Enabel

Executive summary

Strategic Evaluation Sahel Climate Thematic Portfolio (SCTP)

Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger Sénégal

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Presentation of the evaluation

The Sahel Climate Thematic Portfolio (SCTP) originated from an Enabel initiative to develop a multi-country approach, and from a political decision (2021) by the Belgian Minister of Cooperation, who asked Enabel to develop a regional thematic response to the Sahel's climate challenges. The programme endowed with €50 million over five years covers four partner countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal), and combines four national components (€46M) with a regional facilitation component (€4M). It falls within the framework of the Great Green Wall (GGW) initiative and aims to improve the sustainable management of natural resources, restore degraded ecosystems, and strengthen the climate resilience of rural populations. The implementation team (May 2022 – Oct/Nov 2026) operated in a context of three major changes: first, steering the SCTP's objectives; second, significant political and security instability in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (successive regime changes, establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States, withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States — ECOWAS); and third, the simultaneous emergence of the multi-country approach within Enabel, which had not yet developed a dedicated institutional framework for it. The external evaluation commissioned by Enabel follows an internal self-assessment (07/2025), and was intended to be strategic in nature, while being conducted entirely remotely (data collected from December 2025 to February 2026), with a dual objective: to assess the added value of the regional portfolio approach compared to a juxtaposition of national interventions, and to identify strategic directions for future regional initiatives.

Main findings

Summary of the Eight Evaluation Questions (EQ)

EQ 1.1 – Relevance and Alignment

The SCTP's strategic orientation is assessed as broadly satisfactory: the focus on climate change adaptation, land restoration, and resilience aligns with the national priorities of the four partner countries, with Belgian commitments (Enabel's Vision 2030), and with the regional dynamics of the GGW. Limitations do exist, however: the initiative was driven by the Belgian side without a formalised regional request; the volatility of the geopolitical context was underestimated at the formulation stage; and the intervention zones - geographically disconnected and non-cross-border - constrained the portfolio's macro-regional added value. Relevance remains high in 2026, given the worsening impacts of climate change.

EQ 1.2 – Role as a catalyst for dynamics

The SCTP successfully fostered strong partnerships at the national level (focal points, steering committees, quality operational dialogue). At the regional level, however, it remained primarily a catalyst for technical cooperation: while the training delivered by Agrhymet, the Sahel Climate Community of Practice, and the Ouagadougou Forum 2025 marks genuine progress, the role of regional reference point was not fully achieved. Key obstacles included: the absence of a functional regional steering committee, under-resourced communication throughout much of the programme, weak institutional engineering and post-event follow-up, and a geopolitical context unfavourable to inter-state cooperation.

EQ 1.3 – Catalyst for Concrete Initiatives

The SCTP represents an innovative initiative that has generated new forms of technical cooperation and learning among partner countries. Nevertheless, the observed results in terms of regional integration remain more modest than the programme's initial ambitions. The mechanisms for strategic harmonisation, partner mobilisation, and innovation dissemination remain incomplete, and several institutional and contextual factors have restricted the portfolio's integrative or federating reach. The most visible innovations are digital in nature (the Sahel Transhumance Information System - SIT Sahel, the Mobile Application to Secure Tenure - MAST, digitalised monitoring and evaluation), and the harmonisation of land degradation monitoring methodologies through Agrhymet is still ongoing. Strategic harmonisation remains partial, and the diffusion of innovations is still limited, notably due to the absence of an explicit capitalisation and communication strategy initiated at the outset of the programme.

EQ 1.4 – Strategic Opportunities

On one hand, financing opportunities in the region are contracting due to the political context. On the other, the number of actors present is declining, thereby opening up opportunities. Furthermore, there are multiple initiatives supporting the GGW that remain insufficiently coordinated (the Accelerator's land registry not yet operational). In this context, it may prove useful to revisit or modernise the approach to environmental resource management (desertification control), for which donor fatigue appears to be emerging. Several avenues worth exploring include: an approach based on "environmental peace" (concerted resource management in areas of tension); the addition of energy (rural solar power) as a factor for increasing resilience (adaptation); cross-border transhumance corridors; and (economic) resilience corridors.

EQ 2.1 – Results for Ecosystems and Resilience

The operational results of the four national components are broadly in line with initial ambitions: significant restoration of degraded land, improvement of local land governance (village land commissions, territorial plans), introduction of agro-ecological practices, and strengthened social cohesion in the action zones. Women and young people have benefited from new economic opportunities (Labour-Intensive Public Works - LIPW, cooperatives, green entrepreneurship). By contrast, regional institutional results are more fragile, and local mechanisms remain partially disconnected from national planning and financing systems.

EQ 2.2 – Leverage Effects

Real but uneven leverage effects have been generated: the EU's PRISMA programme and the PRADEP programme (multi-country pastoralism) build on the SCTP's technical achievements; the SIT Sahel and digital tools constitute references that can be mobilised at regional scale; the growing partnerships with the Pan-African Agency of the Great Green Wall (PA-GGW) and the National Great Green Wall Agencies (NGGWAs) open up new prospects. However, several promising initiatives (communities of practice, harmonised data) have not yet reached full maturity, knowledge products are still under development, and the initial objective of mobilising €200 million in third-party funding has only been partially achieved, and largely through indirect means (outside the SCTP).

EQ 2.3 – Unintended Effects

Among the unforeseen positive effects: strengthened social cohesion and reduced the incidence of resource-related conflicts in several intervention zones, improved pastoral mobility thanks to SIT Sahel, and local entrepreneurship dynamics (biochar, bio-inputs) going beyond initial objectives. Negative effects are also worth noting: risks of land conflicts linked to the enhanced value of restored lands, partial exclusion of certain vulnerable groups from local governance mechanisms, and the dependence of certain innovations on external support to ensure their sustainability.

EQ 2.4 – Regional Governance

The regional governance framework was only partially described in the Technical and Financial File (TFF), and could not be fully implemented in one essential respect: the absence of a formally constituted regional steering committee undermined the legitimacy and traction of the regional component over the national components. The fragmented contractual structure (five separate agreements), combined with the absence of a thematic lead with functional authority, limited overall strategic coherence. Progressive adjustments were made (redefinition of the Terms of Reference - ToR for the regional project manager, creation of a Regional Coordinating and Oversight Committee - COC/R in 2024–2025), but with delayed effect. This governance deficit is one of the main factors explaining the gap between regional ambitions and results achieved.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Systematically integrate social and institutional engineering into Enabel's interventions

- Recipient: E&T Department, cross-cutting use
- Importance: Very high
- Timeframe: Medium term

The main conceptual shortcoming of the SCTP lies in the absence of an explicit approach to steering systemic change. Enabel should systematically integrate, from the formulation stage: (i) dynamic stakeholder mapping (updated annually) and a prioritised alliance strategy with measurable objectives; (ii) an enriched indicator framework, combining quantitative output indicators with qualitative transformation indicators (policy developments, cooperation dynamics between actors, changes in practice); (iii) a capitalisation and communication strategy in service of influence - substantive analytical outputs for capitalisation, and short, agile formats (position notes, infographics, change narratives) for political influence with products available from the programme's first year.

Recommendation 2 – Extend the regional component in time and scope

- Recipient: SCTP Team and E&T Department
- Importance: Very high
- Timeframe: Short term

Given the late scaling-up of the regional component, the recent arrival of knowledge products, and the still under-exploited potential of various partnerships, it is recommended to extend the regional component by two years beyond the current end date, by mobilising contributions from the new national components currently being developed in the region.

This extension should pursue two objectives: (i) to actively disseminate the SCTP's knowledge products to national and regional decision-makers, and to continue capitalisation efforts with other GGW-related interventions; (ii) to consolidate the formal partnerships that have been initiated and ensure that they are translated into joint action plans in support of Enabel's regional approach.

Recommendation 3 – Adopt a hybrid portfolio model for future regional programmes

- Recipient: E&T Department
- Importance: High
- Timeframe: Medium term

Enabel's future regional approaches in the Sahel should be built on a two-tier architecture: a dedicated regional core for shared functions (knowledge production and dissemination, cross-border coordination, harmonisation of technical standards, strategic communication, financing prospecting) and national/local windows dedicated to operational implementation and institutional ownership. This model must be accompanied by effective regional governance from the outset: a single agreement enabling budget reallocations across components, a thematic lead endowed with functional authority, a regional steering committee recognised by partner countries, and flexibility mechanisms enabling a national window to be "frozen" in the event of a political shock without jeopardising the portfolio as a whole. The vision must be designed over a minimum of ten years, with the possibility of discontinuing what is not working after three or five years.

Lessons learned

Three Key Lessons Learned

Lesson 1: The added value of a regional approach is not generated spontaneously through the juxtaposition of national interventions: it requires deliberate social, institutional, and strategic engineering, as well as a clearly identified objective from the outset of the action. The SCTP experience shows that leverage is not an automatic by-product of good technical results. It requires explicit social and institutional engineering: dynamic stakeholder mapping, a prioritised alliance strategy, continuous post-event network facilitation, and tools for monitoring systemic transformations (beyond quantitative indicators). The programme suffered from an overly mechanical accountability framework, a Theory of Change insufficiently oriented towards political influence, and under-resourced communication for several years. A future regional phase should integrate these functions - capitalisation, strategic communication, networking - from the design stage as activities in their own right, endowed with dedicated human and budgetary resources, and actively driven from the outset.

Lesson 2: A regional thematic approach requires a contractual and governance framework commensurate with the regional ambition : a single agreement, budgetary flexibility, and stronger hierarchical authority. The absence of a formal regional governance framework weakens the legitimacy and influencing capacity of the regional component. It therefore appears essential to institutionalise this mandate through a mechanism formally recognised by partner countries, whether a functioning regional steering committee or another formal governance mechanism. Such a framework would strengthen the legal and political security of the regional component, clarify its role in relation to the national components, and provide a legitimate space for structured political dialogue. This formalisation would be consistent with the programme's original intent and would durably anchor the regional dimension beyond purely technical dynamics.

Lesson 3: In fragile political contexts, a technical and apolitical posture can constitute a comparative advantage, by preserving spaces for cooperation and trust when regional political frameworks are under strain. In an uncertain context, the top-down model (strong regional anchoring with a cascade into national components) is not desirable, due to its lack of agility in the face of unforeseen events. It was precisely through an adapted "low-profile" posture (more technical and less political in nature) that the SCTP managed to maintain course (dialogue and operations) despite the instabilities. The SCTP experience confirms that environmental issues can provide a relatively neutral basis for cooperation, even in political contexts marked by diplomatic or institutional tensions. In a regional context characterised by major political changes, the maintenance of technical exchanges between experts from the various partner countries helped preserve spaces for dialogue and cooperation. This observation suggests that regional environmental programmes can play an important role in preserving technical and scientific networks, even when regional political frameworks are under strain.

Conclusion

The SCTP represents a major institutional learning experience for Enabel. Its operational results at the national level are solid; its regional added value remains, to date, below its initial ambitions, primarily due to an inadequate governance framework and a particularly unstable geopolitical context. By combining tangible field results with valuable strategic lessons, it lays the foundations for a more mature, more agile, and more impactful regional approach for Enabel's future climate programmes in the Sahel.