Lessons for Climate and Nature Programming in Africa

The Africa Regional Climate and Nature Programme (ARCAN) has supported a range of existing multi-partner initiatives in sectors most affected by climate change since 2022.

With International Climate Finance (ICF) funding of over £100 million, ARCAN has been a key vehicle to meet the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) ICF commitments in Africa. Ecorys (with support from Altai and IIED) has been contracted as ARCAN's independent Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Unit.

The 2025 Midline Evaluation of ARCAN is based on document review and interviews with FCDO staff (Phase 1) and subsequently, six case studies designed to address priority evidence gaps (Phase 2). The evaluation draws lessons on key themes from the portfolio of seven programmes: CIWA[1], FFF[2], CAFI[3], SRMI[4], SEFA[5], AAAP[6] and WISER[7] – grouped into five pillars covering Transboundary Water, Nature and Biodiversity, Energy, Climate Finance and Policy and Weather and Climate Information Services. These lessons are set out below.

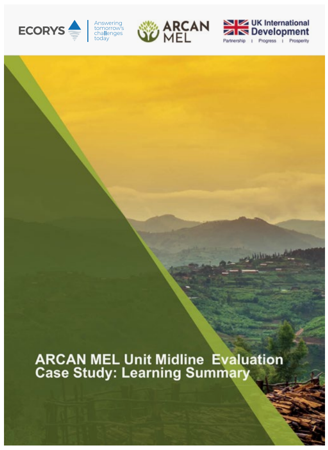
Key findings

Mobilising Private Climate Investment

Attracting private capital for climate projects in Africa is no small feat. Investors are wary of volatile markets, unpredictable regulation, and the simple fact that many projects take years to mature. Yet when returns look steady and someone else is willing to shoulder the early risks, money does begin to move. ARCAN's programmes span the full spectrum: some, like FFF and SEFA, try to coax private firms directly into the fray; others, such as AAAP and CIWA, work mainly by nudging multilateral development banks toward climate-savvy investment.

Results have been mixed. FFF has had success encouraging private finance for sustainable agroecological enterprises in Asia and Latin America, where markets are deeper and smallholder enterprises better supported. Africa, however, remains a tougher environment. In Kenya, for example, FFF's local teams sensibly focused on helping established cash-crop farmers expand their businesses – an easier win than trying to overhaul farming systems wholesale. But this pragmatic approach came with trade-offs: it favoured older, relatively wealthier men and did little to build resilience among poorer farmers. Focusing on proven areas is a good route to scaling but additionality needs to be demonstrated. When aid budgets tighten, the temptation is to chase quick gains rather than long-term transformation. The costs of doing so – reduced inclusion, weaker resilience – tend to emerge only later.

SEFA provides a contrast. Its backing of two investment platforms – the COVID-19 Off-Grid Recovery Platform and the AfricaGoGreen Fund – has shown how smartly designed blended finance can keep companies afloat and attract new investors. During the pandemic, concessional lending helped renewable-energy firms survive a cash crunch that would otherwise have wiped out large chunks of the sector. Crucially, SEFA's willingness to absorb early losses allowed private lenders to step in later. In the case of AGGF, SEFA's junior equity helped bring in more confident senior capital and lower the overall cost of finance. Neither initiative is a silver bullet, and both still face obstacles – from thin equity markets to macroeconomic fragility – but they offer a blueprint for how public capital can coax private investment off the sidelines.



The broader lesson is clear: blended finance works best when donors accept that risk cannot be eliminated but can be redistributed sensibly. Africa's clean-energy markets remain young and vulnerable, yet early signs suggest that well-designed interventions can help promising firms survive long enough to attract commercial capital.

Localisation

Localisation shifts power, funding, and decision-making from international organisations to local actors. In this evaluation, three aspects of localisation were found to be particularly important in driving results. These involved the formation of local partnerships, better analysis of the local context and turning learning into local institutional capacity.

Local Partnerships

Development agencies have long advocated local partnerships. ARCAN's portfolio shows why. Whether it is CAFI forging political buy-in at the highest levels of Congo Basin governments or CIWA helping neighbours manage shared aquifers, the most durable gains come when local actors see reforms as their own.

The same is true at smaller scales. Forest-and-farm producer organisations rely on trust built over years, not months. GCA's collaboration with the University of Nairobi has lent credibility – and staying power – to work on climate-resilient infrastructure. When partnerships align around a shared vision, clear roles and mutual respect, they tend to flourish.

But partnership-building takes time, and many organisations find it difficult. Established players such as the FCDO can draw on long-standing networks; nimbler outfits like GCA often struggle without the luxury of multi-year horizons. The risks of thin partnership networks are evident in Tanzania's climate-resilient rail efforts, where good ideas still outpace the institutional alliances needed to implement them. Even WISER, one of the more mature initiatives, has found that integrating weather and climate services into broader economic systems requires a decade of steady relationship-building.

Political economy analysis, advocacy and influencing the enabling environment

Good policy rarely emerges from technical reports alone. Many ARCAN programmes assume they can influence laws, budgets or planning processes – but often without stating clearly how this will happen or what conditions must hold for success. These invisible assumptions can create blind spots. When things stall, it is hard to know whether the theory was wrong or the execution flawed.

More explicit political-economy analysis would help. CIWA's work in Kenya's Turkana region illustrates the pitfalls. World Bank-backed water schemes assumed communities would repay operational costs, despite evidence from other NGOs that the model was unworkable in this context. A cross-subsidy system – as used in Namibia, for example, – might have been more realistic, but would require navigating fraught national politics. Such tensions are not unique; they are the norm in development programmes that hinge on institutional reform but underinvest in understanding domestic politics.

Funders, too, can do better. Business cases often over-estimate the likelihood that influencing strategies will work. Implementing partners should be asked not just to map stakeholders but to show why they are well-placed to persuade them – and how progress will be tracked and corrected over time.

Learning and Capacity Development

Learning, like partnership, is a core objective. But translating insights into lasting institutional capacity is challenging. ARCAN's experience suggests that the difference between real learning and box-ticking is often down to incentives.

There are examples of genuine progress. GCA's collaboration with the University of Nairobi builds on early lessons from Ghana, creating a replicable model for strengthening local technical expertise. WISER has experimented with participatory climate-information services and used feedback loops to refine tools and improve community uptake.

Elsewhere, learning has struggled to travel from headquarters to the field. CIWA's work on groundwater produced sensible guidelines on topics such as conflict sensitivity and rangeland management, yet evidence from Turkana suggests these were not consistently applied.

The broader lesson is that technical knowledge is necessary but insufficient. Systems must reward staff for applying lessons, adapting approaches and closing feedback loops – not simply producing reports.

The Role of GEDSI in Delivering Outcomes and VfM

Gender equality, disability inclusion and broader social equity (GEDSI) are often afterthoughts, but the evaluation shows they are central to whether projects deliver successful support and value for money. CAFI illustrates the risks of ignoring them. Although gender assessments and data-disaggregation have improved, many actions remain symbolic rather than transformative. Projects often fail to consider the different needs of marginalised groups – despite clear evidence that sustainable forest management hinges on understanding who controls land, who benefits from resources and who is left out.

The consequences of weak GEDSI analysis can be serious. While not CIWA-funded, poorly designed groundwater interventions in the Horn of Africa have fuelled local conflict when communities felt excluded. CIWA supported local interventions in this area that fail to apply GEDSI guidelines run the risk of repeating this mistake. In Kenya's FFF programme, women-led organisations – often highly entrepreneurial but poorly connected to finance – received too little attention, weakening both equity and economic returns.

A recurring pattern indicates that programmes that treat inclusion as a compliance task tend to overlook the deeper structural inequalities that shape climate vulnerability. Those that take inclusion seriously are more likely to deliver resilient outcomes.

Meaningfully Assessing Impact and Transformational Change

In the race to show results, many climate programmes report substantial numbers – billions expected to be 'mobilised', millions expected to be 'reached'. Yet these headline figures often blur the difference between money pledged and money actually spent, or between projected and genuine impact, and do nothing to assess the sometimes small contribution of the programme. Evaluations of CIWA and AAAP show how risks, delays and political constraints can quietly reduce these numbers.

A more grounded approach would focus on what really shifts systems: whether incentives have changed, whether institutions behave differently and whether innovations are spreading without donor nudges. ARCAN's modified transformational-change framework does this. Rather than looking at broad claims it examines 'signals' – modest signs that new practices are taking root.

Across the portfolio, these signals are uneven. SEFA's energy investments have stabilised firms but they still face barriers to scale. FFF Kenya has strengthened producer groups but lacks the policy impact for deeper reform. CAFI has political momentum in the Congo Basin but weak follow-through. AAAP's promising NbS work remains fragile until embedded in domestic systems. CIWA's groundwater efforts show strong upstream coordination but weaker implementation on the ground. WISER has made notable progress in institutionalising climate-information services, though long-term funding remains a challenge.

In the bigger picture, transformation is possible, but only when political alignment, institutional capacity and sustainable financing move together. Most programmes are partway there – but not yet fully.

Footnotes

1 **Cooperation in International Waters in Africa (CIWA)** is a World Bank-managed multi-donor trust fund that helps Sub-Saharan African countries cooperatively manage shared water resources. It aims to boost sustainable growth and climate resilience by facilitating data, building regional institutions, and enabling investments in water-related infrastructure across borders.

2 **Forest and Farm Facility (FFF)** is a multi-donor trust fund led by a partnership between FAO, IIED, IUCN and AgriCord. FFF provides direct financial support and technical assistance to strengthen forest and farm producer organizations (FFPOs) representing smallholders, rural women's groups, local communities and indigenous peoples' institutions. FFF strengthens FFPOs to secure their rights, organise their businesses, sustainably manage their forests, and provide social and cultural services to the poor and marginalised.

3 **Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI)** is a UNDP-led multi-donor trust fund. Through high-level policy dialogue combined with a portfolio of enabling, reform and large-scale investments project, CAFI supports its 6 partner countries – Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and the Republic of Congo to implement the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, fight poverty and develop sustainably, and fulfil the post-2020 biodiversity framework.

4 **Sustainable Renewables Risk Mitigation Initiative (SRMI)** is a partnership led by the World Bank's Energy Sector Management Assistance Program (ESMAP). SRMI provides technical assistance, concessional funding for targeted public investments, and innovative risk mitigation instruments, to mitigate private-sector risks while reducing public-sector exposure.

5 **Sustainable Energy Fund for Africa (SEFA)** is a multi-donor Special Fund managed by the African Development Bank. It provides catalytic finance to unlock private sector investments in renewable energy and energy efficiency across Africa.

6 **The Africa Adaptation Acceleration Program (AAAP)** is a joint initiative of the African Development Bank and the Global Center on Adaptation (GCA). It aims to mobilize $25 billion, over five years, to accelerate and scale climate adaptation action across the continent. AAAP consists of two financing mechanisms: the Upstream Financing Facility (UFF) managed by GCA and the Climate Action Window (CAW) managed under the AfDB's African Development Fund (ADF). The UK has provided funding to the AAAP UFF through ARCAN since 2023, which is earmarked for work under its Pillar 2: Infrastructure and Nature-based Solutions and Pillar 4: Adaptation Finance.

7 **Weather and Climate Information Services (WISER)** is 100% UK funded and led by the UK Met Office. WISER supports the provision of useful, usable and used weather and climate services for communities who are disproportionately impacted by extreme weather, seasonal variability and a changing climate across Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, and Asia Pacific. It prioritises consideration of how and where forecasts can inform decisions that can ultimately protect lives and livelihoods, and compliment ongoing partner activities.

The Midline Evaluation Summary Report and full case studies will be available at: DevTracker Programme GB-GOV-1-300808 Documents and the Ecorys website at: World-class research-based consultancy | Ecorys

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