

Summary of TIAS webinar, Global Environmental Outlook – Findings and Options for Future, June 14, 2019

On March 13, 2019 during the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA 4), the sixth edition of the Global Environmental Outlook (GEO-6) was launched. The report provides a comprehensive assessment of the state of the environment. In addition to the analysis of the state of and trends associated with environmental change, GEO-6 is solution oriented evaluating current environmental policies and, using scenarios, exploring policy options for transformative change which is deemed to be necessary in order to achieve the SDGs.



Although the report was welcomed by the UNEA, the member states ask for options to improve the science-policy interface and to develop options to this end. A working group will be established to prepare an option document for consideration at UNEA 5.

Image source: <https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/global-environment-outlook-6>

Against this background, TIAS held a webinar on June 14, 2019 with inputs from a small group of GEO experts to discuss the findings of GEO 6 and develop initial recommendations for the set-up of future global environmental assessments. This report provides a summary of the findings and the discussion highlights.

Webinar Agenda

Welcome: Klaus Jacob (TIAS)

Findings of the GEO-6: Paul Ekins, University College London and Co-Chair of GEO-6

Lessons learned from past GEOs, Jan Bakkes, Vice president of TIAS and co-author of an upcoming book on the 25-year history of GEO

Setting the scene for Future GEO, Pierre Boileau, Head, Global Environmental Outlook of UN Environment

Round Table: Options for future Global Assessments

Panelists:

Martin Kowarsch - Head of the "Scientific Assessments, Ethics, and Public Policy" working group at Mercator Research Institute on Global Commons and Climate Change (MCC)

Paul Lucas - Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL)

Closing remarks

Presentations

Paul Ekins of University College London and Co-Chair of GEO-6 presented the findings of this edition. Its general theme is the relation between human health and the environment. Its research produced numbers and percentages that struck professor Ekins as mindboggling – for example on food losses. GEO-6 continues the progression of earlier GEOs towards more extensive and in-depth assessment of policies – difficult as that may be – and options for action. The outlook part of GEO-6 is bleak in terms of attaining the SDGs. On balance, it does find that pathways towards a sustainable future exist. However, these imply ‘transformative change’. The outlook part reports, among other things, on tradeoffs and synergies between various approaches, highlighting education, changes in the human diet, and the fight against air pollution. <https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/global-environment-outlook-6>

Jan Bakkes, TIAS vice-president and co-author of an upcoming book on the 25 year history of GEO, reflected on lessons learned from past GEOs. Research for the book identified six features consistently characterizing GEO while it evolved. Among those, the application of regional as well as global perspectives is prominent. Research for the book uncovered many more GEO-inspired regional, national and local assessments than previously thought: not dozens, but hundreds. Four scenarios are used to reflect on GEO's potential in the next decade. Multiplicity emerges as a key challenge in the assessment landscape of the 2020s. The authors are not convinced that the current GEO is sufficiently quick on its feet in these circumstances. At the same time, it could be argued that precisely in times of multiple assessments, with specialized focus and perhaps contradictory framing and messages, GEO has a role to play as their ‘chapeau’. A double bottom line results: a future for GEO requires at least a thorough redesign. But also if GEO would not be continued as such, its 25 years provides useful inspiration and practical know-how for the assessments of the 2020s.

<https://www.pbl.nl/en/publications/insights-from-the-intellectual-history-of-the-global-environment-outlook>

Pierre Boileau, Head of the Global Environmental Outlook of UN Environment, gave a frank account of the challenges managing GEO-6. GEO has become complex, with multiple advisory bodies – valuable but also complicated to manage and balance. The value of very large writing meetings including the multiple advisory bodies plus the newly invented co-chairs plus multiple CLAs plus the actual authors and review editors lies in the possibility to make quick corrections in order to increase GEO policy relevance. It is also useful to maintaining the collaborative atmosphere. GEO's remarkable SPM process adds to the complexity and seems a process feature that the UN Environment Assembly wants to keep. Regional editions of GEO-6 were compiled and published long before the global edition, weakening GEO's important global-regional framework.

<https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/global-environment-outlook-6-regional-assessments>

Integrated assessment guidelines were kept as a recent draft during the work on the global edition and are once more being revised now. In March, at the time of publication of GEO-6, The UN Environment Assembly called for a steering committee to be formed in order to report on options for GEO, prior to UNEA mandating a possible GEO-7.

Discussion and conclusions

Comments and questions followed each of the presentations and were continued in a panel including the three presenters together with Martin Kowarsch, Head of the “Scientific Assessments, Ethics, and

Public Policy” working group at Mercator Research Institute on Global Commons and Climate Change and Paul Lucas of the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency. Among the issues following issues in these discussions:

- the need to foster regional-and-global perspectives. In fact, placing assessment of policies and of pathways to sustainable development in their concrete context requires improving, not weakening, the regional perspective in global GEO editions;
- after the missed opportunities of UNEP Live, the need to develop a global data strategy in relation to environment and development;
- the need to align GEO with the Global Sustainable Development Report; also with thematically focused assessments such as IPBES becoming more comprehensive;
- positioning GEO in a world of increasing populism, for lack of a better term; and the role of ethics in this kind of assessments;
- methods to be tried in order to further improve GEO’s policy assessment (following the important improvement during GEO-6);
- promising work to elaborate pathways towards sustainable development. Also here, the key is to connect to regional and national realities and thereby escape from one-size-fits-all messages.

A recording of the webinar is available: [GEO webinar recording](#).