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Towards resilient and equitable development in Costa Rica with women and nature at the forefront

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In recent years, the Government of Costa Rica has recognized the importance of promoting gender equality and women empowerment in the conservation and sustainable use of forests. Costa Rica recognizes that promoting gender equality implies not only mentioning the issue as a priority or as a principle, but also prioritizing the identification of relevant gender inequalities and proposing concrete actions to address them. This brief examines how the Government of Costa Rica, with support from UNDP, is addressing prevalent gender gaps, empowering women in the environmental sector, and comprehensively integrating gender into environmental policies, governance and finance. This, in turn, has resulted in an innovative and gender-responsive offer of environmental incentives² in the country that are scaling up results at an influential level, simultaneously increasing women's economic empowerment, promoting sustainable use of forests and combating climate change.

1. Background

It is widely known that women play a fundamental role in conservation and sustainable productive activities.³ They are also key agents of change who contribute to the conservation and sustainable use of terrestrial and marine ecosystems and resources. As a result, many countries are now recognizing that promoting gender equality and women's

empowerment is a catalyst for a more effective, efficient, equitable and sustainable environmental action. And vice versa, they are also recognizing that environmental action and finance can be a catalyst to promote women's environmental stewardship and leadership and reduce prevalent gender inequalities that limit their livelihoods,

increase their vulnerability and decrease their resilience.

Costa Rica has made remarkable progress in developing and implementing environmental public policies that have resulted in a clear forest recovery trend over the past decades. This is due to early efforts to design forest policies and legal prohibition of land use changes that allowed the sector to gain net forest cover while providing opportunities for economic incentives, such as through its national Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) programme.⁴ Throughout this process, the country has proposed actions and supported the holistic integration of gender and women's empowerment actions into environmental solutions, including efforts to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+),⁵ as detailed in Section 3 below.

Nevertheless, national data from Costa Rica demonstrates that social and gender inequalities persist and limit women's recognition, involvement and access to benefits related to the conservation and sustainable use of forests.⁶ For example, women are not recognized as key stakeholders in the forest sector and often have barriers in access to environmental incentives, such as PES and forest credits, due to, for example, the lack of land tenure titles. When women do own properties, these are usually smaller than men's. The 2014 Agriculture Census mentions that only 15.6 percent of farm owners are women and the majority of women's properties have surfaces of less than 10 hectares (81 percent). The numbers, in contrast, for male producers' farms tend to be larger, where 46 percent of farms are larger than 5 ha and 4,000 farms have more than 50 ha (7 percent).⁷ In addition, most women's farms do not receive technical assistance and receive much

less financing. The census reported that only 13.5 percent of the farms that received assistance were owned by women and only 9.1 percent of women owned farms received financing.⁸ Moreover, women's access to finance only accounts for 17 to 23 percent of total credits for agriculture, livestock and related service activities.

Women, in many cases, are not considered producers or relevant stakeholders in the forest sector. They have differentiated roles, characteristics and needs, because they are associated with domestic and care activities. Their productive activities in the forest sector also tend to be 'invisible'. For example, the census only identified 12,000 women as agricultural producers, but data from the National Institute of Women (INAMU) suggest that there could be more women producers, as they tend to carry out subsistence and small-scale productive activities close to their homes.⁹ Their contributions and activities are also undervalued, as 73 percent of the women who work in productive units do not receive payment or remuneration.¹⁰ In addition, approximately only 15 percent of PES contracts from 1997 to 2021 were signed with women owners.¹¹ Another gap that persists is related to the participation of women in decision-making spaces linked to nature. Women represent only 28 percent of the National Council of Protected Areas and 32 percent in local Councils of Conservation Areas of marine areas.

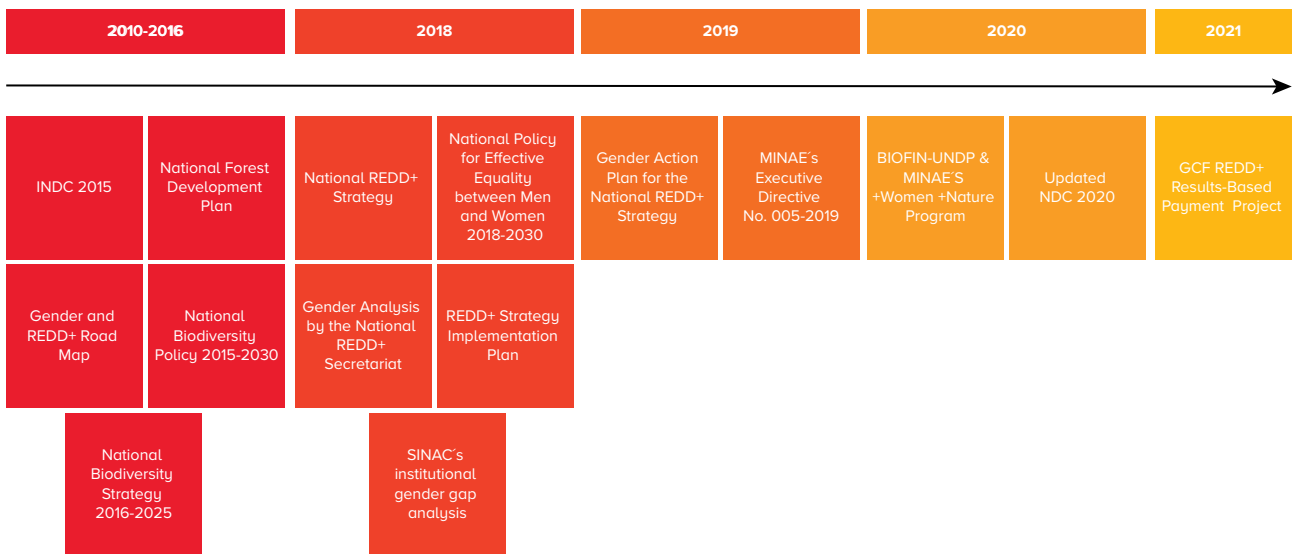
Within this context, to address these existing gender inequalities, Costa Rica is now undertaking strategic and innovative efforts to mainstream gender into environmental public policy, governance and finance to catalyze change across sectors involving gender equality and women's empowerment in the country (see Section 2 and Figure 1 below).

2. Enabling Conditions

Costa Rica has a long trajectory of working on gender and environmental issues. Multiple efforts within public policies and institutions have helped to set the framework and lay the groundwork for these gender successes within the environmental sector in Costa Rica. These efforts have built

upon and complemented one another, helping to promote continuity and the effectiveness of Costa Rica's gender approach within this sector. Figure 1 summarizes these national milestones to accelerate gender equality and the empowerment of women within the environmental sector.

Figure 1: Enabling framework timeline on gender within Costa Rica’s environmental sector



Source: UNDP (2022)

In brief summary, between 2010-2016, several national environmental policies and strategies recognized the importance of gender as a cross-cutting issue, such as the National Forest Development Plan, the Intended National Determined Contributions¹² and the National Climate Change Strategy. Then, in 2016, the National Forestry Financing Fund developed a gender and REDD+ roadmap. This, in turn, helped result in the National REDD+ Strategy and its Implementation Plan to commit to 1) integrating gender in REDD+ implementation and 2) developing a Gender Action Plan to guide such work. To fulfill these commitments, in 2018 various gender analyses and gender gap assessments were undertaken within the environmental sector, including one for the forest sector developed by the REDD+ Secretariat, composed of the National Forestry Financing Fund and National System of Conservation Areas. This analysis helped to identify the social landscape and the key gender inequalities that would prevent women from participating and benefiting from the activities proposed by the National REDD+ Strategy. This contributed to the development of the 2019 Gender Action Plan (GAP) by the National REDD+ Strategy.¹³

Supporting this programmatic approach on gender within the environmental sector and building on the findings and recommendations of these various gender analyses and gender-responsive plans and strategies, in 2019, the Ministry of Environment and Energy, with support from UNDP, put in place

Executive Directive (005-2019): “Starting point to reduce gender gaps in the biodiversity sector — water, protected areas and forests— and ensure gender equality and the contribution of women in that sector”. This Executive Directive is a formal legal mechanism to promote their commitment to accelerating gender equality and women’s empowerment in the environmental sector at a national level. It helps to promote greater support for the gender measures identified in the REDD+ Strategy and GAP. In addition, it helps to address the gender gaps identified within National System of Conservation Areas and the financial gap for women’s economic empowerment in the environmental sector.

Then, in 2020, through its Nationally Determined Contribution¹⁴, Costa Rica established targets to tackle climate change, proposing to also promote that the implementation of its Gender Equality and Climate Change Action Plan on such work takes into account the frameworks outlined by various environmental sector plans, including the National REDD+ Strategy.

It is through these policies and actions that Costa Rica has successfully identified a baseline and developed an effective infrastructure within the environmental sector to support the comprehensive integration of gender and women’s empowerment in its initiatives and projects focused on protecting the environment and combating climate change.

3. Moving from Policy to Practice

Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in the environmental sector is not an isolated event, but requires countries to ensure that gender equality is considered systematically and in a mutually reinforcing way. To do so, countries need to invest in several enabling conditions to ensure the effective, efficient and long-term sustainability of these actions. When the enabling conditions for gender responsive action are accomplished effectively, each condition lays the groundwork for achieving the next enabling condition. For example, if a gender analysis is carried out in the initial planning stage, it generates the required information to properly identify gender considerations relevant to a specific sectoral intervention. At the same time, it allows for areas to be identified for improvement related to policies, planning instruments or governance that will ensure the proper implementation of this gender responsive sectoral initiative. This is precisely what Costa Rica has done.

To guide these efforts, UNDP has developed a multidimensional approach to ensure that gender equality is considered in its support provided to the country's policy, governance, planning and finance processes. Many of the activities described in Section 2 followed this approach and enabled conditions that helped move from policy to practice and have paved the way to the gender-responsive offer of environmental incentives and initiatives. Through the initiatives described below, UNDP supports Costa Rica in this groundbreaking transformation to accelerate the country's pathway towards a resilient and gender equitable pathway. These initiatives demonstrate how the country collects and uses gender data to inform policymaking and then scales up results at an influential level, simultaneously increasing women's economic empowerment, promoting sustainable use of forests and combating climate change.

3.1 The +Women +Nature Programme

With support from UNDP¹⁵, efforts are being undertaken to develop forest financial gaps and support implementation of the National REDD+ Strategy and National Biodiversity Strategy. As part of this work, financial mechanisms for gender inclusion and women's empowerment have been developed. To illustrate, in May 2020, the national +Women +Nature Programme was launched by the Ministry of Environment and Energy as a strategy to

implement Executive Directive 005-2019 (discussed in Section 2) and to mitigate the socio-economic impacts generated by the global pandemic COVID-19.

The +Women +Nature Programme is unprecedented in Costa Rica and unique in the region and globally, as a multidimensional and multisectoral economic development response. It is an umbrella programme that addresses institutional gender gaps and boosts women's access to financial instruments in forest-related activities. It includes the following three financial mechanisms worth around \$30 million per year:

- **Women Natura Credit:** Developed by Fundecooperación para el Desarrollo, this private capital instrument allocates US\$800 to \$16,000 credit to women, with an interest rate between 8 and 15 percent per year with a term of up to five years.¹⁶
- **FONAFIFO at your side / Rural Woman Credit:** A public based credit instrument that provides working capital and infrastructure to rural women for innovative projects related to forest conservation and/or sustainable use, with an interest rate of 4 to 7 percent per year, with mortgage, fiduciary and organizational guarantees and with a term of up to ten years.¹⁷
- **PSA Mujeres de FONAFIFO:** Through this measure, to promote the increase of women participating under the national PES programme, applications submitted by women landowners are given additional points within the scoring system for the programme. This effort increases women's opportunities to access incentives through the PES whose annual budget is approximately \$26 million.

Additionally, as part of the +Women +Nature Programme, UNDP has also been supporting the Gender Equality Seal of the National Institute of Women, which aims to reduce gender gaps and ensure better gender planning and budgeting, thereby increasing services and institutional benefits for women in the environmental sector. As part of this work, efforts are being made to acknowledge and reward local productive units that promote equality for women, their economic autonomy and their efforts to conserve nature. (For results of the +Women +Nature Programme, please see Section 4 below.)

3.2 Costa Rica REDD+ Results-Based Payments (RBPs) for 2014 and 2015 Project

In November 2020, the National Forestry Financing Fund received \$54.1 million from the Green Climate Fund for its efforts in capturing 14.7 million metric tons of carbon dioxide through the country's forests from 2014 to 2015. This financing is not only crucial to protect ecosystems and restore nature but also to bring other concrete social benefits to those that need them most, through tackling inequalities around land tenure, fostering resilient communities and promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. Particularly the financing, which is delivered through a results-based project being implemented with support from UNDP, aims to ensure such efforts equitably involve and benefit women and indigenous territories, complement the +Women +Nature Programme and contribute to the updating and implementation of the GAP for the National REDD+ Strategy as a means to achieve gender-responsive climate action at scale in the forest sector.

The gender approach used within this results-based payments project has incorporated various measures and indicators across a wide range of issues, including payments are rewarded for results achieved. Funding from this project also supports the country's PES programme, including the 'PSA Mujeres de FONAFIFO' mechanism of the +Women +Nature Programme discussed above. Some key gender elements and actions of the project include the following:

- Allocating a specific 10 percent bonus incentive for PES contracts with female landowners or

co-owners for properties under forest protection and agroforestry systems (only in 2021) and under natural regeneration (as of 2022).

- Conducting capacity building efforts with project staff, including internal training on gender-based violence.
- Including requirements within indigenous forest environmental plans being developed to ensure indigenous women's groups receive resources for the development of their own agendas.
- Allocating 10 percent bonus incentives for female firefighters and volunteers who have participated in the forest fire prevention courses.

Another key element of the project is the robust monitoring, reporting and independent verification of key data relating to gender that the project has introduced through its Performance-Based Payment modality.¹⁸ Having accurate, current and reliable data has been critical to assessing progress on gender-responsive actions that, in turn, have shown how combinations of policies and initiatives collectively contribute to change. This modality allows Costa Rica to learn from the results of the verification process and adapt as necessary to enhance gender results during the project. The way in which this modality provides gender data through the projects' monitoring, reporting and verification processes allows the government and project team and stakeholders to know and assess if trends on gender are maintained, change and grow. This information, in turn, can inform REDD+ policymaking to ensure it remains gender responsive. (For initial results of the REDD+ RBP project, please see Section 4 below.)

4. Catalyzing change in the environment sector and beyond

Gender-responsive environmental policies, action and finance are a catalyst to promote women's environmental stewardship and leadership and reduce prevalent gender inequalities that limit their livelihoods, increase their vulnerability and decrease their resilience. In addition, this is also an accelerator to achieve more effective, efficient, equitable and sustainable environmental action. As evidence shows from different experiences across the globe, initiatives with the highest environmental performance are also those that often fully integrate a gender perspective and actively promote the participation of women and encourage their leadership.¹⁹ The initiatives carried out in Costa Rica demonstrate the value and multiplier effect that women's contributions can have, particularly

in reducing deforestation and forest degradation. Not only does it have a significant impact on conservation, but also in improving women's personal well-being and that of their communities.

This multidimensional gender approach has enabled the government and civil society of Costa Rica, with support from UNDP, to address cross-sectoral gender barriers and inequalities, including around land tenure and access to finance within its environmental programs and policies to achieve a structural transformation towards resilient, gender equitable and sustainable development. This coordinated and cross-sectoral approach on gender is laying the groundwork for outcomes at scale, not only increasing women's involvement in

natural resources management and climate change policies and action but also improving their access to related finance as well as their livelihoods and economic well-being. While gender barriers in the country do continue to persist across various sectors, this gender approach is nevertheless a blueprint, which other initiatives in the country can utilize to create transformational change in the country.

Some encouraging results have been achieved thanks to this multidimensional gender approach and the complimentary initiatives discussed above. To illustrate, under the 'Women Natura Credit' instrument, an allocation of 22 credits for rural women totaling \$105,000 was delivered between 2020 and 2021. Additionally, under the 'FONAFIFO at your side/Rural Woman Credit' instrument, a total of 25 credits for rural women totaling nearly \$200,000 were given in 2021.

In addition, in 2021, through the country's PES programme, FONAFIFO signed 51 contracts with women owners or co-owners, which represent 30 percent of the total contracts signed that year. The total amount of 2021's contracts is estimated at \$1,340,879 for the protection of 2,549 hectares.²⁰ This illustrates a positive trend and increase in percentage of contracts held by women despite

the fact that 2021 represented an atypical year of PES programme, wherein new contracts were only formalized starting in the last quarter of 2021 when resources again became available. To illustrate, in comparison, in 2020, while 603 contracts were signed, only 98 (16 percent) were signed women owners or co-owners, and in 2019, only 14 percent (103 of the 732 contracts) signed were signed women owners or co-owners.

To further demonstrate the impact of this gender programmatic approach on forest conservation efforts, through the support being provided under the Green Climate Fund-funded REDD+ RBP Project, a total of 239,190 hectares within the PES programme were under forest protection and were available to receive results-based payment resources in 2021, benefiting 4192 forest landowners including 1102 women and 2263 small holders.²¹ This also led to an additional \$370,632 being transferred to FONAFIFO in 2021 in recognition of the 46,329 ha under contract with female landowners. In addition, 545,849 trees have been planted under agroforestry systems through the PES Programme including 115,899 trees planted on lands belonging to women and 200,601 trees planted in districts with Very Low Social Development Index (SDI).

5. Good practices for replication

While the current environmental and climate agendas can be complex, they can – and should – advance gender equality and women's empowerment. Costa Rica's example presented in this paper clearly shows that it is possible to develop a national environmental agenda, which supports innovative actions to effectively promote gender equality and women's empowerment simultaneously. And while gender barriers are still present in the country, the programmatic approach currently being undertaken in the environment sector is taking substantive and systematic steps to break these down and produce concrete positive results on women's livelihoods and the environment – a win-win approach.

This gender programmatic approach required key enabling factors and mutually re-enforcing activities to achieve the outcomes it has to date. These factors and steps are summarized below and can serve as a good practice for replication. These steps can make the case for other countries to also fully integrate a programmatic approach on gender

in their efforts to protect the environment and combat climate change.

- **Good Practice #1:** Undertake gender analyses and identify gender gaps in the environment sector and develop a corresponding plan of action to address any identified cross-sectoral gender barriers and inequalities.
- **Good Practice #2:** Establish an enabling framework of public policy focused on addressing gender finance gaps and boosting women's access to financial instruments in the environmental sector, such as those established by the +Women +Nature Programme (see Section 3.1 above).
- **Good Practice #3:** Equitably increase women's access and control over resources and promote their effective inclusion and involvement in sustainable livelihood activities and environmental and forest protection efforts. Doing so can help women to simultaneously protect the environment, have access to sustainable productive and economic opportunities and improve their livelihoods and

economic empowerment, not only for them but also for their families (see Section 3.1 and 3.2 above).

- **Good Practice #4:** Propose new and innovative opportunities for women in the natural resources sector through gender transformative programmes and projects. Doing so can strengthen their sustainable livelihoods and increase both their productivity and their economic empowerment.
- **Good Practice #5:** Develop a reporting mechanism and/or approach to collect gender data, which can help to inform gender-responsive environmental policymaking, such as that being done through the REDD+ Results-Based Payments Project (see Section 3.2 above).

- **Good Practice #6:** Value unique and complementary knowledge and skills of women and men, and recognize and engage all relevant actors fully and equitably across genders in all actions. Doing so can help to promote that the approach used and corresponding projects developed are based on realities on the ground and supported by all affected stakeholder groups.
- **Good Practice #7:** Promote the transformation of the institutional management model, which simultaneously supports the empowerment of women, reduces gender gaps and also accelerates compliance with international environmental and gender commitments.

Key Insights for the Operationalization of UNDP's Gender Equality Strategy 2022–2025

This brief illustrates how Costa Rica, with UNDP's support, has comprehensively and strategically integrated gender into environmental policies, governance and finance. The following good practices and lessons learned have emerged from this work and support that which can help to inform the operationalization of UNDP's Gender Equality Strategy across its portfolio of support around the world.

- Integrating gender analysis into environmental policy processes, national programs and financial mechanisms.
- Developing proper tools and strengthening the capacities of UNDP's personnel to integrate gender (e.g. processes such as the Gender Equality Seal were critical in ensuring that staff were empowered and motivated to address gender gaps beyond strict requirements).
- Supporting a programmatic versus single project-based approach that enables the development of stepping stones to be followed and implemented beyond pilot initiatives as well as achieving outcomes at scale.

As the world faces unprecedented planetary and social crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, nature loss and climate change, gender transformative environmental and climate action can contribute to green recovery efforts that catalyze social and environmental transformations. As Costa Rica demonstrates, to meet these challenges, gender-responsive actions must look at multi-pronged and cross-sectoral solutions, which place women at the heart of such actions. Doing so can help to produce catalytic results on gender, which can maximize the reach of green economy and decarbonization efforts, strengthen the economic autonomy of women, reduce gender inequalities within climate and environmental finance as well as improve women's climate resilience and livelihoods.

Endnotes

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- 2 Costa Rica has several economic incentive programmes (such as the PES programme, forest credits, biofinance) that have been established to mitigate greenhouse gases (CO2 fixation, reduction and storage) and protect water resources, biodiversity protection and scenic beauty. These environmental services have been defined in the National Forestry Law 7575.
- 3 MGI, 'The Power of Parity' (2015); UNDP, Human Development Report 2011. Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All (New York: UNDP, 2011); FAO, 2011, 2010-2011 State of Food and Agriculture; EIB (2020), 'Funding women entrepreneurs: How to empower growth', CBD, 2020. Addressing Gender Issues and Actions in Biodiversity Objectives; Commission on the Status of Women Sixty-sixth Session, 2021. Agreed Conclusions.
- 4 Costa Rica's PES Programme is funded by the country's fuel tax and water charge, as well as its own initiatives, such as Certificates of Conservation of Biodiversity, carbon credits and strategic alliances with the public and private sector. See FONAFIFO and UNFCCC for more information: <https://www.fonafifo.go.cr/es/servicios/pago-de-servicios-ambientales/> and <https://unfccc.int/climate-action/momentum-for-change/financing-for-climate-friendly-investment/payments-for-environmental-services-program>
- 5 REDD+ is a framework created by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP) to guide activities in the forest sector that reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, as well as the sustainably manage forests and the conservation and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries. For more information please see: <https://unfccc.int/topics/land-use/workstreams/redd/what-is-redd>.
- 6 See statistics in Costa Rica's 2019 Gender Action Plan of National REDD+ Strategy for additional information. Available at <http://ceniga.go.cr/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Gender-Action-Plan-ENREDD-28-11-2019.pdf>.
- 7 World Bank & FONAFIFO.2019 Costa Rica: Plan de Acción de Género de la Estrategia Nacional REDD+
- 8 World Bank & FONAFIFO.2019 Costa Rica: Plan de Acción de Género de la Estrategia Nacional REDD+
- 9 These gaps are directly related to the gap in domestic work and care. In Costa Rica, women dedicate 35:49 hours a week to this unpaid work, while men dedicate 13:42 hours on average. Thus, women contribute 22 hours more than men to domestic and care work. This behaviour is also observed by urban and rural areas. In rural areas women dedicate an average of 26 more hours to this work, which hinders their participation in Local Councils, for example (National Survey of Time Use, INEC-INAMU, 2018).
- 10 World Bank & FONAFIFO.2019 Costa Rica: Plan de Acción de Género de la Estrategia Nacional REDD+
- 11 World Bank & FONAFIFO.2019 Costa Rica: Plan de Acción de Género de la Estrategia Nacional REDD+
- 12 Intended National Determined Contributions (INDC) were means in which governments communicated internationally the steps they were going to take to address climate change in their own countries. The word "intended" was used because countries were communicating proposed climate actions ahead of finalizing the Paris Agreement (a legally binding international treaty on climate change which was adopted by the 21st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2015). As countries formally joined the Paris Agreement and moved towards implementing these climate actions, the "intended" was dropped and an INDC was converted into a Nationally Determined Contribution.
- 13 This GAP identified several activities to address key gender inequalities prevalent in the forest sector and included the creation of a specific forest fund for women and the [Gender Equality Award for Productive Units](#) (GIGUP).
- 14 Nationally Determined Contributions are targets that countries have made to tackle climate change, covering areas, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions and their plans to adapt to the challenges of a changing climate. These targets were established as a result of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change - the first universal climate deal that was adopted in December 2015. For more information please see <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/nationally-determined-contributions-ndcs>
- 15 + Women + Nature Programme is supported by UNDP with resources from several programs including UNDP's Biodiversity Finance Initiative (UNDP-Biofin) and UNDP-implemented, GCF-financed REDD+ Results-Based Payments (RBPs) for 2014 and 2015 project.
- 16 For more information please see: <https://delfino.cr/2021/03/anuncian-linea-de-credito-especial-para-emprendimientos-de-mujeres>
- 17 For more information please see: <https://www.fonafifo.go.cr/es/servicios/credito-forestal/#overview-tab-0>
- 18 The innovative finance mechanism used by this project is called 'Performance-based Payment (PBP)'. It is a type of agreement between UNDP and a responsible party to provide funding upon the verified achievement of an agreed measurable development result. No advances are provided; rather payments are made only upon verified achievement of agreed results. This approach gives greater incentives to responsible parties to achieve results (UNDP Programme and Operations Policies and Procedures).
- 19 MGI, 'The Power of Parity' (2015); UNDP, Human Development Report 2011. Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All (New York: UNDP, 2011); FAO, 2011, 2010-2011 State of Food and Agriculture; EIB (2020), 'Funding women entrepreneurs: How to empower growth'.
- 20 For more information please see: <https://www.fonafifo.go.cr/es/servicios/estadisticas-de-psa/>
- 21 To clarify, the amount of hectares and trees reflected here correspond to the audited values for the purposes of being able to receive PBP resources under the GCF-funded REDD+ RBP project. This does not correspond to the total number of hectares and trees that FONAFIFO has under the PES programme.