



GEF/C.69/07  
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69<sup>th</sup> GEF Council Meeting  
June 2 - 6, 2025  
Washington, DC

**Agenda Item 09**

## **MANAGEMENT RESPONSE ON THE EVALUATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL WATERS FOCAL AREA**

**Recommended Council Decision:**

The Council, having considered document GEF/E/C.69/02 *Evaluation of the International Waters Focal Area*, and GEF/C.69/07, *the Management Response*, takes note of the related evaluation recommendations and endorses the management response to address them.

## INTRODUCTION

1. The GEF Secretariat welcomes the IEO's report on the Evaluation of the International Waters Focal Area. The GEF Secretariat is encouraged that the evaluation findings highlight the continued critical role of the International Waters (IW) focal area for promoting transboundary cooperation. The report builds on previous evaluations relevant to the IW focal area that demonstrate constant and meaningful evolution towards a more balanced and impactful IW portfolio. The GEF Secretariat is further encouraged that the evaluation notes the important role IW projects have historically played paving the way for GEF programming across the GEF portfolio, such as integrated programming, gender inclusion, and policy coherence.

2. The GEF Secretariat is also pleased with the findings that highlight the continued importance of IW interventions centered around capacity building, improved assessment of environmental challenges and solutions, strategic planning, policy reforms, and investments for transboundary cooperation. The evaluation summarizes the IW projects into three groups: (a) projects that focus on a specific transboundary water body or region; (b) projects that focus on a specific transboundary water issue across different geographic regions; and (c) projects that focus on knowledge management and evidence generation at the global level. The evaluation further concludes that each has made distinct contributions to advancing transboundary cooperation and improving water management.

3. It is also encouraging that the report finds that IW projects mobilize considerable co-financing, highlighting the important role of stakeholder engagement, multi-sectoral cooperation, and the establishment and strengthening of partnerships through IW investments. These findings highlight the complex and human-centered role of many IW projects for protecting critical shared freshwater and marine natural resources.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**4. Recommendation 1: The GEF Secretariat should continue to carefully assess all new IW supported projects to ensure that its core mandate of transboundary cooperation remains central to all investments.**

5. The GEF Secretariat agrees with this recommendation.

6. The GEF International Waters focal area is a critical part of overall GEF programming and delivery of Global Environmental Benefits. The IW focal area fills an important niche for the promotion of cooperation among countries for freshwater and marine ecosystems conservation and natural resources management that underpin the economies for many countries and other GEF focal areas.

7. As the evaluation also highlights, the IW focal area has historically played an important role piloting many emerging issues and approaches for the entire GEF portfolio, such as integrated programming, gender inclusion, testing innovative technologies, and promoting policy coherence. Normal project cycle feedback mechanisms (i.e. Project Implementation Reports, Mid-Term Reviews, Terminal Evaluations) as well as knowledge management via the GEF Secretariat, STAP, and IW:LEARN

have been valuable tools for assessing these efforts and informing IW investments. The GEF Secretariat is committed to continuing its ongoing assessment of all IW supported projects to ensure that its core mandate of transboundary cooperation remains central.

8. Future investments can achieve IW focal area objectives as part of single IW focal area, multi-focal area and multi-trust fund projects, programmatic approaches, and integrated programs. This is reflected in the draft GEF-9 IW Strategy with a continued objective supporting multi-country cooperation in managing and conserving shared freshwater and coastal and marine ecosystems.

9. **Recommendation 2: To enhance the financial sustainability of IW projects, the GEF Secretariat should support stakeholder training on innovative financing models and promote the development of comprehensive sustainability plans early in the project cycle.** The IW focal area should also ensure an early and sustained emphasis on capacity-building, delivering targeted training to a broad range of stakeholders and actively engaging private sector partners.

10. The GEF Secretariat agrees with this recommendation.

11. While fully relevant to the IW focal area, the recommendation to promote the development of comprehensive sustainability plans early in the project cycle is a priority for all GEF projects.

12. Notwithstanding, the GEF Secretariat would like to highlight recent efforts already made within the IW focal area towards implementing this recommendation. For example, through the International Waters Learning and Resource Exchange Network (IW:LEARN)<sup>1</sup>, the 10<sup>th</sup> International Waters Conference in September 2024 in Uruguay (which was included in this IEO evaluation), held a specific pre-conference workshop hosted by CAF that included a session dedicated to incorporating sustainable financing planning into IW projects for long-term sustainability. This topic has also been discussed at recent annual Large Marine Ecosystems annual consultation meetings hosted by IW:LEARN and IOC-UNESCO. The GEF Secretariat also co-convened the UNECE hosted global workshop on funding and financing transboundary water cooperation and basin development in December 2023 which discussed both the sustainable funding of regional processes and institutions as well as innovative financing of investments in transboundary basins. This workshop included a number of representatives of GEF-funded basins and was the second in the bi-annual series of events on this topic.

13. The IW focal area has also invested in recent projects in GEF-7 and GEF-8 towards this goal. For example, the GEF-7 Caribbean BluEFin (Caribbean Blue Economy Financing Project) (GEF ID: 10782) aims to create and strengthen nature-based Blue Economy opportunities and approaches in the Caribbean through innovative financing mechanisms. Likewise, the GEF-8 project “Beyond 30x30: Securing resilience in the Eastern Tropical Pacific through enhanced transboundary cooperation” (GEF ID 11267) includes activities for developing long-term financial sustainability plans for operation and management of the CMAR region, including close coordination with the GEF-supported Enduring Earth project (GEF ID 11014), which is exploring potential project finance for permanence (PfP)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://iwlearn.net/>

opportunities in the region. The GEF IW focal area is planning to support ecosystems protection via a combination of endowment and sinking fund mechanisms, such as in the case of the CORBFund for which the initial set-up was supported by the previous GEF SAP implementation project for the Cubango-Okavango basin (GEF ID 5526) and builds on the extensive experience of the GEF supporting Conservation Trust Funds.

14. Looking ahead to GEF-9, increased efforts are anticipated for utilizing non-grant/blended financing in IW programming based on an already higher demand in GEF-8, increased interest of freshwater and marine issues by private financial institutions, and the innate flexibility of IW programming. Further efforts to support stakeholder training on innovative financing models and promote the development of comprehensive sustainability plans early in the project cycle, including with both enhanced public finance and private sector partners, will be a priority for IW in GEF-9 and are also expected to be a focus for the next phase of IW:LEARN. GEF technical support and training of OFPs on the use of blended finance, innovative financing models, and project sustainability plans feature in the draft GEF-9 Country Engagement Strategy and will be prioritized in efforts to mainstream blended finance across the GEF family of funds. Efforts to inform and enhance the capacity of broader GEF stakeholders will also be considered through such vehicles as the Extended Constituency Workshops, GEF Communications, and Knowledge Management and Learning efforts.

**15. Recommendation 3: The GEF Secretariat should establish guidance for Agencies and national partners to enhance monitoring the effectiveness of transboundary cooperation arrangements and relevant socioeconomic co-benefits using quantitative indicators and qualitative approaches,** this would be particularly pertinent where transboundary arrangements are associated with integrated programs.

16. The GEF Secretariat agrees with this recommendation.

17. Measuring the impact of International Waters focal area projects is challenging, as improvements in ocean governance are complex and their effects often only materialize years after project completion. This is also true of socio-economic co-benefits which often occur only as a logical effect of improved cooperation. Attributing outcomes to a single investment in long-term, regional, multi-sector processes is another challenge in measuring the results of GEF support to transboundary waters. Many International Waters projects also focus on advancing policies, regulations, and management practices, which are often better captured through qualitative reporting rather than quantifiable metrics.

18. The current GEF-8 Results Measurement Framework measures progress in strengthening governance in transboundary water management through three qualitative indicators measuring the quality of governance, complementing an indicator tracking the number of shared water ecosystems. The qualitative indicators rate the effectiveness of progress in governance on a four-point scale: 1 = no institutional framework in place, 2 = framework under development, 3 = agreement signed, and 4 = agreement functional and ratified. Separately, the results framework of each project includes custom indicators that track related processes. They track the: (1) Level of

Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis and Strategic Action Program (TDA/SAP) formulation and implementation; (2) Level of Regional Legal Agreements and Regional Management Institutions to support its implementation, and; (3) Level of National/Local reforms and active participation of Inter-Ministerial Committees.

19. While these indicators provide a solid foundation to measure the quantity of ecosystems covered and quality of progress in governance, the GEF IW focal area has also already made efforts to enhance results measurement. In particular, the GEF-8 project, *The Freshwater Challenge: Accelerating Restoration and Conservation of Freshwater Ecosystems* (GEF ID 11833) includes activities that aim to improve guidance on indicators and tracking approaches for freshwater ecosystems for the IW focal area.

20. Further efforts to develop guidance for enhancing the monitoring of transboundary cooperation arrangements and related socioeconomic co-benefits using quantitative indicators and qualitative approaches are expected to be a key focus in the next phase of IW:LEARN, which will commence in GEF-9. This work is highly relevant to the GEF's long-term vision for a Healthy Planet, Healthy People, and aligns with the steps identified by the GEF Secretariat to improve its results architecture to strengthen its capacity to capture and track socio-economic co-benefits and IEO's related evaluation on the socio-economic co-benefits of GEF-funded interventions to be presented at the 69<sup>th</sup> GEF Council.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the preparation of the Results Measurement Framework for GEF-9 will aim to more accurately reflect a whole-of-society approach, a key cross-cutting effort underpinning GEF-9.

## **CONCLUSION**

21. This evaluation examined the International Waters Focal Area. Building on previous evaluations related to IW projects, this report provides useful insights based on the performance of the IW portfolio and related projects with IW funding. The evaluation offers three useful recommendations to strengthen the impact of future GEF IW interventions.

22. The GEF Secretariat has outlined in this management response (i) areas where efforts are already being made by the IW focal area to implement IEO recommendations; and (ii) suggested actions to be taken in the future to implement the IEO recommendations.

23. The GEF Secretariat will track progress on the implementation of each of these recommendations, reporting to Council as needed through existing reports, as well as through the IEO's standard Management Action Record.

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<sup>2</sup> See, GEF, Tracking and Measuring the Socio-Economic Co-Benefits of GEF Investments, GEF/C.66/12; GEF IEO, Evaluation of the Socioeconomic Co-benefits of GEF-Funded Interventions, GEF/E/C.69/03; and GEF, Management Response to the Evaluation of the Socioeconomic Co-benefits of GEF-Funded Interventions, GEF/C.69/08.