



GEF SGP CSO Challenge Program

Call for Proposals

IUCN and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) welcome submission of proposals to the **GEF Small Grants Program CSO Challenge Program (GEF SGP CSO Challenge Program)** – a new global program that seeks to identify, reward, support and scale up high-impact innovative environmental solutions from civil society organizations. Selected CSOs will be supported with **up to \$300k USD in direct grants** along with demand-driven capacity building and other supports intended to help strengthen impact and expand the sharing of good practices. Eligible proposals must: come from CSOs based in developing countries or economies in transition; be focused on at least 1 of 5 strategic areas (see below); and be based on existing work with high potential for impact and scalability (not just a concept) among other selection criteria. The Program especially welcomes submissions from and with extensive participation of under-represented groups including **youth, women, indigenous peoples and local communities**.

1. Background

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and local communities live and operate on the front lines of the climate, species extinction, land degradation, and other environmental crises. Their ideas, innovations, and work to address these challenges are essential but often under-funded and under-recognized.

In recognition of the importance of CSO work and contributions to solving environmental challenges, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) has, since 1992, implemented the Small Grants Program (SGP), that provides direct grants to CSOs. Since its establishment, the SGP has delivered over \$838 million in project funding to nearly 30,000 community-based projects in 136 countries around the world.

Beginning in 2026, the GEF and IUCN are launching a new **SGP CSO Challenge Program** that aims to recognize and support the scaling and replication of high-impact, innovative environmental approaches and solutions spearheaded by CSOs. Distinguishing features of the SGP CSO Challenge Program include use of larger grants (up to a maximum of \$300k per organization compared with a \$75k limit for the Core GEF SGP program); use of a global, open, inclusive call for proposals rather than national-level calls for proposals and selection; and access to a tailored suite of program-level supports benefitting selected and participating CSOs including technical support and mentoring and support for knowledge sharing and awareness raising. In addition, the CSO Challenge Program especially welcomes proposals from and with extensive participation of under-represented groups including youth, women, indigenous peoples and local communities.

Through the CSO Challenge Program, IUCN and the GEF expect to make a substantial contribution towards increasing awareness and support for CSO-led conservation, through identifying, supporting, and showcasing impactful, innovative, CSO-led solutions to key challenges, including those from youth, women, and Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

2. Program Objectives and Supports

The primary objective of the SGP CSO Challenge Program is to **identify, reward, support, and foster the replication and scaling up of high-impact, innovative environmental approaches and solutions led by CSOs**. The program seeks to:

1. **Recognize and support high-impact CSO-led initiatives** that address global environmental challenges.
2. **Enhance the capacity** of selected CSOs to design, implement, and scale up innovative environmental solutions.
3. **Foster knowledge creation, peer-to-peer learning, and partnerships** among CSOs, governments, donors, and the private sector.
4. **Support the inclusion of under-represented groups in CSO-led conservation including women, youth and Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities.**

The GEF SGP CSO Challenge Program awards **grants up to \$300,000 USD** for supporting CSOs in:

- Replicating proven models in new communities, contexts or locations
- Adapting existing solutions to local conditions
- Testing scaling approaches for promising innovations

In addition to the financial grants, the Program provides a series of demand-driven support for building the capacity of CSOs, including:

- Development of organizational capacities in areas such as green entrepreneurship, financial management, leadership, policy influencing, communications, proposal development, and innovation and risk management.
- Technical training and assistance in using IUCN tools for assessing, strengthening, and monitoring work to conserve/protect threatened ecosystems and biodiversity in protected areas, agricultural landscapes, and urban environments.
- Visibility and opportunities to connect, collaborate, and share solutions with other CSOs and policy makers across the globe through peer-learning platforms, global/regional knowledge exchange workshops and communities of practice.

Winners and finalists and will be selected through a transparent and inclusive process. Winners will receive direct investment and full programmatic support, while runners-up will receive recognition and access to capacity development support through peer-to-peer learning workshops, and relevant networks and communities of practice.

3. Who can apply?

- The Program seeks to support specific replication and scaling of already tested initiatives or work under implementation.
- Proponents and Initiatives to be replicated / scaled must be based in GEF recipient countries listed here: <https://www.thegef.org/projects-operations/recipient-countries>.
- Proponents must be **Civil Society Organizations** (CSOs) with legal entity and a bank account in the name of the organization

- Projects supported by the GEF SGP CSO Challenge Program must be aligned with at least one of the **five SGP 2.0 priority areas**:
 - **Community-based management of threatened ecosystems and species.**
 - **Sustainable agriculture and fisheries, and food security.**
 - **Low-carbon energy access and co-benefits.**
 - **Local to global coalitions for chemicals and waste management.**
 - **Catalyzing sustainable urban solutions.**

Before preparing your application, please refer to the Guidelines for Applicants on the program website for instructions on how to apply and more information on eligibility criteria and the granting process.

4. Selection Criteria

Proposals can be subnational, national, regional, or global in scope. Proposals will be assessed based on the following criteria:

Categories	Criteria
1. Alignment with SGP 2.0 five priority areas	The extent to which the project is aligned with at least one of the SGP 2.0 five priority areas
2. Impact potential	The extent to which the proposed initiative, approach, and solution of the CSO-led project contribute to generating global environmental benefits.
3. Alignment and support to countries to deliver on national MEA commitments	The extent to which the proposal supports host country commitments as set forth in Multilateral Environmental Agreements including the CBD, UNFCCC, UNCCD, GBF, and others. Support may include influencing, supporting, and delivering on MEA commitments, plans and targets. A section on the application template will be provided for CSO-proponents to elaborate on these objectives and aligned work.
4. Scalability	The extent to which the proposal has a robust and realistic replication and/or scaling potential and strategy.
5. Inclusivity	The extent to which the proposal has the potential to enhance the inclusiveness and the diversity of stakeholders and expand the CSO networks with whom the GEF program partners with including those led by youth, women, and indigenous peoples.
6. Innovation	The extent to which the environmental solutions proposed by the project are innovative with regards to their context, and the extent to which this innovation supports achievement of project's objectives including generation of global environmental benefits. The call for proposals will clarify that the CSO Challenge Program seeks to identify and support a wide range of innovations including technological, finance, business models, policy, and institutional. Moreover, as will be explained in the call for proposals, innovation in the context of the CSO Challenge Program is understood to also encompass engagement with new and underrepresented CSO solution providers and networks including those from youth, women, and IP-led organizations.

7. Robust Theory of Change and Logical Framework	The extent to which the project’s overall objective, purpose and intended results are clearly defined, appropriate, achievable and aligned with credible pathways to transformational change. Does the project include a sound logical framework with clear results and indicators? Is the proposed approach feasible and is the timeline for completing the work clear and realistic? Does the project clearly identify underlying assumptions and risks?
8. Technical competency of proponent	The extent to which the skills of the proponent cover sufficient breadth of expertise to implement the project and communicate outputs. Does the proponent have a successful track record of similar projects and/or approaches in the region, including but not limited to prior support from the GEF Core SGP program and successful outcomes?
9. Financial viability	The extent to which the budget including co-financing is seen as adequate to achieve the expected outputs and outcomes and is cost efficient when compared against similar initiatives. Are all activities appropriately reflected in the budget?
10. Sustainability	The extent to which there a clear approach for ensuring the sustainability of the project activities beyond the end of the project
11. Partnerships and cooperation with key stakeholders	The extent to which the project fosters partnerships and cooperation at the local and regional levels. Does the project have the potential to establish or maintain long-term relationships for collaboration with relevant local, national and regional government, CSOs, businesses, academia? Does it promote coordination and synergies with existing and future initiatives?
12. Degree of commitment to knowledge sharing and learning	The extent to which the project proponent is committed to sharing knowledge with other CSOs and partners to ensure that the proposed solutions supported by the Program are effectively disseminated far and wide.
13. Risk management and mitigation	The extent to which measures are provided to mitigate or overcome identified risks

5. Proposal Submission and Selection Process

Proposals must be submitted through the program website: <https://csochallenge.org/>. See program website for call for proposal launch and due dates.

Proposals must be submitted in **English, French, or Spanish**. The review process and the final decision on awarding the grant are expected to take approximately 3 months following the deadline of the Call for Proposals, including a second Full Proposal development stage for shortlisted applicants.

The selection of the proposals consists of the following process:

Step 1: Eligibility check

Step 2: Technical review

Proposals (Concept Notes) will be shortlisted based on the evaluation by a Selection Committee. Applicants may be contacted and asked to provide additional information.

Shortlisted applicants will be asked to develop Full Proposals. A second round of review is carried out by the Selection Committee and the cohort of winners and finalists is selected.

Step 3: Announcement of winners and finalists

Step 4: Contract negotiation

See program website for the timelines for each regional call for proposals.

Before preparing your application, please refer to the Guidelines for Applicants for instructions on how to apply and more information on eligibility criteria and the granting process.

We look forward to receiving your proposals and working together to achieve global environmental benefits for people and the planet!