STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT WITH CLIMATE FUNDS IN AFRICA

FINDINGS FROM A STUDY ON THE GREEN CLIMATE FUND, THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT FACILITY AND THE ADAPTATION FUND IN KENYA, TUNISIA AND ZAMBIA

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VCA VOICES FOR JUST CLIMATE ACTION

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ABOUT THE VCA

Voices for Just Climate Action (VCA) is a global initiative empowering local communities to influence climate policies. Our alliance brings together global and local voices by connecting a diverse range of civil society organiszations representing women, youth, indigenous people, urban poor, digital activists and more. The programme is implemented by an alliance led by four strong Southern CSOs – Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA), Fundación Avina, Slum Dwellers International (SDI) and SouthSouthNorth (SSN) – and two Global CSOs – Hivos and WWF-Netherlands – under the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs' five-year strategic partnership: "Power of Voices".

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This synthesis report examines civil society engagement with three major climate finance mechanisms under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC): the Green Climate Fund (GCF), the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and the Adaptation Fund (AF). Drawing on case studies from Kenya, Tunisia, and Zambia, the study explores how civil society organisations (CSOs) interact with these funds at national and international levels, and assesses the effectiveness of the application of existing engagement mechanisms.

Despite policy commitments to inclusive participation, the Climate Funds' engagement strategies are not fully localised or embedded in country-level operations. Field research involving 49 stakeholders revealed several barriers to meaningful CSO engagement, including:

- Inadequate institutional capacity of national fund coordinators and CSOs.
- Lack of structured institutionalised engagement mechanisms.
- Fragmented civil society coordination and lack of common agendas.
- Inadequate feedback and communication channels between CSOs and fund structures.
- Limited access to information and technical processes, especially for grassroots organisations.

The report identifies good practices such as civil society representation on technical committees, capacity-building through readiness programmes, and localised engagement strategies like the development of guidance documents and networks for engagement. However, these remain isolated and under-resourced.

To enhance civil society engagement, the report recommends:

a. Localising stakeholder engagement strategies to reflect national contexts.
b. Strengthening institutional capacity of both fund coordinators and CSOs.
c. Institutionalising CSO participation across the project life-cycle.
d. Creating inclusive feedback systems and knowledge-sharing platforms.
e. Supporting CSO networks to bridge national and international engagement gaps.

The report advocates for a more strategic, inclusive, and well-resourced approach to civil society engagement in climate finance. This is essential to ensure that climate funding is transparent, accountable, and responsive to the needs of Africa's most vulnerable communities.

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ACRONYMS

AE	ACCREDITED ENTITY
AF	ADAPTATION FUND
AFD	AGENCE FRANÇAISE DE DÉVELOPPEMENT
CSO	CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATION
DA	DESIGNATED AUTHORITY
DAE	DIRECT ACCESS ENTITY
FAO	FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANISATION
GCF	GREEN CLIMATE FUND
GEF	GREEN ENVIRONMENTAL FUND
GHG	GREENHOUSE GAS
GIZ	GESELLSCHAFT FÜR INTERNATIONALE ZUSAMMENARBEIT
IAE	INTERNATIONAL ACCESS ENTITY
IESS	ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY INTEGRATION IN THE GOVERNORATE OF KAIROUAN
IFAD	INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT
ISO	INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION FOR STANDARDIZATION
KCCWG	KENYA CLIMATE CHANGE WORKING GROUP
NIE	NATIONAL IMPLEMENTING ENTITY
NDA	NATIONAL DESIGNATED AUTHORITY
NDCS	NATIONALLY DETERMINED CONTRIBUTIONS
NEMA	NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT AGENCY
NGO	NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATION
NOL	NO OBJECTION LETTERS
OFP	OPERATIONAL FOCAL POINTS
OSS	SAHARA AND SAHEL OBSERVATORY
RIE	REGIONAL IMPLEMENTING ENTITY
RPSP	READINESS AND PREPARATORY SUPPORT PROGRAMME
SGP	SMALL GRANTS PROGRAMME
UNDP	UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME
UNEP	UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAMME
UNFCCC	UNITED NATIONS FRAMEWORK CONVENTION FOR CLIMATE CHANGE
ZANACO	ZAMBIA NATIONAL COMMERCIAL BANK PLC

INTRODUCTION

Africa faces a significant shortfall in accessing funds for climate change, undermining its capacity to address urgent adaptation and mitigation needs. Civil society engagement can make climate financing more effective by enhancing transparency, fostering inclusion and innovation and ensuring that climate funding reaches vulnerable communities. However, multilateral climate funds, despite their policy commitments towards engaging civil society, do not fully address on-the-ground realities.

This report synthesises three country case studies examining the application of the civil society engagement mechanisms within three funds of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC): the Green Climate Fund (GCF), the Green Environmental Facility (GEF), and the Adaptation Fund (AF). In this report, these entities will be collectively referred to as the 'Climate Funds.'

UNFCCC is a key global treaty that establishes the legal and institutional basis for international cooperation to limit climate change and its adverse effects. To provide developing countries with financial resources to combat climate change, the UNFCCC has established a financial mechanism, which comprises two operating entities under the Convention, namely the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF), as well as several special funds, including the Adaptation Fund (AF). Beyond broadly providing developing countries with climate finance, these Climate Funds are expected to facilitate climate finance flows to specifically respond to the needs of climate-affected groups.

However, accessing climate finance at the local level is challenging because the processes and requirements of climate finance institutions, including the GCF, GEF and AF, often do not align with the needs and conditions of local communities and locally led initiatives. Many climate funds have strict criteria that make it difficult for local projects to secure funding. At the same time, community organisations sometimes lack the capacity or expertise to develop proposals that meet these institutional requirements. Therefore, when communities cannot access finance directly, accountability mechanisms need to be in place to ensure that projects that are being implemented are aligning with national and local priorities.

The GCF, GEF and AF have developed various civil society engagement mechanisms that present opportunities to bridge the gap between the institutional frameworks of these funds and the needs and capacities of local stakeholders. The Climate Funds are expected to localize stakeholder engagement mechanisms at a country level during programme scoping and implementation. The assumption is that civil society organisations (CSOs) can effectively participate in and influence the Climate Funds through these engagement mechanisms. Specifically, CSOs are positioned to amplify the voices and priorities of climate-affected communities in the design and implementation of the Climate Funds' strategies and activities, thereby enhancing accountability. However, in practice, the CSO engagement with the GCF, GEF and AF has been less than optimal and not as meaningful as it could potentially be. The assumption is that civil society organisations (CSOs) can effectively participate in and influence the Climate Funds through these engagement mechanisms. Specifically, CSOs are positioned to amplify the voices and priorities of climate-affected communities in the design and implementation of the Climate Funds' strategies and activities, thereby enhancing accountability. However, in practice, the CSO engagement with the GCF, GEF and AF has been less than optimal and not as meaningful as it could potentially be.

This comparative study aims to elucidate good practices, lessons learned, and recommendations for civil society engagement with the Climate Funds. Specifically, it examines three UNFCCC funds, the GCF, GEF and AF, in three African countries: Tunisia, Kenya, and Zambia. The study first examines civil society engagement guidelines and mechanisms within the GCF, GEF and AF. It then outlines field research conducted with 49 stakeholders across the three countries surveyed to shed light on the complex dynamics of civil society's interaction with climate finance in Africa. By analysing institutional frameworks and coordination, the study identifies barriers that hinder CSOs from effectively engaging with financial mechanisms, as well as successful engagement strategies that influence decision-making at various levels. The study provides actionable insights to enhance participation, coordination, accountability, and transparency in climate finance processes. Ultimately, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how civil society can be effectively engaged to support enhanced access to climate finance, thereby empowering local communities to navigate the multifaceted challenges posed by climate change.

BACKGROUND

While climate change poses significant threads worldwide, Africa is considered the most vulnerable continent despite its minimal historical contribution of 2-4 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions (GHG).[1] The continent disproportionately suffers from the adverse consequences of climate change, underscoring the need for stronger international cooperation, greater financial support, and equitable policies to build resilience. One of the most critical limitations to effective climate action in Africa is the lack of access to adequate finance. The 2024 edition of the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) Adaptation Gap Report highlights that the estimated annual adaptation finance need for Africa is US$61 billion, yet the continent currently receives only US$13 billion per year in international public adaptation finance flows. This means current funding covers merely 21 to 36 percent of Africa's estimated adaptation costs[2]. Without immediate and substantial action, the future costs of responding to Africa's climate crisis will far exceed its current climate finance needs. To achieve low-emission, climate-resilient growth across the continent, both the quantity and quality of climate finance must be dramatically scaled and improved.

To date, the GCF, GEF and AF are the main climate finance institutions established under the financial mechanism of the UNFCCC framework. Since 1994, the UNFCCC's goal has been to stabilize GHG emissions by placing the onus on industrialized nations to support climate change response in developing countries through the provision of finance and capacity. In terms of financial resources, a system of grants and loans has been set up through the Convention and is managed through the operating entities and funds[3]. Given that Africa contributes a small percentage to GHG emissions, the UNFCCC is an important entity that aims to hold high emitters to account, while leveraging finances for developing organisations.

To ensure strong governance and accountability, all three entities have stakeholder engagement guidelines and mechanisms that aim to foster inclusive processes in which stakeholders shape decisions. Whilst the GCF, GEF and AF policies and practices around stakeholder engagement are primarily defined at the international level, they are expected to localize stakeholder engagement mechanisms and foster strong country ownership during programme scoping and implementation. The next section details the methodology used in this report to determine the stakeholder mechanisms and guidelines as they appear on paper, and the field research conducted in order to determine how they are perceived by civil society.

1 IPCC. 2022. Emissions Trends and Drivers. In Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

2 United Nations Environment Programme. 2024. Adaptation Gap Report 2024: Come hell and high water — As fires and floods hit the poor hardest, it is time for the world to step up adaptation actions.

3 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. n.d. What is the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change?

METHODOLOGY

This study comprised a comprehensive literature review and interviews conducted by three local consulting teams in Kenya, Zambia and Tunisia. The key findings and themes that emerge from the three country reports were synthesized into this final report.

The literature review involved examining academic publications, policy documents from the GCF, GEF and AF, and government reports to establish a solid understanding of the climate fund landscape and engagement strategies in each of the respective countries. This report is based on available policy documents until 2024. Updated policies and strategies by the funds may have been developed since the research was conducted.

After a stakeholder mapping was completed, semi-structured interviews were conducted with pertinent stakeholders both in-person and online. A total of 49 stakeholders were interviewed across the three countries, including seven relevant government officials, 12 international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), 21 local CSO representatives and nine officials from national government fund coordinators. In Kenya, an additional eight focus group discussions were conducted as a dynamic platform for interactive discourse, amplifying diverse perspectives and engendering a deeper understanding of the subject matter. This qualitative methodology enabled the identification of common themes, challenges, and optimal strategies for CSOs engaging with the Climate Funds, leading to a deeper and more nuanced understanding from different actors. The research embedded ethical considerations, such as ensuring consent and confidentiality. The next section considers good practices on how stakeholder engagement is defined to highlight how the Climate Funds could apply these practices in their own operations.

CONCEPTUALISING CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CLIMATE FUNDS

FRAMING “EFFECTIVE” AND “MEANINGFUL” STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Civil society engagement is understood as the involvement of NGOs, community groups, and other forms of civic participation as key stakeholders in public policy-making and advocacy. Therefore, civil society engagement mechanisms are referred to in this report as the structures, processes and approaches used by UNFCCC funds (namely the AF, GEF, and GCF) to facilitate the participation of CSOs in their decision-making, project implementation, and policy development processes. The Climate Funds have established guidelines for stakeholder engagement within their policies and processes; however, the mechanisms for effectively operationalising these engagement strategies remain underdeveloped.

The Initiative for Climate Action Transparency (ICAT), defines stakeholder participation as “a process that enables stakeholders to understand and influence decisions and processes that may interest or affect them.”[4] It further notes that “when stakeholder participation is effective, stakeholders have meaningful influence over decisions; this includes stakeholders who are potentially affected by, or interested in, a decision, and who have a right to be involved in the decision-making process, with special attention to marginalised stakeholders and those who are directly affected by the policy. The processes recognise and communicate the needs and interests of all stakeholders, involve stakeholders in defining how they participate, provide stakeholders with the information and

4 Wuester, H. 2025. Stakeholder engagement: Key for effective climate action. ICAT.

capacity to participate, and communicate to stakeholders how their input affected the decisions".[5]

ICAT adopts the International Institute for Public Participation's (IAP2) spectrum of stakeholder engagement, each with a varying impact on decision-making. These are: inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower.[6]

TABLE 1: IAP2'S SPECTRUM OF STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

LOW-LEVEL STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION		MID-LEVEL OF STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION		HIGH LEVEL OF STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION
INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Provide stakeholders with balanced and objective information to help them understand the problem, alternatives and solutions.	Obtain stakeholder input on analysis, alternatives or decisions.	Work directly with stakeholders throughout the process to ensure that their concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	Partner with stakeholders in each aspect of decision-making, including developing alternatives and identifying preferred solutions.	Place decision-making in the hands of stakeholders.

Source: IAP2. 2024. IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. IAP2.

Similarly, the Climate Investment Funds, a climate fund partnership managed by multilateral development banks that follows a country-led programmatic approach, recognises five levels of stakeholder engagement as an engagement continuum: information-sharing; policy dialogue; formal consultation; programmatic collaboration; and institutional partnership.[7] As indicated on this continuum, the more engaged stakeholders are in the process, the more influence they can have in terms of participation in the decision-making process. Additionally, more resources are needed to establish strong involvement and partnerships when moving up the continuum.

Meaningful participatory engagement processes have the greatest long-term impact because they build on local capacity and knowledge, while fostering a sense of ownership.[8]

Such engaged and inclusive processes also create stronger communication and understanding, as decision-makers gain greater insights from working closely with stakeholders, who in turn develop a clearer understanding of decision-making processes and how to influence them effectively. This mutual exchange builds capacity and trust between all parties involved. Although meaningful engagement may require more resources initially, a project is more likely to be sustainable if it is embedded, contextualised and empowering.[9]

As a key stakeholder in the governance of climate finance and funds, CSOs play a vital role in making climate finance accessible, accountable, and responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable populations.[10] While governments, international institutions and the private sector are the primary actors in climate finance, CSOs enhance the climate finance process by ensuring its effectiveness and equity. They act as crucial intermediaries, bridging climate finance institutions and local communities to ensure that funding proposals align with these communities' unique social, cultural, and political landscapes. Even when climate finance does not reach the local level, then CSOs, at the very least, can advocate for the inclusion of local needs and demands within national country programming and climate finance frameworks. This approach fosters the equitable distribution of climate finance and strengthens accountability throughout the climate finance system.[11] Having examined what constitutes good practice, the next section now outlines the policies of the GCF, GEF and AF in relation to civil society engagement to assess if they align.

5 Ibid
6 Last, S., Neveu, C., & Potter, R. L. (n.d.). Stakeholder engagement and consultation. In Communication Essentials for Business. Retrieved August 26, 2025

7 Climate Business Initiative. (n.d.). Local stakeholder engagement in CIF. Retrieved August 26, 2025
8 Council Fire. (2025, July 23). How participatory methods improve capacity building. Council Fire. Retrieved August 26, 2025
9 Lee, S. (2025, May 25). Participatory development: A key to sustainable change. Number Analytics. Retrieved August 26, 2025

10 Coger, T., Fransen, T., & Kuramochi, T. (2021). Following the money isn't enough: How civil society organisations provide accountability for climate adaptation finance. World Resources Institute.
11 Coger, T., Fransen, T., & Kuramochi, T. (2021). Following the money isn't enough: How civil society organisations provide accountability for climate adaptation finance. World Resources Institute.

CSO ENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS WITHIN THE GCF, GEF AND AF

To support effective local climate action, it is valuable to understand how the GCF, GEF and AF engage civil society as key stakeholders, while identifying opportunities to promote civil society inclusion and access to finance. The Climate Funds have civil society engagement mechanisms that offer potential entry points to better align their institutional mechanisms with the needs and capabilities of local stakeholders. An overview of the stakeholder engagement strategies and mechanisms of each of the Climate Funds is presented below.

BOX 1: CLIMATE FUNDS' REGIONAL AND COUNTRY STRUCTURES

The Climate Funds have national structures which are relevant for the CSO engagement at the country level. CSOs could engage their respective country's designated authorities, focal points, accredited entities, and implementing entities, depending on the country's circumstances.

GCF	AF	GEF
National designated authorities (NDAs) are government entities that provides strategic oversight of GCF activities. They are responsible for liaising with the GCF in delivering climate solutions. The **Accredited Entities** (AEs) are the subnational, national and regional implementing entities accredited to receive funding to implement adaptation and mitigation activities. The **Focal Point** is a person within a government institution responsible for all matters related to the GCF and for representing the Fund in their country.	**Designated Authorities** (DAs) are government entities that serve as points of contact for the Fund. **Implementing entities** (IEs) are the national, regional, and multilateral institutions accredited by the AF Board to receive direct financial transfers from the Fund to execute adaptation projects and programmes.	**Implementing Entities** (IEs) are organisations authorised by the GEF to develop and execute projects. **The Executing Entity** (EE) is the institution directly responsible for carrying out a GEF-funded project on the ground under the supervision of the Implementing Entity. The **Focal Point** is responsible for coordinating GEF projects, ensuring alignment with national environmental priorities, and facilitating communication with the GEF Secretariat.

Source: CGF, AF and GEF, 2025

Each of the CSO engagement mechanisms within the Climate Funds are now examined in turn.

GREEN CLIMATE FUND (GCF)

The governing instrument of the GCF recognises the importance of stakeholder input and participation[12]. It mandates the Board to develop mechanisms that promote the input and participation of stakeholders. These stakeholders include private-sector actors, CSOs, vulnerable groups, women and Indigenous peoples. The governing instrument further notes that these stakeholders should be involved in the design, development, and implementation of the strategies and activities to be financed by the GCF.[13]

For the GCF, engagement is understood as "a more in-depth, nuanced and time-intensive process [than consultation] that gives stakeholders a larger role in framing questions and participating actively in discussions about the activity."[14] The GCF has identified the following principles for 'meaningful' stakeholder engagement:[15]

- "Processes are designed to be flexible, adapting and responding to national and local conditions and activity requirements;
- Project budgets include resources for stakeholder engagement activities, including salaries or fees for qualified staff and/or consultants with appropriate expertise to carry them out;
- Engagement begins early enough to identify key issues and influence related decisions;
- Information is presented in understandable and culturally appropriate formats and local language(s);
- Communication flows two ways, allowing all sides an opportunity to listen, exchange views and have their concerns addressed;
- Where community norms and practices do not encourage or allow active participation of women in meetings or gatherings, efforts are made to ensure their voices, needs and concerns are heard and incorporated into planning;
- Processes are inclusive; they take into account that women, men, and members of different ethnic, economic and social groups may have different needs and perspectives, as well as different approaches to engaging and decision-making."

Thus, on paper, the GCF commits to flexible processes that consider the local context. Moreover, these policies specify that stakeholders will play a role in decision-making and note that the GCF will make efforts to empower these actors through financial support, as long as they have the 'appropriate expertise.' In addition, the GCF recently endorsed the Locally-Led Adaptation (LLA) principles, committing to provide local actors with direct access to GCF funding and ensuring their meaningful involvement in how funds are used. The GCF approach emphasises engaging local actors throughout the entire

12 GCF. 2025. Governing Instrument for the Green Climate Fund.
13 Ibid
14 GCF. 2022. Sustainability guidance note: Designing and ensuring meaningful stakeholder engagement on GCF-financed projects.
15 Ibid

project cycle and leveraging local, traditional, and indigenous knowledge in its investments. Further, it commits to making investments that address structural inequalities, enable decentralization, and systematically meet capacity needs.[16]

To facilitate engagement with civil society actors, CSOs are encouraged to participate as official observers at Board meetings or through the GCF Observer Network. Both platforms exist at the international level. The Board is required to grant accredited observers access to its meetings, allowing two representatives from accredited CSOs (one from developed and one from developing country constituencies) to take part in formal Board sessions.[17]

A key mechanism for stakeholder engagement at the country level is the GCF's Readiness and Preparatory Support Programme (RPSP), which enhances countries' capacities to effectively access and use climate finance. Readiness activities constitute the range of country-driven efforts aimed at strengthening institutional capacities, governance, and climate finance engagement. Through the RPSP, the GCF supports stakeholder engagement, including governments, sub-national institutions, civil society, and the private sector, through the development of country programmes. This process is considered to enable civil society actors to identify national priorities and contribute to developing country programmes that outline strategic priorities for engagement with the GCF.[18]

16 GCF. 2025. Locally Led Climate Action: GCF in Brief.
17 GCF. 2013. Guidelines for observer participation and accreditation.
18 GCF. 2023. Readiness Strategy 2024–2027.

To enhance coordination at the national level, a government agency is appointed as the National Designated Authority (NDA). The NDA plays a central role in convening diverse stakeholders to identify local priorities.[19] It is also responsible for implementing no-objection procedures and identifying readiness and capacity-building needs for the country. To respect country ownership, the GCF provides guidance on good practices, rather than setting mandatory rules on NDA operations,[20] allowing NDAs considerable discretion in deciding which stakeholders to involve and how.

In terms of delivery of GCF projects, there are two types of Accredited Entities (AEs) based on access modalities: Direct Access Entities (DAEs) and International Access Entities (IAEs)[21] AEs is a broader term that includes both DAEs and IAEs and refers to organisations that have been vetted and approved to access GCF resources and manage climate projects.. DAEs are sub-national, national or regional organisations that need to be nominated by developing country NDAs. IAEs can include United Nations agencies, multilateral development banks, international financial institutions and regional institutions. Importantly, IAEs do not require nomination by developing country NDAs to become accredited.

19 GCF. 2017. Guidelines for enhanced country ownership and country drivenness (GCF/B.17/14).
20 Ibid
21 GCF. n.d. Entity accreditation

GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT FACILITY (GEF)

As with the GCF, the GEF has long acknowledged the importance of promoting meaningful stakeholder consultation and engagement with civil society. These include consultations in the formulation of GEF strategies, policies and guidelines on how to engage CSOs and direct participation in project identification, design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.[22]

The GEF defines 'meaningful consultation' in its Environmental and Social Safeguards policy, noting that this is a two-way process that:[23]

a. "begins early in the project identification and planning process to gather initial views; encourages stakeholder feedback and engagement in the project development and design process;
b. continues during the development and implementation of a project;
c. is based on the prior disclosure and dissemination of relevant, transparent, objective, meaningful and easily accessible information in a timely manner and culturally appropriate format;
d. considers and responds to feedback;
e. supports active and inclusive engagement with project affected parties;
f. is free of external manipulation, interference, coercion, discrimination, and intimidation; and is documented and disclosed."

Like the Board of the GCF, the Council is the GEF's main governing body. The Council does not have representation from civil society but does hold consultations with the GEF's independent global network of CSOs, the GEF CSO Network. In addition, the GEF Council approved an Updated Vision to Enhance Civil Society Engagement with the GEF in 2017.[24] This Vision reinforces key dimensions of civil society engagement with the GEF, particularly in the design and implementation of the GEF projects and programs. The Vision articulates that the GEF's relationship with civil society aims to be "based on principles of transparency and endeavour to support fair, balanced, and inclusive participation as well as meaningful representation at the appropriate level (national, regional, and/or global)."[25]

To promote country ownership and embedded engagement, GEF has a Country Engagement Strategy (CES) that provides the strategic framework to deliver an expanded and coordinated approach in-country. CES activities include upstream technical dialogues, national dialogues, workshops such as the "Stakeholder Empowerment Series", building the execution capacity of stakeholders, financial support to GEF Operational Focal Points (OFPs), and others. The GEF has increasingly strengthened the engagement of civil society, in particular Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, as well as women and youth, through the Country Support Program, civil society forums at the GEF Assemblies, the biannual GEF

22 Global Environment Facility (GEF). Evolving context of civil society engagement in multilateral environmental agreements and comparable organisations.
23 GEF. 2019. Policy on Environmental and Social Safeguards. p.7-9

24 GEF. 2017. Updated Vision to Enhance Civil Society Engagement with the GEF.
25 Ibid

Council meetings and the Pre-Council CSO Consultations.

At the country level, the GEF operates through both Political Focal Points and OFPs. The OFP serves as the government's representative to the GEF, responsible for consulting with civil society and key stakeholders, sharing information on GEF activities and impacts, convening and leading a National Steering Committee where appropriate, coordinating project and program selection with line ministries and stakeholders, engaging with GEF Implementing Agencies, and initiating National Dialogues to ensure strong country ownership of GEF-supported initiatives.[26]

ADAPTATION FUND (AF)

According to the AF, civil society actors are key partners at all levels of the Fund's decision-making processes and operations, contributing to strong governance and adaptive management.[27] The AF's Environment and Social Policy[28] and its updated Gender Policy[29]offer guidelines for civil society and Indigenous peoples' participation throughout the project cycle. Furthermore, the AF is in the process of developing the draft AF Vision and Guidelines on Enhanced Civil Society Engagement, and the draft Guidelines for Participation of Active Civil Observers to further enhance its engagements with CSOs, drawing on lessons from other climate funds.[30]

The AF has endorsed the LLA principles and has started applying this approach to their programmes and grants.

In 2024, the AF Board decided to grant CSOs the status of 'active civil society observer.[31] Civil society representatives of the observer organisations will be accredited to the UNFCCC, entitling them to participate in the proceedings of the open segments of Board meetings. At the international level, civil society can therefore participate in readiness events, board meetings and through the AF CSO Network.

At the country level, the AF operates through government entities referred to as Designated Authorities (DAs). The DA endorses the proposals and accreditation applications of National or Regional Implementing Entities (NIE/REI), which can include both government agencies or CSOs in the country.[32] The AF encourages CSOs to engage with projects throughout the project life-cycle, from planning and implementation to evaluation and learning.[33] Moreover, civil society engages with the AF through resource mobilization, provision of support, assessments of projects and input from the intended beneficiaries, inputs to policy development, and knowledge management.[34]

The following table summarises the main elements of the CSO engagement mechanisms across the Climate Funds.

26 GEF. n.d. OFP roles.
27 Adaptation Fund (AF). 2025. Enhancing civil society engagement and options for active civil society observer status.
28 AF. 2025. Update to the Adaptation Fund Environmental and Social Policy.
29 AF. 2022. Updated Gender Guidance Document for Implementing Entities on Compliance with the Adaptation

30 AF. 2025. Enhancing civil society engagement and options for active civil society observer status.
31 Ibid, p. 2
32 AF. n.d. Designated Authorities.
33 AF. n.d. Civil Society Engagement. Retrieved July 17, 2025
34 AF. 2022. Medium Term Strategy 2023–2027 [PDF].

TABLE 1. COMPARISON OF GCF, GEF AND AF CSO ENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS

	GCF	AF	GEF
Observer Status/ board level	GCF accredits CSO with observer status and two civil society representatives are invited to Board meetings.	Active civil society observers are invited by the Board to participate in proceedings of the Board meetings. The Board organizes a dialogue with civil society at every Board meeting.	Draft Guidelines currently being developed. CSOs provide input through GEF-coordinated assemblies, such as council meetings.
Advisory Group	GCF Observer Network.	AF NGO Network.	GEF CSO Network.
Country level engagement	NDA	Political and Operational Focal Points.	DA
Project-Level Engagement	The project-level engagement is facilitated through the Independent Integrity Unit (IIU).	Required and facilitated.	Encourages stakeholder feedback and engagement.
Direct Funding Access	Yes, as accredited entities.	Yes, as accredited entities or through the Innovation Small Grants Programme	Yes, as accredited entities or through the small grants programme which directly funds community and CSO-led environmental initiatives.
Direct Funding Access	Environment and Social policy, Indigenous people's policy, Gender policy, Information disclosure policy, Observer participation policy, Country ownership guideline	AF Vision and Guidelines on Enhanced Civil Society Engagement (draft), Environmental and Social Policy and Gender Policy.	Stakeholder Engagement policy, Gender Equality policy, Environmental and Social Safeguards policy and Principles and Guidelines for Engagement with Indigenous Peoples.

This section has illustrated the different types of CSO engagement mechanisms across the Climate Funds, as detailed through their policies. The next section outlines the specific country context under which these Climate Funds are operating in Tunisia, Kenya and Zambia.

THE CLIMATE FUNDS' ACTIVITIES IN TUNISIA, KENYA AND ZAMBIA

The GCF and the GEF have established a presence in each of the case study countries. Multiple projects are currently being implemented across three countries, with funding provided by the GCF and GEF. On the other hand, while the AF has a limited presence in Tunisia and Kenya, it is not currently financing any projects in Zambia. A summary of the Climate Fund projects in each of the three countries is detailed in the table below.

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF CLIMATE FUNDS' PROJECTS IN KENYA, TUNISIA AND ZAMBIA

	TUNISIA	KENYA	ZAMBIA
GCF			
Total number of initiatives (regional/national)	· 10 multicountry projects · 9 readiness activities	· 21 multi-country projects · 3 national projects · 8 readiness activities	· 8 multicountry projects · 2 national projects · 9 readiness activities
Total value	· US$245.8 million financing · US$5.6 million readiness support	· US$423.4 million financing · US$6.5 million readiness support	· US$146.8 millionfinancing · US5 million readiness support
Accreditation for national entities	NA	· Environment Management Authority · Kenya Commercial Bank	
GEF			
Total number of initiatives (regional/national)	· 12 national projects · 27 regional /global	· 19 national projects · 43 regional/global	· 12 national projects · 32 regional/global · 3 national
Total value	· US$20.54 million total for national projects · US$418.8 million for regional/global projects	· US$68,98 million for national projects · US$355.78 million for regional/global projects	· US$72.29 milliontotal for national projects and · US$364.14 million for regional/global projects · US$23.93 million for national
Accreditation for national entities	NA	NA	NA
AF			
Total number of initiatives (regional/national)	1	1 co-implemented by IGAD Region (Djibouti, Kenya, Sudan, Uganda)	NA
Total value	USD 9.9 million	USD 13.07 million	NA
Accreditation for national entities	NA	· National Environment Management Authority · National Environment Trust Fund	NA

Source: GCF, GEF and AF databases, 2025

TUNISIA

The climate finance landscape in Tunisia is primarily characterised by its public sector focus, without well-defined strategies to mobilise climate finance flows. The Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development (Ministère de l'Environnement et du Development Durable) is responsible for shaping climate and environmental policy and practice and is the NDA, Focal Point and DA for the GCF, GEF and AF respectively. Tunisia's financial resource mobilization from climate funds more broadly, and the three UNFCCC Climate Funds in particular, are not sufficient to meet the adaptation and mitigation needs of the country. This is due to the complex procedures and extensive accreditation processes that restrict direct access to key funds. Furthermore, the political impetus to mobilise climate finance is limited.

Tunisian climate funds have been managed and implemented by IAEs. Tunisia does not have local entities with accreditation to the GCF. Within the GCF framework, readiness activities were funded in partnership with the Sahara and Sahel Observatory (OSS), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNEP, the Climate Technology Centre and Network, and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). Tunisia is involved in ten regional projects and does not currently host any national projects. Although Tunisia has yet to secure a fully funded national project through the GCF, two concept notes focusing on sustainable agriculture have been accepted, indicating some progress toward national initiatives.

Tunisia's involvement with the GEF has been more extensive than with the GCF or AF, with 12 national and 27 regional/global projects approved to date.[35] The most significant projects, implemented by UNDP and the World Bank, include "Addressing Climate Change Vulnerabilities and Risks in Vulnerable Coastal Areas of Tunisia"[36], and "NAMA Support for the Tunisian Solar Plan".[37] Additionally, the GEF, through its Small Grants Programme (SGP) managed by UNDP, has supported 194 CSO-led initiatives in Tunisia,[38] underscoring civil society's role in addressing localised climate challenges.

Presently, Tunisia has two projects underway with the AF. The first, titled "Economic, Social and Solidarity Integration in the Governorate of Kairouan" (IESS), began in 2022 and has been managed by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) for over six years, including grant co-financing through the AF.[39] The second project, awaiting formal approval, is a grant on "Strengthening adaptive capacity and livelihood security in the most vulnerable oases of the Governorate of Tozeur" in southern Tunisia, implemented by the World Food Programme[40]. Notably, in Tunisia, there

35 GEF. n.d. Tunisia. Country-At-A-Glance

36 United Nations Development Programme. n.d. Addresing climate change vulnerabilities and risks in vulnerable coastal areas of Tunisia. UNDP Climate Change Adaptation.

37 GEF. 2014. Addressing climate change vulnerabilities and risks in vulnerable coastal areas of Tunisia (GEF Project ID 5105). GEF.

38 United Nations Development Programme. n.d. Tunisia. GEF Small Grants Programme.

39 International Fund for Agricultural Development. n.d. Revitalizing the dairy industry in Georgia. IFAD; AF. n.d. Strengthening adaptive capacity and livelihood security in the most vulnerable oases of the Governorate of Tozeur.

40 AF. 2023. Strengthening adaptive capacity and livelihood security in the most vulnerable oases of the Governorate of Tozeur.

are no national entities accredited by the AF. However, several regional and international organisations, such as OSS and other entities headquartered in Tunisia, namely the World Bank, UNDP, FAO, IFAD, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the German Development Agency (GIZ), and the French Development Agency (AfD) act as Multilateral Implementing Entities.

KENYA

Kenya's climate finance landscape is characterised by a blend of public and private sector contributions and is evolving rapidly, buoyed by the emergence of global climate funds and supportive policies to transition the country towards a low-carbon and climate-resilient trajectory. To achieve its climate change objectives, Kenya needs a substantial financial resource base to fully implement climate actions and bridge the climate financing gap.

The National Treasury serves as Kenya's NDA for the GCF. Kenya is among the leading countries in terms of GCF funding received, having mobilised funds for 24 projects, including 3 national projects.[41] Most of these projects are focused on climate mitigation. Kenya has received more readiness support from the GCF than other African countries on average, having received eight RPSP grants.[42] The country remains dependent on IAEs, with only one active project managed by a DAE.

In terms of the GEF, Kenya hosts 19 active national projects, alongside 43 regional/global projects.[43] These projects cover a range of focal areas, including biodiversity, climate change and land degradation. Under the GEF's eight replenishment round of funding, Kenya received substantial support across its priority areas through the Focal Point, the Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Forestry.

In Kenya, the AF is currently supporting four projects, with one being a national initiative and the remaining three spanning multiple countries.[44] The sole national project, titled "Integrated Programme to Build Resilience to Climate Change and Adaptive Capacity of Vulnerable Communities in Kenya," is implemented by the National Environment Management Agency (NEMA) and has an allocation of USD 9.99 million. The three regional projects include: the "Agricultural Climate Resilience Enhancement Initiative (ACREI)", which involves Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda; "Adapting to Climate Change in the Lake Victoria Basin," covering Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda; and "Strengthening Drought Resilience for Smallholder Farmers and Pastoralists in the IGAD Region," which includes Kenya, Djibouti, Sudan, and Uganda. Collectively, these regional initiatives focus on enhancing climate resilience, improving early warning systems, and promoting agricultural sustainability across Eastern Africa.[45]

NEMA was accredited as an NIE in March 2012, signalling the first national organisation to gain accreditation from the AF in Kenya and the 12th country to be accredited by the AF globally. It has since accessed resources through several funding windows.

41 GCF. n.d. Kenya.
42 Ibid
43 GEF. n.d. Kenya.

44 Adaptation Fund. n.d. Projects and programmes.
45 Ibid

ZAMBIA

Zambia's climate finance landscape is characterised by a mix of public and private sources of climate finance. Historically, Zambia's climate financing has relied heavily on international sources such as the World Bank, UNDP, and the African Development Bank. To enhance coordination among these funding sources, Zambia has undertaken initiatives to streamline its financing mechanisms. The country has established a comprehensive climate policy and institutional framework designed to guide and coordinate climate actions in alignment with its Nationally Determined Contributions. While Zambia's intentions reflect a strong commitment to climate action, successful implementation requires addressing challenges related to resource mobilisation and stakeholder engagement.

The Ministry of Green Economy and Environment (MGEE) oversees climate-related activities and serves as the NDA for the GCF and the Focal Point for the GEF and AF. Other key institutions include the Zambia Environment Management Agency and the National Climate Change Secretariat. The World Bank and UNDP have, over the years, positioned themselves as IAEs, but recently, the Zambia National Commercial Bank Plc (ZANACO) and the Development Bank of Zambia have become accredited to the GCF, suggesting a transition towards stronger local ownership.

To date, Zambia has received GCF funds for ten projects, which include two national-level projects.[46] The first national-level project focuses on adaptation by increasing the climate resilience of smallholder farmers, while the second project is mitigation-based, supporting the Government of Zambia to catalyse private investment in the renewable energy sector.

46 GCF. n.d. Republic of Zambia.

Through the GEF, Zambia has received funding to support 12 national projects, alongside 32 regional/global projects.[47] These were biodiversity-related projects, including a package to address the environmental challenges that threaten the Kafue Flats. The objective of this facility is to restore the region's ecology and fortify its economy by implementing two significant projects under the eighth GEF replenishment round.

In 2022, Zambia received its first RPSP grant for accreditation support from the AF. These funds were to build the institutional capacity for the Zambia Industrial Commercial Bank to become an accredited NIE. Zambia was then able to submit its first proposal for financing through the AF for the "Climate Change Adaptation of Livelihoods through Rural Finance Project" through a multi-level implementing modality led by IFAD. The project-executing entities are the Ministry of Finance and National Planning and MGEE.

This section summarizes how the GCF, GEF, and AF function in Tunisia, Kenya, and Zambia. The following section analyses how stakeholders perceive the Climate Funds' civil society engagement across these countries.

47 GEF. n.d. Zambia.

ASSESSING CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CLIMATE FUNDS IN TUNISIA, KENYA AND ZAMBIA

As noted earlier, the GCF, GEF and AF have civil society guidelines and engagement mechanisms, as detailed in their policies, that function at both national and international levels. In each country, there have been substantial investments from the Climate Funds in both climate adaptation and mitigation through single or multi-country programmes. Given that finance is flowing in Kenya, Zambia and Tunisia, understanding whether civil society can influence these flows and enhance the quality of finance received is crucial. This section details the primary conclusions emanating from the field research conducted across the three countries.

Key findings reveal that civil society engagement with the Climate Funds at the country level can be significantly improved. Stakeholders noted that the strategies to engage civil society in decision-making, as well as efforts to engage civil society in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of funded projects are limited. Within the limitations of both country focal points and CSOS, there is a stronger emphasis on informing and consulting as opposed to engaging and partnering. Whilst each Climate Fund demonstrates unique strengths in engaging civil society, the effectiveness of their mechanisms should be enhanced to ensure that the voices of climate-affected communities are reflected in the design and delivery of climate finance. To foster greater accountability and ownership, designated bodies should engage civil society throughout the project cycle, leveraging their local knowledge, networks, and advocacy capacity. The analysis below draws out common insights into the application of civil society engagement guidelines and mechanisms at the national level, identifying key challenges and good practices.

CSO ENGAGEMENT WITH NATIONAL-LEVEL FUND COORDINATORS

1. THE FORMAL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND MECHANISMS OF THE NATIONAL CLIMATE FUNDS' COORDINATORS ARE INSUFFICIENT

Despite good examples of direct engagement with civil society at the country level, coordinating and implementing entities lack formal civil society engagement strategies. Much of the engagement happens less formally and on a project basis, and civil society is not prioritized as a key decision-making resource. The GCF, GEF and AF have organisational policies and/or governance frameworks that highlight the importance of engaging with civil society and local actors, but these practices and processes are not fully domesticated or institutionalised at the country level for any of the three Climate Funds. There are specific entry points where civil society may be engaged in project design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, but with no concrete mechanisms and strategies to leverage this engagement within the three countries.

In Tunisia, civil society's interactions with national coordinators are unstructured and limited to international/regional meetings and events organized by the Climate Funds. Furthermore, the relationship between CSOs and government coordinators is not formalized, creating distance between project delivery and implementation. The most frequent and meaningful interactions are made through calls for projects within GEF's SGP, recognising that civil society is incentivised to engage when there is funding available. Holistically, the government lacks an overarching vision and strategy for civil society engagement in climate change or climate finance, which influences how the funds are embedded at the country level.

Good practice: National Forum of Climate Change Adaptation Stakeholders

In Tunisia, the National Forum of Climate Change Adaptation Stakeholders was set up under the "Capacity building and support for the implementation of the national climate change adaptation policy in Tunisia" project, one of UNDP's readiness activities under the GCF, implemented by GIZ in partnership with the Ministry of Environment.48 The Forum is a consultation and coordination mechanism that aims to bring together stakeholders involved in climate change adaptation in Tunisia, including civil society and the private sector. It offers stakeholders an opportunity to build their capacities, advocate for priorities related to climate adaptation strategies, share good practices and raise awareness. The Readiness Project has funded three forum meetings to date as of 2024, and options are being explored to ensure sustainable finance for this forum. Through this forum, a series of consultations were set up to define national priorities for adaptation and mitigation, and to develop the GCF country programme. The forums are still ongoing, but they are no longer specifically aligned to the funds. Instead, they are more broadly aligned to climate change work in the country.

In Zambia, the Climate Funds' Focal Point is responsible for convening CSOs and including them in decision-making. The primary avenue for this engagement is through the technical committee and occasional ad-hoc meetings, which support the country programmes developed by the NDA. While information is disseminated through the technical committee, CSO representation is limited to one or two organisations. This narrow participation limits the consistency and inclusivity of the engagement. In addition, the Focal Point has experienced leadership changes over recent years, weakening its coordinating role and diminishing its engagement with CSOs. Without structured mechanisms and clear strategies for engagement, efforts lack continuity and sustainability, especially during periods of staff turnover or government restructuring.

In Kenya, several CSO's argued that engagement with the Climate Funds varies and tends to feel more competitive than collaborative. Selected CSOs are invited to engage, resulting in limited awareness of the climate finance landscape among the broader CSO community. This limited involvement excludes many CSOs that play a crucial role in community advocacy, accountability and sensitization. Whilst some larger CSO networks maintain institutional relationships with the country Focal Point that present opportunities for engagement and influence, these collaborations are insufficient to fully represent the diverse voices and needs of civil society in Kenya.

Therefore, a formalized approach and strategy are essential to ensure that civil society is appropriately represented in all its diversity.

Good Practice: Civil society representation on technical committees

The government institutions that serve as the interface between the GCF in Zambia and Kenya have institutionalised entry points for civil society engagement through their respective NDAs. In both countries, civil society is represented on technical committees that govern the decisions made about climate finance, including the UNFCCC funds. In the case of Kenya, the Kenya Climate Change Working Group (KCCWG) participates in the Inter-Ministerial Technical Committee on Climate Finance. This supports the NDA in reviewing GCF proposals and concept notes before the issuance of No Objection letters (NoL), which confirm that funding proposals align with the country's national climate strategy and priorities. KCCWG is a national network of CSOs uniting voices and action on climate change. Similarly, in Zambia, the NDA governance structure allows for CSOs to engage with the technical committee on climate change. The participation of CSOs has mostly been through the Zambian Climate Change Network – a member platform for CSOs toward climate justice.

2. INADEQUATE INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY OF THE NATIONAL CLIMATE FUNDS' COORDINATORS HINDERS EFFECTIVE CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT

In Kenya, Tunisia, and Zambia, and many other countries, national level government coordinators have limited institutional capacity to engage CSOs. Inadequate resources for consultative meetings and broader CSO engagements frequently hinder the relationship between CSOs and government focal points. While readiness support has provided these institutions with the mandate and funding to manage these structures, persistent competing demands and systemic governmental capacity issues remain.

In Kenya, the NDA's strained capacity to execute its GCF mandate effectively is illustrated by its shift from focusing on the GCF to the Financing Locally-Led Climate Action Program (FLLoCA). FLloCA is a 5-year initiative by the Kenyan government, supported by the World Bank and other donors, aimed at delivering locally led climate resilience actions and strengthening county and national government capacities. While FLLoCA is an important programme, its demands have overwhelmed the NDA and strained its capacity to effectively execute other mandates. CSOs have emphasised the need for the government to institutionalise the NDA office to ensure the efficient execution of its broader mandate and issuance of NoLs. If the NDA continues to operate within these capacity constraints, CSOs' engagement with these processes will likely diminish. However, the NDA has acknowledged its strained capacity and is currently developing strategies to enhance its efficiency in stakeholder engagement and convening.

Similar to NDAs, AEs also lack the resources and technical capacity to effectively engage civil society at the project level. A case in point is Zambia's sole national AE to the GCF, ZANACO. As a new institution to climate finance, ZANACO still needs to develop the necessary expertise and institutional connections to facilitate meaningful and effective CSO participation. Although ZANACO may be aware of the GCF guidelines for stakeholder engagement, the NDA needs to clearly outline how AEs should effectively integrate civil society participation in project design and have accountability mechanisms in place. Embedding the contextual sensitivity required for engaging communities and civil society necessitates further capacity development.

3. CSOs' ACCESSIBILITY TO THE CLIMATE FUNDS ARE RESTRICTED BY LIMITED SYSTEMATIC COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION SHARING BY NATIONAL COORDINATORS

CSOs often face challenges in engaging with the national focal points, which can stem from limited knowledge of processes, communication barriers, and/or a lack of established relationships. As a result, CSOs struggle to align their activities with national climate priorities or secure the necessary endorsements for their projects. Limited communication across all three countries, linked to the lack of formal engagement strategies, further divides civil society and fund structures. This information-sharing gap is compounded by the complexity and volume of technical documents that civil society must navigate to engage with them effectively. The GCF, GEF and AF present different conditions and opportunities, which further complicates matters. Much of the communication from the Climate Funds occurs at the Board level in international arenas and rarely filters down to the local level. Additionally, the NDA and other national coordinators lack communication channels with CSOs.

In Tunisia, the NDA has facilitated training and information sessions on the GCF and climate finance through the RPSP. While these sessions have helped increase general awareness, they tend to focus primarily on climate funding mobilization, which remains a challenge for Tunisian CSOs, rather than on accountability or engagement mechanisms for CSOs and communities. Structural barriers also exist, as the Focal Points of the three Climate Funds are executives with key functions within their respective ministries, making them difficult to access for CSOs in Tunisia and other countries. Access to AEs is similarly limited, as these actors are primarily focused on the project implementation, with a limited impetus to engage outside of this scope.

Good Practice: Tunisia's guidebook for CSOs

In Tunisia, a guidebook on the GCF's processes for CSOs was developed by the regional AE, OSS, the NDA, the Ministry of Local Affairs, and the Ministry of Environment. CSOs were engaged in the development of this guiding document, and a capacity assessment was undertaken to identify the priority needs and potential for their engagement in the GCF process. The guide speaks broadly to the role of civil society in climate finance while highlighting how civil society can be involved in the GCF, including through direct engagement with the NDA, submitting project proposals, being involved as implementation partners, and playing the role of 'watch and surveillance' through monitoring activities. The development of this guide and the clear domestication of the framework for civil society is unique to Tunisia. Whilst this guidebook presents a good practice example of communication and knowledge sharing techniques, the NDA has made no further efforts to institutionalise the processes stipulated in the guide.

The experience is similar in Kenya and Zambia, with communication largely confined to specific institutional channels or occasional high-level information sharing. These efforts at inclusion could be further strengthened by transitioning from general awareness creation to more detailed procedural and applied capacity building. By focusing on specific skills and processes, these trainings can better equip stakeholders to meaningfully engage with the Climate Funds.

Good practice: Building civil society capacity and knowledge through readiness programmes

The GCF has placed strong emphasis on the RPSP as key mechanism for establishing stakeholder engagement strategies and platforms. Across all three countries, CSOs have been engaged actively in the GCF's RPSP, primarily through capacity building and information sharing about the Fund's operations and implementation plans in each country. These processes are intended to support country-driven initiatives aimed at strengthening institutional capacity. The interventions under the RPSP focus on providing tailored support to build foundational elements, such as strategic frameworks, coordination mechanisms for climate action, and support for direct AEs. The GCF also uses this process to conduct project scoping and develop an investment pipeline. Through these efforts, the RPSP has laid the foundations for stakeholder engagement, employing diverse approaches tailored to country contexts.

Capacity-building activities during the RPSP were undertaken in all three countries by a wide array of actors, including CSOs. Through meetings, consultations, and training, both the NDA and implementing entities provided CSOs with knowledge on the GCF and its planned in-country roll-out. However, much of these capacity-building activities focused more on raising awareness than enhancing the technical capacity of civil society to effectively engage or to pursue accreditation for direct access to GCF funding.

4. INSUFFICIENT FEEDBACK SYSTEMS EXIST TO INTEGRATE CSO AND COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES WITH THE CLIMATE FUNDS' PROJECT DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Fieldwork in Kenya, Tunisia and Zambia demonstrated that there is a lack of meaningful engagement with civil society and communities during project design and implementation. Without effective consultation and feedback mechanisms, communities cannot provide inputs and monitor project implementation, limiting the alignment of projects with local priorities and conditions.

In Tunisia, CSO engagement remains limited throughout the GCF project cycles. CSOs have not been systematically consulted during the early phases of project design and lament that the term "civil society participation" is often used to satisfy procedural requirements for concept note approval and funding requests, rather than reflecting meaningful involvement. There has been more substantial engagement when CSOs participate as beneficiaries through capacity-building and training during project implementation and readiness activities.

Good practice: Inclusion of civil society in decision-making through the IESS in Tunisia

In Tunisia, the IESS Adapt project," co-funded by an AF grant and a loan from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), illustrates a positive example of civil society and community engagement with project design and implementation. The Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity (UTSS), an NGO focused on promoting social solidarity and supporting vulnerable populations, was involved in the initial design of the project and was contracted for the implementation of a core component of the project. During the design phase, several meetings were organized between the technical and financial partners, the Ministry of Agriculture and UTSS, to establish the final contours of the project's intervention. UTSS holds full membership of the project's steering committee and provides valuable advice and expertise based on its field experience and knowledge of vulnerable populations' needs. UTSS also benefited from the technical support and capacity-building for both the organisation and community beneficiaries. The inclusion of a CSO representative at project steering committee level has fostered CSO participation in decision-making, allowing them to influence the outcomes of the project.

In Zambia, the experience of CSOs is similar. While civil society is consulted, their involvement gives the sense of a 'box-ticking' exercise to participation rather than meaningful engagement. On the other hand, there is no evidence to show that CSOs are engaging proactively with the NDA to influence its operations in Zambia. This finding will be discussed further below.

In Kenya, this experience has been attributed to the fact that CSOs do not have a formalized role in the proposal development process. Instead, CSOs must liaise with the AEs through the NDA. This limits the inputs of grassroots organisations in the design and implementation of climate action interventions that, in most cases, are implemented in their localities. Approved proposals and concept notes for NoLs typically fail to emphasize the need to involve CSOs throughout the project cycle. Furthermore, while AEs facilitate the flow of funds, this top-down approach often disconnects CSOs from decision-making and project ownership, despite CSOs being more closely connected to local needs and priorities. This model can result in projects that are less aligned with the specific requirements of local communities, as the intermediary role of AEs may lead to a lack of direct engagement with those on the ground. Consequently, CSOs, which have the most intimate understanding of and responsiveness to local issues, may find themselves marginalized in the funding process, undermining the effectiveness and sustainability of climate projects.

Good practice: Engaging civil society through the GEF SGP

Civil society's engagement with the GEF as an implementing actor (in the phase of project implementation) or as a beneficiary of activities (capacity building, information, awareness-raising) has primarily been enabled through their SGP. To date, the GEF's SGP has been a significant source of funds and creates alignment with CSOs because it is 'fit for purpose' for small CSOs. Whilst the SGP is a separate funding process, the accessibility has encouraged CSOs to be more engaged and responsive to the GEF. However, the development of funding proposals and applications for projects remain challenging for CSOs. Similarly, the monitoring and implementation of projects (even if small) outside of the implementation phase remains particularly challenging for CSOs.

5. THERE IS A DISCONNECT BETWEEN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CLIMATE FUNDS

Representatives from civil society in Tunisia, Zambia and Kenya have engaged with the independent civil society networks of the funds, namely the GCF Observer Network, the GEF-CSO Network, AF CSO Network at the international level, to varying degrees. These independent networks facilitate collaboration among observers via both virtual and in-person discussions and meetings to inform and influence the Climate Funds' policies and decision-making processes. However, there is still a disconnect between the engagement at the international level and the national levels.

In terms of the GCF, CSO engagement from the three countries at the international level has rarely been tracked, despite the GCF CSO Network's engagement with proposals from Kenya and Zambia. In Kenya, Transparency International Kenya, the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance Kenya, CARE Kenya, and the KCCWG function as an informal alliance of multiple CSOs that are represented in the AF CSO Network. These Kenyan organisations participate in discussions and debates on AF policies, closely monitoring the planning and execution of AF projects. However, there is a disconnect between those that can access these spaces at the international level and the smaller, local CSOs. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that engagement at the international level has any influence on national engagement strategies and approaches within the funds for the three countries. The CSO Networks are independent, civil society-led networks, but also require funding, not only to operate at the institutional level, but also to allow others the opportunity to be actively engaged.

Good practice: Linking the international to the national through the AF NGO Network

The AF NGO Network has played an important role in enhancing awareness of AF projects in Kenya. Practical Action, the AF Network's active CSO partner in Kenya has served as a vital conduit for information sharing and engagement between the AF and other CSOs in Kenya. Since joining the network in 2012, Practical Action has led efforts to increase awareness of the AF at both national and county levels, as well as among civil society groups. Funded annually by Germanwatch, Practical Action has organized civil society consultation forums at both national and county levels, serving as critical platforms for engaging NIEs and relevant government bodies. In addition, Practical Action has worked closely with Kenya's CSO forum for adaptation to monitor the AF work and used the findings to engage in discussions with NEMA.

In Tunisia, two associations, the Association Pour La Protection De l'environmmement et le developpement durable de Bizerte, and Association Tunisienne pour la Protection de la Nature et de l'Environnement are members of the GEF-CSO Network. Membership of this grants CSOs automatic accreditation by the GEF, thereby enhancing participation opportunities. Whilst membership grants access, it does not guarantee participation and engagement as both require resources. Stakeholders interviewed during field research observe that the limited engagement of Tunisian associations in national, regional or global networks restricts their access to information and opportunities within the country. There is also a disconnect between associations and their counterparts, who may represent them directly as observers in fund boards or councils, or indirectly in coalitions or networks.

This section has analysed civil society attitudes toward engagements with the Climate Funds' counterparts and structures. The next section looks more broadly at challenges and opportunities for CSO engagement.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CSO ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CLIMATE FUNDS

1. CIVIL SOCIETY HAS AN INADEQUATE UNDERSTANDING OF THE CLIMATE FUNDS' SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES, LIMITING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

Often, civil society that is engaged in the climate policy space has limited awareness of the role of the Climate Funds in climate finance and the opportunities for engagement at the country level. In Tunisia, Zambia, and Kenya, CSOs emphasized that their limited understanding of the GCF's modalities significantly hinders participation. While there are a few CSOs that are engaging directly with the GCF, GEF and AF, the majority do not have the capacity to do so. The challenge is especially pronounced among smaller and grassroots organisations, which often lack the technical expertise and familiarity with the complex processes and requirements of these funds. Without effective mechanisms or resources to facilitate capacity building strengthening, as well as knowledge sharing and technical understanding that would be provided by the GCF, GEF and AF coordinators at the country level, a gap will continue to exist between funds and civil society. CSOs must navigate complex processes within the climate fund landscape, which are typically designed with a global-facing, top-down approach. These challenges are compounded by bureaucratic structures and trust issues that hinder meaningful engagement with national government coordinators, ultimately limiting collaboration. Simplifying these processes and implementing structured and targeted capacity-building initiatives are essential to empower CSOs to navigate some of these processes in the short and medium term. This will enable civil society voices and needs to be better represented in decision-making and climate finance.

For the GCF, the RPSP has provided some capacity-building support for CSOs, but this has not been sufficient to bolster meaningful engagement. For example, one of the main intended outcomes of the RPSP in Tunisia was to help GCF recipient countries in developing or enhancing strategic frameworks to address policy gaps, improve sectoral expertise, and create enabling environments for low-emission investment programming. However, the ad hoc engagement and capacity building for CSOs has not cultivated the deeper collaboration needed to enhance accountability and align GCF priorities at the country level. More targeted and holistic interventions are needed to bolster engagement capacities. In Kenya, for instance, many CSOs report that they grapple with limited capacity in understanding the modalities of the Climate Funds. Such constraints restrict the inclusion of a collective civil society voice, which is essential for successful climate finance implementation. While many of the CSOs will never meet the accreditation standards of funds such as the GCF, it remains crucial that they understand how these funds operate and identify entry points for engagement.

2. CIVIL SOCIETY HAS LIMITED INSTITUTIONAL AND FINANCIAL CAPACITY TO EFFECTIVELY ENGAGE WITH THE CLIMATE FUNDS

CSOs encounter substantial challenges to engage the Climate Funds effectively, primarily stemming from CSOs' limited institutional capacity, which is characterised by insufficient financial and technical resources. At the policy engagement level, many CSOs struggle with a lack of long-term vision to effectively support the operations of the NDA or Focal Point. Often, CSOs are focused on their own donor-funded programming, which restricts their ability to allocate capacity and technical resources toward supporting the work of the funds in their countries, especially when this falls outside of their project or organisational scope. This financial rigidity significantly limits their ability to dedicate resources toward monitoring and evaluating projects, holding climate funds accountable. Although engagement could have short- or longer-term cycles, developing meaningful relationships between government entities and CSOs requires significant resources and capacity. There is a need to develop broader frameworks that enable effective engagement to be designed.

In Tunisia, most CSOs only broadly focus on climate policy due to their diverse funding. Only a few have begun to specialize thematically. Most Tunisian associations also face human resource constraints, with staff often dedicated to specific activities. The governing instruments of the funds underscore the importance of continuous learning and regular monitoring of funded projects. Given their local presence and focus on community impact, CSOs are ideally positioned to play a key role in overseeing these projects. In cases where CSOs have engaged in monitoring and evaluation, this has been made possible by funding from donors, such as Practical Action in Kenya, funded by Germanwatch. This highlights the need for national government structures to facilitate effective CSO engagement without requiring CSOs to absorb additional resource burdens.

For example, the AF "Integrated Programme to Build Resilience to Climate Change and Adaptive Capacity of Vulnerable Communities in Kenya" project involved CSOs as key participants, but implementation revealed critical capacity challenges. CSOs were allocated smaller budgets because they could not demonstrate the ability to manage substantial funds or comply with government financial regulations. As a result, some functions during project implementation, such as procurement activities, were reassigned from CSOs to NEMA to mitigate risks. This shift marginalized CSOs, leading to a noticeable decline in their interest and engagement. Additionally, the project design did not account for the need to build CSO capacity from scratch, focusing instead on strengthening existing institutional structures. The lack of resources for institutional development made it difficult for CSOs to fulfil their roles effectively, further contributing to their sense of exclusion.

3. CIVIL SOCIETY IS FRAGMENTED AND UNCOORDINATED IN ENGAGING WITH THE CLIMATE FUND(S)

CSOs are crucial to climate action, bringing diverse perspectives and grassroots insights to climate finance programming. However, they often lack a unified voice. In all three countries, national government coordinators have noted the difficulty in engaging civil society when no consolidated approach or channel exists. This fragmentation prevents CSOs from presenting a cohesive front when engaging with national entities. Without a coordinated approach, the impact of CSOs is diluted, reducing their ability to advocate effectively for their needs and priorities within climate fund opportunities. This fragmentation leads to competition, rather than collaboration aimed at benefiting communities. Some of the larger CSOs and networks actively engage the Climate Funds' implementing bodies at both the national and international arenas, but many of the smaller organisations feel excluded and underrepresented in their discussions. The CSO landscape in all three countries is diverse, reflecting a range of perspectives on key climate issues, but harnessing the diversity of approaches requires alignment and collaboration amongst civil society.

There is also an expectation that CSOs should have one coherent opinion. However, it is crucial to facilitate and respect the variety of viewpoints within civil society. Enhancing collective advocacy and representation among CSOs is crucial for amplifying their impact and ensuring their voices are heard in climate finance and governance processes. For CSO alliances to be credible and effective, they must genuinely represent the diverse interests and concerns of the communities they serve.

4. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY ARE NOT ALWAYS CONDUCIVE TO COLLABORATION WITHIN THE CLIMATE FUNDS

Civil society and government can often have differing perspectives on the needs and priorities of climate action within a country. These differences affect how civil society is invited to engage with the Climate Funds. A mutual wariness frequently exists between CSOs and government entities, which undermines collaboration and trust. Government entities tend to operate through bureaucratic structures and processes, while CSOs primarily focus on advocacy approaches aimed at influencing policy and practice. This bureaucratic nature of government institutions often discourages civil society from directly commenting on the Climate Funds' policies, strategies, and documents. Many CSOs perceive that their suggestions and recommendations are unlikely to be considered by the Climate Funds, leading them to deprioritize engagement, fearing their efforts may be futile.

For example, the current political situation in Tunisia illustrates these challenges. With shrinking civic space and restricted rights, Tunisian civil society is increasingly disconnected from government structures. The national environment in which Tunisian civil society operates is a source of several challenges for effective engagement with the Climate Funds and the relationship between civil society and public institutions remains volatile. Historically, the relationship between civil society and public institutions has been marked by mistrust, and the polarized atmosphere that marked the post-revolution period has further entrenched the divides. These conditions isolate CSOs from engaging with the Climate Funds.

These dynamics hinder CSOs' ability to align their activities with national climate priorities or secure the necessary endorsements for their projects. To overcome these barriers, enhanced communication and collaboration strategies are needed. Without formal mechanisms for engagement with the Climate Funds at the country level, issues of trust and communication persist, leading to the fragmented inclusion of civil society and ongoing tensions.

Having examined the main perspectives of stakeholders on civil society engagement across the Climate Funds, including on CSO engagement with government counterparts, as well as more systemic opportunities and challenges, the next section makes some general conclusions and recommendations to enhance civil society engagement in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

The three Climate Funds have conceptualised mechanisms for stakeholder engagement throughout the project life-cycle that provide potential entry points for civil society to be informed or to inform decision-making. However, the stakeholder engagement strategies and mechanisms are not being fully embedded at the country level, impacting the extent to which civil society is meaningfully contributing and influencing the projects that are being implemented on the ground. Structural capacity challenges within the Climate Funds, as well as within CSOs, hinder meaningful engagement with CSOs at the national level and communities on the ground. As a result, funding mechanisms tend to prioritize the objectives of the Climate Funds themselves rather than the specific needs of local communities.

There is limited civil society participation in project design, implementation and monitoring of the Climate Funds-financed projects. National fund coordinators lack systematic feedback mechanisms to gather input from CSOs and communities. This restricts civil society's ability to provide technical input to inform policies, frameworks, and projects focusing on their constituency's needs and priorities. Furthermore, civil society does not have the technical capacity and understanding of the landscape to effectively influence. However, there are positive examples where CSOs have influenced project design and implementation and participated in decision-making processes at the country level. More broadly, it remains unclear how CSOs are involved in advancing core frameworks such as gender policies, Indigenous peoples' policies and environmental and social safeguards, besides through basic consultation. To address these gaps, the Climate Funds need to re-establish and strengthen the framework and mechanisms for CSO engagement at the country level in line with the policies and strategies that each of the funds holds whilst also being responsive to the context-driven needs of stakeholders. This will demand more programmatic visioning, as opposed to project-level thinking, around how to capacitate civil society to engage effectively whilst not burdening their operations.

Simultaneously, civil society lacks the necessary awareness, capacity, and coordination to effectively engage with the Climate Fund structures at the local and international levels. In some countries, CSOs operate across broad thematic areas, with a limited understanding of the imperative to be involved in climate finance, specifically climate funds. Many lack the technical capacity of CSOs to engage with the Climate Funds and the institutional capacity required for meaningful involvement. Despite these challenges, there are encouraging examples where CSOs have successfully organized themselves into working groups and networks to engage in climate policy and finance discussions.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CLIMATE FUNDS

1. SUPPORT COUNTRIES TO DEVELOP LOCALIZED STRATEGIES FOR STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT:

The Climate Funds should support national government coordinators in adapting and localising stakeholder engagement strategies to the national context by analysing, developing and resourcing processes and mechanisms for CSO engagement, whilst encouraging focal points to embed country context in the processes. Immediate actions could include reviewing the application of current engagement mechanisms at the country level and creating medium-term CSO engagement manual that outlines avenues for engagement and provides information for CSOs.

2. STRENGTHEN THE INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY OF LOCAL FUND STRUCTURES:

While there currently are mechanisms that provide support to governments to deliver the Climate Funds (such as the RPSP), there should be more attention to ensuring that civil society can be fully engaged in the process. The government and donors should enhance the institutional capacity of national coordinators to manage climate finance activities through a national action plan.

3. SUPPORT GOVERNMENTS TO INSTITUTIONALISE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION:

Government and national representatives from the Climate Funds must build partnerships and foster collaboration with CSOs to create structured, participatory engagement that goes beyond information sharing to meaningful influence.

4. ENSURE THAT NATIONAL COORDINATORS TAKE ACTIVE MEASURES TO ENGAGE CSOS IN DECISION-MAKING AND ACROSS ALL COMPONENTS OF THE PROJECT LIFE-CYCLE:

This could involve including a CSO representative at the project steering committee-level, defining a quota for CSO representation at meetings, and nominating CSO focal points as organisational representatives to engage as technical experts, advocates, or evidence-based input providers. Indicators for meaningful engagement could also be developed to appropriately refine what engagement can and should look like in practice. These measures help guarantee that grassroots voices are heard and contribute meaningfully. Setting such standards ensures a minimum level of civil society engagement.

5. STRENGTHEN THE INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY OF CSOs:

Comprehensive capability-building programs for CSOs are needed to foster strong engagement, focusing on technical skills, project development, collaboration, financial management, and monitoring and evaluation. Programmes should be practical and focused on strengthening the capacity of CSOs on mechanisms for engagement with the Climate Funds and climate finance more generally. Capacity-building, knowledge sharing and learning activities should not only be confined to national or large CSOs but also given to more localised and grassroots organisations.

6. SUPPORT CSOS FROM LEAST-DEVELOPED COUNTRIES TO ENGAGE WITH THE CLIMATE FUND NETWORKS FOR ENHANCED ENGAGEMENT AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL:

Whilst the CSO networks are working to engage with the decision-making structure of the Climate Funds, their capacity is limited. Therefore, to foster stronger CSO engagement from developing countries, more financial and technical support should be provided to allow them to be part of engagements and to ensure they have the relevant knowledge to engage and represent their constituencies.

7. CREATE A KNOWLEDGE SHARING PLATFORM:

Establish a centralised platform for CSOs to access up-to-date information on climate finance opportunities, application processes, and good practices. This platform should specifically highlight engagement opportunities for CSOs at the international, national and local levels. Additional interventions could include public forums or national conferences that bring together the Climate Fund focal points with CSOs across countries to review and discuss recent developments related to climate funds. Moreover, maintaining continuous communication through various media channels is essential. This ongoing outreach will help both CSOs and government entities effectively present and promote opportunities for climate finance engagement, ensuring broader awareness and participation.

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