

66th GEF Council

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Opening of the Meeting

Introductory Remarks by

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GEF CEO and Chairperson

As Delivered

Good morning to all.

I am delighted to welcome you here to Washington, DC.

I would also like to greet those who are joining us virtually, and I hope that at some time soon, we can be together in person.

We have a truly momentous week ahead of us that includes, for the first time, three Council meetings - the 66th GEF Council meeting, the 35th LDCF/SCCF Council meeting, and the First GBFF Council meeting.

What a great moment this is, and how proud we should be, to have worked together to get to this stage.

Dear Council members,

What a pleasure it is to see you all here once more after our very successful Council meeting in Brasilia last year

Once more I want to thank our colleagues from Brazil for hosting that historic meeting, at which foundational decisions were made.

Subsequent to that, I was so happy to meet many of you in Vancouver at the Seventh GEF Assembly, together with many key stakeholders from all over the world, making this a unique partnership.

There is no doubt that the Assembly demonstrated our tremendous potential of working in an integrated and inclusive way on our joint global challenges.

Our gratitude, as well, to the Canadian government and First Nations for their invaluable contributions in positioning the GEF Assembly as one of the most relevant international environmental events of 2023.

As we are all aware, 2023 was a dramatic year where the world came face-to-face with several extreme weather events.

As a personal anecdote - last July I visited field projects in Morocco, and I had to walk in villages in temperatures of 42 degrees Centigrade

(around 110 degrees Fahrenheit). That same day, southern Europe had 40 degrees Centigrade, China had 41, and that same day the Southwest US had 38 degrees.

I have never in my life experienced something like that. Never.

It was tough. And, it was shocking to me to feel what may be the new normal of the future - unless we act decisively, and take quick decisions.

The COP28 of UNFCCC last November did signal the beginning of the end of the fossil fuel era. But countries must keep their level of ambition high with the necessary mitigation targets, and deliver the finance that vulnerable countries so urgently need.

Just last month, the annual global risks report from the World Economic Forum described a planet in peril. Global economic experts have identified ecological problems as the main threat to economic development and growth.

We are very aware that communities all around the world continue to face severe challenges from the interconnected effects of climate change, land degradation, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and air and water pollution.

We have indeed witnessed some progress, and environmental issues are finally starting to get the integrated attention that they deserve.

This has been evident through the multiple COPs of last year.

But, we need to do more. And soon.

Dear colleagues,

International cooperation and multilateral mechanisms are the most logical way forward to address global systemic problems.

And the GEF is in a unique position to be able to provide comprehensive solutions.

The GEF resources should be the risk capital of societies to solve the ecological crisis.

But the triple planetary crisis requires a better GEF.

We need to bring more resources, enhance access, streamline our policies and procedures, manage higher risks, generate more investment around policy coherence, and catalyze the mobilization of financial resources from all sources.

This means that the GEF and its partnership must evolve in many directions.

This is not just an operational imperative. It is simply the right thing to do. Communities in the Sahel, communities in the Amazon, or in large cities, or in small islands depend some way or another on a great and more efficient GEF.

That is why we continue to increase our focus on integration - across sectors, across conventions, and stakeholders.

We are here seeking to engage with the whole-of-government and take a whole-of-society approach.

At the same time, we are intensifying our activities with the private sector, international financial organizations, and philanthropies.

We are seeking ways to cooperate more with existing environmental and climate funds and other relevant biodiversity-related conventions like CMS, CITES, RAMSAR, and WHS, so that we can catalyze a greater collective, impact.

Next Saturday I will be traveling to Uzbekistan to attend the CMS COP. This is the first time the CEO of the GEF has attended a convention like

this. Last year, I attended the CITES COP, and that was the first time the CEO of the GEF attended those conventions. As I said, our aspiration is looking at ways by which we can catalyze greater and collective impact across the multiple conventions.

For example, now the GEF is housing the Secretariat of the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, in partnership with WRI. We are very excited to have Rita El Zaghoul as the Director of the HAC, and she will be addressing the Council later this week.

Our collaboration with the GCF, the Adaptation Fund, and the CIFs continues to grow. We are exploring ways and ideas to work more closely with the Conservation Trust Funds, many of whom were seeded with a GEF grant.

We are bringing our time and expertise to critical global initiatives such as the G20, and the CBD's Advisory Committee on Resource Mobilization, and we are very grateful to these different bodies for inviting us.

In addition, I am extremely proud to announce that we have just signed the first grant agreement with FUNBIO for the first batch of conservation graduate fellowships under the Gustavo Fonseca Fellowship Program. Four young Brazilian conservation leaders will be the first to benefit from this global program created in honor of our dear departed colleague.

At the same time, we are undergoing an internal restructuring, and increasing our staffing in strategic areas.

We are investing in improved data and analytics, and laying the foundations for an expanded relationship with civil society, including Indigenous communities, women, and youth.

These elements, and more, all come together in an evolutionary process that I simply call the GEF reform.

I have spoken of this to many of you about this topic last year.

The internal restructuring of the GEF Secretariat is among my most immediate and ongoing priorities.

To that end, how honored and proud I am to have our new Director of Strategy and Operations, Dr. Claude Gascon, right next to me at his first Council meeting in his new capacity.

So, the GEF is beginning to take its new shape for the future.

Dear Council members,

We have, together, made great strides last year.

From the rapid establishment of the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund, to a record-breaking work program last July, these achievements and more show the GEF's increasing agility and responsiveness.

We continue to work efficiently to deploy the resources that donors have entrusted to us, and to establish the frameworks through which our impact can be maximized and monitored.

Looking at the week ahead, there are many important, interesting, and, yes, sometimes complex decisions to be taken this week that will help us to advance in these directions.

We will be discussing ambitious and potentially transformative agendas.

The GEF Council work program is the second largest ever, again demonstrating the ability of the GEF to efficiently channel finance to where it is most needed, and designed in an integrated manner for maximum impact.

The LDCF/SCCF work program is one of the largest in the history of these special funds, speaking to the GEF's abilities to raise, design, and distribute resources to the immediate needs of our most vulnerable recipient countries.

And of course, we will have another historic moment, as the Council of the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund meets for the first time.

Dear Council members,

What we discuss and decide this week will set the framework for the GEF partnership, lay the foundation for an ambitious GEF-9 replenishment, and ultimately steer the course of the global environment.

All of us here today are the stewards of the global environment.

All of us here today are the ones who have been entrusted with this magnificent responsibility.

And only with our commitment, and our courage, that is needed for changes, that the change will come.

I thank you.