



Strategic Review of the GEF Civil Society Organization Network 2023

GEF CSO Network Response

GCN Coordination Committee

May 23, 2024

Global Environment Facility Civil Society Organization Network

Response to the 2023 Strategic Review of the GEF CSO Network

Introduction

This memorandum is the Response by the GEF CSO Network (GCN) to the strategic review of the GCN was financed by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Secretariat and conducted in 2023 by a consultant, Andres Falconer.

The review drew on earlier evaluations by the GEF Independent Evaluation Office of the GCN¹ in 2016 and of the GEF's Institutional Policies and Engagement² in 2022. The Consultant also conducted a series of in-depth interviews with selected representatives of the GCN as well as with the GEF Secretariat and other stakeholders. Thus, the report by the consultant provides perspectives and potential actions on both Network operations and the broader issue of the place of the GCN in the landscape of the GEF's relationship with civil society.

The review acknowledges the historical relationship between the GEF and the GCN, notes the broader conceptualization of civil society, and recommends options for repositioning of the GCN within both constructs.

Actions proposed in response to the recommendations reflect current efforts to improve existing Network governance arrangements, the need to re-situate the GCN in the larger construct of civil society, the need to facilitate the GEF's embrace of the 'whole of society' approach and the associated expansion of the GEF's engagement with civil society, and the need to pursue a course of action that is consistent with participatory governance ideals.

Response by the GEF CSO Network

The GCN agrees that the recommendations stated in the Strategic Review identify many of the challenges the Network faces in its organizational structure, governance, and engagement with members and civil society generally. The GCN intends to address those issues through a Network development process, to be elaborated as a Network Development Plan.

This Response focuses on the main elements of the Strategic Review; that is, the GCN-GEF relationship and the value and future of that relationship within the larger context of civil society in the institutional architecture for design and delivery of sustainable development programming at local, national, regional, and global scales.

¹ Evaluation of the GEF-Civil Society Organization Network, September 2016.

<https://www.gefio.org/evaluations/evaluation-gef-civil-society-organization-cso-network-2016>

² GEF Institutional Policies and Engagement, July 2022.

<https://www.gefio.org/sites/default/files/documents/evaluations/gef-policies-2020-vol1.pdf>

Recommendation 1

Reaffirm the independence and autonomy of the CSO Network, seeking legitimacy through actions and outcomes rather than as a result of a historical mandate or entitlement.

Response to Recommendation

The GCN evolved out of the efforts by the GEF to engage with civil society in the GEF establishment and programming. Formation of the Network was supported by the GEF Council and Secretariat, including being given the role of administering the engagement of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the work of the GEF. However, in the evolving landscapes of both the GEF and civil society, there is a need for the Network to engage more effectively with, and facilitate action by, civil society and other stakeholders, particularly at regional and national levels.

Moving forward, the legitimacy of the GCN should not be based mainly on historical mandate, but more on its ability to engage and empower its members, who are working around the world to safeguard the environment on which their communities depend.

The GCN agrees with the statement that the Network is autonomous and has its own rules and decision-making process. Whilst being an independent entity, it was established to work with the GEF partnership. Furthermore, severing the Network from the work of the GEF could undermine the effectiveness of the GEF, as the Network was established primarily to facilitate effective engagement of the GEF with civil society. That relationship has taken on greater importance as the GEF embraces a 'whole of society approach' and as the disruption to human and natural systems by natural and anthropogenic factors increases in scope and severity of impact.

As such, the GEF, as with all intergovernmental organisations and programs, should endeavor to work collaboratively with civil society to effect positive and lasting change towards building just and sustainable societies.

The challenge for the Network is to effectively represent to and within the GEF partnership (and other regional and global multilateral arrangements) the diversity of situations and voices at the local, national, and regional levels. The modalities for engagement, representation, translation, and collaboration will be elaborated in the GCN's Theory of Change.

Short-term Action

The GCN will prepare a Theory of Change that articulates the GCN's role in connecting the GEF and its constituency to civil society, facilitating linkages between multilateral programming at different scales, and supporting collective action within civil society and between civil society and the other two social sectors.

Medium-term Action

The future functioning of the Network will be elaborated in a Network Development Plan.

Recommendation 2

Establish a working relationship with the GEF, in particular with the Secretariat, on a constructive, problem-solving, transactional approach as the basis for a more productive and fruitful long-term relationship.

Response to Recommendation

The GCN agrees that its relationship with the GEF should be productive and constructive but disagrees that it should be transactional.

The recommendation presumes that civil society is attempting to gain something of value from the GEF and should provide some utility value to the GEF in return. A transactional approach undervalues the role of civil society in sustaining their communities, including by safeguarding the environment on which their communities depend. Dealing effectively with current global development challenges requires mobilization of the three social sectors, underscored by the GEF's recognition of the need for a 'whole of society approach' in its programming.

The GCN therefore believes that its relationship with the GEF should be transformational rather than transactional, and an expanded vision of engagement with the GEF will be articulated in the GCN's Theory of Change.

Short-term Actions

- (1) Formalise a memorandum of understanding between the GCN and GEF Secretariat to better define the relationship with the GEF Secretariat, including the Secretariat's engagement with GCN members.
- (2) Seek further guidance or a decision by the GEF Council to clarify and strengthen the recognition of the GCN as an important partner of the GEF.

Medium-term Action

The GCN will enhance communication and relationships with all parts of the GEF constituency (including Independent Evaluation Office, Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel, and the GEF implementing agencies), the country focal points and national coordinating committees, and the Small Grants Programme.

Recommendation 3

Decentralize, localize, and open the Network, expanding the participation and agency of Network members.

Response to Recommendation

The GCN agrees with the recommendation to enable action by Network members at different scales. The Strategic Review acknowledges that the civic sector is not homogeneous and, considering the differences in the enabling environments across countries, the GCN will necessarily utilize different approaches in its response.

The existing structure of the Network is somewhat decentralized, with Regional Focal Points and Country Contact Points facilitating engagement with GCN members and other organisations in many regions. The GCN agrees that its needs to empower decision making and action at regional and country levels to address the specific needs and conditions of those spaces.

Short-term Actions

- (1) Prepare a Communication Strategy for the Network.
- (2) Strengthen Network activities at the regional level.
- (3) Appoint additional GCN Country Contact Points and enhance their participation in national and regional programs.

Medium-term Action

The structure, governance, and functioning of the Network will be elaborated in a Network Development Plan.

Long-Term Action

The intersectionality of the major issues faced by countries and communities requires coordinated responses across a range of actors and spaces. The GCN recognizes that a hierarchical structure reduces its ability to function at the intersections of those major challenges. The GCN will explore models of participation that enable its members to participate in and/or facilitate collective action at national and regional levels to address issues at scale.

Recommendation 4

Embrace an expanded notion of Civil Society, reaching out to new, emerging, and cross-cutting constituencies.

Response to Recommendation

The GCN accepts the definition of civil society advanced by the United Nations³.

The GCN notes that the U.N. and global programs use the typologies in different ways, sometimes interchangeably with terms such as stakeholder.

The GCN also recognizes that both the conceptualization and operations of civil society are expanding beyond the UN's definition, demonstrated by the emergence of social enterprises and by civil society organisations owning profit-making enterprises.

The membership of the Network currently includes non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations, women's organisations, indigenous peoples organisations, trade unions, and research and development organisations. However, the current strategy by the GEF Secretariat to establish its own representative groups of civil society organisations reduces the incentive for such organisations to become members of the Network. In that context, the Network's membership systems and governance structure will be enhanced to facilitate increased involvement of different civil society groups, including using an intersectional approach of nested regional and multi-thematic networks.

The issues of defining potential Network members, engaging non-member CSOs, and collaborating with "cross-cutting constituencies" will be addressed in the Network Development Plan.

Short-term Actions

- (1) The GCN has initiated the process of reviewing the criteria for appointment of new members.
- (2) The GCN has been reaching out to other constituencies, starting with a WhatsApp-based GCN Global Forum, and, on a regional basis, attempting to connect Network members with other networks and programs. The latter outreach is currently opportunistic and will be guided in the future by a Communication Strategy and the Network Development Plan.
- (3) The GCN will seek a decision by the GEF Council to recognize and include the "expanded notion of civil society" within the GEF Operational Program 9.

Medium-term Action

An analysis of the evolving landscape created by emerging constructs of civil society and the national rules that recognize and regulate civil society organisations will inform the revision of the Network rules.

³ UN Secretary-General's Note on Report by the UN Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations-Civil Society Relations: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/523950?ln=en&v=pdf>

Long-term Action

As a global network, the GCN has the potential to facilitate linkages between parts of the civil society sector with similar interests. The GCN will assess its potential role in the institutional infrastructure that connects local movements to regional and global processes.

Recommendation 5

Endeavor to break the capacity trap, seeking low-hanging fruit for action while exploring and creating more ambitious opportunities.

Response to Recommendation

The GCN recognizes the correlation between capacity, network effectiveness, and network value. The Network acknowledges the utility of mobilizing financial and human resources within member organisations to sustain basic functioning of the Network.

Obtaining the substantial resources required to build capability for network development and management, delivery of services to GEF constituencies, and broader engagement with other networks linked to regional and global programs is partially dependent on the legal status and structure of the Network. This substantive issue will be addressed in the Network Development Plan.

Short-term Action

A plan for mobilization of resources within the Network is being developed.

Medium-term Action

- (1) The GCN will prepare an Options Paper for development of the Network to enable input by Network members in determining the future of the Network. The result of the consultation will guide preparation of the Network Development Plan.
- (2) The GCN Theory of Change, preparation of which was initiated in 2023, will provide a framework for long-term resource mobilization, strategic initiatives, and investment.

Recommendation 6

Review the governance of the Network, reflecting its renewed purpose, focusing on participation over representation, decoupling roles concentrated on elected representatives; rethink the current electoral process for its key roles, balancing legitimacy and capacity.

Response to Recommendation

The GCN agrees with the broad intent of the recommendation to improve network governance, including measures to enhance the effectiveness and integrity of the election, membership, and engagement processes.

The Network's structure and operations should be more responsive to regional needs and ways of functioning. Enhancing governance and effectiveness at the regional level requires significant capacity for network management.

Enhanced governance arrangements will necessarily address the decision-making mechanisms that enable the Network to connect to and support the diversity of voices at the local, national, and regional levels.

Short-term Action

Continued expansion of the actions taken by the GCN's Coordination Committee to:

- Expand membership of the subcommittees beyond the regional focal points.
- Expand communication channels with members.
- Identify members who participate in other programs to potentially function as GCN representatives in those programs.
- Review the appointment and performance of Country Contact Points.
- Enhance the membership management procedures for the Network to improve network integrity and functioning.

Medium-term Action

The Theory of Change and Network Development Plan will be used as the basis to overhaul the structure and governance arrangements of the Network.

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Prepared by: GCN Governance Subcommittee