



**United Nations
Environment
Programme**



Distr.
GENERAL

UNEP/INF2000/WP/13
13 September 2000

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

INFOTERRA 2000 – Global Conference on Access to Environmental Information
Dublin, Ireland
11-15 September 2000
(Item 10 of the agenda)

**TOOLS AND INSTITUTIONAL NETWORKS FOR DISSEMINATING ENVIRONMENTAL
INFORMATION IN SUPPORT OF THE AARHUS CONVENTION**

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Introduction

1. Environmental information and communication is a very important management tool in line with laws, regulation, taxes and levies. The Aarhus Convention focuses attention on the importance of access to information by all citizens.
2. UNEP's global environmental information exchange network, INFOTERRA, has an important role to play as a mechanism to facilitate access to information both within countries and between countries. The visibility and efficiency of the network in any given country is dependent on how the National Focal Point (NFP) is organised and funded nationally.
3. The NFP will also have an important role in connection with the ratification of the Aarhus Convention in the relevant countries. However, the NFP cannot fulfil this role on its own. It is an enormous task to deliver environmental information to all citizens in a country as stipulated by the convention. The NFP has to cooperate and network with relevant suppliers of environmental information.
4. Before identifying the relevant partners, the NFP must have a very good overview and knowledge of its own services and target groups. This information must be available in an easy way to communicate to the potential partners and clients. To get this overview decisions have to be taken on the following issues:
 - (a) The environmental domaine - a national definition
 - (b) Customers and clients – for the NFP and its partners
 - (c) Tools - information and communications technology, public access centres, etc
 - (d) NFP services and partner services
 - (e) Relevant information sources
 - (f) Visions and goals
 - (g) Partners and networks

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5. The linkage between environmental information and environmental education is important. Environmental protection often entails changing the attitudes of individuals or consumers. Education and training of children and students should be seen as a special important aspect of the information services concept, and teachers as a target group are not very easy to reach.

The environmental domain

6. The concept 'Environment and Nature' is very difficult to define in practice. The definition in the INFOTERRA network differs from country to country. How it is defined is dependant on local conditions such as the size of the country, climate, natural resources, industrial activities and so on. For example, some countries have coasts, some have deserts and others have nuclear power plants. However, it has to be defined accurately. Practically all environmental issues are included in the Aarhus Convention, including planning and health which are of utmost concern to most citizens. After defining the environmental domain, the NFP will have a clear vision as to what issues to cover, including those that it can cover itself and those that will have to be covered by partner institutions in the INFOTERRA consortium.

Users of information

7. All citizens are included in the Aarhus Convention as users of environmental information but so also are industry, business and trade, teachers and researchers. The NFPs and partner information suppliers are different and therefore the primary target groups for their services will also be different. The primary target group for an information supplier will depend on the type of parent institution – whether it is an administrative authority, a research institution or some other entity.

8. It is not easy for the NFP to influence the type of information service being delivered by a partner institution. However, it is relatively easy to define the most important target groups and to assess their information needs. It is important not to define more target groups than it is possible to serve properly. The capacity of information suppliers is limited therefore a more focussed service to particular target groups is probably a more achievable goal. The groups can be defined both as type of user (decision-makers, administrators, researchers, children etc) and by geographical location.

9. When the target groups have been defined the next task is to identify partners that can deliver information to these groups. The partners can be both central government and local authorities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), public and scientific libraries, universities and research centres, institutional networks, the media, and business enterprises.

Tools

10. Proper tools are needed in order to offer a proper information service. Tools in this context are defined as all physical equipment, technical infrastructure, documentation rooms and related facilities needed to provide services to users. The ergonomic layout of facilities is an important consideration for the optimisation of services to users. For example, sufficient storage must be provided for collections of books and journals.

11. In this technological age, users need access to computers and access to the Internet. It is possible today to offer a very good service without much room and space and with little equipment but with the right partners. However, modern information technology is an absolute necessity. Without access to Internet and relevant databases, e-mail, fax, and other electronic facilities it will not be possible to operate an information centre that meets the demands of the Aarhus Convention. Furthermore, it will be impossible to network with relevant partners spread around in a big country or the whole world without electronic access.

12. It is becoming very expensive to maintain large collections of journals, books and miscellaneous documents and, therefore, the NFP and its partner information centres need to ensure that only the most relevant information is maintained in order to service the information requests of users.

13. It might be more beneficial for the NFP to establish and host a national virtual portal for environmental information on the Internet. If the NFP is to act as the hub of a national network of information suppliers then it should also act as a virtual hub and maintain the electronic gateway to environmental information that is of interest to national users.

The services

14. When the environmental domain, the target groups and the users have been defined, the next step is to develop information services. Consideration must be given to the type of information that can be made available by the suppliers and how can it be disseminated. Some suppliers may be depositories for special collections; some will be primary producers of environmental information; and some will be both. The issue of charges will need to be addressed. A policy is needed among the information suppliers as to whether users will be charged or whether services will be offered free of charge. The Aarhus Convention (article 4, paragraph 8) makes provision for public authorities to impose reasonable charges for the supply of information.

15. The service may be delivering both national and international information. This will have a bearing on the type of tools needed. Timely delivery of information from international sources will be largely dependent on having a good telecommunications infrastructure in place and this may be a problem for developing countries, in which case capacity building will be needed to bridge the so-called 'digital divide'. It is best if the services are unique. It makes it easier to find partners and to become visible. If a supplier has a special type of information or has easy access to a particular target group then this type of scenario will define core services.

16. The services should always be tailored to the target groups and their needs. It is not important whether the service is a CD-ROM search service; an Internet search service; reference service; inter-library loan; translation service and so on. However, it is most important to have the services defined and described so they can be communicated to the target groups and the partners.

Relevant information and sources

17. The next task is to determine the location of relevant sources of information about 'Environment and Nature' in a country. The obvious places to search are - public administration, the science community, libraries, publishers, the media and NGOs.

18. The public administration also differs from country to country, but in many countries the environmental authority is shared among many stakeholders - the central government, the regional authorities, the counties, and the local municipalities. Normally many ministries and agencies will deal with environmental problems, for example, special ministries for transport and traffic, energy, health, planning, green taxes and education, and agencies for environmental protection and health care.

19. Furthermore, the tradition for openness in public administration differs, but the countries that have ratified the Aarhus Convention must have decided on a certain level of openness, at least concerning environmental issues and by implementing practical measures to increase the level of access to information on these issues in accordance with the provisions of article 5 of the Convention.

20. Scientists have a very good tradition of sharing information. They have their own scientific journals and they were among the first to use electronic tools and media. They started more than 40 years ago establishing large bibliographic databases that are now evolving into full text digital libraries. Most universities and research centres have their own scientific libraries where users can find scientific literature on a vast array of subjects. Many are also accessible via the Internet. Patented inventions are also very easy to find, either in the national patent office or in patent databases.

21. Most countries have a system of public libraries and, invariably, public libraries have professional information staff and access to the Internet. Their strategic advantage is that they tend to be situated close to the public and are heavily used by teachers. Public libraries can be very useful partners both as depositories of information and as a mechanism to deliver environmental information to local communities where citizen action to protect the environment can be mobilised. This type of approach is in keeping with principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development which recommends, *inter alia*, that *environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level*

22. Professional publishers of journals, books and databases etc. might be important suppliers of information. Many of these commercial entities provide on-line access to electronic databases and scientific journals, but usually at a cost. The press and electronic media are also important for daily reporting of environmental news and events.

23. The important role of NGOs both as information suppliers and networking partners deserves special attention. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) reinforced the role to be played by NGOs and major groups in the achievement of sustainable development and the protection of the environment. In many countries the NGO community is very strong and may be playing an advocacy role or an information support role in the area of access to environmental information. The ECO-FORUM NGO coalition was accorded full negotiating status alongside governments during the drafting of the Aarhus Convention. Many NGOs operate environmental information and documentation centres; manage thematic networks on environmental issues; and maintain substantive websites to make information accessible to their user groups. They are also well positioned to identify emerging environmental issues and to assess the type of information needed by users. Serious consideration must be given to the inclusion of NGOs as partners contributing to the development and operation of a national environmental information service.

Visions and goals

24. The INFOTERRA NFP must have a vision statement and this vision will help to define objectives at the strategic and operational levels. A vision for the NFP might be to become the national knowledge centre for 'Environment and Nature'. NFPs need to examine their resource base and determine whether they have acquired the status of being a recognised knowledge centre on environmental matters and whether they can maintain that status.

25. NFPs may need to consider producing a brochure or information package on its visions, goals and services, and disseminate it to partner suppliers and the user community. The quality of the services can only be controlled by continuous assessment. This assessment exercise will entail maintaining communications clients and soliciting feedback. It has the added advantage of generating ideas for new activities and establishing new networking initiatives. It is not recommended to start new activities with partners and clients before this visionary overview has been published and disseminated.

Networking

26. In a networking world it is important to cooperate and not compete. Competition is both a waste of resources and energy, and makes it difficult for clients to find the right information in time. Delivering timely and relevant information should be the most important goal for an NFP and it is also one of the main aims of the Aarhus Convention. Networking is a cooperation between equal partners. The relevant partners are to be found in the same locations as the environmental information. If relevant networks do not exist then an opportunity exists to develop a new network. Time and energy is needed for this task but, in the long run, the benefits outweigh the costs.

27. The main topic of a network is to communicate and share information with each other and with the clients. It should also be noted that a network is, in itself, a specific target group and this makes it easier to reach clients that otherwise would be difficult to reach. The opportunities to establish networks are almost limitless in the environmental domain. Networks can be established on a thematic basis by identifying those stakeholders with an interest in a particular environmental issue. From an organisational perspective,

networks can be established that bring together a group of relevant libraries or staff in municipalities and other ministries. From an occupational perspective, networks of environmental journalists or teachers can be established. The Internet makes it possible to establish virtual networks that span geographic or political boundaries at very little cost and with extremely fast communication speeds.

Conclusion

28. The global INFOTERRA network can be a very important partner when the principles and provisions of the Aarhus Convention will become implemented in the ratification countries. The NFPs have to define their own role by making their services visible for the implementing authority, users and partners. No NFP can execute this task acting alone. At an organisational level, it has to play a coordinating role in mobilising the resources of other information suppliers and networks that can deliver the information required by users. At a technical level, it can establish the national portal or electronic gateway for environmental information. This new role model can also be applied in countries that have not signed or ratified the Aarhus Convention as the basic concepts underpinning principle 10 of the Rio Declaration are universally applicable.