

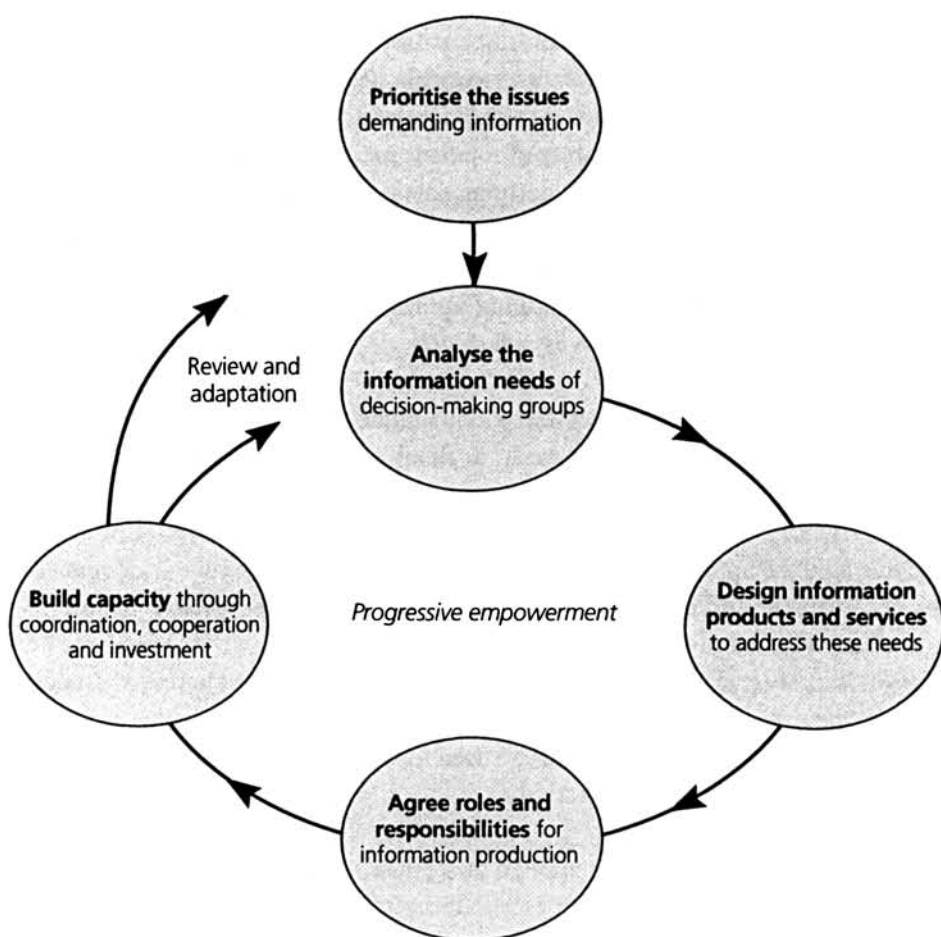
7 THE INFORMATION CYCLE

Many aspects of the management loop introduced in Section 4, particularly the planning, monitoring and reviewing processes, depend on access to high-quality objective information on a potentially diverse set of topics. This provides a rather daunting challenge for information professionals, who may find themselves able to deal with specific themes, but totally unable to marshal the full range of information sources. Indeed, an impressive range of inputs is required to manage information on any specific theme, including the underlying datasets, human resources, facilities and management systems. **Multi-disciplinary cooperation** is clearly the way forward for successful information production. To help those involved cooperate in a coherent, cost-effective, manner, a guiding framework is useful to focus their contributions on common objectives and targets.

Recognising that each country will respond uniquely to the challenge of generating information on environmental issues, a flexible, process-oriented approach is proposed. This breaks down the challenge into a series of small steps which, when taken as a whole, lead to the achievement of major strategic objectives. Figure 5 illustrates how the approach — referred to as the **information cycle** — covers all the steps necessary to address policy issues in a planned, yet responsive manner. The information cycle is not rigid, nor does it prescribe a solution: variable ordering of the processes is likely due to the completion of certain tasks, the need to revisit processes, or further specific constraints. Where individual processes in the cycle have already been accomplished, the cycle can still be used to suggest next steps or draw attention to missed, or under-emphasised activities.

The information cycle can be applied at a range of scales. It could work equally well within a single organisation, a group of organisations, or in a large network of organisations spanning multiple sectors, levels and disciplines (see Volume 4). One thing is certain: at whatever scale the information cycle is applied, a high degree of coordination is required to ensure that stakeholders are kept informed of key results, objectives and responsibilities. An effective way of keeping the information cycle on track is to establish an organisational structure to oversee its implementation. This could be an existing committee, steering group or other body with appropriate representation, or one specially created for the task. Ideally, the body should be closely, if not directly, involved in the policy-development process to ensure that the information cycle is anchored in decision-making machinery.

Figure 5 The information cycle



As an example of how the steering group might function, the prioritisation process could be facilitated by forming a working group to draft a list of priority environmental issues for which better information is required. These could be distributed to key stakeholders for review, following which a visioning exercise could be held to develop a consensus on their relative importance and information needs (see Volume 2).

The information cycle consists of five processes, one of which — **prioritise the issues** — should be undertaken before the others since it establishes which issues are the highest priority for information support and, therefore, which should be addressed first. The remaining four processes cover the activities necessary to produce cost-effective information on the issues selected. Recognising that priorities change over time, and that information needs will change with them, a secondary feature of the information cycle is **review and adaptation**, whereby progress through the cycle is reviewed and new targets defined as appropriate.