BACKGROUND NOTE

The Whole-of-Society Approach: GEF Partnerships

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

The Partnerships Division strengthens the GEF Partnership by building strategic engagement with civil society, Indigenous Peoples and local communities, women, youth, and other non-state actors. It seeks to enable their participation in GEF decision-making, implementation, and in supporting collaboration across the GEF Partnership to advance GEF priorities and environmental impact.

The Division manages dedicated GEF financing mechanisms that support and amplify the contributions of civil society, Indigenous Peoples and local communities, women, and youth, including the GEF Small Grants Program (SGP), the GEF-7 Inclusive Conservation Initiative (ICI), the GEF-8 Heart of Conservation Initiative (HCI), and Fonseca Leadership Program (FLP). The Division leads the GEF's institutional engagement and dialogue with the GEF CSO Network, Indigenous Peoples Advisory Group (IPAG), and GEF Gender Partnership, helping ensure that stakeholder perspectives inform GEF policies, programming, and implementation. The Division also leads institutional approaches on inclusion and stakeholder engagement and works with GEF agencies and Operational Focal Points to translate these commitments into action.

WHY WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY?

GEF-9 marks a fundamental shift in how the GEF thinks about the role of communities, civil society, and non-state actors in environmental programming.

The GEF has a long history of working with civil society, Indigenous Peoples and local communities, women, youth, and other non-state actors—and of investing in their leadership and solutions. GEF-9 builds on this experience, with an ambition to deepen, expand, and scale these partnerships and approaches.

The GEF-9 Whole-of-Society approach recognizes that achieving global environmental goals requires the contributions of actors across society—not only governments. It seeks to strengthen how these actors participate in shaping, implementing, and sustaining GEF-supported action, and to connect their knowledge, leadership and resources with national and global environmental priorities.

GEF-8	**GEF-9**
Governments and Agencies lead; communities are consulted and included	National and local actors are co-designers, co-implementers, and executing partners
Stakeholder engagement as a process requirement	Whole-of-Society as a delivery architecture
Inclusion as discretionary good practice	Inclusion as systematic and measurable

This shift is grounded in evidence from the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) and through operational experience, which show that a Whole-of-Society approach:

- Delivers more durable results by embedding outcomes locally and reducing dependency on external actors;
- Builds national capacity, with skills and institutional memory staying in-country;
- Strengthens legitimacy and ownership, especially in fragile or decentralized contexts; and
- Promotes economic inclusion, job creation, and reduces brain drain by strengthening local organizations rather than relying on external ones.

The GEF-9 Programming Directions identify the Whole-of-Society approach as a priority theme, placing it at the core of the GEF-9 architecture. As such, Whole-of-Society is not a standalone workstream or funding window. It will be embedded across GEF-9 programming from the outset, including the Integrated Programs, Focal Areas, and Strategic Initiatives. Meaningful engagement, leadership, and access to financing for civil society, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women, and youth will be considered from the earliest stages of design. GEF-9 will operationalize the Whole-of-Society approach with concrete, measurable commitments.

GEF-9 WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY: KEY COMMITMENTS AND TARGETS

Indigenous Peoples and local communities

- Twenty percent aspirational target across the GEF Family of Funds for actions by Indigenous Peoples and local communities.
- $100 million dedicated window through the Indigenous Conservation Initiative, direct funding to Indigenous Peoples and local communities' organizations.
- GEF Policy on Indigenous Peoples, moving from discretionary to systematic inclusion.
- Non-objection process for Indigenous-led projects and piloted voluntarily for LDCF/SCCF.
- Framework indicators, disaggregated by Indigenous Peoples and local communities as separate groups (alongside women and youth), plus Indigenous and Traditional Territories included in the results framework.

Ensuring inclusive and equitable participation, particularly of women, youth, and Indigenous Peoples, has long been a core strategy of the SGP. In GEF-7, 22 percent of projects involved Indigenous Peoples, 889 Indigenous leaders directly participated in project activities, about 40 percent of country programs had Indigenous focal points on their National Steering Committees, and culturally appropriate grant procedures were adopted (for example, proposals accepted in local languages in 18 countries) to improve Indigenous access and participation. This participation resulted in improved capacities of Indigenous organizations to design and manage projects and strengthened representation of Indigenous interests in environmental policy advocacy. GEF-9 builds on a track record where GEF-7's Inclusive Conservation Initiative and GEF-8's Heart of Conservation Initiative have demonstrated that direct funding to IPLC organizations delivers results and generates strong demand.

Civil society organizations

GEF-9 builds on longstanding engagement with civil society, with concrete steps to create stronger opportunities to:

- **Shape GEF programming**. Engage from the outset of project and program development, helping shape priorities, approaches, and implementation.
- **Lead and deliver**. Play a more direct role in implementation, including opportunities for CSOs to serve as GEF executing agencies, and to contribute their knowledge, networks and experience.

- **Access resources and support**. Expand opportunities for CSOs to access and manage GEF financing, alongside technical assistance, capacity strengthening, and other support to deliver environmental results.

GEF Small Grants Program

SGP is the GEF's flagship mechanism for community-led environmental action, supporting civil society, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women, and youth to lead environmental action and deliver results. In GEF-9, the GEF Small Grants Program will serve as a dedicated pillar of the Whole-of-Society approach.

- **Deepen direct access and local leadership**. Build on SGP's decentralized, country-driven model, delivered through UNDP, FAO, and Conservation International, while encouraging greater engagement of national executing agencies and civil society in shaping and delivering country programs.
- **Expand innovative financing**. Build on the SGP Microfinance Initiative introduced in GEF-8 to connect community-level action with innovative and blended finance approaches aligned with GEF-9 priorities;
- **Connect learning and scale**. Use the SGP Global Knowledge and Learning Platform to connect experiences across countries, strengthen knowledge exchange, and help successful locally led solutions inform and scale across the GEF portfolio.

Gender equality and women's empowerment

- A new core indicator is included in the GEF-9 Results Management Framework on women's leadership and effective engagement in environmental and natural resource management.
- This indicator tracks women's access and rights to natural and productive resources; leadership and influence in decision-making; access to socio-economic services and instruments (including finance, information, technology, and safety); and catalytic or transformational actions addressing power imbalances.
- All people-related indicators are to be disaggregated by sex.
- Projects and programs are required to integrate gender dimensions and women's empowerment in project design; have gender action plans that are budgeted; and monitor, report, and produce knowledge products on best practices and lessons learned.

Youth

- All relevant indicators in the GEF-9 Results Framework will include disaggregation by youth.
- The Fonseca Leadership Program, which has supported 300+ conservation fellows from 62 countries (42 percent women) through partnerships with 11 international institutions, is being expanded to additional focal areas under GEF-9, broadening partnerships with new international institutions.

GUIDANCE FOR AGENCIES AND OFPS

Start early

The Whole-of-Society approach does not begin at implementation; it begins at concept design. Involving communities, CSOs, and IPLC organizations at the concept stage fundamentally changes what is designed and who owns it. Engagement of these critical actors are key to the meaningful design and development of the Gender Action Plan, Stakeholder Plan, and the Environmental and Social Safeguards for the projects and programs.

Agencies should demonstrate early engagement in their Project Identification Forms (PIFs) and Project Preparation Grant (PPG) documentation.

Strengthen the role of CSOs and IPLC organizations in implementation

Move beyond treating civil society as a consultation requirement. When project design lends itself to community-based or civil society-led implementation, local NGOs, CSOs, women's organizations, and IPLC organizations should be actively considered as executing entities, not only as subcontractors or beneficiaries. Agencies should document their consideration of this option in project documentation.

Strengthen capacity and leadership

GEF-9 will strengthen the capacities of civil society, Indigenous Peoples and local communities, women, and youth to participate, lead, and contribute to environmental results. It will also strengthen these key stakeholder capacities to ensure that GEF policies and requirements on gender equality, stakeholder engagement, and environmental and social safeguards are applied in all project and program phases.

Mainstream the SGP as an integral CSO instrument

GEF-9 provides opportunities to connect GEF projects and programs with SGP country programming and to incorporate locally led, community-driven approaches within GEF investments.

- **Connect with SGP**. Where relevant, link GEF projects and programs with SGP country priorities, partners, networks, and experience to reinforce community-level action.
- **Apply SGP approaches**. Consider locally led grantmaking, community-driven decision-making, small-scale innovation, and learning-by-doing as part of project and program design, where appropriate.
- **Learn and scale**. Use SGP's experience and the forthcoming GEF SGP Knowledge and Learning Platform to bring local solutions and lessons into wider GEF investments and support scaling.

Apply sex and youth disaggregation

Ensure your project's monitoring and evaluation framework disaggregates people-related indicators by sex and youth from the outset. This is a GEF-9 requirement, not an option.

Engage GEF stakeholder bodies early

GEF-9 will build on the GEF's experience in capacity development to strengthen opportunities for civil society, Indigenous Peoples and local communities, women, and youth to participate, lead, and contribute to environmental results. Three formal engagement bodies are available to support project design and implementation:

- **GEF CSO Network**: for civil society input and review.
- **Indigenous Peoples Advisory Group (IPAG)**: for guidance on IPLC-linked programming.
- **GEF Gender Partnership**: for substantive integration of gender equality measures across the portfolio.

Agencies are encouraged to engage these bodies at the project preparation stage. Agencies are expected to engage gender specialists and social safeguard experts early in the project development phase.

THE POLICY ARCHITECTURE: WHAT IS CHANGING UNDER GEF-9

The GEF's Whole-of-Society approach is underpinned by the Stakeholder Engagement Policy, Gender Equality Policy, Environmental and Social Safeguards, and The Principles and Guidelines for Engagement with Indigenous Peoples. For the upcoming GEF-9 cycle, the GEF Secretariat will develop a new Indigenous Peoples Policy and will provide a dedicated policy framework for IPLC engagement, rights, and access to GEF funding, consistent with international standards and the 20 percent resource allocation commitment.

SUMMARY

Area	GEF-9 Expectation
CSOs	Encourage a greater role for national and local CSOs as executing entities, while supporting their capacity to implement, monitor and report on progress.
IPLCs	Advance actions by Indigenous Peoples and local communities through the 20 percent aspirational target and the $100 million Indigenous Conservation Initiative window, supported by the new GEF Policy on Indigenous Peoples and the framework and guidance the GEF will prepare to help agencies engage early and operationalize this commitment.
GEF SGP	Recognize the GEF SGP as the key mechanism for community-level delivery, while incorporating SGP elements, approaches and lessons into GEF programs and projects where relevant.
Gender Equality/Women	Track women's leadership and empowerment with new core indicator; disaggregate all people indicators by sex; promote more women- and gender-focused projects; advance gender transformative and catalytic measures through the GEF community of practice of gender leads of the GEF Integrated Programs.
Youth	Advance a broader youth agenda through youth-disaggregated indicators, a youth strategy, early and meaningful youth engagement, targeted support across GEF programs and projects, and the Fonseca Leadership Program where relevant.
Timing	Better integrate, track, and enforce early engagement of rightsholders and stakeholders at concept stage, building on existing stakeholder engagement and gender equality policies and guidelines.
Policy	Prepare for a new Indigenous Peoples Policy