

Using simple narratives to ensure durability of GEF investments

A STAP Brief
June 2022

STAP SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL
ADVISORY PANEL
*An independent group of scientists that advises
the Global Environment Facility*



UN 
environment
programme

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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 is the world's largest funder of biodiversity protection, nature restoration, pollution reduction, and climate change response in developing countries. It finances international environmental conventions and country-driven initiatives that generate global benefits. The GEF partnership connects 184 member governments with civil society, Indigenous Peoples, and the private sector, and works closely with other environmental financiers for efficiency and impact. Over the past three decades, the GEF has provided more than \$22 billion in grants and blended finance and mobilized another \$120 billion in co-financing for more than 5,000 national and regional projects, plus 27,000 community-led initiatives through its Small Grants Programme. <https://www.thegef.org>

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SUMMARY

The GEF-8 Strategic Positioning Framework¹ points to **the need to “design for resilience in the face of multiple, plausible future scenarios”**. However, drivers of environmental change (such as population growth, conflict, climate change, migration, and technologies), and how they may evolve in future, are often not incorporated systematically in project design. This can make project outcomes less resilient, with short-lived global environmental benefits (GEBs), or even damaging to intended beneficiaries. To address this problem, drivers should be considered early in project development,

using a few simple narratives about how the future could unfold. Developing **simple future narratives** before deciding on a project often widens the range of options, particularly to include options that are **robust** to future uncertainty. **Robust projects work reasonably well in all plausible futures, rather than very well in one but poorly in others.** This brief explains the importance of incorporating future narratives in project design and highlights some of the steps to doing this. The Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) is preparing advice on how to develop simple future narratives.



1. WHAT IS THE ISSUE, AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The core mandate of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) is to deliver enduring GEBs in the face of diverse and often accelerating changes. GEF project designers usually identify relevant drivers of change, such as population growth, conflict, climate change, migration, economy, or technologies, but less often do project designs go on to incorporate those drivers, their future projections, and the associated uncertainties. This has two implications: (i) project outcomes may fail to endure because they were not designed to be resilient to these future changes and (ii) projects may even cause maladaptation – that is, increasing the vulnerability of targeted or other social groups, sectors, or systems over the long term.

For example, a project may aim to reduce illegal logging pressures in a conservation area by creating new livelihoods for a fixed number of families, but a higher-than-planned rate of immigration may increase the pressure for illegal logging. Or, for a project that involves planting trees, project designers may choose species able to cope with a warmer climate but may not consider whether an increase in the risk of dry extremes and forest fires in the longer term could undo carbon sequestration and biodiversity benefits, reducing their durability. Or, in the face

of uncertain trends, farmers may be encouraged to adopt a crop that would work well in a wetter future but fail badly in a drier climate, setting the farmers up for maladaptation should the climate shift in that direction; a more robust option may be a mixed cropping system that maintains moderate production in both wetter and drier climates.

This brief aims to **ensure that projects are designed at the outset to deliver outcomes resilient to future changes**. At present, risk management is often considered post hoc; that is, the project intervention is decided first, and then potential risks from drivers like climate change and social, political, and economic factors are assessed and managed. The World Bank notes that this process increases the resilience of project implementation but does not promote outcomes that are resilient and adapted to the drivers over the long term.² An example of this post hoc process would be managing the risk that seedlings in a tree-planting project are killed by unseasonal drought, rather than deliberately designing an agroforestry project to include diverse species to ensure that the resulting biodiversity and socioeconomic benefits are adapted to all locally plausible future climates.



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2. A VERY SIMPLE CHANGE

STAP proposes a very simple change in how system drivers are addressed early in the development of a project and codifies a more robust approach to ensuring that GEBs endure in the face of future change and uncertainty.

In describing the system, project developers identify trends in key drivers; these trends can be converted into a small number of simple narratives about how the future may unfold and how the key drivers may interact with one another, including any critical uncertainties in their trends. Identifying these **simple future narratives** before the project intervention is chosen often widens the range of options considered by designers, particularly to include options that are **robust** to future uncertainty. **A robust option works reasonably well in all plausible futures, rather than very well in one but badly in others.**

Simple future narratives mean a few brief qualitative descriptions of internally consistent futures that encompass the range of plausible changes in the main drivers and their interactions. In the early stage of design, these descriptions need only be a paragraph each but should consider a time frame commensurate with ensuring the durability of achieved GEBs. It is helpful to consider alternative narratives when identifying potential responses to the environmental problem and then used to help choose a **robust** response. The narratives should highlight *opportunities* as well as *challenges*. The narratives can be a significant part of the system description and support the project's theory of change. **Considering plausible futures during project design is becoming the leading practice in sustainability and development projects**, including among GEF agencies and external organizations.³

3. HOW TO DEVELOP AND APPLY SIMPLE FUTURE NARRATIVES IN GEF PROJECTS

Complex or highly quantified approaches are not needed to improve the design of GEF projects.

STAP is preparing a short guide to developing simple future narratives based on the steps presented in

figure 1, which draws on much literature, as well as insights provided at an expert workshop on scenario planning for project design.⁴

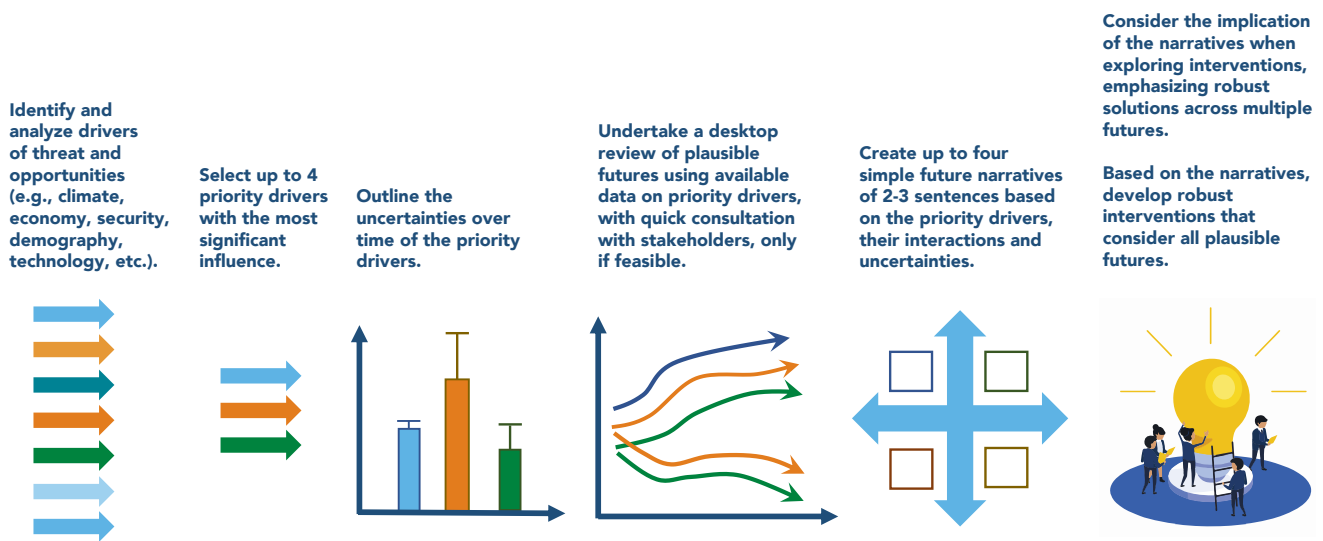


Figure 1: Steps in project design using simple future narratives.

The above process applies to GEF projects and programs at the concept (Project Identification Form or Program Framework Document) stage and can be further elaborated with insights from more stakeholders thereafter. A simple decision criterion can help project developers determine when more elaboration of narratives, including through broader stakeholder engagement, is needed: If the

simple consideration of narratives provided novel insights, changed priorities, or raised issues about understanding longer-term futures at the concept stage, then further elaboration up to the CEO endorsement stage, particularly with stakeholders, is likely to be helpful. If this was not the case, then continuing to use the initial narratives to assess the robustness of proposed actions may suffice.



ENDNOTES

- 1 GEF, 2022. “[GEF-8 Strategic Positioning Framework](#)”. Global Environment Facility, Washington, D.C., para. 58.
- 2 Described as managing the resilience of the project, rather than creating resilience *through* the project: World Bank Group, 2021. [Resilience Rating System: A Methodology for Building and Tracking Resilience to Climate Change](#). World Bank, Washington, D.C.
- 3 Some GEF Agencies already deploy future thinking in their project planning (e.g., the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the World Wildlife Fund, and Conservation International have used this in past GEF projects). Development agencies like the [US Agency for International Development](#) and [UK Department for International Development](#) have also incorporated future thinking into their projects and funding decisions.
- 4 The STAP expert workshop on scenario planning (12 and 14 April 2022) brought together diverse experts and practitioners of scenario planning from academia, industry, and think tanks, as well as members of the GEF Secretariat and Agencies to discuss how to incorporate simple scenario planning into project design and development.

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