

Draft intervention Volker Liebig
GEO Ministerial
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It is a great pleasure to be here today as the representative of the European Space Agency.

I would like to congratulate the GEO Members for their approval of the Declaration, which gives a strong mandate for the future GEO. It highlights the transition of GEO to a more mature and consolidated role in providing geospatial observations and information services to the global society, and I can only applaud their vision for the continuation of GEO into its second decade.

Over the last ten years GEO has demonstrated, through a wide range of activities, its capacity to deliver important data and information addressing questions of great societal importance. I am very proud that ESA has been able to take an active role in a number of these initiatives and in the creation of the underlying infrastructure.

In keeping with the guidance given today by Ministers for a continuation of the voluntary nature of GEO, ESA will continue to contribute to the GEOSS work plan and activities particularly in the areas of forest inventory (GFOI), Agriculture (GEOGLAM), Disaster Management and Climate change, as well as supporting more recent initiatives of Blue Planet and AfriGEOSS. In addition, we must all collectively guarantee that the appropriate infrastructure and means is set up to grant technically the best access to users of such observations. ESA has engaged since the beginning to the development of GEO data access infrastructure and plans to continue to do so in the future.

While continuing to support the excellent work in the areas set out above I believe that now is an excellent moment to consider the strategic direction GEO might take in the future. Through the experience of GEO to date we have gained, as a community, substantial insights into the nature of the societal problems addressed, and particularly how best we might bring to bear geospatial information to address them. We have also learned how best GEO can fit into a wider landscape of agencies, services and initiatives with which it has worked in concert, very effectively, over the last decade. This may give us a clue as to where the focus of GEO might be in the future.

I believe that the most important of the many possible roles for GEO is to secure the basic data and observations which are needed to underpin information services for society. The first step in this is to understand, identify and to document clearly which precisely are those data and observations. It is important also to do this in a way which allows the delivery agencies easily to respond to the stated observational needs, whether these observations are made from space as in the case of ESA, from other remote platforms or from in situ infrastructure,.

The dialogue between those who specify and use the observations and those who deliver them is crucial. It will ensure that the role of GEO in securing these observations can be more easily fulfilled. GEO also has to ensure that the observations, once secured, are available and accessible. I mean this in two senses; firstly, to ensure that there are no policy obstacles which prevent free and open access to the observations, and secondly that the infrastructure is in place to allow their

physical access. These are both easily said, but those of you present who have been involved in these tasks to date will know that delivering them is less simple.

In its first decade GEO has supported a number of very important projects. We should recall that many of these initiatives owe their existence to GEO, and I have already mentioned some of those which ESA has supported. They have been very valuable not only in their own right, but also in demonstrating clearly the benefits to be achieved through better access to data and information. They have also served to help define what are indeed the requirements of the various societal benefit areas for geospatial data. In the decade to come GEO should focus on delivering GEOSS – the observational system of systems – to ensure that the downstream benefits can be secured. There has also been an important element of learning-by-doing in these projects, invaluable in the development of GEOSS.

GEO was set up with a clear political mandate to accompany its technical competences. It has achieved its ambitions but only partially and, at this stage it is important to re-establish the political momentum of GEO and to confirm the support of Ministers. I welcome that we have seen this support so clearly evident today. ESA values enormously the support to the earth observation sector by the GEO Members.

ESA will continue to give strong strategic support to GEO, and to the practical implementation of the GEOSS. In Europe we are about to embark on a new era of Earth observation from space. The launch later this year of the first two Sentinel missions, developed by ESA for the Copernicus programme of the European Union, signals the beginning of a long term commitment to the provision of an extraordinary range of critical observations of the Earth's land surface, oceans and atmosphere which is without parallel. A decade of development of the Programme is about to bear fruit, and will serve the community worldwide for decades to come. Following today's Declaration, GEO will be well-placed to take great advantage.

I would like to thank the Swiss Government for their excellent hosting and organisation of this meeting and wish all the success for the future of GEO.

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