

The Global Environment Facility (GEF): Right Mechanism for Improved Implementation?

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Abstract

The purpose is to feed into the international discussions of environmental financial mechanisms such as for forestry and mercury by examining the performance of the GEF. We discuss performance against effectiveness and legitimacy and focus on institutional set-up and key actors as explanatory factors. Methodologically, we use document and literature analysis and interviews with key actors in organizations, state representatives and NGOs.

The dominant position of the USA and the World Bank has probably contributed to the bias towards a northern environmental agenda and emphasis on effectiveness and climate change projects. The GEF has somewhat predictably diverted the flow of international money from the poorest countries to more rapidly developing countries. Still, despite turf battles between the organizations involved, the broad organisational and thematic composition of the GEF has comparative advantages. This enhances the score on legitimacy especially for biodiversity projects, although they receive less overall funding.

The GEF may be seen as an indication of how, regardless of choosing established or new institutions, basic power structures and interests of dominating parties will be largely decisive for what can be achieved in global environmental governance.

Key Words

the Global Environment Facility, effectiveness, legitimacy, global environmental governance, biodiversity, climate change

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Introduction

UN environmental reform has been in focus over the past decade, and is one of the key issues to be discussed at the upcoming Rio + 20 meeting in 2012. Whether to apply the Global Environment Facility (GEF) as the main financial mechanism or to establish separate financing institutions is among the most difficult issues in the ongoing negotiations on the establishment of an international mercury agreement. This article aims to feed into these discussions by providing an account of the performance of the GEF. Since 1991, it has generated more than US\$51 billion in grants and co-financing from other partners.¹ Although the GEF is by far the most important international environmental institution in terms of economic and operational clout, it has attracted limited scholarly attention.² The GEF represents the opposite approach to the vision of a centralized United Nations Environmental Organization (UNEO), as its main implementing agencies are established international institutions: the World Bank, UNDP and UNEP, and later supplemented by several regional development banks. By inquiring into the merits and shortcomings of this decentralized and comprehensive approach, we can shed light on the current debate on the call for reform of UN environmental institutions (Najam et al., 2006; Andresen, 2007; Evans and Steven, 2011).

According to the GEF homepage, ‘the GEF helps developing countries fund projects and programmes that protect the global environment.’³ This is to be done by providing ‘*new and additional funding to meet the incremental costs of measures to achieve agreed global environmental benefits*’. The mission of the GEF is complicated by two central concepts: ‘incremental costs’ and ‘global environmental benefits’. How to operationalize these costs and how to define global benefits as opposed to local and national ones? Bearing these difficulties in mind, we ask: what has been achieved to date? how can this be explained? and is there room for improvement?

To attempt a comprehensive evaluation of the performance of the GEF is far beyond our scope and ambition. Regular and thorough evaluations are undertaken by the independent GEF Evaluation Office (see e.g. Evaluation Report 34, 2007; Evaluation Report 30, 2006; OPS4, 2010), and we offer a brief summary of the performance of the GEF based on these findings as well as more academic studies of the institution. Our discussion of performance will be linked not only to the concepts of effectiveness but also legitimacy. This we do by comparing the two main areas of GEF financing: climate change and biodiversity. In explaining what has been achieved, we look at the influence of some of the implementing agencies, the most important state actors and NGOs, as well as the role of the Secretariat.

¹ <http://www.thegef.org/gef/whatisgef> Accessed 17 June 2011.

² See Cléménçon (2006), Werksman (2004) and Adler (2009) for some notable exceptions.

³ Economies in transition are also included, but they are not dealt with in this article.

In the next section we discuss the concepts of effectiveness and legitimacy and how these relate to the GEF. Next we turn to the institutional set-up and output produced. How does this translate into effectiveness and legitimacy, and how may it be explained? The concluding section offers a brief discussion of the merits and shortcomings of this decentralized approach.

Studying Effectiveness and Legitimacy

There is broad consensus that effectiveness can be conceived of in terms of output, outcome and impact (Miles et al., 2002). What we want to measure here is the impact of the institution in focus: the extent to which the problem that prompted its establishment has been solved or not. This approach is usually very difficult to apply, due to the long causal chain and the influence of other factors. However, it is the indicator employed by the GEF Evaluation Office when they discuss the impact of certain GEF projects. As these are specific projects targeted at specific problems, this indicator may be used, with caution, in some instances. Output is easily measured, as it deals with rules, regulations and programmes adopted by the institution. In the case of the GEF, the most important outputs are the grants and projects. Output, however, can give information only about potential effectiveness; it is not until policies have been implemented on the ground that we can know their 'true' effectiveness (outcome). Thus, effectiveness can be measured in terms of how the GEF has contributed to increase the capacities of developing countries, thereby facilitating and improving implementation.

Most large-scale studies of the performance of international environmental institutions have focused on effectiveness (Miles et al., 2002, Breitmeier et al., 2006). However, and particularly within global institutions, there are often strong conflicts over values and fairness, making the relation between legitimacy and effectiveness a crucial one. In political theory, legitimacy focuses on the justification and acceptance of political authority. A legitimate institution is one that has a right to govern, based on for example expertise or public accountability rather than the exercise of power (Bodansky, 2007). If there is no firm basis of legitimacy, states are often unwilling to entrust institutions with the necessary decision-making authority.

Legitimacy may be sub-divided into input and output legitimacy (Bäckstrand, 2006; Scharpf, 2001). Input-based (or process-based) legitimacy directs attention to the participation of relevant stakeholders, and transparency and accountability in decision-making processes. Regarding the GEF, input legitimacy relates to the international, national and local levels. The 'score' may well differ at different levels, as well as among various groups of parties and stakeholders. However, whereas effectiveness focuses simply on results, output legitimacy is concerned with the *perception* of results among a broader range of stakeholders. For recipients, output legitimacy derives from how the various affected parties/stakeholders themselves evaluate the benefits that they receive, *ex post*. Do they feel that the results meet their national and local needs? We can expect tension between donors and recipients of GEF funding, as the

main goal of the GEF is to realize *global benefits* rather than respond to specific local needs. Therefore, donors will tend to focus on the traditional cost-effective results generated by their funding and the global benefits achieved. In this, their approach can be expected to be closer to the traditional notion of effectiveness and thereby narrower than output legitimacy. For the recipients, however, higher levels of perceived output legitimacy may compensate, in part, for reduced input legitimacy: if they are satisfied with what they get, they may be less concerned about how the process is organized.

Moving to effectiveness, in analysing and explaining institutional performance, several analysts underline the importance of problem structure (see Miles et al., 2002; Biermann & Siebenhüner, 2009). Basically, the more ‘malign’ a problem, the lower is the effectiveness of the institution presumed to be. As both climate change and biodiversity are malign problems, the GEF faces huge challenges in dealing with these issues. Given the problem structure and limited resources, high levels of performance cannot be expected. In our view, biodiversity is even more difficult to deal with than climate change. Recently, climate change has loomed large on the international political agenda and has risen almost to the level of high politics, not least because of linkages to key issues such as security, energy and trade (Oberthür & Kelly, 2008). Although achievements so far are modest, we can note the considerable attention and high visibility, as well as strong business and associated technology interests – important preconditions for more forceful action. In contrast, biodiversity has attracted far less international political attention. This does not mean that loss of biodiversity is less of a problem than climate change – several weighty sources have argued that the two are equally important (EC, 2008; GBO, 2010).⁴ Rather, the problem of biodiversity loss has appeared less attractive because it is less amenable to technological solutions (Jänicke & Lindemann, 2010). Moreover, it is harder to measure, less visible in the media and seemingly less dramatic, as it appears to be of more immediate relevance to indigenous communities and poor people, not mainstream industrialized society. The latter is a misunderstanding, as the ecosystem services delivered by biodiversity (such as i.a. food, medicines, materials, pollinators, and water- and climate regulation) are of course central to all human well-being (MA, 2005).

We use some elements in the approach elaborated by Miles et al. 2002 in explaining the effectiveness of international regimes as a point of departure. Effectiveness may be explained as a function of the problem-solving capacity of the institution, seen as a function of power, leadership and institutional set-up. The gist of the argument is that some problems will be attacked with greater political and institutional energy than others.

⁴ UN Secretary-General: ‘Conservation of biodiversity makes a critical contribution to moderating the scale of climate change and reducing its negative impacts by making ecosystems – and therefore human societies – more resilient. It is therefore essential that the challenges related to biodiversity and climate change are tackled in a coordinated manner and given equal priority.’
<http://gbo3.cbd.int/the-outlook/gbo3/foreword/foreword-by-the-united-nations-secretary-general.aspx> accessed 16 June 2010.

For instance, power deals with the distribution between ‘pushers’ and ‘laggards’ within the institution. The stronger the pushers are for more ambitious solutions, the more effective will the institution be. However, as we shall see, it is more difficult to distinguish between pushers and laggards within the GEF compared to many other regimes. Also, there may be differences among members as to the emphasis they assign to effectiveness and legitimacy. In this article we combine the concepts of power and leadership, and label it ‘influence’ (Betsill & Corell, 2008). We then measure influence by contrasting the positions and roles of key actors with the decisions taken and the results achieved. The institutional set-up may also make a difference – due to the various types of voting rules, amount of resources involved, status of the Secretariat etc. Although these characteristics are often less significant than the influence of key actors, they are important because they may be more easily changed. This feeds into the discussion of the merits of various types of ‘institutional design’ of institutions (Andresen & Rosendal, 2009). The key point here is the relationship involving the many actors involved within the GEF institutional framework, or the complex web of organizations and regimes, all important agents of policy change (Adler, 2009). Do they all pull in the same coordinated direction, utilizing their comparative advantages (synergy) – or is the picture characterized by lack of trust, by turf battles and conflicts of interest?

As to methodology, we have employed document and literature analysis and interviews with key actors in the GEF Secretariat, the Evaluation Office, the Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP), representatives of selected state actors, the Implementing Agencies (IAs) and ENGOs. This methodology permits a wide range of views to be expressed and allows us to bring out various perceptions of the GEF, its effectiveness and legitimacy. Still, we must bear in mind that actors closely linked to the GEF may be naturally inclined to over-emphasize the positive aspects, whereas external actors may be influenced by their own agendas. A fairly broad and inclusive range of interviews can be expected to provide some balance to this methodological challenge.

The GEF: Institutional Set-up and Output to Date

Organizational Structure

GEF member-states include 182 developing and developed countries, as well as those with economies in transition. Each country has a GEF representative, known as a ‘Focal Point’. The GEF organizational structure consists of a Council, an Assembly, a Secretariat, Implementing and Executing Agencies, as well as a Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) and an independent Evaluation Office.

The main governing body is the GEF Council, which meets twice annually. It is composed of 32 members who represent GEF member-states through regionally divided constituencies, with equal representation from developing and developed countries. The Council approves all GEF full-scale projects, along with GEF policies and operational strategies, work

programmes and annual reports. All Council decisions are preferably to be taken by consensus, but lacking that by a double weighted majority.⁵ The GEF Assembly consists of all the countries that are members of the GEF. It meets once every four years to review the policies and operations of the GEF. Only the Assembly can make amendments to the GEF instrument – the document that established the GEF. The GEF Secretariat, with a staff of 98,⁶ serves and reports to the Assembly and Council, and coordinates the implementation of GEF projects and programmes, as well as the formulation of policies and operational strategies. In this work, they are aided by STAP, which is mandated to provide objective scientific and technical advice. The independent Evaluative Office conducts reviews of GEF's work and publishes lessons learned.

Donor nations fund the GEF. Every four years, donors commit money through the 'GEF Replenishment' process. In August 2006, 32 donor countries pledged US\$3.13 billion to the fourth GEF Replenishment (GEF-4), which funded operations between 2006 and 2010 and for the fifth replenishment (2010-2014) members pledged US\$2.83 billion.⁷ The GEF Trust fund has received a total of \$15.225 billion during its five replenishments.⁸

Beside the member-states, the most influential actors in the GEF are the three Implementing Agencies (IAs): the World Bank, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP). The World Bank has the additional role of serving as trustee; and the GEF Secretariat is located close to the World Bank. Since 1999, the IAs have been joined by several Executive Agencies – the regional development banks (ADB, ADB, EBRD and IADB)⁹ and the FAO, UNIDO and IFAD.¹⁰ There are also institutionalized channels for NGOs to participate in GEF activities and assist in the design, execution, and monitoring of projects. The Implementing Agencies have their own GEF units, functioning in accordance with their respective 'comparative advantages' (GEF instrument, Annex D). Thus, UNDP has a major role in capacity-building and technical assistance, UNEP in technical and scientific analysis and the World Bank in managing investment projects (Werksman, 2004). Along with the Executive Agencies they are responsible for creating project proposals and for managing GEF projects in collaboration with the recipients. Project proposals may also be identified by recipient countries or be proposed by any eligible individual

⁵ 'Double weighted majority' meaning an affirmative vote representing both a 60% majority of the total number of participants and a 60% majority of the total contributors.

⁶ <http://www.gefweb.org/interior.aspx?id=19750> In 2009 staff counted 40; accessed August 25 2009.

http://www.thegef.org/gef/gef_staff Accessed 17 June 2011.

⁷ http://www.thegef.org/gef/sites/thegef.org/files/publication/GEF_Instrument_Oct2011_final_0.pdf. Accessed, 31 January 2012.

⁸ http://www.thegef.org/gef/trust_funds Accessed 4 January 2012.

⁹ The acronyms refer to the Asian Development Bank, African Development Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and Inter-American Development Bank.

¹⁰ UN Food and Agricultural Organization, UN Industrial Development Organization, and International Fund for Agricultural Development.

or group.¹¹ The recipient country approves final projects and provides documentation on GEF activities, including on implementation. The project cycle involves several checkpoints as the GEF priorities are superimposed on those of the respective Implementing Agencies.

The GEF was established as the financial mechanism for four international environmental conventions or areas: the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), International Waters¹² and Ozone depletion¹³. These were followed in 2001 by land degradation, in terms of desertification and deforestation, and persistent organic pollutants (Stockholm POPs Convention). The aim is for the GEF to help fund initiatives that assist developing countries in meeting the objectives of these conventions. Through several Council decisions (2002–2004), a Resources Allocation Framework (RAF) was adopted. This amended the GEF mission to be oriented towards potential and performance. In line with the RAF, resources will be allocated on the basis of a country's potential to generate global environmental benefits, and allocations will be based on the country's performance in such projects.¹⁴

GEF Output: Resources and Projects

From 1991 to 2010, the Global Environment Facility provided US\$9.5 billion in grants and generated over \$42 billion in co-financing from other sources, supporting over 2700 projects in 165 developing countries and countries with economies in transition.¹⁵ GEF allocations by country during this timeframe show that, seen in relation to the large membership from the South, rather few actors have received a comparatively large share of GEF support. The countries that have received more than US\$100 million are all large economies (Category 1):¹⁶ China (516 mill.), Brazil (253), Mexico (210), India (165), Russia (157), and the Philippines (117) (all figures in US\$ mill.). The countries receiving between US\$50 and 100 million (Category 2) are typical medium-size economies: Indonesia (92), Egypt (79), Morocco (70), Poland (70), Peru (59), South Africa (58), Uganda (52), Ukraine (50), and Vietnam (50). From this it follows that the smaller developing economies have received limited assistance from the GEF. There are no African states in Category 1, and the African states in Category 2 are large and fairly developed economies – seen from an African perspective. To some extent this is compensated by a fund designed especially for Africa.

¹¹ Eligibility depends on a country having ratified the relevant treaty and on World Bank loan eligibility, in the case of economies in transition.

¹² For international waters there is no global convention but a cluster of international, regional and sub-regional ones.

¹³ This involves countries with economies in transition that are not covered by the Montreal Protocol's financial mechanism.

¹⁴ The first round of RAF gave all countries a minimum of one million US\$, but future allocations will be based on past performance, in addition to the potential for producing global environmental benefits.

¹⁵ <http://www.thegef.org/gef/whatisgef> Accessed 17 June 2011.

¹⁶ These categorizations and counting have been done by the authors, on the basis of GEF documents.

GEF allocation by focal area reveals that most current projects and funding are divided equally between biodiversity and climate change. According to the GEF project portfolio list, both climate and biodiversity – by far the two largest issue areas in terms of projects and financing – have each received in excess of US\$ 2.5 billion. This means that more than 5 billion of the 7.7 billion went to climate and biodiversity projects between 1991 and 2006.¹⁷ Since then and in terms of *approved* projects, the sums have been quite different: US\$1.8 billion to biodiversity and 3.7 billion allocated to climate change projects. Moreover, when co-financing is added, a further difference is revealed: From 1991 to 2006, climate change received some US\$25 billion, compared to only US\$5 billion for biodiversity.¹⁸ This estimate has since been brought down to US\$19 billion for climate and up to 9 billion to biodiversity.¹⁹

GEF Effectiveness and Legitimacy

Having now accounted for the basic facts, resources and projects allocated – the output produced by the GEF– how can we ‘translate’ this into effectiveness and legitimacy? Most GEF evaluations have focused on the project or local level. In the academic literature we find more general views of the GEF as part of the global environmental governance system. Before we proceed further, a word of caution: the GEF is more of a ‘nested institution’ than an institution in its own right. This applies especially to implementation on the ground, as this is the responsibility of the IAs. Therefore it is exceedingly difficult to evaluate the additional benefits added by the GEF, compared to for example the achievements of the main implementing agency, the World Bank.

This being said, the performance reports show that it took time for the GEF to get under way. The second overall performance study (OPS2, 2002, p.103) concluded that in light of the relatively short existence and modest funding, substantial global *impacts* could not be expected. Only 12% (41 projects) of the GEF project portfolio had been completed and evaluated (OPS2, 2002, p. 102). This illustrates the long and complex project cycle, with proposals queuing up for as much as 66 months in elapsed time from approval to project start (Evaluation Report No 33, 2007). According to the third performance study (OPS3, 2005, p. 3), ‘the GEF Biodiversity Programme has had a notable *impact* on slowing or reducing the loss of biodiversity.’ For climate change, OPS3 concludes that the GEF portfolio has performed satisfactorily, not least in energy efficiency (OPS3, 2005, p. 4).²⁰ The most recent study reports a decline in

¹⁷ <http://www.gefweb.org/interior.aspx?id=44> accessed July 2007. This means that more than 5 billion of the 7.7 billion has been directed at climate and biodiversity. For approved projects the figures are 1.8 billion to biodiversity and 3.7 billion allocated to climate. <http://www.gefonline.org/projectListSQL.cfm> 17 June 2011.

¹⁸ http://www.gefweb.org/interior_right.aspx?id=224 Accessed 6 February 2009.

¹⁹ <http://www.gefonline.org/projectListSQL.cfm> Accessed 17 June 2011.

²⁰ Through all of this, STAP does not receive the greatest of evaluations. Some point out that STAP should have brought in more independent scientists and institutes to check on projects, as it is not possible for only 12 individuals to do all this work. NN1, Natural resources GEF, interview 23 October 2007.

the World Bank share as well as decrease in *real* terms in overall GEF funding (OPS4, 2010). These evaluations all seem to apply a rather traditional effectiveness approach in terms of environmental *impacts* of the projects. Moreover, the latest report indicates that whereas there seems to have been gradual progress over time, this has been impeded more recently due to reduced funding.

The GEF reports and evaluations do not consider the effects of co-financing. Considering the large discrepancy between climate and biodiversity on this account, it seems inevitable that the score will be higher for climate compared to biodiversity at the project level. The direct effects of climate-related projects (e.g. GHG offsets) are also more easily measured. Measuring the impact on biodiversity is more difficult, as this involve more complex issues, ranging from species protection to human livelihoods. A study of the role of the GEF in China has also shown that the impact is higher for climate projects compared to biodiversity projects (Heggelund et al., 2005). Insights from programme studies, however, indicate that the GEF is more critically important in the area of biodiversity than in climate, when it comes to strengthening capacity-building in developing countries (Cléménçon, 2006).

As regards legitimacy at the global level, some have argued that it improved by the GEF restructuring in 1994, which led to nearly universal participation in the Assembly (Matz, 2005, p. 284). However, the significance of this institution is modest. At the national and local levels we assume that perceived legitimacy of the GEF is low among the smaller and poorer developing countries, as they get a very small share of GEF funds. This may be different for major recipients. For example, China has expressed concern over the legitimacy of the overall architecture of the GEF, but is generally satisfied with GEF activities on the ground (Heggelund et al., 2005) – which confirms the assumption of a trade-off between effectiveness and legitimacy.

Most evaluations find that the GEF Small Grants Programme (SPG) is fulfilling an important function. SGP is devoted primarily to biodiversity work.²¹ OPS3 (2005, p. 13) found that the SGP is ‘well received by recipient countries and remains one of the most appreciated programs of GEF’, and also that it is ‘effectively responding to country priorities at the local level’. Both OPS3 (2005, p. 13) and the GEF Biodiversity Programme Study (BPS, 2004) found ‘evidence suggesting that smaller-sized projects may hold more promise in achieving sustainability, not least due to their more transparent, participatory and country driven approach’. OPS4 (2010) reports that those 70% of biodiversity projects with greater focus on global environmental benefits were specifically designed to pay attention to operational local ownership, indicating a higher score for input legitimacy for biodiversity projects over time (OPS4, 2010, p. 27). These findings indicate that the biodiversity projects of the Small Grants Programme have greater perceived legitimacy and effectiveness. This could also imply that even small amounts from the

²¹ 60% biodiversity, 20% climate, 6% international waters and 14% multifocal issues (Boisson de Chazournes, 2005).

GEF go a longer way in small countries, as compared to the major recipients – the BRIC countries.

How does the RAF fit into this perspective? With its emphasis on *performance* and *potential* to generate global environmental benefits, the underlying emphasis seems to be more geared towards effectiveness than legitimacy. It may therefore strengthen the tendency to grant projects to large (climate-related projects) to relatively prosperous developing countries that have good administrative capacities. Poor countries without ‘good governance’ stand to lose. It may also further aggravate the problems for biodiversity projects, due to the difficulty in measuring the potential to generate global benefits. The most problematic aspect of RAF for biodiversity conservation concerns the regional settings. Although these are the most important and most effective projects (species distribution rarely conforms to political borders), these regional projects simply do not fit in with the RAF framework of national performance.²² Moreover, the RAF indicators do not include the CBD objectives of sustainable use and equitable sharing, as they are geared towards the ‘first world priority of preservation’ (Jackson, 2007, p. 126). In a recent mid-term evaluation of the RAF, one conclusion was that the RAF ‘does not provide effective incentives to improve performance’ (Aguilar, 2009, p. 14). Interestingly, it was also noted that the GEF ‘is currently the donor working in the largest amount of countries with the smallest amount of funds’ (ibid). The first quote points to low effectiveness, whereas the other in a sense indicates too much emphasis on legitimacy, with GEF resources being spread too thinly.

In summary, these findings indicate that the GEF has some impact on the problems at hand, particularly in relation to climate. Although the impact of biodiversity projects is harder to measure, it appears that the GEF has done a good job as regards capacity-building here. Compared to the magnitude of the global environmental problems, however, overall the impact is of course modest. Legitimacy at the global level may have increased somewhat over time, but is probably perceived very differently by major as against minor recipients. What we learn from overall performance studies is that the GEF is more critically important in the area of biodiversity than climate. Biodiversity is where it is most needed for strengthening capacity-building in developing countries. Biodiversity projects are usually located in poor areas and tend to score higher on legitimacy than other projects. Further, it is harder to distinguish between global and national benefits in biodiversity than in climate-change projects: most recipients say there is no difference, so it hardly makes sense to fund only the ‘incremental costs’ for ‘global benefits’. This seems to point in the direction of reduced legitimacy in project selection from the perspective of the poorest. However, it is premature to evaluate the effects of the RAF. Its intentions seem geared towards increased effectiveness, but the scores on this dimension and even more so on legitimacy appear to be low.

²² NN7, Senior Policy Advisor for UN Affairs, the Nature Conservancy (TNC), interview 25 Oct 2007.

Thus, we can conclude that the relatively developed among the developing countries get the most funding overall; and, due to co-financing, climate change gets the most resources. This indicates greater GEF effectiveness and probably higher output legitimacy for climate projects and for the 'richer' developing countries. Whereas effectiveness may be higher for climate projects, perceived legitimacy (of both types) may in fact be higher for biodiversity projects, especially as they play a dominant role within the Small Grants Programme. In the following we explore how the key actor and institutional factors may account for this situation.

Explanatory Perspective

Problem structure goes a long way in explaining why progress in terms of effectiveness can be expected to be very modest for the issue-areas of climate change and biodiversity, biodiversity in particular. As problem structures tend to be rather stable and difficult to change, however, we will deal with the two more dynamic perspectives of actor influence and institutional set-up in explaining the variations in GEF performance.

The Council: Key State Actors

The GEF was constituted at independent meetings of participants and was initiated as a 3-year pilot phase at a World Bank Board of Governors meeting in 1989, with the World Bank as legal trustee (Cléménçon, 2006). The idea, promoted by France and Germany, won the confidence of most of the developed countries, whereas most of the developing countries remained sceptical due to the close ties to the World Bank. The South wanted, then as they do now, separate funding mechanisms for each of the major global conventions, along the lines of the model from the Montreal Protocol Fund. By contrast, the North, the USA in particular, was the major driving force in linking the GEF very closely to the World Bank. What emerged was a compromise, a hybrid between an ordinary UN body and a Bretton Woods institution, in terms of financing as well as voting. Considerable political haggling was involved in hammering out the voting procedures, but in practice there has been little effect as all decisions in the Council have been taken by consensus. Thus, although the voting procedures – in principle – give considerable influence to the recipients, in practice the size of members' financial contributions has proven decisive. This lends support to the famous statement by the Norwegian political scientist, Stein Rokkan: 'votes count but resources decide.'

All our interview respondents confirmed the USA as the dominant actor in the GEF. Some paint a rather positive picture of the USA, noting that it gives more priority to the GEF than most others do. For example, Congress is actively involved in discussing the GEF; the USA is more accessible to NGOs than are most other actors, and it has also been the driving force in reforming the GEF. The active role played by the USA in the Council may also reflect the fact that it is the sole key actor that is not party to the CBD and the Kyoto Protocol. Washington sees the GEF as an institution in its own right, one which needs to be accountable and show

results. Also, according to US sources, the COPs have only an advisory role, which is at best diffuse. It is ultimately the Council that calls the shots and that must ensure accountability.²³ On a similar note, the dominant role of the USA can arguably be seen in light of the will to actually do and achieve something,²⁴ bearing in mind that the country is not party to either the CBD or the Kyoto Protocol. Lending support to the former interpretation is the fact that it is 'heavyweight' US ministries like the Treasury and State Department that attend Council meetings.

Many of our respondents had less positive perceptions of the USA, however. Some pointed to the internal controversy between the Treasury and the State Departments. The Treasury is the focal point representing the USA in the Council; it is said to be overly focused on finances and less interested in multilateral cooperation than the State Department. Also, some see Congressional involvement as 'micro-management', detrimental to the effectiveness of the GEF.²⁵

Both these perspectives probably have some merit. Although the USA remains the dominant actor in terms of financing, its role may be eroding. First, the USA has lagged behind in its financial contributions to the GEF. Secondly, during the fourth replenishment round, the USA was not prepared to live up to its obligations (Cléménçon, 2007). The individual countries contribute through a system of burden-sharing, similar to the World Bank. This means a weighted financial system where the standard is set by the member-state contributing the most – in practice, the USA. Other contributions are estimated against this basis. The fourth replenishment showed how Germany, France and Sweden were increasing their shares – but only through voluntary payments as well as paying in Euro rather than US dollars. In practice, this meant that 'in principle, the principle of burden sharing persists'.²⁶ Still, these countries were willing to compensate for the US shortfall.

The dominant role of the USA is facilitated by the fact that the EU is not an actor in its own right within the GEF.²⁷ Still, EU member countries coordinate their positions at meetings held prior to Council meetings. Pending issues are also discussed with the Secretary of the GEF at such meetings.²⁸ Traditionally, key European countries like Germany and France have tended to oppose the traditional US results-based approach in global environmental governance (Vogler & Hannes, 2007). This has also been reflected in discussions over the RAF. Important actors like Japan and the UK play active roles in the GEF and tend to act as bridge-builders between the European and the US approaches.²⁹ The fact that the EU is not an actor weakens the traditional European counter-forces to US

²³ NN3, International Economist, Global Environment Facility Desk Officer, US Department of the Treasury, interview 24 October 2007.

²⁴ NN4, Senior environmental economist, Environmental Defense, interview 22 October 2007.

²⁵ Paul Hofseth, Norwegian Ministry of the Environment, interview, November 2007.

²⁶ NN5, Senior evaluation officer, GEF Evaluation Office, interview 23 October 2007.

²⁷ The EU functions an actor only where common EU policies are directly affected.

²⁸ Paul Hofseth, Norwegian Ministry of the Environment, interview, November 2007.

²⁹ Paul Hofseth, Norwegian Ministry of the Environment, interview, November 2007.

dominance. The differences in approach – and influence – became particularly clear in the case of RAF, which some developing countries and most European countries as well as the NGOs tried to stop. Their efforts failed when the USA threatened to stop the money (Jackson, 2007).

Although the 1994 restructuring of the GEF led to equal representation between the North and the South on the Council (Matz, 2005, p. 284), the overall low number of representatives (32) gives less room for coordination and cooperation for developing (=recipient) countries. Thus, the G-77 has little influence in the GEF – in contrast to the COPs and global UN forums. Most developing countries were against the RAF and voiced their opposition, not least in the COP biodiversity debates (Jackson, 2007). The COPs are not, however, particularly significant for the development of the GEF. The OPS4 report also notes: ‘the GEF Council’s constituency system creates problems for developing countries because of a lack of clear guidelines as to how constituencies are formed, how they operate, how Council members and alternates should be selected and rotated’ (OPS4, 2010, p. 34). As mentioned, most GEF money goes to a few major recipient countries like China, Brazil and India. This may lead to these countries having little incentive to collaborate with the poorer and smaller countries of the South. The GEF agenda seems driven by key donors and a few major recipient countries.

The Role of Green NGOS

Generally, there has never been any strong interest in the GEF among the activist and lobbying ‘green’ NGO community. This may be because the GEF has never been very visible on the international environmental arena and that it is more of a ‘hybrid institution’ than an institution in its own right. However, there are also differences among the NGOs. Some larger operational NGOs like the Nature Conservancy, WWF and IUCN extract funding through the GEF and play an important operational role, and therefore tend to have a generally positive view of the institution.³⁰ They work closely with the GEF; they have good technical relations and are always well informed.³¹ They may also have a central role as policy advisors to countries, and a role in intersecting with IA in implementation. This is not always favoured by recipient governments, who would prefer the funding to go via public agencies, or to local NGOs instead of international NGOs.³² NGOs in general are not necessarily seen as very accountable by recipient countries, while donors tend to trust them more – a point little explored on the literature.

In short, green NGOs tend not to criticize the GEF, as it is an important source of funding.³³ It is mainly through the COPs that other NGOs

³⁰ NN4, Senior environmental economist, Environmental Defense, interview 22 Oct 2007.

³¹ NN5, Senior evaluation officer, GEF Evaluation Office, interview 23 Oct 2007.

³² Echoing findings in GEF evaluation reports, our respondents also point out that the Small Grants Programme (SGP) is much favoured by those involved, as it gives motivation and dedication.

³³ The same is true for IAs; they have their own agendas and use the funding in line with their major goals.

criticize the global environmental financing, and this is where they are most active.³⁴ As expanded upon by NGO respondents, it is far more difficult to be operational and still try to lobby the GEF. For example, everybody knew that Monique Barbut wanted the Adaptation Fund under the Climate Convention while most major NGOs were set against the GEF getting it, as they feared negative consequences for the developing countries. This is not something they felt they could say to her directly, though. ‘Instead, we say that it’s fine: “let the GEF have it”, but behind the scenes we speak to the governments.’³⁵

The smaller NGOs lack sufficient resources to include the GEF among their targets for activism. Generally, NGO observer status in Council has been of little consequence, as they have not been able to coordinate their views and have not been very active in coalition building or as watchdogs.³⁶ True enough, some larger NGOs play an important operational role, but otherwise the NGO community has limited influence on the workings of the GEF.

Significance of the Institutional Set-up

Whereas the Council is most important in explaining the overall direction of the GEF, the Implementing Agencies, the World Bank in particular, are clearly most important for the (perceived) effectiveness and legitimacy of the GEF on the ground. What is the role left to the Secretariat in this setting – is it a traditional facilitator, or does it have some influence of its own? (Biermann & Siebenhuner, 2009)

The role of the Secretariat

Let us start by taking a look at the role played by the Secretariat heads (CEOs). In retrospect, it is often hinted that the former CEO Al Ashrey knew how to play on the World Bank, and that after his term of leadership, the GEF has had less influential leaders. The previous CEO, a Canadian, has been accused of being too weak and ending up a hostage to the USA. The current CEO, however, is perceived as direct and aggressive, interpreted as both her strength and her weakness. Monique Barbut comes from the French Ministry of Finance and has working experience from UNEP, from where she has been recruiting staff. For her, a main goal is to strengthen the GEF Secretariat vis-à-vis the Implementing Agencies. Basically, this is a question of whether the GEF can be strengthened against the World Bank, considering its close ties to the Bank and the Bank’s key role in implementation. This strategy is, unsurprisingly, not viewed with great enthusiasm in the World Bank. Our respondent here was candid that the World Bank had made it clear that

³⁴ NN3, International Economist, Global Environment Facility Desk Officer, US Department of the Treasury, interview 24 Oct 2007.

³⁵ NN7, Senior Policy Advisor for UN Affairs, the Nature Conservancy (TNC), interview 25 Oct 2007.

³⁶ NN4, Senior environmental economist, Environmental Defence, interview 22 October 2007. Corroborated by NN5, Senior evaluation officer, GEF Evaluation Office, interview 23 October 2007.

this is a flawed idea and pointed out that it was the role of the World Bank to work with the countries in mainstreaming environmental issues.³⁷

Still, the CEO's activity is seen by several to have the potential to weaken the Implementing Agencies (IAs).³⁸ The US Treasury Department notes how Barbut is looking for ways to undermine the influence of the IAs altogether: by talking more directly to the countries. Some feel she might to some extent succeed in this mission, but that the question is rather whether it will be the GEF Secretariat or Monique Barbut that will emerge in control. Her vision is for the GEF to have twice or three times more money than at present, but there is scant likelihood that this dream will be fulfilled. However, the GEF has been linked to the UNFCCC Adaptation Fund, and GEF personnel have increased from about 40 to 98 during her term. A second central part of Barbut's strategy is to make the GEF more visible by strengthening its outreach division. Considering that the GEF is almost invisible on the international environmental agenda, this certainly makes sense. It is maintained that Barbut has full control of all statements from the GEF.³⁹ The paradox is that there is full transparency in the GEF, all Council documents and debates are public, unlike the situation in the World Bank. However, there has been and still is so much confusion and complexity that transparency is greatly reduced as regards what it is that the GEF is actually financing.⁴⁰

The GEF Council and the COPs

Part of the criticism of the GEF set-up concerns the Council and the COPs. The Council is often accused of not listening to the COPs. This (again) reflects the representation: countries are often represented in Council by their ministries of finance and in the COPs by their ministries of the environment – where the outputs often come in the form of more general guidance. Some argue that this boils down to domestic co-ordination problems, and the GEF can hardly be blamed for that.⁴¹ On the other hand, the responsibility for and the choice of representation clearly lie with the countries themselves.

This leads back to the distrust and misgiving in COPs concerning the GEF Secretariat. One explanation is that the weaker parties tend to be very critical due to the general lack of multilateral funding, so they end up lashing out at the GEF – and the COP is the only forum where these frustrations can be channelled.

GEF set-up and the relationship between and with the IAs

There was a general view among our respondents (and in the literature as such) that while the GEF set-up may not have been the most efficient

³⁷ NN6, Senior Operation Officer, GEF Coordination Team, Environment Department, World Bank, Interview 24 October 2007.

³⁸ NN1, Natural resources GEF, interview 23 October 2007.

³⁹ NN5, Senior evaluation officer, GEF Evaluation Office, interview 23 October 2007.

⁴⁰ NN5, Senior evaluation officer, GEF Evaluation Office, interview 23 Oct 2007.

⁴¹ NN7, Senior Policy Advisor for UN Affairs, the Nature Conservancy (TNC), interview 25 Oct 2007.

model, it must be recognized as the politically feasible compromise of its time. The arrangement has led to competitiveness between the various IAs, for better and worse. In the view of the larger, operational NGOs, the three IAs lead to inefficiency due to their inherent differences. UNEP is easy to deal with: it has no real capacity and will hence tend to have little influence in project preparations. The UNDP is the most difficult to deal with, as it has a high degree of professionalism through its land offices and also has the capacity for meddling. On the bright side, this also implies that the UNDP can actually be helpful as an ally from time to time. Also the World Bank is difficult to deal with, as it is so closely associated with loans. This will often mean that the small GEF money comes only as a sweetener on top, thrown in to buy off environmental ministries.⁴² Meanwhile, the UNDP and UNEP remain too small and too weak to make a difference.⁴³

Turf battles among and between IAs at the global level include the occasionally uneasy relationship between UNEP and the UNDP.⁴⁴ The dominant position of the latter is due partly to its having more resources, as well as Country Offices in 166 countries. However, there are also signs that UNEP is increasing its share of GEF money, especially within the issue-area of biodiversity.⁴⁵ UNEP and the UNDP have concluded a memorandum of understanding, which has been outwardly highly praised, but dismissed as toothless by internal experts (Rosendal & Andresen, 2004; Andresen & Rosendal, 2009). In any case, the World Bank remains Big Brother in the GEF project portfolio.

As noted, part of Monique Barbut's strategy has been to strengthen the GEF Secretariat in relation to the Implementing Agencies, so let us look into some of the main elements and snags. First, a major incentive behind this strategy is that if a country has problems with World Bank, this will also affect the effectiveness of WB-GEF projects negatively.⁴⁶ A second aspect of this strategy concerns how the Council has come to accept the additional Executive Agencies, with similar rules applying to all agencies. This trend has continued even though the GEF instrument (its 'constitution') does not permit such a set-up. This move was supported by the USA, who sees the original set-up as paving the way for conflicts of interest and turf battles among the IAs. Washington thus backed the increased involvement of the regional banks and has argued for a level playing field between the IAs and executing agencies, as this should force them all toward greater accountability.

⁴² NN7, Senior Policy Advisor for UN Affairs, the Nature Conservancy (TNC), interview 25 Oct 2007.

⁴³ NN4, Senior environmental economist, Environmental Defense, interview 22 October 2007.

⁴⁴ For instance, the UNEP GEF Coordination Office assists 28 countries in preparing biodiversity action plans and national reports and 118 countries in preparing national biosafety frameworks. In comparison, UNDP GEF supports some 250 full-scale projects and 30 medium-sized projects on maintaining and sustainable use of biodiversity in 141 countries. See www.undp.org/gef and www.undp.org/biodiversity

⁴⁵ UNEP's GEF Division increased from 2 to 100 staff members in the course of three years (2001–2004).

⁴⁶ NN1, Natural resources GEF, interview 23 October 2007.

In a sense, this might imply that the balance of power in relation to IAs is being relocated, with slightly more power to the GEF Secretariat.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Monique Barbut's US-backed strategy of talking directly to countries may prove difficult, as there are no land offices for the GEF Secretariat in these countries, so the IAs remain in control. Moreover, funding still goes through IAs, which thereby also maintain their influence. The GEF is almost invisible against the larger shadow of the World Bank, making it hard to see the environmental effects of the GEF against the Bank.⁴⁸

The opposition from the IAs and even GEF staff to this strategy must also be taken into account, not least as it concurs on certain points. As seen from the World Bank, the GEF Secretariat should focus on policy, strategy and communications, instead of getting bogged down in project details, as the IAs have experience when it comes to implementation. Moreover, the World Bank now has a huge and increasing Environmental Policy Department of its own.⁴⁹ One might thus expect less interest in the GEF from the Bank as it begins acquiring its own environmental expertise.

The firm line taken by the World Bank gives rise to the question of how the GEF can ever become more than icing on top of the Bank's projects. Some believe that the World Bank originally wanted to use the GEF for its own purposes – as a sweetener – but that this interest has eroded as GEF has become overly bureaucratic.⁵⁰ On a similar note, the GEF set-up may have been intended as a Trojan horse, getting environmental streamlining into the World Bank through the back door. Meanwhile, the debate continues as to whether the Bank is 'green' or has been merely 'green-washed' (Park, 2007). Also from the Bank itself, there is still an interest in the added funding the GEF brings with it. In addition, even though the picture is clearly one of massive World Bank loans with a tiny GEF grant on top – even that might go a long way, at least if the Bank's and the GEF's parts of projects were blended from the start.⁵¹ Moreover, the GEF may look very different from the perspectives of UNEP and the UNDP. For instance, the GEF Division has expanded and now rivals the general budget of UNEP.⁵²

In the GEF Secretariat there has traditionally been an emphasis on biodiversity in the sense of more growth and capacity for biodiversity in the GEF divisions, compared to climate. This is indeed very different

⁴⁷ NN5, Senior evaluation officer, GEF Evaluation Office, interview 23 October 2007.

⁴⁸ NN3, International Economist, Global Environment Facility Desk Officer, US Department of the Treasury, interview 24 October 2007.

⁴⁹ WB-GEF has 3 to 4 employees; WB Environmental Policy Department employs several hundreds, at central and regional offices: more than 100 on biodiversity and the same for environmental assessments, 13 on climate, 26 coastal and marine, 22 on forestry, 29 Montreal Fund and 8 on POPs.

⁵⁰ NN4, Senior environmental economist, Environmental Defense, interview 22 October 2007.

⁵¹ NN6, Senior Operation Officer, GEF Coordination Team, Environment Department, World Bank, Interview 24 October 2007.

⁵² On the positive side, this brings more funding and attention to UNEP in general, but it has also increased internal skirmishing over limited budgets in UNEP.

from most other trends, including the multilateral environmental agreement secretariats themselves, where most of the growth has been seen in the UNFCCC Secretariat and also more generally the growth in attention to climate change as well as in climate-project portfolios. Most importantly, the demand for biodiversity projects from recipient countries is a major explanation for this ‘bias’ in the GEF. This supports the findings of Clémenton (2006) and would seem to indicate that the GEF itself has tried to be sensitive to the priorities and needs of recipients. Ever since the 1992 Rio Conference, where the two global conventions on biodiversity and climate change were launched, the developing countries have found that the issue of biodiversity is more closely linked to their own environmental policy agendas (Rosendal, 2000).

Concluding Remarks

The dominant position of the USA as well as the World Bank has probably contributed to the bias towards a Northern environmental agenda and an emphasis on effectiveness in the GEF’s climate-change project portfolio. Climate projects also tend to attract co-financing more readily than biodiversity, through the well-established project loads of the World Bank. The GEF has to some extent, and predictably, diverted the flow of international funding from the poorest African countries to the NIC countries, which have higher CO₂ emissions and are thus most interesting from a Northern environmental policy agenda. This may have negative effect for poor countries – but it is understandable, given the explicit ‘global benefits’ goal of the GEF.

Still, despite turf battles among the many organizations involved, the broad organizational and thematic composition of the GEF has also given it overall comparative advantages on the ground, through the roles played by the UNDP, UNEP as well as the GEF Secretariat. This has yielded a fairly high score in terms of legitimacy – not least for biodiversity-related projects, although they receive less overall funding. In other words, being able to draw on well-established organizations of varying scopes and mandates can provide a comprehensive set of competences that can prove useful.

However, there are indications of a growing demand from poor developing countries for biodiversity projects, especially projects focusing on sustainable use and equitable sharing. These aims may become increasingly remote with the development of RAF, which could result in higher overall scores on GEF effectiveness, but less legitimacy among poorer stakeholders. When it comes to strengthening capacity-building in the poorest developing countries, the GEF is of more critical importance in the biodiversity area than in the area of climate change, and this is recognized in the GEF Secretariat. In turn, that could indicate a legitimacy deficit, as the least-developed countries lack influence in the GEF.

A central finding is how the limited number of representatives in the key decision-making body, the GEF Council, gives limited room for cooperation among recipient countries. The G-77 has far less influence

here, compared to the COPs: it is mainly the donors that call the shots. Moreover, it seems likely that the major beneficiaries of the GEF system, like Brazil, India and China, become co-opted by the donors, and have few incentives to work together with their poorer fellow-countries in the South. On the other hand, this may change rapidly as the BRIC countries develop less need for the GEF, which may then turn increasingly to the middle- and lower-income countries. Those countries that tend to don the bridge-builder mantle in UN forums do not play a strong or united role in the GEF. The same is true of most NGOs. They generally fail to coordinate their positions, and the result is that there is no coalition for environmental protection in the poor countries. The big ones are able to extract funding through the GEF and tend to have a positive outlook on its activities. Recipient countries generally do not see NGOs as very accountable, whereas donors tend to trust them much more. On the whole, this picture seems to leave the USA with a particularly dominant role – a role it also feels comfortable with.

Expectations as to the GEF vary among the parties involved. The IAs and many Council members tend to agree that the GEF Secretariat should continue as a think-tank. The USA wants the GEF Secretariat to be more independent of IAs, in order to become more accountable. At the same time, the GEF Council is accused of not listening to the COPs – and hence lacking in accountability towards these forums. The discrepancy is compounded by COP outputs often taking the form of merely general guidance. Weak parties tend to be highly critical to the lack of multilateral funding and end up lashing out at the GEF – and the COP is the only forum where these frustrations can be channelled, with little or no effect on funding. This situation, in addition to the composition of the GEF Council, further points up the lack of confidence among all the parties involved: the GEF Secretariat, the donors, the recipients, and the IAs all suffer from a lack of trust.

Here we should note the current GEF CEO, Monique Barbut, and her strategy of strengthening the GEF Secretariat in relation to the implementing agencies. The question is whether it will be possible to pursue a policy of strengthening the GEF against the World Bank, as long as GEF personnel are defined as World Bank staff. In addition comes the World Bank's fading interest in the GEF as the former begins acquiring its own environmental expertise. Still, GEF activity is seen to have some potential, not least because its CEO has the backing of the USA.

These findings have relevance for how we should judge the GEF as a role model in multilateral environmental funding, and whether building on established institutions can serve as a good option for effective and legitimate problem-solving. This is a relevant question, as similar institutions are currently trying to get off the ground – such as the UN REDD plus. Moreover, whether to use the GEF as a financing institution is a key issue in the ongoing mercury negotiations. Regardless of the choice of established or new institutions, the GEF may itself be seen as an indication of how basic power structures and interests of dominant parties will be largely decisive for what can be achieved in global environmental governance. This does not mean that 'design does not matter': but its significance should not be overestimated.

From the new challenges on the horizon, we conclude that ‘incremental costs’ and ‘global benefits’ still need greater clarification, especially as regards biodiversity projects with the onset of the RAF. With the RAF, resources will be allocated on the bases of the country’s potential to generate global environmental benefits as well as its performance. The controversies over global benefits mainly concern the input legitimacy phase: participation and transparency in decision-making processes on GEF funding. Hence, the performance and global environment potential indicators of the RAF may be expected to further undermine legitimacy in the GEF among the poorest nations. These are important lessons to be drawn by REDD and other – so that a similar development may be avoided (Rosendal & Andersen, 2011)

Considering the mixed bag of achievements and shortcomings of the GEF, we can offer no clear advice as to whether the GEF should be seen as a model for new institutions. However two lessons, perhaps trivial but still important, stand out: First, things do take time. A decade passed before the GEF started to deliver, and this was probably not a unique circumstance. Second, it is better to use political feasibility approaches instead of ‘ideal’ approaches: the former perspective always wins under real-world circumstances, as the experiences of the Global Environment Facility clearly show.

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