

1. What is the Global Environment Outlook?

The Global Environment Outlook (GEO) is the result of a consultative and participatory process to prepare an independent assessment of the state of the environment, the effectiveness of the policy response in addressing environmental challenges and the possible pathways to achieving various internationally agreed environmental goals. The GEO is a series of studies that inform environmental decision-making for Governments and other stakeholders. {1.1}

The sixth Global Environment Outlook (GEO-6), under the theme "Healthy Planet, Healthy People", aims to provide a sound, evidence-based source of environmental information to help policymakers and all of society to achieve the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and internationally agreed environmental goals, and to implement the multilateral environmental agreements. It does so by assessing recent scientific information and data, analysing current and past environmental policies and identifying future options to achieve sustainable development by 2050. {1.1}

Since the first edition of the Global Environment Outlook (GEO) in 1997, there have been many examples of environmental improvement, especially where problems have been well-identified, manageable, and where regulatory and technological solutions have been readily available. Much more can be achieved in that regard through more effective implementation of existing policies. {Chapters 12 to 17}

Nevertheless, the overall condition of the global environment has continued to deteriorate since the first edition of GEO, despite environmental policy efforts across all countries and regions. Environmental policy efforts are being hindered by a variety of factors, in particular unsustainable production and consumption-patterns in most countries and climate change. GEO-6 concludes that unsustainable human activities globally have degraded the Earth's ecosystems, endangering the ecological foundations of society. {Chapters 4 to 9}

Urgent action at an unprecedented scale is necessary to arrest and reverse this situation, thereby protecting human and environmental health and maintaining the current and future integrity of global ecosystems. Key actions include reducing land degradation, biodiversity loss, and air, land and water pollution; improving water management and resource management; climate change mitigation and adaptation; resource efficiency; addressing decarbonization, decoupling and detoxification; and the prevention and management of risk and disasters. Those all require more ambitious and effective policies, including sustainable consumption and production, greater resource efficiency and improved resource management, integrated ecosystem management, and integrated waste management and prevention.¹ {Chapter 22}

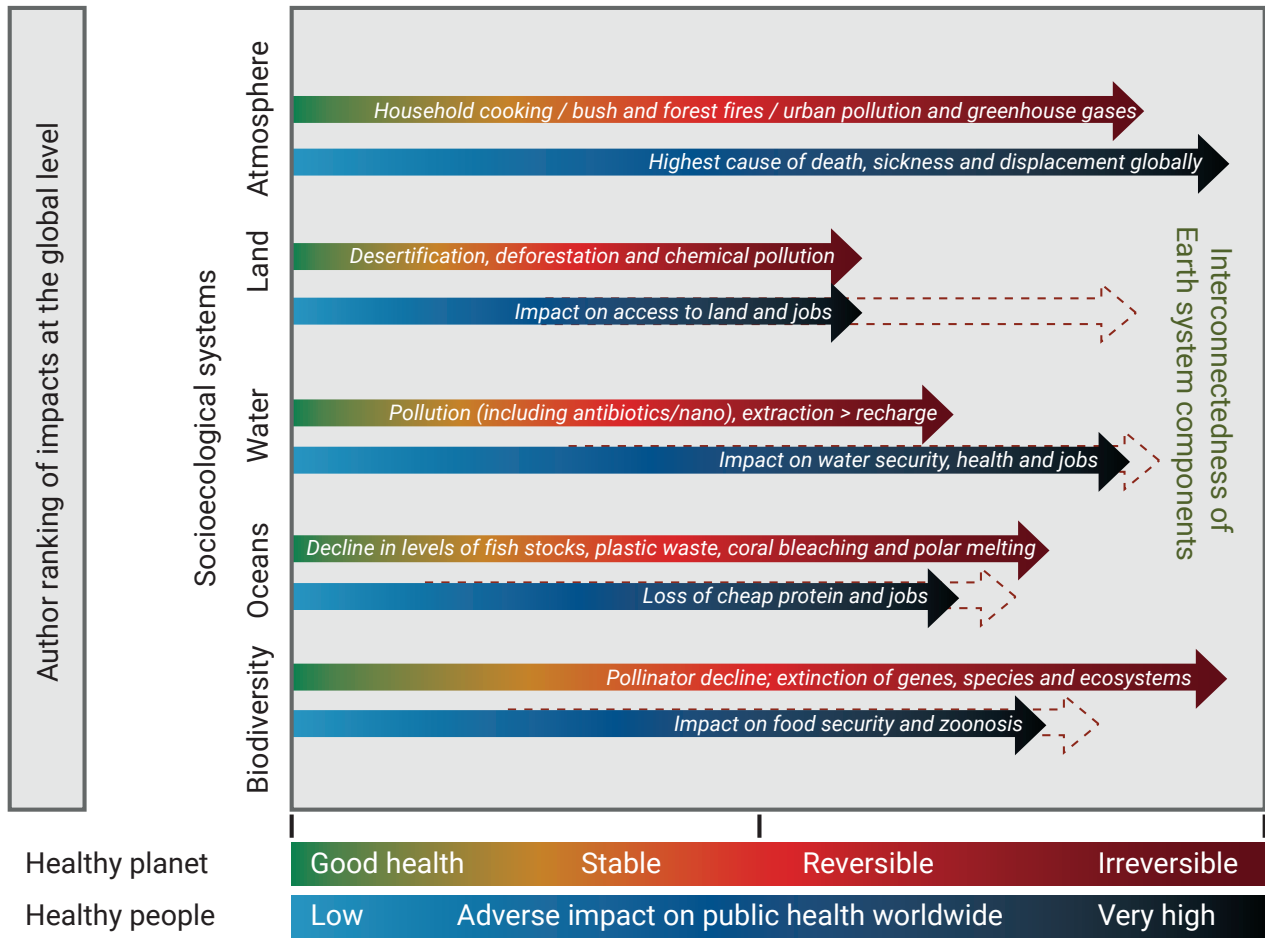
Mainstreaming environmental considerations into social and economic decisions at all levels is of vital importance. In line with the Sustainable Development Goals, GEO-6 shows that environmental issues are best addressed in conjunction with related economic and social issues, taking into account synergies and trade-offs between different goals and targets, including consideration of equity and gender dimensions. Governance can be improved at the local, national, regional and global levels, including broad coordination between policy areas. More ambitious and effectively implemented environmental policies are necessary, but alone they are not sufficient to meet sustainable development objectives. At the same time as ensuring sustainable sources of financing for sustainable development and aligning financing flows with environmental priorities, capacities have to be strengthened and scientific information taken into account for environmental management. Strong commitment from all stakeholders, partnerships and international cooperation would greatly facilitate the realization of environmental goals. {Chapters 22, 23, 24}

GEO-6 shows that a healthy environment is the best foundation for economic prosperity, human health and well-being. As figure SPM.1 illustrates, human behaviour has had various impacts on biodiversity, atmosphere, oceans, water and land. That environmental degradation, which ranges from serious to irreversible, has had a negative impact on human health. Atmospheric pollution has had the most severe negative impact, followed by degradation of water, biodiversity, ocean and land environment. It is therefore important that opportunities for prosperity and well-being that maintain or regain the integrity of ecosystems should be attained through sustainable development pathways that are shared and pursued globally. {24.4}

The following sections highlight the main global drivers of environmental change, the condition of the environment, the scale and effectiveness of policy responses, the potential pathways for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in an increasingly complex world, and the data and information needs and opportunities that can support decision-making towards achieving those Goals.

¹ This summary for policymakers uses confidence statements to better inform policymakers of the extent of evidence on a particular subject and the level of agreement across that evidence. Qualitative confidence statements used include the following: "well established" (much evidence and high agreement), "unresolved" (much evidence but low agreement), "established but incomplete" (limited evidence but good agreement) and "inconclusive" (limited or no evidence and little agreement). In addition, the higher confidence statements are sometimes further refined as follows: "very well established" (very comprehensive evidence base and very low disagreement) or "virtually certain" (very robust evidence base covering multiple temporal and spatial scales and almost no disagreement). Some statements providing quantitative confidence statements are also provided. Those include the following: "likely" (greater than 66 per cent probability) and "very likely" (greater than 90 per cent probability).

Figure SPM.1. Relationship between planetary health and human health



NOTE: Dotted arrows show how things may be experienced differently in various parts of the world

Source: Gupta et al. (2019).

Note: The figure shows the degree of impact of human activity on the health of the planet (ranging from good health to irreversible damage) and the impact of the health of the planet on human health (ranging from low damage to high damage). Some environmental and health impact may be remediable in the short or long term, but "irreversible" environmental impact can only be remedied over the very long term, if at all.

