

4 PARTNER ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

4.1 Overview

In the current context, the main purpose of an information network is to support the development of good policies, plans and decisions on the conservation and sustainable use of living resources (see Volume 1). To achieve this purpose effectively, partners need to feel comfortable contributing to the smooth running of the network, and know how their contributions are leading to its overall goals. To ensure that this occurs, the roles and responsibilities of the network's partners need to be identified, fully defined and, most importantly, agreed.

In a managed network there are three distinct roles for partners to play: **custodians**, the **hub** and **users**. All the activities necessary to achieve the network's goals are encompassed by these roles. One or more roles may be undertaken by each partner, provided that the implications of each role, in terms of the services they are expected to provide to the network, are fully appreciated. In practice, partners will determine the roles they wish to play on the basis of how closely their corporate objectives match those of the networks in which they operate and by their physical capacity to participate.

4.2 Custodians

A custodian is an organisation (or other group, occasionally an individual) which is regarded to be in the best position to **ensure the quality and accessibility of a dataset**, and to advise on appropriate uses thereof (see Volume 5 for a full discussion). Many of the network's partners will be custodians, some of nationally-significant datasets, such as national census results, vegetation cover, and climatic surfaces, and others of specialist interest, such as the breeding locations of rare species, or the variety of non-timber products obtained by local people from a forest.

Proper assignment and management of custodianship is fundamental to the success of an information network, particularly where the management of so-called essential datasets is concerned (see Volume 3). Its principal aims are:

- to minimise duplication in the collection and management of data;

- to ensure that datasets are available for use as and when required (i.e. they exist and are accessible); and
- to ensure that they are quality-assured (i.e. valid, maintained, documented and secure).

In cases where the custodianship of an important dataset is in dispute, or was simply never resolved, the network may wish to facilitate a solution in the interests of all of its partners (see Section 4.3).

Custodianship of a dataset carries with it certain **responsibilities**, as presented in Box 2. Each of these contribute to the well-being of a dataset and, thus, to internal productivity gains as well as an increased capacity to collaborate with others. Naturally, custodians may harbour concerns at the prospect of providing access to their data. For this reason they are also invested with certain **rights**, consistent with broader government, corporate and other applicable policies and agreements, which determine the conditions under which the dataset can be used (see Box 2). Such rights are not intended to prevent legitimate use of a dataset. Indeed, the aim is to foster an environment in which data access is straightforward and encouraged. Above all, custodians must feel comfortable providing data to others, and users should be satisfied with the data they receive.

4.3 The Hub

The hub of a managed network is responsible for **facilitating cooperation** between the network's partners. This ensures that the partners are aware of and are comfortable with their roles, and provides the coordination necessary to ensure that they can work together efficiently. Furthermore, the hub can act as a mouthpiece for network products and services and, as a consequence, attract income for the network's activities.

Despite the obvious leadership role of the hub, the network should remain driven by the interests of individual partners, rather than be subsumed into the programme of a single organisation. This can be achieved by ensuring that the hub is directed by a committee of partner representatives which, if desired, can meet anywhere it chooses. It should be noted that, for administrative reasons, it is also wise to establish a small team to carry forward the committee's decisions. This team, plus their supporting communications and office facilities, are commonly known as a **secretariat**.

Box 2 Responsibilities and rights of custodians

Responsibilities

- To build a dataset (with partners, as appropriate).
- To maintain a dataset (i.e. keep it up to date, abreast of standards, structured as necessary).
- To ensure the quality of a dataset (i.e. ensure that it is valid, maintained, documented, secure).
- To provide access to a dataset (to legitimate users).
- To provide advice on appropriate uses of a dataset (e.g. suggested/unwise/improper uses).
- To coordinate the development of a dataset (with appropriate partners).

Rights

- To regulate access to a dataset (depending on category of user).
- To safeguard intellectual property (e.g. acknowledgement, regulation of copying).
- To recover costs (e.g. recover market value, investment, cost of supply).

Box 3 summarises the overall responsibilities of the hub. There is a close correspondence between these responsibilities and the main activities of the ‘information cycle’ introduced in Volume 1, which provides a guiding framework for cooperative information production. Indeed, an over-arching aim of the hub is to oversee implementation of the information cycle.

The hub delivers its programme through a secretariat, which may vary in size from a single individual (and associated office facilities) to a dedicated team of staff in the largest cases. Box 3 also summarises the responsibilities of the secretariat which enable it to pursue the hub’s — and thereby the network’s — overall purpose.

Box 3 Responsibilities of the hub

Overall

- Promote cooperation between the network's partners (e.g. meetings, workshops, newsletters).
- Facilitate agreement of the network's goals (e.g. which issues to address, which users to serve).
- Facilitate preparation of strategic plans for information production (e.g. information needs analysis, information product design, objectives and targets for the network's partners).
- Facilitate implementation of strategic plans (e.g. through formation of multi-partner teams).
- Facilitate access to data (e.g. through custodianship, data access agreements, Memoranda of Understanding, standards).
- Facilitate the development of the network (e.g. assess capacity, identify areas for restructuring or investment, seek support).
- Market the network's products and services.
- Monitor the effectiveness of the network's products and services.

The hub has no direct need to manage scientific data, since this is the role of individual custodians (see Section 5). Nor has it any need to develop other information management capacities unless these are directly related to its facilitation role. However, given that the hub is responsible for tasks such as preparation of strategic plans for information production, and for facilitating access to essential datasets, it may need to develop its capacity to manage a limited number of datasets.

In particular, the hub needs to know where capacities are located in the network, how readily they can be mobilised for specific tasks, where essential datasets are located, what state they are in, and where financial and other support can be obtained to drive the network's development. Thus, three distinct datasets may be considered:

Box 3 Responsibilities of the hub (cont.)

Secretariat

- Organise meetings and workshops for the network's partners.
- Provide editorial and office support for preparation of key documents (e.g. strategic plans, project proposals, marketing literature).
- Brief the network's partners on new opportunities, plans and progress (e.g. newsletters, email).
- Handle enquiries about the network's activities, referring to individual partners as appropriate.
- Maintain copies of the network's products and services for distribution to users.
- Manage data on the status and availability of the network's capacity.

1. Sources of capacity

Details of the status and availability of capacity within the network. For example, details of the core businesses, expertise, facilities and particular strengths and weaknesses of the network's partner organisations (see Volume 6).

2. Sources of data

Details of the status and availability of datasets which are significant to the network's goals. For example, details of their theme, scale, completeness, currency, reliability, accuracy and pricing strategy, plus an indication of how they were collected, their intended uses, and the data standards and quality-assurance procedures which have been applied. Such details are commonly known as **metadata**, since they are, literally, data about data. When compiled as a catalogue, they enable users to locate the datasets they are looking for and judge whether the data are suited to their needs (see Volumes 5 and 6).

3. External sources of support

Details of national and international sources of external (non-network) development assistance, including funding, technical assistance and access to technologies.

4.4 Users

Users vary, with many having their own individual information needs (see Volume 2). Some of these may correlate closely with each other, in which case the network can produce similar information for multiple users, saving time and resources. However, in the majority of cases, information will need to be tailored to specific users (see Volume 3).

One issue is clear: **information is useless until it is used**. In the current context, this implies that an information network can have no direct bearing on the conservation and sustainable use of living resources unless active use is made of the information it produces. Thus, an urgent requirement for any information network is to define which issues it is trying to address, which users it is trying to serve and, once this has been achieved, actively attempt to recruit these users as full partners in the network. Special attention can then be given to analysing their information needs, and empowering them to make better decisions with relevant and timely information products and services.

In general, networks do not purely serve the interests of users; they serve the interests of all of the network's partners, only some of which will be users. Thus, although users may receive direct support in the form of information products, custodians may receive indirect support in the form of access to each other's data, specific investments in capacity, or new opportunities for cooperation. All partners in a network should feel that they are being served in some way, either directly or indirectly, just as they are aware of how they are contributing.

Users have much to offer an information network. Firstly, they enable a network to project its influence into policy and management domains, through the conversion of information into decisions, then actions and, ultimately, positive effects on the ground. Without users, there is no means of using information to address environmental concerns and, thus, no means of justifying the existence of a network. Secondly, users expose other partners to policy and management perspectives, and wider societal goals, enabling them to understanding more fully how information

Box 4 Responsibilities of users

- Make rational decisions on the basis of the network's information.
- Provide advice on forthcoming information needs, including budgets and schedules.
- Provide feedback on the relevance, timing and quality of the information received.
- Acknowledge sources in publications and reports.

influences decision-making. Greater understanding of the working methods of different partners — whether these are users, custodians or the hub — is helpful in planning effective strategies for dealing with the underlying environmental issues. Box 4 summarises some responsibilities of users.

4.5 Multiple Roles

It is quite usual for individual partners in a network to take on more than one role. For example, a national forestry commission may be the custodian of several key datasets relating to timber stocks, forest biodiversity, and demand for wood products, including firewood. It may also be the primary decision-making body regarding the development of forestry-sector industries, plantations, and protection of forest environmental services. This would make it a substantial user of forest-related information produced within the organisation and outside. Further, stakeholders outside of government, for example non-governmental and community-based organisations, may have developed strong, informal partnerships with each other, but be unable to translate these into forest policy and management support. They may welcome the opportunity to develop formal ties with the forestry commission in order to boost their status and acquire an important user. To consolidate this arrangement they may request facilities for a secretariat and steering committee. Thus, very easily, the forestry commission could find itself in the multiple roles of custodian, user and hub, all at the same time.

The probability of assuming multiple roles increases with each new network that is created, especially where these overlap in theme or scale. Networks which cover, say, water pollution, may overlap significantly with networks covering the themes of biodiversity, climate change or primary health care. The hub of the water pollution network may be viewed as the custodian of water pollution data in the primary health care network; similarly, the hub of the biodiversity network may be viewed as the custodian of biological data within the climate change network. Thus, **single organisations may play multiple roles in different networks** (see Figure 4 and Volume 5).

The same effect occurs with scale. At the local level, a network of concerned organisations may have formed to address specific environmental concerns. These may be coordinated by an NGO which runs campaigns to encourage action. This organisation, which acts as a local hub, may deliver local information to a high-level committee examining the same issues at the national level. To the national committee, the local NGO is a custodian; but to its local partners, it is a hub (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 Multiple roles in information networks

