

How to engage with the **Global Environment Facility (GEF)**



Why this paper?

As the impacts of climate change intensify and Official Development Assistance resources decline, the interest of developing countries in accessing alternative funding sources is growing. At the same time, development actors – particularly the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation – have built experience and expertise that create opportunities to replicate and scale up successful interventions through dedicated international climate funds. The Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Green Climate Fund (GCF), and the Adaptation Fund (AF) play complementary roles in international climate and environment finance. The funds differ, however, in their mandates, thematic focuses, access modalities, governance structures, and funding instruments.

This paper provides:

- basic knowledge on the Global Environment Facility, with a particular focus on the GEF Trust Fund
- guidance for SDC staff and development partners on how to complement and support access to GEF funding.

About the Global Environment Facility

The GEF was established in 1991 by 27 countries as a pilot fund to address global environmental challenges. Today, the GEF is the world's largest multilateral fund for the environment with 186 member countries. It serves as a financial mechanism for six multilateral conventions – [Convention on Biological Diversity](#) (CBD), [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) (UNFCCC), [Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants](#), [United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification](#) (UNCCD), [Minamata Convention on Mercury](#), and the [Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Agreement](#) – and supports countries to address the root causes of environmental challenges while contributing to international environmental objectives.

The GEF includes six funds dedicated to interrelated priorities for people and the planet. GEF-funded projects and programmes are developed and managed by 18 GEF agencies, including multilateral development banks, UN agencies, and international organisations. The World Bank acts as the GEF trustee, responsible for the financial management and administration of GEF trust funds.

Further information on the GEF is available on the official GEF website ([GEF](#)).

Overview of the GEF funds

The following table provides an overview of the thematic scope and eligibility requirements of the six GEF-managed funds.

Thematic scope and eligibility criteria of GEF funds

Fund	Thematic scope	Eligibility criteria	Budget (USD)
Global Environment Facility Trust Fund	Supports global environmental benefits in biodiversity, climate change, chemicals & waste, international waters, land degradation, and integrated programming.	Countries that have ratified relevant conventions and/or are eligible for World Bank or UNDP assistance. Only incremental costs for measures that generate global environmental benefits are financed.	Funds held in Trust:* 6.67 billion (2026) GEF-9 replenishment: 3.90 billion pledged (June 2026)
Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF):	Exclusively supports climate change adaptation in Least Developed Countries. Assists LDCs in addressing their resilience needs and in reducing their vulnerability to climate change in priority sectors. Supports the formulation and implementation of National Adaptation Programmes of Action, National Adaptation Plans, and activities under the LDC work programme of the UNFCCC.	Must be an LDC and a Party to the UNFCCC. Projects must address adaptation needs and align with national priorities. The fund covers the full additional costs of adaptation measures required to make development activities climate-resilient.	Funds held in Trust: 1.05 billion (2026) Financed through voluntary contributions by donor countries. No fixed replenishment cycle.
Special Climate Change Fund (SCCF)	Supports adaptation in developing countries across sectors such as water, land, agriculture, health, infrastructure, ecosystems, and coastal zone management; includes disaster risk management, disease monitoring, and technology transfer.	Open to all developing (Non-Annex I) country parties to the UNFCCC, with priority for vulnerable African, Asian, and Small Island Developing States. Activities must be country-driven and integrated into national development and adaptation plans.	Funds held in Trust: 141.40 million (2026) Financed through voluntary contributions by donor countries. No fixed replenishment cycle.
Capacity-building Initiative for Transparency (CBIT)	Builds institutional and technical capacity for transparency requirements under the Paris Agreement, including greenhouse gas inventories and the tracking of Nationally Determined Contributions.	Open to all developing countries that are Parties to the Paris Agreement and need support to meet transparency obligations.	Funds held in Trust: 7.42 million (2026) Supported through the regular GEF replenishment processes.
Nagoya Protocol Implementation Fund (NPIF)	Supports developing countries in ratifying and implementing the Nagoya Protocol, which establishes ground rules on access and benefit-sharing of genetic resources.	Developing countries that are Parties to the CBD and Parties (or committed to becoming Parties) to the Nagoya Protocol.	Funds held in Trust: 1.13 million (2026) Financed through voluntary contributions by donor countries. No fixed replenishment cycle.
Global Biodiversity Framework Fund (GBFF)	Supports implementation of the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, including the strengthening of policies, governance frameworks, institutional capacities, financing, mainstreaming of biodiversity across sectors, and the implementation or revision of National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans.	Developing countries and economies in transition that are Parties to the CBD. Prioritises actions that generate global biodiversity benefits and strengthen country ownership. Allocates at least 20 per cent of funding to support biodiversity initiatives led by Indigenous Peoples and local communities and particularly considers LDCs and SIDS.	Funds held in Trust: 365.60 million (2026) Financed through voluntary contributions by donor countries. No fixed replenishment cycle.

* Reflects the total funds held in trust, including donor contributions, promissory notes, investment income, and other financial activities.
The replenishment refers only to funding pledged by donors for a specific replenishment cycle.

The Global Environment Trust Fund

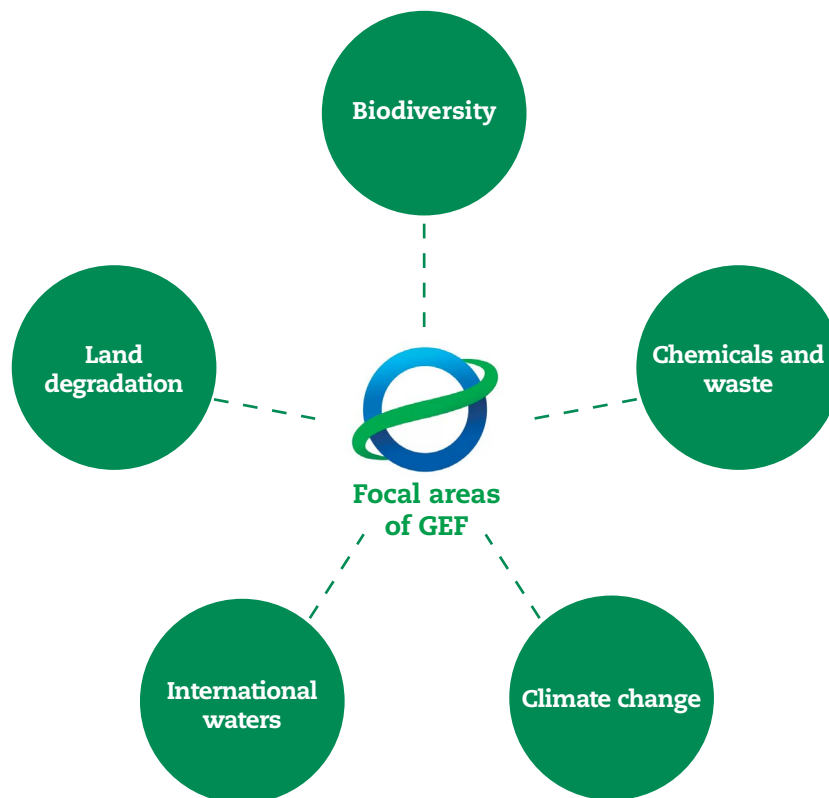
What the GEF Trust Fund does

Funding of projects:

The GEF Trust Fund finances projects that generate global environmental benefits in biodiversity, climate change mitigation, international waters, land degradation and forests, and chemicals and waste. All projects must contribute to achieving international environmental agreements.

- Learn more about the specific focal areas: [What We Do](#)

Figure 1: The five GEF focal areas.



Source: GEF, designed by Zoï Environment Network

Global environmental benefits include conservation of globally significant biodiversity, improvements in energy efficiency, reduction in forest degradation, and protection of human health and the environment through the reduction and elimination of mercury.

The GEF Trust Fund supports government agencies, civil society organisations, private sector companies, research institutions, and other partners. Recipients are primarily developing countries and economies in transition (currently 164 countries). The GEF Trust Fund is replenished every four years, with GEF-9 (2026-2030) securing USD 3.9 billion (as of June 2026).

The GEF Trust Fund operates under the incremental cost principle, financing only the additional costs of making national development projects deliver global environmental benefits. Grants are the main financing modality, alongside non-grant instruments such as loans, guarantees, and equity. Co-financing is required.

- Learn more about [Global Environmental Benefits](#)

- Learn more about the 11 GEF-8 integrated programmes: [GEF-8: Moving Toward an Equitable, Nature-Positive, Carbon-Neutral, and Pollution-Free World](#)

- Learn more about the eight proposed GEF-9 integrated programmes: [GEF-9 Programming Directions](#)

Country-driven programming:

The GEF Trust Fund follows a country-driven approach, where projects are initiated, prioritised, and coordinated by the recipient country in order to align with national development and environmental priorities. The Country Engagement Strategy (CES) provides the strategic framework for this approach, empowering recipient countries to own and coordinate their GEF portfolios. A wide range of CES activities support country-driven programming.

- Learn more about the Country Engagement Strategy and activities: [Country Engagement Strategy](#)

Private sector engagement

The GEF has a long history of engaging with the private sector and catalysing private investment and is increasingly integrating private sector engagement across focal areas and integrated programmes. The GEF engagement with the private sector includes grants, technical support, partnerships, policy incentives, and the Non-Grant Instruments Pilot.

- Learn more about [Non-Grant Instruments](#)

Governing Structure of the Global Environment Facility

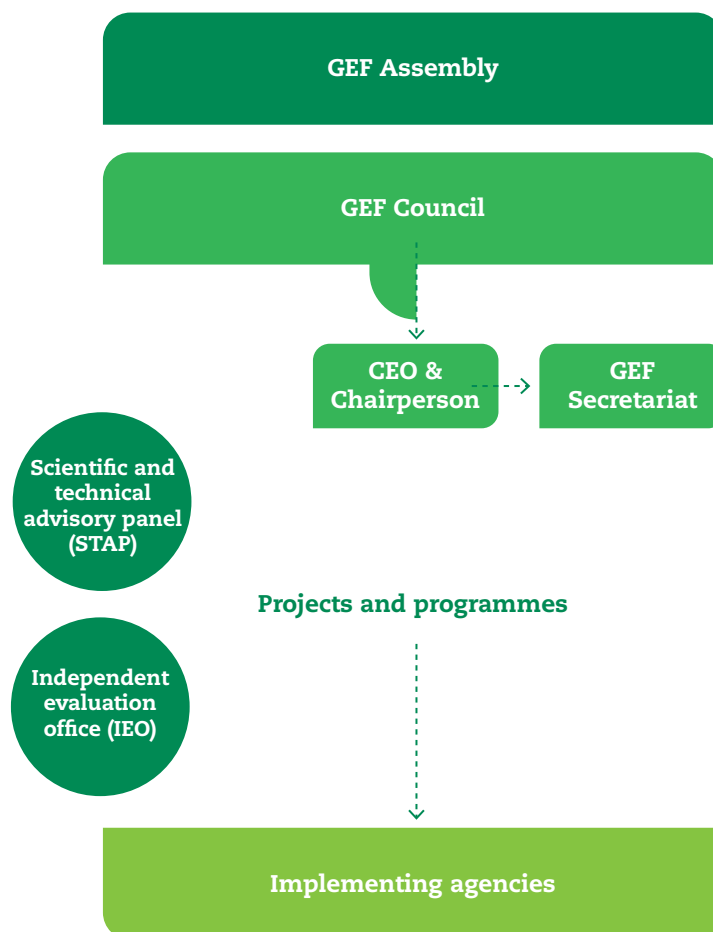
The GEF governing structure includes an Assembly, a Council, a Secretariat, 18 implementing agencies, a Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel, and the Independent Evaluation Office.

The GEF Assembly includes representatives from all 186 member countries and provides strategic and political guidance but does not approve individual projects. The GEF Council is the main decision-making body responsible for developing, adopting, and evaluating GEF policies and programmes, and for approving projects and work programmes. The Council is composed of 32 members, representing both donor and recipient countries. The GEF Secretariat supports the Assembly and the Council, and the 18 GEF implementing agencies develop

project proposals and then oversee the implementation of these projects. Additionally, executing agencies, such as governmental institutions, civil society organisations, private sector companies, and research institutions, are responsible for the management and administration of the day-to-day activities of projects in accordance with project requirements and in agreement with the GEF agency responsible for implementation.

Each of the GEF member countries has designated government officials responsible for GEF activities. Political Focal Points exist in all GEF member countries and represent their country in policy matters. Countries that are eligible for GEF support designate Operational Focal Points (OFPs) who coordinate all GEF-related activities at the national level.

Figure 2: Governance structure of the Global Environment Facility



Source: GEF, designed by Zoï Environment Network

Switzerland and the Global Environment Facility

Switzerland is one of the 32 members of the GEF Council. The Federal Office for the Environment and SDC jointly represent Switzerland on the GEF Council. Switzerland represents a constituency that includes the Central Asian partner countries Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan. This constituency was established in 1999 on Switzerland's initiative and has become an

important platform for cooperation and coordination among its members in engaging with the GEF. As part of its commitment to global environmental cooperation, Switzerland contributed CHF 155.4 million to the eighth replenishment of the GEF Trust Fund (GEF-8) and will also contribute to the ninth replenishment (see FOEN: [International environmental financing](#) and [press release](#)).

Key things to consider when accessing the GEF Trust Fund

Who does what in my country?

GEF activities are generally coordinated through the Operational Focal Point, who reviews proposals, ensures alignment with national strategies, and issues the Letter of Endorsement required for submission. The OFP serves as an important point of contact for collaboration with the GEF and handles enquiries such as those regarding current or future engagements or national priorities

- Find your Focal Point: [Focal Points](#)
- See the list of approved [Projects](#)

Funding is channelled through GEF agencies

The GEF Trust Fund does not provide funding directly to countries or organisations. Instead, all GEF grants and non-grant instruments are channelled through GEF agencies, which are responsible for project development, implementation, financial management, and reporting. Only GEF agencies can submit project proposals to the GEF Secretariat.

- Find the list of [GEF Agencies](#)

How to engage with the GEF

If your organisation wants to participate in GEF projects, you need to partner with a GEF agency to develop and implement a project. Early engagement is essential:

- Work with your Operational Focal Point to ensure alignment with national priorities and GEF eligibility.
- Whenever possible, participate in dialogues, and GEF workshops to learn about strategies, focal areas, and programming opportunities.
- Align your project idea with national strategies and focal area priorities to increase the likelihood of approval.

- Refer to your OFP for more information on current and planned GEF-funded projects: [Focal Points](#)

How GEF projects are structured

The GEF provides funding through four main project modalities:

- Full-sized Project: Financing over USD 5 million for comprehensive, multi-year projects.
- Medium-sized Project: Financing up to USD 5 million for smaller, targeted initiatives.
- Enabling Activity: Support for the preparation of plans, strategies, or reports to meet commitments under international environmental conventions.
- Programme: A long-term strategic arrangement of interlinked projects designed to achieve large-scale environmental impact.

- Find more information on [How Projects Work](#)
- Find project [Templates](#)

How to develop and submit a proposal

While GEF project modalities come with distinct templates and requirements that apply to most GEF-managed funds, the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund follows its own dedicated project cycle and approval procedures. To develop a GEF project proposal, you may work closely with your Operational Focal Point and an accredited GEF agency. The GEF agency guides you through the preparation of the proposal, following the appropriate project template for the chosen modality.

In general, the GEF Project Identification Form (PIF) is the first formal document submitted to the GEF Secretariat for review and approval for a standalone project.

- Learn more about the [GEF Project and Program Cycle](#)
- Find the PIF template: [GEF-8 Project Identification Form \(PIF\)](#)

When to submit a proposal

The timing for submitting GEF proposals depends on the project modality and the deadlines for the GEF work programme cycle. Project documents must be prepared and submitted several months ahead of the relevant GEF Council meeting, with endorsement and approval requests typically due 8–12 weeks before the work programme deadline. Engage early to allow sufficient time for proposal development, co-financing arrangements, and review by the OFP, ensuring your project can be considered for inclusion in the upcoming cycle.

How GEF co-financing works

The co-financing requirements depend on the project modality. Co-financing is required for all GEF-financed programmes and full- and medium-sized projects. The expected amount and sources of co-financing must be included in the Project Identification Form. For Enabling Activities co-financing is encouraged but not mandatory.

- Learn more about the [Global Environment Facility Policy on Co-financing](#)
- Find the PIF template: [GEF-8 Project Identification Form \(PIF\)](#)

How GEF funding allocations are determined

System for Transparent Allocation of Resources (STAR), which provides indicative country allocations for selected focal areas. These allocations are not entitlements but serve as planning references to help countries prioritise projects within their national GEF portfolio. In addition to STAR country allocations, the GEF Trust Fund includes funding windows that are not pre-allocated to individual countries.

- Learn more about the [System for Transparent Allocation of Resources \(STAR\)](#)

Resources for strengthening institutional capacities are available

Countries can access dedicated support for strengthening the institutional, technical, and policy capacities needed to meet international environmental commitments and to design, implement, and oversee GEF-financed projects. This support is provided primarily through Enabling Activities and the Country Support Programme for Focal Points, which is an overarching capacity building mechanism that funds training, outreach, information sharing, and country-level coordination.

- Learn more about the [Country Support Program for GEF Focal Points](#)

Potential engagement with the GEF Trust Fund

Swiss embassies and SDC country offices can support engagement with the GEF by carrying out enabling activities, supporting project development, and scaling up.

Enabling activities

- Strengthen the role and function of Operational Focal Points in reviewing and endorsing project proposals and in ensuring they are in line with national priorities and strategies. This effort could include enhancing intra-governmental coordination, particularly improved alignment and cooperation between ministries and public agencies, early identification of funding opportunities, and more effective inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms.
- Facilitate access to the GEF Trust Fund by supporting national institutions and other relevant actors to act as executing agencies of GEF projects. This work may include enhancing the understanding of GEF focal area strategies or strengthening of institutional capacities through training on GEF policies and procedures.
- Facilitate upstream work such as feasibility studies, risk analyses, or technical advisories to reduce risk in proposal ideas and enhance readiness for GEF funding.
- Enhance the quality of GEF projects by applying thematic expertise in areas in areas of Swiss strength, such as de-pollution, environmental protection, water management, gender equality, social inclusion, governance, as well as supporting environmental and social safeguards.
- Promote private sector engagement. The long GEF history of promoting private-sector engagement makes this a potential area for mobilising co-financing by the private sector.

Project development and implementation

- Improve project preparation and fund access by analysing the existing GEF portfolio to identify potential entry points and potential challenges, to explore opportunities to complement the development of new project concepts, and to facilitate coordination during project preparation.

Scaling-up

- Co-finance projects as a strategic co-financier. The SDC may co-finance GEF projects where it has particular thematic expertise.
- Scale up Swiss bilateral projects by linking them to GEF investment or by complementing planned GEF projects with bilateral activities. Successful bilateral pilot projects and best practices can be expanded through GEF financing.

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