

# GDR RIFT REPORT

## *2021-2025*



### **Introduction**

The GDR Rift is an interdisciplinary adventure that began in January 2019, when INSU asked the TelluS-Rift project leaders (2017-2018) to come and present the results of their project on the East African Rift. Following this event, it became clear to all of us that, despite coming from disciplines that are sometimes very far apart, we all had an interest in crossing our analyses, our views, our knowledge and our timeframes to understand how this object where climate, environment, society and geology interact works.

Under the impetus of our three institutes (CNRS Earth & Universe, CNRS Ecology & Environment, CNRS Humanities & Social Sciences), we therefore launched the creation of a GDR, in order to structure the scientific communities around East Africa, and to offer a gestation site for future interdisciplinary projects. This research group came into being on 1<sup>er</sup> January 2021, following the very favourable opinion of the CID52 interdisciplinary committee to which it was presented.

Its main objective is to unite the Earth & Universe, Ecology & Environment and Humanities & Social Sciences communities around research conducted in and around the Great African Rift. As such, we have identified our main missions as structuring, coordinating, monitoring and forecasting.

The twofold challenge that the Rift GDR had to meet was to bring interdisciplinarity to life alongside the internationality that our subject of study imposes by its very nature (the rift crosses 16 countries in East Africa). Aware that our undertaking was very ambitious, and that the GDR only had a national dimension, we wanted to concentrate initially on interdisciplinarity, a new and major challenge for many of our members. We relied on our existing collaborations to ensure and develop internationality.

Our aim was to become a GDRi (Groupe de Recherche International) or IRN (International Research Network) at the end of our 5-year mandate.

## Research topics

During this first mandate, the GDR Rift was organised around 4 research themes, each led by 3 people (one from each institute):

- Rift heritage
- System dynamics
- Natural resources
- Training and education

The aim of these groups was to "*stimulate the exchange of ideas, to compare scales of study, languages and hypotheses in order to advance our understanding of each of these themes*" (2021-2015 project). A detailed description of these themes and their composition is available online ([www.rift-cnrs.fr](http://www.rift-cnrs.fr)).

These scientific themes are also reflected in the chapters of the book for the general public "Le Grand Rift Africain à la confluence des temps" (Le Cherche-Midi & CNRS, 2023).

## Governance

We have put together a management team that we wanted to be as balanced as possible: the Steering Committee is made up of two co-directors per institute (six in all). The Scientific Committee is made up of the management team and the 12 leaders of the four research themes.

Over the last four years, the management team has changed slightly, with Jessie Cauliez replacing François Bon (co-director for INEE) in 2022, Jean-Yves Reynaud leaving in 2022 (not replaced), and Caroline Robion-Brunner



replacing Sabine Planel (Training and Education theme coordinator) in 2023.

The Scientific Committee meets on the first Tuesday of each month, for between 45 minutes and two hours, depending on current events and the issues to be dealt with. Minutes are taken and made available to all GDR members (on request). These monthly meetings have been extremely useful in bringing the group together, even though the vast majority have been held by videoconference (only two face-to-face CS meetings over four years). They enable us to keep abreast of calls for proposals and the scientific policies of the institutes, and to exchange ideas constructively so that we can take collective decisions. The wide range of topics covered by the committee members, with equal numbers of men and women and equal status (researchers and teacher-researchers), ensures that discussions are comprehensive and well-informed on many aspects.

It is also at these meetings that the Scientific Committee assesses student mobility applications and pre-selects CNRS PRIME80 thesis subjects, and organises the meetings (workshops, colloquia) that we have been organising since 2021.

The number of co-directors and facilitators has enabled continuity to be maintained in the actions, without impacting too much on their parallel professional activities. The counterpart of this has been an increased and continuous demand on the director, and a centralisation of information. In the future, we need to continue to encourage this flexibility of involvement (which is essential for the well-being of the group), while avoiding oversolicitation of one or more people. After discussion and reflection, the Scientific Committee believes that designating specific tasks for one or two contact persons would relieve the management and ensure the continuity of activities. The management of conferences and other ad hoc activities could be facilitated by the participation of GDR members from outside the Scientific Committee.



## Review of actions 2021-2024

At the end of each year between 2021 and 2024, the steering committee presented its annual report and a forecast (year+1) to the three deputy scientific directors (DAS) of the GDR's parent institutes. These meetings (~1h) enabled us not only to keep our supervisory bodies informed, but also to discuss any difficulties and the group's needs, and to benefit from sound advice on current projects (conferences, publications, PRIME thesis, AAP, etc.). These meetings were greatly appreciated by the GDR management, as they were very useful.

On 5 November 2024, a general meeting was held to present the final results and, above all, to prepare for the future. The scientific committee met in Paris (MHNH) and GDR members were able to participate by videoconference. A report and the associated presentation are available on the GDR website.

For the purposes of this four-year review, and for the sake of clarity, we have presented our activities in the form of summary sheets, each summarising one of the GDR's actions over these four years. For each sheet, a reflective assessment is proposed, mentioning the main needs and future actions to be taken to improve, continue or modify the action concerned.

## End of mandate (2025)

The current term of office does not run until the end of August 2025, and for the year 2025, the committee plans to give **priority to webinars and workshops**, which have so far not been held regularly. The year 2025 will also be devoted to the **organisation of the next five-year period** (scientific committee, director, operations) and the **creation of an "eaGDR"** (*eastern african "GDR"*).

- **Workshops and webinars**



Following the Narok conference (May 2024, Kenya), it became clear that students and young researchers needed workshops on writing articles and scientific projects and on interdisciplinarity. We would therefore like to organise video-conference work sessions on these subjects. The idea would be to cover a specific point (choice of journal, organisation of a call for proposals, interdisciplinary tools) in 45 minutes each time.

So far we have not been able to maintain a regular rhythm in the webinars we have proposed, mainly because of the lack of time and of a person dedicated to this action, the fact that we are still too sensitive to our disciplinary field (articles in social sciences and environmental science do not necessarily follow the same rules of construction), and sometimes lack of knowledge of potential speakers. To overcome these difficulties, we essentially need HR support, which would enable us to draw up a timetable of events, to re-solicit speakers and to build a coherent training programme that takes into account all of the GDR Rift's research themes.

– **Organisation of the next five-year period**

At the AGM on 5 November 2024, CNRS Nucléaire & Particules (IN2P3) notified us of its wish to join the GDR Rift. Interdisciplinary projects in the Rift including members of this institute already exist, and this proposal was very favourably received by the members present. Discussions and feedback from previous scientific conferences (Lyon in 2022 and Narok in 2024) have highlighted several other disciplines and institutes that could also be interested in our structure. We would like to take advantage of 2025 to make the GDR known to other institutes. In particular, we think that CNRS Biology and CNRS Chemistry could be interested (problems of soil and water pollution, population evolution, epidemic risks, extremophilic organisms, etc.).

– **Creation of an "eaGDR**

This five-year period has focused on making interdisciplinarity work around the Great African Rift. The various initiatives we have undertaken (mobility, workshops, conferences, etc.) show that this challenge has been



successfully met. What about internationality? These same initiatives have enabled us to establish and grow an international network over the last four years. In particular, the Lyon conference (November 2022), thanks to the participation of many researchers from the rift countries (~20), encouraged the development of joint actions between France and East Africa. Following this conference, the University of Maasai Mara (Narok, Kenya) offered to host and co-organise the 2024 scientific conference. The conference brought together nearly a hundred researchers and students last May. The organisers of this event, convinced of the interdisciplinary and collective approach of the GDR, proposed the creation of a similar structure in East Africa, an "eaGDR" (*eastern african "GDR"*).

Such a structure would ensure a much healthier balance between France and the countries of East Africa, as the eaGDR would not be managed by the CNRS or a French structure. What's more, this is not an initiative instigated by France or French institutes, but one that has been thought up and built by African colleagues.

In 2025, therefore, we must also focus on building this new and exciting perspective: real interdisciplinary collaboration to give the GDR's work an international dimension. This is what we plan to do by organising meetings and discussions with colleagues from Maasai Mara University to move forward with this new dimension of the project.

## **Difficulties noted and to be anticipated**

- Training and education

This was a very cross-disciplinary research theme, which could not be fully developed due to a lack of human and financial resources. Our plan was to offer moodle or online training courses to French and African students. However, the lack of time and logistical and human support meant that we were unable to go any further than a few meetings and a workshop in 2022 at the Lyon conference.



At the AGM (November 2024), we identified two ways of offering training: online training and face-to-face, field-based training. The former are quicker and less costly (in budgetary terms) to set up, but require a full assessment so as not to offer courses that already exist elsewhere in the doctoral schools. The latter are more federative (the common ground is one of the facilitators of interdisciplinarity) and more efficient (face-to-face and single-task), but require a large budget (travel and mobility) as well as heavy logistics (management of missions, visas, authorisations). We want to take advantage of 2025 to look at this issue in greater depth and identify a way of operating. However, we have decided to reorganise the research themes and the way the committee operates so that training is an operational priority and the research themes focus solely on scientific issues.

- HR needs

As mentioned above, we lacked the logistical and organisational support to fully implement the structuring actions that we had planned in the initial project. We need "HR - project management" type support that could look after the website, organise webinars, help with colloquia, facilitate communication between the different institutes and direct requests from GDR members to the right people.

## **Conclusion**

During this first mandate, the GDR Rift has been able to fully implement structuring actions within a very diverse scientific community, both in terms of its themes and its players (students, researchers, IT). These initiatives have made it possible to explore, promote and develop an exceptional interdisciplinary approach to the East African Rift. What's more, the GDR has succeeded in convincing and uniting its African partners around a commitment to sharing and collaboration that we are building together.

So we want to continue this adventure, to enable both existing researchers and the younger generation to work together, to build research by combining our views and skills.

