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Agenda Item 06

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TO THE EVALUATION OF GEF FOOD SYSTEMS PROGRAMS

Recommended Council Decision

The Council, having considered document GEF/E/C.70/02 *Evaluation of GEF Food Systems Programs*, and GEF/C.70/05, 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 GEF Food Systems Programs. The GEF Secretariat is encouraged that the evaluation findings highlight the continued critical role of the Food Systems Program in addressing negative externalities associated with food production and across the value chains and promoting food systems transformation and delivering GEBs across different focal areas. The report highlights the evolution of the Food Systems programs and focuses on the programmatic approach taken since GEF-6 to assess the strategic vision of the GEF to address one of the major drivers of global forest and biodiversity loss, land degradation, water pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions.

2. The GEF Secretariat is pleased with the findings that highlight the important role of taking a programmatic approach to GEF food systems interventions through integrated programming and regional projects. More specifically, the IEO's report notes that Food Systems programs have demonstrated significant progress in knowledge management and governance, marked by increased investment in high-quality learning activities, transparent and criteria-based country selection, and clearer roles between coordination and country child projects. Adaptive management and staff continuity have enabled effective responses to emerging challenges and major food-system environmental issues, while integrated, multi-country approaches have enhanced both internal and external knowledge exchange, cross-learning, and policy dialogue. These efforts have delivered substantial environmental benefits, improved food production, advanced policy and governance, and generated valuable knowledge that supports coherent project design and fosters innovation and replication.

3. The GEF Secretariat is also encouraged by the report's recognition of robust private sector engagement, as demonstrated by significant co-financing and strategic partnerships established in several key countries. These collaborations have significantly increased investments in sustainable commodities, strengthened capacity of the financial institutions, and enhanced innovation, market access, and long-term sustainability for food systems.

Recommendations

4. ***RECOMMENDATION 1: Sharpen Program Focus and Phasing Across GEF Replenishment Periods:*** *The GEF Secretariat should establish clearer boundaries and priorities in program design to better reflect regional and commodity-specific dynamics. This may involve concentrating on a smaller number of targeted commodities, geographies, or biomes. The Secretariat should also consider adopting a phased approach to food systems programming. Such an approach would recognize the longer timeframes required for food system transformation and the need to align coordination mechanisms and country project schedules. Phased implementation would enable the GEF to strengthen readiness—such as through policy development, governance*

improvements, and capacity building—before progressing to larger-scale investment alignment and expansion.

5. The GEF Secretariat agrees with this recommendation.

6. The Secretariat acknowledges the importance of sharpening programmatic focus and adopting a phased approach to food systems transformation. The GEF Secretariat will continue to advance the work already being undertaken within the food systems program in this regard. The GEF Secretariat’s experience with integrated approaches and governance has demonstrated that clear strategic priorities and transparent country selection processes are essential for maximizing impact. Through the evolution from GEF-6 Integrated Approach Programs (IAPs) to GEF-7 Food Systems, Land Use and Restoration Impact Project (FOLUR) and now GEF-8 Food Systems Integrated Program (FSIP), we have refined our focus on key commodities, geographies, and biomes, leveraging multi-country strategies and adaptive management to address complex environmental challenges.

7. The Food Systems programs focus exclusively on food and commodities with the greatest environmental footprint or negative externalities. This approach enables us to limit the geographical scope while accommodating countries interested in advancing sustainability. The targeted selection of commodities—and our expansion into emerging sectors such as livestock, dairy, and aquaculture—are direct results of extensive consultations during the GEF-8 replenishment negotiation process. These consultations included input from the Technical Advisory Group (TAG), learning missions, expert workshops with sector specialists and scholars, and engagement with country representatives. These collaborative efforts ensure that program priorities reflect both expert recommendations and the specific needs of participating countries, thereby strengthening the strategic direction and impact of our food systems interventions.

8. Specifically, the transition from GEF-7 FOLUR to GEF-8 FSIP has demonstrated the value of a phased approach, where foundational activities such as readiness assessments, capacity building, and stakeholder consultations are prioritized before scaling up investments. In addition, phased programming has enabled countries to build foundational readiness, such as policy reform and governance strengthening, before scaling up investments. This sequencing has allowed for more targeted interventions, better alignment with country priorities, and improved readiness for implementation as well as facilitating the delivery of measurable Global Environmental Benefits (GEBs). The programs governance structures and clear roles between coordination and child projects, have supported effective implementation and adaptive learning.

9. Moving forward, the GEF Secretariat will track progress through the GEF-8 implementation and will further define strategic priorities and enhance phasing in GEF-9 to ensure that readiness activities deliver direct GEBs within project timeframes. We will also continue to build on our achievements in integrated governance and program coherence.

10. **RECOMMENDATION 2: Expand focus on value chain segments beyond production and on vertical value chain integration, in order to fully realize the benefits of an integrated program approach.** *Future food systems programming should extend engagement beyond the production segment of the value chain when broader GEF support (a) can generate substantial environmental or socio-economic benefits, and/or (b) ensure the long-term sustainability of environmental outcomes from production-oriented activities, recognizing the interdependencies across value chain segments. The GEF Secretariat should also strengthen the performance of GEF food system programs in both vertical and geographic value chain integration. This includes developing more targeted and effective approaches on the demand and financing side, supporting activities related to national and international standards, and fostering stronger linkages between supply and demand actors across countries.*

11. The GEF Secretariat agrees with this recommendation.

12. The Food Systems programs have already demonstrated significant environmental impact by integrating activities across the entire value chain, including processing, distribution, market access, and sustainable consumption. This evaluation recognizes the progress made in moving beyond production-focused interventions to a more integrated, systems-based approach that addresses multiple segments of the food value chain. The GEF-8 FSIP program requires child projects to address post-production elements, such as nutrition, behavioral change, and food loss and waste, ensuring a holistic approach to food systems transformation from farm to folk.

13. GEF's Food Systems achievements in private sector engagement have been instrumental in driving innovation and investment across the value chain. Partnerships with global buyers, financial institutions, and standard-setting bodies have increased co-financing and market access for sustainable commodities. The FOLUR and FSIP global coordination projects actively foster linkages between supply and demand actors, amplifying the reach and effectiveness of the program's interventions.

14. To strengthen value chain integration, the majority of the approved GEF-8 FSIP country projects plan to improve market linkages between smallholder farmers and buyers (processors, traders and exporters) by promoting appropriate business models, including offtake agreements to increase market smallholder market participation. The GEF Secretariat will also ensure that GEF-9 country child project proposals reflect these priorities. Upcoming operational guidance in GEF-9 will require projects to analyze and incorporate interventions across value chain segments, emphasizing measurable environmental and socioeconomic benefits. The GEF Secretariat will continue to leverage successes in environmental impact and private sector engagement to promote vertical and geographic integration throughout the food systems. Knowledge exchange, private sector engagement, and social inclusion will remain key pillars of this approach.

15. **RECOMMENDATION 3: Increase attention to political economy dynamics and behavioral change in food systems transformation in design and implementation.** *The GEF Secretariat should require more comprehensive and structured political economy and risk analyses to inform the design and implementation of PFDs and child projects. Agencies should be encouraged to incorporate mechanisms that mediate trade-offs and balance short-term incentives with long-term sustainability objectives. The GEF Secretariat should also prioritize engagement with countries demonstrating commitment to the policy and institutional reforms needed to address food systems challenges and work collaboratively with diverse stakeholders to co-develop solutions. To enhance the potential for lasting transformation, greater emphasis should be placed on understanding and influencing behavior change throughout program design and implementation.*

16. The GEF Secretariat agrees with this recommendation.

17. The GEF Secretariat recognizes that addressing political economy dynamics and promoting behavioral change are critical for achieving transformational impact in food systems. The integrated approaches have advanced policy coherence and stakeholder engagement through multi-stakeholder platforms, incentives, and knowledge management initiatives. GEF food systems programs have demonstrated strong alignment with national policies and priorities, successfully integrating environmental objectives into agricultural, livestock, and fisheries frameworks. Multi-stakeholder platforms, adopted by 90% of FOLUR projects, have improved policy coherence and facilitated inter-ministerial engagement, as seen in Ghana and Tanzania. These platforms have enabled environmental ministries to collaborate effectively with agriculture ministries, raising awareness and advancing policy reforms.

18. Structured political economy and risk analyses are now required during the development of Program Framework Documents (PFDs) and child projects, enabling the GEF Secretariat and Lead Agencies to identify potential resistance, power dynamics, and misaligned incentives early in the design process.

19. Additionally, the programs' achievements in knowledge management and learning have facilitated the dissemination of best practices and adaptive strategies, supporting countries in navigating complex political and behavioral landscapes. The FACS (Food and Agricultural Commodity Systems) Community and other platforms have connected practitioners globally, fostering institutional learning and continuity across GEF cycles.

20. Behavior change is already a feature of the GEF-8 FS IP, especially within the Global Coordination Platform project facilitated through the country docking process. For the proposed GEF-9 Food Systems program, the GEF Secretariat will guide GEF Agencies on incorporating mechanisms to mediate trade-offs and promote behavioral change, prioritizing engagement with countries committed to policy and institutional reforms. We will continue to integrate behavioral

science into program design and leverage our knowledge management platforms to support effective implementation.

21. **RECOMMENDATION 4: Strengthen country docking to enhance the knowledge value of country engagement with the global coordination project.** *The GEF Secretariat, in collaboration with Lead Agencies, should intensify efforts to improve country docking and knowledge uptake. These efforts should ensure that (a) the coordination project --and its relevant partners and service providers—remains active and able to engage with child projects when they are ready to receive support and (b) learning is continuously generated, captured, and shared throughout implementation. These efforts should also involve a more participatory and ongoing process to identify country needs for knowledge and technical services and align program offerings accordingly.*

22. The GEF Secretariat agrees with this recommendation.

23. The GEF Secretariat acknowledges the evaluation’s finding that “country docking”—the process of matching country needs with program technical support—is challenging but essential for maximizing the value of integrated programs. Effective country docking and knowledge exchange are essential for realizing the added value of the integrated program modality.

24. The Food Systems’ achievements in knowledge management and learning have established robust platforms for technical support, institutional learning, and adaptive management. The design of the GEF-8 FSIP enables the global coordination project to be implemented alongside country child projects for the full program duration, ensuring continuous support and responsiveness to country needs.

25. The Food Systems programs’ participatory and demand-driven approach to technical assistance includes regular needs assessments, matchmaking services, and South-South exchanges, enabling countries to access tailored support and replicate best practices. Country participants highly value the knowledge sharing facilitated by food systems programs. For example, the evaluation report provides concrete examples of knowledge uptake, such as Liberian producers modifying oil palm practices after learning from Indonesia, Ugandan teams adopting technologies from Kenya, and Mexican projects incorporating gender-responsive childcare provisions inspired by FOLUR’s Gender Learning Program. The evaluation also notes that best practices and innovations from food systems programs are being replicated in other World Bank lending operations, and FOLUR funding is influencing the design of broader projects—a process termed “FOLURization”.

26. The GEF-8 FSIP coordination project is implementing enhanced processes for identifying and addressing country needs from the project preparation stage, drawing on the successes in knowledge management and stakeholder engagement. The FSIP program is also actively learning

from previous country docking challenges, designing its coordination project with greater flexibility to better align service offerings with evolving country needs over time.

27. To further strengthen country docking, the GEF Secretariat will ensure that coordination projects remain active and adequately resourced throughout the child project lifecycle, enabling timely and tailored support. Building on the GEF-8 FSIP efforts, the proposed GEF-9 Food Systems program will adopt a proactive, participatory approach to match country needs with technical assistance, moving beyond passive dissemination. Child project budgets will be reviewed to ensure adequate resources for customized, hands-on support, bridging the gap between global knowledge and practical application. The GEF Secretariat will continue to invest in vibrant communities of practice and adaptive learning platforms, building on the high satisfaction and tangible impact documented in the evaluation. We will continue to build on the achievements in country docking and knowledge exchange to support sustainable food systems transformation.

Conclusion

28. The IEO's evaluation provides a useful and insightful assessment of the GEF's journey in food systems programming. It affirms the strategic relevance of our work while offering actionable recommendations to enhance our effectiveness. The GEF Secretariat is committed to advancing food systems transformation through focused, phased, and integrated approaches. The findings from the evaluation—on coherence, knowledge management, governance, private sector engagement, and environmental outcomes—will guide future programming to deliver global environmental benefits, foster innovation, and support sustainable development, while ensuring alignment with country priorities and readiness.

29. The GEF Secretariat is fully committed to applying these lessons to strengthen the design and implementation of current and future food systems programs. We will continue to refine our integrated approach, ensuring that GEF investments catalyze the deep, durable, and systemic transformations needed to build a more sustainable and equitable global food future. 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.