

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

A STAP INFORMATION NOTE

MAY 2025



STAP

SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL
ADVISORY PANEL

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



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SUGGESTED CITATION:

Andelman and Bierbaum. 2025. *Strengthening GEF Support for Indigenous Peoples: Issues of Governance, Project Design, Financial Access, and Livelihood Benefits. A STAP Information Note.* Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel to the Global Environment Facility. Washington, DC.

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ABOUT STAP:

The Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) provides independent scientific and technical advice to the GEF on its strategies, programs, and projects. <https://stapgef.org>

ABOUT GEF:

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) is a multilateral family of funds dedicated to confronting biodiversity loss, climate change, and pollution and supporting land and ocean health. Its financing enables developing countries to address complex challenges and work towards international environmental goals. The partnership includes 186 member governments as well as civil society, Indigenous Peoples, women, and youth, with a focus on integration and inclusivity. Over the past three decades, the GEF has provided more than \$26 billion in financing and mobilized \$149 billion for country-driven priority projects. <https://www.thegef.org>

COPY EDITOR:

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DESIGN AND LAYOUT:

Four Hundred Communications

COVER PHOTO:

Photo: UNDP Peru

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INTRODUCTION

The Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) to the Global Environment Facility (GEF) provides independent, objective scientific and technical advice to the GEF on policies, strategies, programs, and projects. At the GEF Assembly in Vancouver, Canada (22-26 August 2023), the GEF CEO requested that the STAP synthesize existing scientific and technical knowledge on strengthening GEF support for Indigenous Peoples. To respond to this request, the current information note synthesizes evidence from Indigenous and Western scientific

and technical literature, a summary of 20 completed GEF projects that impact or benefit Indigenous Peoples,¹ and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)'s ongoing work programme.² As an input to this process, the STAP also convened two virtual group consultations with members of the GEF Indigenous Peoples Advisory Group (IPAG) and the Global Steering Committee of the GEF Inclusive Conservation Initiative (Box 1).

Box 1: STAP's Indigenous Peoples Consultations

The STAP convened two virtual group consultations with Indigenous Peoples on the 28th and 29th of April 2025 to gather experience and insights on the principles and pathways of GEF support and consider any potential implications for GEF strategy and programming. The consultation took place in two time zones, with interpretation services provided in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese to enable participation across regions and languages. The two group consultations were supplemented with additional one-on-one consultations for those unable to attend the meetings. In total, 22 experts participated in the consultations.

The outputs from these consultations, together with an analysis of lessons learned from GEF and non-GEF programs and projects, have provided evidence that current GEF approaches need to be enhanced. These consultations have strengthened the STAP's understanding of current challenges for increasing support for Indigenous communities and provided insights on improving operational practices for the GEF.

The main findings are:

- There is high appreciation for the GEF's efforts to support Indigenous communities. Numerous examples have shown how communities have benefited through GEF financing
- The ability of Indigenous scientific and technical knowledge to strengthen project and program design, governance, and implementation.
- The importance of institutionalizing Indigenous representation within the GEF's governance and decision-making bodies.
- The need to improve the cultural relevance of monitoring, evaluation, and learning indicators, supported by mechanisms to enhance project and program design.
- The importance of aligning safeguards to the values of local Indigenous communities to be more culturally relevant and impactful.
- The importance of strengthening innovative financing; balancing risk with innovation to overcome project delays caused by procedural hurdles to securing finance.
- The necessity for increased platforms of communication among Indigenous communities to enable knowledge sharing and increase the use of Indigenous-centered approaches.³

1 Annex 1.

2 IPBES's ongoing work seeks to incorporate the special needs of Indigenous and local knowledge holders through a participatory mechanism and to consider recommendations and findings set out in document IPBES/7/INF/8 and other future IPBES processes. More details at: <https://www.ipbes.net/indigenous-local-knowledge/our-work> and <https://www.ipbes.net/document-library-catalogue/ipbes7inf8>.

3 Indigenous-centered approaches prioritize the knowledge, cultural values, and perspectives of Indigenous Peoples.



The recommendations provided in this information note are not comprehensive. Rather, they serve as an initial step in informing the programming directions for GEF-9 and the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund (GBFF). This area is evolving rapidly. The STAP will continue to receive additional feedback from Indigenous Peoples, the GEF Council, the GEF Secretariat, IPAG, and other stakeholders. A full report on the consultations will be shared with the participants for comment and posted on the STAP’s website when completed. Each section of the note below addresses three key questions:

- 1 What** is STAP’s recommendation, as summarized in the numbered, bold headings?
- 2 Why** is the recommendation important for the GEF and for Indigenous Peoples?
- 3 How** might the recommendation be implemented? This section includes case study examples, drawn from within and beyond the GEF partnership.

SUMMARY OF STAP’S RECOMMENDATIONS

1	2	3	4	5
Bridge scientific and technical knowledge systems.	Reinforce Indigenous rights and control of Free, Prior and Informed Consent processes and protocols.	Recognize and strengthen Indigenous Peoples’ role in GEF governance.	Co-design projects and programs with Indigenous Peoples	Expand fit-for-purpose finance to enable Indigenous Peoples to move from vision to implementation.



1. BRIDGE SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

Why is this important: Indigenous scientific and technical knowledge is a distinctive, time-tested, method-driven knowledge system that can enhance and complement Western science.⁴ A growing number of researchers and scientists are calling for the integration of Indigenous scientific and technical knowledge alongside Western scientific knowledge to improve efforts to protect biodiversity and natural resources and to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change.⁵

Indigenous scientific and technical knowledge can also inform and complement Western land management practices and scientific research.⁶ Science-policy platforms and agreements—such as IPBES and the Convention on Biological Diversity

(CBD)—recognize the value of Indigenous scientific and technical knowledge and explicitly promote the inclusion of these diverse systems to inform global biodiversity assessments and policy decisions.⁷

How: Here we provide several examples of how Indigenous and Western scientific and technical knowledge can be integrated and improve the design, implementation of and **monitoring**, and learning from GEF programs and projects. We begin with examples of tools that help integrate insights from Indigenous scientific and technical knowledge in the context of GEF programming and conclude with a discussion of indicators that integrate Indigenous and Western scientific and technical knowledge and approaches.

4 Conversi (2021).

5 Ibid; Jesson et al. (2021); Hill et al. (2020).

6 Gordon et al. (2022).

7 Tengo et al. (2016).





There are numerous examples where the integration of Indigenous and Western scientific and technical knowledge provide insights that would likely not result from either sphere of knowledge alone. For example, long-term observations by Indigenous Peoples constitute a system of monitoring of species and ecosystems, which provides a baseline against which contemporary ecological change can be gauged.⁸ Further, these observations can be used to identify policy and management objectives and priorities for the future, e.g., the identification of biocultural indicator species.⁹ This dimension of resource management is typically not explicitly considered in Western management. Such long-term observation systems can provide an important mechanism to resist the shifting baseline syndrome in conservation, where perspectives on what abundance, community composition, or other measures of “normal” are lost over time, e.g., over generations, as environmental degradation continues, resulting in lowered expectations for conservation outcomes.¹⁰ Further examples and discussion are provided by Jesson and colleagues¹¹ and in the State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples.¹²

Integrating Indigenous and Western science will also require taking into account specific cultural and historical considerations. Indigenous scientific and technical knowledge systems are inseparable from the value systems that underpin them. Indigenous knowledge is often largely transmitted through oral histories that convey environmental observations, understandings, and practices across generations.¹³

As many Western natural and physical scientists are unfamiliar with working with oral data, collaboration with social scientists and Indigenous Peoples is often necessary to document these histories, enabling their effective use in land management and scientific research.¹⁴ Moreover, because of a history of extractive research practices that overlooked Indigenous data sovereignty and intellectual property rights, some Indigenous communities remain distrustful of and reluctant to engage with Western scientists.¹⁵

Biocultural community protocols and **biocultural mapping** are examples of tools that help integrate insights from Indigenous scientific and technical knowledge with Western science. Biocultural community protocols document customary values, rights, and rules regarding a community’s biocultural heritage and serve as a foundation for regulating access to their knowledge and resources. This helps ensure that their rights are recognized and strengthens their negotiation capacity.¹⁶ Biocultural community protocols are recognized under the Nagoya Protocol¹⁷ as well as by the IPBES.¹⁸

Biocultural mapping involves using geographic information system tools to create land suitability maps that show the interplay between the distribution of natural resources, biological and cultural uses in a specific geographic area to provide an understanding of the interactions between human societies, cultures, and the natural environment.

8 Berkes et al. (2007); Service et al. (2014); Thompson et al. (2019).

9 Lyver et al. (2016); Sterling et al. (2017); DeRoy et al. (2019).

10 Jardine (2019).

11 Jesson et al. (2021).

12 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2025).

13 Huntington (2000).

14 Cruikshank (2012).

15 Huntington (2000).

16 See: <https://biocultural.iied.org/community-biocultural-protocols>

17 See Article 12 of the Protocol: <https://www.cbd.int/abs/doc/protocol/nagoya-protocol-en.pdf>

18 See: <https://www.ipbes.net/policy-support/tools-instruments/biocultural-community-protocols-toolkit-community-facilitators>



It helps document and preserve local knowledge about the environment, natural resources, and land management practices, and can be used to inform decisions about ecological restoration. It has emerged as a valuable tool for grounding conservation in Indigenous perspectives and for integrating Indigenous and Western scientific and technical knowledge. In the Kenya GEF Inclusive Conservation Initiative Phase 1 (ICI-1)¹⁹ sub-project, led by the Indigenous Movement for Peace Advancement and Conflict Transformation (IMPACT),²⁰ communities reconstructed their landscapes through historical memory and contemporary knowledge.

Through this process, youth, elders, and women collaborated to draw maps, comparing past and present patterns of resource access. Maps drawn by women proved especially integrative, documenting medicinal plants, water sources, and cultural sites, while men's maps focused narrowly on areas important for livestock. This revealed both ecological degradation and gender-based perspectives on resource access. These community-driven maps now guide restoration plans and advocacy, ensuring decisions reflect local priorities.

19 ICI: The Inclusive Conservation Initiative works in partnership with Indigenous Peoples and local communities to steward their land, waters, and natural resources to deliver global environmental benefits, recognizing the historical roles they have played in nature conservation. ICI has two phases, phase 1 (ICI-1) and phase 2 (ICI-2). More information about ICI-1 at: <https://inclusiveconservationinitiative.org>

20 IMPACT: Indigenous Movement for Peace Advancement and Conflict Transformation: <https://impactkenya.org>





Adopting culturally relevant indicators can also help bridge Indigenous and Western scientific and technical knowledge. With the recent adoption by the CBD of the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) monitoring framework, there is an opportunity for GEF-9 to consider adopting indicators that may be more integrative and relevant to Indigenous contexts. For example, the Global Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA) Support Initiative, implemented through the [GEF Small Grants Programme](#) (SGP) in 50 countries, has, over the past decade, piloted a Security and Resilience Index. The Index provides a proxy for measuring both the governance condition and the effectiveness of ICCAs. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Facilitative Working Group of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP) includes indicators for measuring the

effectiveness of policies and progress towards adaptation and resilience goals in a specific geographic and cultural context. The CBD is developing indicators of Indigenous ecological knowledge and impact assessment procedures. Together, these efforts offer examples that could be considered in GEF-9.

The new GEF Strategy for Knowledge Management and Learning (KM&L)—recently developed to “guide and promote a more systematic approach to how the GEF harnesses its knowledge resources, establishes an appropriate system to manage the resources, and facilitates learning across the partnership,”²¹—provides an opportunity and a platform for applying the tools described above.

21 GEF (2024).



Photo: UNDP/Barbados/Zaimis Olmos



2. REINFORCE INDIGENOUS RIGHTS AND CONTROL OF FREE PRIOR AND INFORMED CONSENT (FPIC) PROCESSES AND PROTOCOLS

Why this is important: Indigenous Peoples have the right to self-determination and full participation in decisions that affect them. FPIC safeguards these self-determination rights, specifically giving Indigenous Peoples the right to give or withhold their consent for actions that would affect their lands, territories, or rights. The GEF environmental and social safeguard policies are strong, and FPIC is one of the core safeguards. However, individual agencies use their own processes to implement FPIC, and some gaps remain.²² During the ICI-1 Initiative, to maximize consistency in the implementation of FPIC processes, the lead agencies, Conservation International (CI) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), went through a process of harmonization to promote inter-agency consistency in FPIC processes. Undertaking such a harmonization process among all GEF agencies would help advance policy coherence within the GEF partnership. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) protects Indigenous communities' rights to FPIC. The GEF agency's role is to interpret FPIC guidelines or safeguards by the rules that apply in the Indigenous community where the project is developed and implemented.

How: FPIC processes need to be based on an understanding, not only of Indigenous rights, but also of the way the Indigenous Peoples are involved with, or are affected by, the project or program. FPIC processes also need to be shaped by the ways Indigenous Peoples live their lives, including by their cultural values and languages, and they need to align with the ways the relevant Indigenous Peoples organize and govern themselves. This requires integrating and aligning FPIC with the communities' life plans,²³ territorial and environmental management plans, or strategies. Where multiple Indigenous groups are engaged in a project, this may necessitate understanding multiple ways of living, cultural values, and organizational and governance approaches. The GEF agency and

other project partners need to ensure Indigenous Peoples' territories, boundaries, and assets are delineated and respected. GEF project ID 5826 in the Philippines provides an example where the GEF agency, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), made a mid-term course correction to ensure FPIC processes aligned with Indigenous values.²⁴

An excellent example of an Indigenous-designed FPIC protocol, illustrating the recommended approach, is provided by the Tumucumaque Indigenous Consultation Protocol,²⁵ developed through a collective process. Before developing the FPIC process, in 2015, the Indigenous communities of the Tumucumaque region, the Wayana, Aparai, Tiriyo, 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 Apalai Indigenous Peoples (APIWA) and the Association of Tiriyo, Katxuyana and Txikiyana Indigenous Peoples (APITIKATXI), with support from Iepé (a long-term NGO partner selected by the Indigenous groups) and FUNAI (Brazil's federal Indigenous agency), resulted in the development of their Life Plan. Iepé and **Digital Democracy**, with funding from **Nia Tero**, provided tools for visually documenting and mapping the Life Plan. Importantly, the FPIC protocol builds on and supports the Life Plan. The protocol is available in both Apalai and English as an audiovisual animation. As a result of this process, 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. Further, it has resulted in the creation and implementation of the **Pakará Fund** and also in securing long-term funding (15 years) from Nia Tero, **Legacy Landscapes Fund**, and the German KfW Development Bank, for implementation of the Life Plan in the Greater Tumucumaque landscape.

²² <https://www.gefio.org/sites/default/files/documents/evaluations/indigenous-peoples-2017.pdf>

²³ A Life Plan provides a collective, intergenerational vision for how an Indigenous community or collection of communities manage their land, culture and resources. See GIZ. Territorial and environmental management plans in Brazil's Indigenous Territories. Available at: https://cooperacaobrasil-alemanha.com/Indigenas/PGTAS_INDIGENOUS_PEOPLES_ENG.pdf

²⁴ Annex 1.

²⁵ The protocol is available in both Apalai and English as an audiovisual animation here: https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=7rOH_YdmGW0



Photo: UNDP-SCF Mexico

3. RECOGNIZE AND STRENGTHEN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' ROLE IN GEF GOVERNANCE

Why this is important: Indigenous Peoples manage over 25% of the Earth's land surface.²⁶ These areas overlap with 40% of terrestrial protected areas and high-integrity ecosystems.²⁷ These facts highlight the essential role of Indigenous Peoples in delivering global environmental benefits and achieving the goals of the multilateral environmental agreements supported by the GEF. The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) has called for the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in the governance of the international financial architecture,²⁸ including the establishment of special mechanisms for ongoing dialogue with Indigenous Peoples.

By strengthening Indigenous Peoples' role in the GEF's governance, the GEF will support the full implementation of Indigenous Peoples' rights in the international financial architecture; it will strengthen its contributions, not only to its environmental goals, but also to macroeconomic stability, justice, security, and peace.²⁹

How: The GEF IPAG currently plays a voluntary, advisory role within GEF structures. The responsibilities of IPAG members, ranging from advising on project design to influencing policy on large-scale territories, can be comparable to those of formally commissioned experts or decision-makers. Given this, and in addition to the most recent guidance from the UNPFII, participants in the STAP consultations with Indigenous Peoples (Box 1) emphasized that there is a strong case for institutionalizing Indigenous representation within the GEF's decision-making bodies. This would reinforce the GEF's alignment with global frameworks such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the CBD (notably Articles 8(j) and 10(c)), the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), and the Paris Agreement, all of which call for full and effective Indigenous participation in environmental governance.

²⁶ Garnett et al. (2018).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ E/C.19/2025/3 International financial architecture and the rights of Indigenous Peoples <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4077831?ln=en&v=pdf>

²⁹ Ibid.



4. CO-DESIGN PROJECTS AND PROGRAMS WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Why this is important: The GEF Integrated Programs seek to achieve transformational change by incorporating systemic approaches that cross sectors and are integrated with the whole of society. Through its KM&L Strategy, the GEF further acknowledges that accelerating a paradigm shift also requires new strategies for knowledge production, co-production, and management. There is growing evidence and lessons learned coming from the GEF partnership, including from GEF Integrated Programs, the SGP, and from individual projects that have applied successful approaches that can be scaled to advance Indigenous Peoples' guardianship to secure global environmental benefits.

How: As described throughout this paper, there are several models for co-design that the GEF could consider. For example, a working group, including Indigenous Peoples' representatives, could be created to develop principles for the co-design of relevant project goals, metrics, and implementation measures. This might be funded through a medium-sized grant and/or in concert with philanthropic funding and multiple NGOs. Careful consideration must be given to the need for FPIC related to the intellectual property³⁰ of Indigenous Peoples.³¹

Each Indigenous culture has particular protocols describing how and who can access its scientific and technical knowledge. Thus, co-design requires listening to guidance from Indigenous Peoples.

30 "Intellectual property refers to creations of the mind, such as inventions; literary and artistic works; designs; and symbols, names and images used in commerce". WIPO: <https://www.wipo.int/en/web/about-ip>

31 UNDRIP (2007), Article 31.





Photo: UNDP/Thailand

5. EXPAND FIT FOR PURPOSE FINANCE TO ENABLE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES TO MOVE FROM VISION TO IMPLEMENTATION

Why this is important: Direct, long-term funding to Indigenous Peoples is essential for realizing the aims of the Paris Agreement and the KMGBF and delivering on the promises of the Sustainable Development Goals.³² Finance for Indigenous Peoples remains a critical need in the context of the GEF's efforts to strengthen and scale support for Indigenous Peoples. The SGP is a long-established mechanism for supporting Indigenous Peoples. Between 1991 and 2014, the GEF actively involved Indigenous Peoples in over 220 medium- and full-size projects and more than 2,300 projects under the GEF SGP³³.

During GEF-7, the GEF launched the ICI-1.³⁴ Co-managed by two GEF agencies, CI and IUCN, 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 centers Indigenous values throughout the implementation of ten Indigenous-led sub-projects in twelve countries. The Phase 2 Impact Report for ICI-1³⁵ provides more details on implementation and impacts through 2024. The draft GEF-9 programming directions note an intention to expand the ICI as a direct access mechanism for Indigenous Peoples organizations and to support the establishment of long-term financial mechanisms for managing Indigenous lands and territories.³⁶

³² UN-DESA (2025).

³³ <https://www.thegef.org/what-we-do/topics/indigenous-peoples>

³⁴ <https://inclusiveconservationinitiative.org>

³⁵ <https://inclusiveconservationinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/ICI-Phase-Two-Report-2024.pdf>

³⁶ GEF 2025.



In GEF-8, the GEF also launched the Fonseca Leadership Program (FLP), as well as ICI-2. The FLP targets youth, including Indigenous youth and supports formal graduate academic training and conservation field work. ICI-2 focuses particularly on Indigenous-led funds and is currently in the project design phase. Initiatives such as the FLP and the ICI Phases 1 and 2 are powerful, but the amount of funding for the FLP remains small. ICI-1 and ICI-2 are still pilot efforts and are modest in size relative to the broader GEF funding landscape. To truly scale up impact, significantly more resources are needed. In addition, the GBFF has an “aspirational target” that 20% of GBFF programming at the portfolio level will go to Indigenous Peoples and local communities by 2030. See Programming Directions for the GBFF.³⁷

How: There are multiple potential opportunities and modalities for scaling up finance for Indigenous Peoples. Below, we use case studies to elucidate three relevant approaches that provide opportunities for strengthening GEF support for Indigenous Peoples through GEF-9 programming and through the GBFF.

5.1. STRATEGIC INTEGRATION OF MULTIPLE GRANTS WITHIN A SINGLE GEF FUNDING MODALITY

One potentially powerful approach to scale the capacity of Indigenous Peoples to access and manage GEF finance involves systematically clustering support, either thematically or within a landscape. For example, the SGP Mexico was one of the first 35 SGP pilot countries in 1994. Initially, the focus was on the Quintana Roo and Yucatán States in the Yucatán Peninsula. Several thematic portfolios emerged, including one around beekeeping in Indigenous territories. Initially, finance entailed multiple very small grants to different Indigenous beekeeping associations. Then, 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 beekeeping associations, the SGP supported the establishment of a second-level organization representing small honey producers called the “Mayan Alliance for Bees of the Yucatan Peninsula / Kabnáalo'on”, to facilitate the participation of beekeepers, both men and women, in the design of local and national policies. The SGP supported the dialogue, initially through a regional workshop where governments and beekeepers agreed on the main elements of the strategy. Finally, 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.

37 https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/documents/2023-06/EN_GEF_C.64_06_%20GBFF%20Fund%20Programming%20Directions__0.pdf



Photo: UNDP SGP Mexico

Subsequently, the SGP Mexico made a strategic investment of approximately 150,000 USD in the beekeepers' alliance, which has already resulted in the alliance formally changing national legal policy related to beekeeping to better align policies with Indigenous values.

The 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. 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. Importantly, laddering can work in several ways, not only by linking multiple very small projects.

5.2. INTEGRATION AND COORDINATION OF MULTIPLE GEF FUNDING MODALITIES

Scaling capacity and financial access for Indigenous Peoples can also be achieved through the integration of SGP projects with medium- or large-size GEF projects within a country. In the Philippines, from 2012 to 2015, the GEF, with the UNDP as the GEF Agency, supported a pioneering conservation initiative to reconcile state-led protected area expansion with the rights and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples (the Strengthening National Systems to Improve Governance and Management of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Conserved Areas [ICCAs] and Territories project). However, the proposed new reserves overlapped almost entirely with Indigenous territories, and the communities had not been consulted. The project partners then agreed to a course correction, and they shifted focus to documenting and supporting ICCAs that Indigenous groups had long managed according to their own traditions and customary laws.



Building on that success, a second phase of Indigenous-led ICCA work was funded as a GEF medium-sized project from 2015 to 2019. This project (GEF ID 5826) outperformed expectations, mapping and securing 158,000 hectares of ICCAs of high priority for both biodiversity and carbon stocks, well above its 100,000-hectare target.

In parallel with the medium-sized project, the SGP worked with ICCA federations regionally to scale up impacts. This complementarity—between small grants, the medium-sized project, and then the second project—highlights the sequential value addition and showcased the GEF’s global commitment to equitable, Indigenous-led approaches.

5.3. CREATING MULTI-DONOR AND INDIGENOUS PARTNERSHIPS TO SCALE FINANCE THROUGH INDIGENOUS-LED FUNDS

To scale direct access finance for Indigenous Peoples, there is a rapidly growing interest in multi-donor/Indigenous partnerships to advance Indigenous-led funds and other durable support mechanisms.³⁸ Participation in such partnerships and funds gives the GEF an opportunity to further strengthen its support for Indigenous Peoples.

5.3.1. Building on the Project Finance for Permanence

The GEF has invested in Project Finance for Permanence (PFPs)³⁹, with coordinated funding from several donors. This resulted in 15-year funding commitments in several countries, including Bhutan, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Gabon, Namibia and the Eastern Tropical Pacific Marine Corridor.

³⁸ Inga and Kodi (2024).

³⁹ Project Finance for Permanence (PFP) is an innovative sustainable finance mechanism that brings together stewards of a place to co-create and secure long-term funding and resources for conservation projects, ensuring they are well-managed and benefit local communities and achieve tangible, measurable environmental and socioeconomic benefits. The approach brings together governments, civil society, and donors to create a durable foundation for conservation efforts. See, for example, <https://enduringearth.org/9-components-of-a-pfp> and Cabrera et al (2021).



Another multi-donor collaboration, with some similarities to the PFP model, is the [Legacy Landscapes Fund](https://legacylandscapes.org) (LLF). LLF is a public-private partnership model that provides long-term funding (in principle, in perpetuity, but guaranteed for 50+ years) to protect thirty of the most globally significant, high-integrity ecosystems in the Global South by 2030. LLF, with 2:1 public: private funding from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and private funding from Nia Tero, has supported the Greater Tumucumaque Landscape for 15 years, described in Recommendation 2, above.

LLF also has a new program specifically targeting direct, long-term (currently 15 years) support to Indigenous Peoples to conserve high-integrity ecosystems⁴⁰.

There is an analogy between the PFPs and some of the emerging territorial and Indigenous-led funds, e.g., the Pakará Fund, the Mesoamerican Territorial Fund, and the Podáali Fund.

A contemporary challenge the GEF faces, as it moves to strengthen investment in Indigenous Peoples, is understanding the diversity of governance mechanisms among different funds and the extent to which different mechanisms are fit for purpose in particular contexts. The example of the Pakará Fund, described under Recommendation 2 above, illustrates how, following a review of different governance structures and modalities, Indigenous communities ultimately designed a fund that best met their specific needs. Further, funds may need to establish their own track records and strengthen fiduciary capacity before funding can be mobilized. Philanthropic foundations can assist in documenting and understanding the complexity of governing structures, but a systematic review would be valuable. Across Asia, an emerging example is the [Indigenous Peoples of Asia Solidarity Fund](#) (IPAS), established in response to the £1.7 billion forest pledge. Because IPAS was flexible and minimized bureaucratic requirements, more than 25,000 USD per country was rapidly mobilized to communities

40 <https://legacylandscapes.org/for-applicants/>





Photo: ProAmazonia/UNDP Climate

in 13 countries, resulting in effective and positive community-based approaches, showcasing the impact of direct financial access, while maintaining principles of accountability and transparency consistent with mainstream financial architecture.

The use of financial intermediaries to financially support Indigenous Peoples requires the implementation of policies that uphold Indigenous Peoples' rights through consultations, participatory planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The definition of an intermediary in this context includes local partners or NGOs with a history of long association and work acceptable to Indigenous Peoples and their communities. In the context of direct support or financing, where intermediaries or fiscal sponsors are necessary, the focus should be on institutions representing Indigenous communities that are known to community members and have decision-making processes that are representative of Indigenous values.

In the context of GEF-9 programming directions and the GBFF, examples of Indigenous-led, pooled funds provide valuable and useful insights for new financial models. The concept of direct finance

requires a more technical and microeconomic assessment of its implications and feasibility, alongside a coherent definition that is reflective of Indigenous communities themselves. ICI-2 provides a valuable opportunity for the GEF, through its supporting agencies, to take a proactive role, particularly in situations where Indigenous-led funds have yet to be established. This could include engaging directly with Indigenous territories, documenting and understanding local realities, and, where appropriate, offering technical assistance and financial support to help communities develop formal institutions capable of meeting access requirements. Such support would strengthen the ability of Indigenous Peoples to manage funds more effectively.

Ultimately, the aim is to strengthen financial modalities by aligning financial pathways with Indigenous communities and institutions, establishing financial linkages that are both relatable and flexible to the specific local context.

CONCLUSIONS

As the GEF seeks to strengthen support for Indigenous Peoples in GEF-9 programming, and with a 20% aspirational target for the GBFF, there is a solid foundation of examples on which to build, both from within and beyond the GEF partnership. Given the speed with which areas such as integration of Indigenous and Western scientific and technical knowledge and direct access finance are evolving, including within GEF initiatives, such as ICI-1 and ICI-2, continuous capturing and broad sharing of insights and lessons learned will be especially valuable. Doing so will also serve to maintain and amplify the GEF's reputation as a leader in supporting Indigenous Peoples.

The STAP's synthesis and recommendations, informed through research and direct consultations with Indigenous peoples, has foremost showcased the profound role of the GEF in supporting diverse Indigenous communities, often at the forefront of environmental challenges. As climates are changing both figuratively and physically, it becomes paramount to find ways for the GEF to stretch its impact with utmost efficiency. In order to improve the GEF of today for resilient projects of tomorrow, it is essential to embed Indigenous

leadership, knowledge systems, and priorities at the core of project design, implementation, and governance. By advancing on recommendations outlined in this document, centered on co-design, culturally appropriate safeguards, scientific integration, governance, and inclusion, and direct and flexible financing, the GEF can catalyze positive, transformative change.

Moving forward requires more than just technical solutions, it demands genuine partnerships that are grounded in trust, respect, and recognition of Indigenous Peoples as critical actors in achieving global environmental goals. Through continued learning, inclusive engagement, and strategic innovation, the GEF can not only meet its aspirational targets, such as the aspirational target for the GBFF, but also solidify its role as a global leader in impactful environmental finance. As environmental and climate challenges become increasingly complex, the full and sustained integration of Indigenous Peoples into GEF programming is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for achieving lasting, scalable, and inclusive environmental outcomes.



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ANNEX 1: The Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) Summary of 20 GEF Projects involving Indigenous Peoples

In addition to the in-depth consultation session with IPAG and the Global Steering Committee of the Inclusive Conservation Initiative, Phase 1 (ICI-1), the STAP studied 20 completed GEF projects that affected or directly targeted Indigenous communities (Table A). A qualitative review entailed an investigation of relevant project information, including project documents, midterm reviews, terminal evaluations, and project implementation reports, all available in the public GEF project database. We uncovered consistent themes, also reinforced during consultations with IPAG and the Global Steering Committee of ICI-1. Notably, we found numerous positive instances where a GEF project has improved the lives of Indigenous Peoples. In one case, GEF ID 9262 in Honduras, more than 400 Indigenous farmers directly benefited from GEF support to improved livelihoods. The main findings are briefly summarized here.

- There is limited engagement with Indigenous communities in steering project design and in institutional arrangements.
- Culturally relevant safeguards were not reflected in the majority of projects considered, but when applied, are effective in engaging Indigenous populations and securing consent for projects.
- Project delays were frequent, resulting from both political and financial factors. A handful of projects developed innovative financing approaches to reduce delays; however, many projects overlook opportunities for innovative financial approaches.
- Limited communication platforms existed. Few projects used communication or knowledge platforms to enable engagement among multiple Indigenous communities; however, a few projects effectively applied Indigenous knowledge management to overcome barriers to project co-design with Indigenous Peoples.
- For projects directly targeting Indigenous communities, monitoring indicators are often misaligned with Indigenous realities and priorities, resulting in limited participation within projects.

Table A: Summary of the 20 reviewed GEF projects

This table summarizes 20 reviewed projects that involve Indigenous Peoples. During the review of project documents, midterm evaluations, project implementation reports, and terminal evaluations, we recorded references to each of the categories represented in the table columns.

1. Indigenous Peoples as Partners in Project Design. This refers to instances where Indigenous peoples function as partners and leaders in the design and implementation of the project.

2. Application of Culturally Appropriate Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC): This aims to capture efforts to apply FPIC and other safeguards tailored to the cultural contexts and practices of the Indigenous communities involved.

3. Projects that Emphasize Bridging Indigenous and Western Science into Project Design. This identifies projects that incorporate Indigenous scientific and technical knowledge, often alongside Western scientific knowledge, into their design.

4. Projects Showcasing Indigenous-led or Co-led Governance. This includes cases where Indigenous communities are not only beneficiaries, but play a central role in project governance, with their leadership integrated into the program's organizational structure.

5. Direct Financing Examples. This highlights projects that have made efforts to improve financial access and efficiency for Indigenous communities, including examples of direct and innovative financing mechanisms.

Categories	No. of projects	GEF ID	GEF period	Focal area(s)
Indigenous Peoples as Partners in Project Design	3	9437	6	Biodiversity/ Land Degradation
		5826	5	Biodiversity
		9262	6	Biodiversity/ Land Degradation
Application of Culturally Appropriate FPIC	9	10249	7	Biodiversity/ Land Degradation
		9556	6	Biodiversity/ Climate Change/ Land Degradation
		9437	6	Biodiversity/ Land Degradation
		4084	4	Biodiversity
		9262	6	Biodiversity/ Land Degradation
		9434	6	Biodiversity/ Land Degradation
		9573	6	Biodiversity/ Land Degradation
		9449	6	Biodiversity
		5826	5	Biodiversity
		3767	4	Biodiversity/ Climate Change



Categories	No. of projects	GEF ID	GEF period	Focal area(s)
Projects that Emphasize Bridging Indigenous and Western Science into Project Design	5	9437	6	Biodiversity/ Land Degradation
		3367	4	Land Degradation
		5056	5	Climate Change
		4084	4	Biodiversity
		5826	5	Biodiversity
Projects Showcasing Indigenous-Led or Co-Led Governance	10	9556	6	Biodiversity/ Climate Change/ Land Degradation
		3367	4	Land Degradation
		3821	4	Biodiversity
		4084	4	Biodiversity
		5826	5	Biodiversity
		9262	6	Biodiversity/ Land Degradation
		9434	6	Biodiversity/ Land Degradation
		9606	6	Biodiversity
		9600	6	Biodiversity/ Land Degradation
		9449	6	Biodiversity
Direct Financing Examples	4	9556	6	Biodiversity/ Climate Change/ Land Degradation
		3367	4	Land Degradation
		4084	4	Biodiversity
		9600	6	Biodiversity/ Land Degradation

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