



Mid-term Evaluation of IKI project “Growing Greener: Restoration and sustainable agropastoral systems in open arid landscapes across Southern Africa (Growing Greener)”

22_III_124_Sub-Saharan Africa_G_Open arid Landscapes

Summary

info@arepo-consult.com
www.arepo-consult.com

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Arepo GmbH

Albrechtstraße 22

10117 Berlin

Tel.: +49 30 220 124 48

E-Mail: info@arepo-consult.com

AREPO GmbH | Registered Office: Berlin

Managing Directors: Dr. Christine Wörlén

Registered at: Amtsgericht Charlottenburg, Berlin | Registration No.: HRB 219 349 B

VAT-ID: DE 332 314 373

Summary

Arepo GmbH was commissioned by Zukunft-Umwelt-Gesellschaft gGmbH (ZUG) to conduct the mid-term evaluation (MTE) of the International Climate Initiative (IKI) project 'Growing Greener: Restoration and sustainable agropastoral systems in open arid landscapes across Southern Africa' (Growing Greener). Conducted between November 2025 and July 2026, the evaluation assesses the project's relevance; planning, steering and coherence; effectiveness; transformational impact and sustainability; social and environmental safeguards; and IKI standard indicators. It also includes learning questions regarding the gender aspects of the project and the most suitable governance structures for the grazing regime. The evaluation is formative and is intended to inform implementation in the second half of the project, while also providing accountability and learning for Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ), Federal Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety of Germany (BMUKN), ZUG, the project consortium, political project partners and other stakeholders involved in sustainable rangeland management and climate-resilient agropastoral systems.

Project Description

Growing Greener addresses degradation, desertification, biodiversity loss and climate-related pressures in open arid and semi-arid landscapes in Southern Africa. These landscapes are central to rural livelihoods, livestock production, wildlife corridors and climate resilience, but many communal rangelands are characterized by open access, weak or fragmented governance, poorly coordinated grazing, declining pasture quality, erosion and competition over land and water. The project responds through the Herding for Health (H4H) approach, which combines controlled rotational grazing, professional herding on communal lands, community-led rangeland governance, conservation agreements, animal health support, value-chain development and policy engagement.

The project works in Botswana, Madagascar, South Africa and Zambia, each with distinct ecologic, institutional, cultural and socio-economic conditions. In Botswana, the project focuses on communal rangelands in Ngamiland, where livestock systems are affected by drought, open-access grazing, fire, human-wildlife conflict and disease risks at the wildlife-livestock interface. In Madagascar, it targets the drought-affected Atsimo-Andrefana region, where rural poverty, weak infrastructure, pests, animal disease, cattle theft and market constraints affect agropastoral livelihoods. In South Africa, the project works in Namaqualand, a sparsely populated biodiversity hotspot where sheep and goat farming on communal land intersects with commercial sheep farming, land claims from mining and climate adaptation challenges. In Zambia, the project operates in the Simalaha region, where livestock, rain-fed agriculture, wildlife corridors, land-use expansion and limited local administrative capacity shape the intervention context.

The intended outcome of the project is that community-led, market-oriented agropastoral land-use systems prevent soil and landscape degradation while fostering sustainable rural development. Output I focuses on the adoption of community-led sustainable rangeland management practices and nature-based solutions. Output II seeks to enable communities to gain economic benefits from livestock and non-livestock value chains linked to sustainable land management. Output III supports gender-sensitive policies and regulatory frameworks for sustainable land use at national and regional levels.

Output IV strengthens the capacities of local, national and regional stakeholders to implement and scale up sustainable rangeland management approaches.

The project is funded by the International Climate Initiative (IKI) with EUR 20 million. Its preparation phase lasted from June 2022 to September 2023, and implementation runs from October 2023 to September 2029. GIZ is responsible for overall coordination and financial management. Conservation International (CI) and Peace Parks Foundation (PPF) lead technical implementation of community-level H4H and value-chain development, with CI responsible for Botswana, Madagascar and South Africa, and PPF responsible for Zambia. GIZ leads the work on policies, while CCARDESA, as a Southern African Development Community (SADC)-linked regional knowledge broker, supports regional outreach, knowledge management and capacity development.

At mid-term, implementation progress is uneven but substantive. Zambia and South Africa are the most advanced contexts, with progress on grazing plans, conservation or stewardship agreements, grazing committees, herder training and initial value-chain activities. Despite the political challenges faced in Madagascar last year, the Malagasy team has made solid progress against the project's deliberately modest targets and timelines, by laying important foundations through sensitization, local engagement, initial governance structures, and draft grazing plans. Botswana has experienced significant delays, mainly due to political and administrative processes, but synergies with the larger Green Climate Fund (GCF)-funded H4H programme and existing experience in Habu create a credible pathway for accelerated implementation.

Methodology

The evaluation employed a theory-based mixed-methods approach, combining document analysis, internet research, exploratory and semi-structured interviews, participatory foresight workshops and a short online survey. A central methodological element was the reconstruction of the project's Theory of Change (ToC), which conceptualizes the causal links between H4H implementation, local governance, value-chain development, policy engagement, capacity development and the expected ecological, socio-economic and institutional outcomes. The evaluation consistently applied triangulation across data sources and methods to strengthen the validity of findings.

In March and April 2026, the evaluation team carried out one-week field missions to each of the countries. The missions included kick-off meetings with project teams, interviews at national and subnational levels, visits to project sites, and consultations with government representatives, implementing partners, traditional authorities, local administrations, technical services, grazing committees, agropastoral communities and women representatives. The evaluation team conducted in total 79 interviews and focus group discussions, complemented by participatory foresight workshops in Zambia, Botswana and Madagascar to identify potential roadblocks and enabling conditions for the second half of implementation.

The evaluation reviewed project documents, proposal documents, interim reports, monitoring data and external evidence. A short survey with staff involved in other H4H projects across Africa was conducted to support the learning questions; four complete responses were received. While the survey evidence is limited, it helped situate Growing Greener within the broader H4H portfolio and was complemented by an interview with a senior H4H programme manager.

Main Findings per Evaluation Criterion

Relevance: The evaluation finds the project highly relevant. The project addresses a clearly recognized problem across all four countries: degraded communal rangelands, weak pasture governance, low livestock productivity and increasing climate pressure on rural livelihoods. It aligns strongly with partner government priorities, local target group needs and global climate, biodiversity and land-degradation agendas. Government actors value the project for its potential to restore rangelands, improve livestock productivity, support animal health and contribute to national climate, biodiversity and land-use objectives as well as economic development, while target groups emphasize livelihoods, grazing resources, market access and capacity building. The project logic is generally suitable.

Planning, Steering and Coherence: The project is based on a context-sensitive design, a plausible results chain and a multi-level steering structure that is appropriate for a complex four-country programme. Its coherence is strengthened by links to existing H4H experience, especially in Botswana, South Africa and Zambia, and by synergies with domestic, German-funded and international initiatives. The project approach is embedded in the implementing partners' wider H4H initiative across seven African countries. At the same time, planning and steering are limited by unresolved operational constraints, uneven stakeholder involvement, varying monitoring maturity, and coordination gaps with some relevant local and sector actors. The steering structure works well as a framework for coordination and learning, but is not yet consistently used for timely adaptive decision-making across all countries.

Effectiveness: The project logic remains applicable, and planned outputs are still broadly achievable, although implementation has progressed unevenly. Output I has advanced substantially in Zambia and South Africa, while Madagascar has completed important preparatory steps and Botswana is expected to accelerate once delayed start-up constraints are resolved. Output II is still emerging, with promising early signs in Zambia and South Africa but little progress yet in Botswana and Madagascar. Output III has made progress through policy gap analyses and engagement with national and local planning processes, while Output IV has reached many participants but still requires stronger depth and systematic dissemination. Outcome achievement remains more uncertain than output achievement: income-related effects appear plausible, vegetation-cover targets are possible but depend on participation, rainfall and time, and the project period may be too short to demonstrate the expected carbon sequestration outcomes in all four sites.

Transformational Impact and Sustainability: The project clearly shows transformational impact and sustainability. The project has strong transformative potential because it seeks to change not only individual grazing practices but general aspects of how communal rangelands are governed, used and valued, and embeds this in first steps towards a professionalization of the sector. Its pathway combines ecological restoration, collective governance, professional herding, market incentives, policy anchoring and regional learning. Expected climate and biodiversity benefits are most credible for adaptation, rangeland restoration and ecosystem resilience, while quantified carbon effects require more cautious interpretation. Social, economic and governance benefits are plausible through improved livestock health, productivity, income opportunities, strengthened grazing committees, professional herding and better cooperation with veterinary and local authorities. Sustainability is possible as political partners, local authorities and target groups show interest in continuation, but medium- and long-term viability depends on financial self-sufficiency of local H4H structures, functioning public services, enforceable grazing rules, market incentives and sustained capacity development beyond project funding.

Safeguards: The project's safeguards classification B is plausible and appropriate. The main risks relate to labor and working conditions, land- use restrictions, biodiversity and sustainable resource management, marginalized groups, gender, water access, community governance and benefit-sharing. Safeguards are being implemented through stakeholder engagement, Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) processes, continuous sensitisation, professional herder training and deployment, inclusive community governance arrangements, landscape-specific conservation agreements where relevant. No major negative impacts have been observed so far, but isolated incidents and future risks require continued attention, especially women's safety in herding, land and water conflicts, free-riding, possible herd expansion, groundwater impacts and exclusion of vulnerable or non-livestock-owning households. Safeguards are therefore broadly adequate, but uncritical changes are needed.

IKI Standard Indicators: The selected IKI standard indicators are broadly appropriate and reflect the project's ToC. The project reports on mitigation, ecosystem, adaptation and capacity indicators. Reported and planned results are generally plausible, but limitations remain. SI 1, which reports indirect mitigation through carbon sequestration, was based on a calculated estimate rather than empirical soil sampling, and achievement depends heavily on vegetation restoration under variable rainfall conditions. SI 4 may require stricter application of ZUG's operational definition to ensure that only activities genuinely designed to strengthen participants' skills and knowledge are counted.

Learning Questions

Learning Question 1 – How well are gender equity aspects addressed by the project's H4H implementation arrangements? H4H addresses gender equity through paid herding roles, women-targeted value chains and potential pathways into livestock ownership, but gender-impact remains constrained by safety risks for female herders and by the focus on cattle rather than small livestock more commonly owned by women and youth in some countries. First, the framing of herding as a trained, remunerated job enables women to earn income as professional herders, challenging traditional gender norms. On the other hand, the often remote location of herding camps may expose female herders to hardships including gender-based violence. Second, the strengthening of value chains and income-generating activities with strong female representation such as production and sale of fodder, grass seeds, basketry, or the 'agri-hub' agricultural cooperatives in Zambia complement the created job opportunities in herding. Third, the H4H approach reduces the restriction of female livestock ownership, as women are allowed to entrust cattle, resulting in economic benefits.

Learning Question 2 – What are effective governance mechanisms for H4H at local level? There is no universally fitting governance model, as different systems were identified which all may be adequate in different contexts: the most common governance model foresees no exclusion of non-participants from communal land included under the grazing plan. In some project sites, the grazing plan is made obligatory for all community members, while in others, part of the communal land is assigned exclusively to the grazing committee, dividing communal rangeland into designated H4H areas and 'conventional' areas. Evidence suggests that the most effective mechanisms need to offer visible benefits, as otherwise livestock owners are unlikely to change their grazing practices. This includes that it is required to manage free-riding on restored communal rangeland through tolerated access with participant incentives, mandatory grazing plans, or exclusive H4H grazing areas. Furthermore, the governance mechanisms need to be build on legitimate existing community institutions, define clear and enforceable grazing rules, and include livestock owners and relevant authorities.

Main Recommendations

The recommendations focus on enhancing the sustainability of outcomes, and relate to implementation, communication, and monitoring. They are directed to the consortium.

Project design and implementation: The project should maintain ongoing local dialogues around the H4H governance mechanism. Since H4H requires participation of at least 70% of livestock in a given area, broad local acceptance and the balancing of the interests of various users of the commonage is key. The rules for communal land use need to be negotiated. Grazing committees could evolve into legal entities, while water and market access infrastructure should be negotiated with municipalities. Financial sustainability is equally important: Participating in H4H must be better business than non-participation, and revenues should cover additional costs like professional herder wages. The development of supply chains and downstream product marketing may be supported by improved organization of producer groups, branding, targeting specific markets (premium consumers, tourists, National Park Systems, etc.) so that higher revenues can be achieved.

A further opportunity consists in higher levels of (livestock) safety. Cattle theft is easier by easily localizable herds concentrated in kraals – but these could also offer more safety and support against infections like the current outbreak of Foot-and-Mouth Disease. Early engagement with customary and formal authorities is needed to ensure vigilance and protection.

Gender work should be strengthened and systematized across countries, building on the Zambia example of gender awareness trainings for traditional leaders. The project should identify safe niches for women's economic participation and empowerment, including for example women's groups jointly acquiring cattle and the inclusion of sheep and goats in grazing agreements (which should also be an ecological requirement).

Steering, coordination and communication: The project teams should even more systematically and frequently share evidence with national policy makers. Policy stakeholders need timely insights into implementation, economic and public health outcomes, gender achievements, and environmental effects to understand the project's value and support policy changes. National governments and research institutions have offered to contribute their expertise in rangeland assessments, data collection, impact monitoring, and dissemination and the project should take up this offer. Local authorities should also be more strongly involved in grazing plans, training, vaccination campaigns, and infrastructure planning. Finally, dissemination activities should be intensified to support awareness, implementation knowledge, mobilization, and scale-up at local, national, and regional levels.

Monitoring and results-based management: If the project needs to prioritize in the context of results-based management, community ownership and local buy-in should take priority over rushed achievement of indicator targets. Quantitative targets remain necessary, but sustainable effects depend on thorough sensitization, capacity-building, and locally owned governance systems. The vegetation outcome should be made less vulnerable to seasonal climate conditions by tracking long-term NDVI trends, including for example five-year moving averages. The carbon outcome methodology could be expanded beyond soil organic carbon to include above-ground biomass, avoided wildfire emissions, and methane emissions. It is recommended that the project works together with external research networks. A robust cost-effectiveness analysis on the macroeconomic level per country could support policy dialogue and scaling.