

Sixth Global Environment Outlook (GEO6): Outcome of United Nations Environment Assembly 4 (March 2019)

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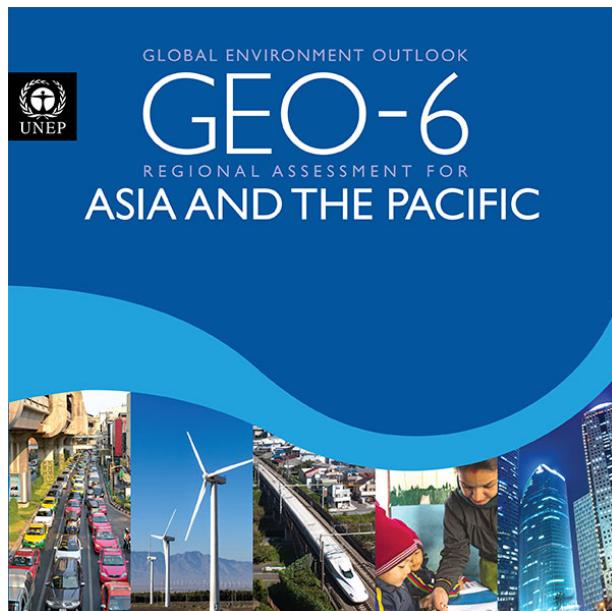
Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)

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1. The GEO Series

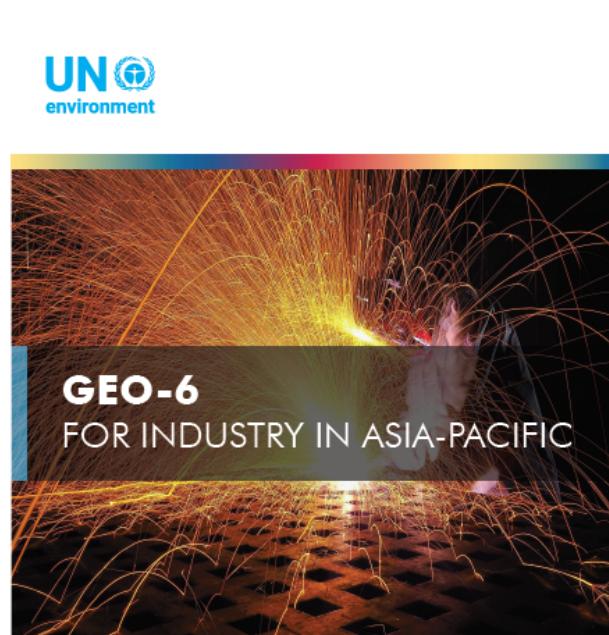
The Global Environment Outlook (GEO) series is the key process by which the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) fulfils its mandate of “keeping the environment under review”. The series comprises global and regional assessments, thematic assessments, and other derivative reports. As a key collaborating centre of UNEP, the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) is fully involved in leading and contributing to this series.

1.1. GEO-6 Regional Assessment for Asia and the Pacific



Prior to the global assessment, each region completed an assessment of environmental state and trends intended to contribute to the global assessment. The Asia-Pacific regional assessment (226 pages, covering 41 countries) covered (i) regional context and priorities; (ii) state and trends; (iii) policies, goals and objectives: review of policy responses and options; and (iv) megatrends, emerging issues and outlooks. The IGES Senior Policy Advisor was a co-Chair of the publication, while IGES staff served as coordinating lead authors or lead authors for all chapters and participated in reviewing the draft document. IGES staff were heavily involved in the Regional Environmental Information Network Conference (REIN), held in Bangkok, Thailand, in April 2015. REIN helped to decide priority topics to assess in GEO-6, and these were subsequently confirmed by the First Forum of Ministers and Environment Authorities of Asia and the Pacific, convened after REIN. IGES also hosted a writers' workshop at IGES headquarters in Hayama, Japan.

1.2. GEO-6 for Industry in Asia-Pacific



Under a Small-Scale Funding Agreement with IGES, UNEP commissioned the GEO-6 for Industry in Asian-Pacific in September 2018. The aim of this assessment was “to stimulate dialogue and catalyse appropriate actions by industry, governments and consumers to ensure that industrial processes incorporate strong social and environmental safeguards”. GEO-6 for Industry in Asia-Pacific (88 pages) covers (i) environmental impacts of key industrial sectors; (ii) policy pathways for greening industry; (iii) technological options; and (iv) lifestyle changes. The outline comprises chapters on (i) climate and industrial energy efficiency; (ii) managing air pollution in Asia; (iii) water scarcity and quality; (iv) biodiversity and industry; (v) electronic wastes; (vi) microplastics and nanomaterials; (vii) pharmaceuticals and personal care products; and (viii) conclusions (UNEP 2018).

1.3. GEO-6 for Youth Asia-Pacific

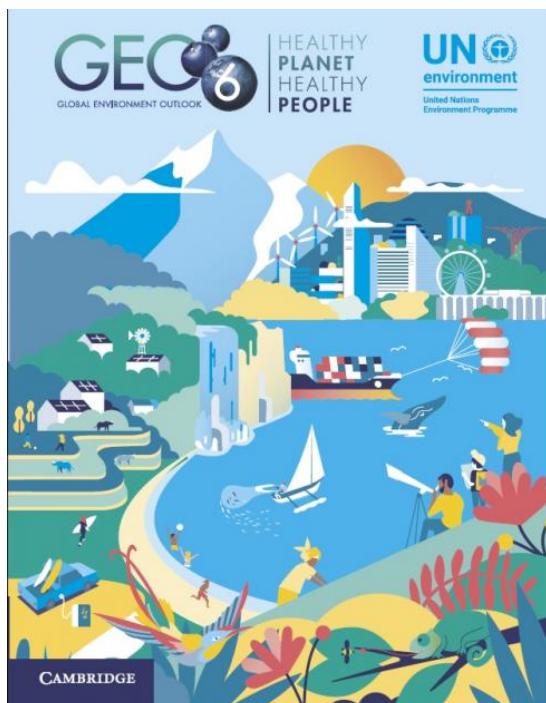


At a relatively slim 49 pages, the GEO for Youth is intended to provide a clear understanding of ongoing environmental challenges in the Asia-Pacific region for “youth and young professionals”. The contents cover (i) our Earth, our story; (ii) circle of life; (iii) life on the line; (iv) sustainability and resilience in a changing world; and (v) transition to action (UNEP 2019a). IGES staff were lead authors for Chapters 3 (Life on the Line), 4 (Sustainability and Resilience in a Changing World), and 5 (Transition to Action). The IGES Senior Policy Advisor was one of the selected reviewers.

2. The Global Assessment

2.1. Main Report

Weighing in at 745 pages, the main report of the global GEO-6 had 146 authors and nearly 2,000 peer reviewers. While the standard environmental “state and trends” occupies about half of the document, significant attention was paid to policy effectiveness (nearly 200 pages) and “outlooks and pathways to a healthy planet with healthy people” (UNEP 2019b).



IGES staff were coordinating lead authors or lead authors for Chapter 1 (Introduction and Context); Chapter 10 (Approach to Assessment of Policy Effectiveness); Chapter 11 (Policy Theory and Practice); Chapter 12 (Overview of Air Policy Instruments); Chapter 15 (Land and Soil Policy); Chapter 16 (Freshwater Policy); Chapter 17 (Systemic Policy Approaches for Cross-cutting Issues); Chapter 18 (Conclusions on Policy Effectiveness); Chapter 20 (A Long-term Vision for 2050); and Chapter 24 (The Way Forward).

2.2. Summary for Policy Makers

The Summary for Policy Makers (SPM) was negotiated and agreed upon by 95 countries in January 2019 (UNEP 2019c). The 28-page SPM covers (i) what is the Global Environment Outlook; (ii) what is happening to our environment and how we have responded; (iii) effectiveness of environmental policies; (iv) changing the path we are on; and (v) knowledge for action. IGES staff contributed to the SPM and participated in the intergovernmental negotiation in Nairobi, Kenya.

The SPM notes that “the overall condition of the global environment has continued to deteriorate since the first edition of GEO, despite environmental policy efforts across all countries and regions. Environmental policy efforts are being hindered by a variety of factors, in particular unsustainable production and consumption patterns in most countries and climate change. GEO-6 concludes that unsustainable human activities globally have degraded the Earth’s ecosystems, endangering the ecological foundations of society” (UNEP 2019c).

In commenting on the draft SPM, “one of the points that Japan appreciated in the summary is that the importance of scientific knowledge in [the] environment area has been firmly inscribed”.



The UN Secretary General's quote included in the SPM neatly sums up the current condition of the planet—"The sixth Global Environment Outlook is an essential check-up for our planet. Like any good medical examination, there is a clear prognosis of what will happen if we continue with business as usual and a set of recommended actions to put things right. GEO-6 details both the perils of delaying action and the opportunities that exist to make sustainable development a reality."

2.3. Main Messages

The two co-Chairs of GEO-6 drew out six main messages: "(i) a healthy planet supports healthy people; (ii) an unhealthy planet leads to unhealthy people; (iii) the drivers and pressures leading to an unhealthy planet need to be addressed; (iv) current science justifies policy action now, but more detailed knowledge can enable more refined and pre-emptive policy; (v) environmental policy is necessary but inadequate by itself to address systemic ecological problems, solutions to which require a more holistic approach; and (vi) healthy people, a healthy planet, and a healthy economy can be mutually supportive" (UNEP 2019b).

The Bureau members of the SPM meeting in January 2019 drafted GEO-6 Key Messages (UNEP/EA.4/INF.18), a 2-page informal note that builds on the co-Chairs' main messages. The headlines of these Key Messages are (i) healthy planet, healthy people: time to act! (ii) transformative change: a call for systemic and integrated policy action; (iii) governance of innovations: innovations in governance; and (iv) harvest time: knowledge for sustainability.

One of the key quotes from this Key Messages document is "achieving internationally agreed environmental goals on pollution control, clean-up and efficiency improvements is crucial, yet insufficient to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Transformative change is needed to enable and combine long-term strategic and integrated policymaking while building bottom-up social, cultural, institutional and technological innovation".

3. Launch at the Fourth UN Environment Assembly (UNEA4)

The Third Session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA3) requested UNEP to present GEO-6 and the SPM “for consideration and possible endorsement” by UNEA4. The full report was launched in Nairobi on 13 March 2019.

The USA submitted the original draft resolution on GEO (USA 2019) which recommended that UNEA4 should “endorse the publication of the sixth Global Environmental Outlook and its Summary for Policymakers”. The resolution also requested “the Executive Director to prepare by UNEA5.....the development of a long-term strategy for the collection, storing, access to, and use of global environmental data”. It also suggested that “preparation of a seventh Global Environment Outlook (GEO-7) ... could be an iterative process rather than a static publication”. Importantly, the resolution also recommended strengthening “the policy relevance of Global Environment Outlook reports by measuring the progress towards the achievement of the previously agreed global environmental goals and targets and to inform relevant global processes and meetings where progress towards these agreed goals and targets will be discussed”.

This draft resolution was debated at the 4th Meeting of the Open-Ended Committee of Permanent Representatives to UNEP and UNEA4. In the Committee of the Whole, compromise text on GEO-6 was tabled, then approved and forwarded to UNEA4. One significant change was that two developed countries wanted to “note” instead of “endorse” the GEO-6 report.

At UNEA4, UNEP tabled the SPM (UNEP/EA.4/18) and the GEO-6 Key Messages (UNEP/EA.4/INF/18). The European Union strongly supported GEO-6 but two developed countries refused to “endorse” the GEO-6 report, preferring the softer version of “welcoming” the two reports. Representatives expect GEO-6 to influence the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) and the Global Sustainable Development Report expected to be submitted by September 2019.

In the final resolution (UNEP/EA.4/L.27), UNEA4 welcomed with appreciation GEO-6 and its SPM, and requested “UNEP to assure the promotion of environmental monitoring, assessment, and the primacy of a strong science-policy interface within and by UNEP” (IISD 2019; UNEP 2019d). A long-term data strategy for future GEOs was proposed that will (i) identify and harmonize data collection and analysis; (ii) improve UNEP’s data storage capacity; (iii) assist countries to manage their own environmental data; (iv) coordinate with the Group on Earth Observations; and (v) encourage citizen science. It also recommended preparing “a proposal for science-policy input on the global environment” for UNEP’s 50th anniversary. A Steering Committee will prepare an “options document” for UNEA5 “outlining the key functions, scope and possible form(s) of the GEO process” (UNEP 2019d).

4. Observations

GEO-6 received significant media coverage compared to previous GEO reports. Typical of the messages extracted from the report was a view that the planet’s environmental situation is dire but not hopeless. For example, “The sixth Global Environment Outlook, released Wednesday at a U.N. conference in Nairobi, Kenya, painted a dire picture of a planet where environmental problems interact with each other to make things even more dangerous for people. It uses the word “risk” 561 times in a 740-page report” (PBS 2019). Unfortunately, the solutions proposed in the SPM and Key Messages are not strong enough to move the current trends closer to sustainable development.

It is not clear why some countries felt that the UNEA4 reports (SPM and Key Messages) could not be “endorsed”, but the practical difference between “welcoming with appreciation” and “endorsing” is probably not significant. Of greater significance is an emerging view that the current process of intermittent GEO reports may not be the best way of keeping the world’s environment under review.

There is concern that UNEPLive, the main data portal, is not very effective and is not sufficiently linked with other data sources like the Group on Earth Observations. The original resolution from the USA stated that GEO-7 “could be an iterative process rather than a static publication (and) should include independent, benchmarked state and trend reporting in 2021 and 2023” (USA 2019).

This concern about the process (and the cost?) of the GEO series has resulted in the proposal to create a Steering Committee (with nominations by end of May 2019) to prepare an options paper on the GEO process for consideration at UNEA5. Assuming GEO creates significant impact and is increasingly focusing on effectiveness of environmental policy, contributing to improvement of the GEO process could be an important role for IGES.

In conclusion, the GEO series is an important set of assessments conducted by UNEP, brings together hundreds of the world’s environment experts (including multiple IGES staff), and strongly influences other global assessment processes like the HLPF and the Global Sustainable Development Report.

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