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SOCIAL RESILIENCE FOR SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

Social Resilience for System Transformation

STAP Information Note

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STAP

SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL
ADVISORY PANEL

*An independent group of scientists that advises
the Global Environment Facility*



Social Resilience for System Transformation

A STAP Information Note

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Executive summary

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) increasingly seeks to harness communities' collective action to deliver global environmental benefits (GEBs). This Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) Information Note synthesizes evidence from the behavioural and social sciences to demonstrate that social resilience is a prerequisite condition for communities to act collectively in delivering GEBs and achieving transformational change. It identifies and explains key institutional and psychological foundations that enable such resilience and outlines how the GEF can integrate these foundations into its programming and investment operations.

The GEF's ambition to achieve transformational change through integrated, inclusive, whole-of-society, behaviourally informed, and locally led approaches – as noted in the GEF-8 and draft GEF-9 Programming Directions, as well as the past and upcoming strategies on adaptation for the Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF) and the Special Climate Change Fund (SCCF) – depends on recognizing that social resilience is not merely an outcome but also a prerequisite for durable environmental progress. It is both an enabler and a co-benefit: the foundation that allows communities to organize, cooperate, and sustain collective action under shared norms and institutions.

Communities that trust one another, maintain strong social networks, and share a sense of hope and agency are far better equipped to manage environmental risks, adapt to shocks, and collectively steward natural resources, thereby facilitating transformation. As emphasized in the literature on transformative adaptation, genuine transformation occurs when local actors are empowered and when well-being, equity, and inclusion are integrated into interventions. These social dynamics form the enabling conditions for systemic transformation – the kind of lasting, self-sustaining change the GEF seeks to catalyse through its investments.

The foundations¹

Figure ES1 maps the key factors of social resilience, as an enabler of collective action, into institutional (green) and psychological (orange) categories. Institutional factors represent established social structures that shape behaviour and are already familiar to the GEF and embedded in current and forthcoming programming. Psychological factors reflect how individuals think, feel, and interact. Social cohesion falls into both categories because it operates simultaneously at the structural (institutional) and the subjective (psychological and social-relational) levels. Together, these factors are mutually reinforcing and equally necessary for communities to become resilient, act collectively, and sustain transformational change.

These interdependent foundations are described below:

- 1. Social cohesion** is the trust-based network of relationships among members of society, between social groups, and between groups and those in power. It is the product of both institutional and psychological processes, shaped by how individuals interact, think, and

¹ The factors considered here are not intended as an exhaustive list, but rather as illustrative examples showing the range and depth of areas where stronger attention to the links between social resilience and collective action is needed across different actors.

sense, as well as by social constructs that influence the behaviour of individuals and groups. The GEF already works to promote social cohesion through principles such as multi-stakeholder engagement, participatory governance, and behavioural change, which are reflected in the guiding frameworks of the GEF-8 and the draft GEF-9 Programming Directions, as well as in many previous STAP advisory documents. However, cohesion is a foundational condition for investments involving communities and could be better nurtured from project design through implementation to inform adaptive management.

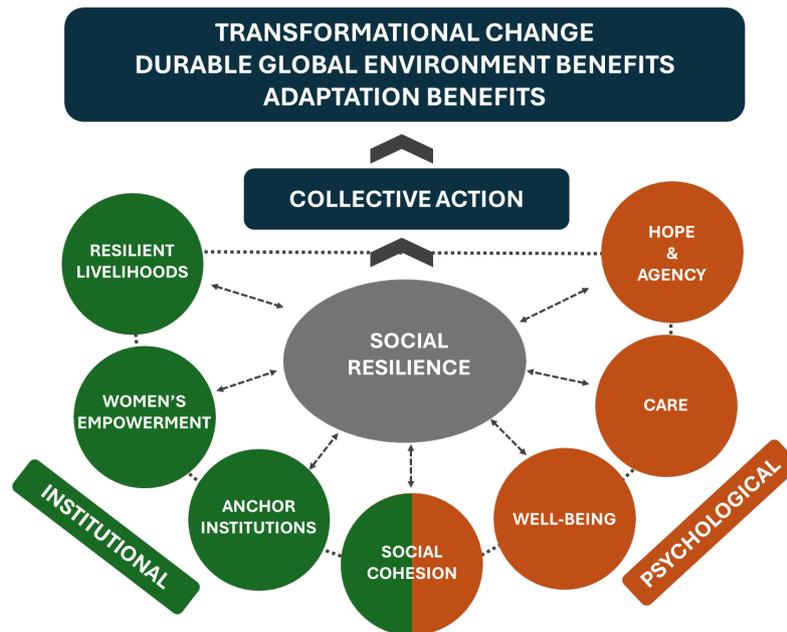


Figure ES1: The foundations for resilient and transformational communities.

2. **Anchor institutions** are locally rooted organizations, such as cooperatives, schools, and faith-based organizations, that act as stable partners to local communities. They provide continuity, legitimacy, qualified local leadership, and trusted channels by which communities can organize, coordinate, and engage in long-term environmental endeavours. Many GEF projects already collaborate with anchor institutions to deliver durable environmental outcomes. Their role in fostering social resilience can be made more intentional by identifying and engaging them early in the project identification and design process.
3. **Resilient livelihoods** are the material foundation of resilient communities. They consist of secure and adaptable livelihood systems, ensuring that households and communities can maintain their well-being in the face of environmental or economic shocks. The GEF has promoted livelihood-related interventions through its investments. However, it is essential that such livelihoods are resilient to shocks, ensuring that communities can adapt and continue to support the delivery of GEBs.
4. **Women's empowerment** entails enabling women to exercise agency, leadership, equitable participation, and control over resources and time, thereby enabling them to contribute directly to more effective and inclusive environmental outcomes. Women's

empowerment is effectively embedded in the GEF Gender Equality Policy and the GEF Implementation Strategy, and it should continue to be enhanced by implementing actions that foster women’s agency and improve their role in decision-making, as noted by the GEF Independent Evaluation Office in its draft Eighth Comprehensive Evaluation of the GEF.

5. **Well-being** arises when people feel that their material and psychological needs and values are being met. When people feel secure, connected, and able to fulfil their values and aspirations, they are motivated to engage in and sustain environmentally sustainable behaviours. Well-being is recognized in the GEF’s emphasis on human and planetary health and is one of the intended long-term impacts that the draft LDCF and SCCF strategy seeks to achieve. Hence, improvement in well-being needs to be considered an important prerequisite co-benefit² in projects and programs involving communities.
6. **Care** involves looking after others and their need and is enhanced through social protection, health, and education systems, enabling collective action. Given the emphasis on locally led adaptation, behaviour change, and resilience building in GEF-9, it is important to consider how environmental stress affects psychological health, social cohesion, and community capacity to adapt or deliver GEBs. This will be particularly important in least developed countries, small island developing States, and fragile and conflict-affected situations.
7. **Hope and agency.** Hope is the belief that a desired future state is possible. It enhances knowledge to achieve desired goals, boosts well-being, and serves as an important antidote to anxiety and despair, thereby fostering individual and community agency. Hope can be nurtured by sharing information about successful examples, and the Small Grants Program can be an effective tool for doing this, especially when delivered in partnership with anchor institutions and governments.

These institutional and psychological foundations³ reinforce one another: institutional factors create stability and opportunity, while psychological factors generate motivation and trust, together enabling communities to sustain collective action beyond project lifetimes.

Implications for the GEF

The GEF’s current initiatives already strengthen many institutional aspects of resilience. The draft GEF-9 Programming Directions and the draft LDCF and SCCF programming strategy emphasize the interdependence of human well-being and a healthy planet, and the GEF is increasingly focusing on behavioural change, women’s empowerment, and whole-of-society approaches as pathways to transformation. Indeed, some of the GEF-9 Integrated Programs (e.g., Drylands and Drought Management; Critical Forest Biomes) aim to empower women

² STAP notes that prerequisite co-benefits are essential for achieving durable GEBs, particularly at transformative levels of ambition, and they should be identified in context and plans to achieve them should be integral to project and program design (See Stafford Smith, M. and Metternicht, G. 2022).

³ Our use of the term “psychological foundations” in this context is to describe the science of experiential, relational and observable behaviour, emotions, mental health, and cognition as significant and modifiable factors of social resilience and collective action. This summary term is intended to consolidate that growing science, inclusive of those definitionally diverse factors.

and promote conservation-friendly livelihoods. Similarly, the draft LDCF and SCCF programming strategy prioritizes women’s empowerment, social protection, and climate-smart livelihoods. To build on these documents, STAP encourages the GEF to complement institutional foundations with recognition of the social and psychological ones in GEF programs.

To operationalize these insights, STAP advises that the GEF Partnership to:

1. **Consider social resilience as a key element of** project design and theory of change to identify barriers and enablers of collective action and guide implementation.
2. **Strengthen partnerships with local anchor institutions**, such as civil society organizations, Indigenous Peoples, cooperatives, and community associations, to deliver projects that build trust, continuity, and local ownership. The GEF can use lessons from the [Small Grants Program](#), which has accumulated considerable experience in this area, to scale such partnerships within other GEF investments.
3. **Advance women’s empowerment and build capacity for local leadership**, as intended in the draft GEF-9 Programming Directions, through targeted investments, training, and expanded implementation of the GEF’s [Gender Equality Policy](#) and [Gender Implementation Strategy](#). The Fonseca Leadership Program could provide lessons for expanding training across GEF operations.
4. **Integrate community well-being into adaptation and resilience investments**, particularly in least developed countries, small island developing States, and fragile and conflict-affected contexts. This may include supporting scalable community-based approaches.
5. **Enhance monitoring, learning, and communication** by capturing best practices of cohesion, agency, and well-being in GEF investments and communicating stories and lessons of success that can be scaled.

By supporting communities to cultivate trust, well-being, care, and agency, the GEF can advance self-sustaining, locally led adaptation and transformation. This can help ensure that GEF investments deliver not only environmental gains but also improvements in equity, inclusion, and collective resilience – the foundations essential for a healthy, adaptive, and sustainable planet.

1. GEF and change through communities

The multilateral environmental agreements for which the Global Environment Facility (GEF) serves as a financing mechanism are increasingly recognizing the importance of communities, human well-being, and resilience to effective and enduring environmental action. For example, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework emphasize the importance of strengthening collective action, including through community-based natural resource management.⁴

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) considers human well-being a key outcome of its work and emphasizes the importance of community-based approaches.⁵ Since 2019, UNCCD has increasingly focused on social resilience, culminating in Resilience Day at the 16th Session of the Conference of the Parties in 2024.⁶ Similarly, the risks of climate change to well-being are a key concern of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Community-based and locally led adaptation are key means of implementation for delivering Parties' adaptation commitments under the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement, including efforts to enhance adaptive capacity, strengthen resilience, and reduce vulnerability.

Social resilience permeates work on just transitions, health, and climate change; the Race to Resilience campaign; and the United Nations Climate Resilience Initiative.⁷ Released at COP, the new *Race for Resilience: Putting People First in the Global Climate Action Agenda*, concludes that while about half a billion people now live with greater climate resilience, "measuring resilience is inseparable from building partnerships, encouraging inclusive participation and learning continuously. Success requires balancing scientific rigour with adaptability, complementing quantitative data with qualitative insight and centering the experiences and agency of vulnerable people."⁸

At UNFCCC COP 30, this momentum was also reinforced by establishing a separate funding window for local communities under the Adaptation Fund; by providing direct and simplified access modalities for Indigenous Peoples and local communities under the Green Climate Fund; and by integrating gender justice issues in discussions of local community issues.

⁴ CBD, 2022

⁵ Verburg et al., 2019; UNCCD, 2019; UNEMG, 2022

⁶ UNCCD, 2024

⁷ For example: UNFCCC, 2024; UNFCCC, 2025; UNFCCC, 2025a

⁸ Race to Resilience, 2025

The GEF also recognizes “the fundamental interdependency of human well-being and a healthy environment”⁹ and increasingly seeks to engage communities to achieve global environmental benefits (GEBs) across its diverse focal areas and programs. Behaviour change, capacity-building, civil society, community-based approaches, empowerment, whole-of-society programming, women’s empowerment, and transformative capacities are increasingly the means for the GEF to achieve transformational change.¹⁰ The concept of social resilience is also important to the GEF, particularly in its work on fragile and conflict-affected situations and environmental security.¹¹

The GEF Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) report [Evaluation of Community-Based Approaches at the GEF](#) found that projects adopting a community-based approach are associated with higher outcome ratings than the overall GEF portfolio and have socioeconomic co-benefits, including enhanced resilience, improved livelihoods, poverty reduction, and empowerment.¹² Yet the report found that, of a sample of 190 projects applying community-based approaches from GEF-4 through GEF-7, 48% had made only limited use of the community-based approaches, and just 5% of completed projects had worked comprehensively with communities. The report called on the Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) to provide more guidance on how community-based approaches can be effectively used within the GEF.

This information note builds on previous STAP papers, including those relating to community-based approaches;¹³ Indigenous Peoples;¹⁴ multi-stakeholder dialogue;¹⁵ resilience;¹⁶ and monitoring, evaluation, and learning.¹⁷ It is informed by *A Roadmap for Care and Change*, prepared by the Billion Minds Initiative in coordination with the UNFCCC’s Race to Resilience campaign.¹⁸ It extends the findings of these reports by synthesizing research from behavioural and social sciences that investigates mental health and well-being in the context of climate change, disaster resilience, rural development, and sustainability. It summarizes this information into seven foundations for resilient communities, which can act collectively to

⁹ [GEF, 2025](#) para. 1.

¹⁰ [GEF, 2022a](#); [GEF, 2022b](#); Barnett et al., 2024; Metternicht et al., 2020; Rare, 2025

¹¹ [GEF IEO, 2024a](#); STAP, 2024a; Schmeier et al., 2024; [GEF-IEO, 2022](#)

¹² [GEF IEO, 2024b](#)

¹³ STAP, 2024b

¹⁴ Andelman and Bierbaum, 2025

¹⁵ Ratner and Stafford-Smith, 2020

¹⁶ Stafford-Smith et al. 2021

¹⁷ STAP and IEO, 2025

¹⁸ Belkin, 2024

achieve transformational change, and it proposes strategies for the GEF to use these foundations to catalyse environmental outcomes and socioeconomic co-benefits.

2. Collective action

Collective action is the actions of groups of individuals working together under shared rules to achieve a common understanding of their problems, needs, goals, priorities, and solutions, and to collaborate in acting on this understanding to effect change.¹⁹ Collective action is necessary for transformational responses to environmental change because many solutions cannot be achieved by individuals alone.²⁰

A core principle of collective action is that the individuals who contribute must derive some benefit.²¹ This benefit could take many forms, including secured livelihoods and reduced poverty, but should strongly motivate actors to engage in and sustain activities over time.²² When groups participate in problem identification, solution scoping, and action, the outcomes are better informed, more equitable, and more effective (Box 1), and they are also more durable.²³

Box 1: Mingas: Collective action among Indigenous communities in Ecuador

In the Andean highlands of Ecuador, the Kichwa Panzaleo community of San Isidro continues to uphold *mingas*, ancestral collective workdays rooted in reciprocity, solidarity, and shared stewardship of land and water. These voluntary gatherings mobilize men, women, and youth to restore irrigation canals, reforest degraded slopes, maintain communal infrastructure, and support vulnerable households. The *mingas* are sustained by the deep social cohesion, trust, and mutual care that underpin the community's social resilience.

Anchor institutions – such as local councils, cooperatives, and women's associations – coordinate these activities, and the activities reinforce livelihood security through collective farming and seed exchange networks, while enhancing well-being and community pride. Women play a central role in organizing and transmitting *minga* values, turning collective labour into an act of empowerment and intergenerational learning that strengthens both family and ecological systems.²⁴

¹⁹ Berkes and Ross, 2013; Glass et al., 2022; Hanleybrown et al., 2012; Norris et al., 2008; Ostrom, 1990

²⁰ Adger, 2003; Armitage et al., 2012; Meharg, 2022; Ostrom 1990.

²¹ Ostrom, 1990

²² Child and Cooney, 2019; Donaldson et al., 2024; Metternicht et al., 2020; Rare, 2025

²³ Rare, 2025; Ratner, B.D. and Stafford Smith, M. 2020

²⁴ Partridge, 2024; Estrella, 2023

Over time, these practices have yielded durable environmental improvements, including enhanced soil fertility, improved water retention, and the reforestation of communal lands, and have fostered a transformational shift from externally driven projects towards self-organized environmental governance. As reported by the Waterkeeper Alliance and in *The Guardian*, community-led mingas have improved watershed management in Guayllabamba and inspired other Indigenous communities to link collective labour with climate adaptation and land restoration.²⁵

There are also several examples of United Nations projects successfully adopting “mingas” to implement various activities. For example, in Colombia, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace co-created “restorative mingas”, where victims of the armed conflict and former combatants jointly built local infrastructure such as a *casa de sabiduría* (wisdom house). These mingas served both material and symbolic purposes – rebuilding roads and social trust simultaneously – by integrating transitional justice with Indigenous values of reciprocity and care. In Ecuador, UNDP organized “innovation mingas” through its Accelerator Lab in collaboration with women vendors in Quito’s medicinal herb market. The process adapted the minga tradition to co-design and test community-led solutions for waste management, irrigation, and cooperative business models, combining design thinking with Indigenous collective action.

Collective action is a primary delivery mechanism for durability and transformational change for the GEF. STAP guidance emphasizes that lasting outcomes hinge on community-based approaches, engaging the right stakeholders, aligning incentives for those actors, and building diversity and flexibility into design, which are among the enabling conditions that collective action provides.²⁶ Communities are more motivated to act if GEF investments provide – directly or as co-benefits – tangible solutions to local needs, such as technologies that empower individuals and communities at the local level, new businesses, reduced prices, and greater security in access to resources. Training local leaders in leadership skills can help catalyse collective action, as can partnerships with peer groups, social movements, governments, and NGOs.

Collective action is unlikely in communities that lack social cohesion, anchor institutions, resilient livelihoods, women’s empowerment, well-being, care, and hope and agency – factors that make communities socially resilient. The next section describes social resilience, followed by key foundations that support its achievement.

²⁵ Waterkeeper Alliance, 2024; Partridge, 2024

²⁶ Stafford Smith, 2019; Stafford Smith et al. 2021

3. Social resilience

Social resilience is achieved when communities can sustain the social and psychological capabilities, as well as the institutional factors necessary, to overcome adversity and become agents of transformational change.²⁷ Communities need to be socially resilient to act collectively for transformational change.²⁸

Disasters, economic shocks, environmental degradation, epidemics, and violence can individually or in combination exceed the coping capacities of communities, impacting their demographic structure, functionality, and well-being.²⁹ These impacts can be particularly devastating for Indigenous Peoples, whose well-being is strongly determined by their strong connection to place and prosocial and collectivist social orientations.³⁰ These impacts on well-being are a key reason why GEF programs now seek to enhance social resilience, especially in conflict-affected countries, least developed countries (LDCs), and small island developing States (SIDS), as reflected in the draft [programming directions](#) and [policy directions](#) for GEF-9, as well as the [draft Least Developed Countries Fund \(LDCF\) and Special Climate Change Fund \(SCCF\) programming strategy and operational improvement](#).³¹

Communities in crisis may not be able to act collectively on adaptation and transformational change for many reasons, including anxiety, depression, and distress among community members, which typically diminish agency, self-efficacy, and the ability for adaptive and collective action.³² Communities that lack the necessary institutional foundations – such as enduring local institutions, resilient livelihoods, and unimpeded contributions from women and youth – may also be restricted in resilience and in their ability to act collectively to achieve future goals. Some attempts to stimulate community-based approaches to environmental change are less than successful when communities lack these preconditions for resilience and collective action.³³

Social resilience is therefore a prerequisite for GEF activities involving communities. It is essential for achieving durable GEBs, particularly at transformative levels of ambition, and

²⁷ Keck and Sakdaporlack, 2013

²⁸ Belkin, 2024

²⁹ Buhaug and Von Uexkull, 2021; FAO et al., 2021; Ratner, 2018; Beyeler et al., 2023; Cunsolo et al., 2020; Doherty & Clayton, 2011; Maharani et al., 2025; O'Donnell et al., 2016; White et al., 2023; Willox et al., 2013

³⁰ Andelman and Bierbaum, 2025; Kirmayer et al., 2011

³¹ [GEF, 2025a](#)

³² Bird et al., 2024; Chatterjee et al., 2023; Davidson and Kecinski, 2022; de Neve et al., 2013; Clayton, 2020; Snyder, 2013; Heeren et al., 2022

³³ Adams et al., 2021; Mathias et al., 2024

should be integral to the design of projects and programs.³⁴ Timely and effective interventions can promote resilience and shift communities to collective action for transformative change.³⁵ The next discussions outline the interdependent and reinforcing foundations of social resilience that enable communities to act collectively, deliver GEBs, and drive transformative change.

4. Foundations for resilient and transformational communities

This section highlights key factors that contribute to social resilience, categorized into institutional and psychological factors (Figure 1), and describes the seven elements necessary to achieve social resilience and enable collective action. Institutional factors represent established social structures that shape behaviour, while psychological factors reflect how individuals think, feel, and interact.

4.1. Social cohesion

Social cohesion is the trust-based networks of relationships among members of society (“bonding social capital” or “horizontal trust”), between social groups (“bridging social capital”), and between groups and those in power (“linking social capital” or “vertical trust”) that deliver returns to actors.³⁶ It is the product of both institutional and psychological processes, as it emerges from the presence of institutional mechanisms that regulate the behaviour of individuals and groups, as well as how individuals feel, identify, interact, sense, and think. See Figure 1.

The GEF already works to promote social cohesion. In the GEF-8 and emerging GEF-9 frameworks, principles such as multi-stakeholder engagement, participatory governance, and behavioural change align with this. Through initiatives such as the Small Grants Program (SGP) and the Integrated Programs (e.g. Amazon, Congo & Critical Forest Biomes, and Food Systems), the GEF fosters cohesion by organizing communities around shared resource governance and environmental objectives. However, cohesion needs to be treated as a foundational condition, not just an outcome; it should be monitored³⁷ and nurtured from the outset and throughout project implementation to inform adaptive management. GEF projects

³⁴ Stafford-Smith and Metternicht, 2022

³⁵ Belkin 2024; Goodman et al., 2023; Obrist et al., 2010

³⁶ Adger, 2003; Carmen et al., 2022; Chatterjee et al., 2023; Chin et al., 2023; Lin, 2002; Newton, 2001

³⁷ An example of method for diagnosing and measuring social capital is the World Bank Integrated Questionnaire for the Measurement of Social Capital (Chatterjee et al., 2023; Grootaert et al., 2004).

can strengthen cohesion by ensuring inclusive community participation in problem-solving and decision-making, partnering with local groups, supporting leadership and conflict resolution training, encouraging community exchanges, and protecting community rights to manage shared resources, where this aligns with its investment mandate.

Bonding social capital (strengthening relationships among members of society) fosters reciprocity within communities, which in turn enables collective action to support the well-being of community members during times of crisis and to address risks to shared needs and values (Box 2). It is integral to the adoption of new practices and technologies, to non-violent conflict resolution, to equity, to improved health outcomes, and to prosocial behaviour³⁸ – actions that benefit others and form the foundation for agency, care, and collective action.³⁹ Bonding social capital is enhanced through frequent positive participation in community organizations and interactions with community members.⁴⁰ A key premise of community-driven approaches is that they work with and enhance bonding social capital. Evidence indicates that when implemented effectively, these approaches yield better outcomes and foster enhanced social capital. For example, evidence from the *Flourishing Communities* model in semi-rural Kenya shows how community-driven savings and lending groups *Kuja Pamoja kwa Jamii* (i.e. Swahili for "Come Together for the place where we belong") deliberately build on existing neighbourhood and kinship ties to strengthen trust, mutual support, and a shared sense of purpose among women participants. Through weekly group meetings, joint microfinance activities, and peer-led leadership structures, these groups generate higher levels of interpersonal trust, belonging, and collective efficacy, which are in turn associated with reductions in depression, child maltreatment, and food and water insecurity at the household level.⁴¹

³⁸ Chatterjee et al., 2023; D'Exelle and Verschoor, 2023; Kawachi et al., 1997; Norris et al., 2008; Yang and Konrath, 2023

³⁹ Atkins et al., 2019; Biglan et al., 2020

⁴⁰ Aldrich and Meyer, 2015; Barnes et al., 2025; Norris et al., 2008; Pennington et al., 2018; Stolle, 2002

⁴¹ Chatterjee et al., 2023; Goodman et al., 2023

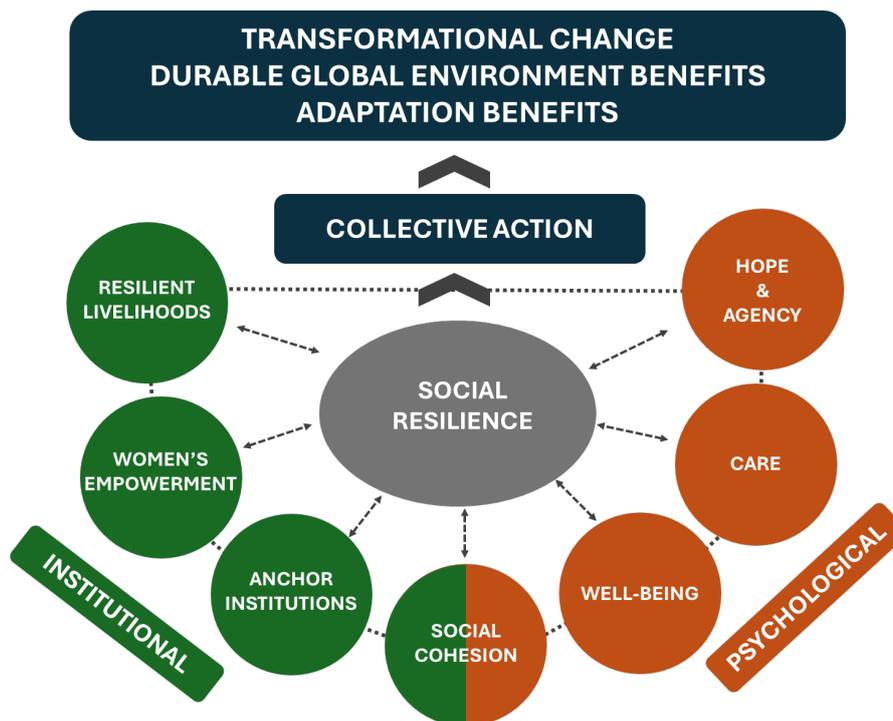


Figure 1: The foundations for resilient and transformational communities. *The diagram illustrates that social resilience underpins collective action, which in turn helps communities generate durable global environmental and adaptation benefits and drive transformational change. The seven factors that enable social resilience are anchor institutions, women’s empowerment, and resilient livelihoods (institutional factors – green); well-being, care, and hope and agency (psychological – orange); and social cohesion, which encompasses both institutional and psychological aspects. All seven factors are interconnected (indicated by dotted lines). As communities become more socially resilient, all seven factors are further strengthened (indicated by the two-headed arrows).*

Bridging social capital involves partnerships between groups and with trusted organizations, such as religious networks, unions, NGOs, and microfinance networks.⁴² Such partnerships can build solidarity, share information about solutions, prevent intergroup violence, and sustain motivation for change.⁴³ Bridging social capital between communities can be enhanced through education and training initiatives that link schools, shared medical services, and work programs that draw on labour from multiple communities.⁴⁴ Supporting networking among women and committing to working with women’s organizations and movements is particularly important to enhancing this type of social capital.⁴⁵

⁴² Child and Cooney, 2019; Maher 2021, Pahl-Wostl, 2009; Ziervogel et al., 2022.

⁴³ GCA, 2023; Meharg, 2022; Routledge et al., 2007; Steiner and Markantoni, 2014; Taylor et al., 2025

⁴⁴ Drolet et al., 2015; Slavchevska et al., 2024; Sonnenfeld et al., 2021

⁴⁵ Drolet et al., 2015; Faxon et al., 2015; Patnaik, 2021

Box 2: Improving social cohesion and resilience in times of crisis⁴⁶

In Honduras, RARE's community-driven Fish Forever program has demonstrated how strengthening social cohesion can drive both resilience and environmental sustainability. Through the establishment of local savings clubs, the program provided small-scale fishers and their families with accessible, community-managed mechanisms for saving, borrowing, and pooling emergency funds. This proved critical when a succession of shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic and Hurricanes Eta and Iota, disrupted livelihoods, damaged infrastructure, and threatened food security across the northern coast. The savings clubs helped families navigate these crises by fostering bonding and bridging social capital – neighbours meeting weekly to save collectively, build trust, and make transparent financial decisions. These interactions nurtured a shared sense of responsibility and care, reinforcing social cohesion and enhancing collective capacity to manage risks and plan for the long term.

Beyond coping with crises, this social infrastructure became a catalyst for collective environmental action by enabling fishing households to rationalize spending and save enough for future needs and eventualities, which implies a shift in their planning horizons from the short to the long term. This change of attitudes and behaviours helped curb destructive fishing practices and generated community support for conservation activities. Trust in local leaders, community institutions, and partner organizations enabled joint decisions on sustainable fisheries management and support for the establishment of marine reserves and no-take zones. Savings clubs evolved into anchor institutions, empowering fishers to transition from short-term exploitation to long-term stewardship of marine resources.

Linking social capital may enable communities to be recognized and included in institutions that operate beyond the local level, including e.g. institution types that help conserve and manage their environments and adapt to climate change.⁴⁷ Social capital encompasses trust in governments, which enables communities to exercise their voice and influence in decision-making, and provides them with a sense of security and predictability during times of crisis.⁴⁸ This trust is built when governments (and other external actors) are present in communities, act consistently, and act in a manner that delivers desired outcomes.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Based on <https://rare.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2023-03-27-Fishing-for-Climate-Resilience-Final-Report.pdf>; <https://rare.org/program/fish-forever/>; RARE - Resilience of Coastal Fishing Communities in Times of Crisis. PANORAMA – Solutions for a Healthy Planet. <https://panorama.solutions/en/solution/resilience-coastal-fishing-communities-times-crisis>;

⁴⁷ Berkes and Ross, 2013

⁴⁸ Bandura, 1997; Chin et al., 2023

⁴⁹ Chin et al., 2023; Kouvo, 2011; Phuong et al., 2018

Social cohesion is a crucial prerequisite for the success of environmental and sustainability projects that involve communities. Research indicates that when community members feel connected and engage in strong social relationships, they are significantly more likely to collaborate to protect ecosystems and adopt sustainable practices.⁵⁰ Communities with high bonding ties can mobilize quickly and support one another in times of stress. Bridging ties provide access to novel information and resources beyond the immediate group, and linking ties enable coordination with external actors, institutions, and policy frameworks.⁵¹ For transformational change, strong social cohesion serves as the backbone of collective governance, mutual accountability, and a shared vision.⁵²

4.2. Anchor institutions

Anchor institutions are stabilizing forces that strengthen social resilience and collective action. They include health centres, schools, hospitals, businesses, universities, and local associations involved in a wide range of activities (e.g. arts, conservation, credit and savings, farming, fishing, and social work). They provide public services, build partnerships, and invest locally, thus enhancing mutual well-being and economic health.⁵³ Because they are socially focused and have a long-standing presence in the territory where they operate, they are trusted actors with strong networks and can provide leadership, build social capital, and mobilize collective action.⁵⁴ They can advocate, convene, and provide technical and managerial support, influencing economic development through their employment, property, and purchasing practices.⁵⁵

Because they are embedded in local communities, anchor institutions share in the community's fortunes and can act when local problems affect their core mandate or values (Box 3). Evidence from the Philippines suggests that community-based organizations and local government units play a crucial role in co-managing marine resources and achieving sustainable conservation outcomes, for example, on San Salvador Island, where fisher associations and local government jointly established and enforced a marine sanctuary, leading to higher compliance, stronger trust, and measurable improvements in fish abundance and coral cover.⁵⁶ Anchor institutions provide the scaffolding for social resilience, enabling communities to coordinate, innovate, and sustain environmental gains beyond project cycles.⁵⁷

Many GEF projects already collaborate with anchor institutions to convene stakeholders, deliver training, and manage environmental assets, reflecting the GEF's commitment to local

⁵⁰ Fazey et al., 2022

⁵¹ Aldrich, 2017; Claridge, 2018; Zhao et al., 2025

⁵² Chatterjee et al., 2023; Sustainability Directory, 2025

⁵³ McAreavey, 2022; Koh et al., 2022; Norris et al., 2008; Taylor and Luter, 2013

⁵⁴ Koh et al., 2020; McAreavey, 2022; Rubin and Rose, 2015

⁵⁵ Koh et al., 2020; Porter and Kramer, 2011

⁵⁶ Pomeroy and Carlos, 1997; Katon et al., 1997; Pomeroy et al., 2001.

⁵⁷ Koh et al., 2020.

ownership and systems-based transformation. However, the role of anchor institutions as partners that foster social resilience and collective action could be made more intentional. They should be identified and engaged early in project design, noting that some may not be the traditional partners. The SGP is well-positioned to work with and connect these institutions to larger GEF projects, although this may require direct support, given the limited resources of these institutions (Box 3).

Box 3: Mayan Alliance for Bees (Kabnáalo'on), a critical anchor organization for environmental action and community resilience⁵⁸

In the Yucatán peninsula, the Mayan Alliance for Bees (Kabnáalo'on), an alliance of 83 Mayan beekeeping communities, has become a critical anchor organization, enabling Mayan communities to effectively participate in the design of local and national policies, defending pollinators, forests, and traditional values and livelihoods. Much of this organizational strength was built through a decade of support and mentorship from the GEF SGP, which funded individual beekeeping associations, supporting organic production of rare meliponia honey, with medicinal properties, produced by a genus of stingless tropical bees; training in business management; women-led cooperatives; community monitoring, and organizational capacity-building across the states of Campeche, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo, Mexico. These SGP investments helped local groups formalize their governance, strengthen cohesion, develop technical and legal capabilities, and receive financial support. The Alliance was able to coordinate evidence gathering, develop a strategy, and engage with government agencies. This organizational foundation contributed to major and transformational outcomes, including the 2015 Supreme Court ruling affirming Indigenous consultation rights and the 2017 cancellation of Monsanto's GM soy permits.⁵⁹

Social resilience translated into collective action for climate adaptation and environmental protection. SGP-supported cooperatives restored meliponia hives; planted native flowering species to support pollinators under climate stress; monitored pesticide drift; and expanded diversified, climate-resilient honey livelihoods. Women's groups, several of which were formed through SGP grants, continued to play key leadership roles in restoration and advocacy associated with the Alliance. By convening communities, providing legitimacy, and coordinating joint strategic action, Kabnáalo'on enabled Mayan villages to defend forest landscapes, sustain pollinator habitats, and advocate for ecosystem-compatible land-use decisions and policies. The experience demonstrates how GEF SGP investments

⁵⁸ Based on Goldman Environmental Prize, 2020; Mongabay Español, 2021; Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación, 2015; SGP, 2021; Irma, 2016.

⁵⁹ Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación, 2015; Andelman and Bierbaum, 2025

in anchor organizations enhance social resilience and facilitate the collective action necessary for durable environmental outcomes.⁶⁰

4.3. Resilient livelihoods

Resilient livelihoods are the material foundation of resilient communities. They are based on institutions, such as local co-operatives, multi-stakeholder community development organisations, micro-finance platforms, or government–NGO partnership agencies, that enable households to combine natural, human, financial, social, and physical capital to secure their means of living at all times, including through periods of disturbance.⁶¹ There are a range of ways to build and restore livelihood resilience that are familiar to the GEF, whose activities focus primarily on protecting and sustaining the natural capital people need for livelihoods, including promoting alternative and diversified livelihood systems based on the sustainable use of natural capital.⁶²

Seeking to affect major changes in peoples' livelihoods can be difficult.⁶³ Interventions are more effective and durable when they first seek to reduce risks and uncertainties to existing livelihoods, rather than seeking to transform them.⁶⁴ Tested and effective means to help reduce risks to livelihoods include:

- Improving human capital by increasing access to education and health care
- Improving access to markets by increasing access to transport and information and communication technology, and by linking local producers with actors along value chains
- Reducing diseases in livestock and crops
- Providing education and training for small businesses
- Equipping communities with technologies that improve their ability to access, control, and use energy, food, and water.⁶⁵

The 2024 World Bank *Rising to the Challenge Report*⁶⁶ provides solid evidence of the benefits of such strategies for social resilience; for example, household water tanks in Brazil have proved effective in mitigating the impacts of drought on waterborne diseases, school absences, women's labour, and food security.⁶⁷

Social protection, including safety nets and policies and laws that provide direct relief to people, is also a well-known means to support livelihoods during times of crisis.⁶⁸ Financial

⁶⁰ Stafford Smith et al., 2021; Stafford Smith et al., 2022

⁶¹ Chambers and Conway, 1992; Quandt, 2018

⁶² Donaldson et al., 2024

⁶³ Donaldson et al., 2024; Ireland et al., 2004; Metternicht et al., 2020

⁶⁴ Carr, 2020; Donaldson et al., 2024; Tanner et al., 2015

⁶⁵ Béné et al., 2014 and 2020; Bishop, 2021; Chambers and Conway, 1992; Glass et al., 2022; Ireland et al., 2004; Schipper et al., 2022; Sen, 2004; Tanner et al., 2015

⁶⁶ World Bank, 2024

⁶⁷ da Silveira et al., 2016; de Moraes and Rocha, 2013

⁶⁸ Aleksandrova, 2020; Tenzing, 2020; GCA, 2019.

inclusion has also been shown to be effective in supporting livelihoods through shocks; for example, access to microfinance has been demonstrated to enhance social resilience to disasters, promote human well-being, and improve the sustainability of projects.⁶⁹

Supporting resilient livelihoods among communities is critical to the success of environmental or sustainability projects because a livelihood that can cope with and recover from shocks while maintaining or enhancing capabilities and assets (without undermining natural resources) is fundamental to sustainable transformation.⁷⁰ Empirical work shows that when communities have diversified income sources, have access to credit and savings, and are supported in transforming their livelihoods (e.g. through value chain upgrades or ecosystem-based enterprises), they are better placed to engage in collective governance of natural resources and sustain environmental outcomes. For example, research on smallholder farmers on the Tibetan Plateau found that those with stronger livelihood resilience were more likely to engage in adaptation practices that also protected ecosystems⁷¹ (see also Box 4). This aligns with the GEF IEO findings that livelihood security underpins the durability of environmental gains and that households must be materially resilient to engage in sustained environmental stewardship.⁷² Thus, by making livelihoods resilient, the ability of communities to participate in collective action, maintain trust and networks during crises, and deliver transformational change towards sustainability is enhanced.

Box 4. The Sundarbans eco village model⁷³

Along Bangladesh's vulnerable Sundarbans coastline, repeated cyclones, salinity incursion, and erosion had made communities chronically fragile until a bold experiment began in Dacope under the Sundarbans eco village model. Launched by the Bangladesh Environment and Development Society in 2015, this initiative wove resilient livelihoods, anchor institutions, collective action, and women's empowerment into a tightly integrated transformation engine.

From the start, the project expanded resilient livelihoods beyond conventional agriculture and fishing. Community members gained access to solar lighting and energy systems (serving over 3,100 people), fuel-efficient cookstoves, and a social business providing safe drinking water (benefiting ~12,000 people). Mangrove-based enterprises (nurseries, handicrafts, honey, and eco-tourism) offered additional and diversified income streams for over 350 women and 150 men. These income paths cushion shocks, freeing up time and capital to invest in long-term restoration.

To anchor the effort, the project helped formalize a registered cooperative, Banojibi, with a multi-year business plan and established links to the national government as well as to markets. The cooperative and the eco village's training and cyclone shelter hub serve as durable institutions, coordinating procurement, product aggregation, marketing, and skill-building beyond typical project time frames.

Collective action is integral to the restoration and enterprise process. Communities jointly select restoration sites, manage nurseries and seed banks, and coordinate planting and maintenance.

⁶⁹ Becchetti and Castriota, 2011; Metternicht et al., 2020; Nader, 2008; Nuruzzaman et al., 2025

⁷⁰ Carr, 2020; CARE, 2018; Lin and Lin, 2020

⁷¹ He et al., 2024

⁷² GEF-IEO, 2025

⁷³ Sources: Equator Initiative, 2024; Mongabay, 2024; Resurrección et al., 2019; UNDP, 2024

A striking element is the central role of women’s empowerment. Women lead restoration plots, run enterprises, and play decision-making roles within the cooperative. Their control over restoration income, nursery work, and product profits has shifted local norms around voice and ownership, strengthening both household and community resilience.

The eco village has restored over 150 hectares of mangroves, improved access to safer water and energy for thousands, diversified incomes across hundreds of households, and garnered external recognition, including the 2024 UNDP Equator Prize.

4.4. Women’s empowerment

Gender norms in many societies mean that women are overwhelmingly expected to do the work of care within households and kinship networks.⁷⁴ This expectation results in an unequal distribution of labour between genders, which is amplified when women also work outside the home.⁷⁵ This burden increases during environmental and other crises, which often create the need for more caring in response to increasing illness and for more work outside the home to secure livelihoods. Simultaneously, these crises can impose greater risks to women’s health and increase the risk of violence towards women.⁷⁶ These added burdens are a key driver of social dysfunction.

Building social resilience requires institutions that empower women.⁷⁷ Empowering women means expanding their freedoms and choices, which begins by working with them to understand and tackle the social norms that limit their agency (Box 5).⁷⁸

Box 5: The Osukuru United Women’s Network, Uganda – women’s empowerment as a driver of social resilience and environmental transformation⁷⁹

The Osukuru United Women’s Network (OWN) in Tororo District, Uganda, exemplifies how women’s empowerment and collective agency can foster social resilience, enhance social cohesion, and yield sustainable environmental and socioeconomic outcomes. Founded in 2017 by a local health worker⁸⁰ after severe floods devastated crops and livelihoods, OWN is a community-led response to rising food insecurity, poverty, and social risks such as child marriage and transactional sex. It has grown to over 2,000 women organized into 40 subgroups. Through savings and loans groups, climate-resilient kitchen gardens, and seedling enterprises, OWN has enabled women to diversify incomes, enhance food security, and restore degraded land. The network’s emphasis on collective learning, capacity-

⁷⁴ Bakker, 2007

⁷⁵ Grassi et al., 2015; Levine et al., 2001

⁷⁶ Alhassan et al., 2018; Denton, 2002; Dev & Manalo, 2023; Drolet et al., 2015; Nelson et al., 2002

⁷⁷ Drolet et al., 2015; Kabeer, 1999; Lau et al., 2021; Slavchevska et al., 2024; GCA, 2019

⁷⁸ Lau et al., 2021; Masud-All-Kamal and Nursey-Bray, 2024; Patnaik, 2021

⁷⁹ Sources: Global Center on Adaptation, 2023

⁸⁰ The Osukuru United Women’s Network (OWN) is a grassroots women’s network founded in 2017 in the Osukuru sub-county of Tororo District, Uganda, by Constance Okollet and 12 fellow village health team volunteers. While formally operating as a community-based network of women, rather than a large, registered NGO, OWN has accessed training and support via international agencies (for example Oxfam) and draws on local contributions, savings groups, and informal donor support to mobilize over 2,000 women across 40 sub-groups.

building, and mutual support strengthens bonding and bridging social capital, fostering trust and cooperation.

These foundations of social cohesion and women’s leadership translated into collective environmental action. Members worked together to plant trees, conserve wetlands, and introduce community bylaws to prevent deforestation. They also engaged local government authorities and NGOs to scale support for climate-resilient agriculture and ecosystem protection. The result was not only increased household income and reduced vulnerability to shocks, but also long-term transformation in gender roles, community resilience, and environmental sustainability.

When women gain access to leadership roles, resources, and decision-making power, they can enhance social capital within households and peer networks, bridge across community groups, and link institutions and formal governance systems (Boxes 3 and 5). For instance, research shows that women’s empowerment in local governance and resource management has strengthened community cohesion and adaptive capacity in the context of climate resilience efforts in several developing countries across Asia and Africa (e.g. India, Indonesia, Kenya, and Nepal),⁸¹ including through enhanced recycling practices and better compliance with conservation directives in fisheries, forests, and rangelands.^{82,92} Embedding gender-responsive strategies in projects and programs enhances the conditions for durable environmental and socioeconomic transformation.⁸³ Moreover, sustainability interventions that seek to work through women without empowering them risk further burdening them.

Women’s empowerment is central to the GEF’s Gender Equality Policy and its commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity, UNFCCC, and UNCCD to advance gender-responsive action. The GEF Gender Implementation Strategy (2018)⁸⁴ guides agencies in integrating gender analysis and participation into their work, and the draft GEF-9 Programming Directions elevate women’s empowerment as a core element of whole-of-society engagement. The Eighth Comprehensive Evaluation of the GEF (OPS8) notes progress in women’s inclusion but highlights the scope for a deeper impact.⁸⁵ This could be achieved through targeted support and engagement of women’s organizations in projects, ensuring that women hold meaningful governance and leadership roles in the GEF’s initiatives, enabling them to shape, lead, and benefit from environmental initiatives.

⁸¹ Kellogg, 2020; Lwamba et al., 2022; Arya and Shukla, 2025;

⁸² Agarwal, 2018; Leach, 2016; Maybom and Funder, 2025; Rahmania et al., 2025; Vargas, 2002

⁸³ Dushkova & Ivlieva, 2024; Nortey et al., 2025.

⁸⁴ [GEF, 2018](#).

⁸⁵ [GEF-IEO, 2025](#)

4.5. Well-being

Defined as the sense that one's material and psychological needs and values are being met, well-being is increasingly recognized as a crucial enabler of resilience and collective action.⁸⁶ Research across disciplines shows that emotions and cognition strongly shape behaviour and that positive states of mind support the capacity of individuals and communities to respond to environmental and social change.⁸⁷

Many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, including several GEF recipients, measure subjective well-being using indicators of life satisfaction.⁸⁸ Similar approaches are also used in non-OECD countries, such as Bhutan, Morocco, and South Africa.⁸⁹ Emerging studies also show that subjective well-being metrics can help quantify the benefits of adaptation investments, including those that reduce flood risk.⁹⁰

GEF's emphasis on the interdependence of human and planetary health (Healthy Planet, Healthy People) aligns with the concept of well-being. Similarly, the draft LDCF and SCCF strategy emphasizes that enhancing the resilience of health systems and promoting well-being are among its intended long-term impacts.⁹¹ GEF Integrated Programs and adaptation investments already aim to improve living conditions, health, and resource security alongside environmental outcomes. Improved community well-being could therefore be considered both a prerequisite and a co-benefit of effective projects.⁹²

Focusing on well-being can support transformation.⁹³ The GEF could explore the use of well-being indicators to monitor change and track social co-benefits, drawing on existing tools, such as those used by the OECD and others.⁹⁴ Such indicators could include 'life satisfaction', which is used as a proxy for Sustainable Development Goal 3 ("Good health and well-being"), or 'quality of employment', which is used to monitor Sustainable Development Goal 8 ("Decent work and economic growth").

⁸⁶ Bechtoldt et al., 2021; Davidson and Kecinski, 2022; Jarillo and Crivelli, 2024

⁸⁷ Hanel et al., 2024; Tiberius, 2018

⁸⁸ OECD, 2013; OECD, 2025a; Smith et al., 2025

⁸⁹ OECD, 2024; OECD, 2025

⁹⁰ Fujiwara et al., 2022

⁹¹ GEF, 2025c

⁹² STAP notes that prerequisite co-benefits are essential for achieving durable GEBs, particularly at transformative levels of ambition, and they should be identified in the context of plans to achieve them, which should be integral to project and program design (See Stafford Smith, M., and Metternicht, G., 2022).

⁹³ de Neve et al., 2013; OECD, 2013

⁹⁴ For example, the Melanesian Well-Being Indicators (OECD, 2013; OECD, 2025; Kobau et al, 2010)

4.6. Care

Care is critical to well-being and involves looking after others' needs. It is a fundamental behaviour characteristic of communities that collectively endure stresses and navigate change. Care underpins the health and well-being of individuals, enabling them to collaborate, work, learn, and lead meaningful lives. By recognizing and bolstering care and the care providers, resilience and transformation can be catalysed.⁹⁵

The timely delivery of community-based basic psychological support can achieve significant and sustained reductions in distress (Box 6) and serve as a readily available means of strengthening the psychological foundation elements outlined in Figure 1. There is good evidence that “task-sharing”⁹⁶ can be a model to scale psychological resilience in response to environmental change.⁹⁷ There are various models for this, but they typically share a hands-on approach that builds on existing cultural practices and training and coaching local lay persons to deliver psychological services. Mobilizations of effort for local-led climate adaptation, such as the [Race to Resilience](#) and [Global Commission on Adaptation](#) partners and collaborating initiatives such as Climate High-Level Champions “Existing Banks of Solutions” platform⁹⁸, are adopting such approaches to both address related mental health burden needs and bolster their adaptive effectiveness⁹⁹.

Box 6: SOLAR: Supporting psychological resilience in Tuvalu

The Skills for Life Adjustment and Resilience (SOLAR) program demonstrates how providing psychological care and psychological skills training can strengthen individual and community resilience, enabling better adaptation to climate shocks and more cohesive collective action. Developed by Phoenix Australia and the University of Melbourne, SOLAR builds psychological skills in communities by training non-specialist facilitators to deliver low-cost, scalable interventions that reduce distress and functional impairment following disasters.

The program was adapted for the communities of Nui and Funafuti in Tuvalu following Cyclone Pam (2015). Results showed significant and sustained reductions in psychological distress after delivery, indicating that structured psychological care can enhance community resilience in climate-exposed

⁹⁵ Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; McEwan and Goodman, 2010

⁹⁶ Task-sharing is the delivery of basic psychological support by trained non-specialist community members, enabling scalable, low-cost interventions that reduce distress and strengthen well-being where specialist services are limited.

⁹⁷ GCA, 2023; Karyotaki et al., 2022; O'Donnell et al., 2020; Patel et al., 2018; WHO, 2024; Xue et al., 2024

⁹⁸ <https://www.climatechampions.net/action-agenda/existing-banks-of-solutions/>

⁹⁹ See Belkin, 2024, GCA, 2023

settings, facilitate people’s re-engagement in daily roles, and strengthen the social fabric necessary for collective adaptation.¹⁰⁰ Also, a randomized controlled trial in Australian communities hit by compounding disasters (wildfires, floods, and the pandemic) found SOLAR produced significant improvements in anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms over time, supporting its value as a population-level resilience tool that can be embedded in recovery and adaptation programs.¹⁰¹

These outcomes demonstrate that addressing mental health and well-being can be an effective climate adaptation. When individuals regain psychological stability and trust, communities can act collectively, participate in local recovery planning, and sustain environmental initiatives. Reviews of climate-related disasters show clear links between extreme events and mental health burdens in vulnerable regions, underscoring the need to pair environmental projects with mental health and psychological support.¹⁰² Studies on climate services and public health also recommend integrating mental health and psychological support into adaptation to enhance recovery, participation, and long-term resilience¹⁰³

Caring and hope (see next subsection) represent emerging yet relevant dimensions for GEF’s future programming. The GEF’s focus on locally led adaptation and actions, behaviour change, and resilience-building in the draft GEF-9 documents,¹⁰⁴ along with STAP’s relevant documents¹⁰⁵, demonstrates the importance of these issues to the delivery of GEBs. Communities overwhelmed by despair or trauma often struggle to organize collectively for adaptation or environmental stewardship.¹⁰⁶ Integrating care through peer support and recognizing community caregiving roles can align with the GEF’s resilience agenda.¹⁰⁷ There may be a role for integrating care into projects, especially in LDCs and SIDS, during project design and in building the capacity of anchor organizations and local laypersons to provide appropriate support during project implementation.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁰ Gibson et al., 2021; Phoenix Australia, 2022

¹⁰¹ Cowlshaw et al., 2023; Phoenix Australia, 2022

¹⁰² Patwary et al., 2024

¹⁰³ Xue et al., 2024; Palinkas et al., 2020

¹⁰⁴ GEF, 2022; GEF, 2025; GEF-IEO, 2025

¹⁰⁵ Barnett et al., 2024; Carr, 2022; Carr et al., 2024; Metternicht et al., 2020

¹⁰⁶ Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Belkin, 2024

¹⁰⁷ Mortreux et al., 2023; Bender and Rawluk, 2023

¹⁰⁸ Care provision could be done by leveraging the support of partner organisations (Belkin, 2024; O’Donnell et al., 2020, Barbui, 2020). There are several open sources and widely used manuals, implementation guidelines, and training materials such as the WHO EQUIP initiative (Kohrt et al., 2025), and the The Skills for Life Adjustment and Resilience (SOLAR) program (Box 6) (Gibson et al., 2021) that can be used for this purpose.

4.7. Hope and agency

Research is increasingly showing that hope is a key driver of collective action to achieve resilience and transformation.¹⁰⁹ Hope is the belief that a desired future state is possible.¹¹⁰ Hope bolsters agency, enhances knowledge to achieve desired goals, boosts well-being, and is an important antidote to anxiety and despair (Box 7).¹¹¹

There is positive feedback between hope and action: people who are educated about ways to act, who see others act with success, or who successfully act themselves have enhanced feelings of empowerment, which in turn give rise to hope, which in turn enables further actions (Box 7).¹²⁵

Hope is closely bound up with self-efficacy and agency. Self-efficacy, a belief in the power to produce an outcome, is a fundamental element of measures of human agency.¹¹² Collective self-efficacy is a key component of hope, as groups must believe they can achieve their desired goals.¹¹³ Successful implementation of group activities builds a community's confidence in its ability to effect further change (Box 7).^{114, 115} There is clear evidence that efforts to restore ecosystems foster hope and build social cohesion, which increase both social and ecological resilience.¹¹⁶

The latest Race to Resilience Report similarly underscores the scale and potential of collective action, noting that over 437 million people now live with greater climate resilience and that the High-Level Climate Champions network has expanded to 46 partner initiatives and more than 1,700 members across 164 countries. The Race to Resilience experience also illustrates that measuring resilience is inseparable from building partnerships, enabling inclusive participation, and learning continuously; success depends on balancing scientific rigor with adaptability, complementing quantitative evidence with qualitative insight, and centering the experiences and agency of vulnerable people¹¹⁷.

¹⁰⁹ Bender and Rawluk, 2023; Mortreux et al., 2023; Mortreux et al., 2025

¹¹⁰ Baumgartner, 2008; Lazarus, 1999

¹¹¹ Graham, 2023; Magaletta and Oliver, 1999; Snyder, 2002

¹¹² Magaletta and Oliver, 1999; Bandura, 2000; Graham, 2023

¹¹³ Bandura, 2000; Bechtoldt et al., 2021; Thaker et al., 2016

¹¹⁴ Bandura, 2000; Markantoni et al., 2019

¹¹⁵ Smith et al., 2025

¹¹⁶ Smith et al., 2025

¹¹⁷ Race to Resilience, 2025

Agency can enable institutional factors, such as women’s empowerment, and translate into women’s ability to actualize empowered opportunities.¹¹⁸

Hope can be stimulated by information that shows how to effect positive futures (Box 7).¹¹⁹ This includes information conveyed through curricula, documents, electronic media, experience, prices, signs, targeted communications, training, and word of mouth. Hope and agency are vital to the GEF’s goal of achieving systemic transformation. The GEF emphasizes empowerment, capacity-building, and locally driven solutions as pathways to lasting change. Hope and agency can help bridge the gap between these aspirations and real-world outcomes. Sharing successful examples through the GEF’s communications strategy can inspire replication and catalyse broader change. The GEF SGP (or small-scale interventions within larger projects) can be an effective tool for nurturing hope and collective self-efficacy when delivered in partnership with anchor institutions and governments and can also strengthen trust and social cohesion.

Box 7: From hope to agency to collective action through farmer-managed natural regeneration

In southern Niger, farmers facing decades of drought, crop failure, and fuelwood scarcity began farmer-managed natural regeneration (FMNR), which involves protecting and pruning shoots from living tree stumps on cropland, after peer-to-peer demonstrations and early successes showed a plausible, locally controlled path to a better future. That visible turnaround (rapid tree growth, shade, mulch, fodder) and the effective communication of success within the farmers’ network, plus enabling measures such as village bylaws against cutting and a decree granting farmer rights to regenerated trees, sparked hope that restoration was achievable and worthwhile. That hope translated into self-efficacy and agency as households learned simple FMNR techniques, replicated successful stories, and witnessed improvements in yields, fodder, and fuelwood. This resulted in income gains as well as psychological benefits (confidence, control) among FMNR adopters.¹²⁰

As individual agency grew, communities formalized collective rules, revived farmer groups, and coordinated pruning, protection, and seed/seedling exchange. These activities built social cohesion (“new social capital”), which sustains the trees and spreads the practice. The result is a landscape-scale transformation of up to 7 million hectares under FMNR in Niger, with documented gains in tree cover, staple crop yields, and drought resilience, as well as reduced pressure on remaining woodlands. This

¹¹⁸ Shankar et al., 2018; Kalra et al., 2024; Bossuroy et al., 2022

¹¹⁹ Mortreux et al., 2025; Ruiz-Mallen et al., 2022

¹²⁰ Garrity and Bayala, 2019; Weston et al., 2015; Regreening Africa, 2023

outcome aligns with broader evidence that hope and “psychological capital” (including perceived efficacy) increase climate adaptation engagement. When people believe improvement is possible and within reach, they act together and persist, resulting in durable environmental and socioeconomic outcomes.¹²¹

FMNR was first developed in Niger in 1983 and is now implemented in 24 countries supported. It is much more than an agricultural technique, as it inspired a farmer-led movement re-greening land in the Sahel region¹²². In places where social cohesion was lower, FMNR was not adopted as widely¹²³.

5. Implications for the GEF

The preceding discussion is highly relevant to the GEF’s ambition to deliver systemic transformation through integrated, locally led, and inclusive programming. It reinforces the principle that social resilience is not only a social objective but a foundational condition for durable GEBs and adaptation to climate change. Communities that are cohesive, well-connected to institutions, have resilient livelihoods, empower women, and promote positive psychological well-being are better able to act collectively, adapt to change, and sustain environmental outcomes over time.

This understanding aligns directly with the draft GEF-9 Programming Directions and the draft LDCF and SCCF programming strategy, which emphasize the interdependence of human well-being and a healthy planet. It also aligns with the GEF’s increasing focus on behavioural change, capacity-building, empowerment, and whole-of-society approaches as pathways to transformation.¹²⁴ The identified factors also align with GEF IEO findings in its evaluation of community-based approaches, which demonstrate that projects that effectively engage communities achieve stronger and more durable environmental and social outcomes; however, such approaches remain underused.

This information note complements ongoing GEF efforts by highlighting social resilience and institutional and psychological foundations that enable communities to act collectively and sustain transformation. By positioning social resilience as a prerequisite for GEB delivery, the

¹²¹ Garrity and Bayala, 2019; Weston et al., 2015; Oxfam, 2020.; Chomba et al., 2020; Chipfupa et al., 2021.

¹²² World Vision, 2018

¹²³ Forestation International, 2018

¹²⁴ Drafts of GEF-9 programming already supports many of the identified foundations. For example, the Integrated Program (IP) on Drylands and Drought Management seeks to promote women’s empowerment through secure tenure and access to resources; the IP on Critical Forest Biomes aims to strengthen conservation-friendly livelihoods; and the draft LDCF/SCCF programming strategy intends to prioritize social protection, gender equality, and climate-smart agriculture.

GEF can ensure that its investments across the family of funds are not only effective but also equitable and enduring. The identified foundations provide a practical framework for strengthening the human dimensions of transformational change. Integrating these foundations into the design of relevant programs and projects can help operationalize GEF policy and programming priorities across the family of funds.

To translate these insights into practice, the GEF Partnership could take the following actions to integrate and operationalize the institutional and psychological foundations of resilient and transformative communities:

1. **Consider social resilience as a prerequisite co-benefit and as a key element of project design and theory of change** processes to identify enablers and barriers to collective action – such as social cohesion, women’s empowerment, anchor institutions, resilient livelihoods, and well-being – and to guide adaptive management throughout implementation.
2. **Strengthen partnerships with local anchor institutions**, including civil society organizations, Indigenous Peoples, cooperatives, community associations, schools, health centres, and faith-based organizations, to deliver projects that build trust, continuity, and local ownership. Lessons from the SGP can inform efforts to scale such partnerships within Integrated Programs and other GEF investments, as well as to support the GEF-9 strategic vision to empower civil society, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities.
3. **Advance women’s empowerment and build capacity for local leadership** by building on GEF-9 plans to expand resources for gender-responsive actions, by supporting actions that reduce care burdens, by investing in leadership and business development training for women and youth, and by enhancing the implementation of the GEF gender policies. The Fonseca Leadership Program supports local capacity-building and can provide important lessons for expanding and mainstreaming leadership training across GEF operations.
4. **Integrate community well-being into adaptation and resilience investments**, especially in LDCs, SIDS, and fragile and conflict-affected contexts, by including activities that provide care, improve well-being, and strengthen social cohesion in targeted communities. This could be achieved by using scalable community-based

approaches, such as task-sharing¹²⁵ and peer support models,¹²⁶ to train communities and enable them to better adapt to climate shocks. These approaches have proven effective in restoring confidence, agency, and collective engagement. The GEF could also do this by leveraging its partnerships with multilateral development banks, GEF agencies, and governments to deliver complementary services that reinforce social resilience, including social protection; access to education, health, and mental health services; and access to technological solutions.

5. **Enhance monitoring, learning, and communication on social resilience** by capturing how cohesion, agency, and well-being are being promoted in GEF investments and documenting and strategically communicating successful community transformations and sharing lessons across countries and agencies to inspire hope and replication.

The GEF's success in achieving GEBs from investments involving communities ultimately depends on whether communities can sustain collective action once projects close. Having robust theories of change¹²⁷ and monitoring evaluations and learning systems¹²⁸ is also an important factor. Embedding the institutional and psychological foundations of social resilience into programming, policy, and learning systems can help promote self-sustaining, locally led transformations. Recognizing social resilience as both an enabler and a co-benefit will ensure that GEF investments deliver not only GEBs and adaptation benefits but also lasting improvements in equity, inclusion, and community well-being, strengthening the social fabric that underpins a healthy planet.

¹²⁵ Task-sharing is the delivery of basic psychological support by trained non-specialist community members, enabling scalable, low-cost interventions that reduce distress and strengthen well-being where specialist services are limited.

¹²⁶ Peer-support models are approaches that rely on community members supporting one another through shared experience, fostering trust, social cohesion, and emotional well-being in ways that reinforce participation and collective action.

¹²⁷ Stafford Smith, 2020.

¹²⁸ Metternicht and Stafford Smith, 2022; Bierbaum and Batra, 2025.

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