

## Resilient Cities and Human Settlements Engagement Priority

*This document is submitted to the 17<sup>th</sup> Plenary for decision.*

### 1 PURPOSE

This document presents a brief overview of the reasoning behind Resilient Cities and Human Settlements as the fourth engagement priority for GEO. This summary was produced from the engagement plan approved by the Executive Committee at its 54<sup>th</sup> meeting (16-17 March 2021).

### 2 RATIONALE

The New Urban Agenda (NUA) is the key policy driver around urban resilience and sustainable urbanisation. It was formally adopted by the 167 countries attending the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in Quito, Ecuador on 20 October 2016, and later endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly on 23 December 2016. NUA sets the frame for essential actions on how national, regional, and local governments, as well as civil society organisations and professional associations – separately and by working together – can make the difference in promoting urban well-being.

In parallel, there has been broad recognition by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) of the value of Earth observations and of GEO's ability to provide valuable tools and services to support UN Member States. Specifically, Earth observation and geospatial information are needed for urban monitoring, reporting processes on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), targets and indicators, as well as other aspects within the NUA. As such, and with the considerable advancement of GEO's efforts on this topic, a strong relationship has been fostered and will continue to solidify between UN-Habitat and the GEO community. Moreover, GEO has increased engagement with additional international organizations focused on urban issues. For example, UNESCO has been keen to collaborate with GEO Members and investigate how Earth observation can help monitor and assess climate change impacts on World Heritage Cities. Further, local governments and municipal authorities (through networks of such actors, such as Resilient Cities Network, C40 and ICLEI) are beginning to meaningfully engage with Earth observation experts in the urban context.

In the past years, there has been increased attention paid to urban topics within the GEO Work Programme, necessitating and resulting in efforts by the Programme Board to increase coordination among urban-related activities. Resilience provides a strong link between the Sendai Framework, the Paris Agreement, and the New Urban Agenda, and also links closely to several of the SDGs (urban challenges relate to about 65% of the total 169 SDG targets<sup>1</sup>, while urban resilience constitutes a subset of this).

The adoption of Resilient Cities and Human Settlements as a fourth GEO engagement priority will provide benefits to the GEO community and to GEO Members through the incorporation

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, "Achieving the SDGs in cities and regions", [Achieving the SDGs in cities and regions - OECD](#), accessed 20 October 2021.

of climate action, disaster risk reduction and sustainable development considerations in urban-related activities. The increased visibility to ongoing GEO Work Programme activities in these areas will potentially attract additional resources and in turn help GEO Work Programme activities to develop services to support GEO Members and others in their use of Earth observations as they face challenges in developing urban areas to become more sustainable and resilient.

### 3 ENGAGEMENT OBJECTIVES AND EXPECTED IMPACTS

In framing the objectives of GEO's engagement on urban resilience, it is important to recognize the policy context in which this topic is addressed. The key policy reference is the New Urban Agenda (NUA), where countries and relevant regional and international organizations will report on the progress of its *every four years*. It thus provides the overarching framework for GEO's engagement. Although called the 'New Urban Agenda', the policy frame is universal in scope and explicitly includes the full spectrum of human settlements from megacities to small rural villages and is particularly concerned with the most vulnerable living in informal settlements. In addition, there are strong connections between urban resilience and the other three GEO engagement priorities, however urban resilience cannot be tackled from the existing priorities alone due to the complexity of several urban scale aspects.

A major challenge for the GEO community is the exploitation of the Earth observation data and products in dealing with the multidimensional problem of urban sustainability, towards increasing urban resilience. However, many of these governments and organizations which need to be involved are unfamiliar with using Earth observations in support of policy, planning, and operational decisions, therefore it is a key need to convene opportunities for dialogue involving urban stakeholders and Earth observation experts. The goals are twofold: to translate needs in the urban domain into requirements for Earth observations data, tools, and services – a current crucial gap – while also translating advancements in Earth observation into novel solutions for human settlements.

With this as the context, the following objectives are set for the engagement priority:

1. Work with UN-Habitat and other competent organizations (including, among others, UN Development Programme, UN Environment Programme, World Bank, and the World Health Organization) to formulate how Earth observations can continue to assist in the implementation of the NUA, to support the assessment every four years of the progress of the NUA implementation, and to foster sustainable urbanization;
2. With the assistance of partner organizations, engage cities and other stakeholders to understand their needs and to identify the highest-value opportunities for application of Earth observations;
3. Exploit existing and develop new Earth observation-based tools and services to support the NUA and sustainable urbanization;
4. Provide greater visibility to ongoing GEO Work Programme activities relevant to urban resilience and encourage the development of new activities to address identified gaps;
5. Collaborate with those working on the other GEO engagement priorities, especially through their dedicated GEO Working Groups; to identify synergies, avoid duplication of efforts, and amplify GEO's impact;
6. Pursue opportunities with Regional GEOs to develop projects addressing urban resilience in line with their existing agendas; and
7. Develop the appropriate messages, language, and tools to communicate what the GEO community has to offer to cities and other stakeholders.

Ultimately, the aims of the urban resilience engagement priority are that:

- Communities, cities, and countries understand the value and usefulness of Earth observations in the urban context and apply Earth observation-based tools in their normal operations to enhance their resilience; and
- The GEO community supports the application of Earth observations to cities, other human settlements, and sustainable urbanization by continuously adapting, as appropriate, GEO Work Programme activities, developing new activities, and engaging with a wider range of key organizations, for example, national statistical offices, sub-national actors, and specific city stakeholders.

#### **4 ENGAGEMENT PRIORITY STAKEHOLDERS**

Urban resilience is of concern to a wide variety of players and there are many stakeholders with interests that could benefit from GEO designating it as an additional engagement priority. The types of key stakeholders targeted by this engagement priority are expected to include the following:

1. Cities, principally through intermediary organizations, such as the Resilient Cities Network (R-Cities), among others;
2. UN agencies with policy responsibilities related to cities, principally UN-Habitat, but also including the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), the UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the UN Statistical Division (UNSD);
3. The GEO community, including GEO Members, Participating Organizations, GEO Associates, and GEO Work Programme activities; and
4. Small, medium, and micro-sized enterprises (SMMEs) in their roles supporting city decision making and providing solutions and services, as well as investors allocating funding to such sectors as transportation, urban and rural planning, water and waste management, infrastructure, health, etc.

#### **5 ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

A new Resilient Cities and Human Settlements Working Group (RCHS-WG) will be formed to develop and implement a coherent and crosscutting approach within GEO to advance the use of Earth observations to support urban resilience efforts, similar to those now in place for Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction, given the extent and multi-disciplinarity of the activities to be accomplished and the necessity to involve several experts and stakeholders also engaged in the implementation of the NUA. A dedicated Secretariat staff resource will be required at some point to maintain momentum and contact with the various stakeholders and to ensure that the new engagement priority is optimally effective.

#### **6 RECOMMENDATION**

The Executive Committee recommends that the Plenary approves Resilient Cities & Human Settlements as a fourth GEO engagement priority.

## Annex A

### Resilient Cities and Human Settlements Engagement Plan

The text that follows has been excerpted from Executive Committee document 54.8. The engagement plan was approved by the Executive Committee with two changes that have been incorporated in this version.

#### 1 ENGAGEMENT OBJECTIVES AND EXPECTED IMPACTS

In framing the objectives of GEO's engagement on urban resilience, it is important to recognize the policy and institutional context in which this topic is addressed. Firstly, the key international organization in the domain is the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and the key policy reference is the New Urban Agenda (NUA), prepared by several UN agencies<sup>2</sup> and which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 23 December 2016. Countries and relevant regional and international organizations will report on the progress of the implementation of the New Urban Agenda *every four years*. The NUA thus provides the overarching framework for GEO's engagement. Although called the 'New Urban Agenda', the policy frame is universal in scope and explicitly includes the full spectrum of human settlements from megacities to small rural villages and is particularly concerned with the most vulnerable living in informal settlements.

In addition, there are strong connections between urban resilience and the other three GEO engagement priorities, however urban resilience cannot be tackled from the existing priorities alone due to the complexity of several urban scale aspects. A major challenge for the GEO community is the exploitation of the Earth observation data and products in dealing with the multidimensional problem of urban sustainability, towards increasing urban resilience. Due to the multifaceted nature of urban resilience and to meet this challenge, synergies with the other three GEO engagement priorities, specifically at the local scale, must be drawn upon: cities hold the key to tackling climate change given that they are responsible for more than 75% of global GHG emissions, urban vulnerability and adaptation is central in disaster risk reduction, whereas SDG-11 links urban resilience with the United Nations 2030 Agenda. While governments at all levels must be involved in addressing urban resilience, it is ultimately the cities and other local administrations that are most crucial. Many of these governments and organizations are unfamiliar with using Earth observations in support of policy, planning, and operational decisions. A key aspect of the GEO urban resilience engagement priority, therefore, is to convene opportunities for dialogue involving urban stakeholders and Earth observation experts. The goals are twofold: to translate needs in the urban domain into requirements for Earth observations data, tools, and services – a current crucial gap – while also translating advancements in Earth Observation into novel solutions for human settlements. These goals are closely aligned with the UN SDGs, for example ensuring reliable and affordable access to electricity and ensuring food security in all types of human settlements.

With this as the context, the Urban Resilience Subgroup proposes the following objectives for the engagement priority:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/preparatory-process/united-nations-task-team/>

1. Work with UN-Habitat and other competent organizations (including, among others, UN Development Programme, UN Environment Programme, World Bank, and the World Health Organization) to formulate how Earth observations can continue to assist in the implementation of the NUA, to support the assessment every four years of the progress of the NUA implementation, and to foster sustainable urbanization;
2. With the assistance of partner organizations, engage cities and other stakeholders to understand their needs and to identify the highest-value opportunities for application of Earth observations;
3. Exploit existing and develop new Earth observation-based tools and services to support the NUA and sustainable urbanization;
4. Provide greater visibility to ongoing GEO Work Programme activities relevant to urban resilience and encourage the development of new activities to address identified gaps;
5. Collaborate with those working on the other GEO engagement priorities, especially through their dedicated GEO Working Groups; to identify synergies, avoid duplication of efforts, and amplify GEO's impact;
6. Pursue opportunities with Regional GEOs to develop projects addressing urban resilience in line with their existing agendas; and
7. Develop the appropriate messages, language, and tools to communicate what the GEO community has to offer to cities and other stakeholders.

Ultimately, the aims of the urban resilience engagement priority are that:

Communities, cities, and countries understand the value and usefulness of Earth observations in the urban context and apply Earth observation-based tools in their normal operations to enhance their resilience; and

The GEO community supports the application of Earth observations to cities, other human settlements, and sustainable urbanization by continuously adapting, as appropriate, GEO Work Programme activities, developing new activities, and engaging with a wider range of key organizations, for example, national statistical offices, sub-national actors, and specific city stakeholders.

## 2 ENGAGEMENT PRIORITY STAKEHOLDERS

Urban resilience is of concern to a wide variety of players and there are many stakeholders with interests that could benefit from GEO designating it as an additional engagement priority. The types of key stakeholders targeted by this engagement priority are expected to include the following:

1. Cities, principally through intermediary organizations, such as the Resilient Cities Network (R-Cities), among others;
2. UN agencies with policy responsibilities related to cities, principally UN-Habitat, but also including the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), the UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the UN Statistical Division (UNSD);
3. The GEO community, including GEO Members, Participating Organizations, GEO Associates, and GEO Work Programme activities; and
4. Small, medium, and micro-sized enterprises (SMMEs) in their roles supporting city decision making and providing solutions and services, as well as investors allocating funding to such sectors as transportation, urban and rural planning, water and waste management, infrastructure, health, etc.

### 3 A RESILIENT CITIES & HUMAN SETTLEMENTS WORKING GROUP

A key recommendation of the Programme Board Urban Resilience Subgroup is that its role be assumed by a new Resilient Cities and Human Settlements Working Group (RCHS-WG), similar to those now in place for Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction, given the extent and multi-disciplinarity of the activities to be accomplished and the necessity to involve several experts and stakeholders also engaged in the implementation of the NUA.

The high degree of interest in the GEO community in participating in the various Foundational Task Working Groups has been demonstrated by the over 300 nominations received from some 47 GEO Members, 28 Participating Organizations, and 5 GEO Associates. These Working Groups have become the primary means for conceiving, coordinating, and implementing actions to address the GEO engagement priorities, in close cooperation with the relevant GEO Flagships, Initiatives, and Community Activities. Just as the mandate of the previous Paris Agreement and Disaster Risk Reduction subgroups of the Programme Board have been transferred to the Foundational Task Working Groups, it is proposed that a similar transition also occur with regard to urban resilience. A key benefit is that it places the activity within the GEO Work Programme itself, offering a more permanent platform than as a Programme Board subgroup. It also provides the opportunity to engage a wider range of participants that reflect the full scope of issues and expertise needed to address urban challenges.

Draft terms of reference for the proposed Working Group, based on those of the Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction Working Groups, is attached to this document as Annex B.

### 4 Secretariat Support

The shift within GEO toward the engagement priorities has led to profound changes in the GEO Work Programme, the Programme Board and its subgroups, but especially on the work of the Secretariat. Most of these changes have been very positive. The grand global priorities have focused and energized the engagement activities of the Secretariat, internally with the GEO Work Programme activities and externally with United Nations bodies, GEO Members, Participating Organizations, and others. The engagement priorities have provided a “common language” that has fostered greater collaboration between GEO and these other bodies. Having clear goals, objectives, targets, and indicators has also spurred the development of methods for measuring and assessing progress and gaps in meeting these common objectives.

Coordinating these efforts has also required changes to the kind of skills required in the Secretariat and the roles these staff perform. It has been clearly demonstrated that greater progress on the engagement priorities occurs when there is a dedicated expert in the Secretariat to maintain momentum and contact with the various stakeholders. These experts may be hired directly by the Secretariat using GEO Trust Fund resources or they may be seconded by GEO Members; both of these approaches can be equally effective. It must be concluded, therefore, that a dedicated Secretariat staff resource will be required at some point to ensure that the Resilience Cities and Human Settlements engagement priority is optimally effective.

Even so, it must also be recognized that dedicated Secretariat positions for all three of the original three engagement priorities have not been in place to date. Indeed, past experience suggests that the recognition of a topic as a GEO engagement priority is a precondition to obtaining the necessary Secretariat resources. Further, it is anticipated that the positions of SDG Coordinator and DRR Coordinator will be staffed in early 2021 via secondments. As these roles were heretofore filled on an interim basis by the Senior External Relations Manager, their staffing will free some additional time (over and above the time he has been devoting to the topic to date) to focus on the Resilient Cities and Human Settlements priority.

To conclude on this topic, while a dedicated Secretariat officer to coordinate the Resilient Cities and Human Settlements priority is highly desirable and would certainly lead to more rapid progress, the absence of existing resources for this position should not delay recognition of the priority and, indeed, such recognition is likely the only path to realizing these resources.

## 5 KEY MILESTONES, DELIVERABLES AND EVENTS

The following table identifies some of the key milestones, deliverables, and events that have been identified thus far. It should be expected that this list will evolve as the engagement priority matures and in response to opportunities that arise over time.

Milestone, Deliverable, or Event	Date
<b>2019-2020</b>	
Letter from UN-Habitat requesting GEO assistance	June 2019
Programme Board Special Session on Urban Resilience	September 2019
Proposed to ExCom to make urban resilience a fourth engagement priority	November 2020
<b>2021</b>	
Engagement plan on urban resilience presented to ExCom	March 2021
ICLEI World Congress (Malmö, Sweden)	April 2021
ICRC 2021: Resilient Cities Conference	June 2021
World Cities Summit (Singapore)	June 2021
UN High Level Political Forum (New York City)	July 2021
GEO-17 Plenary – Approval of Resilient Cities and Human Settlements as a fourth engagement priority	November 2021
<b>2022</b>	
Call for nominations to the RCHS-WG	January 2022
First meeting of the RCHS-WG	March 2022
Recruitment of a GEO Secretariat RCHS Coordinator	June 2022
11 <sup>th</sup> World Urban Forum (Katowice, Poland)	June 2022
Draft RCHS-WG action plan presented to Programme Board	June 2022
<b>Post-2022</b>	
Involvement in UN Secretary General review of the New Urban Agenda via UN-Habitat	2026

## **6 TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR A RESILIENT CITIES AND HUMAN SETTLEMENTS WORKING GROUP**

### **6.1 Purpose**

The Resilient Cities and Human Settlements Working Group (RCHS-WG) is convened to develop and implement a coherent and cross-cutting approach within GEO to advance the use of Earth observations in support of urban resilience and sustainable urbanisation efforts in human settlements, cities, and countries. These efforts include those related to the provisions of multilateral agreements, with emphasis and target on the New Urban Agenda which serves as the current frame at the UN level. In this way, the Working Group will support the translation of the Canberra Declaration and the GEO Strategic Plan into concrete actions within the GEO Work Programme.

### **6.2 Duties**

- Foster support for urban and settlement related activities between the GEO community and national, international, and intergovernmental bodies, including maintaining the relationship with the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat);
- Enable discussion and communication on urban and settlement related activities within the GEO Work Programme;
- Connect different scales of activities – from local, national, regional to global. Notably working with human settlements and cities;
- Monitor the uptake of GEO's activities in support of the New Urban Agenda;
- Review the implementation plans of all GEO Work Programme activities relevant to the New Urban Agenda, and to identify potential gaps and synergies;
- Facilitate communication between the leads and participants of these GEO Work Programme activities;
- Act as a focal point, where appropriate, for engagement with external stakeholders and international organizations and processes relevant to Earth observations and the New Urban Agenda;
- Seek coherence and collaboration amongst the post-2015 development agendas and GEO's engagement priorities, including the identification of common metrics and opportunities for joint reporting;
- Promote to key stakeholders and partners the value of Earth observations and information provided by the GEO community in the urban domain;
- Promote the sharing of data from different platforms, technologies, themes and domains. Advocate the use of open standards and open Application Programming Interfaces (APIs); and
- Stimulate the initiation of projects, case studies or pilots involving participants from multiple GEO Work Programme activities to enhance collaboration across GEO and to address identified gaps.

### **6.3 Membership**

- Membership in the RCHS-WG is by nomination from GEO Members, Participating Organizations, and Associates. As appropriate, the Programme Board may also invite other qualified individuals to participate as members in the Working Group.
- Participation is encouraged from organizations and bodies relevant to urban resilience, human settlements, and sustainable urbanization, including from:

- GEO Work Programme activities;
  - UN and other international organizations;
  - National, regional, and city stakeholders;
  - Related non-governmental organizations and associations;
  - Commercial sector organizations, especially small, medium, and micro-sized enterprises; and
  - Scientific organizations.
- In the interest of ensuring diversity and balance in the Working Group membership, the Programme Board may place limits on the number of members from individual GEO Members, Participating Organizations, or Associates or by specific categories. Participation of commercial entities is welcomed but will be limited to a maximum of two members.

#### **6.4 Working Arrangements**

- There will be at least two co-chairs of the Working Group, who will be selected by and from among the Working Group members.
- The Working Group will meet at such times and places as determined by its members and will work mainly through teleconferences and e-mail.
- The Working Group will provide periodic (at least annual) reports on its activities to the Programme Board as part of GEO Work Programme monitoring. It may also bring specific issues to the Programme Board as needed.
- The Working Group may establish subgroups to assist in fulfilling its duties.
- Administrative support to the Working Group will be provided by the GEO Secretariat.

#### **6.5 Duration**

These Terms of Reference will remain in effect for the period of the 2020-2022 GEO Work Programme. They may be revised with the approval of the Programme Board.