

GEO and the private sector

GEO (the [Group on Earth Observations](#)) is a partnership of governments and organisations envisioning a future whereby decisions for humankind will be informed by timely, reliable, openly shared science-based environmental information underpinned by systematic Earth observations. As an informal public, international body, GEO seeks to help its members (113 national governments) to understand how EO products and services can help them in their work.

EARSC is a participating member of GEO and works closely with the secretariat on various topics, but especially those connected with private sector engagement. The links with the private sector are important and the GEO Secretariat wishes to develop tools in the future to enable the private sector to engage more with GEO and national members. This is a win-win situation where industry can help governments to meet their objectives and develop their own business in doing so.

How can industry work with GEO?

The idea was first expressed during the GEO Plenary Session in Brazil in 2012. Seven years later, the GEO Associate Membership category has been created. With this action, the GEO policy framework structured the involvement of the private sector by *“institutionalising the idea that the private sector was needed to be a partner of the GEO community”*. GEO has built a culture that is welcoming a public-private partnership and has created an environment in which the industry has importance. One important initiative has been the launch of “the industry track” which first appeared during the 2019 GEO plenary week in Australia. This gave the delegates the first real opportunity to meet with industrial representatives in an organised and structured way. EARSC was very pleased to be able to support the Australian organisation Frontiers SI to encourage European participation and to jointly organise events to facilitate meetings between European and Australian companies.

In the recent eocafe, Ms Yana Gevorgyan, appointed as GEO Secretariat Director on 1st July 2021, confirmed that the *Industry Track*^[1] is here to stay and will feature in this years' GEO plenary. Ms Gevorgyan also shared with us her vision for the future of GEO and the links with the private sector.

Beyond the Industry track, new types of partnerships were created in 2019 with some of the larger technology providers. The *GEO Cloud Credits Programmes*^[2] provided extended access to compute technologies for developing countries; it created a new community of technical users satisfied to get access to big earth data in order to develop nationally and locally relevant applications.

Ms Gevorgyan very much hopes that a “business to government” approach will be developed in the future: through engaging with GEO as a forum of governments, there is a possibility to create tailored services with public needs and have the public sector as anchor customer. Even though there is an apprehension with the risk involved in making new investments, GEO is willing to work on finding solutions that derisk those investments. GEO plays the role of an enabler, a communicator, helping countries on how to develop capabilities using EO data. It is easier in Europe and in some other countries because the industry is already developed and is supported by policy makers and robust funding programmes. It presents more challenges in countries where there is not that infrastructure. In this case, GEO can *“rely on their members to be the conduit and bring the industry representatives into the conversation”*.

Ms Gevorgyan also talked about the tools to help small companies and launched the idea of “accelerators” that would bring government needs, local industry representative with GEO providing access to public data. They would also provide mentoring, coaching and training to bring all the ecosystem of stakeholders (scientific actors, governments, and companies) around the table and have a discussion.

The issue of seeking funding is essential in that regard: learning how to access to represent a major challenge, especially in countries where the use of EO is not easy. These accelerators are envisioned at a regional or subregional scale with the objective to seek funding in order to enable small and medium companies to develop solutions that can be market-ready or with a potential. In parallel, GEO is working to create a robust and systematic conversation with the finance industry, in order to ensure that the financing becomes available to solutions and businesses that are underpinned by environmental information and make easier the availability of these prototype services to get access to finance.

In doing so, it is crucial to bring user needs: the most important is to have a conversation with governments to understand their problems and turn them into solutions using earth observation.

As a trade association representing the downstream services sector, EARSC can support GEO's activities in a number of different ways. By showing GEO as a platform for companies to get ideas, innovation, fitting the needs of various users, EARSC can encourage and participate to a better involvement of the private sector. To that end, participating in the Industry Tracks or other activities involving the industry, such as the *Climate policy and finance workshop*^[3] is another important step. Ms Gevorgyan would like to *“build out on the outcomes of these events and put in motion a systematic engagement”*.

Finally, through EARSC's work and experience, GEO can benefit from a better knowledge of the downstream services sector. It will surely contribute to bring the agility and the innovation of the industry to turn it as operational services for decision-makers and support GEO's work and missions.

[1] <https://africanews.space/events/geo-week-2020-virtual-industry-track/>

[2] “Satellite data and imagery require large amounts of storage and processing, so it is key that developing countries make use of cloud computing and take their algorithms to the data, not the other way around, to effectively and efficiently use this data to drive better decisions.” <https://www.data4sdgs.org/news/geo-aws-earth-observation-cloud-credits-programme-harnesses-big-data-decision-makers#:~:text=The%20new%20GEO%20DAWS%20Cloud,and%20outcomes%20for%20the%20SDGs.>

[3] The Workshop was held from 21 to 23 September 2021 with entities providing finance with the industry being part of it; two days were dedicated to EO in support of climate policy and EO as a basis for climate finance.