Evaluation of the Impact of COVID-19 on GEF interventions

Concept Note

July 2022

Introduction

COVID-19 has profoundly affected our lives. It adversely affected our economies, severely impacted international travel, led to unemployment, and affected how people work. Through April 2022, the pandemic had caused over 6 million deaths.[1]

As the potential of COVID-19 to disrupt GEF activities became clear, the GEF Partnership took measures to adapt to the challenges. In the June 2020 Council meeting the GEF Secretariat presented a White Paper on GEF COVID-19 Response Strategy to discuss how GEF activities are being affected, how GEF is responding, and the strategy it would adopt to respond to the long-term challenges due to the pandemic. In the GEF Council meeting of December 2020, GEF Secretariat presented a report on The Impact of COVID-19 on GEF Project Preparation and Implementation. The report showed that the pandemic had made it difficult to prepare and implement projects. It discussed measures – such as relaxation of the cancellation policy and providing guidance on repurposing of a project and amendment to its scope – that GEF adopted to mitigate some of the effects of the pandemic.

The GEF-8 Programming Directions (2022) discusses several implications of the pandemic for GEF's work. For example, it notes that recipient countries need assistance for 'blue and green' recovery from COVID-19 and identifies GEF integrated programs as one of the ways to deliver support. It identifies increased risks related to food supply chain disruption and increased consumption of single use plastics as some of the COVID-19 related challenges. It also discusses how the lessons from the pandemic are being incorporated in GEF strategies and activities providing several examples.

The GEF IEO undertook several studies and reviews to understand the pandemic's effect on GEF's support. This evaluation is a continuation of those efforts and has two parts: Part 1 will review GEF's response to the pandemic, identify lessons and assess the extent these lessons have been utilized in policies, processes, and project design by the GEF partnership. Part 2 of this study will estimate and assess the changes in GEF supported protected area systems to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The two components of the study are described below:

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[1] https://covid19.who.int/

1. Review of GEF Response to COVID-19 Pandemic: Mainstreaming of Lessons in Project Design

Background

The GEF IEO has contributed to the understanding of the pandemic's effect on implementation of GEF projects. Annual Performance Report (APR) 2021 included a review that assessed effects of the pandemic on implementation of GEF projects (GEF IEO 2021). The review found that the projects that were reliant on physical site-based activities, sensitive to cropping timelines, addressing sectors exposed to the global economy, or were reliant on private sector investors, were disproportionately affected. It found that the project teams responded by adjusting implementation schedule; shifted meetings, trainings, and work to virtual platforms; and, implemented measures to protect from, and prevent spread of, the pandemic. The analysis on project activity cycle presented in APR 2021 found that the pandemic had also increased the project preparation time. GEF IEO is assessing the effect of the pandemic on long term results through its ongoing work on APR and thematic evaluations.

More than two years have passed since the onset of the pandemic. It is now feasible to take stock of the lessons from the pandemic, and to assess the extent these lessons have been applied by the GEF Secretariat and Agencies in their policies and processes, and in design of GEF supported activities. This review is aimed at deepening our understanding in these areas.

Key Questions

This review will answer the following questions:

1. What are the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic that are relevant to GEF?

The review will document what the key lessons from the pandemic for the GEF Secretariat and GEF Agencies. The focus will be on lessons related to project preparation, appraisal, design, implementation, and expected results; and to lessons that help in identification of sectors and themes that GEF may support.

2. How have the GEF Agencies mainstreamed the lessons from COVID-19?

The review will identify the lessons from COVID-19 that the Agencies have incorporated in their policies and processes related to project preparation, implementation, and M&E. The focus will be on changes relevant to GEF activities and processes. It will assess how Agencies have incorporated the lessons from COVID-19 in developing proposals for GEF activities. It will also identify relevant lessons that still need to be addressed.

3. How has the GEF Secretariat mainstreamed lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic?

The review will document the lessons from the pandemic that the GEF Secretariat has incorporated in its programming priorities. It will assess how GEF Secretariat has mainstreamed

these lessons in GEF policies and processes related to appraisal, cancellation, amendment, and monitoring of projects. It will also identify lessons that still need to be addressed.

4. To what extent does design of GEF activities approved after the onset of the pandemic address lessons from COVID-19?

The evaluation will determine the extent to which the projects endorsed by the GEF CEO after the onset of the pandemic incorporate design elements linked to lessons from the pandemic. For example, these projects may give more attention to features that support adaptive management, resilience, preparedness, and emergency response.

Summary of the Methodological Approach

The review will be implemented in two-stages. The first stage will establish what the lessons from the pandemic are as they relate to GEF programming, project preparation and appraisal. It will gather information on how the GEF Agencies and GEF Secretariat are incorporating these lessons in their programming priorities, policies, and processes. The sources of information include key informants from the GEF Secretariat, GEF Agencies, and STAP. It will also involve a review of the literature on how concepts related to resilience and adaptive management may be applied to project design.

The second stage will involve desk review of the documents of the full size GEF projects that were endorsed by the CEO from July 2021 to June 2022, and those that were endorsed during calendar year 2019. The focus will be on determining the extent to which the lessons from the pandemic are reflected in the design of the activities endorsed after onset of the pandemic.

The instrument that will be used for the second stage will be developed based on the literature and evidence gathered during the first stage of the review. Literature on resilience suggests that inclusion of measures that support mitigation and preparedness may enhance resilience, and inclusion of emergency management plans may be useful for robust responses when a disaster occurs (Maguire and Hagan, 2007). Generally, features that support ability to undertake an alternative course of action, provide access to additional resources when needed, and contain effect of risks (modularity), may enhance resilience (Walker and Salt 2012). Drawing from the literature, we may hypothesize that policies, processes, and activities, that support mitigation, preparedness, emergency management plans, provide flexibility during implementation and to additional resources when needed, may be reflective of incorporation of lessons of the pandemic. The key informant interviews may provide additional insights on lessons that are relevant to the design of GEF activities.

The review will be conducted during the period June to October 2022. The findings of the review will be presented to the GEF Council during its December 2022 meeting.

B. Estimation of COVID-19 impact on GEF supported protected areas

Background

Support to protected area systems is an important component of GEF investments for generating socio-economic value and global environmental benefits. The pandemic severely impacted economies and protected areas dependent on the nature-based tourism market with lasting consequences for conservation, protected area revenue generation and livelihoods for local communities (Hockings et al. 2020,). Lockdown measures and travel restrictions in response to the pandemic meant most protected area operations were scaled down or suspended, tourist facilities closed, workplaces shut, "non-essential PA staff" removed from duty stations, and supply chains disrupted, all significantly impacting PA operations (Waithaka, 2020). Studies suggest that these changes in protected area operations and programs during the pandemic led to increase in illegal activities (e.g., fires, logging, poaching and illegal wildlife trade) around the time of lockdown implementation (Amador-Jiménez et al 2020, Poulter et al. 2021).

Recent studies have started to examine the extent of damage and range of impacts caused by this pandemic (Anand and Kim 2021, Eklund et al. 2022). Drawing upon literature and building on the earlier IEO impact evaluation of GEF support to protected areas (GEF IEO 2016), this study will look at the changes in the GEF supported protected areas before, during and after COVID-19 to estimate and understand the impact of the pandemic.

Key Questions

This study will answer the following questions:

1. How has COVID-19 impacted GEF supported protected areas?

Using remote sensing analysis, the study will estimate the effects of Covid-19 on GEF supported protected areas.

2. What are the trends in fire incidents and the spatial differences before and during the COVID -19?

The study will also quantify the fire and forest loss trends in GEF supported protected area systems before, during and after the pandemic.

3. Understanding the link between protected area management and COVID-19 impact.

The evaluation will examine the links between the scaling down or suspension of on-site protected-area management activities due to the pandemic on habitat loss and degradation. Field work in select PAs will also be conducted wherever possible.

Methods

The study will use forest cover loss and fire incidents as a proxy for habitat loss and degradation. Raw satellite data will be used to generate habitat proxy indicators such as fire incidents and forest loss. This is important for studying events that occur over a short period of time (days to weeks). The widely available processed remote sensing products doesn't not have

the temporal and spatial resolution to quantify the affect at individual protected area level and for shorter events. For instance, forest loss data by Hansen et al., the most widely used dataset is only available annually. Therefore, it becomes critical to utilize raw satellite data and create a fit-for-purpose product that will help us understand the changes in protected area habitats.

The study will use statistical models using the satellite driven indicators to model and estimate the impact of COVID-19. In addition to the satellite derived proxy data for habitat condition, the statistical model will make use of climate variables and other co-variates to control for confounding factors.

The remote sensing analysis will be supplemented by case studies and field work in select PAs where possible. The study will also use of protected area governance data, literature review, and key informant interviews.

The study will be conducted during the period July to October 2022. The findings will be presented to the GEF Council during its December 2022 meeting.

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