

SRMGI – work plan and priorities for the next 2-3 years

SRM and the need for international discussion

Solar geoengineering (solar radiation management or SRM), is a set of proposals for slowing global warming by reflecting a small amount of inbound solar energy back into space. The basic characteristics of SRM make it very controversial. It would probably be cheap to deploy and could cut the rate of global warming (or even reduce the Earth's temperature) within a few months, and might therefore be the only way to cool the planet in the short to medium term. However, its effects could not be restricted to one country, and the benefits and drawbacks of SRM methods are unlikely to be evenly distributed across regions. There are also many uncertainties concerning the physical and socio-political risks and the feasibility of SRM. In short, SRM could be helpful or harmful for managing climate risks, but not enough is known to understand its full implications.

Despite its potentially profound global implications, research and international discussion of solar geoengineering are still very much in their infancy. What discussion and research there has taken place has overwhelmingly been in Europe, North America, and Japan. This is not a surprise, as a 'laissez faire' approach to the development of SRM will very probably mean that developed countries with the largest university budgets and research infrastructures will continue to move ahead in terms of R&D, with subsequent increases in knowledge and awareness among policymakers, NGOs, media and publics.

This concentration of knowledge in the developed countries is not desirable. SRM is inherently a global issue, and it is the people in developing countries who will be affected most by environmental change, whether it is natural, or caused by climate change or by geoengineering. It is therefore crucial that people in developing countries are involved in SRM discussions as much as possible from early on, particularly in considering how emerging research into SRM can be cooperatively and responsibly governed. At the moment there is a window of opportunity for bringing in developing countries, before the developed world gets too far ahead with R&D. This should help to build a global network of stakeholders, leading to more diverse and representative discussions about SRM research and how it should be undertaken. This in turn will help to ensure that hitherto marginalised voices are heard, which could reduce mistrust and facilitate future cooperation on SRM governance.

SRMGI background

The SRM Governance Initiative (SRMGI) has led the world in bringing people from developing countries into discussions of SRM. It is a cooperative NGO-driven initiative, launched in 2010 and co-convened by Environmental Defense Fund, the Royal Society and TWAS, The World Academy of Sciences. SRMGI has already provided a unique platform for dialogue, even while operating on a very limited budget, it has run regional outreach meetings on SRM research and its governance in Singapore, India, China, Pakistan, Senegal, South Africa, and Ethiopia, engaging people from more than 40 countries and a range of backgrounds.

SRMGI has an unparalleled network of geoengineering contacts around the world, spanning academia, government, civil society, intergovernmental organizations and treaty bodies, and scientific academies. Its staff are some of the best-connected people in the field of solar geoengineering, and it also has proven expertise in making geoengineering outreach meetings accessible and effective for those who are new to the topic. All meetings are driven by the same ethos - SRMGI does not tell people what to think about geoengineering, but rather seeks to elicit their opinions, maximising participant interaction and discussion, and to open up conversations rather than closing them down by trying to reach any premature group consensus. Science is front

and centre at all meetings, as a good understanding of the technological issues and scientific evidence, and where the main uncertainties lie, is crucial to understanding the governance challenge for SRM research. The meetings also encourage participants to develop different perspectives on the socio-political implications of SRM. Workshops move as quickly as possible from a preliminary presenter-audience format (to establish a baseline of shared understanding) on to group discussions and exercises, which emphasise participant dialogue and the sharing of opinions.

SRMGI 2015-2017

SRMGI now seeks to expand its pioneering work in bringing voices from developing countries into discussions of SRM research governance, and exploring ways for stakeholders to remain engaged with solar geoengineering beyond the single outreach meetings. There are three components to our planned work: opening up SRM dialogue in new regions, maintaining the involvement of engaged individuals and institutions who have participated in SRMGI meetings, and raising the international profile of SRMGI to bolster these two core activities.

Opening up

Opening up new regions and countries and new sectors of society to discussions of SRM research governance is the core task of SRMGI. With additional funding we plan to conduct outreach meetings in areas currently underrepresented in international SRM conversations. Particular targets include the Small Island Developing States (particularly the Caribbean and the Pacific Islands), South Asia, South East Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa. By scheduling SRMGI outreach meetings of 0.5-2 days to align with existing climate science and development meetings, we are able to minimise direct costs to SRMGI while also reaching a key target audience. This model has worked successfully for our meetings in China, Ethiopia and South Africa.

SRMGI meetings can be put on by a single SRMGI representative (although having a few additional experts present is preferable), and we have a good network of experts to call on to attend meetings in different locations, making direct costs relatively low. The main expense for these meetings is staff time - researching, liaising, organising, marketing, writing and disseminating results. Therefore to maximise our effectiveness, half of any funds received will be spent on staff time. This is the single most effective way to increase the reach and impact of SRMGI.

Harnessing momentum

Opening up new groups and new regions is one issue, and an important one, but maintaining the momentum and interest of those who attend the meetings and want to stay connected to SRM issues is equally important in the long term and can be harder. The question that participants most commonly ask after a meeting is 'how can I stay involved?'

The successes that SRMGI has achieved in this area (such as finding ways for SRMGI meeting alumni to attend other geoengineering meetings, and helping with the development of an African SRM network) have been achieved through the personal efforts of SRMGI staff, who have maintained contacts and friendships via email and kept an eye open for further opportunities. Until now, we have not had the capacity to do follow-up work at a programmatic level, and this is something we feel would be important to strengthen.

With higher levels of funding, SRMGI would be able to devote more resources to maintaining its contacts and building its networks. There are numerous possible ideas for achieving this, and we would like to continue brainstorming internally, and with our wider network, and hopefully also with GiveWell. At this time, the main areas that we would like to pursue or explore include:

- Hosting an ‘SRMGI forum’ meeting that would seek to interconnect alumni from previous outreach meetings to expand their networks outside their own regions and to continue discussions of SRM and its governance
- Providing scholarships for promising participants from our Outreach Meetings to attend other geoengineering meetings around the world. This could be achieved, for example, by entering into a partnership with the geoengineering summer schools where SRMGI would subsidise the attendance of promising young candidates
- Developing models for partner organisations to run their own geoengineering discussion meetings
- Hosting additional meetings in each region, to reconvene the same groups of people and develop proposals for continued regional engagement
- Working with the emerging African Geoengineering Research Network, which grew out of our meetings in Africa, to develop best practices that other regional groups could follow to maintain their local interest in SRM governance

Raising our profile

In the aftermath of our outreach meetings, it will be crucial to raise SRMGI’s profile and visibility with key audiences such as climate-related researchers, policymakers, and NGOs. This could take place through side-meetings held at UN negotiations, by publishing materials such as articles and reports, by engaging more directly in the dissemination of SRMGI materials, and via a revamped website. This would multiply the impact from our regional meetings, by linking diverse international feedback with key decision-makers in current and future discussions of SRM.

A note on risks and opportunities

Given the controversial and sensitive nature of solar geoengineering, and in the spirit of transparency that infuses the work of GiveWell, it is important to discuss frankly the range of possible risks involved with SRMGI’s operations. The main risks are likely to be:

- It is possible that we will not be able to secure the appropriate people to attend our regional meetings. Given the stage of SRM development in many of our key outreach areas (ie in its infancy), there is no clear methodology for establishing a list of constructive participants. Our experience to-date indicates that we have been successful in our efforts in this area, however there is always the possibility of future problems.
- It could prove difficult to maintain the momentum generated by outreach meetings. Finding ways to keep people involved in SRM conversations is a significant challenge. We have a number of promising ideas for maintaining participant networks and interactions, but we have to be clear about how difficult this can be.
- There are some extreme opinions on solar geoengineering, and there is a risk that individuals or organizations could successfully undermine SRMGI’s reputation. Certainly some will attack SRMGI for its efforts to create an open conversation, as they have done in the past. The organization will continue to rebut these criticisms as it has successfully done in the past, by continuing with its responsible, transparent work that brings no desired outcome to any conversation other than the need for diverse publics to engage in an informed and open conversation, informed by the best available science, regarding a critically important issue.

Conclusion

SRMGI has made a start on a large and difficult task, but its work cannot proceed without continued funding. It would not be appropriate or feasible for this to depend only on its initial sponsoring organisations, and there is therefore an excellent opportunity for other organisations to help it

pursue its objectives by providing financial support. It will be necessary for those concerned to promote transparency and the participation of developing countries and disadvantaged sectors of society to engage in such controversial issues, in order to ensure that the debate is not captured either by extremists or by establishment voices. We hope that GiveWell will find this opportunity to pursue its goals in an unusual way to be attractive, and look forward to discussing how it may engage with SRMGI to facilitate its further development.