Evaluation of Programmatic Approaches in the GEF

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GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT FACILITY
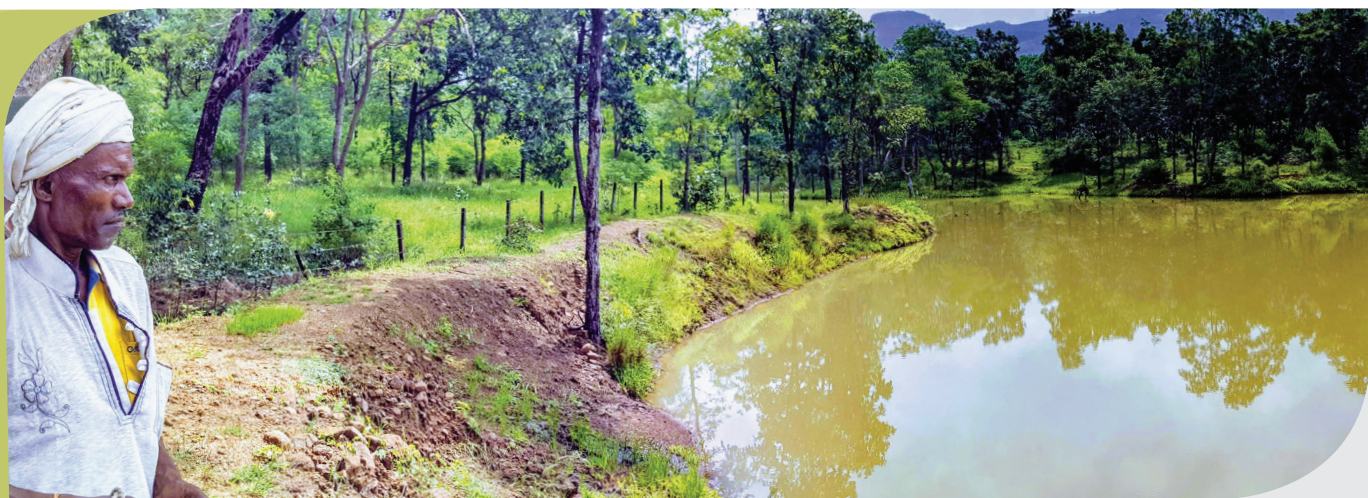
The GEF has evolved in its support of recipient countries, endorsing a programmatic approach to better solve the long-term, multifaceted nature of environmental problems.

This evaluation looks at GEF experience with programmatic approaches to inform its strategic development toward integrated programming. In general, greater complexity did not lead to greater efficiency. The simpler the program, the better the results.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Child projects under programmatic approaches performed better than stand-alone projects that are not part of programs; complexity affects outcomes. In this evaluation, complexity is a function of the degree of homogeneity of a program's child projects and whether they belong to one or multiple countries, Agencies, and/or focal areas. Child projects performed better than stand-alone projects on all dimensions. Child projects in complex programs underperformed those of simpler programs or stand-alone projects on five out of eight dimensions.

2. Program design for broader adoption has improved substantially over time across focal areas, but actions were limited. Data on whether this improved design has translated into broader results are not yet available.

3. Programs represent a shift toward a more integrated, systemic approach to address drivers. Programs have evolved from a narrow approach, largely focused on mitigating the negative effects of food and energy production on biodiversity loss, land degradation, and climate change, toward an integrated approach encompassing a wider set of drivers such as food and energy production, infrastructure construction, and transportation.

4. Country-level program ownership is linked to degree of alignment with national priorities. GEF programs have progressively shifted over time from a country to a multicountry focus. System for Transparent Allocation of Resources (STAR) funds are a substantial share of total program resources, regardless of geographic scope. The less a country's total STAR funds, the greater its STAR allocation program share. Stakeholders noted that country programs have stronger ownership than regional/global ones, as they tend to be more aligned with national priorities.

5. Coherence has improved in recent programs. Program objectives are now

PURPOSE AND METHODS: Programmatic approaches, formalized in 2008, are particularly relevant to the Global Environment Facility (GEF), given the long-term nature of the environmental problems the GEF addresses. This evaluation assesses the mechanisms and conditions by which GEF programs have delivered broader-scale and longer-term results by comparing them to stand-alone projects. It focuses on the extent to which GEF programs addressed drivers of environmental change; performance issues such as coherence, ownership, efficiency, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are also assessed. The evaluation is based on evidence from a wide array of sources, analyzed with a mixed-methods approach.

WEB PAGE: http://www.gefieo.org/evaluations/evaluation-programmatic-approaches-gef

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ABOUT US: The Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of the GEF has a central role in ensuring the independent evaluation function within the GEF. www.gefieo.org

OPS6
SIXTH COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION OF THE GEF

> **Program complexity affects outcomes: The higher the program complexity, the lower the outcomes. This is an issue to consider going forward.** —Carlo Carugi, IEO Senior Evaluation Officer

better defined than in earlier GEF funding periods; child projects have improved in design and are now better linked to the overall program. This improved coherence is notable in the design of complex programs, under which projects more specifically address program outcomes.

6. **Cost-effectiveness declines as programs become more multidimensional.** Child projects do not differ from stand-alone projects in terms of project cycles. Child projects scored higher on effectiveness and efficiency, and leveraged greater cofinancing than stand-alone projects, but efficiency ratings declined with increased complexity. Due to their diversity of mandates and operational approaches, GEF Agencies often struggle to work together as envisaged by the GEF. Program coordination is an added cost that increases with complexity.

7. **Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has improved in the design of recent programs, but still faces challenges.** Child projects achieved higher M&E design ratings compared to stand-alone projects. However, these projects also show weaker M&E implementation than stand-alone projects. Projects in complex programs have similar M&E ratings to simpler ones, but their ratings drop from the design to the implementation stages. When present, program M&E and results-based management (RBM) strategies are coherent with those of their respective child projects. Little evidence of program M&E has been found. When present, it is due to individual GEF Agency requirements. When present, it is due to individual GEF Agency requirements.

8. **Partner roles in program design have evolved with the changing focus on global programs and the Integrated Approach Pilots (IAPs).** IAP development is being actively managed by the Secretariat with a view to piloting new initiatives and including the newer GEF Agencies. The Secretariat's increased role in program design is perceived by some partners as a shift in responsibilities from what was under Agency purview.

BACKGROUND

Programs have been part of the GEF since its establishment. In 1999, the GEF Council supported the evolution of GEF support to countries through programs. In 2001, the Council clarified that programs should "secure larger and sustained impact on the global environment through integrating and mainstreaming global environmental objectives into a country's national strategies and plans through partnership with the country." The shift to a more strategic partnership between the countries and the GEF was discussed during the third GEF replenishment. Parties proposed a performance-based allocation system, leading to the introduction of the Resource Allocation Framework (RAF) in 2006, replaced by the STAR in 2009. These reforms influenced the way programs were to be financed.

In 2008, the Council endorsed the objectives and principles for programmatic approaches. For the first time, detailed procedures for designing programs were approved, including the introduction of the program framework document (PFD). This resulted in an increase in the submission of programs to the Council and a change in their nature from phased to clustered ones. Importantly, a stimulus to program ownership was introduced by defining programs as "a more strategic level interaction with the GEF" for countries. Two years later, the GEF introduced other reforms, leading to the emergence of two typologies: (1) programs led by a qualifying Agency, in which

one Agency runs the entire program; and (2) programs led by a program coordination Agency, in which more Agencies participate. These reforms were aimed at disbursing large-scale resources effectively and efficiently to countries/regions through programs.

Until GEF-5, Council discussions about programs centered more on administrative than technical matters. This changed in 2014, when the Council approved a revised modality based on program scope: (1) thematic—the program addresses an emerging issue (e.g., a driver of environmental degradation), and (2) geographic—the program focuses on a particular geography. In GEF-6, the GEF introduced the IAPs, which focus on drivers of environmental degradation through supporting broad stakeholder coalitions and scalable activities.

RESULTS

Programmatic projects compared with stand-alone projects. Child projects had moderately satisfactory or above ratings compared to stand-alone projects on all dimensions (figure 1).

Projects in simpler programs performed better than stand-alone projects on all dimensions except implementation quality. While projects in complex programs underperformed stand-alone projects and those in simpler programs, they performed better on sustainability, M&E design, and implementation quality. Child projects overall had significantly higher sustainability and M&E design ratings than stand-alone projects (figure 2).
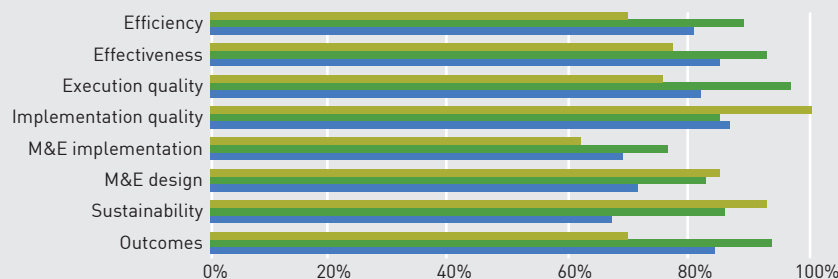
Measuring physical variables, child projects did better when compared with no intervention. Other findings are heterogeneous. Importantly, single-focal biodiversity child projects did better than stand-alone ones. Child projects with

FIGURE 1: Rating comparison highlights
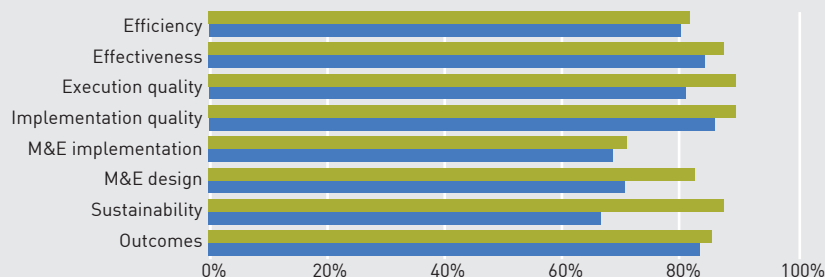
NOTE: ■ = child projects (*n* = 42); ■ = stand-alone projects (*n* = 258).

FIGURE 2: Comparison of program complexity

Efficiency
Effectiveness
Execution quality
Implementation quality
M&E implementation
M&E design
Sustainability
Outcomes

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

NOTE: ■ = high complexity (*n* = 13); ■ = low complexity (*n* = 29); ■ = stand-alone projects (*n* = 258).

progressively decreased in GEF-5 (2 out of 14) and GEF-6 (0). Country stakeholders are split on their view of access to STAR allocations as an incentive to join programs (figure 4). Simpler programs receive higher cofinancing from governments and GEF Agencies, while complex programs leverage more cofinancing from the private sector and multilaterals. Most country programs are simple with high government cofinancing. Interviews consistently indicated alignment with national priorities as the main reason for countries' agreeing to join a program.

biodiversity components that clearly related to improved vegetation (figure 3a) operated in areas that already had good initial condition. In terms of avoided forest loss, there were very few dimensions along which child projects with biodiversity components outperformed stand-alone projects (figure 3b). Measuring the same parameters in three of four case studies confirmed these global trends.

Country stakeholders cite improved knowledge sharing and synergies with other GEF projects among the incentives for joining a program (figure 4). While higher transaction costs in terms of reporting requirements and the PFD are a disincentive, there are perceived efficiency gains in management.

Broader and longer-term programmatic results. Broader adoption is starting to occur, but not yet at scale. Thirty-one percent of child projects intend to promote broader adoption, but only 13 percent took some concrete actions. Projects in complex programs had broader adoption mentioned more often in terminal evaluations, indicating an intent to design with a longer-term focus.

The most frequently observed forms of broader adoption are mainstreaming, mentioned in one-third of the terminal evaluations; and replication, observed in 21 percent of the cases. There is minimal scaling-up. Two-thirds of surveyed country stakeholders believe that programs achieve broader results that are more sustainable than stand-alone projects.

Addressing drivers through programs. A retrospective meta-analysis encompassing 88 evaluations conducted on the 33 pre-2008 programs indicates that food production as driver for environmental degradation was dealt with in 39 percent of

FIGURE 3: Heterogeneity in remote sensing findings along relevant dimensions for programmatic projects with biodiversity components

a. Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (0–10,000 units)

b. Forest cover (km² of avoided loss)
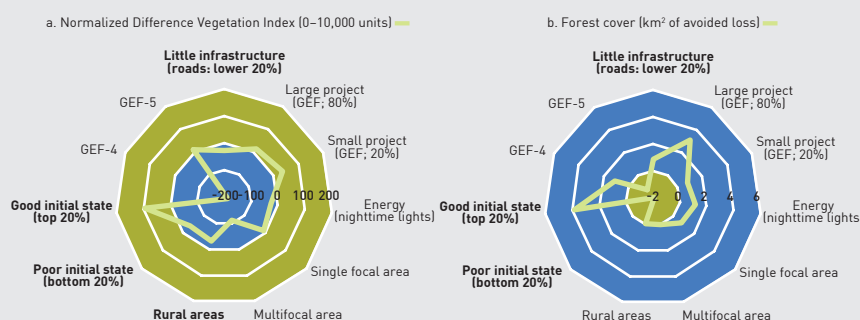
NOTE: Variables in **bold** = standard confidence; all other = lower confidence; ■ = variables on which stand-alone projects outperformed child projects; ■ = variables on which child projects outperformed stand-alone projects; rural areas = distance to roads + nighttime lights.

FIGURE 4: Country stakeholder perceptions on joining a program

Access to GEF funding from country STAR allocation
Access to GEF funding from GEF set-asides
Leverage potential for attracting other donor funding
Synergies with other GEF projects
Efficiency of management arrangements
Knowledge sharing
Transaction costs
Longer-term perspective

80% 60% 40% 20% 0% 20% 40% 60% 80%

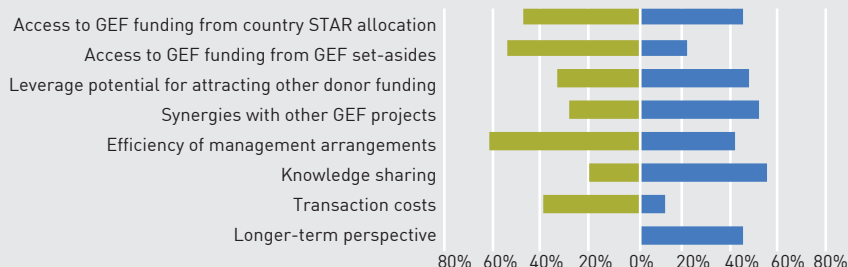**NOTE:** ■ = perceived incentive; ■ = perceived disincentive (*n* = 155).

those programs. Food production significantly increased in post-2008 programs, at 69 percent. The post-2008 cohort shows an evolution toward addressing other drivers—in particular energy, dealt with in 31 percent of the cases. Previous GEF programs also addressed drivers, although without explicit reference to them in program documents.

Ownership. In GEF-4, 7 of 20 programs were country programs; these

Coherence. Over 89 percent of child projects indicate clear linkages with their respective programs. Of these, 43 percent address all program objectives; this is particularly true for complex programs. However, for more than half of these projects, there is no clear indication of a link between project indicators and program metrics.

Cost-effectiveness and efficiency. Child projects scored higher on

effectiveness and efficiency. Cofinancing for child projects is higher than for stand-alone comparators—1:10 versus 1:7. As for project cycle analysis, 67 percent of child projects fail to meet the standards from Council approval to Chief Executive Officer (CEO) endorsement; 64 percent are within the standards for moving from CEO endorsement to start-up.

Coordination. While 37 programs have some form of coordination, only 8 have a dedicated coordination budget. Half of the programs are coordinated by the lead Agency. Regardless of type of coordination arrangement, only seven had plans for program coordination meetings. Nine programs had coordination and M&E funded through a glue project, with a budget of up to $1 million. In GEF-5, two glue projects had budgets of $4.6 and $5.5 million, respectively. In GEF-6, the glue project for the Illegal Wildlife Trade program has a $7 million budget. The three IAPs have an even larger budget for their "hub" projects, acknowledging the need for adequately resourcing coordination.

M&E. Overall, roughly half of projects' M&E strategies relate to program M&E. Sixty-one percent of projects in simpler programs indicate how project RBM contributes to the program, while 43 percent of projects in complex programs do so. In general, program child projects show weaker implementation of M&E than their stand-alone counterparts, with the highest drop in ratings in implementation observed in complex programs. Those programs showed a higher level of alignment between project and program M&E indicators than simpler ones. Implementation of program-level M&E is extremely rare. When present, it is most likely due to individual GEF Agency requirements.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The more multidimensional the program, the greater the need for coordination and management, with potential implications for efficiency, results, and performance. Simpler programs showed better results. Complex programs require more resources to coordinate and manage. Although designs have improved, management and supervision systems have not kept pace with the increasing demands and remain focused on individual projects. Multi-Agency programs face major obstacles posed by the Agencies' differing mandates, practices and systems. Unless program management and supervision systems are improved and appropriately resourced, programs are unlikely to perform as anticipated.

2. Program support needs to be aligned with country priorities in order to generate strong country ownership. Despite the shift in the GEF from country to global and regional programs, national ownership has remained stronger for country programs. This tendency has been overcome in situations where wider programs are strongly aligned with national priorities. In such circumstances, ownership often shows a broadening from one government department to several, and, in some cases, even to private and nongovernmental bodies. The earlier tendency to bundle sets of loosely related projects into regional programs typical in the GEF-4 period has not generated strong ownership of programmatic results. This approach is widely understood as a mechanism for financial convenience and should be reduced to preserve scarce funding for more coherent programs.

3. Program design has improved, but M&E systems have not adapted to measure and demonstrate program-level results and additionality. While project reporting systems are relatively strong, insufficient progress has been made toward assessing the additionality of programs to global environmental benefits. Projects under programs are not seen differently by countries when it comes to implementation. Although coherence of program design has improved, inadequate attention is being put into demonstrating the added value of a program over a set of projects. Initial steps to this end have been taken through the establishment of program-wide theories of change in IAPs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The GEF should continue with appropriate programmatic interventions, addressing issues that are likely to impede outcomes and performance, efficiency, and management, as they become multidimensional. The GEF should emphasize deploying its resources catalytically to mobilize larger flows of funding and achieve impact at scale. While simpler programs have shown better results, the GEF is promoting increasingly complex programs that require more resources to coordinate and manage. Importantly, the GEF shows a clear preference for multi-Agency programs, but these are the most difficult to implement and evaluate. To avoid losses in efficiency and cost-effectiveness, programs need to be well designed and resourced as they become multidimensional.

2. The GEF should continue to ensure that programs are relevant to the specific national environmental priorities of the participating countries while meeting the requirements of the conventions. The GEF should continue to ensure that finance is channeled to support national priorities while strengthening capacities. The GEF should continue providing incentives for longer-term investments in all its programs, and involve country partners early in the programming process to ensure that it can respond effectively to national priorities.

3. M&E should be implemented at the program level, with a clear demonstration of the additionality of the program over projects. Program additionality needs to be demonstrated through a well-developed theory of change, and better information sharing to enhance program M&E. As programs become more prominent in the future, the Secretariat should endeavor to strengthen RBM and monitoring to better capture program results over and above the aggregation of project-level results. ◼

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