

Local Benefits in Global Environmental Programs



An important task of the Evaluation Office is to explore issues that cut across the focal areas in which the Global Environment Facility (GEF) operates. One such issue is the role and achievement of benefits at the local level that are generated by GEF activities. In several GEF focal areas, local benefits—or recompense for costs incurred locally to protect the environment—are an essential means of generating and sustaining intended global benefits. Many evaluations and studies of the GEF have commented on the absence of reliable information on this issue, which has limited the possibility of assessing the role played by such benefits in catalyzing sustainable gains for the global environment; such gains are of course the GEF's ultimate objective.

To address this knowledge gap, the Evaluation Office undertook the current study. Its design was based on three distinct but interrelated approaches:

- a series of case studies, including both field-based (18 projects) and non-field (114 projects) studies, aimed at addressing causal links in project implementation and broader program effects between local and global benefits;
- a review of assessments provided by previous evaluative studies at the project (113 final evaluations), program, and thematic levels; and
- an examination of relevant donor agency, nongovernmental organization, and research community experiences.

Findings

The study found that for many areas of GEF-supported activity, local and environmental benefits are interlinked.

Local support for improved environmental management is built upon the achievement of benefits at the community level, which can offset locally incurred costs and generate sustainable support. The study highlights good practices found in the projects studied, as well as areas where challenges need to be overcome. It also raises fundamental issues about GEF approaches. Central to these issues is the relationship between poverty and the environment, as well as that between conservation and development.

In many areas in which the GEF is active, local and global benefits are strongly interlinked. Global-local interlinkages are particularly found in activities that depend on lasting changes in human behavior to achieve and sustain global environment gains. Behavior that produces current gains to local residents may generate lasting environmental damage. Interventions designed to protect the environment may therefore reduce the livelihood options of communities as a whole or of groups within these. Within the portfolio areas studied, projects based on restricting access to natural resources often imposed local costs that might be unacceptable to the affected populations unless adequate measures are taken to compensate for these losses. The study found that local support for such interventions, which is an important factor in their sustainability, can be generated through a combination of compensatory opportunities and environmental education.

In some GEF projects, there were considerable achievements in developing local incentives to ensure environmental gains. A number of factors contributed to positive gains. At the national scale, the development of supportive policy and legislative frameworks enabled socioeconomic and political incentives for local environmental management. Connected to the national framework, local capacity-building activities strengthened accountability and transparency of existing bodies or developed new institutions. Capacity building enabled institutions to better

manage and deliver incentives for sound environmental management. Achievements in these areas built on good project design and delivery, which targeted long-term objectives while meeting local development needs.

In many projects where local-global linkages were intended to be addressed, they were not sufficiently taken into account, resulting in less local and global benefits than anticipated. Shortcomings that were encountered often started with inadequate understanding of “the community” in terms of its socioeconomics; institutions; and resource access, use, and needs. This limitation hindered project attempts to develop relevant and effective linkages between local incentives and changes contributing to global environmental gains. Approaches to institution building also encountered challenges, in part caused by inadequate assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of local management capacity. Incentives for improved environmental management—such as income-generating activities, ecotourism, and new energy technologies—were in several cases delivered without sufficient consideration of the potential market, affordability, or local capacity. Finally, monitoring of local-global linkages proved to be particularly challenging, reducing the opportunities to learn from success and failure. New project designs approved during the third GEF replenishment programming period demonstrate a stronger emphasis on the integration of local incentives into global environmental interventions.

Win-win situations for global and local benefits proved to be unattainable in many cases. This circumstance is partly due to the incomplete development of alternative courses of action with a range of trade-offs between local costs, compensatory measures, and levels of environmental protection. Insufficient attention to the potential for negative impacts and the need to develop mitigation strategies was another factor contributing to this situation. Successful projects and programs assessed varying possible relationships among resource users and the environment and effectively managed the trade-offs across different levels of intervention (such as policy support, institutional strengthening, and income generation).

Recommendations

- Where local benefits are an essential means to achieve and sustain global benefits, the GEF portfolio should integrate them more strongly into its programming.
- Integration of local benefits should be carried forward more systematically into all stages of the project cycle.
- GEF activities should include processes for dealing with trade-offs between global and local benefits in situations where win-win results do not materialize.
- To strengthen the generation of linkages between local and global benefits, the GEF should ensure adequate involvement of expertise on social and institutional issues at all levels of the portfolio.

The study also highlighted the importance of improved articulation in GEF approaches of the relationship between environment and development—specifically between poverty and environmental management. Failure to address this relationship has reduced the GEF’s effectiveness in meeting its global environmental goals, since poor people are often left with no alternative to unsustainable natural resource management practices.

The GEF Evaluation Office is an independent entity reporting directly to the GEF Council, mandated to evaluate the focal area programs and priorities of the GEF.

The Role of Local Benefits in Global Environmental Programs (May 2006) is available on the GEF Evaluation Office website at thegef.org (in the Publications section under Program Evaluations and Thematic Studies). The GEF Management Response is available in annex F. For more information, please contact the GEF Evaluation Office at gefevaluation@thegef.org.