

Report of the Programme Board

This document is submitted to the Executive Committee for discussion.

1 INTRODUCTION

This document provides a summary of the key activities undertaken by the GEO Programme Board during the period of 1 July to 30 September 2019. This period includes one Programme Board meeting: the 15th meeting on 4-5 September, as well as a special session on 3 September to discuss the request from UN-Habitat for GEO support. The report also includes the work of Programme Board members during the periods between meetings through the multiple review teams and Programme Board subgroups.

2 DEVELOPMENT OF THE 2020-2022 GEO WORK PROGRAMME

The development of the next GEO Work Programme has been the major focus for the Programme Board since the GEO-XV Plenary. This activity has multiple components that will be addressed separately below.

2.1 Review of Candidate Flagships and Initiatives

As has been described in previous Programme Board reports, the largest proportion of effort by Programme Board members has been directed to the review of the implementation plans of GEO Flagships, Initiatives, and Regional GEOs. Decisions on all proposed activities in these categories were taken by consensus at the meeting, although in some cases specific review teams were asked to complete their follow-up and responses with the proposers.

Decisions on the category of each proposal is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Programme Board Decisions Regarding Implementation Mechanism Categories

GEO Work Programme Activity	Proposed Category	Disposition
GEO Biodiversity Observation Network	GEO Flagship	Retained as a GEO Flagship
GEO Global Agricultural Monitoring	GEO Flagship	Retained as a GEO Flagship
Global Forest Observation Initiative	GEO Flagship	Retained as a GEO Flagship
Global Observation System for Mercury	GEO Flagship	Retained as a GEO Flagship
Aquawatch	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
Data Access for Risk Management	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
Data Integration and Analysis System	GEO Initiative	Re-categorized as a GEO Initiative

GEO Work Programme Activity	Proposed Category	Disposition
Earth Observations and Citizen Science	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Community Activity
Earth Observations for Ecosystem Accounting	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
Earth Observations for Sustainable Development Goals	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
Earth Observations for the Atlantic Region	GEO Initiative	Recommended as a GEO Community Activity
GEO Capacity Building in North Africa, Middle East, Balkans and the Black Sea	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
GEO Essential Variables	GEO Initiative	Recommended as a GEO Community Activity
GEO Geohazard Supersites and Natural Laboratories	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
GEO Global Ecosystems Initiative	GEO Initiative	Re-categorized as a GEO Community Activity
GEO Global Network for Observation and Information in Mountain Environments	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
GEO Global Water Sustainability	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
GEO Human Planet	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
GEO Land Degradation Neutrality	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
GEO Vision for Energy	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
GEO Wetlands Initiative	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
Global Drought Information System	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
Global Observation System for Persistent Organic Pollutants	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
Global Urban Observation and Information	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
Global Wildfire Information System	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
Oceans and Society: Blue Planet	GEO Initiative	Retained as a GEO Initiative
Space Climate Observatory	GEO Initiative	Recommended as a GEO Community Activity

Perhaps more important than the decisions on categories were the comments and suggestions provided by the review teams to the leads of the Flagships and Initiatives. Leads were generally very appreciative of the comments and responded promptly to Programme Board requests for revisions. Many of the leads remarked that they found the process valuable for them and their activities, and they welcomed the opportunity for direct interaction with Programme Board members.

One review team reviewed the implementation plans for the Regional GEOs, though not for the purpose of acceptance or categorization, but only to provide advice to improve the plans. This task proved more challenging for the team due to the recent changes making the Regional GEOs governance bodies and not simply Initiatives. Programme Board requested the Secretariat to prepare a discussion paper on the interaction between the Board and the Regional GEOs for discussion at their 16th meeting (February 2020).

2.2 Other Elements of the GEO Work Programme

The overall structure of the Foundational Tasks in the 2020-2022 GEO Work Programme had been agreed at the Programme Board's 12th meeting and further refined at the 13th and 14th meetings. At the 15th meeting, the Programme Board gave its final approval of the Foundational Task descriptions and the terms of reference for the four Working

Groups and one Task Team that support the Foundational Tasks, subject to several minor revisions.

The Secretariat presented the status of its review of the proposals for Community Activities, which are approved by the Secretariat Director and not by the Programme Board. The Board expressed their appreciation for the report and commended the Secretariat for its work in encouraging mergers of related activities.

In its review of the draft Summary Document, the Programme Board requested several additions, including:

- A table showing the activities that were in the 2017-2019 GEO Work Programme but which are no longer included;
- A description of the overall changes to the Foundational Tasks and their rationale;
- A section regarding support to the engagement priorities; and
- A table showing alignment of GEO Flagships and Initiatives with the SDGs.

The Programme Board also approved a set of naming guidelines for GEO Work Programme activities. The guidelines were developed by the Secretariat in response to concerns raised by the Board with names proposed by some new applicant activities. These concerns included the use of “GEO” and “GEOSS” in the activity names, names that suggested a broader scope for the activity than was justified by its participants and resources, and names that did not clearly identify the nature of the activity. In approving the guidelines for application in the 2020-2022 GEO Work Programme, the Programme Board advised that existing names could be retained. Even with newly-accepted activities, the Board suggested that application of the guidelines be flexible and voluntary.

The Programme Board approved the 2020-2022 GEO Work Programme for presentation to the GEO-XVI Plenary, subject to final revisions by the Secretariat as noted.

3 SPECIAL SESSION ON UN-HABITAT

As was noted in its report to the 48th Executive Committee meeting, the Programme Board viewed the 5 June letter from UN-Habitat to the GEO Secretariat as presenting an important opportunity for GEO and was interested in working with the Secretariat to prepare a robust response.

Subsequently, the Programme Board co-chairs and the Secretariat jointly organized a special session of the Programme Board, to be held the day prior to the 15th Programme Board meeting. Representatives from each of the three key GEO Work Programme activities that deal with urban issues (EO4SDG, Human Planet, and Global Urban Observation and Information (GUOI)) were invited to the session, as well as a representative from UN-Habitat.

The session began with a clear and informative presentation from the UN-Habitat representative, Dennis Mwaniki. Mr Mwaniki described the role of UN-Habitat, what supporting sustainable urbanization entails, how UN-Habitat supports the 2030 Agenda, and then detailed the request to the GEO community. This request focused on five key issues:

- **Coordination:** It is difficult to engage with multiple GEO Work Programme activities and thus a single point of entry to GEO was desired;
- **Co-design:** UN-Habitat and their stakeholders want to be involved in the design of the tools and products that better respond to their needs, and not merely have access to tools developed independently;
- **Standards and guidelines:** Since there are many existing tools available, GEO could help by providing comparisons between tools and datasets, identifying which ones are best for which purpose;
- **Tailoring the support:** UN-Habitat requirements go beyond the SDGs (including links to the Paris Agreement, Sendai Framework and the New Urban Agenda), but their interest is also narrower than all SDGs; and
- **Capacity gaps:** Sustainability depends on use by countries, capacity development is not just about training, and continuous engagement with users and other actors is needed to achieve sustained use.

The discussion highlighted the fact that, while there was much good work happening in individual GEO Work Programme activities, as well as coordination being provided by EO4SDG across the SDGs, there are gaps in the existing type and level of coordination across the Work Programme with the effect that GEO was not yet responding effectively to UN-Habitat's needs.

Programme Board members proposed several strategic options for responding to the identified issues and these options were discussed at some length, though without conclusion during the session. A path forward was proposed by the Programme Board co-chairs on the next day during the regular Programme Board meeting:

- Key players (EO4SDG, Human Planet, GUOI, UN-Habitat, GEO Secretariat) would take the discussion further at the Human Planet Forum (30 September to 2 October). Specifically, this would include possibilities for merger of some GEO Work Programme activities and/or better coordination among them, and a greater involvement of UN-Habitat in the definition and implementation of the relevant GEO activities.
- A small Programme Board task force would be set up to ensure the issues raised would be addressed.
- A Programme Board teleconference would be convened the week of 21 October to discuss the outcomes of the Human Planet Forum discussion.
- Programme Board co-chairs would include a brief update on the status of this matter to the GEO-XVI Plenary.

4 PROGRAMME BOARD SUBGROUPS

During 2019, the Programme Board had five active subgroups: Sustainable Earth Observations subgroup (SEO-SG), Recognition subgroup, Paris Agreement subgroup (PA-SG); Sendai Framework subgroup (Sendai SG), and Awards subgroup. The status of the subgroups was reviewed by the Programme Board at its 15th meeting and is summarized below:

- The SEO-SG was closed at the 13th Programme Board meeting and its responsibilities transferred to the GEOSS Data, Information and Knowledge Resources Foundational Task.
- The Recognition subgroup completed its work of recommending a GEO awards process and was closed at the 14th Programme Board meeting. The Awards subgroup was established at that time, but with different membership, to select the winners of the awards.
- The PA-SG was closed and its responsibilities transferred to the new Climate Working Group under the GEO Engagement Priorities Foundational Task.
- The Sendai SG was closed and its responsibilities transferred to the new Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group, also under the GEO Engagement Priorities Foundational Task.
- The Awards subgroup was continued for 2020.

The Programme Board thanked the members of the subgroups for their contributions, in particular, regarding the development of the terms of reference for the Climate and Disaster Risk Reduction Working Groups under the Foundational Tasks in the 2020-2022 GEO Work Programme.

Looking forward to 2020, the Programme Board agreed to establish two subgroups which were discussed in 2018 but whose initiation was deferred due to the development of the 2020-2022 GEO Work Programme. These subgroups are:

- a Diversity subgroup, to examine how to encourage greater diversity of various kinds among the contributors and other participants in GEO; and
- a Symposium subgroup, to work with the Secretariat on the planning for the 2020 GEO Symposium.

Terms of reference for these last two subgroups will be presented to the 16th Programme Board meeting (February 2020) for review and approval.

The Programme Board also agreed to maintain the Review Teams (that reviewed the implementation plans for GEO Flagships, Initiatives and Regional GEOs) in 2020. The role of these teams would be to maintain ongoing engagement between the Programme Board and GEO Work Programme activities. Details of this new role will be the subject of a paper to be prepared by the Secretariat for discussion at the Programme Board's 16th meeting.

5 LESSONS LEARNED REVIEW FOR 2019

A key item for the 15th meeting was a review of lessons-learned, including those related to the process of development of the 2020-2022 GEO Work Programme, but also from other aspects of Programme Board operations. Below are some of the observations from the exercise.

5.1 What worked well

- Programme Board proved itself competent to perform the review of the Flagships and Initiatives: it improved the plans, provided a quality assurance role, ensured proposals were in line with the GEO strategy, and encouraged collaboration among the activities;

- The use of the review teams and the distribution of the documents worked well;
- Programme Board members had a good overview of all activities during the process;
- There was good cooperation from the GEO Work Programme activity leads;
- The Secretariat provided a good level of support;
- The co-chairing approach is working well;
- Programme Board members showed good energy and commitment through the process.

5.2 What worked less well

- It was questioned whether the Programme Board was playing a sufficient gatekeeping role (though the Board rejected three applicants for Initiative status and re-categorized one activity from an Initiative to a Community Activity);
- There was concern that some review teams lacked sufficient expertise to review the technical aspects of some of the plans;
- The number of new proposals for Initiatives and Flagships was fewer than expected;
- There was a sense that the Programme Board has limited power to change the plans due to the voluntary nature of GEO.

5.3 What was not anticipated

- The degree of change within Earth observations community;
- The changes of direction within GEO, such as the Expert Advisory Group process and the changes introduced by the Secretariat Director;
- The challenges faced by GEO Work Programme activities in achieving outcomes.

5.4 Recommendations for the next GEO Work Programme development process

- Invite experts from outside the Programme Board to participate on the review teams;
- Start the process earlier;
- Provide more guidance on the full process and timelines;
- Ask the GEO community for feedback on the format of the GEO Work Programme (Summary Document plus online plans);
- Reviewers wanted more guidance on how to handle activities that did not provide required information;
- More explanation is required for proposers on the differences between the various Implementation Mechanisms (Flagships, Initiatives, etc.) and on the policy mandate;
- More information is needed in the plans on links with organizations outside of GEO.

5.5 General recommendations

- Review teams wanted to continue their engagement over the next two years with the activities they worked with (not wait until the next Work Programme development);

- A document is needed describing how to scale up GEO Work Programme activities, for example, how to find policy support, mobilize resources, and connect with others in GEO;
- It will be important to monitor the changing nature of Earth observations;
- Programme Board requested a closer connection with the external relations function in the Secretariat;
- More sessions like the one with UN-Habitat should be organized;
- Programme Board co-chairs should develop a forward plan for the next year.

6 ATTENDANCE AT PROGRAMME BOARD MEETINGS

The Programme Board would like to acknowledge the generosity of the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission for hosting its 15th meeting and the Special Session on UN-Habitat at its facility in Ispra, Italy. The change in venue was necessary due to lack of availability of meeting rooms at the GEO Secretariat offices for the meeting dates.

6.1 15th Programme Board Meeting

6.1.1 *Present (including by teleconference)*

GEO Members

Australia, Canada, European Commission, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Italy, Japan, Norway, South Africa, United Kingdom, United States.

Participating Organizations

CEOS, COSPAR, ESA, ESIP, GODAN, GRSS, IAG, IEEE, IUGG, MRI, OGC, POGO, SWF.

6.1.2 *Absent*

GEO Members

Cambodia, China, Greece.

Participating Organizations

IOC, UN Environment, WMO.

6.2 Special Session on UN-Habitat

6.2.1 *Present (including by teleconference)*

GEO Members

Canada, European Commission, Ghana, Japan, Norway, South Africa, United States.

Participating Organizations

CEOS, COSPAR, ESA, GODAN, GRSS, IEEE, MRI, OGC, POGO, SWF.

Invited Guests

UN-Habitat, EO4SDG, Global Urban Observation and Information Initiative, Human Planet Initiative.