



## Independent Evaluation of the GCF's Approach to Country Ownership

SEPTEMBER 2025

### BACKGROUND

The evaluation was approved as part of the 2025 workplan of the IEU. It seeks to inform the discussion on country ownership, including on updated guidelines to promote this, identified in the GCF's Updated Strategic Plan.

### OBJECTIVES & SCOPE

Country ownership is one of the founding principles of the GCF. The Governing Instrument states that the Fund will pursue a country-driven approach and that it will promote and strengthen engagement at the country level. Since then, country ownership has been repeatedly emphasized in Board decisions, accreditation standards, and readiness support.

Globally, the original concept of ownership has evolved. From the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) to the Paris Agreement (2015), expectations have shifted from "ownership" to "leadership" — the notion that developing countries should not only endorse but actively steer their climate priorities and financing.

Within the GCF, ownership has been primarily operationalized through NDAs, direct access, readiness support, and the no-objection procedure. Yet the principle has remained loosely defined, with different interpretations in GCF policies and among stakeholders. This evaluation was commissioned to provide clarity on what country ownership means for the GCF and how it is being realized in practice.

### METHODS

- **Portfolio review** of GCF's projects and programmes.
- **Document review** of policies and Board decisions.
- **Nearly 150 interview** respondents, covering NDAs, AEs, Secretariat staff, Board members, and partners.
- **Two country deep dives** + seven light touch studies covering LDCs, SIDS, and African States.
- **Comparative lens** — lessons from other climate funds and development institutions.
- **Synthesis** of all prior IEU evaluations and country case studies, to launch the evaluation.

# COUNTRY OWNERSHIP

# Country Ownership

TRUSTED EVIDENCE. INFORMED POLICIES. HIGH IMPACT.

## KEY FINDINGS

Country ownership, while firmly incorporated in the GCF's Governing Instrument, remains more of a principle on paper than a lived reality across the Fund. The funding modalities, supporting processes, and mechanisms are there, but they often work in isolation. Instead of coming together as a system that consistently reinforces ownership, these mechanisms are experienced as fragmented gateways.

NDA sit at the center of this architecture, but their effectiveness varies enormously. Where the NDAs are housed in finance or planning ministries, they often have the advantage of convening power to align the GCF's investments with national strategies and mobilize co-finance. On the other hand, environment ministries or smaller agencies can be better aligned to environmental priorities.



IEU Country visit to Belize - FP101 farmer beneficiaries from the Nago Bank community

DAEs face hurdles. Slow accreditation and capacity gaps to access GCF funding have prevented many from playing the role that "direct access" was intended to unlock. Readiness has helped, but its support has often been short-term and unpredictable, making it hard to build lasting institutional strength.

Although the no-objection procedure does ensure government approval, its system-wide effect is modest. In many cases, the no-objection letters (NOLs) are treated as an administrative stamp rather than as part of a larger accountability loop. This is especially true for multi-country and private sector projects, where the NDAs are often drawn in late or only formally.

A bigger gap lies in inclusive stakeholder engagement. The 2017 guidelines on enhanced country ownership encouraged whole-of-society engagement, but in practice this remains uneven. Civil society, women's groups, indigenous peoples, and youth often lack the resources to participate meaningfully. When they are consulted, it is merely informative and too often late in the process.

Ownership also tends to fade once projects are approved. The Fund depends mostly on AEs to sustain country ownership during implementation; it does not systematically track whether domestic systems are used, whether the NDAs remain engaged, or whether stakeholder voices are heard as projects evolve.

Access to climate finance is a sore point. It is not just that the project approval process takes time; it is also that countries perceive it as slow and unpredictable. The lack of pipeline visibility makes it difficult for NDAs and DAEs to plan ahead or socialize proposals with stakeholders. Direct access has not advanced as expected, further weakening trust.

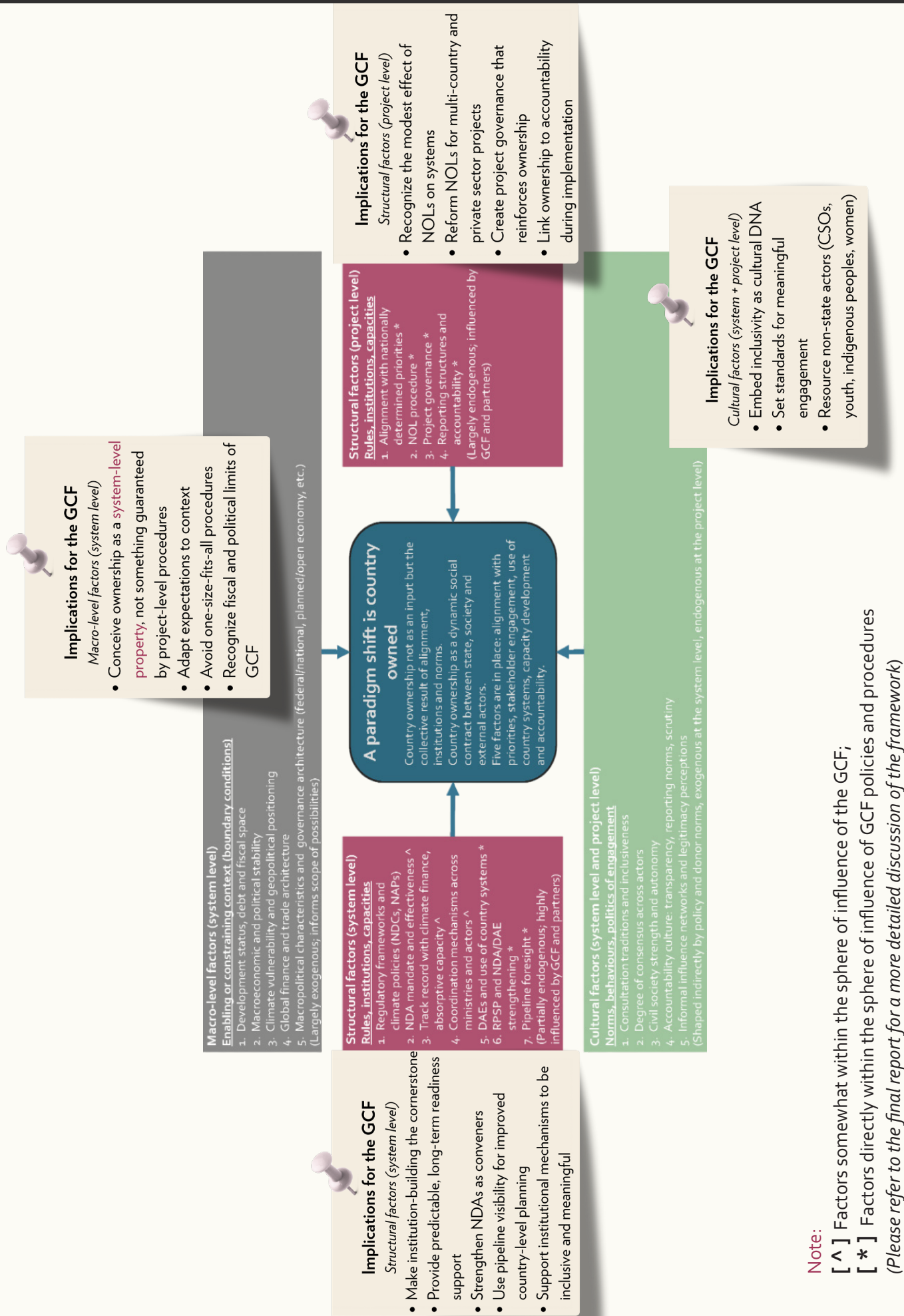
## IN SHORT

The Fund has the right building blocks, but they have not yet been connected into a system that makes ownership real, predictable, and inclusive. Country ownership is a 'system level' property, which cannot only be generated by project level procedures. Building enduring institutions as well as inclusive and meaningful engagement is the key. For this evaluation, country ownership is shaped by the interactions of macro-level, structural and cultural factors at different scales and is a central condition for a paradigm shift to be country-owned.

# FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO COUNTRY OWNERSHIP, AND SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GCF

## IEU Evaluation Brief

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

R1.

### Reaffirm and further operationalize country ownership

The Board can help by reaffirming country ownership as a guiding principle of the Fund and clarifying how it sits alongside scale, speed, and innovation.

The Secretariat's role is then to bring this principle to life across policies and operations, making ownership part a of everyday practice by clarifying the roles of AEs, Executing Entities, and the Secretariat itself in enabling country ownership.

R2.

### Put institution-building at the center

Strong national institutions are the foundation of meaningful ownership. The GCF should set clearer expectations for NDAs while also providing predictable, long-term readiness support. This is particularly urgent for countries with greater vulnerability, where steady GCF support, for instance, through the readiness programme, can both incentivize and sustain institutional development.

R3.

### Make inclusive and meaningful stakeholder engagement the default expectation to strengthen the cultural dimension of country ownership

Whole-of-society engagement should be the norm rather than the exception. This means supporting country platforms that bring stakeholders together, ensuring non-state actors have resources to participate meaningfully in climate action (for instance, through a small-grant window), and setting minimum standards for consultation so that engagement is substantive, not just procedural.

R4.

### Ensure that access to climate finance is faster, predictable, and trusted

Access to the Fund should feel reliable as well as efficient. Greater transparency around the project pipeline would help the NDAs and DAEs plan and align with national strategies.

Treating direct access as the default option and systematically identifying gaps where it is not used can strengthen trust, while reinforcing local institutions. The role of IAEs should be tailored to fit the increasing engagement of DAEs. Predictability and transparency also encourage early engagement of diverse stakeholders and reduce opportunistic approaches.



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