

GEF CSO Network Strategic Review

Final Report

August 2023

I. Scope and Background

1. This report presents the findings and recommendations of the *GEF Civil Society Organization Network (GEF CSO Network) Strategic Review*, a consultancy carried out between February and June 2023 at the request of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Secretariat, with the approval and support of the leadership of the GEF CSO Network.¹
2. The main objective of the consultancy was to *identify strategic options and practical actions for GEF CSO Network to strengthen its operations, work, and impact at the regional and national level and to contribute to a clearer and improved relationship with the GEF Partnership*. Specifically, this assignment responded to a request from the GEF Secretariat to *facilitate a process to support the GEF CSO Network's ambition to increase its relevance and impact and a joint effort to help build a stronger and more productive relationship between the GEF CSO Network and the GEF Secretariat, responding to the OPS7 recommendations of the GEF Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) that the Secretariat should reset the GEF's relationship with the CSO Network with clarity on roles and responsibilities*².
3. The assignment focused on four aspects of the CSO Network: a) the Network itself, i.e. its aims, membership and its relationships with its primary constituencies and interlocutors, b) the activities of the Network, including any projects, events, services, engagement or advocacy actions, c) organizational characteristics of the Network, including its manner of formalization, structure and governance, and d) its role and relationship within the GEF Partnership, including its relationship with the GEF Secretariat, GEF Council and other related bodies. Activities conducted in this assignment involved contact with key stakeholders, through interviews, group discussions, workshops and other activities, and verbal and written presentations of key findings and recommendations to the GEF Secretariat and to the CSO Network, including this report. Twenty-six individuals were interviewed, representing the GEF CSO Network, the GEF Secretariat, and other stakeholders, also including the GEF IEO, Agencies, and GEF Council.³ An in-person meeting was held on June 25th, prior to the GEF Council Meeting in Brasilia, Brazil.
4. The report underscores the challenges for the Network to remain a relevant interlocutor of civil society within the GEF Partnership, as well as the unique opportunity presented to the Network in support of the GEF's ambitious aspirations to expand its engagement with civil society. The findings of the consultancy largely corroborate the conclusions and recommendations of 2016 and 2021 IEO

¹ This report was written by Andres Falconer, the consultant.

² While this consultancy was not conducted as an evaluation, the assignment references and draws extensively from two previous evaluations conducted by the GEF IEO: *Evaluation of the GEF-Civil Society Organization Network*, September 2016, and *GEF Institutional Policies and Engagement*, June 2022.

³ Positions in the report are largely consistent with opinions expressed by the individuals interviewed during this assignment. All interviewees, nevertheless, were offered anonymity and non-attribution, to ensure candor in their responses. Thus, unless otherwise stated, views and recommendations expressed in the report are those of the author, for which he takes full responsibility. A complete list of individuals interviewed is provided in Annex.

evaluations and shed additional light on shortcomings in the current mode of operation of the Network. Yet it is the opinion of the consultant that the Network is capable, with critical support from the GEF Secretariat, of overcoming these issues of concern and rising to the high level of relevance required to respond to the aspirations of civil society and to the needs of the global mobilization to address the environmental crises.

5. **The CSO Network has a longstanding history that has evolved over the years, while largely remaining consistent with its original purpose.** First proposed by the GEF Council, in 1995, as the list of “accredited NGOs” with whom the GEF hoped to establish a “more systematic relationship”, the original Non-Governmental Organization Network (renamed CSO Network in 2014) was conferred a mandate “to prepare for and report on the GEF Council meetings and NGO consultations to the wider CSO community at the national, regional and international levels.” Through a process of self-organization, the CSO Network established rules and guidelines on topics such as membership criteria, election procedures, and representation roles, and expanded on its Council mandate by defining its mission as “to safeguard the global environment through strengthening civil society partnership with the GEF by enhancing informed participation, contributing to policy development and stimulating local action”. The Network reports a current membership of * organizations across * regions. The Network is an unincorporated entity, governed by a Coordinating Committee consisting of an elected Chair and Vice-Chair, serving alongside a group of elected Regional Focal Points (RPF) and Indigenous Peoples Focal Points.
6. **The GEF CSO Network has played a leading role within the GEF Partnership, a facility that has pioneered the practice of engagement with civil society. This role has diminished over the years and has not kept up with the evolution of the field of civil society in the sphere of environment and development, as well as with the perceived needs of the GEF.** The GEF CSO Network was one of the cornerstones of the engagement of the GEF with civil society and is intertwined with the history of the GEF itself. In recognition of the leadership played by civil society spearheading environmental causes, the GEF has created ample space for the participation of a variety of stakeholders at all levels of decision-making and implementation, from its governing bodies to country-level operations, through consultations, dialogues, workshops and, significantly, through the direct representation – as observers – in its main governing bodies, the GEF Council and Assembly. This commitment has evolved and is reflected in policies, guidelines, and practices, such as a *Stakeholder Engagement Policy*, an *Indigenous Peoples Advisory Group (IPAG)*, and an *Updated Vision to Enhance Civil Society Engagement*. International nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) such as Conservation International, WWF, and IUCN, have been elevated to the status of implementing partners (“*GEF Agencies*”) and CSOs worldwide have had access to GEF funding through its *Small Grants Program (SGP)*.
7. **Under its current leadership, the GEF Secretariat articulates an ambitious vision to expand the role of non-state stakeholders in the GEF.** This vision, expressed as a “moral imperative” by the CEO and Chairperson of the GEF, is anchored on the notion that a *sustainable* country engagement approach should extend beyond working exclusively or primarily with *governments* and should enhance the participation of a wide range of stakeholder groups, including, but not limited to environmental NGOs, as well as embracing vulnerable populations, indigenous people, youth, and women, among others. The vision espouses enhancing direct funding to civil society groups from a currently estimated 1% of the overall GEF budget to 10% by 2030 and proposes more coherence and alignment between its

support for civil society and the GEF's broader portfolio and, ultimately, with the UN Conventions it serves⁴.

8. **This ambition for greater engagement with civil society presents both an opportunity and a challenge for the GEF CSO Network.** The Network may be uniquely positioned to play a major role in the GEF's renewed vision for enhanced engagement with civil society, based on its history, mandate, and deep knowledge of the complex arrangements of the GEF. Furthermore, the CSO Network may be an important ally and champion for this vision, in the face of resistance by certain stakeholders to the greater engagement of non-state actors in the GEF. Yet the Network experiences significant challenges which must be addressed if it is to play a meaningful part in this process. The 2016 CSO Network evaluation by the GEF Independent Evaluation Office (EIO) raised important questions about the continued relevance of the Network and its ability to meet its objectives, recommending that the Network create a contemporary vision and update its practices and governance. A subsequent IEO evaluation, in 2022, noted very limited progress across those recommendations. Furthermore, the Council-approved 2017 *Updated Vision* for civil society engagement, while recognizing the CSO Network's key part, diminishes the historic leadership role previously played by the Network. Individuals interviewed in this consultancy, both within the CSO Network and the GEF Secretariat, voiced serious concerns and reservations on a number of aspects pertaining to the organization and the activities of the Network.
9. **In short, in order to play a part role in the GEF's proposed expanded CSO outreach, the CSO Network must rise to the challenge of updating its aims and its actions and address its main shortcomings. Key findings, examined in greater detail throughout the report, are summarized as follows:**
 - 1) *The nature of the relationship between the CSO Network and the GEF is unclear and ambiguous; the GEF Secretariat has played a significant (and at times inadvertent) role in shaping the Network, in an asymmetric and dependent relationship.*
 - 2) *The CSO Network lacks a strong unifying purpose and an operating mode able to define a clear value proposition to its members, to civil society as a whole, to the GEF, and to the environmental causes it seeks to serve.*
 - 3) *In its current format, the network does not have the organizational capacity to represent or operate effectively.*
 - 4) *The CSO Network falls short of operating as a genuine network; rather, it presents itself as a hierarchical membership organization with weak links to its relevant constituencies.*
 - 5) *The existing model of governance stands in the way of a more legitimate and effective Network.*
 - 6) *Despite the noted challenges, virtually all interlocutors – including GEF senior leadership – express support for the idea of a CSO Network as a key ally for the success of the GEF.*
10. **The main recommendations include:**
 - 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.*
 - 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.*

⁴ The GEF serves as financial mechanism for the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, and the Minamata Convention on Mercury.

- 3) *Decentralize, localize, and open the Network, expanding the participation and agency of Network members.*
- 4) *Embrace an expanded notion of Civil Society, reaching out to new, emerging, and cross-cutting constituencies.*
- 5) *Endeavor to break the capacity trap, seeking low-hanging fruit for action while exploring and creating more ambitious opportunities.*
- 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.*

II. The GEF and the GEF CSO Network

11. **The ambiguous and changing relationship between the GEF CSO Network and the GEF itself is central to the identity of the Network and is highly consequential in understanding the incentives that have shaped its current.** The Network is often perceived and described as an integral part of the GEF Partnership or a “GEF Family”. This confers upon it a quasi-official status and – in the prevailing view within the Network – a duty of the GEF Council and Secretariat to recognize and support the CSO Network as its legitimate interlocutor with civil society as a whole. Three decades of interaction have reinforced within the Network a sense of entitlement, translated into an expectation to officially represent civil society in all proceedings of the GEF, including GEF Council meetings and Assemblies. Yet the CSO Network also asserts its autonomy, as a self-governed body that has been granted a special status by the GEF Council. The ambiguity of the CSO Network’s status is also suggested in the behavior of the GEF, at times reinforcing the perceived entitlement of the Network while largely recognizing its autonomy. The relationship between the GEF Secretariat and the CSO Network has been one of dependency, though not of subordination.⁵
12. **The opposing expectations over the status of the CSO Network have generated a level of tension and occasional conflict between the Network leadership and GEF Secretariat staff, typically over issues of participation and representation in events and activities, or over financial support for the Network.** At the core of these tensions is the belief in the entitlement of the Network that is not accompanied by, in the prevailing view of the GEF Secretariat, corresponding responsibilities and accountability. In sum, the Network leadership views a GEF that has evaded its commitments, while the GEF Secretariat expresses reservations about the legitimacy and the capacity of the Network to genuinely represent civil society. Breaking this mutually reinforcing argumentative dynamic is central to the resetting of a relationship built on trust and understanding of the respective roles.

⁵ Characteristically, GEF Secretariat staff speak of their role in “mothering” the network; many expressed surprisingly strong views about what the CSO Network should – and should not – be “allowed” to do, for example, on the issue of whether the Network could incorporate itself as a legal nonprofit entity. This author also found it striking that the GEF IEO considered within its scope to conduct a direct evaluation of the CSO Network, as opposed to an assessment of *policies* or the *relationship of the GEF* pertaining to the Network, reinforcing the view that all parties understand the Network to be a component of the GEF itself (similarly, for example, to GEF Agencies) rather than an external interlocutor. An evaluation of a truly independent citizen network that performs a watchdog role would appear unwarranted.

- 13. In recent years, the GEF Secretariat has moved toward the practice of engaging civil society actors directly, beyond the purview of the CSO Network. The GEF’s *Updated Vision to Enhance Engagement with Civil Society*, approved by Council in 2017, was proposed in response to the findings of the 2016 evaluation of the CSO Network by the IEO. This Updated Vision changes the nature of the relationship with the Network, by establishing, among other provisions, “principles and procedures for the selection of civil society representatives to participate in the biannual GEF Council meetings” and also to “entrust the GEF Secretariat with the responsibility of conducting the selection process of sponsored CSOs”. This policy, in effect, limits the role of the CSO Network, placing its engagement with the Council at the discretion of the GEF Secretariat. Unsurprisingly, this policy was perceived by the CSO Network to have “undermined the Network’s historic role as the voice and coordinating body for GEF-affiliated CSOs.”⁶**
- 14. The institutional design and the governance dynamics of the GEF have also played a part in shaping the role of the CSO Network. The result is a CSO Network whose practical sphere of action has been limited to attending biannual meetings of the GEF Council, in Washington, DC, or in other locations, to the detriment of other activities, such as engaging meaningfully with country-level decision-making and operations.** Various key interviewees highlighted that the complex and indirect manner of operation of the GEF, as a facility that disburses to third parties the funds it holds in trust, is a factor that has constrained the focus of the CSO Network to the GEF Secretariat and Council rather than the full cycle of its operations. The activities of GEF Agencies – which are also required by GEF policies to engage stakeholders – are, in practice, outside the purview of the CSO Network. Furthermore, multiple interviewees, including GEF Secretariat staff, questioned the genuine GEF’s commitment to CSO engagement prior to its current leadership, and noted the lack of consensus within the Council, resulting in an under-prioritization and under-funding of this issue. Finally, the fact that the GEF is a *financial* facility that also disburses grants directly to civil society strongly influences the participation of CSOs, often cash-strapped and dependent on donations. This creates a permanent potential for conflict between self-serving aims⁷ and independent citizen oversight.
- 15. The reasoning above does not seek to place responsibility on the GEF Secretariat for any shortcomings of the Network, nor exempt the CSO Network for any of these. It does, however, underscore the intertwined relationship between the parties, the asymmetry of this relationship, as well as the systemic nature of the challenges, highlighting the importance of an active role of the GEF Secretariat to overcome challenges and reset the relationship with the CSO Network.**

16. A first recommendation is to remove ambiguity and unequivocally affirm the *independence and autonomy* of the CSO Network vis-à-vis the GEF. As discussed further below, the authority of the Network should be anchored on aspects other than any official mandate or entitlement, real or perceived. This is consistent with the nature of civil society as an autonomous sphere, minimizes the risk of capture by the GEF, which could result in a subservient and pliant representation, and, conversely, also recognizes the autonomy of the GEF to engage stakeholders directly, without the

⁶ GEF IEO, *GEF Institutional Policies and Engagement*, Main Report, July 2022.

⁷ The sponsorship of in-person attendance at biannual Council meetings, generally held in Washington, DC – with all travel and accommodation expenses covered – is often cited as a powerful incentive that can have a negative effect on the participation dynamics of the Network.

approval or involvement of the Network. This is compatible with the practice seen in two major climate funds, the *Green Climate Fund* and the *Adaptation Fund*, whose corresponding CSO Networks are fully independent of the funds they engage with.

17. The GEF CSO Network should seek to establish a constructive relationship with the GEF – in particular with the GEF Secretariat – based on action and outcomes rather than an official mandate – as a *partner, advocate, and watchdog*, as appropriate. This relationship may, at times, be transactional in nature, based on the identification of opportunities for activities and projects in areas of common interest, where the GEF may provide finance in exchange for an actual product or service. This approach is further described below, in the section on the operations of the Network. A central element of this approach should be to support and advocate for the expanded role of civil society in the GEF.

18. The GEF CSO Network and the GEF Secretariat should establish a written document, in the form of a *memorandum of understanding or cooperation agreement*, spelling out the mutually agreed responsibilities and obligations of the parties, as well as specific lines of action and expected outcomes, including any activities that may involve finance from the GEF Secretariat to the Network. This agreement should be time-bound and should be periodically reviewed and altered as needed. Terms of the agreement may inform future GEF Council considerations on engagement with civil society and be enshrined in policies but should initially merely constitute a working agreement between the CSO Network and the GEF Secretariat.

III. Purpose and Capacity

19. A key finding is that the GEF CSO Network, as it currently operates, lacks a strong unifying purpose and an operating mode that defines a clear value proposition to its members, to the GEF, and to the environmental causes it seeks to serve. Despite lofty aspirations to serve as a platform for CSOs to share information, build capacity, and collaborate on projects related to the GEF's mission, to provide input and feedback on GEF policies and programs, and to advocate for increased funding for environmental projects, as described in their website, the Network is limited in its ability to do any of the above in a meaningful manner. Furthermore, its leadership team appears to lack a clear and common understanding of the overall purpose of the Network. While much of this inability stems from its low organizational capacity and lack of funding, described in detail in the following section, the lack of clarity in strategic direction reveals the need to revisit the overall *raison d'être* of the Network and its *modus operandi* and establish a roadmap to achieve future outcomes at the scale of its aspirations. This includes enhancing the capacity to engage with its membership and with civil society at large, to serve as a channel for the voice of citizens, to constructively opine on GEF policies and strategies under consideration, to exercise effective oversight, and to advocate for positions that strengthen the GEF's ability to deliver on its mandate and beyond.

20. Currently, the network does not have the organizational capacity to engage or operate effectively. As noted above, the inability of the Network to perform its intended activities stems in part from its lack of capacity. Lack of funding, dependence on the GEF Secretariat, the voluntary and part-time nature of its leadership roles, whose occupants face competing priorities, as well as the inexistence of

a functioning secretariat present formidable obstacles to action. This reinforces a cycle in which the lack of outcomes contributes to a decrease in the reputational standing among two key stakeholder groups: an increasingly disengaged membership and the GEF itself. Lack of capacity has resulted in difficulties in maintaining an updated membership base, adequately vetting and onboarding new members, consulting with these, as well as analyzing and contributing to GEF policies under Council consideration. Currently, most financial support consists of GEF sponsorship of travel and attendance costs at GEF events such as Council meetings and Assemblies. Efforts to address this capacity gap have been met with obstacles, including the lack of agreement among leadership, and an inability to commit the necessary energy to bring efforts to fruition, due to those very capacity constraints.

21. The dual and mutually dependent challenges of *purpose* and *capacity* must be addressed simultaneously, combining a set of actions at the level of strategic thinking and tangible practical action. The following actions are recommended:

22. Review the mission and modus operandi of the Network, through a broad and participatory approach, expressed into a consistent *theory of change* and translated into concrete activities and programs that can be delivered with existing resources or presented to donors and supporters, including the GEF. Initiating a theory of change review is a key recommendation that emerged from the in-person workshop held in Brasilia. This activity has been initiated by a designated Coordinating Committee member and task team, with the support of this consultant.

23. Seek a pathway to break the “catch-22” situation of lack of outcomes resulting in lack of capacity, and vice versa, including:

- 1) Identifying and pursuing “low hanging fruit” activities that can be carried out without additional resources, aiming to create a track record of activities and achievements to strengthen its reputation and ability to mobilize resources.** Examples of such activities include public virtual meetings, open to Network members and beyond, which would create visibility and raise the profile of the CSO Network.
- 2) Engage existing resources of the Network, focusing on the dissemination of the activities of members.** By publicly showcasing the relevant work of members of the Network, rather than exclusively focusing on activities and achievements carried out by the Network itself, the CSO Network not only fulfills one of its primary goals as a network but also demonstrates dynamism and momentum of the Network in its own right, with minimal resources, thus enhancing its public standing.
- 3) Develop a *master fundraising proposal*, as a concrete outcome of the *theory of change* exercise, and as the blueprint for multiple proposals to be presented to different donors, tailored to their specific interests and priorities.**
- 4) Explore and develop incrementally ambitious fundraising opportunities, beginning with an attempt to secure a negotiated support agreement from the GEF Secretariat, likely to be initially modest in nature but with a high potential for leverage.** Consider other realistic financing options, including the submission of proposals to the SGP in coordination with Network member CSOs to carry out activities on behalf of the Network. Explore additional GEF-related channels, such as through medium-sized projects and through GEF donors, including endeavoring to revisit the concept of the Voluntary Trust Fund.

- 5) **Map and approach donors, particularly those reachable through the Network itself, including bilateral donors, philanthropic sources, and others, aiming to familiarize these with the CSO Network and its work, scoping opportunities to present tailored funding proposals**

24. Regarding the proposed working agreement with the GEF Secretariat, the Network and the GEF Secretariat should identify priorities and potential activities where the concerted action of civil society groups can create positive outcomes for the GEF, promoting its ability to fully perform its duties, expand its programming, and operate effectively and transparently. Among these potential areas of opportunity, the following have been identified during interviews with GEF Secretariat staff:

- 1) **Engagement with Council:** proactively engage with Council members, on an ongoing basis, in support of specific policies and agendas of the GEF.
- 2) **Donor engagement:** support the GEF's replenishment efforts by strategically targeting and messaging donors and other key stakeholders.
- 3) **Country engagement:** support the GEF's *all-of-society* approach at the country level, particularly in countries that resist active civil society participation.
- 4) **Global agenda-setting:** coordinate civil society participation at COPs and with UN agencies in alignment with the priorities and needs of the GEF.
- 5) **Project implementation oversight and accountability:** expand the focus of the Network to include oversight on the full project cycle, including the activities of third parties, such as GEF Agencies.
- 6) **Evaluation support:** engage on an ongoing basis with the IEO, enhancing its capacity to include the views of citizens, beneficiaries, and other stakeholder groups in all evaluations.
- 7) **Civil society engagement:** endeavor to advocate for and support the GEF Secretariat's commitment to the expansion of its engagement with civil society.

25. Regarding the *structure* of the CSO Network, an idea currently under consideration proposes establishing a US-based nonprofit organization as a legal entity to support the activities of the Network, enhance its ability to raise funds independently, and eventually directly employ paid staff. This proposal has encountered some resistance from the GEF Secretariat⁸ and has not been acted upon to date. Contrary to the GEF Secretariat's perception, the establishment of a nonprofit organization need not alter the nature of the relationship between the GEF and the Network, serving merely as a support unit or CSO Network secretariat. This option, while relatively simple and inexpensive to implement⁹, is not the universal remedy it is sometimes perceived to be, while it can also result in additional burdens and expenses before achieving any of its purported benefits, including requirements for the annual filing of accounts and other legal obligations.

⁸ A concern expressed by the GEF Secretariat pertains to the continued authorization of the use of the term "GEF" by an independent legal entity. This can be easily resolved through the use of an agreed disclaimer clarifying that the GEF CSO Network is an independent entity that *not* officially affiliated with the GEF. This finds parallel with the naming of other related networks and coalitions, including the AF CSO Network and GCFWatch, which are not officially affiliated with the Adaptation Fund or the Green Climate Fund.

⁹ Articles of incorporation for a nonprofit entity can be filed in any State of the United States of America without the need for a lawyer, and the application for recognition as a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization with the Internal Revenue Service, the US's tax authority, is an equally simple process, including a streamlined "EZ" option, which involves a fee of US\$250.

26. The recommendation of creating a nonprofit entity incorporated under US law, operating in support of the Network, is cautiously endorsed, conditioned on the capacity of the Network to ensure that its filing and reporting obligations will be met by entrusting legal matters to a named officer based in the US with full knowledge of these obligations, or to a reliable pro bono legal partner. The creation of the entity will not likely result in any immediate positive outcomes for the CSO Network, but its existence may serve a useful purpose when concrete funding opportunities arise. The organization may be maintained in a dormant state, without resources, activities, or employees, until required, as long as minimal filing requirements are met. Additional considerations concerning the governance of the entity are addressed in a subsequent section of this report.

27. Independently of the decision to create a legal entity, it is strongly recommended that the GEF CSO Network explore other pathways to enhance its organizational capacity. A recommended option is to enter into a sponsorship arrangement with an existing organization to act as the Network's *fiscal and administrative host*. Such agreement, in which an established organization meets the legal and administrative needs of an unincorporated initiative (whether pro bono or in exchange for a fee) is commonplace in the US. A hosting arrangement brings the advantage of a reduced cost (usually set as a percentage of income) and minimal bureaucratic burden for a small or startup initiative vis-à-vis the requirement to handle its affairs directly. Such agreements can be temporary or long-term and, in the case of the GEF CSO Network, could be superseded by the use of its own legal entity, as circumstances change. A hosting arrangement can be limited to fulfilling basic legal duties and can be enhanced by services such as providing access to the host's professional services, including accounting, fundraising, project management, and use of office facilities, as appropriate. It is advisable to seek a host with an adequate level of understanding and a strong affinity with the field in which the CSO Network operates, in search of potential synergies. An ideal host for the CSO Network may be a reputable environmental organization based in the US, including a GEF Agency or a CSO Network member.

IV. The Network, its Membership, and its Governance

28. The CSO Network falls short of operating in an ideal network model; rather, it presents itself as a hierarchical membership organization with weak links to its relevant constituencies. While there are many definitions and no consensus as to what constitutes a network, let alone an ideal one, certain features are frequently associated with legitimate and effective CSO Networks: in addition to a shared purpose or interest, these often include a decentralized or distributed communication and decision making model across interconnected nodes (as opposed to control by a central body), an open, flexible and adaptable structure that results in new and emergent patterns of behavior as a result of interactions within the network, a focus on information sharing, learning, and collaboration, diversity, and inclusivity. Structures of networks are typically flexible, not hierarchical, and streamlined. This stands in contrast with traditional membership organizations, typically focused on representing or serving the needs of their members, or even of coalitions, which are often narrower in their purpose and may have more defined membership bases and structures. The GEF CSO Network, as it currently operates, stands considerably apart from these network qualities.

29. At present, the CSO Network concentrates virtually all the opportunities and incentives for participation at the top of a hierarchical structure, resulting in a notable absence of member

participation beyond its elected representatives. As a *de facto* membership organization, the Network has gradually alienated its membership base. As the purported vehicle for the voice of civil society within the GEF, the Network has witnessed growing interest and participation of non-Network members in the affairs of the GEF, often at the behest of the GEF Secretariat itself, and has resisted this trend rather than embracing it as an opportunity for expansion of the Network.

30. **The CSO Network has struggled with the process of maintaining an updated record of its membership, one of its most basic prerequisites to function as a Network, contributing to the perception within the GEF that the Network is not genuinely representative of civil society, and has not succeeded in building a strong relationship with this membership.** Vetting and accrediting CSO Network members is itself a complex and intractable problem, as has been the experience of many multilateral bodies seeking objective criteria to identify “legitimate” civil society organizations. Furthermore, given the dynamic nature of the sector, maintaining updated records is a permanent challenge requiring resources that the Network lacks. Nevertheless, keeping track of the Network’s membership is a basic precondition to maintaining any meaningful relationship with the civil society the Network claims to represent.
31. **Over the lifespan of the CSO Network, the concept and the field of civil society have witnessed a period of extraordinary change. A manifestation of the emergence of an “NGO sector” in the 1990s, the Network has struggled to keep up with the pace of the development of civil society.** The change in name from *NGO* to *CSO* Network reflected the adoption of more accepted terminology. Yet the continued focus on civil society *organizations* (and its narrow definition of “organization” as legally incorporated not-for-profit entities) as representative of civil society as a whole proves to be increasingly limited and problematic in a fast-moving era of new social movements and trends emerging through social media and direct citizen action. A contemporary notion of civil society organization (i.e., the *organization* of civil society, not merely its *organizations* or established entities) presents newly emerging actors, cross-cutting coalitions of interests, and less formal arrangements. This reality coexists with a CSO “sector” of increasingly large, professionalized, and highly capable organizations, often operating transnationally. The CSO Network’s membership mostly excludes both these informal groups and the larger INGOs.
32. **Over the course of the years, the CSO Network witnessed a decrease in the participation of organizations from developed countries, likely because of the aforementioned lack of incentives for participation.** Furthermore, INGOs that were accredited as GEF Agencies, such as WWF, were requested to step down from the Network, due to the perception of conflict of interest. Many point to this as a historical milestone at the start of a downward trend in participation and activity of the CSO Network.
33. **The lack of incentives for participation, the perceived centralization of the Network as a representative body rather than a community, its inability to maintain updated member records, and the persistence of a somewhat outdated notion of civil society contribute to a downward spiral of disengagement that must be broken for the Network to regain its relevance.** The following actions are recommended to address these issues:

34. Decentralize, localize, and open the Network, expanding the participation and agency of Network members
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- 1) **Decentralization and localization** of the Network implies recognizing the diversity of civil society, the disparate interests across multiple regions and constituencies, and a recognition that the strength of the Network lies in its ability to boost diverse local voices and reflect views and needs of beneficiaries rather than seeking to serve as a unified voice where such unity may not exist.
- 2) **Opening the Network** involves the recognition that the Network should not merely serve as a membership organization of a select group of NGOs, but should endeavor to cast a wide net to engage and educate society on the environmental crises, the efforts carried out to address these crises, and the role that all citizens can play, at various levels, in support of these efforts. The notion of an *open network* merits further consideration: options may involve eliminating accreditation procedures altogether, engaging in dialogue with the widest possible audience, or creating a *tiered* membership model, with distinct audiences and roles.
- 3) **Embracing an expanded notion of civil society** involves recognizing the multiple and emerging manifestations of citizen action and creating channels for dialogue with these groups including youth, indigenous peoples, women, vulnerable communities, refugees, and minorities. This, as noted previously, involves engaging with interest groups and movements that may not take the form of established nonprofit organizations.
- 4) **Extending beyond the current territory-based constituencies to include new and cross-cutting groups, including those mentioned above**, and creating facilitated opportunities for dialogue within and across these groups.
- 5) **Expanding the participation of international and “Northern” NGOs, potentially including GEF Agencies.** More robust conflict of interest policies may reduce concern about the participation in the CSO Network of NGOs that have GEF Agency status. Should it not be possible to re-enlist these as full Network members, Agencies may be pursued to play strategic partnership roles – including the option of serving as fiscal and administrative hosts of the Network.
- 6) **Refocus the role of representatives of the CSO Network as facilitators.** Current roles, namely the *Regional Focal Points* should become strongly focused on the task of *facilitating the network* rather than their current primary role as the elected *voice* of members. Network facilitation roles include the ability to convene, connect, mediate, broker, educate, motivate, and communicate, as required, generating vibrant communities capable of sharing knowledge, articulating its positions and needs, and exerting influence over the activities of the GEF.

35. The existing model and practices of governance reflect and reinforce a centralized organization that is at odds with the purported goals of the Network. As noted above, most relevant roles are concentrated in the hands of the elected members, combining the duties of Regional Focal Points, Coordinating Committee, and from which the roles of Chair, Vice-Chair, and Secretary are elected. Consistent with the original intent for the creation of the Network, i.e. as a process to select CSOs to attend GEF Council meetings as observers, these individuals tend to behave not unlike elected representatives in a parliamentary body rather than facilitators and catalysts of dialogue among a community of peers. This growing disconnect between representatives and their constituencies is, of course, reinforced by the aforementioned lack of resources and competing priorities of those individuals, acting in voluntary capacity.

- 36. The Network has been committed to democratic principles, through the practice of electing its representatives. Nonetheless, this practice is fraught with problems.** Within a poorly mobilized network, with incentives at the top of the hierarchy, elections can be a divisive process, resulting in winners and losers (who often subsequently disengage), and produce an outcome that can be more indicative of political ambition than of a commitment and capacity to serve. In the absence of active membership, elected representatives may appear to be unaccountable – until a following poorly contested election. In past CSO Network elections, it has been noted that some positions were uncontested, some defined by a very small pool of votes, while others have remained vacant. Many interlocutors stated that the CSO Network has invested a disproportionate amount of energy in conducting its leadership elections while neglecting attention to other duties.
- 37. Traditional elections by membership ballot, as is the current practice of the CSO Network, are not a sufficient condition for democracy and, as noted, can lead to other problems. In fact, in a democratic network-type organization, competitive elections are not the sole option and may not even be necessary.**¹⁰ Alternatives inspired by classical Greek democracy may be more relevant for small polities or organizations of this type: these include the selection of certain representative roles by *consensus*, requiring ample debate rather than a voting box confrontation, or even by *drawing lots* (that is, by chance, serving on a rotating basis), among willing members vetted by their peers to have the necessary credentials. Additionally, clear accountability – and *recall mechanisms* – must be in place to ensure that inadequate performance is promptly and properly addressed. Some positions, particularly those predicated on technical expertise or managerial capacity, do not require a full membership vote, but rather a streamlined selection process based on demonstrated ability to perform the duties.
- 38. As important as the selection method is the *mandate* and the expectations of the performance of the individuals selected to serve the Network.** That is, the *job description*, against which performance might be assessed. As noted previously, the individuals serving the Network primarily conduct, in practice, a role of representation rather than of Network facilitation. The description of the role of the Chair in the organizational chart is “the leader of the Network”.
- 39. Recommendations pertaining to the governance of the CSO Network are described below.** These do not purport to present a comprehensive or detailed model of governance, but they present a set of guiding principles for the reform of the Network’s governance.

40. A first principle in the renewal of the governance of the GEF CSO Network consists in the decoupling of the roles of the officers of the Network. In other words, the separation of the distinct roles of regional facilitation (the Focal Points) from the role of Network coordination (the Coordinating Committee) and the role of actual representation at official instances, such as the GEF Council. While it may be desirable to have some overlap and coordination between the roles, the principle is that it should not simply be *assumed* that these roles are one and the same. In practice, the Network may have many facilitators of multiple communities and constituencies, a smaller coordinating committee that may also include individuals who do not perform facilitation duties, with the individuals chosen to attend GEF Council meetings defined *ad hoc* (in conjunction with the GEF Secretariat), according to the agenda of the meetings and the priorities of the Network, rather than *a priori*, according to job titles.

¹⁰ The rise of *electoral autocracies* is evidence that popular elections may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for democracy. Applied to a network organization rather than to nations, the notion of democracy also denotes a culture of inclusivity, participation, transparency, and participatory government, and, likewise, is not limited to the existence of competitive elections to determine leadership roles.

41. A second recommendation on governance is the review of the roles and responsibilities of the officers of the CSO Network to more adequately reflect the revised nature and manner of operation of the Network as a more open, horizontal, and participatory initiative. This includes, as noted previously, a change in the role of Focal Points as network *facilitators*, and a repurposing of the role of Chair and Vice-Chair to *serve* and *enable* the Network rather than as its visible leaders and representatives. This view embodies the notion of *servant leadership*, a model focused on serving the needs of their team, organization, or community, in contrast to traditional leadership models that place the leader at the forefront or the top of a hierarchy. These roles should be formally described and performance, routinely evaluated by peers.

42. Review the current process of selection of officers, striking a balance between the need for genuine democratic legitimacy and the selection of capable and committed individuals. As noted, competitive elections are not the sole nor may be the most suitable method to meet these needs. This author favors an approach based on a participatory consensus-generating process, prioritizing multiple criteria (diversity criteria, relevance of experience, etc.) rather than majority positions, with selection by ballot used as a last recourse in the absence of agreement. Additionally, the Network should institute a clear process of accountability to recall officers found in violation of their duties or displaying inadequate performance.

43. The implementation of a robust work plan that reflects the Network's renewed role and relevance will almost inevitably require the creation of a professional *Network secretariat*. This body, which would ideally involve a small number of paid staff and volunteers, would coordinate the operations of the Network and raise resources for its activities. The Network secretariat function should be distinct from the membership and the coordination of the Network, and would be accountable to its governing body. This, in practice, will require an increasingly clear separation between the *governance* roles and the *executive functions* of the Network.

44. Should the option to create a legal nonprofit entity be pursued, the CSO Network will be required to formalize a governance structure in compliance with the legal requirements of the jurisdiction in which it is incorporated. In the US, this usually involves the creation of a voluntary board of directors, as well as the appointment of officers, such as the president, secretary, and treasurer. It should be noted that the establishment of a formalized entity need not change the nature of the Network: *the nonprofit is not the Network itself*, but rather merely a *support structure* to a Network that has previously existed. As such, the creation of a board to comply with legal requirements may not be the same body that governs the affairs of the Network as a whole (i.e., the Coordinating Committee may appoint a separate board of directors for the entity, consisting of individuals, ideally based in the US, to fulfill its legal duties.

V. Conclusion

45. **In summary, this consultancy has observed a GEF CSO Network with a strong historical role that has struggled to retain its relevance throughout its recent existence, and, as a result, has lost much of its protagonism as the voice of civil society within the GEF Partnership.** These findings presented, consistent with the assessments of two GEF IEO evaluations, are paired with recommendations to address the current shortfalls of the Network.
46. **Challenges include the lack of a clear vision, translated into concrete lines of action and activities, low capacity to operate, poor member engagement, and a governance model that reinforces some of these challenges.** These issues are strongly interrelated and mutually reinforcing and, as such, must be addressed jointly, in a systemic manner.
47. **Crucially, resolving the historical ambiguity about the status of the Network within the GEF Partnership is essential to address other issues, with the recommendation to reaffirm the independence of the Network as the central proposal presented in this report.** Furthermore, the role of the GEF Secretariat itself in supporting and incentivizing the strategic reforms of the CSO Network is indispensable for their success.
48. **Despite the noted shortcomings, there is a renewed desire and a perceived need, within the GEF, to engage constructively with the CSO Network, and a strategic opportunity to leverage the role of the Network to achieve the GEF's current vision of significantly enhancing its engagement with – and financing of – civil society.** This, in the view of the author, is the central challenge and opportunity of the GEF CSO Network.
49. **The author of this report shares cautious optimism in the capacity of the GEF CSO Network to achieve a higher level of relevance and impact, as a vehicle for the participation of civil society in the activities of the Global Environment Facility.** This view is conditioned on the willingness of the current leadership of the CSO Network to carefully consider and embrace the recommendations presented in this report, and on the commitment of the GEF Secretariat to support this process.

Annex – Interviews conducted during the consultancy

GEF CSO Network

1. Akhteruzzaman Sano
2. Arend de Haas
3. Artur Vakhitov
4. Arturo Arreola
5. Ismail Al Atiyat
6. Kathleen Rodgers
7. Malintle Kheleli
8. Maria Leichner
9. Muhammed Ameen Keryo
10. Nguavese Tracy Ogbono
11. Tumaini Charles Marijani

GEF Secretariat

12. Carlos Manuel Rodrigues
13. Claude Gascon
14. Elsa Gabriella Richardson Temm
15. Jonathan Caldicott
16. Paula Ridolfi
17. Seo-Jeong Yoon
18. Sonja Teelucksingh
19. Susan Matindi Waithaka
20. William Ehlers

GEF IEO

21. Kate Steingraber
22. Anna Birgitta Viggh

GEF Agencies

23. Yoko Watanabe – UNDP
24. Herve Lefevre – WWF

GEF Council

25. Tom Bui – Canada

Other

26. Françoise Clottes
27. Pilar Barrera Rey

