

External Evaluation of GRÓ International Centre for Capacity Development, Sustainability and Societal Change

Programme Evaluation Report - LRT
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GRÓ LRT BACKGROUND

TRAINING PROGRAMME DESCRIPTION, INTERVENTION STRATEGIES AND APPROACH

The **GRÓ Land Restoration Training Programme (LRT)** began in 2007 as a 3-year pilot project. In 2010, it was established as a full United Nations University (UNU) training programme made possible by an agreement between the Government of Iceland's (GOI) **Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA)**, UNU, and the Icelandic implementing partners, the **Agricultural University of Iceland** and the **Soil Conservation Service of Iceland (SCSI)**¹. It was thus the third UNU programme in Iceland joining UNU Geothermal Training Programme (GTP) established in 1978 and the UNU Fisheries Training Programme (FTP) established in 1998. In 2013, the UNU Gender Equality Studies and Training (GEST) programme was added to the Icelandic UNU portfolio as the fourth training programme. The partnership with UNU ended in 2019, and beginning in 2020, the four training programmes operate under the **GRÓ Centre for Capacity Development, Sustainability and Societal Change**. The GRÓ Centre is an independent agency of the MFA, operating under its own legal identity and as a "Category 2 Centre (C2C) under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)"² based in Iceland.

The mission of the LRT is to assist low- and middle-income countries to combat land degradation, promote sustainable land management, and restore degraded land through strategic capacity building for individuals and institutions.

The programme is built on the assumption that the training activities provided through GRÓ LRT contribute to participants' capacity to act as catalysts of change in their respective home countries and regions. In the context of LRT, such **desired change is directly defined by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 15³ and indirectly defined by SDGs 1, 2, 12, and 13**. Its objective for change also aligns with **the objectives of other international conventions** such as the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD).

The GRÓ LRT offerings include the following capacity-building activities:

¹ Since 1 January 2024, the former Soil Conservation Service of Iceland (SCSI) is known as 'Land and Forest Iceland' after a merger with the former Icelandic Forest Service.

² "Category 2 Centres under the auspices of UNESCO" do not seem to be sharply defined and an exact definition could not be found on the official UNESCO websites. One rather vague description found at <https://www.unesco.org/en/partnerships/institutes?hub=953> reads: "[Category 2 Centres under the auspices of UNESCO] are entities legally external to UNESCO and associated with the Organization through various arrangements, as approved by the General Conference. UNESCO can be represented on their governing bodies, but they do not apply UNESCO's rules and regulations and are not led by UNESCO staff members. Though independent of UNESCO, they are a privileged partner of the Organization with access to UNESCO's logo and international and intergovernmental bodies and networks, and may leverage UNESCO's international reach and convening powers." The GRO Centre is listed as a Category 2 Centre under "Earth Sciences" within the UNESCO field of competence of "Natural Sciences".

³ "Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss"

Six-month LRT programme in Iceland (“6-month LRT Programme”)

GRÓ LRT’s core activity is an annual 6-month postgraduate-level training on ecological restoration and sustainable land management in Iceland. It has been held every year since 2007 except for 2020 when it was cancelled due to the COVID pandemic. A total of 198 individuals have graduated from this training as of the end of 2023.

The programme is divided into two sections: the first is training on the principles and processes of land degradation, ecosystem restoration and sustainable land management in the form of lectures, practical training, fieldwork, exercises and group work, while the second is an individual research project in the field of ecosystem restoration and sustainable land management. Since 2022, successful completion of the 6-month LRT programme is awarded with a Postgraduate Diploma from the Agricultural University of Iceland, worth 30 credits of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

Participation in the 6-month LRT programme is fully funded by GRÓ LRT.

Short courses in partner countries

GRÓ LRT also offers **in-country short courses on land restoration tailored to the local context in selected partner countries.** The first short course took place in **Uganda in 2017**. Through the end of 2023, three short courses have been offered in Uganda, three in Mongolia, and one in Ethiopia to a total of 169 participants (24 per course). Additionally, a short course on gender, the environment, and sustainable land management was offered in Kyrgyzstan to 16 participants in 2023 in collaboration with GRÓ GEST.

Postgraduate scholarship programme

GRÓ LRT further offers a **limited number of postgraduate scholarships** (usually not more than two at a given time according to the available budget) for selected LRT alumni to pursue their **MSc or PhD studies** at the Agricultural University of Iceland. In addition, there has been a MA scholarship at the University of Iceland. Until the end of 2023, a total of 7 LRT postgraduate scholarships have been awarded (5 MSc, 1 MA, 1 PhD).

Online Courses

GRÓ LRT has further co-developed three **MOOCs**⁴ as **publicly available online training courses.** By the end of 2023, a total of 20,026 individuals have enrolled on these courses and 1,957 are confirmed to have completed them.

Other

Furthermore, GRÓ LRT supports activities that **foster continued exchange, exposure, and professional growth among the 6-month LRT programme alumni.** These activities include support of selected 6-month LRT programme alumni to attend relevant **international conferences** as well as support towards the **formation of alumni networks.**

GRÓ LRT is **developing collaboration models with selected partner universities** for the **in-country delivery of land restoration training courses through the respective partner institutions.** A case

⁴ 2017: MOOC titled “Landscape restoration for sustainable development: A business approach” (<https://www.coursera.org/learn/landscape-restoration-sustainable-development>) funded and developed in consortium with others

2019: MOOC titled “Business Model Innovation for Sustainable Landscape Restoration” (<https://www.coursera.org/learn/bmi-sustainable-landscape-restoration>)

2019: MOOC titled “Sheep in the Land of Fire and Ice” (<https://sheepfireice.wordpress.com/>)

study on a potential collaboration with Makerere University in Uganda has been conducted in line with this evaluation.

MAIN STAKEHOLDERS AND TARGET GROUPS

The **primary target group** of GRÓ LRT are **early- to mid-career academics and professionals from least-developed (LDC), low-middle income (LMIC), and upper-middle income countries (UMIC)**. The programme has worked with a total of 14 countries since 2007 and 11 countries during the evaluation reference period of 2018 to 2023. Three quarters of the course participants during the evaluation reference period came from the following five countries: Uganda (LDC), Malawi (LDC), Lesotho (LDC), Mongolia (LMIC) and Ghana (LMIC). LRT most recently accepted two students from Kenya (LMIC) as its newest partner country in 2023.

The participants of the 6-month LRT programme are identified and selected through nominations from partner institutions – usually universities, government institutions, or non-governmental organizations (see 0 for a list of all GRÓ LRT partner institutions per country between 2018 and 2023).

To be eligible for the 6-month LRT programme in Iceland, applicants must (i) have at least a Bachelor's degree in a relevant field, (ii) be employed by a GRÓ LRT partner institution, (iii) have a guarantee of returning to their workplace within the partner institution after completing the programme, and (iv) be under 40 years of age. In addition, there is a limited number of places (two for the 2025 cohort) for staff from African biosphere reserves through the UNESCO "Man and the Biosphere" (MAB) programme.

Each annual cohort of participants ideally consists of a heterogeneous mix of ideally only one participant from a given partner institution. This principle shall level the ground between the participants and ensure that all participants have to get out of their known environment and comfort zone.

INSTITUTIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR MANAGEMENT OF THE LRT PROGRAMME

GRÓ LRT was an individual UNU programme until 2020, when it became part of the GRÓ Centre. **The GRÓ Centre oversees the programmes and bundles high-level administrative, contractual, reporting, and budgeting functions of four training programmes in international development under the auspices of UNESCO.** The GRÓ Centre operates under its own legal identity and is guided and overseen by a Governing Board as a unit within the MFA. GRÓ is guided by three policy frameworks: The Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, Iceland's Policy for International Development Cooperation, and UNESCO's Medium-Term Strategy.

Core funding for GRÓ LRT is provided by MFA through the GRÓ Centre as part of Iceland's ODA budget. Some external funding is obtained by GRÓ or GRÓ LRT through counterpart contributions from partner institutions, external grants, and participation in international projects.

GRÓ LRT is hosted by the **Agricultural University of Iceland and implemented jointly with Land and Forest Iceland** (which is the result of a merger of the **Soil Conservation Service of Iceland** and the Forestry Service in 2024).

GRÓ LRT EVALUATION FINDINGS

PROGRAMME GOALS, STRATEGY AND APPROACH (RELEVANCE)

Alignment of the LRT programme with Iceland's development cooperation policies, and with Iceland's national development vision and strategies

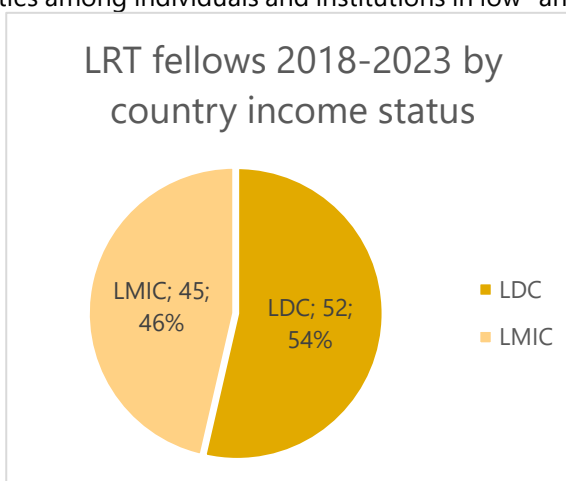
The evaluation finds that **GRÓ LRT is strongly aligned with Iceland's development cooperation priorities** and is therefore **highly relevant**.

Iceland's **international development cooperation policy 2024-2028** supports the SDGs and the 2015 Paris Agreement and emphasizes four thematic areas. Among these is the thematic area of 'climate affairs and natural resources', which **refers to SDG 15 and places strong emphasis on sustainable land use and restoration of habitats**.

Similar to its bilateral partner countries and multilateral organizations, Iceland's international development cooperation policy defines the GRÓ Centre as a development cooperation partner. The GRÓ Centre plays an important role in building capacities among individuals and institutions in low- and middle-income countries in fields in which **Iceland's expertise is strong**. One such field is **land restoration** as Iceland has more than a century of experience in nationally coordinated restoration of degraded ecosystems and sustainable land management.

All GRÓ LRT's partner countries are either low- or middle-income countries. Of Iceland's listed partner countries for bilateral development cooperation, Malawi and Uganda are strongly represented in the GRÓ LRT programme showing **GRÓ LRT is well-aligned with Iceland's bilateral development cooperation priorities**.

Figure 1: Six-month LRT programme fellows 2018-2023 by country income status (data labels show country income status as well as absolute and relative numbers of corresponding LRT fellows).



Alignment of the LRT programme with the partner countries' and target groups' needs and priorities, policies and strategies

The evaluation finds that **GRÓ LRT is strongly aligned with the partner countries' and target groups' needs** and, therefore, **highly relevant**.

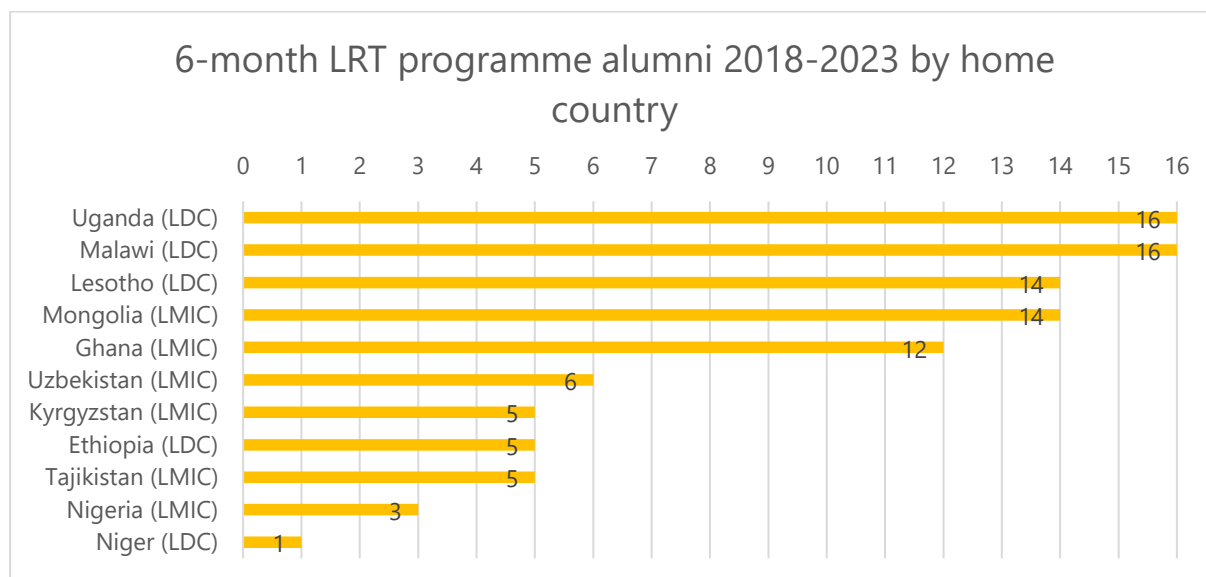
Figure 56 shows the distribution by country of the 97 fellows of the six-month LRT programme from 2018 to 2023. A total of partner 11 countries were involved. All LRT scholarship recipients and short course participants are also from these countries. Seven of the countries are in Africa and four are landlocked countries in central Asia. **All these countries are United Nations (UN) member states and have agreed to the SDGs as well as ratified or acceded to the UNCCD, the 2015 Paris Agreement, and the CBD.** These international treaties set clear priorities for these countries which are relevant to the objectives of GRÓ LRT.

While the causes of land degradation and the context of land restoration differ between countries, interviews conducted for this evaluation indicate that **land restoration is highly important to all partner countries**. Alumni and lecturers from Uganda's 6-month LRT programme highlighted the country's significant land restoration needs due to severe land degradation driven primarily by high population growth and expanding extractive activities. In contrast, alumni from Uzbekistan emphasized the necessity of restoring and sustainably managing the country's extensive rangelands, as well as

addressing challenges related to pollution. In both cases, **the need for well-trained experts in the respective country to address these challenges was emphasized**. GRÓ LRT's objectives are perfectly aligned to meet this need.

Alumni confirmed that the **programme content aligns well with the national contexts of the training participants**, and that the **principles and methods taught are universally applicable** to land restoration activities. The exposure of 6-month LRT programme participants to Iceland's land degradation challenges and land restoration solutions was generally described as both **relatable and inspiring**.

Figure 2: Six-month LRT programme fellows 2018-2023 by country.



In-country short courses are prepared in collaboration with experts from local partner institutions and tailored to the context and challenges of the area where the courses take place. Ugandan interview partners involved in the preparation and implementation of the LRT short courses in Uganda confirmed that these courses were highly valued by participants as exposure to land restoration related challenges and solutions.

Alignment of the LRT programme with international development policy frameworks, goals and strategies

The evaluation finds that **GRÓ LRT is strongly aligned with the international development policy frameworks, goals, and strategies** and is therefore **highly relevant**.

GRÓ LRT's objectives are well-aligned with the SDGs. GRÓ LRT aims to **contribute directly to SDG 15 and indirectly to other SDGs including 1, 2, 12, and 13**, as well as the objectives of other international conventions such as **the three Rio Conventions UNCCD, UNFCCC, and CBD**.

GRÓ LRT's objectives **align with global initiatives such as the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030)** of which GRÓ LRT was approved as an official supporting partner in 2021. The initiative, led by the UN Environment Programme and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, aims to accelerate land restoration globally.

The GRÓ Centre is listed as a C2C under the auspices of UNESCO in the **UNESCO field of competence of "Natural Sciences" in the sub-category "Earth Sciences"**. UNESCO's Medium-Term Strategy 2022-2029 (UNESCO, 2022) formulates four strategic objectives, with the second objective reading, "Work towards sustainable societies and protecting the environment through the promotion of science, technology, innovation and the natural heritage". GRÓ LRT is **well-aligned with this strategic objective**.

Quality of the LRT programme design and management approach

The evaluation finds that **GRÓ LRT offers a well-designed high-quality programme which is well-managed at programme level and well-aligned with the overall programme objectives.**

According to the GRÓ Centre ToC, the desired outcome of GRÓ is that 'GRÓ training participants, fellows, and scholarship recipients and their respective organizations promote and implement changes needed to achieve the SDGs relevant to their field of work'. Outputs of the individual programmes towards this outcome are

1. **Increased capability of individuals and expertise of GRÓ partner organizations** to design and implement programme activities in their respective professional fields.
2. **Production and dissemination of new knowledge** by GRÓ training participants, fellows, and scholarship recipients.
3. **Professional empowerment** of GRÓ training participants, fellows, and scholarship recipients is increased **through GRÓ community building and networking.**

Output 1 concerning the increased capability of individuals is under the most direct control of the GRÓ LRT programme. The 6-month LRT programme is found to be a **high-quality offering** based on decades of relevant academic and practical expertise. Its curriculum is cogent and updated regularly. Fellows appreciate the balance between theoretical and practical elements, the close interaction with lecturers and supervisors, and the exposure to Icelandic society, landscapes, and infrastructure. The high quality of the programme is further demonstrated by the intention of various partner institutions, such as Makerere University in Uganda and Samarkand State University in Uzbekistan, to replicate the training course in their respective countries. The success of the course relies heavily on the selection of motivated and qualified participants. To ensure this, programme management employs a careful and principled selection process through partner institutions and conducts in-country interviews by GRÓ LRT staff. By committing to the long-term enhancement of individual capacities within partner institutions, the programme also strengthens the overall capacity of these institutions. The 6-month LRT programme **design and management approach is clearly derived from the desired outcome and the respective outputs.**

The **production and dissemination of knowledge by GRÓ training participants is actively supported at various levels.** An entire module of the 6-month LRT programme is dedicated to scientific methods and dissemination skills including academic writing and presentation. The GRÓ LRT website makes the 6-month LRT programme project papers of programme fellows and final Master's and PhD theses of scholarship recipients available online. **Former fellows are supported in attending relevant international conferences and workshops** to present, network, and exchange knowledge.

During the 6-month LRT Programme, the foundation for **GRÓ community building and networking** is laid by a focus on team building and fostering a friendly intercultural atmosphere. After the programme, community-building and networking support is rendered primarily through the organization of alumni meetings. **The degree of participation in such networks depends on the interest, availability and awareness of the individuals and is largely beyond the control of GRÓ LRT.** The formation of alumni groups appears to be working within a given partner country as international coordination proves difficult and usually depend on personal relationships formed during the 6-month LRT programme in Iceland.

PROMOTION OF SYNERGIES BETWEEN THE PROGRAMME AND OTHER LOCAL DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS (COHERENCE)

Coherence and synergies between LRT and other GRÓ programmes as well as different development efforts by Iceland in partner countries or regions

The evaluation finds that **GRÓ LRT is coherent with other GRÓ programmes as well as different Icelandic development efforts**. There is **no indication of duplication of efforts**. There are **synergies with other activities, particularly GRÓ GEST**.

The GRÓ LRT activities are **coherent with the other branches of Icelandic development cooperation**. **No indication of any duplication of effort with other GRÓ programmes or different Icelandic development efforts** was found.

GRÓ LRT works extensively with two of the three bilateral partner countries defined in Iceland's development cooperation policy in its work with Uganda and Malawi. This demonstrates coherence towards Iceland MFA's larger bilateral development cooperation plan.

In Uganda, Icelandic bilateral aid focuses on two districts in the fields of education, water and sanitation. **GRÓ LRT has complemented that effort** through training government officers from the current and past target districts through the 6-month LRT programme. This improved their capacity to effect participatory change and strengthen their existing relationship with Iceland.

Iceland's multilateral development cooperation happens through multilateral institutions such as UN agencies, the World Bank, and global funds such as the Green Climate Fund. Collaboration happens through contractual core contributions, special earmarked contributions, or the secondment of experts. The work of these **multilateral institutions in the GRÓ LRT partner countries could indirectly benefit from enhanced capacity** of local experts in the field of land restoration.

Synergies exist both in terms of technical cooperation and in the field of professional empowerment and alumni networking with other GRÓ programmes by creating an interdisciplinary network of professionals.

There are strongest **synergies with the GRÓ GEST programme** since **gender is of high importance to land restoration and sustainable land management**. The 6-month LRT programme features various lectures and sessions with a particular emphasis on gender-related issues. GRÓ LRT and GRÓ GEST implemented a short course on gender, the environment, and sustainable land management in Kyrgyzstan in 2023. Furthermore, both ongoing and new collaborations with partner universities for the development of in-country courses on land restoration could benefit from additional insights from GRÓ GEST.

Potential synergies exist with GRÓ FTP with regards to negative impacts of poor land conditions on downstream aquatic biota and with GRÓ GTP in that LRT expertise may help mitigate negative effect on environment/nature caused by geothermal power development, and restore disturbed areas.

Coherence and synergies between LRT and other development efforts by the key partnership organizations or by other donors in partner countries or regions

The evaluation finds that **GRÓ LRT is coherent with other development efforts by key partners and other donors**. There is **no indication of duplication of efforts**. There is **significant potential for synergies through the collaboration with selected partner institutions**.

Significant potential for synergy exists with selected partner institutions who expressed interest in collaboration with GRÓ LRT to develop in-country offerings which are strongly inspired by the 6-month LRT programme in Iceland. The most interest comes from **Makerere University in Uganda and Samarkand State University in Uzbekistan**, both of which have been partner institutions since the

beginning of the LRT programme and have strong, trustful relationships with LRT. Collaboration with these partner institutions has the potential to increase the output of well-trained individuals in the respective partner countries. This strategy could allow GRÓ LRT to eventually focus their efforts, particularly concerning the 6-month LRT programme, on other partner institutions and countries, all while maintaining their existing collaborations. **A detailed case study was conducted on the envisaged collaboration between GRÓ LRT and Makerere University in Uganda.** The corresponding report is attached to this evaluation.

GRÓ LRT is **associated with the UN system** through its partnership with UNESCO. The 'Man and the Biosphere' programme, which is UNESCO's leading initiative in biodiversity conservation and sustainable development, constitutes a networking platform which provides possible synergies with UNESCO. The strengthening of professional capacities in partner countries by GRÓ LRT may also **correspond with efforts by UN agencies in ecosystem restoration in line with the Rio Conventions.**

With regards to the **activities by other donors in partner countries or regions, this evaluation has not found any indication of duplication of efforts.** The demand for scholarships and capacity building in the GRÓ LRT partner countries certainly exceeds the supply of those offering such opportunities. Furthermore, while other academic scholarship programmes exist (e.g. through the German Academic Exchange Service or the US Fulbright Programme), these are usually linked to regular university courses in the donor countries, but do not constitute a specially tailored programme like GRÓ LRT. In that regard, **the 6-month LRT programme appears to be unique in its combination of quality, experience, and long-term commitment to partner countries and institutions.**

PROGRESS TOWARDS RESULTS (EFFECTIVENESS)

Effectiveness of LRT regarding the delivery and the achievement of intended results

Since the transition from being an independent UNU programme to becoming part of GRÓ, no explicit result framework has been formulated at GRÓ LRT Programme level. Therefore, **the result framework applied by this evaluation to measure the performance of GRÓ LRT during the evaluation period 2018-2023 is derived from the GRÓ Strategic Priorities 2022-2027**, which formulate three outputs and one outcome at GRÓ Centre level. The targets formulated in the GRÓ Strategic Priorities 2022-2027 apply to the year 2027, i.e. they specify where the GRÓ Centre wants to be in 2027. In the following, the effectiveness of GRÓ LRT is analysed against these outputs and the outcome. '

Section 2.3.2 provides a rather qualitative analysis of the effectiveness of the different GRÓ LRT intervention strategies. The contribution of GRÓ LRT towards the desired impact of GRÓ is analysed in section 0. For future progress monitoring and evaluation of programme-level performance, **it is recommended that targets be formulated at programme level which consider characteristics of each respective programme.**

The evaluation finds that **GRÓ LRT is effective in the delivery of outputs.**

Quantitatively, the 6-month LRT Programme is on the right track towards the 2027 target. In terms of country income status and gender balance priorities, the 6-month LRT Programme is perfectly compliant.

The number of postgraduate scholarships could be increased through corresponding budgetary allocations and in-country scholarships to achieve the 2027 target.

Assuming that parity between the four training programmes is envisaged regarding the GRÓ-level target figure, **the annual target for the number of short courses is highly ambitious.**

The programme **effectively supports the production and dissemination of knowledge by its trainees.**

Regarding the achievement of outcomes, the evaluation finds that **the effectiveness of the programme at the micro/individual/local level is high.**

At the meso/institutional level, there are significant outcomes for long-term partners, but outcomes are difficult to assess for all partner institutions in general.

Programme outcomes at macro/country/policy/SDG level are hard to measure and attribute.

The alumni survey as well as anecdotal evidence suggest macro-level outcomes, but a more systematic approach by GRÓ (LRT) to capture those is recommended.

It is recommended that LRT-specific targets be formulated to then correspond with the overarching GRÓ-level result framework.

Output 1: Increased capability of individuals and expertise of GRÓ partner organisations to design and implement programme activities in their respective professional fields

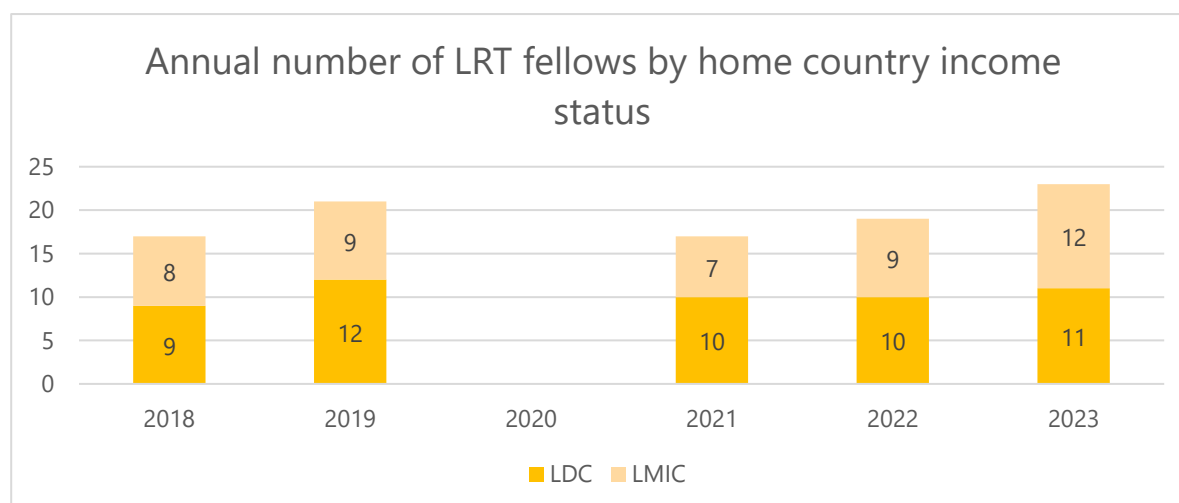
1.1: Train at least 100 fellows in Iceland per year (25 per GRÓ programme). Priority shall be given to fellows from LDCs and LMICs. The ratio for UMIC fellows should not exceed 30% per programme and 20% of the overall number of GRÓ fellows per year. The programmes should aim for gender parity.

Between 2018 and 2023, a total of 97 fellows were trained with an average of 19.4 fellows per year⁵. Although this number is below the target of 25 fellows per year, note that the target of 25 fellows was formulated in 2022 and that attendance in previous year was affected by COVID travel restrictions. The 2024 LRT cohort has 23 fellows, indicating that LRT is on track towards meeting the 2027 target. Historically, GRÓ LRT has been considering about 20 fellows per annum as a sustainable target figure.

54% of LRT fellows were from LDCs and 46% were from LMICs between 2018 and 2023. GRÓ LRT, is therefore fully compliant with the set priorities on national representation. Figure 3 below provides an annual breakdown of the corresponding figures.

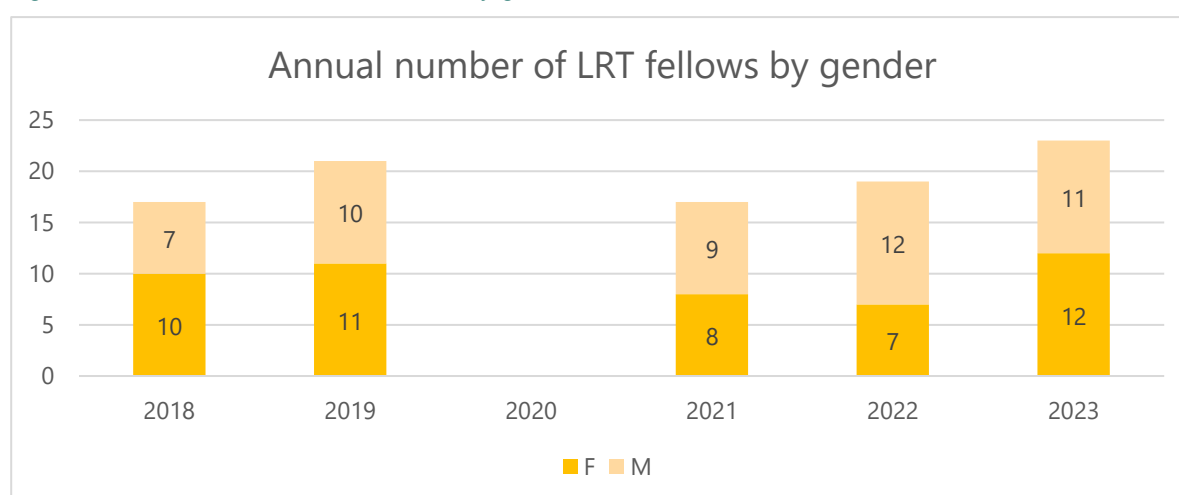
⁵ The 6-month LRT programme could not take place in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, this year is not considered in the statistics.

Figure 3: Annual number of LRT fellows by home country income status between 2018 and 2023.



49% of LRT fellows were female and 51% male between 2018 and 2023. This virtually constitutes perfect gender parity. GRÓ LRT, therefore, is fully compliant with the set priorities. Figure 4 below provides an annual breakdown of the corresponding figures.

Figure 4: Annual number of LRT fellows by gender between 2018 and 2023.



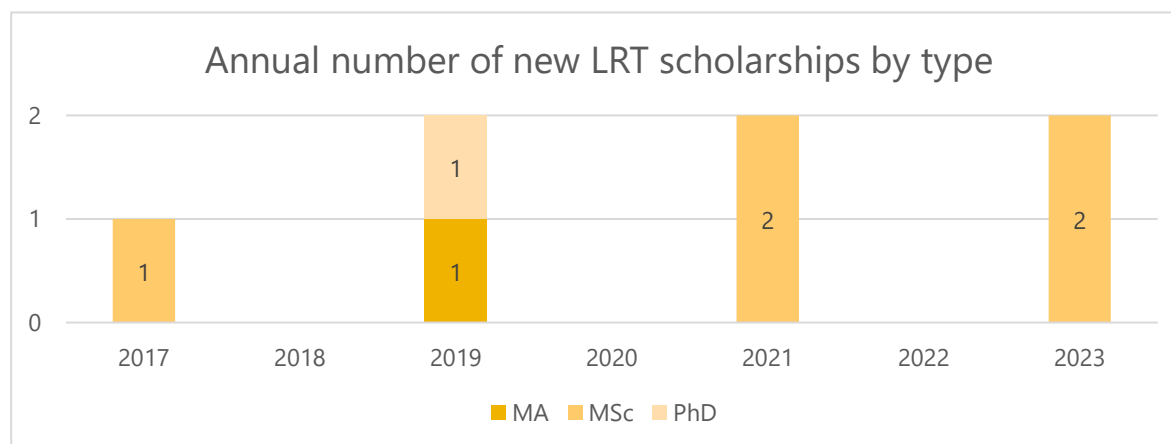
In summary, GRÓ LRT has been consistently below the desired output of 25 fellows per year but is progressing towards meeting this figure. GRÓ LRT is perfectly compliant with the GRÓ priorities in terms of country income status and gender parity.

1.2: Grant 20 new postgraduate scholarships to GRÓ fellows per year in Icelandic or partner universities.

In total, seven new postgraduate scholarships have been awarded by GRÓ LRT in Icelandic universities, six of those during the evaluation reference period 2018-2023, resulting in an annual average of 1.2 new scholarships (the year 2020 is not considered due to the Covid-19 pandemic). **Error! Reference source not found.**9 below provides an annual breakdown of the postgraduate scholarships by type. The target would be five new GRÓ LRT scholarships per year by 2027, assuming that parity between the four training programmes is envisaged regarding the above GRÓ-level target figure. **The LRT outputs during the evaluation reference period have been significantly below this target figure** (however, note that this target was formulated only in 2022 and applies to the year 2027). GRÓ LRT staff emphasized that the number of postgraduate scholarships has been limited only by the available core funding and that budget allocations thus far have not been in line with this target. All scholarship recipients are either from LDCs (5/7; 71%) or LMICs (2/7; 29%). In terms of gender distribution, three (43%) are female and four (57%) are male.

A cost-effective approach to increase the number of new LRT postgraduate scholarships could be the collaboration with partner universities in target countries to offer in-country postgraduate courses on land restoration. Scholarships could then be funded by GRÓ LRT for study in those courses. For more detailed information, refer to the attached case study on the envisaged collaboration between GRÓ LRT and Makerere University in Uganda.

Figure 5: Annual number of new LRT scholarships in Icelandic or partner universities.



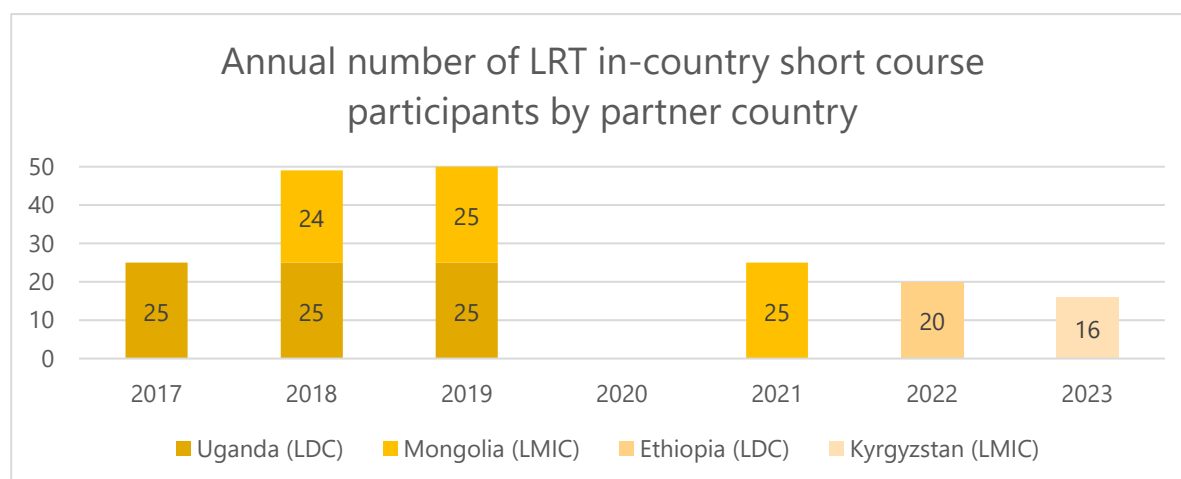
1.3: Host at least 25 short courses annually in partner countries/online.

In total, eight short courses have been offered by GRÓ LRT in partner countries, seven of those during the evaluation reference period 2018-2023, resulting in an annual average of 1.4 in-country short courses (the year 2020 disrupted the delivery of short courses in Uganda due to the Covid-19 pandemic). **Error! Reference source not found.**0 below provides an annual breakdown of the in-country LRT short courses and respective participant numbers. Note that the 2023 short course was hosted in collaboration with GRÓ GEST. No information is available on any online short courses offered by GRÓ LRT during the reference period other than the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) covered in the following section.

In terms of short courses, the principle of parity between the four training programmes is not applicable to the above GRÓ-level target figure, since programmes such as GEST and GTP host relatively many short courses, whereas LRT hosts relatively few short courses. Overall, the four programmes combined are on track regarding this target. **To increase the LRT outputs, there is room and demand to bring back the number of short courses delivered by LRT at least to pre-Covid levels.**

Furthermore, the output could certainly be increased by means of online short courses. However, the evaluation finds that online courses would by no means constitute equivalent replacements of in-country short courses. **It is therefore recommended to revise/refine the target of this output,** possibly by setting distinct targets for in-country and possible online short courses.

Figure 6: Annual number of participants in in-country short courses hosted by GRÓ LRT.



1.4: Produce 4 online teaching tools per year

To date, a total of three online teaching tools in the form of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have been (co-)produced by GRÓ LRT, two of those during the evaluation reference period 2018-2023. One course was produced in 2017 and the other two in 2019. This corresponds to an annual average of 0.33 online teaching tools during the evaluation reference period 2018-2023 (assuming that the Covid-19 pandemic would not have affected the production of online teaching tools, the year 2020 is included here). Assuming that parity between the four training programmes is envisaged by the above GRÓ-level target figure, the target is one online teaching tool to be produced by GRÓ LRT per year. **The LRT output during the evaluation reference period has been significantly below this target figure, however noting that this target was formulated only in 2022 and applies to the year 2027.**

Table 1: MOOCs (co-)produced by GRÓ LRT and their respective enrolment and completion statistics as of the end of 2023.

Year	MOOC	Enrolled	Completed	Completed %
2017	A Business Approach to Sustainable Landscape Restoration	11,347	1,149	10%
2019	A Business Model Innovation for Sustainable Landscape Restoration	6,443	808	13%
2019	Sheep in the land of fire and ice	2,236	NA	NA
	TOTAL	20,026	1,957	10%

An impressive total of more than 20,000 participants have enrolled in the three MOOCs as of the end of 2023. The completion rates for the courses range between 10% and 13%, which are in the common range of completion rates for MOOCs in general. No completion figures are available for the MOOC "Sheep in the land of fire and ice".

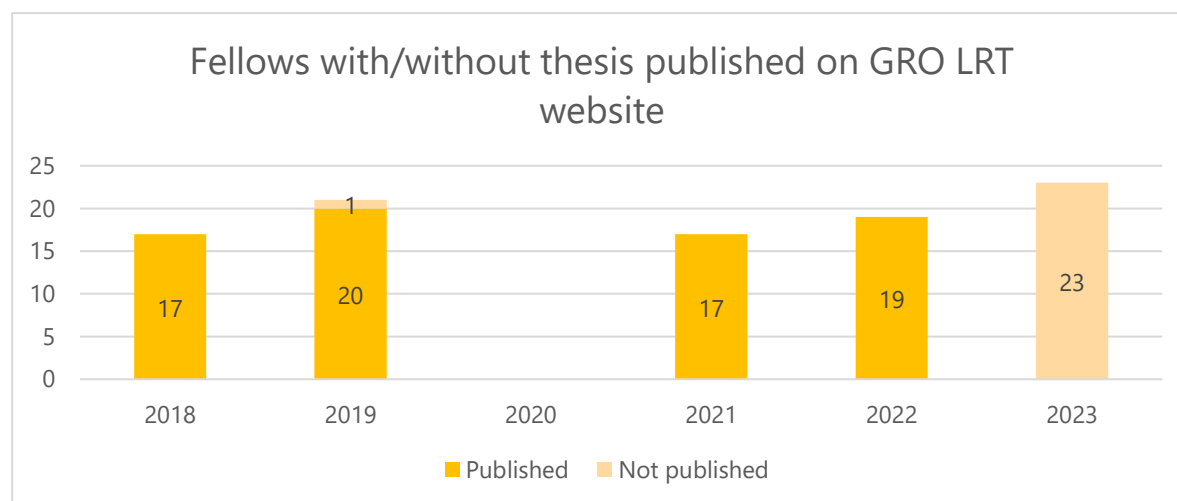
In 2019, GRÓ LRT, as a partner in the ENABLE consortium funded by Erasmus+, further co-developed an online space for a growing community of people involved in large-scale landscape restoration called '4 Returns' (see: <https://4returns.commonland.com>). In total 2,239 members are currently a part of the platform, which includes information about the MOOCs and study cases created by the consortium, as well as other material. One of the study cases and teaching notes describes the Hekluškógar project in South Iceland which examines how to transition from barren desertified land to a resilient and healthy woodland that can provide ecosystem services to the people in the area and beyond. The case was mainly written by GRÓ LRT staff and can be found here: <https://repub.eur.nl/pub/119752/>.

Output 2: Production and dissemination of new knowledge by GRÓ training participants, fellows and scholarship recipients.

2.1: Publish research produced by GRÓ on its website.

GRÓ LRT publishes final project papers produced by the 6-month LRT Programme fellows as well as final university theses of LRT scholarship recipients on its website. In rare case when the overall quality of the output is found insufficient, or the final paper is incomplete, the full version of the output is omitted and only the abstract is published. This is related to cases where fellows did not manage to finalize a final project paper of acceptable quality by the end of the 6-month LRT Programme, or when the final paper is part of an ongoing study that will be published elsewhere. Nonetheless, even unpublished papers are considered to hold significant value as essential internal working documents for the fellows and their respective institutes. **Error! Reference source not found.** below provides an annual breakdown of the LRT final project papers published on the GRÓ LRT website. The papers for the 2023 cohort are yet to be published on the website. All three university theses which have been produced by LRT scholarship recipients thus far are fully available on the website.

Figure 7: Annual number of 6-month LRT Programme fellows by the publication status of their final project paper published on the GRÓ LRT website.



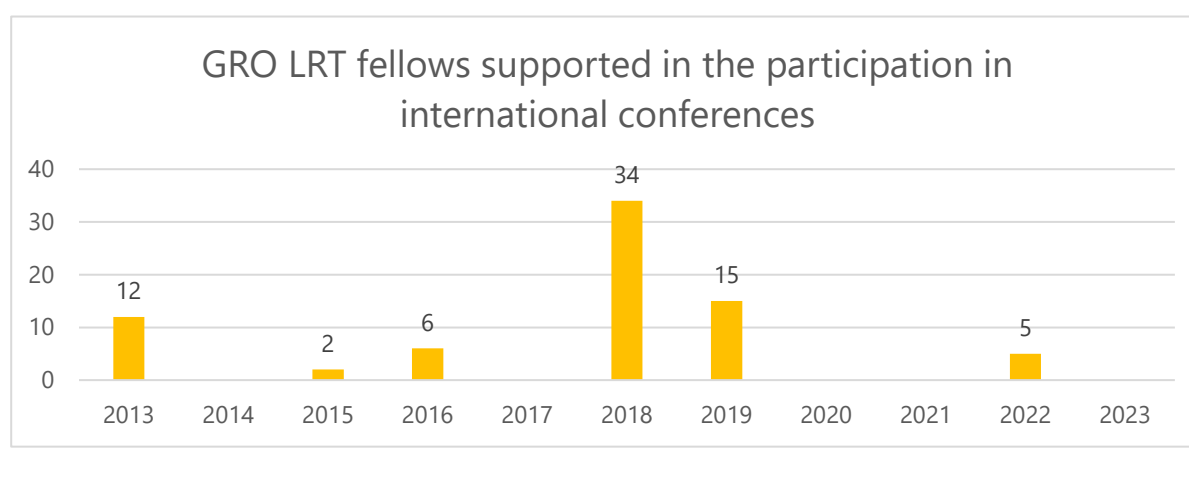
2.2: Host yearly seminars where GRÓ fellows and scholarship recipients introduce their findings.

All 6-month LRT programme fellows present their findings at a seminar held towards the end of the 6-month programme. Usually, this is a two-day seminar, with each session lasting half a day, and with each fellow having 10 minutes to present their findings. In the case of the only GRÓ LRT PhD scholarship so far, the PhD dissertation defence in November 2022 was open to interested parties for attendance in person or virtually via Microsoft Teams. Likewise, when finishing a master's degree, students need to present their master studies at an open seminar.

2.3: Support fellows to participate in international conferences.

In total, GRÓ LRT has supported/facilitated the participation of 74 fellows in international conferences, 54 of those during the evaluation reference period 2018-2023, resulting in an annual average of 10.8 supported fellows. **Error! Reference source not found.** below provides an annual breakdown of the fellows supported. It shows a high variance between years, pointing towards a rather opportunity-based approach (i.e. based on the occurrence of suitable conferences/events) for this support. In 2018, the 11th Society for Ecological Restoration Europe Conference was held in Reykjavik when the 17 fellows of that year plus 17 former fellows attended the conference.

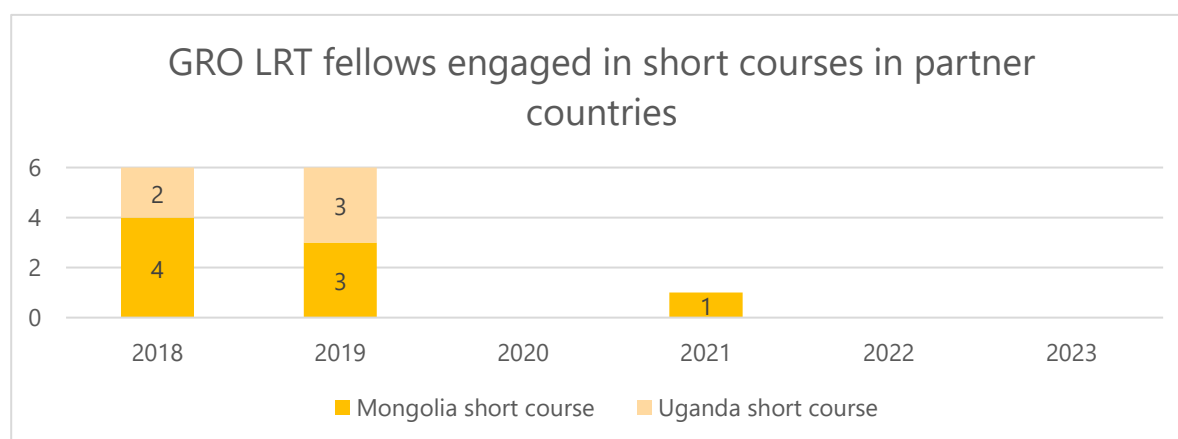
Figure 8: Annual number of fellows supported by GRÓ LRT in the participation in international conferences.



2.4: Engage former fellows in short courses and training in partner countries.

GRÓ LRT has engaged 13 former fellows in the preparation and delivery of short courses in partner countries during the evaluation reference period 2018-2023. Error! Reference source not found. below provides an annual breakdown of the fellows engaged per short course.

Figure 9: Annual number of GRÓ LRT fellows engaged in short courses in partner countries.



Output 3: Professional empowerment of GRÓ training participants, fellows, and scholarship recipients is increased through GRÓ community building and networking.

3.1: Host a minimum of one short seminar for alumni in specific home countries/regions per year.

Joint alumni events for all GRÓ alumni from Uganda were held in 2023 and 2024 in Kampala with the estimated participation between 20% and 30% of all Ugandan GRÓ alumni. The Ugandan GRÓ alumni intend to formalize their group under a legal entity. These alumni activities were piloted in Uganda, with the aim to roll out further to other countries in future.

Furthermore, GRÓ LRT representatives regularly visit the partner countries to interview candidates for the upcoming 3-4 annual cohorts. In line with these visits, the GRÓ LRT representatives meet with the LRT alumni from that country to further cultivate relationships. It is understood that these meetings are rather meant to maintain relationships and follow-up on alumni's careers than constituting formal seminars.

3.2: Create an alumni platform for networking.

This output is considered more relevant at GRÓ Centre level.

Setting up LRT-specific alumni platforms in separate countries is not considered a feasible option by GRÓ LRT. However, GRÓ LRT encourages former fellows to nourish networking in their respective countries. In some countries (e.g. Ghana and Mongolia), alumni formed social media groups to communicate and share information on available grants, seminars, their work, etc.

3.3: Study the feasibility of setting up an alumni fund to support alumni in implementing projects at home.

No information could be found regarding GRÓ LRT specific activities in this regard. This output is considered more relevant at GRÓ Centre level.

3.4: Support annual social media campaigns with alumni participation.

This output is considered more relevant at GRÓ Centre level.

In terms of social media outreach, GRÓ LRT is maintaining social media channels on Facebook, X and LinkedIn. In 2023, GRÓ LRT celebrated the World Environment Day as well as GRÓ LRT day (on the same day) by sharing short videos from 6-month LRT Programme fellows. This was meant to energize the LRT alumni, remind them of the "LRT family" and to raise awareness of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.

3.5: Peer learning events/seminars organised.

Beyond the annual seminars at the end of the 6-month LRT Programme, no information could be found regarding regular GRÓ LRT peer learning events/seminars. In the past, seminars were organised in line with relevant conferences, e.g. during the 2018 Society for Ecological Restoration (SER) Europe Conference in Iceland and the 2019 SER World Conference in Cape Town. However, no such seminars have been organised since then.

Outcome: GRÓ training participants, fellows and scholarship recipients and their respective organisations promote and implement changes needed to achieve the SDGs relevant to their field of work.

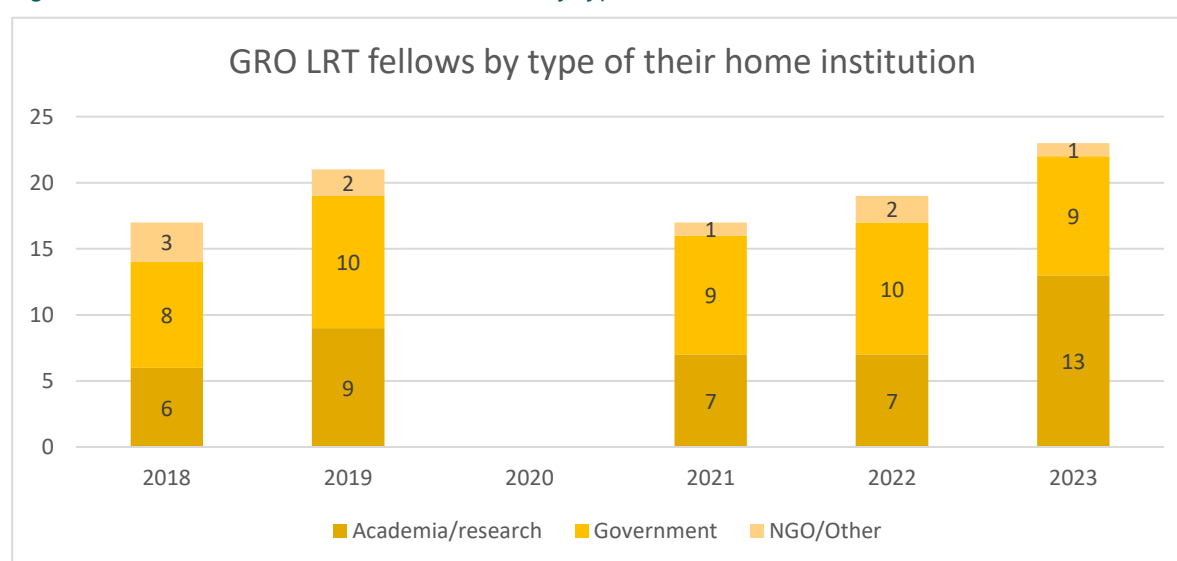
In the context of this evaluation, the **micro level is considered as the individual and/or local level**. Local here is used in the sense of spatial extent over which an individual has some degree of influence. For example, in the context of Uganda, this would be a district in which an environmental officer of the local government operates.

At the micro level, the programme clearly has the most immediate and attributable impact, since it directly trains individuals. **Both focus group discussions (FGDs) with alumni and the alumni survey indicate that impact at the micro level is high.** Many alumni expressed that the 6-month LRT training constituted the point of departure or an important stepping stone in their professional careers in technical fields related to land restoration. The term 'life-changing experience' (in the positive sense) was used to describe the 6-month LRT Programme by various alumni interviewed in line with this evaluation. With regards to career advancement, GRÓ LRT 2018-2023 alumni gave the programme a mean rating of 3.88/5 on a 5-step scale with 1 being no career advancement and 5 being extreme advancement. Regarding the type of career advancement resulting from the 6-month LRT Programme, 70% indicated that they assumed more responsibility, followed by further scholarships⁶ (34%), promotions (29%), and salary increases (27%).

⁶ Both scholarships related to GRÓ LRT and not.

The **impact brought about by individuals within their local/immediate sphere of influence is also found to be significant**. On a 5-step scale with 1 being strong disagreement and 5 being strong agreement, the average rating of 2018-2023 GRÓ LRT by its alumni on whether they were able to advance their contribution in their field/subject area thanks to the 6-month LRT Programme was 4.6/5. Of the LRT alumni participating in the alumni survey, 79% indicated that they contributed to their technical field through training/mentoring of others, 64% through advising local communities and 63% through the implementation of projects/initiatives. This impact **depends on the type of work environment of each LRT alumni**. Figure 64 below provides an annual breakdown of the GRÓ LRT fellows by the type of their home institution during the evaluation reference period 2018-2023. Alumni employed in academia rather create further impact through teaching and research, whereas government employees create impacts in an applied setting. For example, various Ugandan alumni who are local government employees in one of the more than hundred districts confirmed that, as a direct result of the 6-month LRT training, they were able to make an impact at local/district level in terms of awareness, planning and decision-making with regards to land restoration.

Figure 10: Annual number of GRÓ LRT fellows by type of their home institution.



The farther the considered impact level is from the level of the individual direct beneficiaries, the longer it takes for measurable impacts to materialize and the harder it becomes to attribute possible changes directly to the programme. This fact reigns true at the **meso level of the home or partner institutions of the training participants**. While the average level of agreement by GRÓ LRT alumni to the statement that “the management of my organization appreciates and values the skills I gained from the post-graduate training programme” is very strong (4.6/5), quantifiable impacts at the meso level are hard to measure especially when considering only progress towards the SDGs is defined as expected meso-level outcomes in the GRÓ theory of change (ToC). This is also due to the fact that there is no more granular definition of such (expected) impact available than the very high-level and rather vague formulation in the GRÓ ToC that ‘partner countries progress towards the achievement of the targeted SDGs’. In this regard, also refer to the textbox on ‘Training a critical mass’ below. A clearer definition of meso- and macro-level targets may help to better measure and quantify programme impact.

There is **high impact at the level of long-term academic partner institutions**, e.g. Makerere University in Uganda, Samarkand State University in Uzbekistan, the Mongolian University of Life Sciences and the University for Development Studies in Ghana. These have benefitted from the programme over many years and have a high number of LRT alumni as employees and in management positions. Both universities have set a strong agenda towards land restoration and intend to develop their own LRT-inspired postgraduate offerings. This finding underscores the importance of long-term partnerships and support in creating long-term impact.

Effectiveness of the different LRT Programme intervention strategies and of local partnerships in regard to the delivery and the achievement of results

Section 0 provided a quantitative assessment of programme effectiveness against the GRÓ Centre Strategic Priorities formulated in 2022. **The present section aims to consider the qualitative aspects of the programme and its various intervention strategies.**

This evaluation finds that the intervention of the **6-month LRT Programme is highly effective**. This is supported by systematic feedback from GRÓ alumni, with **LRT consistently receiving high quality-related ratings**.

LRT postgraduate scholarships are found to be effective. This finding is in line with the findings of a specific in-depth evaluation of the GRÓ scholarship component conducted in 2023.

The **in-country short courses are found effective in locally raising awareness and creating capacity in land restoration**.

While **LRT MOOCs are found to be effective in terms of enrolment, and quality, it needs to be determined whether the alignment between MOOC participants and LRT target groups is sufficient to justify the effort**.

6-month GRÓ LRT programme

The 6-month LRT programme, constituting the core activity of GRÓ LRT, is an academic postgraduate course offered to early-career working professionals from eligible partner institutions. The course consists of eight modules which bring together disciplines relevant to land restoration and sustainable land management and aim to provide a balance of theory and practice, lecture hall and fieldwork, and hard and soft skills. The curriculum has been reviewed regularly since the course was piloted in 2007 and continuously updated accordingly.

Interviewed alumni attested to the programme's high quality. A systematic⁷ online survey among GRÓ alumni conducted in June 2024 in line with this evaluation supported this finding, **with GRÓ LRT consistently receiving high quality-related ratings**. On a 5-step scale with 1 being low and 5 being high, **GRÓ LRT received the average rating of 4.8/5 for programme quality and 4.8/5 for programme coherence** by the 2018-2023 LRT fellows. The same is true for ratings on skills improvement (4.2/5) and the **usefulness of the individual programme components (4.6/5)**.

Since 2022, successful completion of the programme yields a certificate worth 30 ECTS credits, corresponding to one semester of a three- or four-semester Master's programme. **The introduction of the ECTS credits is a direct response to course feedback from previous alumni and is very much appreciated by GRÓ LRT fellows/alumni.**

Participation in the programme is fully funded by GRÓ LRT, including travel, accommodation, sustenance, tuition, and required equipment. This is an important element of the course, in that it i) allows participants from poor backgrounds to participate in the course; ii) levels the ground between participants with different economic backgrounds; and iii) allows the participants to fully focus on the programme, which has been described as intensive by alumni interviewed for this evaluation.

The design of the programme implies a dense curriculum and schedule during the 6 months in Iceland. Therefore, not all relevant topics can be covered in depth and according to the individual interest of each participant. Corresponding feedback was received from alumni, including the suggestion for extending the programme duration in order to enhance in-depth coverage of topics. This feedback is expected and sensible but would probably also be expressed in a programme of any duration. The

⁷ The survey response rate among all LRT alumni since 2007 was 78.4%, with almost perfect gender balance. For the evaluation reference period 2018-2023, the LRT alumni response rate was 82.5%, with almost perfect gender balance.

evaluation finds that intensity and limited coverage is intrinsic to the programme design and that the programme does not have the ambition/objective to function equivalently to a full university master's course. Instead, this issue may be addressed through early expectation management among selected candidates.

The programme has shown a **strong success rate in course completion**. During the evaluation period, all fellows fully graduated except for two fellows in 2022 and two fellows in 2023. In both years, these fellows did not pass the second course of the programme (individual research project) and thus only obtained 15 out of 30 ECTS credits. If these are not counted as completing the programme, the completion rate still stands at 96%. Key to this success is the **well-designed and rigorous participant selection process**. The selection process is carried out together with the in-country partner institutions (see Annex 6.2 for a list of GRÓ LRT partner institutions between 2018 and 2023) and relies on long-term relationships built over the years with these organizations. The participant selection process usually happens in a 3-4 year cycle. The partner institution first creates a list of eligible candidates, which are then interviewed by GRÓ LRT staff online and/or during country visits. The resulting shortlist of candidates can then participate in the programme during the following 3-4 years. Eligibility criteria are i) at least a Bachelor's degree in a relevant field; ii) permanent employment with the partner institution; iii) a guarantee by the employer that candidates can return to their position upon completion of the programme; and iv) less than 40 years of age at the time of participation.

This selection approach is designed to minimize brain drain from the partner countries and maximize the chance that the enhanced capacity of participants contributes to land restoration capacities within their respective institution and their home country at large.

Scholarships for postgraduate studies

Out of the seven postgraduate scholarships (5 MSc, 1 MA, 1 PhD) awarded by GRÓ LRT to LRT alumni, three have been finalized with graduation (1 MSc, 1 MA, 1 PhD) while the other four are ongoing. Master's level scholarships are for two full years and whereas the PhD scholarship lasted three full years. They are awarded to GRÓ LRT alumni based on their motivation, potential, and performance exhibited during the 6-month LRT programme.⁸ All scholarships were for studies at the Agricultural University of Iceland, except for the MA scholarship which took place at the University of Iceland. The latest two MSc scholarships awarded in 2023 are for the new 2-year 120-ECTS MSc programme in restoration ecology offered by the Agricultural University of Iceland since 2023. It is likely that most future MSc scholarships in Iceland will be in the same MSc program.

All GRÓ LRT postgraduate scholarships are fully funded, including travel, accommodation, and sustenance. **A detailed evaluation of the postgraduate scholarship component of GRÓ was conducted in 2023 and found it received overwhelmingly positive feedback with regards to their effectiveness.**

The final university theses of the postgraduate scholarships are published on the GRÓ LRT website. Additionally, one paper from a PhD student has been published in a peer-reviewed journal.

In-country short courses

In-country short courses are developed and delivered in cooperation with partner institutions. Selected GRÓ LRT alumni regularly have been involved in the design and delivery of the short courses to gain additional experience, maintain their relationship with the programme, and create a sense of ownership of land restoration in their country. Each course usually targets a group of 25 participants from the respective partner country. Courses are usually held in a field setting in a specific area of the respective partner country and course content is accordingly tailored to the context of that area. While there may

⁸ In the past, GRÓ LRT has made two exceptions in hardship cases in which fellows were not able to return to their country of origin, but this is not in line with the GRÓ principles and objectives.

be some overlap, the target groups for the in-country short courses are different from the 6-month LRT programme.

Interview partners consulted for this evaluation indicated that the **short courses are of high value and effective in creating capacity in land restoration**. For example, in Uganda each of the annual short courses delivered between 2017 and 2019 targeted a group of 25 local government employees from a different region and covered the land restoration context and challenges of that region. Interview partners confirmed that the training participants were in a better position to identify and address issues related to land degradation and to promote land restoration at the district level because of the training. The short courses further sparked interest among the participants to continue their studies on land restoration, either locally or through the 6-month LRT programme.

From 2017 until 2019, the duration of the short courses offered in Uganda and Mongolia was typically between seven and nine days. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the delivery of short courses. Since 2021, one short course was offered in each of Mongolia, Ethiopia and Kyrgyzstan, but only over a duration ranging between two and five days. Altogether, it appears as if the **delivery of in-country short courses has not yet fully recovered since the disruption of the COVID pandemic**, but also struggle due to budget limitations and intensive efforts required for delivery of these courses for partner institutions. Yet, programme partners consulted in line with this evaluation clearly expressed the **continued demand for these courses**.

MOOCs

An impressive total of more than 20,000 participants have enrolled in the three MOOCs as of the end of 2023. Slightly less than 2,000 participants, are confirmed to have completed a MOOC (corresponding to an 11% completion rate).⁹ These completion rates are well within the normal range of completion rates for MOOCs in general. The actual value and impact of MOOCs beyond mere completion ratios is difficult to assess. According to statistics derived from users' IP addresses for the two business-related MOOCs, 5-10% of course participants were from Africa and 35-45% from Asia. This is a slightly higher representation of these world regions in these courses as compared to the overall Coursera average. However, none of the LRT target countries is represented in the top 10 list of countries from which course participants originate. Therefore, while the MOOCs may be able to target a relatively large number of people, only a small fraction of those are potentially from the LRT target countries. A notable difference to overall Coursera averages is the relatively high fraction of Master's degree holders among the course participants of close to 40% (average about 22%), suggesting that the topic addresses the interest of postgraduate level participants.

Positive online user feedback for all three MOOCs (4.6/5, 4.7/5 and 4.9/5, respectively) indicates that the three MOOCs co-produced by GRÓ LRT are of high quality. The online course website '[classcentral](#)' rated the MOOC 'Sheep in the land of fire and ice' as 'one of the [235] best free online courses of all time'. A case study in the present evaluation on the GRÓ GEST MOOCs found that, in the context of GRÓ GEST, MOOCs are highly relevant to enhance the programme offer and outreach. A more in-depth assessment on whether this is also true in the context of GRÓ LRT is recommended to determine whether the impact justifies the production effort.

GRÓ LRT website

The GRÓ LRT website was launched in 2020 and provides plenty of information on the programme, alumni, and all sorts of LRT-related news articles, videos and publications. All news articles are further shared via GRÓ LRT's social media accounts on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and LinkedIn. The GRÓ LRT website offer is found to be **effective in disseminating rich information about the programme as well its alumni and publications**. A way to further enhance the offer could be to add to the alumni profiles i) their current position; ii) their publication record; and iii) notable impact they have achieved in

⁹ Completion rates for the MOOC "Sheep in the Land of Ice and Fire" are not available, thus the 11% completion rate only applies to the other two MOOCs.

land restoration. However, this would require regular (highly human resources intense) follow-up with all alumni but would enhance the programme's ability to systematically capture and report on impacts. Alternatively, or in addition, there could be profiles of the partner institutions which feature an overview of impacts generated at institutional level.

Effectiveness of the partnership with UNESCO to support the achievement of results

This evaluation finds that **the partnership with UNESCO has not (yet) brought any significant benefits or disadvantages with regards to the achievement of results.**

With the GRÓ Centre operating as a "C2C under the auspices of UNESCO", this partnership should support the achievement of results. **Minimal benefits for GRÓ LRT from this partnership could be identified.** In terms of funding, no benefits derive from the partnership with UNESCO, as core funding is provided by MFA, sporadically complemented by temporary project-/activity-bound funding arrangements with third-party donors. Instead, according to the UNESCO website¹⁰, C2C "are a privileged partner of the Organization with access to UNESCO's logo and international and intergovernmental bodies and networks and may leverage UNESCO's international reach and convening powers".

The extent of the partnership is more limited than that description. Two working professionals from UNESCO's MAB network have participated in the 6-month GRÓ LRT programme from 2022 (and two more are to participate in the 2025 programme). UNESCO, together with GRÓ and the Icelandic Embassy, did host the annual national GRÓ alumni meeting in early 2024 in Uganda and further offered to provide office space for the planned Ugandan GRÓ alumni association. Beyond this, **this evaluation could not find evidence for either any significant benefits or disadvantages brought about by the arrangement with UNESCO.**

Factors influencing the achievement of the expected results

The evaluation found the following factors influencing the achievement of the expected results:

1. Enabling factors

- a. **Focus on few selected partner countries and partner institutions.** Given limited resources, this is an important factor to avoid dilution of benefits over too many partners. To avoid this also in future, it is recommended not to add more partners above this support capacity.
- b. **Long-term commitment.** This is a crucial factor contributing to GRÓ's uniqueness compared to initiatives by other donors. Trust and reputation are built over time in open-ended long-term commitment. It allows alumni to be involved in programme delivery and develop during their professional careers.
- c. **Regular partner visits.** Each partnership is different and requires flexibility and adaptation. The institutional partnerships strongly rely on individual relationships. Regular visits and exchanges with programme partners are key factors to maintain these partnerships as well as institutional memories.
- d. **Careful selection process.** The involvement by partner institutions increases their sense of programme ownership. The applied principles are clear, plausible, and aligned with the programme objectives.
- e. **Full funding for all participants.** This opens access to participants from poor backgrounds to be in the programme and allows the participants to fully focus on the programme.
- f. **Regular self-evaluation and curriculum review.** This ensures that the programme remains relevant and effective. Feedback from all parties involved appears to be considered. A powerful

¹⁰ <https://www.unesco.org/en/partnerships/institutes?hub=953>

example is the 2022 introduction of the 30 ECTS credits for the 6-month LRT programme, which has been consistently requested by LRT alumni.

- g. Experience, expertise, and dedication of GRÓ LRT management and academic staff.** The high quality and effectiveness of the programme is possible because of the high level of experience, expertise and dedication of those involved. The result is a carefully crafted programme which offers a complete bundle of relevant experiences. The close exchange between staff and fellows and the ample supervision contribute to GRÓ's uniqueness compared to initiatives by other donors.
- h. Iceland.** The programme taking place in Iceland is a crucial factor contributing to GRÓ's uniqueness compared to initiatives by other donors in terms of exposure to the Icelandic land restoration practices and Icelandic society with its emphasis on democracy, human rights and gender equality. Participants are removed from daily stress factors and/or distractions and can fully focus on the programme.

2. Impeding factors

- a. COVID-19 pandemic.** Freedom to travel is key for the programme, so any development affecting this freedom impedes programme implementation. COVID-19 still affects the programme through long-term health impacts on staff members. This factor is hard to mitigate since the programme cannot be effectively delivered through online channels.
- b. Lack of financial security.** While the Iceland MFA has been reliably providing long-term funding, the actual programme-level budgets are approved late on an annual basis. This impedes the planning and implementation of additional activities and the response to possible unforeseen events. It is recommended that a multi-year programme-level rolling budget be considered. If the 2022 targets are to be achieved, funding for various activities (e.g. postgraduate scholarships in Iceland) needs to be allocated accordingly.

PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION AND ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT (EFFICIENCY)

LRT Programme management arrangements, planning, monitoring and evaluation, oversight, steering, and risk management systems and the efficient and effective delivery of results

The evaluation finds that, **at GRÓ LRT Programme level, management arrangements are efficient, albeit the management team appears to be understaffed.**

With regards to the **programme reporting, oversight, and steering arrangement, there are perceived deficiencies which require further internal investigation for possible improvement.**

GRÓ LRT Programme-level management

During the evaluation period 2018-2023, the **GRÓ LRT Programme-level core management team has been fluctuating around four staff members.** Until 2020, these were usually full-time staff supported by an additional temporary staff member (therefore, rather 4.5 staff). Since 2020, only the LRT Director and Office Manager are full-time staff, whereas the Deputy Director and Project Manager are working in part-time as they have additional teaching obligations at Agricultural University of Iceland. Therefore, since 2020, the team consists of less than four full-time staff (currently only three staff members). GRÓ LRT is based on a service agreement between the MFA and the Agricultural University of Iceland, which is the primary host institution of GRÓ LRT. The staff are employed by the University. The University also provides other lecturers and supervisors that contribute to the programme implementation and delivery as well as access to its facilities, but these services are paid for separately by GRÓ LRT.

The **annual programme management cycle is determined by the 6-month LRT Programme implementation period.** During the 6-month LRT Programme implementation period between March and August, focus is on implementation and support to the fellows. Visits to partner countries for in-person candidate interviews and fostering partnerships usually fall outside of this period. Short courses are also offered during the other months but in some instances overlap with the 6-month LRT Programme implementation period.

Evaluation and feedback mechanisms are built into all activities. The 6-month LRT Programme curriculum is reviewed in regular intervals by an academic committee to ensure relevance and effectiveness of the programme. The latest review was done in 2021. Furthermore, feedback from programme fellows is collected on both a weekly basis and near the end of the 6-month LRT Programme. GRÓ LRT has demonstrated that it is responsive to such feedback, most notably by making the programme eligible for 30 ECTS credits.

Overall, the programme-level management appears to be efficient and based on proven and well-established approaches which have been refined over time. It further appears that **programme management is heavily reliant on institutional memory and partnerships built by long-serving staff.** This means that generous learning and handover periods need to be allocated in case of future new hires. The **management team appears to be understaffed**, particularly if recommendations of this evaluation regarding systematic impact monitoring are to be followed.

Programme reporting, oversight, and steering systems

GRÓ LRT reports to the GRÓ Centre on planning, progress, and finances. GRÓ provides steering and oversight but most importantly approves annual budgetary contributions to GRÓ LRT. Funding for LRT channelled from MFA through the GRÓ Centre. The evaluation has found indications of the following deficiencies in the management arrangement between the GRÓ Centre and GRÓ LRT:

1. **Annual budgets are usually approved very late** and at times even once the respective budget year has already started, restricting planning and compromising budgetary flexibility at programme level.
2. There is a reported **disconnect between the GRÓ LRT Programme and GRÓ Centre management** because GRÓ LRT staff are university employees (and not GRÓ employees) and reporting structures are unclear.
3. There is perception by GRÓ LRT management that the **GRÓ Centre's focus is heavily skewed towards maximizing cost efficiency** without sufficiently appreciating the immaterial value/benefits created by the programme.

The use of programme financial and human resources and the efficient and effective delivery of results

The evaluation finds that the **costs per trainee for the different GRÓ LRT interventions are plausible and commensurate with the respective outputs and outcomes.**

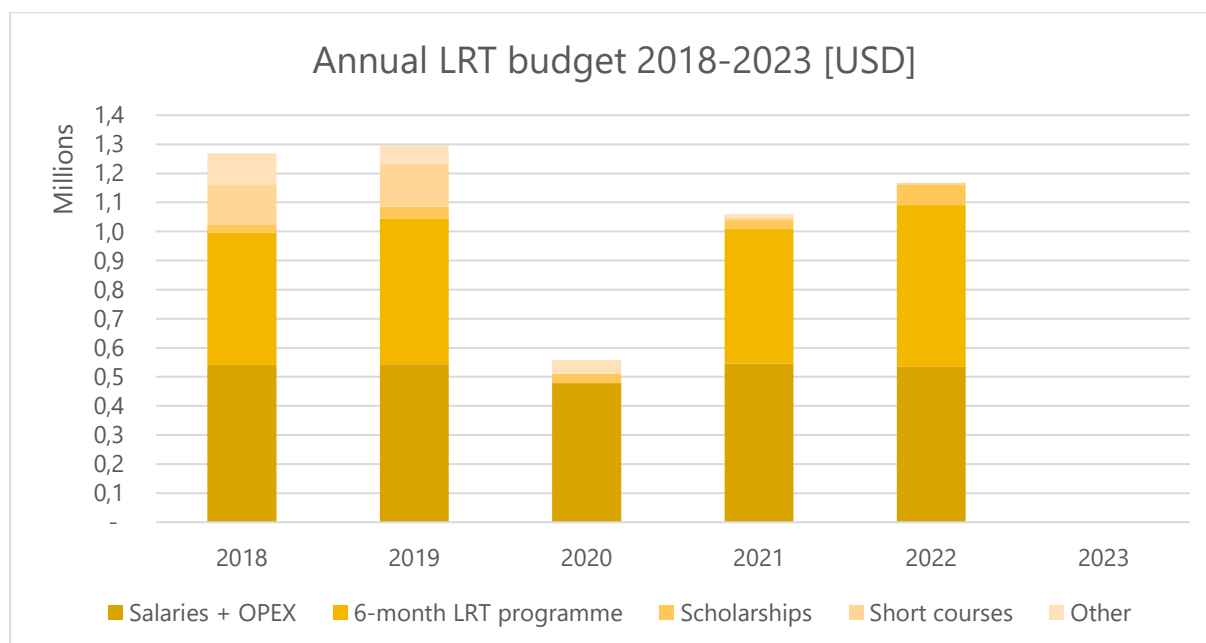
Going forward, the **MFA core funding may need to be increased to meet programme targets and implement envisaged activities.**

External funding has been almost insignificant during the evaluation reference period. This could be increased but likely at the cost of increased administrative burden and reduced sovereignty over programme funds and activities.

Financial statistics were derived from the GRÓ LRT annual financial reports from 2018 to 2022. At the time of the evaluation, the 2023 financial report was not yet available. Figure 11 provides the annual GRÓ LRT budget, estimated in USD¹¹ and disaggregated by activity category. **The annual total budget for GRÓ LRT ranged between 1 million and 1.3 million USD**, except for 2020, when virtually all core activities had to be cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The resulting disruption has affected the following years through the lack of significant budgets for in-country short courses and other activities like conference grants for fellows. The annual cost for staff salaries and operations are relatively constant at about 540,000 USD. The same is true for the annual cost of the 6-month LRT Programme, which amount to about 500,000 USD on average to accommodate the usual 20 participants.

¹¹ Based on average annual USD:ISK exchange rates for the respective year.

Figure 11: Annual LRT budget estimated in USD during the evaluation reference period 2018-2023. At the time of the evaluation in 2024, the 2023 financial report was not yet available.



Between 2018 and 2022, **external funding contributions were minimal**, with only about 70,000 USD contributed from external sources chiefly through participation in the ENABLE consortium and the corresponding work on MOOCs, study cases and learning platform. These external contributions correspond to 1.3% of the total budget of 5.35 million USD between 2018 and 2022.

Table 2: Estimated cost per trainee for the different GRÓ LRT activities, based on GRÓ financial reports 2018-2022.

Activity	Est. direct cost per trainee (USD) total (per day)	Est. total cost per trainee incl. operational expenses (USD) total (per day)	Average annual output during evaluation reference period	
6-month LRT Programme in Iceland (180 days)	26,791 (149)	46,703 (259)	Number of trainees:	20/year;
			Formal outcome:	30 ECTS credits Postgrad. cert.
MSc/PhD scholarship in Iceland (365 days) ¹²	17,313 (47)	25,441 (70)	Number of trainees:	~ 1/year;
			Formal outcome:	MSc/PhD
In-country short course (avg. 8 days)	1,346 (198)	2,471 (275)	Number of trainees:	32/year;
			Formal outcome:	Certificate

For further comparison, Table 45 above provides the estimated average cost per fellow based on the GRÓ LRT financial reports 2018-2022. Note that, for the estimated total cost including operational expenses, the annual GRÓ LRT administrative costs were added to the direct cost of each activity according to the following assumed proportions: 70% for the 6-month LRT Programme, 15% for the in-country short courses, 5% for the postgraduate scholarships and 10% for other activities. In absolute

¹² Figures refer to annual cost over 365 days.

terms as well as relative to each other, **the estimated costs per trainee for the different GRÓ LRT interventions are plausible and appear commensurate with the respective outputs and outcomes.**

An approach to cost-efficiently increase output of GRÓ LRT scholarships could be to (partially) fund in-country postgraduate degrees offered in collaboration with partner universities (see the attached case study on the intended collaboration with Makerere University in Uganda). **It is recommended that a budget for corresponding additional activities be allocated for future years.** Regarding in-country short courses, it is important to note that both interviewed alumni and programme partners have expressed a high demand for their continuation or revival. The pre-COVID budget allocations for these courses of approximately USD 140,000 per year provide an indication of the necessary annual budget. Additionally, to meet the target of 25 fellows per year for the 6-month LRT Programme, the corresponding budget allocation will need to be increased compared to the 2018-2022 period.

Notably, Iceland committed to meet the UN target of allocating 0.7% of gross national income to development assistance by 2035. In the short-term, the **allocation is set to increase** from 0.35% in 2024 to 0.46% in 2028 with explicit **focus on LDCs**. Given this commitment, a respective **increase in the MFA core funding for GRÓ LRT appears reasonable and realistic**. Alternatively, efforts to attract external funding could be increased. However, these usually come at a cost of increased administrative and reporting requirements as well as reduced sovereignty over programme funds and activities.

PROSPECTS FOR THE MAINTENANCE / CONTINUATION OF THE PROGRAMME BENEFITS (SUSTAINABILITY)

Prospects for the sustainability of the LRT Programme results and benefits

The GRÓ LRT Programme design with its emphasis on long-term partnerships is found to be strongly aligned with the goal of sustainable capacity building within partner institutions and countries.

The evaluation finds that **prospects for sustainability of the programme results and benefits are high**, evidenced by high retention rates of GRÓ LRT alumni in their regions of origin and in the technical field of land restoration.

The **GRÓ LRT Programme design includes various elements meant to enhance the sustainability of results and benefits**. This is **particularly evident in the long-term partnership approach and the criteria of the participant selection process**. Potential fellows need proof of employment with a partner institution as well as their employer's guarantee that they can return to their job after the 6-month LRT Programme. Through these criteria, sustainability of benefits for both individual fellows and the partner institution is to be enhanced and subsequent brain drain from the partner country is to be avoided.

A systematic GRÓ alumni survey conducted in June 2024 revealed that 86% of all GRÓ LRT alumni until end of 2023 maintained their region of residence both before and after their participation in the 6-month LRT Programme. Among those, 87% of the fellows originating from African partner countries indicated that they still reside in Africa. For the fellows from Asia, the respective ratio is 84%. **These figures impressively demonstrate the programme's effectiveness in sustainably building capacity within the partner countries**, even more so when considering that some of the alumni who are currently not residing in their region of origin are only temporarily out of their home countries like those studying with a GRÓ LRT postgraduate scholarship.

87% of GRÓ LRT alumni indicated that they are still working in the technical field of land restoration as of June 2024 or have worked in that field until retirement. This is a high ratio both in absolute terms and relative to the 82% average of the other GRÓ training programmes. It illustrates **the programme's effectiveness in sustainably building capacity within the technical field of land restoration**.

Through long-term partnerships, GRÓ LRT aims to build capacity and foster a sense of ownership within partner institutions. These institutions are involved in candidate selection and the delivery of program

offerings, such as in-country short courses. This ownership is crucial for the sustainability of outcomes. Some partners, like Makerere University in Uganda and Samarkand State University in Uzbekistan, have requested collaboration to develop in-country postgraduate courses. This initiative came from the partner institutions, **showing their strong commitment to GRÓ LRT's objectives**. Not all partner institutions might show this level of engagement, but these examples highlight the value of GRÓ LRT's long-term approach, as both universities have been partners since the program's initial phase.

Enabling and impeding factors for the sustainability of the programme results and benefits

The evaluation found the following factors influencing the sustainability of programme results and benefits:

1. Enabling factors

- a. **Demand-driven approach.** The programme only works with partner countries and institutions who sustainably show interest and demand in the programme meeting a necessary condition for ownership and sustainability.
- b. **Long-term partnerships and commitment.** Through a long-term, indefinite commitment, the programme develops strong durable partnerships increasing the likelihood of significant benefits remaining even if the partnership eventually ends. Furthermore, these long-term partnerships enable GRÓ LRT to maintain relationships with programme alumni involve them in current programme activities.
- c. **Candidate selection process.** The candidate selection process is designed to maximize sustainability of programme results in land restoration within the partner institutions and countries.

2. Impeding factors

- a. **Need for longer-term support by some alumni.** Stakeholder interviews and the survey response rate of 78% among LRT fellows suggest that about one fourth of LRT alumni do not maintain a relationship with the programme. Around 48% of the 2018-2023 LRT survey participants indicated that they have participated in any GRÓ networking events/activities. This suggests that, for a considerable group of alumni, further support by the programme would be required to ensure their sustainable engagement in activities aligned with the programme objectives. Beyond the support to individuals to attend international conferences (which likely targets the more active alumni), such individual support appears to be beyond the scope of the programme. Instead, the programme could increase its activities in targeted support of alumni networking, see below.
- b. **Creation of sustainable alumni networks difficult.** Top-down creation of alumni networks is often unsuccessful. It is therefore recommended that the programme identifies any possibly bottom-up initiatives and provides targeted support to those. There are some promising initiatives such as efforts by GRÓ alumni in Uganda. These have been encouraged and supported by GRÓ. However, the evaluation finds that, to become fully functional and eventually self-sustaining, these networks likely require more support in terms of funding and technical assistance than currently offered by the GRÓ Centre or GRÓ LRT.
- c. **Lack of funds among partner institutions.** About half of the LRT alumni who completed the June 2024 alumni survey indicated that insufficient resources constitute a challenge in the application of the knowledge they acquired from GRÓ LRT. Unfortunately, this points towards a dilemma which is intrinsic to initiatives focusing on LDCs and LMICs.
- d. While the overall economic value is potentially substantial (albeit difficult to quantify), there is currently **not much money to be made in land restoration**, although this could change with the growing market for carbon and biodiversity credits. As a result, there is limited evidence that the skills acquired through GRÓ LRT can lead to monetary gains, such as consulting contracts or donor-funded projects, except for careers in academia. Only 3% of LRT alumni from the June 2024 survey found work in the private sector, and less than 2.5% started their own businesses. Stories of individuals becoming successful consultants or entrepreneurs in the field could provide additional motivation.

PROSPECTS FOR LONGER-TERM DEVELOPMENT EFFECTS (IMPACT)

The direct effects and longer-term prospects for impact of the programme on the micro, meso, and macro level

Long-term impact of the programme is defined at very high level and accordingly hard to measure and attribute. The alumni survey as well as anecdotal evidence suggest SDG-relevant impacts, but a more systematic approach by GRÓ (LRT) to measure impact is recommended.

The ability to measure long-term impact at meso- and macro level may be enhanced by more clearly defining the desired impacts and determining what constitutes a 'critical mass' at these levels.

The only definition of desired impact is formulated at GRÓ level as **'Through capable individuals and organisations, partner countries progress towards the achievement of the targeted SDGs by promoting sustainable use of natural resources; strengthening resilient natural and human systems; advancing equality and human rights; and improving human wellbeing.'** This is a rather vague and very high-level definition of expected programme impact. A clearer, programme-specific definition of desired long-term development effects at micro-, meso- and macro-level targets may help to better measure and quantify programme impact. In this regard, also refer to the textbox on 'Training a critical mass' below.

Judging impact at **the policy-, country- and even SDG-level**, is very challenging since the possible impacts of the intervention are confounded with a multitude of other relevant factors influencing a country's ability and success in achieving the respective SDGs. The alumni survey and anecdotal evidence from interviews suggests that **there are macro-level impacts**. Of the 2018-2023 LRT alumni completing the alumni survey, 78% indicated that they contributed towards any of the SDGs in some way. 70% indicated contributions towards SDG 13 (climate action), 64% towards SDG 15 (life on land), and 41% towards SDG 2 (zero hunger). Furthermore, there are individual examples of LRT alumni contributing to national policy-making processes or strengthening regulations related to land restoration. However, the available information does not allow for serious conclusions regarding the magnitude of these impacts. Therefore, establishing causal links between the programme and country-level advances towards SDGs is impossible.

An approach towards better quantifying impacts at all levels could be for GRÓ LRT to define desired impacts more clearly and to systematically follow the careers of all alumni to capture and document their relevant outputs and achievements. Alternatively, or in addition, the programme could conduct regular systematic surveys with the partner institutions to capture impacts at the institutional level. Self-reporting from alumni or institutions is unlikely to be sufficient, so this would probably require additional dedicated human resources within the GRÓ LRT management team.

Training a 'critical mass'

The GRÓ ToC 2022-2027, on p.6 refers to the concept of a **'critical mass' of professionals to be capacitated through the 6-month LRT programme to promote change** and thus translate programme outputs into meso- to macro-level impacts within each country or organization. This concept is central to the overall GRÓ approach. However, at least in the case of GRÓ LRT, it appears that the **definition of what actually constitutes a critical mass within each organization or country is missing** to date. **Such definition would allow GRÓ to set clear targets** at the level of each partner organization or country, i.e. to **draw a horizon for GRÓ support** and thus present a **possible future exit/scaling down strategy** for the programme towards the respective organization or country.

For example, in the case of Uganda with its decentralized administration, 6-month LRT programme candidates are mainly selected from local governments (others also from academia). Since Uganda has 135 districts and an average of three eligible officers per district involved in the local promotion and implementation of land restoration, the overall target group for the 6-month LRT programme in Uganda can be estimated at about 400 persons. Since 2007, 35 candidates (on average two fellows per year) from Uganda have been trained through the 6-month LRT programme. Assuming that roughly 20 of those are from local governments, this would constitute **about 5% of the overall estimated target group**. It is **unclear whether this constitutes a critical mass** to promote change and generate desired impacts beyond the individual and/or local level.

The example further illustrates that different intervention strategies could be applied to build the critical mass at different impact levels. At the localized level of Ugandan districts (meso-level), it is i) rather impossible and ii) not necessary to train every single relevant officer through the 6-month LRT programme. Instead, the in-country short courses, which have a much higher output rate, were found to be very useful at district level and could more easily cater for the high number of potential candidates. Furthermore, the number of postgraduate trainees could be increased through scholarships for postgraduate courses offered by universities in partner countries. The 6-month LRT programme, instead, could consider to (partially) shift focus to strategically target early-career central government officials and thus aim to build capacity specifically for impacts at the level of national policymaking.

While acknowledging that this may be a difficult task, it is recommended that the programme considers assessing and defining on a case-to-case basis, i.e. at the level of each partner organization and country, the critical mass of alumni required to likely achieve impacts at the meso and macro level. To reach a common understanding and agreement, such an assessment should be carried out together with the respective partner institutions.

It is important to note that **alternative activities by no means constitute an equivalent replacement of the 6-month LRT programme**, which offers a unique package of training and experiences. However, alternative activities **may help to find a better trade-off between quality and quantity of trained individuals**.

Enabling and impeding factors for the longer-term achievement of direct effects and impact

The evaluation found the following factors influencing the longer-term achievement of effects and impact:

1. Enabling factors

- a. **High relevance and quality of the programme**, which are necessary conditions for any long-term impacts. The evaluation findings leave no doubt that these conditions are met.
- b. **Long-term commitment and relationships**. Most donor-funded initiatives are very limited in terms of time and (funding) commitment. The decade-long commitments and partnerships set GRÓ apart from most other donors and are a key factor to stimulate impacts beyond the micro level.

2. Impeding factors

- a. **Unclear programme-level result targets.** Concrete desired results and impacts at the institutional and country level are not defined making it difficult to classify anecdotal achievements. Furthermore, the current approach does not define any target in terms of 'critical mass' and therefore does not offer an objectively justified exit strategy.
- b. **Dilution of benefits.** During the evaluation reference period, there were LRT fellows from 34 different partner institutions (see 0). Given the annual target of 25 6-month LRT Programme fellows, this means that each partner institution benefits from an average of 0.7 fellows per year. Depending on the size of the institution, this means that it can take extremely long time until meso-level impacts can be expected to materialize. At the same time, it is a conscious decision by GRÓ LRT to strongly limit the annual number of participants from one institution in order to encourage exchange between fellows and prevent the formation of professional bubbles.
- c. **Lack of resources within partner institutions and countries.** As already alluded to in section 0, about half of the LRT alumni who completed the June 2024 alumni survey indicated that insufficient resources constitute a challenge in the application of the knowledge they acquired from GRÓ LRT. This points towards a dilemma which is intrinsic to initiatives focusing on LDCs and LMICs.

HORIZONTAL THEMES/CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

Contribution to gender equality

The evaluation finds that **the GRÓ LRT Programme contributes seriously and effectively to gender equality**. GRÓ LRT has been very successful in ensuring almost perfect gender parity among participants of all its training offers. Within its curriculum, the 6-month LRT Programme emphasizes the important role of gender in land restoration and involves this in corresponding lectures and exercises. These elements were much appreciated by programme participants. Finally, GRÓ LRT, in collaboration with GRÓ GEST, has piloted the delivery of joint short courses on gender, the environment, and sustainable land management. Continuation of this initiative is planned after the success of the 2023 pilot.

Contribution to human rights efforts by the GRÓ LRT Programme

The evaluation finds that **the GRÓ LRT Programme implicitly contributes to human rights awareness**. When asked to rate their skills improvement across various thematic areas through the 6-month LRT programme, LRT alumni rated their skills improvement in human rights at 4.6/5 on a 5-step scale. While there are no explicit programme elements on human rights, human rights awareness and respective considerations are implicit to numerous course elements. This was both confirmed and appreciated by LRT alumni interviewed for this evaluation.

Contribution to environmental sustainability by the GRÓ LRT Programme

Environmental sustainability is the primary goal of land restoration and sustainable land management. **Contribution to environmental sustainability is intrinsic to the GRÓ LRT Programme.**

Managing and countering the effects of external shocks and risks to the programme

During the evaluation reference period, **the COVID-19 pandemic was a massive external shock** which severely affected and disrupted the programme by cancelling all in-person activities in 2020. However, the 6-month LRT Programme resumed as early as 2021 avoiding accumulating a large backlog of fellows. However, delivery of the short courses and the scope of the programme budget have not yet reached pre-pandemic levels. COVID also still affects the programme through long-term health impacts on GRÓ LRT staff members. **Adequate support in terms of budget allocation for human resources and implementation of activities is, therefore, required by GRÓ management to fully overcome this massive shock.**

Another external risk to the programme is the **political stability in partner countries**. **The programme has demonstrated flexibility in this regard by phasing partner countries in or out according to whether local developments allow for a reliable and meaningful partnership.** Examples are Tunisia and Egypt which contributed fellows to the 2007 LRT pilot programme but not thereafter due to political conditions. Niger has been a programme partner country, but recent political instability may also jeopardize this partnership. Finally, the war in Ethiopia's Tigray Province also affected the partnership with Ethiopian partner institutions from Tigray. The losing or temporary pausing of country partnerships has been countered by forging new partnerships. In 2023, Kenya became the latest GRÓ LRT partner country by contributing two fellows of the 2024.

CONCLUSIONS

THE EXTENT TO WHICH GRÓ LRT PROGRAMME INTERVENTIONS HAVE MET THEIR INTENDED RESULTS

The evaluation finds that **overall, the GRÓ LRT Programme has successfully delivered the intended results** during the evaluation reference period 2018-2023 despite the massive external shock brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The **6-month LRT Programme provides a unique capacity-building package of high relevance and high quality**. In the systematic alumni survey conducted for with this evaluation, LRT consistently received the highest quality-related ratings among all four GRÓ training programmes. In terms of quantitative output, the 6-month LRT Programme has been **below the target formulated at GRÓ Centre level in 2022 but is steadily improving**. The 6-month LRT Programme is **perfectly compliant with country income status and gender balance priorities**.

LRT postgraduate scholarships are found to be effective. This finding is line with the findings of a specific in-depth evaluation of the GRÓ scholarship component conducted in 2023. The number of postgraduate scholarships has been below the 2022 quantitative target and **could be increased through in-country scholarships**. The attached case study on LRT collaboration with partner universities provides more detailed information in this regard.

The **in-country short courses are effective in locally raising awareness and creating capacity in land restoration**. Programme partners consulted for this evaluation consistently expressed the **continued demand for these courses**. **LRT short course quantitative outputs have been significantly below the 2022 target figure and have not yet fully recovered from the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic** and struggle due to budgetary limitations and the high cost of preparation for these courses. Assuming that parity between the four training programmes is envisaged regarding the GRÓ-level target figure, the annual target of 25 short courses (6-7 annual short courses per programme) is considered highly ambitious, at least regarding in-country courses.

GRÓ LRT developed three MOOCs as partner of externally funded consortia. **Positive online user feedback indicates that these courses are of high quality**. **Enrolment figures are impressive and completion rates are in ranges normal for MOOCs in general**. However, the overlap between the GRÓ LRT target groups (i.e. participants from the GRÓ LRT partner countries) and actual course participants is potentially low. Regarding the future development of further MOOCs, it needs to be determined whether the expected benefits justify the cost in terms of production effort.

The programme **effectively supports the production and dissemination of knowledge by its trainees** through the well-designed and well-maintained website, annual seminars for fellows of the 6-month LRT Programme, and the opportunity-based support to alumni to participate in international conferences.

GRÓ LRT effectively engages and maintains relationships with former 6-month LRT Programme fellows through occasional in-country meetings and by involving them in training activities. However, **targeted support to alumni networking activities appears to happen more at GRÓ Centre level**.

THE PRIMARY SUCCESSES OF GRÓ LRT

The evaluation finds that the primary success of GRÓ LRT is to have **developed and consistently delivered a high-quality training programme on land restoration** which offers a **relevant and coherent package of academic and practical experiences** and constitutes a **unique capacity-building offer** which is consistently appreciated by participants and partners alike.

This success is found to be built on i) the high degree of dedication and experience of the involved Icelandic partners and staff; ii) the approach of providing long-term commitment (by MFA and GRÓ LRT) and building long-term reliable partnerships; iii) adhering to well-designed and clear partnership principles and selection criteria; and iv) the regular review and adjustment of the programme.

The **programme's impact at the individual level of direct beneficiaries is found to be very high**. The 6-month LRT Programme constitutes an important stepping stone in numerous successful professional careers in technical fields related to land restoration **creating potential agents of change towards the achievement of the SDGs**.

Various academic GRÓ LRT **partner institutions have begun initiatives towards replicating this success** in their respective countries by initiating the **development of in-country postgraduate training courses** and requesting corresponding support from GRÓ LRT. This constitutes a primary success and potential multiplier of GRÓ LRT results. A corresponding case study has been conducted along with this evaluation, and the resulting report is attached.

THE PRIMARY CONSTRAINTS FOR RESULT ACHIEVEMENT BY GRÓ LRT

1. Internal constraints

- a. **Programme quality vs. quantity.** An annual number of more than 25 participants would not be reasonable to ensure the high quality and manageability of the 6-month LRT Programme. However, both needs and demand for the programme are much higher. Therefore, the number of partner institutions that can be catered for at a time is, and should remain, limited. Alternative activities such as short courses and university collaboration can be expanded to increase quantitative outputs.
- b. **Budgetary limitations and lack of mid- to long-term budgetary planning security.** Core budget allocations to GRÓ LRT since the COVID-19 pandemic have been rather insufficient to meet the targets formulated in 2022. Furthermore, the recent short-notice budget approval process does not allow for medium to long-term planning and preparation of additional activities in collaboration with partner institutions.
- c. **Lack of programme-level targets.** Current GRÓ Centre level targets as formulated in 2022 cannot be analysed on the programme level; GRÓ LRT may currently be measured against indicators which are not appropriate for the programme. The lack of clear targets further impedes effective planning, preparation, and budgeting. Finally, the lack of targets related to the 'critical mass' alluded to in the GRÓ Theory of Change (ToC) prevents the programme from defining a temporal horizon for the support rendered to its respective partners.

2. External constraints

- a. **Lack of resources in partner institutions and countries.** About half of the LRT alumni who completed the June 2024 alumni survey indicated that insufficient resources constitute a challenge in the application of the knowledge they acquired from GRÓ LRT. Unfortunately, this points towards a dilemma which is common among capacity building initiatives focusing on LDCs and LMICs.
- b. **Lack of funds in land restoration sector.** There is not much money to be made in the field of land restoration and the corresponding job market is limited, particularly in the private sector. This situation could change with the growing market for carbon and biodiversity credits.
- c. **External shocks such as COVID-19 pandemic or political instability.** The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that external shocks can drastically impact the programme delivery. At the same time, GRÓ LRT management has demonstrated that it is able to respond effectively and adequately to these shocks.

THE SUITABILITY OF THE PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS TO EFFICIENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY GENERATE THE PROGRAMME RESULTS

The evaluation finds that, **management arrangements are efficient at GRÓ LRT Programme level, albeit the size of the management team is small**, particularly if recommendations of this evaluation regarding systematic impact monitoring are to be followed.

With regards to the **programme reporting, oversight, and steering arrangement, there are perceived deficiencies which require further internal review for possible improvement**. These relate to the budget allocation and approval process, the management and reporting arrangements between the GRÓ Centre and GRÓ LRT, and the perception that top-down pressure towards maximizing cost-efficiency may compromise programme quality and benefits.

Finally, it is found that **the partnership with UNESCO has not (yet) brought any significant benefits or disadvantages with regards to the achievement of results**.

OVERALL EVALUATION CONCLUSION ON THE PERFORMANCE OF GRÓ LRT

On the five-step ordinal scale (1 – highly unsatisfactory to 5 – highly satisfactory) applied by this evaluation to rate programme performance ¹³, the evaluation finds that **the overall performance of the GRÓ LRT Programme is satisfactory** (good). Table 3 below provides the performance rating per evaluation criterion.

Table 3: Evaluation performance rating

Evaluation criterion	Performance rating
Relevance	Satisfactory
Coherence	Satisfactory
Effectiveness	Satisfactory
Efficiency	Satisfactory
Sustainability	Satisfactory
Impact	Satisfactory

LESSONS LEARNED

Lesson 1: The evaluation consistently encountered evidence for the high quality and uniqueness of the 6-month LRT Programme. All parties involved can arguably be proud of this. Offering the programme as a fully funded course in Iceland creates numerous life- and career-transforming experiences for the alumni. **Pressure to reduce programme cost may adversely affect the quality and uniqueness of the programme.**

Lesson 2: The virtually open-ended long-term funding commitment by MFA and the resulting ability of GRÓ LRT to forge of long-term partnerships with institutions and countries is fundamental to the programme's success and sets the programme apart from most other donor-driven initiatives. At the same time, the approach **currently lacks any robust definition of accomplishment** and thus any temporal horizon for these partnerships.

Lesson 3: The high quality of the course logically limits its quantitative outputs. This means that, given the high number of partner institutions relative to the annual cohort size, the programme's high-level impact (progress towards achievement of SDGs enhanced by a 'critical mass' of capacitated individuals) is diluted and hard to reach within a given partner institution, unless the support is rendered over longer periods of time. To address this, the logical options are to either **reduce/ limit the number of simultaneous partners or to increase output through additional alternative activities**.

¹³ The exact definition of the ordinal scale applied for performance rating by this evaluation is provided in a separate annex to the overall evaluation report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To MFA/GRÓ Centre/GRÓ LRT:

- a. With the aim to enhance budgeting, planning, and performance measurement processes, **it is recommended programme level output targets be defined for all programme elements.**
- b. **A review of the budget allocation and budget approval processes is recommended** with the aim to ensure timely allocation of annual budgets commensurate with expected outputs¹⁴. A rolling budget over several years may further help to maximize financial planning security for the programme and its partners.

2. To GRÓ LRT:

- a. In order to achieve the desired programme outcomes at the level of individual partner institutions within reasonable time, **it is recommended to consider reducing the number of partners supported in parallel.** An attempt to define the desired 'critical mass' of trained individuals for each partner might allow for a more staggered approach, i.e. accomplishing capacity-building targets with one partner and then focusing on the next one. Such approach should not go against the successfully applied principle of each annual cohort ideally constituting a heterogeneous mix of individuals from different countries and institutions.
- b. In order to achieve the desired programme outcomes at the level of individual partner institutions within reasonable time, **it is recommended to increase quantitative output through alternative activities** such as in-country short courses or in-country postgraduate courses in collaboration with partner universities¹⁵. While these cannot be expected to have the same quality as the 6-month LRT Programme, they can contribute towards optimizing the programme's overall trade-off between quality and quantity.
- c. Maintaining the programme's institutional memory is critical for both programme quality partnerships. Given the strong reliance on long-serving staff members, lecturers and programme partners in this regard, **it is recommended to i) introduce measures to conserve institutional memory independently from individuals; and ii) enhance measures which ensure handover of knowledge and institutional memory between outgoing and incoming programme staff** (e.g. through extended learning and handover periods).
- d. To be able to better quantify programme impacts at all levels, **it is recommended to introduce/strengthen measures to systematically document relevant outputs and achievements at the individual alumni level and/or the partner institution level.** This would be labour-intensive and might require additional human resources at GRÓ LRT level.

¹⁴ Ideally to programme-level targets, see recommendation 1.

¹⁵ Detail information on the intended collaboration with partner universities is provided in the attached case study report.

SWOT ANALYSIS

Table 4: Summary of GRÓ LRT strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats

Strengths <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 High-quality programme based on comprehensive experience and expertise in land restoration. 2 Well-crafted course in Iceland offers a complete, in-depth, and unique package regarding technical, theoretical, practical, soft, social, and life skills and experiences. 3 Strong and reliable long-term partnerships are established. 4 Demand-driven, well-designed, and principled approach towards partnerships and candidate selection. 5 Further support of alumni through scholarships, attendance of conferences, and involvement in capacity building activities. 6 Fundamental stepping stone for numerous successful professional and academic careers in technical fields related to land restoration. 	Weaknesses <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Programme-level targets are not defined. 2 Critical mass of capacitated change agents for a given partner institution or country not defined. Therefore, lack of temporal horizon for the programme support. 3 By design, annual cohort size in Iceland is strongly limited to ensure course quality, manageability, and individual experience. 4 Lack of systematic tracking and documentation of alumni contributions towards programme objectives.
Opportunities <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Self-driven interest and initiatives from partner institutions to offer LRT-inspired postgraduate training. 2 Quantitative output can be increased through short courses and in-country postgraduate offerings/scholarships. 3 Relevance of land restoration is increasing globally. Growing markets for carbon and biodiversity credits for alumni to contribute to. 	Threats <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Budgetary limitations and lack of financial planning security hamper implementation of activities and achievement of targets. 2 Top-down pressure to increase quantitative outputs may compromise quality and uniqueness of the programme. 3 Institutional memory and relationships with partner institutions strongly rely on long-serving staff members and may severely suffer when they are no longer with LRT.

POTENTIAL OPTIONS TO GUIDE FUTURE LRT ENDEAVOURS

Going forward, the option of collaborating with partner universities towards the development and delivery of in-country post-graduate courses in land restoration is a promising opportunity. The fact that LRT long-term partners such as Makerere University in Uganda and Samarkand State University in Uzbekistan have initiated such options and requested for corresponding support from GRÓ LRT is a remarkable impact of the programme with considerable multiplier potential. While the partner universities could benefit from such collaboration through experience, expertise, and funding support, GRÓ LRT could benefit by increasing the quantitative output of capacity building in LDCs and LMICs in the field of land restoration both indirectly through technical support to these courses and directly through in-country course scholarships.

With regards to current and future partnerships, the current approach appears to be opportunity-based (in the sense of finding interested and suitable partners) and more inclusive than exclusive. In 2023, Kenya joined the group of LRT partner countries and Sierra Leone, as Iceland's latest bilateral development cooperation partner country, will probably be added next. In order to avoid dilution of benefits, a potential option to be considered for the future is to focus on less partners more intensively.

For funding, the MFA has been a reliable and committed donor over decades with no other donor significantly funding the programme. This allowed the programme to forge long-term partnerships in line with Icelandic development priorities. Recently, the budget allocations have been on the lower end and appear insufficient to meet the current programme targets. Going forward, efforts could be made

towards attracting funding from alternative sources to be able to implement additional activities or reducing dependency on MFA. However, the option of increasing external funding should be considered carefully, since this would come at the cost of increased administrative and reporting requirements as well as reduced sovereignty over programme funds and activities.

ANNEX A: GRÓ LRT PARTNER INSTITUTIONS 2018-2023

Table 5: GRÓ LRT's 34 partner institutions in partner countries between 2018 and 2023.

COUNTRY	INSTITUTION	TYPE OF ORG
Ethiopia	Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development of Tigray	Government
Ethiopia	Mekelle University	Academia/research
Ghana	CSIR	Academia/research
Ghana	Environmental Protection Agency	Government
Ghana	University for Development Studies	Academia/research
Kyrgyzstan	CAMP Alatoo	NGO/Other
Kyrgyzstan	Institute of Sustainable Development Strategy	NGO/Other
Kyrgyzstan	Ministry of Agriculture, Food Industry and Land Reclamation	Government
Lesotho	Ministry of Forestry, Range and Soil Conservation	Government
Malawi	Cooperation through the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme, Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust	NGO/Other
Malawi	Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources	Academia/research
Malawi	Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development, Department of Land Resources Conservation	Government
Malawi	Ministry of Natural Resources, Energy and Mining, Department of Mines	Government
Mongolia	Agency for Land Administration and Management, Geodesy and Cartography	Government
Mongolia	Mongolian University of Life Sciences	Academia/research
Mongolia	Information and Research Institute of Meteorology, Hydrology and Environment	Academia/research
Mongolia	Institute of Geography and Geoecology	Academia/research
Mongolia	Research Institute of Animal Husbandry	Academia/research
Niger	Niger Institute of Agricultural Research (INRAN)	Academia/research
Nigeria	Forestry Research Institute of Nigeria	Academia/research
Tajikistan	Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development	NGO/Other
Tajikistan	CAMP Tabiat	NGO/Other
Tajikistan	Mountain Societies Development Support Programme	NGO/Other
Tajikistan	Pamir Biological Institute	Academia/research
Tajikistan	Public Organisation "Bargi Sabz"	NGO/Other
Uganda	Kyambogo University, Kampala	Academia/research
Uganda	National Environmental Management Authority	Government
Uganda	Local Governments	Government
Uganda	Makerere University	Academia/research
Uzbekistan	Samarkand State University	Academia/research
Uzbekistan	Tashkent State Agrarian University	Academia/research
Uzbekistan	Institute of Botany	Academia/research
Uzbekistan	National University of Uzbekistan	Academia/research
Uzbekistan	Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers	Academia/research

GRÓ TRAINING PROGRAMME RESULTS DELIVERY & ACHIEVEMENT – GRÓ LRT

PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	SPECIFIC INDICATORS	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	SUMMARY
Outcome: GRÓ fellows, trainees and respective organisations promote and implement changes needed to achieve SDGs relevant to their field of work									
P1. Management in partner organisations assess the training to be valuable for the organisation	% of survey respondents (organisations) assess the training to be valuable for the organisation (3-years after)	57.1%	100%	100%	N/A	78.6%	88.2%*	95.0%*	91.4% (2018-2023 cohort) (GOPA 2024 alumni survey data)
P2. Graduates have used the training to advance their contribution in their field/sector of work	% of survey respondents (fellows) report the training has advanced their contribution in their field/sector (3-years after)	71.4%	100%	100%	N/A	92.9%	100%*	95.0%*	97.1% (2018-2023 cohort) (GOPA 2024 alumni survey data)
P3. Graduates have used their training to share with colleagues and other experts in their respective field of expertise	% of survey respondents (fellows) report the training has advanced their contribution in their field/sector (3-years after)	87.5%	90.9%	90.9%	N/A	82.4%	94.1%*	81.8%*	87.2% (2018-2023 cohort) (GOPA 2024 alumni survey data)
P4. Graduates have advanced professionally (e.g. promotion or received scholarship for further studies)	% of survey respondents (fellows) report the training has advanced their contribution in their field/sector (3-years after)	85.7%	100%	80.0%	N/A	71.4%	88.2%*	85.0%*	84.3% (2018-2023 cohort) (GOPA 2024 alumni survey data)

PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	SPECIFIC INDICATORS	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	SUMMARY
<i>*The GRÓ Results Framework suggest measuring outcome level results 3 years after programme graduation. Therefore, the indicator value for the graduation year 2022 and 2023 should be interpreted with caution. Generally, the survey findings suggest that it might take some time for outcome level results to materialise after programme completion. Therefore, the measurement 3 years after programme completion seems reasonable.</i>									
Output N°1: Increased capability of individuals and expertise of GRÓ partner organisations to design and implement programme activities in respective professional fields									
P1. Number of experts trained in the GRÓ 5-6-month training programmes	Annual # of fellows Gender ratio M/F (%) Country Income level LDC and LMI (%)	14 4 F (29%) 10 M (71%) 43% LDC 57% LMIC	17 10 F (59%) 7 M (41%) 53% LDC 47% LMIC	21 11 F (52%) 10 M (48%) 57% LDC 43% LMIC	0 (COVID)	17 8 F (47%) 9 M (53%) 59% LDC 41% LMIC	19 7 F (37%) 12 M (63%) 53% LDC 47% LMIC	23 12 F (52%) 11 M (48%) 48% LDC 52% LMIC	111 52 F (47%) 59 M (53%) 58 LDC (52%) 53 LMIC (48%)
P2. Quality of the 5-6 month training	Self-assessment survey of fellows at the start and end of training on knowledge, skills and mindset (on a scale from 1 low – 5 high)	100% = 5/5	88% = 5/5 6% = 4/5 0% = 3/5 0% = 2/5 6% = 1/5	95% = 5/5 0% = 4/5 0% = 3/5 0% = 2/5 5% = 1/5	Not applicable	76% = 5/5 18% = 4/5 6% = 3/5 0% = 2/5 0% = 1/5	100% = 5/5	82% = 5/5 18% = 4/5 0% = 3/5 0% = 2/5 0% = 1/5	86.5% = 5/5 10.5% = 4/5 1.5% = 3/5 0% = 2/5 1.5% = 1/5
P3. Number of graduates eligible for 30 ECTS credits/ Diploma degree at completion of 5-6 month training (ratio from enrolled fellows). Only applicable GEST & LRT fellows	Annual # of diploma certificates issued Graduation ratio (% of total cohort of fellows eligible)	Diploma = 14 30 ECTS only applicable from 2022	Diploma = 17	Diploma = 21	Not applicable	Diploma = 17	Diploma = 19 30 ECTS = 17 (89.5%)	Diploma = 23 30 ECTS = 21 (91.5%)	All fellows (111) awarded diploma ECTS graduation ratio 90.5% (2022-2023)

PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	SPECIFIC INDICATORS	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	SUMMARY
P4. Number of short courses (5-7 days) in partner countries	Annual # of weeks of on-site training # of participants short courses Gender ratio M/F (%)	1 week 25 people 6 F (24%) 19 M (76%)	2 weeks 49 people 24 F (49%) 25 M (51%)	2 weeks 50 people 25 F (50%) 25 M (50%)	0	0.3 weeks 25 people 10 F (40%) 15 M (60%)	0.7 weeks 20 people 1 F (5%) 19 M (95%)	0.5 weeks 16 people 6 F (37%) 10 M (63%)	6.5 weeks 185 people 72 F (39%) 113 M (61%)
P5. Quality of short course training	% of participants assess the course to be useful for enhancing skills & knowledge (relevant and helpful for my job) (on scale from 1 – 5)	Self-assessment survey results not available. LRT's own evaluation report very positive	Self-assessment surveys available, but not corresponding to indicator definition. Overall very positive	65% = 5/5 31% = 4/5 4% = 3/5	Not applicable	Self-assessment survey available, but not corresponding to indicator definition. Overall very positive	Evaluation report not available	Evaluation report not available	Overall very positive
P6. Number of live streaming training courses	Annual # # of participants	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P7. Quality live streaming training courses	% of participants assess the course to be useful for enhancing skills & knowledge (relevant and helpful for my job) (on scale from 1 – 5)	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable
P8. Number of online courses and number of participants in the online courses	Annual # # of participants newly enrolled	1 MOOC # enrolled per year not available	1 MOOC # enrolled per year not available	3 MOOCs # enrolled per year not available	3 MOOCs # enrolled per year not available	3 MOOCs # enrolled per year not available	3 MOOCs # enrolled per year not available	3 MOOCs # enrolled per year not available	3 MOOCs 20,026 enrolled in total

PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	SPECIFIC INDICATORS	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	SUMMARY
P9. Quality of online training	Average online rating of MOOCs	MOOC 1 = 4.6/5	MOOC 1 = 4.6/5	MOOC 1 = 4.6/5 MOOC 2 = 4.7/5 MOOC 3 = 4.9/5	MOOC 1 = 4.6/5 MOOC 2 = 4.7/5 MOOC 3 = 4.9/5	MOOC 1 = 4.6/5 MOOC 2 = 4.7/5 MOOC 3 = 4.9/5	MOOC 1 = 4.6/5 MOOC 2 = 4.7/5 MOOC 3 = 4.9/5	MOOC 1 = 4.6/5 MOOC 2 = 4.7/5 MOOC 3 = 4.9/5	MOOC 1 = 4.6/5 MOOC 2 = 4.7/5 MOOC 3 = 4.9/5
P10. Number of GRÓ graduate studies scholarships provided annually	Annual # Master's and PhD (by gender) Gender ratio M/F (%)	M.Sc. = 1 1 M (100%)	0	M.A. = 1 1 F (100%) PhD = 1 1 F (100%)	0	M.Sc. = 2 2 M (100%)	0	M.Sc. = 2 1 F (50%) 1 M (50%)	Master's = 6 2 F (33%) 4 M (67%) PhD = 1 1 F (100%)
Output N°2: Production and dissemination of new knowledge by GRÓ training participants and scholarship recipient									
P1. Number of research outputs (research project reports) annually by GRÓ fellows	Annual # of research project papers confirmed on GRÓ website	14	17	21	0	17	19	23	All fellows completed a paper. 87 were published on the LRT website
P2. Number of master's thesis published annually by GRÓ scholarship recipients (research output)	Annual # of published master's thesis at universities' websites	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	2 published
P3. Number of PhD papers published annually by GRÓ scholarship recipients (research outputs)	Annual # of publications in research journals	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1 paper published

PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	SPECIFIC INDICATORS	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	SUMMARY
Output N°3: Professional empowerment of GRÓ training participants and scholarship recipients is increased through GRÓ community building and networking									
P1. Number of alumni events organised by GRÓ annually	Annual #	Data not available	1	2	Data not available	Data not available	1	Data not available	2 as side event at conferences 2 in country meetings
P2. Number of GRÓ funded alumni participating in regional and international conferences	Annual #	0	34	15	0	0	5	0	54 alumni
P3. % of GRÓ short courses involving alumni in teaching/organisation of short courses	Annual # (% of GRÓ short courses involving alumni)	100% (1 of 1 event)	100% (2 of 2 events)	100% (2 of 2 events)	No courses delivered	100% (1 of 1 event)	0% (0 of 1 event)	0% (0 of 1 event)	75% (6 of 8 events)

