Community-based approaches

A STAP Information Note

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STAP SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL ADVISORY PANEL

An independent group of scientists that advises the Global Environment Facility

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UN environment programme

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1 Introduction

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) Independent Evaluation Office (IEO)'s *Evaluation of Community-Based Approaches at the GEF*,[1] concluded that:

"Projects that adopt a community-based approach are associated with higher outcome ratings than the overall GEF portfolio... with more frequent achievement of improved environmental conditions…as well as broader adoption and socioeconomic co-benefits related to resilience, livelihoods improvement, poverty reduction, governance, and empowerment."

The IEO report found that the six dimensions of good community-based approach (CBA) practices (Box 1) were not comprehensively utilized, noting that:

"CBA projects are in partial alignment with good practice, with some improvements in recently designed projects relative to older projects."

Box 1: Elements of good CBA practices identified in the IEO report

The IEO report adopted a framework that comprised six dimensions of good CBA practices:

- Devolved decision-making
- Devolved financial and technical resources
- Incorporation of local institutions and customs
- Legitimacy in the eyes of users
- Accountability of implementors to users
- Human rights and equality

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[1] GEF IEO, 2024.

The report further noted that:

"The GEF project cycle presents some challenges for implementing CBA projects, both in terms of involving local stakeholders in design, and in allowing enough time to see results before project close."

The report recommended that *"the GEF Secretariat, together with the GEF STAP, should provide more clarity and guidance on when and how CBAs can be used in GEF projects….and appropriate guidance to facilitate the use of CBAs."*

The GEF management response said that:

"The GEF Secretariat will seek further advice from STAP on opportunities to further promote the use of CBA in GEF projects and programs as appropriate. "

This information note presents the response of the Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) to this recommendation. It draws on the latest research on CBAs and previous STAP reports, including those on local commons for global benefits,[2] alternative livelihoods,[3] multi-stakeholder dialogue,[4] and enabling elements of good project design.[5] It highlights the benefits and challenges of CBAs, suggests criteria for adopting CBAs drawn from several sources,[6] and identifies issues for further consideration. The note is intended to help GEF agencies in designing projects and the GEF Secretariat in reviewing proposals.

The GEF has a long history of using CBAs to achieve environmental outcomes across its diverse focal areas and special programs, such as the Inclusive Conservation Initiative and the Small Grants Programme. Research indicates that CBAs can increase the effectiveness, efficiency, and durability of GEF projects,[7] confirming the IEO's findings. Beyond the GEF, CBAs are widely used for sustainable development purposes.[8] CBAs typically share some common elements (Box 2).

Box 2: Community-based approaches

CBAs for environmental outcomes have been used for more than 40 years and draw on research and practice in other fields, such as public health, tourism, disaster management, education, social work, and international development.

The IEO report[9] defined CBA projects as those "*designed to apply a community-centered approach for natural resource management"* and a CBA as *"a modality of project design that transfers decision-making power – and often, financial and technical resources – directly to communities or natural resource users."*

The International Union for Conservation of Nature, focusing more narrowly on conservation, defined community-based conservation as including *"natural resources or biodiversity protection by, for, and with the local community, taking into account drivers,*

[2] Child and Cooney, 2019.
[3] Donaldson and Moscuzza, 2023.
[4] Ratner and Stafford Smith, 2020.
[5] Stafford Smith et al., 2021.
[6] For example, Berdej et al., 2015; Chevallier, 2021; Coger et al., 2022; IUCN, 2019; Soanes et al., 2021; Welter and Jalonen, 2019.
[7] Sherman and Ford 2014; GEF IEO, 2024.
[8] Esmail et al., 2023; Henfrey et al., 2023; Pisor et al., 2022; Soanes et al., 2021.
[9] GEF IEO, 2024.

institutional linkages at the local level, and multiple levels of organisation that impact and shape institutions at the local level."[10]

CBAs usually assume that the environment is inhabited by and is the legal or *de facto* property of communities and that working with community institutions, knowledge, and values is necessary for sustainable outcomes.

The intention and means of CBAs vary. At a minimum, CBAs require that communities be consulted about projects. At their full extent, CBAs devolve responsibilities to local communities to manage their environments.[11]

CBAs typically seek to involve communities throughout the project cycle, including through shared approaches to decision-making; to strengthen local peoples' rights to resources; to include local and Indigenous Peoples' environmental knowledge; and to include women, youth, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups. Other attributes of CBAs include allocating financial resources from projects to communities, fostering collective action within communities, building local capabilities, making projects accountable to communities, and building collaborative partnerships among communities and other actors.[12]

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2 Benefits and challenges of community-based approaches

The evolution of research on CBAs for environmental outcomes has broadly been one of progressive learning from application. CBAs can effectively and efficiently deliver environmental outcomes but are rarely sufficient on their own. CBAs are most effective when they support the livelihoods and incomes of local communities. The impact and effectiveness of CBAs also increase when they enable "supra-local"[13] organizations, such as municipal governments, to support local communities through the provision of services. Furthermore, reviews suggest that the success of CBAs tends to be inversely proportional to the degree of top-down control of projects and programs.[14]

2.1 Benefits

CBA projects have been shown to deliver environmental benefits, including enhanced conservation of corals, fish stocks, forests, and endangered species; reduced poaching of endangered species; improved soil nutrition, including improvements in soil carbon and nitrogen; and increased land cover.[15] They have also helped reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, stabilize eroding shorelines, decrease pollution of groundwater, improve water supply and quality, and decrease waste generation.[16] Socioeconomic co-benefits are key to these environmental outcomes and have been shown to include improved food security, better access to water and sanitation, strengthening of

[10] Charles, 2021. The International Union for Conservation of Nature takes this definition from Berkes, 2007.
[11] Armitage et al., 2020; Coger et al., 2022; Soanes et al., 2021.
[12] Brown, 1999; Child and Cooney, 2019; Dumaru, 2010; Gruber, 2010; Soanes et al., 2021; TNC, 2022.
[13] In the context of governance structures, the term "supra-local" refers to subnational authorities such as metropolitan and/or regional governments, planning agencies, and other institutional actors that can play a role in the governance of a given area and/or resources (Pagliarin, 2022).
[14] Aheto et al., 2016; Galvin et al., 2018; Gruber, 2010; Kellert et al., 2000; Leach et al., 1999; Omukuti, 2020; Soanes et al., 2021.
[15] Aswani et al., 2007; Brooks et al., 2013; Chevallier, 2021; Gutierrez et al., 2011; Nelson, 2010; Padgee et al., 2006; Porter-Bolland et al., 2011; Welter and Jalonen, 2019.
[16] Esmail et al., 2023; Reid, 2016; Wynne et al., 2018.

property rights, and enhanced educational attainment. Other socioeconomic co-benefits include better human health, improved housing, introduction of new production systems and diversified livelihoods, and (modest) increases in income.[17]

Hence, CBAs can be a cost-effective means to achieve global environmental benefits (GEBs), and a lack of CBAs in some projects and initiatives can increase the risk of failure and, in some cases, negative outcomes.[18] Furthermore, CBAs can be one way of operationalizing the GEF's "whole of society" approach, as they allow members of society – including public, private, and civil society actors – with varying interests and levels of capacity to collaboratively address complex environmental challenges.

However, CBAs are not meant to be a panacea for all issues involving communities and the environment.[19] In some situations – for example, when dealing with rapid changes that require immediate action – other governance arrangements may be better suited.[20]

2.2 Challenges

The available literature suggests that CBAs have their challenges. Projects employing CBAs are more prone to failure when those projects do not properly identify the affected communities, when the projects' environmental objectives are not aligned with the values and goals of communities, when the projects fail to deliver social and economic benefits, and when the project teams do not work with and strengthen local organizations (e.g. local governments, civil society organizations, businesses). Other factors that can lead to project failure include a lack of local champions within the community, lack of continuity of funding, insufficient involvement of marginalized groups (e.g. women, youth, people with disabilities), shifting of costs of action to local communities without adequate funding, and ignoring of powerful actors.[21] Also, CBAs can take longer to implement than the duration of a typical project, and a truncated process may increase their risk of failure.[22]

The literature also indicates that CBAs are most effective when legacies of past dispossessions, resource extraction, and inequalities within communities are acknowledged and redress options are considered; when there is investment in the capacity of local and intermediary institutions; when communities' rights to the environment are strengthened; and when there is transparency and accountability to communities.[23]

A common challenge identified in the literature for CBAs is the issue of scaling and capacity.[24] Scaling up CBAs beyond a small number of local sites is often difficult because CBAs are by nature local and designed to work in a particular set of local circumstances. Successful scaling requires building capacity in local communities and among civil society, which can take longer than the usual length of a project (three to five years).

[17] Celata and Sanna, 2019; Dumaru, 2010; Galvin et al., 2018; GEF IEO, 2024; Jarillo and Barnett, 2021; McNamara et al., 2020; Sherman and Ford, 2014; van Haren et al., 2019.
[18] Dabelko et al., 2013; Dumaru, 2010.
[19] Child and Cooney, 2019.
[20] Alexander et al., 2016; Berkes, 2004; Dodman and Mitlin, 2013; Biswal et al., 2023.
[21] Child and Cooney, 2019.
[22] Adeyanju et al., 2021; Armitage et al., 2020; Berkes, 2007; Henfrey et al., 2023; Jarillo and Barnett, 2021; McNamara et al., 2020; van Haren et al., 2019; Welter and Jalonen, 2019.
[23] Corrigan and Hay-Edie, 2013; Fariss et al., 2023; Soanes et al., 2021; TNC, 2022.
[24] Knight et al., 2016; Kothari et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2019.

3 When to use community-based approaches and guiding principles

The IEO's evaluation of CBAs in the GEF identified six dimensions of good practice for CBAs (Box 1). In addition, the literature[25] suggests some principles that could be used in deciding when a CBA is needed and in designing and implementing CBA projects. These principles are discussed in this section.

3.1 When to use a community-based approach

Where projects seek to effect change in ecosystems to which people have *de jure or de facto* rights, CBAs can be key to success. ***Hence, CBAs should be considered in cases when community stewardship of local environments is key to achieving GEBs, when community practices put GEBs at risk and could be shifted to more sustainable practices, and when projects affect livelihoods***.

Examples of such GEF activities include projects intended to expand protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures; land use, land-use change, and forestry projects; and projects intended to reduce the negative impacts of the overuse of biological resources, such as overfishing. The use of CBAs is also likely to be applicable in projects executing activities in Indigenous lands and those being implemented by or in partnership with local communities for instance in the Global Biodiversity Framework.

When considering whether a CBA could be a possible solution, the following questions should be asked:

1. Can a CBA influence the behaviours of communities in ways that will both benefit local people and deliver the desired environmental outcomes?

2. Are the economic processes, existing livelihood activities, decision-making systems, and governance structures in which communities operate suitable for implementing CBAs successfully?

3. Are the communities ready and willing to participate in a CBA intervention, and do they have the capacity to do so?

4. Is there any information available about previous consultations and CBA-like processes in the identified communities?

5. Are there any barriers that may prevent or hinder community engagement and participation? Are any specific strategies needed to overcome them (e.g. livelihood interventions, incentives, enforcement tools)?

6. How can the CBA activities endure beyond the life of the project?

[25] For example, Berdej et al., 2015; Chevallier, 2021; Coger et al., 2022; IUCN, 2019; Soanes et al., 2021; Welter and Jalonen, 2019.

3.2 Guiding principles for project design and implementation

CBAs need to ensure the meaningful participation of local communities and explain how barriers to participation can be overcome.

3.2.1 Project design

During the design phase, projects should consider the following:

1. How all relevant stakeholders (including women, youth, Indigenous groups, and other marginalized groups, especially those people who claim rights to local resources) will be incorporated to ensure they have a voice and ownership.

2. The need for co-design and co-management arrangements involving relevant groups and institutional structures, where the powers, roles, and responsibilities of each partner are clearly delineated and appropriate arrangements for dispute resolution are in place.

3. The alignment of project goals with community needs – that is, how the project will deliver benefits to communities as well as GEBs, and the appropriate interventions and incentives for achieving these benefits.

4. Provisions to incorporate Indigenous, traditional, and local knowledge systems and natural resource management practices to create an effective and contextually relevant set of interventions.

5. The strategy and plans to build the capacity of the targeted communities; invest in local institutions; and build fiduciary, program management, and risk management capabilities.

3.2.2 Project implementation

During implementation, the following questions can help assess whether projects incorporate essential CBA elements.

1. Does the project governance structure ensure equitable sharing of powers, functions, benefits, and funding with communities?

2. Does the process for monitoring, learning, and evaluation include local communities?

3. Does the project implementation strategy outline processes to overcome any gender-based inequalities and to ensure the continued involvement of youth, Indigenous Peoples, and other marginalized groups?

4. Does the project implementation strategy include plans for ensuring that the CBA activities endure beyond the life of the investments and facilitate possible scaling?

5. Are project activities improving local communities' access to information and technologies for the management of their ecosystems?

4 Further considerations

As the GEF moves to the design of GEF-9, it is encouraging to see greater attention to the involvement of IPLCs, women, youth, and a focus on policy coherence from local to global. All of these should enhance the role of CBAs in future portfolios. To address the point made by the IEO about the GEF project cycle being a challenge to CBA implementation in terms of both local stakeholders' involvement in design and inadequate project timeline, the GEF could consider augmenting the following:

Local stakeholder engagement consultation. Engaging key stakeholders is essential for good project design (see STAP's papers on multi-stakeholder dialogue[26] and enabling elements of good project design[27]). In some circumstances, it may not be feasible to expect the full involvement of a community and a consultation during the project development stage. However, an inadequate consultation process may worsen local power imbalances, raise undue expectations about project deliverables, and lead to problems within and between communities and project implementers. If possible, project implementers should make use of existing processes or coalitions, ensuring that any gaps and existing power dynamics are addressed,[28] or offer to support the development of new civil society bodies or processes. It is also important to ensure that project proponents have the necessary capacity and know-how to implement CBAs effectively or have engaged other partners who have those skills and experience.

Capacity-building of local communities. CBAs may involve devolving the management of decisions, funding, and project activities to local communities. If the communities do not have the capacity for this devolution and or are inexperienced in fiduciary and project accountability, support may be required. Strong community-based organizations are usually able to fill these gaps in capacity and knowledge where they exist, thus improving the effectiveness of project implementation and reducing the fiduciary risks.[29] The GEF, as part of its "whole of society" approach, could work with countries to build and maintain the capacity of local organizations and strengthen governance networks that link local communities and institutions into a network of collective actors.[30] The Small Grants Programme and the Inclusive Conservation Initiative have experience in the devolution of responsibilities, which could be applied more widely in the GEF portfolio.

Project cycle. Building the capacity of local communities to support durable GEBs can take longer than the usual three- to five-year cycle of GEF funding for projects and therefore may require co-funding agreements with partners who are willing to provide longer-term funding to support local communities.

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[26] Ratner and Stafford Smith, 2020.
[27] Stafford Smith et al., 2021.
[28] Ratner and Stafford Smith, 2020.
[29] Armitage et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2013.
[30] For example, Alexander et al., 2016.

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