Frequently Asked Questions

Contents

1. *How do I keep the system context and baseline presentation concise?*

The purpose of describing the system context is to affirm that the proposed project is tackling an issue of importance within the GEF's mandate, and to identify the key system drivers that determine what will happen without any intervention and that will affect the design of an intervention. The baseline explains what will happen without the proposed intervention, which is important for demonstrating that the GEF funding will deliver benefits that would not otherwise arise. Keep the description focused on issues directly important to the proposed project. Avoid unprioritized laundry lists. Delete any sentences that do not either *add* to the readers' perception of the importance of the problem, or *add* to their understanding of the challenges and opportunities to be tackled.

2. *What level of detail is expected in the PIF? (vs the Project Preparation stage)*

The PIF is about persuading the reader that you have identified an important problem that is within the mandate of the GEF and is a priority for the country(s) concerned; that you have a plausible approach to tackling the problem, which identifies what further elaboration (and with who) will be needed during the full Project Preparation; and that you have thought clearly about the challenges of achieving enduring outcomes. The guidelines on the GEF project and program cycle policy outline the main information that can be expanded upon in more detail during project preparation.

3. *What's the point of having word limits on the PIF fields? [how do I get enough information across?!]*

Experience shows that longer is often not clearer! The purpose of a PIF is to show that there is a well-defined problem of significance to the GEF to be tackled, that there is a plausible approach to be taken to that problem which accounts for current and future context, that an approach to stakeholders has been thought through, and that GEF policy requirements have been met. The Project Rationale should focus tightly on information necessary to demonstrate the need and explain the baseline; and a well-defined theory of change provides the scaffolding for a concise description of the proposed response. This enables more efficient and effective assessment of the key aspects of the proposal by the GEF Secretariat, STAP and Council, and ultimately reduces project development time.

4. *How do I identify key system drivers that my project must allow for? [How do I deal with huge uncertainty in these?]*

A description of the system in which the environmental problem occurs should outline what is causing that problem to persist, as well as other major drivers of the system (e.g. population, climate change, markets, conflict, new technologies, etc) that will affect how it may play out in the future. The former, which are at least potentially within the sphere of influence of the intervention, will become barriers to change that the project design should tackle through its theory of change. The other drivers are mostly outside what the project can change, and yet the proposed response must work in whatever future emerges (e.g. higher demand for food due to rising affluence, or an uncertain level of climate change). Where trends in these drivers are fairly certain, these can be planned for; where they are completely unpredictable (e.g. technological break-throughs, unanticipated conflict), responses should look to be generally resilient to change. But some will be moderately uncertain (e.g. 1.5 or 3C in global warming, economic growth that might be 0 or 4% annually, etc.). For these STAP recommends the development of simple future narratives that can help assess whether proposed responses are 'robust' – that is, they

will work reasonably well in all possible futures, rather than being good in one future and failing disastrously in others.[1]

5. *How do I deal with the impacts of policy incoherence on an intervention at the PIF stage?*

A lack of policy coherence can mean that the outcomes of a project are undermined by conflicting policies (you reafforest one valley but meanwhile subsidies or development policy means the neighboring valley is logged and there is no net gain), leakage (you implement a ban on plastic nationally but as a result companies move their packaging activities to another country), or rebound effects (you give irrigators pumps that enable them to access water more easily and cheaply, but as a result they clear more fragile land and use more water). Some projects can promote better formulated policy changes and national level commitments to avoid such effects (e.g. the application of land degradation neutrality approaches explicitly aims for no leakage). At other time times these policies are outside the scope of the project; then it is important to scan not only for supporting policies but also for those that conflict with the proposed intervention, and decide whether it is worth pursuing an intervention if its investment will be wasted. STAP also recommends aligning activities on policy coherence across levels of operations in the GEF to help with this.[2]

6. *What's the difference between project outputs, outcomes and components?*

Components are the project interventions and activities identified as part of the theory of change for the project. The components outline high-level priorities for the project, and cover program and project level activities enabled by GEF co-investments and entrained resources. The outcomes and outputs are organized under the components (though there are often links among these).

Activities are the processes or actions that use the inputs to a project to produce the desired outputs.

Outputs are the immediate results of the activities of a project, such as products and services produced through activities, which are essentially within the sphere of control of the project.

Outcomes are flow-on effects outside the intervention expected as a result of the outputs interacting with other things happening in the wider world; these may be short to long-term, becoming decreasingly within the sphere of influence of the intervention. [3] (These may also be described as pre-conditions for achieving the goal or impact in some guides.)

7. *What's the point of a Theory of Change, and how do I incorporate it into a PIF?*

There are various ways of improving the design of interventions: the specific benefit of a theory of change (ToC) is its emphasis on making explicit the mental models and causal logic that underlie how change occurs or is envisioned, and on helping to design monitoring and learning with this logic in mind. A ToC defines what outcomes the intervention intends to achieve and how it aims to achieve these outcomes, which usually includes some key assumptions about cause and effect. One result is that the whole team should now understand the mental models and causal logic rather than working at cross purposes. A ToC can be developed very simply or be elaborated in great detail. Even at the PIF stage, it is useful to sketch a ToC diagram and brief narrative that identifies the main causal pathways and causal logic. The diagram and narrative immediately provide logical structure to the proposal, which is

---

[1] Using simple narratives to ensure durability of GEF investments; and forthcoming guide.
[2] Source: Framing policy coherence for the GEF
[3] Source: Theory of Change Primer; GEF-8 Project Identification Form (PIF)

immensely helpful in visualizing the intent and helping direct the next steps in development with fuller stakeholder engagement, testing and analysis. It also makes it easier to write the proposal concisely. STAP's Theory of Change Primer provides further guidance on developing a ToC, as well as a series of other FAQs.[4]

8. How do I justify that my proposed interventions are necessary and sufficient?

A good theory of change identifies *all* of the actions needed to achieve the targeted outcomes. It is usually easy to justify whether each is *necessary*. It is harder but important to ensure that collectively they are *sufficient*. In practice this may mean identifying some actions that are outside the scope of the GEF-funded project; these will need to be undertaken by other players in complementary activities. This helps to identify the need for critical alliances and coordination across initiatives. (If there are some necessary actions that no-one is pursuing, then the GEF funding may be wasted.) In addition, the calculation of expected GEBs (see question 10 below) is another tool to help confirm that the expected impact of proposed interventions is at a sufficient scale.

9. How do I plan for possible unintended consequences of an intervention at the PIF stage?

Unintended consequences of an intervention by definition are not deliberate, and sometimes they are completely unforeseeable. However, failing to consider foreseeable ways in which the future may unfold can be a cause of maladaptation or other undesirable outcomes. For example, the single-minded promotion of a crop or a management practice which works very well under today's conditions, or even under a future climate that is wetter, but fails disastrously if the climate dries, could undermine the resilience of local farmers. To avoid this, STAP recommends establishing some simple narratives of how the future may unfold, especially where there is uncertainty in this, and judging proposed interventions against all of those futures. In the case mentioned, this might result in encouraging diversification so some crops are successful in any future climate, allowing rapid adjustment to practices.[5] Identifiable unintended consequences should be planned for in the project logic!

10. What is the purpose of Incremental Cost Reasoning?

The GEF finances the incremental or additional costs associated with transforming a project with national/local benefits to deliver global environmental benefits (GEF trust fund) or lead to adaptation which reduces vulnerability, builds adaptive capacity, and increases resilience to climate change (LDCF/SCCF). The incremental cost reasoning ensures that GEF funds do not substitute for existing development finance but provide new and additional funding to produce agreed global environmental benefits.[6]

11. How do I calculate the GEF Core Indicators? (and how do I connect this with the Theory of Change?)

The first step is to identify which Global Environmental Benefits (GEBs – in the case of GEF Trust Fund projects) and/or Climate Adaptation Benefits (in the case of GEF-managed LDCF and SCCF trust fund projects) the intervention aims to achieve. The level of expected results should generally be based on what a GEF-financed project or program aims to achieve by its completion, drawing on past trends, professional judgment and an assessment of what is feasible considering available resources and planned

---

[4] Theory of Change Primer

[5] Using simple narratives to ensure durability of GEF investments; and forthcoming guide.

[6] Evaluation of Incremental Cost Assessment; STAP guidelines for screening GEF projects

activities.[7] The level of expected values should be justified, with an explanation of the methodological approach and underlying logic or causal pathway adopted, considering barriers, enablers, risks and assumptions. Beyond the data, making the causal pathway explicit and rooting key assumptions in the Theory of Change helps to confirm that the proposed interventions are sufficient to overcome the challenges identified, and to make scope adjustments to ensure a maximized and enduring outcome.

Because Core Indicators are structured along themes that overlap with multiple GEF focal areas, it is important to be cautious with intermediary input data used to calculate several GEBs. For example, hectares of area under improved management practices may vary depending on the practices and drivers of degradation covered in the project. Moreover, the surface area used as input may vary considerably when considering impacts in terms of biodiversity, land degradation or greenhouse gas emissions. The Theory of Change and project components are useful to consolidate these parameters and assumptions. It is important to conduct a final quality assurance check, including a review of the order of magnitude of benefits and of considerations above for consistency.

12. How do I use my project theory of change as the basis for my Monitoring and Evaluation plan and adaptive management?

A good theory of change identifies key assumptions in the cause-and-effect chains that are anticipated to lead to the intended project outcomes. While some such chains are well validated from past work, usually there are some where the evidence is much weaker, especially in more innovative projects. These key assumptions are potential knowledge gaps – essentially hypotheses that need to be tested to ensure that progress really is being made towards the desired outcomes. Monitoring whether assumptions are being met allows adaptive change in the project implementation to occur quickly if expectations are not borne out. The formal structure of the well-thought-through theory of change and monitoring of key assumptions allows constrained flexibility – that is, changes to a project can be justified in terms of departures from the expected theory of change logic, and protect against capricious management. Where a project aims for high levels of innovation, taking considered risks in the interests of getting high returns, such monitoring should be more intense, to pick up on incipient failures early.

13. What's the difference between strategic and implementation risks for my project, and how do I handle them in the PIF? [Why is there a separate Risk Table in the PIF form?]

The PIF Project Rationale should identify key trends in system drivers, which may be among the causes of the problem to be addressed (e.g. increasing population pressure), or may be future conditions which will affect the durability of any intervention outcomes (e.g. climate change that reduces rainfall for cropping, or uncertain economic trends that affect the viability of a new product). These are 'strategic' risks which are known, and should be incorporated in the project design thinking (e.g. in the theory of change [see FAQ7] or (especially where the trends are uncertain) through future narratives [see FAQ2]). By contrast there are implementation risks (such as the loss of a key staff member, or a drought year occurring just when tree planting was intended, or the failure of a novel technological development) which are risks that do not change the fundamental project design, but do need to be planned for. These implementation risks should appear in the Risk Table of the PIF, along with potential mitigation measures and a rating of the level of residual risk.

---

[7] Guidelines on the Implementation of the GEF-8 Results Measurement Framework provide guidance on GEF principles for Core Indicators calculation and references to existing GEB specific repositories of tools and methodologies consistent with GEF investments.

14. How do I integrate gender into the PIF project description without separate sections?

Gender mainstreaming aims to weave gender equality and women's empowerment considerations throughout relevant sections of the PIF. Hence the project description should include a preliminary analysis of gender inequalities in the project context, in particular with respect to gender-differentiated access to natural resources, participation in natural resources governance and decision-making, and enjoyment of socio-economic benefits from resource use/conservation. This description should include how any potential gender-differentiated impacts and risks relevant to the project will be addressed, ensuring that women's voices have been heard in defining the problem and possible responses. Gender equality considerations should also be integrated into project outcomes and outputs by, for example, ensuring that any resulting plans, policies or products are gender-responsive, that women are equally represented in any bodies formed, that women equally benefit from or have equal access to training and to economic opportunities arising from the project. Gender considerations should also be reflected in knowledge, monitoring and learning. [8]

At the PIF stage, any preliminary gender analysis should be uploaded in the portal, which may describe these issues in more detail. By the CEO endorsement stage, gender equality considerations should be fully embedded in the theory of change and gender-sensitive indicators included in the results framework. A detailed gender action plan is also to be developed.

15. What is good practice for knowledge management, monitoring and learning at PIF stage?

Monitoring is critical to supporting adaptive management, learning, and generation of knowledge, as well as confirming that the planned GEBs are achieved. At the PIF stage, the approach to monitoring can be set up by identifying indicators for key outputs and outcomes in each of the pathways. This will help stakeholders (e.g. community stakeholders, project managers and other key actors) reflect on how progress will be defined, what continuous learning will be generated, and what adaptive management may be necessary to continue progressing towards the expected outcome (see also FAQ12). Establishing the basis for a learning and knowledge plan at the PIF stage will help guide and manage knowledge throughout the project. This plan should identify what types of learning and knowledge are needed to achieve the project objective, or program goal, particularly as regards how the knowledge will be shared with among stakeholders and potentially contribute to adoption and scaling of the project outputs. The PIF should start to identify the resources and time required for managing learning and knowledge.

16. What is good practice and required for addressing current and anticipated impacts of climate hazards (particularly for climate adaptation projects seeking LDCF and SCCF finance)?

All projects should ensure they can deliver enduring outcomes in the face of potential climate change. Climate adaptation-oriented projects in particular require a clear rationale, especially with regards to the following key elements: (i) the presence of worsening climate hazards, now and/or in the future; (ii) evidence for the ways these hazards impact people and places; and (iii) interventions that clearly address these impacts. A detailed Decision Tree for Project Developers has been developed by STAP and the GEF Secretariat in consultation with GEF Agencies for designing climate change adaptation projects. LDCF and SCCF projects should align with priorities identified in National Adaptation Plans and National Adaptation Programs of Action, as relevant.

---

[8] See GEF/What We Do/Gender; GEF Guidance on Gender Equality