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‘Future of GEO’ Steering Committee Meeting Summary, call #3 of the iterative process, July 28, 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 twentieth virtual call to discuss progress and plan next steps for the production of the feasibility study. Agenda items included:

1. Review of the future of GEO schematic
2. Discuss and agree on the next steps for the development of the feasibility study
3. Any Other Business

On these agenda items the Steering Committee decided:

- The draft schematic reflects the direction that the Steering Committee wishes to take for presenting options to UNEA.
- The Steering Committee supports the idea of separating the service-oriented option from other GEO options. Therefore, the service-oriented GEO option should be integrated into other GEO options as a complementary and enabling function.
- The expansion of services offered by GEO should be extended beyond just capacity building. This is to ensure accommodation of other services that could be valuable for different GEO options.
- Costing of all options should include consideration of development and negotiation of SPMs, to harmonize costing across all GEO options.
- The Secretariat will start the drafting process of the feasibility study and submit this to the Task Team and eventually the whole Steering Committee for comments. Feedback from the Steering Committee towards the end of the month will enable the Secretariat and the Task Team to finalize the document for approval on a no-objection basis, before the start of consultation scheduled for mid-September.
- Participation of Steering Committee members in the process is important for the legitimacy of the process. This was highlighted in the recent CPR meeting. Members of the Steering Committee are encouraged to actively contribute to the work of the Committee through providing comments and reviews during this iterative process as well as attendance at the Committee’s meetings.

Rapporteur	Signature
Mr. Rafael Monge Vargas	

Summary of the meeting

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

Review of the future of GEO schematic

The meeting started with the Secretariat presenting a draft schematic of the future of GEO process. The schematic was developed after a discussion with the Task Team and the Bureau and it proposes a slightly modified approach to the GEO options. The schematic also attempts to link up the different options and show how they fit within the overall scheme of the GEO process.

The Secretariat presented the draft schematic and invited the Bureau and the Task Team for more inputs before opening discussions. The main components of the schematic entail a recognition that UNEA is the authorizing body for all 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 in any 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 on. 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 foundation base is the foundation on which assessments are built. The one feature about GEO that is unique compared to other UNEP-led assessments is its fully intergovernmental and expert-led nature which allows for inclusion of outside expertise to fulfil the organization's mandate of promoting participation of relevant scientific knowledge holders in the production of UNEP science policy work, through a set of agreed procedures. The Secretariat reiterated that the Steering Committee has discussed at length the assessment options of the future GEO. These could be the final products, but the governance alternatives have not yet been well discussed and developed. These governance alternatives have therefore been included in the schematic to allow for a deeper Steering Committee discussion on them.

Further, there was a discussion in the Task Team and the Bureau that the service-oriented GEO, which was option three in the interim report, might be a complementary function of all of the assessments and could include functions like capacity building, trainings or sub-global assessments and policy support to Member States. The task team therefore proposed a movement of the service-oriented GEO to a mutually supportive category and have it applied to all three of the assessment options. 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, collaborative centers and technical support units 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 conduct the assessment. These two options will be supported by 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. GEO assessments should be conducted in accordance with agreed procedures and that have also emerged from the broad consultations conducted last year.

On this issue, the Steering Committee supported the idea of separating the capacity building elements from other GEO options. The Steering Committee enquired on what kind of policy support for Member States will be offered, as presented on the schematic, and how that support will relate to the other knowledge sources highlighted like the GEDS and WESR and other UNEP assessment reports and products. On this, the Secretariat responded that over time Member States have requested the Secretariat to provide means and ways in which findings of GEO can be fully adapted to their national situation. The current GEO team has conceived a science-policy seminar which is a short seminar discussion with national government's experts to review GEO's findings and what these mean in their country's context. This is designed to be an interactive session where Member States themselves can discuss how they might use the different relevant GEO findings. The Steering Committee further enquired on the difference in composition of the two governance alternatives presented in the schematic. On this the Secretariat clarified that the first alternative of governance presented in the schematic will be a continuation of the governance structure of the previous GEOs while the second alternative proposes an adhoc open ended subsidiary body to UNEA that will be more formalized and working under direct authority from UNEA. The advisory body in GEO six was comprised of 25 Member States representatives geographically and gender balance but also had 10 stakeholder representatives that were drawn from the accredited stakeholder groups that are part of UNEP's major groups and stakeholders. It was quite useful to have those stakeholder representatives in those discussions and would be useful having that in future bodies. However, in this case, it's up to UNEA to decide who sits on those bodies, therefore in the end, UNEA might want to decide on the composition and functions of the different GEO bodies.

The Steering Committee decided that the Schematic be included in the feasibility study report. Written comments can be sent to the Secretariat to allow for a comprehensive review of the schematic. The schematic may also be retained by the Steering Committee in its final report, as a way of summarizing different aspects of the Committee's work and what future GEOs might look like.

Discuss and agree on the next steps for the development of the feasibility study

The Secretariat presented the expanded description of the GEO options and their costing matrix. The next step will entail the production of the feasibility study. The feasibility study is meant to feed into the online and peer review consultation that is scheduled for the last two weeks of September. The findings of that online consultation will be discussed at a Steering Committee meeting in early October. All of that; the feasibility study and the findings of the consultation, will feed into discussions on the final report of the Steering Committee. Therefore, over the next three and a half months a lot of work will have to be done.

The Secretariat is available to start drafting the feasibility study. A zero draft already exists, where elements of the feasibility study are provided with some clarifying text and the structure has been agreed by the Steering Committee. The last section will however have to be modified because it presents the options including the service-oriented GEO that will now be supporting all other options. The two governance alternatives will also need to be added in this section. The next task team call is scheduled for August 12th. Therefore, the Secretariat's proposal was for it to begin the drafting process by taking the zero draft text and turning it into a narrative to make the text more readable before opening that draft up for discussion during the August 12th call with the task team. The Task Team will then be invited to provide comments and suggestions for about a week's time on the text developing a further draft that would be circulated for the Steering Committee call scheduled for August 26 and then invite the full Steering Committee to comment and provide changes to the document until about the middle of September. That version of the feasibility study would be the version that would be submitted to the full Steering Committee for adoption on a no objection basis.

The feasibility study is mainly a working document for the Steering Committee, therefore it's not an official document of any kind but only meant to support the consultations. Therefore, hopefully that online approval on a no-objection basis will be sufficient and will allow the Secretariat proceed with the online consultation towards the end of September. The main inputs to the feasibility study will be the interim report, the enhanced option descriptions and the descriptions of the alternatives.

In addition to the drafting of the feasibility study, the Secretariat will undertake an analysis of the full cost of this undertaking. Currently the costing elements have been determined and presented for the four options presented in the Steering Committee interim report. The two alternatives of the governance options will be costed, and the service-oriented GEO costed and will include other activities beyond the capacity building option, to give variety of services and their cost implications. That will allow for matching the assessment options with supporting and complementary pieces.

On this issue the Steering Committee thanked the Secretariat for producing all the materials needed for the meeting and circulating them for the Committee's feedback. The Committee reiterated the need to focus on the criteria that the Committee had identified in the interim report and thanked the Secretariat for expanding the options in that regard already. Further, the Steering Committee noted that the two governance options have already been introduced in the draft feasibility study report through section 1.5. It was suggested that UNEA would benefit from guidance on the grounds for choosing the respective governance approaches. The Steering Committee also noted that the feasibility study outlined did not contain a section on criteria. This section would present them upfront at an introductory level to then assess each of the options in the report using them. On this issue, the Secretariat clarified that the feasibility study is meant to address criterion G in the interim report which assesses the overall feasibility of the options. It will therefore be important to have the criteria assessed in the final report of the Steering Committee.

The Steering Committee further sought clarifications on where the national assessments support would be provided under GEO. On this the Secretariat suggested that the sub-global assessment support has been proposed in the schematic under the service-oriented suggestions. A clear link will have to be made on the relevant assessments options to allow for a feasibility assessment of this service to governments. GEO has supported national assessments in the past. There is a book that was being drafted by former UNEP staff and a few other experts and they provided a graphic of how many GEO-type assessments have been done. There have been about 300 GEO-type assessments completed over the 20 years that GEO has been in existence. Many of those assessments are national while some are city level assessments. Therefore, there is still a notable interest in doing DPSIR-type assessments at the country level and below the country levels. The Secretariat is very happy to support that. The Steering Committee noted that it had omitted this important support service in its interim report and it will seek to re-establish it in its final report. The Steering Committee also advised that in revising the description of the service-oriented GEO, the target of each service should be clearly defined. The Steering Committee also noted that the costing of options 2 to four seemed under costed compared to option 1. The Secretariat acknowledged that the difference in costs among options may have emerged from omission of SPMs from the other options while including it in the first option. Additionally, a data platform to digitize GEO had added a significant cost for the first option of GEO and had not been included in the other options. The Secretariat will break out the costs more in the other options, and have them include SPMs and data support for a comparative costing exercise.

Any other business

The Secretariat thanked the Bureau of the Steering Committee for presenting to the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) on the future of GEO. In that session most interventions from the CPR members indicated concern on the low level of participation by the Steering Committee members in the process. This is the reason why the Secretariat decided to send out an email and the analysis that it had done on the participation of the Steering Committee members. The legitimacy of the whole process is impacted by the level of participation of its members. This is more so especially if certain geographic areas are underrepresented, this could lead to interventions from the floor of UNEA during negotiations of the resolution from the underrepresented region, indicating that they were excluded in some way. The Secretariat therefore wishes to make sure that the Steering Committee is aware that active participation is important for the success of the process. Additionally, there were comments from the CPR about the fact that there may be a perception that focus is being directed towards only one option; the comprehensive GEO option. This is why the Secretariat and the Bureau have done all the additional work to get the other four options analyzed and a schematic done for all the options, to have all options open for consideration until UNEA's decision.

Having no other business, the meeting was adjourned at 16h11 (EAT).

Action items

- The Secretariat will prepare a written summary of the meeting.
- Secretariat to draft the feasibility study report and circulate for the task team and the bureau's comments before the next bureau meeting on 12th August.
- The Steering Committee to send the Secretariat written comments (if any) on the schematic and expanded GEO options and governance options.

List of Participants

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Apologies

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