

Simple Future Narratives: helping to ensure the durability of GEF investments

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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 futures”**. However, drivers of environmental change (such as population growth, conflict, climate change, migration, and technologies), and how they may play out in the future, are often not incorporated systematically in project design. This can make project outcomes less resilient² with short-lived global environmental benefits, or even damaging for intended beneficiaries. To address this problem, drivers, especially those that are uncertain, 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 those 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; these steps are elaborated as a practical guide in STAP’s **Simple Future Narratives Primer**.³

What is the issue, and why is it important?

The core mandate of the GEF is to deliver enduring global environmental benefits (GEBs) in the face of diverse and often accelerating changes. GEF project designers usually identify relevant drivers of change, such as population, conflicts, climate change, migration, economy, or technologies; but project designs less often incorporate these drivers, their future projections, and the associated uncertainties.

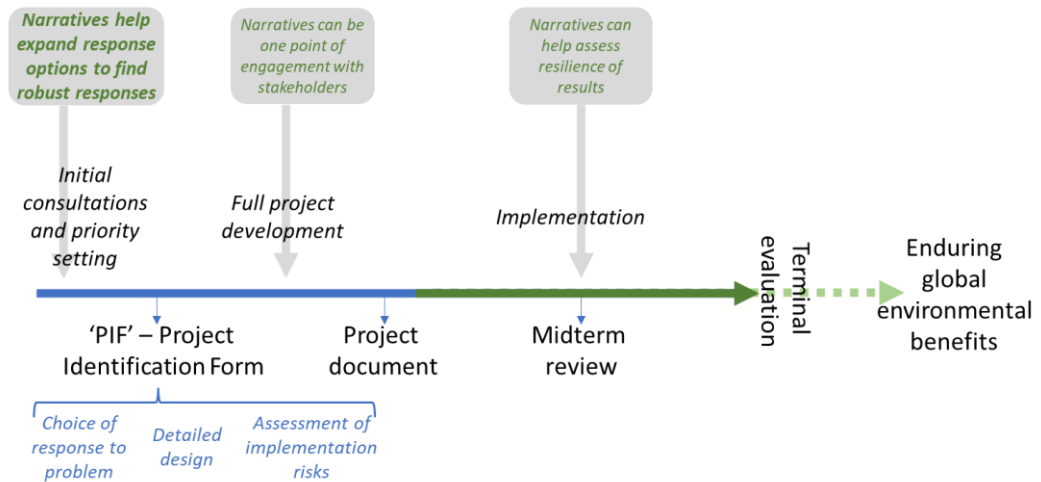
This has two implications: (i) **project outcomes may fail to endure**, because they were not designed to be resilient to these future changes; (ii) **projects may even cause maladaptation** – where they end up increasing the vulnerability of targeted or other social groups, sectors, or systems longer-term.

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 increases the pressure for illegal logging. Or a project may involve planting trees and choose species able to cope with a warmer

climate, but without considering whether an increase in the risk of dry extremes and forest fires in the longer term could undo the 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 fails 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 is aimed at **ensuring that projects are designed at the outset to deliver outcomes that are resilient to future changes**. At present, projects tend to consider risk management *post hoc* – that is, the project intervention is decided first, and then potential risks from drivers like climate change, social, political, and economic factors are assessed and managed. The World Bank notes that this approach increases the resilience of project implementation, but it does not promote outcomes that are resilient and adapted to the drivers over the long-term.⁴ It is akin, for example, to managing the risk that seedlings in a tree-planting project are killed by

Figure 1: Simplified GEF project cycle showing where to use simple narratives



an unseasonal drought, rather than deliberately designing an agroforestry project to include diverse species to ensure that the resulting biodiversity and socio-economic benefits are enduringly adapted to all locally-plausible future climates.

A specific issue for GEF is that, once the PIF stage of project design is approved, most interventions do not greatly change their focus, so the choice of response option is essentially already decided. **Efficient ways of addressing resilience in project design are therefore needed, particularly at the early PIF stage.** In prior PIFs, issues such as climate change tended to be addressed as *post hoc* implementation risks to the already planned project; the GEF-8 PIF now regards these as primary inputs to project design, and a key tool to achieve this is an early use of narratives (Figure 1).

Changing the design mindset

Project developers need to make a small change in mindset to address system drivers early in project development; and STAP proposes a simple change in practice to facilitate this shift and codify a more reliable 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 can be converted into a small number of simple narratives about how the future may unfold and how the key drivers may interact with each other,

encompassing 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.** Such options are more likely to lead to enduring global environmental benefits.

Applying **simple future narratives** means developing 3 or 4 brief, qualitative descriptions of internally consistent futures that encompass the range of plausible change in the main system drivers and their interactions. At early design stages (e.g. in PIFs), these need only be a paragraph each, but should consider a timeframe commensurate with ensuring the durability of achieved GEBs (e.g. at least to mid-century).

It is essential that the alternative narratives are considered when identifying potential responses to the environmental problem, and then used to help choose between responses to seek one that is **robust**. The narratives should highlight *opportunities* as well as *challenges*.

The narratives can be a significant part of the system description, and can be elaborated as part of describing what the GEF calls the project’s ‘baseline scenario’, for minimal duplication of effort or text. STAP’s Primer provides some examples of these approaches.

Considering a range of plausible futures during project design is becoming the leading practice in sustainability and development projects, including among GEF agencies and external organizations.⁵

Developing simple future narratives in GEF projects

There is an extensive literature on scenarios, defined as storylines that explore plausible future states of the world or alternate states of a system, which should be internally consistent.⁶ However, these are often quantified and quite challengingly complex.

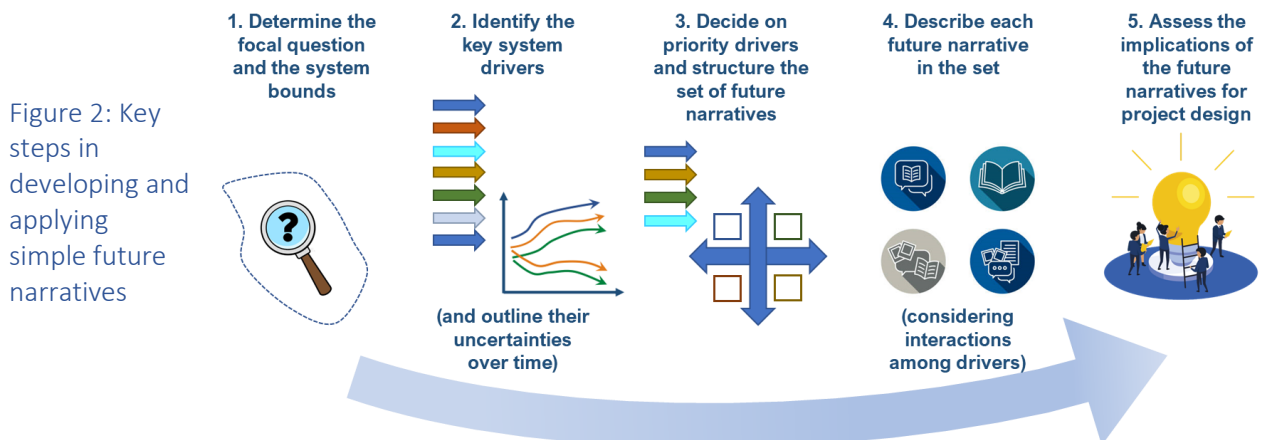
The introductory part of STAP’s Primer explains how similar but simpler approaches can be used to achieve key benefits of exploratory, plausible scenarios. It shows how **complex or highly quantified approaches are not needed to improve the design of GEF projects**. In particular, GEF projects can focus on the critical drivers of importance in their own context and ensure that design accounts for uncertainty about how these may unfold.

STAP’s Primer is based on the steps presented in Figure 2, which draws on much literature and also on insights provided at an expert workshop "on scenario planning for project design".⁷ **The primer provides a step-by-step guide to the process, with practical tips.**

In particular, it provides a number of approaches to structuring the set of narratives (step 3 in Figure 2). For this, it proposes starting by identifying the three or four most uncertain drivers that are also crucial to how the system will evolve. It then recommends the commonly-used approach of identifying the two most important drivers (from those already identified) that vary reasonably independently of each other, which also have uncertain trends. A 2x2 table is then formed with these, with combinations of high in both, low in both, and opposing low/high combinations.

For example, future global population and degree of climate change are likely to be partially correlated since consumption by the former partly drives the latter; whereas level of global climate change impacts and quality of national-level governance may be essentially independent (but interact significantly in terms of a country’s ability to adapt successfully). Consequently, these two axes can define futures with different levels of climate change and of governance.

These combinations are then used to write a short narrative description of each of the futures (step 4) – that is, of how the world will develop (regardless of the GEF intervention) under each, emphasizing key features of importance to the social-ecological system that differ in each, and which are relevant to the problem being tackled. The descriptions should also incorporate what is happening with the drivers that are more universal and certain. See Box 1 for an example.



Options for the intervention should then be assessed for robustness in all of these futures (Step 5) to ensure the resilience of the GEF investment.

The Primer highlights the importance of engaging diverse viewpoints in defining the drivers and developing the narratives, but this can start small at the early PIF stage, and be elaborated later if useful. Indeed, the narratives can also form a particularly useful part of stakeholder engagement.

This process applies to GEF projects and programs at the concept (PIF or PFD) stage. A straightforward criterion can help project developers determine when more elaboration of narratives, including through broader stakeholder engagement, is worth pursuing:

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

The Primer also contains a set of Frequently Asked Questions, and three examples of different approaches to developing and presenting the set of narratives (extending Box 1).

The Primer emphasizes throughout that the **main purpose of using narratives should be to think broadly, rather than precisely.**

Box 1: Using narratives for a project on multinational waters fisheries in the Caribbean

This **hypothetical project** addresses improving the sustainable management of fisheries that cross the waters of several small island States, where overharvesting and poor by-catch management is currently damaging biodiversity outcomes as well as local livelihoods, but where increasing tourism also offers alternative livelihoods. In describing the system, it is clear that key drivers include (i) demand for fish, partly driven by increasing population; (ii) habitat damage, driven by fishing and also by coastal development, exacerbated by the impact of climate change in warming waters and increasing extreme events such as hurricanes; (iii) policy incoherence, encouraging improved practices but also subsidizing more boats; and (iv) economic conditions, which affect population growth and development, as well as demand for tourism and for fish.

Because project interventions broadly seek to address better fishing practices, policy incoherence, and the need for alternative livelihoods, two key axes of uncertainty to guide future narratives can be drawn from drivers that no intervention will greatly affect, one related to the *level of climate change*, and the other related to *economic conditions and level of tourism*.

Examining future narratives framed around lower or higher levels of climate change and lower or higher growth in the economy and tourism, leads to four short narratives that offer guidance on resilient project design.

Narrative 1. Slower climate change, slower economic growth: Slow economic growth both regionally and globally results in no increase in demand for fish. It also causes a pause in coastal development, allowing a window of opportunity to establish better planning controls (for environmental impacts in general and for sea level rise) and to defuse conflicts between local fishers and developers. However, the limited growth of jobs in tourism offers few alternative livelihoods for locals, and the market for premium restaurant fish disappears for a while. The modest rate of climate change allows marine ecosystems to recover or retain their resilience. The risk is that, in the absence of alternative livelihoods, more locals add to the fishing effort, and that the general lack of economic growth means that governments do not have the resources to invest in better planning and management.

Narrative 2. Faster climate change, slower economic growth: Impacts from rapid climate change result in local and regional disasters that damage the local economy and marine ecosystems. Fishers attempt to maintain their livelihoods but contribute further to overfishing, and fisheries collapse. Tourism is in decline, reducing its contribution to local employment. There is less coastal development, but the capacity to plan for climate change is diminished, so the impact of development on marine resources is poorly managed, as is the conflict with fishers. Interventions that do not build social capital are unlikely to have enduring impact.

Narrative 3. Slower climate change, faster economic growth: In this most optimistic future, climate change impacts advance slowly enough that adaptation can occur, and economic growth allows implementation of better planning and management. Increased demands from tourism and population increase put further pressure on the marine system, but there is the opportunity to improve fishery practices and limit catch pressures, partly by facilitating higher value markets in tourist restaurants and by creating new jobs for those displaced from the fishing industry. Thus, there is a window for improving the resilience of marine systems to climate change, with significant multiplier effects for fisheries, as long as the fisheries avoid damaging practices and pressures. Strong engagement between policy, fisheries, and tourism can lead to positive, enduring outcomes.

Narrative 4. Faster climate change, faster economic growth: While economic growth boosts the tourist industry, this comes with increased development pressures and conflict with fishers. The evolving impacts of climate change, with an increased frequency of disasters, absorb much of the public economy and policymakers' attention, as well as reducing the resilience of marine ecosystems to climate change impacts. This could be exacerbated by failures of governance capacity to drive and monitor better coastal development planning. Given the weak capacity of government investment, a strong engagement between the tourism sector and fishers is vital for any positive outcomes.

Clearly, in narratives 1, and 2 (and probably 4), the project may need a focus on changing policy given reduced government resources, whereas this may be less of a problem in narrative 3. Similarly, investing in alternative (sustainable) livelihoods in tourism may work in narratives 3 and 4 but requires alternative thinking in the others. The futures with faster climate change are likely to be much more affected by disasters, undermining government planning capacity. In short, testing project approaches against these scenarios will help design interventions that have a better chance of being robust – that is, workable in any future that unfolds. As a result, intervention options that build alliances among sectors (fishing, tourism, land development) and that emphasize livelihood diversification, may be found to be robust across futures and most likely to deliver enduring global environmental benefits.

¹ From cl58 (see also cl45) in <https://www.thegef.org/council-meeting-documents/gef-r-08-28>

² STAP's Brief: *Making GEF investments resilient*: <https://www.stapgef.org/resources/policy-briefs/making-gef-investments-resilient>

³ STAP's Primer: Simple Future Narratives <https://stapgef.org/resources/advisory-documents/simple-future-narratives-brief-and-primer>

⁴ 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, DC. [Available here](#)

⁵ Some GEF agencies already deploy future thinking in their project planning, e.g., the FAO, IFAD, WWF, and CI have used this in past GEF projects. Development agencies like [USAID](#) and [DFID](#) have also incorporated future thinking into their projects and funding decisions

⁶ IPCC (1994) Technical Guidelines for Assessing Climate Change Impacts and Adaptations. 59 p. See also IPBES (2016) The methodological assessment report on scenarios and models of biodiversity and ecosystem services. Bonn, Germany. 348 p.

⁷ The STAP expert workshop on scenario planning (12 and 14 April, 2022) brought together diverse experts and practitioners of scenario planning from academia, industry, 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. Their input to this brief and to the Primer is gratefully acknowledged.