



United Nations Environment Programme
Division of Early Warning and Assessment (DEWA)
Global Resource Information Database (GRID) - Europe

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The Global Environment Outlook: GEO-4 gets underway



Several meetings were held during the last quarter of 2004 that served to initiate the GEO-4 reporting process at the global and regional levels. One of the first of these meetings was the up-front "Ad-hoc Experts Consultation on GEO-4" in the European region. One of seven regional expert consultations held around the world, the purpose of the meeting was to expose UNEP's current plans for the preparation of GEO-4 and take the advice of governments, international agencies with a regional role, the scientific community, civil society, the private sector and youth in designing GEO-4 from a European perspective.

UNEP anticipated gaining more knowledge and insights into the user requirements for GEO assessment information, and involving all of these stakeholders right from the start.

The objectives of the Consultation were to examine different aspects of the GEO reporting process, and try to elicit answers/feedback on questions and subjects such as: the overall GEO assessment framework; how the GEO process can help to bridge the gap between science and policy; how GEO reports are being used to date; how participants would like to be using them in future; how to best present findings and messages for policy action; the overall outline and structure for GEO-4; what the major environmental and cross-cutting issues and themes are that GEO-4 should cover, specifically for the European region; which tools to use for a GEO-4 outlook chapter; and what the major challenges are for GEO and for the European region.

A wide variety of stakeholders participated, from government representatives and policy-makers, to international organisations, researchers, scientists/university participants and civil society representatives (NGOs), including the private sector and youth. Break-out groups and plenary discussions were conducted on all the subjects mentioned above. At the end, the participants expressed their great satisfaction with being involved in the process of defining both the European and global aspects of GEO-4 from the beginning.

In mid-November, the first GEO-4 global meeting of the Collaborating Centres (CC) network, UNEP and other partners (UN agencies, scientific bodies et al.) took place in Nanyuki, Kenya. Some 60 persons gathered at the foot of Mt. Kenya to discuss the detailed terms of reference for the fourth GEO global report, plan the contents of the various chapters and the institutional arrangements for work on the document over the next two-and-a-half years. "Core groups" of individuals were established to oversee the work on each of the chapters, and GEO Working Groups (such as on core data sets and indicators, policy issues and scenarios), reported to the meeting on progress since the conclusion of GEO-3. Indeed, the GEO Data Working Group headed by Ron Witt and Jaap van Woerden held its third full gathering on the heels of the Design Meeting, at UNEP

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Headquarters in Nairobi. Finally, the Nanyuki meeting heard from each of the regions on their perspectives and plans for GEO-4, based on results of the earlier "ad-hoc experts consultations" and other relevant assessment activities.

The major results of the GEO-4 Design Meeting in Nanyuki were the production of a game plan or road map and time schedule, leading over 2.5 years to the GEO-4 report and associated products, and a much improved sense of common understanding among an ever-broader network of GEO collaborators and participants from around the world.

The significance of the GEO-4 production process and its timing is especially critical and noteworthy for the European region and assessment activities there, given that UNEP's major partner in the region, the European Environment Agency, is charged with preparing the next pan-European assessment report for the Belgrade Ministerial Conference by the same date; that is, September 2007. Relevant staff of DEWA-Europe and the EEA have thus been exploring even greater synergies than were found in the process of preparing the last major global and regional assessments several years ago.

After the global meeting in Kenya, the GEO-4 European Regional Partners Meeting took place on 2-3 December 2004. The major purpose of this meeting was to thoroughly discuss the proposed contents of the GEO-4 report and determine with representatives of European Collaborating Centres (CCs) and other potential partners the roles of each in preparing the GEO-4 report. The first half-day of the meeting allowed for the participants, in a free-wheeling, give-and-take discussion, to describe their past experiences with the GEO process and reporting, along with several background presentations concerning GEO-4.

After that, the meeting turned to an indepth discussion of each of the proposed chapters in turn, the idea being how each of these could be addressed from a European perspective and with the CCs currently involved. Finally, the last half-day of the meeting was spent addressing "practical issues" such as the capabilities, preferences and roles of each CC, financial/human resources, preparation of enabling documents (contracts or MoUs) for the work to be done, and time scheduling for the whole of the GEO-4 process.

The DEWA/GRID-Europe Regional Coordinator Ron Witt and Earthwatch/GEO Data Coordinator Jaap van Woerden participated in UNEP's 23rd Governing Council meeting, a global GEO-4 Consultation of governments and scientific stakeholders, and a number of internal meetings for DEWA held at UNEP Headquarters from 17- 23 February 2005.

The GEO-4 "Intergovernmental, Multistakeholder Consultation" represented the first time that all governments and a large number of scientific institutions were invited, and many of these brought together, to provide their inputs on the design and contents of a comprehensive GEO report. Some 96 governments and 50 scientific bodies and NGOs participated in the Consultation, the major objective of which was to involve governments "up-front" in GEO-4, while strengthening the scientific basis for the fourth GEO assessment reporting process, and more directly throughout GEO-4's preparation.

The GEO-4 Consultation was very ably co-chaired by the Executive Director of the European Environment Agency, Dr. Jacqueline McGlade, and the Permanent Representative of Cuba to UNEP in Nairobi, Mr. Pedro L. Pedroso. At the Consultation, participants called for greater government involvement in GEO, particularly in terms of strengthened capacity building for integrated environment assessment, more work and coordination on environmental data and indicators, and inputs to/review of the document.

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