

Report on the evaluation of Geography and
Development (GEODE), CEPS/INSTEAD

Based on a peer review by order of the Ministry of Higher Education and
Research of Luxembourg

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I INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Higher Education and Research (MESR) of Luxembourg mandated Interface Policy studies Research Consulting, Switzerland, to organise and lead the evaluation of four research units, one of them Geography and Development (GEODE) at the *Centre d'Etudes de Populations, de Pauvreté et de Politiques socio-économiques* (CEPS/INSTEAD). In this report GEODE will be referred to as the “evaluation unit”.

The observations and recommendations presented in this report are based on a peer review by the following three experts working in the evaluation unit’s research fields:

- Prof. Dr. Peter Baccini (Dr. sc. nat. and Dr. honoris causa), emeritus professor at ETH Zurich, Switzerland
- Dr. Michel Rey, former head of CEAT (*Communauté d'études pour l'aménagement du territoire* CEAT), EPFL, Switzerland
- Prof. Dr. James Scott, University of Eastern Finland, Finland

Additionally, Dr. Stefan Rieder and Mirjam Inauen of Interface contributed to the peer review by bringing in their expertise in the evaluation of strategies and organisational structures.

The peer review consisted of the reading of a self-assessment report written by GEODE and a hearing at the evaluation unit. The hearing was composed of a presentation, a group discussion of the self-assessment report and several individual interviews with the heads of CEPS and GEODE and with researchers working in different sections and at different levels of GEODE.

This report is structured in two parts: The first part discusses the expert team’s observations from the evaluation process. This part will follow the structure of the self-assessment report. The second part presents the expert team’s most important recommendations to further develop existing strengths and overcome observed weaknesses; it aims to increase the learning effect of this evaluation.

2.1 INPUT

Activities and objectives

CEPS as a whole is currently in a transition phase: In the past, the institution mainly worked as a policy advisor for Luxembourg public administrations; presently, it is developing more research-oriented activities. The expert team observed that this strategic reorientation of CEPS is supported through all hierarchical levels, thus by the MESR and by the managers and researchers at CEPS and GEODE. However, the need to continue policy support on the one hand and to develop a related but focused research agenda on the other represents one of the main challenges facing GEODE.

GEODE has been active in developing its research focus and is now trying to find the right balance between services and research activities. The ideal mix between services and research has not yet been achieved in each of GEODE's four units. However, it has to be kept in mind that there will always be a certain tension between service and research and that combining these two dimensions will be a continuing challenge.

The development towards more research activities is proceeding well in the two GEODE units 'Local and cross-border mobility' and 'Cross-border metropolitan integration'. Especially the latter is active in pushing forward research-oriented projects. The two other units, 'Housing and urbanisation' and 'Spatial development', are much smaller and more service oriented. As they have been set up only recently, it is too early yet to evaluate their contribution to the evaluation unit as a whole.

The common denominator of the four units' research topics can be seen in urban development. Thus, the units are currently working on issues such as European cohesion, social spatial development, governance and urbanisation. Moreover, they have been developing these topics with a focus on cross-border metropolisation, housing, the environment and the transportation system. In the experts' view, these are interesting and relevant topics, and GEODE has developed a clear research vision.

On a national scale, with its chosen research topic "urban development" GEODE has a monopoly position at present. The researchers are aware of this situation. Consequently, GEODE's researchers are oriented towards international platforms in order to assess their intellectual competitiveness.

GEODE's research favours geographical approaches and methodologies. This orientation, which can be explained by the unit's history, is still useful and appropriate. However, in the experts' view, GEODE's research focuses too much on consequences (e.g. with respect to housing) and not enough on the factors that explain the territorial development of Luxembourg. In view of the future trans-border metropolitan development and the specificities of Luxembourg economy, it would be preferable for the evaluation unit's geographical orientation to be complemented and completed by economic approaches and methodologies so as to better anticipate territorial development. Equally, competences and knowledge in territorial governance have to be amplified,

given the specificities of the institutional context in Luxembourg. This can be done by integrating researchers with a focus on territorial development and governance or by establishing partnerships with universities that are active in these domains.

Organisation

GEODE is well organised, with an appropriate division into four units. In view of the short time that two of the four units have been in existence, the considerable difference in the sizes of the units is comprehensible.

The experts think that there is room for improvement concerning the support by CEPS' management for the evaluation unit's financial and human resources management. The administrative workload of the unit's researchers could be reduced by developing centralised administrative services (for the recruitment and development of human resources as well as for budgeting and financial controlling) within CEPS.

Human resources

The experts were impressed by the motivation of the collaborators at GEODE. They observed a very positive working climate and a real team spirit. Also, the expert team gained the impression that researchers at all levels have the freedom to define new research questions. Combined with the researchers' initiative and creative attitude, this allows new research topics to be discussed and defined in a bottom-up process.

While transforming CEPS into a research institution, a master plan for career planning within an academic structure is needed. At present GEODE has the function of a "pilot unit" in CEPS; through the activities of its senior scientists, it can illustrate how links to university faculties are built up. CEPS can encourage its researchers to apply for positions such as associate professorships by introducing tailor-made incentives.

The ratio of PhD students and supervisors is good, and accordingly, PhD students are very well supported. Competitive salaries, easy access to supervisors, a positive working climate, frequent meetings and the involvement in a PhD programme all add up to privileged working conditions, of which the PhD students are also aware. In the experts' view, GEODE should guarantee that these conditions can be maintained when hiring new PhD students.

In the whole Centre there is currently no human resources manager. CEPS' management is now planning to hire a human resources manager, a plan that is fully supported by the expert team. The experts are of the opinion that this should professionalise human resources activities, such as recruitment and development of staff and conflict management, but also should contribute to reducing the administrative work load of the leaders of the research units.

Financial resources

The expert team had difficulties understanding the procedures and responsibilities with respect to the distribution and use of the block grant at the level of CEPS. However, it was explained during the hearing that rules for the distribution among the units are about to be fixed and made transparent. CEPS' management and the leaders of the units are also discussing giving the units more room for manoeuvre in using financial

resources and enabling the units to set their own priorities. The experts fully support this, as they are of the opinion that CEPS' financial management needs more clarity and transparency and that the unit leaders could be given more independence.

Currently, the evaluation unit's block grant, guaranteed by the MESR, represents around fifty per cent of the unit's overall budget.¹ In the experts' opinion, this current relation between block grant and other funds is appropriate and should be maintained.

In the period under evaluation, GEODE has not been successful in obtaining funds from European Framework Programmes. The expert team is of the opinion that ongoing efforts to obtain such funds must necessarily be continued. Participation in European Framework Programmes will contribute to enhancing GEODE's visibility within Europe.

Infrastructure

GEODE has a well-equipped infrastructure and sufficient space.

2.2 PROCESSES

External communication and cooperation

Every PhD student working at GEODE is supervised by a professor at a university. Thus, GEODE has developed an important network with foreign universities over the past years. In the experts' view, this network offers great potential and should be further exploited in order to increase GEODE's international visibility.

The University of Luxembourg also features an institute of geography. GEODE is involved in the geography institute's Master's programme; one of GEODE's unit leaders teaches a course there as an associate professor. The expert team acknowledges the unit's involvement at the University of Luxembourg and encourages GEODE to maintain and further develop this cooperation.

Internal communication and cooperation

The expert team gained the impression that communication and cooperation between the different units composing GEODE work very well.

Quality assurance

The quality assurance regarding GEODE's PhD programme is excellent. With respect to scientific output, the unit has established a quality assurance system including systematic review of papers, which the experts consider appropriate.

¹ The block grant represented 53 per cent in 2008, 47 per cent in 2009 and 46 per cent in 2010 of the unit's overall budget (source: self-assessment report). In the same period, the share of the block grant in the overall budget of CEPS was around 60 per cent.

2.3 OUTPUT

GEODE has a good number of publications in peer-reviewed journals, and the number continues to increase. This output is thus in good accordance with the goals defined in CEPS' performance contract with the MESR.

The expert team also gained the impression that GEODE's services are well known, as the evaluation unit's activities and results are reported in the local media. The experts are also convinced that GEODE's services are useful and widely accepted by local stakeholders. However, they cannot really assess the quality of the evaluation unit's service activities, as customer satisfaction surveys are missing.

2.4 LONG-TERM EFFECTS AND RELEVANCE

GEODE's main target groups are Luxembourg ministries and the international research community. The unit has been very active in valorising its results among these groups by publishing a satisfying number of books and articles. Also, the research questions that GEODE is studying have the potential to produce results with long-term impacts.

The coverage of GEODE'S activities in the local media seems to confirm the unit's relevance as a provider of data for policy makers in Luxembourg. Still, the experts are of the opinion that the evaluation unit could broaden its impact by collaborating with public sector agencies, NGOs or private companies on the topic of urban development. Especially partnerships with private companies should be established in order to valorise the unit's activities in the economic sector. For instance, valorisation activities with partners such as the chamber of commerce, real estate companies or professional associations, particularly within the banking sector, could be considered.

Given the fact that the unit has not been in existence for long, it is comprehensible that GEODE's visibility in the European research community is still low. Efforts to increase the relevance of the unit's activities and results for European actors should therefore continue. To disseminate the unit's research results, channels other than publications, such as conferences, group discussions, presentations, meetings or seminars, might be considered.

Based on the experts' experience, a new unit such as GEODE, working on a new paradigm of urbanity and developing new tools, has to develop and establish a set of seminars and workshops, which involves inviting potential customers and actively presenting to them the unit's concepts, research results and conclusions regarding practical consequences and applications. Lively dialogue between "research" and "practice" cannot be developed on the basis of scientific publications alone.

2.5 REFLECTIONS AND STRATEGY FOR THE FUTURE

GEODE's strategy paper presented at the hearing seemed reasonable to the experts. However, the experts found room for improvement in the following areas:

- Most importantly, the experts are of the opinion that GEODE's future strategy should be closely linked to the strategy of the overall Centre. However, the experts did not find a clear vision for the scientific development of CEPS and consequently had difficulties understanding how GEODE's key topics are related to CEPS' overall orientation. In their opinion, the vision paper presented during the hearing described CEPS' organisation and the management processes but did not provide an idea of the direction in which the Centre wants to go scientifically. For instance, the experts could not see how the research topics of its units are inter-linked and what the common research questions are. The reason for this might be that at the level of CEPS' management, resources for the development of such a scientific vision are insufficient.
- The experts see a great potential for GEODE to develop interdisciplinary research projects. In the experts' view, the scientific expertise that GEODE's researchers have gained over the past years should not compromise their openness to mixed scientific approaches that integrate sociological, economic, cultural and political aspects.
- As mentioned above, GEODE is required to constantly manage the balancing act between functioning as a service-providing institution and as a research organisation. It has to be recognised that the type of financial means available (relation between block grant and means coming from the private sector or public administrations) will also have an important influence on GEODE's future orientation towards more research or service activities. Thus, a strategy for GEODE needs to address how the unit plans to maintain the required flexibility.
- The two smaller units 'Housing and urbanisation' and 'Spatial development' were set up only recently and mainly as service units. However, the experts expect them to follow GEODE's and CEPS' strategy to develop more research-oriented activities. It should therefore be evaluated whether the resources invested for the set-up and maintenance of the observatories are in a reasonable relation to the practical and scientific benefits of the data that they provide. Furthermore, data collection should not only be based on demands by public administrations but also correspond to the unit's research projects. Accordingly, collected data should allow analysis of existing problems but also anticipate future developments. Finally, the leaders of the two units, together with the leading management of GEODE, should reflect on how their activities can be integrated in GEODE'S overall research agenda.

3.1 SUMMARY

GEODE is a part of CEPS, which in recent years has transitioned from a policy-advising institution to a more research-oriented organisation. GEODE has now chosen interesting and relevant research topics and developed a clear scientific vision. However, the ideal mix between services and research has not yet been achieved in each of GEODE's four units. Also, the experts did not find a clear vision for the scientific development of CEPS and consequently had difficulties understanding how GEODE's key topics are related to CEPS' overall orientation.

GEODE is well organised, with an appropriate division into four units. GEODE also has a well-equipped infrastructure and sufficient space. The motivation of the unit's collaborators, the working climate and team spirit as well as the supervision of PhD students are very positive. Also, communication and cooperation among the different units composing GEODE work very well. In contrast, however, the experts think that there is room for improvement concerning the support of the evaluation unit's financial and human resources management by CEPS' management. The expert team had great difficulties understanding the procedures and responsibilities with respect to the distribution and use of the block grant at the level of CEPS. Concerning the source of funds, GEODE has not been successful in obtaining funds from European Framework Programmes, and ongoing efforts to obtain such funds must necessarily be continued.

GEODE has developed an important network with foreign universities over the past years and is also involved at the University of Luxembourg. Further, GEODE's good number of publications in peer-reviewed journals is continuing to increase. The experts are also convinced that GEODE's services are useful and widely accepted by local stakeholders. However, the unit could still broaden its impact by collaborating with public sector agencies, NGOs or private companies. Finally, sociological, economic, cultural and political aspects could still be strengthened in GEODE's scientific approach.

3.2 RECOMMENDATIONS TO GEODE

Based on the observations stated above, the expert team formulates the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen social, economic, political and cultural aspects in GEODE's research agenda

The experts see a great potential for GEODE to develop interdisciplinary research projects. The scientific expertise that its researchers have acquired over the past years should not, in the experts' view, compromise their openness to mixed scientific approaches. The experts encourage GEODE's researchers to further integrate social, political, economic and cultural aspects into their quantitative approach towards urban development.

The expert team therefore recommends defining potential interdisciplinary research areas as well as networking and establishing collaborations with suitable external partners.

Recommendation 2: Use research results for European comparative research

GEODE's research projects need to be constantly evaluated with respect to the relevance of the results that they produce for the international research community and for the European Commission and European civil society organisations. In view of these target groups, the experts see a need to develop comparative research that provides results relevant for addressing vital social, economic and political issues of urbanisation and cohesion in Europe.

Recommendation 3: Consolidate the unit with the support of the leading management of CEPS

GEODE is a relatively young unit that has grown fast in the past years and was reorganised in 2008. Given the positive development of the evaluation unit, human resources and research plans must now be consolidated in order to assure the unit's continuity. The social integration of recently hired collaborators (team building) should therefore have priority before further expanding the team. Further, GEODE's strategy to develop more research-oriented activities should, of course, always guide the future recruitment and development of human resources.

For its consolidation, GEODE needs the support of CEPS' leading management in a threefold way:

- First, CEPS' management should support GEODE in the unit's human resources management to reduce the work load of its researchers and to install incentives for academic careers on the part of the best scientists.
- Second, the setting up of financial planning and rules for the distribution of the block grant on the level of CEPS will allow for more transparency and independence of its units.
- Third, GEODE's well established research agenda should be supported and legitimised by a clear vision and agenda for research at the level of the CEPS as a whole.

Recommendation 4: Foster collaboration with the University of Luxembourg

The expert team acknowledges the unit's involvement at the University of Luxembourg and encourages GEODE to maintain and further develop the existing cooperation. In the future, both GEODE and the university should examine their complementarities and possibilities for collaboration. Since GEODE, at present, has a clear lead in the chosen topic, the process of collaboration should not be enforced within a short time period. Otherwise GEODE is the loser and there is no winner. The relationship with the University of Luxembourg should also be addressed in GEODE'S strategy, for instance. Concretely, students at the university could acquire practical experience in empirical research by working at GEODE for a limited period of time. Moreover, the

expert team is of the opinion that efforts to collaborate should not be limited to the university's institute of geography but should also include political and social sciences departments. However, GEODE will not be able to establish collaboration of this kind on its own. Support is therefore needed. Namely, the MESR should engage in constantly fostering and accompanying the cooperation between the two institutions.

3.3 RECOMMENDATIONS TO CEPS

Even though the experts focused on the unit of GEODE, some shortcomings in the overall organisation of CEPS became apparent during the evaluation process. GEODE is a relatively young research unit. Its positive development in the last few years now needs to be supported by the management of CEPS. The expert team therefore makes the following two recommendations to the management of CEPS.

Recommendation 5: Develop a research vision for CEPS

The transition of CEPS from a pure service unit towards an institution that combines services with research must necessarily be based on an appropriate scientific vision of its future development. CEPS should, in effect, situate itself more clearly within the European and Luxembourg research “landscape”. A clearer research vision at the level of CEPS is expected to support the definition of a competitive research agenda for GEODE. This vision should highlight CEPS’ specific scientific qualities and specialisations with regard to urban development issues that will affect Europe. The leader of CEPS should therefore work with the leaders of its units on a common research vision, including concrete scientific questions. In the experts’ view, immediate action is needed, and a clearly formulated research vision should be established within the next two years. In the long term, scientific background and scientific competences will be needed within the leading management of CEPS and the management of all of its units.

Recommendation 6: Set up financial planning and make the distribution of the block grant within CEPS more transparent

More professionalism is clearly needed with respect to financial planning. Thus, CEPS’ management needs to think about in what fields it wants to invest its resources and how the funds will be obtained. Of course, financial planning must be closely linked to the Centre’s overall strategy and research vision.

Given the existing lack of transparency with regard to the distribution of the block grant within CEPS, the experts fully support the current efforts to soon establish rules for this. They are also of the opinion that the units composing CEPS could benefit from more independence in the management of their financial resources and the setting of priorities.

Of course, the distribution of funds within the Centre must be continuously evaluated with respect to the overall strategy. Given the positive development of GEODE and its contribution to bringing forward the institution’s research activities, financial support should be assured, so as to allow the evaluation unit to consolidate its activities.

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