



GEF/STAP/C.70/Inf.06
November 18, 2025

70th GEF Council Meeting
December 15-19, 2026
Virtual

STAP BRIEF ON STRENGTHENING GEF SUPPORT FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

A STAP BRIEF

Strengthening GEF support for Indigenous Peoples: Issues of governance, project design, financial access, and livelihood benefits



Introduction

The CEO of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) has emphasized the necessity of strengthening support for Indigenous Peoples to improve the overall performance, equity, and efficiency of GEF-funded projects. This priority has been echoed in subsequent GEF Council and GEF Assembly meetings.

This *Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP)* brief synthesizes the findings of STAP's Information Note [Strengthening GEF support for Indigenous Peoples: Issues of governance, project design, financial access, and livelihood benefits](#) and offers actionable advice to the GEF to help strengthen its support for Indigenous Peoples.

Steps for moving forward

1. Bridge scientific and technical knowledge systems

Indigenous scientific and technical knowledge systems incorporate distinctive, time-tested, and method-driven understanding and ways of knowing that can enhance and complement Western science. Bridging Western and Indigenous scientific knowledge can strengthen GEF projects and programs, enhance efforts to protect biodiversity and natural resources, and provide new perspectives to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change. For instance, Indigenous knowledge can inform land management practices and scientific research, for example, using biocultural mapping to create land suitability maps.

Recommended action:

The GEF may want to consider providing formal guidance on the role of Indigenous knowledge in GEF programs and projects, emphasizing the value of Indigenous scientific and technical knowledge systems throughout the project cycle, including in the design and implementation phases, as well as in monitoring, evaluation, and learning. This would help ensure that projects are designed, implemented, and reported in a way that reinforces Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty and enhances their well-being. The GEF may also want to consider, in the context of the GEF Ninth Replenishment Period (GEF-9) and the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund (GBFF), adopting more integrative, culturally relevant indicators for use in projects involving Indigenous Peoples (e.g., integrating measures of conservation and governance effectiveness).

2. Reinforce Indigenous rights and control of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) processes and protocols

Indigenous Peoples must be involved, on their own terms, in initiatives that affect them. Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) is fundamental to respecting the right of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination by ensuring they have the power to freely give or withhold consent over actions affecting their lands, territories, and rights. Box 1 describes how FPIC processes are shaped by local Indigenous cultural values, governance systems, and languages. This is particularly powerful when FPIC is integrated and aligned with a community's Life Plan: its collective, intergenerational vision for self-determined management of community assets and social development.

Recommended action:

Currently, each GEF agency has its own social safeguard policies, including for FPIC, which creates complexity and unintended barriers to the full participation and project ownership of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous Peoples would benefit from harmonized FPIC standards and safeguard processes among GEF agencies, emphasizing that alignment of FPIC with local Indigenous values is essential. The benefits of harmonization have been effectively demonstrated in the GEF Inclusive Conservation Initiative 1 (ICI-1).

Box 1: Indigenous-led Free, Prior, and Informed Consent in practice: Linking FPIC to Life Plans

Free, Prior, and Informed Consent processes not only need to be based on an understanding of Indigenous rights, they need to be shaped by the relevant local Indigenous cultural values and languages and align with the ways the local Indigenous Peoples organize and govern themselves. An excellent example comes from the Amazon region. In 2015, the Indigenous communities of the Tumucumaque region in Brazil (the Wayana, Aparai, Tiriyó, and Katxuyana Peoples) came together to map out the future of their combined territories, which span 43,000 km². A participatory process, led by the Association of Waiana and Aparai Indigenous Peoples and the Association of Tiriyó, Katxuyana and Txikiyana Indigenous Peoples, with support from Iepé (a long-term NGO partner selected by the Indigenous groups) and FUNAI (Brazil's National Indigenous Peoples Foundation), resulted in the development of the Life Plan. (A Life Plan provides a collective, intergenerational vision and roadmap for how an Indigenous community or collection of communities manages their land, culture, and resources.)

Subsequently, building on the Life Plan, the communities themselves developed an FPIC protocol. The protocol is available in both Aparai and English as an audiovisual animation and is widely accessible to community members. Of the many actions identified in the Life Plan, the highest priority was to establish a dedicated, Indigenous-led fund to support the implementation of the communities' own development and conservation objectives. This resulted in the creation and implementation of the Pakará Fund and in securing long-term funding (15 years) from [Nia Tero](#), the [Legacy Landscapes Fund](#), and KfW (the German Development Bank) for implementation of the Life Plan.

3. Recognize and strengthen Indigenous Peoples' role in GEF governance

Indigenous Peoples play an essential role in delivering global environmental benefits and achieving the targets of the multilateral environmental agreements supported by the GEF. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the Convention on Biological Diversity (notably articles 8(j), 10(c), and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework), and the Paris Agreement on climate change all call for full and effective Indigenous participation in environmental governance, and the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has recently urged the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in the governance of the international financial architecture.

Recommended action:

To further strengthen the role of the Indigenous Peoples Advisory Group (IPAG) within the GEF, reinforce the GEF's alignment with global frameworks, and enhance GEF contributions to economic stability, justice, security, and peace, the GEF may want to consider institutionalizing Indigenous representation within the GEF's decision-making bodies.

Box 2: Exemplary GEF projects in the Philippines

Two GEF projects in the Philippines, "Expanding and Diversifying the National System of Terrestrial Protected Areas" (GEF ID 3606) and "Strengthening National Systems to Improve Governance and Management of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Conserved Areas and Territories" (GEF ID 5826), offer an insightful illustration of the power of Indigenous leadership in project design, implementation, and governance. Initially, the first project aimed to create new national protected areas; however, most of the proposed areas were on Indigenous territories, and without meaningful consultation, Indigenous Peoples refused to provide Free, Prior, and Informed Consent, so the project stalled. At the mid-term evaluation, there was a significant course correction, resulting in a strategic shift in the project leadership and design. Rather than focusing on designating new national protected areas, the project shifted to empowering and directly supporting Indigenous communities to create and manage Indigenous and Community Conservation Areas (ICCAs). This led to the second GEF project, which further focused on strengthening Indigenous land tenure and applying Indigenous scientific and technical knowledge to the territorial management of ICCAs. Through direct engagement with Indigenous communities, support of Indigenous governance, and development of a platform to showcase Indigenous knowledge, the project successfully overcame initial setbacks and met the objectives of strengthening conservation and protection and securing carbon stocks.



Photo: UNDP Philippines

4. Co-design projects and programs with Indigenous Peoples

A growing body of evidence and lessons learned is coming from ICI-1 and ICI-2 (see Box 3), as well as from the Small Grants Program and other GEF projects, on achieving effective project co-design with Indigenous Peoples. Scaling up these approaches will significantly advance Indigenous Peoples' guardianship and secure global environmental benefits.

Recommended action:

The GEF may want to establish an interactive working group, with diverse representation of Indigenous Peoples, to develop principles and provide practical guidance for the co-design of objectives, metrics, and implementation measures for projects involving Indigenous Peoples. Such a working group might also offer guidance on bridging Indigenous and Western scientific knowledge in GEF projects.

5. Expand fit-for-purpose finance to enable Indigenous Peoples to move from vision to implementation

Direct, long-term funding for Indigenous Peoples is essential to realizing the aims of the Paris Agreement and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, as well as to delivering on the promises of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Recommended action:

To strengthen its support for Indigenous Peoples, at least three existing approaches are available to the GEF to scale up finance through GEF-9 and the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund. Under the first option, support from multiple grants (e.g., multiple small grants) could be systematically clustered, either thematically or within a landscape or seascape, to build capacity among Indigenous communities for financial management and to provide long-term support (see Box 4). A second option is to strategically integrate multiple GEF funding modalities, for example by integrating multiple medium-sized, full-sized, and/or small grants. A third option is to create multi-donor-Indigenous partnerships to advance Indigenous-led funds and other durable support mechanisms (e.g., Project Finance for Permanence, Legacy Landscapes Fund; see Box 5).

Photo: UNDP Climate

Box 3: Inclusive Conservation Initiative 1 and 2

During GEF-7, the GEF launched the Inclusive Conservation Initiative 1 (ICI-1), co-managed by two GEF agencies: Conservation International and the International Union for Conservation of Nature. ICI-1 works in partnership with Indigenous Peoples and local communities to enhance their stewardship of land, water, and natural resources to deliver global environmental benefits. ICI-1 centres Indigenous values throughout the implementation of 10 Indigenous-led subprojects in 12 countries. The [ICI Phase 2 Report](#) provides more details on the project's implementation and impacts from June 2023 to June 2024.

During GEF-8, the GEF launched ICI-2, focused particularly on Indigenous-led funds, which is currently in the project design phase. ICI-1 and ICI-2 are powerful, but they are still pilot efforts and are modest in size relative to the broader GEF funding landscape. The Global Biodiversity Framework Fund has an "aspirational target" that 20% of the fund's programming at the portfolio level will go to Indigenous Peoples and local communities by 2030. Currently, the GEF Secretariat is developing guidelines to define what counts as support for Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

The [draft GEF-9 programming direction](#) notes an intention to expand the ICI as a direct access mechanism for organizations representing Indigenous Peoples and to support the establishment of long-term financial mechanisms for managing Indigenous lands and territories.



Box 4: Building capacity and scaling up finance

The Mayan Alliance for Bees of the Yucatán Peninsula

For over 30 years, the Small Grants Program (SGP) Mexico has supported Indigenous beekeeping projects, designed by local Indigenous communities. Initially, finance entailed multiple very small grants to different Indigenous beekeeping associations. In 2002, the SGP supported the creation of the Fondo Peninsular, providing working capital for beekeepers to avoid predatory lenders and improve harvests and exports to Europe.

After a decade of making very small grants to individual beekeepers, the SGP supported the establishment of the Mayan Alliance for Bees of the Yucatán Peninsula (Kabnáalo'on), to facilitate the participation of beekeepers, both men and women, in the design of local and national policies. The SGP first supported a regional workshop at which the government and beekeepers agreed on the main elements of the strategy. Subsequently, members of Kabnáalo'on travelled to the capital to present the strategy to the new officials of the federal government. An agreement between the beekeepers and the federal government was formalized to address key threats to bees, including deforestation, extensive use of chemicals that are banned in other countries, market access, and capacity-building needs.

Subsequently, SGP Mexico made a strategic investment of approximately US\$150,000 in the beekeepers' alliance, which resulted in the alliance formally changing national legal policy related to beekeeping to better align policies with Indigenous values. SGP Mexico thus employed an intentional scaling strategy, increasing capacity and finance over time and geographically, progressing from small amounts of funding to larger pools, strategically integrating and reinforcing synergies among what were initially different initiatives scattered among different parts of the country. Such thematic or landscape-level clustering approaches potentially could be applied across the SGP's 127 implementing countries, wherever strategically coalescing a critical mass of small grants can create a de-risking effect.

Lessons from the past, a roadmap for the future

This brief has been developed to translate the findings from the [STAP Information Note Strengthening GEF support for Indigenous Peoples: Issues of governance, project design, financial access, and livelihood benefits](#) into digestible advice the GEF on robust actions to strengthen support for Indigenous Peoples across GEF programs and projects.

The Mayan Alliance for Bees of the Yucatán Peninsula shows the positive impact the Small Grants Program achieved through strategic scaling over time to strengthen national policies, increase the alignment of these policies with Indigenous values, and improve Indigenous livelihoods. The example of the ICI demonstrates how Indigenous-led project design, implementation, and governance, as well as direct access to finance, strengthen the participation of Indigenous Peoples in the GEF and provide enduring global environmental benefits. The example of the Tumucumaque Indigenous Life Plan and FPIC highlights the power of Indigenous-led FPIC processes, showcasing that when Indigenous communities develop a participatory vision for the management of their land and assets for the future, and have a clear community-led FPIC process, it enhances their ability to mobilize long-term funding and provides a model for other communities and projects. The Project Finance for Permanence and the Legacy Landscapes Fund provide models for long-term, collaborative funding and its potential to provide support for both enduring Indigenous territorial management and global environmental benefits. Indicated in each of the suggested steps for the GEF moving forward are specific actions for implementation to strengthen GEF support for Indigenous Peoples.



Box 5: Project Finance for Permanence

Project Finance for Permanence (PFP) is an innovative sustainable finance mechanism, managed by the [Enduring Earth](#) partnership, that brings the stewards of a place together with donors to co-create a comprehensive agreement, securing long-term funding (10–25 years) to achieve measurable goals for environmental and social benefits. As of 2025, PFPs have been implemented in 13 countries, and the GEF has invested in three: in Gabon, Namibia, and the Eastern Tropical Pacific (Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Panama). Several of the PFPs provide support to Indigenous Peoples for stewardship of their territories, effectively maintaining global environmental benefits.

Expanding fit-for-purpose financing mechanisms, such as PFPs, is crucial to translating Indigenous visions into long-term, sustainable action. These investments by the GEF and others are not only ethical imperatives, they are strategic necessities. If the GEF is to fulfill its mission of delivering enduring global environmental benefits, it must center Indigenous communities as partners, leaders, and agents of change.

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