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October 7, 2021

**‘Future of GEO’ Steering Committee Meeting Summary, call #4 of the iterative process
August 26, 2021**

Important Note: In order to make our calls more efficient and effective, Steering Committee members are encouraged to keep their verbal interventions to a maximum of 3 minutes each. Members are encouraged to mute their telephone lines when they are not speaking, to minimize background noise.

The Steering Committee on the Future of GEO met at its twenty-first virtual call to discuss progress and plan next steps for the production of the feasibility study. Agenda items included:

1. Discussion on the draft feasibility study and review progress that has been made so far
2. Review and discussion of the costing approach to be used for the GEO options
3. Any Other Business

On these agenda items the Steering Committee decided:

- The Steering Committee should look more closely at the second governance alternative, which could create a subsidiary body for the governance of future GEOs.
- A careful combination of the three assessment options may be necessary. Since GEO is characterized by its comprehensiveness, the first option is seen as a high priority, however, there is a risk of duplication with other assessments. This risk is managed better in option three. Therefore, a combination of options one and three could yield a comprehensive and unique report as a GEO product.
- The enhanced descriptions of the GEO options contain the Secretariat’s first attempt to evaluate the options across the different criteria. Such descriptions exist and could become annexes to this feasibility study report or could be used in the development of the final report.
- The proposed governance structures are tied to UNEA in the future of GEO schematic, but there is a need to have an implementation structure that feeds back to UNEA at some point. The Summary for Policy Makers (SPM) could be that link, but it is not currently provided in the schematic.
- Providing financial consequences of the assessment and governance options in the schematic would be a useful undertaking for providing a reader with a full picture.
- The manner in which the function of GEO is presented in the feasibility study does not clearly identify its origin. There is a need to reflect the sources of information presented in the feasibility study report. This should be better reflected in the report for clarity.
- The differences in the two governance alternatives, as presented in the schematic, are not as clear as they could be. This should be better presented in the schematic and in the feasibility study report.
- The functions and financing of the Secretariat should be detailed in the report since this was a key weakness of previous GEOs. This had only been done for the costs of maintaining core staff, but it should be expended to the extrabudgetary staff.
- The Steering Committee can send comments on the draft feasibility study report to the Secretariat by mid of the following week to allow for time to turn around the draft for final Steering Committee review and approval on a no-objection-basis in preparation for the broad online consultations.
- The current work on the future of GEO feasibility study is an important opportunity for building awareness of GEO in the UN organization, too to build up capacity and ensure competent skills are available in-house for GEO.
- The upcoming consultation period will be shortened to two weeks and is planned for the end

of September. The format of the consultation will be similar to last year’s consultations, but it will be supported by four webinars this time.

- The two main documents for the consultation will be (1) the draft feasibility study and (2) the online questionnaire. These two documents will be available for the Steering Committee to comment on during the week of the 6th of September. A quick turnaround of 2-3 days will be allowed for comments on the questionnaire and the feasibility study and these will be incorporated into the two documents over the remaining part of that week in readiness for the Steering Committee’s approval on a no-objection-basis over 48hrs period from the 10th of September.
- An initial early structured draft of the final report of the Steering Committee, to be prepared for UNEA 5.2, will be shared with the full Steering Committee immediately for the start of commenting and feedback.
- The Secretariat will start the process of identifying appropriate dates for the final workshop of the Steering Committee, potentially in the first week of November

Rapporteur	Signature
Mr. Rafael Monge Vargas	

Summary of the meeting

The meeting was chaired by the co-chairs of the Steering Committee.

Discussion on the draft feasibility study and reviewing of progress that has been made so far

The meeting started with the Secretariat presenting the draft report on the feasibility of future of GEO (i.e. the feasibility study). The Secretariat thanked the Steering Committee for its valuable inputs on the draft report so far. Since the draft had advanced to a first order draft stage, it has been structured with various sections. The Secretariat presented the draft highlighting the main changes since the last version of the draft report. The title of the draft report has been changed to include the *collaborative consequences* of the options, since this is identified in the evaluation criteria that were agreed by the Steering Committee. Some changes have also been made to ensure better explanation of the overview, the context as well as the steps in the process that had been followed to arrive at the findings of the study. The overall orientation of the future GEO as proposed by the Steering Committee is drawn mostly from the discussion on the Schematic of the Future of GEO Alternatives and Options. The Schematic has been improved by members of the Bureau and Task Team since the last meeting of the Steering Committee. The main components of the schematic entail a recognition that UNEA is the authorizing body for all GEO-type intergovernmental and expert-led assessments conducted by UNEP. There is a broad body of evidence that can be drawn on in any UNEP assessment like the Global Environmental Data Strategy (GEDS) requested through resolution 4/23, peer reviewed literature that fills the knowledge gaps, the World Environmental Situation Room (WESR) and other UNEP publications that provide evidence for GEO-type assessments. Additionally, there are other efforts in knowledge generation like citizen science, monitoring under the World Water Quality Assessment and indigenous and local knowledge that can be drawn from. There are also assessments that are outside UNEP's purview but are very important to be able to provide the information that is needed for each of the GEO assessments. This knowledge base is the basis on which assessments are built. For the governance options, the first option is similar to a GEO-6 governance model that has an intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder meeting at the beginning of the GEO to determine the scope, theme and annotated outline of the GEO. This is complemented by advisory bodies, author teams and collaborating centers to conduct the work. The two advisory bodies could provide intergovernmental and scientific support to the GEO process to ensure the relevance and scientific credibility of the GEO process and products. The second governance alternative proposes a more permanent structure for the governance of GEO with an adhoc open ended subsidiary body that is authorized by UNEA to make decisions, and a multi-disciplinary expert panel to provide scientific and technical expertise in order to support the assessment process. These two options will be supported by procedures for the selection of author teams, task teams, technical support units and collaborating centers to be able to produce the assessments. All these governance options and outputs aim to support policy making.

A section has been inserted in the feasibility study to highlight the new approach in the feasibility study, compared to the interim report, because of the separation of the enhancing and enabling functions from the main assessment options. While these functions are still considered mutually supportive the Steering Committee felt that this was not a stand-alone option and that the new proposal better reflected the current and envisaged future practices in the GEO assessment process. This change from the interim report findings is consistent with UNEP's science-policy interface and with the science-policy interfaces of other assessment processes (e.g. IPBES, IPCC). It was highlighted that this overall understanding of GEO's possible future function and place in the broader science policy interface, was meant to help frame the elements such as the objectives, functions and criteria for designing future GEOs.

The feasibility study also now contains a methodology section that shows how different options will be assessed, and an explanation of the main costs related to salaries for Secretariat staff, disbursements to cover intergovernmental and expert meetings, and costs for substantive and expert support during the assessment process. The feasibility study has also highlighted the benefits and in-kind returns that are realised when investing in the three main costs in a GEO process. Finally, the financial, collaborative and administrative consequences of the options are discussed. The costing for the options has been copied from the costing matrix. The Secretariat highlighted that these were preliminary numbers and based on assumption mainly to give the Steering Committee a general sense. In the governance options, it was noted that the two alternatives have very similar cost implications. A section on the mandate and terms of reference of an advisory group has now been moved to an annex of the report because it is for UNEA to discuss once a decision on governance alternatives has been taken. Lastly, for the assessment options of GEO, a costing table has been provided for each to distinguish the base costs and the variable costs as agreed in the last meeting of the Steering Committee. A final summary table is now provided in the feasibility study that will show all options costed out and their implications. A costing summary table has also been provided for the enabling functions, but it only includes at the moment: a capacity building programme, a science-policy seminar series and support for national and sub-national GEO-type assessments. The Secretariat noted that there are certainly other enabling activities that GEO could be involved in but these haven't been costed out yet. This can be done in future versions of the report. Further, the Secretariat noted that possible synergies and comparisons across the options section of the report hadn't been developed yet and the final results section which will provide a summary table of the costing and offering of the explanation on each of the administrative and collaborative arrangement of the options. These will be provided in the next draft.

On this issue, the Steering Committee thanked the Bureau, Secretariat and the Task Team for advancing the draft feasibility study. Further, it was highlighted that the Steering Committee should seriously consider the possibility of using the second alternative which could create a subsidiary body for the governance of GEO. It was emphasized that a careful combination of the three assessment options could be useful. Since GEO is characterized by its comprehensiveness, the first option is seen as a high priority, however, there is a risk of duplication with other assessments. This risk can be managed in option three. Therefore, a combination of options one and three could yield a comprehensive and unique report as a GEO product. This will then give option two as an additional option to address emerging challenges. Additionally, the Steering Committee suggested creation of tables that present the pros and cons of each governance alternative and assessment option against the criteria agreed by the Steering Committee. Additionally, the Steering Committee noted that the estimated costs of assessment options two and three seem to be low because of lack of production costs like editing and printing. A clear cost comparison will therefore be necessary to avoid questions during the consultation period.

The Steering Committee enquired whether the agreed criteria will be used to assess the options and alternatives of governance at this stage or whether that will be done in the final report development. On this issue, it was clarified that the feasibility study was meant to answer criterion 'g' as agreed by the Steering Committee. The question was raised by the Steering Committee of whether the report should highlight all criteria at the start of the feasibility study. The enhanced descriptions of the GEO options contain the Secretariat's first attempt of comparison across the different criteria (e.g. does the comprehensive GEO option fulfil the organization's mandate). Such descriptions exist and could become annexes to this feasibility study report or could be used in the development of the final report. The Secretariat's preference is that these enhanced descriptions be used in the final report preparation to allow for more comments on them from the Steering Committee in the meantime. On the schematic, the Steering Committee enquired to what extent there can be a feedback mechanism into UNEA. The governance structure is tied to UNEA but there is need to have an implementation structure that feeds back to UNEA at some point. The Summary for Policy

Makers (SPM) could be that link but it is not currently provided in the schematic. Further, it was highlighted that providing financial consequences in the schematic would be a useful undertaking to providing a reader with a full picture. The Steering Committee further enquired about whether Technical Support Units (TSUs) have been used before as part of GEO processes. It was highlighted that the manner in which TSUs have been presented in the feasibility study report might give an impression that they have previously been part of the GEO process. It was also noted that the SPM had only been mentioned one time in the draft feasibility report which does not emphasize the importance of the science policy interface role of GEO. Lastly, it was highlighted that the rationale for defining the function of GEO is not presented clearly in the feasibility study. There is need to reflect the sources of information in the feasibility study report.

On these issues the Secretariat clarified that although TSUs have been presented in the schematic, GEO has always used collaborating centers. These collaborating centers provide specialized expertise, such as on oceans or polar. The TSUs function is different in that these will actually be managing the production of certain parts of the assessments. On this issue the Steering Committee enquired to what extent should this be an externalized service rather than building up or harnessing internal expertise within UNEP to deliver on GEO. The Steering Committee also noted the need to ensure comparability across documents leading up to the final report. It is important to ensure that the interim report is consistent with the feasibility study report and the final report. On these issues, it was noted that the functions of GEO as presented in the feasibility study report are emerging from the interim report of the Steering Committee and the consultations that were undertaken last year. It was agreed that this should be better reflected in the report for clarity. Further, the consistency issue with the interim report was noted to ensure that the fourth option which has now been converted to an enabling function should be harmonized for consistency.

The Steering Committee enquired on the possibility to send written comments on the feasibility study draft later. Further, it was highlighted that the difference in the governance alternatives as presented in the schematic are not as clear as they should be. The functions and financing of the Secretariat should be detailed in the report since this was a key weakness of previous GEOs. It was noted that the second governance alternative would be an adhoc open ended subsidiary body, but that doesn't make it permanent, but rather longer term until UNEA disbands it. This should be presented in the schematic and in the feasibility study report. The Secretariat agreed that indicating financial implications for staff is vital. This had only been done for the core staff but it will be expanded to the extrabudgetary staff. It was also noted that the main difference between the two governance alternatives is that UNEA could request the ED to produce a GEO in alternative 1 but for the second alternative UNEA could create a subsidiary body and then directly call on it to deliver a GEO. This could ensure that feedback loop back to UNEA is ensured through the subsidiary body regularly reporting to UNEA.

The Steering Committee also enquired if the feasibility study was going to be presented at UNEA together with the enhanced description of GEO options. The Committee was also happy to see the support to national and regional assessment as a complementary function of any GEO option. In the final report, there is need to summarize and build on all other reports that the Steering Committee has worked on so far to reach a set of recommendations and conclusions. It was also noted that names for the options is needed for consistency, especially for the enabling functions that had now transitioned from being called a *service-oriented option*. This will be done in the final stages of the report but was noted as an outstanding issue. The Steering Committee was reminded of the need to remain on track to the UNEA mandate. The Secretariat noted that the consultations last year had asked if GEO should continue and the response was overwhelming that GEO should continue. This clarification is essential in the feasibility study to ensure the message is clear for UNEA.

It was agreed that the Steering Committee can send comments to the Secretariat by mid of the following week to allow for time to turn around the draft for final Steering Committee review and approval on a no-objection-basis in preparation for consultations.

Review and discussion on the costing approach to be used for the GEO options

The Secretariat presented the costing approach to be used for the GEO options and their costing matrix. Costs have been expanded out as discussed in the previous Steering Committee calls to show base and variable costs. Variable costs include several authors meeting that could be included together with authors stipends, collaborative support and payment of expertise from outside institutions while base costs included the two meetings needed for the drafting and approval of the SPM as well as document production layout and translation. Variable costs have been included in all assessment options in the summary table. The Secretariat highlighted that the costing matrix was important to give the Steering Committee a sense of how much the annual costs were for each of the options in the lead up to the final report aimed for UNEA. This will help the comparison to the Secretariat's available funding at the moment. This will help in discussions on how to fill the gaps in financing GEO. On this item the Steering Committee asked for clarity on why the variable costs were different in different GEO options. The Secretariat noted that the base costs are similar because of the same number of meetings for the SPMs. However, variable costs are different for each assessment option because the document and meeting sizes are different.

The Steering Committee further enquired if there could be an option within an option for building up human resources in certain areas in the Secretariat to be a center for key skills for scientific and political expertise rather than outsourcing these roles. On this the Secretariat noted that its challenge during a GEO process is access to the relevant expertise in-house. This is mainly because UNEP experts are normally involved in other areas of work in the organization. In GEO-6, the Secretariat seeks out external collaborating centers and request for their expertise. The GEO team is very small and the substantive expertise is often not available in the team because of GEO's integrated nature. The Steering Committee emphasized that this could be opportunity for building importance of GEO in the organization to build up capacity and ensure competent skills are available in-house for GEO. The Secretariat welcomed this suggestion but also noted that the use of collaborative centers before was a result of GEO being periodic in nature. It therefore calls for collaboration especially at the peak seasons of production rather than having a permanent staff who would be working only periodically on the GEO process.

Any other business

Discuss the process and documents for the online consultation on the future of GEO

The Steering Committee had earlier agreed that it would shorten the consultation period to two weeks which would happen at the end of September. The format of the consultation will be similar to the last year's consultations, but it will be supported by four webinars this time. The two main documents for the consultation would be the draft feasibility study and the online questionnaire. The Secretariat proposed to have drafts of these two documents available for the Steering Committee to comment on during the week of the 6th of September. A quick turnaround of 2-3 days would be allowed for comments on the questionnaire and the feasibility study and these would be incorporated in the remaining part of that week in readiness for the Steering Committee's approval on a no-objection-basis, over 48hrs. The consultation would begin on the 10th of September. The Steering Committee agreed on the Secretariat's proposal and requested for the breakdown of the proposed dates in an email.

Initial discussion on the outline of the final Steering Committee report

The Steering Committee co-chairs presented an initial early structure of the final report of the Committee for UNEA 5.2. It was agreed that the draft could be shared with the full Steering Committee for start of commenting and feedback.

Timeline for the final workshop of the steering committee

There are only two main meeting of the Steering Committee left in the process. The October meeting will present the findings of the consultation process and allow the Steering Committee to comment and digest the result. Then similar to last year's workshop there will be a series of sessions in early November to finalize the final report of the Steering Committee for UNEA 5.2. These could be two to three-hour sessions for a few days to help approve the final document. In the interim various drafts of the report will be shared for comments by email and then a final text would be shared with the Steering Committee about a week before the sessions in early November. The Steering Committee noted that the timeline should be adjusted and shared with the Committee to allow for early planning.

Having no other business, the meeting was adjourned at 16h34 (EAT).

Action items

- The Secretariat will prepare a written summary of the meeting.
- Secretariat to adjust the timeline of the Steering Committee on the remaining milestones and share in good time
- The Steering Committee to send the Secretariat written comments (if any) on the feasibility study report
- The Secretariat will start the process of identifying appropriate dates for the final workshop of the Steering Committee potentially in the first week of November
- The co-chairs of the Steering Committee will share their initial draft of the outline of the final Steering Committee report aimed for submission at UNEA 5.2 for the Committee's review and comments as soon as possible

List of Participants

First name	Last name	Affiliation	Nominated by
Jerome	Sebadduka Lugumira	National Environment Management Authority (NEMA)	Uganda
Anna	Mampye	Ministry of Environment	South Africa
Keisuke (alternate)	Takahashi	Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)	Japan
Narges	Saffar	International Affairs & Conventions Center, Department of Environment	Iran (Islamic Republic of)
Marek	Haliniak	Ministry of the Environment, Poland	Poland
Nino	Gokhelashvili	Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia	Georgia
Ivar Andreas	Baste	Norwegian Environment Agency	Norway
Huang	Yi	Peking University	China
Rafael	Monge Vargas	Ministry of Environment and Energy	Costa Rica
Charles	Lange	National Environment Management Authority (NEMA)	Kenya
R S K	Doolwalage	Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment	Sri Lanka
Kazuhiko	Takeuchi	Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)	Japan
Chatchai	Intatha	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Thailand	Thailand
Toral	Patel- Weynand	US Forest Service	USA
Sebastian	Jan Konig	Swiss Federal Office for the Environment,	Switzerland
Claudia	Kabel	German Environment Agency	Germany
Cathy (alternate)	Maguire	European Environment Agency (EEA)	European Union
Salla	Rantala	Finnish Environment Institute	Finland
Mona	Westergaard	Ministry of Environment and Food	Denmark

Apologies

First name	Last name	Affiliation	Nominated by
Ryan	Assiu	Environmental Management Authority	Trinidad and Tobago
Akzan	Shiranov	Ministry of Energy	Kazakhstan
Celso	Moretti	Agricultural Research Corporation	Brazil
Mira	Zovko	Ministry of Environment and Energy	Croatia
Ivana	Stojanovic	Ministry of Sustainable Development and Tourism	Montenegro
Chenouf	Nadia	Ministry of the Environment and Renewable Energy	Algeria
Christine Okae	Asare	Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)	Ghana
			Bahrain
Noasilalaonomenjanahary	Ambinintsoa Lucie	Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development	Madagascar
Anshu	Singh	Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate change, Government of India	India
Marcos	Serrano	Ministry of Environment Chile	Chile
Rhian (alternate)	Rees-Owen	International Environment Negotiations Evidence-UK	United Kingdom and Northern Ireland
Mery	Harutyunyan	Ministry of Environment	Armenia
Garry	Kass	Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs-UK	United Kingdom and Northern Ireland
Ouedraogo	Desire	Ministry of Environment, green economy and climate change	Burkina Faso
Isaac	Dladla	Eswatini Environment Authority	Swaziland/Eswatini
Deepa (alternate)	Liyanage	Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment	Sri Lanka
Najib	Saab	Arab Forum for Environment & Development (AFED)	Lebanon

Teshia	Jn Baptiste	Ministry of Education, Innovation, Gender Relations and Sustainable Development	Saint Lucia
Shanna (alternate)	Emmanuel	Ministry of Education, Innovation, Gender Relations and Sustainable Development	Saint Lucia
Keri (alternate)	Holland	US Department of State	USA
Andrew	Stott	Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs-UK	United Kingdom and Northern Ireland
Jock	Martin	European Environment Agency (EEA)	European Union
Marcel	Kok	Environment Assessment Agency (PBL)	Netherlands
Paul (alternate)	Lucas	Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL)	Netherlands
Carlos (Alternate)	Cordero Vega	Ministry of Environment and Energy	Costa Rica