

Programme Completion Review

Programme Title: Biodiverse Landscapes Fund – Western Congo Basin (BLF WCB) project	
Programme Value £ (spend): £4.91m	Programme Code: GB-GOV-7-BLF
Program Start date: 11-2023	Programme End date: 03-2026
Review conducted: 04-2026	Period this review covers: 11-2023 to 03-2026

Summary of Programme Performance

Year	23/24*	24/25*	25/26		
Overall Score	B	B	B		
Risk Rating	High	High	High		

* Score from overall BLF portfolio annual reviews

DevTracker Link to Business Case:	DevTracker WCB Project Business Case GB-GOV-7-BLF
DevTracker Link to Logframe:	N/A

A. SUMMARY AND OVERVIEW

A1. Programme description

The Biodiverse Landscapes Fund (BLF) Western Congo Basin (WCB) project is a UK Official Development Assistance (ODA) investment designed to support people, nature and climate centred on the Tri National Dja Odzala Minkébé (TRIDOM) landscape spanning Cameroon, the Republic of Congo (RoC) and Gabon. Delivered through a consortium led by the Zoological Society of London (ZSL), the project's vision was to achieve large-scale and locally equitable landscape wide ecosystem protection and recovery, integrating human health and wellbeing with animal and ecosystem health (a “One Health” approach) through nature-based solutions. Part of the wider BLF programme, it was closely aligned with BLF's programme-level objectives to tackle poverty, protect nature and address climate change.

Following the decision to reduce UK ODA to 0.3% GNI to fund an increase in UK defence spending, Defra received a significantly reduced ODA budget in the 2025 Spending Review. The reduced funding settlement required a number of changes across Defra's ODA portfolio. As part of this, Defra took the decision to consolidate the BLF in fewer landscapes by the end of FY2526, which meant closing two landscapes early: Lower Mekong and Western Congo Basin. The criteria used to make the decision was informed by a range of factors, including evidence of early performance and delivery across the BLF portfolio. This decision meant that the WCB project originally intended to be at least £12.3m value and run for seven years, closed instead after roughly two years of operation.

Overall, this PCR describes WCB project delivery shaped by a complex operating environment, including slower-than-planned progress in securing permission to operate in RoC and Gabon. In

the case of Gabon, the coup in August 2023 created uncertainty around host government support for the programme leading to delays. In RoC there was a 3-month delay in securing government support, and further delays during the due diligence process. Delivery was further affected by a protracted inception period and early closure, as described further in Sections A2 and A4. As a result, activities were mainly progressed in Cameroon, with more limited delivery elsewhere.

Early achieved outputs included:

- Supporting the development of the TRIDOM landscape strategy and presenting it to the Central African Forest Commission (COMIFAC)
- Government recognition of an Indigenous Community Conserved Area (ICCAs)
- Development of market analyses for non-Timber Forest products (e.g. cocoa) helping to identify demand, supply chain bottle necks and sustainability
- Production of roadmap for EUDR-Compliant, deforestation-free value chains outlining the necessary steps for local producers to adapt and comply with these international standards
- Identification of potential ecotourism sites across TRIDOM
- Farmer training in sustainable agricultural practices and zero deforestation techniques
- Distribution of 15,000 trees to 200 beneficiaries for climate-smart agroforestry
- Improved transparency and sustainability in forest management through targeted training on legality, traceability and certification and biodiversity friendly action plans for multiple companies

However, early closure meant that costs were incurred but some of the corresponding benefits had not yet materialised as originally intended at scale. In addition, while future programme allocation decisions were being considered and it was unclear what the long-term financing situation would be for the programme, a cautious value for money approach was adopted. This included pausing baseline data collection exercises for outcomes in BLF landscapes where it had not yet begun (including WCB).

As such, at landscape level, early closure limits Defra's ability to fully assess and realise the VfM anticipated in the original business case. However, at the overall BLF portfolio level, the decision to streamline and consolidate the BLF in fewer landscapes in the context of a significantly reduced UK ODA budget is expected to protect the BLF's overall VfM. Actively concentrating resources in fewer landscapes is intended to increase the likelihood of delivering meaningful outcomes and realising benefits at scale, rather than thinly spreading funding and effort.

Defra's management focus was on ensuring strategic alignment with departmental priorities, maintaining oversight and risk management by working with the Fund Manager and Independent Evaluator (IndEv), and supporting engagement with partner governments (including in country visits that helped secure a license to operate in RoC, a letter of support in Gabon and a letter of intent with Cameroon). Once early closure was decided, focus changed to prioritising a responsible exit and capturing learning.

A2. Summary supporting narrative for the overall score in this review

Key considerations for scoring: The overall score for the project should be considered taking account of three key factors.

1. First, ZSL and the consortium were informed in August 2025 that the programme would close early (around two years into the originally planned seven-year programme) which had an immediate impact on delivery, with the team instructed not to initiate new or scale existing activities.
2. Second, to enable an orderly and responsible exit, Defra and the Fund Manager requested that partners cease implementation by December 2025, focusing instead on programme closure and learning in the final quarter.
3. Third, the March 2026 output milestones, which were set during inception, were not revised in order to minimise the monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) burden on delivery partners and focus on a responsible exit; however, this means performance is assessed against targets that assumed continued, full delivery through to March 2026 and beyond.

Together, these factors explain limited performance against targets and low overall score.

Overall, project delivery was strongest for the enabling and foundational components (governance, sustainable forest management/transparency, and sustainable finance), and where partners were able to establish partnerships and generate evidence products. Delivery was weaker for the beneficiary-dependent components (health, livelihoods, human–wildlife conflict mitigation at scale, and illegal wildlife trade outcomes), where delays to permissions, procurement and community engagement meant that planned downstream services and behaviour-change interventions could not be rolled out before closure.

Based on performance against the March 2026 milestones, the distribution across the seven outputs are (including weightings):

- above target (A+): **14%** (1 of 7 outputs)
- on target (A): **0%** (0 of 7 outputs)
- underperforming (B): **26%** (2 of 7 outputs)
- highly underperforming (C): **60%** (4 of 7 outputs)

Achieving the March 2026 output milestone targets was difficult to achieve, given the three key considerations set out above. Given these mitigating circumstances Defra has decided that the **overall score for the project is a B.**

A3. Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI)

Gender equality, poverty reduction and wider social inclusion was embedded across all landscape-level interventions, recognising the central role of women, Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) in sustainable forest management, livelihoods, health and conservation outcomes. GEDSI was treated as a cross-cutting principle, integrated within programme design, implementation and monitoring, rather than as a standalone component.

During implementation, the programme applied a rights based, do no harm and participatory approach, with continuous community consultation used to inform the selection and design of interventions. Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) assessments were conducted in Cameroon and Gabon, highlighting persistent inequalities faced by women and IPLCs in relation to land tenure, access to healthcare, education and participation in decision making, as well as the prevalence of gender-based violence. These findings informed some adaptations to project delivery, including increased attention to inclusive consultation processes and safeguarding

integration but the timing of the assessment meant that its findings could not be fully integrated into all interventions.

Concrete actions included consultations with women, Indigenous communities, adolescents and youth to identify barriers to accessing primary healthcare and livelihoods, and the incorporation of their priorities into proposed interventions (e.g. mobile health services, community health workers, and climate-smart agriculture). Across governance, livelihoods, biodiversity and anti-illegal wildlife trade components, the project prioritised meaningful IPLC engagement, Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), and capacity-building to support community participation and stewardship. Rangers and enforcement personnel were trained using a human-rights-centred and conflict-de-escalation approach, reinforcing ethical enforcement and community trust.

While early project closure and delays to community engagement significantly constrained the delivery of GESI results (particularly under the health and livelihoods components) and VfM equity indicator reporting, the project established strong GEDSI informed foundations, including community trust, inclusive planning processes and evidence on structural inequalities. These provide a valuable platform for future investment. A standalone GEDSI Action Plan was not finalised due to early termination; instead, some GEDSI actions were embedded within partner strategies, component implementation and learning processes.

A4. Major lessons, evidence generated and recommendations

1. **Ambition, sequencing and operating context must be more tightly aligned in future programmes.** The BLF WCB experience demonstrates that attempting to deliver a highly ambitious, multi-component programme across three countries in parallel, particularly in contexts where the UK government and Lead Delivery Partner had limited presence, significantly constrained early progress. In practice, substantial time was required to build government trust, secure permissions to operate and establish functional in-country partnerships, all of which were underestimated in the inception phase. This was compounded by the complexity of coordinating multiple thematic components simultaneously, which diluted delivery focus and slowed mobilisation.

Recommendation: Future programmes should adopt a longer, fully resourced inception phase and prioritise phased, sequential delivery (across geographies and components) rather than attempting to mobilise multiple countries and complex interventions in parallel, particularly in contexts where the UK has limited prior ODA engagement and relationships need to be built from first principles.

2. **MEL, compliance and governance structures add value but must be proportionate and adaptive.** The BLF governance model; combining Defra oversight, a Fund Manager, the IndEv and in-country coordination, provided strong accountability, transparency and safeguards, which were valued by Posts and host governments. However, complex MEL requirements and layered approval processes slowed delivery, particularly during inception, diverting capacity from early implementation (e.g. community engagement). Further delays were incurred due to the need to provide additional support to improve the consortium's capacity to design, develop and deliver MEL inception deliverables (landscape ToCs, MEL frameworks, Baseline Data Collection Plans, logframes) to ensure they were aligned to ODA rules and that there would be confidence in the results being reported.

Recommendation: Maintain strong governance and independent oversight, but streamline MEL where possible, approval pathways and role clarity, and allow proportional adjustment of targets and budgets when context shifts. Lessons have been incorporated into the rest of the BLF to strengthen overall delivery of the programme going forward.

3. Political economy and host-government engagement are decisive delivery factors

Delivery was materially affected by external political factors (e.g. the Gabon coup), which directly explain under-performance against several output-level milestones. There was early misalignment between BLF's delivery model and host-government expectations, particularly around ODA funding flows and the role of delivery partners.

Recommendation: Political economy analysis, early host-government orientation, written permissions, and clarity on roles must be front-loaded, not treated as background risks.

4. Country-based coordination and neutral convening are critical enablers

Country-based Landscape Coordinators act as neutral convenors across governments, communities, delivery partners and UK stakeholders. This role was central to securing licences to operate, building trust, escalating risks, and maintaining delivery momentum during periods of reputational and geopolitical stress.

Recommendation: Future programmes should formally empower and protect country-based coordination roles, with clear mandates, joint governance backing and parity of voice with UK-based teams.

5. Strong foundations and public goods were delivered despite early closure

Despite curtailed implementation, the programme generated durable public goods: the TRIDOM Landscape Strategy endorsed through COMIFAC, progress towards ICCA validation, biodiversity and climate modelling, sustainable finance pipelines, and peer-reviewed scientific outputs. Embassy and partner reflections confirm that participatory, GESI-informed approaches-built trust even where outcome-level impacts could not yet be realised.

Recommendation: In complex landscapes, foundational strategies, data, partnerships and finance pipelines should be recognised as legitimate outcomes, particularly when shocks disrupt delivery, with adaptation and integral part of programme design.

Independent evaluation and learning

The IndEv was engaged throughout project inception and project implementation, providing support and facilitating structured learning processes which included an annual learning workshop in March 2025. Learning from the project has also been informed by an early exit workshop facilitated by the IndEv, drawing together ZSL, Plan (a consortium member) and partner evidence to reflect on delivery challenges, achievements and lessons. No standalone post-completion independent evaluation report was produced due to early termination however, learning has been systematically captured within this PCR and associated workshops.

A5. How this report was conducted

This PCR was prepared by Defra. It synthesises evidence from the LDP's programme completion report, annual and quarterly reports and output-level monitoring data. The report is also informed by structured learning and reflection exercises, including facilitated learning workshops led by the IndEv and written reflections from locally based Embassy/Post staff, which provide first-hand insight into delivery conditions, political economy constraints, government engagement and coordination effectiveness.

A6. Actions following approval of this report

At the point of project closure, the majority of administrative, financial and contractual close-out actions were completed in line with the Grant Funding Agreement and FCDO's Programme Operating Framework (PrOF) Rule 29. In particular, project delivery activities ceased in advance of the March 2026 end date, and no Defra programme funds were used to support activity beyond the agreed funding period.

The following actions were either completed as part of orderly closure or remain subject to final confirmation through standard Defra and Lead Delivery Partner close-out processes:

- **Audited financial statements:** Receipt and review of final audited accounts (or equivalent assurance, as required under the Grant Funding Agreement) was completed by June 2026.
- **Final payments and reconciliation:** Final claims and payments were processed in June 2026 in accordance with the agreed payment schedule and exit provisions.
- **Asset management and disposal:** Programme assets were recorded in the approved asset register and reviewed during closure. Assets have either been disposed of, transferred to other UK-funded ODA programmes where appropriate and permissible, or retained by the ZSL or downstream delivery partners in line with Defra-approved asset transfer plans.
- **Contracts and staff close-out:** Partner sub-agreements and staff contracts were terminated in line with contractual and local legal requirements, with any associated severance costs met from non-Defra funds where required.
- **Safeguarding, complaints and feedback mechanisms:** No safeguarding incidents were outstanding at closure. In line with the approved Exit Plan, safeguarding and feedback channels will remain operational for a defined post-closure period to enable late reporting and appropriate referral. See section D1 for more details.

No further delivery or expenditure is planned under this project. Any residual administrative actions are limited to assurance, audit confirmation, and documentation of asset and financial reconciliation, and do not involve the use of Defra project funds beyond the agreed end date.

B. THEORY OF CHANGE AND PROGRESS TOWARDS OUTCOMES

B1. Summary of theory of change (ToC)

Changes from the original theory of change

The latest version of the Theory of Change (ToC) (Annex 1) was developed through an iterative refinement of the original Business Case ToC, led by the Fund Manager, Defra and the IndEv. The original ToC was submitted by ZSL as part of its application to the BLF and was subsequently adapted during inception to provide a clearer, delivery-ready articulation of causal pathways and component linkages.

In addition to this internal refinement, changes to the consortium and delivery context resulted in targeted adjustments to the component structure of the ToC. Specifically, Protected Area Management and Human–Wildlife Conflict were merged into a single component following changes to the consortium to ensure continued feasibility and coherence of delivery. The original Health component also included Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) activities on an exceptional and conditional basis. Continuation of SRHR activities was subject to further evidence and assurance, including through GESI self-assessment and ToC review. In practice, agreement to proceed was not reached and SRHR activities were therefore not taken forward, with delivery focusing on other elements of the Health and One Health component.

Overall, the evolution of the ToC represented clarification and strengthening rather than a change in strategic direction.

Key refinements included:

- Making One Health explicit as an integrating framework linking people, nature and climate outcomes
- Clarifying the role of rights-based approaches as enabling conditions for conservation impact
- Defining sustainable financing mechanisms as a distinct pathway to long-term sustainability, rather than an implicit assumption
- More clearly identifying interlinkages between thematic components to support integrated delivery and learning

Overview and assessment of the theory of change

The WCB ToC articulates a deliberate pathway to deliver benefits across poverty reduction, biodiversity and climate mitigation/adaptation. It does so by combining (i) inclusive forest and protected area management, biodiversity monitoring and human–wildlife conflict mitigation; (ii) rights-based approaches to illegal wildlife trade; (iii) diversified livelihoods and health/One Health interventions to strengthen resilience and reduce pressure on natural resources; (iv) inclusive landscape governance with climate and biodiversity targets; and (v) sustainable finance mechanisms intended to sustain outcomes.

Strength of Evidence and data gaps

At closure, evidence generation was strongest for nature and climate pathways, where the programme invested early in baseline assessments, biodiversity monitoring approaches and climate analytics, while outcome-level evidence for poverty and health was limited by inception delays and early closure. As a result, pathways were credible but only partially testable in practice.

Learning highlights the need for sufficient time and early mobilisation to evidence complex outcomes.

Validity of logic, evidence and assumptions

The core logic and assumptions set out in the Business Case remain valid, including the rationale for integrated, landscape-scale approaches linking governance, livelihoods and conservation. Implementation experience confirmed these pathways were plausible, but some assumptions were optimistic (e.g. pace of mobilisation, cross-border coordination). Political economy and delivery sequencing proved more constraining than anticipated. Overall, the logic held, but was harder to operationalise.

New or unexpected pathways and negative impacts

Implementation reinforced the importance of certain pathways, notably human–wildlife conflict mitigation as an enabling condition for conservation. Conversely, the conditional inclusion and later non-continuation of SRHR activities led to unintended negative effects in some locations (e.g. reduced trust where expectations had been raised). These experiences highlight risks associated with sensitive components without early certainty.

External context affecting ToC validity

Several external factors affected the extent to which the ToC could be fully tested, including political instability, delays in formal government approvals and early closure. These factors constrained time and geographic scope, particularly for longer-term livelihood and finance pathways. The overall validity of the ToC was not undermined, but opportunities to demonstrate impact were reduced.

Stakeholder and community engagement

Engagement with governments, IPLCs, civil society and the private sector informed refinements to delivery priorities (e.g. emphasis on climate data, rights-based enforcement and conflict mitigation). Feedback from stakeholders also highlighted sensitivities around certain interventions, reinforcing the importance of aligning design ambition with assurance processes, expectations management and delivery feasibility.

B2. Evaluation planning

The IndEv was engaged throughout project inception and project implementation however, following the UK's ODA budget reductions a decision was made to end the IndEv's contract at the end of March 2026. IndEv learning has been systematically captured within this PCR and associated workshops.

B3. Progress toward outcomes and impacts

Following the UK's ODA budget reductions, Defra took the decision to pause baseline data collection for outcomes because it had not yet started and proceeding with these household surveys and community engagement exercises would not necessarily offer value for money or be appropriate given uncertainty about the future of the programme. Baseline outcome data collection had been scheduled to begin following the inception phase and permissions work and would have provided data to support outcome indicator reporting (providing both baseline data and targets), with midline data collection tentatively planned to be carried out between January and August 2027 to track progress against outcomes. A baseline evaluation study by the IndEv would have provided an assessment against ICF KPI 15 ("extent to which ICF intervention is likely

to lead to transformational change”), which was the landscape and programme-level impact indicator. However, due to the extended inception period, outcome baseline data collection and studies had not yet begun at the time of the ODA budget reductions and therefore did not proceed before early programme closure.

However, while outcome-level baseline data were not collected before the closure decision, output-level monitoring data were collected throughout implementation and form the basis of this PCR assessment.

C. DETAILED OUTPUT SCORING

Output Title	Sustainable, inclusive, and equitable landscape governance framework(s) with clear climate and biodiversity targets, enabling strategic decision-making across industry, conservation, and community land uses, and supported by robust economic, biodiversity, and climate accounting		
Output number:	1	Output Score:	B
Impact weighting (%):	13	Weighting revised since last AR?	N/A
Indicator	Target (in-year)	Achieved (in-year)	Progress
Indicator 1.1 Number of concessions effectively managing internal conservation set-asides (e.g., HCVs)	7	Unknown – see below	Unverified
Indicator 1.2 Number of steering committees, working groups, governance structures, and frameworks (including those for economic, biodiversity, and climate accounting) put in place/revamped and operationalised (disaggregated by country, type, and stakeholder)	3	6	Exceeded
Indicator 1.3 Number of Community Conserved Areas (CCA) and Community Forests (CF) mapped (disaggregated by country and type)	9	1 (ICCA in Cameroon)	Under target

C1. Output activities and score

Component 1 focused on strengthening institutional arrangements, governance processes, and multi-stakeholder collaboration to support inclusive land management across the WCB landscape.

Progress was mixed. Engagement with private sector actors was strong, with multiple companies supported to update management approaches, including the integration of conservation set asides. However, due to early closure, it was not possible to conduct studies that would verify the effective management element of the indicator and therefore progress against this indicator remains unconfirmed.

Good progress was made in establishing and supporting governance structures, including working groups and multi-stakeholder platforms, which exceeded targets and provided a foundation for improved coordination and decision-making. The project also supported the designation of one Indigenous Community Conserved Area in Cameroon, representing an important step towards community-led land management, although targets in other countries were not met.

Delivery was constrained by delays in securing government engagement and approvals, particularly in Gabon and the Republic of Congo. More broadly, landscape governance processes proved time-intensive and complex, requiring sustained consultation, alignment across stakeholders, and clear policy frameworks. Limited budgets and reliance on partner collaboration further constrained delivery.

C2. Changes to output

No significant changes to the output were made throughout the year.

C3. Lessons and recommendations for future

Landscape governance proved to be more time and resource intensive than originally anticipated. In hindsight, the budgets prepared for this component were judged to be insufficient to cover all necessary activities needed to reach the output targets, and this is a lesson to take forward into future planning and design.

Another lesson is that meaningful IPLC participation requires sustained support to facilitate their engagement to participate in and contribute to the sustainable management of natural resources in the WCB landscape.

Output Title	A shift to a more sustainable, inclusive, and transparent model of forest management through well-managed timber concessions and diversification (e.g. carbon credits or eco-tourism initiatives)		
Output number:	2	Output Score:	<i>B</i>
Impact weighting (%):	13	Weighting revised since last AR?	N/A
Indicator	Target (in-year)	Achieved (in-year)	Progress
Indicator 2.1 Number of forest-management companies disclosing evidence of legal timber harvest and trade increases.	6 companies have increased their transparency by >5 percentage points	3 of the 12 companies engaged improved their scores by >5%	Under target
Indicator 2.2 Number of forest concessions (Forest Management Units - FMUs) participating in BLF WCB-run capacity-building programmes in sustainable forestry.	10 forest concessions (with an average of 10 staff to be trained by company owning a forest concession)	10 FMUs	Met
Indicator 2.3 Number of companies engaged in discussions about improving forestry practice.	15 Companies	14 companies	Under target

C1. Output activities and score

Activities under this output focused on improving sustainable forest management, strengthening traceability, enhancing independent monitoring systems, and supporting sustainable agricultural practices.

Progress was mixed. Capacity-building activities reached multiple forest concessions, with training delivered on legality, traceability, and sustainable management practices, meeting targets for participation. Engagement with companies was also strong, with most target firms involved in discussions to improve forestry practices.

However, more limited progress was made on improving transparency outcomes, with fewer companies demonstrating measurable improvements than planned. This reflects delays in government processes (e.g. approvals and documentation), as well as the influence of market incentives - where companies prioritised certification and compliance with client requirements over broader transparency improvements.

Supporting activities included training and technical assistance on regulatory compliance (e.g. FLEGT-VPA, EUDR), use of transparency tools (such as Open Timber Portal and SPOTT), and development of biodiversity-friendly action plans. Needs assessments highlighted that while many

companies had baseline capacity, fewer had established procedures, underscoring the importance of continued technical support.

C2. Changes to output

No significant changes to the output were made throughout the year.

C3. Lessons and recommendations for future

Data was easily available from forest concessions who are existing members of the ATIBT network (in contrast to non-members as highlighted above). However, this process could be more effective by utilising existing tools and platforms, such as WRI's Open Timber Portal, SPOTT and TRAFFIC's timber data and tracking systems.

Output Title	Improved health of local communities and Indigenous people, and women in particular, with an additional focus on One Health through the design of disease resilient landscapes and by promoting sustainable alternatives to wild meat consumption and diversification		
Output number:	3	Output Score:	C
Impact weighting (%):	13	Weighting revised since last AR?	N/A
Indicator	Target (in-year)	Achieved (in-year)	Progress
Indicator 3.1 Number of mothers and adolescents/youths reporting benefits from primary healthcare by the BLF WCB Programme (disaggregated by gender, age class, IP status, village, country).	2100 mothers (>=60% IP status)	0 mothers	Under target
Indicator 3.2 Number of mothers and adolescents/youths supported to access primary healthcare by the BLF WCB Programme (disaggregated by gender, age class, IP status, village, country).	2520 mothers (>=60% IP status)	0 mothers	Under target
Indicator 3.3 Number of HHs with improved awareness of the risks of eating wild meat (disaggregated by IP status, village, country)	2800 (>=60% IP)	0 households	Under target

C1. Output activities and score

This output was significantly affected by challenges in finalising the MEL design and operating restrictions in RoC and Gabon which delayed community engagement and implementation.

Despite this, stakeholder engagement and consultations were carried out across Cameroon (and to a lesser extent Gabon), involving government, communities and civil society. These helped identify key barriers to accessing primary healthcare - such as distance, cost, language, and limited availability of appropriate services - and informed locally appropriate solutions, including mobile clinics and community health workers. GESI assessments further highlighted persistent inequalities faced by women and Indigenous Peoples, including in access to healthcare, education and land rights, as well as the prevalence of gender-based violence.

There were discussions on whether to implement SRHR activities to help address these challenges which slowed delivery, with the final decision taken not to proceed.

Overall, the output generated valuable insights and engagement but was unable to translate these into downstream service delivery or measurable outcomes prior to early closure.

C2. Changes to output

No significant changes to the output were made throughout the year.

C3. Lessons and recommendations for future

Learning from this output includes integrating human-centred elements (such as combining health and livelihood services) significantly increased project acceptance and collaboration among governments and communities. Participatory consultations with adolescents, youth, women, and local leaders helped identify gaps in maternal and child health, nutrition, and protection services, ensuring interventions were context-appropriate. Discussions on whether to include SRHR interventions proved challenging for community engagement, however, IPLCs appreciated the project's rights-based, do-no-harm approach, which strengthened trust and engagement overall.

Output Title	Increased preservation and improved management of biodiversity, particularly of endemic species inside and outside of protected areas, and a lesser prevalence of human-wildlife conflict		
Output number:	4	Output Score:	C
Impact weighting (%):	22	Weighting revised since last AR?	N/A
Indicator	Target (in-year)	Achieved (in-year)	Progress
Indicator 4.1 Number of PA and concession staff trained in and using biodiversity data collection methods (focusing on the use of camera traps)	120	58 (7 F) March 2025: 6F, no disabilities August 2025: 1F, 6 Bantou, 2 Baka, no disabilities	Under target
Indicator 4.2 Number of HWC hotspots adopting best practice for HWC mitigation (adoption defined as >40% of people trained in best practice are using the methods) (disaggregated by country, village, practice type).	12	0	Under target
Indicator 4.3 Number of people trained in HWC mitigation methods (disaggregated by country, village, IP status, methods)	1500 (>=60% IP)	0	Under target

C1. Output activities and score

This output focused on two core areas: human–wildlife coexistence and biodiversity monitoring.

Progress was mixed. Early work on human–wildlife conflict included hotspot mapping in Cameroon and Gabon, alongside identification of effective mitigation approaches. Awareness-raising activities reached communities at scale and helped build understanding of conflict mitigation options.

For biodiversity monitoring, training was delivered to protected area staff and community members in camera trap use, generating initial data on species presence and demonstrating the potential value of monitoring approaches. However, activities were only implemented in Cameroon, and fell short of planned scale across the landscape, with limited access in the Republic of Congo particularly constraining delivery.

Delivery was affected by delays in securing permissions, changes to consortium arrangements, and budget constraints linked to multi-country delivery requirements. These challenges slowed mobilisation and limited geographic coverage, resulting in activities largely remaining at a preparatory or pilot stage rather than achieving full implementation.

Overall, this output established important technical foundations and generated some useful data, but delays in delivery meant that these could not be translated into scaled delivery or measurable results.

C2. Changes to output

No significant changes to the output were made throughout the year.

C3. Lessons and recommendations for future

Human-wildlife conflict (HWC) activities were designed to follow a logical sequence, with hotspot mapping and best practice reviews intended to inform prioritisation of mitigation measures. Early implementation confirmed the importance of this sequencing, as levels of evidence and patterns of HWC varied significantly across countries (e.g. human–elephant conflict is more prevalent and better documented in Gabon than in Cameroon or RoC), however this was not reflected in the original targets which were over ambitious.

A second learning relates to the need for greater flexibility in adaptive management following consortium and indicator changes. Revisions led by the IndEv shifted biodiversity monitoring indicators from species presence/absence to occupancy and abundance, requiring significantly more intensive and costly monitoring methods, including repeated camera-trap surveys. Given that most delivery activities were outside protected areas, this approach was felt to not always proportionate to its contribution to impact measurement. The key learning is the importance of early, collaborative redesign of activities, budgets and MEL requirements following substantive changes, to ensure monitoring approaches remain feasible, proportionate and aligned with delivery realities.

Output Title	Sustainable revenue mechanisms are in place			
Output number:	5	Output Score:	A+	
Impact weighting (%):	13	Weighting revised since last AR?	N/A	
Indicator	Target (in-year)	Achieved (in-year)	Progress	
Indicator 5.1 Number of environmentally-friendly innovations (e.g., organic cocoa, tools for supply chain modelling, community-ownership of carbon projects) piloted by the project	6	6	Met	
Indicator 5.2 Number of Sustainable Finance Models (SFMs) with design documentation (business plans, feasibility studies, pitch decks, etc.) in place and ready for finance.	6	9	Exceeded	
Indicator 5.3 Number of organisations (businesses, civil society organisations, and government agencies) engaged in the development of SFMs to protect and restore biodiversity	30	34	Exceeded	

C1. Output activities and score

This output focused on developing sustainable revenue mechanisms across three areas: cocoa and NTFP value chains, carbon projects, and ecotourism.

Performance was strong, with all milestones met or exceeded. A range of innovations and sustainable finance models were developed, alongside high levels of stakeholder engagement across government, private sector actors, and community organisations.

Progress in cocoa and NTFP value chains included market analysis, development of deforestation-free supply chain roadmaps, and targeted capacity building for cooperatives. These activities strengthened readiness to meet international standards and improve market access, providing a foundation for future revenue generation.

Under carbon projects, significant preparatory work was completed, including legal reviews, FPIC processes and community engagement. However, projects remain at the design stage and will require further investment and partnerships to move into implementation and deliver revenue.

Ecotourism activities produced a regional development roadmap and identified priority sites, supported by community engagement and spatial mapping.

Overall, the output delivered strong foundational progress across multiple finance pathways, with clear potential to generate long-term revenue, although most mechanisms require further development to reach full implementation.

C2. Changes to output

No significant changes to the output were made throughout the year.

C3. Lessons and recommendations for future

Early and continuous engagement with IPLCs throughout design and implementation is critical to ensuring activities are culturally appropriate and locally supported, as demonstrated under REDD+ and ecotourism interventions. While this helped build trust and ownership, achieving equitable participation of women remained challenging due to prevailing gender norms, highlighting the need for future programmes to integrate gender and cultural dynamics more explicitly and adapt activities to help address structural barriers.

Output Title	Improved livelihoods and opportunities, and strengthened inclusivity for local communities and Indigenous people, and women in particular.			
Output number:	6	Output Score:	C	
Impact weighting (%):	13	Weighting revised since last AR?	N/A	
Indicator	Target (in-year)	Achieved (in-year)	Progress	
Indicator 6.1 Number of people who have been trained in diversified livelihood options	1800 ($\geq 60\%$ female and $\geq 60\%$ IP status)	194 people trained in climate-smart agriculture and market access (52 F, 27 IPs)	Under target	
Indicator 6.2 Number of households that receive and use improved/clean cookstoves	2000 ($\geq 60\%$ IP status)	0	Under target	
Indicator 6.3 Number of people, especially women, engaged (consulted, participating, interviewed, etc.) on sustainable, inclusive, and equitable landscape governance (disaggregated by country, institution type, nature of engagement, gender, and IP status)	1600 ($\geq 50\%$ women; $\geq 60\%$ IP)	2011 (28% women, 62% IP)	Under target	

C1. Output activities and score

As with Output 3, this output was significantly affected challenges finalising MEL design and operating restrictions in RoC and Gabon which delayed community engagement, and implementation.

Despite this, several important activities were delivered. These included support to climate-smart agriculture and food security through distribution of inputs and training to local communities, alongside value chain analysis to identify priority opportunities for livelihoods development. These activities strengthened community resilience and provided a foundation for future income-generating interventions.

Engagement on inclusive landscape governance was undertaken at scale, involving a wide range of stakeholders across the three countries, including government, IPLCs, civil society and development partners. Much of this contribution fed into Output 1, supporting broader efforts to strengthen participatory and inclusive decision-making processes.

However, delivery remained limited relative to ambition. While training and analysis were completed, there was insufficient resource to provide inputs at scale to enable communities to fully apply new skills in practice. This reflects an imbalance between programme ambition and available resources, which constrained the ability to translate early activities into sustained livelihood outcomes.

C2. Changes to output

No significant changes to the output were made throughout the year.

C3. Lessons and recommendations for future

Climate change is increasingly affecting eastern Cameroon, highlighting the urgent need for resilience measures such as improved irrigation, meteorological collaboration, and drought-resistant seeds. Experience from this component suggests that future programmes would benefit from a more clearly articulated and integrated approach linking livelihoods, climate resilience, governance and conservation objectives. While individual activities were often well justified in their own right, it was not always clear how some interventions would collectively contribute to a pathway towards improved resilience and livelihood outcomes. For example, the links between activities such as supporting households adopt clean or improved cookstoves and wider sustainable livelihood interventions, governance and climate resilience objectives. Future programmes should place greater emphasis on demonstrating how different interventions complement one another and contribute to shared outcomes.

Output Title	Reduced wildlife trafficking reinforced by more robust anti-illegal wildlife trade regulations and a rights-based approach to enforcement on the ground		
Output number:	7	Output Score:	C
Impact weighting (%):	13	Weighting revised since last AR?	N/A
Indicator	Target (in-year)	Achieved (in-year)	Progress
Indicator 7.1 Number of traders in illegal wildlife products in a representative selection of markets (disaggregated by country, village, wildlife product types)	TBD based on baseline	0	N/A
Indicator 7.2 Number of people trained in basic and advanced law enforcement techniques, focusing on human rights and conflict de-escalation skills (disaggregated by country, agency)	140	28	Under target
Indicator 7.3 Number of wildlife trade regulations and laws that incorporate changes suggested by the consortium	2	0	Under target

C1. Output activities and score

This output focused on strengthening anti-illegal wildlife trade efforts through community engagement, law enforcement capacity building, and policy support.

Progress was limited overall due to restricted access in Gabon and the Republic of Congo, as well as early closure. No progress was made on market monitoring and regulatory reform; however, opportunities were identified to support governments in aligning national legislation with CITES decisions.

Despite these constraints, community engagement activities in Cameroon reached a significant number of beneficiaries, raising awareness of wildlife laws and encouraging behaviour change. This contributed to improved collaboration between communities and enforcement agencies, with increased reporting of illegal activities and evidence of early shifts in attitudes towards wildlife protection.

Training for ecoguards was delivered at a smaller scale than planned, covering core enforcement skills and human rights principles. While below target, this helped strengthen local capacity, and additional training had been planned prior to early closure.

Overall, while tangible results against targets were limited, the output contributed to improved awareness, strengthened community–law enforcement relationships, and identified clear entry points for future regulatory and enforcement support.

C2. Changes to output

No significant changes to the output were made throughout the year.

C3. Lessons and recommendations for future

Evidence from the project suggests increasing pressure from illegal wildlife trade, alongside gaps in core competencies, professional standards and understanding of human rights required for effective and ethical enforcement. While training helped strengthen capacity, sustained investment is required to embed consistent standards of conduct and reinforce rights-based approaches.

Future investments should prioritise strengthening relationships between communities and law enforcement, alongside continued support for core skills, professional development and appropriate equipment. This will help build trust, improve effectiveness, and support more accountable and equitable enforcement systems.

D: RISK

D1. Overview of risk management

WCB project risks were monitored through a landscape risk register which was reviewed regularly through monthly Landscape Working Group meetings (which included Defra, the Fund Manager and ZSL). Relevant updates were fed into the BLF programme level risk register, with any risks assessed as approaching or exceeding appetite escalated promptly to the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) and discussed through the BLF Quarterly Programme Board.

Risk appetite:

The project operated within Defra's standard ODA risk appetite, which remained unchanged throughout delivery. This involves:

- Greater tolerance for strategic and contextual risks inherent in complex, fragile operating environments; and
- Low tolerance for safeguarding, reputational, and financial/fiduciary risks

Risks that came close to risk appetite:

Only a small number of risks approached the upper limits of Defra's risk appetite:

- **Strategic and contextual risk:** There was a sustained risk that changes in the regional political and operating context (including elections, political instability and shifts in host-government engagement) could constrain delivery or lead to pauses in activity. This risk came closest to appetite following the August 2023 coup in Gabon, which restricted UK Government engagement, and affected the programme's licence to operate, and led to significant delivery delays.
- **Safeguarding risk:** Safeguarding considerations led to changes in consortium arrangements, with associated second-order impacts on delivery sequencing, budget allocation across countries and relationships with host governments. Given Defra's very low tolerance for safeguarding risk, this risk tested appetite but was managed through precautionary action.

Changing and emerging risks following early closure

Following the decision to close the programme early, the risk profile shifted to reflect the challenges of responsible exit in a complex setting. The most significant emerging risks were:

- **Reputational risk:** Reputational risk increased as a result of project closure, particularly in relation to host-government perceptions and uncertainty around other UK Government funding in the region. Defra worked closely with UK Embassies and ZSL to ensure timely, coordinated and consistent communication with governments, partners and stakeholders. Efforts were made to reaffirm the UK's continued engagement in the region including through other relevant HMG programmes.
- **Financial and fiduciary risk:** Early closure required the accelerated disposal and transfer of programme assets, increasing the risk of loss or inappropriate reallocation. Defra, the Fund Manager and ZSL mitigated this risk by maintaining up-to-date asset registers and agreeing a clear, auditable asset transfer process, focused on value for money and sustainability, including transfer to other UK-funded programmes or trusted delivery partners where appropriate.

Safeguarding mitigation following project closure

ZSL's exit strategy ensures that safeguarding risks continue to be mitigated beyond project closure, in line with the approved Exit Plan and the Do No Harm principle. While no safeguarding incidents were recorded during implementation, mechanisms are in place to manage any late-emerging concerns. Dedicated safeguarding and feedback phone lines remained operational until the end-March 2026, and beneficiary communities have been linked to government-mandated protection services. Responsibility for safeguarding complaints has also been transitioned to a landscape-level grievance mechanism, with the *Centre pour l'Environnement et le Développement* (CED) designated to receive, manage and follow up cases post-closure. These arrangements ensure continuity, accountability and safe reporting beyond the programme's lifetime.

E. PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT: DELIVERY, COMMERCIAL & FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

E1. Summarise the performance of partners and Defra, notably on commercial and financial issues.

Narrative reporting

ZSL's quarterly narrative reports were consistently detailed and structured, providing clear descriptions of activities undertaken, progress against workplans, and contextual constraints to delivery. ZSL provided regular updates on progress and limited milestone achievement reflected structural and contextual issues rather than weak reporting. Quarterly reports were submitted largely in line with reporting requirements, though there were instances where milestones were approved late in the reporting year (April–May 2025), limiting the period over which delivery could be evidenced. Evidence uploads for output reporting lagged behind narrative reporting, largely affecting verification rather than the substance of delivery.

Financial reporting

ZSL submitted quarterly financial reports alongside narrative reports, linking expenditure to planned activities, as required under BLF reporting arrangements. Forecasting accuracy was affected by:

- Extended inception and delayed permissions;
- Pauses to baseline data collection at Defra's request following ODA cuts; and
- Subsequent early closure decisions, which required rapid re-forecasting and reallocation of planned spend.

There was no evidence of the misuse of funds or ineligible expenditure, instead noting that underspend and forecasting variance were largely driven by external and programme-level decisions rather than weak financial control.

Monitoring activities

Monitoring of the WCB project focused on active engagement, in-country presence, and structured technical and risk oversight, supported by the Fund Manager and Independent Evaluator.

In-country engagement and field visits were undertaken by the Landscape Coordinator, UK Government officials, and Fund Manager representatives across Cameroon, Gabon and the Republic of Congo. These included technical monitor and finance monitor visits, which reviewed delivery progress, safeguarding controls, financial management practices and asset registers, and provided direct challenge and assurance to Defra.

E2. Assess the VfM of this output compared to the proposition in the Business Case, based on performance over the past year [~1 page]

VfM assessment from the economic case

The economic case in the WCB project business case included a quantitative cost-benefit analysis focused on the value of ecosystem services generated through avoided deforestation and improved land and forest management, expected to materialise gradually over the full seven-year implementation timeline and continue beyond the lifetime of the programme. The appraisal

estimated that, under the central scenario including primary and anticipated secondary funding, the programme would deliver a positive Net Present Value (NPV) of **c. £4.1m** and a **Benefit–Cost Ratio (BCR) of 1.3**, indicating good value for money. Sensitivity analysis showed a BCR range of 1.0–1.6, demonstrating resilience to adverse assumptions. The economic case noted that these estimates were conservative, as they excluded a range of non-monetised benefits (e.g. biodiversity protection, livelihoods, governance and GESI outcomes).

VfM assessment at project closure

At closure, the WCB project demonstrates reasonable value for money within the constraints faced. However, the shortened delivery period and limited opportunity to realise the full scale of benefits envisioned in the original business case constrain the VfM assessment. While the business case anticipated that some benefits, such as livelihood and income improvements, would begin accruing during programme implementation, a significant proportion of the programme's overall value for money case depended on longer-term biodiversity, ecosystem and climate outcomes that were expected to build over time, including beyond the life of the programme. As such, it has not been feasible to update the quantitative appraisal for this PCR. In addition, the programme's VfM profile was inherently front-loaded, with set-up and inception costs incurred prior to benefits being realised. Early closure therefore meant that these costs were incurred but the corresponding benefits had not yet materialised at scale.

As such, at landscape level, early closure limits Defra's ability to fully assess and realise the VfM anticipated in the original business case. However, at the overall BLF portfolio level, the decision to streamline and consolidate the BLF in fewer landscapes in the context of a significantly reduced UK ODA budget is expected to **protect the BLF's overall VfM**. Concentrating remaining reduced resources in fewer landscapes increases the likelihood of achieving meaningful scale and realising the intended benefits, rather than spreading funding thinly and diluting effort and impact.

Insufficient data are available to populate many VfM indicators, particularly those related to outcomes, effectiveness and equity. This is due to:

- Incomplete community engagement, resulting from restrictions on operating in Gabon and the Republic of Congo, delays in agreeing beneficiary sampling approaches with the IndEv, and subsequent early closure.
- Baseline data collection not being completed, following an extended inception period and delays in permissions, and a pause to baseline-related activities to protect VfM ahead of the 2025 ODA cuts and closure decision.
- Several indicators being linked to activities that could not be implemented at scale, as parts of the project remained at preparatory or foundational stages when closure occurred.

These constraints mean that **cost-effectiveness** and **equity** VfM indicators **could not be robustly calculated**, and this limitation reflects feasibility rather than weaknesses in financial management or controls.

Economy

The project demonstrated appropriate economy in the use of resources during delivery and early closure. Staff costs reduced from 55% to 47% of total delivery costs as the project moved from an extended inception phase towards implementation before closure (in line with other landscape staff cost %), while administration costs remained stable consistent with a complex, multi-country landscape programme. Procurement and financial controls were applied in line with the Grant

Funding Agreement, and no issues of ineligible expenditure were identified. Overall, resources were acquired and managed at reasonable cost given the operating context.

Efficiency

Efficiency was reasonable where delivery took place but constrained by external factors. Unit costs improved for delivered activities (e.g. biodiversity monitoring training costs reduced from £396 to £211 per person, reflecting a shift to refresher training). However, many planned activities could not progress beyond preparatory stages due to delayed permissions, incomplete community engagement and early closure. As a result, several efficiency metrics (e.g. cost per HWC hotspot mitigated, cost per person accessing healthcare) cannot be calculated.

Effectiveness

Effectiveness evidence is partial. Outcome-level indicators could not be reported on at this stage, due to the reasons set out above and because baseline data collection was not completed.

Despite this, the project delivered high-value foundational outputs, including political traction across all three countries, strengthened engagement with COMIFAC, development of the TRIDOM Conservation Strategy, GESI assessments, and environmental monitoring and modelling. These outputs underpin longer-term impact but could not mature into outcome-level results within the shortened delivery window.

Equity

Equity performance is partially demonstrated at output level but not assessable at outcome level. The project had strong GEDSI design and targeting, with equity considerations embedded across governance, health, livelihoods, safeguarding and enforcement activities. Evidence shows meaningful engagement with IPLCs, women and other priority groups, including 2,011 people engaged on inclusive landscape governance, 194 people trained in climate-smart agriculture and market access, GESI assessments in Cameroon and Gabon, and targeted support through livelihood inputs, community consultations, ICCA support and rights-based enforcement training.

However, equity evidence is largely limited to participation, consultation and training metrics. Overall, equity design and targeting were strong, but results remain unproven beyond participation and engagement metrics.

Overall, the evidence shows that the WCB project demonstrated credible early delivery, but insufficient time and scale to realise or evidence the value for money at outcome level anticipated in the business case. However, economy and efficiency were maintained where delivery occurred and the project delivered foundational public goods and learning.

Date of last narrative financial report	March 2026	Date of last audited annual statement	BLF Fund Manager financial monitoring concluded June 2026
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