Executive summary

INTEGRATION FOR GREATER

EIGHTH COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION OF THE GEF

OPS8

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In today's challenging global context, GEF-9 presents a critical opportunity for action. The Global Environment Facility's (GEF's) ninth replenishment comes at a time of mounting global crises. Despite important progress in biodiversity conservation, renewable energy, and sustainable agriculture, the overall trajectory of environmental degradation is worsening. In 2024, global temperatures surpassed the 1.5°C threshold, fueling extreme weather events, ocean pollution, and biodiversity loss. The Stockholm Resilience Centre found that six of nine planetary boundaries had been breached in 2023, pushing humanity beyond the safe limits required for Earth's stability.[1] These escalating environmental threats are compounded by geopolitical conflict, trade tensions, and economic instability—factors that strain development finance and weaken global cooperation. The urgency for transformational, integrated, and inclusive action has never been greater.

Delays in addressing these challenges will entrench unsustainable practices, deepen vulnerabilities, and significantly raise the eventual costs of transition. Immediate and coordinated action is therefore essential if the global community is to avoid irreversible tipping points and secure a more resilient future. At the same time, growing scrutiny from citizens, investors, and markets means institutions are increasingly measured by the credibility of their commitments. This places the GEF in a pivotal position to demonstrate leadership—advancing policy reform, catalyzing market transformation, and mobilizing innovative finance to drive the transformational change the world urgently requires.

Amid growing environmental pressures, the GEF is uniquely positioned to drive transformational action as the financial mechanism for six major multilateral environmental agreements. With more than three decades of experience, it has demonstrated an ability to deliver high-impact, performance-driven interventions, foster innovation, and take measured risks. The GEF leverages a catalytic funding model to mobilize additional resources and works through 18 implementing Agencies to connect global policy commitments with country-level action. This mandate enables it to move beyond isolated, sectoral projects toward integrated programs that address the underlying drivers of environmental degradation through cross-sectoral, systems-based solutions.

The GEF family of funds continues to evolve beyond the GEF Trust Fund. The Global Biodiversity Framework Fund now complements the Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF) and the Special Climate Change Fund (SCCF) to support biodiversity, climate adaptation, and the needs of the most vulnerable nations. As it focuses on integrated and transformational approaches, the GEF remains firmly aligned with its focal area priorities, supporting multiple conventions

[1] Stockholm Resilience Centre, Planetary boundaries web page.

simultaneously and fostering synergies that link global priorities to national and local actions.

The Eighth Comprehensive Evaluation of the GEF (OPS8) centers on integration as a driver of change. This emphasis reflects the need for approaches that connect sectors, actors, financing models, systems, and policy frameworks to address today's complex and interconnected environmental challenges. It builds on a core premise of the GEF's evolution: that solving these challenges requires coherent, multisectoral solutions and alignment of policies, institutions, and behaviors—while also acknowledging the complexity, transaction costs, and selectivity challenges involved. The GEF's mandate to serve multiple global environmental agreements positions it to pursue this broader vision of integration—not only through flagship impact programs, but also by embedding social inclusion, private sector engagement, and risk-taking innovation across its portfolio.

OPS8 assesses how an approach focused on integration is shaping the GEF's work, drawing on 34 evaluations and studies completed since 2022. The report is organized around three core themes: GEF performance, the enablers of transformational change, and the partners and systems that underpin the GEF's effectiveness.

- **The first theme assesses performance across focal areas and country programs**, highlighting achievements and lessons on how socioeconomic co-benefits link environmental outcomes with improved livelihoods and resilience.
- **The second theme focuses on the enablers of transformational change**, reviewing the role of integrated programs in driving systemic solutions, the ways inclusion—particularly of Indigenous Peoples and local communities—has strengthened ownership and outcomes, and how private sector engagement, risk-taking, and innovation are being advanced.
- **The third theme examines the partnership of GEF Agencies and stakeholders and evaluates the supporting systems**, including results-based and knowledge management, underscoring their importance for adaptive learning and lasting transformational impact.

OPS8 is timed to inform negotiations for the ninth replenishment of the GEF Trust Fund, at a moment when donors and countries are seeking clarity on how the GEF can deepen its impact, enhance its efficiency, and strengthen its role as a global convener of solutions that work across sectors and scales.

FINDINGS

The GEF portfolio

The GEF's portfolio reflects its long-standing role as a major source of financing for global environmental action. As of June 2025, the GEF has provided a total of $26.5 billion in funding for more than 6,000 projects across its family of funds. The GEF Trust Fund remains the primary financing instrument, accounting for $23.5 billion across 5,505 projects. During GEF-8, $3.9 billion has been approved for 525 projects—representing 76 percent of the $5.1 billion target allocation. Across all GEF-managed trust funds, 6 percent of projects are currently in the preparation phase, with approximately 30 percent under implementation. To date, 3,904 projects have been completed, demonstrating the GEF's delivery of results, accountability, and lasting environmental solutions.

Shifts in the regional and thematic allocation of GEF resources under GEF-8 reflect evolving priorities and strategic realignments. Recent replenishment periods have brought noticeable changes in regional distribution. While Africa and Asia have historically received the largest shares of GEF financing, GEF-8 saw an increase in Latin America and the Caribbean's allocation, which rose from 22 percent in GEF-5 to GEF-7 to

26 percent; Africa's share rose slightly—from 25 percent to 27 percent—over the same period. Meanwhile, Asia's share declined from 26 percent to 20 percent, and Europe and Central Asia's share dropped from 9 percent to 5 percent. Global projects increased, rising from 16 percent to 19 percent over the same period. Support for small island developing states (SIDS) and least developed countries (LDCs) also increased, reinforcing the GEF's focus on vulnerable countries.

Across focal areas, allocations have adapted to reflect growing global needs. Biodiversity remains the largest investment area, accounting for 29 percent in GEF-5 and rising to 37 percent in GEF-8. Funding for chemicals and waste and land degradation has also increased, with the latter showing a strong focus on Africa. Support for international waters declined slightly, and climate change funding under the GEF Trust Fund decreased, although adaptation continues to be supported through the LDCF and the SCCF, with an increase in funding since GEF-6. Integrated programs gained significant prominence in GEF-8, now accounting for nearly 43 percent of the portfolio at this stage of the GEF-8 programming cycle—highlighting a continued shift toward more integrated, systems-based solutions.

At the institutional level, the distribution of GEF resources across Agencies has also evolved. While the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Environment Programme, and the World Bank have historically managed the majority of GEF Trust Fund resources, GEF-8 reveals notable changes. Comparing Agency shares for the replenishment periods through GEF-4 with GEF-8, UNDP's share declined from 36 percent to 29 percent, and the World Bank's fell sharply from 46 percent to 8 percent. In contrast, the share for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations grew from 1 percent to 16 percent. Multilateral development banks continue to play a key role in the GEF, consistently achieving higher cofinancing ratios than other Agencies; this highlights their strategic importance in leveraging GEF resources to scale impact.

GEF programming continues to demonstrate strong alignment with global environmental conventions and national priorities. Across all focal areas, the GEF has consistently aligned its support with the mandates of multilateral environmental agreements, as well as with national priorities and country-driven strategies. Biodiversity interventions show strong adherence to the Convention on Biological Diversity and actively support implementation of the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. Climate change mitigation efforts reflect evolving United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change guidance and increasingly emphasize enabling environments. International waters projects remain consistent with regional and national development priorities and, more recently, align with the emerging framework of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement). Land degradation projects align closely with the objectives of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, while chemicals and waste programming is guided by the Stockholm and Minamata Conventions.

Performance

GEF project performance remains strong overall, with consistent outcome achievement across replenishment periods and notable results across focal areas. The outcomes of approximately 82 percent of 2,475 completed projects with terminal evaluations are rated in the satisfactory range, with particularly strong performance in international waters and chemicals and waste. Regional variation is evident: projects in Asia and Europe and Central Asia generally perform better; those in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, SIDS, and fragile and conflict-affected situations face greater implementation challenges. Child projects from integrated programs have shown slightly higher outcome ratings than stand-alone projects, although the differences are not statistically significant.

Although over 80 percent of projects achieve outcomes rated in the satisfactory range, just under two-thirds are in the likely range for sustainability. While this performance is broadly in line with other international organizations, the persistent gap between high project-level outcomes and sustainability underscores a critical challenge for the GEF. Bridging this gap will require stronger integration of projects into national policies and budgets, adequate financing mechanisms to sustain results, more consistent attention to institutional and behavioral change, and systems for learning and support beyond project closure—so that individual project successes translate into systemic and lasting global environmental benefits.

Across focal areas, GEF interventions have contributed to biodiversity protection, improved land management, and strengthened regulatory frameworks. Fifty-nine percent of GEF-6 and GEF-7 projects achieved some form of broader adoption. This is an improvement over the performance reported for the cohorts covered in OPS7 and OPS6. Behavior change plays a critical role in influencing outcomes and sustainability, such as in the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Globally Important Agro-biodiversity (GEF ID 6943; UNDP) project in Azerbaijan, where three times the number of targeted households learned to plant native crops, leading to the restoration of more than 1,000 hectares of degraded land. At the same time, challenges remain, including uneven innovation uptake and limited private sector engagement.

The GEF's interventions in country clusters have become increasingly aligned with regional ecological priorities and national development goals. At the country level in drylands, the Lower Mekong, and Pacific and Caribbean SIDS, these interventions have evolved from sectoral efforts to integrated, landscape-scale approaches. Environmental successes are notable—such as land restoration, improved water management, and coral reef recovery—particularly when embedded in national strategies and supported by local institutions. Regional sustainability of project outcomes remains an area for improvement, with more than a third of projects rated as unlikely to sustain outcomes at completion. Projects in chemicals and waste show the highest sustainability; while projects implemented in Africa, LDCs, SIDS, and fragile and conflict-affected situations face elevated risks. Strong implementation and execution—each rated in the satisfactory range in over 80 percent of projects—are closely linked to outcome success and long-term impact. Other factors contributing to stronger performance and sustainability include robust community engagement, cross-sectoral integration, alignment with national priorities, and strengthening of institutional and policy frameworks. Long-term financial viability remains a challenge because of continued reliance on external funding and limited integration with national monitoring systems.

The GEF has taken steps to promote policy coherence as a strategic priority, aiming to align environmental objectives with broader development goals across government sectors. The 2023 approval of a new strategic roadmap—Enhancing Policy Coherence through GEF Operations—marked a shift toward more deliberate integration of environmental considerations into national and sectoral planning. This approach is evident in the evolution of the GEF's integrated programs, which now include mechanisms to align policies across local, national, and regional levels and link them to financing instruments. The GEF has also supported cross-sectoral alignment through national action plans tied to the environmental conventions, as well as focal area approaches like sustainable land and water management. Despite these efforts, policy coherence initiatives so far have had limited focus on explicit harmonization of policy misalignments.

Historical experience shows that GEF support for policy coherence can strengthen intersectoral coordination, although progress remains highly context-dependent. Positive examples include integrated water resource management in Azerbaijan and

Georgia, and clarifying institutional roles in wildlife law enforcement in the Philippines. However, in countries such as Malawi and Uruguay, limited cross-disciplinary capacity and political support have constrained impact. While the GEF is well positioned to serve as a neutral facilitator of intersectoral collaboration, a lack of shared understanding of policy coherence and limited engagement with finance and planning ministries hamper effectiveness. GEF Agencies with experience in economic policy reform and access to ministries beyond the environment are well suited to lead on this agenda within the GEF partnership. Leveraging different Agencies' comparative advantages in policy reform, alongside stronger strategic use of integrated programming and more catalytic initiatives, will be key to advancing environmental policy coherence goals in GEF-9.

GEF projects have delivered socioeconomic co-benefits alongside environmental outcomes. These co-benefits have strengthened human and social capital, creating income opportunities and improving resilience—particularly for women, youth, and Indigenous Peoples and local communities. Many initiatives have linked conservation to sustainable livelihoods through ecotourism, sustainable agriculture, and nature-based enterprises. These co-benefits have fostered local ownership and political support, helping sustain environmental outcomes over time. However, co-benefits are often limited in scale and unevenly tracked due to short project durations, weak monitoring frameworks, and inconsistent inclusion of marginalized groups. Limited country-level coordination and enabling policies further constrain scaling and sustainability. GEF-9 offers an opportunity to systematize collaboration, strengthen design and monitoring, and ensure socioeconomic benefits are fully integrated, supporting broader adoption of sustainable practices and long-term environmental impact.

Sustainability and clear exit strategies remain central challenges for GEF-supported interventions. While many GEF projects achieve their intended outcomes by completion, sustaining these results beyond the life of GEF funding remains uncertain. Evaluations show that about one-third of completed projects face risks to long-term benefits, especially in fragile or capacity-constrained contexts. Key threats include inadequate financial mechanisms, limited institutional capacity, and weak integration of project outcomes into national policies and planning frameworks. Projects with strong local ownership, stakeholder engagement, and institutional reforms tend to sustain benefits more effectively, as seen in chemicals, waste management, and international waters projects. In contrast, biodiversity and land degradation projects are more vulnerable because gains often rely on continuous resource inputs, enforcement, or market conditions. Sustainability planning is often underdeveloped, with limited exit strategies, financing pathways, and post-completion monitoring. OPS8 evidence shows sustainability improves when projects are embedded in broader programs or aligned with national priorities and budgets. Incorporating sustainability strategies into project design will help strengthen future programming and reinforce lasting impacts.

Integrated programs

The GEF's integrated programs provide a unique platform to address interconnected environmental challenges through coordinated, cross-sectoral approaches. Originally introduced in GEF-6 as integrated approach pilots, this programming reflects the GEF's ability to align actions across multiple focal areas while supporting country-driven priorities and advancing multiple global environmental conventions.

Over successive replenishment cycles, the model has evolved from pilots to full impact programs in GEF-7 and expanded further under GEF-8. Integrated programs now account for 32 percent of allocations—up from 7 percent in GEF-6—and engage 98 countries, including 31 LDCs (up from 8) and 26 SIDS (up from 0). Nine of the 11 GEF-8 integrated programs address at least three focal areas, implemented through seven GEF Agencies and engaging governments, civil society, and the private sector. GEF-8 expanded thematic coverage to plastic pollution and net-zero transitions, embedding nature-based solutions such as ecosystem-based adaptation, sustainable land and forest management, and regenerative food systems.

The integrated programming model has matured, introducing clearer theories of change, competitive country and Agency selection, and knowledge platforms. Most programs and child projects from GEF-8 are just beginning implementation. Initial results from earlier phases of the Global Wildlife, Sustainable Forest Management, Food Systems, and Sustainable Cities Programs include improved land use planning; updated urban and spatial plans; and institutionalized governance and stakeholder engagement innovations, notably financial structuring and multistakeholder platforms.

However, these programs are complex, driving up transaction costs and increasing coordination demands at both global and national levels. Compressed design schedules have sometimes limited inclusive stakeholder consultation and alignment with national systems, while operational focal points have lacked adequate support to manage additional responsibilities. Coordination between global platforms and country-level child projects has varied, presenting challenges for consistent knowledge exchange and program coherence. Sustaining and scaling results often depends on temporary funding or individual champions rather than durable institutional arrangements. Private sector engagement, while growing, remains below potential; and mechanisms to maintain outcomes beyond GEF support are underdeveloped.

Looking ahead, certain programs will mature and necessitate phaseout, while new initiatives will be required to address emerging and evolving challenges. This phaseout should be guided by clear principles for program selection, graduation, and sustaining knowledge resources. The reduced share of System for Transparent Allocation of Resources (STAR) allocations in GEF-8 has shifted participation incentives toward alignment with national priorities. To sustain engagement and impact under this new dynamic, it is critical to ensure program relevance, transparency in participation criteria, and access to robust knowledge systems.

These findings highlight the importance of strategic focus in program design. The focus should be on contexts with strong institutional readiness and potential for systemic transformation while supporting countries with limited capacity through targeted assistance. Integrated programs are most effective when timelines are realistic; responsibilities between global and country components are clearly defined; adaptive learning and knowledge exchange are robust; and participation is inclusive of LDCs, SIDS, and diverse stakeholders, including the private sector.

Social inclusion

The GEF has established robust environmental and social safeguards and significantly advanced inclusion, particularly in gender equality and engagement with Indigenous Peoples and local communities. Since adopting the 2018 GEF Policy on Environmental and Social Safeguards, compliance with risk screening has improved; and gender considerations are now integrated into nearly all projects, supported by gender action plans, budgets for gender-specific interventions, and gender-disaggregated indicators. Advisory structures, including the Indigenous Peoples Advisory Group and gender partnerships, have strengthened technical expertise and promoted culturally appropriate, equitable approaches. Community-driven models such as the Small Grants Programme (SGP) continue to demonstrate how local leadership and participatory governance can deliver enduring environmental and socioeconomic outcomes. Civil society networks, including the GEF–Civil Society Organization (CSO) Network, have amplified local voices and contributed to more inclusive decision-making, while integrated programs are increasingly embedding inclusion into landscape management, value chains, and urban development.

Despite this progress, inclusion remains uneven and often dependent on individual champions rather than institutionalized practice. Youth, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups are still underrepresented, especially during early design stages when influence over outcomes is greatest. Projects frequently measure inclusion in terms of participation rates, such as the proportion of women in activities, rather than equitable decision-making power. Compressed preparation timelines, limited outreach budgets, and the absence of systematic indicators further limit meaningful engagement and tracking of inclusion results. Where inclusion is well implemented—particularly through community-based approaches that empower local leadership—projects show stronger performance and more sustainable results. However, sustaining inclusive outcomes beyond project closure remains challenging, especially where local institutions are weak or enabling policies are absent.

The GEF-CSO Network and other civil society mechanisms hold significant potential to enhance the scaling and sustainability of inclusion efforts. As an independent actor within the GEF partnership, the network can play an important role in strengthening country- and regional-level engagement. However, it continues to face capacity constraints, because not all members have expertise in project design or implementation; and in some countries and regions, membership lists require updating to improve communication and coordination. Strengthening these areas would enable the network to more fully realize its role in advancing the GEF's objectives.

Private sector engagement

The GEF has significantly expanded its private sector engagement. It has moved from isolated pilot initiatives to more systemic approaches embedded within integrated programs on sustainable food systems, nature-based solutions, climate-smart agriculture, and blue economy opportunities. Partnerships with agribusiness, financial institutions, and small and medium enterprises have supported sustainable commodity supply chains, renewable energy, circular economy models, and sustainable urban services. These collaborations have accelerated the uptake of innovative technologies, including precision agriculture, remote sensing, traceability systems, and circular economy platforms for plastics and waste. GEF-supported financial innovations, particularly nongrant instruments (NGIs), have mobilized over $10.6 billion in cofinancing and introduced mechanisms such as risk-sharing facilities and blended finance tools that de-risk private investments and influence business practices, opening new markets for environmental solutions.

Despite notable achievements, private sector engagement in the GEF remains inconsistent and below its full potential. Many projects still treat private sector participation as supplementary rather than integral to design and implementation, relying heavily on public sector cofinancing, with private contributions often limited to in-kind support rather than significant financial commitments. NGIs remain underutilized, constrained by the $15 million project cap, limited Agency and country experience with financial structuring, and a limited, shallow pipeline of innovative proposals. Regulatory barriers, long approval timelines, and risk-averse institutional cultures further discourage engagement. In frontier markets and fragile contexts, weak enabling policies and regulatory frameworks compound these challenges. Lengthy project cycles and bureaucratic processes add to transaction costs, reducing the attractiveness of GEF initiatives for private partners.

Addressing these limitations will require expanding partnerships with the private sector arms of multilateral development banks, strengthening internal capacity for financial innovation, and embedding private sector participation as a core feature of GEF-9 programming. Realizing the full catalytic potential of the GEF also requires building on its proven market transformation role—through policy reform, standards, capacity building, and value chain engagement—while scaling up the use of NGIs to mobilize private capital and de-risk innovation. By combining market transformation with catalytic financing, the GEF can better align with private sector incentives, foster systemic change, and accelerate progress toward global environmental benefits.

Risk and innovation

More explicit management of risk and innovation have gained greater visibility in the GEF portfolio, yet both are constrained by structural and operational limitations. While testing new approaches and deploying emerging technologies is often critical to transformational change, risk-taking within the GEF remains moderate and innovation is not yet systematically embedded across the partnership. The adoption of a formal risk appetite statement in GEF-8 is an important step toward encouraging higher-risk, innovative initiatives; and several programs have successfully piloted digital monitoring tools and advanced technologies such as remote sensing, data analytics, and traceability systems for supply chains. These efforts have shown potential to increase efficiency, influence behavior change, attract additional investment, and shape national policy.

Systemic barriers limit broader uptake and scaling of innovations. Approval processes often favor established approaches, institutional and technical capacity gaps constrain innovation in lower-capacity settings, and limited incentives to take risks discourage experimentation. Strengthening risk management systems, aligning risk appetite with technological ambition, and investing in early-stage innovation will be critical. Partnerships with proven innovators—including private enterprises, universities, and spin-off companies—alongside supportive policy environments and strong knowledge exchange, will be essential to embed innovation more systematically and deliver transformational environmental solutions.

Administrative and operational efficiency

Efficiency remains a GEF strength, but complexity is increasing. The GEF continues to demonstrate strong administrative and project cycle efficiency, maintaining one of the lowest overhead ratios among multilateral environmental funds at 3.7 percent of total expenditures and achieving a disbursement-to-approval ratio of 76 percent, compared to 31 percent for the Green Climate Fund. Agency fees, at around 9 percent, are also in line with those of peer climate funds. Recent reforms under GEF-8, including increasing the medium-size project cap to $5 million and streamlining project cycle steps, have reduced the median time from concept approval to Chief Executive Officer endorsement for full-size projects from 22 to 19 months, showing tangible progress in accelerating delivery.

Despite these gains, operational challenges remain. Fewer than half of full-size projects meet the 18-month target. The expansion of specialized financing windows—such as NGI, innovation, inclusive conservation, and SGP initiatives—has introduced diverse objectives aimed at promoting inclusivity and innovation. However, this proliferation has also added procedural complexity, fragmented demand management, and increased transaction costs for countries and Agencies, even as it creates important opportunities to broaden participation, foster innovation, and strengthen country choice. Additionally, civil society and community-based organizations now access GEF resources through multiple entry points, each with distinct timelines and requirements, further complicating project development and alignment across the GEF partnership. To address these operational challenges, streamlining and consolidating funding mechanisms, together with harmonizing operational procedures, will be essential in GEF-9 to sustain efficiency gains, reduce administrative burdens, and enhance responsiveness to country needs, while preserving the GEF's comparative advantage as one of the most cost-effective multilateral environmental funds.

Partnership and financing

The GEF's partnership model remains a core strength, but overlapping roles and differing Agency procedures have at times slowed delivery, increased transaction costs, and limited knowledge synthesis and sharing. The GEF's partnership model remains one of its defining strengths. It brings together 18 accredited Agencies—including United Nations (UN) organizations, multilateral development banks, and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs)—alongside donors, civil society, the private sector, and research institutions. This diversity enables countries to select Agencies best suited to their needs, leveraging the technical expertise and convention alignment of UN agencies, the financial scale and policy leverage of development banks, and the innovation and local access offered by INGOs. Combined with a country-driven approach that empowers national focal points to guide Agency selection, this network allows the GEF to deliver across levels, sectors, and geographies while aligning global environmental commitments with national priorities.

Administrative complexity remains a challenge within the GEF. Differences in Agency risk appetites and operational policies create inefficiencies, while multi-Agency projects often incur higher transaction costs and longer preparation times. In some cases, Agency components within the same project are managed and reported as separate initiatives, leading to gaps and reduced coherence. Knowledge-sharing systems also remain fragmented, limiting real-time learning across the portfolio.

Agencies often face inherent tensions in balancing their programming interests with governance responsibilities. This dynamic can limit effectiveness and collaboration, and lead to weakening national ownership and missed opportunities for strengthening local partner capacities. While conflict of interest rules exist, stakeholders note that this arrangement can discourage candid discussions of Agency performance, innovation, and comparative advantage. Additionally, competition among Agencies, particularly for leadership roles in integrated programs, has sometimes hindered collaboration and slowed delivery.

Addressing these administrative issues will require strengthening accountability, harmonizing operational practices, providing institutional support for country coordination platforms, and strengthening local partner capacities.

The Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) remains a core strength of the GEF, and refining its mandate could amplify its scientific contributions and strategic influence across programs. The STAP ensures scientific rigor and supports innovation through early-stage project reviews, thematic studies, and guidance on emerging issues. Its work has improved the technical quality and strategic orientation of GEF programs, supporting systemic, cross-sectoral approaches and advancing risk-informed design. However, its influence is shaped by an advisory mandate rather than direct implementation authority, which can limit the uptake of recommendations in country-level contexts. Stakeholders value its strategic thematic work, but note that the burden of routine project reviews may divert attention from broader horizon scanning and policy-oriented guidance to operational items that may be well covered by reviewers with deep project management and field experience. Updating the STAP's terms of reference and clarifying its focus could better align its expertise and governance with the evolving needs of the GEF, ensuring timely and impactful scientific input to the GEF's strategic directions while continuing to support innovation and quality assurance across the portfolio.

Country engagement has improved through the Country Engagement Strategy (CES), with opportunities for improvements in implementation. The CES has enhanced alignment between GEF programming and national priorities via upstream planning, national dialogues, and operational focal point support. In countries that have fully embraced the CES, cross-ministerial coordination has improved and GEF pipelines have become more strategically focused. Yet implementation has been uneven, with some dialogues occurring too late to influence programming and nonstate actor engagement remaining inconsistent. Strengthening focal point capacity, ensuring timely and inclusive dialogues, and improving monitoring systems will be critical to unlocking the full potential of the CES in GEF-9.

The GEF's financial foundation has long been regarded as one of its greatest strengths, underpinned by consistent donor confidence in its unique mandate to serve multiple conventions and deliver global environmental benefits. Successive replenishments have secured stable contributions that have enabled the GEF to maintain its catalytic role in supporting global environmental action. However, the donor base has narrowed over recent cycles, and contributions have become increasingly concentrated among a small number of donors. This concentration heightens exposure to financial and geopolitical risks. Despite record nominal funding secured for GEF-8, real-term resources have declined compared to GEF-5, although they remain higher than in GEF-6 and GEF-7. This erosion in purchasing power constrains the GEF's ability to meet rising global environmental demands. At the same time, the GEF has yet to fully leverage new sources of capital, such as philanthropic contributions and private finance, leaving significant opportunities for financial diversification untapped.

The predictability of resources provided through the STAR is widely recognized by recipient countries as a key comparative advantage of the GEF. Predictable resource allocation helps them—particularly those with capacity constraints—access GEF resources more effectively. However, channeling resources through the STAR can also result in resource fragmentation. The GEF thus has introduced greater flexibility for countries to use STAR resources across different focal areas, enabling interventions to be implemented at scale. Moving forward, the GEF should maintain the comparative advantage of predictable resource allocation while ensuring that supported activities are delivered at an appropriate scale. The STAR's share of total GEF funding has gradually declined, dropping from 53 percent in GEF-6 to 46 percent in GEF-8. This decline is largely due to reduced climate change allocations and a growing share directed to set-asides, especially for integrated programming.

Cofinancing remains central to the GEF model, demonstrating its catalytic effect in mobilizing additional resources; nevertheless, the quality and durability of cofinancing vary widely. Much of the reported cofinancing is derived from public sector budgets and linked to short-term project timelines rather than representing sustained commitments. Private sector participation is still limited, and contributions often take the form of in-kind support rather than significant financial investments, reducing their transformational potential. The GEF's flexible definition of cofinancing, which includes parallel financing and noncash contributions, has broadened participation but also raised questions about comparability and credibility, because these different types of contributions are not always equivalent or consistently reported. Realization rates are particularly low for loan-based cofinancing—55 percent of which goes unrealized—and for projects in LDCs and SIDS. In addition, verification of actual contributions is challenging due to incomplete documentation and difficulty tracking in-kind resources.

NGIs, designed to mobilize private capital and share risk, have demonstrated potential through blended finance models and guarantee mechanisms, but are underutilized due to structural barriers. These barriers include the complexity of structuring financial products under current GEF procedures, uneven Agency capacity for financial innovation, and the lack of robust risk-sharing mechanisms. Addressing these constraints—including revisiting the NGI operational cap and strengthening financial structuring capacity—will be critical for scaling and diversifying financing for environmentally sustainable solutions.

Results and learning systems

The GEF's systems for results, knowledge, and learning have shown meaningful improvements. However, to support adaptive management, innovation, scaling, and transformation, these systems require deeper integration into core project functions, improved feedback loops, and sustained institutional commitment and resourcing. The GEF has strengthened its results-based management framework by expanding tracking tools and refining its corporate results system to better capture global environmental outcomes. Indicators are more harmonized across Agencies, aligned with environmental conventions, and tailored for integrated programming. These enhancements bolster the GEF's ability to monitor biophysical results such as greenhouse gas reductions, land restoration, biodiversity gains, and pollutants control.

Despite improvements, the results-based management system remains heavily oriented toward outputs and near-term environmental outcomes. It has limited capacity to track deeper transformational changes including institutional strengthening, policy alignment, behavior shifts, and program sustainability. Reporting on socioeconomic co-benefits and inclusion outcomes remains inconsistent, making it difficult to assess broader development impacts. Weak feedback loops hinder the timely translation of data into adaptive decision-making and program refinement.

Knowledge efforts continue to grow, offering scope to overcome fragmentation and timing gaps. Knowledge management has advanced through targeted coordination platforms under integrated programs and thematic initiatives that produce technical guidance and foster exchanges within specific focal areas. Yet knowledge remains fragmented even within a program and is often confined to individual projects or Agencies. Timing mismatches—when global knowledge production does not align with country-level implementation—reduce practical value. Lessons from innovations such as blended finance initiatives, private sector engagement, and integrated programs are not consistently converted into operational tools or shared across programs and geographies. Notably, there is no centralized repository for knowledge generated across the integrated and impact programs despite knowledge being claimed as the core element of integrated programming value addition.

Institutional learning from challenges and failures is not yet fully systematized. While valuable insights on stakeholder engagement, financial design, and risk treatment are generated, they often remain confined to individual projects. Building on existing progress, the GEF should enhance feedback loops, create incentives for learning from failures, ensure structured uptake of evaluation findings, and translate lessons into practical guidance for both project and policy design—thereby moving toward a culture of continuous learning and improvement to support catalytic change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of OPS8 highlight both the progress and challenges facing the GEF as it strives for greater transformational impact. The GEF has demonstrated measurable environmental results, strengthened inclusion, expanded private sector engagement, and maintained one of the most efficient administrative structures among comparable funds. Its integrated programs have aligned global and national priorities, fostering innovative governance and knowledge sharing. Yet sustaining results beyond project closure, embedding innovation and risk-taking, deepening private sector engagement, and improving coordination across the growing number of financing windows remain critical challenges. These lessons point to the need for sharper selectivity, stronger sustainability planning, enhanced financial innovation, more inclusive and efficient country engagement, and a systematic approach to learning and adaptation.

The following recommendations outline how the GEF can build on its strengths while addressing these gaps to deliver deeper, more sustainable, and more scalable impact in GEF-9 and beyond.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen the transformational impact of integrated programming, focusing on strategic selectivity and consolidation. Integrated programs should be streamlined to fewer but deeper rather than broader, all-encompassing initiatives. They should be built around robust theories of change, explicit scaling pathways, and strong knowledge and learning platforms, with a centralized repository for knowledge and lessons. This focus will provide the clarity and depth needed to address systemic drivers of environmental degradation and deliver impact at scale, including in complex areas such as food systems and sustainable urban development. Implementation must also address challenges observed in current programs, including compressed design timelines, uneven coordination between global platforms and country-level child projects, and limited opportunities for inclusive stakeholder engagement during preparation. Clear roles and responsibilities across Agencies and countries, realistic timelines that prioritize depth over breadth, and mechanisms that link global knowledge support directly to in-country implementation are essential. Programs should be structured from the outset to attract cofinancing and private sector investment, aligning financial innovation and policy reforms with programmatic goals to deliver scalable solutions that endure well beyond GEF funding. There is a distinct need for a clear exit strategy in the individual integrated programs, including well-defined criteria and guidance for determining whether and when integrated programs should continue or be phased out.

Recommendation 2: Embed sustainability and financing arrangements at design to secure long-term outcomes. The GEF should require relevant projects to include sustainability and financing arrangements at the design stage. Early engagement with relevant ministries and technical agencies is essential to integrate environmental priorities into national budgets and financial systems, ensuring results are anchored in long-term country commitments. Greater attention should be given to institutional sustainability, including strong linkages with in-country institutions and stakeholders—notably local governments, the private sector, and civil society organizations—that can uphold and scale outcomes over time. Stronger linkages to complementary financing sources—such as the Green Climate Fund, the Adaptation Fund, and domestic revenue streams—could enable continuity and scaling beyond GEF funding. Tracking outcomes in select projects beyond closure will generate useful feedback to strengthen future programming and reinforce lasting impact.

Recommendation 3: Pursue higher-risk, high-reward innovation with appropriate safeguards and incentives, aligned with the GEF's risk appetite framework. To achieve transformational change, the GEF should, where possible, actively prioritize innovations that carry higher risk, but have the potential to deliver breakthrough environmental solutions. This requires giving Agencies clear guidance to manage risk appropriately, deploying risk-sharing mechanisms, and enabling engagement in frontier markets and disruptive approaches such as advanced digital tools, artificial intelligence applications, and nature-based solutions. Innovation must be explicit and deliberate, with clear pathways for scaling, stronger integration of theories of change into adaptive management, and robust systems for monitoring and real-time learning. Embedding risk and innovation metrics into results frameworks and institutionalizing knowledge exchange will ensure lessons are captured, successful models are replicated, and innovative solutions achieve systemwide impact.

Recommendation 4: Unlock private sector potential and expand the use of NGIs to deliver scalable change. Private sector engagement should be strengthened by embedding it more systematically across GEF programming. This includes expanding partnerships with agribusiness, financial institutions, and small and medium enterprises; aligning project design with private sector incentives; and fostering enabling conditions—such as policy reform, standards, and institutional frameworks—that encourage investment and behavioral change.

Expand the use of NGIs to mobilize private capital and share risk, particularly in sectors requiring larger-scale and more innovative financing. Countries and Agencies need enhanced capacity to design blended finance solutions, with incentives to integrate private sector approaches across all focal areas. The GEF should capitalize on Agency strengths, leveraging multilateral development banks' investment and risk-sharing capacity alongside the technical expertise and policy support of United Nations Agencies and others. Despite growing demand, the share of NGIs in the GEF portfolio remains small due to limited resources allocated to the window, and countries are hesitant to use the STAR allocations. The GEF should seek to improve countries' understanding of NGIs and can enhance conditions for their use. Removing constraints such as the cap on NGIs can enable larger, transformative investments that can attract institutional and commercial finance in collaboration with multilateral development banks, and must be carefully balanced to avoid crowding out smaller, innovative NGI initiatives.

Recommendation 5: Streamline processes and improve efficiency across the GEF family of funds, where possible, to reduce application complexity and support countries, particularly those with limited capacity. Aligning operational processes across all GEF-managed trust funds and funding windows, to the extent feasible, could simplify access and ease the administrative burden on countries and Agencies. Project approval timelines should be accelerated through simplified review layers; a clear division of roles between the Secretariat, the GEF Agencies, and the STAP; and time-bound steps for each stage of the cycle. Simplified procedures for integrated programs can avoid delays from complex coordination arrangements. Strengthening readiness requirements at Chief Executive Officer endorsement, expanding the use of digital tools for project development and monitoring, and systematically tracking cycle performance will further improve responsiveness. Regular benchmarking against peer funds will help maintain the GEF's comparative advantage while ensuring countries can efficiently access and implement resources across all GEF funds.

Recommendation 6: Take decisive steps to address structural challenges within the GEF partnership and create an inclusive, transparent, and impactful country engagement process. This requires clarifying the dual role of Agencies as both implementing and executing entities when present, supported by transparent mechanisms to manage potential conflicts of interest and strengthen trust. Greater collaboration should be incentivized by leveraging Agencies' comparative strengths, reducing duplication of effort, and enhancing the overall efficiency of resource use. The GEF Council should review and update the STAP's terms of reference to align its structure, expertise, and work program with evolving strategic directions—thereby enhancing transparency, advisory clarity, and governance to ensure timely, high-quality scientific and technical input.

Institutionalize country engagement through early and inclusive dialogues that involve both environmental and nonenvironmental ministries as well as civil society and the private sector. Strengthening the capacity of operational focal points will be critical to coordinating effectively across ministries and with other environmental funds, ensuring alignment with national priorities. At the same time, the GEF should adopt a unified external partnership strategy that brings together other global environmental funds, philanthropy, civil society, the private sector, and financial institutions, while creating knowledge platforms to facilitate peer learning, replication of successful approaches, and the diffusion of innovative solutions.

Recommendation 7: Encourage the GEF Agencies to share country-specific priorities and competencies to improve transparency and inclusivity in national planning processes. This should be done early in the replenishment cycle to inform upstream technical planning with operational focal points and shared as part of the Country Engagement Strategy, as appropriate, to ensure that these processes and approaches are openly shared with all stakeholders. Countries and Agencies should be asked to collaboratively produce a concise outcome document summarizing priorities and agreed-upon actions following the completion of the national GEF portfolio planning process. Together, these measures will strengthen partnerships, reduce fragmentation and concentration, enhance country ownership, and improve the environmental and development impact of GEF programming.

Recommendation 8: Strengthen financial sustainability and reduce reliance on a limited group of donors by improving cofinancing practices and building on current efforts to diversify the funding base. Cofinancing targets should be recalibrated with differentiated, realistic expectations based on country income levels, project types, and financing conditions. These targets must be supported by standardized definitions of financial, in-kind, and parallel contributions, as well as independent verification mechanisms by Agencies at midterm and completion. Transparency is essential, with disaggregated data on cofinancing commitments and realization published regularly. Performance assessments should be focused on realized, high-quality leverage rather than pledged amounts.

To secure long-term funding stability, the GEF should adopt a strategic resource mobilization plan that incorporates efforts to broaden the sovereign donor base, engages former contributors, and extends outreach to underrepresented regions. The plan should also establish a structured framework to engage philanthropic foundations, corporations, and other nonsovereign contributors, drawing on proven approaches from leading global funds. In parallel, the GEF should explore engagement with regional and global groups with a strong environmental focus, such as the G20, which has already issued recommendations directed to the GEF and whose members are all GEF partners. Together, these actions would reduce concentration risk, broaden the GEF's financial base, and enhance its ability to respond to escalating global environmental challenges.

Recommendation 9: Integrate knowledge, results, and learning systems into a coherent platform that drives adaptive management and innovation across the GEF partnership. This requires establishing a unified knowledge platform accessible to Agencies, countries, civil society, and partners and focused on capturing and sharing lessons from integrated programs, innovative approaches, and private sector engagement. Indicators and evaluation tools must be strengthened to measure systemic change, behavior shifts, and resilience outcomes, moving beyond output-based reporting. Expanding training and peer learning will ensure that evidence and best practices directly inform project and program design, while institutionalized mechanisms for learning from both successful and failed projects will embed continuous improvement and innovation into all aspects of GEF programming.

OPS8

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