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# The GEF response to CRISIS



# What can we learn from EVALUATION?

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# The GEF response to crisis

## WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM EVALUATION?

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic affirms the inextricable link between the broader ecosystem in which we live and human health. Human activities have substantially expanded into previously undisturbed domains, destroying landscapes, fundamentally altering the interactions between animals and humans, and affecting the dynamics of pathogen transmission (Berardelli 2020). By encroaching into ecosystems we have never been exposed to before, we let new viruses enter our population.

About two-thirds of all infectious diseases in humans have their origins in animals (Jones et al. 2008). Land mismanagement, habitat loss, over-exploitation of wildlife, and human-induced climate change have created multiple pathways for pathogens to transmit from wildlife to domestic animals and humans, affecting our health and well-being. If we do not change our behavior today, if we do not learn from this pandemic, similar multidimensional crises with environmental, health, and socioeconomic impacts are likely to recur.

### The GEF and COVID-19

Globally, there are few significant and reliable funding resources for biodiversity and environmental

areas other than climate change. Established in 1992, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) is the principal financial mechanism for the Convention on Biological Diversity and an important financial mechanism for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, and the Minamata Convention on Mercury. Working through its 18 Agencies, the GEF has provided close to \$20 billion in grants and mobilized an additional \$107 billion in cofinancing for more than 4,700 projects in 170 countries. The GEF also funds projects in international waters and sustainable forest management that support implementation of a number of global and regional multilateral environmental agreements. More recently, the GEF has promoted multifocal and integrated interventions that interact with broader natural and human systems.

Global partnerships are responding to the COVID-19 crisis in different ways, either by allocating additional resources to meet their objectives or by repurposing resources. Since GEF projects address global environmental challenges, there is no immediate need for it to repurpose projects or change project objectives. GEF Agencies have

responded through lending and advisory programs to assist clients (GEF 2020). For all GEF-7 projects, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) has extended the deadlines for both submission and actual CEO endorsements/approvals by six months. The CEO's statement on extensions (available [here](#)) outlines these details. Midterm and terminal evaluation deadlines continue to be governed by the GEF Monitoring Policy (available [here](#)). Further, existing policies and guidelines allow for "minor amendments" of up to 5 percent of GEF project financing (page 58, annex 3, paragraph 10, of the Guidelines on the Project and Program Cycle Policy, available [here](#)); however, this is not a COVID-specific rule and will not apply as a blanket approach.

Similarly, the Small Grants Programme, like the GEF, will not repurpose funds but focus on recovery by addressing the root causes of vulnerability and enhancing community resilience, in line with the existing Small Grants Programme project document, strategy, and approaches agreed on by the GEF and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Going forward, a task force has been established in the GEF to better understand how GEF programs in the next replenishment could be designed to address the human-nature systems nexus to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

## The past informs the present

An ongoing analysis by the GEF's Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of GEF projects finds that most projects plan for risks to non-achievement of project outcomes by using risk matrixes and identifying potential mitigation steps. In general, the focus of these risks is not on crises or shocks but is

more related to local systemic issues such as corruption, lack of trust in the government, or lack of interest by financial institutions or other key stakeholders. Not surprisingly, global crises such as a pandemic are not mentioned in project design documents, as such events have been extremely rare. Crises are usually mentioned as something to be avoided rather than mitigated; project designers hope to avoid the impacts of sectarian conflict, for example, through broad stakeholder engagement and by avoiding working in conflict zones. It is rare to find specific crisis mitigation plans. One project noted that "if any problem happens, the project will consider transferring the project to another country with better chances of success in implementation"—a drastic measure that would involve significant sunk costs, and negatively affect the country in crisis.

Efforts to identify and avoid potential risks to outcomes in GEF project design are commendable, and there are examples of GEF projects that have demonstrated resilience through disaster risk management (Garcia 2020). However, the lack of plans for quickly reacting to unforeseen or unpreventable crises could leave projects without adequate guidance when crises—such as the current pandemic—do occur.

During its 27-year history, the GEF has weathered health and economic crises, and independent evaluations of GEF programs offer valuable insights relevant to the pandemic based on lessons learned from implementation.

Given its unique mandate, the GEF has implemented projects committed to improving human health and well-being in addition to providing global environmental benefits. Within the GEF portfolio, there is not only a significant amount of overlap



between the various environmental domains, but also profound interlinkages to socioeconomic benefits and human health. This short report, drawing on ongoing and completed evaluations, discusses the GEF's response to crises, and provides relevant lessons in mitigation strategies and in building resilience from the GEF's previous and current projects.

## Crisis management in the artisanal gold mining sector

One sector in which the GEF invests heavily that is being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic is artisanal small-scale gold mining (ASGM). The GEF's planetGOLD Programme, established under the Global Opportunities for Long-term Development of ASGM Sector - GEF GOLD project (GEF ID 9602, implemented by the United Nations Environment Programme), is an eight-country, eight-project initiative aimed at reducing emissions of mercury from ASGM.

The program has been cataloguing the effects of the pandemic on the countries and regions in which it works through its global hub project and program website (planetGOLD 2020). DELVE, a global online data platform on artisanal mining, has also reported on the impacts of the pandemic on the sector. The impacts have varied by country, but patterns have emerged. Because mining areas are generally rural, they have not yet (as of mid-April 2020) been greatly affected by the virus, which tends to hit urban centers first; economic shocks have been felt, however. Supply chains have been halted through curbs on transportation, and miners have been forced to stop their activities because of government-mandated curfews and closures of nonessential businesses (which in many countries

include ASGM). As a result of supply chain disruptions, gold buyers are offering lower prices to miners than before the pandemic even though the international price of gold has not dropped significantly. Consequently, miners, many of whom live in poverty, have not been able to produce as much gold and have to sell what they can produce at cheaper prices, leaving them with less income in this time of crisis.

The National Program for the Environmental Sound Management and Live Cycle Management of Chemical Substances project in Ecuador (GEF ID 9203, implemented by UNDP) has accelerated non-ASGM activities that are directly related to health care—the proper disposal of hospital waste—although this has not involved reducing funds from other project components. The project has also collected donations from project staff to purchase baskets of basic goods that have been delivered to over 100 families in one of their ASGM project sites, targeting members of a women's group that sorts mine tailings for residual gold. Other projects have released educational videos on public health guidance to combat the virus for their project sites and outlined ways in which governments could assist artisanal miners to lessen the economic impact of the pandemic.



### Relevant lessons

**Flexibility.** Rapid adjustments in project activities to help affected communities are important in keeping in touch with communities and maintaining the relevance of the project.

**Proactive program management.** Proactive management actions have demonstrated the GEF's commitment to protecting vulnerable ASGM communities around the world. The planetGOLD

program staff are maintaining regular updates on how the virus is affecting ASGM communities in their countries and soliciting their recommendations for ways to respond.

## Crisis management in the small and medium enterprise sector in India

The Promoting Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy in Selected Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) Clusters project in India (GEF ID 3553) aims to develop and promote a market environment for energy-efficient and renewable energy technologies in energy-intensive MSME clusters in India, such as the dairy, ceramics, and foundry industries.

Logistical and bureaucratic hurdles kept the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) from rolling out project activities on the ground until 2014. The project faced its first shock during demonetization, which forced many MSMEs out of business. Three years later, the COVID-19 pandemic is taking a further toll, as MSME resources are fast being depleted in terms of working capital, skilled workforce, inventories, and orders.

UNIDO reached out to 85 MSMEs to take stock of their perceived challenges, expectations, and plans for recovery and revival of their business. The Agency is working with the MSMEs to help them get back into business at the earliest possible point in a strategic and planned manner. Specifically, UNIDO is contributing to ongoing infection prevention and control to minimize and contain the spread of COVID-19 and prevent resurgence, and facilitating and accelerating the revival of MSME

businesses and the economy. Envisioned tools to be applied in this regard include training programs provided through tutorials and webinars, resource materials, and the dissemination of good practices on successful energy-efficient technologies that can be implemented to reduce energy consumption and increase profitability. Some energy service company models for various potential technologies are also being explored so as to make implementation easier and more attractive to MSMEs in the current crisis.



### Relevant lessons

**Communication.** Staying in touch with project beneficiaries and making an effort to understand their constraints is important for projects to be able to adjust the assistance, technologies, and interventions in a timely fashion. It is also important to include training materials and awareness programs on disaster management and preparedness for beneficiaries.

**Relevant models.** Projects related to private sector MSMEs in developing countries should be provided with a model for financial savings planning for better resilience to disasters.

## Crisis management during the Ebola crisis

### WEST AFRICA FISHERIES

This case study, based on the implementation completion report (World Bank 2017) illustrates the GEF's continuous support in building resilience in Ebola-affected countries to buffer external shocks, and in responding to country needs for immediate recovery and long-term food security through improved governance of fishery resources.

The Ebola epidemic, which began in Guinea in late 2013 and spread to Sierra Leone and Liberia, affected the means of making a living for millions of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the region (FAO n.d.). The areas hit particularly hard by the epidemic were among the most agriculturally productive regions of the three affected countries. Mandatory quarantine measures and fear of infection kept farmers from attending to their fields, resulting in considerable disruption of farming activities. Food trade between villages and bordering countries was slowed, which translated into food shortages.

The fishing industry helped feed the population when agricultural lands were abandoned during the 2014–16 Ebola outbreak. Liberia and Sierra Leone were part of the initial phase of the GEF-funded West Africa Regional Fisheries Program (GEF ID 3558, implemented by the World Bank from 2010 to 2016), which aimed to strengthen the capacity of recipient countries to govern and manage targeted fisheries, reduce illegal fishing, and increase local value added to fish products.

The project's investments in fighting against illegal fishing have had transformative results in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The exclusion of illegal trawlers from the six-mile inshore exclusion zone has opened the space for artisanal fishers, coastal communities experienced a change in fish availability and incomes increased (World Bank 2017). During the Ebola outbreak, fish as a food source played a more central role in securing a protein supply for both coastal and inland communities, mostly in the form of smoked small pelagic fish transported by road through a marketing chain controlled by women fish smokers on the coast.



## Relevant lessons

**Flexibility and quick adaptation.** The GEF recognized that marine fish resources represent valuable natural capital that could enhance communities' resilience in times of crisis, if managed properly. When impacts on agriculture resulted in food shortages during the Ebola crisis, the GEF reacted quickly to support the fishing industry by reducing illegal fishing and increasing local incomes.

**Long-term strengthening of governance and resilience building through sustainable interventions.** Improved governance resulted in a reduction of illegal fishing, opening up space for artisanal fishers; coastal communities experienced a change in fish availability, and incomes increased.

**Ensuring long-term financial sustainability.** To help ensure the livelihoods and food security of fisher communities, the GEF approved an additional grant of \$10 million in 2016 to Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone for further targeted support of their fisheries sector, as all three countries prioritize conservation of their fish stocks for artisanal fisheries in their Ebola recovery plans. The additional financing project (GEF ID 9360, implemented by the World Bank from 2017 to 2021) provides incremental funding by supporting a suite of interventions that address both immediate recovery strategies and long-term responses to strengthening fisheries governance and increasing resilience.

## PROMOTION OF INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS TO DEAL WITH INFECTIOUS WASTE

During the 2014–16 Ebola outbreak, Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone faced challenges in safely disposing of a growing amount of infectious waste.

The waste generation rate was estimated at 240 liters of infectious waste per Ebola patient per day (UNDP 2015). The infected medical equipment and waste had to be properly treated to minimize the risk of transmission. However, in many hospitals and community care centers in Ebola-affected countries, Ebola-contaminated waste was burned in barrels, burial pits, or low-tech incinerators that emitted dangerous fumes and created toxic ash.

With support from the GEF and UNDP, environmentally friendly sterilizing equipment was used to help dispose of the vast amounts of infectious waste generated in treating Ebola patients (UNDP 2014). This equipment, the autoclave, was the first of its kind used in any of the Ebola-affected countries (Health Care Without Harm 2015). Unlike burning or incinerating, the autoclave uses high temperature and pressure steam to disinfect the waste, allowing for safe disposal. It does not generate pollutants and has a much smaller carbon footprint.

The autoclave was designed under a GEF-funded project, Demonstrating and Promoting Best Techniques and Practices for Reducing Health-Care Waste to Avoid Environmental Releases of Dioxins and Mercury (GEF ID 1802), implemented by UNDP in partnership with the WHO and the nongovernmental organization Health Care Without Harm from 2007 to 2012 in Argentina, India, Latvia, Lebanon, the Philippines, Senegal, Tanzania, and Vietnam. An important component of the project was to develop and disseminate affordable non-burn health care waste treatment technologies that could be built and serviced in Sub-Saharan African countries using locally available supplies and skills. After completion of pilot activities and testing of the prototype in Tanzania, the new autoclave system was produced in partnership with a South African autoclave manufacturer, Medi-Clave.

During the Ebola outbreak, the microbiological tests indicated that the virus was effectively destroyed by the autoclave system. Another project was immediately launched by UNDP, which provided 20 autoclaves to the three Ebola-affected countries. These autoclaves are now used for treating hospital waste in the post-Ebola recovery period (UNDP IEO 2013). The autoclave system demonstrated the synergy between health care and environmental sustainability, which can lead to overall reduction in harm to human health and the environment.

As a result of this project, non-incineration health care waste treatment technologies and mercury-free medical devices were introduced in four Sub-Saharan African countries of Ghana, Madagascar, Tanzania, and Zambia to reduce harmful releases from the health sector (GEF 2017).



### Relevant lessons

**Adapting and promoting existing technologies to a new crisis situation.** The solution of using autoclaves to dispose of hazardous waste brought significant and positive change to the Ebola-affected countries and has been sustained long after the crisis has ended.

**Taking risks and allocating resources based on project additionality to promote new technologies.**

The initial capital investment costs and start-up costs for migrating from current unsafe and environmentally polluting practices to the use and application of non-incineration technologies and the phaseout of mercury-containing devices could not be covered by national budget allocations and the contribution of health care facilities alone, due to severe budget constraints at the national level,



particularly in Ghana and Madagascar. Funding from the GEF, in addition to support provided by project cofinanciers, was critical for putting in place environmentally sound practices for health care waste management and treatment.

## Health and socioeconomic outcomes from thematic evaluations

GEF interventions in all focal areas—biodiversity, sustainable forest management, international waters, climate change, chemicals and waste, and land degradation—have implications for improving human health and other socioeconomic outcomes. However, because GEF projects are designed to increase global environmental benefits, their direct focus is not on measuring human or health cobenefits—though such benefits are often noted as unintended positive outcomes. For example, a recent evaluation of the GEF’s projects in the Yellow Sea clearly points to a long-term reduction in nutrients and marine pollution that clearly has positive health benefits, but these were not explicitly measured (Sidman, Fuhrig, and Batra 2020).

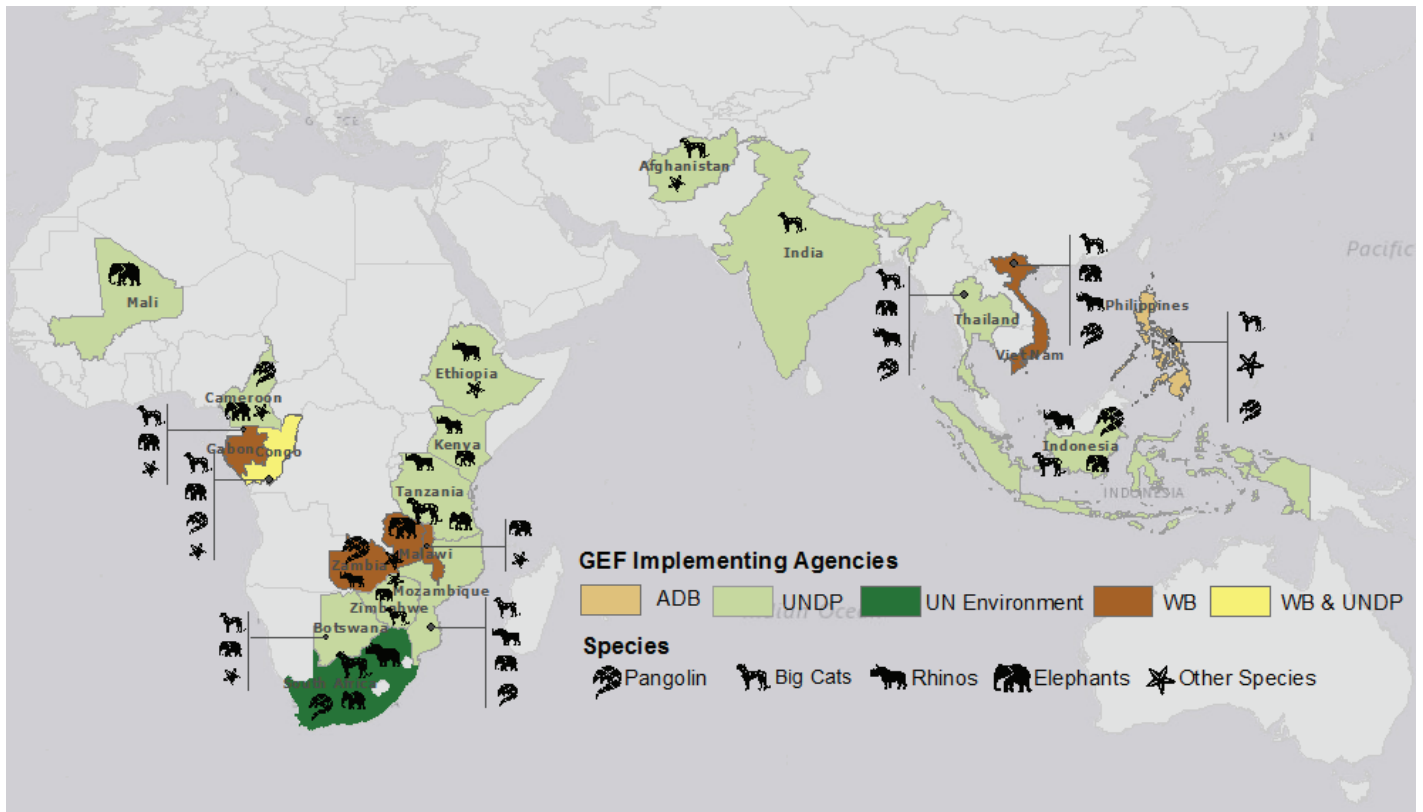
More recently, the IEO has begun to deliberate measure the socioeconomic outcomes of GEF interventions to demonstrate the strong link between environmental and human outcomes and capture **all** benefits of GEF interventions. In this regard, a 2019 IEO evaluation demonstrates the links between interventions in forest management and socioeconomic outcomes such as household assets, in addition to environmental outcomes such as carbon sequestration (GEF IEO 2019). Findings from evaluations of programs with direct implications for current and future programming follow.

## EVALUATION OF THE GEF GLOBAL WILDLIFE PROGRAM

Of most direct relevance to the current pandemic is the GEF’s program to combat illegal wildlife trade. Wildlife trade—both legal and illegal—is a transmission pathway that exposes humans to zoonotic diseases. The supply chain of wildlife and wildlife products from source areas, and transportation through local, national, and international networks to distant markets, allows for natural spillover and spread. Unsafe handling and other practices allow pathogens to pass from wildlife to humans. These conditions and practices are even more challenging to monitor—and impossible to regulate—in illegal wildlife trade. Illegal wildlife trade generates \$26 billion per year, making it the fourth most profitable illegal industry in the world. Stopping illegal trade has been a difficult endeavor, and unfortunately, as long as there is a demand for wildlife products, there will be trade.

Several GEF-funded projects include activities related to combating illegal wildlife trade and address the drivers of biodiversity loss. The GEF’s first concerted effort to tackle illegal wildlife trade in a coordinated and comprehensive manner was the launch of the Global Partnership on Wildlife Conservation and Crime Prevention for Sustainable Development in 2015 (figure 1). Covering 19 countries in Africa and Asia, the program aims to prevent the extinction of threatened species by reducing poaching, curbing trafficking, and reducing demand. Its main interventions have included supporting protected area management, reducing poaching of target species, engaging communities in managing human-wildlife conflict, improving performance across the enforcement and criminal justice chain, establishing partnerships, and knowledge management.

FIGURE 1 Countries and iconic species addressed by the GEF-funded program



**NOTE:** The program has now been extended to include more countries and species.

The IEO conducted a formative assessment of the program in 2017 (GEF IEO 2018). At that point, the program was in its early stages of implementation, and the evaluation provided insights into what works, why and under what circumstances, for whom, and the extent of the benefits. The lessons learned from the formative assessment allowed for timely improvements in program implementation. Moreover, the evaluation of the GEF's illegal wildlife trade program underscored the need for a comprehensive approach along the entire supply chain—from sources to global markets—to contain the spread of illegal trade.

The COVID-19 outbreak has highlighted the issue of illegal wildlife trade and—more broadly—of habitat destruction and biodiversity loss. While maintaining our current global (and local) focus on immediate medical, health, and socioeconomic needs, we need to be better prepared to address and mitigate risks to environmental health and human well-being posed by climate change, biodiversity loss, and deforestation and degradation.



### Relevant lessons

**A globally coordinated approach.** Often, initiatives are designed for single countries. Illegal wildlife trade by its very nature permeates jurisdictional

boundaries, thus dictating cross-boundary strategies at the regional and global scales. Illegal wildlife trade ultimately is an international issue and combating it requires a more cohesive approach with the inclusion of regional initiatives, cross-border activities within nationally implemented projects, and coordination among countries on transboundary issues.

**Greater attention to a broader spectrum of illegally traded species.** Most programs are found to be limited to certain threatened and endangered species and megafaunas. Species coverage needs to be strategically expanded to conserve the maximum number of species and save species from extinction. The GEF addressed this gap in its follow-on funding phase by expanding interventions to include additional species. A recent study found that the propensity to transmit a zoonotic disease varies minimally among animal groups (Mollen-tze and Streicker 2020). Thus, paying attention to more species has significance in public health surveillance and in assessing zoonotic risk.

**Appropriate focus on demand countries.** Most interventions typically focus on reducing poaching of wildlife in source countries and anti-trafficking of illegal wildlife and derived products. Only a few initiatives we observed focus on reducing demand for illegally traded wildlife in Asia, the European Union, and the United States. Interventions to combat illegal wildlife trade should focus more on demand reduction. China has banned all forms of illegal wildlife trade and consumption in the context of the current pandemic and in response to growing indications that the COVID-19 outbreak stemmed from a coronavirus found in wildlife (Vaughan 2020). This response highlights the linkage between illegal wildlife trade and zoonoses, and the importance of

working with countries with the most demand for wildlife and wildlife products.

**Explicitly addressing political will and corruption.** A coordinated focus on political will and corruption will ultimately help strengthen legislation, law enforcement, and judicial systems in combating illegal wildlife trade.

**Enhancing livelihoods.** Illegal wildlife trade is driven, in large part, by growing demand from expanding economies in Asia, often facilitated by transnational criminal networks. Poverty and absence of sustainable livelihoods drive communities to engage in poaching. Efforts should focus on the livelihood security of people living near wildlife coupled with demand reduction strategies, including public awareness and behavior change campaigns in major market hubs.

## THE HEALTH COBENEFITS OF THE GEF CHEMICALS AND WASTE PORTFOLIO

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A recent study looked at the health cobenefits associated with GEF interventions, with useful lessons for the current pandemic (GEF IEO 2020). As a result of globalization and the spread of the chemical manufacturing industry, the burden of disease due to pollution is significant and increasing in lower and middle-income countries. Overall, analysis of the cohort of projects evaluated suggests that there are significant health cobenefits that can be associated with GEF interventions in the chemicals and waste portfolio, primarily in artisanal gold mining. The primary objective of the typical GEF chemicals and waste intervention is the elimination of harmful chemicals from the environment, which translates into direct impacts on health and well-being—namely decreased disease



burden and mortality. This is not a trivial finding, as the conservative global estimate of observable pollution-related deaths in 2015 is 9 million—or 16 percent of total deaths (Landrigan et al. 2017).



### Relevant lessons

**Community health approach to better target interventions to the most vulnerable.** Hands-on training provided health care workers with the capacity to assess cases of mercury poisoning in a timely fashion and to effectively manage them. Protocols were established to send any unclear diagnoses to the hospital. This success in building proper community health surveillance neatly supplemented efforts to raise awareness of the health consequences of mercury use and exposure, mobilizing the community and leading to more sustained impact.

**Enhancing local agency through awareness raising, education, and knowledge dissemination.** Personal health impacts are a great motivating factor to individuals on the ground. Awareness raising, education, and the dissemination of knowledge help break down exposure pathways and inequities in health. Engaging proper awareness-raising activities around new technologies and in building community forms the basis to secure the commitment of communities.

**Industry formalization.** Local stakeholder engagement demonstrated that the priority for action was formalization of the artisan gold mining industry with government support. This step is critical for advancement of community-level issues, advocacy, and long-term sustainability.

## Conclusions

As a partnership, the GEF has responded to the current crisis by appropriately mapping the potential impacts of the pandemic on GEF-financed projects—particularly those in execution and including the impact on project beneficiaries. The GEF has adjusted timelines and aimed for flexibility.

But there is always room to do more to manage in a crisis. Based on responses to a brief survey, GEF Agencies indicated that they would appreciate **information as the situation evolves** and encourage the GEF Secretariat to **coordinate pragmatic solutions** with its partner Agencies to mitigate risk to the portfolio and, where appropriate, **redirect resources** in response to the crisis. Agencies also suggested that the GEF Secretariat share with its institutional partners examples and best practices regarding if and how to incorporate potential major health crises (including pandemics) or economic/financial crises into **project risk matrixes and recommended mitigation measures**. The GEF could also contribute to understanding the linkages between global environmental benefits and this kind of crisis, to demonstrate if and how promoting global environmental benefits can enhance our collective capacity to avoid and manage major health crises.

As was well summarized by an Agency staff member, “This pandemic seems to be a generalized reminder to all countries and to the organizations that support sustainable development that severe shocks to socioeconomic development are not necessarily local or small/regional but can even be global. Climate change scenarios predict that we will see an increase in global, highly interruptive shocks over the next 10–20 years. The concept of ‘resilient development’—and how to operationalize



it in times of crises—has never been more relevant. The members of the GEF partnership are joined by a common belief that sustainability is the cornerstone of resilient development; the current pandemic highlights the need to accelerate progress toward sustainability, for responsive business and economic models, and for identifying opportunities for ‘building back better’ and acting on them in a timely fashion.”

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