

68th GEF Council

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Virtual

Opening of the Meeting

**Introductory Remarks by
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As Delivered

Good morning, good afternoon and good evening – welcome to the 68th GEF Council meeting.

It is a pleasure to be joined again by my Co-chair, Dawda Badjie for the third time this year. This will be his last Council in this capacity; and so, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to him for co-leading the Council through the three meetings of 2024.

Nevertheless, the last few months have been a rollercoaster for multilateralism and international environmental negotiations and processes.

We have witnessed many highs – and honestly – a few lows, too.

Much has been said or written about the multilateral environmental processes that we are all part of.

But let us not forget why we are doing this.

The triple planetary crisis we are confronted with shows no sign of abating.

As a matter of fact, one can argue it is not even a triple crisis, it is just one!

Today, we are faced with the possible collapse of the global ecological system that maintains life and balance on our planet. Why? because all of our human systems are all in direct conflict with nature's systems.

To quote the recent “Planetary Health Check” report: our planet's vital signs are flashing red.

Dear friends and colleagues, in my remarks this morning, I will touch upon the recent meetings in Cali, Baku, Busan, and Riyadh.

We will, of course, also have a chance to dig deeper into these topics in other agenda items across the three Councils this week.

I also want to take a few minutes to remind you of what we have achieved in GEF-8 so far, our shared journey of improved GEF effectiveness and impact, an update on the GEF reform, and the huge opportunity of what we can potentially do together as part of GEF-9.

Let us first talk about Cali.

I have been attending the CBD COP for almost thirty years, I have attended fifteen out of the sixteen CBD COPs. I know very well how challenging these political negotiations can be. But this one was different.

COP16 was the first global moment for biodiversity since the agreement of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. And financing was the make-or-break political issue of the negotiations.

Almost all discussions on the financing mechanisms and the resource mobilization strategy were linked to whether countries should create a dedicated financial mechanism for biodiversity, separate from the GEF and the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund. This can potentially impact the GEF partnership's aspiration of higher impacts with more integration and more synergies across all multilateral environmental agreements.

Negotiations on this were slow, and ultimately not yet resolved.

This lack of agreement will continue to be a challenge for future negotiations, and potentially slow down implementation ambition.

In the COP, in my view there was not enough time dedicated to the discussion of the GEF-8 report or the CBD's evaluation of our effectiveness as the financial mechanism of the Convention.

To me, this was such a missed opportunity.

The GEF has decades of experience at the heart of biodiversity finance.

And by the way, the GEF's fingerprints are in almost all of the protected areas in the Global South.

As the GEF report to COP 16 noted, we have approved over \$2.4 billion in support to the GBF during the last two years! Out of that amount, \$700 million was allocated to the African continent. It is notable that Africa was also the first beneficiary of biodiversity-related funding in GEF-8.

And with the GBFF, in the context of implementing Target 3, in record time, during 2024 we approved many important projects across the

globe, including to Colombia on management of mangroves for \$16 million, to Mexico for 30x30 expansion of protected areas for \$18.5 million, to Brazil on the protection of the Caatinga biome and on conservation in Indigenous lands for a total of almost \$20 million, as well as several other significant projects in LDCs and SIDS.

The evaluation presented to the COP on our effectiveness said we have made significant progress in resource mobilization.

In Cali, more money was also pledged to the GBFF Fund - a signal of growing trust in the GEF partnership for biodiversity.

Dear colleagues, since Cali, I had the opportunity to engage with many ministers from our donor and recipient countries, particularly in Africa, and SIDS. I received strong and positive signals of support for the GEF to continue to be the preferred channel to fund biodiversity action - quickly, efficiently, and fairly.

COP16 part two is set to reconvene in February next year, and the GEF stands ready to support greater resource mobilization ambition, and to be responsive, as always, to the needs of Parties.

Now let me turn to Baku.

For many, the outcomes of COP29 have been steeped in controversy. Yes, it is clear that no one got everything they wanted.

However, a finance deal was reached, multilateralism did prevail, and the dynamics driving a climate-resilient future, and the clean energy transition are underway.

For the GEF, there was an important signal of scaling up finance through our adaptation funds, as well as support for our mitigation portfolio.

Along with the Green Climate Fund, the Climate Investment Funds, and Adaptation Fund, the multi-lateral climate funds offer a proven and cost-effective mechanism. I really do believe that we are stronger together.

On this point, negotiators seemed to agree, as can be read in the final finance decision. I quote:

“[the COP] Decides that a significant increase of public resources should be provided through the operating entities of the Financial Mechanism, the Adaptation Fund, the Least Developed Countries Fund and the Special Climate Change Fund and also decides to pursue efforts to at least triple annual outflows from those Funds from 2022 levels by 2030 at the latest.”

The increased support to the GEF’s adaptation funds was included in the New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance.

Parties agreed on this agreement to call on all actors to enable the scaling up of \$1.3 trillion per year from all public and private sources to developing countries by 2035. As part of the overarching goal, it calls for developed countries to take the lead on mobilizing \$300 billion per year from a wide variety of sources and a goal to at least triple the funding that flows from the various funding entities associated with the Convention and Paris Agreement.

To advance progress towards these goals, countries established the “Baku to Belem Roadmap to 1.3T” with the aim of scaling up climate finance to developing countries, to be guided by both Azerbaijan and Brazil as Presidencies of COP29 and COP30 and to deliver a report by November 2025.

In these conversations on climate finance, it is important to note that, today, the Climate Funds (including the GEF) only manage around 2.7% of climate finance. It is important to also remember the distinction between grant and non-grant climate finance, which is key for developing countries.

The GEF looks forward to engaging in and supporting these processes in any way needed.

And what was achieved in Busan?

Countries negotiating a legally binding instrument on plastic pollution concluded their fifth session with plans to reconvene in 2025.

Delegates agreed on a “Chair’s Text” which will serve as the basis for future negotiations in the next year.

Despite lack of a final agreement, Busan sent a clear signal that the world wants, and needs, a meaningful, ambitious plastic pollution treaty

The GEF will continue to make itself available to support this goal and this process, while continuing to fund key chemicals projects and integrated programs that address plastics pollution.

Finally, to Riyadh.

The UNCCD COP16 just ended this last weekend. Again, not everyone got what they wanted. In the end, parties were unable to agree on whether to begin negotiations on a new drought framework or a legally-binding protocol. As Friday turned to Saturday, parties were left with no choice but to adopt a procedural decision that agrees to continue discussions on the basis of the progress made at COP16 with a view to adopting a decision at COP17.

There has never been a more urgent need to restore damaged ecosystems than now, when up to 40 percent of the world's land is degraded, impacting 3.2 billion people.

In the past two decades, the GEF has provided a lot of funding, around \$5.2 billion to combat land degradation, desertification, and drought through 674 projects and programs and leveraged another \$35.4 billion in co-financing.

The feedback we received in Riyadh on the GEF's investments was a clear reminder of what we have achieved in recent years, and what we should be proud of.

Now, allow me to offer some reflections on what we have been doing so far in GEF-8.

This Council meeting comes at an inflection point for the GEF partnership.

We are at a pivotal point in our collective journey. The decisions that you and your capitals take over the next 12-18 months are critical for the country's future.

To take informed decisions together, we need to reflect on what we have collectively achieved, and the big successes we can all share.

In the GEF's regularly updated Scorecard, a picture of effective progress toward results and impact emerges.

Between July 2022 and June 2024, GEF funding:

- Supported the creation and sustainable management of **more than 130 million** hectares of terrestrial and marine protected areas (nearly all of these protected areas were newly established with GEF support)
- improved sustainable land management practices on 25 million hectares of productive landscapes
- averted 840 million tons of greenhouse gases.

These efforts are positively impacting millions of people, many of whom were women.

Small Island Developing States and Least Developed Countries have demonstrated swift and robust progress in programming, utilizing around 70% of their allocations.

This highlights the significant demand for GEF funding.

Resources mobilized have exceeded the GEF-8 co-financing target.

Our new knowledge management and learning strategy and communication and visibility policy offer huge opportunities for greater engagement across the partnership.

Overall, we are on track to meet all 10 environmental results targets in the GEF-8 funding cycle, and at just over the halfway mark for the period we have already surpassed three.

Integration is now one of the hallmarks of GEF programming, and our true competitive advantage.

This is in line with the growing calls for integration across Conventions – for example, at COP16 in Cali, presidents of the CBD and UNFCCC COPs were invited to collaborate on opportunities for strengthened multilateral coordination on climate change and biodiversity loss.

The Rio Markers, which assess the benefits of integration, are surpassing our set targets.

All of this is only possible with our dedicated collaboration with our recipient countries which, to date in GEF-8, has been particularly extensive.

The numbers speak for themselves!

These are the kind of results of which the whole partnership – the GEF Secretariat, Council members, agencies, countries, and every single stakeholder – should be proud of!

Now allow me to highlight a few points on the GEF's effectiveness and impact.

Colleagues, it has become clear that we needed to do things differently.

Like all institutions, there are areas where we can do better, where we are doing better, and where we will do better.

We hear you! Please be assured that we hear every single Council member.

And so, the GEF is committed to continuing to improve our processes so that the funding entrusted to us supports relevant actions quickly, efficiently, and fairly.

At the same time, we must have an honest conversation backed by data and by evidence.

The time from concept submission to disbursement has been declining over the past decade. In fact, the first few projects in GEF-8 reached disbursement in just 22 months—half the time it took in GEF-6.

At the same time, our monitoring report shows that the majority of our active projects show positive implementation progress.

We will continue to increase our monitoring of our active projects, including discussions with agencies on where improvements can be made.

I want to stress that the GEF, efficiently and responsibly, manages the resources entrusted to us.

The corporate budget only accounts for 3.5% of the total GEF-8 funding envelope. And, once funds are received, they are speedily committed.

I can assure you that we are working both inside the GEF, and with agencies and countries, to find ways to speed up processes to get money out the door faster, while also keeping the necessary safeguards to ensure quality and trust.

I would like to turn now to the ongoing GEF Secretariat reform

As you know, we have in the last one and a half years been enacting improvements and reforms to the way the GEF does its business, internally and externally.

The GEF Secretariat has been reorganized for greater collaboration, more efficiency, and improved impact.

And to this end, we have also been working hard to improve operational performance through initiatives such as streamlining, results management, risk monitoring, and portal development, in

consultation with Council members, focal points, and stakeholders across the partnership.

We are also working to ensure that all relevant decision-makers, negotiators, and GEF stakeholders like the Convention focal points, OFPs, and CSOs, get access to the information about the GEF that they need.

Over the last year, as part of the GEF reform, and thanks to the strong GEF-8 replenishment, we have been hiring new staff.

Step by step, we are putting in place the experts in key areas to manage the GEF's family of funds.

With every new hire, the GEF secretariat grows stronger, the GEF partnership grows stronger, and the global environment gets another powerful advocate.

I have been talking so far today about the strengths of the GEF. But what do external evaluators have to say about us?

Also, as you know the GEF is regularly, externally evaluated on multiple dimensions through several different bodies.

I have already mentioned the positive evaluation of the GEF to the CBD COP16. It points to significant progress of the GEF in its role in resource mobilization, and in supporting the implementation of activities that achieve the objectives of the CBD.

It pointed to improvements in timely disbursements, the predictability of its resources, and its strong co-financing.

Interestingly, this evaluation noted that the GEF's effectiveness is limited by, among other things, the limited availability of financial resources.

Another relevant external process in 2024 was the G20 High-Level Expert Group Review of the Vertical Climate and Environment Funds. It reported that in 2022, the GEF has disbursed a high share of its approved funding, outpacing other funds in the same space.

It also noted that, when it comes to efficiency improvements, the GEF partnership needs to look towards the agencies to accelerate processes.

In the coming months, we will be receiving the MOPAN Assessment of the GEF, as well as the OPS-8 report of the Independent Evaluation Office. Early indications from both indicate several positives, as well as areas for improvement.

We look forward to studying both reports intently, and we will take their recommendations forward in our path of continuous improvement.

Finally, let me conclude with some words of excitement, and yes, the challenges ahead of us for 2025 and 2026.

The GEF-9 replenishment ahead of us is a defining moment for the planet – together we need to seize it!

At the same time, we need to honestly confront the political realities around us.

We must be able to have an open discussion on the key issues that have been polarizing the international community in recent months.

We know that developing countries need more financing to deal with growing environmental threats.

We know that donors want to channel finance in the most efficient way to ensure impact at scale.

We know that financing from all sources is critical, needed, to narrow the nature funding gap.

We know that Indigenous Peoples and local communities have an enormous stake in environmental funding, action, and governance, and play an important role in ensuring transparency and fairness.

Now, you know that the GEF partnership delivers solutions, demonstrates results, and provides value for money.

You know that the GEF partnership is committed to continue improving, and to ensuring that the funding entrusted to us gets to where it is most needed, quickly, fairly, responsibly, and inclusively.

You know that the GEF partnership is better positioned than ever, to deliver an ambitious GEF-9 replenishment.

But who is the GEF partnership? it is all of us.

And this GEF partnership is like a big family to me.

As in any family, we all have our roles, obligations, and responsibilities.

When we – the Council, the Secretariat, the agencies, and the countries – perform our roles to the best of our ability, we will maximize our cohesion and our impact.

The planet needs us. Let us deliver – as a family.

I thank you all.