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**Findings of the review of the initial impact of the fourth *Global Environment Outlook: Environment for Development* report and the self-assessment survey<sup>1</sup>**

**Note by the Executive Director**

*Summary*

The annex to the present note sets out the findings of the review of the initial impact of the fourth *Global Environment Outlook: Environment for Development (GEO-4)* report, which assesses the extent to which the *GEO-4* report and its summary for decision makers have reached their intended target groups and examines use and influence in the 10 months subsequent to the launch. The findings of the *GEO-4* self-assessment survey conducted between 2006 and 2007 of participants in the *GEO-4* process are also included. The annex was commissioned by the secretariat of the United Nations Environment Programme and prepared by a team of independent evaluation specialists. The full reports will be made available online in January 2009. The annex has been issued without formal editing.

\* UNEP/GC/25/1.

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of the Secretariat of the United Nations Environment Programme.

## Annex

### **Findings of the review of the initial impact of the fourth *Global Environment Outlook: Environment for Development* report and the self-assessment survey**

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## I. Findings of the Review of the Initial Impact of the GEO-4 Report

1. The role and mandate of UNEP continue to evolve within the context of broader international development challenges. There is renewed focus on the future evolution of international governance, including calls for more coherence within the UN System and increased focus on the role of the private sector. These directional shifts are reflected in UNEP's Medium Term Strategy and, in turn, influence the focus and strategy of UNEP's programme.
2. The launch of the *fourth Global Environment Outlook: environment for development* (GEO-4) on 25 October 2007 coincided with the 20th anniversary of the launch of the Brundtland report, which was used as a point of reference to assess the progress made over two decades in addressing critical environment and development issues. GEO-4 placed sustainable development at the core of the assessment, highlighting the vital role of the environment in development and for human well being. It related the global environmental challenges primarily to the situation of poor countries, vulnerable societies and the need for intra- and intergenerational equity. For the first time a Summary for Decision Makers (SDM), which was considered and endorsed by governments and other stakeholders, accompanied a GEO report, synthesizing findings, gaps and challenges into key policy relevant messages.
3. GEO-4 was designed as an integrated assessment of the global environment which was to involve governments, build upon national, sub-regional and regional information, assessments and experiences, and strengthen appropriate sub-regional and regional capacities. Significant efforts were made to ensure its integrity, quality and relevance and to broaden its stakeholder involvement. An intensive intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder consultative process with a set of global and regional meetings defined the issues that needed to be addressed. More than 380 scientific and policy experts researched and drafted the report; the interaction between scientists and policy makers was deemed essential to identify and focus the policy questions. Fifty-four partners/Collaborating Centers (CCs) contributed in the report production and more than 1 000 expert reviewers considered drafts at different stages of the process. A High Level Consultative Group with prominent persons from policy, science and civil society provided guidance during the final stage.

### 1. The Review design

4. A *Review of the Initial Impact of GEO-4* took place ten months after the launch of the report. It had a limited brief to concentrate only on the two global products and not on the GEO process. It was designed to:
  - assess early on whether the global GEO-4 report and the Summary for Decision Makers (SDM) (hereafter referred to as the GEO-4 Report) are being used as intended among those targeted as primary<sup>2</sup> and secondary<sup>3</sup> users;
  - focus on the 'use' and influence of the Report as a means to assess initial 'impact', which (i) may take a decade or more to emerge, and (ii) require extensive studies that focus on determining causality;
  - analyze the types and patterns of use and the factors determining the extent of use in order to signal the *potential* for longer term influence and impact over time;
  - identify the 'success factors' by analyzing those attributes known from the literature and experience to be critical for the use and influence of environmental assessments: (i) the three main attributes of salience (which includes issues of relevance and timeliness), credibility and legitimacy - determining factors in GEO-4's reputation for quality and authority; (ii) the extent to which users and potential users find it useful and of value to

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2 Defined by the GEO Outreach Working Group in the Outreach and Engagement Strategy as the UNEP Governing Council/Global Ministerial Forum; UNEP Committee of Permanent Representatives; actors in intergovernmental processes, MEA Secretariats and Conference of Parties; and policy advisors (on the environment) in relevant ministries.

3 Defined by the GEO Outreach Working Group in the Outreach and Engagement Strategy as UN agencies/UN sustainable development processes, other government ministries and agencies, NGOs, civil society, the scientific community, the media, the private sector and the general public. The description of the primary and secondary target groups differed somewhat between different documents, with the youth explicitly mentioned in some.

their work; and (iii) the extent to which the information reaches (penetrates) the intended primary and secondary target audiences; and

- identify lessons that can be useful for UNEP in shaping the purpose, focus, design and implementation of GEO-5, in particular in view of the vision and role of UNEP as articulated in the Medium Term Strategy (2010-2013).

5. It can take years, sometimes a decade or more, for science to influence policy and strategy. Conceptual thinking and opinion can be swayed, over time, by many influences which make it difficult to attribute change to specific products or interventions. The main premise for the Review stated that it was too early to focus on the impact of GEO-4. How and by whom it is being used therefore would therefore provide the best indication of its potential to have influence and impact over time, and understanding the patterns and reasons for use would highlight issues for consideration in future GEO initiatives.

6. The Review design was informed by the vision and objectives articulated for UNEP and GEO-4, the current literature on how science and global assessments influence policy, the GEO-4 'impact pathway', and quantitative and qualitative methods for breadth, depth and adequate triangulation<sup>4</sup>. An explicit 'impact pathway'<sup>5</sup> is frequently used to provide the basis upon which to implement and manage an initiative, and to monitor and evaluate its results and impact. As this was not available for GEO-4, the Review team constructed a simple version informed by discussions with programme managers and a review of GEO documents.<sup>6</sup> However, as this version was not approved through consensus it was only partly used during the Review.

7. Assessment influence is relational and is known to vary significantly across audiences. This means that the concerns, perspectives and assumptions of groups initiating an assessment might differ markedly from those of potential users. This is one of the reasons why the data collection methods drew from the perspectives of targeted groups of potential users (working in the environment or development or both), comparing these to what was intended. A distinction was made between potential users who had been part of the GEO-4 process and those who had not participated, as well as between those from developed and developing countries.

8. The perceptions and experiences of 148 potential users<sup>7</sup> and four GEO-4 Coordinating Team members were captured through structured and semi-structured interviews. They were selected from GEO-4 contact lists partly in a random and partly in a targeted manner. Three quarters were involved in the GEO-4 production process; this sample bias was considered during data analysis. A desk study, two short surveys and Internet searches in English, French and Spanish were used to gather data beyond this GEO-4 'inner circle'.

9. Due to the relatively small sample sizes, the quantitative data for each target group were seen as indicating opinions and trends, and the qualitative comments, both positive and negative, were used to make the findings more robust and pertinent. Comments were taken as an indication that they might be shared and magnified among larger groups of users beyond those sampled.

10. It is widely recognized that UNEP has established and maintained over many years a unique position of leadership in the assessment of global environmental change. The original concept and vision of the GEO process as an inclusive, participatory process of global integrated assessment set an important precedent for UNEP and for the many other assessment processes that followed in the global environment community. Unlike most other assessment processes, UNEP has invested incrementally over time in the development of networks of data and assessment providers, the convening of geographically and gender balanced multi-stakeholder platforms and an inclusive and participatory process for the generation of regular global environmental outlook reports and associated products. The investment in this constituency has in turn increased the knowledge base relevant to addressing the most

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4 Triangulation: cross-checking facts and perceptions using different methods, sources of information and analyst perspectives.

5 That is, a clear articulation of the intended causal pathways of change, including a measurable description of the changes sought and the underlying assumptions to achieving the changes.

6 The statement provided to UNEP by the Global Intergovernmental and Multi-stakeholder Consultation (UNEP/GC.23/CRP.5, 22 February 2005) as well as various GEO brochures and UNEP reports.

7 Those interviewed were selected partly randomly, partly purposefully from the contact lists of the GEO-4 Coordinating Team: three quarters were involved in the GEO-4 production process, 61% worked in the environment, 10% in development and 13% in both, with the largest group from government (31%) followed by the academic sector (23%), non-government sector (21%), UN (14%) and the private sector (7%).

pressing of global environmental problems, as well as strengthening the capacity of governments, NGOs and research and academic institutions. .

## 2. Main findings

11. Overall the Review Team found that GEO continues to fill an important niche in the global assessment landscape by being relevant, useful and adding value to most of its primary environment constituency. It also concludes that much more could be done to increase the use and influence of the GEO assessments among diverse influential stakeholders, given the increasingly crowded assessment and information landscape and changing contexts. More attention could also be given to maximizing GEO's potential to ensure that environmental problems and emerging issues of wide international significance receive appropriate and timely consideration by key stakeholders, particularly with respect to human and ecosystem wellbeing and the role of private sector in global sustainable development.

### *Achievements*

12. The GEO-4 Report is an assessment that remains pivotal to UNEP's mandate to keep the global environmental situation under review. The Review found that the actors responsible for its design and production have been very successful in meeting the overall GEO-4 objective to provide a 'comprehensive, reliable and scientifically credible, policy-relevant and legitimate up-to-date assessment of, and outlook regarding the interaction between environment and society'. It is widely used among those who were interviewed<sup>8</sup>, in particular as a source of reference – an 'encyclopedia' - aimed at raising general awareness and informing research and teaching. Its use for policy purposes is concentrated at the beginning of the 'policy cycle' – problem identification, agenda setting and policy research.

13. A majority of respondents found the GEO-4 Report to be relevant to their work where they need a global and, to some extent, a regional perspective. This view is particularly strong among government and developing country representatives. More than the other target groups, policy makers and academia found it to be useful for their work. It is considered to be important for environmental governance and is making contributions to multilateral environmental agreements. There is significant appreciation for the focus on the intersection between environment and development, and a general view that this focus should be retained and strengthened. In a global assessment landscape that is becoming markedly more crowded, GEO-4 compares favorably with other assessment reports. Just over 60% of respondents found it to be the same or better than others in terms of the value it could add to their work.

14. The GEO-4 Coordinating Team and its collaborators worked hard and with considerable success to ensure that GEO-4 maintained its reputation as an assessment of high quality. The credibility of the Report is high in terms of comprehensiveness, reliability and standing and as an authoritative resource. It is perceived to be fairly user-friendly and up-to-date considering the significant challenges in this regard inherent in this type of assessment.

15. The GEO-4 team gave higher priority than any of its predecessors to reaching its primary target group. This yielded good results, especially during the production process when several impressive strategies were launched to ensure credible and high level intergovernmental engagement and input, especially among environmental actors. The Summary for Decision Makers played a significant role in the positive reception among policy makers. The availability of the Report in several languages, its distribution through the Internet and its successful launch made it widely accessible, increasing its reach among both primary and secondary target groups.

### *Challenges*

16. Challenges inherent in the GEO-4 production process affected the scientific rigor (an aspect of its credibility) and legitimacy of the Report largely due to differences in data quality across chapters (due to the data available), the need for negotiation in a multi-stakeholder process and the balance between representation and expertise from scientific and policy communities. Of particular concern is the general perception across user groups that the SDM production process did not meet standards of independence. The SDM is therefore generally perceived to be less reliable and authoritative than the main assessment report.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> It should be taken into account that these are likely to have a positive bias towards GEO.

<sup>9</sup> This is primarily in response to what some see as a compromise during a negotiated process that sacrificed 'scientific rigor' for 'political expediency' during the final stages of the intergovernmental consultation towards endorsement of the GEO-4.

17. The Report was written for a global audience with a global focus on ‘Environment for Development’, and thus is perceived as less relevant, valuable and used by actors at national level, by development practitioners and by private sector actors. Its relevance has also to some extent been affected by the increasingly crowded assessment landscape, especially given the limited conceptualization and articulation of target groups, desired outcomes and how they are to be achieved. Special concerns are twofold: the tepid comments by a significant number of respondents and key informants<sup>10</sup> across the primary and secondary target audiences on the relevance, utility and value of GEO-4 compared to other sources of information, and the lack of coordinated, cohesive and focused action among UN agencies and by UNEP to use and promote the use of GEO.

18. Engaging influential policy makers from *outside* the environmental constituency, as well as secondary target audiences - in particular private sector and development actors - proved to be challenging, partly as a result of inadequate resources and concerted outreach strategies, and possibly also as a result of limited involvement in the assessment process of these secondary target audiences. Penetration therefore remains relatively low among the secondary target audiences compared to the primary target audience. They find that the lens through which the content has been designed and the ‘language’ in which facts and arguments are presented do not resonate or suit their needs. The potential of the Internet and the new as well as specialized media was used effectively for the launch but not fully tapped, nor were resources available to follow up on launch activities. There is some concern about the awareness and accessibility of GEO in developing countries with inadequate infrastructure and without adequate mobilization of organizations and individuals that can champion GEO.

19. While some of these issues are inevitable given the focus and nature of UNEP’s mandate specifically on environment, the Review pointed to a need to clarify the purpose and objectives of GEO in the global environmental assessment landscape and the need for careful consideration of trade-offs in process and content. Other concerns relate to issues of design and execution. Key areas for attention were identified: (i) the design and management of the production process; (ii) the scope and focus of the Report; (iii) the conceptualization and strategies for penetration of primary and secondary target audiences; and (iv) the articulation of outcomes and impact pathways.

#### *Strategic considerations*

20. Over the past decade UNEP has successfully developed a niche in the increasingly crowded environmental assessment landscape. UNEP’s reputation and weight as a neutral actor has supported the evolution of GEO as a unique product - an authoritative, comprehensive assessment of global environmental issues that sculpts the ‘bigger picture’ by articulating key environment and development issues and their interconnections, monitoring critical trends over time and using these to provide a global outlook on the future. Each successive GEO has increasingly built on and developed critical strengths – the unique network of contributing centers and individual experts from developing and developed regions, the multi-layered peer review mechanisms and an intergovernmental, multi-stakeholder process that increases the relevance and accuracy of the content.

21. The Review showed that GEO’s mandate and niche are also the basis of some of its most significant challenges, including (i) competing sources of information that are more easily applied to action (from environment *and* development sectors), (ii) shifting demands for information - from problem identification and scenario building for the future towards providing policy options for concerted action, and (iii) the importance of engaging major actors beyond the environmental constituency in addressing the drivers of unsustainable development, particularly those in economic and social development, trade and finance at international, regional and national levels.

22. The Review also identified other critical factors that determine the extent of GEO’s use and influence: (i) its scope and scale, timing and intent that requires clear articulation of desired outcomes and ‘impact pathways’; (ii) the precision with which audiences are targeted; (iii) the strategies and mechanisms through which they are reached; (iv) perceptions among users of relevance, credibility and legitimacy, and (v) the receptiveness of the target audiences given their particular contexts and needs.

23. The new phase in UNEP’s development heralded by the Medium Term Strategy 2010-2013 and the broader UN Reform process provides a strategic opportunity to evolve the mandate, role and niche of GEO to meet the challenges posed by changing institutional and global contexts, and thereby to position GEO as the flagship assessment product that can help anchor and direct UNEP strategies and programmes. GEO can, in this new programmatic setting, become a robust foundational product of high

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10 Key persons among primary and secondary target audiences usually selected due to their deep insights and broad perspectives.

scientific integrity, authority and utility within the scope of “environment for development”, with a stronger focus on the expansion of its influence to new, influential processes and actors beyond UNEP’s traditional environment constituency. This approach, however, will require more strategic targeting of international, regional and national processes and primary audiences related to influential policy making outside of, but fundamental to, the environmental domain, particularly in development and private sector processes.

24. In addition, there seems to be a demand for more practical solutions to use assessment results in designing and implementing programmes and policies, and in monitoring and evaluation of development efforts. The degree to which UNEP can respond to this challenge will depend on the extent to which it positions and uses GEO as part of its leadership role in global environment and development agenda setting.

25. It is also likely that, regardless of whether the next global assessment continues to be very broad in its approach and target audiences or it seeks a more targeted influence at the science-policy interface, a range of ancillary products of different types and formats will be needed. These would have to be developed through the lens of the main target audiences, requiring their closer engagement from the beginning of the production process. Additional products will not necessarily require more GEO funds, but rather better coordination and partnerships within UNEP, through key UNEP programme areas and divisions, and with key external partners in the UN system and more broadly.

### **3. List of findings**

#### **3.1 The use of the GEO-4 Report**

26. The findings in this section provide an overview of the use and influence of the GEO-4 report and give insights into successes and challenges.. They may help to define the broader niche of GEO among the assessments that have proliferated in recent years.

*Finding 1* A very high percentage (92%) of those interviewed professed to have used the GEO-4 Report. Thirty percent of respondents in UN agencies and around 10% of those in government, the private sector and UNEP stated that they had not used it to date. Of those who profess to have used it, just more than half provided actual examples of use, in particular in the academic and government sectors.

*Finding 2:* As 93% of those interviewed had been either engaged in the GEO-4 process (75%) or were familiar with previous GEO efforts (only 5% became aware of GEO-4 only around the time of its launch), these numbers will reflect the most positive situation and cannot be interpreted as valid for those sectors as a whole. This is confirmed by 48% of respondents who felt that GEO-4 has not had a high profile among their peers (who have not participated in the GEO processes). This view is prevalent especially among respondents from the private sector (71% of respondents from this group) and NGOs (62%) whereas it was less felt by respondents from UNEP (50%) and government (46%). Other UN agencies and the academic sector were more positive; only 38% and 35% from these groups respectively were of the opinion that GEO-4 does not have a significant profile in their sector.

*Finding 3:* Among those interviewed, the GEO-4 Report has been by far most frequently used as a source of reference to raise general awareness of environmental issues and trends (57%), and to inform research and teaching (59%). These types of use are most characteristic of its present niche.

*Finding 4:* Around 20% of the examples of use were for policy purposes in the academic, government and NGO sectors. As can be expected, the most prevalent types of use were at the beginning of the 'policy cycle' - for problem identification (25%) and agenda setting (18%) and for policy research (17%), the latter primarily in the academic sector. It was to a lesser extent used for policy formulation (7%). These patterns are reflected in the types of use displayed in the examples provided by the users (figure 1).

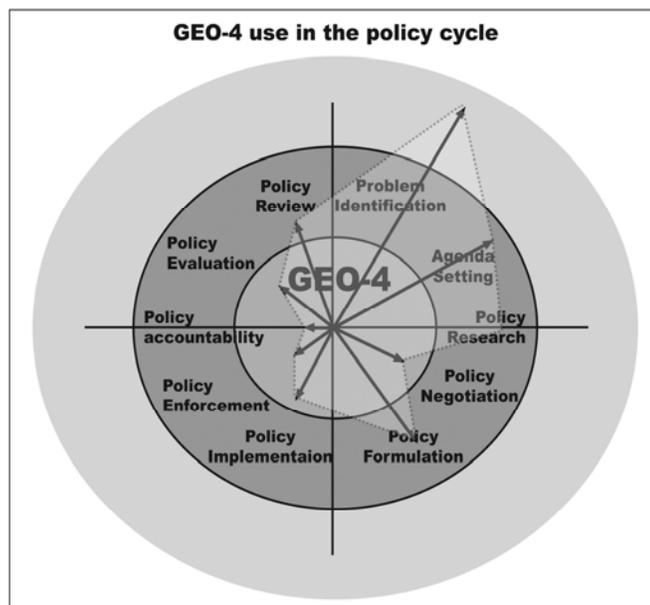


Figure 1: Use of the GEO-4 report in the policy cycle

- Finding 5:* Google searches in English, French and Spanish carried out a year after its launch yielded a snapshot of more than a 100 references to GEO-4, including on several blogs of civil society networks. Just over a third of the references were found in the policy domain, mostly used to justify arguments or call for action, often with reference to the credibility of the assessment.
- Finding 6:* Respondents from the UN agencies professed to have their own, more useful data sources. Respondents from UNEP in particular indicate a lack of ownership and feeling of partnership in GEO-4, in spite of contributing to its content.
- Finding 7:* In spite of some notable exceptions, GEO-4 is generally perceived and used as one of a number of data sources rather than as a critical or preferred source of data and information. This might negatively affect any intent by UNEP to promote it as a product that should have a strong influence on policy and strategy, including in the international environmental governance arena.
- Finding 8:* Developing country respondents were more likely to use GEO than respondents from developed countries. The latter tend to rely more heavily on their own sources for data and analysis. Developing countries often do not have such well established and reliable services.
- Finding 9:* Qualitative information signals that the penetration and use of GEO-4 remains low among 'non-traditional' yet influential (given UNEP's and GEO's mandate) audiences - in particular the private and development sectors, as well as influential policy makers in areas such as finance, development planning, trade and industry.

### 3.2 The utility and value of the GEO-4 Report

27. The findings in this section indicate the extent to which (potential) users find GEO-4 useful and of value to their work. They emphasize that although useful, the value addition of GEO-4 to users' work may not for all be as significant as desired.

*Finding 10:* Respondents from government and academic institutions are quite positive about the usefulness of the GEO-4 Assessment Report for their work. The scale and format of GEO-4 lends itself better for work in an academic environment, while the SDM enhanced the utility for policy makers.

*Finding 11:* A large majority, nearly three quarters of respondents, found the GEO-4 Report useful or very useful for their work. Respondents who participated in the production of GEO-4 were somewhat more positive about the utility of GEO-4 compared to their counterparts. It is

not clear whether this positive attitude is a result of the process or the reason for their participation in the process.

- Finding 12:* The number of respondents involved and not involved in the production of GEO-4 who found the Report of some or great value in their work correlated well with the numbers who found it useful or very useful. In both cases more than 70% agreed that it is useful or valuable to their work.
- Finding 13:* Although the difference is not regarded as significant, those involved in development as their primary area of work were somewhat more positive about the utility of the GEO-4 Report to their work than those primarily involved in the environment. Those working in both were the most positive - nearly all agreed that it is useful or very useful to their work.
- Finding 14:* Respondents working in development found the Report of significantly less value to their work than those working in the environment or in both. This indicates that although all groups find the information quite useful, the value that it adds to the work of those working in development is much less than for the other two groups.
- Finding 15:* Of all three groups, those working in both environment and development valued GEO-4 most, and found it to be the most useful for their work.
- Finding 16:* Although preferences will differ depending on the interests of the reader, respondents have found all chapters more or less equally useful, with most rated as useful or very useful by between 40-50% of the respondents. It appears as if perceptions of utility are more positive when respondents consider the whole product, possibly because of its use as widespread use as an ‘encyclopedia’.

### 3.3 The salience of the GEO-4 Report

28. Findings in this section refer primarily to the relevance of the Report, one of the most important attributes determining the use and influence of an assessment. They highlight the challenges inherent in trying to meet the needs of a range of diverse, inclusive audiences targeted as potential GEO users.

- Finding 17:* GEO-4 is relevant to all user groups in providing an overview of (long-term) environment trends and issues at global level, although some groups (government; developing countries) feel better served than others (private sector; developed countries). Its relevance to users decreases with respect to providing similar information at regional and country levels.
- Finding 18:* According to nearly 80% of users, GEO-4 provides relevant or very relevant information on development trends and issues as they relate to the environment at global level, leading to perceptions that GEO is ‘moving in the right direction’.
- Finding 19:* GEO has been less successful in integrating development practitioners and the private sector in the assessment process, which is one factor that may be limiting its relevance to these user groups.
- Finding 20:* GEO-4 is relevant in guiding environmental and development policy at the regional level. Its policy relevance declines at the national level due to its global orientation that makes the scope, level of detail and timeframes less useful for national and local purposes.
- Finding 21:* For most of the respondents, GEO-4 is either more or less the same (37%) or better (26%) than other Assessment reports in terms of the value it adds to their work. The GEO-4 characteristics - global, general and integrated - have mixed effects on perceptions of its relevance.
- Finding 22:* Although the GEO-4 compares favourably with other global assessments, its relevance is affected by the crowded assessment landscape and a perceived lack of clear objectives and target audience for GEO.
- Finding 23:* The relevance of the GEO-4 at a global level is confirmed by the guidance it provides for international environmental governance and global development policy.
- Finding 24:* Key factors that facilitated the relevance of GEO-4 – and hence potentially its use – include (i) its unique global perspective that pays significant attention to the nexus between environment and development, highlighting developing country concerns and issues; and (ii) user participation in the assessment process that provides for more relevant formulation of contexts, priorities and issues.

*Finding 25:* Key factors constraining the relevance of GEO-4 – and hence its potential use – relate to the general, global nature of its content and to its production process. Specific challenges include (i) the multiple, somewhat vaguely defined audiences in environment and development, and at multiple levels; (ii) branding a global assessment and raising its profile amidst a proliferation of assessments aimed at defined audiences; (iii) balancing the trade-offs inherent in the inclusive, participatory GEO process.

### 3.4 The quality and authority of the GEO-4 Report

29. Findings in this section address the most salient attributes determining the quality of the assessment - the credibility, and legitimacy of the report. They are critical to the use and influence of the report. In order to be perceived as credible the report has to be seen as accurate, reliable and scientifically rigorous. For legitimacy the report has to be seen to be the result of a rigorous, transparent and independent process.

*Finding 26:* Overall, all user groups regard GEO-4 as an environmental assessment of high quality.

*Finding 27:* The credibility of GEO-4 as a global environmental assessment is high in terms of its comprehensiveness, reliability, and standing as an authoritative source of information. However, there were variations on the issue among users depending on (i) the depth of the information they felt they needed; and (ii) the specific GEO-4 product, with the SDM seen as less reliable than the comprehensive Report.

*Finding 27:* Differences in data quality across chapters in the report, the effects of the negotiations that are part of the GEO process, and the perceived lack of rigor in the development of the SDM were all cited as factors which may have reduced the credibility of GEO-4.

*Finding 28:* The balance between scientific integrity and political representation has been difficult to maintain and is reflected in the user views on legitimacy. There are significant concerns about the independence of the process, particularly with respect to the SDM.

*Finding 29:* GEO-4 is regarded as user-friendly and up-to-date. Areas in need of attention are the length, the font size used and the timeline required for its publication.

*Finding 30:* Key factors perceived to have boosted the credibility and legitimacy of GEO-4 are (i) the combination of the engagement of an extensive network of experts, the transparent multi-stakeholder process, substantive peer review mechanisms and the GEO team's commitment to data quality; (ii) the reputation and weight of UNEP as a neutral UN body; and (iii) its comprehensive articulation of key issues and problems, and the interconnections between them in order to establish 'the bigger picture'.

*Finding 31:* Key factors perceived to have had a negative effect on the quality of GEO-4 are (i) the ongoing challenge of trying to meet the needs of diverse stakeholders and target audiences; (ii) lack of access to tested data sources at the regional level and among Collaborating Centers; and (iii) perceptions that some of the processes potentially allow government interference in contributing selected data, shaping conclusions and determining what should be included in the report.

### 3.5 The targeting and reach of the GEO-4 Report

30. Findings in this section relate to the strategies for the articulation and targeting of the GEO-4 primary and secondary audiences (the potential user groups), the implications of the targeting for the use and influence of GEO-4, and the extent to which the intended audiences were reached.

*Finding 32:* In spite of an explicit focus on policymakers, the target audiences for GEO-4 were as diverse and vaguely defined as for its predecessors. This presented the GEO team with significant challenges during the implementation of outreach and engagement strategies.

*Finding 33:* The GEO-4 team gave higher priority than any of its predecessors to targeted outreach and engagement activities. A variety of engagement, communication and dissemination mechanisms were employed with varying success.

*Finding 34:* The early termination of the Outreach and Engagement Strategy led to loss of momentum in the deliberate and systematic targeting of intended audiences.

*Finding 35:* In spite of the employment of a variety of engagement, communication and distribution mechanisms, it appears unlikely that GEO-4 has managed to penetrate 'non-traditional' UNEP/GEO audiences – the private sector, development sector and powerful government Ministries - to any significant extent.

- Finding 36:* In line with the intent to focus on the primary target audience, GEO engaged policymakers in numbers larger than ever before in production and outreach processes, although they were primarily from the environment sector.
- Finding 37:* Opportunities to reach the academic sector have not been optimized. A notable exception is the collaboration with Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability into African Universities partnership (MESA), which indicates the value obtainable if UNEP units and programmes are successfully mobilized in support of GEO.
- Finding 38:* There have been only ad hoc initiatives to promote GEO-4 after its launch, primarily through distribution of the report at environmental events and forums. Although the role of the capacity building initiative has not been studied, it is likely to be a key vehicle through which awareness of GEO is raised in between production processes.
- Finding 39:* Fewer than half of those interviewed believe that GEO-4 is readily accessible to their peers who have not participated in the GEO production process.
- Finding 40:* Developing country respondents were significantly less sure than developed country counterparts that their peers were aware of GEO-4 or that they would have ready access to the products if so. Perceptions are that too few hard copies are in circulation, that the unwieldy format was intimidating or inappropriate for the target audiences, and that Internet access is inadequate.
- Finding 41:* Respondents involved in policymaking were significantly more positive about the accessibility of the GEO-4 products than those whose primary activities were in other areas. This was in large part due to the availability of the SDM as a user-friendly, tailor-made product that was widely distributed in hard copy and also available in six languages on the Internet.
- Finding 42:* The reach of GEO-4 has been determined by the extent to which: i) outreach and engagement strategies have been tailor-made for well defined target audiences, and appropriately implemented; ii) influential stakeholders, in particular from new audiences, were successfully engaged in the production (writing and consultative) processes; iii) the products (or parts thereof) were readily accessible through the Internet and through the 'new media' in formats and languages that facilitate search and social sharing opportunities; iv) the initial success of the media strategy and launch was followed up by systematic efforts to give GEO-4 profile during influential processes and events; v) the media, including the new and specialist media, were mobilized to promote GEO; and, vi) UNEP units and programs and 'champions' from the networks of Collaborating Centers and authors were deployed to promote GEO-4.
- Finding 43:* Inadequate conceptualization and definition of influential groups among target audiences continue to stymie efforts to expand GEO's reach.
- Finding 44:* The GEO-4 production process is perceived to be an effective mechanism to reach key actors among targeted audiences, but incentives to participate may be lacking among 'non-traditional' GEO constituencies.
- Finding 45:* Internet access to the products in several languages has been a cost-effective way to increase the reach of the Assessment among all target groups, although there are concerns about limitations in some developing countries.
- Finding 46:* GEO-4 could gain from mobilizing more 'new media' and mobile communications to increase awareness of and access to the GEO products. The reach to civil society and the youth is likely to have been the hampered most by this factor.
- Finding 47:* Although widely regarded as successful, the launch of GEO-4 was not followed by consistent action to promote the report, presenting a substantial challenge to UNEP to sustain awareness and interest in its flagship product.

## 4. Lessons learned

### *GEO and the UNEP Medium Term Strategy*

31. There are a number of important factors affecting the use of GEO at the strategic and operational level. Not surprisingly, many of these factors resonate with the lessons learned in the UNEP Medium Term Strategy, which sets out the following vision for UNEP in the medium term:

*“The leading global environmental authority that sets the global environmental agenda that promotes the coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the United Nations system and that serves as an authoritative advocate for the global environment.”*<sup>11</sup>

32. In order to achieve that vision, GEO needs to consider how it will contribute to the following high level issues in the way it is shaped, managed and followed up:

- Improving environmental governance – how will GEO effectively contribute to close the gap between science, policy and to effective and informed governance, thereby helping to build stronger more effective institutions at national and regional levels, and to position UNEP as a key and essential player in the global governance agenda?
- Strengthening internal coherence, programmatic integration and influence – how GEO can provide a unifying platform for UNEP’s programmes and associated stakeholders to more effectively analyze, debate and use the collective knowledge of trends in environment and sustainable development in a concerted and focused way to fulfill the Mission of UNEP.
- Informing the poverty and sustainable livelihoods global agenda and action. Despite the rhetoric and the belief that environment and development are inextricably linked in achieving sustainable development, environment and development programming too often take place in isolation from each other. Evaluations of multilateral, UN and bilateral organizations have repeatedly pointed to the need to better integrate environmental sustainability programming with development programming. The ‘Delivering as One’ message of the current UN reform process sets the stage for GEO, the Human Development Report and other assessments such as the State of the World’s Children to work more together for more unified programmes and actions across the UN family.

33. The following have been found to be the main factors affecting the use and influence GEO-4, aside from various external factors:

- On the supply side: the scale, scope and timing of the assessment; the approaches for targeting audiences; the engagement, communication and dissemination strategies to reach these audiences; the role and type of the coordinating body (UNEP); the assessment attributions – credibility, legitimacy and salience.
- On the demand side: institutional and personal receptiveness, and the availability and extent of use of technology.

34. Some of these factors are addressed in more detail below:

#### *Refining the niche of GEO*

1. UNEP has a unique and timely opportunity within the current UN Reform process to reposition itself to be the leading environment partner for development agencies, governments and NGOs that seek to achieve sustainable development goals. With its current aspiration to be an assessment process that focuses on ‘environment for development’ GEO requires a clear elucidation of what leads to sustainable development, who the key actors are and how an assessment process can contribute to achieving those goals. It then needs to position itself further up the impact chain to engage with the key players that can make that change happen. Engagement of data providers and environment specialists is essential but not sufficient to establish the legitimacy it needs with the development community and the private sectors – both key stakeholders in using assessment information to influence decisions and policies.
2. The proliferation of assessments requires occasional reconsideration of the intent and objectives of GEO to ensure that it fills a space that best utilizes UNEP’s position in the UN and global system, its expertise and the experience, and the network of collaborators it has developed over the past decade. Linkages with complementary assessments such as the Human Development Report, the World Development Report and others should be considered in order to optimize resources.

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11 Ibid. paragraph 26.

3. Management of the repositioning of GEO and engaging the full range of necessary stakeholders further along the GEO impact pathway/result chain/value chain requires a range of skills and capacities beyond the essential assessment and administrative skills. Policy influence analysis, policy mapping, communication and outreach, relationship management, private sector engagement are some examples of the capacities that need to be resourced and supported if future GEOs are to achieve this repositioning along the impact path.

*Establishing, using and monitoring the ‘impact pathway’ to increase use and influence*

4. Work does not stop when the assessment product has been established, and both production and follow-up strategies need to be informed by the changes the product is envisaged to encourage. It is not adequate to concentrate only on the quality and relevance of the report unless the mandate is interpreted to stop at that point. Outcomes that are explicitly articulated as part of the ‘impact pathway’ for the use and influence of the assessment will help to clarify target audiences and the assumptions underpinning the production and outreach strategies. This will help inform the strategy design and resource allocation.
5. Good data management is imperative if the monitoring of progress towards the achievement of outcomes is to be used to determine strategies to encourage use and influence of the product. This requires systems that enable the systematic tracking of key aspects over time, such as an updated database of targeted users, detailed Internet tracking mechanisms, evolutionary data across GEO products<sup>12</sup>.

*Types of use and the implications for influence and impact*

6. GEO-4 has been used for diverse purposes - information and awareness raising, research and teaching, policy work, informing integrated assessments and development practice as well as private sector initiatives. The GEO mandate and content lends itself to be used overwhelmingly as a reference source for general awareness raising, research and teaching. This is confirmed by its primary use on the policy cycle for problem identification and agenda setting (figure 1). As the mandate of GEO will always place it in a specific position on the ‘knowledge value chain’ (figure 2), ancillary products tailor-made for specific target audience needs as well as the different types of use by UNEP, the UN system and other partners will need to move its utility and potential for influence up the value chain.

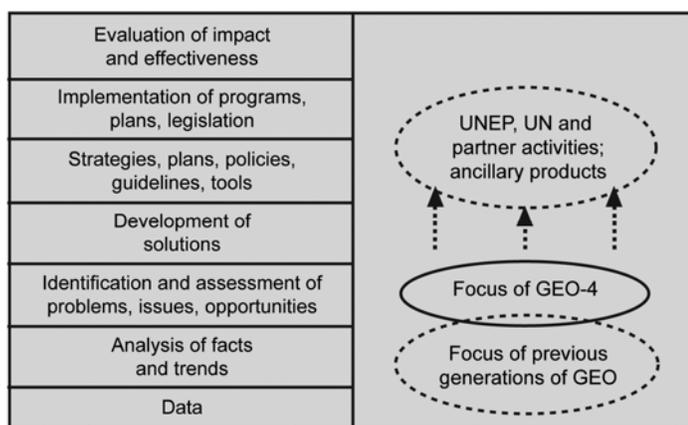


Figure 2: GEO-4 ‘knowledge value chain’

7. Depending on the aspirations of UNEP, the potential influence of GEO can be extended through leadership by UNEP’s policy group in establishing a network that can define the

<sup>12</sup> In GEO-4 the lack of systematized and updated database and contact information as well as Internet tracking data one year after the launch of GEO-4 have inhibited the monitoring of such progress.

policy implications of the data and information emerging from GEO. Some of the most influential activities would include the assessment of the progress of countries in meeting the obligations of international agreements and conventions.

*Defining, targeting and reaching audiences*

8. People in general, and those in advisory, decision and policy making positions in particular, are constantly flooded with information. They demand and require strategies that help them to cope and distil what is needed with as little effort as possible. To meet those demands GEO has to be known, regarded as authoritative and reliable, be readily accessible and presented in a user-friendly format. A key requirement appears to be the need for content to speak as directly as possible to the needs of users in a particular sector or subsector in a 'language' that resonates with them. The lens through which content is designed and presented is therefore of the utmost importance and requires the engagement of representatives from that sector from the beginning to help shape the content and outreach strategies, as has been done with the SDM. Target audiences that are too broadly defined and too diverse therefore present significant challenges, and opportunities for product use and influence will be easily missed.
9. Even where GEO production and outreach processes concentrate efforts on its 'primary' target audience(s), they have to be well defined and accounted for in the design and production processes: Policy makers in the environment arena have different needs to those in development planning. Those engaged in international environmental governance are different to those working at national level. Developing country needs may be different from those in developed countries. As one product cannot satisfy everyone, this situation strengthens arguments for a foundational assessment product that is supplemented by a range of tailor-made products, from policy briefs to substantive documents such as the SDM. Partnerships and the use of modern technologies and the new media can help relieve the strain on UNEP resources in the production and dissemination of such materials.
10. Trade-offs in terms of use and influence have to be carefully considered when producing an assessment without strategies and resources to ensure that it continues to have a profile over its lifetime. The shelf-life of an assessment can be short if other competitive sources of information exist, thus limiting its branding and strategic value to its organization.

*Reaching and influencing specific audiences: Policy makers*

11. Engaging policy makers in the production process and providing a tailor-made product to suit their needs can have a marked effect on their buy-in and use of the assessment information. It can also lead to challenges when political agendas are used to manipulate focus and content. This requires at all times good management of the production and consultation processes and the weighing of benefits and disadvantages when dealing with the potential tension between scientific credibility and political relevance and buy-in.
12. If audiences are as broad-based as those for GEO inevitably will be, concentrated efforts to target specific sub-groups to increase potential impact will be useful. In this context it makes sense to target those processes, organizations and individuals that are the most influential. In the policy sector this will mean considering how best to ensure that GEO reaches the drivers of multilateral environment agreements *and* moves beyond the environment constituency to influence critical processes as well as key organizations and individuals engaged in for example economic and social development, trade, finance and development planning at international and regional but also to some extent at national levels. A critical decision is whether to work through UNEP's environment constituency or to increase efforts to target audiences beyond this group.
13. By all accounts the network of Collaborating Centers provides GEO with a unique expertise base and provides a model for the mobilization of external resources to support the work of UNEP. This concept can be further enhanced through the engagement of additional policy centers across the world that could help design and translate the

assessment information for specific policy processes and actors. UNEP's Division of Environmental Policy Implementation (DEPI) is well positioned to play a pivotal role in this effort.

*Reaching specific audiences: Influencing the next generation*

14. The youth may need to become a primary target audience for GEO in future as they are of obvious importance and potentially one of the easiest to reach. Networks of curriculum developers provide fertile opportunities, as demonstrated by UNEP's Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in African (MESA) Universities Partnership Program where 90 universities across Africa have been made aware of GEO-4. Further opportunities exist through UNEP's Tunza initiative, attracting the interest of specialized media for the youth, dynamic websites<sup>13</sup> and exploiting new Internet technologies will help in these efforts. An e-book in HTML/XML format will facilitate access to figures, graphs and titles and will lend itself better for use in social networking services or the exploration of the potential of wikis, blogs and other modern communication tools.

*Reaching specific audiences: The private sector*

15. The private sector is a key actor in environmental policies and strategies, and they present good opportunity for a range of side-products aimed at sector and sub-sector needs. For relevance the targeted products should be developed with them, using their 'lens' on the content, providing relevant case studies, offering possible solutions and areas for action, publicizing the effort at important global and regional business forums, benchmarking business with regard to their performance, linking with initiatives such as the Global Reporting Initiative and social accounting, and the Green Economy. This could significantly enhance the influence of GEO. Products can take many forms, from simple case studies and briefing notes to substantive publications with policy implications similar to the SDM.

*Mobilizing the expertise and influence of UNEP*

16. The use of GEO is weakened when the products are not fully owned and used by staff in UNEP. GEO findings can provide significant direction to the MTS and thematic plans, and alignment and collaboration between UNEP sub-programmes in using GEO will help to achieve the objectives of the Medium Term Strategy. A lack of incentives and focus on their input from an early stage in the design were some of the obstacles identified to the participation of key UNEP divisions. DEPI, DTIE and the MEA secretariats could lead in the production of such ancillary product designs in conjunction with the GEO team. This will create more synergies between UNEP products and establish a product portfolio that reinforces the MTS thematic objectives based on the GEO frameworks and data.

## **II. Findings of the GEO-4 self-assessment survey**

35. As part of UNEP's commitment to ongoing monitoring and evaluating of the effectiveness and influence of its work, a self assessment process was commissioned by UNEP in 2005 for the purpose of capturing the lessons from participants of the process toward the preparation of the fourth Global Environment Outlook: environment for development (GEO-4). The self assessment survey process sought to:

- Obtain feedback from experts, partners and stakeholders on the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency and value added of the GEO-4 assessment process
- Provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on:

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<sup>13</sup> For example UNEP's Google Earth atlas with examples of environmental change and degradation could be linked to relevant chapters of the Assessment.

- The performance and functioning of the Working Group process
- The extent to which objectives were met and results achieved
- The management and leadership of the GEO process
- The motivation and satisfaction of GEO-4 participants
- The value added of GEO-4

36. Approximately half of the estimated total participants in the GEO Working Groups responded to the self assessment survey and interviews over a period of one and a half years between 2006 and 2007. The 167 responses obtained cover all geographic regions and GEO Working Groups. The data from the self assessment show a consistent pattern of issues and themes over time pertaining to both the operational management of the GEO process and to the longer term value and benefits of GEO.

## 1. Key findings

37. The self assessment revealed many positive attributes of the GEO process, and a number of key areas in which improvements are needed.

38. The majority of participants found the GEO process effective in delivering a high quality, independent, credible, scientifically based, policy relevant product. They were generally satisfied with their working group experience and reported that the GEO experience enriched their professional work and put them in a stronger position to support the work of UNEP. A strong majority indicated that GEO was worth their time and effort and that they would be willing to contribute their time and expertise to GEO again. More than half indicate that the GEO-4 experience has led to other collaborations and partnerships.

39. A third of participants reported that GEO performs better than other assessment processes because of such factors as good methodologies, interdisciplinary team work and diverse exchanges across boundaries. Many reported GEO to be more cost effective than other large assessment processes despite some inefficiencies in managing the process. A key finding on the value added of GEO was that it has spawned many assessments and products at regional, national and city level. No other global assessment process has achieved this level of engagement and utility and ripple effect.

40. At the same time, participants called for significant improvements in the clarity, expectations, roles and responsibilities in managing the process and in engaging other parts of UNEP and key partners and policy audiences in the private sector and development community.

## 2. Main messages

- GEO is a credible, scientifically based product with significant reach across regions largely because of the strength, breadth and motivation of its stakeholder process.
- Most participants are satisfied and motivated to be part of the GEO process and are willing to contribute their time and expertise to future GEOs.
- The catalytic and value added effect that GEO has had on individuals and institutions is significant and should not be underestimated.
- The platform for capacity building created through GEO has a real and potentially higher value than is currently recognized or utilized by UNEP.
- The GEO process has expanded and strengthened the constituency not only for assessment but for the work of UNEP itself.
- Some participants found the management and administration of GEO could be more effective.
- The GEO process can be significantly improved and strengthened by paying greater attention to the clarity of roles, responsibilities, intended results and target audiences and more efficient cross organizational management of the process.
- The policy, private sector and development aspects of GEO need special attention and significant strengthening.

- The self assessment observations provide the GEO Team with a rich and compelling basis to re-examine and strengthen the GEO model, its role and purpose, structure, management and leadership.
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