 2023 – it still needs implementation and monitoring of results. Capacities on sustainable forest management have been strengthened, in the framework of Bregalnica regional forest planning.
2. Regional approaches applied for implementing management plans, potential Natura 2000 sites in Bregalnica region, capacities of PEMF and marketing products by local core groups
3. Knowledge, achievements and results of NCP are consolidated and documented and publicly available (issue papers and other documentation).

Most of the outputs were achieved. Output 2.4 on the sale of sustainable produced goods, was considered partially achieved as the number of households selling sustainable products by project end was 73 instead of a target of 75 and the number of youth selling sustainably produced goods was 42 instead of the target of 50. All other outputs (1.1., 1.2., 2.1., 2.2., 2.3., 3.1., 3.2., 3.3.) were either achieved or exceeded.

The achievements concerning outputs and outcomes are highly satisfactory.

In this section we also assess the extent to which the intervention achieved or is expected to achieve its intended results related to transversal themes.

Transversal themes such as gender and governance were not explicitly mentioned in the log frame of NCP. Results are therefore difficult to assess, even though the topics were mentioned by some interview partners. These transversal themes were specifically promoted globally in the preparation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The NCP worked on limited support to vulnerable groups which have been identified as unemployed women, single mothers and unemployed youth, especially in the sustainable honey production component (Phase 2). Also, NCP collected gender disaggregated data on all capacity building and public awareness activities. Reducing gender-based discrimination and aiming for transformative change is both a goal and a pre-condition for development and peace, and therefore, gender equality and women's empowerment should be included in the planning for future interventions.

Good governance, including social inclusion and “Leave no one behind” (LNOB), is the central, transformative promise of Agenda 2030. It is a strategic objective and a transversal theme, which has already been considerably stressed in the past, while working with different public and private institutions and engaging in different processes (e.g., policy dialogue in water governance).

Governance principles cut across all Swiss interventions, especially the principles of transparency and accountability.

The achievements concerning transversal themes cannot be evaluated.

3.3 Efficiency

To assess efficiency, we review the extent to which the intervention delivers results in an economic and timely fashion.

All the interventions carried out within the NCP were implemented cost-effectively and in a timely manner. The interventions were well defined, adapted to the local context and prioritised to secure nature conservation. At the beginning of the third phase the country was facing high inflation rates that affected project implementation mainly due to increased expenditures than what was budgeted. Therefore, significant budget reallocations were done but also some of the budget lines were not spent. However, this did not affect the efficient implementation of the project activities and the project team and collaborators that were engaged in different research activities confirmed that the budget was enough for completing the activities. Moreover, with the exception of the Covid 19 crisis period and certain delays due to heavy bureaucratic procedures at national and local levels which affected the timely implementation of the activities, most of the activities were completed on time and as planned according to the project timeframe.

NCP successfully fulfilled all the outcomes and outputs even though it did not manage to fully implement the Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) scheme; adoption of the Spatial Plan for the East Region (since the final plan is still not adopted by the Parliament) as well as to fully integrate the Regional Forest Development Plan (RFDP) into local and regional policies, due to the fact that this is not a legally binding document. Nonetheless, the RFDP was recognised as very important by the local stakeholders even though it is not legally binding under the new draft law on forests which is currently under preparation.

Project delivery was largely efficient with only minor delays, most of which were outside the control of implementation partners (e.g., Covid-19). Project monitoring processes were mostly rigorous, significantly geared towards measuring quantitative indicators and contractual milestones, supported by a huge amount of qualitative data gathered. The Farmahem team developed monitoring tools for tracking progress on the implementation of the National Strategy for Nature Protection, a high-level policy document that was developed within the project (1st and 2nd phase) whose implementation is realised partly within NCP but also other programmes. The tool is providing information on which action/objective from the strategy is delivered by NCP and which are delivered with the support of other donors. The monitoring system for tracking progress, i.e. achievement of outcomes and outputs was in place and regularly reported through half year reports as well as at project steering committee meetings.

The entire project team as well as the engaged experts had the relevant and necessary competence and expertise to implement the activities. At Farmahem, the team was mainly carrying out project management and coordination activities but their expertise is directly related to nature conservation. The team leader is a biologist and was supported by a forestry engineer and an environmental engineer with significant experience in environment and nature. The engaged experts were mainly professors from Faculty of Forestry, but also from the Faculty of Natural Sciences (Institute of Biology), all of them possessing long term experience in nature conservation and forestry management. The Macedonian Ecology Society (MES) is a civil society organisation (CSO) that works mainly in nature conservation and had a major role in the implementation of activities on site related to research and analysis, monitoring, education, NATURA 2000 sites, restoration of riparian vegetation, onsite work related to the proclamation of protected areas, etc.

The efficient delivery and robust project management can be partly attributed to Farmahem's dedicated support to local stakeholders, their regular presence on site and extensive monitoring processes using different tools. In addition, the fact that they established a local office and

conducted regular steering committee meetings were also major success factors. The efficiency of the project delivery is satisfactory for those outcomes that do not require strong multi stakeholder dialogue and support. The project also demonstrated well-justified, pragmatic adaptiveness to changes in the operating context aiming to achieve project results, i.e., to contribute to the overall goal of nature conservation.

The efficiency of the programme is considered as highly satisfactory even though there were certain limitations and obstacles.

3.4 Impact

In this section we review the extent to which the intervention has generated significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects.

At the start of the project, the legal framework for biodiversity conservation was either outdated or goals had not been reached, awareness about the importance of nature conservation was low and capacity to address biodiversity conservation was also low.

The goal of the first phase was: *"The main stakeholders on national, regional and local level effectively conserve the natural resources of the Bregalnica Region, integrating up to date conservation approaches with the principles of sustainable natural resources management and the local economic development agenda."* The target groups for phase I were: Centre for Development of the East Planning (Bregalnica) Region; 13 municipalities in the Bregalnica Region; MoEPP; Faculty of Forestry in Skopje; the population (approx. 200'000) in the Bregalnica Region. The surveys that were carried out in phase I helped to inform the government's biodiversity policies and eventually its updated (2018) National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). It also helped to define a sustainable tourism strategy. A significant impact of the project was that it contributed to improving knowledge of biodiversity and nature conservation at all levels: local, regional and national, and among a diverse group of stakeholders, from the government to NGOs, local citizens, business operators, staff from both forest and environment ministries or departments. The extent of that knowledge clearly differed and much more remains to be done. However, it is evident, as well when reading the NBSAP submitted by North Macedonia to the CBD in 2018, (and which refers explicitly to SDC's support) that a much stronger knowledge base exists on nature (providing a baseline) in the country, and particularly in the East Planning Region. Throughout the project duration, and thanks to the detailed ecological analyses carried out, a total of 36 potential protected areas were identified with more detailed studies carried out for 8 areas. Specifically, knowledge was strengthened on the species present in the region, on forest management, on restoration approaches for riparian forests and on the development of management plans for nature conservation.

For the second phase, starting in January 2017, the overall goal was *"Bregalnica region safeguards its natural values and promotes socio-economic development that is sustainable and inclusive"*. The same goal was kept for the 3-year exit phase (from February 2021 to January 2024). The creation of two protected areas (Osogovo Mountains as a PA of category V – 48,807ha - and Maleshevo PA - 11,461 ha - declared in 2021) in the East Planning Region was a significant result, although long term and effective management is needed to ensure the lasting impact of such a measure on nature.

The Eastern Planning Region has had limited international cooperation efforts and, in this respect, the project has contributed to making a difference. It was evident as we spoke with stakeholders in the local municipalities, local businesses and local civil society organisations, that they were grateful for the support and opportunity to develop their region and to protect their environment while seeking to develop sustainable economic opportunities.

Associated with the knowledge generated, the project contributed to improving capacities of a diversity of stakeholders, again, from the local to the national. It also provided a number of useful tools. In particular, the multiple plans produced (spatial plan, regional forest plan, tourism plan etc.) provide, although not necessarily a legal basis, but at least a strong strategic basis for decision-making and management of nature. Contributing to building the interest and awareness of the next generation of environmental scientists, the project supported the creation of an impressive educational centre in the Municipality of Pehcevo (Negrevo) established in 2017 which receives multiple groups of schoolchildren.

The potential economic benefits of the protected areas have yet to be fully realised. Nevertheless, several interviewees mentioned the potential value of nature-based tourism and had high expectations that this could generate jobs and attract many people to the region. The flip side of this is clearly the risks that tourism can bring (as highlighted by the Swiss Embassy in Skopje) especially where appropriate infrastructure is missing. At the same time, the initiation of payment for ecosystem services schemes provided another avenue for making nature conservation pay for itself. Although the scheme set up focused on tourism, the process of setting it up clearly provided a considerable learning experience for stakeholders engaged (from national government to NGOs and local authorities) and would be more readily replicable in another location and for other services (e.g., water provision and biodiversity protection).

Areas that could have been improved relate to the selection of beneficiaries for capacity building which could have been more systematic and more targeted (for example, stronger local nature conservation associations that could have played a more effective longer-term role in the region). Governance structures and implementation mechanisms for the management plans of the two new protected areas could also have been anticipated and designed in a more rigorous fashion in order to yield the desired impact of effectively managing these two areas into the future.

Although major legal tools (e.g., the National Strategy on Nature Protection, aligned with the EU) were developed thanks to the project, they have not yet been fully adopted.

Major lessons emerging from the project can be outlined as follows:

- The importance of communicating and engaging with stakeholders, at all levels, and taking the time to bring them on board. This has been a challenge for the project that was working with such a diversity of stakeholders, each with their own needs, and priorities. For example, bringing in private forest owners who were against the concept of nature conservation as they thought that would take away their rights to manage their timber, required perseverance. Similarly, bringing both the MoEPP and MAFWE to the table together was a challenge, but the project was able to improve the relationships between these two ministries.
- Another lesson has been the importance of working at all levels, from the local to the national in order to address the multiple challenges for nature conservation. Nevertheless, what has emerged was also the lack of effective official linkages between these different levels, a challenge for the country more generally and for the project going forward.
- A key lesson and area for the future is the need to establish the solid capacity at the right administrative level (regionally and locally) to take key outcomes of the project (namely the establishment of two protected areas) to the next level so that they can fulfil their role in both biodiversity conservation and regional economic development.

The impact of the project is considered satisfactory as much progress was made but more needs to be done to ensure real and lasting impacts.

3.5 Sustainability

To assess sustainability of the project, we review the extent to which the benefits of the intervention are likely to continue, including determining the extent to which partners are capable and motivated (technical capacity, ownership) to continue activities contributing to achieving the outcomes and financial sustainability.

NCP emphasised technical capacity building and exchanges, as well as sharing of experiences and recommendations. Equally there was a considerable input by national and international expertise in all the different phases of NCP. The capacity has been built at all levels: local – regional – national; government, municipalities, NGOs as well as businesses. In summary, the basic capacity for continuation is mostly well established. However, as the priorities and objectives of the management plans that staff in the protected areas are required to fulfil have expanded to include biodiversity conservation and broader landscape conservation, capacity building is much needed and should continue as an ongoing process to secure sustainability.

The achievements concerning improved capacity are highly satisfactory.

We also consider the extent to which partners have the financial resources to continue activities contributing to achieving the outcomes.

Financial resources for interventions will be a crucial factor for continuation of most of the interventions. Sustainable financing is not satisfactory for most of the activities: e.g., management and monitoring of the two protected areas, payments for ecosystem services, regional forest plan, etc.

The need for sustainable finance is apparent at all levels: e.g., in municipalities for maintaining small schemes, in the Centre for Development of the East Planning Region (CDEPR) regarding monitoring and promoting nature conservation in the municipalities, or in the local National Forest Enterprise for implementation of the activities in the management plan and monitoring of progress in the protected areas.

In this respect, the achievements are unsatisfactory.

We also assessed the extent to which contextual factors (e.g. legislation, politics, economic situation, social demands) are conducive to continuing activities leading to outcomes.

In general, the national government has been positive about the support and the results of the NCP programme.

In many of the key activities of NCP the contextual factors however are not conducive:

- Political changes are often followed by other priorities than biodiversity conservation.
- Legislation on implementation of for example, the National Strategy for Nature Protection or on management of protected areas or on payments for ecosystem services, is not always in place.
- The economic situation is not conducive to prioritising funds for biodiversity conservation, due to other priorities at national or municipality level.
- Elections are planned for April 2024 and the political outcome is not predictable. In any case, the election will have strong implications on priorities and availability of financial and human resources in the next years for nature conservation at national, regional and local levels.

The rating is connected to the contextual external factors on which NCP has no direct influence.

The contextual factors are unsatisfactory.

4 Conclusions

The overall goals of all three phases had the focus to effectively conserve the natural resources of the Bregalnica region. The approach has been integrated, combining conservation methods with principles of sustainable natural resource management and with local economic development. The main objective is to contribute to nature and biodiversity conservation in a relatively marginalised area of North Macedonia. The choice of the Bregalnica region for the NCP is very relevant for the following main reason:

- The area is relatively poor and has not received much attention; it is quite well defined geographically and is highly suitable for an integrated ecosystem (watershed) approach.
- The region has a good potential for sustainable or low impact tourism, more or less linked to nature, and for the development of certified local products and services.
- It had very few (small) protected areas; it is therefore much less prestigious than other areas with well-known National Parks, and there is less potential for conflict with large economic interests. This gap in the protected area system was recognised.
- The regional cohesion, with the functioning CDEPR and the association of mayors. The project and its activities to date are really welcome by all partners.

The outcomes of the 3 phases were quite ambitious, given the low level of knowledge and capacities at regional and local levels, and the lack of understanding and practice in transdisciplinary work. They were also expressed in relatively general terms which makes measurement of the results difficult.

The strengths of the NCP Programme were the intensive and continuous capacity building and awareness raising, accompanied with competent expertise at national level with mainly the Macedonian Ecological Society as well as at international level with Swiss institutions including the backstopping by Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation and the technical collaboration with the Bern University HAFL.

The forest sector played an important role in NCP, considering the high proportion of forests in the Bregalnica area and also in the protected areas. The PEMF shows a strong presence at local level, due to the national ownership of the forest resources.

However, the agriculture sector has been touched only in a very limited way. For the cultural landscape management, the incorporation of agriculture is equally essential. Promotion of local varieties, breeds and products (branding) with measures to protect the environment (reduction of pesticides and fertilisers) are all important.

The project has initiated several studies, inventories, strategies and policy papers, in particular the comprehensive ecological gap analysis. These contributions were important to promote the development of the National Strategy for Nature Protection and the preparation of the two successfully proclaimed protected areas: Osogovo Mountains and Maleshevo. The documents clearly demonstrate the biological richness and high conservation value of the region. The combination of the available documentation in a single database and the permanent work with the CDEPR gave an added value to the sectoral studies and strategies.

At project level, very few concrete activities could be implemented besides training, general capacity building and awareness raising. Some small-scale restoration activities were also carried out in riparian zones. To support the implementation of the management plan on regional forests or the management plans of the two protected areas still requires substantial support and close monitoring.

The small grants component of NCP (for the municipalities and also for civil society) proved to be an excellent instrument for communication and acceptance of the main project goals. This was a good start

but the types of projects submitted, especially from the municipalities, showed the challenge involved in presenting attractive initiatives in the field of nature protection (many projects dealt more with technical environmental issues (e.g., energy saving) than specific nature and biodiversity conservation). Another disadvantage has been that the local partners, even if they produced good results, could not bring the findings to broader regional or even national level. A joint venture with a local organisation along with a nationally working institution or university could have guaranteed the dissemination of these experiences.

All interviewed partners were very satisfied with the implementation process. The coordination Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation - Farmahem went very smoothly. Farmahem proved to be a very good and reliable project implementer and is very highly considered in the region. In the last years, Farmahem had the full responsibility for implementing the project and Helvetas had an adviser role for the planning, monitoring and for ad hoc technical inputs. As a consequence, and also because of, a reinforced focus on the region, Farmahem kept a local office to increase its presence in the region.

5 Recommendations and lessons learnt

As a framework condition, the evaluation has identified the following points on relevance and coherence:

- Considering the achievements of NCP Programme that are well appreciated at national as well as at the level of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the continuation of support to North Macedonia in their efforts for biodiversity conservation and nature protection is highly recommended.
- The theme of biodiversity conservation fits perfectly in SDC's thematic priorities for cooperation with the Eastern Europe programme, mainly related to climate change mitigation and adaptation and environmental protection. It also contributes to the other main priorities, such as governance and economic development.

Following the findings of the evaluation, the team has the following specific recommendations and lessons learnt:

- Continue a middle to long-term support with a vision of 10 years, i.e., until North Macedonia becomes an EU member (2030 or later).
- Continue the focus on interventions to improve biodiversity conservation and ecosystem resilience as a basis for regional and local development, integrating conservation approaches, principles of sustainable natural resources management and supporting the local economic development agenda.
- Further define and follow the landscape approach – this could also include a stronger integration of agricultural aspects in landscape management, whereas in the past priority was given to forest management and tourism development.
- Consolidate some of the most successful activities in the Bregalnica Region, with support for the implementation of strategies, management plans, etc. through visible, measurable activities with reliable partner organisations.
- Continue careful monitoring of the impact of the interventions on biodiversity and ecosystem resilience, in order to better understand the priority interventions and to communicate positive results at all levels.
- Continue supporting interventions at national, regional and local level (with emphasis in the beginning at regional and local levels), in order to finally promote the integration of successful interventions into national guidelines and legislation for stabilising human and financial capacity for implementation.

- Test some of the most successful activities in other areas in North Macedonia, if there is a clear opportunity.
- Develop and include new innovative interventions, based on the previous experiences in NCP. Fields of intervention could include the expansion of restoration of forests and landscapes, especially considering the impact of, and the adaptation to, climatic changes. There are sufficient areas within and outside protected areas that are damaged by fire, insects, erosion, invasive species. It is recommended to first analyse the situation in order to prioritise themes and also determine financial implications.
- Narrow down the scope of a new project to 2-3 main priority elements (rather than spreading thin)

The Evaluation Team does not recommend the option to replicate the NCP Bregalnica as such in another watershed/region of North Macedonia but rather to focus on consolidating activities in the existing programme area, while adding a couple of additional relevant interventions that would strengthen impact and sustainability.

6 Annexes

Annex 6.1 Terms of reference

1. Introduction

The Republic of North Macedonia is situated at the center of the Balkan Peninsula and is part of the wider Mediterranean Region that has been identified as the third most important biodiversity hotspot in the world with respect to the number of endemic plant species. Accordingly, although relatively small in territory (25,713 km²), the Republic of North Macedonia holds an important position on the global map of biological diversity hotspots. The national network of protected areas is not yet fully functional. The designation of the three newly protected areas (including protected landscapes Osogovo Mountains (2020) and Maleshevo (2021), and the National Park Shar Mountain (2021)) contributed to an increase of the area under protection to 13.9% of the country's territory. However, not all the important biodiversity sites in the country are protected. The national target of 15% of the country territory under protection (National Biodiversity Strategy with Action Plan (2018-2023)¹ and National Strategy for Nature Protection (2017-2027)²) has not been reached yet and is far from reaching the EU3 and the Global biodiversity targets 4, which are to have 30% of terrestrial habitats under protection by 2030. The protected areas network is still in a transitional phase as it also includes areas that were declared according to the old categorization system. Management authorities have not yet been appointed for all protected areas, and the existing ones are facing constraints in effectively managing the sites due to weak capacities and the lack of funding. Mainly supported by the EU, activities for the identification of Natura 2000 sites (an obligation for the EU accession) are ongoing. The concept is to preserve species and habitats of European importance in a favorable conservation status in protected areas. This also requires actions to connect and restore important habitats currently threatened by economic activities, infrastructural development, unsustainable use of resources, land use change or affected by climate change. Although the country is ranked as upper middle-income country, North Macedonia's Government struggles with a number of challenges regarding nature and biodiversity protection including financial constraints, lack of human and technical capacities, inadequate legislation relevant for biodiversity conservation etc. Following the latest progress on the adoption of biodiversity targets for 2030 at global and EU level, and in line with the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans⁵ and the preparation for EU accession (the EU report on the screening process that took place in July 2023 on Cluster 4 – environment, shall be published in January 2024), the country needs strong support to reach the set targets. Since 2012, Switzerland has been actively supporting nature conservation in the country, especially by enlarging the protected areas network, establishing and building capacities of management bodies, assessing and evaluating ecosystem services, introducing regional spatial planning, implementing different biodiversity conservation actions while supporting socio economic development at local level, and increasing public awareness on environment and nature topics. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has been providing financial and technical support for the implementation of the Nature Conservation Programme (NCP) from November 2012 to January 2024 with an overall goal to enable the main stakeholders on national, regional and local level to effectively conserve the natural resources of the Bregalnica Region, integrating up-to-date conservation approaches with the principles of sustainable natural resources management and the local economic development agenda. By working at three levels (national, regional and local) NCP achieved very important results and contributed significantly to improving the status of nature conservation in the country. However, protected areas require further support to ensure their effective management and financial sustainability. Issues such as the active participation of stakeholders in the management protected areas; the connectivity between protected areas; the comprehension of biodiversity conservation as a horizontal issue requiring collaboration, communication and joint implementation between different sectors in the country; and/ or an effective policy dialogue, capacity building and awareness raising going along with biodiversity conservation measures remain to be tackled or where existing strengthened. SDC, through the Swiss Embassy in Skopje (the Contracting Authority) thus intends, to engage a Consultancy team to conduct a final evaluation of the NCP. Building on the insights gained from the evaluation and conducted reviews, appreciations and assessments, a Concept for a potential

long term (up to 10 years long) programme in the field of improvement of biodiversity and ecosystems' resilience shall be developed.

2. Background Information (more details are presented in Annex 4)

2.1. Biodiversity and Ecosystems' Resilience in North Macedonia - State of Play

Due to its specific geographical position and the climatic, geological, geomorphologic, hydrological and soil characteristics, the Republic of North Macedonia offers a great diversity of natural values represented by various elements of geodiversity, biodiversity and landscapes. Most of the territory (44.1%) lies on altitude between 500-1.000 m. Geomorphology and relief are characterized by domination of hilly terrains (almost 80% of the territory), while valleys are connected with deeply incurved canyons and gorges. There are three main river basins, out of which river Vardar's is the largest one, covering about 80% of the country territory. In the southern lowland areas, the climate is sub-Mediterranean, continental throughout the country and mountainous on altitudes above 1500m a.s.l. An average precipitation in mountainous areas is 1,000-1,500 mm/year, and 600-700 mm/year in the valleys, while Ovche Pole plain is the driest area with only 490 mm/year. According to the Fifth National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity of the Republic of Macedonia (2014), 28 most important (key) ecosystem types/groups have been identified, which equals to 177 habitat types of level 3 (according to European Nature Information System EUNIS classification, with necessary modifications), indicating high diversity of ecosystems in North Macedonia. The various ecosystems and habitat types in the country host about 1.700 algal species, 3.200 vascular plants, over 2.000 fungi, 450 lichens, 13.000 invertebrates, 85 fish species and cyclostomata, 15 amphibians, 32 reptiles, 333 birds and 84 mammal species. The endemism among these groups is large. Main pressures - drivers of change to biodiversity In the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, 17 threats of very high priority have been identified including agriculture, use of mineral resources, urbanization, forest fires, energy production and irrigation, unsustainable hunting and fishing, unsustainable/uncontrolled collection of wild plants and fungi specie, illegal logging, pollution of groundwater and climate change. These threats have led to a decrease of populations in many species, and reduction of coverage of priority habitats. Root causes leading to biological diversity loss in North Macedonia are typical for developing countries that face transition from one system of political ruling and governance to another and cope with poverty. The country stands on a cross-road between more intensive economic development (intensive exploitation of natural resources, enlargement of agricultural land under the management of a small number of economically strong companies, etc.) and ever growing devastation of natural values. Lack of capacity to specify efficient measures for protection and poor coordination among sectoral strategies is another classical underlying cause. Protected Areas Network Since 2020, with the proclamation of the Protected Areas "Osogovo Mountains" and "Maleshevo" (both supported by the NCP), and the National Park (NP) "Shar Mountain", a significant progress has been made in the increase of the network of protected areas, which currently covers 13.9% of the country's territory. The network of protected areas also includes areas that were declared according to the old categorization system (from 1973), and they have not been yet re-declared in accordance with the Law on Nature Protection (2004) and do not conform with the IUCN categorization.

Public institutions NP Pelister, NP Mavrovo and NP Galicica as well as the newly established institution for the new NP Shar Mountain, are in charge of overall management of the national parks, including preparation of management plans and their implementation. However, no funds are allocated from the national budget for the functioning of the NPs (as well as for other categories of protected areas), i.e they are self-financed through various sources. Additionally, many protected areas do not have yet a designated management entity nor management plan. Out of 90 protected areas, management plans were adopted for only 7 protected areas, 3 management plans were prepared, but not yet adopted and 5 management plans exist in a draft version. Implemented activities for nature/ biodiversity conservation are dominantly financed through projects supported by a few donors (the Governments of Switzerland, Germany and Sweden, the Prespa-Ohrid Nature Trust Fund (PONT), EU IPA funds, Global Environmental Facility (GEF) and others).

2.2. Institutional Set-up

The existing institutional set-up for nature protection management in the Republic of North Macedonia is mainly centralized i.e. the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia (through the Commission for transport, communications and environment) and the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia (through ministries), play the main role in the process of adoption of the legislation and the strategic documents, the proclamation of protected areas, etc.

Established in 1998, the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning (MoEPP), is the key institution responsible for nature protection and environmental monitoring, including protection of biodiversity (flora, fauna), geodiversity, protected areas as well as water and solid waste management, IPCC and impact assessment procedures, spatial planning and climate change. The MoEPP is in charge of leading and creating nature protection policies, protection and management of biological and landscape diversity and protection of natural heritage as well as control and oversight of the implementation of the provisions of the National Strategy on Nature Protection. The Administration of Environment as part of the MoEPP is the competent authority for expert work in the field of nature protection and is in charge of keeping a cadastre of protected areas, register of natural heritage and records of trade and other activities of protected species, monitoring the state of nature and other activities in accordance with the law provisions. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy (MAFWE) plays an important role in contributing to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in particular through protection and sustainable use of forests and forest products, the promotion of organic agricultural production, sustainable rural development, management of pastures and hunting, and the management and consolidation of agricultural land. The policies of the Ministry of Economy (MoE) also play a very significant role in the process and procedures of the nature conservation and sustainable use of the natural resources especially through activities of the Department of Mineral Resources, Energy Department and the Tourism Department. Both ministries (MAFWE & MoE) are 'drivers of change' and potentially 'spoilers' in their interaction with 'nature protection and conservation'. However, the way forward is to find concrete ways how they can contribute to environmentally friendly development. The State Environmental Inspectorate (SEI) performs supervision over the application of technical-technological measures for: protection of air, water, soil, geodiversity protection, biodiversity, protected areas, protection from noise in the environment, protection from environmental incidents etc. The SEI functions as a separate legal entity, and is not part of the MoEPP. The capacities of SEI are very limited - there are only two (2) authorized state inspectors for nature protection at national level. Ministry of Culture, Cultural Heritage Protection Directorate has competences in the area of studying, protection and promotion of cultural heritage, safeguarding and protecting nature, especially in the areas that are part of UNESCO World Heritage. Public Enterprise National Forests (PENF) – manage the state forest ecosystems outside of the protected areas in accordance with the Law on Forests, with over 30 regional offices. Recently, PENF was designated as management authority for the protected areas "Osogovo Mountains" and "Maleshevo". Public Enterprise for Management of Pastures – acting through 17 regional offices, supports the traditional way of management of pastures. Spatial Planning Agency - implements the policy of spatial planning, through preparation and monitoring of implementation of the National Spatial Plan. Scientific and educational institutions for biological diversity are listed in the Annex 4. At local level, the municipalities have very limited competences for nature protection. They can be entitled as responsible for the execution of management and protection activities in the protected areas and natural rarities. The quality of the services provided by the municipalities depends on the administrative, technical and financial capacity of the municipality which in general is limited. Environmental Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are active in nature protection including research and monitoring, awareness raising, environmental education activities, support of protected areas management bodies but also implementing pilot restoration activities and testing the ecosystem services payment scheme. Due to limited financial capacities of the CSOs, their activities are mainly financed by donors.

2.3. Policy and Legal Framework

General principles and measures for biodiversity conservation are prescribed in the Law on Nature Protection (adopted in 2004) which has been modified by many amendments, mainly due to the ongoing process of transposition of EU Acquis into national legislation. A new Law on Nature Protection was drafted in 2016 but still not adopted. Most of the multilateral environmental agreements and conventions (relevant to the field of nature protection) have been ratified by the Republic of North Macedonia. In order to prioritize nature protection actions and to contribute to the improvement of the legal framework, the Government in 2018 adopted the two key strategic documents: National Strategy for Nature Protection with an Action Plan (2017-2027) and the National Biodiversity Strategy with Action Plan (2018-2023). Recognizing that nature protection is multi-sectoral topic, it is being considered in several laws: draft Law on Forests, draft Law on Pastures, draft Law on Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), new Law on Hunting, updated Water Law and the Law on Spatial Planning in which the concept of Green Infrastructure will be incorporated. 2.4. Other Donors' Support Active donors in the field of nature and biodiversity are the European Union (IPA funds), GEF, PONT, Swedish Agency for Development SIDA and EBRD (limited involvement). The EU support is implemented through two on-going projects: "Improving Capacities for Natura 2000 and CITES" and "Supporting the reforms in Forestry in North Macedonia". GEF support is provided to the following projects: STAR 6 "Promoting Sustainable Land Management (SLM) and STAR 7 "Biodiversity conservation, sustainable land management and sustainable tourism development in North Macedonia". The support of PONT to protected areas started in the region of Prespa and Ohrid and expanded to the western part of the country along the border with Albania, covering Vevchani Springs up to NP Shar Mountain. The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) supports the project 'Civil Organizations in Action for Climate Change' and the project for environmental education, implemented by UNICEF. EBRD's support is focused on preparation of Red Lists of fungi and mammals, and development of the National habitats map.

3. Description of Tasks

The main objectives of the assignment are: a) To conduct the final evaluation of the three phases of the Nature Conservation Programme (for details see chapter 4) including recommendations on fields in nature and biodiversity protection, and/ or ecosystems resilience for which continued support will be critical; b) Building on the recommendations of the evaluation and the insights gained, to develop in a first stage, a few potential intervention options in the field of improving biodiversity and ecosystems' resilience, and then, in a second stage, for the selected option(s), to develop a Concept for a new Programme in North Macedonia (here and after refer as "Concept"). For details see chapter 5.

4. Final Evaluation of the Nature Conservation Programme in North Macedonia (NCP)

4.1. Background information and context of the evaluation

Switzerland's support to Macedonia in the area of environment started in 1994, mainly focusing on water protection (wastewater treatment), improved water supply and sewage systems, rivers' monitoring, river restoration and management of protected areas. The valuable experience gained through improving the management of protected areas (National Park Pelister) combined with the long-term experience and investment in water management, have built up the capacity and knowledge of Switzerland's development cooperation in nature protection. Due to these considerable positive experiences in this area and an evident need for further support to the country in terms of its objectives to achieve the EU environmental acquis, Switzerland decided in its Cooperation Strategy (CS) Macedonia 2009-2012 to continue its support under the domain Water and Environment. The project for Integrated Water Resources Management of the River Bregalnica (SECO-financed project, started in 2011) applied an integrated approach that opens a door of possible synergies and interlinks between different actions in the area of water and nature protection. Since this project was mainly focused on water resources (river basin management and small infrastructure projects), an additional programme on nature protection in the same geographical area should significantly

contribute to the overall protection of environment and nature. Therefore, Switzerland decided to develop a programme on nature conservation, originally in two phase, with total duration of 8 years and a budget of about CHF 9 million. The concept and main elements were initially defined through a number of analyses and reports prepared by an international consultant. The Programme Coordination Team (PCT), selected in an open tender procedure, elaborated the Project Document, involving all relevant stakeholders. The proposed Nature Conservation Programme (NCP) intended to go beyond an intervention focusing only on one protected area. Instead, it covered a wider geographical area (river basin) with a specific biodiversity value. In focusing on the River Bregalnica, which also received support through the SECO funded projects for Integrated Water Resources Management and later, a Wastewater Treatment Plant project in Kocani, synergies between different Swiss supported actions in the area of water and nature conservation, such as the elaboration of strategic documents were created. An external evaluation was conducted in spring 2016 to assess the intervention strategy and results of the first phase and to provide recommendations for the concept of the phase 2.

4.2. Objective, scope and focus of the evaluation

4.2.1. Evaluation object

The overall objective of the NCP valid for the entire duration of the programme is: "The main stakeholders on national, regional and local level effectively conserve the natural resources in the Bregalnica Region, integrating up to date conservation approaches, with the principles of sustainable natural resources management and the local economic development agenda." The outcomes and outputs for each phase were developed accordingly (see Annex 5). The first phase of the NCP (01.11.2012 – 31.12.2016) tempted to establish basic and conducive conditions for nature conservation, create initial and concrete experiences on nature conservation and improve the corresponding institutional frameworks at all levels. The second phase (01.01.2017 – 31.12.2021) put the emphasis on the application of a regional integrated approach to nature conservation. The proclamation of the Osogovo Mountains as protected area was the most significant result of the NCP, and increased the North Macedonia's territory under protection from 9 to 11%. The process was conducted fully respecting the principles of transparency and participation and following the procedures set in the national legislation and international/EU guidelines. Parliamentary elections, COVID 19 pandemic and cumbersome administrative procedures delayed the process by almost one year and thus the envisaged establishment of the related management body was postponed to the exit phase. An exit phase of 3 years was decided to ensure a proper functioning of the established system and management by the local stakeholders without external support. The main focus was on providing support to relevant institutions and organizations at all levels to implement innovative approaches for integrated management of natural resources. During the exit phase, the NCP has further strengthened the ownership of partners and worked on capitalizing its results. These processes were guided by approaches and principles (e.g. holistic, regional, participatory, bottom-up, multi stakeholder, systemic approach etc.) that had been introduced and applied in previous phases. According to NCP's concept, the interventions were implemented by the institutional partners and implementers and facilitated, coordinated and monitored by the PCT. The PCT was set up as a temporary structure, avoiding the creation of parallel structures and ensuring external technical support to local partners through Swiss and local experts/organizations. For the first phase, the PCT was selected in an open tender procedure. Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation (HSI) was the main implementing partner in consortium with the Macedonian company Farmahem. In the second and exit phase, the PCT included the same partners, but switched roles and responsibilities, i.e. Farmahem as main implementer coordinated, facilitated and monitored programme interventions, while HSI provided backstopping services to Farmahem, facilitated the identification of specific international expertise, guaranteed the transfer of Swiss knowledge and experience in nature conservation to North Macedonia, and assisted in the capitalization of knowledge and its dissemination. The NCP covered all three administrative state levels – national, regional and local. The Programme activities were directly implemented / supervised by the different programme partners, (Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning (MoEPP), Centre for Development of the East Planning

Region (CDEPR), Agency for Spatial Planning (ASP), municipalities from the Bregalnica region, Faculty of Forestry, Public Enterprise National Forests and CSOs). The total duration of NCP is 11 years and 2 months, while the total budget for the three phase amounts to CHF 10'950'000.

4.3. Purpose and objectives

This programme evaluation serves several purposes: 1) learning (what works, what does not and why), 2) planning (inform and guide further development of the Swiss engagement in general and in improving biodiversity and ecosystems' resilience in North Macedonia; and 3) accountability to stakeholders and funders. Guided by the OECD/DAC Criteria⁸, the objective of this evaluation is to provide insights into the NCP effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence, impact and sustainability in the frame of set targets. The focus on and the exclusion of criteria should be explicitly stated in the bid of the consultant as well as the final evaluation report.

4.4. Scope

The extent and depth of the evaluation will be informed by the indicative evaluation questions that the evaluation seeks to answer (see chapter below). The evaluation will assess: - The overall performance of the programme and the extent to which the planned programme outcomes and outputs have been achieved since the beginning of the programme on 1st of November 2012;

The specific institutional country context that proved critical in producing the intended outputs and the factors that facilitated and/or hindered the progress in achieving the outputs, both in terms of the external environment and risks, crisis caused by pandemic, as well as internal, including weaknesses in the programme design, management and implementation, human resources, skills and financial resources. The timeframe covers the entire programme duration, from Phase 1 that started on 1st of November 2012 until the end of the exit phase on 31st of January 2024. For the outcomes on regional and local level, the geographical scope is the Bregalnica region, while outcomes at national level refer to the whole country.

4.5. Indicative evaluation questions / key focus area

During the preparatory phase of the evaluation, the consultant(s), in consultation with the SDC, should further refine and prioritise the questions that structured according to the OECD DAC Criteria. The bidder is also expected to address these questions within the technical bid.

Relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To what extent do the objectives of the NCP respond to national needs and priorities, and to what extent has the NCP focus contributed to addressing and supporting them?• How appropriate was the approach behind the development intervention to address the problems and how far could they be solved?• How consistent were the activities and outputs with the intended effects?
Coherence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Internal coherence (consistency, complementarity and synergies): to what extent was the intervention complementary to other Swiss interventions financed by SDC and SECO, in the same geographic region and the other two thematic domains of the SCP?• External coherence: to what extent was the intervention compatible with and complementary to interventions of other

	actors (bilateral and multilateral donors, private sector, UN, SCoS, etc.) in the country, region and thematic field (complementarity and synergies)?
Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent have the planned results been achieved at the different levels? • What were the obstacles or constraints in the implementation process and the achievement of results? • What participatory mechanisms were applied and how effective were they? • To what extend did the programme reach the intended vulnerable groups?
Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were the interventions related to nature conservation prioritized correctly, implemented cost-effectively and in a timely manner? • Was the development intervention implemented conducive to reach intended results? • Is the monitoring system suited to track progress of the different programme components in a systemic manner? • Have the programme team and the engaged experts had the right skills and expertise to implement this complex programme? • How appropriate were programme set-up, management, steering and decision-making to address issues? Were problems identified in time and managed appropriately?
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which positive, lasting effects and behavioural changes were achieved among the main target groups? • Which unexpected and unintended positive and negative (side) effects have occurred and in which programme areas? • What real difference have the programme interventions made to the beneficiaries? Have woman and men equally benefitted? • To what extend are key stakeholders satisfied with the implementation and results of the programme in general and the partnership support in specific, and what issues remain to be tackled? • How effective were the interventions in contributing to the results? If changes occurred, to what extent can these be attributed to the intervention? • To what extend the project could address the needs of vulnerable groups? • To what extend were the gender equality and climate change mainstreamed within the programme?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Was the project affected by political interferences? To which extend was the project and its results affected by “vested interests”? Has the project used the adequate management tools to mitigate political and governance risks? What are the key lessons learnt from the programme implementation?
Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What evidence indicates that achieved results (special emphasis on management of the protected areas Osogovo and Maleshevo, concept on payment for ecosystem services, Educational centre, agro-tourism interventions, etc.) so far will remain after programme completion? If not, what is necessary at what level (local, regional, national) to reach a sustainable long-term impact, and does the programme adequately address/manage necessary conditions? Which major factors might enhance the results achieved or prevent them from continuing? Have partner institutions and involved sections of the population embraced the aims and activities promoted by the programme (ownership)? Was the approach inclusive (i.e. integrating also the vulnerable groups in key decisions making or awareness building)? Are mechanisms in place for partner institutions and involved stakeholders (target groups) to continue the activity independently (of existence of financial resources) and to adjust their strategies to changing conditions? Have they strengthened their own capacities (institutional, technical and financial)? What are the potential and conditions for the programme to be scaled up?
Results framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Which assumptions in the intervention logic have proven to work and which mitigation measures have been successful; which were not?

5. Specific tasks for elaboration of the Concept

The specific tasks of the Consultant team for the Concept include:

- To provide an update overview of the competent authorities and institutions related to nature protection in accordance with the national legislation (including secondary legislation);
- Assessment of the needs (in terms of capacities/financing/equipment) that hinder competent authorities and institutions to effectively and efficiently carry out their tasks as defined in the national legislation and as required by relevant EU Directives including Directives on Wild Birds and Directive on Habitats;
- To provide an overview of the current situation with regard to nature protection/ biodiversity/ ecosystems' resilience;
- Appreciation of main pressures on biodiversity and ecosystems' resilience (qualitative/quantitative);

- Appreciation of possible innovative mechanisms for financing sustainability of the protected areas including payment for eco-system services mechanism developed within the Nature Conservation Programme (see chapter 4);
- Appreciation of the status of the connectivity between existing protected areas;
- Appreciation of the need for most pressing challenges and conservation measures and their level of implementation;
- Appreciation of possible opportunities for private sector engagement in improving biodiversity and ecosystems' resilience;
- Appreciation of awareness of the general public about nature protection / biodiversity and ecosystems, measures undertaken so far and further needs;
- Appreciation of opportunities for academic collaboration/ education in the field of nature protection / biodiversity and ecosystems;
- On the basis of the conducted assessments and appreciations (listed above) identify the drivers and restrainers of change and their interconnection and interdependency;
- As a first step, based on the evaluation of the NCP and the conducted assessments, propose a few potential intervention options. These options will be discussed between the Swiss Embassy, SDC Head office and main national partners and the most favorable option(s) will be selected.
- As a second step and for the selected option(s), only, elaborate a Concept for a long-term program including a description of possible interventions/measures at central and local level (legislative interventions, technical assistance, capacity building, on-site measures, etc.);
- Outline the required qualifications and experience of the Consultancy team who could support different stakeholders in the implementation of the Programme on 'improving biodiversity and ecosystems' resilience' (here and after refer as new Programme);
- Preparation of a cost estimation for the implementation of the phase 1 of the new Programme;
- A brief risk assessment.

The Evaluation Report, the presentation of intervention options, and the Concept of the selected intervention, shall serve the Swiss Embassy in North Macedonia as basis for the preparation of tender documents for a consultancy supporting the detailed design and the implementation of the new Programme. The above list of tasks and activities is not exhaustive, and the Consultant may engage in other activities deemed important during elaboration of the Evaluation Report and the Concept in order to accomplish the mandate.

6. Methodology and Approach

The methodology shall include, but does not have to be limited to:

- Desk Study: The Consultant(s) shall review before carrying out the field mission:
 - Legislation, strategies, action plans and other relevant documents at national and local level related to biodiversity resilience and nature protection;
 - Documentation on past, on-going and planned donor supported activities related to biodiversity resilience and nature protection;
 - Documents provided by the Swiss Embassy;
 - For evaluation of the Nature Conservation Programme: Entry Proposal / Credit Proposals, Extension of the Credit proposal, Project Documents, Contractual documents; Programme narrative and financial reports prepared by PCT; Steering Committee meetings' documents;
 - Law on Nature protection.

- EU report and screening process (it will be provided in January 2024);
- Field missions: The Consultant(s) shall carry out two field missions in North Macedonia. The first one will be combined for the evaluation of the NCP and identification of potential intervention options. The second mission will be focused on elaboration of the Concept for the selected intervention (new Programme). The first field mission includes briefing and debriefing meetings at the beginning and at the end of the mission with the Swiss Embassy in Skopje and the SDC headquarter. For the second mission, briefing and debriefing meetings are foreseen with the Swiss Embassy.
- Interviews/working sessions with relevant national, regional and local stakeholders:
 - Minister of Environment and Physical Planning (MoEPP);
 - representatives of the MoEPP, Nature Department.
 - representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy (MAFWE);
 - Secretariat for Economic Affairs; - PCT in North Macedonia (Farmahem) and the backstopper (HIS) in Switzerland;
 - Mayors and representatives of 11 municipalities in the Bregalnica region; -Centre for Development of the Bregalnica Planning Region;
 - representatives of the core group “Honey East”;
 - beneficiaries of different interventions in the Bregalnica region;
 - representatives of the identified vulnerable groups in the Bregalnica region;
 - representatives of the Macedonian Ecological Society MES;
 - representatives of the Public Enterprise National Forests; -representatives of the “Hans Em” Faculty of Forest Sciences;
 - Mayor and representatives of the municipality of Vevcani (payment for ecosystem services);
 - EU delegation;
 - Civil society organisations active in the field of environment/nature conservation.

During the first field mission, the Consultant(s) shall visit (not only) the Bregalnica region to get familiar with the different measures and interventions applied by NCP. During the visits, the Consultant(s) shall interview the local programme partners and discuss with them about the NCP implementation and achieved results. Other (selected) protected areas in the country shall be also visited as a cross check, but also as basis for the development of potential intervention options. During the second field mission, the main focus of the visits shall be in region/areas where the new Programme shall be implemented and on interviews and discussions with the relevant stakeholders and partners.

The Consultant(s) is invited to propose other methods and instruments for carrying out the assignment.

7. Roles and responsibilities of the Consultants

The evaluation and elaboration of the Concept will be conducted by a team composed of one/two international consultant(s) accompanied by a national expert. The overall responsibility lies with one of the international consultants who will be the team leader. The national consultant shall support the international consultant(s) with expert knowledge on the context, national legislation, relevant institutions

and stakeholders. Based on her local network/ contacts he/she will be i) responsible for organizing meetings with support, if needed, of the Swiss Embassy: ii) ensure logistics and transport, and iii) provide translation services in English and Macedonian. The international consultant(s) will have a contract with Swiss Embassy in North Macedonia to whom he/she/they will report, and one of them, in the capacity of team leader, will sub-contract the national consultant.

Since the Concept will provide insight for preparing a new Programme and a tender process, the consultants will not be eligible as bidders for the tender of the implementation consultant for the new Programme, nor as consortium partners, nor as subcontractors, nor are they entitled to provide information to bidding organizations.

7.1. Assignment process and timeframe

The following work plan provides suggested dates, responsibilities and resources needed for the various activities of the assignment process. This work plan will eventually be adapted by the consultant team, in consultation with the Swiss Embassy in North Macedonia.

Activity	Date	Responsibilities
Logistical and administrative preparation	Mid-October 2023	Consultants; SwissEmbassy
1 st field mission	November 2023 (up to 12 workingdays)	Consultant(s)
Debriefing of evaluation findings in Skopje	End of November2023	Consultant(s)
Debriefing on Potential Intervention Options (PIO) in Skopje	End of November2023	Consultant(s)
Data analysis and preparation of the Draft Reports (Evaluation and PIO)	December 2023	Consultant(s)
Submission of Reports	mid of January2024	Consultant(s)
Presentation and discussion of PIO (virtual meeting)	mid of January2024	Consultant & SwissEmbassy
Feedback on reports (Draft Evaluation Report and PIO) end of January2024	End of January2024	Swiss Embassy
Submission of Final Reports (Evaluation and PIO)	Mid of February2024	Consultant(s)
SDC Management Response (Evaluation Report)	End of February2024	Swiss Embassy
Dissemination of the Final Evaluation Report	March 2024	Swiss Embassy
Preparation of draft Concept, incl. 2 nd field mission	March 2024(up to 5 days fieldmission)	Consultants

Submission of the draft Concept	Beginning of April 2024	Consultants
Feedback on the draft Concept	Mid-April 2024	Swiss Embassy
Final Concept	End of April 2024	Consultants
Discussion with stakeholders on the Final Concept	May 2024	Swiss Embassy

The expected duration of the assignment of the international consultant(s) is up to 55 days, including two field mission to North Macedonia in total duration up to 17 working days, while for the local consultant, the expected duration of the assignment is up to 28 working days. Timeframe to be discussed with the consultant(s), but the work will be undertaken over a timeline of approximately 7 months (October 2023 – April 2024).

8. Reporting and Deliverables

8.1. Deliverables expected to be submitted by consultants:

- Debriefing meeting on the Evaluation of the NCP

This meeting shall be organized at the end of the first field mission, to share first findings and to discuss and receive comments from the programme stakeholders and the Swiss Embassy.

- Debriefing meeting on the a few Potential Intervention Options (PIO)

This meeting shall be organized at the end of the first field mission, to share first findings and to discuss with the Swiss Embassy.

- Draft Evaluation Report

The draft Evaluation Report shall include evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations. After receiving feedback from the Swiss Embassy, the consultant(s) should finalise the Evaluation Report in view of these comments.

- Presentation and discussion of the Potential Intervention Options

On the basis of the evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations, and the report on potential intervention options, the Swiss Embassy will organize a discussion with the SDC Head Office and the main national partners in order to select the most favorable option of an intervention, for which a Concept shall be elaborated.

- Final Evaluation Report

The Evaluation Report should be self-explanatory, logically structured, contain evidence-based findings, conclusions, lessons and recommendations. All information that is not relevant to the overall analysis belongs in an annex. The Report should respond in detail to the evaluation questions and key focus areas. The Evaluation Report should not exceed 30 pages in English language, excluding an executive summary and the annexes. The documents should contain clear references to important information/data available in the annexes.

- Debriefing meeting on the Concept

This meeting shall be organized at the end of the second field mission, to share the findings for the draft concept and to discuss with the Swiss Embassy, after which the Concept will be finalized.

- Draft Concept

For the selected option(s), in the second stage, to propose a draft Concept for the long-term new Program including a description of possible interventions/measures at central and local level (legislative interventions, technical assistance, capacity building, on-site measures, etc.), description of roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders, time and cost estimate and expertise required. After receiving feedback from the Swiss Embassy, the consultant(s) should finalise the Concept in view of these comments.

- Final Concept

The Concept should be self-explanatory, logically structured, contain evidence-based findings, conclusions and recommendations. All information that is not relevant to the overall analysis belongs in an annex. The Concept should not exceed 30 pages in English language, excluding an executive summary and the annexes. The documents should contain clear references to important information/data available in the annexes.

8.2. Proposed structure of documents

Evaluation Report

- Cover page
- Table of contents
- Acronyms and abbreviations
- Acknowledgments
- Executive summary
- Introduction
- Summary description of the programme
- Findings, incl. results
- Conclusions
- Recommendations and lessons learnt

Annexes (compulsory)

- o Terms of reference
- o Filled out Assessment Grid of the DAC Criteria
- o Complete list of stakeholders and others consulted and interviewed
- o Detailed description of the scoping and evaluation process, including data sources and possible methodological weaknesses and limitations
- o Analysis of the intervention logic (logframe or ToC): extent to which objectives have been achieved.

Report on potential intervention options (PIO)

- Cover page
- Table of contents
- Acronyms and abbreviations
- Acknowledgments
- Executive summary

- Introduction
- Presentation of context, status, needs and potentials, opportunities, selection process of potential options for intervention, presentation of the potential options, selecting the most favorable options and priority interventions
- Conclusions and recommendations
- Annexes
 - o Terms of reference
 - o Complete list of stakeholders and others consulted and interviewed
 - o List of documents reviewed

Concept

- Cover page
- Table of contents
- Acronyms and abbreviations
- Acknowledgments
- Executive summary
- Introduction
- Presentation of context, status, needs and potentials, opportunities, new programme orientation and envisioning, concept and approach, risk assessment
- Conclusions and outlook
- Annexes
 - o Terms of reference
 - o Complete list of stakeholders and others consulted and interviewed
 - o List of documents reviewed o Requirements regarding Inception phase and the new Programme implementation.

The Consultant(s) will report to the Regional Advisor on Water and Environment in Skopje for the entire duration of the assignment. The operational support will be provided by the country cooperation office and the National Programme Officer (NPO) in North Macedonia.

9. Reference Documents

After signing the contract, the National Programme Officer in the Swiss Embassy will share the following documents with the consultant for the first desk review:

- For the evaluation of the NCP (all three phases):
 - Project documents;
 - o Entry and credit proposals,

- o Annual plans and reports, o End of Phase Reports,
- o Report on External Evaluation of the Phase 1, 2016
- An open list of key people to interview

10. Competency profile of the consultants

The consultants must be independent of the FDFA and in particular, the SDC and were not involved in activities covered by this assignment. The international consultant(s) should have the following qualification and thematic expertise:

Essential qualities are:

- University degree in the field of nature protection /biodiversity/ ecosystems/ environment;
- More than 10 years of relevant experience in development and evaluations of projects and programme;
- Familiarity with relevant EU directives;
- Confirmed experience in developing and evaluating similar development interventions;
- Working knowledge and experience with regional conservation management /landscape management planning; Integrative inter-sectorial / interdisciplinary approaches;
- Working experience with multi-stakeholder dialogue processes / policy dialogue.
- Competency with gender, governance and “leave no one behind (LNOB)” issues;
- Ability to apply the DAC evaluation standards;
- Excellent communication, writing and reporting skills in English language.

Desired qualities are:

- Knowledge of the Swiss development cooperation system;
- Working experience in countries of the Balkan region.

The national consultant should have the following qualification:

- Relevant professional expertise in nature protection / biodiversity /ecosystems / environment;
- Knowledge on national legislation related to the nature and environment;
- Excellent knowledge of relevant national institutions and stakeholders in the field of nature and environment;
- Knowledge of the political, social and development context in North Macedonia and preferably understanding of natural resources management / environment issues within the country context;
- Good communication skills (good command in English).

11. Award criteria

The following table provides the award criteria (AC) and the corresponding weighting, based on which the bids will be evaluated.

AC	Award criteria	Weighting
AC 1	Qualifications and experiences of the consultant(s) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University degree in relevant science field; • Fully available during the contract period; • More than 10 years of experience on similar tasks; • Familiarity with relevant EU directives; • Excellent English language capacities. 	45%
AC 2	Understanding of the assignment and proposed approach and methodology General understanding of the assignment and the approach and methodology for the execution of the tasks described in the document.	30%
AC 3	Financial offer	25%
AC 3.1	Financial offer - Overall price The overall amount (excl. VAT) across the assignment will be evaluated using the following formula $\text{Score} = \left(\frac{P_{\min} \times \text{max. Points}}{P} \right)$ P = price of offer being assessed P min = price of lowest offer max. Points = 5	Sub-weight 90%
AC 3.2	Clarity of the proposition, full character of the cost structure, realistic estimation of costs	Sub-weight 10%
	Total	100%

12. Application procedure

Technical and financial offers have to be submitted to the Swiss Embassy in North Macedonia by email [to stanislava.dodeva@eda.admin.ch](mailto:stanislava.dodeva@eda.admin.ch) and to carmen.thoennissen@eda.admin.ch, by 16:00 CET on 11.09.2023.

The following documents are requested for the offer:

- 1) Covering letter
- 2) Technical proposal (max. 8 pages), which shall include:
 - Understanding of the assignment;
 - Proposed approach and methodology for the assignment;
 - Competences, roles and responsibilities of the consultant(s);
 - Proposed timeframe of the evaluation and the scoping study;
 - Financial offer in a requested form;
 - Annexes:
 - Curricula vitae of the proposed international consultant(s);
 - Relevant experience of the international consultant(s) with similar assignments;

- Short Curricula vitae of the proposed local consultant.

The financial offer shall be submitted in CHF using the standard form that is sent together with these Terms of References. Up to 55 person days for the international consultant(s) (including up to 17 working days in North Macedonia) and up to 28 days for the local consultant. Traveling time to and from North Macedonia should not exceed 1 day (two times 0.5 day). The financial offer shall include contract daily fees, travel expenses (air travel, local travel), daily allowances and ancillary expenses. Flight bookings in economy and the ordering of the air tickets must be made by the Consultant(s). Only the actual cost of the flight arrangement will be reimbursed.

Filled in Data on Creditor/Contractor (Note: do not send back this file to Bern, as indicated in the file, but to the Contracting Authority/Embassy, as part of the offer).

13. Contracting

The contract will be awarded by the Swiss Embassy in North Macedonia, following an analysis of technical and financial proposals received in response to these terms of reference. Contact: Swiss Embassy/contracting authority Swiss Embassy in North Macedonia, Maksim Gorki 19, 1000 Skopje

<https://www.eda.admin.ch/deza/en/home/sdc/publications.html/content/publikationen/en/deza/diverse-publikationen/broschuere-iza-2021-24>

<https://www.bing.com/search?q=3+Swiss+Cooperation+Strategy+North+Macedonia+2017-2020&cvid=74f3e108c23b4e5ca538e924736ad66d&aqs=edge..69i57.949j0j1&FORM=ANAB01&PC=U531>

- Annex 1: Switzerland's international cooperation strategy 2021-2024:
<https://www.eda.admin.ch/deza/en/home/sdc/publications.html/content/publikationen/en/deza/diverse-publikationen/broschuere-iza-2021-24>
- Annex 2: Swiss Cooperation Strategy North Macedonia 2017-2020:
<https://www.bing.com/search?q=3+Swiss+Cooperation+Strategy+North+Macedonia+2017-2020&cvid=74f3e108c23b4e5ca538e924736ad66d&aqs=edge..69i57.949j0j1&FORM=ANAB01&PC=U531>
- Annex 3: Swiss Cooperation Programme North Macedonia 2021-2024:
<https://www.eda.admin.ch/countries/northmacedonia/en/home/representations/botschaft/embassy-tasks.html>
- Annex 4: Background Information
- Annex 5: Nature Conservation Programme impact/outcomes/outputs
- Annex 6: Assessment Grid for the DAC Criteria
- Annex 7: Code of Conduct
- Annex 8: General Terms and Conditions of Business
- Annex 9: Data on Creditor/Contractor
- Annex 10: Fact sheet expenses
- Annex 11: Form for offer

Annex 6.2 Assessment Grid – OECD DAC Criteria

(version July 2021)

Note: this assessment grid is used for evaluations and internal assessments of SDC or SECO financed projects and programs (hereinafter jointly referred to as an 'intervention'). It is based on the OECD Development Assistance Committee evaluation criteria.¹ If specific results are not yet measurable at the time of the assessment, it requires analysing the likelihood of achieving impact and sustainability. All applicable sub-criteria should be scored and a short explanation should be provided. Additional sub-criteria may be added.

Select the corresponding number (0-4) representing your rating of the sub-criteria in the column "score": 0 = not assessed; 1 = highly satisfactory; 2 = satisfactory; 3 = unsatisfactory; 4 = highly unsatisfactory

- **Highly satisfactory (HS)** – there were no shortcomings in relation to the intervention's relevance, coherence and efficiency; the objectives at outcome level were fully achieved or exceeded and are likely to have a significant impact, which will be sustained in the future.
- **Satisfactory (S)** – There were moderate shortcomings in relation to the intervention's relevance, coherence and efficiency. Most intended objectives at outcome level were achieved (or for mid-term: are likely to be achieved). The likelihood of achieving intended impact or sustainability of the intervention's benefits is reasonable.
- **Unsatisfactory (U)** – There were important shortcomings in relation to the intervention's relevance, coherence and efficiency, in the achievement of its objectives (N.B. if outputs are achieved, but do not result in the expected outcomes, consider rating relevance and/or effectiveness as unsatisfactory). The likelihood of achieving intended impact or sustainability of the intervention's benefits is questionable.
- **Highly unsatisfactory (HU)** - There were very severe shortcomings in relation to the operation's relevance, coherence and efficiency. Intended objectives have not been achieved, achievement of intended impact or sustainability of benefits are highly unlikely.
- **Not assessed (na)** – The criteria statement cannot be assessed. Please explain and provide details in the justifications section.

Title of the evaluated intervention: Nature Conservation Programme NCP 2012 - 2024

Evaluation type: External Final Evaluation NCP 2012-2024 – Focus in the following table lies on the Exit Phase after 2021

Evaluator(s): Christoph Dürr (CD), Stephanie Mansourian (SM), Bojana Stanojevska (BS)

Date of the evaluation: **01.03.2024**

¹ For more guidance see: Better Criteria for Better Evaluations. Revised Evaluation Criteria. Definitions and Principles for Use, OECD/DAC Network on Development Evaluation, 2019.

Key aspects based on DAC criteria	Score	Justification (Provide a short explanation for your score or why a criterion was not assessed)
Relevance Note: the assessment here captures the relevance of objectives <u>and</u> design <i>at the time of design</i> and <i>at time of evaluation</i>		
1. The extent to which the objectives of the intervention respond to the needs and priorities of the target group.	2 - satisfactory	The project responded partially to the need of national level policymakers. It supported the development of the new nature protection plan, and brought two rival ministries (MoEPP and MAWFE) closer together. However, several aspects of the project signified that the two main ministries felt that the project should have been implemented differently, and that they should have played a more significant role.
2. The extent to which the objectives of the intervention respond to the needs and priorities of indirectly affected stakeholders (not included in target group, e.g. government, civil society, etc.) in the country of the intervention.	2 - satisfactory	Indirect stakeholders such as communities, private forest owners, CSOs, the business sector, tourist associations and other interest groups were less involved and benefitted only partially from the project. Some businesses (e.g. beekeeping) were strengthened, with others (e.g. tourism operators in Berovo) starting to see new opportunities. However, the links with the project, and the potential role of the project in meeting these stakeholders' needs could be significantly strengthened.
3. The extent to which core design elements of the intervention (such as the theory of change, structure of the project components, choice of services and intervention partners) adequately reflect the needs and priorities of the target group.	1 - highly satisfactory	The project took a multilayer approach (from local to national) to address the diverse challenges appearing at these different levels. It strengthened the knowledge base on biodiversity and nature protection as a necessary prerequisite to advance any nature protection in the country. It also sought to reconcile some of the policy dimensions with more local priorities (such as local economic activities). The theory of change and core design of the project identified the importance of capacity building. The selection of capacity building activities carried out through the project could have been more directly relevant to the needs of the target groups.

Key aspects based on DAC criteria	Score	Justification (Provide a short explanation for your score or why a criterion was not assessed)
		Exchange visits were probably the most useful capacity building activities.
If an additional sub-criteria is relevant please formulate it here	select	Click here to enter text.
Coherence		
4. Internal coherence: the extent to which the intervention is compatible with other interventions of Swiss development cooperation in the same country and thematic field (consistency, complementarity and synergies).	1 - highly satisfactory	The project is complementary to two Swiss-funded projects to strengthen local municipalities and CSOs. It is also coherent with other projects around water management in the East Planning Region.
5. External coherence: the extent to which the intervention is compatible with interventions of other actors in the country and thematic field (complementarity and synergies).	1 - highly satisfactory	The project responds to the significant need (identified notably in the 2018 NBSAP and the UNECE review of North Macedonia's Environmental Policy in 2019) for improved capacity in environment and nature protection. No other donors are investing in the East Planning Region, making this project particularly relevant.
Effectiveness		
6. The extent to which approaches/strategies during implementation are adequate to achieve the intended results.	1 - highly satisfactory	The integrated holistic approach during all three phases was adequate. The focus on capacity building, stakeholder inclusion and sharing experiences was appropriate. The support of national and international expertise was highly appreciated. Communication of results and capitalisation of experiences was adequate.

Key aspects based on DAC criteria	Score	Justification (Provide a short explanation for your score or why a criterion was not assessed)
7. The extent to which the intervention achieved or is expected to achieve its intended objectives (outputs and outcomes).	1 - highly satisfactory	<p>The outcomes 1-3 have been achieved:</p> <p>1 implementing PES for PA "Vevcani springs" and capacities on integrative forest management</p> <p>2 Regional approaches applied for implementing management plans, potential Natura 2000 sites in Bregalnica region, capacities of PE "national forests" and marketing products by local core groups</p> <p>3 knowledge, achievements and results of NCP are consolidated and documented and publicly available (issue papers and other documentation).</p> <p>The outputs had all been achieved (or surpassed) by project end except for output 2.4 that was partially achieved.</p>
8. The extent to which the intervention achieved or is expected to achieve its intended results related to transversal themes.	0 - not determined	<p>In the design of NCP Exit phase, little emphasis on objectives to transversal themes has been given, therefore evaluation is not applicable.</p> <p>The transversal themes such as gender and governance were specifically promoted in the preparation of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).</p>
If an additional sub-criteria is relevant please formulate it here	select	Click here to enter text.
Efficiency		
9. The extent to which the intervention delivers the results (outputs, outcomes) cost-effectively.	2 - satisfactory	<p>The interventions carried out within the NCP were implemented cost-effectively and in a timely manner. The activities are well defined,</p>

Key aspects based on DAC criteria	Score	Justification (Provide a short explanation for your score or why a criterion was not assessed)
		adapted to the local context and prioritised to secure nature conservation and reaching the results (outputs, outcomes)
10. The extent to which the intervention delivers the results (outputs, outcome) in a timely manner (within the intended timeframe or reasonably adjusted timeframe).	2 - satisfactory	Most of the activities were completed on time and as planned according to the project timeframe. Certain delays are evident but mainly due to heavy bureaucratic procedures at the level of national and local authorities and the Covid 19 crisis.
11. The extent to which management, monitoring and steering mechanisms support efficient implementation.	1 - highly satisfactory	<p>Project monitoring processes were mostly rigorous, significantly geared towards measuring quantitative indicators and contractual milestones, supported with a significant amount of qualitative data gathered. In addition, the team developed monitoring tools for tracking the progress of the implementation of the National Strategy for Nature Conservation, a high-level policy document that was developed within the project.</p> <p>Regular steering committee meetings were conducted as planned where all members participated and contributed.</p>
If an additional sub-criteria is relevant please formulate it here	select	Click here to enter text.
Impact		
<p>12. The extent to which the intervention generated or is expected to generate 'higher-level effects' as defined in the design document of the intervention.</p> <p>Note: when assessing this criterion, the primary focus is the intended 'higher-level effects'. In the event that <i>significant</i> unintended negative or positive effects can be discerned, they must be specified in the justification column, especially if they influence the score.</p>	2 - satisfactory	Although significant strides were made in nature conservation notably through the designation of two new protected areas, the development of several plans and strategies, and the building of capacities, much more remains to be done to consolidate these efforts. In particular, it is essential to ensure that the two protected areas can be effectively managed in the long term.

Key aspects based on DAC criteria	Score	Justification (Provide a short explanation for your score or why a criterion was not assessed)
If an additional sub-criteria is relevant please formulate it here	select	Click here to enter text.
Sustainability		
13. The extent to which partners are capable and motivated (technical capacity, ownership) to continue activities contributing to achieving the outcomes.	1 - highly satisfactory	<p>Emphasis on technical capacity building and exchange has been provided by the Programme, as well as sharing of experiences and recommendations.</p> <p>Equally, there was considerable input from national and international expertise in all the different phases of NCP.</p> <p>The capacity has been built at all levels: local – regional – national, but also within Government, Municipalities, NGOs as well as businesses.</p>
14. The extent to which partners have the financial resources to continue activities contributing to achieving the outcomes.	3 - unsatisfactory	<p>Financial resources will be a crucial factor for continuation. The sustainability of financing is not satisfactory for most of the activities: management of protected areas, payments for ecosystem services, regional forest plan,</p> <p>The need for sustainable financing is apparent at all levels: municipalities with small schemes, CDEPR regarding nature conservation, PEMF for implementation and monitoring of the protected areas.</p>
15. The extent to which contextual factors (e.g. legislation, politics, economic situation, social demands) is conducive to continuing activities leading to outcomes.	3 - unsatisfactory	<p>In many of the key activities of NCP the contextual factors are not conducive:</p> <p>Political changes are often followed by other priorities than biodiversity conversation.</p>

Key aspects based on DAC criteria	Score	Justification (Provide a short explanation for your score or why a criterion was not assessed)
		<p>Legislation on implementation of e.g. strategy on nature protection or on management of protected areas or on payments for ecosystem services is not always in place.</p> <p>Economic situation is not conducive for prioritising budget allocations to biodiversity conservation</p> <p>With elections planned in April 2024, the political outcome has implications on priorities and available financial and human resources in the next years at national, regional and local levels.</p>
<p>If an additional sub-criteria is relevant please formulate it here</p>	select	<p>Click here to enter text.</p>

Annex 6.4 Detailed description of the scoping and evaluation process, including data sources and possible methodological weaknesses and limitations

The evaluation and the scoping processes were conducted based on the Terms of Reference provided by the Swiss Embassy and the offer submitted by the evaluation team. Moreover, the evaluation is based on a standard evaluation assessment matrix (OECD-DAC) focusing on relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability. A review of all available documents (project outputs, half-year and year reports, issue sheets and project documents for each phase) was carried out. Additional documents were consulted such as reports to the CBD or the UNECE Environmental Performance Review for North Macedonia. The evaluation encompasses the whole project period, i.e. 2012-2023 with a special focus at the final, exit phase 2020-2023.

The work was completed through a desk top review, interviews with around 30 stakeholders that were engaged in project activities (based on a previously designed questionnaire), analysis of project reports and other relevant documentation arising from the project as well as all available project outputs.

All needed sources of information were available online or upon request of the project team, Swiss Embassy and also relevant stakeholders. The evaluation focused on the work done at the regional level and for the purposes of better understanding the impact and achievement a whole 3 days were allocated to meetings with the local and regional stakeholders during the first mission (see annex 6.3). The discussions focused on the impact of the programme at local level, on their everyday work, the

development of the local community and the region and, most importantly, to the achievement of nature conservation and biodiversity protection. All sources and means for verification were available with the exception of the final report from implementing company Farmahem which cannot be ready prior to the end of March and is a limitation regarding analysis of the achievement of the programme objectives. However, based on the available documents and cooperation by implementing company and project partners, the achievements could be assessed in a timely manner.

A significant part of the discussions was focused on the potential intervention options, the needs of the stakeholders, problems they are facing and potential of the region and local communities. The discussions and preliminary findings were elaborated and briefly presented in front of the Embassy representatives including H.E. Ambassador [Veronique Ulman](#). Based on a debriefing held with Swiss Embassy representatives, a comprehensive report was developed. In addition, a debriefing meeting during the first mission was held with the MoEPP, where main preliminary findings from the mission were presented and feedback was invited.

In parallel to development of the evaluation report, the evaluation team was working on the report on potential intervention options (PIO) – Report B from the Terms of Reference.

Annex 6.5 Analysis of the intervention logframe NCP: extent of achievements¹

According to the annual and half year reports as well as the available documents reviewed it can be concluded that all of the outputs and outcomes from the intervention logframe are achieved, but the extent of achievement cannot be analysed yet for all objectives, since the final report is not completed. The outputs related to the first outcome are partially achieved. The scheme for Vevchani springs is developed and implementation started. The website is developed and promoted. The Municipality has not started to receive payments from the established PES scheme, even though the website is developed with a full package of offer (accommodation, meals, entertainment, etc.).

Actions related to PES are already defined in the management plan (MP) for “Osogovo Mountains” and the draft MP for “Maleshevo”, but has not been implemented. There are also considerations for developing schemes through open dialogue and initiate the introduction of fiscal instruments (PES) to compensate the management body and local population for ecosystem services (ES). However, this has not been introduced or further analysed.

In regards to implementation of the management plans, for both protected areas, MPs are in place (developed and adopted) but currently there are different capacities available for their implementation. There is significant knowledge and capacity for implementation of the management plan for Osogovo Protected Area (PA) and some of the activities have started to be implemented. There are 2 employees of Public Enterprise National Forest (PENF) for Maleshevo, but limited progress can be seen on implementation of the management plan. Therefore, this output is partially achieved.

In regard to Natura 2000, SDFs are developed and dossiers completed, but it is not clear if the management plans can be implemented. In regard to information and education on benefits from Natura 2000 there is some progress. However, the completion and extent to which this output is met cannot be analysed.

The output related to „capacities of PE “*National forests*” for raising and care of white poplar and willow seedlings are strengthened“ is achieved and exceeded. 17 employees of PENF, from the headquarters and local branches in Berovo, Delcevo, Sveti Nikole and Kavadarci, received trainings about raising and care of white poplar and willow seedlings.

Furthermore, the indicator related to output 3.2, is also achieved. Even though the first employee that received major support by the NCP was no longer engaged at the educational centre, still nowadays the capacities of the current employee are sufficient and she can present the content of the centre and work on its promotion effectively. The educational centre is part of another programme on lifelong learning (supported by UNICEF), which means that this output is completed.

Also, based on the interviews and conducted site visits, NCP has a big network of local and regional stakeholders, that enabled significant reach to people that attended events organized by the NCP and EC.

The detailed overview of the achievement of programme objectives is summarised based on the available logframe and details that are given by the implementing company Farmahem. The table below outlines progress on the indicators for all outputs and outcomes achieved. Based on the information provided, all outputs and outcomes have been achieved, and most of the objectives are met to a high extent.

¹(see Annex 5: Overall goals, Outcomes and Outputs in the SDC TORs for the Evaluation)

IMPACT LEVEL

Impact Bregalnica region safeguards its natural values and promotes sustainable and inclusive socioeconomic development			
Indicator	Acc. to Logframe		Comment
	Baseline 2020	Achieved 2023	
No. of actions of the National Strategy for Nature Conservation and National Strategy for Biodiversity implemented in Bregalnica region	55	60	analysis of the status of implementation of the National Strategy for Nature Protection.
No. of tourists visiting the East Planning Region has increased	32,077 ¹	45,000 23,304	Concerning the turnover in the tourism sector within the EPR region the baseline for this indicator was set in 2018, with an achieved value of 612 million MKD by 2023. The observed trend indicates a decline from 2020 (523 million MKD) to 2023, due to the global pandemic and economic crises affecting the tourism industry. The data source utilized for this analysis is the report from the State Statistical Office, the latest version available being from 2022. The official data of the State statistical office for the target year are published regularly in the second half of the next year. Therefore, 2018 was set as the baseline year due to the availability of official data. The same reasons apply to the second indicator related to the number of tourists visiting the EPR.
Turnover in the sector of hospitality industry ² for the East Planning	827 million MKD	950 million MKD 612M MKD/	

¹ The official data of the State statistical office for the target year are published regularly in the second half of the next year.

² Hospitality industry refers to catering trade and services including also accommodation capacities according to the State statistical office

Region has increased			
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OUTCOME LEVEL

Outcome 1 Relevant institutions and organizations at all levels implement innovative approaches for integrated management of natural resource					
Indicator	Acc. to Logframe		Acc. to YPO TPY		Comment
	Base line 2020	Achieved 2023	Target TP	Achieved 2023	
No. of actions related to payment of ecosystem services' approach that initiated by different stakeholders in the Bregalnica region or in the country	2	4	/	4	<p>This indicator is achieved.</p> <p>The baseline refers to (1) PES scheme for the PA "Vevchani springs" that is in final phase of development within NCP and (2) identified options for PES scheme for Dojran Lake in frame of the project "Integrated water resources management at Dojran Lake in Macedonia", supported by Critical Ecosystem partnership Fund in 2016.</p> <p>The other 2 refer to PES related actions already defined in the MP for "Osogovo Mountains" and draft MP for "Maleshevo". Developing scheme through open dialogue and initiate the introduction of fiscal instruments (PES) to compensate the management body and local population for ecosystem services (ES) is one of the objectives of MPs programmes for local development.</p>
No. of innovative measures from regional forest development plan for Maleshevo region implemented by relevant institution (s)/ organization (s)	2	4	/	9	<p>This indicator is achieved and surpassed in 2022.</p> <p>According to the implementation status analyses of RFDP, conducted by PCT in 2022, 12 measures (23% of the total number) are fully completed and 4 are ongoing. Out of 12 implemented measures, 5 measures were supported by NCP and 7 by additional donors/institutions (e.g., EU cross border programme with Bulgaria, Erasmus,</p>

					<p>National programme for balanced regional development etc.).</p> <p>The 7 measures implemented without support of NCP are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Joint assessment of illegal logging and related activities between public and private forest owners; 2. Organization of promotional events for visiting the EC by students; 3. Renovation of equipment at existing picnic areas; 4. Marking and unification of a network of pedestrian, bicycle and jeep tourism trails; 5. Mapping of the existing pedestrian, bicycle paths and creation of a map with all active and marked trails. 6. Arrangement of a recreation center in a tourist settlement Revna Reka in Pehchevo (I and II phase) 7. Municipality of Pehchevo, in partnership with EU leading company NAASAT and FINNOVA, implement FIPAS (Forest fire prediction alarm system through artificial intelligence) project for prevention of forest fires, supported by EIT Climate-KIC
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Outcome 2 Key stakeholders of the Bregalnica region jointly apply a regional approach to promote nature conservation and sustainable socio-economic development

Indicator	Acc. to Logframe		Acc. to YPO TPY		Comment
	Base line 2020	Target 2023	Target TPY	Achieved 2023	
No. of joint actions for nature conservation and sustainable development in and around protected areas in Bregalnica region emerged from cooperation of different stakeholders	0	5	5	5	<p>This indicator is achieved and the emerged joint actions are related to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Memorandum for cooperation (MoC) signed between NGOs "Zdravec" from Makedonska Kamenica and "Ekoturizam" from Ohrid for sharing experience and knowledge between PA "Osogovo Mountains" and Belchishko wetland area which is in process of proclamation. 2. MOVING (Mountain Valorization through INterconnectedness and Green growth) a Horizon 2020 project (2020-2024) implemented by Connecting Natural values and People (CNVP) in N. Macedonia (focus area is Maleshevo region and focus group

					<p>consists of municipalities, business sector and NGOs was established)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Center for development of the East Planning Region (CDEPR) and municipality of Pehcevo have signed agreement for "Arrangement of a recreation center in a tourist settlement Revna Reka in Pehchevo (I and II phase)" (also part of the indicator 2 of Outcome 1) PENF in partnership with Association Ambrozija (MK) and Southwestern State Enterprise Blagoevgrad and Center for cross-border cooperation and development-Sandanski (BG) have prepared application for cross border project initiative NEST – Nature's Embrace: Sustainable Tourism in harmony with the nature within EU Interreg IPA BG/MK Representatives of the hiking club "Osogovo" from Kocani have marked certain hiking paths within the protected area which soon are going to be equipped with signs prepared by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung foundation.
State financial support for farm diversification and business development in the East Planning Region increased	42,377 EUR	100,000 EUR	/	598,210 EUR	<p>This indicator is achieved and exceeded.</p> <p>According to the official data provided by the MAFWE in February 2023, during the period November 2021 – December 2022 additional 330,391 EUR have been allocated to farmers and legal entities in East Planning Region related to Measure 7 "Farm diversification and business development" from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for Rural Development (IPARD).</p> <p>At the end of the year PCT is going to request for an update from MAFWE regarding the distribution of additional budget.</p>

Outcome 3 The consolidated and documented knowledge, achievements and results of the NCP are used for further application of sustainable management of natural resources in the Bregalnica region and in the country

Indicator	Acc. to Logframe		Acc. to YPO SPY		Comment
	Baseline 2020	Target 2023	Target TPY	Achieved 2023	
No. of actions based on NCP's achievements/	0	5	10	9	This indicator was achieved and exceeded in 2022. But because it is expected that it could be additionally exceeded in the last

<p>results initiated by institutions/ organisations in the Bregalnica region or in the country</p>				<p>year of implementation due to NCP capitalization process, new target was set for the TPY.</p> <p>The 9 achieved actions refer to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The experience and lessons learnt gained from applying participatory approach during the preparation of Study for valorization of "Osogovo Mountains" were used and applied during the process of declaration "Shar Mountain" as a national park; 2. The experience of defining and declaring protected areas in the East Planning Region (EPR) through the involvement of stakeholders from the very beginning, especially related to the protected area "Osogovo Mountains" and "Malesevo", was used to prepare the process and the necessary documents for the declaration of a future protected area of Jablanica. Involvement of key parties from the very beginning of the process, research of the public opinion regarding the declaration of a protected area and applying the bottom-up approach in creating the proposal itself, proved to be well received and useful approaches and methods 3. The experiences gained during implementation of activities for revitalization of the riparian belts are replicated in the project "Prespa – Conservation of biodiversity in cross-border Prespa", which is implemented by MES with financial support of Prespa Ohrid Nature Trust and Jensen Foundation. The project is focusing on revitalization of wet habitats with alder's species. For this activity, the methodology for selection of areas for revitalization has been replicated and adapted, and already established communication and cooperation with PENF as well as experience from working in nursery conditions for production of planting material of riparian species has been used. 4. Also, the acquired knowledge and gained experience of PENF in production of planting material of riparian species (white poplar, white and brittle willow), is recognized by PE State Roads (PESR). PENF was invited in negotiation process
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				<p>of PESR for submitting a project concept about construction of the A2 highway on the section Bukojcani – Kicevo to the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). In accordance with the EBRD requirements for compensation of lost important habitats (including riparian forests), PENF was invited to produce seedlings of riparian species and revitalize the areas affected with the project through afforestation with white poplar seedlings and black alnus. Even though this negotiation was not completed successfully, it was a good initiation and recognition of the experience and knowledge of PENF regarding the production of seedlings from riparian species</p> <p>Based on the experience and knowledge gained through the training for ecosystem services concept provided by NCP, some of the participants have started with implementation of topic related projects, such as:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. National Park “Galichica” has started with realization of one day trainings every second month for students from secondary school about concept of ecosystem services. These kinds of trainings are planned in their yearly working programme. 6. National Park “Galica” has won a project “Sources of St. Naum - Inventory of biological characteristics and ecosystem services (SN_BESI)” that received financial support from the Regional Bureau for Science and Culture of UNESCO in Europe and the Abrdn Charitable Foundation 7. Association for ecology and tourism ECOTOURISM-2016 from Ohrid have won a project supported by Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund named “Assessment of Ecosystem Services in the Belchista Wetland, North Macedonia” <p>Also, as a result of NCP’s activities related to integrated touristic offers (during TPR):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. 3 women running local business (horseback riding club – The Countryside retreat, hotel Gradce and artisan soap making – My soap), have become
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					<p>members of the organization "Heroines in tourism". This organization aims to promote and support women in North Macedonia that are offering unique tourism experiences.</p> <p>9. The equipment that was purchased through NCP, has helped the Countryside retreat club to two new projects - one cross border for development of social entrepreneurship and one from Fund for Innovation and Technology Development for training for trainers for working with children with disabilities and hippotherapy.</p>
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OUTPUT LEVEL

Output 1.1 The scheme for payment for ecosystem services (PES) for PA "Vevcani springs" is developed and implementation has started

Indicator	Acc. to Logframe		Acc. to YPO TPY		Comment
	Baseline 2020	Target 2023	Target TPY	Achieved 2023	
No. of stakeholders ¹ understand PES concept and its practical application	0	10	10	16	<p>This indicator is achieved and surpassed. The achieved number refers to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Municipality of Vevchani and local branch of NGO Eko svest in Vevcahni which representatives have participated on training about the concept of ES and strengthened their capacities about different topics, among which PES is one of them and 2. 14 local businesses (restaurants, accommodation facilities, horse club, mountain lodge, cow farm, hiking clubs, beekeepers etc.) that were introduced to the PES scheme for PA "Vevchani springs". These introductions took place through individual meetings, group events and workshops. Out of these 14 businesses, only 4 have continued

¹ E.g. Ministry of environment and physical planning, Municipality, local NGOs, local business, local public enterprise, hiking association

					with the process of certification and have officially become part of the PES scheme, which is referred to as "Vevchani Green"
No. of agreements/ Memorandum of cooperation for PES scheme implementation signed	0	2	2	1	Four businesses have signed Memorandum for cooperation.
Output 1.2 The capacities of key stakeholders for implementing integrative forest management are strengthened					
Indicator	Acc. to Logframe		Acc. to YPO TPY		Comment
	Baseline	Target	Target	Achieved	
No. of project applications related to measures from RFDP "Maleshevo" action plan prepared by the target municipalities and PE "National forests" and submitted to other calls/donors	0	3	/	3	<p>This indicator was achieved during 2022.</p> <p>The achieved 3 project applications refer to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Municipality of Pehchevo, in partnership with NAASAT and FINNOVA, FIPAS project for prevention of forest fires, supported by EIT Climate-KIC, implemented in April-December 2022 • National Association of Private Forest Owners - Application "Local action of Private Forest owners for forest protection" submitted on the call "Together for the climate action", published by Eko Svest • Partnership application of Municipality of Berovo and Municipality of Pehchevo "Tourist value of the forest- connection of the tourist settlements in Berovo and Pehcevo"- developed and is going to be submitted on suitable call.
No. of initiatives for cooperation between Faculty of forestry, landscape architecture and environmental engineering "Hans Em" and national and international institution/s established	1	3	/	5	<p>This indicator was achieved and exceeded during first project year (FPY). "Hans Em" faculty, with support of PCT, have signed 5 memorandums for cooperation with following institutions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty of forestry in Sarajevo; • Faculty for lowland forestry in Novi Sad; • Faculty of forestry in Belgrade;

					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty of forestry at Karabuk University in Turkey and • Forestry high school "Gjorce Petrov" from Kavadarci.
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Output 2.1 Maleshevo is established as protected area and management bodies in the Bregalnica region (Osogovo and Maleshevo) implement their management plans

Indicator	Acc. to Logframe		Acc. to YPO TPY		Comment
	Baseline 2020	Target 2023	Target TPY	Achieved 2023	
No. of measures from the management plans related to capacity building and technical support of management bodies implemented	0	10	23	24	<p>This indicator was achieved and exceeded in SPY and new target was set for TPY. The new target was also surpassed during the reporting period.</p> <p>According to the MB's annual reports for PA "Osogovo Mountains" for 2021 and 2022 as of January 2023, NCP has supported the PENF in implementing activities from 21 different measures related to capacity building and technical support.</p> <p>The measures refer to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. monitoring of priority habitats from the EU directive on habitats; 2. monitoring of species; 3. monitoring of landscapes structure, 4. monitoring of fens; 5. monitoring of riparian forests, 6. monitoring of refuge/specific forest communities 7. monitoring of invasive shrub and woody allochthonous species; 8. preservation of abandoned old varieties of fruit crops in the region; 9. establishing and strengthening cooperation with key stakeholders; 10. control and prevention of poaching; 11. establishment of game monitoring; 12. adjustment of planning documentation; 13. development of a management plan;

					<p>14. cooperation and partnership;</p> <p>15. cooperation with local community;</p> <p>16. cooperation with scientific community;</p> <p>17. establishing efficient management of PA</p> <p>18. sustainable collection of economically significant other forest products;</p> <p>19. implementation of forest ecosystem management measures according to their specific structure and functionality and branding of the protected area.</p> <p>20. Setting up a network system of trails for mountain tourism</p> <p>21. Establishing mechanisms for equal participation and involvement of local communities living in the Osogovo Mountains in decision-making</p> <p>22. Establishing a sustainable waste management system</p> <p>23. Branding of the PA</p> <p>24. Provision of technical equipment and resources</p>
No. of initiatives for networking of management bodies with international, national, and local institutions/organizations established	0	2	3	2	<p>This indicator was achieved.</p> <p>PENF has initiated collaboration with many different institutions/organizations such as: PE for pastures, National Association of private forest owners, Joint Stock Company for Water Economy – branch in Kocani, national park “Galichica”, hydro system company Zletovica and the municipality of Probishtip.</p> <p>Official collaboration by signing agreement/ MoC was established with: (1) Municipality of Kocani for using the info centre in Ponikva as a Head office for Protected Landscape Osogovo and (2) Voluntary Mountain rescue service Osogovo, Kocani for future cooperation within PA “Osogovo Mountain”; as well as with (3) Hiking Association “Smojmirovo” and (4) Voluntary fire fighting association Pehchevo for future cooperation within PA “Maleschevo”.</p>

Output 2.2 Dossiers for potential Natura 2000 sites in Bregalnica region are completed

Indicator	Acc. to Logframe	Acc. to YPO TPY	Comment
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	Bas elin e 202 0	Targ et 202 3	Targ et TPY	Ach ieve d 202 3	
No. of draft management plans for Natura 2000 sites prepared	0	2	2	2	The draft management plans for 2 Natura 2000 sites in the Bregalnica region (Dolna Bregalnica and Ovche Pole) were prepared and submitted to MoEPP.
No. of stakeholders ¹ informed and educated about benefit of Natura 2000	42	60	/	72	This indicator was achieved and exceeded during the SPY. In total 72 different stakeholders (e.g cattle breeders, farmers, beekeepers, collectors of non-timber forest products, wood gatherers and processors, tourist entities, economic sector private individuals, institutions on national and local level, owners of weekend houses, companies involved in the trade of mushrooms, tourist workers, resellers of other forest products etc.) were informed about the benefits of Natura 2000 through conducting in-depth interviews.

Output 2.3 The capacities of PE “National forests” for raising and care of white poplar and willow seedlings are strengthened

Indicator	Acc. to Logframe		Acc. to YPO TPY		Comment
	Bas elin e 202 0	Targ et 202 1	Targ et TPY	Ach ieve d 202 3	
No. of employees in PE “National forests” who received trainings for raising and care of white poplar and willow seedlings	0	10	/	17	This indicator was achieved and exceeded during the FPY. In total 17 employees from PENF, its headquarters and local branches in Berovo, Delcevo, Sveti Nikole and Kavadarci, received trainings about raising and care of white poplar and willow seedlings.

Output 2.4 The core groups and local stakeholders sell their sustainably produced goods/services

Indicator	Acc. to Logframe		Acc. to YPO TPY		Comment
	Bas elin e 202 0	Targ et 202 3	Targ et TPY	Ach ieve d 202 3	

¹ E.g. Ministries, public enterprises, agencies, municipalities, business entities, NGOs, scientific institutions, media etc.

No. of market channels for sustainably produced rice and honey products established	1	5	/	8	<p>This indicator was achieved and exceeded in SPY. With the support from NCP, Honey East's products can be purchased via:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct sales on fairs and other events; • Orders from the association's webpage and social media; • Phone sales (direct contact with producers or through the association); • Retail sales in the organic shop/cooperative "Dobra zemja" and via their e-shop; • National Federation of Farmers (NFF)'s e-farm.mk shop; • Market-café Rod in Skopje; • Food delivery website Kliknijadi.mk and • Hotel Gradce – Kocani.
No. of households that sell sustainably produced goods/services has increased	50	75	/	73	<p>This indicator is almost achieved. In total 23 new households (15 beekeepers and 8 local service providers) have started to sell their sustainable produced goods (honey) and agrotourism services.</p>
No. of youth/woman that sell sustainably produced goods/services has increased	Yout h: 35 Wo man :15	Yout h: 50 Wo man :25	/	You th:4 2 Wo ma n:2 6	<p>This indicator is almost achieved. In total 7 youth and 11 women have started to sell their sustainable produced honey and agrotourism services.</p>

Output 3.1 The awareness of public about natural values and resources of Bregalnica region and their potential for sustainable use is increased

Indicator	New defined		Acc. to YPO TPY		Comment
	Bas elin e 202 0	Targ et 202 3	Targ et TPY	Ach ieve d 202 3 ³	
% of population (including the socially excluded groups) in Bregalnica region that is aware of the value of nature and	68,2 % of total population (where 49,5 %)	70% of total population (51% of which)	70% of total population (51% are youth)	70,4 % of total population (48,7% are youth and 50,1% women)	<p>According to the survey carried out in January 2022, 70,4% of the total population is aware of the values of nature (where 48,7% are youth and 50,1% women).</p> <p>New survey is going to be conducted in the last year of the exit phase.</p>

its sustainable use has increased	are yout h and 50,3 % wo men)	51% are yout h and 50,3 % wo men)	and 52% are wo man)	h and 50,1 % wo men)	68.5 % pop ulati on (48, 7% are yout h and 50,1 % wo men)	
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No. of followers on NCP's social media increased	40.0 00	55.0 00	69.0 00	66. 571 653 40	As of 31 July 2023, there are 62,631 followers on FB page and 3,940 followers on NCP Instagram profile.
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Output 3.2 The capacities of the employees in the educational center (EC) for promotion of natural values of Bregalnica region are enhanced ¹

Indicator	Acc. to Logframe		Acc. to YPO TPY		Comment
	Baseline 2020	Target 2021	Target TPY	Achieved 2023 ⁵	
No. of project applications prepared by the employee in EC and submitted to different calls/donors	4	7	/	10	<p>This indicator was achieved and surpassed in FPY when 5 project applications were prepared by the employee in EC and submitted to different calls/donors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "In harmony with the nature" (cultivation of medical herbs for creation of sustainable souvenir) to ARNO green ideas call • YOU_Ween (EU supported programme for promotion of green

¹ Although targets for the indicators under this output are set as of 2021, PCT has monitored the work of the EC and collected some additional data given in the column for comment.

					<p>entrepreneurship education among youth rural women),</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Education for climate change programme", supported by UNICEF • Looking for spring Cowslips", in cooperation with naukazadeca.mk/NatprevarJagliki/ • The future is circular" financed by EU, a project for promoting the circular economy in the frame of the education process. <p>During the reporting period, an employee within EC prepared and subsequently submitted 1 project application focused on the development of a Local Environment Action Plan for the Municipality of Pehchevo to the MoEPP.</p>
No. of people who participated on events organized by the EC	136 6	205 0	/	370 9	This indicator was achieved and exceeded in FPY. However, PCT in cooperation with the EC employee has continued to collect data about people participated on different events such as: international bicycle day, workshop for green entrepreneurship, workshops with kindergartens, international bee day, workshops on various topics for participants on ERASMUS+ programme, workshops for teachers, presentation of educational package Honeyland, scouts' weekend, international Biodiversity day, workshops in frame of UNICEF programme, etc.

Output 3.3 The NCP's results, main approaches, achievements and lessons learnt that have been capitalized are publicly available and broadly shared amongst stakeholders at regional and national level

Indicator	Acc. to Logframe		Acc. to YPO TPY		Comment
	Baseline 2020	Target 2023	Target TPY	Achieved 2023	
No. of products/tools for capitalisation of NCP's results and achievements developed	0	5	10	14	<p>Since SPY, following capitalization products have been developed or are under development:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inventory of existing knowledge products prepared within NCP – on-going

					<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Reorganization of the NCP web page to more result oriented – on-going 3. Presentation of NCP results in front of international organizations (Ecosystem Service Partnership (ESP) conference, Pan European stakeholder consultation for the Intergovernmental platform for biodiversity and ecosystem services (IPBES), MES congress, Webinar Presentation of How heritage interpretation is helping us preserve biodiversity in North Macedonia etc.) – on-going 4. Workshops on practical examples of using agriculture to develop eco-tourism (agrotourism) and knowledge transfer among local service providers from different regions of the country – completed in SPY 5. Dissemination of results of developing sustainable beekeeping methods and eco-friendly practices by organizing trainings for beekeepers from Shar mountain - completed in the SPY 6. Promotional campaign for sustainably produced honey and promoted on national TV show Agrar - completed in the SPY 7. Healthy snack workshop for pupils in EC Negrevo as part of international bee day – completed in the SPY 8. Blog posts for beekeeping and agritourism - completed in the SPY 9. Online Booklet named “Joint beekeepers for honey future” for promoting the lessons learnt/experience/practical recommendations of NCP on establishing beekeeping association - completed in SPY 10. Blog posts prepared and published – on-going 11. 21 abstracts on research topics developed within NCP were prepared for the need of 6th Congress of ecologists – completed in SPY 12. Symposium on Nature conservation in Bregalnica for promoting NCP results
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					<p>and achievements has been organized within the 6th Congress of ecologists – completed in SPY</p> <p>13. Video for capitalization the successful outcomes achieved in the development and promotion of integrated agritourism tourist offers – completed in the TPY</p> <p>14. Nine issue sheets</p>
No. of stakeholders that participated on events for promotion of NCP's capitalized results and achievements	0	70	70	74	NCP results and achievements have been presented on different events in and outside the country to domestic and foreign stakeholders such as: civil society organisations, associations, ministries representatives, academia representatives, donors and funding agencies, municipalities and local self-governing institutions, schoolchildren and young people, local service providers of sustainably-produced products and services, medias etc.

Annex 6.6 List of documents reviewed

1. NCP, Final Report, Phase 1, November 2012 – December 2016
2. NCP, Final Report, Phase 2, January 2017 – June 2021
3. NCP, Yearly Progress Report, January – December 2014
4. NCP, Yearly Progress Report, January – December 2013
5. NCP, Yearly Progress Report, January – December 2015
6. NCP, Half - yearly Progress Report, Phase 2, January – June 2020
7. NCP, Half - yearly Progress Report, July – December 2020
8. NCP, Project Document, Phase 1 - Implementation Phase, 15 November 2012 – 31 December 2016
9. Phase report february 2017 to december 2020 -backstopping mandate nature conservation programme, phase ii (2017 – 2020)
10. Yearly report 2017 – backstopping mandate, Nature Conservation Programme Phase II (2017 – 2020), Macedonia, 23 February 2018
11. Yearly report 2018 - backstopping mandate nature conservation programme, phase ii (2017 – 2020)
12. Yearly report 2019 - backstopping mandate nature conservation programme, phase ii (2017 – 2020)
13. NCP, Exit Phase, Yearly progress report February 2021– January 2022
14. NCP, Exit Phase, Yearly progress report February 2022– January 2023
15. NCP, Exit Phase, Half yearly progress report, February 2023– July 2023
16. NCP, Exit Phase, Half yearly report February to June 2021: backstopping mandate nature conservation programme, phase III (2021 – 2023)
17. Half yearly report July to December 2021: backstopping mandate nature conservation programme, phase III (2021 – 2023)
18. Half yearly report January to June 2022: backstopping mandate nature conservation programme, phase III (2021 – 2023)
19. Half yearly report July to December 2022: backstopping mandate nature conservation programme, phase III (2021 – 2023)
20. Half yearly report January to June 2023: backstopping mandate nature conservation programme, phase III (2021 – 2023)
21. NCP, Project Document, Phase 2 - Implementation Phase, 1 January 2017 – 31 December 2020
22. NCP, Programme Document (ProDoc) Exit phase, February 2021– January 2024
23. NCP, Phase 2, Draft Yearly Progress Report, January – December 2017
24. NCP, Phase 2, Yearly Progress Report, January – December 2018
25. NCP, Phase 2, Yearly Progress Report, January – December 2019
26. UNECE, Environmental Performance Review, 2019, North Macedonia
27. 2004 Law on Nature Protection
28. 2016 National Strategy for Nature Protection 2017–2027
29. 2018 National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan for the period 2018–2023
30. First Shadow Report on Chapter 27 – Environment and Climate (chapter on nature)
31. EU Progress monitoring report for North Macedonia 2023
32. North Macedonia, 2018. National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP).
33. Galland Pierre, 2016. Mission report, The Nature Conservation Programme in Macedonia . consultancy on regional conservation management issues in the scope of phase 2
34. North Macedonia, 2020. Sixth National Report to the CBD.
35. CBD, 2022. Decision adopted by the Conference of the parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. Monitoring framework for the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework
36. Government of North Macedonia, National Development Strategy 2043
37. SDC and SECO, 2017. Swiss Cooperation Programme North Macedonia 2021–24

38. SDC, Mai 2024. The Nature Conservation Programme NCP in North Macedonia - Final external Evaluation of the three phases 2012-2023
39. SDC, Mai 2024. The Nature Conservation Programme NCP in North Macedonia - Report on potential future interventions



Management response to the External Final Evaluation of the Nature Conservation Programme 2012-2024

Management Response

The Management Response (MR) states the position of the SDC on the recommendations of the external final evaluation of the Nature Conservation Programme 2012 - 2024. The MR provides a solid basis for strategic decision-making.

Assessment of the evaluation

The evaluation was conducted by a team of independent experts in accordance with international standards. The evaluation process was well managed and included close involvement of the SDC's reference group comprising the Swiss Embassy/Swiss Cooperation Office Water and Environment Team.

The main objectives – conducting a final evaluation of the programme including provision of insights into its relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability in the frame of set targets, and elaboration of recommendations on fields for nature and biodiversity protection, and/or ecosystems' resilience for which continued support will be critical – have been met by the evaluators. The SDC appreciates the comprehensiveness of the evaluation report and the sound analysis of key elements of the performance of the Nature Conservation Programme (NCP) in North Macedonia.

The report's analysis and resulting recommendations are considered useful for strengthening the strategic orientation for the development of a concept for a new SDC programme in a field of improving biodiversity and ecosystems' resilience.

Main findings

The evaluation of the NCP assessed as highly successful for its coherence, effectiveness and the sustainability in increasing the capacity of partners; and successful for relevance, efficiency and impact. However, sustainability is rated unsatisfactory in terms of financial and contextual factors because of a difficult and often non-conducive environment.

Relevance and geographic focus: The selection of the project area was rated adequate, since it is a poorer region, often neglected by other donors, with great potential for enhancing biodiversity conservation, combined with a need to sustainably enhance livelihoods. The NCP responds to SDC's environmental priorities in North Macedonia. Close cooperation and synergies with SECO financed water-related projects working in the same region were established.

The emphasis and support for nature conservation is relevant in North Macedonia and contributed to align with EU directives. NCP also supported the EU project "Improving Capacities for Natura 2000 and CITES" as it contributed to identifying Natura 2000 sites and developing management plans for three of them.

Integrated approach: The evaluation assessed that the integrated holistic approach during all three phases was adequate and the focus on capacity building, stakeholder inclusion and sharing experiences was appropriate. The support of national and international expertise was highly appreciated by the stakeholders. Also, communication of results and capitalisation of experiences was adequate.

The evaluation showed that the NCP has carried out interventions efficiently, with a transparent and flexible management approach. The focus on capacity building, awareness raising at national, regional and local level as well as at the level of government institutions, municipalities, NGOs, civil society and businesses has been appreciated by stakeholders.

Effectiveness: The evaluation confirmed that the NCP has achieved most of the objectives, outcomes and outputs. One of the main achievements during the last years of the NCP was the proclamation of the two protected areas, Osogovo Mountains and Maleshevo, where the scientific preparation as well as the awareness raising campaigns led to a positive attitude towards nature protection among the majority of the local population. With the appointment of the managing body (Public Enterprise National Forests) as well as approved management plans, a good basis for implementation is in place.

Management: The coordination team composed of Farmahem - Helvetas - functioned effectively and smoothly. Helvetas performed successfully its role as backstopper for planning, monitoring and for ad hoc technical inputs. Also, the engagement of the Bern University Zollikofen was highly appreciated. At national level, the expertise of the Macedonian Ecological Society (MES) has been crucial in providing a robust scientific foundation for the developing of new schemes such as payments for ecosystem services (PES), gap analysis on biodiversity hotspots for spatial planning or the documentation on Natura 2000 sites.

The evaluation concludes that **sustainability** of some of the achieved results has not been ensured, in particular for Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES), which was only recently established and needs more time to be fully functional, and the implementation of the Regional Forest Plan, that needs further resources and capacities, as well as monitoring.

Overall, Swiss Cooperation Office (SCO) concludes that:

- Considering the achievements of the NCP Programme, high relevant of the topic and alignment with Swiss priorities, support to North Macedonia in the field of biodiversity conservation and nature protection should be continued.
- Despite significant progress, more efforts are needed to institutionalize and sustain results. Therefore, a new programme shall focus on and consolidate the most successful interventions (management of protected area, implementation of the PES in Vevchani, capacity building on communication of the importance of nature conservation at national, regional and local level) and further work on finding ways to sustainably finance. This will also contribute to aligning NMK with European directives.
- The theme of biodiversity conservation fits the SDC's thematic priorities in the field of the Climate Change, Disaster Risk Reduction and Environment perfectly, in particular climate change mitigation and adaptation and environmental protection.

The recommendations of the evaluation are geared towards the preparation of a concept for a new SDC programme in the field of improvement of biodiversity and ecosystems' resilience. SDC supports fully or partially the evaluation recommendations – see table below.

1. Continue a middle to long-term support	
2. Continue the focus on interventions to improve biodiversity conservation and ecosystem resilience as a basis for regional and local development	
3. Continue to follow the landscape approach	
4. Consolidate some of the most successful activities in the Bregalnica Region	
5. Continue careful monitoring of the impact of the interventions on biodiversity and ecosystem resilience	
6. Continue supporting interventions at national, regional and local level (with emphasis in the beginning at regional and local levels)	
7. Test some of the most successful activities in other areas in North Macedonia, if there is a clear opportunity	

8. Develop and include new innovative interventions, based on the previous experiences in NCP (for exp. expansion of restoration of forests and landscapes)		
9. Narrow down the scope of a new project to 2-3 main priority elements (rather than spreading thin)		
10. Not to replicate the NCP Bregalnica as such in another watershed/region of North Macedonia		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree

Main conclusion: Based on these recommendations, the SDC/SCO will undertake preparatory activities for development of a new Programme in the field of improvement of biodiversity and ecosystems' resilience in North Macedonia.

Overview of recommendations, management response and measures

Recommendation 1		
Continue a middle to long-term support with a vision of 10 years, i.e., until North Macedonia becomes an EU member (2030 or later).		
Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
SDC/SCO has taken steps towards the development of a new Programme within the Cooperation Programme North Macedonia 2025 – 2028, which due to budget restriction might be shorter than what is proposed by the evaluation team, but should last at least 6-8 years, since activities in these fields take time to be implemented, as well as to show results. Partnering with other donors/funds will be explored whenever possible. First measures are:		
Measures		Responsibility
a) The experts' team prepares a concept for the new long-term support		<u>Experts' team</u>
b) To undertake preparatory activities for the new programme		<u>SDC/SCO</u>
		Timing
		By June 2024
		By end of September 2024

Recommendation 2		
Continue interventions on the improvement of biodiversity conservation and ecosystem resilience (BCER) as a basis for regional and local development, integrating conservation approaches, principles of sustainable natural resources management with the local economic development agenda.		
Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
With its focus and insights, the new project constitutes an optimal frame to implement the 'Payment for Ecosystem Services' concept and bring it to scale as a mean to contribute to local economic development. Synergies with other Swiss supported projects engaged in cross-cutting and complementary fields will be enhanced where purposeful.		
Measures		Responsibility
Refer to Recommendation 1 in the sense of considering and including the above aspects in project planning activities.		<u>SDC/SCO</u>
		Timing
		June- September 2024

Recommendation 3			
Further define and follow the landscape approach – this could also include a stronger integration of agricultural aspects in landscape management, whereas in the past priority was given to forest management and tourism development.			
Management response			
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree	
As part of a coherent landscape approach, we support the stronger consideration of 'agricultural aspects' in the sense of their contribution to and impact on biodiversity and ecosystems' resilience. However, we would refrain from engaging too strongly in this field, and address specific key aspects in a targeted manner, and as far as possible through stronger coordination and collaboration with programmes engaged in these fields.			
Measures		Responsibility	Timing
Refer to Recommendation 1 in the sense of considering and including the above aspects in project planning activities.		<u>SDC/SCO</u>	June- September 2024

Recommendation 4			
Consolidate some of the most successful activities in the Bregalnica Region, with support for the implementation of strategies, management plans, etc. through visible, measurable activities with reliable partner organisations.			
Management response			
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree	
Most successful activities understood as enhancement of BD and ecosystems' resilience on the established basis with a focus on BD monitoring enhancement, the implementation of management plans for protected areas, as well as implementation of PES in the Bregalnica region.			
Measures		Responsibility	Timing
Refer to Recommendation 1 in the sense of considering and including the above aspects in project planning activities.		<u>SDC/SCO</u>	June- September 2024

Recommendation 5			
Continue careful monitoring of the impact of the interventions on biodiversity and ecosystem resilience, in order to better understand the priority interventions and to communicate positive results at all levels.			
Management response			
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree	
'Well informed' awareness raising and communication on biodiversity and ecosystem resilience is considered critical for further to enhance understanding and guide and incentivise action as part of the project as well as beyond.			
Measures		Responsibility	Timing
Refer to Recommendation 1 in the sense of considering and including the above aspects in project planning activities.		<u>SDC/SCO</u>	June- September 2024

Recommendation 6		
Continue supporting interventions at national, regional and local level (with emphasis in the beginning at regional and local levels), in order to finally promote the integration of successful interventions into national guidelines and legislation for stabilising human and financial capacity for implementation.		
Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
While concrete action is crucial for the protection and enhancement of BD and ecosystems' resilience, the integration of these aspects into national guidelines and legislation is key for sustained long term sustainability of interventions.		
Measures		Responsibility
Refer to Recommendation 1 in the sense of considering and including the above aspects in project planning activities.		<u>SDC/SCO</u>
		June- September 2024

Recommendation 7		
Test some of the most successful activities in other areas in North Macedonia, if there is a clear opportunity.		
Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
This recommendation is understood mainly as testing most successful activities in the Bregalnica region (for exp. PES that was established in Vevchani), and of course share findings from NCP and the new project with other protection measures across North Macedonia.		
Measures		Responsibility
Refer to Recommendation 1 in the sense of considering and including the above aspects in project planning activities.		<u>SDC/SCO</u>
		June- September 2024

Recommendation 8		
Develop and include new innovative interventions, based on the previous experiences in NCP. Fields of intervention could include the expansion of restoration of forests and landscapes, especially considering the impact of, and the adaptation to, climatic changes. There are sufficient areas within and outside protected areas that are damaged by fire, insects, erosion, invasive species. It is recommended to first analyse the situation in order to prioritise themes and also determine financial implications.		
Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
While we consider this recommendation important, due to its broad scope, it could constitute a project by itself. Nevertheless, we think that the new project can be instrumental to identify, prioritize and determine financial implications for further support activities, as a basis to link new complementary interventions to larger, long-term funding.		

To achieve significant results within the limited time, financial and human resources of the new project, it is suggested to support selective and targeted activities in the Bregalnica region (in the sense of realistic to be implemented with results that will enable further scaling-up with a financial support from other sources).

Measures	Responsibility	Timing
Refer to Recommendation 1 in the sense of considering and including the above aspects in project planning activities	SDC/SCO	June- September 2024

Recommendation 9

Narrow down the scope of a new project to 2-3 main priority elements (rather than spreading thin)

Management response

Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
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Priority elements understood as enhancement of BD and ecosystems' resilience on the established basis with a focus on BD monitoring enhancement, the implementation of management plans for protected areas, as well as implementation of PES in the Bregalnica region.

Measures	Responsibility	Timing
Refer to Recommendation 1 in the sense of considering and including the above aspects in project planning activities	SDC/SCO	June- September 2024

Recommendation 10

The Evaluation Team does not recommend the option to replicate the NCP Bregalnica as such in another watershed/region of North Macedonia but rather to focus on consolidating activities in the existing programme area, while adding a couple of additional relevant interventions that would strengthen impact and sustainability.

Management response

Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
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Agreed and in line with what is proposed in the SDC comments on measures above.

Measures	Responsibility	Timing