A Workshop on Knowledge Management and Learning in the GEF: Agency Experiences with Integrated Programming

A STAP Brief

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Introduction

On 4 May 2023, the Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Secretariat held a virtual workshop with four objectives: to learn from GEF agencies' experience with knowledge management and learning (KM&L) platforms developed for the Integrated Approach Pilots (IAPs) and Impact Programs;

(1) to see how this experience could benefit the development of platforms for the Integrated Programs;
(2) to encourage cooperation and collaboration in the development of platforms for the Integrated Programs; and
(3) to consider the implications for a new GEF KM&L strategy

This workshop was part of STAP's continuing contribution to the development of KM&L in the GEF. STAP has frequently made the case for KM being an integral part of all GEF investment.[i] Most recently, STAP suggested that articulating this vision requires a theory of change[ii] to guide the development of a new KM&L strategy for GEF-8.[iii] This advice is reflected in the new GEF strategy for KM&L submitted to the June 2023 Council meeting.[iv]

KM and the Integrated Programs

The criteria for selecting agencies to lead the Integrated Programs included, "recognition for knowledge innovations", specifically "the lead agency must have an established track record in creating and mobilizing knowledge innovations that help countries make informed decisions about transforming key economic systems".

The functions and responsibilities of the lead agency include a global or regional coordination child project that is, "critical for linking the country-specific child projects to a 'knowledge platform' that will facilitate learning and exchange between countries. The platform will also create a 'space' for countries to access innovations, tools and good practices, and seek technical assistance on relevant thematic aspects. This includes providing training and capacity development opportunities, establishing standards for monitoring and assessment of outcomes, and creating communities of practice on key thematic issues."[v]

GEF Independent Evaluation Office evaluation of knowledge management

The 2022 Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) evaluation of KM[vi] noted the benefits of knowledge that is "consistently integrated, easily searchable, and accessible through online repositories", which can help identify good practices and solutions for replication and scaling up to increase the GEF's impact. The evaluation also noted that "the lack of effective approaches to knowledge management (KM) can lead to duplication of effort, missed opportunities, and failure to learn from the experience across the GEF

partnership" and that "a standard approach to or guidance on transforming data and information into usable formats that can be shared is still needed". Stakeholders had highlighted concerns about "the accessibility and curation of knowledge products that would allow the products to be easily searched and accessed".

The IEO recommended a strategy that should "set out principles and standards for the KM steps – knowledge capture, development, sharing, dissemination, and application – articulated in reinforced project-level guidelines, requirements, and common KM metrics". This should be supported by a technical solution with "the ability to capture KM data, lessons, and good practices and to present them in a usable and accessible format for both GEF stakeholders and externally."

GEF/STAP Workshop on Knowledge Management and Learning

The GEF/STAP Workshop on Knowledge Management and Learning included presentations from the World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies (WOCAT); the Food Systems, Land Use and Restoration (FOLUR) Impact Program; the Amazon Sustainable Landscapes (ASL) IAP, Impact Program, and Integrated Program; and the Global Platform for Sustainable Cities (GPSC) IAP and Integrated Program. Responses were invited from agencies with experience of KM&L in all three generations of GEF integrated programming, followed by a moderated discussion.

The presentations were focused on five questions:

(1) Does your platform have some underlying principles? How was your platform developed? If you were developing it now, what would you do differently, and what were the lessons learned? What are the principles, and why did you choose them?
(2) How is your platform organized, for example by type of intervention? Does the platform provide project developers with information about what works, why, how, and in what circumstances, and what doesn't work?
(3) How accessible is your platform? For example, to GEF recipient countries outside the integrated program and to entities external to the GEF partnership?
(4) Does your platform link to other sources of knowledge and learning? For example, the IAPs, Impact Programs, and other new Integrated Programs? And does it link to sources external to the GEF?
(5) When the program concludes, how will you ensure that the KM&L will continue to be available (durability)?

The discussion sought to draw out contrasts, similarities, and common principles to guide future KM&L platform development, recognizing the importance of linkages across integrated programs, within the broader GEF portfolio, and among stakeholders globally addressing shared priorities.

Summary of main findings and conclusions

1. Common principles: all platforms would benefit from being organized in accordance with some common principles to ensure that they are inter-operable, easy to access, easy to use and search, and available both within the GEF partnership and beyond.

Platforms differ in terms of scope and the outcomes each is expected to deliver. Some platforms focus primarily on servicing the needs of child projects: to provide a repository for data, to facilitate learning

and exchange between countries in program, to offer space for capacity-building, and to create a community of practice.

Other platforms go beyond capturing knowledge for the benefit of child projects: for example, GPSC and FOLUR seek transformation in key global systems by using the knowledge and learning created by the program to drive policy change and to accelerate external finance for investment. GPSC, for example, produces knowledge that feeds into partnerships and networks, urban planning commissions, multilateral development banks and international financial institutions, and the private sector for scaling up and leveraging resources towards green and low-carbon investment.

Whether a knowledge platform is more inward looking or outward facing, it would still benefit from being organized in accordance with some common principles that ensure it is easy to access, easy to use and search, and available both within the GEF partnership and beyond. Even if a platform is seen as primarily serving child projects within a program, it should still provide knowledge and learning for projects outside the program. Maximizing global environmental benefits requires that everything the GEF learns be available to apply for the benefit of future investments – and related initiatives – in a timely manner.

2. Accessibility: in principle, platforms should be open to all and easy to access for those within the GEF partnership and beyond.

Most platforms describe themselves as having open access with some restrictions, for example difficulties with sharing data either for software reasons or because of privacy requirements.

WOCAT is truly open to all. Anybody could join the database, with worldwide sharing of good SLM practices in more than five languages and free access to more than 2,000 proven, field-tested SLM practices from over 130 countries.

Ensuring that platforms are **available in relevant languages** is essential for good communication. All platforms aimed to be available in relevant languages and emphasized the importance of this.

Access is easy where there are good Wi-Fi connections. There was an interesting discussion about how to ensure that those living in remote areas – for example, Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in the Amazon – could have equal access. ASL was expanding its reach through radio and podcasts, through recorded webinars and videos, and by bringing people to the closest city with Internet access.

The way in which people preferred to receive information is changing rapidly, with TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp all clamouring for attention. People want to learn at their own pace, in their own time, using technologies and platforms of choice. LinkedIn, WhatsApp, etc., are enablers of this new way of learning, where users decide 'what', 'how', 'when', 'for how long' they want to learn.

Some platforms had adopted a more targeted approach on social media for sharing content with other platforms. Artificial intelligence could have significant implications KM&L.

3. Searchability: knowledge needs to be easy to use if it is to be translated into action; standardized data and common definitions are important for effective search.

WOCAT emphasizes the importance of standardized data and using common definitions for exchange, comparison, and analysis (see box). This allows data and knowledge to be integrated in different ways

into knowledge products for different end uses. For example, a proposition seeking to effect policy change requires a different treatment to one seeking private investment aligned with conservation goals.

The GEF is well placed to adopt a standardized approach because its projects all use the same Project Identification Form and the GEF has a well-understood nomenclature of technical terms. (By contrast, projects submitted to WOCAT come from a wide variety of sources and are hence in different formats.)

This approach would contribute enormously to ease of use because it would make a platform easily searchable. Looking for what works, where, under what circumstances, why, and how, and what doesn't work, would be much easier to search for. It would open the possibility of searching across several platforms for common types of intervention, such as nature-based solutions, natural capital approaches, and circular economy applications, rather than requiring separate searches across several different platforms organized in non-standard ways.

WOCAT uses key themes in the form of filters to find relevant sustainable land management (SLM) practices that enable users to understand what is available inside the database, for example filtering by technology, land-use type, degradation type, SLM measure, and natural or human environment.

WOCAT, ASL and FOLUR empathized the **importance of co-development and co-creation of knowledge**, that is working together with users to foster ownership and to improve durability. And WOCAT underscored the need for quality assurance and review to guarantee quality of information. ASL emphasized the importance of information being trustworthy, relevant, and useful.

Like WOCAT, the Conservation Measures Partnership[vii] is another knowledge platform that could provide a suitable model for future GEF platforms, with a standard terminology and a lexicon for problems, interventions and contexts framed around impact pathways for conservation management.

A standardized approach may be easier to adopt for new Integrated Programs, where there is no preceding IAP or Impact Program on the same or a similar theme. Where there are already analogous platforms, more effort will be required on interoperability.

Box: WOCAT – the global network on sustainable land management

The World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies (WOCAT) is a global network established in 1992. It supports the compilation, documentation, evaluation, sharing, dissemination, and application of sustainable land management (SLM) knowledge. In 2014, WOCAT was officially recognized by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) as the primary recommended global database for SLM best practices and adaptation measures. And in May 2023, the UNCCD Conference of the Parties recommended that the Global Environment Facility (GEF) should promote the use of WOCAT for GEF projects and programs to support knowledge-sharing and the dissemination of SLM best practices.

WOCAT's seven principles for knowledge management to ensure robustness and durability of knowledge management processes and products:

- Harmonize tools and methods applied to generate data and evidence
- Standardize data to allow exchange, comparison, and analysis
- Ensure open access and ease of access and use Integrate data and knowledge into platforms that endure after project completion
- Co-develop and co-produce knowledge with multiple actors and social groups
- Produce data and knowledge so that it can be integrated into products for different audiences
- Embed knowledge and evidence at local, national, regional, and global levels

WOCAT global SLM database: main features:

- free upload and worldwide sharing of countries' good SLM practices in more than five languages
- quality assurance and review process, guaranteeing quality information and facilitating learning
- free access to more than 2,000 proven, field-tested SLM practices from over 130 countries
- searchable database (filters) to find relevant SLM practices for specific landscapes, land uses, etc.
- ability to be integrated into and linked to national, project, and global platforms through API

Key lessons:

- Ensure standardization; work together to follow same standards and use the same definitions
- Use, enhance, and link existing platforms to ease search for and facilitate exchange of knowledge
- Co-develop and create ownership for knowledge, platforms, and products to ensure durability

WOCAT cost about $1 million to establish, with annual maintenance costs of about $100,000 and annual improvement costs of about $100,000.

4. Interoperable is the ability to exchange and make use of information

To be interoperable, platforms need to be organized on common principles. Interoperability can adopt several dimensions: connecting KM&L platforms on the same theme; connecting Integrated Program KM&L platforms; and connecting platforms to other non-GEF sources of knowledge.

Future platforms and initiatives should be designed intentionally to link up with other platforms, seizing the opportunities for integration in advance. This would help avoid a proliferation of related but not connected platforms, provide greater integration, and provide more scope for durability, at a lower cost.

The discussion raised a number of questions:

- how to ensure that those who don't know about a particular platform or knowledge base would be able to find their way through to draw on the knowledge and information that is most accessible?
- how do these KM&L platforms relate to the ones that have come before and will come afterwards?
- how can Integrated Program platforms share information so that those funding similar types of interventions, e.g., nature-based solutions, can learn from each other?

(a) connecting KM&L platforms on the same theme

For several Integrated Program themes, notably food, cities, and forests, one or more platforms are already operating. There may be opportunities for lead agencies to work with existing platforms rather than creating a new one.

When STAP reviewed the lead agency applications, some proposals intended to build on existing platforms, both within and outside the GEF. For example, the World Bank's proposals referred to learning lessons from preceding integrated programming on wildlife conservation for development (from the Global Wildlife Program) and on sustainable cities (from the World Bank's GPSC and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) UrbanShift existing global platforms).

FOLUR benefited from and captured the experience of the Good Growth Partnership and Resilient Food Systems. Could the Food Systems Integrated Program use and extend FOLUR as its knowledge platform?

The same issue arises for forests, with Integrated Programs on the Amazon (World Bank) and Congo (UNEP), and three new critical forest biomes to be added: Indo-Malay (International Union for Conservation of Nature IUCN– Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), Meso-America (International Union for Conservation of Nature), and West Africa (Conservation International). How will the lessons learned from the Amazon and Congo inform the three new Integrated Programs? And could the three new forest Integrated Programs share a common platform?

(b) connecting Integrated Program KM&L platforms

Most proposals to lead Integrated Programs did not consider the links between the Integrated Programs, and there may be opportunities for collaboration and synergy, for example between (a) Circular Solutions to Plastic Pollution and Sustainable Cities and (b) Food Systems, Ecosystem Restoration, and Blue and Green Islands.

There may also be opportunities to develop joint KM platforms, where it makes sense to do so, for example, between (a) Blue and Green Islands and Clean and Healthy Oceans and (b) Eliminating Hazardous Chemicals from Supply Chains and Circular Solutions to Plastic Pollution.

The Sustainable Cities Integrated Program intends to work with other Integrated Programs, such as Circular Solutions to Plastic Pollution, Net-Zero Nature-Positive Accelerator, and Greening Transportation Infrastructure Development.

There are many entry points to create and maximize the synergy because there are so many overlapping themes, but these need to be developed from the start, as retro-fitting is much harder.

(c) connecting platforms to knowledge elsewhere in the GEF and outside the GEF

In addition to being interoperable with platforms from other Integrated Programs, the platforms need to tap into the broader landscape of knowledge exchange globally – for example, a country's own knowledge hubs, and the GEF agencies' own knowledge systems – for mutual benefits. (Platforms can be integrated into and linked to national and global platforms through API[viii].)

Cities in the GPSC have access to the in-house expertise of the World Bank and can benefit from its resources in urban development. The GPSC works with different global leads and communities of practice. The World Bank's knowledge ecosystem (GURL) has six global solutions groups that GPSC cities can access, including land and geospatial, resilience and disaster risk management, sustainable city infrastructure, city management, governance, and finance – and 30 communities of practice, led by different technical leads to share knowledge and provide just-in-time support.

5. Outcome orientation: KM&L platforms are an integral part of GEF effectiveness, and they should be subject to the same requirements, including evaluation, as other projects and programs

Platforms should be subject to the same rigours as any other project or program, with the same due diligence and scoping, monitoring and evaluation, and reporting of results and effectiveness, given the substantial investments being made. Having this kind of emphasis in mind at the outset is likely to have a significant effect on designing platforms.

A number of questions were raised in discussion:

- how are knowledge platforms being used in practice?
- how is KM&L helping to move the needle on achieving GEBs?
- how to measure progress in terms of changing practices and policies, and scaling up?
- how is KM&L contributing to actual programmatic outcomes?
- are there indicators to show how users are replicating best practices?
- how to design systems of monitoring and evaluation to look at the overall effectiveness of knowledge and learning within the GEF, in addition to the performance of specific platforms?

A theory of change for knowledge initiatives with more focus on outcomes rather than outputs would be useful in considering these questions, building on STAP's brief (2022).[ix]

6. Durability: how to ensure that when programs end, the learning and knowledge endures

Platforms operated by the World Bank, for example on the Amazon and GPSC, are likely to endure, provided that they continue to be useful and that the Bank is willing to invest in and maintain them.

However, what happens to knowledge and learning when funding ceases after five years and an agency no longer intends to support the platform? Some IAPs are nearing the end of their investment phase, and it is not always certain whether their KM&L will continue to be available for future GEF projects.

It is important to think in advance when setting up a platform how the knowledge could endure at the end of the platform's life. One option could be to integrate the knowledge into another extant platform.

Knowledge that endures is likely to have cost implications. For example, WOCAT cost about $1 million to establish, and the current costs are about $100,000 a year for maintenance and $100,000 for investment. This is not cheap but given the scale of investment in the Integrated Programs, it is not huge either.

On thinking ahead about the durability of global platforms, FOLUR suggested the following:

- strengthen country ownership and the knowledge base
- consider links to wider government structures, for example influential and policymaking agencies, like finance and planning, to ensure that the knowledge is institutionalized and picked up by government programs – even if the program ends, the agenda is still relevant and important
- explore external finance for continued support for the platform
- find a common space repository to enable the transfer of knowledge gained when the program ends

7. Integration: could interlinked Integrated Program platforms be a foundation for the future GEF KM&L system?

Investment in the Integrated Programs represents about one-third of the total GEF-8 portfolio. The selection of lead agencies was in part determined by their ability to create and mobilize knowledge as a key element in securing transformation in global systems. How these KM platforms are developed will therefore have a profound effect on the development of the GEF's new KM&L strategy.

One option could be to use this network of KM&L platforms as the basis for the new GEF KM&L system.

Briefly, the GEF could establish the principles for the organization, management, and governance of knowledge in collaboration with the agencies, which generate and hold much of the knowledge and learning in the GEF Partnership. The knowledge would exist in a decentralized, federated system of linked agency KM&L platforms, for example on food, forests, and cities. Other platforms could be created or encouraged, for example on chemicals, making use of what already exists, wherever possible.

Thereafter, the role of the GEF secretariat could be to ensure that platforms are organized on similar principles, linked up, easy to access, and available for all, not just within a particular Integrated Program. This work could include setting the terms for new platforms, including how they are organized (e.g., by type of intervention); encouraging existing platforms to be more compatible with one another and to be open to those outside the program; and providing a signposting service to help project developers navigate a multiplicity of platforms to find what they need.

Other options could be to consider using existing non-GEF platforms for GEF projects, for example WOCAT for SLM and the Conservation Measures Partnership for biodiversity, as well as the platform of the United Nations Decade of Ecosystem Restoration. Some of these options could also help with durability.

[i] Stocking, M., et al. 2018. *Managing Knowledge for a Sustainable Future*. Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel to the Global Environment Facility, Washington, DC.

[ii] Stafford Smith, M. 2020. *Theory of Change Primer*. Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel to the Global Environment Facility, Washington, DC.

[iii] Metternicht, G., and Stafford Smith, M. 2022. *Knowledge Management and Learning*. Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel to the Global Environment Facility, Washington, DC.

[iv] GEF. 2023. "Global Environment Facility strategy for knowledge management and learning". Global Environment Facility, Washington, DC.

[v] GEF. 2022. "GEF-8 Integrated Programs lead agency terms of reference and selection process". Global Environment Facility, Washington, DC.

[vi] GEF IEO. 2022. *Knowledge Management in the GEF*. Global Environment Facility Independent Evaluation Office, Washington, DC.

[vii] https://www.conservationmeasures.org/about-cmp/

[viii] API is the acronym for application programming interface, a software intermediary that allows two applications to talk to each other. APIs are an accessible way to extract and share data within and across organizations.

[ix] Metternicht, G., and Stafford Smith, M. 2022. *Knowledge Management and Learning*. Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel to the Global Environment Facility, Washington, DC.