

Rapid Review: Blue Planet Fund

Approach Summary Paper

September 2023

1. Introduction

The rapid review of the Blue Planet Fund will build on ICAI’s previous scrutiny of UK aid funding for climate and nature, in particular the 2019 review *International Climate Finance: UK aid for low-carbon development* and the 2021 review *International climate finance: UK aid for halting deforestation and preventing irreversible biodiversity loss*.¹ The previous reviews examined issues under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 15 on ‘Life on land’, while this rapid review will complement these by focusing on marine protection and conservation, in connection with SDG 14, ‘Life below water’.²

2. Background

In January 2021, the UK government announced plans for a new £500 million Blue Planet Fund to support developing countries to reduce poverty through the protection and sustainable management of the marine environment. The announcement was part of a promise to “commit at least £3 billion to climate change solutions that protect and restore nature”, through an existing £11.6 billion commitment for international climate finance.³

The Blue Planet Fund was launched in June 2021 and will run for at least five years. It is jointly managed by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), with Defra as the strategic lead. The Fund’s aim is to support a range of programmes at bilateral and multilateral level to work across four areas: marine biodiversity, climate change, marine pollution, and sustainable seafood. So far, the Blue Planet Fund has launched ten programmes. A further two programmes were launched and later folded under one of the ten.

The Blue Planet Fund supports the delivery of the UK government’s *Integrated review*⁴ and the *2022 Strategy for international development*,⁵ both of which list tackling climate change and biodiversity loss among the government’s top international priorities. The Fund contributes to the UK’s Global Ocean Alliance commitment to protect at least 30% of the world’s oceans by 2030,⁶ and to the Commonwealth Clean Ocean Alliance’s commitment to stop plastic pollution entering the ocean.⁷ It supports delivery of the December 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030,⁸ as well as SDG 13 to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, and SDG 14 to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, sea and marine resources for sustainable development.

3. Purpose and scope

The Blue Planet Fund is the main vehicle for UK official development assistance support to tackle key marine environment issues. It is one of several cross-government funds created in recent years to target development

1 See *International Climate Finance: UK aid for low-carbon development*, Independent Commission for Aid Impact, February 2019, [link](#) and *International climate finance: UK aid for halting deforestation and preventing irreversible biodiversity loss*, Independent Commission for Aid Impact, July 2021, [link](#).

2 See The Global Goals website: SDG 14 Life below water, [link](#); SDG15 Life on land, [link](#).

3 *Prime Minister commits £3bn UK climate finance to supporting nature*, Prime Minister’s Office, press release, 11 January 2021, [link](#).

4 *Global Britain in a competitive age: the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy*, Cabinet Office, March 2021, [link](#).

5 *UK government’s strategy for international development*, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, May 2022, [link](#).

6 *Global Ocean Alliance: 30by30 initiative*, UK government, accessed February 2023, [link](#).

7 *Commonwealth unites to end scourge of plastic*, Department for International Development and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, press release, 15 April 2018, [link](#).

8 *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework*, Convention on Biological Diversity, Dec 2022, [link](#).

challenges while drawing on the skills and expertise available across the UK government.⁹ After about two years of the Fund’s operations, in March 2023, ICAI launched work on an information note on the Fund’s evolution, describing its systems and processes and early portfolio. In July 2023, ICAI decided to update the scope from an information note to a rapid review, with the main difference that the rapid review will come to evaluative judgments and provide recommendations to the UK government. This was agreed with the International Development Committee. This approach summary paper outlines the scope, review questions, methodology and timeline for the rapid review. The review will build on work done so far in terms of evidence collected.

4. Review questions

The rapid review is built around the evaluation criteria of **relevance**, **coherence** and **effectiveness**. It will address the following questions: (i) the **relevance** of the Blue Planet Fund through an analysis of governing policies and strategies, paying particular attention to how the Fund responds to developing country needs as part of meeting the UK’s wider international climate finance objectives; (ii) the **coherence** and coordination of programme delivery within and between the two departments; and (iii) whether it has the governance arrangements, systems and procedures to allocate its funds **effectively** in support of its objectives. The review questions are set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Our review questions

Review criteria and questions
Relevance: How relevant is the Blue Planet Fund to developing country needs as part of meeting the UK’s international climate finance objectives?
Coherence: How coherent and coordinated is the Fund within and across the two departments (Defra and FCDO)?
Effectiveness: Are the systems, controls and procedures of the Blue Planet Fund adequate to ensure effective and efficient programming and good value for money?

5. Methodology

The review methodology has three main components, each used to inform and triangulate findings in the others. For each of the three, some of the evidence gathering and analysis has already been conducted, as part of the planned information note on the Blue Planet Fund:

- 1. Strategic review:** We will review documentation relevant for the Blue Planet Fund’s establishment and operation, including relevant policies, strategies, frameworks and coordination mechanisms. We will also review wider strategies, to analyse how the Fund fits within and supports the UK’s international climate finance. Finally, we will review key Blue Planet Fund documents covering the funding approach at portfolio and programme levels, and results management.
- 2. Key informant interviews:** We will conduct interviews with staff from the Fund across both Defra and FCDO. These will cover key themes such as the Fund’s direction and operations, including strategy, governance and management processes; funding decision making, including the approval process, procurement and contracting processes; the Fund’s results management; and the shape and coherence of the Fund’s emerging portfolio. Coordination, communication and coherence across departments and countries will also be considered.
- 3. Country case studies:** We will explore the Blue Planet Fund’s relevance, coherence and effectiveness through its investments and programming in two developing countries – Fiji and Mozambique. The country case studies will involve review of relevant country and programme documents, and virtual interviews with

⁹ For example the Newton Fund, ICAI, 2019, [link](#); the original International Climate Fund (now finance), ICAI, 2014, [link](#); the former Global Challenges Research Fund, ICAI, 2017, [link](#); and the former Prosperity Fund, ICAI, 2017, [link](#); Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, ICAI, 2018, [link](#).

delivery partners from selected countries as well as UK staff in post to triangulate data. Fiji and Mozambique were selected based on the following criteria: regional diversity; a high number of Blue Planet Fund programmes in the country; a good balance between bilateral and multilateral spend; and the presence of UK staff in post.

6. Risk management

We propose the following risk mitigation strategies for this rapid review:

Risks	Mitigation
The review’s timeline may be affected if Blue Planet Fund departments do not share additional documentation or provide access for interviews in time.	The review will build as much as possible on material already received from the government for the planned information note. The ICAI secretariat will work closely with departments to facilitate and ensure timely information sharing of new requested material.
The Blue Planet Fund’s programmes are relatively young and some programmes are just starting, which can pose a challenge to assessing effectiveness at the programme level.	The review will look at whether the Blue Planet Fund’s systems and procedures, including investment decisions and the composition of the emerging portfolio, are set up to achieve effective programming and value for money. It will not, however, seek to draw conclusions on the effectiveness of any individual programme funded by the Blue Planet Fund.

Risks will be reviewed on a regular basis and any mitigating actions will be adjusted as the operating environment changes or if any new risks emerge.

7. Quality assurance

The review will be carried out under the guidance of ICAI Lead Commissioner Tarek Rouchdy, with support from the ICAI secretariat. The review will be subject to quality assurance by the service provider.

The final report will be peer-reviewed by Professor Pierre Failler, Director of the Centre for Blue Governance, University of Portsmouth, with particular expertise on the blue economy.

8. Timeline

The rapid review was launched in August 2023, building on work and data collection done in the previous four months for the previously planned information note. Publication is expected in November 2023.