

Regional consultations on GEO-4

AFRICA

The regional consultation for GEO-4 in Africa, held on 13-14 September 2004, considered the GEO-4 scope/context; Africa environmental issues; the GEO-4 outline; process; strengthening of policy-science interactions; the GEO product; and main messages.

On the GEO-4 context, participants agreed that the 1987 Brundtland Report could be used as the baseline for assessing the global and specifically African environmental context. On the GEO-4 Chapter Outlines, participants suggested a focus on environmental issues, crosscutting issues, outlook, and policy options.

The environmental issues raised included land degradation, conflict over environmental resources, the impact of HIV/AIDS on the environment, GMOs, pollution, invasive alien species, and chemicals. Crosscutting issues included poverty, vulnerability, governance, energy, water management, human settlements, health, including HIV/AIDS; transfer of technology; tourism; access to information and education; early warning of disasters; environmental accounting and methodologies; and trade and environment.

Participants felt the report should reflect that policies and strategies are in place but that a number of factors impede progress, including limited capacity to implement; lack of political will – commitment; absence of ownership of the problems; and human health and the environment impact on capacity (HIV/AIDS, TB, malaria).

On the outlook for GEO-4, participants suggested prioritising the eight NEPAD programme areas in the context of the MDGs. To promote science-policy linkages, a consultative body and a systematic, participatory and integrated assessment process at the regional, sub-regional, national and local levels was proposed, along with a framework for collaboration, bringing together scientists and policymakers under a national scientific committee.

On the GEO product, participants proposed the use of clear, precise and simple language; inclusion of illustrations, pictures, diagrams, flow charts; specific case studies to illustrate specific issues; use of easily identifiable indicators for assessment and illustrations; extracts/briefs/pull-outs from the GEO to target specific groups such as policymakers, scientists, researchers; a stronger process that combines GEO, AEO and National Environment Outlook processes; and consistent indicators that allow for comparisons.

Participants agreed that the process should be participatory and consultative; policy-science linkages must be strengthened; the focus should be on environment for prosperity; African issues should be clearly articulated, and the distribution of the report to all stakeholders should be improved.

ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

The GEO-4 consultation for Asia and the Pacific was held in Bangkok on September 20-21, 2004. The meeting discussed the needs of GEO as an assessment framework for regional context and the expectations of GEO-4. Participants agreed on the need for a global document reflecting policy guidelines with a good database. They felt that previous GEO reports were useful in terms of trend analysis and policy formulation guidelines. However, data are inadequate and more indicators are needed as a basis for development.

Issues and concerns in the regional context include:

- language barriers in the use and understanding of GEO information;
- need for wider coverage of policy issues, emerging issues, transboundary issues such as air and water pollution, linkage between poverty and natural protection, governance and internalization of environmental issues in all sectors, and beneficial trends for industries/business in environmental protection policy;
- the need for more analytical and focused reporting; and
- the low interaction between science and policy. The possibility of using one-page summaries to bridge this gap was discussed.

Specific suggestions were made regarding chapters:

Chapter 1/GEO context: This chapter should have more information on how the region can adopt sustainable development; more focus on regional priorities and context; and should highlight economy in relation to society and environment.

Chapter 2/SOE: more standard and compatible data in reporting state and trends; more clarification of standards, goals and targets and greater use of maps and illustrations to intensify issues. The focus should be shifted from human to nature.

Chapter 3: Crosscutting issues highlighted include migration and urbanization, human security, environmental ethics, market-based instruments, transboundary issues, consumption and production behaviours, vulnerability assessment, peace and security, rural environment deterioration, technology and innovative financing mechanisms.

Chapter 4/Scenarios and Outlook: This chapter should differentiate between scenarios and outlooks, and look at the future influence of the industrial sector on environment in terms of waste and pollution generation, and energy consumption.

Chapter 5/Options for actions: a focus on the MDGs with reference to the Bruntland report; the broad outline should be an action agenda, roles and responsibilities, financing mechanisms and participatory monitoring and steering arrangements. Suggestions on public awareness initiatives, scientific research and assessment and institutional changes are also needed.

EUROPE

The GEO-4 Ad-hoc Experts Regional Consultation for Europe was held in Geneva on 7-8 October 2004, and was attended by over 35 persons from national governments, international and regional agencies, scientific bodies, NGOs, the private sector and youth, as well as UNEP staff. The Consultation dealt with the overall GEO assessment framework; how the GEO process can bridge the gap between science and policy; how GEO reports are being used to date; how to best present the findings and messages; what are the major challenges on the environmental agenda; and what are the major environmental themes and crosscutting issues to include, particularly for Europe.

Among the major conclusions and recommendations from the Consultation, participants suggested:

- looking beyond the strict regional boundaries of Europe, as the region has many impacts that extend beyond its actual boundaries;
- a greater focus on policy issues and action;
- to translate existing scientific materials into useful information in GEO-4;
- achieving greater synergies with other organizations working on similar reporting processes, (ECE and EEA in the Environment for Europe (EfE) process; OECD's report, etc.); and
- a communications strategy designed to better reach a wide variety of end users.

On the structure and contents of GEO-4, participants recommended a global focus instead of a sub-regional focus, saying the greatest value-added of GEO is on the regional-global interface.

Some of the other major suggestions received from the participants included to:

- reduce the emphasis on "state-and-trends" in chapter 2;
- use sectoral themes (agriculture, energy and transport) as entry points for some analysis;
- put the Outlook chapter before the Challenges chapter, and add a quantitative data annex;
- include a full examination of drivers such as changing production and consumption patterns, the EU's enlargement, and demographics;
- consider not only the impacts of policies and actions, but also what kinds of impacts may have occurred if action was *not* taken ("missed opportunities");
- give more thought to the GEO audience, involve a broader variety of stakeholders, and consider preparing different products for varied end users, aside from the "big GEO" report;
- revise and re-use the scenarios from the GEO-3 report in GEO-4's Outlook chapter, rather than writing entirely new ones, since previous ones remain largely valid with update; and
- give more weight to the final chapter, renaming it "Environment for shared prosperity".

All of these inputs/recommendations/suggestions were achieved through a combination of plenary and small group discussions, featuring intensive exchanges among the stakeholder groups present.

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARRIBBEAN (LAC)

The GEO-4 regional consultation for LAC was held on 22-24 September 2004. Participants felt GEO-4 should be viewed as a process rather than product, with more consultations and emphasis on capacity building, especially for collaborating centers.

The need for policy analysis was emphasized, along with greater participation from a variety of stakeholder groups that were not engaged earlier, and a bottom up approach. Participants felt the sections on policy analysis are too important to hide in different chapters, and called for a whole chapter on policy in future reports. Within this chapter, global policy responses can be considered with regional examples. Strategies, policies and legislation should be considered for effectiveness or failure. Not just trade policies, but relevant policies on issues such as trade and finance should also be considered.

Participants stressed the need to ensure global-regional linkages, where global issues are delved into, but with regional examples of failure or success. They called for the involvement of other UN agencies or major multilateral agreements into the assessment process, and the use of key indicators, such as those used for the MDGs, Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and others.

They suggested going beyond a traditional thematic assessment, to consider crosscutting issues relevant to different parts of the world, and with similar driving forces and responses - for instance, tropical forests or river basins.

On crosscutting issues, participants highlighted international trade and environment; technology options that are not environment friendly, and how their use can be discouraged; intellectual property rights (IPR) with regard to biodiversity and genetic resources; and the advantages and disadvantages of paying for environmental services.

On Chapter 4, participants called for scenarios to be started from the regional rather than the global level. Regions could use a global milestone to indicate how they will affect the regional scenarios.

Participants felt it was important to consider recommendations not only in the final chapter, but also in Chapter 2. The overview analysis of all the chapters should be used for the final chapter.

Participants felt the final product should be presented in different formats, including on the Internet, user group workshops, and information kits to target specific groups, like farmers and housewives, with better follow-up after the report is launched.

NORTH AMERICA

Two consultations were held in North America - one in Washington DC on 10 September 2004, and the other on 22 October 2004 in Ottawa.

Participants had several expectations from GEO-4, including that it should address crosscutting issues, emerging trends, adaptation issues, science, technology and innovation; and scenarios. They felt GEO-4 should demystify widely held notions on issues such as the war over water, decentralization etc. The following priority areas were identified for the region:

- assessment of monitoring systems;
- climate change;
- nitrogen cycle disruption;
- health impacts;
- coastal zone and water quality issues;
- particulate matters and mercury in the food chain;
- land use and cover change, urban sprawl;
- invasive species; and
- e-waste.

The following crosscutting issues were identified:

- healthy people, healthy environment, and healthy economy (economic competitiveness);
- trade and environment;
- perverse subsidies or incentives;
- aging water infrastructure/bottled water;
- transport in shared air and watersheds; and
- ways to address tradeoffs.

In addition, participants called for more reliable and up-to-date time series data, more real time data and an index (like the stock market). Other recommendations include:

- an effective strategy for communication and public relations, focused on policy makers but providing citizens and opinion leaders with support for pressuring policy-makers;
- an integrated information network;
- greater transparency;
- inclusion of brief summaries of GEO-2 and GEO-3; and
- revisiting past issues and better understanding of trends in GEO-4.

To increase participation of the scientific community in UNEP's assessment work, participants felt universities are a under utilized resource, and the peer review process could also be used to bring scientists on board the process. They felt UNEP should create an infrastructure to increase collaboration.

WEST ASIA

The West Asia expert meeting on GEO-4 was held in Manama, Bahrain, on September 28-29, 2004. The consultations, attended by 51 people from various sectors, were of great interest in the region and some countries even paid for additional participants to attend. Most of the attention at the meeting focused on scenarios and policy analysis.

On the presentation of issues, participants felt GEO was limited in reaching stakeholders other than intergovernmental representatives and focal points, and they highlighted the need to reach various target audiences; carry out stakeholder analysis; produce different products for policy makers and scientific community; and produce a separate 30-page report with indicators.

On the organization and content of GEO-4, they recommended drawing on existing assessments such as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment; a separate chapter on crosscutting issues, and emphasizing critical national issues in boxes.

The highest priority among issues was given to water scarcity, followed by land degradation and desertification; degradation of marine and coastal areas; and air pollution in big cities.

A number of crosscutting and emerging issues were identified, with the suggestion that success stories from the national level could be included in boxes. Other such issues identified include:

- environment, peace and security;
- increasing human vulnerability;
- education and access to information;
- gender and the woman participation offers an opportunity rather than a challenge; and
- human settlement and urbanization.

For the outlook and scenarios section, participants felt it would be useful to relate progress to the MDG targets for 2015, with a 2000 baseline. They felt the scenarios should consider where we will be in 2015, and expressed a preference for quantitative scenarios, incorporating risks and costs into scenarios; a consistent approach and the need to develop a realistic vision.

On policies, participants felt the need to consider the enforcement of national and international legislation, discuss the links of national and global policies, and also to discuss important new policy directions. In addition, they felt it was important to:

- give clear policy options and actions based on scenarios;
- recognize the role of civil society and media in filling gaps between science and decision making, and of civil society in building and maintaining institutions for environmental governance; and
- consider globalization and external factors influencing the execution of national policies.

In general, participants felt there was a need to strengthen ownership of the report, involve the media, connect to global networks, and involve the private sector.