

Global Environment Outlook: Consulting the Path Forward

By Franklin Odhiambo

Through the mandate of keeping the global environment under constant review, the United Nations Environment Programme is tasked by its member states with ensuring the latest science and technical advice on the environment is brought to the attention of policy makers and other stakeholders in a timely manner. One aspect of ensuring compliance to this request has been through regular assessments and reporting on the global environment. These assessments aim to report on the statuses and trends of selected global environmental themes but also project their future. Recently, there has been an attempt to assess policies and consider their effectiveness for appropriate actions. The duration of such an undertaking is often longer and varies depending on the mandate, however, over time the process itself has proven valuable through ensuring that key stakeholders dialogue and collaborate to develop the final assessment report. This is a key step in addressing the science policy interface since through the production of these reports, independent experts are involved in the writing and reviewing of the findings of the report which are then presented to policy makers for action. The process is as important as the final product.

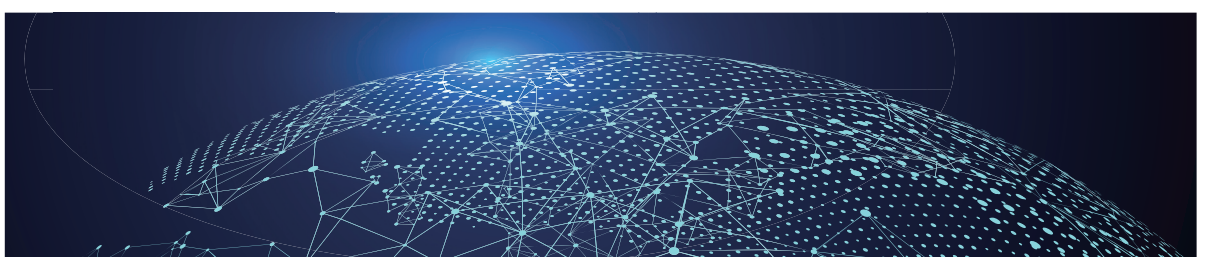


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The Global Environment Outlook (GEO) is a critically important piece of UNEP’s science policy interface. As much as UNEP has a broad science policy interface than just GEO i.e. the World Environment Situation Room, the SDG methodologies and capacity building work and its support to National Governments through the common country analysis, GEO’s specific role within the science policy interface is its independent expert led periodic assessment of the entire environmental sphere. The effectiveness of policy response and the outlook for the future is an important aspect in that link, which is really why the assessment part of the

GEO process is important because it complements all the other pieces of the UNEP science policy interface. UNEP has several reports that are specifically timed to influence different policy processes, such as the Emissions Gap Report which is important for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process and UNEP’s Frontiers Report that is important for the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) resolutions process amongst others. It is however important to ensure that the science policy work outside GEO is undertaken in a complementary manner and synergies are created where possible. There are elements of the current GEO already touching on the science policy interface. It is already doing more work on increasing synergies across assessments and on education through developing education products around the GEO findings. There are however areas where the science policy interface could be expanded. In this Future of GEO consultation phase, a questionnaire has been developed with a question specifically on the science policy interface role of GEO.

GEO has emerged over time as an integrator in the larger global environment assessment landscape. Its recent edition focused on the interaction between human health and the environment under the theme “Healthy Planet Healthy People”. This has been particularly relevant now with the current global health pandemic that has not only reminded us about nature and people, but also how an ailing environment affects the overall wellbeing of humankind. Similarly, previous GEOs also reported strategically on such important global environmental issues. GEO-5 focused on patterns of production and consumption while GEO-4 explored sustainable development and equity just before the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Such assessments have proven useful over time as they give perspectives and project the future. However, in a crowded global assessment landscape, there is now a need to strategically place GEO for its desired impact.



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With the launch of the [Sixth Edition of GEO](#) in the last UNEA, Member States requested for a study on GEO to allow for options for consideration in the next UNEA. In doing so, a Member State led steering committee was formulated to analyse the future objectives, form and function of GEO and recommend options for its future. This has been done in consideration of previous GEOs, other global assessments processes and best practices available. The success of the process is to be effective through broad consultations with Member States, Stakeholders and Assessments experts to ensure that the options presented are representative and harvested from a transparent and objective process.



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The consultation process on the Future of GEO will therefore be conducted in the month of September 2020. A team of independent consultants have produced an in-depth analysis of key aspects of GEO that has informed a short discussion paper produced by the Co-Chairs of the Steering Committee to highlight key information and present some building blocks for a future GEO. These building blocks will be consulted on during the consultation period to ensure all important aspects of a future GEO are known by the steering committee in the analysis phase of the process. A survey will be used to receive inputs on the following strategic questions;

1. What should be GEO's objectives?
2. What should GEO's functions be?
3. What process and methods should be followed and to what extent should they be formalised for GEO?
4. What should be GEO's scope and utility?
5. Who will be the main users of GEO and how will they use it, what products do they require and when will these products be needed?
6. What would the preferred governance and implementation structure look like, and to what extent should GEO be a scientific intergovernmental assessment?
7. What key criteria or aspects should be used to assess the limited set of options for the Future of GEO to be presented to UNEA?



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