

## Evaluation of the GEF Focal Area Strategies



Before 2007, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) followed a Council-approved Operational Strategy and operational programs for each of its focal areas and cross-cutting areas of work.

Since 2007, the GEF has programmed resources according to defined focal area strategies. In May 2011, the GEF Council requested an evaluation of these GEF focal area strategies.

The study was designed as a formative evaluation that emphasized learning. The main objective was to inform the development and improvement of strategies for GEF-6 (2014–18). The evaluation encompassed the analysis of the following strategies covering the GEF-5 period (2010–14): biodiversity, climate change mitigation, international waters, land degradation, chemicals, sustainable forest management/REDD+,\* and climate change adaptation (under the Least Developed Countries Fund and the Special Climate Change Fund). The methodological approach used in the evaluation included constructing theories of change to identify causal pathways toward achievement of each strategy's objectives, reviewing the relationship with convention guidance, assessing the connection with scientific knowledge, and using the Real-Time Delphi method for expert consultation.

### Findings

**The GEF-5 focal area strategies fulfill an important function for GEF programming by defining areas of GEF activities, providing a general rationale for GEF engagement in these areas, and identifying the types of activities to receive GEF support.** They provide a clear picture of what the GEF intends to support by breaking down the overarching goals into objectives, explaining the GEF's role, and providing

an overview of fundable activities with concrete examples. The strategies also include a results framework that defines outputs for each objective. The frameworks serve as the basis for GEF's results-based management system and for resource allocation decisions during the replenishment process.

**The GEF-5 focal area strategies are not based on systematic identification of envisaged causal relationships between strategy elements or of connections between GEF activities and expected results.** This refers to the links between different types of GEF activities, as well as more complex causal chains toward achievement of results. However, these links and chains of causality have not been brought together in a systematic way. Using the system of causal links, GEF-6 could rely on a more modular approach to reduce the burden on individual projects and guide the design of multifocal area activities.

**The GEF-5 focal area strategies recognize the potential for broader adoption of results, but in most cases do not systematically consider the pathways that could maximize the catalytic role of GEF activities.** On the whole, the strategies are not explicitly based on chains of causality from GEF results to broader adoption (larger scale impact) that could serve as a guiding framework for programming to maximize the GEF's catalytic potential. Furthermore, the level of consideration on pathways to broader adoption differs between strategies. For example, the climate change mitigation and international waters strategies feature a comparatively stronger link to broader adoption than other strategies.

**The GEF-5 focal area strategies do not include a comprehensive approach to the creation and utilization of synergies between focal areas through multifocal area activities..** The land degradation strategy represents a partial exception as it elaborates on linkages and potential synergies with other focal areas. However, none of the GEF-5 focal area strategies include a systematic discussion

\*The GEF defines REDD+ as reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries; and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries.

of how elements from different focal areas can be combined to create effective multifocal area projects.

**GEF activities regardless of focal area employ a certain “toolbox” of elements and causal links that fulfill different purposes in each focal area strategy, but are similar in their design.** The differentiation between strategies derives from the distinctive selection and combination of common elements and causal links, which are determined by the nature of environmental challenges a strategy addresses. These elements can be market or legal oriented, or depend on other dimensions such as stakeholder composition and convention guidance to the GEF.

**Many types of GEF activities identified in the GEF focal area strategies build on creating local benefits for achieving global environmental benefits.** GEF activities such as changing economic structures in favor of sustainable practices, demonstrating benefits of alternative livelihoods, or reducing initial investments through new financing mechanisms are offering local benefits in exchange for behavioral changes that are ultimately envisioned to create global environmental benefits.

**GEF focal area strategies are largely responsive to and shaped by convention guidance. Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) guidance has been detailed and restrictive, which has made it difficult for the GEF to formulate a strategic approach in the biodiversity focal area.** Differences in the nature of guidance from different conventions have shaped the corresponding focal area strategies. The CBD guidance is more concrete and prescriptive than that of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). CBD guidance is reflected in the biodiversity strategy through a number of separate objectives or subsections of objectives addressing specific issues. In contrast, the climate change strategy follows UNFCCC guidance which allows for flexibility of interpretation and integration of issues, allowing for more consistency.

**Based on results of the Real-Time Delphi process, the elements of GEF-5 focal area strategies, with few exceptions, correspond with current scientific consensus. From a scientific perspective, room for improvement exists in terms of relative prioritization of specific aspects and the**

**selection of elements.** A partial exception is the discussion on protected areas as a suitable instrument for biodiversity conservation. Some experts voiced fundamental doubts about the contribution of protected areas to biodiversity conservation, and most deemed the emphasis given protected areas as the main component of the biodiversity focal area strategy as too high.

## Recommendations

- An explicit discussion of envisaged causal linkages and chains of causality in line with current scientific knowledge should form the basis for the formulation of the GEF-6 strategies.
- GEF-6 strategies should enable a more flexible and strategic approach to developing multifocal area projects that would be able to adopt elements from several focal areas in a consistent manner.
- GEF-6 strategies should be based on systematic considerations of potential pathways from GEF activities to the broader adoption of GEF results to further define and strengthen the GEF's catalytic role.
- Given the impact of convention guidance on the focal area strategies, the GEF should continue the dialogue with the CBD to further define the relationship between guidance and strategies to facilitate responsiveness as well as strategic coherence in GEF-6.
- GEF-6 strategies should revisit the GEF's overall approach to capacity development in response to concerns voiced by the conventions.

The GEF Independent Evaluation Office is an independent entity reporting directly to the GEF Council, mandated to evaluate the focal area programs and priorities of the GEF. The full version of *Evaluation of the GEF Focal Area Strategies* (Evaluation Report No. 78) is available on the GEF Independent Evaluation Office website, [www.gefeo.org](http://www.gefeo.org). For more information, please contact the Office at [gefevaluation@thegef.org](mailto:gefevaluation@thegef.org).