

2016 GEO Programme Board - Lessons Learned

This Document is submitted to the Executive Committee for information.

DRAFT TEXT FOR INCLUSION IN THE DRAFT REPORT OF THE 38TH EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING

The Executive Committee took note of the lessons learnt from the 2016 Programme Board, and expressed their appreciation for the Board's work.

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The 2016 GEO Programme Board (PB) represented the first instance of the new element of the GEO governance structure, proposed by the Implementation Plan Working Group (IPWG) as part of the *GEO Strategic Plan 2016-2025: Implementing GEOSS*. Although the main duties and many elements of the Board's functioning were laid out in its Terms of Reference (as part of the GEO Rules of Procedure [RoP]), the Board was in largely uncharted waters for how it was to conduct its business: among other tasks, co-chairs needed to be selected and a timetable set across 3 meetings; a process for setting Foundational Task priorities had to be established; an open, transparent and iterative review process of the candidate Initiative and Flagship implementation plan proposals had to be put into place; and various ad-hoc requests from the Executive Committee needed to be dealt with in an expedient manner.

By most accounts, the PB has been successful in organizing and executing its mission according to the GEO Strategic Plan to “oversee the establishment of the multiyear GEO Work Programmes as it ensures alignment of the scope and substance of activities proposed with GEO priorities and committed resources.” However, there is always room for improvement. The Board wishes to offer the following synopsis of reflections on “lessons learned” during its first year of existence, as food for thought to both the Executive Committee and the new 2017-2019 PB. The comments are organized along a “SWOT” outline, with Strengths and Weaknesses referencing matters internal to the Board, and Opportunities and Threats referencing external factors. This structure allows for the next PB to take ownership of the Strengths (maintain) and Weaknesses (address, if needed). At the same time, responses to Opportunities and Threats can be recognized and addressed through a combination of actions by the PB, the Executive Committee, the Secretariat, and Plenary.

1 IN GENERAL:

- The lifespan of the 2016 PB was only for one year and its tasks included setting up processes for future Boards. As a result, some lessons will be unique to the start-up year and not apply again, or to the same degree;
- The PB should continue with current working arrangements, harvesting the good will and constructive engagement of all participants in the PB, while resisting temptations to become too formal. At the same time, though an ad hoc approach may be at times expedient, there is also value in consistency and some formal agreement on procedures and standards may prove useful.

2 STRENGTHS:

- The single board entity has proven to be relevant, effective and useful;
- The mix of Board members drawn from Participating Organizations (POs) and Members is working well;

- Having three co-chairs with at least one from a Member country and one from a PO is a strength;
- Having PO-nominated Board members sit as observers in the Executive Committee has also been beneficial;
- The template used as part of the Work Programme review process worked well, including the designation of a lead reviewer; some minor adjustments might address some elements identified below;
- A good level of collaboration between the Secretariat and review panels is needed and important – this is a strength, but needs to be carefully planned, strengthened and monitored;
- The process of reviewing Initiative and Flagship proposals initially via the review panels, then discussing the proposals as a group and finally obtaining explicit consensus in the full PB meeting worked well, and uncovered the need for additional information in some cases;
- The contents of the Initiative and Flagship proposals were effective for clarifying the background, vision, strategy, structure and methodology by the proposing groups. (See notes under ‘Opportunities’ too.);
- The design of the review process to encourage proposers to engage in creating a more coherent and improved Work Programme (comparative rather than competitive process) helped review the proposals in a balanced way as well as engage proposers in dialogue and improvements;
- Review panels need at least three members, from different domains, to have multiple views and balance;
- The GEO Website and the section on the PB http://www.earthobservations.org/geo_pb.php have been developed well and provide a good overview as well as transparency in relation to PB work;
- The current PB spent considerable time setting up the majority of its processes, which the next PB will inherit. This is a strength; however if the processes are perceived to need revision this will be a weakness taking up large amounts of PB time and creating confusion in the community.

3 WEAKNESSES:

- Effective chairing of PB requires substantial preparation by both chairs and the Secretariat for difficult topics;
- For a variety of reasons, documents were sometimes not provided according to the Rules of Procedure (four weeks before the meetings), thus making it problematic for PB representatives to adequately prepare internal consultations;
- Several discussions and decisions were made on short notice, “spontaneously”, without proper preparation;
- In the start-up phase, a key element of work was the “categorization” according to the new categories of the Strategic Plan and this was a time-consuming process;
- In the start-up phase of the GEO Strategic Plan, some definitions and applications of the categories of the Implementation Mechanisms are still unclear;

- Despite the 2016 Transitional Work Programme and merger of three previous Implementation Boards into one single PB, there has been some turnover in participation in GEO and lost expertise as a consequence;
- The review process was based on papers and implementation plans (we could not do more in one year), but the real implementation and the dialogue with the whole PB needs to be intensified;
- There were instances where Board review panels were not responsive internally, which needed Secretariat interventions to overcome;
- At the final stage of the review process, i.e., reporting by review panel(s) to the PB meeting, every report and its decision by the Board should be clearly identified, including what to communicate to the proposing groups;
- Document exchange during review process by email or ftp is cumbersome, but not many other solutions exist to address everyone's minimum needs;
- PB members, including the co-chairs, realize that a large amount of sustained intercessional work is required for the PB to accomplish its activities effectively and efficiently. Everyone on the PB has a very busy "day job." There is a gap between aspirations for PB and individual member's time allocations;
- The requirement for in-person meetings in Geneva may restrict participation from inadequately resourced groups, including some Member States;
- The PB did not establish any standing groups; however, the idea of standing groups might be considered in the future (for example, a standing monitoring sub-group) to avoid time lost creating processes for future PBs;
- The 2016 PB did not advance "Monitoring and progress" reporting much;
- The PB took a while to develop a "group feeling and shared responsibility" and mutual understanding among colleagues; this should be preserved as much as possible for the transition to the 2017-2019 Board;
- A tiered approach to reviewing new vs. ongoing vs. mature proposals may be useful, especially regarding resources and deliverables;
- The distribution of proposals without any common reviewer may lead to significant unevenness of the reviews.

4 OPPORTUNITIES:

- Making sure basic dependencies are in place. An example of this is the need for the PB, the Executive Committee and Secretariat to work collaboratively to advance GEO and GEOSS, a collaboration that was not fully achieved during the first year. A pro-active approach is needed to accelerate this collaboration since the PB is a new body, and direct communication between all entities (as opposed to linear) is needed. The full PB would have likely benefited from at least one face-to-face meeting with the full Executive Committee;
- Monitoring and progress reporting. In the review of new proposals for Flagships or Initiatives, identify early on if there are any issues that might be sensitive to the organisation/country with PB representation, in order to consult early and avoid unnecessary delays in later stages of review process;
- How to account more specifically for policy relevance and use in decision making processes;

- The representative aspect of PB is not yet as strong as foreseen, but is strengthening (i.e. there is a varying degree to which participants on the PB represent their constituency versus bringing expert knowledge). For members taking this forwards, longer consultation periods (in compliance with RoP) are needed for members to prepare themselves. This is a positive sign; however this conflicts with the informal group working and consensus building approach to discussions that is still a strong, important and relevant feature of GEO and the PB. Some elements might be given a more formal nature for consultation, for example the Work Programme and Progress reports, whereas other discussions and decisions might be taken on shorter notice;
- PB has worked to create a more stable set of structures to support and sustain assigned GEO functions. It is better to boost existing structures (give ad-hoc tasks if necessary) and reconfirm relevance rather than create new ones, (especially to undertake functions already assigned);
- Encourage more participation via web conference, keeping in mind that for those with English as a second or third language, web conferencing increases potential for miscommunication. (See comment in ‘Weaknesses’ on participation in meetings in Geneva.);
- Meetings outside Geneva might also result in extra benefits, such as enabling wider participation, reducing hotel costs, getting feedback from Organisations, strengthening the importance for GEOSS at the host locations and providing overviews of Earth observation activities (as discussed in the PB September meeting);
- In the proposals, show-cases or prototypes should be highlighted more. In particular, accessibility by the users (in a broad sense) should be one of the points to engage users and to deliver the Earth observation data, knowledge and information they require;
- Expansion of SBA’s could also be used to understand and explore possibilities in relation to SDG related information needs;
- There is still the need to address the degree of oversight of Flagships by the PB, as they are more independent;
- More work needs to be done to strengthen some of the proposals in the areas of user engagement, capacity building, deliverables and policy relevance;
- Greater engagement and attention to the Community Activities could help some develop into Initiatives;

(Note: the following point has not reached consensus within the PB.)

- Given GEO communities were very familiar with the nine Societal Benefit Areas (SBAs) during the first decade of GEO, the PB should encourage use of the new eight SBAs as outlined in the GEO Strategic Plan in communications with the Flagships/Initiatives/Community Activities of the GEO 2017-2019 Work Programme. Promotion of the new eight SBAs could possibly be a theme of the 2017 Work Programme Symposium.

5 THREATS

- Multiple processes are overlaid for the PB. It is difficult to navigate timelines and dependencies, especially in its start-up phase. In 2017 the Monitoring & Reporting process will become significant in this context;
- Overload of ad hoc requests from the Executive Committee, with short response deadlines.

- As GEO becomes more relevant, so will strength of opinions (i.e. conflicting positions will increase);
- Across all meetings, the GEO community must have an early understanding of the purpose, see a clear benefit in the meetings and participation;
- The PB should not become perceived as the one and only body to solve all GEO Work Programme necessities and improvements; a balanced approach is needed;
- The so-called “top-down-approach” can be realized in hierarchical arrangements (e.g. in a governmental department). However, this approach can only be applied with great difficulty in GEO. GEO is a voluntary international cooperation based on trust and cooperation of both organizations and individuals. Therefore acknowledgement of individual contributions needs to be given;
- Lack of active representation from some regions in PB work creates unintentional bias in some PB decisions;
- As GEO encourages WP components to become more policy relevant there may be a potential for proponents of the WP proposals to inadvertently overstate or mischaracterize the efforts, role, or contributions to ongoing policy processes, such as in regards to Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs). In some cases this could invoke a strong reaction by Member States of the MEAs and undermine support for GEO. For example, implying an authoritative role for GEO in UNFCCC processes for Monitoring, Review and Verification (MRV), or in MEA Parties review of effectiveness, as opposed to indicating a GEO effort may inform the Parties review, might seem trivial but could have major consequences for GEO;
- Policy relevance may also require active recruitment and engagement, or require repeated invitation to representatives of the policy processes. In order for GEO to effectively review the policy relevance sections of proposals to be certain they do not undermine GEO by overstating their authority and role, governance and user engagement will be critical, and must be open to participants of representatives of the MEAs and governments involved in the Conventions. At a minimum, PB representatives of the governments should reach out to focal points within their governments responsible for the ongoing policy processes. The PB may also explore ways to have the Secretariats of the processes review the initiatives.