

Central project evaluation – executive summary

Regional programme on integrative and climate-sensitive use of land resources in Central Asia

Project title	Regional programme on integrative and climate-sensitive use of land resources in Central Asia		
Country/region/global	Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan		
Sector and CRS code	41010 Environmental policy and administrative management		
Project number	2017.2110.9		
Commissioning party	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)		
Lead executing agency/implementing partner organisations	Depending on the thematic focus, the programme cooperated variously with regional organisations the Interstate Commission on Sustainable Development (ICSD) and the Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (CAREC), and with other suitable partner organisations.		
Project value	EUR 7,005,704		
Project term	December 2017 – February 2021		
Reporting year	2021	Sample year	2019

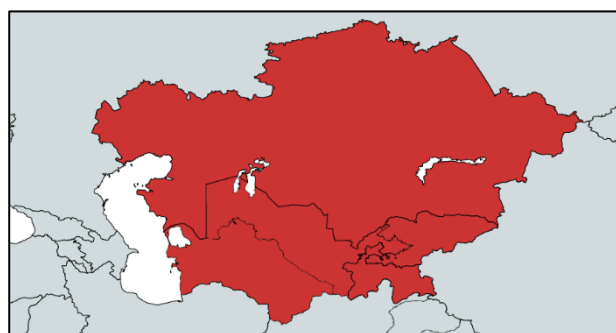
Context of the project

Much of Central Asia is made up of arid land. Live-stock farming is the predominant form of land use and the main source of income for the rapidly growing rural population. For lack of alternatives, livestock is also treated as a major form of financial investment. This has resulted in increasing overuse of forest and pasture resources, and the ensuing degradation of soils and depletion of biodiversity. This trend has already been exacerbated by the tangible impacts of climate change. Different forms of land use are generally practised by various groups on the same land. This is giving rise to increasing conflicts of interest among users or user groups, which are also aggravated by competing government agencies with different remits acting largely in isolation from each other. All the countries in Central Asia are transitioning from a centrally planned to a market economy. Central planning and state-run production predominate in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and are on the rise again in Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have made the greatest progress towards a market economy, but deep-seated corruption also hampers development there.

Key actors (government organisations, land-users and the private sector) do not coordinate their land-use interests. Nor do they incorporate the various land-use forms into jointly planned management schemes (the core problem). The causes of the

lack of integration of land management initiatives and the resultant progressive degradation of land resources in Central Asia lie in the overall political, socio-economic, social-normative and institutional conditions: a lack of technical-methodological advice to land-users, insufficient promotion of innovative production alternatives, the cultural shift in values, inexperience of decentralised management procedures, competing forms of land use, the incoherent legal framework and poorly organised, underfinanced and corrupt government agencies.

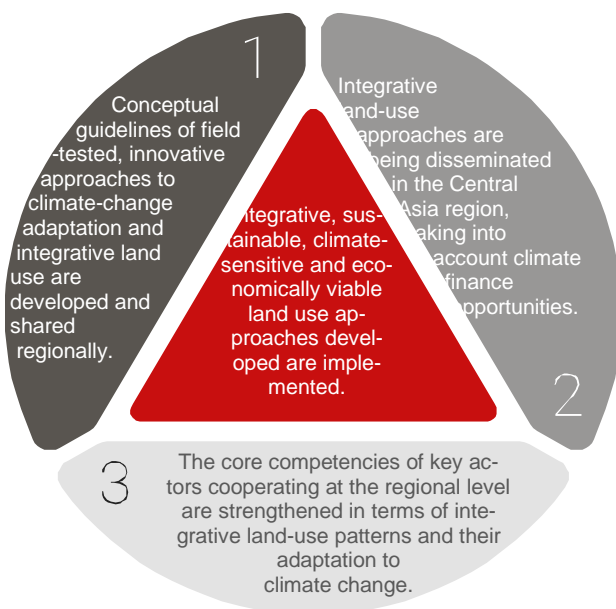
Figure 1: Project region – Central Asia



Brief description of the project

The project carried out activities at different levels of intensity in all five countries of Central Asia: field of activity (1) – drafting sectoral policies; field of activity (2) – disseminating land-use schemes; and field of activity (3) – strengthening the core competencies of key actors. Field of activity (1) aimed to develop, in consultation with all key actors, a conceptual framework for integrative land management for Central Asia and mutual exchange at the regional level, to serve as a guide for regional and national sector policies. Field of activity (2) focused on the dissemination of inclusive, sustainable, climate-sensitive and economically viable land-use approaches, taking into account climate finance opportunities. The regional project aimed to prepare aggregated figures, facts and success stories from other bilateral and regional projects working in close cooperation with the project and communicating these to both national and regional partners. Field of activity (3) aimed to strengthen the core competencies of key actors cooperating at the regional level concerning forms of integrative land use and their adaptation to climate change.

Figure 2: Project objective/fields of activity



Assessment according to DAC criteria

Relevance

The evaluation team concludes that the design of the project was in line with the interests and strategies of national governments, and with the regional interests of Central Asian countries. The design was strongly adapted to past and ongoing GIZ initiatives. The relevance to the needs of the target groups was high. However, the target groups were diverse and differed from country to country, making central management of the project very complex. The project was heavily reliant on the political processes within the individual countries, and several delays in implementation occurred due to shifting political priorities, restructuring of government bodies and unforeseen changes in legislation. Furthermore, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions on domestic travel resulted in further delays in implementation and the cancellation of some capacity-building activities. According to the evaluators, the project objective was realistic.

Coherence

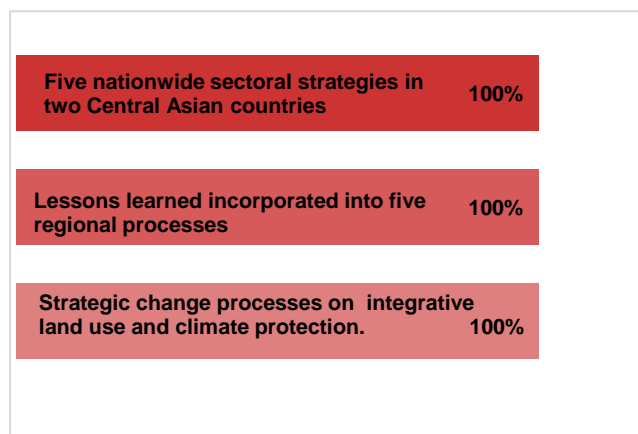
Regarding internal coherence, the project, by design, aimed to improve the enabling environment on a national level by supporting the reform efforts of governments in the region, which also indirectly benefited other German international cooperation projects around sustainable use of natural resources and environment. Direct efforts to coordinate within German international cooperation resulted in shared activities with KfW Development Bank and institutionalised coordination of efforts to strengthen sustainable land use on a regional level through the ICSD. The project was able to exploit synergies and support the projects of several international donors on integrative land management in all target countries. In Kyrgyzstan, these efforts culminated in heavy reliance by a World Bank project on the methodologies and national and local institutions established by the project, which, consequently, had an ongoing advisory role to the World Bank project. Nevertheless, a lack of communication with UNEP in Uzbekistan, as well as the absence of ICSD leadership, led to a duplication of effort in terms of support to the ICSD, which was

resolved when the latter resumed a leading role in coordination.

Effectiveness

The evaluation team found that the project indicators were achieved by the end of the project. However, the way in which the indicators were achieved varied slightly from the original intention. Contribution analyses allowed for a more detailed examination of the effectiveness of selected activities and corresponding pathways of change. Regarding the strengthened capacities of key stakeholders to increase the use of sustainable land-use approaches, the evaluation of pilot sites found that most tenants are applying the approaches introduced but with mixed degrees of satisfaction regarding their user-friendliness. Strengthening the capacities of key stakeholders through the Lead the Change programme was successful, while the usefulness of the ensuing network remains to be seen. Regarding the capacities of the ICSD in coordinating regional processes, the commission's capacity issues largely persist from the period during which there was no leadership or regional commitment, despite some recent efforts to increase support. Regarding the implementation of the Regional Environmental Programme for Sustainable Development of Central Asia for 2020–2030 (REP4SD) process, the analysis showed that the project supported strategic processes in every country. REP4SD was developed with these experiences in mind, but because of the capacity issues at the ICSD, this action plan has yet to produce tangible results.

Figure 3: Achievement of the project's objective indicators



Impact

The analysis of pilot sites in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan showed that in locations where farmers changed their behaviour, the promoted approaches in sustainable land use can contribute to SDG 15: protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss. Participants also observed improvements in their prospects for future income (SDG 1) and indicated potential positive environmental effects (SDG 13). Regarding the strengthening of capacities of the IFAS, the project followed the logic that this could be achieved by strengthening the ICSD. The ICSD's capacities remain unchanged, however, owing to a temporary lack of leadership, and both organisations are still reliant on further donor support to coordinate regional change processes. Regarding the development and implementation of new development cooperation projects, the first projects have been approved and implementation has begun. No concrete results were able to be measured at the time of the evaluation, however. Regarding the implementation of cross-border projects based on Integrated Land Use Management Approaches (ILUMA), the evaluation found that ILUMA were mostly driven by the national need for sustainable land-use models, without a direct connection to more regionally focused projects. Even though the focus was on national initiatives, some regional projects were proposed by the project, one of which was implemented. Lastly, the evaluation revealed one unintended positive result at impact level, with regard to incentives for private actors to invest in pilot sites where long-term tenure was secured.

Efficiency

According to the evaluators' analysis of the project's production efficiency, there are indications that output A (a conceptual framework for integrative land management for Central Asia and mutual exchange at the regional level in consultation with all key actors, which serves as an orientation for regional and national sector policies, is developed) could have been maximised with a different approach. Hindering factors were the external influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the high administrative costs in the first part of the project and the delays in reaching a financial agreement with the partner in Kyrgyzstan. Based on the analysis of the project's allocation efficiency, indicator achievement rates are moderate. The low budget of the project within the individual countries compared with other donors' initiatives meant the project's influence was lower, and discussions arose early on among the project team as to how they could remain relevant for the public implementation partners. An additional challenge was that the final budget took a long time to be confirmed, partly because it took BMZ and GIZ time to officially approve the transfer of the remaining budget of the predecessor project.

Sustainability

The project's contribution to supporting sustainable capacities at the level of partner institutions is assessed as moderately successful. The evaluation team found that the project contributed, to some extent, to supporting sustainable capacities of all target groups, with some exceptions among the land-users. Furthermore, risks were identified for the durability of capacities in public institutions and especially within the ICSD at a regional level. The limited resources and low pay in the forestry and pasture department often result in high staff turnover – the main reason for the loss of capacities. Another risk to the durability of results was the limited awareness among public officials of the integrated land management approaches and where they were documented. The ILUMA document was known only to very few of the interviewed stakeholders. Positive indicators for durability were the agreements and programmes at a regional level. Owing to the efforts of other projects and donors, such as the World Bank, many results are durable.

Overall rating

The project achieved satisfactory results. Considering the complexity of the sector and the involvement of myriad national and international actors, as well as many challenges in the political-structural landscape, the project provided considerable support to government actors at the regional and national levels, achieving its goal to institutionalise integrative, sustainable, climate-sensitive and economically viable land-use approaches as part of government policy. The design of the project was in line with the interests and strategies of national governments, and with the regional interest of the Central Asian countries. The design was very well adapted to past and ongoing GIZ initiatives.

Direct efforts to coordinate within the German international cooperation resulted in shared activities with KfW Development Bank and the institutionalised coordination of efforts to strengthen sustainable land use on a regional level through the ICSD. The project was able to exploit synergies and support several projects of international donors based on regular exchange mainly driven by the project itself, thanks in large part to the expertise gained through extensive piloting of integrative land management methodologies in all target countries.

Strengthening the capacities of key stakeholders through the leadership academy was successful, while the usefulness of the ensuing network remains to be seen. Regarding the capacities of the ICSD in coordinating regional processes, problems remain, due to a period without leadership and regional commitment. Regarding the implementation of the REP4SD process, the analysis showed that the project supported strategic processes in every country. REP4SD was developed with these experiences in mind, but, owing to the capacity issues at the ICSD this action plan had not yet produced tangible results at the time of this evaluation.

Regarding new international cooperation projects, the first projects have been approved and launched. Concrete results were not yet measurable at the time of this evaluation.

Regarding the implementation of cross-border projects based on ILUMA, the evaluation found that ILUMA were mostly driven by the national need for

sustainable land-use models, without a direct connection to more regionally focused projects.

Table 1: Rating of OECD/DAC evaluation criteria

Criteria	Score (max. 100)	Rating 1 (highly successful) to 6 (highly unsuccessful)
Relevance	88	Level 2: successful
Coherence	92	Level 1: highly successful
Effectiveness	74	Level 3: moderately successful
Impact	69	Level 3: moderately successful
Efficiency	84	Level 2: successful
Sustainability	75	Level 3: moderately successful
Overall	80	Level 3: moderately successful

Conclusions and factors of success and failure

To facilitate learning from the outcomes of this evaluation, this section corroborates key factors of success and central weaknesses of the project. Efforts and positive achievements in the key factors of success (which sometimes overlap) have the potential to bolster current achievements, mitigate current or future risks, or be applied to other similar projects.

The following are examples of success factors:

- ✓ **Highly demand- and needs-driven activities:** the project was well designed. During the evaluation, the evaluators understood that the project was built on the long-lasting land management and climate-change experience accumulated by GIZ in the region.
- ✓ **Engagement of relevant stakeholder groups:** the project engaged all relevant stakeholders in introducing integrative, sustainable land management approaches in the region: government agencies, civil society organisations, private-sector organisations and land-user groups.
- ✓ **Reliance on external technical expertise:** the project partners benefited in

particular from the inclusion of individual experts in the development of integrative land management approaches, policy amendments and by-laws.

- ✓ **Coordination and synergies with other projects and donors:** there were synergies among projects throughout GIZ, which complemented each other. Furthermore, knowledge management within GIZ ensured the exchange of experiences/approaches and information. Synergies with other development partners were also successfully established.

The following are examples of weaknesses:

- ✗ **Communication gaps in the first phase of implementation:** communication was not very well managed at the beginning, especially regarding activities at the regional level. The national project teams often functioned as separate projects, with little coordination and interaction. This improved slightly as implementation of the project progressed.
- ✗ **Large, diffuse team and high administrative overhead costs:** the regional project team was quite large, given the overall budget, and included a lot of international staff. This strained the budget and made regional coordination of the project challenging. This situation improved in the course of implementation.
- ✗ **Diverging political interests among government stakeholders regarding integrative land management:** during project implementation, there were conflicts of interest among users or user groups, which were further aggravated by government agencies competing over competencies and funding. This was a challenge to the coordination and long-term planning of the project, as government agencies were often realigned and restructured as a result.
- ✗ **Understaffing and underfunding of the ICSD:** the understaffing and underfunding of the ICSD, and lack of political interest in regional cooperation in some countries,

challenged the ambitions of the project to build sustainable regional capacities.

- ✘ **Limited influence on partners due to comparatively small budget:** the budget in some of the individual countries was low in comparison with other donor initiatives. Consequently, the influence of the project was lower, and discussions arose early on among the project team as to how they could remain relevant for the public implementation partners.

Recommendations

Recommendations based on the findings discussed in the full evaluation report are divided into two sections:

Recommendations for similar project interventions and the design of new projects (addressed to GIZ FMB):

- Investment projects that provide complementary assistance to financial assistance projects have great potential to leverage overarching development results sustainably. While creating these synergies can lead to impactful results, it is also recommended to leave a certain amount of flexibility in the project design, to decrease dependency and avoid encountering roadblocks during implementation.
- Given the ongoing situation caused by COVID-19, projects should plan hybrid training models and set up online as well as offline training, to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of that training.

Recommendation for general project implementation (addressed to the project team):

- Incorporate refresher training in the project, so that the main training can be conducted in the early phase of the project, followed by less rigorous refresher training. It is important that the capacity-building that was not conducted in the previous phase because of COVID-19 is carried out as part of these training sessions.
- More activities and capacity-building efforts should be implemented through local

organisations to ensure that the results are durable and are not adversely affected by rapid changes at the national level.

- Established results on the use of integrated land use management need to be monitored and frequently revisited with technical government staff at the national level.

Approach and methods of the evaluation

The project was assessed based on the standardised evaluation criteria of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the evaluation criteria for German bilateral co-operation. Specific evaluation dimensions and analytical questions were derived from this framework, stipulated by GIZ, and form the basis for all GIZ central project evaluations.

During the inception mission, a workshop was conducted with the project team members to understand their knowledge interests in the evaluation. Furthermore, contribution analyses form a cornerstone of the evaluation design. A project's theory of change is central to a contribution analysis, to make causal statements on interventions and observable results. At GIZ, theories of change are visualised in results models and complemented by a narrative, including corresponding hypotheses. The evaluation relied on a mix of primary and secondary data sources:

Monitoring data: the project team monitored progress made on indicators via two key documents. First, the project used the exported data from the 'GIZ-Wirkungsmonitor' (GIZ online results monitoring system). All categories necessary for a results-based management system were complete and up to date. Second, the project compiled an overview of results using the results matrix of the project, updating it with the current indicator values. Both types of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) documents were updated during the inception mission and sent to the evaluation team. Identified risks to the project were not monitored regularly as part of the monitoring system. After analysis of the project documents, it appears that the KOMPASS qualitative survey procedure was not used in its strict sense by the project.

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions: conducted remotely online or semi-remotely. When interviewing, the evaluation team took a robust approach to avoiding bias created by a wrong question or method (suggestive questioning, cultural insensitivity).

Secondary project documents: these included the project proposal, national strategies, annual progress reports, BMZ country strategies and planning documents, as well as the results matrix, the previous results model and a map of actors.

Rating system

Projects are rated based on the OECD/DAC criteria of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, impact, sustainability and efficiency. Each of the six criteria is rated on a scale of 1 to 100 (percentage system).

The project's overall score is derived from the average points awarded for the individual DAC criteria. The average value for the overall score is rounded according to mathematical convention. All DAC criteria are equally weighted for the overall score. Compared with the predecessor systems (6-point scale, 16-point scale), a 100-point scale has a number of advantages in that it allows differentiation, is commonly used internationally, is easy to understand and can readily be converted into other assessment systems.

Both the assessment dimensions within the OECD/DAC criteria and the determination of the overall score using a points system serve to increase the transparency of ratings while enabling better comparability between individual projects.

Table 2: Rating and score scales

100-point scale (score)	6-level scale (rating)
92–100	Level 1: highly successful
81–91	Level 2: successful
67–80	Level 3: moderately successful
50–66	Level 4: moderately unsuccessful
30–49	Level 5: unsuccessful
0–29	Level 6: highly unsuccessful
Overall rating: the criteria of effectiveness, impact and sustainability are knock-out criteria: If one of the criteria is rated at level 4 or lower, the overall rating cannot go beyond level 4, although the mean score may be higher.	

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