

Self-evaluation

A POWERFUL TOOL FOR IMPROVING CONSERVATION IMPACT

True impact in conservation is not achieved by scoring achievements and writing success stories, but by critically assessing effectiveness and adapting strategies accordingly.

By relying on a process of genuine self-reflection, the MAVA Foundation helps its grantees boost their effectiveness and strengthen the partnership of collaborating teams. As grantees can rest assured of continued funding independently of the evaluation outcome, they have a safe space to draw their own conclusions.

MAVA strongly believes in this approach of approving funding and asking for internal evaluation, as it leads to transparent communication with grantees and the assurance that the grant is used in the best way possible. The approach provides a way of simultaneously evaluating and improving the impact of the conservation projects MAVA funds.



A self-evaluation story

In 2016, after ten years of dedicated conservation work by the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme, MAVA asked the team to undergo an internal evaluation process, in order to understand the achievements and impact of their work and to bring this understanding into the design of the next programme phase. MAVA had granted the follow-up funding for the next programme period irrespective of the evaluation results. Thanks to this, the team was free to perform a truly transparent review. In the role of external facilitator, FOS Europe provided methodological and process guidance, navigating the team through the self-evaluation process described on the next page.

The Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme (BLRP)

is a transboundary conservation programme, working to recover a viable population of the critically endangered Balkan Lynx (*Lynx lynx balcanicus*). It is implemented by a partnership of NGOs:

- Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania (PPNEA)
- Macedonian Ecological Society (MES), North Macedonia
- Environmentally Responsible Action Group (ERA), Kosovo
- KORA (Carnivore Ecology and Wildlife Management), Switzerland
- EuroNatur, Germany

... in collaboration with Center for Protection and Research of Birds of Montenegro (CZIP) and Finch from Kosovo between 2013 and 2018. The BLRP has received funding from the MAVA Foundation since its beginning in 2006.

Photo © PPNEA

Process

The self-evaluation process was based on the Conservation Standards and structured into three steps:

1. Collectively agree on a Theory of Change to create a clear framework for the programme's actions.

The team quickly reached consensus for most Theories of Change. But when discussing their strategy of empowering local communities to co-manage natural resources, it became clear that there were very different views within the team on the expected outcomes of this strategy, as well as on how it was expected to achieve those outcomes.



We are very grateful that MAVA gave us the chance to do this self-evaluation. It was not easy, but we are happy that the process gave us the insight needed to be more effective.

– The BLRP Team

Lukova lake in an important Balkan lynx area in Albania. Photo © PPNEA

2. Concretise the Theories of Change into specific expected results, and use data to assess whether goals and objectives have been achieved.

The work with local communities was one of the core programme strategies and brought multiple benefits. It had served – through the delivery of grants – to raise the project management capacities of local NGOs, and empower these communities to implement small projects for natural resource use, education, and the conservation and promotion of natural heritage. It had also helped to build a constituency for the work on the Balkan Lynx conservation and a trustworthy relationship with the local communities, which is crucial for protecting the species in the long term.

At the same time, the evaluation showed that the efforts had not led to the intended result of establishing alternative sustainable land-use practices owned and implemented by the local communities.

3. Ask questions and look at data to answer them, in order to increase collective understanding of the assumptions in the Theories of Change. Use the insights gained when designing the next phase.

Even though the team agreed on the importance of working with local communities, they took the difficult decision to leave this core strategy out of the next programme phase. The critical self-evaluation process had helped the team draw their own conclusions about the effectiveness of the strategy, and thus prepared them for the decision, in spite of having had heavily invested in the work.

Benefits & Learnings

This self-evaluation process was carried out by a highly dedicated team, committed to understanding the impact of its work and prepared to look in the mirror. Without doubt, the process was heavy in terms of preparation, intensive discussions, and tough decisions. Indeed, critical self-evaluation is typically more demanding than external evaluation.

However, the payoff is much higher, as teams and partners are pushed to find common ground regarding what the partnership wants to achieve and how to do it. An open, evidence-based discussion about the effectiveness of interventions lets teams draw their own conclusions, building a strong basis for objective decision-making on the future direction of interventions. For the BLRP team, it increased the cohesiveness of the partnership, incited a cultural shift from assessing progress to assessing effectiveness, and helped refine their strategies.

The support of a professional coach proved to be crucial for facilitating the process and the discussions. This is especially true when a team embarks on this journey of self-evaluation for the first time.

But most important of all, self-evaluation needs to be honest. Having assurance on continued funding of the next programme period is essential for encouraging an open and critical discussion on what the programme has achieved and what it has not, why that is so, and what to do about it.

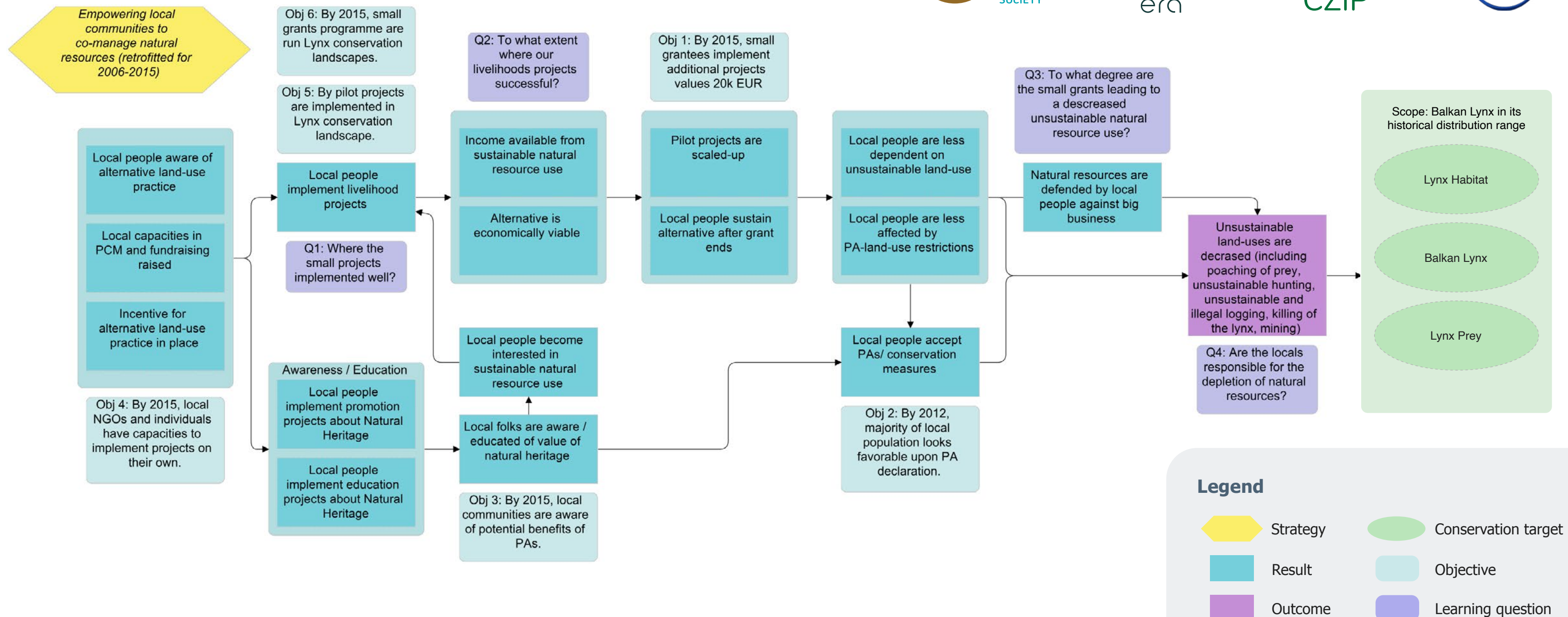
The Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation (Conservation Standards) build a framework and include a set of best practices for conservation planning and management. They explicitly incorporate the principles of collaboration, evidence-based conservation, and adaptive management. They are developed by the Conservation Measures Partnership (CMP), a global partnership of conservation organisations committed to increasing the impact of conservation.

Theory of Change for the strategy of empowering local communities in the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme

This strategy was aimed at **decreasing unsustainable natural resource use in local communities** in Balkan Lynx habitat areas. The BLRP team had implemented a small grants programme to provide incentives and raise awareness for alternative land-use practices but also to increase the acceptance of restrictions in land-use due to (potential) protected areas. In total, they had awarded 81 small grants to local NGOs for pilot projects related to livelihoods, education, and conservation and promotion of natural heritage. The plan was to scale up successful pilot projects in order to achieve a bigger impact.

A **Theory of Change (TOC)** explains how a team thinks that their action(s) will lead to the expected outcomes and the desired conservation impact.

Note: The content of this example has been simplified for learning purposes.



Evaluating the strategy of empowering local communities in the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme

During the self-evaluation process, the team assessed whether the objectives in the Theory of Change had been reached, posed questions about the assumptions contained in the strategy, and then used data to answer those questions.

Note: The content of this example has been simplified for learning purposes.

Question 1: Were the small grant projects implemented well?

Most small grant projects had been implemented according to plan. However, there were fewer livelihood projects than education, conservation and promotion projects, shifting the focus away from alternative livelihoods. While the projects had helped raise the general project management skills of the local NGOs, more training would have been needed to scale up the pilot projects.

Conclusions

The team could not demonstrate that the strategy led to decreasing unsustainable land-uses. In order to verify the assumptions and show that objectives had been reached, closer monitoring of project results and more data on the site-specific causes of depletion would have been needed. The unintended shift of focus from livelihood projects to education and promotion projects meant that there had been less emphasis on the key part of the strategy.

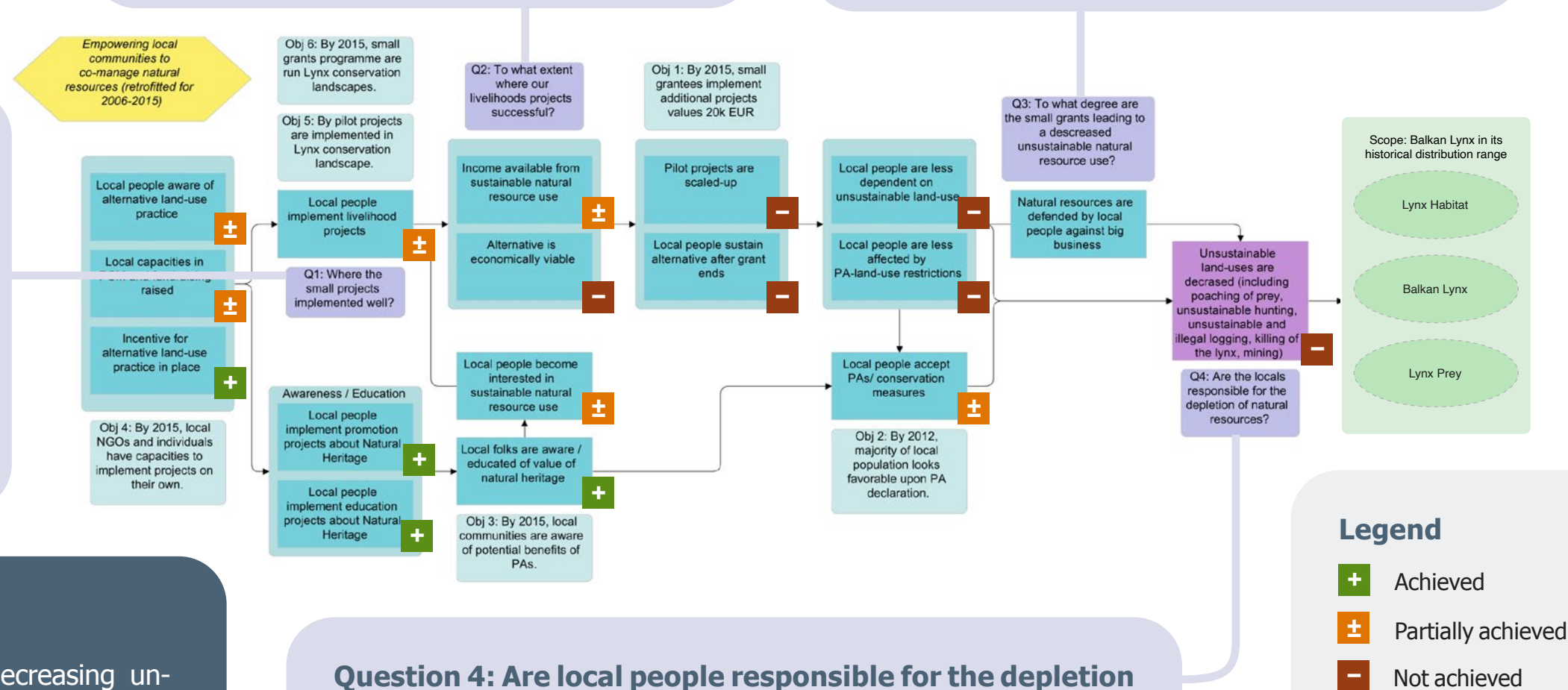
Even though the strategy had been crucial for local capacity building, building local constituency for Balkan Lynx conservation, and empowering local communities, the team concluded that as the strategy was not showing the desired results, they would not continue working on it.

Question 2: To what extent were our livelihood projects successful?

The team did not have enough data to determine how much the livelihood projects had increased the income from natural resource use. The income increase reported by some pilot projects was not deemed big enough for scaling up the projects.

Question 3: To what degree are the small grants leading to a decreased unsustainable natural resource use?

The team could not determine that there had been a decrease in unsustainable natural resource use since the programme had started. Therefore, it was not possible to show that the implemented livelihood projects had led to the desired impact.



Question 4: Are local people responsible for the depletion of natural resources?

The team had scarce evidence to assess whether local people are causing natural resource depletion. Based on individual observations, they concluded that external actors generally contribute more to natural resource depletion than local people do. This is supported by the lack of national policies for sustainable natural resource use. Instead, they found that local people have a genuine interest in protecting the natural resources on which they depend.