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PROGRAMME DES NATIONS UNIES POUR L'ENVIRONNEMENT • PROGRAMA DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS PARA EL MEDIO AMBIENTE
ПРОГРАММА ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ НАЦИЙ ПО ОКРУЖАЮЩЕЙ СРЕДЕ

Strengthening the biodiversity conventions through the strategic use of information

A vision statement and work plan

"There is no integrated system designed to store, search and retrieve information generated at the UN, much less to do so rapidly and in real time, limiting the ability to translate data and facts into informed policy and management decisions."

– UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, "Investing in the UN for a Stronger Organization Worldwide" (A/60/692)

"Perhaps our greatest challenge is to create a way for the thousands of information-gathering bodies around the world to connect with each other and share knowledge. We need to create more equitable access and commit ourselves to a more flexible and efficient open source community."

– UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner, "International Environment House News", June 2006

I – The objective

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and its related agreements, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands each generates large quantities of data, documents and other forms of information. Much of this information addresses common biodiversity-related themes and activities. However, because it is not inter-linked or organized in a consistent and harmonized manner, grasping "the big picture" and ensuring that the conventions are mutually supportive can be extremely difficult.

Most major corporations and organizations also face the challenge of managing large, isolated pools of information. Fortunately, the growing recognition that institutional information is a vital strategic asset is occurring just as rapid advances in information technology (IT) are providing new solutions. Together, these forces have inspired the development of a new, more strategic approach to information resources known in the jargon as "knowledge management". This paper proposes a practical and feasible approach to empowering Parties and secretariats by using the principles and IT tools of knowledge management.

This is an exceptionally opportune time for implementing a knowledge management strategy for the biodiversity conventions. The Secretary General's recent report on UN reform highlights the need to improve information management across the entire UN system. The leadership transition

at UNEP, various COP mandates for promoting data exchange, the need to collaborate on the 2010 biodiversity target, the opportunities provided by the Bali Strategic Plan and the availability of funds from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) all support early action. By working as a team on the project outlined below, the four convention secretariats can service the wider biodiversity community while maintaining control over their own information resources and building their in-house technical capacity.

Representatives of the four convention secretariats (plus the AEWA and IOSEA Marine Turtle MOU secretariats) and of UNEP's Division of Environmental Conventions (DEC), the UNEP-World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) and the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) met for a workshop in Cambridge from 13 – 15 June 2006 to discuss this project (see Appendix for the list of participants). They agreed to propose to their respective organizations that the group's members be assigned to a project team to develop and implement the project. The group also reviewed and signed off on this present paper.

II – “Knowledge Management for Biodiversity”

Background

Each of the four conventions currently maintains large collections of data and information on their web sites and in various databases. This information is not generally organized in a manner that supports strategic decision-making. Many databases hold complementary information (for example on case studies and best practices) that could be better linked. Harmonizing these information resources would boost the overall value of their contents and facilitate the development of new information products.

The CBD secretariat has succeeded in channelling significant financial and technical resources into its information management systems. The other secretariats have also each succeeded in developing unique and valuable resources, ranging from sophisticated on-line reporting systems to web-based databases. Nevertheless, there is currently limited capacity for moving towards a more strategic and harmonized approach to information management. UNEP is therefore contributing \$200,000 from its Government of Norway trust fund to enable the secretariats to implement a joint project on Knowledge Management for Biodiversity.

Project implementation

The key types of information that biodiversity conventions generate include:

- List of Parties
- National focal points and other contacts;
- Strategic plans;
- Official COP documents;
- COP decisions, resolutions and articles;
- Calendars of events;
- Case studies and best practices;
- Indicators for measuring progress towards the 2010 target;
- Documents and recommendations of the technical bodies; and
- National reports.

The project team evaluated each of the above information categories as candidates for this project based on the following criteria: existence of a clear need or mandate, risk of duplicating work already being done by others, uniqueness of convention/secretariat information, strategic

relevance for harmonized implementation of conventions, benefits to Parties, feasibility given existing financial and technical resources, value of the outcome as a stand-alone result and its contribution to the future development of knowledge management, and costs of maintenance and updating. Based on these criteria, the team decided that the project should start with the following four categories:

List of Parties – This will allow secretariats and Parties to view the status of ratification across Conventions

National focal points – Interlinking national focal points and other key contacts is relatively simple. A searchable list offers a practical way of promoting the harmonized implementation of the conventions and the 2010 target.

Strategic plans – Hyperlinking the strategic plans of the conventions will facilitate comparisons and analyses of progress and, as above, promote the harmonized implementation of the conventions. The plans will be indexed using keywords.

Decisions and resolutions – Interlinking the exponentially growing mass of convention decisions will facilitate practical collaboration on specific issues and support Parties' efforts to retire or consolidate decisions. It will also inform debates on crafting future decisions.

Over the coming months, the project team will develop a further proposal for Phase II of the project that will build on these four first information categories. The next categories to be tackled could include official documents, case studies, and recommendations from scientific bodies and information aimed at assisting Parties to achieve the 2010 target.

Technical issues

The four categories of information resources described above will be structured in XML (eXtensible Markup Language) format. This involves defining and coding titles, dates and other text elements of all the documents to make them compatible. The documents will then be registered in a database to make it easier to access and use them. They will also be indexed using a controlled vocabulary with key words so that users can search, locate and retrieve information.

The harmonized information base could be accessed via a shared home page. However, the conventions will also be encouraged to use common data and network protocols and standards that would make other categories of information on their respective sites interoperable. With these tools in place, each secretariat could then, if it so wished, adapt the design of its own information system so that information could be compared and harmonized directly via the existing convention web sites.

Because UNEP-WCMC combines biodiversity and convention expertise with strong IT skills, the project team agreed to invite WCMC to manage the technical aspects of the project. At the same time, the project will be conducted in a way that builds technical capacity within the secretariats so that they can implement knowledge management strategies over the longer term. Another priority will be to minimize any disruption to existing web sites and databases and to monitor how and by who the new harmonized information base is used.

Anticipated outcomes

The above project will establish the harmonized information base by May 2007. The outcomes and benefits of this work will include:

- Improved capacity of Parties and secretariats to manage and use the harmonized knowledge resources of the four conventions, leading to improved implementation of the conventions and agreements.
- Improved ability to ensure mutually supportive decisions and activities across the four conventions (for example, a more efficient collaboration on the 2010 targets, reduced duplication of work, easier identification of gaps).
- Significantly greater technical capacity of secretariats to develop and maintain knowledge management systems.
- Continued control by each convention and secretariat over its own information resources.
- Continued maintenance of the harmonized information base and the related software after the main development phase is concluded.
- A practical demonstration of the future potential for knowledge management and other collaborative projects amongst secretariats.
- A sound basis for raising additional funds for widening, deepening and sustaining the knowledge management system.
- A model for increased technical cooperation among the secretariats.

III – A vision for the longer term

This project is not intended to stand alone in splendid isolation. Over the coming years, the harmonized knowledge base it envisions will need to become increasingly interlinked with other UN and environmental information resources. Just as the Internet exploded out of obscurity in the early 1990s to become the dominant medium that it is today, knowledge management will evolve over the coming decade to become a universally used organizational tool for strategic management.

The Knowledge Management for Biodiversity project will therefore anticipate the benefits of linking up with similar efforts throughout the UN system and beyond. The chemicals and wastes cluster of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions, for example, could be a suitable early partner. The CBD has already taken steps to explore knowledge management with its sister Rio conventions, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The FAO and other UN organizations are also investing in knowledge management programmes.

The Knowledge Management for Biodiversity project will coordinate with the existing UNEP-facilitated project on Issues-Based Modules for the Coherent Implementation of Biodiversity Conventions. The project team would also like to encourage the Environmental Management Group (EMG), which is currently exploring knowledge management issues, to collaborate with and build on the present project as it seeks a way forward.

The links created by this and other knowledge management projects must be sustained, widened and deepened. While maintenance is not necessarily expensive, further fund raising will be key to future success. Developing the technical capacity of secretariats, investing in staff at UNEP and engaging UNEP-WCMC in project development are all possible ways forward.

In addition to drafting a proposal for Phase II of this project, over the coming months the project team will also elaborate a more detailed technological vision. The team also proposes that the bodies from which the workshop participants were drawn agree to formalize it as the MEA Knowledge Management Group, open for membership to other environmental conventions.

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IV – Appendix: Workshop participants and emails

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