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## **THE APPROACH TO TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE IN THE MULTILATERAL CLIMATE FUNDS : AF, CIF, GEF AND GCF**

(Prepared by the Independent Evaluation Office of the GEF)

# The approach to transformational change in multilateral climate funds: AF, CIF, GEF and GCF

## *Synthesis Report*

May 2025



### JOINT MULTILATERAL CLIMATE FUNDS SERIES

Transformational Change

### TOPICS

- Transformational Change
- Multilateral Climate Funds
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# List of Abbreviations

<b>ACT</b>	Accelerating Coal Transition (CIF program)
<b>AF</b>	Adaptation Fund
<b>AF-TERG</b>	Adaptation Fund Technical Evaluation Reference Group
<b>CIF</b>	Climate Investment Funds
<b>DAC</b>	Development Assistance Committee
<b>DGM</b>	Dedicated Grant Mechanism
<b>E&amp;L</b>	Evaluation and Learning
<b>FIP</b>	Forest Investment Program
<b>GCF</b>	Green Climate Fund
<b>GEB</b>	global environmental benefit
<b>GEF</b>	Global Environment Facility
<b>IEO</b>	Independent Evaluation Office
<b>IEU</b>	Independent Evaluation Unit
<b>IAP</b>	integrated approach pilot
<b>IBRD</b>	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
<b>IP</b>	impact program
<b>IPCC</b>	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
<b>IRF</b>	integrated results framework
<b>IRMF</b>	integrated results management framework
<b>Itad</b>	Information, Training, and Development (evaluation and learning firm)
<b>LDC</b>	least developed country
<b>LLA</b>	locally led adaptation
<b>MDB</b>	multilateral development bank
<b>MEL</b>	monitoring, evaluation, and learning
<b>MOPAN</b>	Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network
<b>MTS</b>	medium-term strategy
<b>NIEs</b>	National Implementing Entities
<b>NPC</b>	Nature, People, and Climate (CIF program)
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>OPS</b>	comprehensive evaluation of the GEF (previously overall performance study)
<b>PIF</b>	project identification form
<b>PPCR</b>	Pilot Program for Climate Resilience
<b>REI</b>	Renewable Energy Integration (CIF program)
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>SREP</b>	Scaling Up Renewable Energy Program
<b>SRF</b>	Strategic Results Framework
<b>STAP</b>	Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel
<b>TC</b>	transformational change
<b>TCLP</b>	Transformational Change Learning Partnership
<b>UNFCCC</b>	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change



# Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>List of Abbreviations</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. Meeting This Moment: Why This Study Matters?</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3. Profile: Transformational Change at CIF</b>	<b>7</b>
3.1. Understanding of transformational change at CIF	7
3.2. Analytical framework for transformational change at CIF	9
3.3. Institutionalization of transformational change at CIF	10
3.4. Evaluation and transformational change at CIF	13
<b>4. Profile: Transformational Change at GEF</b>	<b>15</b>
4.1. Understanding of transformational change at GEF	15
4.2. Analytical framework for transformational change at GEF	17
4.3. Institutionalization of transformational change at GEF	19
4.4. Evaluation and transformational change at GEF	20
<b>5. Profile: Transformational Change at GCF</b>	<b>22</b>
5.1. Understanding of transformational change at GCF	22
5.2. Analytical framework for transformational change at GCF	24
5.3. Institutionalization of transformational change at GCF	26
5.4. Evaluation and transformational change at GCF	27
<b>6. Profile: Transformational Change at the Adaptation Fund</b>	<b>29</b>
6.1. Understanding of transformational change at the Adaptation Fund	29
6.2. Existing transformational elements at the Adaptation Fund	30
6.3. Institutionalization of transformational change at the Adaptation Fund	34
6.4. Evaluation and transformational change at the Adaptation Fund	35
<b>7. Insights: Shared Potential for Transformational Climate Action</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>8. Looking Forward: Opportunities for Collaborative Transformational Impact</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Annex: References and Background Resources</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Endnotes</b>	<b>51</b>



# 1. Introduction

This report synthesizes insights from an **exploratory study** on how transformational change (TC) is conceptualized, operationalized, and evaluated in the four largest multilateral climate funds: the Adaptation Fund (AF), Climate Investment Funds (CIF), Global Environmental Facility (GEF), and Green Climate Fund (GCF).<sup>1</sup> **The study aims to provide key considerations to amplify TC work across these funds.**

The study was produced collaboratively by the four funds. Designed as a **light internal analysis** to provide timely insights, it relied primarily on a desktop review of secondary data provided by fund focal points—including strategic documents, policies, frameworks, guidelines, evaluations, and other relevant reports—and supplemented by interviews with these fund representatives. A review process incorporated input from all four funds.<sup>2</sup>

This report begins with **Meeting This Moment: Why This Study Matters** (section 2), which outlines the urgency of collective transformational climate action. It then presents **individual profiles of the four funds**, organized first by those for which TC is a strategic priority—CIF, GEF, and GCF, listed alphabetically. The analysis for these funds includes how each conceptualizes, institutionalizes, and evaluates TC, along with an assessment of their TC frameworks. The AF profile follows, analyzing the same aspects of the other funds; however, because TC is not a formal strategic priority for the AF, the analysis shifts from a TC framework to an exploration of key elements that contribute to the AF's TC potential.

Section 7 synthesizes cross-fund insights in **Shared Potential for Transformational Climate Action**, while section 8 concludes with **Looking Forward**, identifying concrete opportunities for enhanced collaboration and coherence in TC work. Lastly, the **annex** provides a comprehensive list of references and background resources, organized into general and fund-specific materials.

## A note on the use of “transformational change” in this report

TC has a variety of definitions in the climate and development sectors. For instance, the IPCC defines it as “altering of fundamental attributes of a system” and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as “a change in the fundamental attributes of natural and human systems” (IPCC 2012, UNFCCC 2024). Recognizing the diversity of definitions, this study does not prescribe a single definition, but adopts the definition of the Transformational Change Learning Partnership (TCLP), of which all four funds are members: “Transformational change is a deep and fundamental change in a system’s form, function, or process” (TCLP 2021).



## 2. Meeting This Moment: Why This Study Matters?

**The relevance of this study** lies in the growing urgency for collective and ambitious climate action. As emphasized in the 2023 *Joint Declaration of the Heads of the Adaptation Fund, Climate Investment Funds, Global Environment Facility, and Green Climate Fund*, a “system-wide shift in climate finance architecture” is needed, where all actors collaborate more effectively in a synergized and coordinated manner (AF, CIF, GEF, GCF 2023).

While the diverse landscape of climate finance offers clear advantages—such as increased access to funding, complementary approaches, and innovation spurred by competition—it also underscores the need for stronger collaboration and coordination among the funds. **No single actor, institution, or intervention can achieve transformational climate goals alone**, and partnerships are critical to scaling transformational climate action.

**The mandates and governing frameworks of the funds already emphasize the importance of partnerships**, in line with the joint efforts called for in the Paris Agreement, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17, and key United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) agreements, including the 2010 Cancun Agreements and the 2021 Glasgow Climate Pact.

Stronger **cross-fund collaboration** can streamline processes, enhance complementarity, and improve coherence, aligning TC efforts while reducing fragmentation. A coordinated approach can also **simplify TC design, monitoring, and evaluation**, easing administrative burdens and helping implementers navigate funding requirements. In turn, stronger partnerships can foster **greater stakeholder ownership**, ensuring the long-term sustainability of transformational climate action.





# 3. Profile: Transformational Change at CIF

This profile summarizes CIF's conceptualization, operationalization, and evaluation of TC. Key takeaways at the beginning of each section highlight top-level insights, and the primary aim of this analysis is to inform key considerations for amplifying TC approaches across the four major climate funds—the Adaptation Fund (AF), Climate Investment Funds (CIF), Global Environment Facility (GEF), and Green Climate Fund (GCF)—listed alphabetically.

Unlike the other three climate funds, CIF operates outside the UNFCCC framework, functioning as a programmatic, multilateral initiative in partnership with multilateral development banks (MDBs). Since CIF's inception in 2008, TC has been one of its core objectives and is reflected in its comprehensive suite of resources that define key concepts and provide operational guidance. While CIF has made significant progress in embedding TC within its programs, challenges persist in translating high-level ambitions into country-level implementation, particularly in ensuring that investment plans are effectively aligned with transformational objectives.

## 3.1. Understanding of transformational change at CIF

### 3.1.1. Key takeaway

CIF provides a clear definition of TC, stressing large-scale systemic change. Its definition is adaptable to diverse operational contexts, and its evolution reflects a commitment to adaptive learning. Challenges remain in translating this vision into programmatic practice, particularly in embedding transformational intent within country-led investment plans and ensuring alignment between these plans and projects designed to achieve them.

### 3.1.2. Analysis

**From its inception, transformation has been central to CIF's mission.**

CIF was established as a learning laboratory for scaled-up climate finance. Transformation featured prominently in the two funds that comprised CIF. The Clean Technology Fund (CTF) was established to “finance transformational actions,” while the Strategic Climate Fund (SCF) aimed to “provide incentives for scaled-up and transformational action” (World Bank 2008). Within the SCF, the Pilot Program for Climate Resilience (PPCR) was designed to “provide transformational and scaled-up support for the development and implementation of national climate-resilient development plans” (World Bank 2008).

This foundational emphasis on transformation has evolved into a well-defined and adaptive understanding of TC that shapes CIF's approach to climate action. At the organizational level, CIF defines TC as a “fundamental change in systems relevant to climate action with large-scale positive impacts that shift and accelerate the trajectory of progress toward climate-neutral, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable development pathways” (CIF 2022b).

CIF refers to its current definition of TC as a working definition, revised from an earlier 2017 version to expand its emphasis beyond market systems.<sup>3</sup> This revision illustrates CIF's commitment to continuous learning, adaptability, and collaboration. CIF-led **Transformational Change Learning Partnership (TCLP)** played a key role in shaping both the original and revised definitions, highlighting the importance of collective knowledge-generation in refining CIF's approach. In addition to its working definition, CIF also recognizes a broader definition from TCLP, describing TC as a “deep and fundamental change in a system's form, function, or process” (TCLP 2021b). This expanded



perspective provides even greater flexibility to apply TC across the diverse organizational and operational contexts in which CIF and its partners operate.

CIF views TC as a **multifaceted, multisectoral process that fundamentally reshapes interconnected ecological, social, economic, political, and technological systems**—overhauling the status quo to drive sustainable development and climate action through shifts in thinking, behavior, and institutions. CIF acknowledges that **TC can have both positive and negative impacts** on different stakeholders over time. For instance, renewable energy investments reduce carbon emissions but may harm fossil fuel companies and their employees through profit losses and job cuts, underscoring the need for a just transition.

CIF's 2023 publication *Principles for Transformational Climate Finance to Advance Just and Equitable Solutions* refines its understanding of TC by **defining transformational climate finance** as “an approach to financing climate action that prioritizes catalytic investments, promotes systemic changes in financial systems to align financial flows with the Paris Agreement, and delivers resources to climate investments that are climate-neutral, resilient, inclusive, equitable, and sustainable” (CIF 2023f). The publication outlines five **normative goals of CIF's transformational climate finance** that reflect CIF's understanding of TC:

- **Climate neutrality:** Climate actions should aim for net-zero greenhouse gas emissions while preventing other negative environmental impacts.
- **Inclusivity:** Climate action and evaluation must include all affected individuals, ensuring that marginalized populations—who face disproportionate impacts and offer valuable insights—are prioritized to enhance justice and efficiency.
- **Equity:** Climate action should address power dynamics and intersectional factors, such as gender, race, ethnicity, caste, and socioeconomic status, to mitigate differential impacts of climate change and associated climate action.
- **Resilience:** Climate action should not only enable recovery from shocks (e.g., storms, floods) but also

anticipate future risks and support pathways for long-term adaptation and regeneration.

- **Sustainable development pathways:** Climate action should align with the SDGs, fostering inclusive, equitable, and resilient human systems within healthy, productive ecosystems.

It also introduces **seven guiding principles** to advance these goals, highlighting context-sensitive approaches, inclusivity, systemic change, risk mitigation, streamlined processes, collaborative financing, and robust monitoring and evaluation. Together, the goals and principles reflect CIF's evolving understanding of TC, underscoring **systemic shifts, equity, and inclusivity as foundational to transformational climate action**.

Programmatic design is a useful proxy for assessing how this understanding of TC translates into practice. **Two key challenges emerge in aligning programmatic design with CIF's transformational vision at the country level:** (1) embedding a deeper transformational intent within country-led investment plans, and (2) strengthening alignment between these plans and the projects designed and implemented to achieve their objectives. The first challenge requires robust engagement with countries and MDBs during investment plan development, supported by CIF publications, tools, and guidance. The second challenge underscores the need to review project development and selection processes to better align with investment plans, ensuring that transformational goals are achieved.

A review of select CIF evaluations illustrates these challenges. The *Scaling Up Renewable Energy Program (SREP) Evaluation* (ICF 2022) and the *Forest Investment Program (FIP) Midterm Evaluation* (Indufor and ICF 2024) highlighted the need for a clearer line of sight in aligning program objectives, theories of change, and results frameworks with transformational goals. For example, SREP's dual framing—initially as a pilot program for renewable technology and energy access, and later as a large-scale driver of national and sectoral transformation—exposed a tension between its original objectives and the expanded expectations that emerged during implementation.

This tension arose because the scale and timing required for TC often exceeded the program's initial scope, resources, and focus on piloting innovation.

CIF is addressing such challenges with targeted guidance, including diagnostic and design evaluation guides (discussed below), and Evaluation and Learning Toolkits to better align the transformational vision in investment plans with subsequent project designs.

## 3.2. Analytical framework for transformational change at CIF

### 3.2.1. Key takeaway

CIF has adopted a dynamic framework to guide and evaluate TC in climate action initiatives. It is anchored by five dimensions that capture diverse aspects of such change—from strategic relevance and systemic shifts to scalability, urgency, and sustainable adaptability over time—and the framework integrates guiding questions and contextual signals that enable flexible and nuanced assessments across diverse contexts. This adaptability ensures that interventions remain responsive to the dynamic contexts where transformational climate action is pursued.

### 3.2.2. Analysis

CIF's TC framework<sup>4</sup> builds on its core definition by establishing **transformational dimensions**, **guiding questions**, and **signals** to operationalize TC throughout the design, implementation, and evaluation of climate action initiatives (CIF/TCLP n.d. 2021; CIF n.d.-d, n.d.-f, 2021b, 2021c). The **five dimensions of transformational change** serve as the cornerstone of CIF's TC framework, serving as key criteria to guide the design and evaluation of transformational climate action:

- **Relevance:** Alignment with and attentiveness to goals and context through time.
- **Systemic change:** Fundamental shifts in system structures and functions.
- **Speed:** Accelerated impacts to achieve the appropriate speed of change.

- **Scale:** Contextually large transformational change processes and impacts.
- **Adaptive sustainability:** Robustness, resilience, and adaptiveness of change.

Developed through a learning-by-doing approach, these dimensions were initially established by the TCLP as four dimensions and nine arenas of transformation in 2017–19 and refined in 2021 (CIF 2021b).<sup>5</sup> The addition of speed emphasized the urgency of the climate crisis and the need to accelerate climate action, while also ensuring that this acceleration accounts for a just transition, leaving no one behind. Adaptive sustainability was also introduced, replacing sustainability to emphasize the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in TC to adapt to evolving contexts, goals, and innovations.

CIF's **guiding questions for TC** are organized into **what** questions (focusing on desired outcomes) and **how** questions (addressing the processes needed to achieve these outcomes) (CIF/TCLP n.d.). Together, these questions provide a contextual foundation for identifying signals and shaping transformative processes. **TC signals** function as both a compass and a gauge, observing progress and directing efforts toward transformational climate action. The signals are flexible, contextual markers rather than standardized indicators, allowing CIF's program leads and external partners to assess change across stages, sectors, actors, and contexts. Unlike traditional indicators, as also required in CIF's integrated results frameworks (IRFs), signals emphasize adaptable, nonlinear assessment suited to TC. CIF **categorizes signals as emerging or advanced** to capture different levels and timing of progress, recognizing that transformational impact unfolds gradually and varies across systems.

The monitoring function within CIF programs and projects, as outlined in the IRF (discussed further below), primarily tracks quantitative indicators to measure progress. However, the application of CIF's TC dimensions as evaluation criteria has provided valuable insight into the transformational intent and impact of its programs. While TC has always been central to CIF's mandate and program design,

evolving clarity on its meaning and requirements has enhanced understanding of CIF's transformational intent and impact. This deeper insight is emerging through evaluative work conducted across the design, implementation, and review stages of programs and associated projects. Strengthening communication, integrating TC narratives, and further applying TCLP methodologies could enhance CIF's ability to track and evaluate transformational impacts while fostering a cohesive and adaptable TC framework across its programs.

### 3.3. Institutionalization of transformational change at CIF

#### 3.3.1. Key takeaway

The institutionalization of TC within CIF is evident across its foundational documents, policies, frameworks, and tools. It reflects CIF's commitment to not only embed transformational climate action and investment practices within its own operations, but also extend them to influence the broader climate finance landscape. While a degree of variation was found in relevant documents and resources, this variance is understandable over time as CIF refines its approach to transformational climate action through continuous learning and adaptation.

#### 3.3.2. Analysis

##### 3.3.2.1. Founding documents

Established in 2008, the foundational documents of CIF reflect that TC has been embedded in the organization's DNA from its inception. These documents highlight that CIF was created to respond to "a major gap in the international architecture for development to address climate change (both mitigation and adaptation) in developing countries at a scale necessary to initiate **transformational change** [emphasis added]" (World Bank 2008). This intent is reflected in an emphasis on achieving "transformational outcomes in a sector, sub-sector, country, or sub-national region" and evaluating the "transformative potential" of investment plans, along with efforts to "provide incentives for scaled-up action and transformational action." (*ibid*)

##### 3.3.2.2. Governing and strategic priority

CIF's governing documents specifically identify transformational climate action as its overarching goal (CIF 2011 and 2014), a commitment reaffirmed in the recent 2023 *Memorandum of Understanding between CIF and the IBRD* (CIF and IBRD 2023). In alignment with this governance framework, CIF's theory of change features transformational change in its overarching impact statement that also functions as its mission statement: "accelerated transformational change and climate financing that enable progress toward net-zero emissions and adaptive, climate-resilient development pathways, in a just and socially inclusive manner" (CIF 2022b).

##### 3.3.2.3. Investment criteria and design process

CIF's investment criteria are identified in the program design documents that guide investment plan development and project design for each program area. A core criterion shared across programs is the **potential for transformational change**, which encompasses the five key TC dimensions: relevance, systemic change, speed, scale, and adaptive sustainability. These dimensions are further detailed in an appendix to the program design documents,<sup>6</sup> and are supplemented with additional guidance in the Evaluation and Learning Toolkits for each program area (CIF 2024a).

Countries and MDBs receive technical support to integrate TC potential into their investment plans. These plans are assessed against the criteria, with feedback provided if they fall short. While proposals are not automatically excluded for failing to meet criteria, gaps are often flagged during Trust Fund Committee review and discussions. Investment plans must clearly demonstrate their potential to meet investment criteria, and failure to do so may lead to requests for revision before final Trust Fund Committee approval.

##### 3.3.2.4. Integrated results frameworks

CIF has developed IRFs tailored to each of its program areas (CIF n.d.-a). While the initial programs adopted program results frameworks at launch, later programs implemented IRFs with a **unified monitoring**,

**evaluation, and learning (MEL)** approach, integrating aspects such as gender and social inclusivity. Each IRF identifies objectives (and co-benefits) aligned with CIF's overarching goal of supporting climate change mitigation and adaptation in ways that are transformational, accompanied by indicators, targets, and other design elements.

**Variations across the IRFs reflect CIF's adaptive approach**, with recent frameworks embedding TC dimensions and signals alongside an increased emphasis on transformative gender impacts (aligned with CIF's Gender Policy and Gender Action Plan), social inclusion, just transition, community engagement, and enabling environments. This evolution also marks a shift from logic models in earlier frameworks to formal theories of change in more recent ones, highlighting CIF's move toward theory-driven pathways for climate action and transformational impact.

### 3.3.2.5. CIF policy frameworks

CIF's MEL policy established key principles to guide MEL at CIF, including the **inclusive transformational change** principle, which ensures that "MEL activities are aimed at supporting the wider CIF mission of systems-level transformation" (CIF 2023e). Additional principles, such as **innovation, multistakeholder engagement**, and **gender and social inclusion**, are also crucial for advancing TC. The MEL framework promotes feedback loops and learning, enabling CIF projects to adapt and scale transformative outcomes across programs. CIF's Gender Policy underscores gender equity as essential to transformational goals, affirming that CIF's climate-resilient, low-carbon objectives "cannot be achieved in a sustainable manner without due attention to the participation, contribution, and equitable outcomes for both women and men" (CIF 2018, 2022a). Both policies illustrate a commitment to TC by enhancing equitable participation and benefits in CIF programs.

### 3.3.2.6. Community of Practice

A cornerstone of knowledge generation and sharing at CIF, the TCLP drives TC work within and beyond CIF (CIF n.d.-d). Launched in 2017, TCLP fosters collaborative learning among CIF stakeholders—

including MDBs, donor and partner countries, civil society, and other climate finance actors—drawing on insights from over 900 participants across 175 institutions to refine key concepts, dimensions, methods, and metrics for transformational climate action. TCLP's outputs include guidance documents, publications, webinars, and the monthly online CIF TCLP Working Sessions, which support the joint creation of knowledge and feedback gathering on TCLP draft products (CIF n.d.-g). TCLP has strengthened global engagement, collaboration, and learning in TC work.

### 3.3.2.7. Guidance and research

CIF's guidance documents, case studies, and toolkits provide the conceptual foundation and practical tools to operationalize transformational climate action throughout the intervention lifecycle—from design and implementation to monitoring, evaluation, reporting, and learning (CIF n.d.-b, c, d, e, f, g; CIF 2021b, c; CIF 2023e, f; CIF 2024a, b, c, d; CIF forthcoming a, b, c).

Drawing on its work with TCLP, **CIF has a suite of resources on TC**, defining key elements of its TC framework (described above). **TC case studies**, like those from Mexico, Turkey, and Zambia, analyze specific program impacts, providing actionable insights into TC across diverse geographies and sectors, including resilience, energy efficiency, and forestry (CIF 2020d, 2021a, e). Additional topics, including *Principles for Transformational Climate Finance to Advance Just and Equitable Solutions* (CIF 2023f), *Managing Foreign Exchange Rate Risk for Transformational Climate Solutions* (CIF 2024b), and a forthcoming series of evaluation guides, embed TC across the intervention lifecycle, from diagnostic and design evaluation to implementation and impact evaluation (CIF Forthcoming-a, Forthcoming-b, Forthcoming-c).

In addition to transformation-focused guides, **program-specific guidance integrates TC priorities in alignment with IRFs**. Programmatic IRF guides have dedicated sections for "proposed approaches for tracking and evaluating TC, just transition, and inclusivity aspects of investment plans" (CIF n.d.-a).

**Evaluation and Learning Toolkits** for the newer CIF programs (Accelerating Coal Transition [ACT], Nature, People, and Climate [NPC], Renewable Energy Integration [REI], and Industry Decarbonization) explicitly include sections on TC dimensions and signals (CIF 2024a). In contrast, Monitoring and Reporting Toolkits for the older CIF programs (PPCR, FIP, SREP, etc.) place less focus on TC dimensions and their measurement, such as the PPCR toolkits that use a scoring system (0–10) to track progress toward transformational objectives (CIF n.d.-c). However, this difference has not hindered the application of newer understandings of TC in evaluative work, supported by the Evaluation and Learning Toolkits. Dimensions of TC have been effectively used as evaluation criteria in large external evaluations of older programs, including SREP, FIP, Dedicated Grant Mechanism (DGM), and PPCR, demonstrating their relevance across CIF portfolio.

Written guidance is complemented by **interactive workshops**, such as the annual TCLP workshop hosted by CIF, which bring together diverse stakeholders to build collective understanding and advance understanding and practices in TC. In addition, applied workshops in the field, such as a 2024 workshop in Zambia, provide tailored, hands-on support to country offices, helping integrate TC into investment plans.

### 3.3.2.8. Strategic outreach and communication

CIF's outreach and communication outputs play a crucial role in promoting a culture of transformational climate investment. Through **blogs, multimedia stories, videos, and press releases** (section 9.2, CIF blogs, online feature stories, press releases, and videos), CIF disseminates insights and actively engages a global audience on transformational climate action. For example, the **TCLP video animation** and **TC multimedia stories** provide accessible overviews of complex concepts, demystifying TC for a broad audience, from policy makers to the public. **Regular blogs and feature stories** share country case studies, insights, and lessons in transformational finance, while many evaluation reports are accompanied by concise learning briefs that offer accessible summaries for readers.

In conclusion, CIF's extensive documentation, guidance, and communications supporting transformational climate action, combined with its commitment to continuous learning, reflect an evolving approach to advancing TC. As CIF acknowledges, often in the forewords of its publications, its definition of TC is a working definition, and the dimensions, questions, and signals reflect ongoing efforts by the TCLP to use research, analysis, expert opinion, and collaborative discussion to further refine key concepts related to transformational change.

## 3.4. Evaluation and transformational change at CIF

### 3.4.1. Key takeaway

CIF's approach to evaluating TC combines adaptive learning, methodological flexibility, and its internal Evaluation and Learning (E&L) Initiative. By aligning evaluations with its TC framework, CIF reinforces a degree of consistency in assessing TC while allowing the framework to adapt to programmatic and operational contexts. This balance ensures that evaluations are rigorous, responsive, and stakeholder-driven, fostering learning that is both relevant and widely owned by key stakeholders.

### 3.4.2. Analysis

CIF's E&L unit is unique among multilateral climate funds in being an internal function rather than external. This internal structure allows the unit to work closely with CIF programs and stakeholders, directly supporting TC efforts through integrated, iterative learning and tailored evaluation approaches.

CIF integrates learning and evaluation as core functions, aiming to engage stakeholders to drive sustainable, adaptive TC. It outlines five key evaluative stages—diagnostic, design, implementation, impact, and systemic—that span from planning through post-implementation, fostering a culture of evaluation that empowers stakeholders to commission, conduct, and use evaluations and broader evaluative processes effectively for transformational work. This approach seeks to support strategic learning and critical thinking throughout the project lifecycle and extend beyond individual programs to influence partners and the wider climate finance ecosystem.

The review of evaluations provided for this study reveals **a strong focus on assessing TC based on CIF TC dimensions**. Notably, in 2019, CIF's E&L Initiatives conducted two parallel exercises focused on TC: an **Evaluation of Transformational Change in the Climate Investment Funds** (Itad 2019) and a **Transformational Change in the Climate Investment Funds A Synthesis of the Evidence** (Bird et al. 2019). The Itad evaluation provided a structured framework for

assessing TC, building on TCLP's existing framework, offering key insights into how CIF interventions contribute to systemic shifts over time. Meanwhile, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) synthesis study consolidated evidence across CIF programs, highlighting patterns and lessons that informed ongoing and future evaluations. Together, these studies established a foundational approach for understanding and measuring TC within CIF.

Building on this foundational work, subsequent evaluations have continued to apply and refine these insights. The **Scaling Up Renewable Energy Program in Low-Income Countries** (ICF 2022) assessed the program's role in initiating renewable energy development and its progress toward achieving scaling effects at national, regional, and global levels. The evaluation highlighted the evolving expectations placed on the program and the challenges of aligning these with available funding and resources, illustrating CIF's commitment to critically evaluating the trajectory of transformational processes.

CIF's **approach to evaluating TC has evolved alongside its TC framework**. For example, the 2019 Itad evaluation and the 2019 ODI synthesis study applied an earlier TC framework developed by TCLP, which included four dimensions and classified signals of change by maturity—early, interim, or advanced. As noted above, this framework has since evolved to five dimensions with signals categorized as emerging and advanced, reflected in CIF's later evaluations.

The 2024 midterm evaluation of the Forest Investment Program demonstrates methodological flexibility by incorporating, along with the TC framework, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criteria, outcome harvesting, and realistic analysis across eight country case studies (Indufor and ICF 2024). Additionally, the forthcoming evaluation of the PPCR uses rubrics paired with the framework to assess transformational progress in the PPCR portfolio (ICF 2024).


**The case studies serve as targeted evaluations of TC within specific program contexts**, applying CIF's TC dimensions and signals to assess impact. Some, like



Zambia (CIF 2020d), applied the earlier configuration of dimensions alongside early, interim, and advanced signals, while others, such as Mexico (CIF 2021a) and Turkey (CIF 2021e), used the updated five dimensions paired with emerging and advanced signals. This adaptability again highlights CIF's methodological flexibility and its evolving approach to understanding and assessing TC.

**Regarding evaluation use,** CIF has actively responded to recommendations from Itad and ODI evaluations for institutionalizing TC by developing “tools to support transformative program design” and prioritizing research, measurement, reporting, and learning initiatives for TC (CIF 2019). These include creating high-level descriptions of TC, developing Evaluation and Learning Toolkits to support specific programs, and drafting three of five **planned evaluation guides to support TC throughout the intervention lifecycle.** Such follow-through demonstrates CIF's responsiveness to evaluative feedback and learning, ensuring that evaluative insights steer transformational climate action.





## 4. Profile: Transformational Change at GEF

This profile summarizes the GEF's conceptualization, operationalization, and evaluation of TC. Key takeaways at the beginning of each section highlight top-level insights, and the primary aim of this analysis is to inform key considerations for amplifying TC approaches across the four major climate funds—the Adaptation Fund (AF), Climate Investment Funds (CIF), Global Environment Facility (GEF), and Green Climate Fund (GCF)—listed alphabetically.

At the GEF, TC is understood as a pathway to achieving systemic and sustainable environmental impact at scale. With its long-standing presence in climate finance, the GEF has progressively refined its approach to TC. The concept was formally integrated into programming during GEF-6<sup>7</sup> (2014–18) and further expanded in subsequent funding cycles. While efforts to embed TC into project design and implementation have advanced, challenges remain, highlighting the need for better alignment and accessibility of TC frameworks to enhance transformational climate action potential.

### 4.1. Understanding of transformational change at GEF

#### 4.1.1. Key takeaway

The GEF's understanding of TC has evolved, with its 2018 definition of systemic, large-scale, sustainable change providing a strong foundation for subsequent refinement. While evidence indicates progress in embedding TC into intervention design, challenges remain. TC is a dynamic concept, and continued learning and shared understanding are essential to the GEF's capacity to drive TC.

#### 4.1.2. Analysis

With the longest history among the climate funds in this study, the GEF's understanding of TC has evolved over time. The concept began appearing in the mid-2010s, primarily in board meeting minutes and reports, often linked to systemic and scalable environmental interventions (Kasdan et al. 2020).

In 2012, GEF CEO and chairperson, Dr. Naoko Ishii, articulated a vision to “compel the GEF to equip itself to promote transformational change” (GEF 2015b). Two years later, a Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP)<sup>8</sup> report, *Delivering Transformational Change: The Journey of the Global Environment Facility*, identified the transformation of human economic systems as a “fundamental solution” and “the backbone of GEF 2020” (STAP 2014b). That same year, another STAP report, *Delivering Global Environmental Benefits for Sustainable Development*, recommended that “the GEF should continue to be catalytic and innovative while actively seeking to effect permanent and transformational change” (STAP 2014a).

**TC was formally integrated into strategic planning with the launch of integrated approach pilots (IAPs)** during GEF-6 (2014–18) (GEF 2014b). Its prominence as a core strategic goal was further reinforced in the GEF 2020 Strategy and expanded under GEF-7 (2018–22) through the introduction of **impact programs (IPs)** (GEF 2014a, 2018).

A widely cited definition of TC at the GEF originates from the IEO's 2018 *Evaluation of GEF Support for Transformational Change*, defining transformational interventions as “engagements that help achieve deep, systemic, and sustainable change with large-scale impact in an area of global environmental concern” (IEO 2018a). This definition has since broadened, such as in the 2022 OPS7 glossary, replacing “global” with “major” environmental concern, expanding the scope

to include fundamental shifts at regional or sectoral levels, not just globally (IEO 2022b).

Various GEF Secretariat, STAP, and IEO studies, reports, and evaluations further elaborate the GEF's understanding of TC. For instance, the 2022 GEF-8 Strategic Positioning Framework incorporates a definition from the STAP, describing a transformative investment as one that “involves a pathway to durable change at a sufficient scale to deliver a step improvement in one or more global environmental benefits (GEBs)” (GEF 2022).<sup>9</sup> The underlying rationale for TC lies in addressing large-scale challenges to flip systems toward fundamental change. This rationale aligns with the GEF 2020 Vision Statement, which emphasizes that “incremental environmental strategies alone will simply not suffice” given the unprecedented pressures on Earth's ecosystems (GEF 2015b).

The following section on the GEF's analytical framework will further detail the GEF's understanding of TC. However, key overarching and interrelated aspects to highlight here include:

- **Radical change:** TC requires “a clear departure from business as usual” through the radical shift of existing practices in extraction, production, distribution, consumption, and waste management (IEO 2022b). This aspect aligns with findings from the IEO 2018 evaluation, which emphasizes the importance of ambitious objectives that address systemic bottlenecks and market distortions to achieve deep, fundamental change (IEO 2018a).
- **Collective effort:** TC is “far beyond the capacity of any single institution, or even a network of institutions” (GEF 2020a), but requires coordinated, “multiple interventions that address different parts of a system,” as well as “well-aligned small changes” that contribute to a system's capacity for transformation (STAP 2022a).
- **Systemic undertaking:** TC work must recognize the interconnectedness of coupled human and natural systems. According to the STAP, “transformative interventions must also consider the complexity of the problem, taking a systems perspective on the underlying drivers

of change, adopting flexible and adaptive management strategies, and embracing risk-taking on innovative solutions followed by careful monitoring and evaluation” (STAP 2023b).

- **Integrated programming:** The systems perspective has driven a shift from stand-alone projects to more cross-sectoral and holistic programs—to a more systemic approach motivated by the overarching strategic objective to support transformational change and achieve global environmental benefits (GEBs) on a larger scale” (IEO 2021c). These integrated approaches employed theories of change that analyze root causes and articulate clear pathways for scaling interventions, aligning closely with country contexts.
- **Catalytic effects:** The goal is to generate broader systemic change by scaling up successful models, harnessing market forces, enhancing institutional frameworks, improving policy coherence, fostering co-benefit recognition, supporting adaptation, and mobilizing additional financing that contribute to TC (IEO 2024a). The 2018 Evaluation of GEF Support for Transformational Change highlights the establishment of effective transformational mechanisms—including mainstreaming, demonstration, replication, and catalytic approaches—as crucial for scaling and sustaining TC impact (IEO 2018a).
- **Irrelevance of size:** The IEO 2018 Evaluation of GEF Support for Transformational Change found that size does not determine transformational impact, because smaller, well-designed interventions can achieve outcomes comparable to larger investment programs (IEO 2018a). This factors relates to the importance of strategic design, execution, and scalability over project scale.

A **review of select GEF evaluations at the corporate/ portfolio level** (IEO resources in section 9.4) did not uncover direct findings on the level of shared understanding of TC within the GEF and its partners; instead, this is assessed indirectly through intervention design. A 2021 IEO evaluation on innovation found that **integrated programs were designed with attention to depth of change and scaling up**, while respondents in a global survey for a 2021 IEO evaluation of

the GEF's integrated approach identified **impact programs among GEF offerings as “best designed to enable transformational change”** (IEO 2021a, 2021c). Challenges persist, such as “limited attention to scaling” in IAPs (STAP 2022a), but overall, **“substantial progress” has been achieved in designing for transformation across all GEF focal areas** (IEO 2022b).

## 4.2. Analytical framework for transformational change at GEF

### 4.2.1. Key takeaway

Grounded in its influential 2018 *Evaluation of GEF Support for Transformational Change*, the GEF's TC framework integrates criteria, metrics, and theories of change to guide TC work (IEO 2018a). Over time, it has evolved through considerable research, studies, and evaluations, incorporating insights on scaling, leverage points, risk management, and related aspects. However, the information remains somewhat fragmented across various resources, making it less accessible and coherent for partners or newcomers. A centralized and user-friendly guide would enhance the TC framework's utility and effectiveness. The 2024 GEF IEO online training module *Assessing Transformational Change and Progress Towards Impact* (IEO 2024c) offers a promising example, but its limited accessibility and time requirements highlight the need for a concise, written document to fill this gap.

### 4.2.2. Analysis

The IEO's 2018 evaluation features **four core criteria for transformational change** that serve as the foundation of the framework:

- **Relevance:** Alignment with GEF focal areas addressing global environmental challenge.
- **Depth:** Support for fundamental shifts in systems or markets.
- **Scale:** Broad impact across local, national, or regional levels.
- **Sustainability:** Impact that is financially, economically, environmentally, socially, and politically sustainable in the long term, after the intervention ends.

These criteria are anchored within a theory of change for GEF transformational interventions, emphasizing that ambitious objectives in depth and scale increase the likelihood of achieving transformative outcomes:

The underlying theory of change is that by strategically identifying and selecting projects that address environmental challenges of global concern and are specifically designed to **support fundamental changes in—i.e., flip—key economic markets or systems**, GEF interventions will be more likely to cause a large-scale and sustainable impact...” (IEO 2018a)

The 2018 evaluation report provides a template for review of GEF transformational interventions to guide assessment of the selection rationale for transformational intervention based on the four core criteria, available evaluation evidence, and relevance to GEF focal areas. It then employs a four-level scale<sup>10</sup> to assess:

- **Ambition:** Extent that the intervention(s) aimed to support depth and scale of the aimed-for change(s) in markets, systems, and other types of qualitative change.
- **Transformational mechanisms:** Extent that triggers or support mechanisms drive the achievement of TC, including mainstreaming (aspects of a GEF intervention become part of a stakeholder's own initiatives), demonstration replication (feasibility of adoption to amplify overall impact), catalytic effects (externalities that go beyond the intervention, leading to impact exceeding the sum of individual contributions), or other potential drivers.
- **Internal factors:** Extent that factors within implementers' control had a positive or negative effect, including implementation quality, partnerships, strategic execution, and other internal factors.
- **External factors:** Extent that factors outside implementers' control had a positive or negative effect, including government ownership, local implementation capacity, policy environment, community and private sector participation,

economic and market conditions, and other external factors.

- **Outcome—depth and scale:** Extent that aimed-for qualitative changes and scale of change were achieved in markets, systems, or other types of qualitative change.
- **Outcome—sustainability:** Likelihood that GEF intervention results and the aimed-for-scale of change were achieved financially, economically, environmentally, and social/economically.

Although the framework does not prescribe specific indicators, **key indicators are to be identified for each of the above elements according to the project's specific focus area and operational context.** Also, subsequent resources, such as the 2022 STAP guide discussed below, provide targeted guidance on transformation metrics. Additional studies, reports, and evaluations have enriched the framework, addressing its application and expanding on transformational mechanisms. For instance:

- **Typology for scaling:** The IEO's 2020 *Evaluation of GEF Support to Scaling Up Impact* identifies three interdependent modes of scaling: (1) replication (expanding interventions across stakeholders or areas), (2) mainstreaming (integrating interventions into institutional policies or operations), and (3) linking (coordinating multiple interventions across systems or sectors to achieve unified impacts) (IEO 2020). In addition, the STAP's 2022 *Achieving Transformation through GEF Investment* brief frames differentiates **scaling out** (expanding reach), **scaling up** (changing rules and institutions), and **scaling deep** (shifting norms and culture) (STAP 2022a).
- **Leverage points:** The *GEF-8 Strategic Positioning Framework* identifies four critical levers for creating TC: (1) governance and policies, (2) financial leverage, 3) innovation and learning, and 4) multistakeholder dialogues (GEF 2022). The 2022 STAP brief *Achieving Transformation through GEF Investment* also identifies four system leverage

points to assess transformative potential: (1) parameters, e.g., industry standards; (2) feedback, e.g., time to detect regulation breaches; (3) design, e.g., structures and incentives; and (4) intent, e.g., goals and mindsets (STAP 2022a).

- **Integrated theories of change:** The 2022 STAP brief *Achieving Transformation through GEF Investment* emphasized the importance of developing a **separate theory of change for effective scaling**, supported by a **simple logic tree for assessing transformative potential**, to assess transformational ambition and pathways (STAP 2022a).
- **Indicators:** The 2022 STAP brief *Achieving Transformation through GEF Investment* identifies five categories of lead indicators for monitoring and learning about TC: (1) capacity for change, (2) governance and policies, (3) multistakeholder dialogues, (4) innovation and learning, and (5) financial leverage (STAP 2022a).
- **Linking:** The IEO's 2022 OPS7 report expands on transformational mechanisms to include linking as the coordinating multiple interventions to achieve unified impact across a system (IEO 2022b).
- **Innovation and risk management:** A 2021 IEO study linked innovation to higher TC potential, using a transformational index based on the 2018 framework's dimensions and a **value-added index** assessing factors like scalability and enabling environments (IEO 2021a). In 2023, STAP's *Leveraging Innovation for Transformational Change* proposed five practices (e.g., aligning ambition and designing for scale) and long-term priorities to institutionalize innovation, including a **risk appetite framework** with metrics for transformational change (STAP 2023b).
- **Risk and learning:** The 2024 IEO report *Learning from Challenges in GEF Projects* underscored the importance of **careful risk estimation to balance transformational ambition** with practical, adaptive planning and learning from failure, including a classification of risks and practical mitigation strategies (IEO 2024b).

## 4.3. Institutionalization of transformational change at GEF

### 4.3.1. Key takeaway

The institutionalization of TC at the GEF has evolved through new policies, strategies, and ongoing learning through research, studies, and evaluation, reflecting its commitment to build a culture to operationalize TC. However, variability in approaches, limited explicit references to TC in key tools like the GEF-8 Results Measurement Framework, and fragmented guidance across multiple resources present challenges. A more coherent and streamlined approach could enhance the coherence and accessibility of the GEF's TC efforts, enabling stronger integration of TC into project design, implementation, and evaluation.

### 4.3.2. Analysis

#### 4.3.2.1. GEF governing documents and strategic priorities

The GEF's strategies<sup>11</sup> have progressively advanced a transformative agenda to address growing environmental crises:

- The **GEF Strategy 2020** emphasizes “supporting transformational change and achieving global environmental benefits at scale” through systemic, multisectoral approaches that move beyond single-sector solutions (GEF 2014a).
- **GEF-6 (2014–18)** introduced IAPs to address complex challenges through scalable, multisectoral, and innovative solutions (GEF 2014b).
- **GEF-7 (2018–22)** expanded this holistic approach with IPs, aligning interventions with national priorities and fostering multistakeholder coalitions to achieve market and behavioral transformations (GEF 2018).
- **GEF-8 (2022–26)** emphasizes that its programs and investments “are meant to be catalytic and lead to transformational change” (GEF 2022). Systems transformation is prominently identified at the impact/goal level in its GEF theory of change, and the framework describes how transformational change will be supported through integrated programming in each of its target systems: natural systems, food systems,

urban systems, energy systems, and health systems. A newly introduced **theory of change** features systems transformation at the impact/goal level, aligned with the GEF's 2030 goals<sup>12</sup> to drive systems transformation across these five systems.

#### 4.3.2.2. GEF policy frameworks

A 2021 *IEO Evaluation of Institutional Policies and Engagement of the GEF* highlights the “instrumental role of GEF Policies on Gender Equality, Stakeholder Engagement, and Environmental and Social Safeguards in advancing a transformational agenda” (IEO 2021b). However, a review of five GEF policies<sup>13</sup> for this study revealed that only the **Policy on Gender Equality** explicitly references TC, underlining the link between gender equality and the GEF's ability to catalyze transformation.

#### 4.3.2.3. Investment criteria and screening process

The **GEF-8 project identification form (PIF) does not list TC as a mandatory project criterion** (GEF 2024). However, if a project aims to be transformative, the project summary section requires a brief explanation of how this ambition will be achieved, including how barriers will be addressed and enablers leveraged (GEF 2024). Similarly, the project description section calls for **projects with transformational or innovative aspirations to outline potential pathways for scaling up**.

The **STAP revised screening template** includes a **dedicated section on innovation and transformation** to assess whether a project has the potential “to contribute to enduring, transformational change at a sufficient scale to deliver a step improvement” in global environmental benefits (STAP 2022c). This assessment considers the credibility of the proposed logic, along with the project's capacity to address institutional, social, or cultural shifts, barriers, enablers, and scalability. Importantly, these criteria apply only to projects explicitly designed for TC. Similar guidelines are also used to assess whether innovation-focused projects align with transformational objectives.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4.3.2.4. Results Measurement Framework

The **GEF-8 Results Measurement Framework** does not explicitly integrate TC. While it includes 52 core and subindicators, none directly references TC, representing a missed opportunity to embed transformational change into project design and measurement.

#### 4.3.2.5. Guidance resources

In addition to the strategic, policy, and operational guidance mentioned above, the GEF provides TC-focused guidance through various resources, including:

- **Achieving Transformation through GEF Investments (STAP 2022a):** Guidance for identifying transformative investments, testing their ambition, and ensuring that designs include credible, monitored pathways to achieve transformational ambitions.
- **Theory of Change Primer (STAP 2019):** Highlights of the importance of scaling, durability, and causal pathways for achieving transformative outcomes.
- **Designing Projects in a Rapidly Changing World: Guidelines for Embedding Resilience, Adaptation, and Transformation into Sustainable Development Projects (STAP 2016):** Introduction of the resilience, adaptation, pathways, and transformation assessment (RAPTA) framework that guides the integration of these elements into projects and programs, emphasizing system dynamics, participatory design, and adaptive management for long-term sustainability.<sup>15</sup>
- **Assessing Transformational Change and Progress Towards Impact (IEO 2024c):** This GEF IEO online training Module 5 provides outstanding and concise introductory guidance on TC, including the four TC evaluation criteria (noted above), as well as broader stakeholder buy-in (adoption) to sustain interventions, learning for adaptability, and cost-effectiveness as measures of progress toward long-term impact.

#### 4.3.2.6. Engagement with collective initiatives

The GEF actively engages with collective initiatives to support and accelerate TC by leveraging partnerships that facilitate systemic shifts across environmental and social domains. One notable example is the **Systems Change Lab**, a collaborative effort that “learns from and mobilizes action toward the transformational shifts needed to protect both people and the planet” (Systems Change Lab. n.d.). Such partnerships enhance the GEF’s ability to drive systemic transformation by fostering cross-sectoral collaboration, knowledge sharing, and informed decision making, thereby complementing its internal strategies and frameworks.

### 4.4. Evaluation and transformational change at GEF

#### 4.4.1. Key takeaway

While TC is not a stand-alone focus across all GEF evaluations, it is embedded within broader frameworks, including the IEO’s analytical approach, OECD DAC criteria, and project/program guidelines. The integration of TC elements, such as scaling and replication, demonstrates the GEF’s commitment to assessing transformational impacts. However, varying methodologies and limited TC-specific guidance indicate a need for a unified, explicit approach to fully assess the GEF’s catalytic role in achieving systemic change.

#### 4.4.2. Analysis

**The review of select GEF corporate-level evaluations (IEO resources in section 9.4) highlights that TC is a key priority in GEF evaluations,** emphasizing its strategic role in driving systemic and enduring change. The evaluations reviewed can be classified into three categories:

- **Thematic or synthesis evaluations:** Independent IEO-led evaluations, such as the IEO’s 2018 *Evaluation of GEF Support for Transformational Change*, and other studies, such as those on innovation, learning from challenges, sustainable forest management, and the GEF’s integrated approach, examine TC-related mechanisms like



replication, mainstreaming, scaling, and catalytic effects. TC is assessed according to the specific evaluand; for instance, an evaluation question in the IEO's 2023 *Strategic Country Cluster Evaluation of the Lower Mekong River Basin Ecosystem* asks, "How have results frameworks and systematic adaptive management contributed to transformational changes at the regional and national levels?" (IEO 2023c).

- **Comprehensive evaluations of the GEF:**<sup>16</sup> These IEO-led evaluations assess the GEF's relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and results to guide replenishment cycles. TC has been a focus in all reviewed comprehensive evaluations for this study—OPS5 (IEO 2014), OPS6 (IEO 2018b), OPS7 (IEO 2022b), and the *OPS8 Approach Paper* (IEO 2024a)—with evaluation questions exploring the GEF's catalytic role in promoting broader adoption and scaling for TC.
- **MOPAN Assessment:** The 2017–18 evaluation by the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network of the GEF independently assessed its effectiveness, providing key findings and recommendations for advancing TC (MOPAN 2019).


The **IEO's evaluation methodologies vary** according to the evaluation purpose and evaluand. For instance, the 2018 *Evaluation of GEF Support for Transformational Change* developed specific criteria, but in other instances, such as the 2023 *Strategic Country Cluster Evaluation of the Lower Mekong River Basin Ecosystem* and the 2022 *Evaluation of GEF Support to Sustainable Forest Management*, the methodology adopted the **OECD DAC Evaluation Criteria**, incorporating evaluation questions to assess TC.

A key element of the IEO's approach is the use of a **distinct GEF theory of change for evaluative assessment**, separate from the GEF Secretariat's theory of change introduced in its *GEF-8 Strategic Positioning Framework* (GEF 2022a). The IEO's theory of change has evolved since OPS5-based lessons and evidence, with TC as a core component, emphasizing the GEF's catalytic role in driving systemic change

**Ex ante and ex post evaluations also support TC assessment.** OPS6 emphasized ex ante evaluations at the project design stage, while the IEO's 2019 *Methodological Approach for Post-Completion Verification* outlines a framework for ex post evaluation to assess the "cumulative impact," including whether key outcomes "have been sustained, replicated, mainstreamed, scaled up, or contributed to transformational change" (IEO 2019).

However, evaluations reviewed in this study focused on larger-scale thematic areas, with **limited insights into TC at the project level**. The IEO's 2023 *Guidelines for Conducting Terminal Evaluations of Full-Size Projects and Guidelines for Program Evaluation* emphasize integrated and systemic outcomes but lack specific guidance for assessing TC (IEO 2023a, 2023b). Both guidelines align with the updated 2019 OECD DAC criteria, and TC is embedded within the effectiveness criterion alongside adoption factors like mainstreaming, replication, scaling, and market change.





# 5. Profile: Transformational Change at GCF

This profile summarizes GCF's conceptualization, operationalization, and evaluation of TC. Key takeaways at the beginning of each section highlight top-level insights, and the primary aim of this analysis is to inform key considerations for amplifying TC approaches across the four major climate funds—the Adaptation Fund (AF), Climate Investment Funds (CIF), Global Environment Facility (GEF), and Green Climate Fund (GCF)—listed alphabetically.

At GCF, TC is a core objective aimed at driving a paradigm shift toward low-emission, climate-resilient development. Anchored in its 2011 Governing Instrument, GCF's approach to TC has evolved through policies, strategic plans, and evaluation frameworks designed to operationalize and assess transformational impact. However, while TC remains a strategic priority, its interpretation and application vary across projects and stakeholders, reflecting an ongoing learning process.

## 5.1. Understanding of transformational change at GCF

### 5.1.1. Key takeaway

**TC is central to GCF's mission of promoting a paradigm shift** toward low-emission, climate-resilient development. While TC is a core GCF objective, its application and understanding remain uneven—a reflection, in part, of GCF's evolving understanding of TC as it has developed new policies, practices, and a learning-by-doing approach. This variability highlights an opportunity to clarify and streamline the understanding of TC within GCF and among its partners, ensuring that it translates from an abstract goal into actionable, systemic change.

### 5.1.2. Analysis

An analysis of board minutes suggests that GCF was one of the **first climate funds to promote a transformational agenda** (Kasdan et al. 2020). GCF's 2011 *Governing Instrument* defined its purpose as “to promote the paradigm shift towards low-emission and climate-resilient development pathways” by providing financial support to developing countries (GCF 2011). In March 2013 at its third meeting, GCF Board introduced the concept of transformational proposals, and in June at its fourth meeting, it tied the goals of a paradigm shift to the vision that “the Fund should be transformational” (GCF Board 2013). The board's 2013 report *Business Model Framework: Objectives, Results, and Performance Indicators* reflects a focused consideration of how to achieve “transformational change” and “transformational impact potential” (GCF Board 2013).

The significance of TC was reinforced in GCF's **First Strategic Plan** in 2015, recognizing it as crucial for both mitigation and adaptation efforts to achieve the “highest level of transformational ambition” (GCF 2016). However, the board sought **greater clarity on the meaning of transformational and paradigm shift potential**, as reflected in meeting minutes from 2016 to 2019 (Kasdan et al. 2020). In 2019, a revised strategic programming document introduced a **theory of change to articulate GCF's transformational outlook**, incorporating TC into two of four outcomes that encompassed capacity building for climate investment and the promotion of best practices to drive replication and systemic change (GCF 2019).

GCF's understanding of transformational change has evolved over time, reflecting the dynamic nature of the concept and receptivity to emergent learning. While GCF does not provide a single, rigid definition of TC, a consistent interpretation emerges across its material that is intrinsically tied to the notion of a

**paradigm shift.** Since introduced in 2011, paradigm shift serves as a benchmark for how GCF defines and pursues TC. For example, while the 2015 GCF Board document *Analysis of the Expected Role and Impact of the Green Climate Fund* does not refer to transformation once, it underscores the importance of programs that “have a truly paradigm shifting impact” (GCF 2015a).

In its 2014 **Initial Investment Framework**, GCF distinguishes between a **paradigm shift potential**, which refers to the “degree to which the proposed activity can catalyze impact beyond a one-off project or programme investment,” and an **impact potential**, which refers to “potential of the programme/project to contribute to the achievement of the Fund’s objectives and result areas” (GCF 2014b). This conceptualization is reaffirmed in the updated 2023 Investment Framework, which identifies paradigm shift and impact potential as key criteria for evaluating proposals (GCF 2023b).

Impact beyond a one-off project emphasizes scalability but is not necessarily a fundamental systems shift. In 2022, the Independent Evaluation Unit (IEU) defined TC as “a structural change that alters the interplay of institutional, cultural, technological, economic, and ecological dimensions of a given system,” highlighting a holistic shift across interconnected areas rather than isolated adjustments (Reumann 2022). **TC is conceived as both a goal and an ongoing process.** The broader interpretation is reflected in the 2024–27 Strategic Plan (GCF 2023c), which stresses that achieving such change requires enabling, scaling, and sustaining interventions beyond individual projects to transform entire sectors or regions.

The **review of select GCF corporate-level evaluations since 2015** (IEU resources in section 9.3) stands out among the funds, because some explicitly assess how the concept of paradigm shift is understood. As reflected in the review of pre-2020 board minutes (Kasdan et al. 2020), these evaluations reveal **variability in how TC is understood and implemented across projects and regions**, often remaining too abstract to drive systemic change. For instance:

- The **Independent Evaluation of the Green Climate Fund’s Country Ownership Approach** (IEU 2019a) highlights that paradigm shift was perceived as a “subjective and context-specific concept,” often not fully integrated into national climate and development planning, with stakeholders noting a disconnect between what is considered “transformational by country stakeholders, and what might be perceived as transformational at the international level,” creating tensions in the funding proposal process when differing expectations arise.
- The **Readiness and Preparatory Support Programme evaluation** (IEU 2023e) found that at the country level, the concept of a paradigm shift is largely an abstract idea and not integrated into local strategies, with stakeholders linking it to broad aspirations rather than specific, actionable outcomes.
- The **Second Performance Review** (IEU 2023b) noted that “an understanding of paradigm shift within GCF has emerged only incrementally over time, preventing a consistent approach to ambition setting and reporting of results.” The concept is often framed in terms of potential rather than actual outcomes, and while project documentation emphasizes transformational ambition, pathways and mechanisms to achieve it are inconsistently articulated, with systematic changes yet to materialize. Similarly, the **Energy Sector Portfolio evaluation** (IEU 2024a) recommended that “GCF clarify the pathways for a paradigm shift in the energy sector and its intended role.”<sup>17</sup>
- The **Investment Framework Evaluation** (IEU 2024b) found that national direct-access entities (e.g., banks, financial institutions, government agencies) were more positively receptive to the concept of paradigm shift potential compared to regional direct access entities (operating across subregions like the Caribbean and West Africa) and international accredited entities, indicating varying levels of engagement and alignment with the paradigm shift concept among different types of entities.

## 5.2. Analytical framework for transformational change at GCF

### 5.2.1. Key takeaway

**GCF has structured elements for assessing TC**, including operational dimensions, assessment criteria, and scorecards, with the integrated results management framework (IRMF) serving as a key mechanism for measuring, assessing, and reporting project impacts. However, these components are not coherently integrated across GCF documentation, which can make GCF's analytical framework for TC challenging for external stakeholders to understand and apply. Attributes, coverage areas, and scorecards, while present, remain fragmented rather than systematically consolidated into a unified framework for designing, assessing, monitoring, and reporting on TC. This challenge highlights an **opportunity to clarify and streamline how TC is operationalized within GCF and among its partners through a coherent framework paired with clear guidance.**

### 5.2.2. Analysis

GCF's 2021 IRMF incorporates the concept of a **paradigm shift potential** from the 2014 Initial Investment Framework as the "degree to which the proposed activity can catalyse impact beyond a one-off project or programme investment" (GCF 2021b).<sup>18</sup> It identifies **five coverage areas to support the assessment** of this investment criterion: (1) scaling up and replication potential aligned with global climate goals, (2) knowledge and learning potential, (3) contribution to an enabling environment, (4) contribution to regulatory frameworks and policies, and (5) contribution to climate-resilient development pathways aligned with national strategies and plans.

GCF 2022 *Integrated Results Management Framework: Results Handbook*<sup>19</sup> also identifies the three assessment dimensions identified in the 2021 IRMF document (GCF 2022a), but section 3.2 on measuring paradigm shift potential does not include a discussion of the five coverage areas to support the assessment of this investment criterion.

Additionally, the IRMF identifies three assessment dimensions for GCF impact level and paradigm shift potential—scale, replicability, and sustainability—and introduces a paradigm shift scorecard to systematically assess these dimensions throughout the project lifecycle using a three-point scale for each dimension.

The IRMF (GCF 2021 and GCF 2022) incorporates **four core indicators for an enabling environment**: (1) strengthening institutional and regulatory frameworks; (2) technology deployment, dissemination, development, transfer, and innovation; (3) market development and transformation; and (4) effective knowledge dissemination, learning practices, methodologies, and standards. Although these indicators are not explicitly included in the IRMF's discussion of the assessment of paradigm shift potential, they provide important dimensions for evaluating the foundational conditions needed to achieve systemic and lasting impacts, which are critical for assessing TC. An enabling environment scorecard with a three-point scale for each dimension is also presented to assess these four core indicators.

Aligned with the scorecard, GCF's *Investment Framework* (GCF 2023b) identifies paradigm shift potential as one of six criteria for evaluating program and project proposals. It identifies similar coverage areas, such as scaling up and replication aligned with low-carbon pathways (below 2°C), knowledge and learning potential, contributions to an enabling environment, support for regulatory frameworks and policies, and overall contributions to climate-resilient development pathways in line with national climate adaptation strategies.

In addition to these frameworks, a 2021 GCF learning paper from the IEU, *Assessing the Likelihood for Transformational Change at the Green Climate Fund*, outlines **eight operational dimensions for evaluating paradigm shift potential**: (1) scale, (2) depth, (3) innovation, (4) permanence, (5) policy change, (6) behavioral change, (7) complementarity and coherence, and (8) demonstrability (Puri et al. 2021). Developed as part of the IEU's learning mandate, the paper aims to provide insights that inform and

enhance GCF's transformational change approach by evaluating different aspects of project design and outcomes. However, this framework is not uniformly referenced or integrated across all strategic and operational documents, which limits its application as a formal, organization-wide analytical tool.

**The variety of frameworks and approaches to TC work at GCF can create confusion for external stakeholders.**

For instance, a search for GCF's approach to TC commonly leads to the 2021 learning paper, which offers a comprehensive framework based on its eight operational dimensions, but it is not GCF's formally adopted approach integrated into key documents such as the IRMF or the *Evaluation Guidelines for Accredited Entity-led Evaluations* (IEU 2023a).

Recent evaluations reinforce this observation, highlighting challenges in achieving a coherent, organization-wide framework to support TC:

- The **Second Performance Review** (IEU 2023b) identifies inconsistencies in applying the paradigm shift concept, noting that “systemic changes . . . that can act as early drivers and signals of paradigm shift are not explicitly captured within the paradigm shift assessment dimensions.” This gap leads to a focus on potential impact rather than actual results. The review also highlights variability in how projects describe paradigm shift potential, with unclear pathways to long-term outcomes and inconsistent use of GCF frameworks. It further identifies “overlap in investment criteria points, especially between paradigm shift, sustainable development, and impact potential,” complicating evaluation efforts (IEU 2023b).
- The **Energy Sector Portfolio and Approach Evaluation** (IEU 2024a) illustrates the fragmented nature of GCF's analytical approach, noting that “limited alignment between the Investment Framework and the IRMF systematically limits

assessment of the effectiveness, outcome, and sustainability of the energy sector portfolio.”

It identifies inconsistencies in metrics and methodologies for measuring paradigm shift, with insufficient clarity and detail in funding proposals affecting progress tracking: “Paradigm shift potential (stated in funding proposals) lacks the level of detail necessary for its assessment in annual performance reports (APRs), due to the lack of defined criteria/metrics for measuring paradigm shift in project proposals” (IEU 2024a). The evaluation calls for clearer articulation of GCF's goals and pathways for catalyzing a global energy transition.

- Similarly, the **Readiness and Preparatory Support Programme Evaluation** (IEU 2023e) finds that “paradigm shift remains largely abstract to stakeholders” at the country level, with divergent interpretations among GCF staff and partners. The lack of conceptual clarity hampers the program's potential to foster TC, suggesting a need for a more precise understanding of paradigm shift and guidance on its operationalization within project theories of change.

However, while findings from these evaluations support the overall conclusion that GCF's framework for TC is fragmented, **the Investment Framework Evaluation (IEU 2024b) offers a nuanced view.**

While noting coherence issues due to misalignment between frameworks, it found that of the Investment Framework's policies, “only paradigm shift has a strong alignment between the Investment Framework and the IRMF” (IEU 2024b). The IRMF directly references the paradigm shift policy, allowing GCF to compare a project's planned contribution to TC (ex ante) with its outcomes (ex post), enabling the collection of knowledge and data on paradigm shift effectiveness. This alignment provides a foundation for tracking transformational impact, though similar coherence across other policy areas remains lacking.

## 5.3. Institutionalization of transformational change at GCF

### 5.3.1. Key takeaway

GCF has made **notable strides institutionalizing TC**, embedding it across its governing documents, policy frameworks, strategic plans, and results measurement systems. Through tools like the Investment Framework, IRMF, and Evaluation Policy, TC is positioned not merely as an aspirational goal, but also as a measurable and integral part of operations. As noted in the Readiness and Preparatory Support Programme Evaluation (IEU 2023e), “all projects report of their ambition or potential towards paradigm shift,” and this review of selected evaluations found that assessing transformational or paradigm shift potential was a key assessment area. However, as noted above, challenges remain, particularly in fostering a shared understanding and unified approach to TC work within GCF and among its partners.

### 5.3.2. Analysis

#### 5.3.2.1. Governing documents and strategic priorities

GCF’s **Governing Instrument** (GCF 2011) establishes TC as a central objective, framed as a “paradigm shift towards low-emission and climate-resilient development pathways.” Aligned with the Governing Instrument, the **2024–2027 Strategic Plan** (GCF 2023c) prioritizes TC with a long-term vision to “promote the paradigm shift . . . in the context of sustainable development.” The plan outlines programming priorities to “support and leverage opportunities for funding and designing investments for paradigm shift across sectors,” focusing on just transitions in energy, industry, and transport, as well as nature-based solutions and ecosystem-based approaches (GCF 2023c).

#### 5.3.2.2. Investment criteria and the IRMF

GCF’s **Investment Framework** serves as an upstream tool, guiding the design and decision-making process for selecting projects with high transformational potential (GCF 2023b). The IRMF complements

this function as a downstream tool to implement and assess project outcomes for alignment with transformational goals (GCF 2021b). Together, they integrate TC across the intervention lifecycle, from proposal to evaluation, requiring alignment with paradigm shift potential for funding eligibility.

GCF’s 2014 **Initial Investment Framework** identifies **paradigm shift potential**—its equivalent for TC—as a key criterion for assessing program and project proposals (GCF 2014b). While many of GCF’s investment criteria align with those of other climate funds, it uniquely requires projects to demonstrate the potential for transformation (paradigm shift potential) to secure funding. This requirement distinguishes GCF from the GEF, AF, and CIF, which do not explicitly mandate transformation potential as a funding prerequisite (although CIF comes close). In addition to paradigm shift potential, GCF’s **sustainability criterion** aligns with the GEF’s emphasis on market transformation and private sector engagement.

The IRMF establishes mechanisms to measure and report on paradigm shift, positioning TC as a core investment target and using scorecards and indicators to assess impact, outcomes, and enabling environment changes for sustainability and replicability. Since its implementation in 2022, 95 GCF projects and programs (including those approved at the October 2024 board meeting), totaling \$5.8 billion, now follow the paradigm shift and enabling environment scorecard metrics.<sup>20</sup>

#### 5.3.2.3. Evaluation policy and standards

The **Evaluation Policy** (GCF 2021a) further institutionalizes TC by setting criteria for assessing GCF activities, including “investment effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability, country ownership, and potential for paradigm shift.” These criteria evaluate factors for promoting a paradigm shift, including investment impact, innovations, scalability, and alignment with multilateral efforts. However, GCF **Evaluation Standards** (GCF 2022b) focus on values like independence and accountability without directly linking them to TC ambitions.

#### 5.3.2.4. Guidance documents and sectoral planning

The three guidance resources reviewed for this study reflect GCF's efforts to embed TC into evaluation and sectoral planning, and it is important to recognize that other resources reviewed above, like the evaluation policy, strategic plan, and IRMF, inherently also provide guidance. GCF *IRMF Handbook* (GCF 2022a) and *Evaluation Operational Procedures and Guidelines for Accredited Entity-led Evaluations* (IEU 2023a) together provide foundational guidance for integrating TC into GCF projects, emphasizing early incorporation of paradigm shift potential in planning and the use of IRMF scorecards and indicators to measure and assess investments for transformational potential. Complementing these, the *Sectoral Guides' Summaries* (IEU 2022c) outline paradigm-shifting pathways for systemic change, addressing barriers and embedding TC across four pillars: (1) planning, (2) innovation, (3) funding, and (4) coalition building.<sup>21</sup>

## 5.4. Evaluation and transformational change at GCF

### 5.4.1. Key takeaway

**Evaluations of TC at GCF reflect both progress and variability, with methodologies differing across evaluations in assessing paradigm shift potential.**

On the one hand, this finding highlights the potential benefit of adopting more uniform evaluation criteria and systematic approaches to ensure consistent and comparable analyses of GCF paradigm-shifting impact. On the other hand, while standardization could enhance impact and attribution assessments, GCF's principles—emphasizing contribution over strict attribution, prioritizing learning over accountability, and focusing on context-specific analysis—suggest a need for flexibility. An adaptable approach may better suit diverse operational contexts, explaining the methodological variation across evaluations. Nonetheless, **consistent core elements and definitions, adaptable to each context, could offer valuable alignment.**

### 5.4.2. Analysis

**The IRMF recommends an evaluation frequency of twice during the intervention lifetime** through an interim and final evaluation. However, it also recognizes the long-term nature of paradigm shifts beyond the lifetime of an intervention, and therefore the occasional need for GCF to commission ex post evaluations of specific interventions.

The *Evaluation Operational Procedures and Guidelines for Accredited Entity-led Evaluations* (IEU 2023a) provides a coherent summary of how to evaluate a paradigm shift potential using the scorecard-based approach centered on the IRMF's three assessment dimensions: scale, replicability, and sustainability. All scores should be backed by a qualitative narrative, drawing on evidence from project documents, stakeholder interviews, and broader data sources like national statistics and media reports.

The operational guidelines emphasize **three key principles for the assessment of paradigm shift potential**: (1) focusing on contribution rather than attribution, (2) prioritizing learning over accountability, and (3) ensuring context-specific analysis. Additionally, while not a formal principle, the guidelines highlight the need to assess unanticipated changes across all dimensions. Evaluations should document evidence of a paradigm shift and explain why it has or has not occurred, along with the project's contribution to it. However, the focus on unanticipated contributions risks overlooking negative consequences or setbacks that may impede TC.

A review of the 14 GCF evaluations provided for this study (IEU resources in section 9.3) shows that **each evaluation assessed the potential for TC or paradigm shift**. Most evaluations, such as those of the energy sector, investment framework, and various regional portfolios, examine GCF's impact on catalyzing substantial, sustainable change by assessing project outcomes like increased institutional capacity, private sector engagement, and local resilience. The *Adaptation Portfolio Evaluation* (IEU 2021) specifically centered on the overarching question: What does it take for GCF to contribute to a paradigm shift in



adaptation? Similarly, the **LDCs Evaluation** (IEU 2022) included a dedicated section that “assesses the key enabling conditions for GCF to support a paradigm shift towards low-emission and climate-resilient development pathways in LDCs,” offering a nuanced analysis of the foundational factors required to achieve transformational outcomes in the world’s most vulnerable countries.

These evaluations, along with others, highlight the **variability in methodologies used to assess transformational impact, reflecting both context-specific considerations and the evolving nature of GCF’s evaluation framework for TC**. Analyzing the methodologies in forthcoming evaluations of projects and programs approved under the current IRMF will likely provide deeper insights than those drawn from the corporate-level evaluations reviewed here.

**The evaluations partially align the IRMF’s five coverage areas, three assessment dimensions, four core indicators, and eight operational dimensions for assessing TC** discussed above. For example, while some evaluations employ a theory-based evaluation with detailed frameworks or logic models to trace causality and assess paradigm shifts (e.g., the Readiness Programme evaluation and the Adaptation Portfolio evaluation), others rely more on qualitative judgments or region-specific indicators, as seen in performance reviews of African states or small island developing states.





## 6. Profile: Transformational Change at the Adaptation Fund

This profile explores the AF's understanding and integration of TC into its operations and strategy. Key takeaways at the beginning of each section highlight top-level insights, and the primary aim of this analysis is to inform key considerations for amplifying TC approaches across the four major climate funds—the Adaptation Fund (AF), Climate Investment Funds (CIF), Global Environment Facility (GEF), and Green Climate Fund (GCF)—listed alphabetically.

Although TC is not explicitly a strategic priority at the AF, the mandate, strategy and operational modalities of the AF encompass many elements regarding TC that are present in other funds. As an exploratory review, the analysis here does not seek to redefine the AF's mandate or strategy but examines operational elements of the AF that support the TC concept and approach.

### 6.1. Understanding of transformational change at the Adaptation Fund

#### 6.1.1. Key takeaway

Despite the absence of an official definition or priority on TC, the review of secondary data reflects increasing reference to transformational adaptation and the potential for climate change adaptation work at the AF to contribute to transformational impacts.

#### 6.1.2. Analysis

Established in 2001 under the Kyoto Protocol, **the AF predates TC's emergence as a core climate and development concept.** Following the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, the AF's mandate expanded to align with its goals, particularly Article 2, though the agreement does not explicitly reference TC. In

addition, the mandate of the AF as outlined by the parties (Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP) and Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement (CMA) does not refer to TC. Consequently, **TC is not prominently featured in the AF's official documents, and the AF Board has not asked the AF Secretariat to develop a deep conceptual understanding of and mainstream a TC approach in implementation.**

Despite the absence of an official recognition of TC at the AF, a review of the AF's board meeting publications and broader strategy documents reveals increasing reference to transformational adaptation (Kasdan et al. 2020):

- A 2015 AF Board report, *Analysis of Climate Change Adaptation Reasoning in Project and Programme Proposals Approved by the Board*, concluded that while **transformational adaptation remains an evolving concept, transformation is “integral to conceptions of adaptation,” with “potential for the project outputs financed by the Fund to achieve transformational impacts”** (AF 2015). It drew heavily on the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report's focus on transformational adaptation as responses that operate at larger scales, introduce new technologies and practices, establish new governance structures, shift activities' location or nature, and incorporate normative changes in values, objectives, and problem perceptions.
- The AF's *Medium-Term Strategy 2018–2022* reflected increasing reference to TC, emphasizing innovation and learning mutually reinforcing competencies that “offer the Fund real opportunities for transformational impact” (AF 2018a, discussed below). The strategy highlights the AF's capacity to generate valuable

knowledge through concrete adaptation activities fostering innovation, capacity strengthening, and climate finance.

- A 2018 AF Board report, *Second Phase of the Overall Evaluation of the Fund*, concluded that “there is potential for the project outputs financed by the Fund to achieve transformational impacts,” identifying types of TC that include national policies, laws, reforms, coordination mechanisms, scaling up of adaptation, and the application of lessons from projects (AF 2018b).
- A 2020 AF Board report, *Options for further defining innovation in adaptation projects and programmes*, gives considerable attention to approaches to “increase the likelihood of more transformative outcomes” (AF 2020b).

The references to TC within the AF have continued to increase since 2018. For instance, the AF’s *Medium-Term Strategy 2023–2027* explicitly describes its goal as “an ambitious and transformative vision for the future” and the AF’s 2023 Evaluation Policy recognizes the limitations of conventional evaluation criteria in capturing TC in its introduction of new evaluation criteria. The remainder of this profile explores how the AF’s principles, strategies, and operational frameworks—such as its emphasis on locally led adaptation, innovation, learning, and scalability—reflect both the potential and presence of TC within its adaptation work, even if not formally articulated as a strategic priority.

## 6.2. Existing transformational elements at the Adaptation Fund

### 6.2.1. Key takeaway

This analysis highlights nine interconnected elements within the AF that have the potential to contribute to TC through climate change adaptation: incremental transformational potential, locally led adaptation (LLA), relevance, equitable social inclusion, learning, innovation, scalability, sustainability, and systems change. Together, these elements reinforce each other, amplifying the AF’s potential to drive systemic transformation.

## 6.2.2. Analysis

### 6.2.2.1. Concrete efforts as building blocks for TC

While adaptation efforts at the AF have traditionally focused on concrete efforts to protect people, ecosystems, and livelihoods from the adverse effects of climate change, these efforts can (and have already, in some cases) serve as **building blocks for TC over time**. The IPCC defines adaptation as “adjustments in ecological, social, or economic systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli and their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities” (AF n.d.-a). The focus on adjustment suggests an emphasis on incremental responses to climate change rather than transforming the underlying systems perpetuating it.

However, **climate adaptation can significantly encompass and contribute to TC**. The AF’s *Medium-Term Strategy 2023–2027* identifies this potential, referencing a 2022 IPCC report that highlights the transformational potential of adaptation efforts to address root causes of vulnerability and transition from incremental to transformational adaptation, overcoming “soft adaptation limits” (IPCC 2022).

Incremental actions can serve as **stepping stones for TC**, driving sustained engagement, fostering capacity development, and building institutional frameworks to sustain TC in the long run. The AF’s project-based financing model can **contribute to transformational adaptation through the cumulative effect of multiple, strategically linked projects**, building on each other over time, creating synergies that generate long-term, systemic impact.

### 6.2.2.2. Locally led adaptation (LLA)

LLA empowers local actors to drive climate adaptation efforts by decentralizing decision making, addressing structural inequalities, investing in local capacities, ensuring accessible funding, and fostering collaborative, context-specific solutions (AF n.d.-b). LLA has been foundational to the AF since its inception. As noted in the 2023–27 medium-term strategy (MTS) mission statement for the AF, “all of the Fund’s activities are designed to promote locally

based or locally led action,” and it is identified as an AF cross-cutting theme (AF 2022a).

By fostering context-specific, inclusive, and sustainable solutions, LLA lays the groundwork for TC. As the 2023–27 MTS notes, beneficiaries and affected communities play a critical role in “shaping project outcomes and transformative change on the ground” (AF 2022a). LLA ensures sustainability by reinforcing relevance to local contexts and needs, empowering communities to implement solutions best suited to their specific circumstances. This approach enhances understanding, builds local leadership capacities, and fosters ownership within communities, increasing the likelihood of sustained participation and maintenance of adaptation interventions—a key enabler of TC.

**Meaningful local engagement also increases the likelihood of scaling interventions to achieve TC.** A 2022 study produced by the AF Board Secretariat, *Scaling Adaptation Finance*, identified local stakeholder engagement as a “factor of scale-up success,” noting that **all successfully scaled AF projects “showcased strong buy-in from local communities,”** and conversely, the absence of local stakeholder participation was a factor of “scale-up failures” (AF 2022c).

### 6.2.2.3. Relevance

Relevance is crucial for TC, **aligning interventions with local contexts, needs, and national goals to embed adaptation and its transformational potential.** At the AF, relevance, as reflected in its MTS and other strategic documents, encompasses **coherence with international climate agreements** like the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement, alignment with the United Nations SDGs, and adherence to **cross-cutting principles** like leave no one behind, do no harm, and gender equity. The 2023–27 MTS highlights **complementarity, coherence, coordination, and cultural competencies** as central to aligning adaptation efforts across scales, fostering collaboration, and addressing systemic challenges with agility and inclusivity.

Building on its commitment to LLA, the AF **prioritizes relevance to local realities through its country-driven approach,** empowering stakeholders to design and

implement context-specific projects while avoiding a sectoral focus. Relevance **aligns adaptation efforts with core country-level objectives,** including national action plans, nationally determined contributions, and broader Paris Agreement goals, while ensuring **coherence and complementarity with MDBs and other public, civic, and private actors** to foster synergy and avoid duplication.

Relevance is further reinforced as one of the AF’s nine evaluation criteria, extending to “indirect beneficiaries at a more distant point in the results (value) chain” (AF 2023). By integrating locally tailored solutions into broader systemic frameworks, AF projects generate ripple effects that extend beyond direct beneficiaries, addressing interconnected systems barriers and enablers that can drive transformative impacts essential for TC.

### 6.2.2.4. Equitable social inclusion

Equitable social inclusion ensures that all individuals, particularly those from marginalized groups, have meaningful opportunities to participate in and benefit from adaptation efforts. It is essential for TC because it ensures that **diverse perspectives inform systemic solutions, address structural inequalities and foster the ownership and capacity needed to sustain TC over time.**

The AF integrates this principle across its operations through consultations in project design and selection, stakeholder engagement plans, and vulnerability assessments, addressing the needs of underserved groups, including women, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, and youth. The 2023–27 MTS identifies “open and inclusive stakeholder consultation processes” as vital for equitable, contextually relevant adaptation strategies aligned with priorities across all levels. Inclusivity is also core to the theory of change outlined in the MTS (AF 2022a).

This commitment is further reinforced in the AF’s Environment and Social Policy, Gender Policy, the Equitable and Gender-Sensitive Inclusivity evaluation principle, and the Equity evaluation criterion, ensuring that equitable social inclusion remains a guiding principle throughout its work (AF 2013, 2016, 2023).

### 6.2.2.5. Learning and sharing

Learning and sharing generate and disseminate knowledge to refine, replicate, and scale successful adaptation approaches, fostering adaptive capacity and systemic understanding essential for TC. Highlighted across both MTS cycles, the AF acts as a knowledge broker, **bridging local insights with global strategies to drive systemic change**. The 2018–22 MTS notes that “innovation and learning are interlocking, or mutually reinforcing competencies, that offer the Fund real opportunities for transformational impact [emphasis added],” (AF 2018a) while the 2023–27 MTS links learning to LLA, empowering local stakeholders as **agents of change** to deliver **TC on the ground**.

**Institutional capacity development** is central to the AF’s learning agenda, which is critical to advance, adapt, and sustain TC. This theme is exemplified by the AF’s *Readiness Programme for Climate Finance* (AF n.d.-c), which builds institutional capacity by addressing gaps in project design, accreditation, and implementation for designated authorities, implementing entities, and local stakeholders. The 2023–27 MTS expands the program with iterative, inclusive approaches that engage local communities, women’s organizations, indigenous peoples, and youth, strengthening the foundation for scalable and sustainable impacts.

Additionally, the Community of Practice for Direct Access Entities (CPDAE) underscores further its commitment to learning and capacity development (AF n.d.-d). As a collaborative network of AF- and GCF-accredited entities, CPDAE facilitates knowledge exchange and peer support, enhancing the effectiveness of these entities in implementing adaptation and mitigation projects. This initiative, led by the entities themselves, significantly boosts national capacities and ownership in addressing climate change, reinforcing the AF’s strategy for deepening direct access impact.

**Adaptive learning** is another AF priority, underscored by the AF’s adaptive management evaluation criterion, which stresses the importance of **emergent learning essential to navigating complex, dynamic contexts characteristic of TC work** (AF 2023). **Ex post**

**evaluations** complement this priority by offering critical longitudinal learning to guide scaling pathways to TC (AF-TERG 2024a, 2024b, 2024f).

**Learning partnerships** like CIF’s TCLP further enhance the AF’s capacity to foster TC.

### 6.2.2.6. Innovation

Innovation at the AF refers to “the creating, testing, deployment or diffusion of new, adapted or improved adaptation solutions, developed contextually and with the inclusion of the communities most vulnerable to climate change, to enable those communities to become more resilient to climate change” (AF-TERG 2023a). As one of the AF’s three strategic pillars in its MTS 2023–27, innovation contributes to TC by **introducing disruptive solutions that address systemic root causes, enabling scalable and cross-sectoral impacts**. The AF’s 2022 evaluation of innovation highlights the link between innovation and transformative change, emphasizing strategic risk taking, adaptive learning, and a stronger enabling environment to scale innovative adaptation solutions (AF 2022c). Through its innovation facility and mechanisms like small- and large-scale innovation grants, the AF fosters experimentation, challenges entrenched norms, and drives **paradigm shifts** in adaptation—essential for advancing TC.

While some innovations are incremental, the AF’s 2020 report on defining innovation in adaptation projects highlights transformative innovation as breakthroughs carrying higher risks but offering greater rewards (AF 2020b). The report outlines “new methods and ways of instigating more transformative innovations,” including a framework with criteria such as innovation’s “potential to have a transformative impact.” Key recommendations to enhance the “innovation pipeline and increase the likelihood of more transformative outcomes,” include supporting early-stage design, defining innovation relative to standard adaptation, clarifying risk appetite, and prioritizing evidence generation (AF 2020b). The report notes that stakeholders saw no strict distinction between the action and innovation pillars, suggesting both should be innovative and ideally transformative, requiring “a more flexible approach to risk and use of incentives to create more transformative projects across a wider

range of the portfolio” (AF 2020b). This approach aligns with the importance of adaptive learning highlighted above.

#### 6.2.2.7. Scalability

Scalability is the potential for climate adaptation innovations, policies, programs, and projects to sustainably expand their impact over time by reaching wider populations and locations (AF 2022c).<sup>22</sup> Central to TC, **scalability enables successful interventions to deliver systemic, transformative impacts across diverse geographies and sectors.** Since its inception, the AF has championed scalability, notably through its **direct access mechanism**, which finances small-scale, innovative adaptation pilots that can be efficiently scaled into larger interventions. Beyond supporting pilot projects, direct access **fundamentally shifts how countries manage their adaptation finance and efforts**, enhancing national ownership and institutional capacity—both of which are critical for long-term, transformative change. Scalability is **embedded in its mission**—“scaling and replication of results” (AF 2022a)—and **integrated across its action pillars and as an evaluation criteria.**

The Adaptation Fund Technical Evaluation Reference Group’s (AF-TERG) 2024 thematic evaluation of scalability outlines a **three-phase process for scaling** interventions: piloting for proof-of-concept, demonstrating scaling potential, and mainstreaming to replicate and “expand transformational impact” (AF-TERG 2024h). It also highlights scree-scaling, emphasizing small, replicable solutions as **building blocks for systemic transformation.** Key recommendations include defining scalability, embedding targets in the MTS, fostering partnerships, and refining project design and evaluation criteria.

#### 6.2.2.8. Sustainability

Sustainability at the AF aligns closely with TC because it embodies a broad systems perspective that integrates social, institutional, political, economic, and environmental dimensions. Unlike the conventional OECD DAC evaluation criterion, focused on sustaining benefits after donor funding ends, the AF emphasizes **human and ecological sustainability and security** as an evaluation criterion. This criterion

includes assessing “positive or negative, intended and unintended impacts beyond its lifetime, taking into consideration social, institutional, economic, and environmental systems” (AF-TERG 2024d).

This approach recognizes that “human security is tightly coupled with ecological sustainability” and is essential for ensuring enduring transformative outcomes (AF-TERG 2024d).

**Capacity development is a critical enabler of sustainability**, identified in the 2023–27 MTS through initiatives like the Readiness Programme, discussed above. **Complementarity, coherence, coordination, and cultural competencies** further ensure that adaptation efforts are relevant and durable. Without alignment with other necessary transformations—such as social, economic, and environmental goals in the 2030 Global Agenda—TC is unlikely to endure. SDG 17 underscores these interdependencies and the importance of global partnerships to harmonize efforts to achieve the Agenda’s transformational vision.

The uptake of ex post evaluations at the AF enhances sustainability by assessing long-term impacts, resilience, and adaptability. These evaluations contribute to systemic learning, helping to refine strategies and ensure enduring pathways for transformative, sustainable change (AF-TERG 2024f, 2024i).

The AF-TERG’s 2024 *Thematic Evaluation of Scalability Concepts and Practice* highlights the sustainability of scaling interventions, focusing on the continuation of piloted adaptation efforts (AF 2024h). While not explicitly framed around TC, these insights align with TC principles by addressing systemic drivers and fostering durable outcomes. Key enablers include financial sustainability through budget allocations, microfinancing, and revolving funds; stakeholder empowerment to sustain activities; shifts in local behavior; institutional capacity building; socio-physical infrastructure development; and the mainstreaming of adaptation into policies and plans. Stakeholder partnerships, such as formal agreements, further embed transformative outcomes and systemic, lasting impacts critical to TC.



### 6.2.2.9. Systems change

Systemic change is central to TC, involving the **transformation of structures, functions, and interrelationships within systems** that produce or shape outputs and outcomes relevant to climate adaptation. Although not an explicit objective or evaluation criterion at the AF, **systems thinking is embedded in its recognition of complexity and systemic analysis**, including stakeholder, gender, and power dynamics. For instance, the AF complexity sensitive and adaptive evaluation principle acknowledges that “fund interventions occur in dynamic and complex contexts, as do their evaluation. Fund evaluations will be prepared to flex and adapt around the needs of stakeholders, emergent learning, and any unexpected challenges during the evaluation exercise” (AF 2023).

The AF-TERG’s 2024 *Thematic Evaluation of Scalability Concepts and Practice* emphasizes that “it is vital to understand the system that the ‘project’ is embedded in and how the project ‘interacts’ with the wider system in order to create impact at larger scale” (AF 2024h). The evaluation also cites GCF’s 2024–27 Strategic Plan, which notes that “climate adaptation projects may be more suitable and promising in view of transformational change,” due to their capacity to address systemic complexity across multiple dimensions. Unlike mitigation projects, which often target one or two sectors, adaptation projects integrate diverse factors and dimensions, positioning them as key drivers of transformative outcomes.

## 6.3. Institutionalization of transformational change at the Adaptation Fund

### 6.3.1. Key takeaway

Although TC is not formally institutionalized at the AF, its strategies, operational modalities, and evaluation frameworks incorporate key TC elements. Paired with its commitment to capacity building and knowledge sharing, this foundation **positions the AF to further align its work with TC and drive systemic, transformative adaptation**. If the AF were to prioritize

TC, next steps could include formally integrating TC into its 2028 strategy and across other relevant policies, results frameworks, operational modalities, and guidance materials.

### 6.3.2. Analysis

#### 6.3.2.1. Governing documents and strategic priorities

While TC is not explicitly an objective, the AF’s principles and strategies align with its key elements, discussed above. The 2023–27 MTS describes the AF’s goal, vision, and mission as “an ambitious and transformative vision for the future.” Both MTS cycles reference the Paris Agreement, focusing on the Global Goal on Adaptation, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which emphasizes universal and transformative goals. While the 2015 Paris Agreement does not explicitly mention transformation, the concept is integral to its implementation. For example:

- The IPCC’s Fifth Assessment Report (IPCC 2014), extensively referenced in the 2015 AF Board report *Analysis of Climate Change Adaptation Reasoning in Project and Programme Proposals Approved by the Board*, expands the conceptualization of adaptation by cautioning that “restricting adaptation responses to incremental changes to existing systems and structures, without considering TC, may increase costs and losses and miss opportunities” (AF 2015).
- The 2024 technical paper by the UNFCCC secretariat on *Defining and Understanding Transformational Adaptation at Different Spatial Scales and Sectors* explores how transformational adaptation is defined and applied across contexts (UNFCCC 2024).
- The 2024 report to the CMA “stresses the importance of global solidarity in undertaking adaptation efforts, including long-term transformational and incremental adaptation” (UNFCCC 2024).
- At a 2022 UNFCCC workshop, an IPCC presentation on *Concepts, Approaches and Examples of Transformational Adaptation* explored “actions aiming at adapting to climate change resulting in significant changes in

structure or function that go beyond adjusting existing practices” (Nalau et al. 2022).

### 6.3.2.2. Project review criteria and operational modalities

The AF *Project/Programme Review Criteria* do not explicitly focus on TC (AF 2012). Instead, they prioritize concrete adaptation actions that address urgent needs, emphasizing project eligibility factors such as alignment with national strategies, cost effectiveness, and sustainability. While elements like learning and knowledge management are included—which can contribute to scaling and replication—TC is not directly framed as a core objective. The focus remains on delivering immediate benefits to vulnerable communities rather than fostering systemic shifts.

The AF’s direct access modality supports locally led adaptation by empowering National Implementing Entities (NIEs) to design and implement projects, fostering ownership and innovation—key enablers of TC. Enhanced direct access goes further by channeling resources directly to community-driven initiatives, promoting grassroots adaptation. While these mechanisms embed adaptive practices into governance structures that can contribute to vertical scaling for systems change, they are not explicitly linked to a broader TC framework.

### 6.3.2.3. Results frameworks and monitoring tools

The AF’s 2019 Strategic Results Framework (SRF), currently under revision, indirectly incorporates aspects of TC, such as increased institutional and adaptive capacity within the development sector (AF 2019b).

### 6.3.2.4. Evaluation policy and standards

A review of AF policies and guidelines reveals limited reference to TC. While the AF’s *Gender Policy* (AF 2016) and *Gender Policy and Action Plan* (AF 2021b) mention **gender-transformative adaptation** to promote equal access to and benefits from the Fund’s resources for women, girls, men, and boys, this concept is not directly linked to TC as it relates to fundamental systems change. However, the 2023 Evaluation Policy notes that the conventional OECD DAC

evaluation criteria are not a “particularly useful tool for descriptive analysis of transformative change or systems change.” It introduces four additional criteria and seven evaluation principles (discussed below) that are more aligned with systems and complexity thinking central to TC (AF 2023). Particularly relevant criteria for TC work include relevance, coherence, equity, adaptive management, scalability, and human and ecological sustainability and security, and particularly relevant principles include equitable and gender-sensitive inclusivity, complementarity, and complexity sensitive and adaptive (discussed in section 6.2.9 above).

### 6.3.2.5. Guidance resources

The AF does not yet provide specific guidance on TC design, implementation, or evaluation but offers a strong foundation of resources and tools that can be used to integrate TC into capacity development. These include evaluation guidance notes, knowledge products, and capacity-building initiatives such as the *Direct Access: Unlocking Adaptation Funding* e-course (AF 2019a) and the *Adaptation Fund Innovation Small Grants Training* (AF 2020a).

## 6.4. Evaluation and transformational change at the Adaptation Fund

### 6.4.1. Key takeaway

Although not an explicit evaluation focus, the AF’s evolving evaluation practices demonstrate increasing alignment with TC principles. The 2023 *Evaluation Policy*, thematic evaluations on innovation (AF-TERG 2022c) and scalability (AF-TERG 2024h), and the adoption of ex post evaluations reflect progress incorporating elements of TC into the AF’s evaluation function.

### 6.4.2. Analysis

In its 2023 *Evaluation Policy* (AF 2023), two of the seven evaluation principles particularly highlight the potential for TC work at the AF. The **complementarity principle** fosters cross-organizational learning by encouraging evaluations to integrate lessons and



processes across country partners, the Fund, and other climate finance channels, enabling systemic collaboration and shared knowledge essential for TC. The **complexity-sensitive and adaptive principle** stresses that evaluation should remain flexible and responsive to dynamic, complex contexts, with “attention to the systems orientation inherent in transformational change work” (AF-TERG 2024e).

The AF-TERG’s 2021 midterm review of the 2018–22 MTS concludes that the AF can analyze how its projects are being transformative because it is likely having “a wider impact, beyond what it is accounting for, which is not being fully assessed or understood” (AF-TERG 2021a). Such attention to the evaluation of TC is evident in the uptake of **ex post evaluations** at the AF (AF-TERG 2024f, 2024i). These evaluations aim to generate “longitudinal learning” to assess and track the Fund’s contributions to the Global Goal on Adaptation (AF 2023). By examining long-term anticipated and unanticipated outcomes and their influence on broader system resilience, these evaluations have much to offer TC work.

Ex post evaluations of projects in Samoa, Ecuador, and Argentina illustrate the interplay between local adaptation measures and their scaling potential (AF 2022a, 2022b, 2024a, 2024b). Notably, the **resilience analysis framework** used in Samoa and Ecuador emphasizes resilience characteristics such as adaptive capacity, recovery from shocks, and systemic change, making it highly relevant for assessing TC.



## 7. Insights: Shared Potential for Transformational Climate Action

Despite differing mandates and approaches, CIF, GEF, and GCF—funds formally mandated to achieve transformational change—share common challenges and strengths in designing, implementing, and evaluating TC. Key areas for improvement across the funds include better alignment between project design and transformational objectives, stronger methods for measuring long-term systemic change, and greater consistency in how TC is applied across projects and stakeholders. Additionally, these funds face difficulties in fully integrating TC frameworks into project design, monitoring, and evaluation, limiting their ability to track and sustain transformational outcomes.

These challenges are discussed in the respective fund profiles, whereas this synthesis section takes a **strength-based approach** to better align with the study's purpose, synthesizing shared potential across the funds to drive more effective and coordinated transformational climate action. Grounded in appreciative inquiry, the analysis identifies key areas of convergence that foster deeper collaboration and coherence, leveraging existing strengths to address shared challenges and providing a foundation for more cohesive TC efforts across the funds. It also informs key considerations for streamlining climate action, which are explored in the following section.

1 | **Transformational change as a strategic priority:** TC is a **core priority for CIF, GEF, and GCF**, integrated into their strategies, investment frameworks, and evaluations. GCF requires all funded projects to demonstrate paradigm shift potential, which is incorporated into its IRMF and assessed through a scorecard. At CIF, TC potential is a core investment criterion across its programs, encompassing its five key TC dimensions and supported by a suite of guidance. The GEF treats TC as aspirational, allowing applicants to decide whether projects are transformational in its PIF.

And while TC has not been formally adopted as a strategic priority at the AF, key TC elements are evident in its work, e.g., scalability, innovation, and systems change.

- 2 | **Conceptualization of transformational change:** The conceptualization of TC varies across the funds, but convergence in fund discourse is growing, reflecting early definitions such as the IPCC, which describes transformation as “altering of fundamental attributes of a system” (IPCC 2012). While CIF, GEF, and GCF each define TC differently and have distinct TC frameworks—CIF’s five-dimensional TC framework, the GEF’s four TC criteria, GCF’s paradigm shift framework—they align around large-scale, long-term systemic shifts. The AF has not formally adopted a TC definition but defines key TC elements such as scalability and innovation.
- 3 | **Emphasis of systems thinking:** All four funds integrate systems thinking into their strategies, programming, evaluation frameworks, though only CIF, GEF, and GCF explicitly apply it through a TC lens. There is a shared recognition of the need for deep, systemic change that goes beyond project-level interventions, highlighting the potential of a portfolio approach in which projects build on each other over time. The funds also acknowledge the nonlinear and unpredictable nature of change in both human and natural systems. Each fund incorporates systems thinking in different ways, for instance: CIF’s interrelated TC dimensions, the GEF’s cross-sectoral approaches through IAPs and IPs, GCF’s assessment of enabling environments and paradigm shift potential, and the AF’s evaluation principles and criteria for complexity-sensitive, adaptive evaluation and human and ecological sustainability and security.

- 4 | **Longitudinal and cumulative nature of transformational change:** The funds acknowledge that systemic change unfolds over long timescales, requiring sustained engagement and iterative adaptation. CIF, GEF, and GCF explicitly integrate this long-term perspective into their TC frameworks, evaluation criteria, ex post evaluations, institutional learning, and capacity development. While the AF does not prioritize TC, it recognizes the extended timeline required for systemic change, particularly in adaptation efforts. Across the funds, transformational outcomes are understood to emerge incrementally through layered interventions, scaling of successful models, and enabling policy shifts, ensuring that climate action remains adaptive and capable of driving systemic, long-term impact.
- 5 | **Scaling as a key enabler of transformational change:** All four funds recognize that scalability is a critical element of TC, enabling successful interventions to extend beyond isolated projects and drive systemic, long-term transformational impact. For example, scale is one of the five dimensions in CIF's TC framework, GCF's paradigm shift framework evaluates replicability and scalability in funding decisions, the GEF embeds scaling typologies into its strategy to expand interventions beyond pilots, and at the AF, scaling is one of the cross-cutting areas identified in its MTS 2023–27 and is an evaluation criteria.
- 6 | **Innovation as an enabler of transformational change:** Across the funds, innovation is linked to learning, experimentation, and scaling to enhance climate action. While its role in TC varies, all four funds recognize innovation as a critical tool for enabling systemic shifts. For instance, the GEF embeds innovation in its strategic programming, emphasizing risk taking and experimentation to drive market transformation; CIF identifies innovation in its theory of change as a strategic outcome that contributes to transformational potential; GCF's Strategic Plan 2024–2027 identifies promoting innovation as critical for its private sector program priority; and in the AF, the MTS 2023–2027 identifies innovation as one of three strategic pillars and advances innovation through its innovation facility, funding scalable, locally led adaptation solutions.<sup>23</sup>
- 7 | **Gender, equity, and inclusion aligned with transformational change:** Across the funds, gender, equity, and inclusion are foundational principles, embedded in policies, investment criteria, and evaluation frameworks. While specific approaches vary, there is a shared understanding that inclusive and equitable climate action is critical to achieving systemic, sustainable change. For example, CIF's Gender Action Plan and Just Transition Initiative prioritize social inclusion, ensuring that marginalized groups participate in decision making; the GEF's Policy on Gender Equality mandates gender mainstreaming across projects, learning, and capacity building, with evaluations showing long-term benefits; GCF's Gender Policy requires equal, equitable participation in consultations and decision making, aligning with its Environment and Social Policy; and the AF's Gender Policy, Environment and Social Policy, related evaluation criteria and principles, and its 2023 study on intersectionality approaches highlight gender mainstreaming (AF 2023b).
- 8 | **Capacity development potential for collective transformational change:** All four funds recognize capacity development as essential for sustaining climate action, with complementary approaches to strengthening institutional, technical, and community capacities. CIF, GEF, and GCF consider it a foundational enabler to sustain TC, emphasizing continuous learning, adaptive management, and long-term investment in knowledge building. While approaches vary, they primarily focus on strengthening skills, policies, and institutional systems for systemic change. For instance, GCF's Readiness Programme enhances institutional readiness for paradigm shifts; Learning and Sharing is an AF strategic pillar, and its Readiness Programme builds national and regional capacities; the GEF integrates capacity building into its IAPs, IPs, and its Capacity-building

Initiative for Transparency; and CIF's Evaluation and Learning Initiative and TCLP provide research, learning, and training to embed transformational approaches. Together, these efforts create a strong foundation for coordinated TC work across the funds.

- 9 **Learning partnerships potential for collective transformational change:** Each fund engages in cross-institutional learning partnerships and knowledge-sharing, which can be leveraged for collective TC work. These priorities are central to each fund's approach: i.e., the AF's Learning and Sharing pillar in its Medium-Term Strategy 2023–2027, CIF's Evaluation and Learning Initiative, GCF's Readiness Programme, and the GEF's IAPs and IPs (GEF-8 Strategy). CIF's TCLP already includes the GEF, GCF, and AF as members, and other examples of partnerships include the GEF's collaboration with the Systems Change Lab and the Earth-Eval Community of Practice, CIF's engagement with multilateral development banks (MDBs), and the AF-GCF framework for complementarity and coherence, supporting knowledge management and cross-fund learning for systemic adaptation. These partnerships reflect synergy across the funds that can be used for more cohesive TC work.

- 10 **Evaluation of and for transformational change:** All four funds evaluate TC or key elements of TC, embedding it in their assessment frameworks, investment criteria, and results management systems. CIF, GEF, and GCF explicitly evaluate TC using multidimensional frameworks: CIF's five TC dimensions with guiding questions and signals, the GEF's four core criteria for TC and scale, and GCF's scorecards for paradigm shift potential and enabling environments. While the AF does not explicitly evaluate TC, it accesses key TC elements with evaluation criteria and principles that include scalability, adaptive management, and complexity-sensitive approaches. Across the funds, evaluation emphasizes contribution analysis rather than strict attribution, acknowledging the challenges of linking systemic change to a single intervention. They recognize that TC unfolds over time and within complex systems, making direct causation difficult to measure; the uptake of ex post evaluation to assess the longitudinal nature of systems change has been particularly notable at the GEF and the AF.



## 8. Looking Forward: Opportunities for Collaborative Transformational Impact

Aligned with the study's exploratory nature, this section concludes by identifying three concrete **considerations** to amplify transformational impacts across the AF, CIF, GEF, and GCF. While each fund operates within distinct mandates, decision-making structures, and operational constraints, their shared commitment to systemic, long-term change creates opportunities for greater collaboration, alignment, and impact. Rather than prescribing a one-size-fits-all approach, these considerations highlight practical ways that the funds can build on existing strengths and synergies to support more effective and coordinated transformational efforts.

### 1 | **Establishing a shared understanding of transformational change across the AF, CIF, GEF, and GCF.**

The funds could develop a **broad, adaptable understanding** of TC that reflects core elements across funds while **accommodating their institutional mandates and operational contexts**. Each fund emphasizes different aspects of TC, from systemic change at the GEF and CIF to paradigm shift at GCF and scalability and innovation at the AF. A **high-level understanding of TC** with common principles will allow funds the **flexibility to tailor** it to their specific contexts and needs.

A shared set of principles could clarify **how** to pursue TC, complementing analytical frameworks that define **what** TC is. These principles should reflect good practices already recognized across the funds—such as systems thinking, the long-term nature of TC, and the importance of contribution analysis over attribution—while ensuring relevance across diverse adaptation and mitigation

contexts. A cross-fund process could develop these principles, drawing on lessons from existing initiatives, and disseminate them as a reference tool for fund partners, implementers, and evaluators to support more coherent TC efforts.

### 2 | **Developing a compendium of metrics and signals for transformational climate action for use across different sectors and contexts.**

Each fund currently uses different approaches to track TC, such as CIF's signals, GCF's scorecards, and the GEF's scaling typologies. While diversity in methods is necessary to reflect diverse contexts, a **menu-style or toolbox approach** with a set of quantitative and qualitative indicators, signals, and other types of progress markers could guide TC monitoring, evaluation, and reporting and allow funds and implementing partners to select TC metrics and signals most appropriate to their needs and priorities. This alignment would also foster cross-fund learning by identifying common success factors and progress markers in TC efforts.

### 3 | **Establishing shared knowledge-sharing platforms for transformational climate action across and beyond the GEF, AF, CIF, and GCF.**

A shared repository of TC resources, co-maintained by all funds, to provide accessible guidance for implementing partners, evaluators, and other stakeholders could add considerable value. Each fund has produced valuable TC knowledge products, tools, evaluations, and more. Taking inventory of and considering relevant resources that can be adopted or adapted ensures more effective and efficient efforts. This

efficacy will align with fund strategic learning priorities, such as the AF's strategic Learning and Sharing pillar and the GEF's Strategy for Knowledge Management and Learning.

The platform could feature practical guidance, real-world examples, and context-specific tools to address diverse needs. Such a knowledge base would have added value beyond the funds and their stakeholders, contributing to the broader climate finance and sustainable development ecosystem. This platform can be complemented by an active community of practice, notably the TCLP, to generate, refine, and share knowledge; capitalize on peer-to-peer learning; and build a collective understanding of what works in transformational climate action.

These opportunities are **not meant to be exhaustive** but rather illustrative of how the funds can further leverage their collective strengths. As this report highlights, significant progress has already been made—each fund has developed unique and valuable approaches to transformational climate action, demonstrating innovation, learning, and impact in their respective contexts. By continuing to build on these achievements and foster deeper collaboration, the funds can amplify their contributions to systemic, long-term climate action. With growing urgency for transformative solutions, the potential for transformational impact has never been greater.





# Annex: References and Background Resources

This annex provides a comprehensive list of references and background resources that informed the study, including key documents, policies, evaluations, frameworks, and examples of TC outputs from the Adaptation Fund (AF), Climate Investment Funds (CIF), Global Environment Facility (GEF), and Green Climate Fund (GCF). These materials include both cited references from the main report and additional resources that contributed to the study's analysis. The annex is organized into sections, beginning with general references relevant to the study as a whole, followed by fund-specific references and resources categorized under each of the four climate funds.

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# Endnotes

- 1 Throughout this guide, when referenced together, the fund names are presented in alphabetical order (AF, CIF, GEF, GCF) for consistency.
- 2 Methodological limitations include reliance on a selective sample of secondary data and a limited number of interviews, which may not fully capture all perspectives within each fund.
- 3 The original definition stated, “Strategic changes in targeted markets and other systems, with large-scale, sustainable impacts that shift and/or accelerate the trajectory toward low-carbon and climate-resilient development pathways” (CIF/ TCLP 2021, p. 2).
- 4 CIF’s TC framework was developed collaboratively through the TCLP, but once adopted and operationalized by CIF, this framework is referred to as CIF’s TC framework, reflecting its integration into CIF’s tools, processes, and strategic guidance.
- 5 Relevance (strategic alignment), scale, systemic change, and sustainability.
- 6 Each CIF program area, such as the Forest Investment Program and the Nature, People, and Climate Investment Program, has a design document aligned with CIF integrated results framework for that program area.
- 7 Refers to the Sixth Replenishment of the GEF Trust Fund, covering the funding cycle from 2014 to 2018.
- 8 The Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) is an independent advisory body that provides scientific and strategic guidance to the GEF to inform strategic decision making.
- 9 An earlier STAP definition is found in its 2015 Resilience, Adaptation Pathways, and Transformation Assessment (RAPTA) Framework: “Transformation refers to the process of moving from one type of system to another that has different controlling variables, outputs, structure, functions, and feedbacks (a different ‘identity’).”
- 10 The scale includes options for “not applicable” and “no opinion possible.”
- 11 **Strategy 2020** outlines the GEF’s long-term vision and guiding principles, while **GEF-6**, **GEF-7**, and **GEF-8** are specific replenishment cycles implementing that vision through targeted funding and programming directions over defined periods.
- 12 These goals are: (1) scale green recovery; (2) promote sustainability through policy and behavior change; (3) leverage natural capital, nature-based solutions, and ecosystems services; and (4) promote circular value chains.
- 13 Policy on Stakeholder Engagement (2017), Policy on Gender Equality (2017), Project and Program Cycle Policy (2018), Policy on Environmental and Social Safeguards (2019), and The GEF Evaluation Policy (2019).
- 14 The rationale for the screening guidance is discussed in more detail in the STAP 2022 advisory document Achieving Transformation Through GEF Investments.
- 15 Despite its value, the framework faced scaling challenges due to complexity; the IEO’s 2022 OPS-7 assessed that the RAPTA framework was well received by project designers when piloted with a GEF-6 Food Security IAP but was not widely scaled due to its complexity and implementation challenges.
- 16 Since 2014, the evaluations formerly titled Overall Performance Studies (OPS) have been referred to within the GEF as the Comprehensive Evaluation of the GEF.
- 17 This evaluation has not yet been approved by GCF Board.
- 18 This definition slightly differs from that in the 2014 Initial Investment Framework quoted above.
- 19 The 2021 publication is GCF IRMF policy document, whereas the 2022 publication is its IRMF handbook of operational guidance to implement the IRMF policy.
- 20 Data obtained through key informant interview.
- 21 Unlike the IRMF and Evaluation Policy, GCF sectoral guides are not supported by formal GCF policy; they should therefore be regarded as light guidance materials for accredited entities (clarification made during key informant interviews).
- 22 The AF 2024 Thematic Evaluation of Scalability Concepts and Practice at the Adaptation Fund notes that “there is not a unified definition of scaling or scalability across the Fund” (AF 2024h).
- 23 Innovation themes covered include advancement of gender equality, disaster risk reduction, cultural heritage enhancement, youth inclusion, community strengthening, urban adaptation, nature-based solutions, social innovation, and water and food security, along with innovative adaptation financing and more.

