

GEF Bulletin

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71st GEF Council Highlights: Sunday, 31 May 2026

The first day of the 71st meeting of the Council of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) considered: the negotiations of the ninth replenishment of the GEF Trust Fund (GEF-9); the Work Program; the business plan and budget for 2027; strengthening the GEF Partnership; the GEF-9 System for Transparent Allocation of Resources (STAR) policy; modalities for Integrated Program lead agencies; and the report of the Chairperson of the Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP).

Opening of the Meeting and Adoption of the Agenda

Claude Gascon, Interim Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Chairperson of the GEF, opened the meeting, highlighting accomplishments under GEF-8, including focus on:

- high-impact investments and blended finance;
- integration, with 98 countries participating, including 31 least developed countries (LDCs) and small island developing states (SIDS); and
- advanced knowledge sharing and learning, gender equality, and Indigenous Peoples' participation.

By video message, Rob Walton, Rob Walton Foundation, announced a new collaboration with the GEF that will match up to USD 50 million in GEF funding, focused on areas identified by the Africa Keystone Protected Area Partnership.

Council Co-Chair Richard Bontjer (Australia) stressed the importance of providing solutions amid geopolitical tensions and accelerating environmental and climate crises, noting a proposal to add up to three new implementing agencies to address identified gaps in programming for the private sector and Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs).

Aziz Abdulkhakov, Advisor to the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Environment, and Chairman, National Committee on Ecology and Climate Change, outlined his country's strong collaboration with the GEF and announced their intention to contribute to GEF-9.

Chair Gascon presented, and the Council approved, the meeting agenda ([GEF/C.71/01/Rev.01](https://enb.iisd.org/gef/c/71/01/rev.01)).

Summary of Negotiations of the Ninth Replenishment of the GEF Trust Fund

Maitreyi Das, World Bank, noted that negotiations on the ninth replenishment were conducted with openness, perseverance, and a shared sense of commitment. She noted that while the initial agreed envelope is USD 3.9 billion, additional pledges can be made right up until the World Bank, as Trustee, adopts the final resolution on the replenishment.

Gascon presented document [GEF/C.71/02/Rev.03](https://enb.iisd.org/gef/c/71/02/rev.03), characterizing the negotiations' results as a "a strong and ambitious package" containing the investment strategy, the policy recommendations, and a resource allocation model. He identified the main GEF-9 priorities and said the package represents a renewed vote of confidence in multilateralism, the



Claude Gascon, Interim CEO and Chairperson, GEF

GEF partnership, the GEF as a financial mechanism, and the importance of protecting the global environment.

In the ensuing discussion, Council members generally welcomed the outcome, although several expressed disappointment in the smaller envelope compared to previous replenishments. Several particularly welcomed the emphasis on LDCs, SIDS, and IPLCs. Some also stressed the importance of GEF-9 implementation being a country-owned and -driven process.

Among other issues, members:

- encouraged more transboundary projects;
- urged expanding the number of agencies available to support LDCs and SIDS;
- underscored the importance of the new *ad hoc* working group on the evolution of the GEF architecture, oversight, and donor base;
- stressed the potential of private sector, blended, and non-grant-based finance, noting this must not substitute the allocation of concessional resources;
- called on donor countries to rapidly finalize their pledges, to allow for clear and predictable programming;
- welcomed the aspirational target on 20% of GEF-9 programming toward actions by IPLCs, and called for clearly defining these actions; and
- stressed the need to redirect nature-negative financial flows.

Council members welcomed the successful conclusion of the replenishment, took note of the Summary, and endorsed the programming directions, including allocations of resources and policy recommendations.

Work Program for the GEF Trust Fund

Fred Boltz and Mohamed Bakarr, GEF Secretariat, introduced document [GEF/C.71/03](https://enb.iisd.org/gef/c/71/03). After reviewing GEF-8 achievements in the five GEF focal areas, they highlighted blended finance initiatives, the expansion of the Small Grants Program, support to



Aziz Abdulkhakov, Advisor to the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Environment and Chairman of the National Committee on Ecology and Climate Change

IPLCs, the Fonseca Leadership Program, and GEF-8 contributions to multiple targets of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF).

They also introduced the June 2026 Work Program, explaining it comprises 16 projects in 19 recipient countries, totaling USD 141.4 million and expected to mobilize USD 828.1 million in co-financing.

Many Council members highlighted the Uzbekistan Risk Mitigation Facility project as an example of the potential for using blended finance to increase co-financing. Many also welcomed the utilization of 97% of programming for GEF-8 and the Work Program's geographical coverage and expressed satisfaction with surpassing most core indicator targets. Some members voiced concerns on targets which have yet to be reached. Others encouraged using innovative technologies and blended finance, aligned with national priorities.

The GEF Civil Society Organizations (CSO) Network highlighted, among other things, the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund and the Global Flyways Grant Mechanism projects as examples for strengthened CSO participation.

Members raised issues regarding:

- implementing agency concentration in the Work Program;
- lessons learned from setting targets in GEF-8;
- the drivers behind the weaker co-financing ratio in the Work Program;
- the lack of mercury-related projects;
- how to promote a whole-of-society approach in GEF-9;
- multilateral development bank (MDB) engagement since GEF-7;
- the lack of contribution by GEF-8 projects to GBF Target 18 (reducing harmful incentives to biodiversity); and
- the need for progress toward reaching the agreed level of appetite for risk.

One member voiced concerns about earmarking GEF-8 resources for projects involving countries for which they had human rights concerns.

In their response, Boltz and Bakarr noted the relatively modest size of this Work Program and that for GEF-8 overall, the co-financing ratio is 8:1, while no agency has exceeded the 30% participation limit. They said that more progress is expected for some targets as the pipeline matures, including work to fully expend resources on mercury.

Boltz and Bakarr further clarified that:

- the GEF-9 policy directions ([GEF/R.9/Inf.14](#)) ensure an active and diverse GEF Partnership, describing how the 25% ceiling of GEF portfolio allocation per implementing agency will be managed;

- remaining funding from GEF-8 will be carried over to GEF-9 and incorporated in the overall replenishment figure;
- MDB reporting will be incorporated for GEF-9; and
- only a few countries used their STAR allocations on GBF Target 18, though all 91 countries in the umbrella program supporting the development of biodiversity finance plans are working to identify harmful incentives to biodiversity.

Gascon also expanded on the 97% utilization rate of GEF-8 programming, saying that the 3% represents what had been pledged but was not yet available in the GEF Trust Fund.

Council members adopted the draft decision contained in the document, approving the Work Program.

GEF Business Plan and Corporate Budget for the Fiscal Year 2027

Peter Lallas, GEF Secretariat, presented the document ([GEF/C.71/04/Rev.1](#)), noting the budget request is designed for effective and efficient delivery of the ongoing project portfolio and related work needs. Among priority areas of delivery, he cited support for conventions and new mandates, including the newly entered into force Agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement, support for a strong start to GEF-9, and enhanced engagement with countries and partners.

In the ensuing discussion, many Council members recognized efforts to maintain efficient and transparent administrative management, aligned with GEF-9 priorities. Some stressed that the document provides a bridge between strategic directions and practical execution and balances ambition with financial realism.

Some Council members questioned the need for two in-person Council meetings, suggesting that one of them may be held virtually. Others opposed, citing time zone and communication challenges.

Many stressed efficient resource use and focus on implementation that minimizes administrative costs, further querying increased staff costs. They suggested streamlining operations and reflecting the division of labor between Secretariat staff, while fully recognizing their independence.

A member suggested that a gap analysis on environmental priorities, technological readiness, institutional capacity, and financial needs would assist developing countries toward better-designed GEF projects. Several members drew attention to the ongoing STAP review as an opportunity to streamline its budget.

The CSO Network highlighted provisions in the budget for strengthening the Network to support key GEF-9 commitments. The Indigenous Peoples Advisory Group (IPAG) noted support for Indigenous Peoples throughout the GEF financial architecture and the planned update of the Principles and Guidelines for Engagement with Indigenous Peoples by 2028.



Giovanni Reyes, Indigenous Peoples Advisory Group (IPAG)



Richard Bontjer, Co-Chair of the GEF Council for 2026, Australia

Some suggested amendments to reduce travel costs, including potential adjustments to World Bank policies. Others urged against micromanaging the Secretariat, proposing instead a cap on travel-related expenses and encouraging voluntary downgrades.

Following consultations, Co-Chair Bontjer noted a revised draft decision had been circulated to Council members that calls for the Secretariat, under the leadership of the new CEO, to find solutions to reduce travel costs, including a dialogue with the World Bank about its related policy. The Council approved the corporate budget with this modification.

Strengthening the GEF Partnership: Agency Expansion Procedure

Jonathan Caldicott, GEF Secretariat, presented the document ([GEF/C.71/05](#)), outlining the proposed four-stage procedure. He explained that initial screening would focus on entities already accredited by the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and/or the Adaptation Fund that could fill GEF partnership gaps in addressing the needs of LDCs and SIDS, which would be given fast-track assessment and possible approval as early as June 2027. Caldicott said entities not accredited with GCF or the Adaptation Fund would be subject to a standard assessment pathway requiring about 14 months. He reviewed the proposed eight minimum eligibility criteria. Caldicott also detailed a proposed change in the GEF's compliance assessment policy to align it with those in the GCF and Adaptation Fund, moving from the current annual assessment to continuous compliance risk monitoring.

In their discussion, Council members generally welcomed the paper, the proposed procedure, and minimum eligibility criteria, as well as the proposed switch to continuous compliance risk monitoring. Some requested clarifications about the timeline and steps.

On the proposed procedure, members queried:

- the evaluation of candidates regarding their engagement with IPLCs and civil society, and mobilization of the private sector;
- a possible pathway for national agencies to join the GEF partnership;
- the possibility of de-accrediting existing GEF agencies; and
- the necessity of expanding the search for agencies beyond those already accredited by the Adaptation Fund and GCF.

In response, Caldicott outlined the timeline for expanding the number of agencies and emphasized that the four key GEF minimum standards, namely fiduciary, environmental and social safeguards, stakeholder engagement, and gender equality, still apply. Regarding de-accreditation, Caldicott highlighted action plans developed to improve internal policies when needed

and added that national entities do not meet the criteria of geographical reach and scale of engagement.

Some Council members suggested amendments to the selection process, including through: the nuanced categorization of potential agencies; expanding criteria to include expertise in other GEF focal areas; and prioritizing entities working in underserved regions. Several cautioned that limiting the selection pool to agencies already accredited by the Adaptation Fund and GCF would hinder the consideration of entities with expertise on non-climate focal areas. They stressed ensuring the expansion is needs- and evidence-based, and provides added value, and urged focus on monitoring and evaluation. Several members further queried the selection process.

One member cautioned against lengthy timelines in accrediting agencies that are already accredited with the GCF and the Adaptation Fund. Some members expressed concerns with the proposed eligibility framework, urging for a standalone criterion assessing demonstrable experience of working with IPLCs. IPAG called for accrediting a network of Indigenous Peoples as an implementing agency, citing the successful track record of Indigenous-led projects. The agenda item was suspended pending informal consultations to finalize the draft decision.

GEF-9 STAR Policy

Naiying Peng and Sonja Sabita Teelucksingh, GEF Secretariat, presented document [GEF/C.71/06](#), drawing attention to the STAR policy and the STAR indices and calculations, annexed to the document. Peng highlighted key proposed modifications to STAR, including:

- enhancements to the methodology and data of the Global Benefit Indices (GBI) for biodiversity, land degradation, and climate change;
- introduction of a disbursement sub-index under the Country Performance Index;
- an increase in the weight of the GDP per capita Index; and
- lowering the STAR focal area ceilings to 5% of the respective focal area STAR envelope.

They noted that following the adjustments, approximately 43% of GEF-9 STAR resources will be allocated to SIDS and LDCs and highlighted the expansion of the special window in STAR with a thematic focus on blended finance and the conducting of a mid-term review to assess resource utilization.

Council members welcomed efforts to strengthen the STAR methodology. Some noted that the GDP per capita Index does not capture climate risks, natural disasters, economic shocks, or dependence on natural capital, particularly for SIDS, suggesting further efforts to recognize their unique circumstances. A few members noted that increases in the weighting of the GDP per capita Index may affect countries transitioning to a higher income status that remain vulnerable to climate and environmental risks. One stressed that large economies should not be eligible for funding. Members highlighted the Drought Vulnerability Index, encouraging consideration of a broader multi-hazard approach.

Some queried the proposed expansion of the special window for the ten top STAR recipient countries, and a few cautioned the level of priority given to SIDS and LDCs, suggesting that in some cases, concessional finance may achieve greater global environmental benefits when allocated to projects involving countries belonging to neither category.

One member stressed: preserving country ownership related to the special blended finance window; assessing whether innovative financing mechanisms simply replace concessional resources; and the aspirational target of the total STAR allocation for SIDS and LDCs, emphasizing the agreed 35% and noting that the formula's outcome is 43%.

Members suggested:

- an analysis of the decline of the STAR portion of the GEF portfolio over recent replenishments;
- considering a GBI for chemicals/waste in GEF-10;
- priorities for the GEF-9 STAR mid-term review; and
- using the mid-term review to ensure effective funding allocation and potentially reconsider the maximum allocation per country.

Members also queried the process for reusing frozen resources, and stressed continued support toward the timely allocation and disbursement of resources.

The CSO Network urged adding peatland ecosystems to the Climate Change Index and called for civil society to have real weight in national steering committees.

Responding to members, Peng explained that the proposed STAR policy reflects the GEF-9 replenishment negotiations, including the focal areas. She said the proposed policy's blended finance elements will be part of the GEF-9 blended finance implementation plan that the December 2026 Council meeting will discuss. Teelucksingh said any proposals for a chemicals/waste GBI will be considered in the context of the discussions on the GEF-10 model, which are expected to begin early in GEF-9.

Following consultations, a revised document was circulated, noting that "the adjusted STAR formula indicates that the share of GEF-9 STAR resources allocated to SIDS/LDCs would be approximately 43%, with the final share depending on the final replenishment size. These results are preliminary and not yet final." Council members approved the amended STAR policy, which replaces and supersedes all relevant previous Council decisions regarding STAR.

GEF-9 Integrated Programs Lead Agency Terms of Reference and Selection Process

Mohamed Bakarr, GEF Secretariat, introduced [GEF/C.71/13](#), noting that the document is an update to the terms of reference and selection process approved by the Council at its 62nd meeting in June 2022, and includes lessons learned. He noted that since GEF-6, the role of lead agencies has gained critical importance, now demanding stronger commitment and capability, including the ability to mobilize significant co-financing at scale, willingness to collaborate with partners and countries, and a comparative advantage for coordination. Acknowledging the importance of continuity in leadership and coordination across GEF cycles, Bakarr added that Integrated Programs evolving to GEF-9 proposing new or alternative lead agency arrangements must demonstrate capability and clear commitment to continuity frameworks.

In subsequent discussions, members welcomed the inclusion of criteria on experience with working with SIDS and mobilizing private finance. A member underscored the importance of country ownership on program implementation and informing upstream government decisions. IPAG and the CSO Network stressed including civil society and IPLCs in project design and evaluation.

Many members cautioned against agency concentration in Integrated Programs. The Secretariat specified that Integrated Programs have a lower agency concentration rate compared to the rest of GEF-8.

The Council adopted the decision.

Report of the Chairperson of the STAP

In her report to the GEF ([GEF/STAP/C.71/Inf.01](#)), STAP Chair Rosina Bierbaum reviewed new science and its implications for the GEF, recent STAP reports, STAP's observations on the GEF Work Program, and plans for future STAP work.

On new science, she noted recent reports on:

- rising global temperature change;
- the climate costs of crop growing;
- the synchronization across regions of fire weather;



Rosina Bierbaum, Chair, STAP

- the risk multiplier effect of extreme heat events;
- the threat to seafood supply of a warming Ocean;
- limits and safeguards in biodiversity finance;
- the public health burden of plastics; and
- exposure pathways for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS).

On reports, Bierbaum reviewed recommendations from the STAP report to the Assembly, including to:

- articulate an overarching GEF-9 theory of change for transformation;
- emphasize innovation risk;
- advance policy coherence across sectors, countries, and multilateral environmental agreements;
- strengthen CSO role in governance;
- influence market transformation;
- monitor to verify that systems transformation is occurring; and
- build on lessons learned from both successes and failures.

She also discussed recommendations from recent STAP reports on:

- the global hydrological cycle;
- emerging technologies and the GEF;
- illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing;
- breaking "lock in" in the chemicals and waste focal area; and
- a checklist for reviewing blended finance project proposals.

On the Work Program review, she noted only one major concern raised by the STAP and highlighted four exemplary project proposals.

As for STAP work over the next six months, Bierbaum outlined focus on three pathways as the GEF Partnership starts implementing GEF-9: filtering global science through the GEF lens; supporting quality in the GEF investment portfolio; and supporting adaptive management and learning.

Council members strongly welcomed the value of science in underpinning solutions to environmental challenges, and the demonstrable contributions of the STAP toward strengthening the GEF's work and credibility.

Some stressed the voluntary nature of recommendations and advice. One member expressed concerns that some analyses extended beyond technical assessments and into strategic, political, or regulatory reforms, and noted certain concepts used in the reports are not recognized by all member states. The CSO Network noted several outstanding gaps, including the need to develop an overarching GEF-9 theory of change, and to complement blended finance with strategies that shift regulation and corporate behavior toward nature-positive outcomes.

Bierbaum reflected that the STAP does not provide prescriptive recommendations, but rather diagnoses what works and what does not.