



Summary of the process

**Evaluation for Non-Reimbursable International
Cooperation in biodiversity and climate change
received by Costa Rica, for the period 2010-2018**

A thematic evaluation from the Global South within the framework of the 2030 Agenda

Summary of the evaluation process for Non-Reimbursable International Cooperation in biodiversity and climate change received by Costa Rica, for the period 2010-2018

This document aims to facilitate understanding of the context around Costa Rica's pioneering thematic evaluation, led by the country, within the framework of the 2030 Agenda. It describes the process of evaluating the Non-Reimbursable International Cooperation received by Costa Rica from 2010 to 2018. The evaluation process began at the end of 2018 and ended with the delivery and approval of the final evaluation report in December 2020. It refers to significant milestones, intermediate products created, and some of the challenges faced and solutions implemented. The evaluation generated some important conclusions and recommendations to improve international cooperation management, align cooperation with targets and guide the results toward sustainability. This information can be found in the evaluation's executive summary.

In parallel to the evaluation implementation, the Focelac project contracted external consultancy to systematise the experience¹ of the evaluation process, in order to identify the main lessons generated during the evaluation that could constitute a route to follow for those who wish to carry out similar evaluations.

1. The context

Since 2015, the Costa Rican government, through the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Policy (Mideplan), has included a National Evaluation Agenda (ANE, from its Spanish abbreviation) within its National Development and Public Investment Plan (PNDIP in Spanish). The ANE sets out strategic public actions that are to be evaluated within the PNDIP period. The actions are selected according to a set of basic criteria that they must fulfil in order to ensure that they not only meet conditions that make it possible to carry out the evaluations (evaluability), but are also strategically relevant to, and align with, the Sustainable Development Goals.

Mideplan, as governing body in the evaluation and the country's international cooperation, included the evaluation of "Non-Reimbursable International Cooperation received by Costa Rica in Biodiversity and Climate Change (NRIC in BioCC), during the period 2010-2018" within the ANE 2019-2022. This evaluation aims to strengthen Costa Rica's commitment to the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation principles and generate evidence to sustain decision-making, and guide decisions, to improve the use of international contributions to the country.

As this was the first thematic evaluation from the ANE, and the first evaluation of NRIC led by a recipient country within the context of the 2030 Agenda, a broad and ambitious scope was defined with many expectations held by institutions with direct involvement and the presidency of the country.

The body in charge of the evaluation management was Mideplan. It was also supported financially and technically by DEval, through the Focelac project, and was carried out between April and December 2020 by the company, Red2Red, with a team from Spain and Costa Rica.

¹ The systematisation of experiences is a methodology that was generated in Latin America in the 1980s that seeks to learn from practice itself and so integrates all stakeholders linked to the process to be systematised.

1.1. Policies and institutions related to biodiversity, climate change and cooperation

Costa Rica is signatory to numerous international agreements and commitments related to sustainable development, biodiversity and climate change. These include:

- 11 international conventions, protocols and agreements that the country adheres to. The oldest, from 1971, is the Convention on Wetlands; the most recent is from 2015, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.
- 5 international agreements in areas of cooperation which include the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The national counterpart to this regulatory body includes:

- The Political Constitution of the Republic, that established in article 50 “...the right to a healthy and ecologically balanced environment”.
- 5 laws and executive decrees on the environment and biodiversity, the oldest from 1977 with regard to national parks.
- Law on National Planning, from 1974, which defines Mideplan as governing body to “...formulate, negotiate, coordinate, approve and evaluate technical support programs, taking into account the objectives in the National Development Plan”.²
- State action, expressed in strategies, political plans and programs.

Key instruments for evaluating NRIC in BioCC can be found within this last group:

- National Development Plans (NDP) for the periods 2011-2014, 2015-2018 and 2019-2022. This last version was created with the SDGs in mind and includes 138 indicators that are directly or indirectly linked to the SDGs defined for Costa Rica.
- Strategies and policies related to biodiversity and climate change. It emphasizes the National Biodiversity Policy 2015-2030, which frames the National Biodiversity Strategy 2016-2025, which establishes Costa Rica’s cooperation priorities in relation to biodiversity.
- The National International Cooperation Policy 2014-2022 and its Action Plan. Mideplan, as internal governing body, coordinates the NDP priorities with cooperation offers, converging in this policy with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the external governing body. It contains strategic guidelines and actions to guide Costa Rica in its international cooperation, both as cooperation provider and recipient.

Costa Rica is classified as an upper-middle income country and the NRIC it has received has gradually decreased over the last twenty years, from 870 million USD in the 1990-1994 presidential period to 362.1 million USD in the 2014-2018 period.³ In the period covered by the evaluation, an approximate total of 500 million USD was contributed to NRIC in biodiversity and climate change. The Ministry of Environment and Energy (MINAE) has been responsible for implementing 62.4% of the cooperation resources received in the period for biodiversity and climate change.

² Regulatory mapping to be considered in the evaluation of Non-Reimbursable International Cooperation in Biodiversity and Climate Change, Costa Rica 2011-2018, p.8.

³ Red2Red. Evaluation of Non-Reimbursable International Cooperation in Biodiversity and Climate Change received by Costa Rica 2010-2018. Final Report, December 2020, p16

In relation to the links between biodiversity and climate change projects and the SDGs: the main connections relate to SDG 13 (Climate action); SDG 15 (Life of terrestrial ecosystems); SDG 12 (responsible production and consumption) and SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation).⁴

Costa Rica and the 2030 Agenda

In 2015, Costa Rica made a commitment to implement the 2030 Agenda and a year later became the first country to establish a national pact to fulfil the SDGs. This commitment was crystallised in September 2016 when the three governmental powers came together with the business chambers, civil society organisations, academic sectors and others. This was a sign that the country had taken on the commitment to fulfil the SDGs under the principle to “not leave anyone behind”.

In 2017, Costa Rica was one of 44 countries to present their Voluntary National Review (VNR) of the Sustainable Development Goals, a monitoring mechanism approved in the 2030 Agenda that countries carry out on a voluntary basis. The report presented a detailed review of the advances obtained by the country in the different SDGs in relation to the 2030 Agenda targets. A second report of this nature was presented in 2020. These expressions of transparency before the country and international community are indicators of the government’s political willingness in this area.

Costa Rica carried out an initial alignment of its development objectives with the SDGs in its NDP 2015-2018. It identified 94 programs and projects being implemented that had links with 169 SDG targets. The NDP 2019-2022 specifies SDG indicators with objectives from the seven presidential strategic areas for the period.

Thus, the country already has instruments that favour the achievement of national development objectives in line with the SDGs and makes explicit its commitment and political willingness to conform to the 2030 Agenda.

1.2 National evaluation policy and instruments

Costa Rica has developed proven evaluation capacities in the public sector thanks to a combination of regulations, instruments and resources aimed at monitoring and evaluating state interventions. Mideplan guides the implementation of the National Evaluation Policy (2018-2030) and coordinates the National Evaluation System, which brings together diverse government authorities. Furthermore, this ministry is in charge of implementing the ANE.

The Directorate of Evaluation and Monitoring within Mideplan is in charge of “developing a culture of monitoring and evaluation within the public sector”, through different lines of activities. The Unit of Evaluation (UEV), the technical arm of the Directorate, offers consultancy in evaluation topics to various public institutions, consultancy that aims to not only solve tasks but also build capacities for public sector evaluation. This Directorate has developed different methodological tools, such as the Evaluation Handbook for Public Interventions (2017) and various practical guides related to evaluation management.

1.3 Focelac

The Focelac project, run by the German Institute of Development Evaluation (DEval), aims to contribute to developing evaluation capacity in Latin America through developing activities at

⁴ Petry, Imre J. Characterisation and behavioural analysis report for non-reimbursable international cooperation in biodiversity and climate change, during the period 2010-2018. September 2019, p26, 35 and 39.

different impact levels (individual, organisation and contextual). This project contributed as a stakeholder that is relevant to this evaluation context due to its contribution to strengthening evaluation capacities in the public sector in general, and more specifically, for its technical and financial support that enabled the NRIC evaluation in BioCC.

1.4 Pandemic

This situation that marked 2020 all around the world, had repercussions on the evaluation's implementation phase. Work methods and tools had to be adapted to the conditions at hand, and the task had to be carried out online. This situation prevented the Evaluation Team (ET) from carrying out its fieldwork in the normal way, reduced the possibility of holding meetings and made direct meetings with the different stakeholders difficult. It also prevented the team from being able to work with everyone involved in Costa Rica.

2. The evaluation

2.1 Background to the evaluation of NRIC in BioCC

In September 2018, Mideplan's Area of International Cooperation (ACI) requested that an evaluation of NRIC in BioCC was included in the ANE 2019-2022. The ACI was responsible for preparing information that reported on the conditions that existed that influenced the ability to carry out the evaluation (evaluability). It also gathered data on cooperation projects related to climate change and biodiversity, and drafted stakeholder mapping to show who should be involved in the evaluation.

2.2 Evaluation preparation (Nov 2018 – Mar 2019)

Once it had been confirmed that the evaluation would be included in the ANE, a process was initiated to form various teams that integrated stakeholders that were relevant in the areas to be evaluated.

- Management team (MT): comprised of leadership from the Evaluation and Monitoring Area and the Area of International Cooperation at Mideplan.
- Technical team (TT): integrated by two people from the ACI, two from UEV, and two people from the Focelac project.
- Wider technical team (WTT): with staff from MINAE, the main recipient of cooperation in BioCC topics. The MINAE authorities represented in the WTT were the Directorate of Climate Change (DCC), the Directorate of International Cooperation (DCI), the Secretariat of Sectoral Planning and the Environment (SEPLASA), the Directorate of Planning and the Office of Cooperation and National System of Conservation Areas Projects (SINAC).

The TT and WTT take on the task of defining the scope, objectives, stakeholders and other aspects of the evaluation. Expertise was shared within the TT and WTT, for some institutions their area of competency was international cooperation (ACI and DCI), others had experience in the two evaluation areas: biodiversity and climate change (DCC, SINAC), and others in evaluation and planning (UEV, Directorate of Planning at MINAE and SEPLASA). A feature shared by all the parties was that they had no prior experience in preparing a thematic evaluation.

Products generated in the preparation stage

At the end of this stage, several products were prepared that were later re-examined during the evaluation design:

- **Stakeholder mapping:** stakeholders related to the evaluation were identified, from both governmental and non-governmental sectors, their reason for being selected was explained as were the roles they would play in the evaluation: informant, technical team or consultant.
- **Regulatory mapping:** related to sustainable development, biodiversity and climate change.
- **Preliminary database:** with the support of two interns, the ACI searched in the SIGECI, using certain search criteria that resulted in 304 projects that could be considered in the evaluation. The ACI used this data to prepare an Excel database built with around 22 variables including those to be used in the evaluation.
- **Basic bibliography** of information sources on evaluation topics. Information was sought in OCDE databases and contacts were made with different authorities linked to biodiversity and climate change.
- **Preliminary sketch of evaluation design:** the evaluation object, scope, objectives and evaluation matrix. These products were at different stages of their elaboration.
- **Analysis of evaluation context.** The information produced in the first few months of the process was gathered and ordered in this document. It was used to attain shared language among the TT and become a reference document for the evaluation team and Focelac team.

2.3 NRIC characterisation study (Mar 2019 – Sept 2019)

After the ACI's first data collection, it became apparent that the SIGEI⁵ information system database, where information was held on projects to be considered in the evaluation, did not respond to all the variables that the evaluation had planned to include. Therefore, the ACI searched for information in state institutions and universities and built a new database adding to the data from the SIGECI. However, the data collected was not considered sufficient for the evaluation use and a characterisation study was commissioned with regard to the NRIC in biodiversity and climate change projects. A characterisation and behavioural analysis study on NRIC in biodiversity and climate change between 2010 and 2018 was therefore carried out through a consultancy firm.

Together with the WTT, various aspects were analysed that the study should contemplate and 25 variables were proposed in order to build the database that would become one of its products.

The proposed objectives for this study were the following:

- Build a database and digital archive on projects benefitting from non-reimbursable international cooperation received by Costa Rica in biodiversity and climate change in the 2010-2018 period; and
- Analyse the behaviour of non-reimbursable international cooperation in the area and period mentioned.

During the drafting of the study, the ACI and MINAE authorities played an important role in identifying information that was necessary for the consultation. This study involved a considerable level of complexity due to the number of variables that were incorporated and the information required for each variable, part of which was difficult to obtain. The period covered began in 2010 and this meant that: there were projects developed with other criteria; sometimes the people who

⁵ International Cooperation Management System (SIGECI) at Mideplan's Area of International Cooperation.

were in charge of feeding the databases could no longer be located; there were databases built with technology that was no longer in use. Furthermore, the authorities assigned for this function did not always possess the project information that they were supposed to have.

According to the consultant, the supporting documentation for the projects was sparse, fragmented and of low quality. In the consultant's opinion, a lot of information on international cooperation projects does not get to the ACI because there is no incentive for the institutions to follow through with this step; on the contrary, it involves more work for them.

Products generated in the characterisation study stage

- **Database** with information on 219 projects according to variables required for the evaluation
- **Guide for periodic update** to the database
- **Analysis of the trends** with regard to the NRIC in BioCC which includes linking the projects to the SDGs.

2.4 Evaluation design (Sept 2019 - Feb 2020)

The TT carried out a preliminary design of the biodiversity and climate change ToC, as a baseline input for delimiting the evaluation scope and as a starting point for the evaluator team. These ToC were viewed by the WTT and by experts in both topics. The exercise was useful for setting boundaries around the evaluation complexity.

Taking the ToC and the NRIC behavioural study final report as inputs, the TT elaborated a detailed evaluation matrix and ToR so that an evaluator team could be contracted to carry out the evaluation. Both products were viewed by the WTT. The ToR anticipated contracting an evaluation team with three members: a coordinator, an expert in biodiversity and climate change, and an expert in evaluation.

The ToR were an object of debate and negotiation between the ACI and UEV and there were different viewpoints with respect to the evaluation matrix and the formulation of the evaluation team. Some of the points of debate were:

- Topics that would be covered in the evaluation matrix: it was acknowledged that the evaluation covered various topics in a very broad manner. The WTT pointed out that most of the projects were related to climate change and suggested therefore that the evaluation should concentrate on this topic which was already extensive as it covered projects related to adaptation and mitigation among others. The suggestion was not taken on board.
- Evaluation of the SDGs: for the ACI, the priority was to evaluate the NRIC in BioCC for the period 2011-2018, and not the SDGs. However, the Technical Datasheet⁶ which inscribed the evaluation into the ANE linked it to SDGs 7, 13, 14 and 15.
- The evaluator team profile: the ACI considered that the evaluator team should be coordinated by an international cooperation expert as the evaluation was centred around this topic. The UEV preferred the profile of evaluator to handle a thematic evaluation as it

⁶ This refers to the datasheet that has to be presented to the UEV by authorities interested in getting an intervention evaluated within the framework of the ANE. This datasheet includes information on links with SDGs, the participation of different stakeholders, the availability of information to carry out evaluation, among others.

considered that although the profiles are a guide, it is the market that finally conditions the choice of consultant. It is not common for an exact profile to respond to a tender.

- Formulating the ToR took longer than was expected and this generated time pressure that affected subsequent steps in the evaluation process, including selecting the evaluation team. The evaluation could not be extended beyond December 2020, due to the fact that the financial resources available could not be used after this date. Furthermore, the fact that the evaluation could not be extended beyond December, given the financing conditions on the part of Focelac and the WTT calendar, the deadline could not be extended to allow for a more exhaustive selection.

This stage came to an end when the evaluation team was contracted after a selection process which also involved new areas of negotiation among the TT. In the end, the company Red2Red was contracted, with a team composed of two evaluation experts and an expert in BioCC.

2.5 Evaluation Implementation (Mar – Dec 2020)

At the precise moment when the ET selection and contracting was formalised, the global context changed radically due to the spread of COVID-19 which had now turned into a pandemic. The conditions for carrying out an evaluation became extremely difficult, and there were even moments when delaying it altogether was considered, but in the end it was adapted to use online methods. This fact surely influenced the evaluation development.

Methodological proposal and work plan (Mar – May 20)

After an intense exchange between the TT and ET, the work plan and methodological proposal was approved in April. The ET suggested an evaluation design using an exploratory evaluation perspective, specifying that “it should not be limited to assessing one specific reality but should, at least to a certain extent, “construct” this reality first and then evaluate it. This is because, among other factors, it was the first evaluation to take place within the field of International Cooperation and there are certain characteristics or behaviours in this reality that have not yet been analysed”.⁷ As it deals with inductive logic, the sequence proposed for the “course of action” was the following: What is there → What is it like → Hypothesis → Contrast → Assessment.

Furthermore, the methodological proposal had an open-ended focus, and so, according to the ET “the complexity of the analysed topic and current circumstances means that we recommend leaving final details, regarding the way it will be implemented, until later as these details will be more easily established as the work progresses”.⁸ This made it possible to introduce various adjustments to the original work plan, but at the same time, it created a more difficult path for the TT and for the UEV coordinating the process as it required greater levels of time and energy.

The methodological proposal included the use of a set of tools, depending on the possibilities enabled by the pandemic context: documentary analysis, interviews, focus groups, group interviews, case studies, online questionnaire and observation.

Fieldwork (Jun - Nov 2020)

From mid-May to 23 June 2020, the ET dedicated itself to three activities: documentary analysis, database searches and, with these inputs, the preparation of interview models. During the month

⁷ Red2Red Consultants, Evaluation of NRIC in Biodiversity and Climate Change in Costa Rica. Revised Work Plan, 30/04/20, p5.

⁸ Idem, p7.

of June, there was intense interaction between the ET and TT around the topic of reviewing and adjusting the interview models to be used with: authorities integrated in the WTT, donors and implementation institutions. Each draft is reviewed and receives observations from the TT members.

In the period beginning 23 June 2020, 22 of the 30 programmed interviews are carried out, most with MINAE authorities. This initial round provided inputs that could be used for project analysis and a sample preparation.

In its first progress report, the ET expressed some doubts with respect to the future of the work: "...it remains somewhat unclear how some of the so-called main areas of analysis will be responded to...", as this is a "very ambitious" evaluation. Later, it states: "...there still remain doubts around whether or not a sufficiently rigorous and complete response can be provided."

The ET tried to select the sample in an attempt to ensure that: "...it was proportional to the presence of the main variables in the database." But this was not feasible due to the large quantity of variables which had to be included in the selection. The decision was made to carry out the selection according to the main areas of analysis, crossed by a number of more general criteria that should feature in a global sample. Projects that were addressed in the interviews were also added to this selection, resulting in 37 projects.

When the EE used the databases to review the projects, it found "*significant weaknesses*" in all projects' available supporting documentation and this would weaken the analysis in some cases. The EE was able to partially address the main areas of analysis with the information it was able to extract.

In the first few months of the fieldwork, the ET encountered various difficulties in being able to give "... a sufficiently rigorous and complete response" to the main areas of analysis. Therefore, in September a "re-working of the main areas of analysis was suggested in order to adjust the rest of the evaluation to the remaining time and the specific conditions in which this exercise was being carried out. The objective, as the TT was reminded in the last meeting held, is to guarantee responses to the seven evaluation questions requested in the ToR".⁹

The main point of the proposal was to substitute the evaluation matrix included in March's work plan, which had been elaborated using suggestions from the TT in the ToR. The suggestion was to replace it with a matrix designed around the seven evaluation questions and organised into four columns:

- Evaluation questions
- Evaluation sub-questions
- Indicators
- Information sources.

The data collection tools were also redefined:

- Online questionnaire directed at the people responsible for the projects selected. However, the contact details for the person responsible was not always available.

⁹ Red2Red Consultants, Second progress report, 07/09/20, p2.

- Focus groups. Two with representatives from the projects and one with the WTT. Each addressing different topics, one on NRIC support, the second on the cooperation results and the third, with a more intense agenda, on project and approach sustainability¹⁰.
- Online sessions to contrast with the ET assessment of the Theories of Change prepared by the TT.
- Case study analysis, applied to eight projects that were selected taking into account the main areas of analysis.
- Brief in-depth interviews with people linked to the 19 selected projects using the documentary analysis carried out and integrating the different areas of analysis.

In this stage, Red2Red integrated two more evaluators into the team to support the implementation of the rest of the work, following the new direction, in the little time that was left to finish the evaluation.

The tools suggested for information gathering in this last stage performed well despite the fact that there were some difficulties to find space in calendars due to the time of the year:

- The online questionnaire was answered by 67% of those it was sent to.
- The three focus groups attained good levels of participation with the exception of one.
- 15 interviews were carried out with representatives from 13 projects.
- Case study analysis was carried out for the 8 projects selected.

The TT and ET organised sessions for monitoring and product review:

- Every six weeks during the first months of the fieldwork.
- In October, the last monitoring session was held.
- In November, validation of the evaluation's findings was carried out, with the TT, WTT and ET present.
- At the end of November, the preliminary report written by the ET, with participation from the TT, was presented.
- In December, the final report was submitted with the observations integrated.
- In January and February 2021, three results presentation sessions were delivered to different stakeholders that were interested in the evaluation.

2.6 Communication and use (Jan – Jul 2021)

The results of the evaluation were presented in the three different sessions. The first session was delivered to the TT and WTT, followed by a session for leaders of institutions linked to the topic, and finally to members of the general public interested in the topic. When the institutional leaders and international cooperation authority stakeholders received the results, they made commitments to review and implement the recommendations.

Mideplan has an instrument for monitoring and supporting the stakeholders responsible for using evaluation results. This step will take place in the first half of 2021. To date, the relevant decision makers have had four multi-stakeholder sessions to define an action plan using the recommendations and assign specific tasks.

¹⁰ According to the document, these approaches were re-worked: "Factors that make it difficult for the different stakeholders to participate in the different stages of the project. Factors that make it difficult to incorporate the gender approach into the different stages of the project".

In addition to the evaluation's final presentations, Mideplan presented an analysis on the process at the International Evaluation Conference, held in Mexico in March 2021 and it has already presented panel proposals for the European Evaluation Society Conference 2021, and the What Works Global Summit 2021.

It is also worth mentioning that the lessons identified from systematising the evaluation process, have been published and distributed among the stakeholders who participated in the process and others interested in carrying out similar evaluations.