



**The 5<sup>th</sup> Regional Scientific and Technical Committee Meeting  
For the SEAFDEC/UN Environment/GEF Project on Establishment and Operation of  
a Regional System of Fisheries *Refugia* in the South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand**

16-17 March 2022  
(08:30 – 12:00 am, UTC+7)  
Zoom platform

### **Executive Summary Report of Mid Term Reviews**

A Mid-Term Review of the SEAFDEC/UNEP/GEF Project: '*Establishment and Operation of a Regional System of Fisheries Refugia in the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand*', has been undertaken, consistent with the requirements of the GEF and UNEP by Dr. Peter Whalley.

This report presents the background to the project, the findings from the Mid-Term Review together with conclusions, lessons and recommendations identified from the work of the project. The project started in December 2016 and was originally planned to end in December 2020. A two-year no cost extension was requested and approved by the Project Steering Committee. The current end-date is December 2022. This Mid-Term Review was conducted between November 2021 and February 2022.

The review is designed to inform stakeholders, including the GEF Agency and Executing Agency on the levels of achievement of the project towards the delivery of the planned outputs and outcomes and provide suggestions to the Project on key activities that would assist enable the achievement of the overall planned objective.

The project was designed to pilot aspects of the fishery management actions identified in the regionally endorsed South China Sea Strategic Action Programme (2008) through the testing of a *fisheries refugia* concept to manage coastal environments and key fish stocks. The pilots, undertaken in six countries (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam) were supported through regional capacity building and awareness programmes at the regional level.

#### **1. Findings**

The **Project has been assessed overall by this Mid-Term Review** as being **Moderately Satisfactory**. The Mid-Term Review acknowledges the **achievements** to-date of the project but considers that there is still a significant programme of work required to complete the project within the next year and rates the output delivery as **Moderately Satisfactory**. The project builds directly on the success of the Strategic Action Programme and is highly relevant to the countries of the region and the strategies of UNEP and the **Relevance** is considered to be **Highly Satisfactory**. The project has been **effective** in establishing 12 *refugia* sites and undertaking multiple workshops, capacity development and awareness raising activities, and has been rated as **Satisfactory**. The **efficiency** of project execution is rated as **Moderately Satisfactory** due to the delays associated with the change of project managers, the slow contracting of some countries to implement pilots and the inevitable delays resulting from COVID, resulting in a two-year no-cost extension. The overall **sustainability** of the project's activities is considered to be **Likely** through the support of an active regional fisheries organisation and strong support from the countries demonstrated by the endorsed Strategic Action Programme.

#### **2. Conclusions**

The fisheries *refugia* project is derived from actions in the regionally endorsed South China Sea Strategic Action Programme that identified the high pressure of fishing on the fish stock and related coastal ecosystems that was resulting in declining ecosystem services and affecting the socio-economic conditions of dependent communities. The Strategic Action Programme recommended the establishment of fisheries *refugia* to address these problems by drawing on fisheries management concepts that are easily understood at the fishing community level, emphasising sustainable use rather than prohibition.

The development of the Project Document involved extensive engagement with coastal communities and national fisheries stakeholders that has assisted the regional acceptance of the concept of fisheries *refugia*.

The original Project Manager resigned shortly after the project's inception phase and there was a significant delay before appointing a replacement which led to a slow initiation of the project. The project also struggled to get final signed agreements with Indonesia and Viet Nam that has delayed further their progress in the project. As with all projects at present, the fisheries *refugia* project has had to work under varying COVID restrictions since early 2019, and has responded with appropriate adaptive management actions to ensure that meetings and other activities could be undertaken remotely where possible. However, these restrictions have clearly had a significant impact on progress. A two-year no-cost extension was identified by the Project Steering Committee in 2020 as a necessity and this was granted by UNEP with a revised end-date of December 2022.

The project has successfully launched pilots at 12 sites, with three more planned in Viet Nam to test community-based actions relating to fisheries *refugia*, complemented by significant capacity development and awareness raising actions, with ten management plans either developed or likely to be approved by 2022.

There have been significant changes (ca. 50% variation from the approved figures) to component 1 and 4 budgets that clearly represent changes of ambition to the expected component activities. These changes should be clearly explained and justified prior to the terminal evaluation.

Stakeholders interviewed have indicated their support for the project and shown their commitment to the concept of fisheries *refugia* which provides confidence to the Mid-Term Review in the sustainability of the project's actions that is reinforced with the previous national endorsement of the Strategic Action Programme with which this project is aligned. The project has been successful at conveying the concept of fisheries *refugia* to coastal communities that have seen this approach as a viable alternative to 'no-catch' approaches such as Marine Protected Areas.

The Mid-Term Review considers that the current level of project output deliver (60%) and grant expenditure (58%) appears low given the remaining approved project extension. The Mid-Term Review considers that a further extension, working in close co-operation with the GEF/UNEP South China Sea Strategic Action Programme implementation project, should be considered.

### 3. Lessons Learned

**Lesson 1 Importance of full involvement of stakeholders in the design, execution and management of project activities:** The fisheries *refugia* project has adopted a very proactive approach to engaging stakeholders in the initial and subsequent implementation through the formation of National Science and Technical, and Management Committees. This has resulted in a high level of acceptance of the fisheries *refugia* approach. GEF IW projects involving pilot actions with communities should be encouraged to more actively engage local stakeholders, at the earliest opportunities, to gain acceptance for actions in a range of local and ministerial level stakeholders of novel concepts.

**Lesson 2 Importance of Project Inception Reports and updating Project Results Framework:** The fisheries *refugia* project had a detailed inception phase resulting in a wealth of documents and other information that was presented at the inception meeting. Unfortunately, this information did not result

in a formal project Inception Report presenting any changes to the project design, including the Results Framework. The Implementing Agency should ensure that all projects deliver an agreed Inception Report that includes any changes to the Results Framework for approval by the Project Steering Committee and/or Inception Meeting.

**Lesson 3 Ensuring partners/countries fully understand the contractual arrangements planned for the implementation of the project:** The project did ensure that there was a wide understanding of the technical aspects of the project that had been formulated in the Strategic Action Programme. However, it is clear that the modality of project execution was not fully understood, resulting in significant delays in initiating project activities in some countries. GEF International Waters projects involving pilot or country specific activities should also have the proposed arrangements for implementation fully explained.

#### 4. Recommendations

**Recommendation 1 To: Project Co-ordination Unit/Executing Agency:** Should seek an additional project extension to complete the remaining work and utilise the budget to deliver expected activities, especially for the countries that have achieved 50% or less of expected outputs. The Mid-Term Review considers that a further one-year extension would enable the project to focus on the countries that have achieved less progress to ensure all countries and relevant coastal communities get the maximum benefits from pilot actions to test fisheries *refugia* approaches. The Project Co-ordination Unit should explore what resources could be available from the South China Sea Strategic Action Programme implementation project to enable the finalisation of the fisheries *refugia* project.

**Recommendation 2 To: Project Co-ordination Unit/Executing Agency:** Irrespective of Recommendation 1 being accepted, the Project Co-ordination Unit should revise workplan and Results Framework to ensure that these reflect the current situation and budgets to deliver all remaining expected activities and outputs to be achieved. There is an opportunity at the Mid-Term Review to present realistic deliverables that reflect the 10% reduction of unspent budgets that might have an impact on what can be achieved by the pilots at the national/local level. The Project Co-ordination Unit should also prepare a clear statement of the significant project component changes (from the Endorsed CEO Document) with justifications and an assessment of the impacts on the intended ambition of the project.

**Recommendation 3 To: Project Co-ordination Unit: Collate and analyse disaggregated sex data of participants involved in project activities.** the project has collected sex disaggregate information from workshops and meetings which is commendable. It would be beneficial to present this information in the next Project Implementation Review report and have the data analysed prior to the Terminal Evaluation.

**Recommendation 4 To: Project Co-ordination Unit Develop a clear Exit Strategy for the regional and national sustainability and replication of the activities.** The project has collected a wealth of experiences and information from the pilot sites and regional activities, much of which is presented on the website(s) and at various IW:LEARN and other organisations' events. The Mid-Term Review recommends that the project managers of this project and South China Sea Strategic Action Programme implementation project brainstorm shared approaches to address their project needs. The South China Sea project requires an update of the fishery aspects of the 2008 Strategic Action Programme and the fisheries *refugia* project needs to complete the project (e.g. Indonesia and Viet Nam) to the level of detail expected in the GEF CEO Endorsement Document.

**Recommendation 5 To: Project Co-ordination Unit: Preparation of GEF IW:LEARN Experience Notes.** GEF International Waters recommends the preparation of Experience Notes by projects based on practical lessons from the execution. This project has a number of key aspects that would merit sharing through this mechanism including stakeholder involvement in pilot locations (design, implementation and management), lessons from gaining acceptance to the fisheries *refugia* concept, coastal ecosystem management, etc.

**Recommendation 6 To: UNEP and Executing Agency:** Ensure regional and national staff (and any replacement staff) engaged in financial management are briefed on the requirements of IA and EA at the start of the project. Stakeholders and the UNEP Fund Management Officer identified that staff and consultants were not sufficiently familiar with the requirements of financial reporting. The Fund Management Officer suggested that a training session is provided at project inception meetings to act as an induction course on the approaches for complying with UNEP financial reporting and the expectation of the GEF as the donor.

## 5. Summary of Project Ratings

Criterion	Reviewer's Rating <sup>1</sup>
<b>Attainment of project objectives and results (overall rating)</b>	<b>MS</b>
<b>Sub criteria (below)</b>	
Achievement of outputs and activities	<b>MS</b>
Relevance	<b>HS</b>
Effectiveness	<b>S</b>
Efficiency	<b>MS</b>
<b>Sustainability of Project outcomes (overall rating)</b>	<b>L</b>
<b>Sub criteria (below)</b>	
Socio Political	<b>L</b>
Financial	<b>L</b>
Institutional framework	<b>HL</b>
Environmental	<b>L</b>
<b>Catalytic Role</b>	
<b>Replication</b>	<b>S</b>
<b>Preparation and readiness</b>	<b>S</b>
<b>Country ownership</b>	<b>S</b>
<b>Stakeholders' participation and public awareness</b>	<b>S</b>
<b>Implementation approach and adaptive management</b>	<b>S</b>
<b>UNEP Supervision and backstopping</b>	<b>S</b>
<b>Financial planning and Management</b>	<b>MU - MS</b>
<b>Monitoring and Evaluation (overall rating)</b>	<b>MS</b>
<b>Sub criteria (below)</b>	
M&E Design	<b>MS</b>
M&E Plan Implementation	<b>MS</b>
<b>Overall Rating</b>	<b>MS</b>

<sup>1</sup> **Criteria** are rated on a six-point scale as follows: Highly Satisfactory (HS); Satisfactory (S); Moderately Satisfactory (MS); Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU); Unsatisfactory (U); Highly Unsatisfactory (HU).

: **Sustainability** is rated from Highly Likely (HL) to Highly Unlikely (HU) on a four-point scale.