



**Independent
Evaluation Office**
GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT FACILITY

Evaluation of the GEF Country Engagement Strategy

OPS8 BACKGROUND STUDY



**INTEGRATION FOR
GREATER IMPACT**

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All dollar amounts are US dollars unless otherwise indicated.

GEF replenishment periods: **Pilot phase:** 1991–94; **GEF-1:** 1995–98; **GEF-2:** 1999–2002; **GEF-3:** 2003–06; **GEF-4:** 2006–10; **GEF-5:** 2010–14; **GEF-6:** 2014–18; **GEF-7:** 2018–22; **GEF-8:** 2022–26

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Abbreviations

AF	Adaptation Fund
CBIT	Capacity-building Initiative for Transparency
CES	Country Engagement Strategy
CIF	Climate Investment Funds
COP	conference of the parties
CSO	civil society organization
CSP	Country Support Program
ECW	expanded constituency workshop
GBFF	Global Biodiversity Framework Fund
GCF	Green Climate Fund
GEF	Global Environment Facility
IEO	Independent Evaluation Office
LDC	least developed country
LTV	Long-Term Vision for Complementarity and Coherence
OFF	operational focal point
OPS	comprehensive evaluation of the GEF (previously overall performance study)
SGP	Small Grants Programme
SIDS	small island developing states
STAR	System for Transparent Allocation of Resources
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme

Executive summary

The Country Engagement Strategy (CES) of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) is a corporate strategy rolled out in GEF-8 with the purpose of enhancing the capacity of recipient countries to make informed and impactful strategic decisions on the use of GEF resources and sustaining their impact toward globally relevant targets, outcomes, impacts, and sustainability. The CES seeks to influence the following outcomes: enhanced country ownership and empowerment, improved strategic alignment of country portfolios with national and GEF-8 priorities, enhanced visibility of the GEF as a strategic partner at the country level, improved country portfolio development, improved national policy coherence, and increased coordination at the country level with other funds. The CES is implemented directly by the GEF Secretariat, with an allocation of \$40.2 million for GEF-8.

The purpose of the present evaluation was to assess the evolution, implementation progress, and early outcomes of the CES to inform the Eighth Comprehensive Evaluation of the GEF (OPS8) and the ninth replenishment of the GEF. The evaluation was guided by the following key questions:

- How is the CES an improvement over the Country Support Program (CSP)? To what extent has it addressed the conclusions and recommendations of the previous evaluation?
- What is the progress to date on CES components as they are combined to provide effective assistance to countries?
- How does the CES empower and support countries in achieving higher impact?

The evaluation covered the initial implementation of the CES (from October 2022 to January 2025), globally and in the four regions where the GEF operates: Africa, Asia and Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Particular attention was paid to the support provided to least developed countries (LDCs) and small island developing states (SIDS).

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach to triangulate quantitative and qualitative data sources and stakeholder perspectives, including a desk review, a portfolio analysis of CES activities and outputs, an e-survey, four country case studies, interviews and focus group discussions with GEF Secretariat staff and country stakeholders, and observation of five CES events.

Conclusions

As shortcomings identified by the GEF Independent Evaluation Office’s 2021 CSP evaluation have only been addressed in part, there are still opportunities to improve CES design, management, and accountability. The CES brings together preexisting and new country engagement activities under the same umbrella and takes a more proactive approach to country engagement. This expanded approach is reflected in a total allocation of \$40.2 million, a significant increase over the GEF-7 allocation of \$21 million for the CSP. However, there are still opportunities to improve strategy design; strength coordinated management within the Secretariat; establish information management, monitoring, and reporting systems; further diversify the types of support offered to better meet the diverse needs of GEF stakeholders; improve the timing of national dialogues; and advance collaboration with other multilateral climate funds at the operational level. As a consequence, the CES’s intervention logic is not clearly articulated, and its overall coherence has been affected by the significant modifications to its scope during implementation. There are missed opportunities to sequence and tailor activities for greater impact, and there is limited accountability on implementation and results. These challenges have been exacerbated by the absence of clear leadership and effective systems for information sharing and collaboration at the operational level.

Progress in implementing the CES was slower than expected at midpoint through GEF-8, and several activities had yet to start implementation. While 40 percent of the budget allocated for CES implementation had been committed or disbursed by November 2024, this hides significant differences across activities, with several of the new CES activities having only recently, or not yet, started. However, there are indications that implementation of some of these activities has accelerated in the first half of 2025. The main factors that have hindered the implementation of CES activities are, on the one hand, the capacities of operational focal points (OFPs) and limited awareness of demand-based CES activities; and on the other, the restructuring of the GEF Secretariat and an increased workload for the same staff. Challenges within the GEF mostly affected implementation of the CES during the first year of GEF-8, especially as multiple integrated program rollout workshops were delivered, which were not initially planned in the strategy. The rapid rollout of the Gustavo Fonseca Youth Conservation Leadership Program was enabled by an innovative approach based on ancillary agreements, which is in the course of being replicated for other CES activities, such as financial support for GEF OFPs. These agreements enable the Secretariat to work with intermediary entities to deliver funds to individual beneficiaries.

There are untapped opportunities to harness synergies across activities to increase impact. The CES was designed as a comprehensive strategy, but its implementation shows shortcomings in that respect, especially as some of the activities directed to support more sustained stakeholder engagement have had limited progress so far, and the scope of OFP empowerment activities was reduced to financial support to GEF OFPs. While implementation of integrated program rollout workshops was timely to support resource allocation, there are persisting challenges in the timing of national dialogues and potential synergies between these activities were insufficiently leveraged.

Participation of LDCs in CES activities has been important, but less so for SIDS. Both LDCs and SIDS have participated in a larger number of activities relative to their representation among all GEF recipient countries, although only a small proportion of national dialogues took place in SIDS. None of the activities currently under implementation are specifically designed to address the specific needs of LDCs and SIDS. While nearly half of all survey respondents found that the CES had facilitated access to GEF resources, decisions on their use, and their sustained impact to a high or very high extent, survey respondents from LDCs were more positive than average and survey respondents from SIDS were less positive than average.

When implemented, CES activities make small but important contributions to the strategy’s expected outcomes. However, progress toward these outcomes is uneven and constrained by the limited frequency and scope of events. Case studies conducted in four countries (Lesotho, the Philippines, Suriname, and Togo) and interviews conducted in seven countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ghana, Honduras, Maldives, Thailand, and Uganda) show that, in countries that have benefited from a range of CES activities, the CES has made valuable contributions to strengthening portfolio development, ensuring alignment of the portfolio with national priorities and GEF-8 objectives, and enhancing country ownership of the GEF portfolio, including the empowerment of GEF stakeholders. The CES contribution is modest when it comes to increasing the visibility of the GEF as a strategic partner, improving national policy coherence, and enhancing coordination with other funds at the country level. The limited frequency and depth of CES activities for any given country prevent them from contributing to all CES expected outcomes in each country. While CES activities are viewed positively in terms of responding to stakeholder needs, more frequent and diversified capacity building is needed through a mix of in-person activities, virtual training, and outreach.

CES activities have contributed to different extents to supporting country ownership of the GEF portfolio and empowering stakeholders depending on the country context. CES events have facilitated knowledge and information sharing, allowing for greater control over portfolio development. They have also provided an opportunity to clearly demonstrate how the GEF portfolio aligns with national priorities, supporting efforts to foster broader buy-in, and enabling wider stakeholder engagement, especially through national dialogues. In some countries, such as Suriname, the 2024 national dialogue has been instrumental in taking initial steps toward improving portfolio ownership and stakeholder empowerment. In others where country drivenness is already strong, such as the Philippines, the national dialogue has enabled a wider range of stakeholders to engage with portfolio development. However, this engagement remains mostly sporadic and concentrated at key moments rather than sustained throughout the project cycle.

CES activities have contributed to improved country portfolio development by providing structured opportunities for countries to consolidate, refine, and prioritize project ideas. National dialogues have been particularly valuable in this regard, offering a platform for government agencies and other stakeholders to engage in technical discussions and receive guidance from the GEF Secretariat. In several cases—notably Azerbaijan, Honduras, Maldives, and Suriname—the CES has contributed to greater clarity on programming options and eligibility, leading to adjustments that made draft portfolios better aligned with both country and GEF priorities.

CES activities contributed to initial steps toward improving national policy coherence by creating space for discussion and awareness-raising among participants. While several CES events have addressed the need to strengthen coherence across sectors and ministries to optimize the impact of GEF-financed interventions, CES contributions remain focused on initiating dialogue and agenda-setting rather than enabling specific policy shifts.

The CES has made a modest contribution to enhancing the visibility of the GEF at the country level, with notable variation across events and contexts. CES events have provided a platform to present the GEF Communication and Visibility Policy and helped raise the profile of the GEF among stakeholders who previously had limited awareness of its role, but there are indications of persisting visibility challenges; this points to the need for more targeted efforts across different scales, from line ministries to communities.

The contribution of CES activities to increased coordination with other funds at the country level has been limited. In recent years, multilateral climate funds have strengthened high-level commitments to increase collaboration on country engagement, but cooperation at the operational level is still limited. In this context, the CES's contribution has consisted of two pilot joint programming consultations with the Green Climate Fund in Rwanda and Uganda alongside national dialogues, and in inviting representatives from other multilateral climate funds to participate in events such as national dialogues and expanded constituency workshops.

Efforts to increase inclusiveness need to continue and expand beyond events. By design, the CES is intended to broaden engagement by bringing together a wide range of stakeholders, including government representatives (such as GEF focal points, convention focal points, and relevant line ministries), civil society organizations, academic institutions, private sector actors, and other nonstate participants. CES activities are widely perceived as inclusive, and participation in similar events increased between GEF-7 and GEF-8. However, the depth of this engagement remains uneven, and its potential to support inclusive decision-making is not fully realized. Some OFPs need additional support to sustain stakeholder engagement after CES activities.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were identified to strengthen the design, management, and outcomes of the CES, based on the findings and conclusions of the evaluation.

Recommendation 1: Improve CES design and accountability. As the design of the CES for GEF-9 progresses, the GEF Secretariat should ensure that the CES is grounded in a coherent and explicit intervention logic that identifies ambitious yet realistic outcomes, and clearly articulates the expected contribution of different CES activities and outputs to these outcomes, both individually and in synergy. Simple but effective information management, monitoring, and reporting systems should be established to track implementation progress and budget expenditures.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen CES management at the operational level. In the current configuration, where CES implementation is a shared responsibility of different divisions under the operational

leadership of the Programming Manager, the latter has a critical role to play in ensuring that the CES is implemented as one strategy by enabling swift communication, coordination, and information sharing among the staff engaged in different CES activities.

Recommendation 3: Provide diversified modes of engagement, improving the timing and sequencing of CES activities to increase impact. To help countries make sustained progress in developing their capacity to engage with the GEF, the GEF Secretariat should do the following:

- Develop regional engagement plans at the beginning of the GEF-9 cycle based on a mapping of the diverse needs of countries and constituencies in each region in consultation with OFPs and Council members. Country engagement roadmaps could also be developed at the request of countries to outline how they intend to engage with the GEF during the cycle.
- Where possible, appropriately sequence global, regional, and country-level CES activities and ensure that key stakeholders are invited to multiple events to create synergies across events and more sustained engagement.
- Take a more proactive approach in meeting the needs of specific categories of countries (particularly LDCs and SIDS) and stakeholders. Specifically, the GEF Secretariat should provide comprehensive but differentiated financial and capacity-building support to OFPs tailored to different levels of institutional capacity and based on transparent criteria, and improve training, experience sharing, and information dissemination through a mix of face-to-face activities, virtual training, and outreach products.

Recommendation 4: Disseminate the CES widely to increase its visibility and to empower OFPs and Council members to leverage the support offered. As many country stakeholders are not aware of the support offered by the CES, the GEF Secretariat, in collaboration with the Communications Division, should ensure that information about this strategy—including the process for requesting demand-based activities and key data on the progress of CES implementation—is disseminated widely and through different channels to enhance country engagement and accountability.

Recommendation 5: To increase cost-effectiveness in GEF-9, focus on the most impactful activities and seek synergies across capacity-building windows and with other multilateral funds. Within the context of ongoing efforts to increase cost-effectiveness in GEF-9, the GEF Council and the GEF Secretariat should consider the following strategies to optimize country engagement:

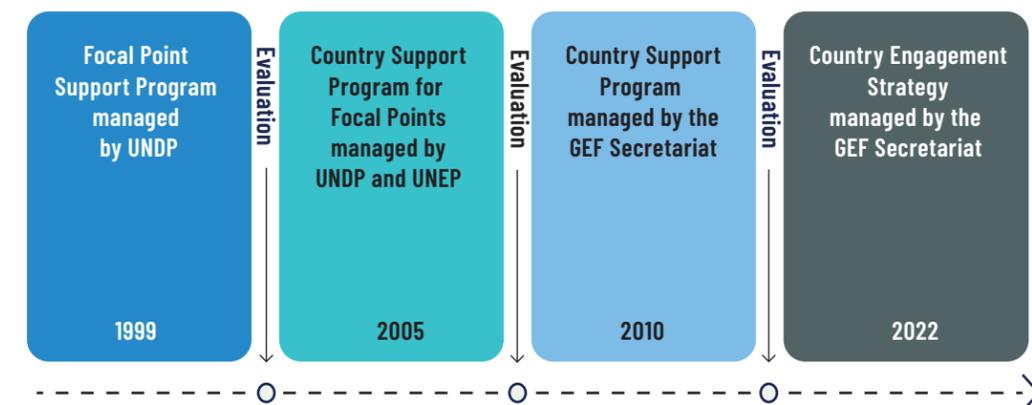
- Maintain core country engagement activities with proven cost-effectiveness such as rollout workshops, expanded constituency workshops, national dialogues, and virtual introduction seminars.
- Identify potential synergies the CES can establish with capacity-building windows in the GEF family of funds, such as the Capacity-building Initiative for Transparency, enabling activities, and support offered by the Least Developed Countries Fund and the Special Climate Change Fund for the development and implementation of national adaptation plans.
- Join forces with multilateral climate funds, and potentially with other players in the wider climate finance space, to sustain country engagement efforts.

1. Evaluation context

1.1 Background

Country support at the Global Environment Facility (GEF) dates back to 1999, when a Focal Point Support Program managed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), was launched in response to recommendations provided during the second replenishment of the GEF Trust Fund (figure 1.1). A new four-year phase of the program, called the Country Support Program for Focal Points, was approved in 2005 and managed by UNDP and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). In 2010, the Country Support Program (CSP) was brought under the management of the GEF Secretariat and absorbed the National Dialogues Initiative implemented by UNDP since GEF-2 (GEF 2018; Navajas 2010).

Figure 1.1 Evolution of country support at the GEF



The 2021 evaluation of the CSP, conducted by the GEF's Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) as part of the Seventh Comprehensive Evaluation of the GEF (OPS7), found that the program had contributed to stakeholder dialogue, country ownership, and access to GEF resources (GEF IEO 2023). However, there were opportunities to strengthen program management, broaden stakeholder engagement, provide more timely support tailored to country needs, and better leverage synergies with other environmental funds. As a result, six recommendations were issued:

- Build on current efforts to collaborate with other global environmental funds.

- Develop a clear and comprehensive CSP program strategy and implementation plan with an appropriate budget and resources envelope.
- Strengthen the technical expertise of the CSP team and the program's monitoring and reporting systems.
- Better align the reach and timing of national dialogues with country needs for support.
- Enhance inclusiveness at events to improve collaboration on the ground.
- Apply a customized approach to capacity building.

The management response identified a series of actions to address the recommendations in the context of a comprehensive country engagement strategy for GEF-8 (GEF 2021b). As a result, the CSP evolved into a component of the Country Engagement Strategy (CES), which "aims at providing an expanded and coordinated approach to the GEF's efforts to empower countries and address critical needs to help them achieve impactful outcomes with GEF resources" (GEF Secretariat 2022, 2023). The CES is expected to contribute to two strategic priorities:

- Enhancing the capacity of recipient countries to make informed and impactful strategic decisions on the use of GEF resources; and
- Sustaining the impact of GEF resources at the country level, toward globally relevant targets, outcomes, impact and sustainability (GEF Secretariat 2022).

In particular, the CES seeks to influence the following outcomes (GEF Secretariat 2022):

- **Enhanced country ownership and empowerment** through regular and strategic interactions with operational focal points (OFPs), GEF Agencies, and other relevant stakeholders, including civil society
- **Improved strategic alignment** of country portfolios with national and GEF-8 priorities for higher impact
- **Enhanced visibility of the GEF** as a strategic partner at country level, in line with the GEF Communication and Visibility Policy
- **Improved country portfolio development**, including by maximizing synergies across GEF focal areas
- **Improved national policy coherence** across different sectors of government through an increasingly effective coordination of environmental strategies, objectives, and activities
- **Increased coordination at the country level with other funds** to improve the complementarity of activities and programming at the country level for higher impact.

The GEF-8 Programming Directions identify five pillars of country engagement: building and sustaining the capacity of OFPs and recipient countries' stakeholders, upstream programming support, project design review and support, operational and policy support, and knowledge and learning exchange. This approach is operationalized in three interrelated components, each of which provides an umbrella for different activities: upstream technical and national dialogues, the CSP,

and the Strategy for Knowledge Management and Learning (GEF Secretariat 2022, GEF 2023b). The CES implementation arrangements also contemplate a set of additional activities (GEF 2022).

In the absence of a theory of change for the CES, [figure 1.2](#) provides a visual summary of the CES intervention logic and seeks to identify the underlying drivers and assumptions that must hold for CES components to influence expected outcomes and impacts.

The CES is managed by the GEF Secretariat, with an allocation of \$40.2 million, representing 0.8 percent of the total resource allocation for GEF-8 (GEF 2022). The CES implementation arrangements were approved by the GEF Council in November 2022. At the time of this evaluation, the CES was about halfway through its implementation period.

Key stakeholders of the CES include GEF Council members and alternates, OFPs, political focal points, convention focal points, line ministries involved in GEF programming, and civil society organizations (CSOs). Some activities, such as national dialogues, engage a broader audience including GEF Agency country offices, subnational governments, academia, private sector organizations or businesses, and Indigenous groups.

1.2 Evaluation methodology and limitations

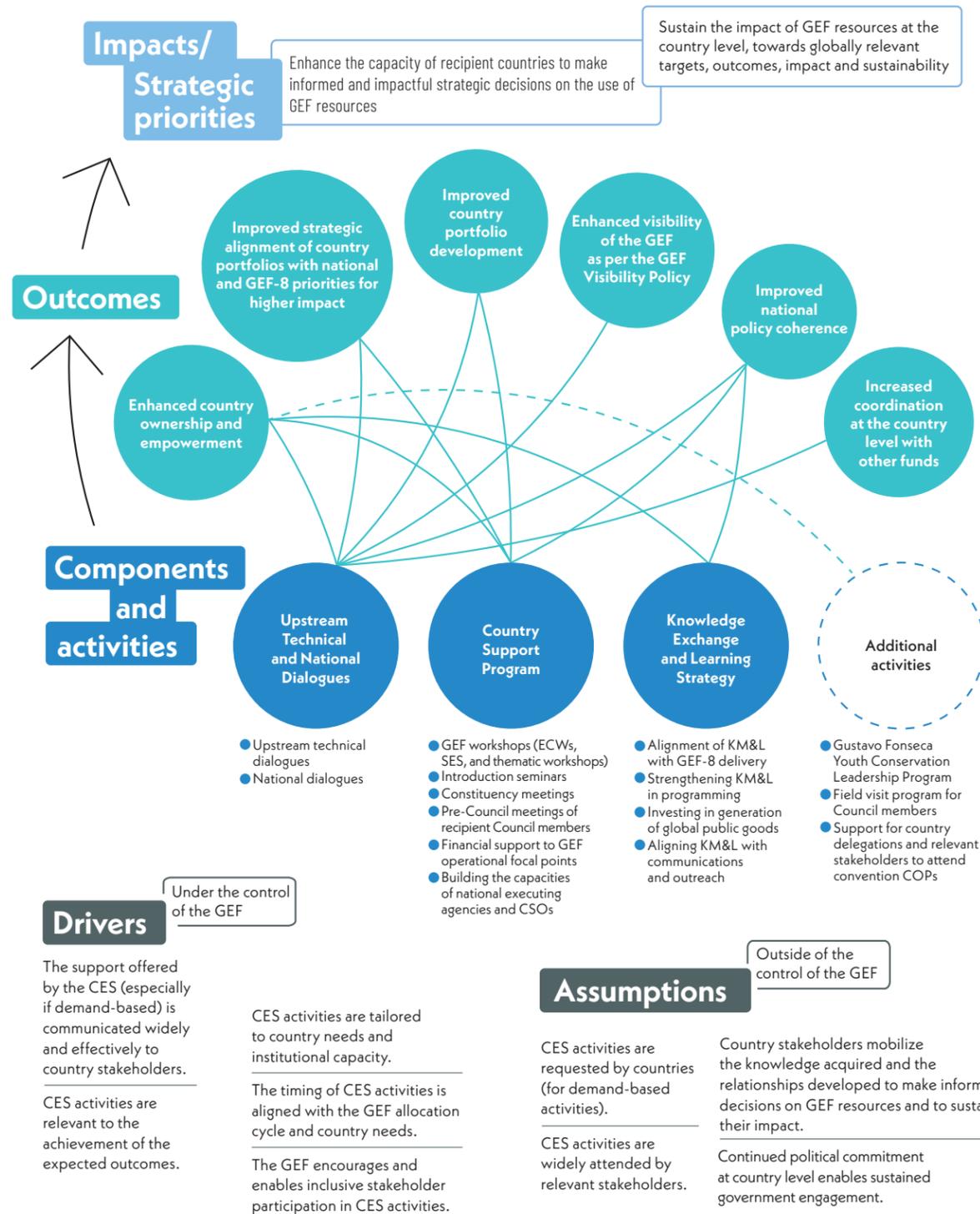
Building on the findings and recommendations from the last CSP evaluation, the purpose of the present evaluation was to assess the evolution, implementation progress, and early outcomes of the CES to inform the Eighth Comprehensive Evaluation of the GEF (OPS8) and the ninth replenishment of the GEF. The evaluation was guided by the following key questions:

- How is the CES an improvement over the CSP? To what extent has it addressed the conclusions and recommendations of the previous evaluation?
- What is the progress to date on the CES's components as they are combined to provide effective assistance to countries?
- How does the CES empower and support countries in achieving higher impact?

The evaluation covered the initial implementation of the CES (from October 2022 to January 2025), globally and in the four regions where the GEF operates: Africa, Asia and Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Particular attention was paid to the support provided to least developed countries (LDCs) and small island developing states (SIDS).

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach to triangulate quantitative and qualitative data sources and stakeholder perspectives. The data collected from different sources were summarized, systematized, and coded against evaluation questions using a data analysis software called Dedoose. Data for this evaluation were collected between October 2024 and January 2025; data analysis continued in 2025. The methods used include the following:

Figure 1.2 Intervention logic of the country engagement strategy



Sources: Based on GEF 2022 and GEF Secretariat 2022.

Note: CES = Country Engagement Strategy; COP = conference of the parties; CSO = civil society organization; ECW = expanded constituency workshop; KM&L = knowledge management and learning; SES = sector engagement strategy.

- **In-depth desk review:** 41 relevant documents were carefully assessed based on the evaluation criteria and questions in the evaluation matrix. In addition to providing a solid basis for other data collection activities, the desk review investigated how the recommendations of the last CSP evaluation have been addressed.
- **Portfolio analysis of CES activities and outputs:** Drawing on publicly available data and information provided by the GEF Secretariat, a database of CES activities and outputs was developed to generate a snapshot of progress in the implementation of the CES and to identify relevant trends at the portfolio level. The portfolio analysis covered the first two years of implementation of the CES (October 2022–October 2024).
- **E-survey:** A brief e-survey, an updated version of the questionnaire developed for the last CSP evaluation, was administered by the GEF IEO using SurveyMonkey to CES event participants, GEF focal points, and Council members. The survey received a total of 507 responses from 121 countries—equivalent to a 20 percent response rate, which is adequate for this type of survey.
- **Country case studies:** Four country case studies were conducted to explore the emerging outcomes of the CES in greater depth and in different country contexts: Lesotho, the Philippines, Suriname, and Togo. The focus was on assessing the extent to which the CES has contributed or is likely to contribute to its expected outcomes, the role of the CES in facilitating strategic decisions on GEF resources, and the inclusiveness of stakeholder engagement at the country level. The countries were selected based on geographic representation, country type (including two LDCs and one SIDS), significant participation in CES activities (including a national dialogue), and upcoming CES events.
- **Interviews and focus group discussions:** These were held with 28 stakeholders, including 16 key GEF Secretariat staff, one GEF-CSO Network representative, two representatives of multilateral climate funds, seven OFPs, and two GEF Agency country representatives. These interviews were semistructured and conducted virtually. The sample of OFPs (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ghana, Honduras, Maldives, Thailand, and Uganda) was complementary to the sample of country case studies.
- **Observation of CES events:** This took place in the context of the Introduction Seminar (September 2024, virtual), the Guinea National Dialogue (September 2024, virtual), the Suriname National Dialogue (October 2024, in person), the Asia and Pacific Constituency Meeting (December 2024, virtual), and the South Africa Expanded Constituency Workshop (ECW) (January 2025, in person).

The following limitations were encountered during data collection and analysis.

- **Gaps in the portfolio data provided by the GEF Secretariat.**
 - The portfolio of CES activities had to be pieced together from different information sources. The number of upstream technical dialogues has not been confirmed by the GEF Secretariat at the time of writing this report.

- The e-survey was sent out to participants in 29 out of 75 events because the GEF Secretariat was unable to provide the attendance lists of the other events or they were illegible. To ensure broad reach, the contact database was complemented with the list of OFPs and Council members.
 - Due to inconsistent records, it was not possible to carry out an analysis of participants by stakeholder type and gender at the portfolio level. The case studies provide some information.
- **Challenges in engaging country stakeholders.**
 - As data collection was carried out in the fall of 2024, OFPs were busy with the conferences of the parties (COPs) to three of the conventions served by the GEF. As a result, the Kazakhstan case study had to be replaced by Togo, and it was not possible to schedule interviews with the OFPs of Bolivia and Guinea.
 - Only in the case of Maldives was it possible to identify and obtain interviews with Agency country officers who attended CES events.
- **It is too early to fully assess the outcomes of the CES.** At the time of conducting data collection, there was limited or no progress in the implementation of some CES activities. Data analysis and collection thus focused on identifying early progress toward some of the expected outcomes of the CES.

2. Evaluation findings

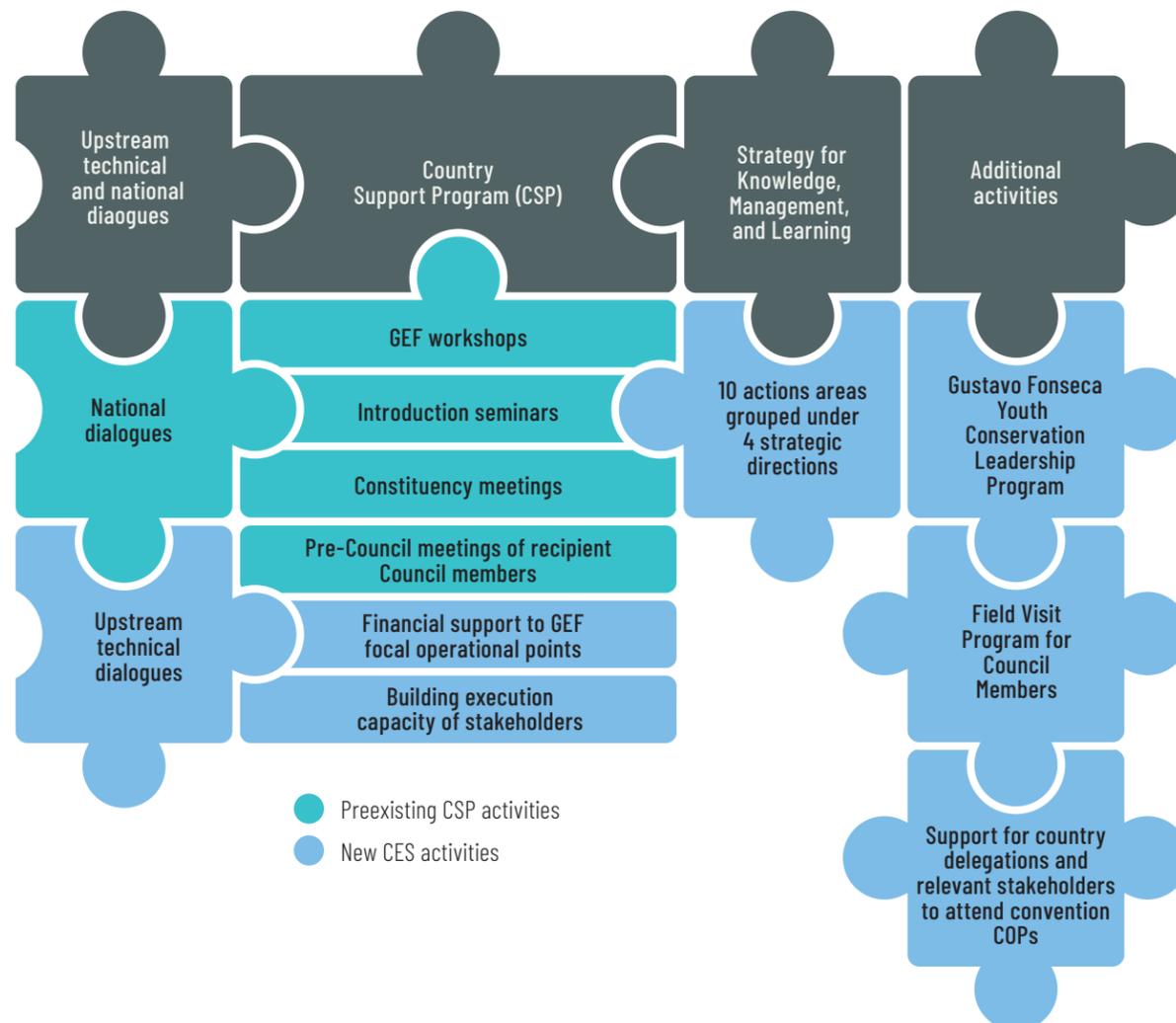
2.1 Evolution from the CSP to the CES

The CES builds on the strong foundation provided by over 20 years of CSP implementation and on the efforts to establish a knowledge management function since 2015. The CSP was established in 1999, with the UNDP and UNEP managing different components. In 2010, these were integrated into a single program managed directly by a dedicated team within the GEF Secretariat's Policy, Partnerships, and Operations Unit with the aim of improving efficiency and enhancing the GEF's visibility at the country level (GEF 2010). By GEF-7, the CSP included the following activities: Introduction seminars, constituency meetings, pre-Council meetings of recipient Council members, national dialogues, ECWs, thematic workshops, and stakeholder empowerment series (SES) webinars. Some programming-related country engagement activities were still led by the Programs Unit.

Efforts to develop a knowledge management function at the GEF date back to 2015, with the roll-out of the GEF Knowledge Management Approach, the appointment of a Knowledge Management Coordinator, and the establishment of the Knowledge Management Advisory Group. By GEF-7, the Knowledge Management Coordinator was working closely with the CSP team on specific activities (such as GEF Knowledge Days at ECWs and the GEF Academy), knowledge products (such as good practice briefs), and tools such as Kaleo, a question-and-answer platform for GEF partners and stakeholders. While acknowledging this progress, the 2022 evaluation of knowledge management in the GEF recommended the development of a clear strategy (GEF IEO 2022a).

The CES seeks to articulate preexisting and new country engagement activities under a comprehensive strategy. The CES aims to provide "an expanded and coordinated approach" to country engagement by bringing together all the activities previously under the CSP, the Strategy for Knowledge Management and Learning approved in 2023, and new activities to provide targeted support to OFPs and other country stakeholders (GEF Secretariat 2022, 2023) (figure 2.1). This expanded approach is reflected in a total allocation of \$40.2 million, including \$13.2 million for additional activities, which is a significant increase over the GEF-7 allocation of \$21 million for the CSP. While CES activities are overall relevant to the expected outcomes, the strategy's design does not provide guidance for their timing and sequencing, their tailoring to diverse country needs and institutional capacities, and their communication to country stakeholders, which has affected progress in implementation and effectiveness (see subsections 2.2 and 2.3). Additionally, CES activities are more focused on one of the CES's strategic priorities: enhancing the capacity of recipient countries to make

Figure 2.1 New and preexisting Country Engagement Strategy activities



Note: COP = convention of the parties.

strategic and informed decisions on the use of GEF resources. They are less focused on sustaining the impact of GEF resources at the country level.

While the new CES activities seek more proactive engagement by the GEF Secretariat with GEF country stakeholders, their added value has yet to be demonstrated, as implementation progress was limited at midpoint through GEF-8. According to the portfolio analysis, the new activities already implemented or under implementation include the GEF-8 integrated program rollout workshops, the Gustavo Fonseca Youth Conservation Leadership Program, and support for country delegations and relevant stakeholders to attend COPs to the conventions. Progress in the Field Visit Program for Council Members and the Strategy for Knowledge Management and Learning is limited, while implementation of building execution capacity of stakeholders accelerated in 2025 and financial support to

GEF OFPs was rolled out in the spring of 2025 (see [subsection 2.2](#)). Upstream technical dialogues are also included among the activities to be supported under the CES, but none were identified by the portfolio analysis conducted for this evaluation. Interviews seem to suggest that they have been conducted by the GEF Secretariat on the sidelines of national dialogues.

Persistent shortcomings from the 2021 CSP evaluation have yet to be addressed, resulting in limited accountability and missed opportunities to better target activities. The CES brings all country engagement activities under the same umbrella, which is in line with the recommendation of the last CSP evaluation to develop a “comprehensive program strategy,” and with the OPS7 recommendation to develop and implement a more strategic and coherent approach to country-level engagement (GEF IEO 2022b). However, there are some specific shortcomings:

- The CES does not explicitly articulate a logical framework or theory of change, and targets are set only for a subset of activities. In addition, information management, monitoring, and reporting systems have yet to be established. This limits, by design, CES accountability and also results in unclear and sometimes unrealistic assumptions about the contribution of CES activities to expected outcomes and impacts.
- As country engagement—once the responsibility of a dedicated team in the Policy and Operations Unit—has become a cross-cutting responsibility of five divisions, there is a lack of clear leadership at the operational level and effective systems to promote information sharing and collaboration. This, together with the expanded scope of the CES, has created bottlenecks in implementation.
- Challenges remain in the timing of national dialogues and in sustaining stakeholder engagement after CES activities, due to capacity constraints of both the GEF Secretariat and the OFPs (see [subsection 2.2](#)). There is a widespread need for more frequent and diversified capacity building, including additional training, experience sharing, and improved dissemination of information through a mix of face-to-face activities, virtual training, and outreach.
- Although in recent years multilateral climate funds have strengthened high-level commitments to increase collaboration on country engagement, cooperation at the operational level is still limited.

Progress on each recommendation is summarized in [table 2.1](#) and is discussed further in the following sections.

While the evolving nature of CES design can be interpreted as a result of adaptive management in a period of rapid change within the GEF, it complicates accountability and creates misalignments between activities and expected outcomes. The CES, which was adopted as part of the GEF-8 Programming Directions in April 2022, was significantly modified when its implementation arrangements were approved in October 2022. Implementation tends to follow what is in the latter. This is partly related to the fact that the GEF-8 Programming Directions do not clearly define new CES activities such as upstream technical dialogues, OFP empowerment, and building execution capacity of stakeholders in terms of what support is to be provided, to whom, by whom, and with what expected results. Some key changes between the two documents include the following.

Table 2.1 Progress in addressing the recommendations from the 2021 Country Support Program evaluation

Recommendation	Status	Summary of evidence
Build on current efforts to collaborate with other global environmental funds	Partially implemented	In recent years, multilateral climate funds have strengthened high-level commitments to increase collaboration on country engagement. However, cooperation at the operational level is still limited, mainly consisting of two joint GEF–Green Climate Fund programming consultations held in Rwanda and Uganda in conjunction with the GEF national dialogues in December 2022 and November 2023, and invitations of other funds’ representatives to some CES events. In 2024, the GEF also engaged with the International Monetary Fund and other partners on country climate finance platforms in Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Madagascar, and the Seychelles.
Develop a clear and comprehensive Country Support Program (CSP) program strategy and implementation plan with an appropriate budget and resources envelope	Partially implemented	The Country Engagement Strategy (CES) brings all country engagement activities under one umbrella and includes several new activities targeted at different GEF stakeholders. This expanded approach is reflected in a total allocation of \$40.2 million, compared to a GEF-7 CSP allocation of \$21 million. The GEF-8 Programming Directions define the strategic priorities and six outcomes that the CES is expected to deliver. However, some aspects of the recommendation have not been fully addressed, namely a theory of change or logical framework has not been explicitly articulated, targets are established only for some activities (not at the outcome or impact level), and—while some flexibility has been introduced—CES activities are not tailored by design to the specific needs of different country groupings.
Strengthen the technical expertise of the CSP team and the program’s monitoring and reporting systems	Partially implemented	As part of the GEF Secretariat restructuring, country engagement, once the responsibility of a dedicated team in the Policy and Operations Unit, became a cross-cutting responsibility of five divisions. This has allowed for greater integration of country engagement activities into broader programming processes at the regional level and flexibility in mobilizing relevant technical expertise. However, there is a lack of clear leadership at the operational level and an increased workload for the same staff. There are indications that these issues are in the process of being addressed in the ongoing restructuring of the GEF Secretariat. Information management, monitoring, and reporting systems have yet to be established.
Better align the reach and timing of national dialogues with country needs for support	Partially implemented	While the design of the CES has attempted to address this recommendation by introducing two types of national dialogues and upstream technical dialogues, the timing of national dialogues continues being a challenge. Operational focal points (OFPs) express a preference to hold national dialogues before the beginning or during the first months of the cycle. However, only 7 of 29 national dialogues were held within the first semester of the cycle, and 12 within the first year. This is due to capacity constraints on the part of both the GEF Secretariat and the OFPs.
Enhance inclusiveness at events to improve collaboration on the ground	Partially implemented	While the CES has facilitated broader stakeholder engagement at events, this remains uneven, and challenges remain in sustaining stakeholder engagement after CES activities, mainly due to the limited institutional capacity of OFPs. Financial support for GEF OFPs, launched in the spring of 2025, could be instrumental in enabling OFPs to coordinate these engagements.
Apply a customized approach to capacity building	Partially implemented	While CES activities are viewed positively in terms of responding to stakeholder needs, they do not fully address the extensive information and capacity-building needs of different country stakeholders. There is a widespread need for more frequent and diversified capacity building, including additional training, experience sharing (e.g., among small island developing states), and improved dissemination of information through a mix of face-to-face activities, virtual training, and outreach.

- Project design review and support, mentioned as a pillar of the CES in the GEF-8 Programming Directions, is not clearly linked to a specific activity and was removed in the CES implementation arrangements for GEF-8, which state that “GEF technical staff will continue providing technical support during portfolio development, project design, and project review” (GEF 2022, 1).
- The approach to upstream technical dialogues changed from a focus on continuous engagement with countries to communications about GEF-8 programming.
- The scope of OFP empowerment activities was significantly reduced. Activities such as the promotion of national steering committees and onboarding training for OFPs are not included explicitly in the implementation arrangements, while the knowledge management/community of practice piloted under GEF-7 was discontinued. The only activity that was maintained was financial support for OFPs, which had previously been abandoned because no mechanism had been found to channel funds to OFPs.
- Three activities not contemplated in the GEF-8 Programming Directions were added: the Gustavo Fonseca Youth Conservation Leadership Program, the Field Visit Program for Council Members, and support for country delegations and relevant stakeholders to attend COPs to the conventions. While the Field Visit Program for Council Members and the support for country delegations and relevant stakeholders to attend COPs to the conventions potentially contribute to country ownership and empowerment, the Gustavo Fonseca Youth Conservation Leadership Program is not aligned to the expected outcomes of the CES.

While these changes likely reflect the GEF Secretariat’s evolving approach to country engagement and the gradual operationalization of new activities, the discrepancies with the GEF-8 Programming Directions complicate accountability as the CES’s scope and intervention logic become blurred.

2.2 Progress in CES implementation

Implementation of CES activities midway through GEF-8

Progress in implementing the CES was slower than expected at midpoint through GEF-8. As of October 2024, 75 activities had been carried out as part of the CES. Several activities were initiated at the request of OFPs or constituencies; others do not have established targets against which to assess implementation progress. Where targets were defined, the number of activities implemented remains below what could have been expected by October 2024 (table 2.2). Looking only at activities that existed in both periods, 103 had been implemented by the midpoint of GEF-7, compared with 75 for GEF-8.

Except for national dialogues, implementation of demand-based activities has been limited. With 29 national dialogues to date, the GEF Secretariat is in line with its expectation of organizing 50 national dialogues in GEF-8. On the other hand, the number of thematic workshops, constituency meetings,

Table 2.2 Country Engagement Strategy activities and progress against October 2024 targets

Component	Activities	Target	Achieved
Upstream programming support	Upstream technical and national dialogues	Not determined	29
	Upstream technical dialogues	Not determined	0 ^a
	National dialogues	Approximately 50, upon OFP request ^b	29
Country Support Program	GEF workshops	28 and more, upon OFP request	21
	Expanded constituency workshops	22	6
	Stakeholder empowerment series	6	0
	Thematic workshops	Up to 15, upon OFP, Agency, or GEF Secretariat request ^b	2
	Other workshops	Not applicable	13
	Introduction seminars	4	3
	Constituency meetings	Up to 76, upon constituency request	20
	Pre-Council meetings of recipient Council members	Up to 76, upon Council member request	1
	OFP empowerment/Financial support to GEF OFPs	Upon OFP request	0
Building capacities of national executing agencies and civil society organizations	Not determined	0	
Strategy for Knowledge Management and Learning		Not determined	0
Additional activities	Gustavo Fonseca Youth Conservation Leadership Program	Not determined	127 participants
	Field Visit Program for Council Members	4-6	1
	Support for country delegations and relevant stakeholders to attend convention conferences of the parties	Not determined	39 participants
Total			75 activities; 166 participants

Note: Since the portfolio analysis covers all activities conducted by the Country Engagement Strategy globally between October 2022 and October 2024, the targets for October 2024 are for two years of implementation or 50 percent of GEF-8 targets. Pre-Council meetings and constituency meetings consider a target of up to two annual meetings for each of the 19 developing country constituencies.

a. The portfolio analysis did not identify any upstream technical dialogues based on the information provided by the GEF Secretariat. Interviews seem to suggest that they have been conducted by the GEF Secretariat on the sidelines of national dialogues.

b. GEF (2022).

and pre-Council meetings implemented represent only a fraction of those possible (table 2.2). The implementation of some non-demand-based activities has also been slow, such as for ECWs; also, no stakeholder engagement workshops have been implemented to date.

OFP capacities and access to information on CES activities influence the implementation of demand- and some non-demand-based activities. The implementation of most CES activities depends on the OFP to request, organize, or inform country stakeholders of CES opportunities. This applies beyond the above-mentioned demand-based activities, to activities such as support to country delegations and various GEF workshops. In countries like the Philippines and Thailand, strong OFP organizational capacity made the difference in enabling these countries to request support early for the

organization of national dialogues to program their GEF-8 resources. However, OFPs often have limited capacities due to staff constraints, turnover, or competing priorities; and GEF Secretariat interviewees noted that several OFPs simply did not have time to organize national dialogues.

Furthermore, the information on the CES available on the [GEF website](#), in Council documents, and at events is quite general; and OFPs need to proactively inquire with the GEF Secretariat about how to benefit from certain types of support and disseminate information to relevant stakeholders. For example, there is no publicly available information about how to access support to attend COP meetings, and the website is not clear about which CES activities are under implementation. All case studies clearly demonstrated that country stakeholders are not familiar with the CES as a program. OFPs have the most information; and in many cases, it was clear that they did not have it all.

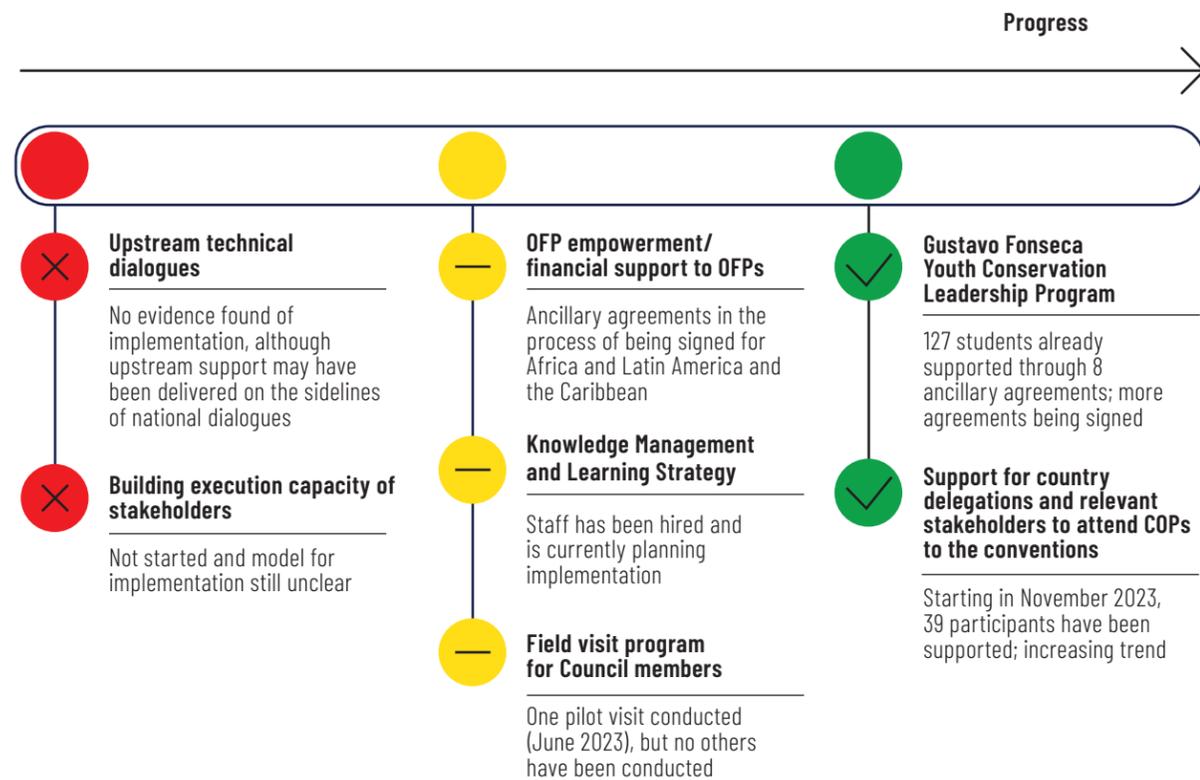
By October 2024, several of the new CES activities had yet to start implementation (figure 2.2). This included the financial support to GEF OFPs, which was delayed due to challenges in finding the right modalities for channeling funds to beneficiaries. These challenges have now been addressed, and, according to a data update from the GEF Secretariat, initial disbursements took place in April 2025 to some of the African constituencies (GEF 2025a). No activities were reported for building the capacities of national executing agencies and CSOs, but substantial disbursements in the first half of 2025 indicate that implementation has recently accelerated, as discussed later in this subsection. Implementation of the Strategy for Knowledge Management and Learning has so far not entailed the organization of specific activities, but rather support to strengthening internal and external processes; its implementation is expected to accelerate in 2025 with the onboarding of two dedicated staff.¹

The rapid rollout of the Gustavo Fonseca Youth Conservation Leadership Program was driven by innovation that will benefit other CES activities. In the past, activities that involve the transfer of small amounts of money to specific beneficiaries to build their capacity have faced administrative bottlenecks because the World Bank mechanisms on which the GEF relies are not appropriate for this type of transaction, as stated by GEF Secretariat staff and alluded to in the GEF-8 Programming Directions. This was notably the case with previous attempts to provide financial support to OFPs, which had to be abandoned for lack of an efficient mechanism (GEF IEO 2023). For the Gustavo Fonseca Youth Conservation Leadership Program, a modality that establishes ancillary agreements with partner institutions to disburse funds to beneficiaries was identified. To date, eight ancillary agreements have been signed, which have enabled the identification of 127 beneficiaries. This modality is now being applied to roll out the financial support to GEF OFPs (box 2.1).

While the implementation of workshops was timely to support GEF-8 integrated program resource allocation, national dialogues were insufficiently leveraged to that end. The strategic importance of integrated programs under GEF-8 required the deployment of significant efforts to support their programming.

¹ This situation was as of this evaluation's cutoff date in January 2025. With a later cutoff date, OPS8 finds that, "as of June 2025, progress had been made in approximately half of the action areas" of the Strategy for Knowledge Management and Learning (GEF IEO 2025, 187).

Figure 2.2 Progress in implementation of new Country Engagement Strategy activities as of October 2024



Note: COP = conference of the parties; OFP = operational focal point.

Eight GEF-8 rollout workshops were delivered between October 2022 and February 2023.² This implementation was timely, as the first call for expressions of interest for integrated programs was launched in January 2023, thus providing countries with crucial information to engage in the integrated program process. Indeed, 119 out of 144 eligible countries participated in these workshops, and 99 of them (74 percent of participating countries) submitted an expression of interest. Most countries that submitted an expression of interest (89 percent) participated in one of these workshops (GEF 2023d). By the time the expression of interest process closed, only six countries had organized national dialogues. A representative of one of these countries mentioned during an interview having organized a national dialogue with the specific purpose of planning its integrated program submission.

Overall, only 12 national dialogues were conducted during the first year of GEF-8 (2 of which in 2022), against 22 for GEF-7. Since then, another 17 national dialogues have been organized. This is not coherent with the approach adopted in the Programming Directions that involved two main

² GEF reporting indicates 11 events, as some were held virtually jointly or consecutively in the same location.

Box 2.1 Use of ancillary agreements to channel funds directly to beneficiaries

Because the World Bank serves as the trustee to the GEF, the GEF must abide by the World Bank's financial processes to disburse its funds. These processes are not adapted to transfer small amounts of money to individuals or government departments, as opposed to registered institutions. The newly established Gustavo Fonseca Youth Conservation Leadership Program was faced with this challenge. This program focuses on empowering young leaders in conservation and environmental action, with youth-centered projects and integration of young leaders into larger programs to amplify their influence. Channeling grants to individuals would not have been possible under World Bank processes. To overcome this issue, the GEF Secretariat established ancillary agreements with intermediary entities to deliver the funds. The ceiling for these agreements was raised from \$50,000 to \$1 million. As of the cutoff date, the GEF had established eight such agreements based on proposals received from preselected institutions, as shown in the figure. Some institutions proposed leveraging their existing training programs, while others set up dedicated initiatives for young conservationists.



Building on this success, financial support to GEF OFPs is being rolled out using the same type of ancillary agreements with selected intermediaries. These institutions will be responsible for channeling up to \$32,000 to OFPs for eligible expenses that support their capacity to oversee project implementation. An additional \$4,000 per OFP will be dedicated to a regional training event organized by the partner organization.

types of national dialogues—namely, national dialogues on portfolio prioritization and program-ming, to be organized at the beginning of the cycle; and targeted national dialogues throughout the entire cycle focusing on specific issues of interest to the country. Indeed, there is widespread acknowledgment across interviewees from the GEF Secretariat staff and recipient countries that national dialogues are most useful at the beginning of a cycle or before the beginning of a new cycle to support programming. Nonetheless, national dialogues conducted later in the GEF cycle are greatly appreciated by country stakeholders as they have been leveraged to improve access

to programming windows outside the System for Transparent Allocation of Resources (STAR) and start brainstorming project ideas for GEF-9.

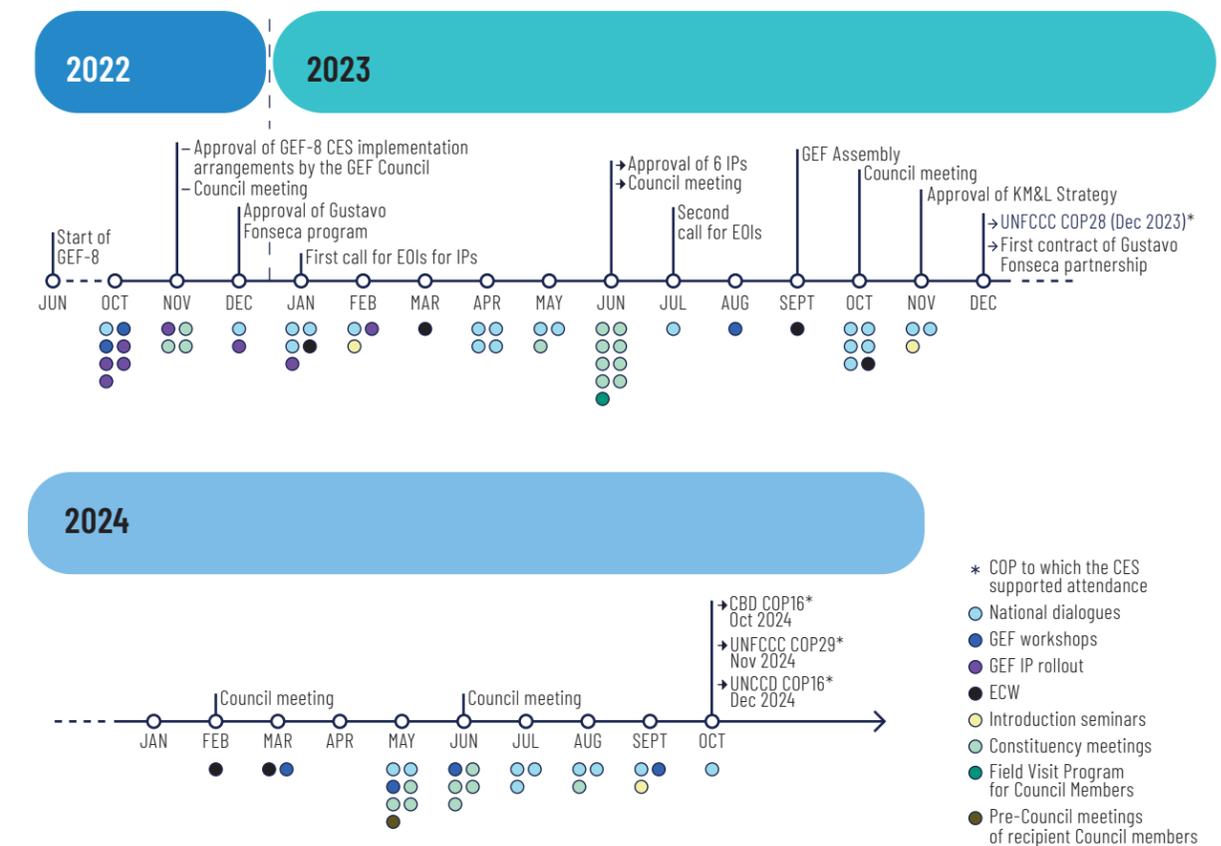
This was also a conclusion of the CSP evaluation conducted in 2021, which found that while national dialogues are typically held at the beginning of the GEF cycle, country stakeholders would prefer to hold them before the start of the new cycle once there is some indication of GEF priorities. It also noted that some national dialogues are held months into the cycle because the Secretariat does not have enough staff to organize them simultaneously. As a result, the evaluation recommended that the timing of national dialogues be improved, or that other mechanisms be developed for upfront strategic dialogue on the future use of GEF resources.

The management response to the CSP evaluation indicated that the GEF Secretariat was in the process of exploring different options to rethink national dialogues (GEF 2021b). While these options were outlined in the Programming Directions, there is no evidence that national dialogues are being implemented according to this plan—and therefore that they contributed to GEF-8 programming to the extent foreseen and in complementarity with integrated program rollout workshops.

Several of the countries interviewed mentioned that they would have preferred their national dialogue to take place earlier. In the case of Lesotho, stakeholders expressed that the fact that the national dialogue being held over a year into GEF-8 limited its ability to influence resource allocation and align projects with emerging priorities. Yet, for 56 percent of survey respondents, CES activities were to a high or very high extent timely in supporting programming for GEF-8 in their country. This indicates an overall favorable perception for programming support, to which national dialogues contributed less than foreseen in the CES. While national dialogues are demand-based activities, the GEF Secretariat does not seem to have put mechanisms in place to ensure their implementation aligns with the GEF-8 Programming Directions and implementation arrangements. While they are useful to countries that conduct them, as discussed in the next subsection, their limited implementation is not aligned with the role national dialogues are expected to play in the CES as a whole.

Trade-offs between the organization of integrated program rollout workshops and national dialogues reflect the capacity constraints of the GEF Secretariat in the early years of GEF-8. These integrated program rollout workshops were not planned in the GEF-8 Programming Directions and the implementation arrangements, and organizing eight of them over a short period of time demonstrated commitment and adaptability from the GEF Secretariat staff. However, interviewees from the Secretariat pointed out that their implementation created delays in implementing other activities, especially national dialogues, as limited human resources were available to organize multiple events at the same time. The matter of institutional capacity was an important challenge during the first year of GEF-8 (figure 2.3), as many new activities had to be rolled out under the CES, but the GEF Secretariat had yet to expand its staff. Undertaking these workshops thus required doing more (e.g., Rollout workshops) with the same staff.

Figure 2.3 Timeline for implementation of Country Engagement Strategy activities, June 2022–October 2024



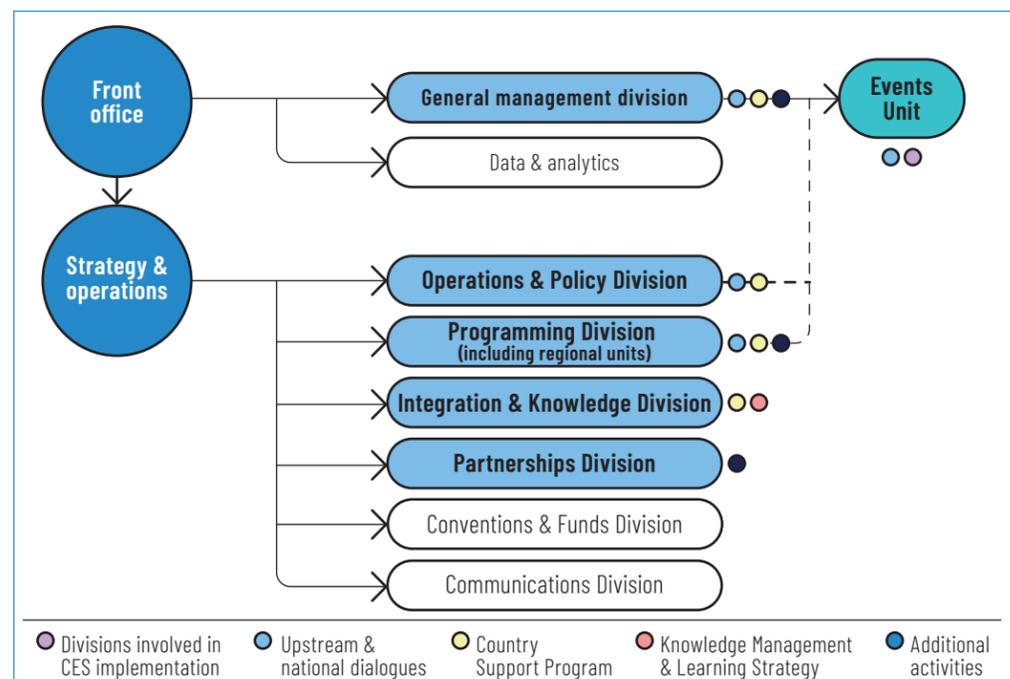
Note: CBD = Convention on Biological Diversity; CES = Country Engagement Strategy; COP = conference of the parties; ECW = expanded constituency workshop; EOI = expression of interest; IP = integrated program; UNCCD = United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification; UNFCCC = United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Among the various factors identified that have hindered the implementation of CES activities, the restructuring of the GEF Secretariat and staffing constraints have been critical. Challenges around OFP capacity and communication have always been present and do not explain the slower implementation of activities under GEF-8. Staffing constraints pose a challenge to the execution of CES activities, and GEF Secretariat interviewees reported a heavy workload partially explained by the additional activities planned with no additional staff. However, this alone does not explain why activities that existed under GEF-7 are no longer implemented (stakeholder engagement series) or have not progressed significantly (ECWs). The restructuring of the GEF Secretariat has a lot to do with the slow pace of implementation, as responsibilities and coordination mechanisms for activities evolved rapidly during the first two years of GEF-8. As discussed in box 2.2, this resulted in a lack of leadership and of collaboration mechanisms at the operational level. Furthermore, several interviewees reported a learning curve in implementing some activities that were not previously under their responsibility.

Box 2.2 Management of the Country Engagement Strategy in the context of the GEF Secretariat restructuring

The 2021 Country Support Program (CSP) evaluation recommended that the GEF Secretariat improve the program's dedicated technical capabilities in the face of a heavy workload, provide more localized support, and put in place results-based data management, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting systems to track the use of resources, activities, outcomes, and impacts (GEF IEO 2023). This recommendation is being addressed in the context of the broader restructuring of the GEF Secretariat, which has moved from a structure organized around two units—the Programs Unit and the Policy and Operations Unit—to six divisions grouped under the Director of Strategy and Operations, as well as a Division of General Management and a Data and Analytics team under the GEF Chief Executive Officer. Additional staff is also in the process of being hired to enhance the Secretariat's capacity.

As part of this restructuring, country engagement—once the responsibility of a dedicated team in the Policy and Operations Unit—has become a cross-cutting responsibility of five divisions. Country Relations Officers, once in the CSP team, were relocated to the Programming Division to join the respective regional teams and an Events Unit was created under the General Management Division, with some part-time members from other divisions, to support the organization of Country Engagement Strategy (CES) events. In this context—as indicated on the GEF [website](#) and noted in interviews—several CES activities are a shared responsibility of two or more divisions, with national dialogues and GEF workshops organized by three divisions with support from the Events Unit.



(continued)

Box 2.2 Management of the Country Engagement Strategy in the context of the GEF Secretariat restructuring (continued)

According to the interviewees, the main advantages of this management approach are the greater integration of CES activities into broader programming processes, as well as the flexibility to bring in relevant technical expertise to organize specific activities. The main downside is the lack of clear leadership at the operational level to ensure that the CES is implemented as one strategy, with coordinated activities that build on each other. While interviews indicate that the Programming Manager, hired in September 2024, has started to fill this role, this may put staff from other divisions in the position of having to respond to multiple managers at once.

A related drawback is the lack of effective systems to enable information sharing and collaboration among the staff involved in CES implementation. Staff are generally unaware of the overall progress of strategy implementation beyond the specific activities in which they are involved, and the existing knowledge (e.g., on best practices for organizing and facilitating national dialogues and expanded constituency workshops) is not widely shared. This is related to the fact that information management, monitoring, and reporting systems for the CES have yet to be established, despite the commitments to do so in the management response to the 2021 CSP evaluation and the GEF-8 Programming Directions. As a result, there is no single database of CES activities, nor an effective information system to collect participant data and organize event materials.

Progress in budget expenditure

Despite a 44 percent increase in the budget for country engagement, some efficiency gains were foreseen and built into the budget. A budget of \$28 million, corresponding to 0.5 percent of the GEF's budget, was allocated to the CES in the GEF-8 Programming Directions. This budget was increased by 44 percent to \$40.2 million in the implementation arrangements. This increase includes the incorporation of additional activities (table 2.2) with a budget of \$13.2 million, funded through unused GEF-7 CSP funds. The budget for the rest of CES activities was decreased by \$1 million, to \$27 million, which included \$2 million for implementation of the Strategy for Knowledge Management and Learning (table 2.3). Compared to GEF-7, the budget requested for similar activities has decreased by an average of 14 percent (table 2.4). Savings on introduction seminars are related to the sessions now being online, while the budget for pre-Council meetings is to be covered through that for Council meetings or are to be held virtually.

While 40 percent of the budget allocated for CES implementation was committed or disbursed by November 2024, this hides significant differences across activities. With 81.5 percent of budget available for national dialogues executed, only a few more national dialogues can still be implemented under GEF-8, compromising the GEF's capacity to deliver up to 50 national dialogues for that period. This would indicate that the foreseen efficiency gains have not materialized, and that the cost per national dialogue is higher than expected. Indeed, delivering 50 national dialogues within the allocated budget would entail a cost of \$42,000 per event. Current disbursements for 29 national dialogues indicate a unit cost of \$59,000—that is, 40 percent more than planned. The high disbursement rate for constituency meetings may also limit the GEF's ability to respond to future

Table 2.3 Budget implementation progress, as of November 2024

Item	GEF-8 amount approved by Council (mil. \$)	Commitments/disbursements (FY25 to date) (mil. \$)	Available balance (mil. \$)	% of commitments/disbursements
Upstream technical and national dialogues	2.1	1.712	0.387	81.5
Expanded constituency workshops	11.74	4.38	7.359	37.3
Introduction seminars	0.26	0.029	0.231	11.2
Constituency meetings	4	3.347	0.653	83.7
Building execution capacity of stakeholders	1.1	0.065	1.035	5.9
Financial support to GEF OFPs	5.8	0	5.8	0.0
Knowledge exchange and learning	2	0.003	1.997	0.2
Gustavo Fonseca Youth Conservation Leadership Program	10	6.107	3.893	61.1
Site visits for Council members	1.2	0.252	0.948	21.0
Support for country delegations and stakeholders to attend COPs and related meetings	2	0.262	1.738	13.1
Total	40.2	16.15	24.04	40.2

Sources: GEF 2024c and communications with the GEF Secretariat.

Note: COP = conference of the parties; OFP = operational focal point.

Table 2.4 Budget allocated under GEF-7 and GEF-8 for comparable activities

Activity	GEF-7 budget (mil. \$)	GEF-8 budget (mil. \$)	Variation (%)
GEF programming and training activities (national dialogues and workshops)	14.7	13.8	-6
GEF constituency meetings	5	4	-20
GEF introduction seminars	1	0.3	-70
Pre-Council meetings for recipient country Council members/alternates	0.3	0	-100
Total	21	18.1	-14

Source: GEF IEO 2023.

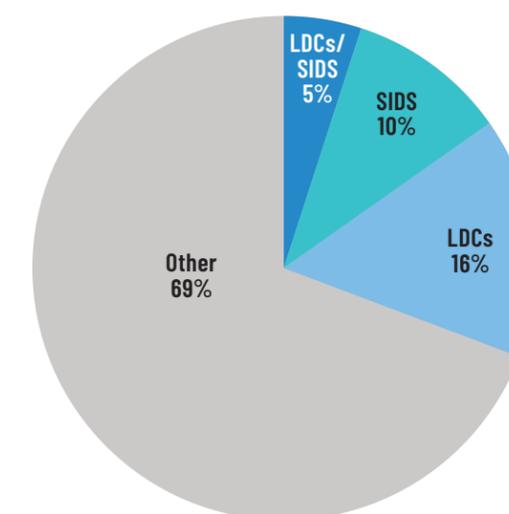
country requests. On the other hand, several unspent budget lines reflect the limited progress in implementing some activities.

The CES was designed as a comprehensive strategy, but its implementation shows deficiencies in that respect. This is illustrated by the variations in commitments/disbursement rates between activities. Activities that aim to support wider and more continued stakeholder engagement (e.g., stakeholder engagement series and building execution capacity of stakeholders) have yet to be implemented,

while the scope of OFP empowerment was significantly reduced to financial support to GEF OFPs.³ There are untapped opportunities to harness synergies across activities, e.g., by leveraging complementarities between GEF-8 Roll Out workshops and national dialogues.

Geographic coverage of the CES

Participation of LDCs in CES activities has been important, but less so for SIDS. At least 50 percent of CES activities involved the participation of LDC representatives, and out of 29 national dialogues, 13 (44 percent) took place in LDCs. They were also involved in almost 50 percent of constituency meetings. Comparatively, SIDS participation in CES activities was less important: SIDS participated in 33 percent of CES activities, and only 4 out of 29 national dialogues (14 percent) were for SIDS. However, SIDS were represented at 60 percent of GEF workshops and all introduction seminars, which are virtual and thus more accessible. Among all CES activities, the only one that explicitly mentions prioritizing LDCs and SIDS is OFP empowerment/financial support to GEF OFPs. However, current plans are to offer the same financial support to all countries. According to GEF Secretariat staff, support for participation in COPs also informally prioritizes participants, although no specific criteria or selection process is established for this activity. Ultimately, participants from LDCs and SIDS are largely underrepresented in this activity (figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4 Support to attend COPs for LDCs and SIDS

Note: COP = conference of the parties; LDC = least developed country; SIDS = small island developing states.

There are significant differences in regional engagement in CES activities. These differences correlate with their overall level of capacities. Across different types of activities, the portfolio analysis shows that Africa, the region with the most LDCs, is also the region that has been involved in most activities (table 2.5). National dialogues are especially in high demand, representing 58 percent of the activities in which Africa participated, while 62 percent (18) of national dialogues held during GEF-8 were in Africa. African countries have also participated in eight GEF workshops and four constituency meetings, as well as in a pre-Council meeting. At the other end of the spectrum, Central and Eastern European countries have been involved in three GEF workshops, all organized by the GEF (not country requested) and in two constituency meetings. No national dialogue has been undertaken in that region, where most countries have higher levels of institutional capacity and development. The participation profile for countries from Asia and Pacific is quite mixed,

³ Based on updated data provided by the GEF Secretariat, \$385,576 was disbursed in the first half of 2025 for building execution capacity of stakeholders, equivalent to 35 percent of the total budget allocated to this activity; and approximately \$2.5 million was spent or committed for financial support to GEF OFPs during the same period, equivalent to 43 percent of the corresponding allocation.

Table 2.5 Number of engagements in CES activities per region

Item	Asia and Pacific	Latin Am. and Carib.	Africa	Europe and Central Asia	Total
Events					
Constituency meetings	10	7	4	2	20
Field Visit Program for Council Members	0	1	0	0	1
GEF workshops	7	6	8	3	20
National dialogues	8	3	18	0	29
Pre-Council meetings of recipient Council members	0	1	1	0	1
Total	25	18	30	5	71
Individual participants					
Support to attend conferences of the parties	6	23	10	0	39
Gustavo Fonseca Youth Conservation Leadership Program	13	56	58	0	127
Total number of participants	19	79	68	0	166

Note: The total number of events is less than the sum of each geography as some events covered more than one region.

with relatively high participation in national dialogues (9), as well as a strong emphasis on constituency meetings (10). Countries from Latin America and the Caribbean, on the other hand, have only requested three national dialogues, but have been involved in the greatest variety of activities, including the newest ones like field visits for Council members, the Gustavo Fonseca Youth Conservation Leadership Program, and support to attend COPs.

2.3 CES role in empowering and supporting countries to achieve higher impact

CES contribution to expected outcomes and strategic priorities

While the challenges encountered to roll out the CES have affected the scope of its implementation, the CES has positively benefited the countries that have participated in a wider range of CES activities. Previous sections have addressed the scope of CES design and implementation, highlighting several challenges encountered to roll out the strategy. Notwithstanding these challenges, case studies, interviews, and survey responses indicate that countries and stakeholders engaged in a wider range of CES activities were able to benefit meaningfully from them. This subsection focuses on these more positive cases to offer insight into the difference the CES could make if it succeeds in fulfilling its intended scope and achieves greater coordination and coherence across its target countries and stakeholders.

When implemented, CES activities make small contributions that are nevertheless instrumental in facilitating informed decisions on the use of GEF resources in the context of broader country portfolio development processes. Case studies conducted in four countries (Lesotho, the Philippines, Suriname, and Togo) and interviews conducted in seven countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ghana, Honduras, Maldives, Thailand, and Uganda) show that the CES has made valuable contributions to strengthening country portfolio development, ensuring alignment with national priorities and GEF-8 objectives, and enhancing country ownership of the GEF portfolio, including the empowerment of GEF stakeholders. However, as detailed below, its contribution has been more modest in increasing the visibility of the GEF as a strategic partner, improving national policy coherence, and enhancing coordination with other funds at the country level.

CES activities have contributed to supporting country ownership of the GEF portfolio and empowering stakeholders at different levels depending on the country context. Country ownership is a core principle of the GEF, which has the mandate to fund programs and projects that are country-driven and based on national priorities designed to support sustainable development (GEF Secretariat 2022). In addition to country-drivenness, early discussions on country ownership have stressed the importance of country-level coordination through focal points and of stakeholder involvement at different stages of the project cycle (GEF 1998). CES events have facilitated knowledge and information sharing (on GEF guidelines, policies, funding opportunities, priorities, etc.), allowing for greater control over portfolio development. They have also provided an opportunity to clearly demonstrate how the GEF portfolio aligns with national priorities, supporting efforts to foster broader buy-in, and enabling wider stakeholder engagement, especially through national dialogues. However, this engagement remains mostly sporadic, with stakeholder engagement concentrated at key moments rather than sustained throughout the project cycle.

While CES support has been consistent in terms of event type and frequency across the case study countries, the nature of its contributions has varied. In some countries, it has been instrumental in taking initial steps toward improving portfolio ownership and stakeholder empowerment. In others, where country drivenness is already strong, the CES has further deepened it. In Suriname ([box 2.3](#)), the CES has contributed to the very first steps in addressing the challenges to national ownership of the portfolio and the empowerment of national stakeholders including raising awareness of the facility. In contrast, in the Philippines, which has already achieved a strong

Box 2.3 Strategy contribution to enhanced country ownership in Suriname

In Suriname, the 2024 national dialogue marked a renewed effort to support a more inclusive and country-driven approach to GEF portfolio development. Prior to this, no national dialogue had taken place since 2009, and portfolio development was largely shaped through bilateral discussions. While functional, this approach offered limited space for broader stakeholder engagement.

The 2024 national dialogue introduced a more participatory format, with small group discussions around four themes. Although the time allocated was brief and some topics, such as chemicals and international waters, were not covered, stakeholders saw the event as a valuable starting point. A framework for continued engagement was presented, outlining steps to strengthen partnerships and coordination.

Moving forward, deeper stakeholder engagement, improved intersectoral collaboration, and capacity building will be essential to fully realize country ownership and ensure that national priorities drive future GEF programming.

level of country drivenness, the CES is helping to deepen it by enabling a wider range of stakeholders to engage with portfolio development. However, in general, ownership of the portfolio remains with a small set of government agencies, which require sustained support to lead portfolio development and implementation and to facilitate broader stakeholder engagement processes.

The CES has contributed meaningfully to the strategic alignment of country portfolios with both national development priorities and the GEF-8 Programming Directions. The CES has contributed to improved alignment of country portfolios with national priorities by creating space during the programming phase to inform stakeholders about how proposed projects relate to national development objectives or to identify new project ideas aligned with these priorities (e.g., in Suriname and Uganda). In the Philippines, the national dialogue also served as a platform to present project ideas or draft portfolios in relation to national priorities as defined in the country's development plans, helping ensure that key actors, including less-involved government stakeholders, were aware of and could fully appreciate the alignment of proposed GEF interventions with national goals.

The CES has also supported strategic alignment of national portfolios with GEF-8 priorities by significantly increasing awareness and understanding of GEF programming directions. While the GEF project approval process already ensures portfolio alignment with GEF-8 priorities, the CES has helped streamline this process by enabling earlier dialogue and clarification of programming expectations. All the country stakeholders interviewed participated in CES events that contributed to a better understanding of GEF-8 priorities, particularly the integrated programs. CES events helped national stakeholders become familiar with GEF-8 policies and criteria, which are then used to guide project selection and improve alignment with GEF expectations. In several cases, such as during national dialogues and regional workshops, the presence of GEF Secretariat staff created a direct opportunity to discuss the eligibility and strategic relevance of proposed projects, further reinforcing alignment between national portfolio and GEF-8 programming goals. In the Philippines, as a follow-up to the national dialogue, GEF Secretariat staff provided detailed feedback to the OFP team on the proposed portfolio. This feedback addressed the potential eligibility of each project and the key elements that needed to be considered to better align them with the focus of integrated programs. This upstream guidance allows countries to better position their portfolios within the GEF-8 framework and GEF objectives.

CES activities have contributed to improved country portfolio development by providing structured opportunities for countries to consolidate, refine, and prioritize project ideas across GEF focal areas. National dialogues have been particularly valuable in this regard, offering a platform for government agencies and other stakeholders to engage in technical discussions and receive guidance from the GEF Secretariat. As illustrated below, in several cases the CES has contributed to greater clarity on programming options and eligibility, leading to adjustments that made draft portfolios better aligned with both country priorities and GEF focal area strategies. The CES has supported country portfolio development in a range of ways across countries. It has helped disseminate essential information on project eligibility, the GEF-8 Programming Directions, and available funding windows. The national dialogues and GEF-8 workshops have provided opportunities for countries to discuss draft portfolios, engage with a broad group of stakeholders, and receive direct

technical feedback from GEF Secretariat staff (box 2.4). These exchanges helped refine project ideas and enhance the overall coherence and strategic focus of country portfolios. The CES has also raised awareness of funding windows beyond the STAR in several countries (notably Honduras, Maldives, and Suriname), helping stakeholders better understand opportunities available under the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund (GBFF), the Capacity-building Initiative for Transparency (CBIT), and the Small Grants Programme (SGP), as well as in focal areas not covered by the STAR (e.g., international waters, chemicals and waste). In Honduras, this awareness translated into the development of proposals under multiple funding windows, including for the GBFF and the CBIT; and, in Azerbaijan, into the development of a project under the international waters focal area. In some contexts, including Lesotho, Maldives, and Suriname, the timing of the national dialogue limited its influence on GEF-8 programming, and its full contribution may be more visible in subsequent programming cycles.⁴

CES activities contributed to initial steps toward improving national policy coherence by creating space for discussion and awareness-raising among participants. At several CES events, including constituency meetings, ECWs, and national dialogues, the agenda explicitly addressed the need to strengthen coherence across sectors and ministries to optimize the impact of GEF-financed interventions. Discussions around the integrated programs helped highlight areas where increased coordination would be beneficial, serving as a starting point for reflection on how to align sectoral actions. In countries including Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Lesotho, and the Philippines, these discussions (e.g., on food systems) prompted reflection on opportunities to improve policy coherence. High-level participation in some national dialogues was seen by a number of stakeholders as an opportunity to inform and influence ministerial decision-making, although evidence of follow-up is limited. Overall, CES contributions remain focused on initiating dialogue and agenda-setting rather than enabling specific policy shifts. As revealed through the majority of case studies and country-level interviews, persistent gaps remain, including a limited shared understanding of what policy coherence entails, frequent confusion between policy coherence and the alignment of individual projects with one specific national policy, and insufficient preparatory analysis or stakeholder engagement to support actionable improvements. There is still scope for enabling OFPs to take a stronger leadership role in fostering coherence across sectors and institutions. This was also seen by a number of stakeholders interviewed as a key area for improvement.

Box 2.4 Strategy contribution to country portfolio development in the Philippines

The Philippines National Dialogue was specifically designed to support country portfolio development. It featured detailed presentations of draft project concepts organized by focal area and integrated program, followed by stakeholder breakout sessions to prioritize and provide feedback on the portfolio. The event concluded with direct recommendations from GEF Secretariat staff, who also held bilateral meetings with the GEF operational focal point to further strengthen proposals. These inputs were used to revise and improve the overall draft portfolio, enhancing the quality and alignment of the project concepts with both national priorities and GEF programming directions. Held prior to this national dialogue, the GEF-8 Regional Workshop for Asia and the Pacific also informed the design of some proposed projects and contributed to the refinement of the Philippine portfolio.

⁴It should be noted that, while a handbook for OFPs was published in 2025, this strongly focuses on project oversight, with very limited guidance provided on portfolio development and management (GEF 2025c).

Box 2.5 Strategy contribution to improved national policy coherence in Lesotho

In Lesotho, CES activities have helped raise awareness on policy coherence and foster initial cross-sector dialogue. The 2025 Southern Africa Expanded Constituency Workshop included a session on integrated approaches and the role of institutional frameworks in aligning environmental and development priorities. A key recommendation from the national dialogue was the integration of multiple line ministries in project concept development to improve coordination and policy alignment.

These efforts have led to early steps in reviewing key policies, with broader stakeholder input. However, progress remains limited due to institutional silos, lack of ongoing inclusive consultation, and interministerial power dynamics. While momentum is building, sustained efforts are needed to translate discussion into coherent, cross-sector policy action.

The CES has made a modest contribution to enhancing the visibility of the GEF at the country level, with notable variation across events and contexts. CES events have helped raise the profile of the GEF among stakeholders who previously had limited awareness of its role. In both Lesotho and Suriname, some government officials and ministries only became aware of the GEF or specific GEF-funded projects through recent CES activities, despite long-standing involvement in the environmental sector. In Lesotho (box 2.5), the national dialogue directly led to increased engagement from CSOs, as it generated a noticeable rise in their inquiries about the SGP.

Some CES events, such as the GEF introduction seminars and the Southern Africa ECW in 2025, explicitly presented the GEF Communication and Visibility Policy. While presenting the policy helped raise awareness of GEF visibility requirements and tools, providing a foundation for more consistent recognition of the GEF's role in country-level activities, its actual influence on communication practices of those directly concerned with policy implementation remains difficult to measure. In the Maldives, for example, visibility challenges were observed in the context of project implementation on the ground, where local communities tend to recognize the contribution of implementing GEF Agencies, such as UNDP, rather than that of the GEF itself. These examples highlight

the potential of the CES to strengthen GEF visibility, while pointing to the need for more targeted efforts across different scales, from line ministries to communities.

The contribution of CES activities to increased coordination with other funds at the country level has been limited. The 2021 CSP evaluation recommended the GEF Secretariat build on past efforts to collaborate on readiness activities with other funds, and continue to monitor developments to identify where substantive opportunities for collaboration can be established beyond current efforts. In recent years, multilateral climate funds have strengthened high-level commitments to increase collaboration on country engagement, but cooperation at the operational level is still limited. Therefore, the recommendation made by the CSP evaluation is still in the process of being addressed.

At the time of the last CSP evaluation, there had been pilot attempts at planning coordinated regional and selected national events between the GEF and the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and discussions were ongoing between the two funds on a potential framework for enhanced coordination. This framework, called the Long-Term Vision on Complementarity, Coherence, and Collaboration (LTV), was approved in 2021. Among its priorities, the LTV includes facilitation of national investment planning and knowledge exchange (GEF 2021a). In the context of the LTV, the GEF and the GCF launched a joint pilot to support investment planning in five countries (Bangladesh, Fiji, Jamaica, Rwanda,

and Uganda) in partnership with the Task Force on Access to Climate Finance. Indeed, the clearest example of a direct CES contribution comes from two pilot joint programming consultations with the GCF in Uganda and Rwanda, organized alongside national dialogues in, respectively, December 2022 and November 2023. These engagements supported country-driven discussions on aligning the use of GEF and GCF resources with national climate priorities and explored opportunities for synergistic investments. In Uganda, this led to the adoption of a programmatic investment structure and the reorganization of the Climate Finance Unit to improve coherence across funding sources. In addition to this pilot, some CES activities have aimed to foster complementarity by inviting representatives from other climate funds to participate in events such as national dialogues and ECWs. An analysis of processes and policies of both funds, including country support and engagement, was also conducted to identify opportunities for complementarity and coherence (GEF 2023c, 2024a, 2024b). Interviews indicate that this analysis is in the process of being expanded to also include the Adaptation Fund (AF) and the Climate Investment Funds (CIF).

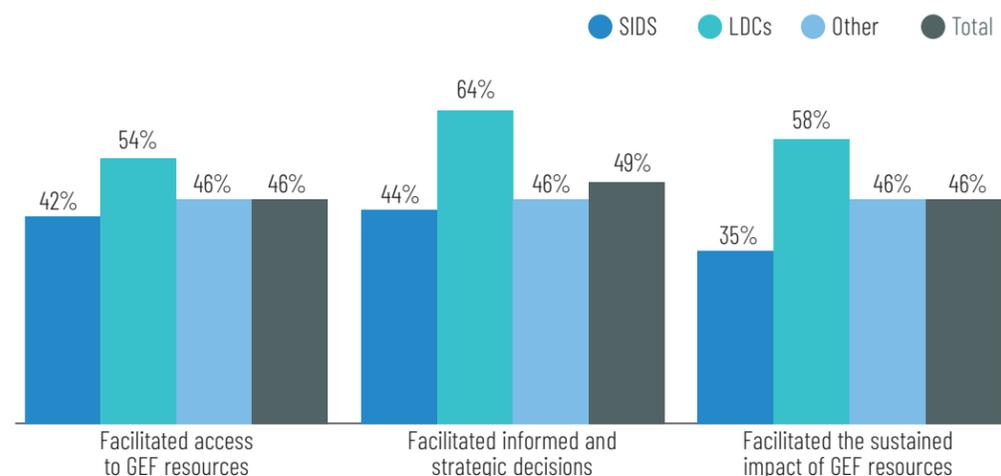
In December 2023, the AF, the CIF, the GCF, and the GEF issued a joint declaration, with a commitment to ramp up collaboration on capacity-building support and learning (GEF 2023a). The resulting draft joint action plan (pending approval by the GCF Board, which has requested some comments to be addressed) includes capacity building, programming, and knowledge exchange among its priority areas. Proposed actions in the area of capacity building and programming include support to country-driven investment planning, the development of and engagement with country platforms, joint capacity building and coordinated technical assistance, among others; in the area of knowledge exchange, the focus is particularly on the development of joint knowledge products and a [joint Climate Project Explorer platform](#) (GEF 2024b). The latter was launched in November 2024 at COP29.

In 2024, the GEF also engaged with the International Monetary Fund on country climate finance platforms in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar, and the Seychelles (GEF 2025b). While this engagement was an emerging opportunity not contemplated under the CES, interviews and the draft programming directions for GEF-9 indicate that it will be a priority for GEF-9, in line with the recommendations of the G20 Sustainable Finance Working Group (G20 2024; GEF 2025b) and given the role these platforms are expected to play in enhancing policy coherence.

Despite these efforts, concrete outcomes remain scarce, and there is no clear evidence of sustained coordination with other funds emerging from the CES beyond these isolated cases. Evidence from CES case studies and interviews suggest that coordination is primarily perceived as being driven by other mechanisms, such as national institutional arrangements or climate COP processes. Where coordination is seen to occur, stakeholders often attribute it to institutional factors, such as the co-location of GEF, GCF, and AF focal points within the same ministry (as in Honduras, Lesotho, Maldives, and the Philippines), enabling collaboration regardless of CES involvement. Stakeholders generally view these institutional arrangements as more influential than CES events in shaping coordination. Overall, CES events have raised awareness and created entry points, but more structured and systematic approaches are needed to support coordination with other funds at scale.

Given the recent and partial implementation of the CES, it is too early to assess the influence it has had on the access to and use of GEF resources. Nevertheless, nearly half of survey respondents felt that the CES contributed to its strategic priorities to a high or very high extent, with a larger proportion reporting this in LDCs and a smaller proportion in SIDS (figure 2.5).

Figure 2.5 Percentage of survey respondents answering that the Country Engagement Strategy contributed to strategic priorities to a high or very high extent



Note: LDC = least developed country; SIDS = small island developing states.

The CES has served as a key platform for the acquisition of essential information to facilitate access to GEF resources and to make decisions. Through presentations, bilateral meetings, and guidance materials shared during CES events, participants have gained a clearer understanding of the GEF architecture, eligibility criteria, and full range of funding windows available. This included, in some countries, practical insights into combining STAR allocations with non-STAR windows such as the GBFF and the CBIT. These exchanges addressed frequent barriers to access, including limited familiarity with newer funding mechanisms and uncertainty around application processes.

CES events have also played a role in supporting the uptake of integrated programs at the national level. By introducing countries to the objectives and structure of integrated programs, and by providing a space for initial concept discussions, CES activities have encouraged countries to explore more integrated and cross-cutting project ideas. This has included efforts to align draft project concepts with integrated program goals and to understand how multiple sectors could be brought together under a single intervention. In several cases, this was seen as contributing to more coherent and potentially impactful portfolios.

While CES activities are viewed positively in terms of responding to stakeholder needs, there is a widespread need for more frequent and diversified capacity building. The 2021 CSP evaluation identified

several barriers to applying CSP-acquired knowledge and skills in the development of country pipelines, including the need for broader reach of GEF information within governments, and the largely theoretical character of this information, among others. To address these barriers, it was recommended (1) to develop more customized approaches to capacity building, with consideration for more flexibility as to the number of participants from each stakeholder group and their level of capacity; and (2) to continue empowering OFPs by better informing them on their roles in GEF portfolio management beyond portfolio development and supporting their crucial facilitation role in engaging country stakeholders.

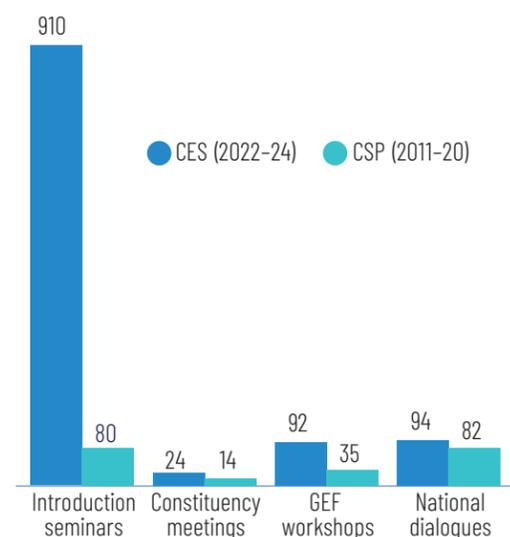
The management response to the 2021 CSP evaluation noted that the Secretariat was exploring the feasibility of options to introduce new components of the CSP that would be targeted to specific stakeholders' needs. This is reflected in the introduction of new activities targeted at different GEF stakeholders, such as financial support to GEF OFPs (expected to include onboarding training for new OFPs), building execution capacity of stakeholders (targeted to national executing agencies and CSOs), the Gustavo Fonseca Youth Conservation Leadership Program, the Field Visit Program for Council Members, and support for country delegations and relevant stakeholders to attend COPs to the conventions. Stakeholder empowerment series webinars are also presented as a tool to address specific training needs and promoting South-South knowledge sharing. Progress in the implementation of some these activities at midpoint through GEF-8 was limited, however.

Sixty percent of survey respondents consider that CES activities were planned to a high or very high extent around their needs as GEF stakeholders. Similarly, interviews and case studies indicate that capacity building is tailored to the extent possible to country needs, thanks to the one-to-one relationship maintained by country relations officers with countries and constituencies. For instance, national dialogue agendas are developed by OFPs; and WhatsApp groups with OFPs have been an effective, if informal, channel to address practical questions. A remaining challenge is how to provide capacity building to stakeholders who are not fluent in English.

There is consensus among the stakeholders consulted that additional training, experience exchange (e.g., among SIDS), and improved information dissemination mechanisms are needed—both for GEF focal points and for other country stakeholders—through a mix of in-person activities, virtual training, and outreach. A positive step in this direction was the shift to biannual virtual introduction seminars, which has increased the average number of participants per seminar from 80 in GEF-7 to 910 in GEF-8 (figure 2.6). While national dialogues remain the CES's primary space for broader stakeholder engagement at the country level, interviews and case studies reveal limitations in how these events can address the needs of diverse audiences and ensure information retention over the course of two days. In the opinion of some interviewees, however, increased engagement can be a challenge given the time constraints of OFPs who do not have a supporting team and wear multiple hats.

Interest in accessing financial support for OFPs—and, to a lesser extent, support for country delegations and relevant stakeholders to attend COPs to the conventions—was also expressed by several interviewees and survey respondents.

Figure 2.6 Comparison of average number of participants per activity type: Country Engagement Strategy versus Country Support Programme



Sources: GEF IEO 2023; portfolio analysis.

The CES's contribution to its expected outcomes and strategic priorities has been strongly influenced by institutional capacity and stability, limited stakeholder awareness of CES activities, and discontinuity of support. Proactive OFPs with stable teams and sufficient baseline capacity were more effective in leveraging CES activities to inform national processes. Conversely, weak institutional contexts for GEF engagement, particularly in LDCs and SIDS, constrained CES uptake and limited its strategic influence. Frequent shifts in political leadership further hindered continuity, often disrupting progress and resetting relationships built under earlier phases. In Lesotho, for example, political instability resulted in constant changes in senior government officials; principal secretaries are frequently replaced, interrupting continuity in programming and undermining the implementation of previously agreed-upon plans. Limited stakeholder awareness of CES activities, coupled with the absence of continuous support mechanisms, constrained the potential for scaling and sustaining results. These factors were particularly pronounced in countries with less established institutional frameworks for GEF engagement, such as Azerbaijan and Maldives, highlighting the need for tailored approaches

and longer-term support in such contexts.

Inclusiveness of engagement

By design, the CES is intended to broaden stakeholder engagement by bringing together a wide range of actors—including government representatives such as GEF focal points, convention focal points, and relevant line ministries; CSOs; academic institutions; private sector actors; and other nonstate participants—to ensure a coherent, cross-sectoral approach to environmental sustainability and climate change in recipient countries. The 2021 CSP evaluation found that the inclusiveness and diversity of event participants had increased over time, but still varied greatly across countries, constituencies, and events; and that participation in CSP activities often did not lead to further dialogue or collaboration on the ground, especially in the case of CSOs. In this context, the evaluation recommended that OFPs be provided with best practices for active and fruitful collaboration to ensure successful GEF programming. The management response to the evaluation noted that the GEF Secretariat was exploring options to “enhance inclusivity and collaboration at CSP events as one of the parameters that can lay the groundwork for better collaboration on the ground,” for instance, by sharing best practices (GEF 2021b, 3). The GEF-8 Programming Directions state that the CSP, as a component of the CES, would focus on (1) broadening the engagement of stakeholders at CSP events and (2) expanding the outreach and support to stakeholders beyond CSP events, highlighting stakeholder empowerment series webinars and new CES activities as instrumental to this end.

CES activities are widely perceived as inclusive, and participation in similar events increased between GEF-7 and GEF-8. Although it was not possible to carry out a comprehensive analysis of CES event participants due to significant gaps in the participant data provided as the CES lacks a standardized reporting system for tracking the types of stakeholders involved in the various activities, 60 percent of survey respondents consider that CES activities were inclusive to a high or very high extent; this is in line with the opinions gathered in interviews and case studies. Indeed, the majority of stakeholders consulted felt that engagement through CES activities has been inclusive, emphasizing both the large number of participants—particularly during national dialogues, introduction seminars, and regional workshops—and the diversity of stakeholder groups involved. The average number of participants per activity type increased from GEF-7 to GEF-8 (figure 2.6). Most notably, the shift to virtual introduction seminars has increased the average number of participants per seminar from 80 in GEF-7 to 910 in GEF-8.

Based on case studies and interviews, the range of stakeholder types participating in national dialogues, regional workshops, and ECWs was broad and usually included government representatives, CSOs, the private sector, academia, and GEF Agencies. This finding, however, points to the need for continued efforts to engage the private sector, CSOs, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities. Also, the case studies, the e-survey and direct observation indicate that virtual constituency meetings have not always been effective in fostering wide and active engagement by GEF focal points.

CES events help convene diverse stakeholders, but their contribution to sustain inclusive national decision-making remains limited, highlighting the need for stronger follow-up and support to sustain engagement beyond individual events. Forty-five percent of survey respondents believed that the CES highly or very highly contributed to the inclusiveness of GEF-related decisions and processes at the national level; this is well below the 60 percent that considers CES activities to be inclusive, which seems to indicate persisting challenges to sustain stakeholder engagement after events. Some events have addressed this topic directly; for instance, one full day of the 2023 Southern Africa ECW was focused on Ensuring an Inclusive Participation of GEF Partners. In addition, interviews, case studies, and the e-survey suggest that CES events, in particular national dialogues, are valued as opportunities to bring together a variety of country stakeholders—and in some cases have resulted in increased collaboration with line ministries (as in Maldives, Suriname, Togo) and Agencies (as in Azerbaijan and Honduras). In the Philippines, the national dialogue rather served as a complement to the work of the national steering committee. It is clear from the interviews and the case studies conducted that some OFPs need additional support to ensure continued stakeholder engagement beyond specific consultation activities. Financial support to GEF OFPs, a new CES activity launched in spring 2025, holds promise to increase the capacity of OFPs to play this strategic role. The stakeholder empowerment series webinars, an activity launched in GEF-7 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, were not held in the first half of GEF-8, based on the portfolio analysis.

The quality and continuity of stakeholder engagement under the CES are shaped by OFP capacity, institutional conditions, and structural barriers that limit meaningful and sustained participation in some contexts. Several factors influence the quality and consistency of engagement. Among the most important

enablers is the capacity of some OFPs to identify and involve stakeholders throughout the national portfolio design and implementation process by leveraging networks and sustaining momentum beyond individual events. This capacity can be constrained by OFP staff limitations, high turnover, and competing priorities, as highlighted above. Moreover, weak institutional frameworks for GEF engagement and the absence of ongoing support mechanisms—financial, technical, or logistical—can limit meaningful participation and follow-up. In some instances, CSO participation is limited to attending meetings, with no concrete agenda for future collaboration. Additionally, in contexts where language barriers exist, as in Lesotho and Suriname, the ability of marginalized groups to meaningfully contribute is further constrained. In Suriname, for example, difficult access to the capital and reliance on English-speaking umbrella organizations for representation in CES activities limit direct community input. In other cases, the role of Indigenous Peoples is mediated through a small number of selected individuals. Several countries highlighted the need for capacity building and strategies to better mobilize the private sector, such as in the Philippines. Where conditions are favorable, CES activities tend to spark more active and sustained stakeholder involvement. In other cases, engagement remains more superficial and episodic. Overall, it is clear that there are persisting challenges in sustaining stakeholder engagement after CES activities. Financial support to GEF OFPs, which was launched in 2025, could be instrumental in enabling OFPs to coordinate these engagements.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

3.1 Conclusions

How is the CES an improvement over the CSP? To what extent has it addressed the conclusions and the recommendations of the previous evaluation?

As shortcomings identified by the GEF Independent Evaluation Office’s 2021 CSP evaluation have only been addressed in part, there are still opportunities to improve CES design, management, and accountability. The CES brings together preexisting and new country engagement activities under the same umbrella and takes a more proactive approach to country engagement. This expanded approach is reflected in a total allocation of \$40.2 million, a significant increase over the GEF-7 allocation of \$21 million for the CSP. However, there are still opportunities to improve strategy design; strength coordinated management within the Secretariat; establish information management, monitoring, and reporting systems; further diversify the types of support offered to better meet the diverse needs of GEF stakeholders; improve the timing of national dialogues; and advance collaboration with other multilateral climate funds at the operational level. As a consequence, the CES’s intervention logic is not clearly articulated, and its overall coherence has been affected by the significant modifications to its scope during implementation. There are missed opportunities to sequence and tailor activities for greater impact, and there is limited accountability on implementation and results. These challenges have been exacerbated by the absence of clear leadership and effective systems for information sharing and collaboration at the operational level.

What is the progress to date on the CES’s components as they are combined to provide effective assistance to countries?

Progress in implementing the CES was slower than expected at midpoint through GEF-8, and several activities had yet to start implementation. While 40 percent of the budget allocated for CES implementation had been committed or disbursed by November 2024, this hides significant differences across activities, with several of the new CES activities having only recently, or not yet, started. However, there are indications that implementation of some of these activities has accelerated in the first half of 2025. The main factors that have hindered the implementation of CES activities are, on the one hand, the capacities of OFPs and limited awareness of demand-based CES activities,

and on the other, the restructuring of the GEF Secretariat and an increased workload for the same staff. Challenges within the GEF mostly affected implementation of the CES during the first year of GEF-8, especially as multiple integrated program rollout workshops were delivered, which were not initially planned in the strategy. The rapid rollout of the Gustavo Fonseca Youth Conservation Leadership Program was enabled by an innovative approach based on ancillary agreements, which is in the course of being replicated for other CES activities, such as financial support for GEF OFPs. These agreements enable the Secretariat to work with intermediary entities to deliver funds to individual beneficiaries.

There are untapped opportunities to harness synergies across activities to increase impact. The CES was designed as a comprehensive strategy, but its implementation shows shortcomings in that respect, especially as some of the activities directed to support more sustained stakeholder engagement have had limited progress so far, and the scope of OFP empowerment activities was reduced to financial support to GEF OFPs. While implementation of integrated program rollout workshops was timely to support resource allocation, there are persisting challenges in the timing of national dialogues and potential synergies between these activities were insufficiently leveraged.

Participation of LDCs in CES activities has been important, but less so for SIDS. Both LDCs and SIDS have participated in a larger number of activities relative to their representation among all GEF recipient countries, although only a small proportion of national dialogues took place in SIDS. None of the activities currently under implementation are specifically designed to address the specific needs of LDCs and SIDS. While nearly half of all survey respondents found that the CES had facilitated access to GEF resources, decisions on their use, and their sustained impact to a high or very high extent, survey respondents from LDCs were more positive than average and survey respondents from SIDS were less positive than average.

How does the CES empower and support countries in achieving higher impact?

When implemented, CES activities make small but important contributions to the strategy's expected outcomes. However, progress toward these outcomes is uneven and constrained by the limited frequency and scope of events. Case studies conducted in four countries (Lesotho, the Philippines, Suriname, and Togo) and interviews conducted in seven countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ghana, Honduras, Maldives, Thailand, and Uganda) show that, in countries that have benefited from a range of CES activities, the CES has made valuable contributions to strengthening portfolio development, ensuring alignment of the portfolio with national priorities and GEF-8 objectives, and enhancing country ownership of the GEF portfolio, including the empowerment of GEF stakeholders. The CES contribution is modest when it comes to increasing the visibility of the GEF as a strategic partner, improving national policy coherence, and enhancing coordination with other funds at the country level. The limited frequency and depth of CES activities for any given country prevent them from contributing to all CES expected outcomes in each country. While CES activities

are viewed positively in terms of responding to stakeholder needs, more frequent and diversified capacity building is needed through a mix of in-person activities, virtual training, and outreach.

CES activities have contributed to different extents to supporting country ownership of the GEF portfolio and empowering stakeholders depending on the country context. CES events have facilitated knowledge and information sharing, allowing for greater control over portfolio development. They have also provided an opportunity to clearly demonstrate how the GEF portfolio aligns with national priorities, supporting efforts to foster broader buy-in, and enabling wider stakeholder engagement, especially through national dialogues. In some countries, such as Suriname, the 2024 national dialogue has been instrumental in taking initial steps toward improving portfolio ownership and stakeholder empowerment. In others where country drivenness is already strong, such as the Philippines, the national dialogue has enabled a wider range of stakeholders to engage with portfolio development. However, this engagement remains mostly sporadic and concentrated at key moments rather than sustained throughout the project cycle.

CES activities have contributed to improved country portfolio development by providing structured opportunities for countries to consolidate, refine, and prioritize project ideas. National dialogues have been particularly valuable in this regard, offering a platform for government agencies and other stakeholders to engage in technical discussions and receive guidance from the GEF Secretariat. In several cases—notably Azerbaijan, Honduras, Maldives, and Suriname—the CES has contributed to greater clarity on programming options and eligibility, leading to adjustments that made draft portfolios better aligned with both country and GEF priorities.

CES activities contributed to initial steps toward improving national policy coherence by creating space for discussion and awareness-raising among participants. While several CES events have addressed the need to strengthen coherence across sectors and ministries to optimize the impact of GEF-financed interventions, CES contributions remain focused on initiating dialogue and agenda-setting rather than enabling specific policy shifts.

The CES has made a modest contribution to enhancing the visibility of the GEF at the country level, with notable variation across events and contexts. CES events have provided a platform to present the GEF Communication and Visibility Policy and helped raise the profile of the GEF among stakeholders who previously had limited awareness of its role, but there are indications of persisting visibility challenges; this points to the need for more targeted efforts across different scales, from line ministries to communities.

The contribution of CES activities to increased coordination with other funds at the country level has been limited. In recent years, multilateral climate funds have strengthened high-level commitments to increase collaboration on country engagement, but cooperation at the operational level is still limited. In this context, the CES's contribution has consisted of two pilot joint programming consultations with the Green Climate Fund in Rwanda and Uganda alongside national dialogues, and in inviting representatives from other multilateral climate funds to participate in events such as national dialogues and ECWs.

Efforts to increase inclusiveness need to continue and expand beyond events. By design, the CES is intended to broaden engagement by bringing together a wide range of stakeholders, including government representatives (such as GEF focal points, convention focal points, and relevant line ministries), civil society organizations, academic institutions, private sector actors, and other nonstate participants. CES activities are widely perceived as inclusive, and participation in similar events increased between GEF-7 and GEF-8. However, the depth of this engagement remains uneven, and its potential to support inclusive decision-making is not fully realized. Some OFPs need additional support to sustain stakeholder engagement after CES activities.

3.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations were identified to strengthen the design, management, and outcomes of the CES, based on the findings and conclusions presented above. Additional suggestions for implementing these recommendations are included in the [annex](#).

Recommendation 1: Improve CES design and accountability. As the design of the CES for GEF-9 progresses, the GEF Secretariat should ensure that the CES is grounded in a coherent and explicit intervention logic that identifies ambitious yet realistic outcomes, and clearly articulates the expected contribution of different CES activities and outputs to these outcomes, both individually and in synergy. Simple but effective information management, monitoring, and reporting systems should be established to track implementation progress and budget expenditures.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen CES management at the operational level. In the current configuration, where CES implementation is a shared responsibility of different divisions under the operational leadership of the Programming Manager, the latter has a critical role to play in ensuring that the CES is implemented as one strategy by enabling swift communication, coordination, and information sharing among the staff engaged in different CES activities.

Recommendation 3: Provide diversified modes of engagement, improving the timing and sequencing of CES activities to increase impact. To help countries make sustained progress in developing their capacity to engage with the GEF, the GEF Secretariat should do the following:

- Develop regional engagement plans at the beginning of the GEF-9 cycle based on a mapping of the diverse needs of countries and constituencies in each region in consultation with OFPs and Council members. Country engagement roadmaps could also be developed at the request of countries to outline how they intend to engage with the GEF during the cycle.
- Where possible, appropriately sequence global, regional, and country-level CES activities and ensure that key stakeholders are invited to multiple events to create synergies across events and more sustained engagement.
- Take a more proactive approach in meeting the needs of specific categories of countries (particularly LDCs and SIDS) and stakeholders. Specifically, the GEF Secretariat should provide comprehensive but differentiated financial and capacity-building support to OFPs tailored

to different levels of institutional capacity and based on transparent criteria, and improve training, experience sharing, and information dissemination through a mix of face-to-face activities, virtual training, and outreach products.

Recommendation 4: Disseminate the CES widely to increase its visibility and to empower OFPs and Council members to leverage the support offered. As many country stakeholders are not aware of the support offered by the CES, the GEF Secretariat, in collaboration with the Communications Division, should ensure that information about this strategy—including the process for requesting demand-based activities and key data on the progress of CES implementation—is disseminated widely and through different channels to enhance country engagement and accountability.

Recommendation 5: To increase cost-effectiveness in GEF-9, focus on the most impactful activities and seek synergies across capacity-building windows and with other multilateral funds. Within the context of ongoing efforts to increase cost-effectiveness in GEF-9, the GEF Council and the GEF Secretariat should consider the following strategies to optimize country engagement:

- Maintain core country engagement activities with proven cost-effectiveness such as rollout workshops, ECWs, national dialogues, and virtual introduction seminars.
- Identify potential synergies the CES can establish with capacity-building windows in the GEF family of funds, such as the Capacity-building Initiative for Transparency, enabling activities, and support offered by the Least Developed Countries Fund and the Special Climate Change Fund for the development and implementation of national adaptation plans.
- Join forces with multilateral climate funds, and potentially with other players in the wider climate finance space, to sustain country engagement efforts.

Annex

Suggestions for addressing evaluation recommendations

Recommendation	Suggestion
1: Improve Country Engagement Strategy (CES) design and accountability	<p>It is suggested that the GEF Secretariat develop a theory of change or logical framework for the CES and define SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) indicators with four-year targets at the activity, outcome, and impact levels to monitor and report progress.</p> <p>Information management, monitoring, and reporting systems to track implementation progress and budget expenditures could include templates for event attendance lists to collect participant data by gender and stakeholder type, as well as post-event surveys.</p>
2: Strengthen CES management at the operational level	<p>Guidelines and templates for different types of activities could be developed and disseminated to all GEF Secretariat staff to ensure that all benefit from the accumulated knowledge gained during 15 years of the GEF Secretariat's direct support to countries.</p> <p>Leads for specific activities could be appointed and made responsible for monitoring and reporting progress to the Programming Manager.</p> <p>Event logistics could be outsourced to focus the efforts of GEF Secretariat staff on more substantive aspects.</p>
3: Provide diversified modes of engagement, improving the timing and sequencing of CES activities to increase impact	<p>Regional engagement plans could outline the sequence of activities to be offered by the Secretariat in each region during the cycle, as well as the on-request activities prioritized for the cycle, taking into account needs and workloads. To inform these plans and country roadmaps, the GEF Secretariat could consider developing a country engagement index based on a self-assessment administered through an e-survey at the beginning and end of each cycle, which would help monitor country progress and assess emerging needs.</p> <p>To improve the sequencing of CES activities, upstream technical dialogues, intended as higher-level discussions on programming, could be held at the end of GEF-8 or early in GEF-9 in preparation for the next cycle, followed by rollout workshops and then national dialogues. Support to operational focal points (OFPs) should be rolled out early in the cycle to strengthen their role in portfolio development and stakeholder engagement.</p> <p>To improve the mix of face-to-face activities, virtual training, and outreach products, virtual formats could be used for events whose primary purpose is to share information (e.g., introduction seminars), while face-to-face activities could be organized when inclusive discussion is needed (e.g., constituency meetings). The GEF Secretariat could also provide summaries on GEF policy updates to OFPs and other GEF stakeholders, potentially through a newsletter distributed via email and made available on the GEF website.</p>
4: Disseminate the CES widely to increase its visibility and to empower OFPs and Council members to leverage the support offered	<p>The GEF Secretariat could post more information about the CES on the GEF website, including the process for requesting demand-based activities and key data on the progress of CES implementation for greater accountability. The GEF Secretariat could also issue calls with clear selection criteria for activities such as support to attend convention conferences of the parties (COPs). This information could also be shared at CES events and through other existing outreach channels.</p>

Recommendation	Suggestion
5: In a potential scenario of funding restrictions, focus on the most impactful activities and seek synergies across capacity-building windows and with other multilateral funds	<p>Assess the effectiveness of financial support to GEF OFPs to determine whether it should be included among the core activities of the CES for GEF-9.</p> <p>While the Capacity-building Initiative for Transparency, enabling activities, and support offered by the Least Developed Countries Fund and the Special Climate Change Fund for the development and implementation of national adaptation plans respond to specific mandates from the conventions and are implemented by GEF Agencies, it is suggested that the GEF Secretariat explore potential opportunities to align and build on these activities, e.g., for institutional strengthening and OFP empowerment.</p> <p>To strengthen synergies with other multilateral climate funds, the GEF Secretariat could (1) establish collaboration at the operational level by enabling information and experience exchange among funds' staff; (2) continue experimenting with country platforms as a way to build synergies at the country level; and (3) identify capacity-building functions that, in the medium term, can be consolidated across funds into a joint readiness facility, as recommended by the G20 Sustainable Finance Working Group in 2024.</p>

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