

# Knowledge management and learning

A STAP Brief

April 2022



**STAP**

SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL  
ADVISORY PANEL

*An independent group of scientists that advises  
the Global Environment Facility*



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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 (GEF) was established on the eve of the Rio Earth Summit to help tackle our planet's most pressing environmental problems. Since then, the GEF has provided more than \$22 billion in grants and mobilized an additional \$120 billion in co-financing for more than 5,200 projects in 184 countries. Through its Small Grants Programme, the GEF has provided support to nearly 27,000 civil society and community initiatives in 136 countries. <https://www.thegef.org>

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# CONTENTS

|  |          |
|--|----------|
| <b>SUMMARY .....</b>   | <b>3</b> |
| What is the issue? .....   | 3        |
| What is required for GEF-8? .....  | 3        |
| <b>IMPLICATIONS: KEY PATHWAYS IN A THEORY OF CHANGE FOR KM&amp;L<br/>AS AN INTEGRAL COMPONENT OF GEF-8 .....</b> | <b>4</b> |



# SUMMARY

Increasing the impact of Global Environment Facility (GEF) investments requires a vision of knowledge management and learning (KM&L) that treats KM as an integral part of the GEF's business, not as a separate process.

**The Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) suggests that articulating this vision requires a theory of change<sup>1</sup> to guide the development of a new KM&L strategy for GEF-8.**

This brief sets out five pathways to achieve this: governance and leadership; enduring learning; empowerment and exchange; design and application; and tracking and adapting.

## WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

The value of knowledge as an asset has long been recognized by the GEF,<sup>2</sup> and managing knowledge well within the GEF Partnership will help the GEF create and transform knowledge into action, innovation, and change for improved performance.<sup>3</sup>

The literature<sup>4</sup> defines KM as bringing together organizational processes, information processing technologies, organizational strategies, and culture for the enhanced management and leverage of human knowledge and learning to the benefit of an organization. This definition emphasizes the breadth of players and activities that need to be encompassed in an effective KM&L strategy for the GEF.

Knowledge can be both implicit (or tacit) and explicit; implicit knowledge (e.g. in the heads of team members) may account for as much as 90% of an organization's knowledge and is often poorly managed when staff leave.<sup>5</sup> **Knowledge, action, and learning form a mutually reinforcing cycle.** This occurs in GEF projects and programs at the portfolio level and throughout the whole GEF Partnership and recipient countries: all need attention.

**KM&L is everyone's business,** and every team member – from recipient countries, from GEF

Agencies, and from the GEF Secretariat – is a knowledge worker: everyone needs to understand the importance of KM&L and to help create a culture in which it flourishes. **KM&L requires knowledge use and action,** not only archiving. It needs to be systematized so that knowledge is not lost when staff leave.

## WHAT IS REQUIRED FOR GEF-8?

The KM requirements for GEF-8<sup>6</sup> reflect the 2015 GEF KM Approach<sup>7</sup> and advice from STAP:<sup>8</sup>

"The purpose of KM in the GEF context is to facilitate and enable the capture, exchange, and uptake of knowledge within and beyond the GEF Partnership with two key objectives:

- a. to inform global, regional, and national policy dialogues on options and approaches to reverse the course of environmental degradation; and
- b. to improve the impact of GEF-supported projects and programs."<sup>9</sup>

The GEF-8 Strategic Positioning Framework<sup>10</sup> articulates its goal as **systems transformation to deliver global environmental benefits that ensure the GEF-8 vision of a healthy, productive, and resilient environment underpinning the well-being of human societies.**

To deliver this GEF-8 goal, KM&L needs to:

- **Support more rapid learning and application** to keep up with accelerating rates of change.
- **Ensure that innovation and learning are systematized, enduring,** and kept up-to-date.
- **Work across internal and external silos** horizontally to support policy coherence and integration.
- Work **across levels vertically** to help merge top-down and bottom-up actions and **across countries horizontally** to inform priorities and improve policy coherence.
- **Demonstrate that GEF investments are delivering greater impact** to encourage further investment.
- Have continuing support throughout the GEF.

The terms of reference for the GEF-8 KM strategy identify four key elements:<sup>15</sup>

1. Strengthening existing systems to extract and share knowledge and lessons learned from GEF investments.
2. Increasing knowledge flow among GEF investments and partners.
3. Enhancing the use of existing knowledge to improve future GEF investments and to enhance impact, uptake, and scale-up of innovative solutions.
4. Monitoring and measuring the impact of GEF investments in knowledge and learning.

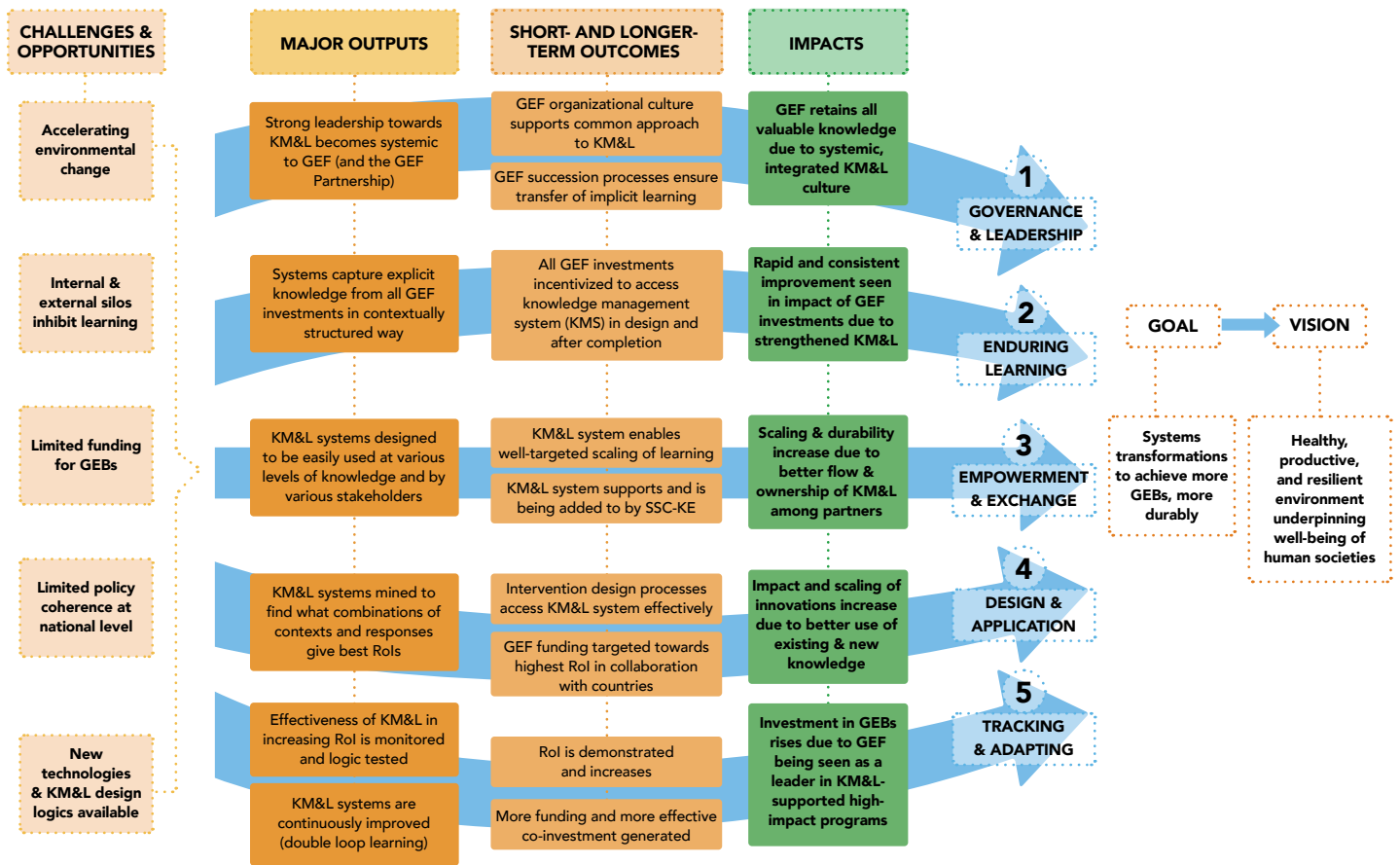


Figure 1: Key pathways in a simple theory of change diagram.

GEB: global environmental benefit; KM&L: knowledge management and learning; Rol: return on investment; SSC-KE: South–South cooperation for knowledge exchange.



# IMPLICATIONS: KEY PATHWAYS IN A THEORY OF CHANGE FOR KM&L AS AN INTEGRAL COMPONENT OF GEF-8

STAP suggests that the terms of reference could be usefully extended to frame the development of a new KM&L strategy through a simple set of necessary and sufficient causal pathways (figure 1) that interact with and reinforce one another to deliver the desired impacts.

**Pathway 1 – Governance and leadership:** to ensure that the *GEF retains all valuable knowledge through having a systemic, integrated KM&L culture*. The governance of knowledge and learning within the GEF Partnership requires strong leadership to engage all staff in a learning culture, which includes processes at the organizational level to ensure the transfer of implicit learning. (The GEF Partnership would benefit from appraising how it handles intrinsic knowledge held, potentially transitorily, by staff.) This pathway is key to the other pathways being able to operate well.

**Pathway 2 – Enduring learning:** to attain *more rapid improvement in the impact of GEF investments through strengthened KM&L processes*. Approaches for capturing and sharing knowledge and learning from GEF investments<sup>11</sup> should be redesigned so that explicit knowledge is systematically recorded<sup>12</sup> and used in relation to context (e.g. the need to know what works where, how, why, and in what circumstances), especially for the most innovative and transformative activities. This requires a careful design process that considers incentives (and penalties) to ensure that the systems are used and are dynamic (e.g. capitalize on lessons learned by gaining insight and understanding from experience and by applying this knowledge to generate new knowledge<sup>13</sup>).

**Pathway 3 – Empowerment and exchange:** to achieve *more scaling and durability from GEF investments through greater flow of, and ownership of, knowledge and learning among and across partners and countries*. The KM&L system should be designed to be easily used for knowledge exchange purposes (e.g. to support regional workshops and training or existing communities of practice) and, in particular, should be relevant, accessible, and

used for South–South cooperation for knowledge exchange.<sup>14</sup> This requires structuring systems that allow top-down guidance but strong bottom-up empowerment (e.g. of recipient countries); this will ensure that stakeholders provide enduring support for scaling towards transformation, and draw on their understanding of successes and failures for learning.

**Pathway 4 – Design and application:** to achieve *more impact and scaling of innovations due to the better use of existing and new knowledge*. Efficient processes should be developed to mine existing knowledge, identify where and how future investments are most effectively deployed to get the best returns on investment, and ensure that knowledge and learning are applied in the design of new investments. The emphasis should be on how the best return on investment can be achieved and on helping countries use this knowledge to direct future investments.

**Pathway 5 – Tracking and adapting:** to *position the GEF as a leader in KM&L-supported high-impact programs*. Results from the GEF investment portfolio should be tracked to show the full value of GEF investments and to demonstrate continual improvement in the GEF's KM&L system (e.g. through adaptive learning) and how KM&L has led to a higher return on investment, and more co-investment, while also supporting the GEF Partnership in achieving more GEBs.



## References

- 1 Stafford Smith, M., 2020. *Theory of Change Primer*. A STAP Advisory Document. Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel to the Global Environment Facility, Washington, D.C.
- 2 GEF, 2015. *GEF Knowledge Management Approach Paper*. GEF/C.48/07/Rev.01. Global Environment Facility, Washington, D.C.,
- 3 Batra, G., Uitto, J.I., & Feinstein, O., 2021. *Environmental Evaluation and Global Development Institutions: A Case Study of the Global Environment Facility*, 1st ed. Routledge, London.
- 4 This paragraph draws on Ahmed et al., 2001. *Learning through Knowledge Management*, Routledge, London; Lytras and Pouloudi, 2006. "Towards the development of a novel taxonomy of knowledge management systems from a learning perspective: an integrated approach to learning and knowledge infrastructures". *Journal of Knowledge Management* 10(6), pp. 64–80.; Chapin et al., 2009. *Principles of Ecosystem Stewardship: Resilience-Based Natural Resource Management in a Changing World*, Springer-Verlag, New York; Staiger-Rivas et al., 2014. "Designing knowledge management interventions in agricultural research for development: methodology, experiences, and lessons learned."
- 5 Most of the knowledge regarding GEF project development and implementation occurs in recipient countries where the project is developed, and it is held by a transient group of project staff. Very few projects have permanent staff housed in established institutions. In-country project staff mainly interact with the GEF implementing agency and only peripherally with the GEF. It is often difficult to even retain and capture that knowledge in the relevant country, where the knowledge has most impact, yet it may be essential as a building block to the next set of projects.
- 6 Technical note on Knowledge Management in the GEF- GEF-8 replenishment. 4 pp. Unpublished internal GEF document.
- 7 GEF, 2015. *GEF Knowledge Management Approach Paper*. GEF/C.48/07/Rev.01.
- 8 STAP, 2021. *Understanding South-South Cooperation for Knowledge Exchange*. Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel to the Global Environment Facility, Washington, D.C.; STAP, 2018. *Managing Knowledge for a Sustainable Future*; STAP, 2015. *Knowledge Management in the GEF: STAP Interim Report*; STAP, 2014. "Managing information and knowledge", in *Delivering Global Environmental Benefits for Sustainable Development*; STAP, 2012. *Research within the GEF: Proposals for Revising the Targeted Research Modality*; STAP, 2012. *Experimental Project Designs in the Global Environment Facility*.
- 9 GEF, 2017. *Status Report on Knowledge Management*.
- 10 GEF, 2022. *GEF-8 Strategic Positioning Framework*.
- 11 In STAP, 2021 (*Understanding South-South Cooperation for Knowledge Exchange*), figure 2 introduces an effective process of knowledge management and exchange. One component of that process calls for the GEF and its partners to rely on federated KM&L systems, based on good typologies of the problems being addressed, the contexts those problems are being addressed in, and the types of intervention (e.g. see *World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies [WOCAT]* or the *conservation measures approach described in STAP 2021*). An effective KM&L system also considers incentives for use in the design and the contribution of results as learning after completion; the system should be designed to be easy to use, and updated, and not a static place for storage. The KM&L system also needs to encompass the different levels of learning, probably in different processes.
- 12 See STAP, 2021 (*Understanding South-South Cooperation for Knowledge Exchange*), which mentions the Conservation Measures Partnership and WOCAT as exemplars of the potential of systematizing the explicit knowledge generated through the GEF, particularly in projects and programs. The approaches depend on typologies to structure the knowledge and on incentives to encourage or require participants to draw on and contribute to underlying knowledge bases, and these approaches should be part of the socio-technical design of the GEF's KM&L system.
- 13 The GEF Independent Evaluation Office evaluation policy points out that knowledge sharing enables partners to capitalize on lessons learned by gaining insight and understanding from experience and by applying this knowledge to generate new knowledge. See *Batra et al., 2021 (Environmental Evaluation and Global Development Institutions: A Case Study of the Global Environment Facility)*. STAP argues that this sharing also makes learning more enduring.
- 14 South-South cooperation for knowledge exchange is a bottom-up process; this contextualizes learning in a salient, legitimate, and credible way for countries (supporting durability of outcomes, as well as local co-investment), and allows rapid horizontal scaling of learning.
- 15 GEF Knowledge Management Strategy. Terms of Reference, October 2021, cl 18. Unpublished internal GEF document.





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