

4 STRATEGIC PLANNING

4.1 Overview

Having assessed the distribution and quality of existing capacity, the next step is to create plans for the development of new capacities to achieve organisational and the network's goals. The survey prepares the ground for this endeavour, ensuring that these plans reflect the true needs of participating organisations for investment and cooperation.

The results of the survey are not the only source of information needed for strategic planning. Indeed, the reason why the process is referred to as **strategic** is that the new capacities which the network builds are intended to address its long-term, collective needs, as well as the immediate priorities of individual organisations. For this reason planning is guided not only by the results of the survey, which highlight areas in which capacity building may be required, but also by the results of earlier processes which have identified the overall goals of the network (the processes in question are amply described in the 'information cycle' introduced in Volume 1). Active consultation and consensus-building may be necessary to determine the network's goals, which then translate into the definition of a series of priority **products and services** for the network to deliver to its users (see Volume 3).

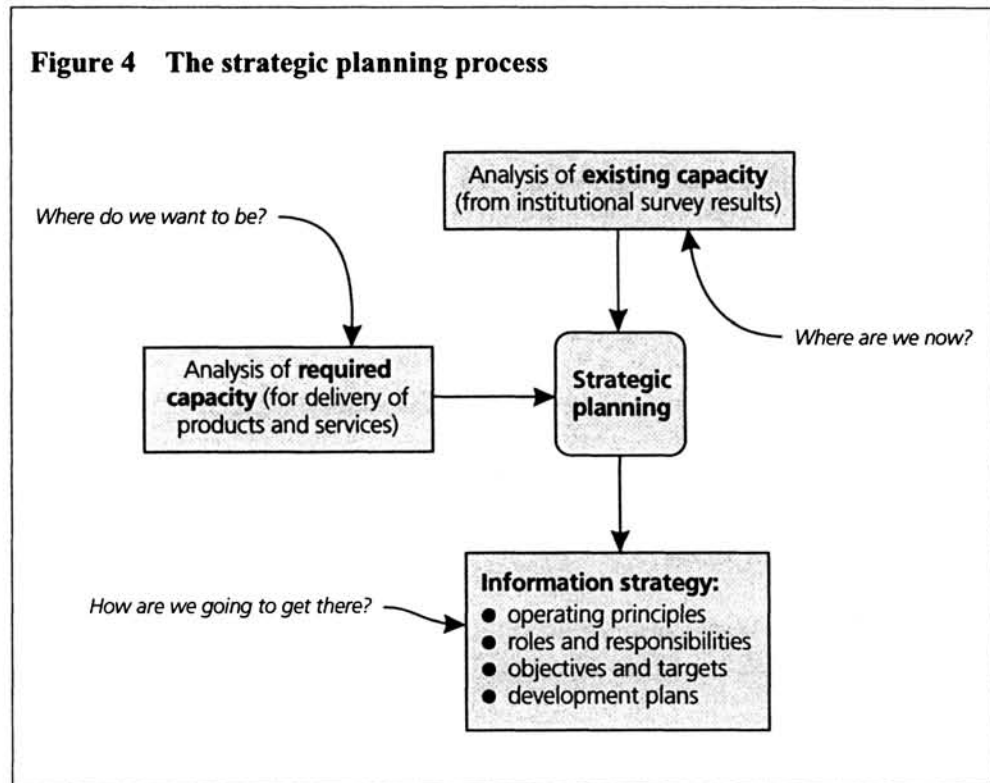
In the case of a biodiversity information network operating at the national-level, the main goal may be to support government policy-making in the area of sustainable use of living resources. This may translate into a series of one-off information briefings on current issues of concern (i.e. products), plus a commitment to continuously monitor agreed ecological parameters (i.e. a service). A complementary goal of the network may be to reduce the loss of sensitive habitats through ill-informed development planning. This may translate into a series of map-based products illustrating the location and value of sensitive habitats, for use by construction companies and local authorities.

Once the network's products and services have been agreed, it is possible to analyse what capacities are required to deliver them, for instance in terms of essential data, expertise and facilities. This process is very important since it sets targets for capacity building across the network which, once reached, enable it to achieve its goals effectively. Strategic planning then becomes a relatively simple task: **match the capacities outlined in the survey to those required, and prepare a strategy to**

move forward (see Figure 4). As with other strategic exercises, this process can be summarised in terms of three underlying questions as follows:

- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to be?
- How are we going to get there?

The first question is addressed by the results of the institutional survey; the second by analysing which capacities are required to deliver the network's main products and services; and the third through the preparation of an **information strategy**.



4.2 Information Strategy

Typically, a network information strategy contains a statement of operating principles, covering the goals of the network, its membership, form of cooperation and organisational structure. It goes on to describe the major products and services which the network aims to deliver, and the users for whom these are designed (for example, see BCIS 1996). The roles and responsibilities of the network's partners are also highlighted and, where appropriate, specific objectives and targets for information production are assigned to them. Finally, the strategy contains plans for the development of the network's capacity in areas which have been identified as crucial to its success (for example, see Government of Sri Lanka 1996b, Government of Egypt 1997 or Government of Thailand 1997). These may include extensive detail, for example projected sources of data, job descriptions and procurement plans, confined to annexes.

It may be possible to implement parts of the strategy simply by improving coordination between organisations or sharing scarce resources. Also, the value of 'free' resources for capacity building should not be underestimated. For example, Internet-based literature, self-teaching tools, training materials and 'source books' for skills development are widely available from governments, non-governmental organisations and international organisations. Nevertheless, many information strategies will require direct financial support to implement and it is the role of senior managers within the network, coordinated by its steering committee, to enable access to financial resources in such cases. Potential sources of financial support are presented in Box 2.

4.3 Development Plans

Development plans are the heart of the information strategy. They range from brief concepts for small-scale projects, up to detailed proposals for the development of the network's data, expertise, facilities and partnerships (i.e. the areas covered by the survey). In order to maximise the benefits of network participation, individual organisations may wish to extend the development process to the operation of their internal management systems.

Typically, a development plan would include a set of clearly-defined objectives and targets for capacity development, plus preliminary indications of costs, time-scales and management responsibilities. Plans could be generated for the

Box 2 Sources of financial support for capacity building

- Direct contributions from the network's partners.
- 'In-kind' contributions from the network's partners (e.g. the exchange of data, expertise or other services).
- Implementation of joint projects with government, industry or international organisations.
- Government grants or incentive schemes.
- Support from bilateral and multilateral development assistance agencies.
- Funds released by efficiency savings or from changes in government priorities.

network as a whole, or be prepared for individual organisations — provided these also address the needs of the network as a whole. When presented in the form of sound business cases, development plans may prove useful in helping to convince potential sources of financial support to invest in the network.

Key areas in which to build information management capacity are reviewed below. The reviews necessarily are brief since, in any particular situation, local conditions, needs and perspectives are bound to dictate precise requirements.

● Data

A network's datasets need to **underpin the products and services it wishes to generate**. The mobilisation of data on essential themes should therefore be one of the network's top priorities. An early task is to determine which datasets are essential to the network's operation, and to ensure that the custodians (i.e. primary sources) of these have the capacity to manage them effectively. Capacity building can then focus on the twin objectives of improving the **quality** and **accessibility** of datasets.

Responsibility for managing datasets can be identified using the principles of custodianship (see Volumes 4 and 5). Other fundamental techniques, relating to the storage, standardisation and quality-assurance of datasets, can also be applied to the mobilisation of datasets after management responsibility has been assigned (see Volume 7).

● **Expertise**

A network's expertise should reflect its needs for generating products and services, and may be very wide ranging. They include the basic skills necessary to collect and process data, but also embrace the areas of publishing, communication and management, plus specialist areas, such as computer systems support, programming and electronic communications.

Skills development can be addressed through a variety of learning processes, including formal education and training courses, lectures, seminars, informal workshops and discussion groups, and 'on the job' coaching sessions. Secondments, study visits and self-study breaks are also popular and useful. Depending on the topic, some learning environments are more appropriate than others. For example, training in the use of computer software may be delivered directly in the workplace, perhaps using real problems to illustrate how the software is used. Conversely, training in matters of corporate policy and management may need to be tackled in discussion groups free from the everyday distractions of the workplace. In general, highly applied topics, such as the generation of information for policy-making, benefit from a combination of experience-sharing and formal instruction.

● **Facilities**

The network's facilities should support its needs for information product development (see Volume 3). Typical facilities embrace the equipment necessary to gather and process data, through to the facilities needed to publish and distribute information. Although computer equipment (including communication technologies) tends to dominate discussions of information management facilities, the need for physical infrastructure, such as buildings and transport, should also be considered.

Requirements for facilities are best specified in functional terms (i.e. the tasks which need to be done), rather than focusing on particular equipment brands or models. The latter change very rapidly and should be selected on the basis of proven experience or following independent advice. A process of tender is often applied to the procurement of equipment, allowing quotations from a range of potential suppliers to be compared in advance of purchase (Aronoff 1991). Organisations may wish to share the burden of acquiring and maintaining facilities by doing so as a group, particularly where they are expensive or used only intermittently (e.g. specialist data collection or processing devices).

When acquiring new facilities, due consideration should be given to training needs, running costs, maintenance and technical support. This is particularly relevant to computer equipment which, although not always essential, can significantly enhance information management capacity (see Volume 7).

● **Management systems**

The management policies, systems and procedures adopted by the network's partners bind together its physical assets into a cohesive information management capacity. They govern the quality of the contributions made by individual organisations to the network, and affect the degree to which constructive partnerships are formed.

Organisations evolve a particular style of doing things, based upon their histories, the personalities of their staff, and the degree to which they are constrained by bureaucracy and resources. Like human cultures, organisational 'cultures' evolve naturally and need not necessarily be changed unless they are ineffective. Where this is the case, change is often encouraged to emerge from within the organisation, perhaps with external facilitation, unless exceptional circumstances prevail. For example, the organisation may not be fulfilling its obligations to provide access to data, or may be failing to ensure the safety of its staff.

Organisations evolve their management systems in line with market demands, the expectations of society, and the opportunities created by new technologies. Sometimes this results in job losses, although it can be argued that the efficiencies gained serve to enhance the productivity (and therefore the prospects) of the organisation in the long term. The pace of change has quickened over the last two decades, such are the opportunities presented by global markets and information

technology. For example, many organisations have decided to replace their traditional management hierarchies with flexible, self-regulated teams.

When deciding how to enhance the management of an organisation, staff at all levels should be engaged in consultation. Almost certainly, it is their vision which will unlock the potential of the organisation. Consultation should not be rushed, since it may take considerable effort to assess, reconcile and consolidate the different views expressed. Typical areas to examine include project management, reporting and control, performance assessment, time management, management of human resources, and management of external cooperation.

● Partnerships

Partnerships between organisations are a relatively unexploited form of capacity, with many organisations still preferring to duplicate each other's activities. Making partnerships an obvious, attractive way of doing business is one of the greatest challenges for an information network, and much progress still has to be made (see Volumes 4 and 5).

Partnership generally occurs at two levels: the **management level**, where formal agreements may be signed to develop or confirm long-term alliances; and at the **operational level**, where data and expertise can be given, bartered or sold to address urgent and immediate challenges. At the management level, formal ties, such as Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and 'twinning' arrangements, provide helpful frameworks in which to plan cooperative activities. At the operational level, cooperation can be facilitated through various cooperative activities, including joint project teams, shared training courses, seminars, workshops, formal secondments and by encouraging informal communications between staff.

Ideally, the sharing of data, expertise and facilities should become an everyday activity amongst the network's partners. This can be promoted through the agreement of consistent principles, policies and procedures for cooperation, and by building trust through common objectives and a spirit of fair dealing.