Review of the GEF Management Action Record

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Foreword

The Review of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Management Action Record aims to examine GEF follow-up on evaluation recommendations made by the GEF Independent Evaluation Office and provide feedback on implementation of the management action record process following its 2021 revision. This is the first time that the GEF management action record process has been thoroughly examined to distill lessons.

The review found that GEF management undertakes substantial follow-up actions on the evaluations presented to the GEF Council. Thus, broadly, the system is working as it should. However, there are areas for improvement. These include ensuring that the action plans list specific and time-bound actions, development of a suitable platform for tracking follow-up, and facilitating greater participation of the GEF Agencies in the management action record process. GEF management agreed with the review findings and recommendations.

The review was presented to the GEF Council at its November 2022 meeting. It took note of the review findings and management's response to these findings. Through this report, we are sharing the lessons from the review with a wider audience.

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Acknowledgments

Abbreviations

GEF   Global Environment Facility

IEO   Independent Evaluation Office

M&E   monitoring and evaluation

MAR   management action record

NPFE   national portfolio formulation exercise

PMIS   Project Management Information System

SIDS   small island developing states

STAR   System for Transparent Allocation of Resources

UNDP   United Nations Development Programme

GEF replenishment periods

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

Executive summary

This review sought to understand the principal themes for recommendations in evaluations of the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and the factors that affect the level of adoption and follow-up of IEO evaluation recommendations. It provides early feedback on management responses, including action plans, to evaluations presented by the IEO since the transition to a revised management action record (MAR) process in 2021. By assessing the MAR systems of other multilateral institutions, the review draws lessons from their experience.

The review covers 16 annual MAR reports presented to the GEF Council between 2006 and 2021, including 186 evaluation recommendations/GEF Council decisions of 59 IEO evaluations and their management responses, and 435 records of management's self-assessments of the adoption of recommendations, together with the corresponding IEO validations presented in the MAR.

MAIN FINDINGS

Sixty-one percent of GEF IEO evaluation recommendations were operational in nature, and 33 percent were fully adopted upon graduation or retirement. Policy recommendations were more likely to be fully adopted. The recommendations that were not fully adopted were often those that had financial implications or practical constraints. A few issues, such as improving data quality and data management, are repeated in GEF IEO recommendations over time, reflecting both the importance of the issue and the sustained efforts required to address it.

The management response rate to evaluation recommendations has significantly improved since the MAR process reform. Additionally, GEF management agreement with IEO recommendations has been increasing over time, in part due to the engagement between the IEO and GEF management on evaluation findings and recommendations. The level of detail in management responses regarding the specific types of actions and the timelines to address recommendations has also improved significantly since the MAR reform, with about two-thirds of the management responses including specific actions with timelines.

Recommendations that were not accompanied by a management response were not likely to achieve full adoption. Recommendations are more likely to achieve full adoption when follow-up actions are identified in the management responses. It is often difficult to determine the extent of progress without a timeline for

implementation of follow-up actions. When the management response provides a time-bound action plan to address the recommendation, it is feasible to assess implementation progress and adoption level by the target completion date.

The concurrence between management's self-assessment ratings and IEO validation ratings has improved over the GEF replenishment periods, demonstrating a shared understanding on implementation progress of follow-up actions to recommendations. It takes four years on average for the majority of recommendations to achieve at least a substantial level of adoption. A Council decision and the associated recommendations are retired when less than substantial progress has been achieved in their implementation and more than five years have elapsed since the decision was made, or subsequent Council decisions have superseded the earlier decision. Seventy-five percent of retired recommendations are rated as less than substantially adopted.

The benchmarking exercise found that the GEF formal process of tracking and reporting on implementation of recommendations shares some good practices in institutions with independent evaluation units, and that the GEF is more advanced than other global partnerships in having such a formal system. Gaps identified include limited time for management to develop detailed action plans with timelines, unclear articulation on the level of agreement with each recommendation, management responses that do not always include action plans with timelines for recommendations that are agreed with, and the absence of an online platform to record and monitor implementation of recommendations or which facilitates the participation of relevant parties.

CONCLUSIONS

GEF IEO recommendations are implemented with substantial follow-up actions. During the assessed period (2006–21), 74 percent of the recommendations were adopted with full or substantial status. Policy recommendations were more likely to be fully adopted than were recommendations on strategic or operational issues. Recommendations were more likely to be adopted when they were aligned with the GEF Secretariat's work plans on GEF corporate-level policies.

Recommendations were more likely to be implemented and adopted when management expressed full agreement and clearly identified follow-up actions in the management responses to recommendations. When recommendations were fully agreed upon by management, they were more likely to be adopted (at least substantially), compared to partially agreed or rejected recommendations. Recommendations were also more likely to be fully adopted when follow-up actions to address them were specified in the management responses.

Management responses prepared after the MAR process reform provide a greater level of detail in action plans to address recommendations, but tracking progress on implementation will require actions and timelines in all cases. Both management's response rate and level of agreement with recommendations have improved since the change in the MAR process was introduced in June 2021. The majority of the management responses prepared after the MAR reform included action plans with time frames. Where such timelines are missing, it will be difficult to track whether follow-up actions are completed in a timely manner.

The concurrence in management's self-assessment and the GEF IEO's validation ratings has improved, indicating a shared understanding on implementation and adoption. The GEF MAR adopts a two-tier approach to assessing the adoption of recommendations, which involves self-assessment by management and its validation by the GEF IEO. Concurrence in the assessment

ratings has improved over the GEF replenishment periods. Going forward, the assessment rating scale in the MAR will be updated to assess progress against the management action plans.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that while the GEF MAR system has several good practices, there are gaps that can be addressed to make the system serve as a better accountability and learning tool. The GEF MAR process has improved since the reform in 2021. The system would benefit further from clearly addressing the recommendations to specific actors in the partnership, a clear articulation of acceptance or rejection of recommendations by management, a time-bound action plan in the management response, greater participation of GEF Agencies on relevant recommendations, and the use of a suitable platform to improve access and efficiency in recording and monitoring the implementation of recommendations. If a period of more than eight weeks prior to presentation of an evaluation is required to develop a detailed action plan with timelines in response to an IEO evaluation, the Council might, in certain cases, consider allowing the presentation of the detailed action plan and timelines by the GEF Secretariat at the next Council meeting. The GEF Secretariat would still present a management response at the Council meeting in which the IEO evaluation is presented.

RECOMMENDATIONS

GEF management should ensure that the action plan included in its management response to GEF IEO recommendations lists specific actions with timelines where appropriate. GEF management should ensure that the management response to an evaluation clearly indicates the level of agreement with each recommendation. Where management fully or partially agrees with a recommendation, a clear articulation of time-bound actions should be included in the management response which will make it possible to track progress on the implementation of follow-up actions and report on these to the Council. Where additional time is required by the GEF Secretariat to develop detailed action plans and timelines on certain evaluations, the Council may consider giving the GEF Secretariat time until the next Council meeting to present the details.

The GEF should improve the MAR process and reporting through a more participatory approach involving the GEF Agencies, where relevant, and develop a suitable platform for tracking the implementation of action plans. Where IEO recommendations are clearly directed toward GEF Agencies or other actors, GEF management should explore ways to incorporate Agencies' and/or others' feedback and comments when preparing action plans to implement IEO recommendations and in assessing the implementation progress of follow-up actions. In this way, Agencies or other actors can respond to recommendations that are directed toward them and will be able to implement and track these recommendations. A suitable platform that centralizes the recording of recommendations, management responses, action plans, and follow-up will help streamline access and improve efficiency in monitoring the status of implementation.

Introduction

In November 2004, during discussion of the elements for a new GEF monitoring and evaluation (M&E) policy, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Council agreed with a proposal by the GEF Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) to develop procedures "for the follow-up of monitoring and evaluation reports through management responses" and for "preparing a management action record (MAR) for reporting on the follow-up on the Council's decisions on evaluation recommendations" (GEF 2004). In the November 2005 meeting, the Council approved the procedures and format of the GEF management action record (GEF 2005), and requested the GEF Secretariat and the GEF IEO to prepare the GEF MAR in consultation with the appropriate GEF entities.

1.1   Evolution of the MAR

The MAR has been presented to the GEF Council on an annual basis since June 2006. It is the main accountability mechanism for monitoring and reporting on the implementation of Council decisions related to evaluation recommendations.

Until 2021, the Council endorsed the recommendations of IEO evaluations, and the GEF IEO tracked implementation of the recommendations.

The GEF Secretariat provided a management response to IEO evaluations and recommendations, but the specific actions included in the management response were not endorsed by the Council. Each year, as part of the MAR process, the IEO reported on the implementation progress of the evaluation recommendations, and not on the specific actions noted in the management response; however, the management response was included in the MAR template to provide context on progress.

As a follow-up to the Third Professional Peer Review of the Independent Evaluation Function of the GEF (Menon 2020), the IEO, in consultation with the GEF Secretariat and the Council, agreed on a revised process. As part of this revision, GEF management responds to each IEO evaluation recommendation with an action plan, and the Council comments on and endorses this action plan. **Under this revised process, the Council decision does not endorse the IEO recommendation, but rather endorses the management action plan.** The IEO tracks progress on implementation of the action plan endorsed by the Council. While this revised process maintains a focus on follow-up actions instead of assessing progress against actions recommended by the IEO, the MAR tracks progress against the actions and time frames provided

in management's action plan. In the wake of the revised MAR process, the GEF Council began to endorse management's action plans in June 2021.

As the GEF transitions to this new MAR process, this is a timely opportunity to learn from the GEF's long MAR experience. This review seeks to gain some early insights into whether the action plans prepared by GEF management provide a good basis to track progress in their implementation, and learn from current practices in peer organizations and the GEF Agencies. The review, which is the first of the GEF MAR, aims to enhance understanding in these areas. An assessment of actual progress in implementation of GEF action plans will begin in 2023; this will include an update of the MAR template and rating scale.

1.2 MAR process and assessment ratings

Key steps performed prior to 2021 in the MAR process for assessing implementation of recommendations endorsed by the Council include the following:

- After the evaluation report is shared with GEF management, its recommendations are discussed with management before report finalization, and a management response is prepared addressing the evaluation's recommendations.
- The evaluation recommendations and corresponding management responses are presented to the GEF Council for discussion.
- The IEO compiles the evaluation recommendations, management responses, and Council decisions in the MAR after Council endorsement of IEO recommendations.
- On an annual basis, GEF management self-assesses, and the IEO validates, progress on the adoption and implementation of recommendations tracked in the MAR. This assessment uses a four-point rating

scale to categorize the adoption level of recommendations:

- **High:** Fully adopted and fully incorporated into policy, strategy, or operations
- **Substantial:** Decision largely adopted but not fully incorporated into policy, strategy, or operations as of yet
- **Medium:** Adopted in some operational and policy work, but not to a significant degree in key areas
- **Negligible:** No evidence or plan for adoption, or plan and actions for adoption are in a very preliminary stage.

- The IEO presents an overall analysis on adoption of recommendations to the GEF Council in its annual performance report at each June Council meeting.

A recommendation may be graduated or retired from the MAR. A recommendation is graduated when it achieves a high or substantial level of adoption.[1] A recommendation may be retired based on subsequent Council decisions, or where further progress on adoption is likely to be slow and drawn out. A recommendation is automatically retired when a decision has been reported on in the MAR for five years but has not achieved a high or substantial level of adoption. Often, such recommendations are noted in subsequent evaluations conducted on a similar theme or issue.

The revised MAR process retains most of the above-described elements. However, instead of tracking the implementation of IEO evaluation recommendations, the MAR focuses on implementation of management's action plans endorsed by the GEF Council.

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[1] Some recommendations may be maintained in the MAR even after achieving substantial progress, if the GEF IEO assesses that a higher level of adoption is feasible.

Review objectives and scope

This review aimed at understanding the factors that affect the level of adoption and follow-up of IEO evaluation recommendations. It also provides early feedback on the management responses, including the action plans, to the evaluations presented by the IEO since the transition to a revised MAR process in 2021. By assessing the MAR systems of other multilateral institutions, the review draws lessons from their experience.

The in-depth analysis of this review covers 16 annual MAR reports presented to the GEF Council between 2006 and 2021, including 186 evaluation recommendations/GEF Council decisions of 59 IEO evaluations and their management responses, and 435 records of management's self-assessments of the adoption of recommendations, together with the corresponding IEO validations presented in the MAR.[1] The IEO has presented 35 recommendations from nine evaluations since the reform of the MAR process in June 2021; this review assessed the quality of the management responses to these recommendations and compared them with management responses developed before the MAR reform.

2.1 Questions and methodology

Based on the objectives and scope, the review was guided by the following questions:

- What are the principal themes for recommendations in IEO evaluations, and what has been the GEF's record in adoption and implementation?
- Do the management responses provide a sufficient basis for assessing the implementation progress of follow-up actions?
- What are some current practices across multilateral organizations in assessing progress in implementation of management action plans to address an evaluation's recommendations?

The following methods were used to collect information.

- **Portfolio review.** A database of the MAR annual reports was compiled to take stock of the following: duration for which a recommendation is

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[1] Recommendations from the comprehensive evaluations of the GEF (formerly overall performance studies, or OPSs) are not tracked in MARs; hence, OPS high-level recommendations and their management responses are not included in this review.

tracked; GEF management's self-assessment on the level of adoption of a relevant recommendation/Council decision; independent assessment on adoption by the IEO.

- **Interviews.** An interview protocol was used to interview key stakeholders involved in the GEF MAR process, including GEF management and GEF Agencies (annex b).
- **Benchmarking of MAR systems.** This included document review and comparison of the MAR systems of nine multilateral organizations that have independent evaluation functions (annex c). MAR approaches—including the roles of the key actors, the MAR process flow, ratings of management action status, and MAR information management platforms used to facilitate tracking of progress—were compared.

GEF IEO recommendations were categorized based on theme or subject matter and the targeted level of the results chain. The review assessed whether a management response addressed each of the recommendations of the corresponding evaluation, and whether it indicated the level of agreement with the recommendation and provided detail on follow-up actions. The categories of recommendations and assessment of the specificity in the management response were used to identify factors that may be associated with the adoption of recommendations.

2.2 Categorization of recommendations

The United Nations Evaluation Group defines evaluation recommendations as

> proposals aimed at enhancing the effectiveness, efficiency, impact, relevance, sustainability, coherence, added value or coverage of the operation, portfolio, strategy or policy under evaluation. Recommendations are intended to inform decision making, including program design and resource allocations. (UNEG 2018)

In line with this definition, 186 recommendations in the GEF MAR were classified into three categories based on their focus.

- **Strategic:** recommendations related to GEF strategic directions and programming
- **Operational:** recommendations related to GEF operations and implementation of strategy/policy
- **Policy:** recommendations related to the development and revision of GEF policies and principles.

Depending on their stated intended results, the recommendations were classified into one of three levels of the results chain.

- **Directional:** results set as goals and objectives
- **Outcome-oriented:** desired change for improvements in operations, strategy, or policy
- **Output-oriented:** specific actions contributing to achieving outcomes.

2.3 Specificity of management response

Management responses prepared before and after the revision of the MAR process were compared and assessed along three aspects.

- **Response rate:** whether a management response was provided for each recommendation
- **Level of agreement:** whether the management response explicitly stated the level of agreement with a recommendation
- **Details of follow-up actions:** whether time-bound actions to address the given recommendation were specified in the management response.

The management response to each recommendation was analyzed using sentiment analysis (with the NVivo software) to better understand and codify

management's level of agreement with/acceptance of each recommendation. In this review, four types of sentiments were identified in the management responses, corresponding to three different levels of agreement:

- **Agreed:** full agreement with specified actions (positive), or broad agreement (neutral)
- **Partially agreed:** partial agreement (mixed)
- **Rejected:** did not agree (negative).

Findings

3.1 Types of recommendations

This section presents the distribution of different categories of IEO evaluation recommendations. The relationship between the types of recommendations and the level of adoption is also presented.

The majority of GEF IEO evaluation recommendations were operational in nature. Of the 186 recommendations tracked in the MAR, 61 percent (113) were related to operational issues, followed by strategic issues (32 percent, 59) and policies

(7 percent, 14). As shown in figure 3.1, operational recommendations were mainly output oriented (56 percent, 63), while recommendations concerning strategies and policy topics were mainly outcome oriented (90 percent and 71 percent, respectively).

Directional recommendations that set goals or objectives for desired changes were found in recommendations focusing on operational issues. The examples in box 3.1 illustrate the types of recommendations and intended results expected from the evaluation recommendations.

Figure 3.1 Recommendations by type and intended result

a. Type (number and percent)

- Strategic
- Operational
- Policy

14
7%

59
32%

113
61%

b. Intended results

- Directional
- Outcome-oriented
- Output-oriented

Strategic: 53%, 6%
Operational: 6%, 44%, 63%
Policy: 10%, 4%

Outcome-oriented strategic recommendation. "The GEF Council should consider further investment and capacity development to assist CEITS [countries with economies in transition] in addressing the remaining threats to the ozone layer" (Recommendation 1 of the 2009 GEF Annual Report on Impact).

Output-oriented strategic recommendation. "The GEF should develop country strategies for large recipients of GEF support such as the Philippines" (Recommendation 1 of the 2007 GEF Country Portfolio Evaluation in Philippines).

Directional operational recommendation. "Recommendations to improve project M&E systems have been issued in the past, as well as request to include an assessment of project M&E systems in all terminal evaluation reports. While there have been advances in upgrading project M&E systems, there is still considerable room for improvement, and therefore the Office considers that these recommendations continue to be valid" (Recommendation 1 of the 2004 GEF Annual Performance Report).

Outcome-oriented operational recommendation. "Address the shortcomings of the focal area tracking tools. The GEF needs to rethink the approach to

tracking tools for the biodiversity and multiple focal area projects" (Recommendation 3 of the 2017 Review of Results-Based Management in the GEF).

Output-oriented operational recommendation. "Fully documented project proposals should be endorsed by the CEO on a rolling basis" (Recommendation 5 of the 2006 Evaluation of the GEF Activity Cycle and Modalities).

Outcome-oriented policy recommendation. "The GEF Secretariat should make efforts to improve consistency regarding its understanding and application of the GEF gender mainstreaming policy and the Gender Equality Action Plan to the LDCF." (Recommendation 2 of the 2016 Evaluation of the Least Developed Countries Fund).

Output-oriented policy recommendation. "Monitor application of Minimum Standard 4 and Indigenous Peoples' portfolio. ...Agencies should inform GEF of the safeguard risk categorization assigned to projects involving indigenous peoples and keep GEF informed of safeguards implementation issues through monitoring and reporting" (Recommendation 5 of the 2015 Review of GEF's Engagement with Indigenous Peoples).

Source: GEF MAR annual reports.

Note: No directional recommendation was found in strategic or policy recommendations.

A higher percentage of policy recommendations achieved full adoption compared with strategic and operational recommendations. Of the 13 policy recommendations that have graduated/retired from the MAR, 46 percent (6) achieved full adoption; while 27 percent (13) of strategic recommendations and 33 percent (30) of operational recommendations were fully adopted upon graduation/retirement (figure 3.2).

The fully adopted policy recommendations are related to recent updates and revision of GEF

corporate-level policies in GEF-6, such as the revision of the GEF Policy on Gender Equality and the updated GEF Policy on Environmental and Social Safeguards. The recommendations were presented when processes to review and revise these policies were initiated by the GEF Secretariat. The timing and alignment of the IEO's policy recommendations with the GEF Secretariat's revision plans led to their full adoption.

The fully adopted strategic and operational recommendations were aligned with replenishment

Figure 3.2 Level of adoption by type of recommendations
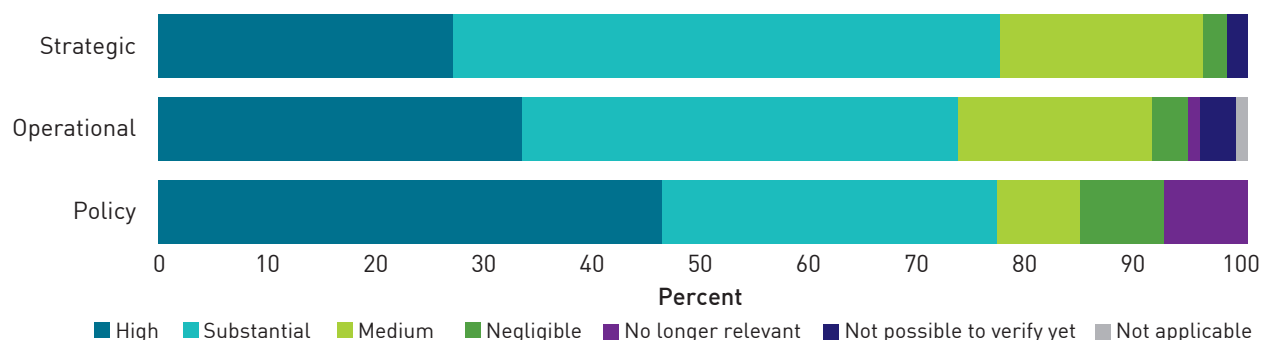
Note: This analysis includes 151 recommendations that have graduated or been retired from MAR tracking.

discussions. The recommendations were timely and influenced GEF programming for the following GEF period. For example, the 2009 GEF Annual Report on Impact recommended that "the GEF Council should consider further investment and capacity development to assist CEITs [countries with economies in transition] in addressing the remaining threats to the ozone layer" (GEF EO 2010). This achieved full adoption within two years of implementation, as the GEF-5 focal area strategy for chemicals developed in 2010 included provisions for investments in economies in transition to support them in meeting their reporting obligations under the Montreal Protocol.

Another example is a recommendation from the 2013 Midterm Evaluation of the National Portfolio Formulation Exercise (NPFE), which called for continued implementation of NFPEs by the GEF Secretariat to maintain neutrality between countries and Agencies and to provide funding for a country-led NPFE on a voluntary basis (GEF IEO 2014c). This recommendation was fully adopted in 2014, with a proposal developed by the GEF Secretariat, and was included in the replenishment documents for GEF-6.

Recommendations that were not fully adopted were often those that had financial implications. For example, the 2004 Program Study on International Waters recommended that the International

Waters Task Force produce an accessible focal area manual to clarify the processes related to recurrent difficulties observed in project design and implementation (GEF EO 2005). Management's self-assessment in the MAR reported that there was limited progress in implementing this recommendation as additional resources were required to produce the manual. A training course was provided to fill the gap in the interim. This recommendation was retired with a medium level of adoption.

Some recommendations were not adopted due to practical constraints. The 2009 Annual Country Portfolio Evaluation Report in GEF-4 recommended that the GEF focus its attention on countries in exceptional situations concerning limited access to international financial institutions, such as Syria (GEF EO 2009). After being tracked in the MAR for five years, this recommendation was retired with negligible action, as noted by management's self-assessment that "limited access to IFIs [international financial institutions] by certain countries may result from larger political considerations that are beyond the remit of the Secretariat and the GEF network" (GEF IEO 2014b).

Of the six directional recommendations that set goals or objectives for continued improvement of GEF operations, it was difficult to assess the extent of their achievement in the MAR (figure 3.3). For

Figure 3.3 Level of adoption by intended result of recommendations
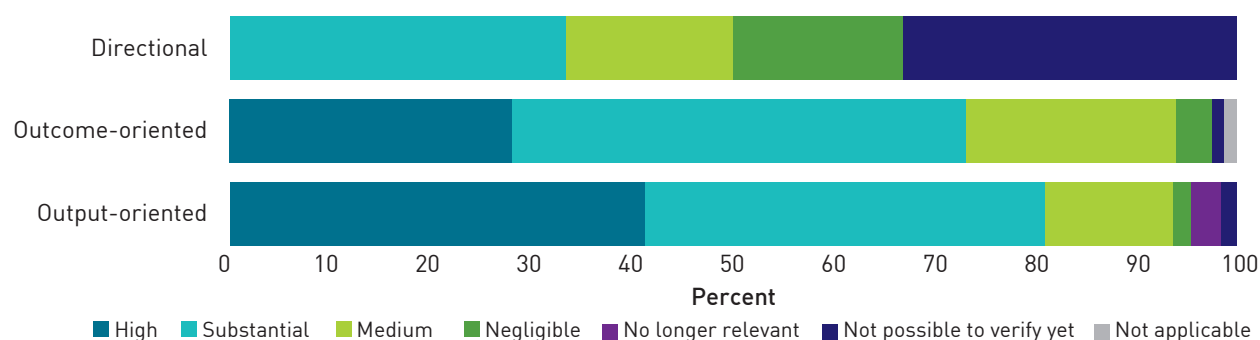
Note: This analysis includes 151 recommendations that have graduated or been retired from MAR tracking.

example, the 2011 Annual Performance Report recommended that the GEF Agencies continue to include operational focal points in M&E plans at project entry and improve their efforts to specify how the operational focal points would be engaged in project or program M&E (GEF EO 2013). After being tracked in the MAR for two years, the IEO retired this recommendation in 2014 as "not possible to verify," stating that "although some actions are starting to take place, it is not practical to verify the extent of such engagement" (GEF IEO 2014b). Several of these issues were then assessed and noted in subsequent thematic evaluations.

A few issues are repeated in GEF IEO recommendations over time, reflecting both the importance of the issue and the sustained efforts required to address it. For example, improving data management and data quality in the GEF's Project Management Information System (PMIS, now replaced by the GEF Portal) is a recommendation theme picked up by six different evaluations from 2007 to 2017; while substantial progress has been made, there is still further work to be done. Another example is the recommendation for improving the System for Transparent Allocation of Resources (STAR) calculation and data quality control. This recommendation was included in the Midterm Evaluation of the STAR in 2013 (GEF IEO 2014d), and was graduated in 2015 as largely

adopted (rated as substantial). The evaluation of the STAR in 2017 acknowledged substantial progress following the 2013 recommendation, but identified other areas where improvement is needed, including data quality and calculation accuracy in the STAR models (GEF IEO 2018b). This recommendation was assessed as largely adopted and was graduated from the MAR in 2021.

The recommendation for improving the measurement of greenhouse gas emissions reduction in GEF projects was first included in the 2004 Program Study on Climate Change (GEF EO 2004). It was retired in 2006, as the methodological guideline was still in progress and required further resources. The 2013 GEF Annual Impact Report brought up the recommendation once again (GEF IEO 2014a). This time, the GEF Secretariat and the GEF Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel formulated a research project with three working groups to improve the GEF greenhouse gas accounting methodologies. As a result, the "Guidelines for Greenhouse Gas Emissions Accounting and Reporting for GEF Projects" was developed and presented to the Council in June 2015. This recommendation was graduated from the MAR in 2016 with a substantial level of adoption.

3.2 Management response to IEO evaluation recommendations

RESPONSE RATE

The management response rate to evaluation recommendations has significantly improved since the MAR process reform. On average, 89 percent of Council-endorsed recommendations received management responses before the MAR process revision (table 3.1). Since the change in the MAR process was introduced in June 2021, all of the 35 recommendations (100 percent) received a specific management response from GEF management,[1] demonstrating a significant increase in the response rate. Having the Council endorse management's action plan contributed to this improvement, as the GEF Secretariat gives more attention to providing a response to each recommendation.

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[1] The IEO presented 35 recommendations from nine evaluations in the three most recent GEF Council meetings (June 2021, December 2021, and June 2022). The nine high-level recommendations from the OPS7 report are not included here.

LEVEL OF AGREEMENT IN MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

Management responses are usually not clear on the extent of agreement with IEO recommendations. GEF management uses different terms to suggest agreement with IEO recommendations, such as "agrees," "takes note of," "welcomes," "supports," and "appreciates." The sentiment analysis conducted as part of this review used contextual information provided in the management responses to determine whether the terms used by the Secretariat indicated full or partial agreement. This review categorized the levels of agreement as agreed, partially agreed, or rejected, corresponding to four types of sentiments. Box 3.2 shows examples of management responses expressing different levels of agreement.

GEF management agreement with IEO recommendations has been increasing over time. Of the 35 recommendations presented after the June 2021 MAR reform, 89 percent received full agreement from management; this reflects a nominal increase over the previous period, when the average agreement rate was 85 percent (table 3.2). During GEF-3, when the MAR was a relatively new instrument at the GEF, management's agreement rate was lower, at 76 percent (at 95 percent confidence). There also appears to be a decrease in the number of instances of GEF IEO recommendations

Table 3.1 Distribution of management responses to evaluation recommendations

Management response	Before MAR reform						After MAR reform
	GEF-3	GEF-4	GEF-5	GEF-6	GEF-7[a]	Subtotal	
Provided	34	46	27	55	2	164	35
Not provided	4	5	1	10	n.a.	20	n.a.
Total[b]	38	51	28	65	2	184	35
Response rate (%)	90	90	96	85	10	89	100

Note: n.a. = none of the observations belonged to the given category for the period in question.

a. In GEF-7, only two recommendations, both from the 2020 Program Evaluation of the Least Developed Countries Fund, were included in the MAR as of June 2021.

b. Two recommendations were directed to the GEF IEO; as these did not require responses from GEF management, they were excluded from this analysis.

Box 3.2 Examples of management responses expressing different levels of agreement

Full agreement (positive sentiment). "The Secretariat fully agrees with Recommendation 2 that GEF-6 strategies should 'enable a more flexible and strategic approach to developing Multi-Focal Area projects, which would be able to adopt elements from several focal areas in a consistent manner.' The Secretariat and the Agencies have initiated discussions in regards to the streamlining measures, and will continue to work with our partners to develop a more coherent strategy for Multi-Focal Area projects in GEF-6."

Full agreement (neutral sentiment). "The Secretariat appreciates IEO's review of results-based management (RBM), which comes at an important time for the GEF Partnership. As recognized in the review, RBM has been a key area for internal reform in GEF-6, and further work is required to put in place an effective, fit-for-purpose results architecture for GEF-7. Accordingly, the Secretariat agrees broadly with IEO's recommendations and is in the process of addressing many of these" (Management Response to the 2017 Review of Results-Based Management in the GEF).

Partial agreement (mixed sentiment). "While we agree with the need to further refine, clarify, and strengthen the Strategic Priorities and the utility of the impact and coverage indicators and their associated targets, we believe the Study failed to acknowledge that these efforts have already brought substantial strategic direction to the GEF Biodiversity Program during GEF-3" (Management Response to Recommendation 8 from the 2004 Program Study on Biodiversity).

Rejection (negative sentiment). "The Secretariat does not support this recommendation. The Secretariat has an obligation to respect the focal area allocations agreed during the replenishment negotiations. From the perspective of a country, increasing flexibility implies greater autonomy on how resources are used. Increasing flexibility means a fundamental shift in resources among focal areas that could be in gross contravention of replenishment agreements" (Management Response to Recommendation 1 from the 2013 Midterm Evaluation of the STAR).

Source: GEF MAR annual reports.

Table 3.2 Distribution of recommendations by level of agreement and GEF replenishment period

Level of agreement	Before MAR reform						After MAR reform
	GEF-3	GEF-4	GEF-5	GEF-6	GEF-7[a]	Subtotal	
Agreed	26	41	23	48	2	140	31
Partially agreed	7	3	3	4	0	17	4
Rejected	1	2	1	3	0	7	0
Total	34	46	27	55	2	164	35
Agreement rate (%)	76	89	85	87	100	85	89

Note: The agreement rate is calculated as a percentage of agreed-upon recommendations of the total recommendations. Only the 164 recommendations that received management responses were included in the analysis.

a. In GEF-7, only two recommendations, both from the 2020 Program Evaluation of the Least Developed Countries Fund, were included in the MAR as of June 2021.

being rejected by GEF management, reflecting a greater clarity and common interpretation of evaluation recommendations. The engagement between the IEO and GEF management on the recommendations has contributed to this clarity and agreement.

Before the MAR reform, management's main reasons for partial agreement or rejection of 24 recommendations (15 percent) included the following:

- Recommended actions have been adopted by the GEF Secretariat, or recommendations did not fully reflect ongoing efforts made by the GEF Secretariat.
- Recommended actions were not within the GEF Secretariat's responsibility.
- Recommended actions had implications for financing or required additional resources.

DETAILS OF FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS IN THE MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

The level of detail in management responses regarding the specific types of actions and the timelines to address recommendations has improved significantly since the MAR reform. Each of the 35 recommendations presented to the Council after the MAR process reform received a management response, 86 percent of which have specified follow-up actions. This represents a significant improvement over the period before the MAR revision, when this figure was 57 percent (table 3.3). For example, the 2021 Evaluation of the Agency Self-Evaluation Systems recommended that the GEF Secretariat and the GEF Agencies strengthen the use of midterm reviews for learning and adaptive management (GEF 2021). GEF management fully agreed with this recommendation and identified three concrete actions in its management response: strengthening guidance, implementing a more efficient midterm review process, and better tracking of midterm review submissions.

The majority of the management responses to recommendations specify actions along with time frames (63 percent), representing an improvement from 31 percent for the pre-reform period. These management responses included either a specific completion date for the identified actions or a broad time frame of implementation. For the remaining 37 percent, it will be difficult to track time-bound progress. The findings show that, of the recommendations for which management should have specified follow-up actions, 14 percent did not include such specifics. Similarly, for 37 percent of recommendations, time frames have not been provided; in these cases, it will be difficult to track whether follow-up actions are completed in a time-bound manner.

Table 3.3 Distribution of management responses by the level of detail

Management response		Before MAR reform						After MAR reform (*n* = 35)
		GEF-3 (*n* = 34)	GEF-4 (*n* = 46)	GEF-5 (*n* = 27)	GEF-6 (*n* = 55)	GEF-7ª (*n* = 2)	Subtotal (*n* = 164)	
Actions identified	Number	17	36	15	25	1	94	30
	Percent	50	78	56	45	50	57	86
Time frame included	Number	12	16	10	13	0	51	22
	Percent	35	35	37	24	0	31	63

Note: 164 recommendations that received management responses were included in the analysis

a. In GEF-7, only two recommendations, both from the 2020 Program Evaluation of the Least Developed Countries Fund, were included in the MAR as of June 2021.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE ADOPTION OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations that were not accompanied by a management response were not likely to achieve full adoption. In the period prior to June 2021, 20 recommendations/Council decisions did not receive a management response (see annex a for the full list). Of these, 11 have graduated or been retired from the MAR, and none was adopted fully with a high rating (figure 3.4). No specific reason was documented in the MAR regarding why a management response was not prepared for these recommendations. In the case of the 2005 Annual Performance Report in GEF-3 (GEF EO 2006), two recommendations that did not receive management responses were directed to GEF Agencies. In the case of the 2017 Biodiversity Focal Area Study in GEF-6, a total of 12 recommendations were presented in the evaluation report (GEF IEO 2018a), and management's response covered only three recommendations that pertained to the Global Wildlife Program.

When recommendations are fully agreed upon by management, they are more likely to be adopted than partially agreed-upon or rejected recommendations. Recommendations and their follow-up actions were tracked in the MAR regardless of whether they were agreed to by management. Of the 119 recommendations that were graduated or retired from the MAR with a full agreement in the management responses, 76 percent (91) were adopted highly or substantially; 9 out of 14 (64 percent) partially agreed-upon recommendations reached the same level of adoption (figure 3.5).

An example of a partial agreement with a recommendation is from the 2012 Annual Country Portfolio Evaluation Report, which recommended that "project approval and implementation in SIDS [small island developing states] should be more flexible and context specific" (GEF EO 2012). GEF management agreed partially with this recommendation, noting that "caution should be exercised in order not to give the impression that each country's unique needs can be met in every case" (GEF 2012). In the self-assessment in the MAR, the GEF Secretariat noted that it was not feasible to tailor approval and implementation procedures and/or standards for specific groups of countries. This recommendation was retired after three years, with negligible action being taken, but was reflected in a subsequent country cluster evaluation of the SIDS.

There were several instances where management initially disagreed with a recommendation, but effectively implemented the actions suggested. Three out of five recommendations rejected by management were subsequently adopted with a high or substantial rating upon graduation. For

Figure 3.4 Adoption level by presence of management responses to recommendations
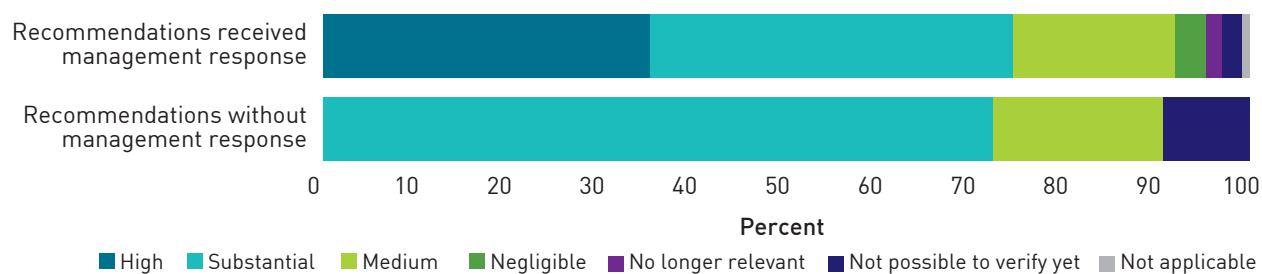
Note: This analysis includes 149 recommendations that have either been graduated or retired from the MAR; 138 of these received a response from management and 11 did not.

Figure 3.5 Adoption level by management's level of agreement
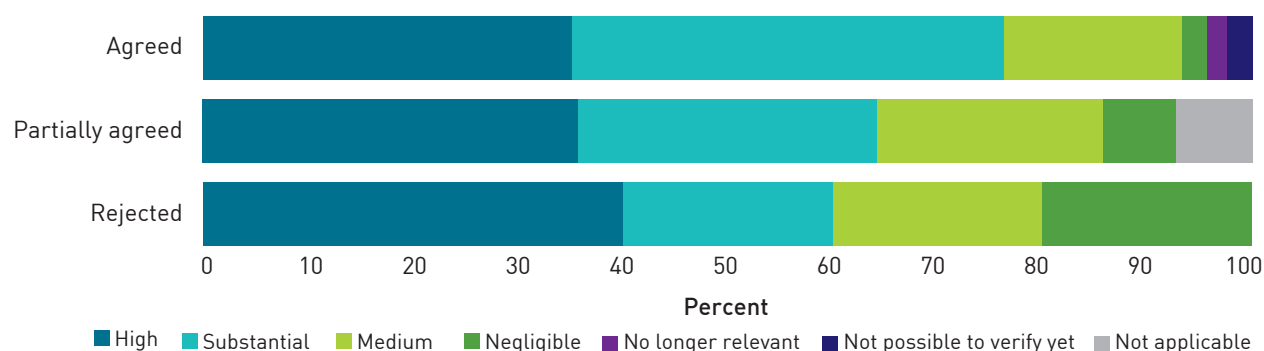
Note: This analysis includes 138 recommendations that received management responses and were graduated or retired from the MAR.

example, the first recommendation from the 2013 Midterm Evaluation of the STAR recommended that the limits for flexible use of focal area allocations should be increased for countries with marginal flexibility (GEF IEO 2014d). GEF management disagreed with this recommendation, as the GEF Secretariat had an obligation to follow the focal area allocations agreed to during the GEF-5 replenishment negotiations. However, the Secretariat took this recommendation into consideration when developing the STAR proposal for GEF-6. In May 2014, the GEF Council approved the GEF-6 STAR proposal to provide adjustment to countries with marginal flexibility. This recommendation graduated with full adoption.

Recommendations are more likely to achieve full adoption when follow-up actions are identified

in the management responses. Fifty-four recommendations were graduated or retired from the MAR with follow-up actions identified by management in its responses, 44 percent (37) of which were adopted fully with a high rating upon graduation. Where follow-up action was not specified in the management response, only 22 percent (12 out of 54) reached the same level of adoption (figure 3.6).

When the management response provides a time-bound action plan to address the recommendation, it is feasible to assess implementation progress and adoption level by the target completion date. For instance, the 2006 Evaluation of Incremental Cost Assessment recommended strengthening efforts to include better identification of global environmental benefits in GEF activities (GEF EO 2007). In the management

Figure 3.6 Adoption level by level of detail in management response

Note: This analysis includes 138 recommendations that received management responses and were graduated or retired from the MAR.

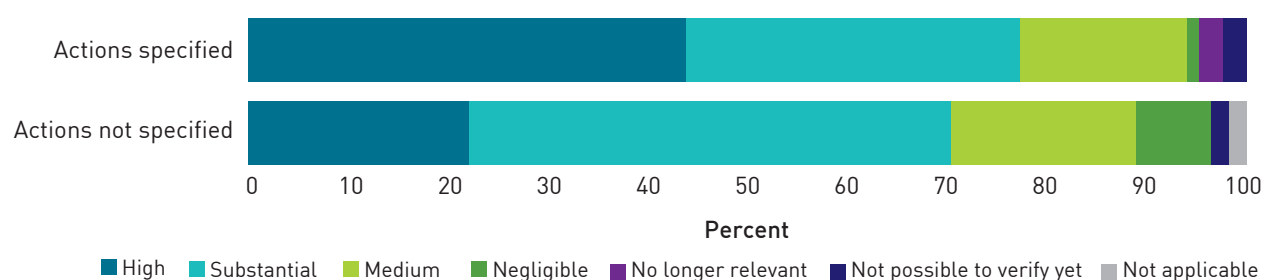response, the GEF Secretariat committed to refine the new approach to incremental costs and to present a proposal to the Council at its June 2007 meeting. The "Operational Guidelines for the Application of the Incremental Cost Principle" was submitted and discussed at the June 2007 Council meeting, and this recommendation graduated with full adoption.

In the case of developing a knowledge management strategy, the second recommendation of the 2017 Evaluation of Knowledge Management in the GEF focused on development of a work plan on knowledge management and learning (GEF IEO 2018c). GEF management fully agreed with this recommendation, but no time-bound action was identified in its response. This recommendation was retired in 2021 with a medium level of adoption, as no work plan or knowledge management strategy had been developed. The 2020 Evaluation of Knowledge Management revisited this issue and, once again, recommended that the GEF partnership develop a clear knowledge management strategy (GEF IEO 2022). The adoption level of this recommendation is yet to be assessed.

3.3 Assessment of follow-up to recommendations

The GEF MAR adopts a two-tier approach to assessing the implementation and adoption of recommendations. On an annual basis, the IEO invites GEF management to provide (1) a self-assessment rating of the adoption level of recommendations tracked in the MAR and (2) evidence on actions that have been taken to implement the recommendations. Subsequently, the IEO validates the self-assessment and provides its own rating on the level of adoption.

The IEO validation concurred fully with 57 percent (248 out of 435) of management self-assessment ratings on level of adoption. For the 186 recommendations tracked in the MAR during the period 2006–21, there were 435 records of management's self-assessment ratings on progress toward adoption of recommendations, each corresponding to a validation rating from the IEO. Where there was concurrence, a majority (67 percent, 166 out of 248) had a rating of a high or substantial level of adoption (table 3.4). In 34 cases, the IEO did not find evidence of adoption (rated as not possible to verify), while management's self-assessment rated at least a medium level of adoption.

Table 3.4 Comparison of self-assessment and validation ratings

Self-assessment ratings	Rating					Total
	High	Substantial	Medium	Negligible	Not possible to verify yet	
High	45	48	28	2	10	133
Substantial	4	121	55	4	10	194
Medium	0		73	5	14	98
Negligible	0	0	0	5	1	6
Not possible to verify yet	0	0	0	0	4	4
Total[a]	49	175	156	16	39	435

Note: ■ concurrence between IEO and management ratings; ■ higher ratings by IEO than management; ■ lower ratings by IEO than management. Eleven recommendations rated as not applicable were excluded from this analysis.

Concurrence between management's self-assessment ratings and IEO validation ratings has improved over the GEF replenishment periods. When the adoption level of recommendations was first assessed in the MAR in GEF-3 (2006), the concurrence rate was only 41 percent (figure 3.7). This rate has steadily increased in each GEF period and reached 68 percent for the assessment conducted in GEF-7 (till June 2021). The upward trend shows a shared understanding of the implementation progress of follow-up actions to recommendations.

It takes four years on average for a majority of recommendations to achieve at least a substantial level of adoption. Seventy percent of the recommendations that were graduated or retired achieved a high or substantial level of adoption after four years of implementation (figure 3.8). Approximately half (55 percent, 11 out of 20) of the recommendations that did not achieve full or substantial adoption by the fourth year were operational recommendations related to improving project M&E systems and streamlining the project review process in GEF-3 and GEF-4.

It is often difficult to determine the extent of progress without a timeline for implementation of follow-up actions. Of the 186 recommendations tracked in the MAR before the process reform, 47 (25 percent) were deferred by the IEO in the annual

Figure 3.8 Cumulative percentage of recommendations graduated/retired with at least substantial level of adoption by years of implementation
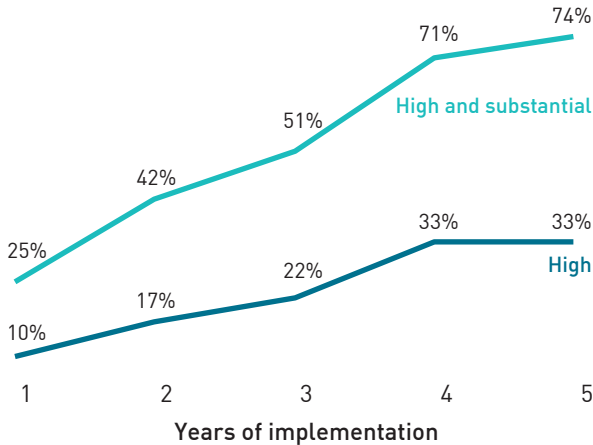
Note: This analysis included 127 recommendations that have been graduated or retired from the MAR and were not deferred in the MAR assessment. The IEO defers tracking a recommendation when it is too early to assess progress toward adoption.

assessment of implementation as it was too early to assess their progress toward adoption. These 47 recommendations were from the semiannual evaluation reports that were presented to the Council in May and November 2017. For 36 of the 47 recommendations, the management response did not provide a timeline for follow-up actions. Subsequently, the annual assessment of implementation of follow-up actions for these recommendations was postponed.

The MAR is regarded as a GEF corporate-level activity by the GEF Agencies, as most recommendations are not directly targeted at Agencies, limiting the opportunities for them to engage in the MAR process. Twelve of the 18 GEF Agencies participated in key informant interviews conducted for this review or provided written responses to the interview questions. With the exception of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Agencies stated they have not been directly involved in the GEF MAR process. UNDP's involvement is specifically related to the joint evaluations

Figure 3.7 Rate of concurrence between GEF IEO and management assessments of recommendations by GEF replenishment period
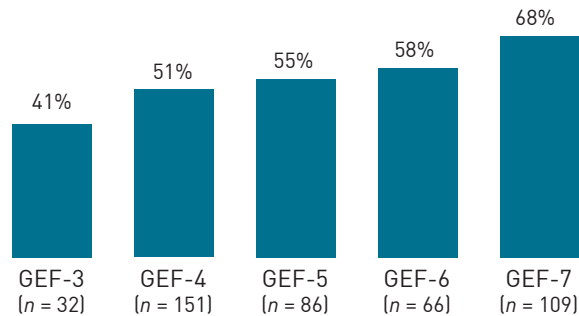
of the Small Grants Programme. Management used to share the MAR template with the Agencies, but the practice was discontinued in 2015.

The GEF Secretariat discusses GEF IEO evaluation findings and recommendations with the Agencies to identify ways to address them. Several Agencies pointed out that during the recent GEF-8 replenishment process, GEF IEO evaluation recommendations were presented and considered throughout the discussions and were mainstreamed in the GEF-8 documents.

Eight of the 12 surveyed Agencies showed a strong interest in being more actively involved in the GEF MAR process. Suggestions given by the Agencies to encourage their participation in the process include the following:

- Specify the key actors for implementation in the GEF IEO recommendations.
- Use the Agency retreat to increase awareness of the MAR among Agencies.
- Where relevant, improve the MAR process to incorporate Agencies' feedback and comments into management responses to IEO recommendations, so that the Agencies are involved in the process and will be able to implement these recommendations.
- Make the MAR a living document online to enable and facilitate Agency participation.

3.4 Retiring recommendations

The process of retiring recommendations was introduced in the GEF MAR system in 2014. A Council decision and the associated recommendations are retired when less than substantial progress has been achieved in their implementation and more than five years have elapsed since the decision was made, or subsequent Council decisions have superseded the earlier decision.

The majority of retired recommendations (75 percent, 38 out of 51) were rated as less than substantially adopted. Four of the six directional recommendations were retired as having less than a substantial level of adoption; these recommended operational actions to make project approval and implementation more flexible and context-specific for SIDS; to improve project M&E systems; to improve engagement of operational focal points in project M&E activities; and to improve data accuracy in the PMIS.

The main reason recommendations are retired are because they are superseded by later Council decisions/recommendations (figure 3.9). For example, the 2015 Joint GEF-UNDP Evaluation of the Small Grants Programme recommended that the GEF and UNDP should "Continue upgrading, building on strengths while addressing the weaknesses identified. The criteria for selecting countries for upgrading should be revisited" (GEF IEO and UNDP IEO 2015). This recommendation was retired when a new Council decision was made in 2021 when the Third GEF-UNDP Joint Evaluation of the Small Grants Programme recommended that the program reconsider the need for a continued upgrading policy (GEF IEO and UNDP IEO 2021).

Figure 3.9 Reasons for retiring recommendations

Reason	Number of recommendations
Superseded by later recommendation	31
Automatically retired after 5 years	9
Not possible to assess in short or medium term	5
Limited implementation	3
Limited evidence	3

Number of recommendations
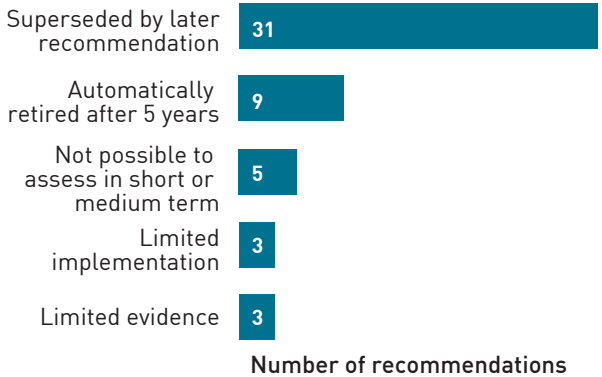
Lessons from institutional comparison

A MAR process is implemented as an accountability mechanism in many multilateral organizations. To draw on their experiences, a benchmarking exercise sought to understand current good practices through institutional comparison covering formulation of management responses and action plans, assessment of recommendation implementation, and MAR tracking platforms (see annex c for more detail).

Nine institutions with independent evaluation functions were included in the benchmarking: the African Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Green Climate Fund, the Inter-American Development Bank, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the International Labour Organization, the United Nations Development Programme, and the World Bank Group. Seven of these (all but the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the World Bank; see annex C) adopt the approach of implementing an action plan to address recommendations. The benchmarking exercise identified the following features shared by these seven institutions:

- Management responses clearly state the level of agreement, indicating whether management agrees, or partially agrees, with or rejects each recommendation.

- Management's action plans are developed for fully and partially agreed-upon recommendations.

- Action plans are clearly aligned with the evaluation recommendations and are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART).

- When an action plan is implemented, the self-assessment in the MAR focuses on the status of action plan implementation and the overall adoption of the recommendation.

- A four-point rating scale is used to assess progress on implementation of the action plan in the MAR system—namely high, substantial, moderate, and low.

- To make the MAR process user friendly, an online platform/information technology (IT) system is used to centralize recording of recommendations, management responses, and action plans and their follow-up in the MAR.

The benchmarking exercise found that the GEF process of tracking and reporting on implementation of recommendations shares some good practices with peer institutions. Moreover, the GEF is in fact more advanced in its practices than other global partnerships:

- The GEF has a formal process in the partnership to follow up and report on implementation of evaluation recommendations.

- Management responses are disclosed in conjunction with the evaluation. A focal point is established by management to coordinate preparation of the management response and the annual self-assessment on implementation progress on follow-up actions.

- The GEF IEO independently assesses the level of adoption of recommendations once a year and reports this status to the GEF Council.

Based on the benchmarking exercise, the following gaps in the GEF MAR system were identified:

- The GEF IEO should provide about eight weeks for preparation of a management response. The present practice of the GEF IEO provides less time for a management response to be prepared.

- The management response presented to the Council needs to clearly indicate the level of agreement with each recommendation (fully agree, partially agree, or reject).

- For fully and partially agreed-upon recommendations, management's action plan should include a description of the actions to be taken, the responsible party, and the time frame for implementation. The GEF Council could, in certain cases, consider extending the time for presenting action plans and timelines to the next Council meeting.

- The assessment rating in the MAR will need to be updated to capture timing and implementation progress on the action plans.

- An online platform could be used to improve efficiency in recording and monitoring recommendation implementation and to better facilitate the participation of relevant parties.

Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

Conclusion 1: GEF IEO recommendations are implemented with substantial follow-up actions. During the assessed period (2006–21), 74 percent of the recommendations were adopted with full or substantial status. Policy recommendations were more likely to be fully adopted than were recommendations on strategic or operational issues. Recommendations were more likely to be adopted when they were aligned with the GEF Secretariat's work plans on GEF corporate-level policies.

Conclusion 2: Recommendations were more likely to be implemented and adopted when management expressed full agreement and clearly identified follow-up actions in the management responses to recommendations. When recommendations were fully agreed upon by management, they were more likely to be adopted (at least substantially), compared to partially agreed or rejected recommendations. Recommendations were also more likely to be fully adopted when follow-up actions to address them were specified in the management responses.

Conclusion 3: Management responses prepared after the MAR process reform provide a greater level of detail in action plans to address recommendations, but tracking progress on implementation will require actions and timelines in all cases. Both management's response rate and level of agreement with recommendations have improved since the change in the MAR process was introduced in June 2021. The majority of the management responses prepared after the MAR reform included action plans with time frames. Where such timelines are missing, it will be difficult to track whether follow-up actions are completed in a timely manner.

Conclusion 4: The concurrence in management's self-assessment and the GEF IEO's validation ratings has improved, indicating a shared understanding on implementation and adoption. The GEF MAR adopts a two-tier approach to assessing the adoption of recommendations, which involves self-assessment by management and its validation by the GEF IEO. Concurrence in the assessment ratings has improved over the GEF replenishment periods. Going forward, the assessment rating scale in the MAR will be updated to assess progress against the management action plans.

Conclusion 5: **The comparative analysis demonstrates that while the GEF MAR system has several good practices, there are gaps that can be addressed to make the system serve as a better accountability and learning tool.** The GEF MAR process has improved since the reform in 2021. The system would benefit further from clearly addressing the recommendations to specific actors in the partnership, a clear articulation of acceptance or rejection of recommendations by management, a time-bound action plan in the management response, greater participation of GEF Agencies on relevant recommendations, and the use of a suitable platform to improve access and efficiency in recording and monitoring the implementation of recommendations. If a period of more than eight weeks prior to presentation of an evaluation is required to develop a detailed action plan with timelines in response to an IEO evaluation, the Council might, in certain cases, consider allowing the presentation of the detailed action plan and timelines by the GEF Secretariat at the next Council meeting. The GEF Secretariat would still present a management response at the Council meeting in which the IEO evaluation is presented.

5.2   Recommendations

Recommendation 1: **GEF management should ensure that the action plan included in its management response to GEF IEO recommendations lists specific actions with timelines where appropriate.** GEF management should ensure that the management response to an evaluation clearly indicates the level of agreement with each recommendation. Where management fully or partially agrees with a recommendation, a clear articulation of time-bound actions should be included in the management response which will make it possible to track progress on the implementation of follow-up actions and report on these to the Council. Where additional time is required by the GEF Secretariat to develop detailed action plans and timelines on certain evaluations, the Council may consider giving the GEF Secretariat time until the next Council meeting to present the details.

Recommendation 2: **The GEF should improve the MAR process and reporting through a more participatory approach involving the GEF Agencies, where relevant, and develop a suitable platform for tracking the implementation of action plans.** Where IEO recommendations are clearly directed toward GEF Agencies or other actors, GEF management should explore ways to incorporate Agencies' and/or others' feedback and comments when preparing action plans to implement IEO recommendations and in assessing the implementation progress of follow-up actions. In this way, Agencies or other actors can respond to recommendations that are directed toward them and will be able to implement and track these recommendations. A suitable platform that centralizes the recording of recommendations, management responses, action plans, and follow-up will help streamline access and improve efficiency in monitoring the status of implementation.

Recommendations/ Council decisions missing management responses

Evaluation	Recommendation/Council decision
Annual Performance Report 2005	GEF partner Agencies need to continue to follow up on the recommendations made in last year's APR regarding the need to improve terminal evaluation reports.
Annual Performance Report 2006	The Council notes that negligible progress has been made in developing a management information system and requests the Secretariat to make this a priority activity for completion before the end of the calendar year.
Country Portfolio Evaluation: Costa Rica (2006)	The GEF Secretariat needs to improve the information mechanisms in the GEF, most notably the GEF website, to make essential operational information available at the national level.
	Council reiterates its decision of June 2005 that "the transparency of the GEF project approval process should be increased" and requests the GEF Secretariat to reinforce its efforts to improve this transparency.
Evaluation of Incremental Cost Assessment (2006)	Monitoring for progress toward achieving global environmental benefits and for achieving cofunding should be included in project information reports and the portfolio performance report.
	Terminal evaluations should evaluate achievement of global environmental benefits and cofunding.
Country Portfolio Evaluation: Philippines (2007)	The Secretariat is also requested to ensure transparency of, and better access to, information on GEF procedures and the status of projects in the GEF project cycle.
Joint SGP Evaluation (2007)	Council requests the SGP Steering Committee to report for decision of the Council on the actions taken to implement the recommendations at the April 2008 Council meeting.
GEF Annual Impact Report (2012)	The Council requested the Secretariat to take into account the findings and recommendations of this evaluation when screening future proposals submitted for GEF funding in the South China Sea and adjacent areas.
Biodiversity Focal Area Study (2017)	Address practical sustainability questions more directly.
	Continue to use the simplified but relevant measures for tracking overall program performance while reflecting the uniqueness of child projects.
	Create links between other international activities regarding demand and GEF-supported efforts.
	Sustainability of knowledge-sharing components needs to be established.
	Focus on technical and professional capacity building in addition to increasing general and generic awareness.

Evaluation	Recommendation/Council decision
Biodiversity Focal Area Study (2017)	Adopt a tailored country-specific approach in projects.
	Maximize the earliest possible availability of project lessons, experiences and outputs.
	The GEF has an important role to play in combating illegal wildlife trade, and the ongoing illegal wildlife trade crisis warrants scaling up of the GEF's work. Given the scale of the problem, additional efforts are required to combat illegal wildlife trade.
	Further integration of bottom-up, country-driven approaches with top-down, strategic approaches is necessary.
Climate Change Focal Area Study (2017)	The GEF Secretariat should take measures to ensure reporting against global environmental benefit targets.

Interview protocol

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR GEF MANAGEMENT

- How is the management response to IEO recommendations developed? What are the challenges?

- How is the management action plan formulated? Are there challenges to be addressed?

- How is the implementation of the management action plan being tracked? What, if any, have been the challenges related to tracking?

- How involved is the GEF Council in the MAR process?

- What role do the implementing Agencies play in developing management responses and assessing the follow-up actions?

- What further improvements could be made to the MAR system?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR GEF AGENCIES

- To what extent, and how, has your Agency been involved in the GEF MAR process, including the development of management responses to GEF IEO evaluation recommendations, and assessing the progress of follow-up actions?

- To what extent does the GEF MAR process provide incentives that enable Agency participation? How can the IEO, GEF management, and GEF Agencies better support this through their respective functions?

- Does your organization have its own management action record/management response tracking system? If yes, how does it compare with that of the GEF?

- What role has your Agency played in the development of GEF-8 programming and policy directions? To what extent, and how, are GEF IEO evaluation recommendations mainstreamed in the process?

- Do you have any suggestions to improve the GEF MAR?

MAR institutional comparison

ADB	AfDB	EBRD	GCF	IDB	IFAD	ILO	UNDP	WBG
Roles in the MAR process								
Established focal points in management and IED facilitate systematic engagement Management approves actions and ensures follow-up is undertaken IED validates and reports on progress	Management prepares MAR and reports twice a year to Board on status of implementation of actions IDEV independently assesses level of adoption of recommendations and reports to Board once a year	Management develops action plan and presents a progress report to the Board twice a year to update all outstanding recommendations and action plans EvD provides independent comments on progress of each case, as well as on entire report, to the Board's Audit Committee	Secretariat prepares management responses and action plans IEU submits MAR to the Board, which provides an overview of the Board's consideration of the recommendations, respective management responses, and status of implementation	Management ensures preparation, implementation, and tracking of action plans OVE assesses action plan relevance and progress of implementation	Management prepares PRISMA based on input by operational services IOE provides comments for consideration by Evaluation Committee and Executive Board	Line management responsible for completing management response and action plan, updating on progress made Annual evaluation report presents compilation data on status of management response	M&E specialists or focal points responsible for preparing management responses and action plans, as well as monitoring implementation of key actions and reporting on achievements IEO validates and reports on implementation of recommendations in its annual evaluation report	Management prepares MAR report IEG prepares validation report Both reports are discussed together by Committee on Development Effectiveness

ADB	AfDB	EBRD	GCF	IDB	IFAD	ILO	UNDP	WBG
Requirement for decision in management response								
Management states decision on recommendation: fully accepted, partially accepted, not accepted	Management indicates level of agreement: not agreed, partially agreed, agreed	Not available	Management indicates: agree, partially agree, require clarification	Management indicates level of agreement: agree, partially agree, disagree	Management indicates level of agreement: agree, partially agree, disagree. PRISMA follows up on recommendations agreed to by management in management response	Line management responds to each recommendation individually, acknowledging if it is accepted or rejected; management must explain reasons for rejection (no action planned)	Management states decision on recommendation: fully accepted, partially accepted, rejected	Management responses clearly agree or disagree with each recommendation; partial or total disagreement is stated clearly
Requirement for formulation of an action plan for follow-up actions								
Yes: management prepares action plans and completion target dates; each action needs to have targets and timelines (due date)	Yes: for all recommendations that are fully or partially agreed on, management prepares a MAR including action completion target dates, baselines, targets, and indicators	Yes: action plan parameters include title, description, business unit, responsibility, due date, and implementation status	Yes: GCF Secretariat prepares management response and action plan together with other relevant GCF stakeholders	Yes: management prepares an action plan for each recommendation endorsed by the Board (90-day deadline)	No	Yes: if a recommendation is accepted, line management completes management response and provides an action plan that indicates a specific time frame and any resource implications	Yes: management response should clearly define follow-up actions, responsible units, and time frame for the action	No: management's action plans were discontinued following 2020 reform
Role of evaluation office in development of action plans								
Optional	Informal feedback at management's request	EvD has opportunity to comment on draft action plans before their finalization	None	Informal feedback	None	None	None	None
Requirement for monitoring and reporting on implementation of follow-up actions								
Management provides self-assessment of implementation progress of action plans, and updates twice a year	Implementing departments implement actions and update MARS on a quarterly basis. Management reports on status of implementation of actions twice a year to the Board	Management responsible for tracking and reporting (twice a year) to the Board	The secretariat provides comments to IEU on progress made to adopt recommendations in MAR	Management reports on progress of annual targets and can adjust action plans as necessary	Management prepares annual PRISMA	Line management describes progress made in implementing action plan	M&E specialists or focal points responsible for monitoring implementation of key actions and reporting on achievements on a quarterly basis	Management reports annually on progress toward recommendations' intended outcomes through a self-evaluation

ADB	AfDB	EBRD	GCF	IDB	IFAD	ILO	UNDP	WBG
Evaluation office inputs for MAR								
IED validates self-assessment of actions and reports on implementation progress in the annual evaluation review	IDEV independently assesses level of adoption of recommendations and reports to the Board once a year	EvD reports on implementation progress in the annual evaluation review	IEU provides ratings and commentary for each recommendation tracked in the management action reports	First year: OVE assesses the relevance and evaluability of action plans; annually: OVE assesses degree of implementation of those actions; final year: OVE determines level of adoption	IOE provides comments on PRISMA for consideration by Evaluation Committee and Executive Board	Evaluation office synthesizes results of management responses in its annual evaluation report for discussion and review by the Governing Body	IEO reports on number of management responses and key actions completed, initiated, overdue, or considered no longer applicable in its annual report	IEG publishes its MAR validation report annually
Aspects covered in MAR rating								
Action relevance/specificity and status of implementation	Alignment, implementation, and adoption of action plans	Status of implementation	Adoption of recommendation	Relevance, implementation, and adoption of action plans	PRISMA assesses degree of compliance with recommendations	Line managers required to indicate whether action taken in response to a recommendation has been completed or not	Status of implementation tracked electronically in the Evaluation Resources Center database	IEG and management no longer rate progress of recommendation implementation; IEG assesses evidence provided by management
Rating scales used in MAR reporting								
Four-level scale: fully implemented, largely implemented, partly implemented, not implemented	Four-level scale: high, substantial, moderate, low	Not available	Five-level scale: high, substantial, medium, low, not rated	Four-level scale: full, substantial, partial, negligible	Seven-level scale: full follow-up, ongoing, partial, not yet due, not applicable, pending, not agreed upon	Four-level scale: completed, partially completed, no action is planned, action has not yet been taken	Four-level scale: not initiated, initiated, completed, no longer applicable	Three-level scale: satisfactory evidence, partially satisfactory evidence, unsatisfactory evidence
Duration of tracking in MAR								
Action plans contain a time frame for each action; reporting period is up to 5 years	Action plans contain target completion date for each action; action implementation tracked until 2 years after target completion date	Not available	Not available	Action plans recorded in tracking system and validated by OVE for up to 4 years or until date management has set for completion of corresponding action plan	Not available	Action plans contain a time frame for each action	When all planned actions have been completed, or after 5 years	Recommendations tracked until sufficient progress has been made (notional time frame of 4 years; earlier retirement possible)

ADB	AfDB	EBRD	GCF	IDB	IFAD	ILO	UNDP	WBG
Presence of information technology (IT) system to facilitate process								
SharePoint platform	MARS IT system	Internal system (OneSumX)	Excel/Word–based templates	Evaluation Recommendation Tracking System (ReTS) Portal	Excel-based templates are used in transition to an online platform for tracking follow-up actions	Automated Management Response System (AMRS)	Online system (Evaluation Resources Center)	IT platform

Sources: Key informant interviews and information from institutions' websites and publications.

Note: ADB = Asian Development Bank; AfDB = African Development Bank; EBRD = European Bank for Reconstruction and Development; EvD = Independent Evaluation Department; IDB = Inter-American Development Bank; IDEV = Independent Development Evaluation; IEG = Independent Evaluation Group; IEU = Independent Evaluation Unit; IFAD = International Fund for Agricultural Development; ILO = International Labour Organization; IOE = Independent Office of Evaluation; OVE = Office of Evaluation and Oversight; PRISMA = President's Report on the Implementation Status of Evaluation Recommendations and Management Actions; WBG = World Bank Group.

Management response

INTRODUCTION

1. The GEF Secretariat welcomes the IEO's Review of the GEF Management Action Record (MAR). The Secretariat values this informative review that focuses on the main accountability mechanism for monitoring and reporting on the implementation of Council decisions related to evaluation recommendations.

2. The Third Professional Peer Review of the Independent Evaluation Function of the Global Environment Facility and IEO Action Plan[1] recommended that: *"GEF Council, the GEF Secretariat and the Independent Evaluation Office should jointly establish an agreed procedure or mechanism that: a)*

enables the Secretariat to prepare robust and articulate Management Responses and Management Action Records that can be used for a transparent decision-making process about follow-up to recommendations and allows progress in their implementation to be transparently recorded; and b) ensures adequate consideration by Council to the Secretariat's Management Responses and to the Management Action Records."

3. This recommendation was subsequently reflected by the GEF/C.59/08/Rev.01: *Report of the Working Group on Governance*,[2] where decision 22/2020[3] states that "[the Council decides to]… *Receive and consider, rather than endorse, future evaluation reports and related recommendations and discuss the Management Responses and Management Action Records to evaluations in the Council before deciding to endorse them – or not."*

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[1] GEF/E/C.58/Inf.04, *Third Professional Peer Review of the Independent Evaluation Function of the Global Environment Facility and IEO Action Plan*, https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/council-meeting-documents/EN_GEF.E_C58_inf_04_Third_Professional_Peer_Review_of_the_IE_Function_of_the_GEF.pdf

[2] GEF/C.59/08/Rev.01, *Report of the Working Group on Governance*, https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/council-meeting-documents/EN_GEF.C.59.08_Rev.01_Report%20of%20the%20Working%20Group%20on%20Governance.pdf

[3] GEF/Council.Decisions/2020, *GEF Council Decisions 2020*, https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/documents/2022-07/GEF_Council_Decisions_2020.pdf

4. This revised process has been under implementation since the 60th Council of June 2021. From the GEF Secretariat's perspective, this process has led to the preparation of more detailed and analytical management responses to IEO Evaluations. In this context, this Review is timely - while it is inevitable that much of the data upon which the Review is based is skewed to the pre-June 2021 process,[4] its results nonetheless present a valuable analysis that can inform and enrich the interaction between the Secretariat and the IEO on a number of levels moving forward.

RECOMMENDATION 1

5. **GEF management should ensure that the action plan included in its management response to GEF IEO recommendations lists specific actions with timelines where appropriate.** *GEF management should ensure that the management response to an evaluation clearly indicates the level of agreement with each recommendation. Where management fully or partially agrees with a recommendation, a clear articulation of timebound actions should be included in the management response which will make it possible to track progress on the implementation of follow-up actions and report on these to the Council. Where additional time is required by the GEFSEC to develop detailed action plans and timelines on certain evaluations, the Council may consider giving the GEF Secretariat time until the next Council meeting to present the details.*

6. The GEF Secretariat agrees with this recommendation.

7. Applicable immediately (and as evident in this management response), the GEF Secretariat will clearly state the level of agreement with each

recommendation of IEO Evaluations as follows: "The GEF Secretariat agrees / partially agrees / rejects this recommendation."

8. Where there is full or partial agreement with the recommendation, and if the nature of the recommendation is appropriate to do so, the Secretariat will include into the management response a preliminary time frame for measures/actions, giving a suggested calendar time / year when these will begin and possibly a suggested calendar time / year by when the recommendation may be completely adopted. If the Secretariat is of the view that inclusion of a timeline is not appropriate to a particular recommendation, this will be explicitly discussed with the IEO in upstream consultations, and also explicitly articulated in the management response.

9. The Secretariat would like to emphasize any time frames introduced into management responses may be preliminary in nature. This is due to the fact that (i) timing can sometimes be influenced by factors beyond the Secretariat's control, and that (ii) the implementation of the recommendations themselves may further inform the process. Therefore, all timelines should be treated with a certain degree of flexibility, and the Secretariat should retain the option to introduce adjustments to these timelines as needed. These adjustments can be reassessed together with the IEO as needed in the preparation of the yearly MARs.

10. The Secretariat would like to highlight that, as the required commitments and levels of detail of the management responses increase, this needs to be simultaneously accompanied by an increased preparation time. Since the IEO Peer Review Report in June 2020 and the subsequent adoption of the revised process in June 2021, the Secretariat and the IEO have been engaged in constructive discussions on the lead-time available to the Secretariat

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[4] The Review addresses 186 evaluation recommendations between 2006 and 2021, versus 35 evaluation recommendations since June 2021 when the reforms were implemented.

for the preparation of these detailed management responses.[5]

11. To this end, the Secretariat greatly appreciates conclusion 5 of the Review which states that *"…If a period of more than 8 weeks prior to presentation of an evaluation is required to develop a detailed action plan with timelines in response to an IEO evaluation, the Council might, in certain cases, consider allowing the presentation of the detailed action plan and timelines by the GEF Secretariat at the next Council meeting. The GEF Secretariat would still present a management response at the Council meeting in which the IEO evaluation is presented."* The Secretariat welcomes the implicit commitment of this conclusion that evaluations will be available to the Secretariat 4 weeks[6] before the posting deadline for council documents (and therefore 8 weeks before presentation to Council) in order to facilitate timely preparation of the detailed management responses by the required posting date.

12. The Secretariat also values the suggestion of this recommendation that, if needed, additional time can be given to the Secretariat to develop detailed action plans and timelines on certain evaluations. In the cases where that course of action becomes necessary, the Secretariat will present a more general management response at the Council meeting to which the IEO evaluation is presented, clearly explain the reasons that more time is needed for the required detailed action plans

and timelines, and commit to the presentation of these outstanding items in the subsequent council meeting.

RECOMMENDATION 2

13. **The GEF should improve the MAR process and reporting through a more participatory approach involving GEF Agencies, where relevant, and develop a suitable platform for tracking the implementation of action plans.** *Where IEO recommendations are clearly directed towards GEF Agencies or other actors, GEF management should explore ways to incorporate Agencies' and/or others feedback and comments when preparing action plans to implement IEO recommendations and in assessing the implementation progress of follow-up actions. In this way, Agencies or other actors can respond to recommendations that are directed toward them and will be able to implement and track these recommendations. A suitable platform that centralizes the recording of recommendations, management responses, action plans, and follow-up will help streamline access and improve efficiency in monitoring the status of implementation.*

14. The GEF Secretariat agrees with this recommendation.

15. The GEF Secretariat welcomes the commitment by the IEO to clearly address its recommendations to the specific actors of the GEF Partnership and looks forward to this in all subsequent evaluations. Where recommendations are clearly directed towards GEF Agencies in particular, the Secretariat will explore ways to consult with the Agencies in order to incorporate their input in the preparation of the relevant management response, action plans and timelines. As this may add to the preparation time needed for the relevant management response, the Secretariat would again like to underscore the need for appropriate preparation time, as discussed in the earlier recommendation.

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[5] Paragraph 153 of the IEO Peer Review Report states that "A reasonable timespan for the preparation of a credible MR is four weeks, to allow adequate consultation and planning at various levels, though some organizations allow longer." GEF/E/C.58/Inf.04, *Third Professional Peer Review of the Independent Evaluation Function of the Global Environment Facility and IEO Action Plan*, https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/council-meeting-documents/EN_GEF.E_C58_inf_04_Third_Professional_Peer_Review_of_the_IE_Function_of_the_GEF.pdf

[6] Ibid.

16. The GEF Secretariat agrees that the MAR process would benefit from a more centralized approach. To this end, the Secretariat would like to highlight the improvements made in its own internal processes on IEO evaluations over the last two years. Since 2020, the GEF Secretariat has adopted a centralized and coordinated Secretariat-wide approach to IEO evaluations that has resulted more efficient, structured, and constructive engagements with the IEO and ultimately to a higher quality of management responses and evaluation uptake. The Secretariat agrees that further improvements to this process can be made and is already working on further strengthening its internal process for the recording of recommendations, management responses, action plans, and follow-up, particularly in light of the many recommendations of the OPS-7 report and its related evaluations. The Secretariat wishes to emphasize, however, that while the recommendation references a "suitable platform" which can imply some new digital solution, this is not envisaged – rather, what is already underway is the deepening of the Secretariat's centralized process which to date has demonstrated very positive and successful impacts on its engagements with IEO evaluations.

CONCLUSION

17. The GEF Secretariat welcomes the findings of the Review that GEF IEO recommendations are implemented with substantial follow-up actions, the recognition of its efforts since June 2021 in the preparation of more detailed and action-oriented Management Responses, and the improved concurrence over time in the Secretariat's self-assessment of recommendation uptake relative to the IEO's validation ratings. The GEF Secretariat also agrees that, while the revised process in place since June 2021 represents a significant step-forward in terms of strengthened accountability and learning, this process can benefit further from several improvements from both the IEO and the GEF Secretariat.

18. To that end, the Secretariat welcomes the conclusions and recommendations of this Review, would like to highlight the increasingly strengthened and structured upstream interactions that now take routinely take place between the Secretariat and the IEO on all evaluations, and looks forward to continuing to work closely together with the IEO on all evaluations, recommendations, and MARs.

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