

# Research to Develop a Master Plan for the Customized Support Programme for Internationally Designated Areas

Summary

December 2025

# **Research to Develop a Master Plan for the Customized Support Programme for Internationally Designated Areas**

## **Summary of the Final Report**

### **1. Background and Purpose of the Research**

- The UNESCO Global Research and Training Centre for Internationally Designated Areas (GCIDA) is a UNESCO Category 2 Centre established to provide research and training programmes in an integrated and coherent manner to strengthen the management of Internationally Designated Areas (IDAs), including Multi-Internationally Designated Areas (MIDAs), particularly biosphere reserves, World Heritage sites (natural, mixed), UNESCO Global Geoparks and Ramsar Sites, while ensuring that environmental conservation is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- This research aims to develop a 10-year mid- to long-term master plan to implement a customized support programme for IDAs, identified as one of the key initiatives of GCIDA following the commencement of its full-scale operations in early 2025.
- As the number of IDAs worldwide, including MIDAs, continues to increase, concerns regarding qualitative improvements in management and the need for institutional reforms have become more prominent. In this context, many developing countries face difficulties in applying for designation and conducting regular monitoring and reporting due to limited expertise and financial resources. Furthermore, countries without IDAs often require external support, as they lack experience with applying for designation or have insufficient technical capacity and budgets.
- In response to these challenges, GCIDA, as a UNESCO Category 2 Centre, seeks to move beyond conventional, generic, or one-sided capacity-building approaches by planning and implementing a customized IDA management capacity-building support programme tailored to the specific conditions and needs of beneficiaries (countries, sites, managers,

etc.).

- Based on the background and necessity of this programme, this research was conducted for approximately 5.5 months, starting in July 2025. As a result, a mid- to long-term strategy and implementation plan for the Customized Support Programme for IDAs was developed to effectively contribute to enhancing IDA management capabilities.

## **2. Structure of the Report**

- This research report is structured into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the research, including the research methodology and the composition of the research team. Chapter 2 examines international and Korean trends and cases of demand-driven capacity-building support programmes, such as the UNESCO Earth Network Project and the World Heritage Leadership Programme, similar to the Customized Support Programme for IDAs, and delivers key implications. Based on this analysis, it presents the necessity of establishing the Customized Support Programme for IDAs.
- Building on this literature review and expert consultations, Section 1 of Chapter 3 presents the overall framework, detailed programme components, and the proposed operational structure of the Customized Support Programme for IDAs to be implemented over a 10-year period. Section 2 of Chapter 3 outlines the development of a web-based programme management system designed to support the efficient management of the entire programme, while serving as a platform for communication and learning, along with the key content required for its operation. The composition and operational strategy for the Expert Group, which will play a central role in the successful implementation of the programme, are presented in Section 3 of Chapter 3.
- Chapter 4 presents the 10-year mid- to long-term development plan for the programme, as well as the objectives and implementation plan for the first year of operation (2026). Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the report by offering several recommendations intended to support the successful implementation of the proposed mid- to long-term master plan.

### 3. Programme Overview

Programme Title	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customized Support Programme for Internationally Designated Areas (CSP-IDAs)</li> </ul>
Project Period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2026 - 2035 (10 years)</li> </ul>
Key Programme Components by Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2026: Establishment of the programme operational framework and preparatory activities for implementation</li> <li>• From 2027 (Year 1) for eight years: Online Support Project for IDAs</li> <li>• From 2031 (Year 5) onwards for four years: Field-integrated Support Project for IDAs</li> <li>• 2035: Coordination and dissemination of overall programme outcomes, and preparation for the next phase of programme expansion</li> </ul>
Target Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IDAs, including MIDAs, and countries/institutions preparing to apply for IDA designations</li> <li>- with a particular focus on MIDAs, biosphere reserves and UNESCO Global Geoparks, which have limited capacity-building opportunities</li> </ul>
Thematic Categories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management-related issues concerning IDAs, including MIDAs</li> <li>• Issues related to the designation/application of IDA candidate sites</li> <li>• Issues related to the preparation and review of IDA periodic reports</li> </ul>
Working Languages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English (French to be added in the later phases of programme implementation)</li> </ul>

- Programme Vision
  - To establish a differentiated, customized capacity-building support model that effectively contributes to the qualitative management improvement of IDAs, including MIDAs, and to expand the project's scope and impact by linking it to follow-up international cooperation initiatives, such as an Official Development Assistance (ODA) project.
- Programme Objectives
  - In terms of programme outcomes, to support the resolution of challenges related to the IDA nominations and post-designation management faced by management authorities

and site managers in developing countries, and to strengthen their capabilities. This contributes to their self-reliant and sustainable improvement of the management, protection, and utilization of IDAs.

- In terms of programme operations, to establish and implement an effective and efficient programme operation system that ensures the programme's scalability, continued development, and long-term sustainability.
- Expected Outcomes of the Programme
  - To contribute to strengthening the management and conservation capacities of IDAs and MIDAs in developing countries.
  - To bring about tangible improvements in IDA management and conservation capabilities, thereby reinforcing the effectiveness of international designations and fostering the internalization of sustainable post-designation management systems.
  - To strengthen the self-reliance of IDA management actors and promote a culture of peer learning and self-assessment.
  - To develop, collect, and disseminate practical resources (such as toolkits, manuals, videos, etc.) that support low-cost access to and utilization of knowledge and information for improving IDA management.
  - To establish networks among participating IDA managers and experts in the programme, contributing to GCIDA's institutional branding and visibility.
  - To contribute to the implementation of global strategies and goals, including the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (K-M GBF), the Paris Agreement, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), through improved IDA management practices.
- Programme Implementation Strategy
  - To pursue the programme's phased expansion and development, considering GCIDA's founding mandate, implementation capacity, and available resources.
  - To enhance programme effectiveness by prioritizing IDAs with high demand for capacity-building programmes (biosphere reserves, UNESCO Global Geoparks, and MIDAs).
  - To design the programme components that strengthen participants' practical implementation capacities and link capacity-building efforts with organizational and institutional improvements, enabling the enhancement of the scalability and sustainability of outcomes.

- To expand the programme's outputs and impact by aligning and integrating them with GCIDA's related training and educational initiatives.
- To ensure the direct leadership of GCIDA in programme implementation, facilitating the accumulation and strengthening of the Centre's internal capacity.
- To foster close cooperation with relevant international organizations such as UNESCO and IUCN.

#### 4. Projects

- The Customized Support Programme for IDAs consists of two projects: Online Support Project for IDAs and Field-integrated Support Project for IDAs.
- While the Online Support Project for IDAs is delivered entirely online, the Field-integrated Support Project for IDAs combines on-site (in-person) and online components in order to maximize the effectiveness of capacity-building outcomes.

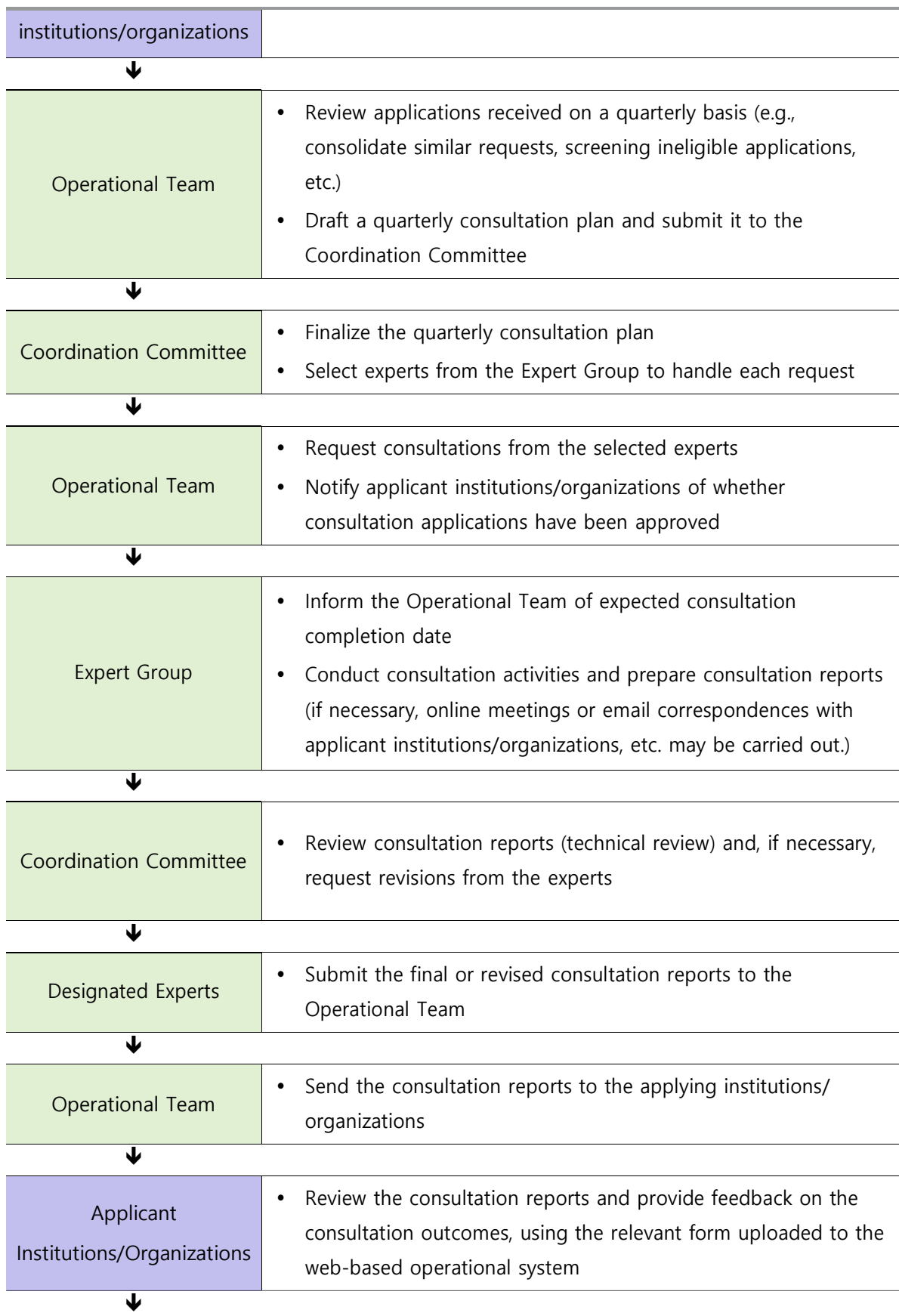
##### ① **Online Support Project for Internationally Designated Areas (IDAs)**

- This programme provides online expert consultation on challenges and issues related to the management, designation applications, periodic reports, etc., of IDAs, including MIDAs. It is implemented through two modules: Application-based Consultation Module and Follow-up Mentoring Module.
- Following completion of the preparatory arrangements for project operation in 2026, the project will be launched in 2027.

##### ► **Application-based Consultation Module**

- **Eligible Applicants:** Government agencies, IDA management administrations, local organizations, etc., involved in IDA management and designation applications
- **Implementation period:** Pilot phase in 2027, followed by long-term operation for eight years
- **Workflow:**

Applicant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fill in and submit the consultation request form</li> </ul>
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Operational Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upload publicly shareable consultation outcomes to the web-based operational system</li> </ul>
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► **Follow-up Mentoring Module**

- Eligible participants are individuals who voluntarily apply among the participants of the annual capacity-building workshops on IDA management hosted by GCIDA.
- Designated experts provide mentoring to participants, focusing on their requests, through online modules such as video conferencing (online meetings) and email correspondence, either individually, in groups, or in a combination of both, and document consultation content according to the mentoring format of the web operational system (confidential).
- GCIDA's Operational Team uploads publicly shareable mentoring outcomes to the web operational system.
- The Follow-up Mentoring Module will be implemented annually starting in 2027. From 2031 (the fifth year after the programme launch), when the Field-integrated Support Project for IDAs is launched, this module will be integrated into that project.

② **Field-integrated Support Project for Internationally Designated Areas (IDAs)**

- Three interconnected phases ('expert field visits related to the project' – 'Jeju capacity-building workshop' – 'follow-up mentoring') are organically structured to deliver a more focused and advanced project.
- Compared to the Online Support Project for IDAs, this project requires a higher level of expertise and experience, greater financial resources, and stronger network-based collaboration for both preparation and implementation. Accordingly, it will commence in 2031 (the fifth year after the programme launch).
- Key features of the Field-Integrated Support Project for IDAs:
  - Participation of IDA management authorities and stakeholders involved in designation applications from countries within the same region (e.g., 1~3 countries) that share common characteristics and similar contexts.
  - The programme is not based on a one-directional, pre-designated set of lectures or content determined solely by the host institution. Instead, it is designed as a customized

and interactive programme grounded in the specific conditions and needs of the participating countries and sites.

- Rather than being limited to one-off consultations or workshops, the project provides phased and ongoing support through follow-up mentoring.
  - The project makes effective use of the practical learning resources and policy tools available on the project's web-based operational system.
  - Good practices identified from the programme will be disseminated through the web system, newsletters, publications, and social media channels.
- Participating countries and sites will be selected from among those that apply or are nominated, based on a set of selection criteria to be established at a later stage.
  - The structure of the Field-integrated Support Project for IDAs is outlined below.

Phases	Content
① Scoping and basic capacity-building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-assessment: Participating institutions and sites complete and submit the self-assessment form available on the web system to identify the basic status and challenges in their area.</li> <li>• Expert's site visit: Assigned experts visit participating institutions and sites to interview government officials, site administrators, community representatives, etc., and conduct on-site inspections to specifically identify requests and challenges requiring customized support.</li> <li>• Basic capacity-building: Basic training is provided to relevant practitioners as needed.</li> </ul>
② Jeju capacity-building workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshop Program Development: Assigned experts develop customized workshop programs based on scoping and site visit results.</li> <li>• Workshop Participation: Practitioners from participating institutions and site managers attend workshops held in Jeju and receive necessary consultation.</li> </ul>
③ Follow-up mentoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize follow-up mentoring and feedback forms on the web operation system to assess how participants have applied the acquired knowledge to field practice; experts provide feedback when questions arise.</li> </ul>

## 5. Composition and Roles of the Programme Management Organization

- To ensure the smooth operation of the Customized Support Programme for Internationally Designated Areas, transparent decision-making, and systematic, effective consultation and review procedures, the project management structure is composed of three units: the Operational Team, the Coordination Committee, and the Expert Group.
- The roles of each operational unit are as shown in the table below.

Operational Units	Composition	Key Roles
Operational Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2-3 dedicated personnel within GCIDA</li> <li>• May include external collaborators and consortium partners, depending on the programme expansion phase</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Executes overall project operations and manages workflow as the practical core</li> <li>• Manages the project’s web operational system and curates content</li> <li>• Supports smooth communication and collaboration between the Coordination Committee and Expert Group</li> </ul>
Coordination Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3-4 experts in relevant fields and GCIDA Director-General</li> <li>• Representatives from relevant ministries and partner organizations may participate as temporary members when necessary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sets detailed project direction and coordinates implementation plans</li> <li>• Matches appropriate experts for programme consultation roles</li> <li>• Provides professional advice for programme operations</li> <li>• Reviews project outcomes and offers guidance (e.g., reviewing consultation reports)</li> </ul>
Expert Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Composed of experts with specialized knowledge and experience in IDAs, such as current and former members of specialized advisory bodies for IDAs with extensive relevant experience, UNESCO Chairs related to IDAs, relevant researchers, IDA</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducts consultation activities based on expertise in IDAs</li> <li>• Proposes improvement measures for the programme</li> </ul>

	<p>managers, etc.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expands the Expert Group's size in line with the phased expansion of the programme</li> </ul>	
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- Operational Plan for the Expert Group
  - The Expert Group will be established and operated as a pool of experts who are available to participate in consultation activities required for the programme.
  - Information on each expert, such as areas of specialization, regional expertise, and professional experience, etc., will be systematically managed in a database. This database will serve as a reference for selecting suitable experts for consultation requests and mentoring topics, etc.
  - Experts may be recruited through the following channels: i) recommendations from relevant institutions and outreach, ii) promotion at relevant international events, or iii) open recruitment. Initially, the Expert Group will be formed on a small-scale using methods i) and ii), with expansion to method iii) as the programme grows.
  - Regarding consultancy fees, since it is undesirable to expect experts participating in a UNESCO Category 2 Centre to contribute their expertise entirely on a voluntary basis, as in the UNESCO Earth Network Project. Therefore, a modest symbolic honorarium will be provided. In the longer term, a formal remuneration framework will be established by referencing relevant regulations, such as the Korean Ministry of Government Legislation's 'Regulations on Payment of Consultancy Fees.'

## 6. Web-based Operational System and Content for the Programme Implementation

- This research first proposes a web-based operational system required for the Online Support Project for IDAs, which will be implemented in the initial phase. The system for the Field-integrated Support Project for IDAs, scheduled to be launched in 2031, will be further developed and refined during the preparatory phase of this project to reflect its specific requirements.
- Purpose of the Web-based Operational System

- To provide a 'one-stop management system' that integrates all stages of 'Application Reception – Progress Management – Outcome Accumulation – Knowledge Sharing – Follow-up Monitoring' into a single and coherent system.
  - To function as an efficient communication channel for participants and relevant institutions.
  - To serve as a platform for delivering practical, field-oriented learning resources and policy tools that can be directly applied in the field.
  - To reduce the operational and administrative burden of programme management while promoting cost-effective implementation and improved accessibility.
- System Development Option
    - Two options are proposed for the development of the web-based operational system: (i) Option 1 involves integrating the system into the GCIDA website by adding a dedicated main menu for the programme, enabling centralized management; and (ii) Option 2 involves developing the system as a separate external platform and linking it to the main page of the GCIDA website.
    - Option 1 is proposed, considering operational convenience, the preservation of the institution's brand identity, and the constraints in terms of budget and human resources.
  - The content structure of the operational system (menu tree) is outlined in the table below.

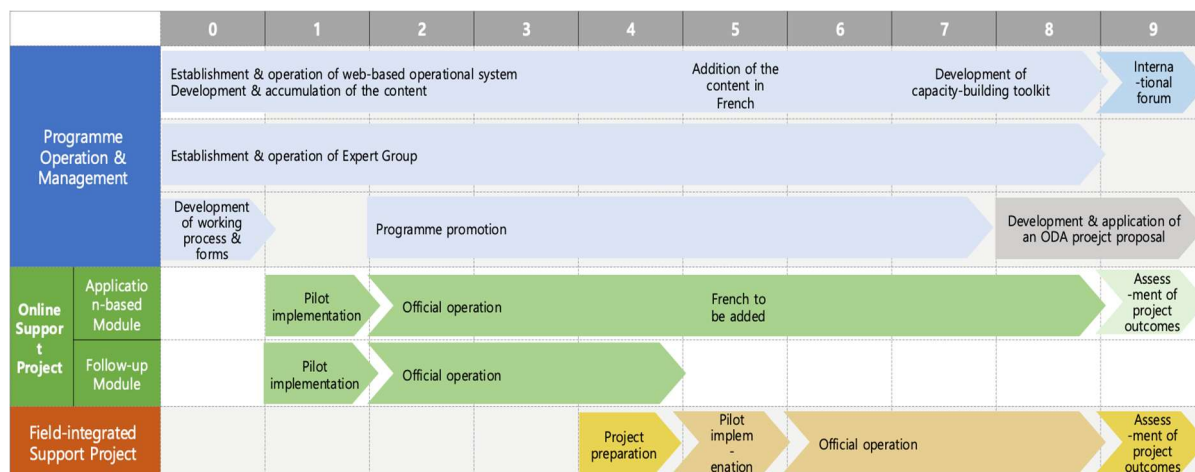
<b>Main Categories (Depth 1)</b>	<b>Items to be included in subcategories (Depth 2)</b>
About the Project	Background & Purpose, Implementing structure, etc.
Application-based Consultation Module	How to apply, Application form, Self-diagnosis, Progress status, etc.
Follow-up Mentoring Module	Participation & Process, Participation form, Mentoring notes, Progress status, etc.
Resource Library	Knowledge resource, MIDAs Information Hub (link), Consulting cases, Mentoring cases, Statistics and infographics, etc.
Community	FAQ, Notice, Peer-learning board, Q&A forum, Satisfaction survey & Suggestions, etc.

- The detailed menu structure will be finalized after the programme operational framework has been further specified and the relevant materials, including templates and forms, have been developed.
- Phased Development and Establishment of Programme Content
  - Initial phase (Years 1-3): Development of foundational resources for the implementation of the Online Support Project for IDAs and accumulation of project results
  - Mid-term phase (Years 4–6): Systematization of physical and digital resources, expansion of content modules, and development of foundational materials for the implementation of the Field-Integrated Support Project for IDAs
  - Late-term phase (Years 7–10): Development of GCIDA's unique IDA capacity-building toolkit

## **7. Mid- to Long-Term Direction and 2026 Implementation Plan**

- Phased Expansion and Development of the Programme
  - In consideration of the operational conditions of the newly established Centre and in order to enhance programme effectiveness, two projects, Online Support Project for IDAs and Field-integrated Support Project for IDAs, will be implemented sequentially.
  - 2026: Preparatory phase for programme implementation, including development of the web-based operational system
  - 2027: Official launch of the programme, starting with a pilot phase of the Online Support Project for IDAs
  - 2031: Commencement of the Field-integrated Support Project for IDAs, building on experience and accumulated content through the prior Online Support Project for IDAs
- During the eight-year implementation period, key operational elements, such as modes of delivery (online and field-based), the number of participating institutions and supported cases, accumulated content, and the range of working languages, will be gradually expanded, and further refined in line with the scaling up of programme operations.
- The outline of the phased development direction for the Customized Support

Programme for IDAs is shown in the figure below.



- 2026 serves as a year for preparatory actions and foundational work in advance of the official launch of the programme in the following year. Details of monthly implementation plans and responsible entities are presented in Chapter 5 of the report.
  - Objectives of the first to third quarters: Develop the operational framework and content (e.g., application forms) for the Online Support Project for IDAs
  - Objectives of the fourth quarter: Establish a dedicated webpage for Online Support Project for IDAs

## 8. Recommendations

- The following recommendations are put forward to facilitate the smooth execution and achievement of the programme outcomes.
  - To link the programme with the renewal process of GCIDA's UNESCO Category 2 Centre agreement, thereby enabling the systematic accumulation of results and the adoption of a data-driven operational approach.
  - To ensure that this programme is organically and effectively integrated with GCIDA's other projects and activities, allowing for mutual reinforcement and strategic utilization of resources and outputs.
- Recommendations for Expanding Programme Outcomes
  - To link the programme with the renewal process of GCIDA's UNESCO Category 2 Centre agreement, thereby enabling the systematic accumulation of results and the adoption of a data-driven operational approach.
  - To ensure that this programme is organically and effectively integrated with GCIDA's other projects and activities, allowing for mutual reinforcement and strategic utilization of resources and outputs.

- To leverage the 48th Session of the World Heritage Committee, to be held in Busan, Republic of Korea in July 2026, as a strategic opportunity to enhance the international visibility of GCIDA and the programme, and to foster international cooperative networks.
- Recommendations for Enhancing the GCIDA's Role and Status
  - To establish a strategic positioning that demonstrates GCIDA's expertise and leadership to the international community during the project's initial implementation phase.
  - To utilize this project as an opportunity to strengthen GCIDA's internal capabilities and institutionalize sustainable mechanisms for international cooperation.
  - To consider strengthening the formation of GCIDA's advisory group (Advisory Committee) in conjunction with the project's Coordination Committee and Expert Group.