

Approach Paper: Evaluation of the GEF Sustainable Cities Program

GEF Independent Evaluation Office¹

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SUMMARY

The GEF Sustainable Cities Program supports developing countries in addressing urban sustainability challenges. Launched as a pilot in GEF-6, it has evolved into a long-term initiative with a cumulative GEF allocation of \$480 million and over \$5.3 billion in co-financing. Several projects from the pilot phase have already been completed.

The GEF Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) is conducting this evaluation to assess the program's design, implementation, and outcomes. The evaluation will examine the program's alignment with key conventions, GEF programming documents, and its responsiveness to the needs of participating countries and cities. It will assess the program's effectiveness in addressing key drivers of urban sustainability, the relevance of its design in achieving targeted outcomes, and progress to date. Key aspects that will be covered include global environmental and socio-economic co-benefits; sustainability; stakeholder involvement; innovation; additionality; engagement with private sector; gender, inclusion and equity; integration; implementation; knowledge-sharing platforms and global partnerships; and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) arrangements.

This paper outlines the evaluation approach to be followed. A draft version of the paper was shared in February 2025 with the GEF Secretariat and GEF Agencies to solicit their feedback. Their feedback has been addressed in this final version. Findings will be presented to the GEF Council in June 2026.

1. Background

Cities contribute 71–76 percent of global GHG emissions (IPCC, 2022), are home to 55 percent of the global population (UN, 2018), and generate 80 percent of global GDP (World Bank, 2016). As economic hubs and centers of innovation, they face significant challenges in providing adequate infrastructure—particularly in developing countries—to meet essential needs such as health, water, sanitation, transportation, and housing. The high density of populations and concentrated economic activity make cities especially vulnerable to climate and environmental risks, with the urban poor being disproportionately affected. Moreover, urbanization, population growth, and rising affluence increase the demand for goods and services, often sourced from distant regions, amplifying environmental degradation in areas far removed from where these goods are consumed. Cities must address these

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challenges by transforming into compact, green, low-carbon, resilient, inclusive, and sustainable hubs of urban living.

The GEF's Sustainable Cities Program supports developing countries and their cities in addressing urban sustainability challenges through a systems-based approach. It tackles systemic barriers, strengthens urban governance, finances innovative technologies, fosters stakeholder collaboration, and builds institutional capacities. Launched as one of three Integrated Approach Pilots under GEF-6, the program was approved by the GEF Council in June 2015, with the first child projects receiving CEO endorsement in December 2016. Now spanning more than 90 cities across 33 countries, the program serves as a model for integrated urban planning. To date, the GEF has allocated \$480 million to the initiative, and has mobilized an additional \$5.3 billion in co-financing commitments. The number of cities covered through individual child projects of the program ranges from one to seven cities. GEF investment in an individual city through a child project ranges from about US \$ 2 million to US \$ 10 million.

A coordination team, comprising the GEF Secretariat and the lead agency, manages the program, supported by an advisory and consultative committee. The World Bank leads the global platform for GEF-6 and GEF-8 phases, while UNEP leads for GEF-7 phase. The child projects are implemented by GEF Agencies. So far 11 GEF Agencies have been involved in implementation of the child projects of the program (Table 1). Among them, the World Bank, UNDP, and UNEP have led at least one child project in each of the three cycles. As part of the GEF-8 cycle, three new Agencies—BOAD, FAO, and IUCN—have joined for the first time in implementing a child project.

Table 1: Implementing Agencies of the Sustainable Cities Program

Participating Agencies	GEF-6	GEF-7	GEF-8
<i>Lead Agency</i>	<i>World Bank</i>	<i>UNEP</i>	<i>World Bank</i>
AfDB	√		
ADB	√	√	
BOAD			√
DBSA	√		√
FAO			√
IDB	√		√
IUCN			√
UNDP	√	√	√
UNEP	√	√	√
UNIDO	√		√
World Bank	√	√	√

The 33 countries covered so far include seven Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and two Small Island Developing States (SIDS) (Annex 1). During the GEF-6 cycle, 11 countries participated in the program, while in the GEF-7 cycle nine countries participated of which six were new participants. Major economies such as China, Brazil, and India participated in both cycles, with China remaining the only recipient country to participate in the program across all three cycles. In GEF-8, the Sustainable Cities Program expanded to 20 countries, introducing 16 new participants. GEF-8 marked a significant change in the socio-economic profile of countries participating in the program, with a higher representation of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) compared to previous cycles.

The program has evolved in design and scope. Under the Sustainable Cities Integrated Approach Pilot of GEF-6, demonstration activities primarily focused on climate change mitigation interventions at the municipal government scale, while also allowing scope for addressing other environmental themes. In contrast, the GEF-7 cycle broadened the geographical scope of demonstration activities to a metropolitan scale and expanded its focus to include biodiversity conservation and nature-based solutions, alongside climate change mitigation, and addressing peri-urban areas. The GEF-8 cycle further evolved by prioritizing knowledge sharing and capacity building. While GEF-6 and GEF-8 included dedicated monitoring components. GEF-7 did not include a dedicated monitoring component in the program framework document (Annex 2). However, GEF-7 addressed monitoring and evaluation (M&E) arrangements within the coordination section of the document and incorporated it as a separate component in the global coordinating project proposal. Consistent with the environmental themes supported, the core indicators used to measure the programmatic results of GEF contributions have broadened over time. Initially focused solely on CO2 reduction in GEF-6, the indicators now also include protected areas, land restoration, improved practices, and waste reduction in GEF-7 and GEF-8 (Annex 3).

GEF funding to the program has slightly increased in nominal terms. GEF had allocated \$150.23 million to the program in GEF-6, \$159.95 million in GEF-7, and \$169.48 million in GEF-8 (GEF 2016, 2019, 2024). However, the distribution of funds among different country categories has shifted. The share of five major recipient countries (Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, and South Africa) has declined significantly, dropping from 55 percent in GEF-6 and 49 percent in GEF-7 to just 8 percent in GEF-8. Meanwhile, the share of LDCs in program resources has steadily increased, rising from 6 percent in GEF-6 to 15 percent in GEF-8. Similarly, SIDS, which did not participate in GEF-6 or GEF-7, will receive approximately 7 percent of program funding in GEF-8 for two projects. In GEF-8 cycle, there is an increased participation of African countries, which are currently experiencing rapid urbanization. The number of participating countries in a cycle has increased from nine in GEF-7 to 20 countries in GEF-8, and the average of GEF resources per participating country has reduced.

The program portfolio is maturing, with GEF-6 projects either completed or nearing completion, GEF-7 projects under implementation, and GEF-8 projects in preparation (Table 2). Among the six completed GEF-6 projects, terminal evaluations have been submitted for five. This progression makes it possible to evaluate experiences across all stages of the activity cycle, presenting an opportune moment to assess various aspects of program performance.

Table 2: Distribution of Child Projects by Project Cycle Stage²

Project cycle stage*	GEF-6	GEF-7	GEF-8	All Periods
Under Preparation	0	0	21	21
Under Implementation	6	10	0	16
Completed	6	0	0	6
All stages	12	10	21	43

Source: GEF Portal (*through December 2024)

² Excluding dropped and cancelled projects but including child projects for program coordination. Through December 2024.

2. Coverage in past evaluations

The Sustainable Cities Program has been covered in several evaluations conducted by the GEF IEO. The *Formative Review of the Integrated Approach Pilots Programs* (2018), hereafter referred to as the Formative Review, provides insights into the preparation and design of the program for GEF-6. The *Formative Evaluation of the GEF Integrated Approach to Address the Drivers of Environmental Degradation* (2021), hereafter referred to as the Formative Evaluation, compares the program's process and design for GEF-6 and GEF-7 and reports on the implementation of the GEF-6 program.

The Formative Review identified discrepancies between the scope outlined in the GEF-6 Program Framework Document (PFD) and the activities proposed in child project proposals. It noted that although the program aimed to address climate change mitigation, biodiversity conservation, and chemicals and waste, it fell short in realizing synergies among these themes. Moreover, while urban resilience was not a program priority, it was still incorporated into the design of several child projects. The review found that selecting the lead agency and participating countries lacked transparency and was based on informal consultations, though it acknowledged the World Bank's suitability as Lead Agency.

The Formative Review also noted efficient child project preparation, with five of twelve projects submitted within 12-14 months of PFD approval. However, stakeholder engagement varied across countries. Engagement with city-level entities and CSOs was limited overall but more robust in Latin America and South Africa. Although the program emphasized private sector engagement, it received limited attention in child project proposals, as did gender mainstreaming.

The review found that the GEF-6 PFD did not adequately capture child project results, specifying only a target for GHG abatement. While all 11 child projects targeted GHG abatement, four also included biodiversity conservation, two addressed persistent organic pollutants, and one focused on land management. Limited alignment between outcomes and indicators in the results framework was observed, with only two child projects having well-aligned frameworks.

The Formative Evaluation found that the GEF-7 program built upon its predecessor in GEF-6, with key enhancements including an increase in scope of demonstration activities from municipal to metropolitan-scale, increased emphasis on biodiversity conservation, and the integration of nature-based solutions. However, it noted that land degradation objectives were insufficiently integrated. The evaluation noted that the GEF-7 program was closely aligned with country priorities, facilitating the development of child projects that effectively integrate both local and global environmental benefits.

The Formative Evaluation identified challenges in program preparation and implementation, such as the lead agency replacement for GEF-7, weak M&E design, and COVID-19 impacts. It noted that replacing the World Bank with UNEP aimed to increase CBO participation but resulted in duplicated knowledge platforms and inefficiencies. The evaluation found that GHG abatement from GEF-6 activities was not consistently tracked. COVID-19 further hindered implementation, highlighting the importance of urban resilience.

The Formative Evaluation reported emerging results, particularly from GEF-6. For example, the program facilitated the development of integrated urban plans, including the Melaka Smart City Policy in Malaysia and transit-oriented development strategies in five Chinese cities. The program also engaged the private sector in energy efficiency and renewable energy, such as smart meter installations in Malaysia, and

strengthened cities' capacities to mobilize finance through public-private partnerships (PPPs) and improved creditworthiness. The Global Platform for Sustainable Cities (GPSC) has effectively facilitated knowledge exchange on urban sustainability.

The current evaluation will build on this knowledge base, examining program preparation, design, and governance arrangements, program's additionality, contributions of knowledge platforms, with a stronger focus on results, given that several child projects are complete or nearing completion.

3. Methodological Approach

3.1 Key Questions

1. *Is the Sustainable Cities Program relevant to recipient countries' needs, GEF objectives, and multilateral environmental conventions?*

The evaluation will assess whether GEF support is effectively targeted to address critical urban sustainability challenges relevant to recipient countries. For example, one of the program's stated aims is to support upstream planning to prevent locking in conventional urban forms. To achieve this, it must target cities where such risks are high, particularly those experiencing rapid economic and population growth. The evaluation will assess whether this targeting is effective. Similarly, it will assess if the child projects are supporting innovative and impactful sustainability solutions prioritized by the program.

The evaluation will examine the program's design in responding to recipient countries' urban priorities and its relevance in achieving intended outcomes. Special attention will be given to whether systems-thinking and integrative approaches have been effectively applied to align program activities with both country-specific and global environmental objectives.

The evaluation will assess the relevance of the Sustainable Cities Program in relation to guidance from the UNFCCC, CBD, and UNCCD as it relates to the relevant GEF focal areas. It will examine how well the program—including its child projects and supported activities—aligns with the objectives outlined in GEF programming documents from GEF-6 to GEF-8.

2. *Does the program demonstrate internal and external coherence?*

The evaluation will assess the coherence of the Sustainable Cities Program both internally and externally. It will examine the program's alignment with major global urban sustainability initiatives and its internal coherence, including its objectives, theory of change, results framework, and consistency with GEF programming directions. It will assess how GEF program complements other global and regional programs that aim at addressing urban sustainability. The evaluation will also assess adherence to GEF policies on gender and stakeholder engagement.

Coherence across different scales—city/metropolitan, national, and global—will be analyzed to determine how well the program integrates efforts at various levels. At the child project level, the evaluation will examine whether projects align with the program's objectives, theory of change, and results framework, as well as their coherence with urban development initiatives in recipient countries.

3. *Has the program achieved its intended outcomes, and are they sustainable?*

The evaluation will assess whether the Sustainable Cities Program has achieved its intended outcomes at both the programmatic and child project levels, as measured through GEF core and other results indicators. It will examine progress toward long-term system transformation and determine whether approaches piloted through child projects are being sustained, mainstreamed, upscaled, or replicated by non-GEF actors. The evaluation will analyze patterns in results achievement, exploring whether outcomes vary based on factors such as project complexity, the level of GEF investment at the city level, innovativeness, and the related socio-economic context. It will also assess the factors influencing both the achievement and sustainability of results.

The evaluation will review GEF-7 activities to determine whether they are on track to deliver expected outcomes. Where applicable, the evaluation will also document unintended consequences of the program activities.

4. *Does the program demonstrate efficiency in resource use?*

The evaluation will assess the efficiency of the Sustainable Cities Program in delivering outputs relative to resource use and time taken. It will compare the project cycle timelines of program activities, particularly child projects, with those of other GEF-funded urban sustainability initiatives.

The evaluation will also examine the allocation of resources across program components, the effectiveness of GEF contributions in mobilizing cofinancing, and the factors influencing efficiency in project delivery.

5. *Have the program and its child projects effectively contributed to knowledge sharing?*

The evaluation will assess the contribution of the Sustainable Cities Program and its child projects to knowledge sharing, particularly through the knowledge platforms established under GEF-6 and GEF-7. It will examine how these platforms have supported recipient countries and participating cities in fostering evidence-based, integrated urban development planning and management.

The evaluation will also assess whether these platforms have facilitated connectivity and partnerships at local, national, and global levels. In line with the GEF-6 Programming Directions, it will review whether the program has effectively built partnerships for disseminating lessons learned and promoting replication through knowledge-sharing mechanisms. Additionally, it will assess how well the Sustainable Cities Knowledge Platform has highlighted activities that promote gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment.

Finally, the evaluation will determine whether the knowledge platform-related objectives set for GEF-6 and GEF-7 have been achieved and how targeted cities and executing agencies have benefited from the products and services provided.

6. *How has the program leveraged global partnerships to advance GEF's urban sustainability objectives?*

The evaluation will assess the effectiveness of global partnerships in advancing GEF's urban sustainability objectives within the Sustainable Cities Program. Beyond GEF Lead Agencies and child project implementers, several organizations—such as ICLEI, C40, and WRI—have played key roles in supporting the program since GEF-6, as noted in the GEF-8 Program Framework Document.

The GEF-6 Program Framework emphasized the program's goal of building strong partnerships with organizations that provide topical, regional, or global support based on their expertise and complementary initiatives. These partnerships enable GEF to leverage synergies, enhance program effectiveness, and reduce duplication.

The evaluation will assess whether objectives related to partnerships have been achieved. Specifically, it will examine whether these collaborations have strengthened program implementation, contributed specialized expertise, and improved overall outcomes.

7. *How effectively has the program been implemented, and what key factors have influenced its execution?*

The evaluation will assess the implementation of the Sustainable Cities Program by GEF Agencies, focusing on the GEF-6 and GEF-7 cycles. It will examine coordination and collaboration among Agencies at both the global program and child project levels, identifying key challenges and responses.

The evaluation will review the Lead Agencies' management of the program's knowledge platform, M&E arrangements, and progress reporting. It will also assess child project implementation, including progress, challenges, and reporting for GEF-6 and GEF-7 activities.

Additionally, the evaluation will examine how effectively GEF Agencies have engaged with recipient countries, city governments, civil society organizations, and the private sector to prepare and implement child projects.

8. *How effectively have the program's M&E arrangements supported decision-making and learning?*

The evaluation will assess the design, implementation, and effectiveness of the Sustainable Cities Program's M&E arrangements across GEF-6 to GEF-8. It will examine the program's theory of change, intended results, and outcome indicators, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the M&E design and its implementation in GEF-6 and GEF-7.

The evaluation will also review revisions made to address gaps, identify persisting challenges, and assess whether data on specified indicators was systematically collected, aggregated, and effectively used for decision-making. While the focus is on program-level M&E, it will also examine child project results frameworks, indicators, and data utilization.

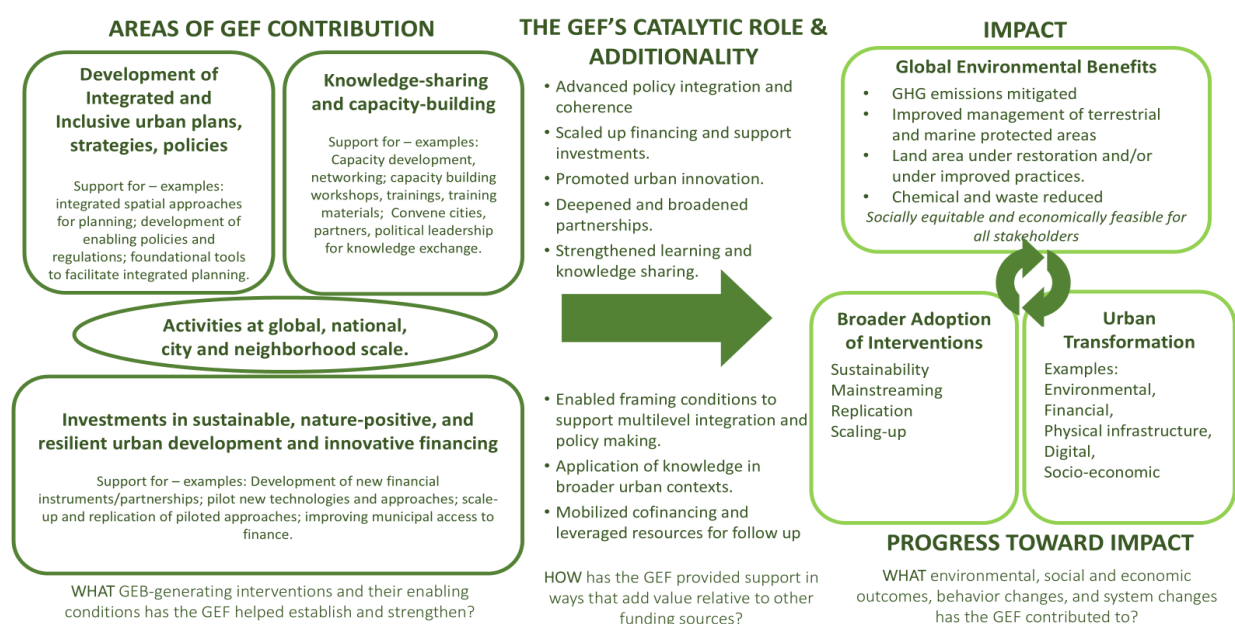
3.2 Conceptual Framework

Theory of Change

Figure 1 presents the Sustainable Cities Program Theory of Change, which serves as the foundation for assessing the program's results chain. This theory is based on the GEF IEO Theory of Change (GEF IEO 2024) and the theory outlined in the Sustainable Cities Program's PFD for the GEF-8 cycle (GEF 2024). GEF contributes to three main areas: urban planning, knowledge sharing and capacity development, and investments through pilots and demonstrations, at various levels including global, national, city, and neighborhood.

Inputs such as support for integrated plan preparation, policy and regulatory changes, capacity development at different governance tiers, knowledge sharing, implementation of green technologies, adoption of circular economy practices, and nature-based approaches are expected to contribute to program outputs and outcomes. Together with contextual factors, contributions from other actors, and broader adoption processes, these activities aim to achieve long-term environmental and socio-economic impacts and urban transformation.

Figure 1: Evaluation's Sustainable Cities Program Theory of Change



Based on: GEF IEO 2024, GEF 2024.

Sustainable Cities

A city functions as a complex system of interconnected environmental, socio-political, and economic subsystems (Liu et al., 2007). The socio-political subsystem includes factors such as population structure, education, public safety, social security, culture, and governance. The economic subsystem encompasses elements like economic structure, infrastructure, labor, taxation, and public expenditure. The environmental subsystem consists of biodiversity, natural resources, and key components such as air, water, and green spaces. These subsystems are interdependent and often overlap.

Beyond its immediate surroundings, a city is also linked to distant regions, shaping and being shaped by their dynamics. For example, much of the goods and services consumed in a city may be produced elsewhere, while locally produced goods may reach markets far beyond its boundaries. Similarly, shifts in a city's population and demographics result not only from fertility rates and life expectancy but also from migration patterns, including immigration and emigration.

While there is no single universally accepted definition of a sustainable city, various frameworks highlight key attributes. For instance, Sustainable Development Goal 11 defines sustainable cities as inclusive, safe, resilient, and environmentally sustainable (United Nations, 2024). Similarly, the Urban Sustainability Framework characterizes them as cities that balance productivity and innovation with affordability and environmental responsibility (World Bank, 2018). The framework emphasizes the importance of fostering secure, healthy urban environments where both people and nature can thrive.

These definitions suggest that a sustainable city should be inclusive, safe, resilient, environmentally responsible, productive, innovative, and affordable. Within the context of the GEF Sustainable Cities Program, a guiding concern is whether and how the program supports cities in advancing these objectives.

Characteristics of Countries and Cities

The evaluation will examine the characteristics of the countries and cities covered by the Sustainable Cities Program, considering factors such as population size and growth, urbanization rate, income levels and economic development, fragile-conflict-violence (FCV) situations, whether a country is a small island developing state (SIDS) or landlocked, and the level of GEF STAR allocations.

Understanding these characteristics is crucial not only to identify which countries and cities have benefited from the program but also to assess the nature of activities supported considering these characteristics. For instance, research on income and environmental quality aligns with the Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC) hypothesis (Grossman and Krueger, 1991, 1993, 1995; Shafik and Bandyopadhyay, 1992; Dinda, 2004; Apergis and Ozturk, 2015), which suggests that environmental degradation tends to rise at lower income levels but improves once economic development surpasses a certain threshold. In lower-income settings, urban growth often leads to pollution and resource overuse, whereas higher-income countries are better positioned to invest in cleaner technologies, improved waste management, and stronger environmental regulations. These insights underscore the differing needs of low- and high-income countries, making it essential to assess how the Sustainable Cities Program tailors its interventions to diverse economic contexts.

Similarly, GEF STAR allocations determine the level of GEF funding available for Sustainable Cities Program activities in each country, shaping the scale and scope of interventions. Countries with higher allocations may have greater flexibility to implement a broader range of sustainability initiatives and engage multiple cities, while those with lower allocations may need to prioritize specific interventions or focus on one or two cities. Evaluating these factors will help assess whether the program effectively targets cities and countries facing the most pressing sustainability challenges and whether resources are being allocated to maximize global environmental benefits.

Coverage of Themes

The Sustainable Cities Program aims to deliver integrated urban sustainability solutions. To assess its effectiveness, it is essential to examine the dimensions of urban sustainability it addresses, the types of solutions implemented, and the outcomes achieved.

Several studies and frameworks have identified key challenges that must be addressed to achieve urban sustainability and resilience (e.g., Mahendra et al., 2021; World Bank, 2010; ADB, 2001; CEREMA, 2016; UN, 2017; ARUP, 2015; Race to Resilience, 2023). These frameworks and indices outline multiple dimensions and thematic areas (Table 3). This evaluation will use these dimensions and thematic areas to map the scope of GEF interventions, assess areas directly supported by the GEF, area supported by GEF partners, and identify gaps. While the GEF Sustainable Cities Program does not aim to address all listed dimensions, mapping its coverage—directly through GEF support, indirectly via partners, or not at all—will clarify its contribution to urban sustainability and resilience.

Table 3: Urban Sustainability and Resilience Dimensions and Action Areas for Mapping

Dimensions	Areas of action
Social and demographic	Population structure; urbanization rate; migration; housing; social cohesion; inclusiveness; education and skill development; and public health and well-being.
Economic Resilience and Livelihoods	Economic productivity/income; employment and job creation; economic diversity; innovation; financial services; income inequality; livelihood security; and informal economy.
Environment and climate	Air quality; green space; biodiversity conservation; water and sanitation; waste management (collection, recycling, circular economy); energy consumption and efficiency; climate change planning.
Infrastructure and services	Public transport & mobility; infrastructure; digital connectivity; public service quality; housing.
Governance and Institutions	Local governance; transparency and accountability in governance; budget support; multi-stakeholder collaboration and coordination; emergency preparedness and response capacity.
Data, information, and communication	Risk communication; public awareness; data collection and utilization for decision making; urban planning and land use management; monitoring and evaluation of progress in achieving sustainability goals.

Sources: Global City Indicators Program (World Bank, 2010); The Cities Data Book (Asian Development Bank, 2001); Reference Framework for Sustainable Cities (CEREMA, 2016); Sustainable Development Goals 9 and 11 (UN, 2017); City Resilience Index (ARUP, 2015); Race to Resilience Metrics Framework (2023); Mahendra et al. (2021).

The scale of GEF interventions may vary. For example, project activities supporting legal, regulatory, and policy measures for urban sustainability may seek to drive changes at the national, provincial, or local (city) level—or a combination of these. Accordingly, the evaluation will classify GEF-supported actions and inputs based on their targeted scale.

Assessment of Program Performance

The evaluation will adapt the GEF IEO's Guidelines for Conducting Program Evaluation (2023a) to the specific context of the Sustainable Cities Program. In line with these guidelines, the evaluation will assess program performance based on multiple criteria, including OECD's (2019b) evaluation criteria—relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and impact—as well as additional GEF-specific criteria such as additionality, integration, and alignment with GEF policies.

The evaluation will apply the **OECD evaluation criteria** of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability (OECD, 2019b). These criteria are widely used in evaluations conducted by multilateral organizations and are recognized in the GEF IEO's guidelines for program and project evaluations (GEF IEO 2023a, 2023b).

The evaluation will determine the **additionality** of the Sustainable Cities Program by comparing the benefits of the program to a scenario without the program (GEF IEO, 2023a). For example, areas where GEF support has contributed additional results, uniqueness and innovativeness of the GEF approach and activities on ground. The evaluation will seek to compare benefits of the program to a situation where the GEF support was provided through stand-alone projects.

Integration implies the use of systems thinking – It involves specifying system boundaries, addressing multiple drivers of environmental degradation simultaneously, addressing relationships among the system elements across scales, addressing key risks and vulnerabilities, considering system resilience, and establishing a feedback loop that facilitates timely course correction (STAP, 2019; GEF IEO, 2023a). The evaluation will examine the extent to which the Sustainable Cities Program has integrated systems thinking in its design, implementation, and results. It will assess how integrated approaches were applied and complexity was addressed, the degree to which integration was achieved, and the outcomes produced. Additionally, it will evaluate whether an integrated approach was the most appropriate choice given the context, objectives, and associated costs, compared to a simpler approach that is narrowly targeted.

The evaluation will assess Sustainable Cities Program's **alignment with GEF Policies**, particularly in the areas of environmental and social safeguards, gender equality, and stakeholder engagement. These criteria are crucial for ensuring that program interventions are equitable, inclusive, and sustainable while maximizing global environmental benefits.

GEF projects are expected to prevent and mitigate environmental and social harm, in accordance with the GEF Policy on **Environmental and Social Safeguards**. The evaluation will examine whether appropriate safeguards were integrated into project design and implementation, particularly for child projects, and how they addressed potential adverse effects on marginalized communities, including indigenous peoples.

The location and implementation of urban sustainability interventions raise concerns about their potential to exacerbate intra-city inequalities, displace households, or negatively impact the informal sector. One issue receiving increasing attention is green gentrification, which occurs when sustainability initiatives—such as parks, ecological corridors, and green infrastructure—lead to rising property values, rent increases, and the displacement of lower-income residents (Angotti, 2011; Anguelovski et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant when such interventions target historically underserved areas.

Many projects under the Sustainable Cities Program support urban greening efforts, including lake rejuvenation, nature-based wastewater filtration, and non-motorized transport infrastructure. While these initiatives enhance environmental sustainability, they may also reinforce socio-economic inequities if safeguards are not in place. The literature emphasizes the need for inclusive governance, equitable access, and a balance between environmental and socio-economic considerations to mitigate these risks (Hasse, 2018; Immergluck & Balan, 2018).

This evaluation will examine whether projects incorporated measures to address these concerns and ensured that environmental improvements did not disadvantage vulnerable communities.

The GEF Policy on Gender Equality mandates that projects integrate gender considerations in their design and implementation. The evaluation will assess whether gender analysis was conducted in child projects and if gender-equitable participation and benefits were ensured. It will also examine whether gender-disaggregated data were collected and if the program's M&E systems tracked gender-related concerns effectively.

Urban sustainability interventions often have gendered impacts, particularly in access to services, mobility, and economic opportunities. If projects fail to proactively include women, they risk perpetuating existing inequalities. The evaluation will determine whether the Sustainable Cities Program actively promoted gender equity or inadvertently created barriers to women's participation and benefits.

Stakeholder engagement is central to effective and sustainable urban development. **The GEF Policy on Stakeholder Engagement** defines this as a process involving stakeholder identification, planning, consultation, participation, grievance redress, and ongoing reporting. The evaluation will assess the extent to which the Sustainable Cities Program engaged government agencies, civil society, the private sector, and project beneficiaries in both planning and implementation.

A lack of meaningful stakeholder participation can exacerbate existing inequities in urban development (Dodman et al., 2022; Anguelovski et al., 2016). Research shows that when marginalized communities are excluded from planning, they are less likely to benefit from interventions, whereas inclusive planning processes improve long-term outcomes and community ownership (Agyeman, Bullard & Evans, 2002; Anguelovski et al., 2016; Dodman et al., 2022). In the context of the Sustainable Cities Program, the evaluation will examine whether projects:

- Identified key stakeholders and engaged them early in the planning process.
- Facilitated their involvement in implementation, ensuring that their interests were represented.
- Prioritized the needs of socio-economically marginalized communities, fostering inclusion and equity.

By assessing environmental and social safeguards, gender equality, and stakeholder engagement, the evaluation will provide insights into how well the Sustainable Cities Program aligns with GEF policies and whether it effectively promotes equity, inclusivity, and sustainability in urban development.

Scope of Evaluation Coverage

Scale: The evaluation will assess the Sustainable Cities Program across global, national, and city levels, examining its design, implementation, and integration, using a differentiated approach. At the global level, it will focus on key global partnerships, program coordination, knowledge-sharing platform, and

programmatic results monitoring. At the national level, it will assess alignment with country needs, city selection, national partnerships, activities aimed at influencing national policies, regulations and legal frameworks, national knowledge and information technology platforms, and links to the global program. At the city level, the evaluation will examine the demonstration pilots, stakeholder collaboration, cross-sector coordination, and knowledge-sharing practices.

Replenishment Cycle: The evaluation will cover the Sustainable Cities Program from GEF-6 to GEF-8. Table 4 provides a summary of the key aspects that will be covered for each program phase. Since activities under GEF-6 are nearing completion, the evaluation will cover this phase in detail, focusing on design, implementation, and results. For GEF-7, it will focus on design and implementation. For GEF-8, only the design will be assessed.

Table 4: Coverage of key aspects of program and child projects

Aspects covered	GEF-6	GEF-7	GEF-8
Programmatic aspects			
Lead Agency selection	√	√	√
Selection of participating countries	√	√	√
Program design	√	√	√
Program Implementation	√	√	
Program Results	√		
Program M&E design	√	√	√
Program M&E implementation	√	√	
Child project aspects			
Project activities design	√	√	√
City selection	√	√	√
Child project design	√	√	√
Child project implementation	√	√	
Child project results	√		
Child project M&E design	√	√	
Child project M&E implementation	√		

3.3 Data Sources

The evaluation will utilize multiple data sources, including program and project documents, GEF Portal datasets, field observations, and key informant interviews (Table 5). A Focus group will be conducted for sensemaking of the data gathered.

Desk reviews

The evaluation will include a desk review of GEF programming directions, program framework documents, and project documents for coordinating projects and child projects approved within the program framework. The review will examine aggregated program progress reports, including documents submitted at CEO endorsement/approval, project implementation reports (PIRs), mid-term reviews, and terminal evaluations for both coordinating and country child projects.

Table 5: Sources of information to answer key evaluation questions

Key Question	Information Source	Coverage
Is the Sustainable Cities Program relevant to recipient countries' needs, GEF objectives, and multilateral environmental conventions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk Reviews • GEF Portal • Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program documents (GEF-6 to GEF-8) • Documents for 43 child projects • UNFCCC, UNCCD, CBD guidance • Key Informants (KIs): GEF Secretariat, Agencies, countries.
Does the program demonstrate internal and external coherence?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk Reviews • Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program documents (GEF-6 to GEF-8) • Documents for 43 child projects • KIs: GEF Secretariat, Agencies, global partners, countries.
Has the program achieved its intended outcomes, and are they sustainable?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk reviews • Portal data • Interviews • Field observation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program and Project M&E documents (GEF-6) • Field verification in 9 countries • KIs: GEF Secretariat, Agencies, executing partners, beneficiaries, global partners, and countries.
Does the program demonstrate efficiency in resource use?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk reviews • Portal data • Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GEF Portal data on milestones and cofinancing (GEF-6 and GEF- 7). • KIs: GEF Secretariat, Agencies, executing partners, and countries.
Have the program and its child projects effectively contributed to knowledge sharing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk reviews • Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program and Project M&E documents (GEF-6 to GEF-7) • KIs: GEF Secretariat, Agencies, executing partners, beneficiaries, global partners, and countries.
How has the program leveraged global partnerships to advance in advancing GEF's urban sustainability objectives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk reviews • Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program and Project M&E documents (GEF-6 to GEF-7) • KIs: GEF Secretariat, Agencies, global partners, and executing partners.
How effectively has the program been implemented, and what key factors have influenced its execution?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk reviews • Interviews • Field observation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program and Project M&E documents (GEF-6 to GEF-7) • KIs: Agencies, executing partners, and participating countries.
How effectively have the program's M&E arrangements supported decision-making and learning?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk reviews • Interviews • Field observation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program and Project M&E documents (GEF-6 to GEF-7) • KIs: Agencies, executing partners, and participating countries.

GEF Portal datasets

The GEF Portal maintains data on key program and project milestones, such as approval dates, first disbursements, mid-term reviews, project completions, and financial closures. It also provides data on project resource usage, cofinancing realization, and achievement of results as measured by core indicators. These datasets will be used to assess the progress of program and project implementation

activities. In addition, the Portal is also a repository of project documents that will be source material for desk reviews that will be conducted as part of this evaluation.

Field Verification and Country Coverage

Field observations will be conducted in nine of the 23 countries that participated in GEF-6 and/or GEF-7. The selected countries represent diverse geographic regions and implementation contexts. Table 1 summarizes the coverage.

Table 6: Country coverage through field observation

Country	Region	Phases covered	Agencies
Brazil*	LAC	GEF-6, GEF-7	UNEP
Mexico	LAC	GEF-6	IDB
Paraguay	LAC	GEF-6	UNDP
Morocco	Africa	GEF-7	UNDP
Senegal	Africa	GEF-6	UNIDO, World Bank
South Africa*	Africa	GEF-6	UNEP, DBSA
China	Asia	GEF-6, GEF-7	World Bank, UNIDO
India*	Asia	GEF-6, GEF-7	UNIDO, UNEP, ADB
Malaysia*	Asia	GEF-6	UNIDO

(*Countries that have already been covered through incidental field verifications)

Key Informant Interviews

Key informants (KIs) will be interviewed to gather insights related to program design and the factors that affected results and progress in implementation. The evaluation will adopt a purposive approach to identify these KIs. Broadly, these KIs will include individuals involved in the program's design (GEF Secretariat), those who led its implementation (lead agencies), partners engaged with the GEF program at the global or regional scale, individuals involved in the implementation of child projects on the ground (GEF Agencies), executing partners (executing agencies and their partners), and targeted beneficiaries. The interviewees in the recipient countries and child projects will include individuals from the countries and projects covered through field observations. To ensure that independent perspectives are also represented, the evaluation will approach individuals involved in sustainable cities and sustainable urban development who are not associated with the GEF program.

Focus Group

The evaluation will include at least one focus group at the global program level, inviting key stakeholders to assess the overall performance of the program considering the data collected during the evaluation. The focus group is aimed at sense making of the data gathered and evaluation findings. This will help in drawing conclusions from the data. Participants will include representatives from the GEF Secretariat, GEF Agencies, program partners, STAP, and other independent experts.

3.4 Evaluation Team and Advisory Support

The evaluation team is led by Neeraj Kumar Negi, Program Manager for Corporate & Climate Evaluations and Senior Evaluation Officer. Mariana Calderon Cerbon, Evaluation Analyst, is the other core team member. To support the evaluation, consultants will be recruited, with additional experts joining as needed as the evaluation progresses.

The evaluation team will receive advisory support from two experts with extensive experience in urban planning, who will provide guidance on the evaluation methodology, data synthesis, and the draft report. Additionally, the team will receive strategic direction from the Director and Deputy Director of the GEF IEO.

3.5 Stakeholder Engagement

A draft version of this paper was shared in February 2025 with the GEF Secretariat and GEF Agencies to solicit their feedback. Their feedback has been addressed in this final version.

A reference group will be established, comprising representatives from the GEF Secretariat and GEF Agencies, who have been invited to nominate participants. The group will:

- Provide feedback on the evaluation team's analysis.
- Participate in a sense-making exercise, such as a focus group, to help articulate key messages and conclusions based on evaluation findings.
- Review and provide feedback on the draft evaluation report.

The draft report will also be shared across the GEF Partnership for broader feedback, which will be carefully considered in finalizing the report.

4. Activity Calendar

The evaluation began with scoping in March 2023. The evaluative phase starts in June 2025 and concludes in February 2026, with the final report presented to the GEF Council in June 2026. Table 7 provides the details of the calendar.

Table 7: Activity Calendar

Activity	Start	End by – cut-off date
Scoping of the evaluation	March 2023	November 2024
Preparation of concept note	October 2024	November 2024
Preparation of Draft Approach Paper	January 2025	February 2025
Finalization of Approach Paper	May 2025	May 2025
Desk reviews	June 2025	September 2025
Field visits and interviews	June 2025	December 2025
Data analysis	November 2025	January 2026
Focus group	January 2026	January 2026
Draft report for sharing with stakeholders	February 2026	February 2026
Final report for upload for GEF Council	March 2026	March 2026
Presentation of the evaluation to the GEF Council	June 2026	June 2026

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ANNEXES

Annex 1: List of Countries Participating in the GEF Sustainable Cities Program

Country	Country Category	GEF-6	GEF-7	GEF-8
Algeria	Other			√
Argentina	Other		√	
Belize	SIDS			√
Benin	LDC			√
Brazil	Other	√	√	
Chile	Other			√
China	Other	√	√	√
Congo	LDC			√
Costa Rica	Other		√	
Cote D'Ivoire	Other	√		
Cuba	SIDS			√
Gabon	Other			√
Guatemala	Other			√
India	Other	√	√	
Indonesia	Other		√	
Kenya	Other			√
Madagascar	LDC			√
Malaysia	Other	√		√
Mali	LDC			√
Mexico	Other	√		
Mongolia	Other			√
Morocco	Other		√	
Paraguay	Other	√		
Peru	Other	√		√
Philippines	Other			√
Rwanda	LDC		√	
Senegal	LDC	√		
Serbia	Other			√
Sierra Leone	LDC		√	
South Africa	Other	√		√
Sri Lanka	Other			√
Vietnam	Other	√		
Zimbabwe	Other			√

Annex 2: Sustainable City Program – by GEF Cycle

Particulars	GEF-6	GEF-7	GEF-8
Program objectives	<p>The goal is to promote sustainable urban development through better integrated models of urban design, planning, and implementation. Designed to function as proof of concept, it is expected that this innovative pilot program will create a strong network of cities that will act as global ambassadors for urban sustainability planning, with tangible benefits at both the local and global levels. Moreover, in contrast to more traditional project-based approaches, the activities implemented as part of the Sustainable Cities IAP will continue to influence resource flows and investments for years to come. Given the extent of urban infrastructure development expected to take place in developing countries over the coming decades, such a comprehensive program could not come at a better time.</p>	<p>To support cities pursue integrated urban planning and implementation that delivers impactful development outcomes with global environmental benefits (GEBs).</p>	<p>The SCIP objectives are to support cities and local governments to undertake integrated urban planning, implement policies and invest in nature-positive, climate-resilient, and carbon-neutral urban development.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The SCIP will generate impact at the local, national, and global levels and demonstrate thought-leadership in urban sustainability, fostering behavior, business model, and institutional changes through integrated planning, innovative financing mechanisms, knowledge-sharing, capacity-building, and multi-stakeholder engagements. • The SCIP will help cities integrate sustainability into planning and policies and engage diverse stakeholders and partners across different sectors and scales.
Components and GEF financing	<p>1. Enhancing integrated sustainable urban planning and management. (GEF: \$32,864,969; Cofinancing: 148,570,000)</p> <p>2. Monitoring local and globally relevant performance frameworks for improved performance. (GEF: 13,047,341; Cofinancing: 56,200,000)</p>	<p>1. Sustainable and integrated urban planning and policy reform. (GEF: 28,416,420; Cofinancing: 133,964,573)</p> <p>2. Sustainable integrated low carbon, resilient, conservation or land restoration investments in cities. (GEF: 70,962,842; Cofinancing: 1,296,216,173)</p>	<p>1. Supporting integrated and inclusive urban planning, strategies, and policy development. (GEF: \$10,267,805.59; cofinancing: \$ 88,722,256.04)</p> <p>2. Promoting investments in sustainable, nature-positive, and resilient urban development and</p>

	<p>3. Catalyzing investments in sustainable cities. (GEF: \$ 65,617,410; Cofinancing: 1,176,880,000)</p> <p>4. Enhancing partnerships for sustainable cities at local, national, and global levels (through knowledge management, capacity building, global coordination) (GEF: \$ 20,587,265; Cofinancing: \$ 55,700,000)</p> <p>5. Project Management Cost (GEF: \$5,705,087; Cofinancing: \$ \$41,297,433)</p> <p>Total GEF: \$ 137,822,072 Cofinancing: \$ 1,478,647,433</p>	<p>3. Innovative financing and scaling-up. (GEF: \$21,859,069; cofinancing: \$172,926,173)</p> <p>4. Advocacy, Knowledge Exchange, Capacity Building, and Partnerships (GEF: \$18,555,119; cofinancing: \$54,674,291)</p> <p>5. Project Management Cost (GEF: \$6,949,003; Cofinancing: \$ 31,973,141)</p> <p>Total GEF: \$ 146,742,453 Cofinancing: \$ 1,689,754,351</p>	<p>adopting innovative financing mechanisms. (GEF: \$ 102,678,050.32; cofinancing: \$ 887,222,564.63)</p> <p>3. Strengthening knowledge-sharing and capacity-building (GEF: \$29,336,586.;01; cofinancing: \$ 253,492,160.72)</p> <p>4. Monitoring and Evaluation (GEF: \$ 4,400,488.08; cofinancing: \$38,023,823.61)</p> <p>5. Program Management Cost (GEF: \$5,157,744.00; Cofinancing: \$40,921,136.00)</p> <p>Total: GEF: \$ 151,840,674.00 Cofinancing \$ 1,308,381,941.00</p>
Outcomes	<p>1. Increased scope and depth of integrated urban sustainability management policies and processes, including institutionalization within the local governance structure.</p> <p>2.a Core performance framework for local and global environmental benefits implemented at the local level.</p> <p>2.b Improved local and global environmental sustainability</p> <p>3.a Increase in investment flows to sustainable cities initiatives from national</p>	<p>1. Local and/or national governments have strengthened governance, institutions, processes, and capacities to undertake evidence-based, sustainable, inclusive, integrated planning and policy reform.</p> <p>2. Local and national governments have undertaken sustainable integrated low carbon, resilient, conservation or land restoration investments in cities.</p>	<p>1. Local and/or national governments have strengthened governance, institutions, process, and capacities to undertake evidence-based, sustainable, inclusive, integrated planning and policy reform.</p> <p>2.a Local and national governments have undertaken sustainable integrated nature positive and low carbon land restoration investments in cities.</p> <p>2.b Local and national governments initiate</p>

	<p>governments, subnational governments, development partners, and the private sector</p> <p>3.b Increase in the number of innovative financing mechanisms and approaches</p> <p>3.3 Enhanced ability at the local level to leverage long-term financing for sustainability initiatives.</p> <p>4. Contribution of IAP to global discourse on sustainable urban management enhanced (including within the context of multilateral environmental conventions)</p>	<p>3. Local and national governments initiate innovative financing and business models for scaling-up sustainable urban solutions</p> <p>4. Policy making and action are influenced at local, regional and national levels to promote sustainable and inclusive cities</p>	<p>innovative financing and business models for scaling-up sustainable urban solutions.</p> <p>3. Policy making and action are influenced at local, and national levels to promote sustainable and inclusive cities.</p>
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Annex 3: Sustainable Cities Program Results Targets – by GEF Core Indicators

Core Indicator	GEF-6	GEF-7	GEF-8
Terrestrial protected areas created or under improved management ..		901,242.40 ha	500.00 ha
Areas Newly created		15,500.00 ha	
Areas Under improved Management effectiveness		885,742.40 ha	500.00 ha
Area of land restored		24,938.00 ha	367,802 ha
Area of degraded agricultural lands under restoration			3,072.00 ha
<i>Cropland</i>			100.0 a
<i>Range and Pastureland</i>			2,972.00 ha
Area of Forest and Forest Land restored		2,660.00 ha	21,960.00 ha
Area of natural grass and woodland under restoration			
<i>Woodlands</i>			330,000.00 ha
<i>Natural grass</i>			946.00 ha
Area of wetlands (incl. estuaries, mangroves) restored		22,278.00 ha	11,824.00 ha
Area of landscapes under improved practices (hectares; excluding PAs)		281,081.00 ha	2,332,945
Area of landscapes under improved management to benefit biodiversity		281081.00 ha	2,324,827.00
Area of landscapes under third-party certification incorporating biodiversity considerations			3000.00 ha
Area of landscapes under SLM in production systems			5118.00 ha
Terrestrial OECMs supported			65,000.00 ha
Area of marine habitat under improved practices to benefit biodiversity (excluding PAs)		38,248.00 ha	300,061.00 ha
Fisheries under third-party certification incorporating biodiversity considerations			300,061.00 ha
Greenhouse Gas Emissions Mitigated (metric tons) – direct (D) and indirect (I) (GEF-6 indicator: Support to transformational shifts towards a low-emission and resilient development path) (in metric tons).	Total 100,118,756	D: 40,450,825 I: 144,046,842	D: 39,113,415 I: 87,130,689
Carbon Sequestered or Emissions Avoided in the AFOLU (Agriculture, Forestry and Other Land Use) sector (in metric tons) – direct (D) and indirect (I).		D: 16,850,000 I: 49,320,000	D: 25,893,279 I: 23,529,163
Emissions Avoided Outside AFOLU (Agriculture, Forestry and Other Land Use) Sector (in metric tons) – direct (D) and indirect (I).		D: 23,600,825 I: 94,726,842	D: 13,220,136 I: 63,601,526
Energy Saved (MJ)		14,026,652,655	3,000
Increase in Install. Renewable Energy Capacity per tech		159.60 (MW)	
Chemicals of global concern and waste reduced			
Avoided residual plastic waste (metric tons)			110,804.00
Number of beneficiaries disaggregated by gender (Female = F; Male = M; Total = T)		F: 27,971,000 M: 30,228,000 T: 58,199,000	F: 13,399,495 M: 13,497,116 T: 26,896,611