

**EU+MS views on the Future of Global Environment Outlook (GEO)
Presented at the CPR Subcommittee meeting of 23 September 2021**

The process so far

- GEO6 was launched at UNEA4; a draft resolution welcomed the global assessment and called for the launch of a new process that should lead to GEO7. At the instigation of the EU/MS among others, UNEA eventually decided to first take a step back and reconsider whether ‘more of the same’ would be the best way forward.
- Resolution 4/23 ‘requests the Executive Director, [...] to prioritize in the programme of work and budget the preparation of an options document on the future of the Global Environment Outlook process, [...] focusing on the scope and objectives of the Global Environment Outlook process.’ It further requests the ED to further develop and prioritize a long-term data strategy, in support of, inter alia, the acceleration of efforts to assist the Member States in developing their national environmental data management capacities and their environmental monitoring systems with regard to air and water quality, deforestation, marine litter and environmental security, and their ability to use data analysis to support evidence-based decision-making.
- A Steering Committee with a UNEP secretariat was established, which developed objectives, functions and criteria to be met by a new GEO-process. The objective is to keep the world environment situation under review to periodically inform and support action by the world’s governments and other stakeholders, while strengthening UNEP’s science-policy interface. The functions focused on GEO to undertake a robust status and trends analysis, strengthening of policy analysis and support, data sharing, capacity building in the science policy interface and outreach to communicate findings. The 7 criteria chosen by the Steering Committee (chapter III of the Interim report mentioned below) involve consistency with UNEP’s mandate and comparability across editions of GEO, as well as relevance, legitimacy, credibility, accessibility, added value and overall feasibility.
- The secretariat produced an interim report from the Steering Committee to UNEA 5.1, doc. UNEP/EA/5/24, which identified four options for the future of GEO, and two main governance models. These were initial proposals that have been the basis for further work by UNEP and the Steering Committee.

Options

- Document EA/5/24 describes four options for GEO:
 - Option 1: The GEO would provide a comprehensive global assessment approximately every four years;
 - Option 2: The GEO would provide focused, thematically based assessments and other products not covered by existing global assessments identified by the Member States;
 - Option 3: The GEO would initiate the development of a service-oriented approach for supporting and building capacity for monitoring and data collection, knowledge generation, assessment, outreach and decision making;
 - Option 4: The GEO would continually synthesize the findings of relevant global assessments, drawing out the key conclusions, analyzing the systemic links between different thematic areas and supporting evidence-based decision making.

- The document notes that these models are not mutually exclusive, and that combinations can be made. It specifically identifies option 3 as a core set of activities that can be implemented together with another (combination of) option(s).
- In the further elaboration, the Steering Committee has chosen to transform option 3 into an enabling and enhancing support model with service oriented suggestions, and to keep the three remaining options as the main options:
 - Option 1: Periodic comprehensive global and/or regional integrated environmental assessment every 4 years ;
 - Option 2: Gap filling thematic, emerging issues and/or derivative assessments;
 - Option 3: Periodic Synthesis of major global assessments.
- The service oriented approach is now presented as a separate element, called “Support to agreed needs in capacity building, knowledge generation and policy making (enabling, enhancing)”.
- The orientation towards an enabling and enhancing approach is in line with earlier EU+MS positions including the questionnaire (October 2020) that called for such an approach. The EU+MS at the time also indicated that more attention should be paid to the regionalization of data and information, something that is currently not included in the interim report, which was elaborated for UNEA 5.1.
- EU+MS welcome the suggested enabling and enhancing element as part of the future GEO, noting that such an approach already existed in earlier GEO’s on an ad hoc basis, as noted in the background document. EU+MS strongly call for the enabling and enhancing element to be structural, and with sufficient means to allow for strengthened implementation (as called for by EU+MS).
- The EU+MS further have the following observations:
 - While acknowledging the need to comply with UNEP’s mandate of keeping the world environment review, the **two pillars should both be prioritized**, and dedicated resources for both elements should be ensured;
 - The enabling and enhancing approach should explicitly also **address the aspect of regionalization**, in order to allow for sub global assessments to be produced, within available resources;
 - The enabling and enhancing approach also includes articulation of **how the knowledge needs of the end-users will be identified** and met through co-production of knowledge. It is hence partially addressed also in the assessment function, particularly option 2, through joint scoping of thematic focus according to urgent or emerging environmental issues, but this aspect should be further strengthened;
 - Elaboration and implementation should be done in close coordination with the development and implementation of the **Global Environmental Data Strategy**, the further development of the **World Environment Situation Room** and should aim to **increase synergies with MEAs**;
 - Acknowledging that further specification of services within an enabling and enhancing approach may be needed, the EU will provide further input on this in time for inclusion in the document for UNEA5.2.
- **Regarding the assessment pillar**, the EU+MS are of the opinion that GEO should indeed deliver credible, legitimate and relevant environmental assessments, with a special focus on the global level, to keep the world environment under review. These assessments

should be authoritative, non-duplicating, cost effective and demand driven, and aimed at answering the needs of clearly identified target audiences, first and foremost governments.

- In recent years many different outlooks have been produced on a regular basis, the Global Resources Outlook (2019) being one of the latest new 'lenses' on the environment, alongside outlooks on climate, biodiversity, chemicals and waste etc. This means that GEO does not necessarily have to produce its own assessments on these issues, but can indeed **revisit these assessments and assemble and interlink their key messages in an integral and compelling narrative, while taking into account inter alia interlinkages, spillover effects and opportunities for synergistic solutions and policies to environmental challenges.**
- Given that we want to avoid duplication and be cost effective, EU+MS think **an adjusted option 3** (synthesis option) is both feasible and preferable. Such continual synthesis of different assessments can lead to regular global reporting, (e.g. following the model of the latest report 'Making peace with nature'). This synthesis would also ensure a holistic view that takes into account interlinkages, synergies and tradeoffs, and be supplemented by addressing emerging issues and aspects not adequately addressed and provide a horizontal assessment on the content.
- An adjusted option 3 (option 3+) could possibly allow freeing up funds to spend on the other service/enabling and enhancing elements and on increased outreach with target groups.
- The EU+MS acknowledge that **new and novel themes and issues may come up, and that gaps may remain that require specific attention and assessment.** Therefore, ideally, option 3 should be combined with option 2 (thematic/ gap filling/ novel assessments), allowing for flexibility and ensuring that the full range of environmental issues is covered in a balanced and authoritative manner.
- For this model (Options 3+2 + enabling and enhancing functions) to be optimally effective, synergies with MEAs and relevant other assessment bodies, including IPBES, IPCC and IRP should be considered and further strengthened, as well as synergies with other UN assessment and capacity building bodies, including such as UNITAR. The **current efforts of the informal coordination group, led by UNEP**, to promote greater coherence and coordination of global assessments undertaken within the United Nations system would be the basis to work from, also through making use of the UN Environmental Management Group (EMG).
- EU+MS welcome the progress made in recent year and specifically in the GEO6 process to better service target audiences, being more demand driven, and present information in a range of different functional formats so as to strengthen the science-policy interface and maximize uptake of key messages. It encourages UNEP to help strengthen these efforts, and specifically calls for further development of distance to target methodologies, inspired by e.g. the Emission Gap report.

Governance

- Document EA/5/24 clearly lays out the need for a set of flexible procedures to be established to guide the work of GEO, and describes the main elements to be considered. The EU/MS agree to the need of a set of flexible procedures and endorses the **elements a-h contained in para 19 of the interim report, while underlining the importance of ensuring scientific credibility.**

- This set of procedures requires a clear governance framework; EU/MS have repeatedly indicated that UNEA should remain the inclusive body to guide the work of GEO, while at the same ensuring that ad hoc decisions are avoided and practice is streamlined and standardized.
- Also, doubt has been expressed on an approach where methodologies and processes that resemble the ones of IPCC and IPBES are being introduced. Such an approach would be less flexible, more costly and **would risk frictions with the mandates of UNEP and UNEA**, while **also diminishing the role of UNEA in providing guidance on the needs, scope and other elements of future assessments**. Such an approach, which would be elaborated along the lines of **para 22 in the interim report**, would most likely **prove to be less adequate** in guiding the work under the second pillar of the future GEO – the enabling and enhancing pillar. Creating a permanent subsidiary body to oversee the role of GEO would most likely create frictions with the regular work of the Science Division that is underpinning for the service-oriented pillar (e.g. work on Global Environmental Data Strategy, the WESR and regular capacity building activities).
- Considering this, **the EU+MS favor a lean governance model** that remains close to current practice in that it charges the Executive Director to convene open ended intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder meetings and advisory bodies to GEO, in a way roughly outlined in para 21 of the interim report.
- On the governance and implementation structure, codification can be achieved via continued management by UNEP, provided that sufficient guidance and resources/means of implementation are allocated to the area from the Environment Fund and possible supplementary funding provided by Member States. We should be cognizant of the risk of a too complicated model of collaboration and support structure that might not be equally feasibly to set up in different regions, or only possible in OECD countries.
- **The compliance with relevant parts of UNEP and UNEA’s key mandates and roles is important, especially:**
 - Keeping the world environment under review;
 - Relevance to the intended audience;
 - Legitimacy for UNEA MS;
 - High credibility and consistency with other scientific and assessment bodies;
 - Overall feasibility, including UNEP staff complement, budget and procedural
 - Demonstrating and explaining complexity;
 - The envisaged degree of impact in improving the global environment.

The Financial structure of GEO

- In the past the GEO-process has suffered from an unstable and unpredictable financial basis that at times interfered negatively with the envisaged work streams and ambitions. EU/MS favor a strengthening of the financial structure of GEO, to ensure stability and predictability, for core functions of GEO under the two pillars (option 3+2 complemented by enabling and enhancing support).
- The reforms needed for this, however, need to be cost-neutral and aim at obtaining a structure which is lean and not overburdened by functions. In our view, **core functions of GEO, such as the financing of the secretariat of GEO, and core staff for the production of GEO itself, should be financed through the Environment Fund**. Non-core activities should be financed through voluntary contributions and/or contributions into a **dedicated**

Trust Fund, or through other and supplementary ways from various sources or in-kind contributions.