Annex I: The Evolution of UNEP Mandates for the Global Environment Outlook

Having set the Global Environment Outlook (GEO) process in motion in 1995 and received the first GEO report in 1997, the governing body of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has taken a keen interest in GEO ever since. Whether it has been to acknowledge process outcomes, provide the mandate for the next report, or give up-front guidance on how it would like GEO to evolve, the governing body has repeatedly included GEO in its decisions over the years.

By voicing new expectations and actions for both processes and products, the decisions have been a significant driving force for the evolution of successive GEOs. While the new directives articulated in the decisions may appear to have come out of the blue, many of them originated from experiences gained during GEO and other ongoing assessment processes as potential ways to strengthen future GEO activities and outcomes. These new ideas were then included in the draft decisions prepared by the UNEP Secretariat, in consultation with the Committee of Permanent Representatives in Nairobi, and subsequently considered and negotiated by member states in their decision-making process.

A brief analysis of these decisions provides insight into, and an explanation for, some of the changes that GEO has undergone since its first edition. The paragraphs below summarize substantive points, focusing on the new directives agreed by member states.

The first GEO received a favourable reaction when it was launched at **UNEP's Governing Council (GC-)19** in early 1997. The GC decision 19/3 noted "with appreciation the timely production of the new, comprehensive report on the state of the world environment, Global Environment Outlook-1, ...as well as the participatory assessment process (known as the Global Environment Outlook process) which has been established to support United Nations Environment Programme assessment activities, and

its components (the scientific working groups, network of collaborating centres, regional and United Nations-wide consultative mechanisms)" (GC/UNEP, 1997 Decision 19/3, paragraph 1).

In paragraph 3 of the same decision (19/3), it also approved "the continuation of the Global Environment Outlook process and the production of the biennial Global Environment Outlook reports, following the guidelines set out in Decision 18/27 C, taking into consideration the recommendations pertaining to future Global Environment Outlook reports that have emerged from the Global Environment Outlook process and subject to the allocation of adequate funding" (GC/UNEP, 1997 Decision 19/3, paragraph 3).

Thus, Decision 19/3 not only recognized and endorsed the GEO process that had been established, but also renewed UNEP's mandate to produce the GEO report and confirmed an initial periodicity of two years. At the same time, it left the door open for future modifications based on lessons learned and acknowledged the need for sufficient funding.

Decision 19/3 also stressed the importance of working together with other UN entities on future GEOs, as well as holding regular consultations with governments on the GEO framework. On another issue that reappeared many times in subsequent decisions and became a virtual leitmotif in the global process, the decision urged "major report producers to collaborate and use a common data and knowledge base, comprising indicators, models, scenarios and expert systems, in order to avoid duplication, save cost and ensure that global reports are mutually supportive" (GC/UNEP, 1997 Decision 19/3, paragraph 6)

Two years later, having expressed appreciation of the broad participatory approach undertaken to prepare the second GEO report, the **GC-20** Decision 20/1 of February 1999 requested UNEP's Executive Director (ED) to produce "a third Global Environment Outlook in the form of a "30 Years After Stockholm" report, to be published in 2002" (GC/UNEP, 1999 Decision 20/1, paragraph 4). Given the explicit request for *GEO-3* to look thirty years backward to the Stockholm Conference of 1972, there would also be a rationale to gaze thirty years into the future with its Outlook chapter. In the same decision, GC-20 requested, for its twenty-first session in 2001, a "user profile and qualitative analysis of the actual use of the first and second Global Environment Outlook reports and the Global Environment Outlook process, together with a proposal for an optimal frequency and production schedule for future Global Environment Outlook and related reports" (GC/UNEP, 1999 Decision 20/1, paragraph 3).

The **Seventh Special Session/Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GMEF) of the GC** held in February 2002 considered UNEP's contribution to the World Summit on Sustainable Development that would follow in June. The GC noted that GEO-3 would "mark a major UNEP contribution... by analyzing the changes in the environment since the 1972 Stockholm Conference" (GC/UNEP, 2002 paragraph 89). The Appendix containing the accompanying Statement of the President of the GC to the World Summit on Sustainable Development reiterated this point but, more significantly for future GEOs, voiced "a common view that the scientific basis of decision-making in global environmental issues should be further strengthened" (GC/UNEP, 2002 Appendix, paragraph 10). Strengthening the scientific base of UNEP became a preoccupation and recurring theme of both the Secretariat and the GC in the following sessions and had significant spin-offs for the GEO process.[1]

UNEP's GC-22, held in February 2003, commended the ED "on the production of the third Global Environment Outlook report...and its publication in May 2002, prior to the World Summit on Sustainable Development" (GC/UNEP, 2003b Decision 22/1, part I, preambular paragraph). In terms of the future of the process, it introduced some significant new elements. The ED was requested "to continue keeping under review the world environmental situation, and providing early warning on emerging environmental issues of wide international significance..." (GC/UNEP, 2003b Decision 22/1, Part B, paragraph 1). It specified two approaches: "Preparing the comprehensive Global Environment Outlook report series, following the full participatory and consultative Global Environment Outlook approach, every five years, with the next report for 2007"; and, "Producing annual global environment outlook statements on the environment...highlighting significant environmental events and achievements during the year and raising awareness of emerging issues from scientific research and other sources"(GC/UNEP, 2003b Decision 22/1 part B, paragraph 1a and 1b). This annual statement was the beginning of the *GEO Year Book* series, envisaged as a product that would keep the name of GEO alive during the five-year intervals. Its name changed to the '*UNEP Year Book*' in 2008 and evolved into the '*Frontiers*' report from 2016.

But Decision 22/1 also included another request that was to have a significant impact on the future series of reports: UNEP should also support "sub-global integrated environmental assessment processes, including the

[1] An Intergovernmental Consultation on Strengthening the Scientific Base of UNEP, which took place in January 2004, made many recommendations for how this could be done for future GEOs (IISD, 2004).

production of regional, sub-regional and national environment outlook reports, in partnership with relevant authorities and institutions" (GC/UNEP, 2003b Decision 22/1 part B paragraph 1c). This green light to take the GEO process to the regional, sub-regional and national levels reflected GEO's success at the global level and led to dozens of reporting processes and products at these sub-global geographic levels.[2] However, it would also have consequences for the global GEO process by downplaying regional aspects within some of those reports.

As well, Decision 22/1 reiterated the need to cooperate "with Governments and relevant organizations to develop up-to-date and harmonized integrated databases and indicators that provide the basis for early warning, monitoring and assessment" (GC/UNEP, 2003b Decision 22/1, part B, paragraph 1f). Finally, it called for the promotion of "networking with relevant institutions to enhance the exchange and dissemination of environmental data and information, including through the use of information and communication technologies" (GC/UNEP, 2003b Decision 22/1, part B, paragraph 1g).

In February 2005, before work began on *GEO-4*, a significant new component arose in the global GEO process. A *Global Intergovernmental and Multi-stakeholder Consultation on GEO-4* was held in the two days before **GC-23,** with the outcomes noted in one of the preambular paragraphs of Decision 23/6 (GC/UNEP, 2005). The *Statement on the scope and process for GEO-4* that resulted from the consultation was very detailed and included no less than 34 key questions that *GEO-4* should answer (UNEP, 2005f)! So it was no longer up to the UNEP Secretariat and GEO partners to determine what the next GEO should examine. The governments and other stakeholders made their expectations crystal clear. The Statement also voiced participants' expectation of a follow-up global consultation in 2007 and made specific process recommendations, including ways to ensure and use the best scientific knowledge and expertise for *GEO-4*. These outcomes undoubtedly prompted many of the changes made to the GEO process from *GEO-4* to strengthen the rigour and scientific credibility of its reports.

The increased involvement of governments in the GEO process became more evident at **UNEP's GC-24** held in February 2007. In Decision 24/2 on the *World environmental situation*, Governments and experts were called

[2] Actually, quite a number of sub-global assessment processes had already been undertaken prior to 2003 (Annex IV). For example, the first *Africa Environment Outlook* was completed in 2002, and three GEO Small Island Developing States reports had been published in 1999. At national level, Latin American countries had forged ahead and completed reports for, amongst others, Barbados, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Chile, Mexico, Panama and Peru.

on "to contribute to the finalization of the fourth Global Environment Outlook report…by, among other things, reviewing the summary for decision makers in 2007, participating in the second global intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder consultation in September 2007 and supporting outreach activities relating to the fourth Global Environment Outlook report" (GC/UNEP, 2007 Decision 24/2, paragraph 6). Together, the directives for *GEO-4* resulting from GCs 23 and 24 brought about a sea change in the GEO. This more direct role of governments in GEO, from start to finish, underlined their desire and the need to increase the relevancy of both the process and the product.

Decision 24/2 also requested the ED to present the findings of the fourth GEO report to the GC at its tenth special session to "facilitate consideration of the findings and their potential implications, for example for the strategic direction of the programme of work of the United Nations Environment Programme and for the performance of the functions of the United Nations Environment Programme in the United Nations system and in the provision of services to Member States of the United Nations" (GC/UNEP, 2007 Decision 24/2, paragraph 7). This was not the first time, nor would it be the last, that governments urged the ED to take GEO findings into account in developing and implementing management actions and programmes.[3] In making this request, it is clear that governments expected the global GEO reports to also serve as signposts setting priorities and guiding the allocation of resources for UNEP's programme itself.

Having reiterated the need for cooperation on data and indicators and encouraged the use of communication technologies in several previous sessions, Decision 25/2 of **UNEP's GC-25/GMEF** of February 2009 requested the ED "to make scientific data, meta-data and standards from assessments available in an open-access electronic format so that future assessments can be based on past work and can be useful as a baseline for modeling and predictive analysis" (GC/UNEP, 2009c Decision 25/2, part II, paragraph 5). But the GC's vision went far beyond this by also requesting the ED "to elaborate further on the requirements for a migration to targeted assessments on thematic priority areas supported by a UNEP-Live enabling framework" (GC/UNEP, 2009c Decision 25/2, part III, paragraph 14).[4] Thus appeared the first hint of a GC-mandated online assessment and reporting system that could have great importance for the GEO process of the future.

[3] See, for example, Decision 19/3 of 1997 (GC/UNEP, 1997), relating to GEO-1 and Decision 20/1 of 1999 (GC/UNEP, 1999), relating to GEO-2000.

[4] This was further described as "A framework where decision makers have easy access to assessment findings, syntheses, summaries and technical briefs" (GC/UNEP, 2009c Decision 25/2, part III, paragraph 14).

Several other substantive requests appeared in the same decision. Despite having urged governments to provide additional funding for capacity building in earlier decisions (such as in GC/UNEP, 2003b Decision 22/1) and welcomed UNEP's efforts to build regional and national capacities, Decision 25/2 encouraged the ED to "include as a priority capacity building for developing countries as a component of the assessment processes" (GC/UNEP, 2009c Decision 25/2, part III, paragraph 10).

The ED was also requested to "undertake a coherent set of integrated and thematic…assessments, including a comprehensive integrated global assessment, the fifth report in the Global Environment Outlook series, GEO-5, which should also inform, as appropriate, the strategic directions of the United Nations Environment Programme" (GC/UNEP, 2009c Decision 25/2, part III, paragraph 11). This was a re-affirmation of the previous GC decision (GC/UNEP, 2007 Decision 24/2) that the results of the global GEO should feed directly into UNEP's Programme of Work and help set related priorities – but which the UNEP Secretariat still had not implemented.

A specific new focus for the fifth global GEO report emerged through the request for UNEP's ED to "strengthen the policy relevance of GEO-5 by including an analysis of appropriate policy options and their indicative costs and benefits to speed up realization of the internationally agreed goals and targets, and also to inform relevant global processes and meetings where progress towards these agreed goals and targets will be discussed " (GC/UNEP, 2009c Decision 25/2, part III, paragraph 12). While offering policy options had been part-and-parcel of previous global GEO reports, the Secretariat was now asked to analyse and cost those options and cite their potential benefits.

These paragraphs of Decision 25/2 maintained the greater involvement of governments in the GEO process while the requirement to conduct policy analysis on their behalf indicated their continuing high aspirations for the global process and report at five-year intervals. At the same time, the plan for going forward with UNEP-Live signalled that the GC understood that an underpinning and long-term system was essential to support the host of modular assessments and products they were requesting and a demand for greater transparency in this realm.

Emphasizing the value of integrated environmental assessments as "sources of information for national and international policy processes to strengthen the scientific basis of environmental management and decision-making," **UNEP's GC-26/GMEF** of February 2011 called on the ED in Decision 26/2 to "assist countries in capacity development, in line with the Bali Strategic

Plan as appropriate, through…notably the customization of global methodologies to other scales of implementation such as the national and city levels, to assist countries in building their capacity in the use of national and local data and to support countries in identifying key environmental policy issues that require scientific research" (GC/UNEP, 2011 Decision 26/2, paragraph 2b). This decision opened the door to adapting global methodologies for environmental assessment and reporting to the national and local level, reflecting multiple calls for national- and local-level GEO reports to be developed.

Part II, *Future Assessment of Environmental Change over the Period 2012-13*, included a request to finalize *GEO-5* and its summary for policymakers "in time to feed into the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012" (GC/UNEP, 2011 Decision 26/2, paragraph 3d).

However, it was in part IV of Decision 26/2 that the future UNEP-Live system was fully elaborated. Under paragraph 11, the ED was requested to:

a "…present the pilot proof-of-concept phase of a UNEP-Live platform… to the Governing Council at its twelfth special session, in 2012;

b …mobilize partnerships and institutional and technical networks in the non-governmental and private sectors to provide technical assistance for the development of the UNEP-Live platform;

c …work with countries and relevant regional and thematic networks to agree on a set of priority environmental data and indicators to be shared within UNEP-live;

d …present a detailed set of requirements and costing of resources needed for the development of a more elaborate version of the UNEP-Live platform to the Governing Council at its twenty-seventh session, in 2013" (GC/UNEP, 2011 Decision 26/2, paragraph 11).

Thus did UNEP's governing body re-affirm its confidence in the GEO framework, process and product at the global level and offer strong support for these being replicated at national and local levels. It also mandated the development of (or at least a plan for) an underpinning, long-term system for handling data and information relevant to producing a multiplicity of integrated global and thematic assessments. It is hard to imagine a more sweeping endorsement for what by now had become known as UNEP's 'flagship product'. But what the GC may not have realized was that the financial resources to keep expanding the GEO process and panoply of products – particularly the development of a UNEP-Live system – would present an undeniable challenge for an organization working under a

new 'matrix management' approach, and where internal competition for budgetary resources was becoming fiercer with each biennial programme cycle. Despite this clear and resounding mandate, few of UNEP's divisions were willing to help row the GEO boat with the same intensity as the Division of Early Warning and Assessment, which had the main responsibility for organizing and maintaining GEO from the 1990s.

UNEP's 27th GC/GMEF, held in February 2013, was the first GC meeting to take place under 'universal membership' and saw its formal retitling as the 'first universal session.' It was also the first meeting after the launch of GEO-5 in 2012.

Preambular paragraphs of Decision 27/11 on the *State of the environment and contribution of the United Nations Environment Programme to meeting substantive environmental challenges* recognized the benefits of and gaps in global environment assessment processes and welcomed the publication of *GEO-5* and its summary for policymakers, several spin-off publications and processes and the progress made on the prototype proof-of-concept for UNEP-Live (UNEP, 2013d). This was recognized as "an initiative to significantly enhance the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the future approach to keeping the world environment situation under review, including capacity-building and technology support for developing countries and countries with economies in transition to improve their data collection and assessment efforts and ensure that data collected and information generated are made available to policy makers and the public" (UNEP, 2013d Decision 27/11, preambular paragraph).

Under part I, *Assessments*, the decision made a number of process-related requests, including for the ED "to review best practices and develop a set of transparent procedures, particularly with regard to administrative processes, the selection of participants, the inclusion of diverging view points, as well as government and peer reviews to support a wide range of environmental assessments that United Nations Environment Programme conducts" (UNEP, 2013d Decision 27/11, part I, paragraph 1). It also requested that UNEP "continues to build on the capacities developed during the GEO-5 process and other thematic and integrated assessments at the national, regional and global levels" (UNEP, 2013d Decision 27/11, part I, paragraph 2).

Part II of Decision 27/11 welcomed "the enhanced policy relevance of the Global Environment Outlook as a result of its identifying policy options" (UNEP, 2013d, p. 2013 Decision 27/11, part II, paragraph 1) and invited governments to "use the findings of GEO-5…and its summary for policy makers

to facilitate informed policy decision-making at all levels" (UNEP, 2013d Decision 27/11, part II, paragraph 2). In addition, and again on a process-related note, it requested the ED, "in close collaboration with other United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, the private sector and civil society, to convene an intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder consultation as soon as practicable and before mid-2014 to determine the objectives, scope and process for the next Global Environment Outlook assessment, taking into account progress made with UNEP-Live..." (UNEP, 2013d Decision 27/11, part II, paragraph 4).

In part III of Decision 27/11, *Strengthening sustainable development*, the ED was further requested in "building on the Global Environment Outlook, to continue work at the national, regional and global levels to promote the science-policy interface through inclusive, scientifically sound, evidence-based and transparent thematic and integrated assessments, taking into consideration diverse knowledge systems, as well as access to reliable, relevant and timely data and information, and making such data and information available to UNEP-Live for access by policy makers and the public" (UNEP, 2013d Decision 27/11, part III, paragraph 1).

Finally, under part IV of Decision 27/11, *UNEP-Live*, the ED was asked to "implement the next phase of UNEP-Live during the 2014–2015 biennium as an open platform" and to "undertake and encourage capacity-building activities to ensure that developing countries and countries with economies in transition are able to work with UNEP-Live and contribute to scientifically sound evidence-based environmental assessment processes" (UNEP, 2013d Decision 27/11, Part IV, paragraphs 1 and 2). It also invited "Member States, major groups and stakeholders and United Nations agencies, funds and programmes to engage in the development of UNEP-Live and in particular the implementation of online state-of-environment reporting capabilities by increasingly sharing relevant data, information and indicators through open platforms" (UNEP, 2013d Decision 27/11, part IV, paragraph 3). In paragraph 4 "the donor community, other sources and Governments" were (again) invited to "provide funding to support the full and effective implementation of technology support and capacity-building programmes to support environmental monitoring and data and information management needs of developing countries and countries with economies in transition" (UNEP, 2013d Decision 27/11, part IV, paragraph 4).

Taken together, the 2013 decisions and directions for UNEP's assessment programme probably constitute the lengthiest and most detailed set of instructions ever handed down for the GEO process by one of UNEP's GC meetings. In line with previous directives, it mandated the continued

development of UNEP-Live and related capacity building, asking for governments' and other support, but as always without offering any real assurance that such support would actually materialize.

The first true **United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA)** was held 23-27 June 2014. **UNEA-1**, as it was styled, included Resolution (previously Decision) 1/4 on the *Science-policy interface*. Within Resolution 1/4, and on the topic of assessments, UNEP's ED was requested, "within the programme of work and budget, to undertake the preparation of the sixth Global Environment Outlook (GEO-6), supported by UNEP Live, with the scope, objectives and procedures of GEO-6 to be defined by a transparent global intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder consultation..., resulting in a scientifically credible, peer-reviewed GEO-6 and its accompanying summary for policymakers, to be endorsed by the United Nations Environment Assembly no later than 2018" (UNEP, 2014b Resolution 1/4, paragraph 8). Perhaps the most interesting aspect to note in this part of Resolution 1/4 was the explicit confirmation of the marriage between GEO(-6) and UNEP-Live.

The ED was further requested to "consult with all United Nations Environment Programme regions regarding their priorities to be taken up in the global assessment" and to "strengthen 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" (UNEP, 2014b Decision 1/4, paragraphs 9 and 11). Although this was similar to the request for *GEO-5*, it would obviously need to be refocused for *GEO-6* to include the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals agreed in 2015. And, perhaps in direct response to paragraph 9, work on the global *GEO-6* was preceded by a full set of regional *GEO-6* reports published in 2016.

Having been aware of, and agreed with, the ongoing development of UNEP-Live since 2011, UNEA now asked the ED "to prepare...a long-term plan for the development and use of UNEP Live, with particular reference to its contribution to future Global Environment Outlook reports, future assessment modalities, stakeholder engagement, institutional networking and partnership activities, content development, technology support and capacity-building, in particular for developing countries...and to present the plan to the United Nations Environment Assembly at its second session" (UNEP, 2014b decision 1/4, paragraph 13). Since most if not all of these expectations for UNEP-Live had already been articulated for earlier meetings and implementation was underway, this latest request was perhaps a bit redundant.

Finally, the ED was also requested yet again to "undertake, at the request of member States, capacity-building and technology support activities for developing countries and countries with economies in transition to improve their data collection management and assessment, including strengthening indigenous and local knowledge systems and practices" (UNEP, 2014b Decision 1/4, paragraph 14). Echoing previous GCs, governments and others were once again invited to "provide financial support…so that developing countries can engage effectively and take advantage of the benefits of platforms such as UNEP Live" (UNEP, 2014b Decision 1/4, paragraph 15).

When comparing Resolution 1/4 of 2014 with Decision 27/11 of 2013 (and even Decisions 26/2 of 2011 and 25/2 of 2009), one can sense a sort of GEO-related decision fatigue. The GC had already stated and re-stated several times what it wished to see stemming from the GEO process and products. With the go-ahead given for *GEO-6*, it may have been shifting its attention to the promised underpinning system UNEP-Live. In any case, the high tide had now passed, as would be confirmed at UNEA-2 when the shortest decision relating to the GEO process in two decades would be issued.

UNEA-2 was held in May 2016. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development took pride of place in this session, potentially providing further guidance and impetus for UNEP's flagship assessment process.

This is clear from Resolution 2/5, *Delivering on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*:

- part IV emphasized that UNEP "has an important role in the follow-up to and review of progress in implementing the environmental dimension of sustainable development…as a contribution to the Global Sustainable Development Report, and to the annual Sustainable Development Goals progress report" (UNEP, 2016g Decision 2/5, paragraph 15)
- part V "Requests the Executive Director to strengthen the science-policy interface regarding the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, by…Continuing to provide policy-relevant information, including the Global Environment Outlook assessments, to track progress regarding the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets, as well as information on trends in global sustainability, and to present them to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development to support informed decision-making with regard to strengthening implementation" (UNEP, 2016g Decision 2/5, paragraph 18)

- part VI, *Assessments and early warning*, requests the ED to "ensure that the Global Environment Outlook process, products and thematic assessments, which include assessments of the state of, the trends in and the outlook for the environment, and cover the internationally agreed environmental goals, take into account the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular the Sustainable Development Goals and targets" (UNEP, 2016g Decision 2/5, paragraph 19)
- finally, part VII "Requests the Executive Director to ensure that UNEP Live, which already covers the internationally agreed environmental goals, provides credible, up-to-date information to support the follow-up and review of progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, at all levels, by establishing a long-term plan for the maintenance of the programme and the relevance of its content and ensuring good traceability of the data and information made accessible through it" (UNEP, 2016g Decision 2/5, paragraph 21).

The resolution very clearly shows the high priority being accorded to the new sustainable development agenda among member-states and the Secretariat, but also the sense that, while GEO clearly has an associated role, it is just one of many means for tracking the ultimate goal of environmental sustainability, rather than an end in itself.

At **UNEA-3**, held in December 2017, the ED submitted a report on progress in preparing the sixth Global Environment Outlook, stating that delivery of *GEO-6* and its accompanying summary for policymakers was planned for the fourth session of the Environment Assembly (UNEP, 2017b). It recognized that this date change (from 2018 to 2019) would require an amendment to Resolution 1/4 of UNEA-1. Member states duly agreed on Decision 3/1, requesting the ED to issue *GEO-6* at least three months before UNEA-4, to schedule the negotiations on the summary for policymakers at least six weeks in advance of UNEA-4 and to present *GEO-6* and its accompanying summary for policymakers for consideration and possible endorsement by UNEA-4 (UNEP, 2017b).

Recalling some relevant organizational responsibilities, including UNEP's mandate from 1972 to keep the world environmental situation under review (UNGA, 1972) and its role in tracking progress on SDG indicators (UNEP, 2016g), **UNEA-4** of March 2019 welcomed with appreciation *GEO-6* and its summary for policymakers and (for the first time ever) also recorded its appreciation to all who had contributed to the compilation and publication of the report (UNEP, 2019j). In line with previous decisions on GEO, it requested continuing collaboration with multiple entities and the

prioritization of a long-term data strategy to support, inter alia, the future GEO process. Most notably, it requested the ED to "prioritize…the preparation of an options document on the future of the Global Environment Outlook process, in broad consultation with Member States, stakeholders and the custodians of other global environmental assessment processes" (UNEP, 2019j paragraph 6). The document preparation should be overseen and managed by a steering committee whose members would be nominated by Member States or members of the specialized agencies and approved by the Committee of Permanent Representatives. "The options document is to be submitted by the steering committee to the Environment Assembly for consideration at its fifth session, to inform a decision on the future form and function of the Global Environment Outlook" (UNEP, 2019l paragraph 6).

The Steering Committee was set up and started its work in 2019 (UNEP, 2019a), but subsequent progress was considerably delayed and eventually ran into the complications of the COVID-19 era. The International Institute for Sustainable Development had been commissioned in 2020 by the Steering Committee and UNEP to prepare a background paper to support the consultative process. The Steering Committee produced its own summary of the draft background document and both documents were put forward in a multi-stakeholder consultation that ran for a month towards the end of 2020. Both documents were then finalized based on the consultation results and made available to UNEA-5 in early February 2021 (IISD, 2021; UNEP, 2020d). The Steering Committee continued the process during 2021, prepared a draft feasibility study on financial, administrative and collaborative options for the future GEOs and presented it in another month-long multi-stakeholder consultation in late 2021. The document was finalized and made available to the second session of UNEA-5 in 2022 along with the multi-stakeholder consultation results (UNEP, 2022i, 2022h).

The process culminated in a draft resolution on the Future of the Global Environment Outlook being submitted on 26 February for consideration by the resumed session of UNEA-5. The resolution (UNEP/EA.5/Res.3) was adopted during the closing plenary of UNEA-5 on 2 March 2022. It decides that:

- "the core function of the Global Environment Outlook process should be to undertake, every four years, an intergovernmental, expert-led, global authoritative assessment with regional specificities that assesses and tracks trends, evaluates the effectiveness of the global policy response, evaluates future perspectives for all five environmental themes addressed in previous Global Environment Outlook assessments, and evaluates the drivers of environmental change and the

interactions across these environmental themes, while benefitting from but not duplicating existing assessments, and supplemented, as needed, by Global Environment Outlook thematic assessments at the request of the Environment Assembly, to fill knowledge gaps" (UNEP, 2022b paragraph 5)

- "the seventh edition of the Global Environment Outlook... [is] to be submitted for endorsement by the Environment Assembly...no sooner than 2025" (UNEP, 2022b paragraph 6)
- "the Global Environment Outlook process should identify intergovernmentally defined needs and terms for the provision of support for capacity-building, knowledge generation and policymaking and...should provide support services for addressing those needs, in partnership with relevant institutions as appropriate" (UNEP, 2022b paragraph 7)
- "the summaries for policymakers of Global Environment Outlook assessments should continue to be based on transparent and inclusive clearance and scoping procedures, through an intergovernmental review process" (UNEP, 2022b paragraph 8)

Thus, the resolution effectively maintains course as developed during *GEO-5* and *GEO-6* and mandates *GEO-7*.

Final Comments on the Trend of GC/UNEA Decisions Relevant to GEO

Historically, there has been an evolution in GEO-related decisions by UNEP's GC (and more recently, the UNEA) from simply ordaining this ongoing, regular integrated environment assessment reporting process to increasingly prescriptive and process-controlling guidance, in terms of content, governments' roles, diversifying products and an intended data support system (UNEP-Live). However, the resources that UNEP's governing body repeatedly suggested be made available have rarely been commensurate with the ever-expanding GEO mandate as given by successive GCs/UNEAs (Chapter 7.9). Thus some of the most far-reaching ambitions for the process remain to be attained. Given the shift in focus to other priorities such as the SDGs in the last few years, it is not certain that the loftiest proposals of the UNEA for the ongoing GEO process, and the wide range of related products of multiple types and at multiple levels, will be achieved in the years ahead (Chapter 11).