SGP CSO Innovation Challenge Program

CALL FOR PROPOSALS - 2026

GUIDELINES FOR APPLICANTS FOR THE CONCEPT NOTE PHASE

Led By:

In Partnership With:

Use this guide as a practical companion to the application template. Focus first on eligibility, then on the sections where reviewers look for evidence of impact, scalability, and feasibility.

1. Background

What this program is for

The **GEF SGP CSO Innovation Challenge Program** supports civil society organizations with proven environmental solutions that are ready to grow, replicate, or scale. It is designed for initiatives that can deliver clear global environmental benefits while strengthening inclusion, learning, and partnerships.

The program provides grant funding of up to **$300,000 USD**, along with technical and institutional support. Proposals may be subnational, national, regional, or global in scope, but they must align with **at least one** of the five GEF SGP priority areas listed below.

Grantees receive **both financial and programmatic support**, including technical and institutional capacity development. Selected finalists also receive **programmatic support** to strengthen their capacities and improve their chances of securing additional financing or investment.

Applicants apply through the program website **(see How to apply, below).**

Through this program, the GEF SGP CSO Innovation Challenge aims to identify, reward, and support CSO-led initiatives that deliver clear global environmental benefits. Specifically, the program seeks to:

- Recognize and support high-impact CSO-led initiatives that address global environmental challenges.
- **Enhance the capacity** of CSOs to design, implement, and scale up innovative environmental solutions.
- **Support the replication and/or scaling up of solutions that deliver clear conservation benefits**, among other global environmental benefits.
- **Foster knowledge creation, peer-to-peer learning, and partnerships** among CSOs, governments, donors, and the private sector.
- **Promote the empowerment of women, youth and Indigenous Peoples** and **Local Communities**.

Innovation can include technology, finance, business models, policy, institutions, or new partnerships, including with youth-, women-, and Indigenous Peoples-led organizations.

2. How to apply

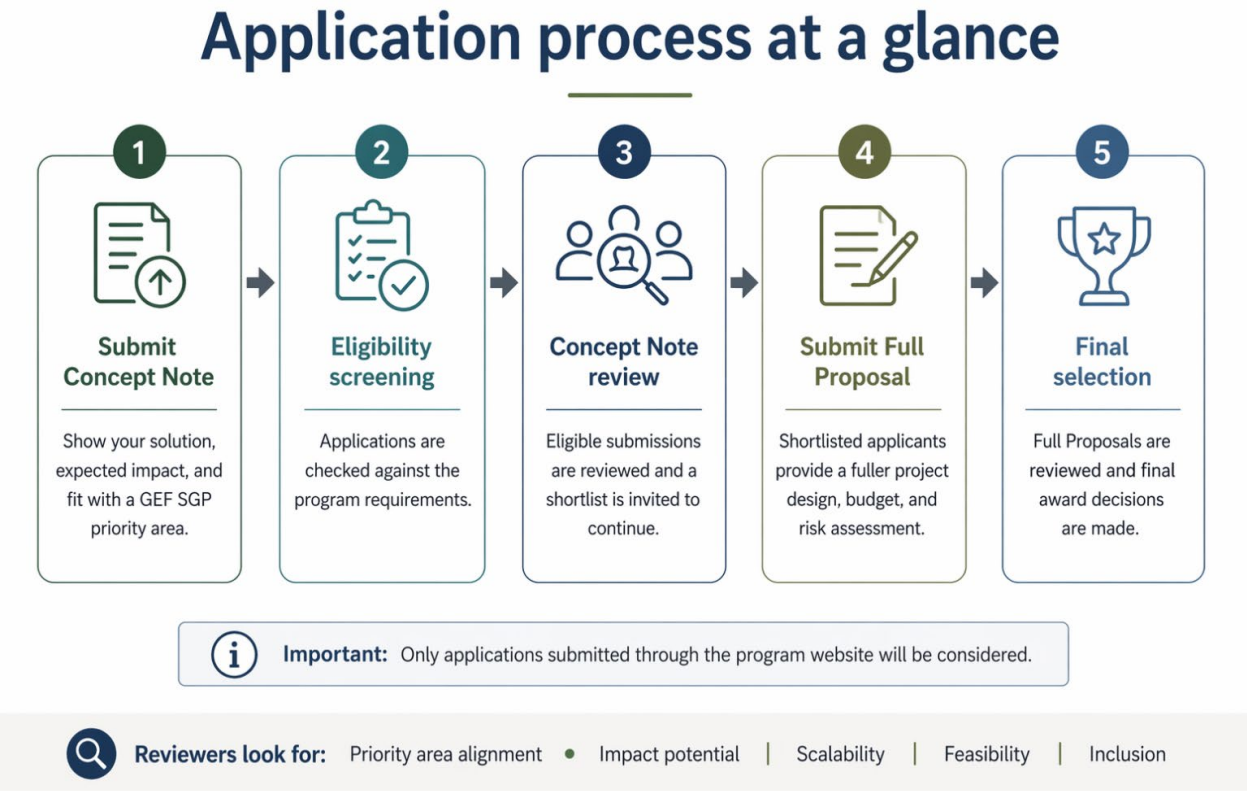
Applications can be submitted only through the program website at **https://csochallenge.org/.**

Applications may be submitted in **English, French, or Spanish**. Templates and guidance are available in each language.

- ✓ The reference application template in English (Word) can be downloaded here.
- ✓ The reference application template in French (Word) can be downloaded here.
- ✓ The reference application template In Spanish (Word) can be downloaded here.

Use the PDF templates as references or for offline drafting, but **only applications submitted through the program website will be reviewed.**

Applications steps:



The concept note is not just an eligibility form. It is your first opportunity to show that your organization has a **proven solution**, a **clear environmental result**, and a **realistic path to replication or scale**. Keep answers concise, specific, and evidence-based.

The table below walks through each section of the Concept Note template and explains what reviewers expect in your response. Use it as a checklist as you draft.

Concept Note — Section-by-Section Guidance

Section	Guidance
1. Applicant Information	
Use the organization's registered legal name and ensure all information is consistent with registration and banking documentation. The proposal lead should be the person responsible for coordinating proposal preparation and future communication with IUCN.	
2. Eligibility	
Review all eligibility criteria before applying. Projects should focus on replication, scaling, or expansion of proven environmental solutions rather than basic research or untested pilots. Confirm alignment with at least one challenge theme. **Eligible actors:** Eligible applicants are local, national, regional, or international civil society organizations (CSOs) that are authorized to receive charitable contributions from foreign sources, maintain a bank account in the organization's name, and are directly responsible for implementing the project. International CSOs are eligible provided they work closely with national stakeholders and local communities and obtain all required government authorizations. Governments may participate in project activities but are not eligible to receive grant funding directly. Proposals from, or with strong engagement of, youth, women, and Indigenous Peoples are strongly encouraged. The lead partner may apply alone or with co-applicants. If awarded, the lead partner signs the grant agreement, serves as the main contact, and takes overall responsibility for technical and financial implementation. An applicant may submit a maximum of two proposals as lead partner and may be a co-applicant in any number of applications but may receive only one grant; if both proposals score highly, only the higher-scoring one is selected.	
Conflict of interest: Applicants must not have any personal, financial, political, or other relationship that could create a conflict of interest in relation to this funding opportunity. Current employees of IUCN or the GEF, and their immediate family members, are not eligible to apply.	

Which priority area best fits your project?

Choose the area that best matches your project's main environmental result.

1

Threatened ecosystems & species

Protect habitats, species, and community stewardship systems.

Examples:

- Marine turtle protection — Cabo Verde
- Polillo habitat corridors — Philippines

2

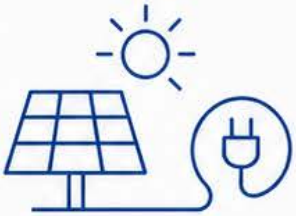
Sustainable agriculture, fisheries & food security

Support food systems and livelihoods that reduce pressure on ecosystems.

Examples:

- Tilapia aquaculture & aquaponics — Dominica
- Agroecological livelihoods — Uganda

3



Low-carbon energy access

Expand clean energy access with environmental and social co-benefits.

Examples:

- Dakuibeqa Solar Energy Project — Fiji
- Biogas and solar project — Tanzania

4

Chemicals & waste

Reduce pollution through prevention, reuse, recycling, and safer disposal.

Examples:

- Plastic waste reduction — Ha Long Bay, Viet Nam
- Urban waste collection & composting — Afghanistan

5

Sustainable urban solutions

Improve environmental performance in towns and cities through local action.

Examples:

- Tbilisi New Yard — Georgia
- Urban farm & biodiversity garden — Malaysia

Tip: *If your project spans multiple areas, choose the one that reflects the main environmental outcome.*

Eligible location: Projects must be implemented in GEF SGP-eligible recipient countries (https://csochallenge.org/uploads/GEF Recipient Countries by Region.pdf).

Eligible activities: Supported projects should include concrete activities that replicate or scale up ongoing or successfully tested initiatives. These may include pilot expansion, capacity building, toolkits and guides, policy advocacy, partnerships, seed funding, awareness campaigns, technology transfer (including protecting IP to recognize innovators), and community peer-learning networks. Instruments to enable scaling may also be supported, such as feasibility and financial-viability analyses (cost-benefit analysis, cash-flow modelling, business-plan refinement); environmental and social safeguards (EIAs, ESMPs, protected-area management plans); and applied research, provided it is applied to solution optimization with results delivered within the project timeframe (pure research is not eligible).

Ineligible activities: Review the full ESMS exclusion list in Section 8 of the Concept Note Template. In addition, financial support to third parties through sub-grants and pure research or conservation planning are ineligible. A small portion of the budget may, however, be devoted to monitoring to inform the project's conservation results and evidence improvement in the conservation status of target species.

3. Project Overview

Project Title: Use a concise title that communicates the solution being scaled, target geography, and intended outcome.

Executive Summary: Summarize the environmental challenge, describe the proven solution being replicated, outline major activities, identify beneficiaries, and explain anticipated environmental and social impacts. The summary should stand alone and provide reviewers with a complete understanding of the project.

Project Duration: The maximum project duration is 24 months, starting from the date the grant agreement is signed. Contracts are expected to be signed by December 2026, with projects starting in early 2027. Costs incurred before the start date are not eligible, and all results and activities must be achievable within the grant period.

Budget Overview: Clearly indicate total project cost, amount requested, and any cash or in-kind co-financing. Given the larger grant sizes and emphasis on scaling under the CSO Challenge Program compared to traditional SGP grants, applicants are encouraged to demonstrate existing co-financing commitments and/or credible pathways to mobilize additional public, private, philanthropic, or community financing. This helps demonstrate that the proposed solution has the potential to attract further investment,

be sustained beyond the grant period, and achieve replication and scale beyond the initial project footprint.

Project Location: Provide sufficient geographic detail to understand the project's scope and biodiversity context. Maps should clearly identify intervention areas and anticipated impact zones.

4. Project Description

Project Objective: The objective should describe the change the project seeks to achieve rather than the activities it will undertake. Objectives should be specific, measurable, and achievable within the project's sphere of influence.

Theory of Change: Develop the theory of change by starting with the desired environmental outcome and working backwards to identify the outcomes, outputs, and activities required to achieve it. Clearly articulate assumptions that must hold true, barriers that could impede progress, and enabling conditions that support success. Explain how the project contributes to long-term sustainability and scaling. Strong theories of change identify who will change, what they will do differently, why they will do it, and how those changes contribute to lasting environmental benefits.

Example: IF community organizations are trained and supported to replicate a proven mangrove restoration model and local governments integrate the approach into planning processes, THEN degraded coastal ecosystems will be restored and become more resilient to climate impacts, BECAUSE stakeholders will have the capacity, incentives, and institutional support needed to sustain restoration efforts over time.

See additional guidance here: https://www.stapgef.org/resources/advisory-documents/theory-change-primer

Project Rationale: Describe the environmental challenge, its root causes, and the socio-economic context. Explain how the proposed project builds on previous work and provide evidence that the solution has already demonstrated success. Focus on why replication or scaling is needed and what barriers currently prevent broader adoption.

Components, Approach and Activities: For each component, explain the activities to be implemented, expected outputs, target beneficiaries, and contribution to replication or scaling. Indicative activities may include pilot expansion, capacity building, policy engagement, partnerships, technology transfer, awareness campaigns, community learning networks, toolkits, or seed funding mechanisms.

Project Impact: Describe direct and indirect impacts. Include expected biodiversity gains, ecosystem restoration outcomes, livelihood improvements, policy changes, institutional strengthening, and broader replication effects. Distinguish between impacts expected during the project period and those expected through longer-term scaling.

Impact Measures: Applicants should select all indicators that your project will contribute to from the list provided. Relevant indicators may include measures related to biodiversity conservation, ecosystem restoration, sustainable land and seascape management, climate resilience, livelihood enhancement, gender equality, youth engagement, Indigenous Peoples' participation, policy influence, and knowledge sharing. Applicants are encouraged to select indicators that best reflect both direct project outcomes and longer-term replication and scaling impacts. Applicants who are invited to submit a full proposal will be asked for more details and given additional guidelines.

Project Innovation: Innovation may involve applying a proven solution in a new geography or context, developing new financing approaches, introducing novel partnerships, or creating new policy or governance mechanisms that enable broader adoption.

Project Risks and Mitigation: Identify major risks, assess their likelihood and potential consequences, and explain mitigation measures. Demonstrate awareness of factors that could affect delivery and provide realistic management strategies.

Long-Term Sustainability and Replicability: Describe how project benefits will continue after grant funding ends. Address ownership, maintenance, financing, policy integration, knowledge transfer, and pathways for replication and scale. Explain how the project contributes to scaling out, scaling up, and scaling deep.

KBA Assessment: Determine whether activities occur within or near Key Biodiversity Areas. See **https://www.keybiodiversityareas.org/** for explanation and map of global KBAs.

5. Preliminary Stakeholder Identification

Include government agencies, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women, youth, civil society organizations, academia, and private sector actors where relevant. Consider both beneficiaries and stakeholders who influence project success.

6. Project Budget

Summarize major expenditure categories and explain significant costs, demonstrating a clear relationship between resources requested and expected results. The maximum grant is $300,000 USD per grantee; request an amount that matches your activities, timeline, and implementation readiness, and that can realistically be used within the grant period. Co-funding is not required but is strongly encouraged and strengthens the proposal.

Eligible costs: Only eligible costs will be reimbursed. To be eligible, costs must be necessary for project implementation; reasonable, justified, and consistent with sound financial management (value for money and cost-effectiveness); incurred during the project lifetime (costs before the official start or after the official end date are not eligible); actually incurred by and recorded in the accounts of the beneficiary per applicable accounting principles; identifiable and verifiable; compliant with applicable tax and social legislation; and incurred in line with the IUCN Procurement Policy and Procedure for Grant Recipients (see the portal's Useful Documents page). For any cost over $20,000 USD, three price quotations from different suppliers must be obtained and kept with financial records.

Eligible cost categories: personnel (salaries, social charges, employer costs); subcontracting (external services); supplies (non-office); equipment and maintenance; travel (international and local travel, accommodation, subsistence); meetings and workshops (venue, catering, speakers' fees); and indirect costs, eligible at a flat rate of up to 7% of total estimated eligible direct costs (covering local office costs such as rent, supplies, utilities, and telecommunications).

Ineligible costs: debts and debt service charges (interest); provisions for losses or future liabilities; purchases of land and buildings; financial support to third parties through sub-grants; and reckless or excessive spending**.**

7. Experience of Applicant Organization

Relevant Experience: Provide examples of previous projects demonstrating technical expertise, geographic experience, grant management capability, and experience scaling environmental solutions.

Key Personnel: Include name and title of key personnel and attach CVs describing relevant experience.

8. Preliminary Environmental and Social Risk Assessment

Review all exclusion criteria and screening questions carefully. Identify potential risks relating to gender, Indigenous Peoples, labour conditions, biodiversity, cultural heritage,

climate change, health and safety, and vulnerable groups. A positive response may require additional safeguards measures but does not automatically disqualify a proposal.

The Full Proposal template includes a more complete version of the same sections plus additional sections/elements:

Section 1: Applicant Information
Section 2: Project description
Section 3: Project logical framework, monitoring plan and timeline
Section 4: Stakeholder analysis and engagement
Section 5: Project budget
Section 6: Project partners
Section 7: Experience of applicant organization
Section 8: Environmental and social risk assessment
Section 9: Due diligence

Note: Some Full Proposal questions repeat the Concept Note for a new set of reviewers. Reuse and refine your earlier responses where helpful.

Detailed guidelines on Full Proposals will be released separately.

Please note that the following documents are required and necessary for submission:

- Articles of Incorporation, Constitution, Statutes, Government Decree, as appropriate (certificate of registration or bylaws)
- Organization in-country registration certificate (if applicable)
- Location map
- CVs of key project staff

Partner confirmation letters may be uploaded in the **Additional Documents** section. Additional documents may be requested later if your proposal is shortlisted.

Allow enough time to complete your proposal.

Applicants are encouraged to explore the program website, review the reference templates, and prepare the required documents early — and to allow time to resolve any portal issues before the deadline.

Your proposal should show how the project will be managed, staffed, and sustained or replicated after the grant.

Include clear impacts, measurable indicators, and a monitoring plan.

Also explain how results will be sustained and how major implementation or security risks will be managed, where relevant.

3. Deadlines

The deadlines for each regional Call for Proposal will be announced at their official launch.

Send clarification questions to the program email on the website no later than **15 days after the launch of the call** and include the relevant call reference.

Answers to frequently asked questions will be posted and updated on the program website.

The information in the FAQs will be regularly updated based on new questions received.

4. Evaluation of proposals and selection criteria

The review and award process is expected to take about **3 months** after the application deadline.

The evaluation of the proposals consists of the following process:

Step 1: Eligibility check

The Lead Executing Agency confirms that each proposal meets the eligibility requirements in Section 2. Proposals with missing or incorrect required information will not move forward.

Step 2: Selection process for eligible proposals

Eligible proposals are reviewed by a multi-stakeholder Selection Committee chaired by the GEF Secretariat and including IUCN, GEF partners, civil society, and other relevant groups.

Eligible applications move through these steps:

- Two reviewers from the Selection Committee are assigned by the Lead Executing Agency [1] to each Concept Note proposal according to the proposed project's thematic scope and type of proponent CSO.
- Based on the review scores, the Lead Executing Agency will invite the highest scoring group of 20-25 proposals to submit a Full Proposal.
- Full Proposals will be evaluated by another panel of two reviewers (also drawn from the Selection Committee according to the same criteria).
- Based on the review scores, the Lead Executing Agency will select the highest scoring group of 12 proposals to be presented to the Selection Committee.
- The Selection Committee is convened virtually to exchange impressions about the final shortlist and select six winners from the pool of shortlisted applicants. At this stage, IUCN will recuse itself from voting on any decisions involving IUCN members to avoid any potential conflict of interest.

Reviewers are looking for strong evidence in a few core areas. Use the criteria below as a checklist when drafting your application.

What reviewers look for	How to respond well in the application
Priority area alignment	State clearly which of the five areas your project fits and why.
Impact potential	Show the environmental result you expect, the scale of change, and the evidence behind your estimate.

[1] The Lead Executing Agency for the GEF SGP CSO Challenge is RTI International

Scalability and sustainability	Explain what is already proven, what will continue after grant funding, and how others could adopt the model.
Feasibility and organizational capacity	Show that your team, timeline, partnerships, and budget are realistic for the work proposed.
Inclusion and partnerships	Describe who is involved, who benefits, and how youth, women, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and other key stakeholders shape the work.

Successful applicants will be notified if their proposal is selected for funding or programmatic support.

Selected proposals will go through a technical and ESMS refinement process before grant signature. This may take **1 to 5 months**, so applicants should plan for about **6 months** between Concept Note submission and project start.

Once both IUCN and the selected CSOs are in agreement about the final version of the proposal that results from this enhancement process and about the remaining contractual conditions, winning CSOs will be asked to sign a grant agreement.

All applicants will be informed of the outcome in writing. Unsuccessful applicants will receive an explanation, and they may contact the Lead Executing Agency with follow-up questions or submit a grievance within one month of the decision.

5. Contact

For questions, please visit the program website's contact section at **https://csochallenge.org/#contact**.