Evaluation of the GEF–Civil Society Organization (CSO) Network

IEC Independent Evaluation Office
GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT FACILITY
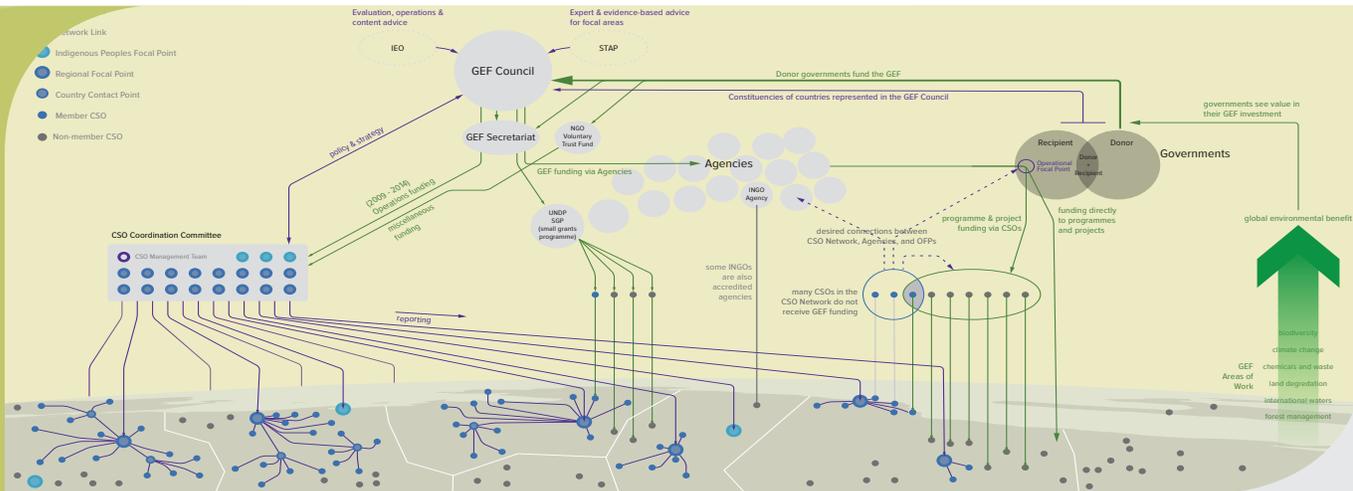
The GEF has a long-standing history of engaging with CSOs.

Since the pilot phase, CSOs have held consultations in sessions prior to the GEF semi-annual Council meetings, at which time they exchange their views about GEF activities. The GEF-CSO Network was established in 1995 as a result of a GEF Council decision to establish a formal dialogue and partnership with CSOs worldwide. Since then, the network has been a major mechanism for GEF engagement with CSOs. This evaluation of the GEF CSO Network is in response to a request from the GEF Council at its 47th meeting in October 2014. It covers the period from the last review of the network in 2005 to the present. The evaluation team identified eight network elements as a basis to answer the evaluation's key questions. The elements were: credibility, connectivity, capacity, results, structure, membership, governance and resources.

FINDINGS

1. The GEF-CSO Network continues to be relevant. The GEF-CSO Network continues to be relevant and is delivering results to the GEF partnership. The GEF-CSO Network makes consistent progress toward its objectives and maintains a more than moderate value added toward project designs and the GEF policy agenda. The majority of CSO members participating in the evaluation score the GEF-CSO Network as successfully making progress toward its Council-mandated objectives. It also performs well in its role of disseminating knowledge about the GEF. Others in the partnership—the GEF Council, the GEF Agencies, and country governments—find that the network's value addition to the partnership is generally satisfactory, influencing the policy agenda and increasing CSOs' understanding about the GEF.

2. The locus of GEF-CSO activities is not at the country level. The GEF-CSO Network's activities are distant from the country level where GEF projects make their mark and from where the majority of network CSOs operate. This compromises the network's ability to inform the GEF Council with country perspectives which add strength and value to network deliberations. Over its history, the CSO Network has grown not from the ground upward, but from the global policy table outward.

PURPOSE AND METHODS: The purpose of this study is to inform the Global Environment Facility's (GEF's) partnership of the extent to which the GEF-CSO Network is meeting its intended goals and strategic objectives and adding value to the GEF partnership and its membership, and how network features contribute to its functioning.

The evaluation took a mixed-methods approach and included a literature review, global online survey interviews with over 75 stakeholders, workshops, and focus groups using critical systems analysis in seven global regions. A social network analysis and a comparative analysis with analogous networks were also undertaken.
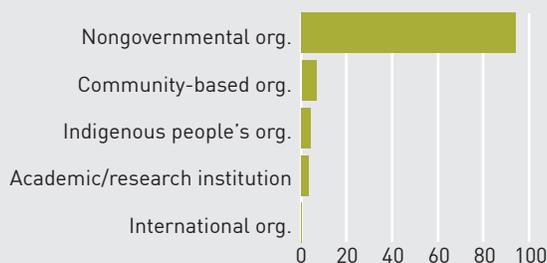
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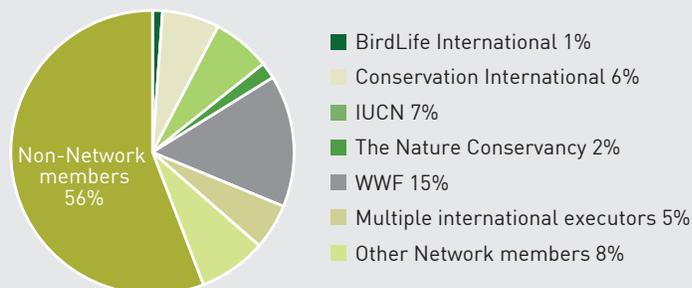
OPS6
SIXTH COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION OF THE GEF

NETWORK CHARACTERISTICS

GEF-CSO Network membership by organization type (%)

Major CSO project executors by share of GEF grant amount

- ■ BirdLife International 1%
- ■ Conservation International 6%
- ■ IUCN 7%
- ■ The Nature Conservancy 2%
- ■ WWF 15%
- ■ Multiple international executors 5%
- ■ Other Network members 8%

Source: CSO Network Membership Database.

3. The CSO Network structure has strengthened, but there is room for improvement. Within the context of an increasingly complex operating environment, the GEF-CSO Network has strengthened organizationally over the period under evaluation, but governance challenges remain—e.g., conflict resolution mechanisms. A further constraint on the organization is that the GEF-CSO Network today operates in an expanding GEF partnership without a shared contemporary vision of the role the network can play within a changing architecture.

4. Resources constrain scope. The GEF's funding commitment underwrites network member participation in Council, Assembly, and Expanded Constituency Workshop (ECW) meetings. A public management focus on results accountability has intensified over the evaluation period. This puts the onus on the network to be focused on results in its program/service offerings. Those serving in elected positions in the network have high performance expectations with a high outlay of volunteer resources. It is implausible to expect much more activity from the network without guided financing. With limited resources on hand, the network is focused on policy activities and not on networking within the organization, including the dissemination of knowledge and best practices across the network.

HISTORY

The GEF-CSO Network began in 1995 as the GEF Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) Network, changing its name to the current iteration prior to the Fifth GEF Assembly. Initially, it was a group of NGOs accredited by the GEF as eligible to attend Council meetings. In those early days, any accredited NGO was automatically a member of the GEF-NGO Network. Over time, the network has become a voluntary, self-organized collection of almost 500 environmental and sustainable development–oriented CSOs spread across 122 countries. Over two decades, the network's program has responded to the GEF Council's 1995 mandate that NGOs attending Council meetings "prepare for and report back on those meetings to the wider CSO community in their countries and regions." In addition to its Council-derived mandate, the network has, over time, also set objectives for itself. These pertain to enhancing the role of civil society in safeguarding the global environment, strengthening GEF program implementation through partnership with civil society, and building network capacity.

The network is organized according to different geographic regions. The structure consists of 16 elected CSOs, or regional focus points (RFPs), each of which represents a region encompassing more than one country to make a constituency. The representation of indigenous peoples is formally established in the governance and structure of the CSO Network through three focal points. Altogether,

these organizations make up the Coordination Committee. Up until October 2015, network leadership was provided by a central focal point (CFP) elected from among the RFPs. Currently, a Chair, Vice Chair, and Network Secretariat share the duties formerly carried out by the CFP. The Coordination Committee meets twice a year, prior to the Council meetings, to discuss network business.

A report is submitted to the Council itemizing network activities each year, and a report is prepared following each Council meeting for distribution to the network. Since 2011, the network has organized a meeting of regional CSOs on the day prior to ECWs to promote the network, exchange project-based knowledge, and prepare CSO positions for presentation to the regional constituency during the workshop. These meetings are supported logistically and financially by the GEF Secretariat.

RESULTS

Performance. The majority of CSO members participating in the study scored the GEF-CSO Network as successful in making progress toward its Council-mandated objectives. It also performs well in influencing the policy agenda and increasing CSOs' understanding about the GEF. At the policy table, the network's influence is most acknowledged in terms of review of the GEF Policy on Public Involvement, the GEF Policy on Minimum Standards on Environmental and Social Safeguards, and overall support

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE OF THE GEF-CSO NETWORK
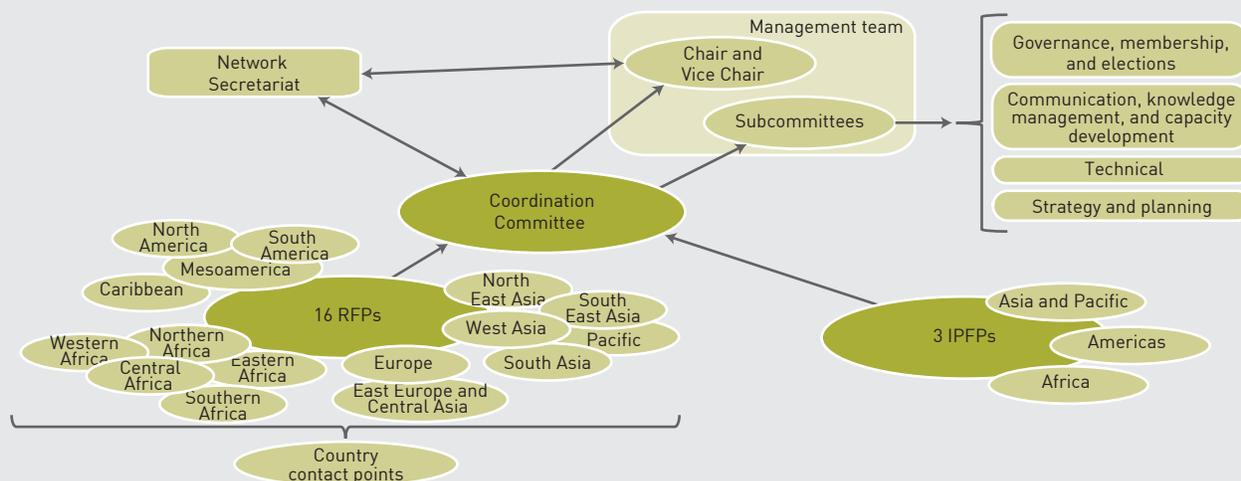
to indigenous peoples' policy issues. The network's efforts before and at replenishment meetings were also noted as important in ensuring strategic orientation. Almost to the same degree, other functions of the network that are associated with its own objectives (e.g., building relationships and exchanging knowledge, and strengthening project design and implementation within the network) remain valued by CSO members. However, the GEF-CSO Network has only infrequently commented on the GEF work program presented at every Council meeting.

Credibility. For CSOs, the GEF "brand" gives network members credibility, especially in those countries where the GEF identity is recognized. At the same time, affiliation does not automatically open doors or translate to the desired country-level engagement, somewhat diminishing the value that could accrue. All components of the GEF partnership maintain that the best way to earn the credibility to inform policy discussions and provide informed viewpoints is through direct experience with GEF projects/operations. That said, the space for CSO project execution has shrunk in the period under evaluation—due, in large part, to the revised resource allocation system with its increased emphasis on execution by government agencies. Although the "face" of the network is clear to the GEF Council, the depth of the network's reach at the country level is not visible, and credibility hinges on this. GEF projects are

operationalized at the country level. Country-informed perspectives, and especially those gained by CSO experiences with GEF operations, are necessary to the strength and value of network deliberations.

Some GEF-CSO Network members, accounting for 15 percent of global survey respondents, registered displeasure with the network, primarily over the lack of transparency and communication regarding network governance and the remoteness of the global policy information flowing to them. These organizations tended not to be engaged with information flow or to interact with fellow members on network business, and were potentially disenchanted with the way the network operates.

Capacity. The network's capacity development has largely been dedicated to information sharing about the GEF. To date, the network has been unable to muster the resources to advance a skills-building agenda for its members. Those CSOs that feel they are contributing to network business, are engaged at Council meetings and in ECWs, or enjoy a close working relationship with RFPs are more likely to see capacity gains than those that are not. Internally, the network does not have an assessment of the knowledge, skills, and experience resident within its membership. As such, it has not been able to leverage the resources that it may have for strategic entry into roles concerning focal area objectives or related to the GEF project cycle. There is observable impetus for enhancing network capacity

by (1) reinforcing RFP outreach capacity with the addition of country contact points, (2) pursuing the medium-size project modality as a vehicle for piloting capacity-building initiatives, and (3) working with the Small Grants Programme (SGP) in the implementation of the Communities Connect initiative and a CSO-Government Dialogue Platform.

Connectivity. Social network analysis indicates that opportunities for information exchange and interaction are highest among core members (focal points) as compared to the rest of the network. There is also greater connectivity between members and nonmembers than among themselves, with variation in the extent to which different RFPs are connected to the rest of the network. While most of the member CSOs report collaborating more with organizations outside the network than with those inside, international CSOs such as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Wildlife Federation (WWF) show relatively more ties and centrality within the network due to their multiple field locations across several continents. Generally, the GEF-CSO Network's activities continue to focus more at the regional and global levels and not enough at the country level.

Membership. The GEF-CSO Network's membership system has become more coherent over the period under evaluation (since 2005). It has developed application requirements and verification protocols that have prevented the inclusion of

ineligible CSOs. However, some describe and criticize the process as complex, slow, and unresponsive, so work is needed to improve the process.

ISSUES TO ADDRESS

1. Structural and governance issues

- One of the greatest external factors bearing on the network's structure concerns **vision**. Across the partnership—Agencies, government focal points, Council members, and CSOs—the evaluators were told that the GEF partnership is without a shared, contemporary understanding for the GEF-CSO Network.

- There is a confusing relationship between the network and its **CSO members that are now GEF Agencies**. The latter hold potential, through their field/regional linkages, to support a shift in the network's locus of activity closer to the country level. However, the dual identity of the members has raised questions within both systems, including how best to leverage shared values and interests while avoiding conflicts of interest associated with a CSO entity simultaneously serving as a GEF Agency and having a field office as a network member. At this stage, there are no guidelines to manage this risk.

- The **terms of office** for the indigenous peoples' focal points and RFPs have sometimes emerged as a constraint to member participation in the network. While there are pros and cons to having a once-renewable four-year term of office, the balance of opinion from all parts of the partnership is that this period is too long and is detrimental to voter participation and network building.

- Though **network leadership** has been strong by most accounts, some members perceive it as domineering. Major contributions and relationships have been consolidated through a few people, leaving the network subject to the risk of personality differences. Process disagreements and personality conflicts have arisen within and across the network, though to a lesser degree than in the past. The network's complaint procedure does not delineate the trigger point for external intermediaries to act in the best interests of the network. Where network disputes have arisen, they have distracted from daily business and posed reputational risks.

2. Lack of shared vision. The GEF partnership relationship should be influenced by a shared understanding of supply-demand across the partnership. A contemporary vision for the GEF-CSO Network does not exist to clarify the network's role among all elements of the partnership. Areas that need clarity include procedures for engagement with country governments, including with the GEF operational and political focal points; and how to encourage activities to be pushed more directly toward regional and country-level activities without compromising global-level encounters. As part of the vision, the funding modality should be considered.

LOOKING AHEAD

- **Clarify communication procedures**. The GEF Secretariat and the GEF-CSO Network should develop clear modes of engagement to guide cooperation and communication, to be adjusted as needed. The GEF Secretariat and the CSO Network work in areas of mutual interest and cooperation. Agreed-on rules of engagement should guide cooperation with the means to evaluate against expectations on an annual basis. Possible areas to be addressed include communications guiding country-level engagement, alignment of geographic regions, and procedures for complaint resolution.

- **Continue to promote CSO engagement**. The GEF-CSO Network should continue to build itself as a mechanism for strengthening civil society participation in the GEF at the global, regional, and national levels, paying particular attention to membership development, capacity building, and value-added working relationships across the partnership. Most of the network's members are NGOs and there is underrepresentation of other CSO types, namely indigenous peoples' organizations, community-based organizations, and academic and research institutes.

- **Strengthen governance**. The GEF-CSO Network should strengthen its governance with particular attention to annual work plans, cooperation with the Indigenous Peoples Advisory Group (IPAG), terms for the network's RFPs, and the complaints process. ◼