

Role of Regional GEOs

This document is submitted by Programme Board to Plenary for decision.

1 ISSUE FOR DECISION

GEO Plenary is asked to take note of the distinguishing and unique characteristics of what have been referred to as the Regional GEOSS Initiatives (RGIs) – namely, AfriGEOSS, AmeriGEOSS, AOGEOSS and EuroGEOSS – and approve the recommendation to recognize these as extensions of the activities of the Regional GEO Caucuses and thus refer to them as Regional Groups on Earth Observations (Regional GEOs).

2 BACKGROUND

Questions about the role of the RGIs were initially raised at the GEO Work Programme Symposium held in Pretoria in 2017. The importance of the RGIs has been increasingly recognized over the past few years in terms of raising GEO's visibility, networking with regional communities, and understanding regional and local needs. The RGIs have proven valuable in seeding and implementing tasks and projects that accord with GEO principles and the GEO Work Programme.

Meanwhile, it has also become evident that these efforts, while labelled as RGIs, do not align closely with the definition of a GEO Initiative (refer to Implementation Mechanisms in the *GEO Strategic Plan Reference Document*). Nor are they defined by efforts to develop regional systems infrastructures; to date, only AmeriGEOSS has taken steps to develop an infrastructure platform. GEO Programme Board and Executive Committee identified the need to properly characterize and categorize these activities in relation to other GEO Work Programme activities that have a specific domain focus. This need is particularly important in anticipation of the development of the 2020-2022 GEO Work Programme.

A dedicated subgroup of the Programme Board was established to understand the landscape of these geographically-focused activities. The subgroup reached out to the four RGIs, a Regional GEOSS session was held at the 2018 GEO Symposium, and the RGI leadership presented their perspectives on the topic at the 44th Executive Committee meeting, among other steps.

At the 44th Executive Committee meeting, the Programme Board subgroup on Regional GEOSS was asked to continue its work, focusing on interactions of the RGIs with the global GEO, including organizational connections and communications exchange, and to make recommendations regarding changes to the RGI terms and conditions required to recognize their distinct role. This document presents the results of this exercise.

3 QUESTIONS TO BE ADDRESSED

During the course of the discussions on RGIs at various levels, several questions emerged that needed to be resolved. These included:

- Is there a clear distinction between the role of the Caucus-based RGIs and the other geographically-based GEO Work Programme activities?
- Are the general criteria for accepting Initiatives into the GEO Work Programme, as well as the expectations regarding monitoring them, appropriate to RGIs?
- Should the Caucus-based RGIs be removed from the GEO Work Programme to become a “structural” component of GEO or should they remain in the GEO Work Programme, perhaps in a separate category?
- Given that many of the activities in which RGIs are involved are regional components of other GEO Work Programme activities, how can these overlaps and connections be made more transparent?
- Who should oversee the RGIs?

4 CONCEPT OF A REGIONAL GEO

Through the Programme Board Subgroup exchange with the RGIs, it became clear that the four Caucus-chartered RGIs are distinct from other GEO Initiatives for their role in performing the following functions:

- **Coordination.** This includes Symposia, daily communication, resource mobilization, and user engagement (all 4 Regional GEOs);
- **Scaling from global to regional:** Whereby global GEO activities are scaled to a regional level, for example, Sustainable Forest

Management of AfriGEOSS is part of GFOI; the Water task in AmeriGEOSS is part of GEOGLOWS; and AP-BON in AOGEOSS is part of GEOBON;

- **Initiation of new regional activities based on regional needs.** Examples include Environment Monitoring and Assessment in AOGEOSS, which is also a Community Activity in GWP, and the emerging Mekong River Basin pilot project in AOGEOSS, which is not yet included in the AOGEOSS implementation plan.

The strong coordination and fostering roles makes RGIs distinct from other Initiatives in the GEO Work Programme.

The discussion at the 44th Executive Committee meeting also highlighted a misunderstanding related to the term “Regional GEOSS”. Literally, GEOSS stands for Global Earth Observation System of Systems and thus “Regional GEOSS” is a “Regional Global Earth Observation System of Systems”, which is logically inconsistent.¹ Further, GEOSS by definition is “a set of coordinated, independent Earth observation, information and processing systems”², which is often understood to refer to the infrastructure pillar of GEO including, for example, the GEOSS Platform Foundational Task. While this may be an overly narrow interpretation of GEOSS, there has been a misperception by some that the RGIs intended to develop regional infrastructures that could challenge the unity of GEOSS as a single system of systems. Through the consultations undertaken by the Programme Board Subgroup, it became clearer that the RGIs include various parts of the Earth observation value chain, but largely focus on downstream products and services rather than on infrastructure development.

Therefore, a key recommendation is to replace the term “Regional GEOSS Initiative” with the term “Regional Group on Earth Observations”, which may be abbreviated to “Regional GEO”. This would better capture their role as implementing arms of Caucuses and would recognize their primary functions in coordination of GEO activities within a region, fostering and facilitation of stakeholder engagement, and resource mobilization. This change should be applied as the collective name for the four Caucus-chartered RGIs. Recognizing that each of the individual Regional GEOs has an established branding using the “GEOSS” element, there is no expectation that they would immediately revise their names.

¹ It has been suggested that “Regional GEOSS could be understood as “Regional component of GEOSS”, although this does not appear to be a universally understood.

² *GEO Strategic Plan 2016-20125 : Implementing GEOSS, p.5.*

5 PLACE OF REGIONAL GROUPS ON EARTH OBSERVATIONS

Having agreed that the Regional GEOs are distinct from other geographically-based GEO Work Programme activities and having clarified the name and role, the Programme Board Subgroup turned to the question of their position within the GEO structure and governance. Understanding that Regional GEO teams prefer to retain the flexibility of the Regional GEOs, as well as the necessity of maintaining clarity and consistency of GEO Work Programme activities, the Programme Board Subgroup proposed three options on Regional GEOs positioning in GEO:

- **Option 1:** Regional GEOs as part of the GEO governance structure;
- **Option 2:** Regional GEO as a new category in the GWP;
- **Option 3:** Regional GEO as a cluster of regional activities in the GWP.

In their deliberations, the Programme Board recalled that the RGIs had been originally categorized as Initiatives as a temporary arrangement when the interim 2016 GEO Work Programme was developed. Through the following years of implementation, it has become evident that these activities operate differently from thematic Flagships, Initiatives and Community Activities. The coordination and facilitation roles the Regional GEOs have played are unique and extremely valuable to GEO. More importantly, the close relationship the Regional GEOs have with their respective Caucuses creates a distinct oversight and reporting relationship that doesn't exist in the other GEO Work Programme activities. For these reasons, the Programme Board recommended that the unique role of Regional GEOs be recognized in the GEO Rules of Procedure, as well as formalizing their relationship with the Caucuses. In effect, the Regional GEOs would become the extensions of the Caucuses with a responsibility for a more intensive coordination of activities that promote GEO's objectives at regional levels. As such, Regional GEOs would ensure that any and all efforts that are carried out in the name of GEO conform to the fundamental principles of GEO on data sharing, data management, and GEOSS architecture. Oversight of the activities of each Regional GEO will be provided by GEO Principals participating in the relevant Caucus .

The move to make Regional GEOs structural elements of GEO has some implications for the GEO Work Programme. As was noted above, one of the key roles of Regional GEOs is to coordinate regional involvement across multiple GEO Work Programme activities, as well as to seed activities in accordance with specific regional needs. The activities of the Regional GEOs should therefore be visible in the GEO Work Programme. The ways in which this visibility will be realized will be further explored by consulting the Regional GEOs and the broader

GEO community during the process of developing the 2020-2022 GEO Work Programme.

6 RECOMMENDATION

The Programme Board recommends that Plenary replace the term “Regional GEOSS Initiative” with the term “Regional GEO” and approve the proposed changes to the GEO Rules of Procedure as per their definition, functions, participation, and oversight, as detailed in Annex 1.

ANNEX 1

PROPOSED ADDITIONS

TO THE GEO RULES OF PROCEDURE

8 Regional Groups on Earth Observations

8.1 Definition: A Regional Group on Earth Observations (Regional GEO) is a coordinated set of GEO activities working on a set of priorities agreed by the Caucus, and overseen by the Caucus.

8.2 Function: Regional Groups on Earth Observations (Regional GEOs) engage regional stakeholders in GEO activities and coordinate implementation of GEO activities within the region. Regional GEOs may also:

- Engage national agencies, regional intergovernmental organizations and other users and potential users of Earth observations, including those having responsibility for the implementation of global and regional policy priorities;
- Identify regional needs for Earth observation applications and conveying these to global GEO activities;
- Facilitate regional Earth observation activities collaboration with global activities in the GEO Work Programme;
- Promote communications among regional GEO Members and other participants, as well as with other Regional GEOs; and
- Identify funding opportunities to support regional GEO activities and projects.

8.3 Participation: Participation in Regional GEOs is open to all countries and multinational organizations interested in advancing the collection, management and use of Earth observations within the region, including countries and organizations that are not currently GEO Members, Observers, Participating Organizations or GEO Associates.

8.4 Oversight: Activities of each Regional GEO are overseen by the respective Caucus. Matters involving the scope of Regional GEO functions and other issues affecting more than one Regional GEO will be referred to Executive Committee for decision.