Keeping the World’s Environment under Review

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Published by Central European University Press

Witt, Ronald G., et al.

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Introduction to the book

The Global Environment Outlook (GEO) has been the flagship publication of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) since the mid-1990s. It is the most comprehensive, regular review of the state and trends of the global environment. GEO was introduced at a time when governments and other stakeholders lacked a common information basis to develop a broad and comprehensive view of environmental issues, following the 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development. Six global editions of GEO have been published over the past quarter-century. And while GEO is a global process, its underlying integrated environmental assessment approach has inspired countless assessment and reporting processes at regional, national and local levels around the world. Over and above providing analyses of environmental state and trends, related policy responses and a future-oriented outlook from which it derives its name, GEO systematizes and frames its analysis in the context of sustainable development.

This book is the result of an independent project of research into UNEP’s GEO, conducted by five long-term veterans of global integrated environmental assessments. The purpose of this research has been to document and critically analyse the history of GEO as the most comprehensive, ongoing global environmental assessment process ever undertaken by the international community. It is driven by a recognition that the need for understanding the global environmental and sustainability dilemma is more urgent than ever, and with the belief that recording this history will serve as an essential resource for future integrated environmental assessment practitioners.

This book covers the evolution of the GEO processes and products over approximately 30 years, from experimental pieces in the early 1990s through to the recent GEO-6. It documents for the first time:

- the origins of GEO as linked with UNEP’s mandate from its governing body to “keep the global environment under review”
- GEO’s widely adopted conceptual framework based on an integrated environmental assessment methodology
- the highly collaborative and participatory approach undertaken by GEO
- how GEO’s comprehensive contents evolved from one report to the next, in the application of the Drivers – Pressures – State – Impacts – Responses framework
the evolution of the unique and widely noted outlook component in GEO reports, which helped introduce scenarios of potential future development into policy and societal discourses around the world

the full and unexpectedly extensive range of GEO and GEO-inspired outputs at many geographic levels, from global to regional and even down to local reporting

its multiple support systems, including that of the UNEP Secretariat, data systems, capacity building and development at various levels, and evaluation and financing mechanisms

GEO's outreach to and interaction with stakeholders around the world

the multiple impacts of GEO, including strengthened integrated environmental assessment capacities, and how various stakeholder groups have perceived it around the world and in different regions

an exposé of four potential futures for GEO itself, depending on how global political will and UNEP's future status might evolve in coming years

The authors have jointly participated in over 25 years of GEO history. For this book, they relied on many sources, including their own memory and archives. These included, for example, GEO outputs, methodological guidance documents and internal and external evaluation reports. An inspiring and unique wealth of information was derived from interviews with 40 individuals involved in at least two editions of GEO. They spoke from various roles, including as users, regional champions, former heads of UNEP, project managers and lead authors, and government representatives.

Navigating the increasingly complex landscape of risks associated with global change requires not only assessment approaches that focus on specific themes such as climate, biodiversity or chemicals. There is also a need for assessments covering the full spectrum of key themes, an integrated picture of their compounding consequences and the necessary responses. Put another way, the recognition of how different environmental changes affect each other, driven by human activities and well-intended but segmented policies, is an essential feature of GEO. It is one global tool for helping to penetrate silos in governance and to assist in tracking and reporting cross-influences.

This need for comprehensive assessments was one important motive for writing this book. It is also a primary consideration for the book's timing, as UNEP and governments have been rethinking the future of GEO (UNEP, 2019j, 2022b). GEO's history can provide relevant, previously undocumented insights and save valuable time for those who will commission, design and conduct, as well as critique and improve, such environment-development assessments in the decades to come. For all of these reasons, the authors anticipate that the next wave of assessment practitioners will be the main audience for this book.