

Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund
45th Meeting of the CEPF Donor Council
Tuesday 25 November 2025
8:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m. Eastern Standard Time (EST)
2:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m. Brussels and Paris Time
10:00 p.m. – 1:00 a.m. (+1 day) Tokyo Time

Findings of the Stakeholder Consultations for the
GEF Small Grants Program

Recommended Action Item:

The Donor Council is asked to review the document and provide comments.

Background

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) Small Grants Program (SGP) has been a unique and essential element of the GEF's work since its establishment in 1992. It has consistently provided a highly important avenue to work closely with civil society organizations (CSOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) in support of the GEF's mission and mandate. It has served as an essential piece of the GEF's larger and increasing efforts to support inclusion and strong engagement of civil society stakeholders and partners, providing financing as well as technical and capacity building support to Indigenous peoples, local communities, women and youth.

In December 2022, the GEF Council approved the implementation arrangements for a new phase for the GEF SGP, including an increase in the number of Core SGP Implementing Agencies (IAs). In December 2023, Conservation International (CI) was selected as one of two new GEF SGP Implementing Agencies. At its 42nd meeting, on 15 February 2024, the CEPF Donor Council approved the CEPF Secretariat to act as a delivery mechanism for the new phase of the GEF SGP in countries where CI is selected as the IA.

There are 144 countries eligible to participate in the GEF SGP during the Eighth Operational Phase of the GEF, of which 45 had the option of working with either UNDP or one of the new IAs (CI and FAO). Five of these countries chose to work with CI. Consequently, during the period of February to April 2025, the CEPF Secretariat visited each of these countries to consult with stakeholders and seek their input into the design of the GEF SGP project implemented by CI, through CEPF as Executing Agency. This paper summarizes the findings of these stakeholder consultations. In so doing, it responds to an action point from the 44th meeting of the CEPF Donor Council, on 11 February 2025.

Stakeholder Consultations

The CEPF Secretariat visited the five participating countries, as follows:

- Equatorial Guinea, 3–7 February 2025
- St. Vincent and the Grenadines, 24–28 March 2025
- Sri Lanka, 1–4 April 2025
- Turkmenistan, 6–11 April 2025
- Libya, 20–23 April 2025

During each visit, the Secretariat staff met with the GEF Operational Focal Point, organized one or more national stakeholder consultation meetings, and held bilateral meetings with selected government and civil society stakeholders. The purpose of these consultations was to better understand the operating environment for CSOs and CBOs working on environmental issues; agree on key elements of the implementation arrangements for the new phase of the GEF SGP in the country; and identify opportunities for synergies and alignment with national priorities, especially those set out in National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs).

Key Findings

The stakeholder consultations revealed several barriers faced by the CSOs in the participating countries:

- **Barrier 1:** There is **limited alignment** between local civil society actions and national environmental policies and action plans. Government capacity at subnational levels is insufficient to follow up and engage with local CSOs. National CSOs are often overlooked in the design of large projects in the environment sector. With limited information channels available at the local level, CSOs have limited insights and agency in influencing and contributing to national policy processes.
- **Barrier 2:** Smaller CSOs have **limited access to funding**. When it is available (e.g. through private donations), it is often limited and insufficient to effectively address larger environmental issues. Moreover, funding tends to be project-based, *ad hoc* and bound within short timeframes. Stakeholders in Sri Lanka, for example, reported that most CSOs found it difficult to meet donor requirements, especially when they are required to apply and report in English.
- **Barrier 3:** Local CSOs have **limited organizational capacity**, in particular in the areas of administrative, technical and financial management. For example, CSOs in St. Vincent and the Grenadines reported facing challenges with awareness of funding opportunities, capacity to write proposals (applicants find it difficult to align their proposed activities with a problem statement), staff retention (many CSOs are made up of volunteers), and concentration of knowledge (many CSOs are led by one or two key individuals who are often around retirement age).
- **Barrier 4:** Local CSOs in rural areas and underdeveloped urban areas have **limited technical skills** in biodiversity conservation, natural resource management, sustainable land management, waste management and/or sustainable urban solutions. Local CSOs and CBOs are usually aware of the problems to be addressed in these areas but lack the specific expertise to

address them. For example, activities of CSOs in Equatorial Guinea tend to be restricted to awareness raising, organizing training workshops, and monitoring.

- **Barrier 5: Women, youth, Indigenous people and other marginalized groups face an intersection of challenges**, and their needs are often poorly understood. In some countries, it is challenging for women and youth to lead organizations openly, since CSOs are typically led by older men. As other issues are often more pressing for women, youth, Indigenous people and other marginalized groups, CSOs led by them typically focus on development, rights or social issues, rather than environmental issues.
- **Barrier 6: CSOs have a limited understanding of and capacity to demonstrate impacts** of their activities and, thereby, leverage either political influence or additional funding. Moreover, because most local CSOs and CBOs have small budgets, government officials view them as minor players, which limits their influence on development policies and plans.
- **Barrier 7: Many smaller CSOs operate in a highly localized context, and, if they are not located in larger urban or well-connected geographies, knowledge exchange and peer-to-peer learning is limited** due to physical distance. In addition, resource-constrained CSOs typically have few resources to spare beyond dealing with the immediate issue at hand. Limited or missed opportunities for smaller CSOs to become part of a larger network or to form partnerships leads to limited peer-to-peer learning, cost sharing and impact.

Regarding the first barrier, the stakeholder consultations revealed opportunities in each country for implementation of the new phase of the GEF SGP to contribute to improved alignment and policy coherence. These are summarized in the following table. It is realistic to expect CSOs and CBOs to raise awareness of existing environmental legislation and policies at the community level, while also emphasizing the inherent interlinkages between different environmental problems in their countries. In addition, the impacts of grants, if properly documented and disseminated through National Steering Committees or other channels, can inform development and review processes of environmental legislation and policies, especially as small grants can generate information on the status of implementation of certain policies.

Country	Expected contribution to improved alignment of national policies and policy coherence
Equatorial Guinea	- GEF SGP grantees will increase the awareness of local communities regarding the following policies: (i) National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (ENPADIB); (ii) Sustainable Development Plan to 2035; (iii) National Climate Change Adaptation Plan (PANA); (iv) National REDD+ Strategy; (v) Forest Certification Strategy; and (vi) National Program on Food Security (PENSA). - Through scientific studies, grantees will generate improved understanding of forest ecology and threats to biodiversity, which in turn will inform the development/review of protected area management plans and policies related to nature conservation.
Libya	- The Country Program Strategy for GEF SGP will be aligned with the recently approved NBSAP, Action Plan against Desertification

	and Libyan Green Initiative. Grantees will contribute to raising awareness regarding the objectives of these three policies. - Grantees will inform the development of the National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy (currently under preparation) by showcasing its results and raising awareness on the interlinkages between biodiversity conservation and climate change adaptation.
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	- GEF SGP grantees will make local people aware of legislation dealing with climate change and biodiversity conservation. For example, a law was recently passed to protect parrotfish because of their role in keeping reefs healthy, but the new regulations need to be communicated to fishers and the wider public. Other priorities for awareness raising include the NBSAP, the NAP, the National Ocean Policy and Strategic Action Plan, and the National Climate Change Policy. - Grantees will also inform policy initiatives by demonstrating local solutions to environmental problems that can be integrated into wider development policies. For example, grassroots initiatives on waste management can inform the national strategy of the Central Water and Sewage Authority.
Sri Lanka	- GEF SGP grantees will raise awareness of the following policies: (i) NBSAP 2016-2022; (ii) Green Sri Lanka Programme; (iii) National Environmental Action Plan and Policy 2022–2030; (iv) Forestry Sector Master Plan 1995; and (v) Coastal Zone and Coastal Resource Management Plan 2024. - Results of the GEF SGP can inform the gap analysis and review of the National Environmental Action Plan and Policy 2022–2030, which is currently being undertaken.
Turkmenistan	- The GEF SGP will be implemented in close coordination with the CBD focal point within the Ministry of Environmental Protection to ensure that policies on biodiversity, climate and desertification are well coordinated. These policies include: (i) NBSAP; (ii) National Determined Contribution; (iii) National Programme on Socioeconomic Development 2022–2052; (iv) National Programme on Socioeconomic Development 2028, which highlights protected areas and biodiversity; (v) National Forestry Programme for Turkmenistan 2020–2025 and 2025–2050; and (vi) National Climate Change Strategy. - Grantees are expected to contribute to knowledge on the status of implementation of certain policies through their research activities. This knowledge is expected to relate mostly to policies on nature and species conservation.