

GEF Heart of Conservation Initiative

Frequently Asked Questions on the Call for Expressions of Interest for Component 1

This document provides answers to questions that were asked during in-person meetings (the Rome workshop in February 2025 and a side event at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in April 2025) and webinars in March held to provide information about the GEF Heart of Conservation Initiative (HCI). The latest set of webinars were held on June 5, June 9, and June 11 2025 in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese to provide information on the Call for Expressions of Interest for Component 1 Partners. For more information about the HCI please see the project page (<https://www.worldwildlife.org/projects/heart-of-conservation-initiative>) and the call for expressions of interest <https://www.worldwildlife.org/pages/wwf-gef-expressions-of-interest>).

A. ELIGIBILITY

1. What is the main focus of Component 1 of the Heart of Conservation Initiative (HCI)?

There is an increasing number of institutions, organizations, networks, and funding mechanisms led by Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities that are managing, distributing, and disbursing funds to affiliated communities, members, and partners. These organizations are able to support communities, members, and partners in ways that are attuned to their local realities. Overall, they perform an important role by enabling increased levels of funding to reach Indigenous Peoples and local communities in locally appropriate ways. Component 1 of HCI is designed to build partnerships with a limited number of such organizations to enable them to support affiliated communities, members and partners to enhance stewardship of lands, territories and resources and deliver Global Environmental Benefits.

2. What are the eligibility criteria for Component 1 partners?

The call for expressions of interest is open to organizations that comply with the following eligibility criteria:

- a. Applicant organizations are either:
 - Representative institutions of Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities;
 - Organizations, networks or funding mechanisms established by Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities to advance their rights and wellbeing;
 - A consortium composed of any of the above types of organizations.
- b. Applicant organizations must be registered and operate in GEF-eligible country/countries.
- c. Applicant organizations must have established mechanisms for consultation and accountability with the Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities that they represent or serve.

- d. Applicant organizations must have demonstrable institutional capacities (including administrative, financial, project management and monitoring capacities) and experience in effectively managing complex projects, grants and risks.
- e. Applicant organizations must have adequate institutional capacity and experience in managing, distributing and/or disbursing funds to members, communities or partners working on the ground.
- f. Applicant organizations must have documented experience in supporting or implementing on-the-ground projects determined by Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities.
- g. Applicant organizations must have a proven strategy or approach to ensure inclusion and leadership of women and youth in their work.

3. Who are “Indigenous Peoples” and “local communities”?

The identification criteria for Indigenous Peoples are enshrined in ILO Convention No. 169, Article 1. The Convention establishes that Indigenous Peoples are:

- Peoples who descend from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions.
- Moreover, self-identification as Indigenous is a fundamental criterion.

In accordance with article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the local communities considered under the HCI are those who embody traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.

4. Can an Indigenous-led fund from a GEF-eligible country apply?

Yes, we especially encourage Indigenous-led funds to apply. Eligible applicants are:

- Representative institutions of Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities;
- Organizations, networks or funding mechanisms established by Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities to advance their rights and wellbeing; or
- A consortium composed of any of the above types of organizations.

The fact that the organization is established to manage, distribute and disburse funds makes this a strong applicant.

5. If an NGO organization that has Indigenous leadership, works with Indigenous communities and is registered in a GEF-eligible country eligible, but is not a representative institution of a particular community, is that organization eligible?

Yes, that organization would be considered as an organization established by Indigenous Peoples to advance their rights and wellbeing, and would therefore be eligible, in accordance with the established criteria. As above, organizations are eligible if they are:

- Representative institutions of Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities;
- Organizations, networks or funding mechanisms established by Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities to advance their rights and wellbeing; or
- A consortium composed of any of the above types of organizations.

6. Can a locally-led community-based organization (CBOs) that does work with a small number of communities apply?

A locally-led organization is eligible if it is specifically aimed at representing or serving Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities. However, Component 1 is specifically aimed at larger organizations that have or wish to develop the capacity to manage, distribute and disburse funds to a range of other communities, CBOs and/or members to deliver Global Environmental Benefits.

7. Are international NGOs that work directly with Indigenous Peoples and local communities eligible to apply? Can a registered nonprofit working with local communities or grassroots civil society organizations (CSOs) be eligible for this funding? What if they have one staff member who is an Indigenous person, does that make them eligible to apply?

No. The only eligible applicants are:

- Representative institutions of Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities;
- Organizations, networks or funding mechanisms established by Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities to advance their rights and wellbeing; or
- A consortium composed of any of the above types of organizations.

Having an Indigenous staff member does not make other types of organizations eligible to apply under HCI. Likewise, NGOs, registered non-profits, and international NGOs, even if they work directly with Indigenous Peoples and local communities, are not eligible to apply.

8. Is a GEF Small Grants Program (SGP) country programme eligible to apply for HCI?

No. The eligible applicants are:

- Representative institutions of Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities
- Organizations, networks or funding mechanisms established by Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities to advance their rights and wellbeing; or
- A consortium composed of any of the above types of organizations.

9. Can legal entities that manage national parks, where Indigenous communities are included, eligible to apply?

The only eligible applicants are institutions, organizations, networks or funding mechanisms of Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities. Hence, a National Park authority as such is not an eligible applicant.

10. Do all the members of a consortium that is applying need to meet all the eligibility requirements?

Yes, all members of a consortium must be either:

- Representative institutions of Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities; or
- Organizations, networks or funding mechanisms established by Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities to advance their rights and wellbeing.

11. Is there a limit to the number of organisations in a consortium?

No, there is no limit to the number of organizations applying as a consortium, as long as the members are in GEF-eligible countries.

12. Can two or more organizations that support Indigenous or local community associations—but are not Indigenous or local community led organizations themselves—submit a proposal as a consortium?

No. All members of a consortium must be either:

- Representative institutions of Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities; or
- Organizations, networks or funding mechanisms established by Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities to advance their rights and wellbeing.

13. If a group or organizations decide to apply as a consortium, how should they fill out the format for EoI, which only asks for information about one organization (questions 1-5)?

When filling out the format for EoI for a consortium, please provide information about the lead applicant of the consortium (the organization that will be the contract holder) in response to questions 1-5, and provide information about the other consortium members under question 6 (names, country of registration etc).

B. FISCAL SPONSORS

14. Can an organization apply with a fiscal sponsor, and if so who needs to demonstrate eligibility, the applicant or the fiscal sponsor? Do both the applicant and the fiscal sponsor need to be registered in a GEF-eligible country?

An organization can apply with a fiscal sponsor. It is the applicant and not the fiscal sponsor that needs to fulfill the eligibility requirements. The applicant needs to be registered in a GEF-eligible country; however, the fiscal sponsor does not need to be registered in a GEF-eligible country.

15. Can the fiscal sponsor be a lead applicant?

No. The only eligible applicants are:

- o Representative institutions of Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities;
- o Organizations, networks or funding mechanisms established by Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities to advance their rights and wellbeing;
- o A consortium composed of any of the above types of organizations.

16. Is it the applicant or is it the fiscal sponsor that needs to demonstrate institutional capacities (administrative, financial, project management and monitoring) and experience in effectively managing complex projects, grants and risks?

It is the applicant that needs to demonstrate institutional capacities and experience in effectively managing complex projects, grants and risks. They can work with a fiscal sponsor but it will still be the applicant that is the executing partner.

17. Should fiscal sponsors be an Indigenous Peoples' Organization (IPO) or can an NGO be a fiscal sponsor?

The fiscal sponsor does not need to be an Indigenous Peoples' or a local community organization. The fiscal sponsor may be an IPO, NGO, or international NGO.

18. If an applicant works with a fiscal sponsor, is it the fiscal sponsor that should fill out the format for EoI and provide information about the organization's name, country and year of registration, website, contact person and experiences?

No. The EoI format must be filled out by the applicant, i.e., the Indigenous Peoples and/or local community fund or organization, in accordance with the established eligibility criteria. If the applicant works with a fiscal sponsor, it should include information about that arrangement as well as information about the fiscal sponsor in its response to **question 10** of the EoI, about the total budget of the organization for the past three years.

If a selected partner chooses to work with a fiscal sponsor, it should be clearly indicated in the contractual arrangements between the selected partner and WWF that the funding is in support of the applicant and that the decision about fiscal sponsorship is made by the applicant, exercising its right to self-determination.

19. Can an official/government institution be a fiscal sponsor for community projects in a specific area?

Such an arrangement can only be considered if an eligible applicant (Indigenous Peoples and /or local community) requests such an official/government institution to be the fiscal sponsor for its on-the-ground project.

C. OTHER GEF PROJECTS AND BUDGET

20. Can an organization that is receiving funding under the GEF-7 Inclusive Conservation Initiative (ICI) apply to become a GEF HCI Component 1 partner?

Yes. But the work that forms the focus of the application should be additional to the ICI work. Moreover, during partner selection, HCI will pursue geographic and ecosystem diversity across the HCI portfolio of sub-projects.

21. Is an organization that is approved to receive other GEF 8 funding eligible?

Yes, organizations that have other sources of funding, including from GEF 8, can still apply for HCI. However, there must be no double-funding or duplication of already funded activities or double counting of co-finance or hectares reported.

22. Is there a minimum annual budget requirement for applicants to be eligible?

No, there is no minimum annual budget required for applicants to be eligible. But they must at least meet the following criteria:

- Applicant organizations must have demonstrable institutional capacities (including administrative, financial, project management and monitoring capacities) and experience in effectively managing complex projects, grants and risks.
- Applicant organizations must have adequate institutional capacity and experience in managing, distributing and/or disbursing funds to members, communities or partners working on the ground.
- Applicant organizations must have documented experience in supporting or implementing on-the-ground projects determined by Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities.
- Applicant organizations must have a proven strategy or approach to ensure inclusion and leadership of women and youth in their work.

However, the HCI was designed to move beyond what the GEF Small Grants Program and others are supporting, and will provide grants of at least \$1 million dollars over four years.

23. What is the desired ratio between the operational costs of the applicant and the budget going to on-the-ground communities?

There is no recommended ratio between the operational costs of the applicant and the budget allocated for communities on the ground. The overall guidance is that “a significant proportion” of the budget should reach communities on-the-ground, but the right proportion will be context specific.

24. Can “sub-grants to communities” be a category/item in the budget?

Yes. Sub-granting or disbursing monies funds to communities and/or members is a relevant and desirable activity within the project, it should be reflected as a category in the budget with a description in the EoI form.

D. PROJECT PROPOSAL ASSESSMENT

25. What are the evaluation criteria for projects?

The evaluation criteria are based on the above selection criteria proposals for on-the-ground projects and give a maximum score to each criteria. This is an illustrative outline of the evaluation criteria that will be used as a guide for the technical experts to review, assess and rank the proposals.

| Selection criteria | Maximum score |
|--|----------------------|
| The proposal has a clear objective and feasible results with a view to delivering Global Environmental Benefits in GEF eligible country/countries. | 15 points |
| The proposal will ensure that a significant proportion of the funds are distributed to members, communities or partners working on the ground, on self-determined priorities for conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. | 20 points |
| The proposal has a clear strategy for enhancing stewardship of Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities of lands, territories and resources. | 15 points |
| The proposal includes actions to ensure the inclusion of women and youth at all levels of activities. | 10 points |
| The proposal presents a clear strategy for involving other relevant rightsholders and stakeholders to maximize the impact and sustainability of results. | 10 points |
| The proposal will increase the visibility and recognition of the contributions of Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities in conservation and sustainable use of globally significant biodiversity. | 10 points |

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| The partners will report on the number of direct beneficiaries (disaggregated by gender). | 10 points |
| The partners will report on at least one other GEF core indicator | 10 points |
| Total (Maximum score possible) | 100 points |

26. What are the relevant GEF core indicators for projects?

All GEF-funded projects report on GEF core indicators, which are standard indicators that the GEF Secretariat uses to understand the performance and results of their portfolio. All sub-projects must report on the number of direct beneficiaries, disaggregated by gender. Additionally, grantees will be expected to report on one or more of the indicators below, based on what is most relevant to the project.

- Terrestrial protected areas under improved management effectiveness (# ha)
- Marine protected areas under improved management effectiveness (# ha)
- Area of forest and forest land under restoration (# ha)
- Area of wetlands (including estuaries and mangroves) under restoration (# ha)
- Terrestrial OECMs supported (name and # ha)
- Marine OECMs supported (name and # ha)

Most GEF projects only report on a few of the core indicators above and sometimes only one. Applicants are encouraged to select the indicators you think best describes the planned activities while counting every hectare only once. If selected, the proponents will work with the WWF team to ensure alignment with GEF definitions.

As a result of activities on the ground reported in hectares, some projects may also report greenhouse gas emissions mitigated (Core Indicator 6).

Additional guidance can be found in the following document:
https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/documents/2022-09/Results_Framework_Guidelines_2022_06_30.pdf

27. How are projects assessed when they score well in one high-weight criterion (e.g., fund distribution) but weakly in another (e.g., women/youth inclusion)?

The technical assessment of all eligible Expressions of Interest includes scoring of individual criteria and the calculation of an overall score per EoI. It's anticipated that the 50 highest-ranked EOIs will undergo a more detailed technical analysis by a team of experts and the 30 highest ranking EoIs will be shared with the Interim Steering Committee for final decision-making, taking into account regional and ecosystem balance.

28. Are Letters of No Objection required from the governments of the countries where applicants are based, or from each of the countries where activities will take place?

Letters of No Objection will be required from the governments of the countries where the selected applicants are based, but not from each of the governments where activities will take place (in the case of multi-country projects) .

29. Can a multi-country project be submitted?

Yes.

30. Can the private sector be included in the proposal, considering its significant impact on the ecosystem and the need to engage them to achieve effective results?

Yes, one of the evaluation criteria is, “The proposal presents a clear strategy for involving other relevant rightsholders and stakeholders to maximize the impact and sustainability of results.” Private sector partners can absolutely be included if the applicant wants to work with them.

31. Should project ideas be planned to cover the entire 2026–2030 period, as indicated in the informational documents, or would it be acceptable to propose shorter initiatives, for example, projects with a two-year duration?

A core evaluation criteria is the applicant’s contributions to Global Environmental Benefits, which often require a longer period to deliver. But, if the applicant plans to make sub-grants and it is appropriate to make grants for shorter periods than 5 years, that is acceptable.

E. ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

32. Should the Expression of Interest be a maximum of 10 pages including annexes?

Yes, the Eoi should be of a maximum of 10 pages, including all annexes. Selected partners will go on to develop a full sub-project plan.

33. Are there additional documentary requirements, such as certificates of registration, audited financial statements and others, that will be required during the expression of interest phase?

No, there are no additional requirements for submitting documentation at this stage. Applicants should answer all the questions in the Eoi format, keeping within the limit of 10 pages. Selected applicants will be asked to submit additional documentation at a later stage.

34. What time zone and time is the deadline on June 30?

As long as the Eol is submitted on June 30, there is no specific time zone/deadline to take into account.

35. Do applicants need to present a Letter of No Objection at the expression of interest phase?

No. There is no requirement for a letter with the submission of the Expression of Interest. The HCI team will work with the selected projects to obtain needed documents.

36. Will Component 2 funding be restricted to Component 1?

Component 2 of the HCI has two main elements: one that aims at supporting Component 1 partners to address their self-identified capacity strengthening needs, and another that aims at providing training opportunities and other resources for collective strengthening of Indigenous Peoples and local community organizations and networks.

37. What is the implementation period for the on-the-ground projects under component 1?

The on-the-ground projects have the same implementation period as the overall HCI – from 2026 to 2030.

38. Would the following activities be considered eligible in order to raise the visibility of the contributions of Indigenous Peoples in biodiversity conservation: campaigns, production of audiovisual materials, community media, participation in international events?

Yes, all such activities would be eligible so long as they are part of a wider range of activities that deliver Global Environmental Benefits.