

## Roadmap for the Establishment of the GEO Innovation Fund

*This document is submitted to Plenary for information, following its approval by the Executive Committee at its 68<sup>th</sup> session in March 2026. The Plenary is invited to take note of the development of this voluntary, pilot-phase GEO Innovation Fund, and provide support where possible.*

### 1 PURPOSE

This document sets out the proposed roadmap to establish a GEO Innovation Fund as a voluntary, pilot-phase financing mechanism under the GEO Trust Fund, designed to accelerate delivery of the GEO Work Programme (GWP), with particular emphasis on bridging the Research-to-Operations (R2O) gap.

The GEO Innovation Fund has been designed to align with the objectives of the GEO Post-2025 Strategy and the Post-2025 GWP by the Programme Board's Ad-hoc Innovation Fund Task Force since mid-2025, informed by consultations with the Programme Board and the Budget Working Group (BWG), and approved by the Executive Committee at its 68<sup>th</sup> meeting on 18 March 2026.

Consultations undertaken through the Programme Board's Ad-hoc Innovation Fund Task Force, including discussions with the Programme Board, the Budget Working Group, and Executive Committee members, have consistently highlighted that both the establishment and sustainability of the Innovation Fund are contingent on securing a small number of critical enablers. These include:

- seed funding from a limited group of committed GEO Members and partners to enable an initial pilot launch;
- dedicated capacity for resource mobilization and partnerships, both to support the Fund's establishment and to sustain contributions over time; and
- adequate Secretariat implementation capacity to administer calls, facilitate monitoring and evaluation, as well as coordinate reporting in line with GEO governance and fiduciary requirements.

For the purposes of an initial pilot call, the Secretariat considers that the design and launch of a single, tightly scoped call could be undertaken on a time-bound basis using existing staff capacity, provided that the scale remains modest and administrative requirements proportionate. However, sustained operation of the Innovation Fund beyond a pilot phase - including repeated call cycles, expanded project portfolios, active incubation support, structured monitoring and evaluation, and proactive resource mobilization - would require dedicated and appropriately resourced capacity, secured through cost recovery, secondments, or other agreed staffing arrangements. The proposed roadmap, for a pilot

phase initiation of the Innovation Fund, therefore links the establishment of the Fund with targeted engagement and a transition toward sustained resource mobilization and implementation arrangements.

The establishment of the Fund requires targeted updates to the GEO Rules of Procedure to include such type of fund mechanism and to define the role of the Programme Board within it. Draft language has been included in the revised GEO Rules of Procedure to be approved at this Plenary.

## **2 STRATEGIC CONTEXT AND RATIONALE**

### **2.1 Alignment with GEO Post-2025 Strategy**

The GEO Post-2025 Strategy emphasizes the need to turn Earth observations data and knowledge into actionable Earth intelligence and operational services that deliver measurable societal and economic value. The GEO Post-2025 Strategy with its corresponding GWP place strong emphasis on:

- Accelerating Earth intelligence;
- Bridging the R2O gap;
- Delivering user-driven, operational services with measurable societal and economic impact.

While the GWP has demonstrated strong convening power and technical excellence, a recurring challenge identified by GEO activities' teams, Members and partners is that promising initiatives struggle to secure the flexible, time-bound financing needed to move from research outputs and pilots into sustained deployment and uptake.

### **2.2 The R2O Financing Gap**

The GEO Mid-term Evaluation, together with assessments of the GWP, has highlighted a funding gap affecting the transition of GEO-enabled activities from research outputs and pilot activities into sustained operational deployment and uptake. A flexible, targeted financing mechanism for GWP activities will support co-design and sustained engagement with users as well as partnerships with operational agencies and, where appropriate, private sector actors.

In developing this proposal, the Programme Board's Ad-hoc Innovation Fund Task Force has drawn on focused discussions with GEO Members and selected external stakeholders, as well as internal reflection on delivery constraints observed across the GWP. These discussions indicate clear demand for a catalytic mechanism focused on developing sustained services and uptake, confirming that no dedicated financing vehicle currently exists within GEO to address this transition gap in a structured manner. They further underscore the importance of credible and transparent implementation pathways, robust monitoring and quantification of results and their impacts and the need to accommodate differentiated engagement approaches for public and private sector stakeholders and/or donors.

The Innovation Fund is therefore intended to address this specific R2O transition financing gap, rather than replace or duplicate existing funding or core GEO Secretariat Operations functions.

### **2.3 Positioning within the Existing Funding Landscape**

A rapid review of comparable international organizations and multilateral initiatives indicates that many maintain internal catalytic or innovation-focused financing instruments designed to accelerate priority initiatives aligned with their strategic mandates. These mechanisms can operate on a time-bound, pilot-oriented basis and provide flexible, relatively small-scale funding.

Existing external funding sources, including national research grants, development finance instruments, philanthropic funds, and multilateral trust funds, generally focus on one of three categories: basic or applied research; large-scale programmatic implementation; and/or sector-specific development financing.

Few mechanisms are specifically designed to finance the intermediate R2O transition at a global, cross-sectoral level, particularly where projects require coordination and joint design across various sectors in multiple countries. The proposed GEO Innovation Fund is therefore not intended to duplicate existing research or development financing instruments. Rather, it is designed to:

- Fill a catalytic gap specific to internationally coordinated Earth observation initiatives;
- Enable translation of science into operational services across jurisdictions;
- De-risk early-stage operational deployment through structured co-design and partnership development;
- Leverage, rather than replace, larger-scale funding instruments.

In practice, Innovation Fund-supported initiatives would be expected to demonstrate a credible pathway towards sustainability and potential access to downstream financing from development banks, national funds, philanthropic partners, or private sector investment. Depending on the stage of maturity defined in each call for proposals, support may include feasibility assessment, proof of concept development, prototyping or early piloting. Specific maturity expectations and transition milestones will be defined by the Programme Board in the context of each call. The Innovation Fund would therefore serve as a bridge mechanism, enabling initiatives to become “investment-ready” and operationally credible within the GEO framework.

## **3 OVERVIEW OF THE PROPOSED GEO INNOVATION FUND**

### **3.1 Nature and Scope of the Fund**

The GEO Innovation Fund is envisaged as a dedicated, voluntary financing mechanism to support:

- The launch of the GWP Accelerators and other priority activities under the GWP;
- Short-duration, results-oriented initiatives;

- Activities that translate existing research outputs into operational or sustained services.

The Fund is not intended to finance basic research or sustained operations, nor to serve as a general grant facility. Its focus is catalytic and time-bound.

As a guiding principle, support would be concentrated on service development and operationalization activities that build on existing research and demonstrate credible pathways to user uptake and scale, including early-stage prototyping, piloting, and co-design, rather than on stand-alone basic research.

### **3.2 Types of Activities Supported**

Subject to ExCom approval of the final framework, the Fund would support activities such as:

- Stakeholder and user co-design;
- Feasibility studies and proof-of-concept development;
- Prototyping and early piloting of services;
- Integration of EO solutions into operational or sustained services.

Consultations indicate strong support for keeping the scope anchored in the GWP, while allowing necessary flexibility to involve external technical or implementation partners where this strengthens delivery, especially when the latter may spark longer term engagement within GEO or other well-established frames.

Support could also cover costs related to the migration of a service management to an operational agency or other end users that will adopt and sustain the services developed.

### **3.3 Operating Modality: Calls for Proposals**

The Innovation Fund would operate primarily through targeted calls for proposals, designed to support a manageable (within GEO Sec's operational capacity) number of high-impact, time-bound initiatives aligned with the GWP.

Calls for proposals would be designed by the Programme Board and taking into account expectations of donors and would be tailored to specific priorities for the GWP. This approach allows the Fund to remain flexible and responsive while maintaining strategic coherence.

Indicative funding envelopes, evaluation criteria, implementation timelines, and expected outcomes would be specified in each call, allowing contributors and applicants to understand the scale and ambition of the initiatives to be supported.

Proposals would be transparently assessed against clear eligibility and evaluation criteria, including alignment with the GWP, user demand, feasibility, partnership strength, and potential for operational impact. The Programme Board would review proposals and, where appropriate, invite clarification or refinement to strengthen alignment with the GWP, enhance synergies with existing GEO initiatives or resources, or address identified gaps. Following this process, the Programme Board would formulate its final funding recommendation for submission to the Executive Committee for approval.

## 4 OPERATING MODEL

### 4.1 Integration with GEO Governance

The proposed Innovation Fund would be embedded within GEO governance:

- Programme Board
  - Defines the strategic framing for Calls for Proposals, ensuring alignment with the GWP;
  - Approves Call for Proposals documentation prior to launch, assuring clarity of processes and criteria;
  - Conducts evaluation of proposals, including assessment of:
    - Alignment with the Call objectives;
    - Innovation and scientific/technical merit;
    - Partnership profile to ensure delivery of results;
    - Timeline, feasibility and operational readiness;
    - Measurable impact and scale-up potential;
    - Improvements.
  - Ensures elimination of conflicts of interest throughout the evaluation process, and proposes the invitation of external experts, to provide individual reviews or participate in a panel, if deems necessary;
  - Formulates funding recommendations for submission to the Executive Committee.

In addition, following approval of projects by the Executive Committee, the Programme Board will:

- Review periodic implementation updates and monitoring reports coordinated by the Secretariat;
  - Assess progress against agreed outputs, outcomes, and R2O transition indicators;
  - Provide technical guidance, where appropriate, to strengthen alignment with the Call and GWP;
  - Review lessons learned from funded initiatives, and provide recommendations to the Executive Committee regarding continuation, adaptation, or scale-up of the Fund.
- Executive Committee
    - Approves the establishment of the Fund and its operating framework;
    - Provides strategic oversight of the Fund;
    - Reviews and approves funding recommendations submitted by the Programme Board;
    - Monitors financial and fiduciary, risk implications;
    - Reviews the Programme Board's recommendations on continuation or scale-up based on outcomes of the pilot phase of the Innovation Fund prior to consideration of further advancement.

Final authority for funding decisions rests with the Executive Committee.

- GEO Secretariat
  - Supports the Programme Board in drafting Call for Proposals;
  - Administers the call process;
  - Manages contracting, disbursement, and coordinates monitoring, and reporting;
  - Ensures compliance with WMO financial regulations and GEO governance procedures;
  - Provides technical and administrative support to the Programme Board and Executive Committee;
  - Prepares regular financial and performance reports.

The Secretariat does not evaluate or approve funding decisions.

This integrated model aims to safeguard coherence with the GWP and ensure that Innovation Fund activities are fully embedded within GEO's strategic and programmatic processes.

#### **4.2 Decision Authority and Conflict of Interest Safeguards**

To safeguard integrity, impartiality, and institutional credibility, the following principles will apply:

- Members of the Programme Board and Executive Committee shall declare any actual, potential, or perceived conflict of interest in relation to proposals under consideration;
- Where necessary, independent technical reviewers may be engaged to strengthen objectivity;
- The detailed Conflict of Interest procedures will be codified in the Innovation Fund Operating Manual and aligned with GEO Rules of Procedure.

These safeguards apply equally to Programme Board members, Executive Committee members, and external experts involved in the review process.

#### **4.3 Role of Donors**

The Innovation Fund is designed to provide donors with a meaningful and visible role, while operating within GEO's governance framework and safeguarding institutional impartiality.

Donors to the Fund may, as appropriate:

- Contribute to conceptualizing and shaping Calls for Proposals, upon strategic priorities and convergences of scope;
- Provide high-level input on Calls' content (e.g., thematic focus, expected outcomes and impacts, indicative funding envelope, in consultation with the Programme Board);
- Ensure early communication of all compliance obligations, including implementation, fiduciary, and procedural requirements, stemming from the organization's established practices
- Participating in advisory or observer capacities during proposal review processes, in line with agreed governance safeguards;

- Support additional or after-life resource mobilization efforts, visibility, and partnership development.

Final funding recommendations remain the responsibility of the Programme Board, with final approval by the Executive Committee.

All donor engagement will be governed by the to-be-designed Operating Manual, which will include conflict-of-interest safeguards to ensure fairness, transparency, and consistency with GEO's mandate.

## 5 FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS AND RISK MANAGEMENT

### 5.1 Funding Model

The Innovation Fund would rely on voluntary, earmarked contributions from Members, Participating Organizations, Associates and/or other external partners, potentially including cash contributions and in-kind support. It will be established as a dedicated financing mechanism under the GEO Trust Fund, separate from the GEO Secretariat Operations Fund.

The Fund is envisaged to begin on a pilot basis, with a modest initial envelope (approximately CHF 200,000) sufficient to support at least one call for proposals. A pilot approach allows the mechanism to be tested in a controlled and proportionate manner before any consideration of scaling.

The pilot phase is intended to:

- Test the operational feasibility of the Fund's governance and decision-making arrangements;
- Assess administrative and Secretariat capacity requirements;
- Generate practical lessons on call design, evaluation processes, and monitoring frameworks;
- Provide evidence to inform future decisions regarding continuation, adaptation, or scale.

Any expansion beyond the pilot phase would be contingent upon:

- Demonstrated effectiveness of the mechanism;
- Availability of sustained voluntary contributions;
- Secured resource mobilization and Secretariat implementation capacity.

The Fund is not intended to grow in an open-ended manner but to scale proportionately to demonstrated demand, impact, and available voluntary contributions.

### 5.2 Administrative and Fiduciary Considerations

The Innovation Fund is envisaged to operate within GEO's financial and fiduciary framework, ensuring transparency, accountability, and consistency with established practices.

In particular:

- The Fund would be established as a designated financing mechanism under the GEO Trust Fund, administered by the GEO Secretariat in accordance with applicable WMO financial regulations and GEO governance procedures;
- Programme support costs and administrative overheads applicable to extra-budgetary activities would apply, in line with WMO and GEO cost-recovery policies;
- The design of the Fund is based on the principle of full cost recovery, such that no Innovation Fund activities would be undertaken without commensurate resourcing for Secretariat administration, coordination, monitoring, and reporting.

These fiduciary principles are intended to be agreed as part of the decision to establish the Fund. Operational modalities (e.g. staffing arrangements, call-level budgets, and timelines) would be developed and applied within this agreed framework, subject to ExCom oversight.

Standard financial reporting and audit arrangements for extra-budgetary resources would apply, and contributors would receive regular updates on the use of funds and results achieved.

### **5.3 Distinction with the GEO Secretariat Operations Fund**

Members have explicitly flagged the risk that a new financing mechanism could divert contributions from the core GEO Secretariat Operations Fund. Mitigation measures under consideration include:

- Clear positioning of the Innovation Fund as complementary to core funding;
- Tight scope and modest initial scale;
- ExCom combined monitoring of the contributions to the Secretariat Operations and Innovation Funds to proactively identify any relevant risks.

Furthermore, communication materials will highlight the distinct purpose of the GWP-targeted Innovation Fund and the continuing centrality of the GEO Secretariat Operations Fund in sustaining core coordination and governance functions.

### **5.4 Critical Enablers for Fund Sustainability**

While there is broad conceptual support for the Innovation Fund, consultations undertaken by the Programme Board's Ad-hoc Task Force and the Budget Working Group have consistently underscored that the Fund's longevity and sustainability is contingent on a limited number of critical enablers.

*First, dedicated resource mobilization capacity.*

The Innovation Fund is expected to rely on voluntary contributions, potentially including engagement with non-traditional partners. Members emphasized that this cannot be sustained through ad-hoc efforts and will require explicit resource mobilization capacity, whether through dedicated Secretariat staff, secondments, or champion-supported arrangements.

*Second, adequate Secretariat implementation capacity.*

The proposed model assumes hands-on incubation, coordination, monitoring, and reporting for short-cycle, results-oriented initiatives. This represents a qualitatively different workload from existing Secretariat functions. Members cautioned that the Fund should not proceed beyond pilot phase unless sufficient administrative and technical capacity is secured and appropriately resourced, including through cost recovery or dedicated staffing modalities.

*Third, investment-facing communication tools grounded in demonstrated delivery experience.*

Consultations have highlighted that effective resource mobilization will require the development of clear, investment-facing communication tools, including concise investment briefs, call-specific value propositions, and illustrative use cases. These materials should be grounded in evidence of GEO's track record in incubating, convening, and scaling Earth observation initiatives from concept to operational services through international partnerships and user co-design. The availability of such tools has been identified as a practical prerequisite for attracting both public and private sector contributions.

*Fourth, a robust monitoring and evaluation framework.*

Discussions have emphasized that donor confidence and sustained engagement will depend on the availability of credible evidence of results. A robust monitoring and evaluation framework should therefore be in place from the outset to track outputs, outcomes, and early impacts; ensure transparency and accountability in the use of funds; and capture lessons from the pilot phase. This evidence base will be critical to informing decisions on scaling up, sustaining, or institutionalizing the Innovation Fund over time.

## **6 PROPOSED WAY FORWARD**

Following the Executive Committee approval of the establishment of the GEO Innovation Fund on a pilot basis in March 2026, a phased approach is now being implemented:

1. The Executive Committee endorses the governance framework and recommends the associated amendments to the Rules of Procedure to the GEO Plenary for formal adoption;
2. Subsequently, a detailed Innovation Fund Operating Manual will be prepared by the Secretariat, for approval by the Programme Board. The Operating Manual will define:
  - Call procedures and timelines;
  - Evaluation criteria;
  - Conflict of interest safeguards;
  - Monitoring and evaluation + risk framework;
  - Financial management and reporting arrangements;
  - Capacity development and supporting approaching such as pairing the demand side and supply side of solutions.
3. The Fund will not launch a call for proposals until adequate seed funding has been secured;

4. Following completion of the pilot phase of the Innovation Fund, a consolidated report will be submitted by the Programme Board to the Executive Committee for consideration of continuation, modification, or discontinuation of the Fund.