



GROUP ON  
EARTH OBSERVATIONS

## GEO-IX

22-23 November 2012

Engaging the Private Sector in the Implementation of  
Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS)

Document 14

For consultation



## Engaging the Private Sector in the Implementation of the Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS)

The Plenary is requested to discuss the proposed framework for Private Sector engagement. The proposed guidelines have also been reflected in the proposed amendments of the GEO Rules of Procedure (RoP) (Document 20).

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Since the establishment of the Group on Earth Observations (GEO), the GEO community has recognized the value of engaging the private sector in the development and utilisation of the Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS).

The 10-year GEOSS Implementation Plan, in chapter 7.1 (Funding of GEOSS), envisages contributions of other “entities” (including from the private sector) to the implementation of GEOSS<sup>1</sup>.

The Executive Committee has previously discussed this matter at its 16<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> meetings; the Committee recognized the importance of contributions from the Private sector to GEOSS implementation, and affirmed the need to move forward by defining a systematic approach to ensure their actual involvement.

In particular, at its 21<sup>st</sup> meeting, recognizing the urgency to start a structured dialogue with the private sector and while waiting the definition of an agreed framework, the Executive Committee decided that “...In the meantime the Secretariat could negotiate private sector contributions under the Committee’s guidance and subject to its final review<sup>2</sup>”.

Many Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs), including UN organizations and programmes, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have developed rules of engagement with the private sector with an aim of maximizing the benefits of working with the private sector while minimizing potential risks. The GEO Secretariat conducted a survey in 2009 (ref. to Document 18, ExCom 16), showing that a common sense approach is consistently taken which emphasizes flexibility, transparency, fairness and even-handedness, and clarity regarding expectations. A recurring theme was the need to carefully regulate the use by private-sector companies of the organization’s logo and name.

The private sector is already contributing to GEOSS implementation and in many ways is also participating in GEO Governance (e.g. IEEE and OGC are GEO Participating Organizations)

The GEO Post-2015 Working Group, according to its mandate and meeting in Geneva on 6-7 September 2012, discussed the matter and reached the conclusion that the current GEO founding documents already provide the basis to move forward on private sector engagement, and that there is no need to include the matter in the GEO/GEOSS Post 2015 vision. The WG therefore decided to

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<sup>1</sup> “Unless otherwise agreed, any costs arising from GEO activities will be borne by the Member or Participating Organization that incurs them and will be subject to the availability of funds, personnel, or other resources. Members and Participating Organizations may make voluntary financial or other contributions to GEO activities, including the baseline activities of the Secretariat, through a trust fund to be administered by the Secretariat. Other entities may make contributions to finance specific activities approved by GEO.”

<sup>2</sup> Summary Report of the 21<sup>st</sup> Executive Committee Meeting - Geneva, 22-23 March 2011

remove this topic from their report and recommended that the GEO Secretariat prepare a document for GEO-IX summarizing the proposed framework for private sector engagement.

The present document builds on the previous documents and discussions at Executive Committee, and is now being submitted to Plenary as the supporting rationale for the relevant amendments to the GEO RoP, to ensure a structured process for private sector participation in GEO and contributions to GEOSS.

## **2 THE PRIVATE SECTOR**

The private sector includes a number of different institutions and organizations that may be interested in contributing to GEOSS development and in using GEOSS provided data and information.

The analysis performed (Executive Committee 16<sup>th</sup>, Doc.18) identified three broad categories -- providers of infrastructure and data; developers and providers of services; and end users. It also recognized the need to acknowledge the profit or non-profit nature of the institution/organization (e.g. private companies and/or foundations) when defining a potential framework for engagement and interaction.

In this analysis, NGO's are not considered given the assumption that they already meet the requirements of becoming a Participating Organization in GEO, with all the relevant implications described in the GEO founding documents.

Finally, the document leaves for further analysis the issue of where citizens, acting individually or collectively, should be positioned in the overall picture: in any case they are the end beneficiaries of GEO action.

## **3 MUTUAL BENEFITS**

While the burden of investing in Earth observation infrastructure and data is generally carried by governments, there is a shared understanding that not only the public sector, but also the private sector benefits from increased data sharing, and from the exploitation of integrated Earth observations for the provision of societal benefits. In a world where public budgets are under increasing pressure, and where the private sector can increasingly benefit as users of Earth observations, GEO should define a suitable framework to allow and encourage private sector contributions to develop and grow GEOSS.

Private sector engagement would bring additional expertise and resources in all domains associated with GEOSS development and to SBA-related services as well as additional political support for ensuring continuation of the GEO action.

From another perspective, the private sector also represents a big "consumer" of Earth Observation data and information. In this regard, its main interest in contributing directly to GEO would be to access GEOSS resources, both for provision of commercial services and for the provision of institutional services, under contract from governmental entities. GEO may also work as a multiplier of private sector R&D resources. GEOSS could be a "window" to display private sector capabilities and products and, for private companies, an operationally sustained GEOSS could represent a good opportunity to operationally run, on a long term basis, many of its components.

## **4 A GEO FRAMEWORK FOR PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT**

### **4.1 Background**

The previous discussion within the Executive Committee showed a general agreement on the principles for engagement, and on the fact that, while the main mechanism for private sector

contributions would likely be in-kind contributions to Work Plan tasks, private sector contributions to the GEO Trust Fund shall be also envisaged.

## 4.2 Guiding principles

As identified in the Introduction, many IGOs, including UN organizations and programmes, and NGOs have developed rules of engagement with the private sector with the aim of maximizing the benefits of working with the private sector while minimizing potential risks.

A common sense approach is consistently taken emphasizing flexibility, transparency, fairness and even-handedness, and clarity regarding expectations. It is, therefore, proposed that GEO adopt the same principles, together with specific guidelines, identified below, which will become part of the GEO RoP.

## 4.3 Proposed guidelines

1. When partnering with private sector entities, the GEOSS Data Sharing Principles will be followed:
  - *There will be full and open exchange of data, metadata and products shared within GEOSS, recognizing relevant international instruments and national policies and legislation*
  - *All shared data, metadata and products will be made available with minimum time delay and at minimum cost;*
  - *All shared data, metadata and products being free of charge or no more than cost of reproduction will be encouraged for research and education.*
- GEOSS 10-Year Implementation Plan, 16 February 2005;
2. GEO Members and Participating Organizations are encouraged to invite private sector entities to participate in the implementation of GEOSS through the Tasks of the GEO Work Plan, establishing appropriate arrangements in accordance with the established procedures of their individual agencies, including public-private partnerships;
3. When engaging with the private sector, GEO Members and Participating Organizations will respect their mandates and established procedures regarding transparency and competition in contracting;
4. GEO Members and Participating Organizations are encouraged to develop and organize private sector engagement events at the national and regional levels;
5. Private sector engagement in the implementation of GEO Work Plan Tasks will be managed primarily by individual GEO Members and Participating Organizations, according to the established procedures of those GEO Members and Participating Organizations;
6. The GEO Secretariat is encouraged to organize international forums, or expositions, in collaboration with the private sector, for example in conjunction with the GEO Plenary and the GEO Work Plan Symposium, and to facilitate dialogue among private sector entities and the GEO Work Plan participants;
7. The GEO Secretariat may negotiate terms and conditions based on the guidance provided by the GEO Executive Committee, and subject to the Executive Committee's review, under which private sector entities may make contributions to GEO.

The GEO Secretariat is available to identify and propose solutions on specific aspects related to private sector participation, such as the use by private-sector companies of the GEO logo and name.

#### **4.4 Private sector participation in GEO**

For a partnership to be effective and fruitful, the partners should be equally satisfied with the agreed mechanisms to both develop the partnership and assess achievements. This would mean finding an appropriate mechanism for private sector involvement in GEO, without changing GEO's nature and without unnecessarily increasing the complexity of the overall management processes. Two measures are proposed:

- A yearly Forum on private sector engagement with GEO and in the development of GEOSS.  
The Forum, beyond representing the occasion to present progress on GEOSS implementation and to discuss potential private sector contributions, should also have the objective of generating private sector views and recommendations on GEO actions, initiatives and Tasks, and to reflect their views on how the partnership should further develop. GEO Governance (Plenary and/or Executive Committee) could acknowledge this annual report from the Forum and respond to its recommendations.
- An explicit invitation to industrial associations and foundations to become GEO Participating Organizations (e.g. IEEE and OGC are already PO's).

While for contributions to individual Tasks, and under the agreed guidelines, it is expected that Members, Participating Organizations and the Secretariat will mainly interact with companies, it is proposed to leverage private company associations to ensure a systematic and “neutral” approach to ensure transparency of, and to seek input for the GEO decision process.

The above measures are part of the framework for Private Sector engagement, but they likely will not require amendments to the GEO Rules of Procedures, so no amendments are proposed to the RoPs.

### **5 POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

The potential contributions of the private sector to GEOSS implementation can range from contributing resources to GEO Work Plan Tasks to creating the conditions for broader support for GEO, including enhancing the linkages from information to decisions: very often private service providers constitute the connection between environmental information and the end users– a key area of GEO action.

This chapter only addresses potential private sector contributions to GEOSS implementation and to the GEO Secretariat operations. Actual arrangements will be finalized in accordance with principles and guidelines described in Chapter 4.

The use of GEOSS Data Sharing principles as the basis for private sector contributions need not create problems for either the non-profit private sector nor for private companies. Again, while the GEOSS Data Sharing principles will apply to contributions to GEO Work Plan Tasks (such as provision of data and information, pilot services development), companies may well see an interest in contributing and then selling these services on a broader basis. From a GEO perspective, this greater and enhanced participation in GEOSS will provide users a greater awareness of what data information, and services exist..

#### **5.1 Direct contribution to Work Plan Tasks**

The private sector represents developers, providers and operators of a number of GEOSS components to be implemented as part of the GEOSS Common Infrastructure (GCI) such as IT infrastructure, communication infrastructure, software, and hardware.

It also represents owners and operators of observing systems, providers of observations, as well as, developers of information services in all the GEO SBAs.

The basis to foster private sector contributions will be the current version of the GEO Work Plan, and actual arrangements may take the form of in-kind resources (data, services, human capital) or financial contributions (direct support to Task activities such as Task team travel, events organization, publications, etc.).

There are already examples of private contributions to GEOSS development, that the GEO framework was able to incorporate, a key example being the initial, competitive development of the GEO Portal conducted by two private companies.

## **5.2 Contribution to the GEO Trust Fund**

The proposed guidelines also include the possibility of direct private sector contributions to the GEO Trust Fund. In accordance with these guidelines, no major problems are anticipated for either Secretariat operations or for purposes of GEOSS implementation. The financial management of the FCT/GFOI contributions to the GEO Trust fund have shown that from an accounting perspective, the tools are in place to accept and use resources earmarked for direct support to GEOSS implementation.

## **6 CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD**

The framework for Private Sector Engagement in GEO has been developed and proposed to advance the implementation of GEOSS while preserving its public-good dimension. The proposal contained in this paper proposes a structured and open approach toward the private sector, and also overcomes many of the problems and difficulties of defining private sector participation on a case by case basis, rather than holistically.