

Summary Report
18th Executive Committee Meeting
Geneva, 22-23 March 2010

(As accepted at the 19th Executive Committee meeting)

1 GENERAL BUSINESS

The meeting was chaired by the GEO Co-Chair from South Africa, Mr Philemon Mjwara. He started by welcoming the new Executive Committee representatives from Brazil, Cameroon, Chile, Italy and Japan, as well as his fellow GEO Co-Chairs and the other Committee members. He highlighted some of the meeting's key agenda items, including the Beijing Ministerial Summit, the GEOSS Data Sharing Principles and the GEOSS Common Infrastructure (GCI).

Ms Manuela Soares, the GEO Co-Chair from the European Commission (EC), thanked the US for last November's successful GEO-VI Plenary meeting in Washington DC. She emphasized the importance of a thorough preparation of the upcoming GEO-VII Plenary and Ministerial. At the same time, she noted the need to pay attention to ongoing GEOSS implementation, and she reiterated the EC's support for GEO.

Ms Shere Abbott, the GEO Co-Chair from the US, said that GEO-VI had made a very positive impression within the US and should provide some good momentum towards the Beijing meetings.

Mr Zhao Datong, representing the GEO Co-Chair from China, said that he looked forward to working with his GEO colleagues to ensure the success of the Beijing Summit.

1.1 Adoption of Agenda (Document 1)

The Chair asked the meeting whether they had any changes to the draft agenda. Mr José Achache, the Secretariat Director, suggested including a discussion of the GEO-VII Plenary agenda, as there would be links between the Plenary and the Ministerial. In addition, the selection of a date for the July meeting of the Executive Committee should be included under Any Other Business. The agenda was accepted with these additions.

The EC reiterated its earlier request that it needed to be clear what action, e.g. "for acceptance" or "for information", was required for each document. The Secretariat Director said that from now on this would be included in the agenda. After a brief discussion, it was decided that the extended discussion of the Ministerial would remain for the second day.

Action 18.1 – Secretariat to indicate on all future Executive Committee agendas the actions expected for each document (e.g. "for acceptance" or "for information").

1.2 Approval of Summary Report of the 17th Executive Committee Meeting (Document 2)

The Chair asked whether there were any corrections or comments on the Summary Report. He noted one small editorial correction, and with this the document was accepted.

1.3 Review of Actions from Previous Meetings (Document 3)

The Secretariat Director presented the document. The Chair said that for action 9.18, concerning options for suitable instruments to be developed for GEOSS (such as GEONETCast and the

GEOPortal), the Executive Committee should provide some guidance. He also urged the Committee to provide a recommendation on action 15.4, concerning the relationship between the Secretariat and the Committees, in order to close it. The EC agreed on the need to close actions 15.4 and 17.1. The EC therefore proposed that the Secretariat ask the Committees for their written input on this topic by 31 May 2010. The Secretariat should then, as a first step, correlate these inputs and present them, together with their own comments on how to strengthen the relationship between the Committees and the Secretariat, to the next meeting of the Executive Committee. Based upon this document, the Executive Committee can then direct the Secretariat and the Committees on the next steps to take in finalizing this process.

Turning to action 16.8, on the issue of cooperation with the private sector, the Chair urged the need for guidelines, given that the private sector is increasingly engaged in GEOSS. He stressed that the Executive Committee needed to provide guidance, and Australia agreed. Italy said that first there is a need for an update of the document produced by the Secretariat last year on the strategic picture vis-à-vis the private sector. The EC noted the complexity of the issue. The Secretariat Director reminded the meeting that a document had been produced on this issue for a previous Committee meeting, and he noted that the pending decision on the GCI and a single portal meant that a debate would be timely. He proposed revising and updating the earlier document. The Committee agreed and asked the Secretariat to revise the paper, removing certain contentious issues, for the next Committee meeting.

Regarding action 17.4 on Participating Organizations, the EC proposed the possible creation of an additional category of organizations that would not be formal members of the Plenary, but would be welcomed and encouraged to contribute to the Work Plan. The Secretariat Director noted that this would lead to a major debate. The US said that action 17.3, which asks the Secretariat to write to organizations not accepted at GEO-VI, could help to resolve action 17.4. Australia said that creating a new informal category of organizations could raise implementation issues, for example concerning organizations already accepted that might now be perceived as falling into the newer 'informal' category. An alternative approach could be to position the new category at a higher level and invite only genuine intergovernmental Participating Organisations to join. The EC could consider various options, including both those mentioned, in its paper.. The meeting agreed that the EC should draft a paper setting out its proposals.

The EC reported that Germany had recently said that action 12.26 concerning an external evaluation of GEO, which it had earlier proposed, could now be closed as its objective was being pursued through other forums and activities. Australia and the Secretariat Director agreed, and the item was closed.

The Secretariat Director said that, rather than leaving action items open for too long, it can be appropriate to transfer some of the ongoing issues to the final section in the document on Future Actions. The Chair noted that it normally takes the Committee several meetings to resolve and close any particular issue.

Action 18.2 – The Secretariat to ask the Committees to submit written suggestions so that it can draft a document on the roles of, and relationship between, the Secretariat and the Committees for the 19th meeting of the Executive Committee.

Action 18.3 – The Secretariat to present a document on policy guidance regarding the private sector for discussion at the 19th meeting of the Executive Committee.

Action 18.4 – The EC to draft a paper with various options on creating a new category of organizations, which will welcome and engage a broader range of organizations in Work Plan implementation, for discussion at the 19th meeting of the Executive Committee.

2 SECRETARIAT OPERATIONS AND TRUST FUND

2.1 Secretariat Operations Report (Document 4)

The Secretariat Director presented the report, emphasizing the Secretariat's growing interactions with international organizations, the increasing involvement of the scientific community in GEOSS, and some significant progress and achievements (e.g. Haiti and Chile earthquake Supersites, GEO BON, the GCI, and the Forest Carbon Tracking Task) in which the Secretariat was directly involved. The ensuing discussion focused in particular on the Forest Carbon Tracking Task.

The US noted its earlier request that the Director send a letter to "GEO-All" encouraging broader participation in the Forest Carbon Tracking (FCT) Task, citing the need for a fully open process. The US noted specifically that the activities of the "GEO Interim Working Group on Global Operational Forest Monitoring", announced by the Secretariat Director at GEO-VI, were mischaracterized in the Secretariat Operations report as "fulfilling the action agreed at the GEO-VI Plenary," as the Plenary had no opportunity to discuss this idea, nor did it formally endorse the creation of the body. The US asked that the report be amended, and the Chair proposed instead that the US comment be reflected in the minutes, as it is not customary to amend the Secretariat Operations report. The US agreed to this approach.

Australia recalled that all co-leads engaged in the FCT Task support the additional element that had been introduced at GEO-VI, which aims to explore, at a conceptual level, the implications of moving from an R&D focus towards an operational system. All existing contributors to this important GEOSS task are very committed and would welcome a broader engagement that might come through such an invitation letter. Cameroon highlighted the contributions that GEO could make in this field, and Japan cited the many methods and issues currently under discussion.

Turning to the substance of the Task, Italy cautioned that the GEO Secretariat should avoid direct engagement in issues dealing with sensitive policy issues without first consulting GEO's Principals and/or the Executive Committee and also asked for the criteria that were followed for the invitations to participate in the Working Group and in the Los Angeles seminar. France emphasized GEO's contribution to providing data rather than information. The US expressed the view that, while GEO could indeed make a valuable contribution in the area of forest carbon monitoring, the science of forest carbon does not yet support the establishment of an operational system. Japan supported the US view, citing concerns about the term "operational" and noting the many methods and issues currently under discussion. Cameroon noted that GEO could make an important contribution in this field and should not step away from the task simply because of the complexities involved. The U.S. proposed that the GEO Co-Chairs review the Director's draft letter before it is sent. The Secretariat Director agreed to distribute a draft letter for review by the Co-Chairs by 9 April.

The Chair requested that the title of a document distributed by Japan concerning a monitoring tool for GEO targets and Tasks that it was developing be revised. The EC noted that an organigram had not been attached to the Secretariat Operations report, as is the custom.

The US also referred to a commentary in Space News written recently by the Secretariat Director and expressed concern that the article did not reflect a consensus GEO view. The US proposed that the Co-Chairs discuss a process for guiding the Secretariat when it produces future editorials on GEO policy issues.

Action 18.5 – The Secretariat to invite the GEO community to contribute activities to the Forest Carbon Tracking Task.

2.2 Financial Report for 2009 (Document 5)

2.3 The Financial situation of Trust Fund 2010

The Secretariat Director presented the Financial Report for 2009. He noted that receipts for the year were CHF 1 million below budget. To avoid over-spending, the Secretariat had reduced staff mission travel, the hiring of contractors, and support to workshops and meetings. He noted that although the GEO membership had grown over the years, the number of contributors to the Trust Fund had remained stable. Over the year, the Secretariat had managed to “live within its means” and thus protect the working capital (CHF 2.2 million), but at the expense of support to workshops and to travel for many developing country participants.

The Chair and Australia asked for clarifications. Australia proposed that the Committee discuss the implications of two alternative budget scenarios (“Rev 1” and “Rev 2”) which, the Secretariat Director explained, had been distributed earlier to the Committee. Italy said it would be useful to have a better understanding of how many GEO members were actually active and contributing, including in-kind resources. He noted that GEO was following the financial rules of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), a UN body, although when GEO was created it was decided to avoid making it a UN-like body to reduce burdensome procedures.

The Chair said there were three main issues under discussion: an analysis of the broader situation, the implications of the draft alternative budget scenarios, and the implications of following WMO rules. The Secretariat Director said that he was certain that the Secretariat was not overspending. He also observed that, despite being hosted by a UN body, GEO remained flexible and innovative. He suggested that a discussion about GEO’s status should be opened soon.

The meeting held an extended discussion about the implications of the two alternative budget scenarios, the issue of cash flow, the obligation to staff salaries and a reserve of 10% of estimated expenditure at the beginning of the calendar year, the need to communicate the financial situation to the broader GEO membership, the pluses and minuses of a low but mandatory contribution from all members, and how to achieve the recommended level of spending of CHF 4.5 million.

The Chair noted that there could be many reasons for members not to contribute and that the Committee had not yet analysed the full implications of the smaller budget, such as reduced capacity building. The US doubted that the private sector was part of the solution for the budget problems. France noted the difficulty of raising more funds when the Secretariat seemed to be functioning well within its current budget and when it does not have a strong legal status. Australia urged the Executive Committee to come up with solutions and to provide guidance. Cameroon said that members need to convince ministers that GEO actually delivers, as ministers are responsible for allocating budgets.

Summarizing, the Chair noted the need to highlight the problem to the broader community, conduct more analysis, and establish a realistic budget. The US agreed and added that the budget should be distributed to members with a positive message from the Executive Committee, under signature of the Co-Chairs. The message should note the strong support GEO received at the last Plenary and the need to prepare for the upcoming Ministerial.

France proposed requesting an external evaluation team to recommend the right level for the Trust Fund. The Chair agreed that this could be added to the terms of reference of the new Evaluation Team. Italy stressed the need to be pragmatic and ambitious at the same time and to demonstrate to ministers that GEO is useful to them and is a good investment. Japan agreed with the approach under discussion and highlighted the value of in-kind contributions, such as the direct funding of flights and workshops. Australia, too, agreed the proposed approach, particularly on the need for positive messaging, but advised against using the Evaluation Team since that was a GEOSS, and not a GEO, process.. France urged clarity that the target being pursued was CHF 4.5 million in cash contributions per year. The Secretariat Director suggested that the Monitoring & Evaluation process was about GEOSS and may not be appropriate for an evaluation of GEO and the Secretariat.

The Executive Committee noted that, in the absence of any certainty as to the level of contributions, the Director of the Secretariat had therefore decided to work during the first half of 2010 on the basis of the Rev 2 budget projections, i.e. an expected cash income of CHF 3.5 million. The Executive Committee decided to review the budgetary situation again at its next meeting in July before formally adopting the 2010 budget. The Secretariat was also asked to draft a communiqué to GEO members to be signed by the Co-Chairs expressing in a positive way the importance of contributions to the Trust Fund but making clear:

- The risk that the GEO Secretariat will not have enough working capital, even under a revised budget, to continue operations throughout 2011; and
- The reduction in Secretariat operations implicit in operating below the proper level and the pain this will cause in achieving the mission of GEO and the delivery of GEOSS.

Action 18.6 – The GEO Co-Chairs, supported by the Secretariat, to distribute a positive and encouraging letter to GEO Principals urging stronger support to the GEO Trust Fund in advance of the Beijing Ministerial.

3 REPORT OF THE DATA SHARING TASK FORCE (DOCUMENT 6 AND 7)

Mr Alan Edwards, Co-Chair of the Data Sharing Task Force, presented the report. He summarized the GEOSS data sharing principles, noted that the draft action plan for the implementation guidelines now being developed was already clarifying the practical meaning of the principles, and described the outline of the draft supporting documents that are to be developed for the Ministerial. He pointed to a number of outstanding questions, such as the handling of data that are registered in GEOSS but are encumbered with restrictions and the proposed drafting of a letter to ministers. He reminded the meeting that the mandate of the Task Force will conclude at the time of the Ministerial. Finally, he stressed that the Task Force proposes that the action plan be adopted or endorsed by the Ministerial, and not just by the Plenary.

In response to a query from Australia, Mr Edwards explained that the proposals in the action plan were divided into three groups that applied to: (i) GEO as a whole, (ii) GEO Members (i.e., governments), and (iii) GEO Members and Participating Organizations. He noted, however, that if the plan was adopted at the Ministerial Summit, then this would only be by governments. Brazil endorsed the document. The EC said that since the supporting documents are to go to ministers they should be short. Mr Edwards suggested that the proposed letter to ministers on the data sharing issue could be merged with the more general invitation letter that will soon go out from the Ministerial Task Force. The US and Italy noted that it could be difficult to negotiate both the text of the Action Plan and the Ministerial Declaration during Plenary, given the length of both documents. Given that it could be difficult for ministers to adopt the Data Sharing Action Plan in its entirety, the US suggested that perhaps the Action Plan should be adopted by Plenary and a summary paragraph containing the key actions be inserted into the Declaration.

Mr Edwards said that the Task Force would continue its work and report back on progress to the Executive Committee at its July meeting. France said that the most important element in the current paper was the idea of open resources for everyone, and that it could be useful to start by identifying essential core data sets. Mr Edwards explained that the Task Force had been following the line of asking data providers for data that is appropriate for GEOSS. The Chair concluded the item by noting that legal and practical issues, such as data tagging and citation, still remained to be resolved, and he invited the Task Force to report again in July.

Action 18.7 – The 2010 Ministerial Task Force and the Data Sharing Task Force, supported by the Secretariat, to coordinate inputs into a single letter to inform ministers about the Beijing Ministerial in general and the issue of data sharing principles in particular.

4 REPORT OF THE GCI COORDINATION TEAM (DOCUMENTS 8, 9 AND 10)

Mr Edwards presented the documents on behalf of the Coordination Team. He recalled that six of the recommendations presented by the Initial Operating Capability (IOC) Task Force to the GEO-VI Plenary were adopted, and that the newly established GCI Coordination Team had been asked to develop its terms of reference. Because no one has offered to chair the Task Force, the Secretariat had assumed this role following the GEO-VI Plenary. At the first meeting of the Coordination Team, three members of the IOC Task Force, Ivan DeLoatch, Alan Edwards and Ivan Petiteville, had agreed to act as Transitional Co-Chairs through to the end of July 2010. However, the absence of dedicated co-chairs remains a serious problem for the GCI-CT. The issue of a possible Reserve Fund to support the GCI has not yet been addressed, as a great deal of work was first required on the process for selecting a single clearinghouse and a single portal. He presented the six criteria being used for the selection process and noted that functional and usability testing were ongoing. The Team aims to make a recommendation to the Executive Committee about the choice of a clearinghouse and a portal before the July meeting.

In response to queries from France, Mr Edwards and the Secretariat Director explained that the point of the exercise was to guarantee that GEO has a fully operational GCI before the Ministerial. Australia suggested that there be required minimum scores in the tests. In response to a query from Italy, Mr Edwards explained that each candidate portal and candidate clearinghouse clearly had its strengths and weaknesses. In response to a request from Russia, he explained that for each of the direct (on-site) usability tests, about 100 people with Earth observation backgrounds had participated in each of the tests.

The Secretariat Director clarified that the selection process is ongoing and will not conclude until July and that the Work Plan Symposium in Pretoria in May will offer another opportunity for testing. He also suggested that GEO Principals could be invited to nominate their own remote testers to give them more confidence in the process and the eventual selections. Brazil confirmed that it had already participated in the testing. The US asked for a small correction in the document. The Secretariat Director proposed that should no volunteers be forthcoming, the Secretariat could provide a long-term chair for the Coordination Team. The Chair suggested giving the matter some more thought and to return to the issue at the next meeting.

The terms of reference of the Coordination Team were accepted.

5 REPORT ON 2009-2011 WORK PLAN PROGRESS (DOCUMENT 11)

Ms Alexia Massacand of the Secretariat presented the document. She described some of the data sets, products and services that have been developed, as well advances on data sharing and capacity building. As of February, over 200 approved components have been registered in the GEO Portal. Other advances include a new web portal for the Haiti Supersite, a new forecasting system for ocean waves in the western Pacific, a major reanalysis of climate data, and the establishment of the Asia-Pacific Biodiversity Observation Network (AP BON) as part of GEO BON.

Italy asked if any particular problems should be highlighted, recalling that the Tsunami Working Group, for example, had previously been a concern. Ms Massacand explained that some of the problems indicated by the “traffic light” color coding were simply reporting issues.

The Secretariat Director said that the next three-year Work Plan may soon need to be addressed. It will benefit from the fact that the new targets are now better linked to the Tasks. The meeting agreed that work on the next three-year update should only start after the Summit.

6 REPORT OF GEO COMMITTEES (DOCUMENT 12)

Mr Stuart Minchin of Australia reported on behalf of the four Committees. He reminded the Executive Committee of the reporting guidelines it had recently established, whereby the Committees were asked to coordinate their written and oral reports, identify an individual from amongst the various Committee Co-Chairs to make the presentation, and to schedule their own meetings at least four weeks in advance of each Executive Committee meeting.

Since GEO-VI, the Committees have prepared possible showcases for consideration by the 2010 Ministerial Task Force. The Science & Technology Committee (STC) has worked to engage scientists, and it initiated a dialogue with the International Group of Funding Agencies for Global Change Research (IGFA). The User Interface Committee (UIC) has conducted usability tests of the GCI, engaged the Communities of Practice and advanced the joint UIC/CBC Call for Proposals. The Capacity Building Committee (CBC) has promoted the GEONETCab project, capacity building in the regions and the UIC/CBC Call for Participation. The Architecture and Data Committee (ADC) developed a GEO data strategy and has worked on technological solutions for increasing the availability of data through the GCI.

Referring to the recommendations contained in the report, Mr Minchin asked the meeting whether the report satisfied their guidelines; the meeting confirmed that it did. With regard to feedback to the Committees, the EC recalled that the GEO Master Schedule for 2010 was approved at the GEO-VI Plenary. The EC asked that all of the Committees respect this schedule and the Committee meeting windows, as the decision of Plenary was taken, amongst other considerations, in order to establish a schedule that would improve the interaction and flow of up-to-date information between the GEO Committees and the Executive Committee.

He asked the meeting to acknowledge the progress made by the STC, which it did. Finally, he asked that the meeting note the UIC report and provide assistance with identifying experts.

Australia and the EC proposed using GEO News to communicate with the rest of the GEO community about the next steps for the Call for Proposals and to demonstrate the Executive Committee's support for the Call. The EC noted that the EU's research framework programme was one means by which support could be provided to certain of the UIC/CBC proposals, as the EU research framework programme is open to research projects from all countries in the world. Italy noted that the UIC and CBC had done a great deal of work but that many of the proposals would still need to be reworked in order to translate them into funding proposals for the 7th Framework Programme, bilateral donors or other international financing programmes, each with different thematic priorities and financing requirements.

Action 18.8 – The Executive Committee, with support from the Secretariat, to submit an article to GEO News urging the GEO community and donors to support the Proposals identified by the UIC and the CBC, while the CBC and the UIC should be encouraged to try to match some proposals with possible targeted donors.

7 PREPARATION OF 2010 MINISTERIAL SUMMIT (DOCUMENT 13)

7.1 Summit Agenda

Mr Gilles Ollier, Co-Chair of the 2010 Ministerial Task Force, made the presentation. He noted that a number of Task Force members were also present at the current meeting. He described the meetings of the Task Force, the issuance of a first invitation letter to ministers, the drafting of the declaration and agenda, the development of six showcases, and plans for a thematic exhibition, publications and other outreach tools. He noted that a second announcement will be sent out to ministers in April or May. The showcase presentations are being advanced, and the exhibition and logistical and pricing

information will be provided soon. He confirmed that the Task Force recognizes the need to liaise with the Data Sharing Task Force on communications with ministers, as well as with the Evaluation Team.

Turning to the draft Ministerial agenda, Italy, supported by Australia, emphasized the importance of ensuring that ministers can make a meaningful contribution in order to make their time and effort worthwhile. This can hardly be the case if only two-minute presentations are envisaged. The benefits of GEO must be clearly shown with the core components of the systems. The EC recommended that the data-sharing implementation plan should be endorsed or accepted by ministers. Australia said that, in addition to speeches, the ministers could be offered an opportunity to table a short summary document on their views.

Russia said that ministers should be able to express their expectations about the future benefits and operational resources they want GEOSS to deliver. In addition, it is important that they understand that GEOSS includes both a space and an in-situ component. The success of GEOSS will ultimately depend on the availability of surface observation networks.

Japan stressed that this was a special summit, half way through the 10-Year Implementation Plan, and that it should focus on the major achievements of the past five years as well as on the policy and technical issues to be addressed over the next five.

The Chair said that GEO has come a long way and become a functional and effective organization. Many organizations want to continue contributing to GEO and GEOSS; this should not be taken for granted, but rather should be emphasized for the ministers.

The US observed that the conversation was assuming that the Ministers would be at the table, but it was important to address the issue of how to get them to Beijing in the first place. Ministers tend to have their signature, or priority, issues, and the meeting should somehow make it possible to address these. A general explanation of how Earth observations contribute to issues such as food security is needed.

Italy agreed with these points and on the need to emphasize in-situ and the integration of space and in situ. He also reminded the meeting that 2010 is the International Year of Biodiversity.

The Secretariat Director agreed that something more was needed in the agenda to motivate ministers to attend. Picking up on Russia's earlier comment, he noted that the space component of GEO is well organized by the Committee on Earth Observation Satellites (CEOS), and that advancing the in-situ component could be a good focus for the Ministerial. It could serve as a practical hook for promoting the general concepts of sharing data and sustaining observations. He noted that the Ministerial will take place just after the Nagoya conference on biodiversity, an issue that relies heavily on in-situ observations. He recalled that the recent Asia-Pacific Symposium had proposed the creation of a Borneo Island Supersite for coordinating and sharing in-situ resources and capabilities. In response to comments from the US and others, and taking into consideration the current set of showcases, the Director suggested focusing on food security, biodiversity, and carbon monitoring, with a cross-cutting emphasis on the coordination and sustainability of in-situ observations.

Mr Ollier said that different issues are priorities in different parts of the world, but that GEOSS contains building blocks for all of them.

The Chair returned the conversation to the issue of how to convince ministers to attend the conference and, in this regard, supported the approach put forward by the Director. This approach would focus on critical policy issues and how GEOSS can support decision making on those challenges. The showcases can play an essential role here.

Australia cautioned against over-selling GEOSS as a one-stop shop for everything. The message should be that GEOSS is a sound investment because it provides a cross-cutting and integrating approach that does serve all these issues.

Italy said that a convincing argument had to be made to ministers before July, by which time they may have already made their plans for the rest of the year.

The Secretariat Director said that the second invitation letter is the next opportunity to make the case. Mr Ollier reiterated that this letter needs to be strong and to go out by April or May. In response to Italy, the Chair suggested that the GEO Co-Chairs review the second letter to be prepared by the Task Force.

The Chair said that the Cape Town Exhibition proved very successful in explaining GEOSS to his minister and no doubt to others. It was suggested that the current draft title of the Ministerial needed to be improved. It should reflect the high-level concerns of ministers, not of Earth observation providers. Australia said that the title should capture the idea of information sharing and of gaining local benefits through global information sharing.

France reiterated that ministers will only come if they can take a decision relevant to their concerns about the global environment.

The Chair said that the high-level outputs proposed by Cameroon and the Secretariat should be pursued. The selling points that had been discussed should be included in the second invitation letter. The Task Force should reflect on the Committee's comments and be responsible for crafting the language.

Australia supported the emphasis on in situ and added that a particular value of in-situ observations is that, unlike satellites in space, all GEO members had such data. To engage ministers, it could be interesting to invite them to commit at the Summit to making new in-situ data sets available per the GEOSS data sharing principles, similar to the way that improved access to space data was highlighted and promoted in Cape Town. This could be included in the second invitation letter and would enable ministers to lead by example. The Chair and the EC supported this, noting that the idea is consistent with proposals coming out of the Data Sharing Task Force.

Summarizing his understanding of the debate, Mr Ollier confirmed that the showcases can provide topical content for the second invitation letter, and the basic elements of GEO and the GCI can provide models and tools. A new, more compelling title for the Ministerial is essential.

The Chair noted that each representative would likely need to take a different approach for selling the Ministerial back home.

7.2 Draft Beijing Declaration

The meeting then turned to the declaration and the kinds of political messages it should contain. The US said that the ministers should be asked to commit to specific actions for GEO over the coming five years; this would also make it more attractive for them to come to the Ministerial in the first place. Three possible long-term commitments that could be included in the draft Declaration are land surface imaging (LSI), which is relevant for agriculture, land use and in-situ observations; health, with a focus on a disease-prediction system for meningitis and malaria as a contribution to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); and a global assessment of Earth observation assets and gaps. The Chair said that these would all be consistent with plans for GEOSS implementation.

France agreed that these are good goals but said they do not necessarily belong in the declaration; instead, a few countries should collaborate on advancing some of these issues. The EC also expressed mixed feelings about whether the declaration should highlight just several issues. The US responded that focusing on several important and specific stakeholder benefits in the declaration could be an effective way to engage ministers. The Secretariat Director disagreed with the idea of promoting the LSI at the Ministerial and suggested that, following earlier discussions, it might be better to focus on support to in situ observation; he recalled that the Committee on Earth Observation Satellites is already taking the lead on addressing GEO's space priorities. Australia agreed that several long-term

commitments could be useful in the declaration but that they should focus on the value-add of sustained in-situ observations.

Italy underlined that data sharing is a crucial issue for the success of GEO, that it is important to continue working on it, and that much negotiation is still needed. He suggested that the declaration call for steps towards implementing the data-sharing guidelines and action plan. France urged that it also highlight implementing and sustaining the GCI.

Italy suggested that another avenue to pursue could be how GEO contributed to global environmental governance, as governance is particularly interesting to politicians. He recalled that the origins of GEO in 2003 were essentially political, rather than technical. He urged a focus on the added value of GEO and its ability to produce useful information for society.

The Chair said the meeting should focus more on the general philosophy of the declaration and leave the specifics to the 2010 Task Force. He suggested that the US submit its proposed text on long-term commitments to the Task Force and that others could do the same.

Australia cited GEO's ability to contribute to improving agricultural productivity through its global information system.

France stressed the importance of sustaining Earth observation systems, core data sets and the GCI.

Japan proposed highlighting the importance of capacity building and making a direct link to funding mechanisms. These agencies channel enormous sums to development assistance; because GEOSS can help them decide how best to do this, they would benefit from closer collaboration with GEO. The Secretariat Director recalled that the Asian Development Bank had recently expressed interest in GEO.

The US said that the contents of the declaration should drive the contents of the agenda, rather than the other way around.

Cameroon remarked that the structure of the declaration could be improved. It could reference such critical issues as food security, disasters, desertification and drought. General references to land, sea and atmosphere are not sufficiently compelling. The Secretariat Director added that water management, biodiversity, food security and carbon monitoring, which were highlighted in the showcases, would also attract attention, and they all rely heavily on in-situ observation. Such issues tend to be handled by different agencies, but GEO helps to make the linkages necessary for building operational decision-support systems.

7.3 Showcases for Ministers

China said that the showcases identified by the Task Force are well chosen. After consulting within the Asia-Oceania caucus on a regional Asian showcase, China proposed highlighting data from satellites and GEONETCast. Japan said that the Asia Water Cycle Initiative should also be considered. Australia explained that the caucus had considered both these ideas and agreed that the Asia Water Cycle Initiative would showcase GEOSS well within the region, but the caucus would complement this with the region's contribution to global GEOSS activities such as GEONETCast. The Chair encouraged the caucus to agree on its recommendation to the Task Force. Brazil noted that the capacity-building showcase includes a strong emphasis on GEONETCast. China said that in addition to societal benefit areas it is important to communicate the cross-cutting, value added of GEO. Italy asked if, following these statements by China and Japan, the selection of showcases was being re-opened.

Mr Ollier said that the showcases should be finalized in the very near future. He concluded that the Executive Committee had endorsed the Task Force's selection of showcases, but had requested further trimming of the list to possibly reduce the total number. He reported that the Task Force planned to have pilot presentations for each of the showcases ready by June

7.4 Further discussion on preparation of the 2010 Ministerial Summit

The Chair asked whether there were any logistical issues that should now be discussed. The EC noted its ambitious plans for the Exhibition and asked China for details about the site. China said that it, too, has ambitious plans for what it expects to be the largest exhibition in GEO history. China will try to have pricing information available for the Secretariat, hopefully by end April, so that the Secretariat may start interacting with interested exhibitors as early as possible.

China then explained that it had sent the first round of invitation letters to 28 ministers whose names had been provided by GEO Principals. Other letters were delivered to ministers of foreign affairs, generally via the Beijing embassies. Italy requested more information on the names and titles of the ministers who had been contacted. The Chair asked the Secretariat to contact Principals again to obtain more names of ministers. China asked the Secretariat to draft a letter of invitation to Participating Organizations and to provide a mailing list.

The Secretariat Director noted that, in addition to the Exhibition, the Plenary preceding the Ministerial would offer other opportunities for highlighting GEOSS and GEO activities. The Chair asked the Secretariat to consult with the Task Force and to develop a draft Plenary agenda for consideration at the Committee's July meeting. He asked the Data Sharing Task Force to continue its work on drafting an action plan.

Mr Ollier confirmed that he recognized the need for strong political messages, an improved title for the Ministerial, a focus on in-situ observation and data sharing, a request to Ministers to "bring their data" to the Ministerial by announcing the full and open availability of new in-situ data sets, and an introductory presentation on GEO and GEOSS. The declaration could cite donor agencies and capacity building as well as how the showcased examples will help them in addressing top-of-agenda political issues. The showcases could be presented at different moments during the Ministerial and the previous evening. The M&E report could be acknowledged in the declaration.

The Chair thanked Mr Ollier and asked the Ministerial Task Force and the Secretariat to consider the broad points made by the Committee. He said that the Co-Chairs welcomed the opportunity to comment on revised versions of the declaration, agenda and title. This could be done via email over the next few weeks. The draft declaration will then be distributed to GEO Principals.

Action 18.9 – The Secretariat to work with the Ministerial Task Force and develop a draft GEO-VII agenda for consideration by the 19th meeting of the Executive Committee.

Action 18.10 – The Secretariat to write to Principals who have not yet provided the name and contacts of a minister and request this information for use by China.

Action 18.11 – The Secretariat to draft an invitation letter to Participating Organization heads and to develop a mailing list for use by China.

Action 18.12 – The Secretariat to distribute pricing and other logistical information about the Exhibition to the GEO community after such information has been provided by China.

Action 18.13 – The Ministerial Task Force, with the Secretariat, to draft a second invitation letter and revise the declaration, agenda and Ministerial title for review by the GEO Co-Chairs before wider distribution.

8 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The US returned to the issue of establishing a process for the communications work of the Secretariat. The US was concerned by a commentary written by the Secretariat Director for the industry publication Space News. It proposed a set of draft guidelines whereby the Co-Chairs would oversee the Secretariat's issuance of public statements, opinions and commentaries involving GEO policy issues.

Italy agreed in principle but said that the entire Executive Committee, and not just the Co-Chairs, should be involved. France pointed out that such controls could conflict with the Secretariat's terms of reference, which call for it to advocate for GEO and actively communicate; they could also be impractical to implement.

The US said that the guidelines would apply to policy issues that have not yet been fully decided within GEO, such as how to best approach the private sector. The Secretariat Director did not agree that the Space News article went beyond issues already discussed at the Executive Committee and at the Plenary, and he expressed his disappointment at the introduction of external controls that are even more intrusive than those used in the UN.

The Committee did not object to the guidelines, and the Chair reminded the Secretariat Director that, when speaking publicly or submitting articles for publication, he must take great care to ensure that his statements are fully reflective of the views, mandates and policies of GEO Members and Participating Organizations. When the Secretariat Director wishes to develop major new initiatives to be advanced by GEO, these should be advanced in the context of the Executive Committee and Plenary. The Executive Committee agreed that all future opinion pieces or commentaries proposed or authored by the Secretariat Director on such new initiatives on policy issues be subject to review and approval by the Executive Committee.

The Committee then agreed to hold the 19th meeting of the Executive Committee in Geneva on 15 and 16 July. Following a round of concluding remarks by the Co-Chairs, the Chair gavelled the meeting to a close.