

SDNP 1994 Strategy/Evaluation Report

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1. Introduction

1. SDN is a consultative process among national institutions from all sectors of society aimed at opening access to information for use in sustainable development planning and decision-making at all levels. The SDN Office in UNDP headquarters acts as a catalyst in the process and the UNDP country offices as full participants.
2. The idea for SDN originated in preparatory work for UNCED, which demonstrated clearly that countries would not be able to take responsibility for decisions concerning environmental sustainability without access to a sound information base and the tools to make use of it. UNDP accepted the challenge of developing SDN and established a small programme in 1992 with a headquarters secretariat and an allocation of resources for initiating country activities.
3. Since then eleven national or regional SDNs have come into operation and another thirteen are close to that stage. UNDP has defined a programme approach which involves discussions within the country initiated by the Resident Representative

and assessment missions by external consultants, followed by feasibility studies defined and executed by nationals. SDNs are managed by Steering Committees representing governments, NGOs, universities, the private sector and UNDP country offices. The process of defining SDNs and their work programmes is a participatory one. Initial emphasis has been placed on building network connections among national institutions and between them and global information sources. UNDP support is predicated upon the participation of a wide spectrum of institutions from different sectors of society, the agreement of participating institutions to open up their information resources to public use, and acceptance of the principle of sustainability through the incorporation of steps leading to cost recovery.

4. Enough experience has been accumulated, if not to evaluate SDN in terms of improved development decision-making, at least to identify the results of the network building process and to adjust the model as a consequence.
5. Adjusting the model, however, is probably less critical than determining the role that the SDN concept can play in UNDP and the level of UNDP commitment to the programme. It is these factors which will determine in turn the niche that UNDP can occupy among the increasing number of international organizations and national institutions in the industrialized world that are working on environment, development and information issues and the extent to which countries will turn to UNDP, with its unique structure of country offices and its broad development mandate, as a partner in their own endeavours to build information-based planning and decision-making capacities that reflect their own requirements for development, self-reliance and sustainability.
6. This report is not primarily an evaluation of the SDN programme. That programme within UNDP has been in existence for little more than two years and it is too early to pinpoint in more than an anecdotal way the impact of increased network participation and information use at the national level. The report will however attempt to trace the history and development, in operational terms, of the SDN concept and the processes behind it, and to position the programme within UNDP and within the international community of organizations dealing with information issues in relation to sustainable development. Sections 2 to 6 of the report define SDN, describe its origins and conceptual basis and show how the concept has been operationalized at the country level and in UNDP headquarters. Section 7 relates SDN to other international actors and suggests ways in which UNDP's role at this level can be reinforced. Section 8 addresses questions to UNDP and SDN management and recommends adjustments to the way the SDN model is implemented. Section 9 reviews SDN in relation to other UNDP programmes and plans, suggests how SDN can be used in a corporate context and discusses the location of the programme. Sections 10 and 11 review and make recommendations on funding and staffing issues. Section 12 summarizes the recommendations contained in the report and suggests, inter alia, the need for a broad advisory group to work with SDN and feed into UNDP thinking on a corporate information approach, particularly as it relates to services at the field level. Section 13 offers conclusions which are intended to justify continued UNDP support for SDN.

7. One recommendation can be made immediately: to change the name of the programme from Sustainable Development Network to Sustainable Development Networking to reflect two realities: the importance of the process of building consensus on the benefits of sharing information and the fact that SDN is not intended to be one network but a number of linked networks with gateways to global and specialized services.
 8. One reservation and one bias need to be stated at the outset.
 9. The reservation is that this report is not based on direct experience of SDNs at the national level. To be meaningful, field visits should have covered several countries where SDN initiatives had, and had not, been carried out. This was not feasible within time and budget constraints. Visiting only one or two selected SDNs might have added a veneer of credibility but would not have had substantial impact on the substance of the report. All operational SDNs were queried by fax or e-mail and the answers received reflected in this report.
 10. The bias is that of this consultant in favour of a focus not on whether the international community should promote programmes to improve access to information in the South but on how this can best be achieved. A more sustained effort is required than has been evidenced in the programmes of many United Nations agencies in the last decades.
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2. What is SDN?

11. "SDN aims at creating country-wide networks to provide information support to development activities in a sustainable fashion. Underlying a successful sustainable development network are: knowledge of the kinds of information people require for development decision-making; the capacity to obtain, assimilate and make available that information; and the establishment of connections among users and providers of information and people skilled in facilitating its use.
12. The SDN approach provides countries with the opportunity to focus on information as a tool for the empowerment of all sectors of society. It changes the direction of the traditional flow of information from the North to the South and provides developing countries with the tools to enable them to select information appropriate to their own assessment of their needs. It thereby promotes self reliance.
13. The involvement of local consultants and expertise mitigates in favour of sustainability."
14. The above three paragraphs provide neither an official nor a comprehensive definition of SDN. It was offered in

conversation with a member of the SDN Steering Committee from Cameroon. This Committee was created following a short prefeasibility mission organized by the SDN secretariat in UNDP New York and independently of any further UNDP input. Its membership includes government ministries, NGOs, national offices of international organizations, the UNDP country office and the University of Yaounde. It has defined the terms of reference for a full feasibility study to be undertaken by local consultants and is about to issue a call for tenders to initiate the study which will provide an overview of the national institutions and expertise that can contribute to information networking on development issues. The Cameroon initiative, and similar experiences in several other SDN countries, indicate how a relatively small UNDP investment can stimulate a communication process within a country when its objectives and methods coincide with national aspirations. It also demonstrates the independent and collaborative nature of the first phase of the SDN process at the country level.

15. SDN is representative of a new UNDP approach to development which focuses on broad participation of different segments of society (governments, NGOs, the private sector, community organizations, academia), and emphasizes the need for self reliance and sustainability. Among the consequences of this approach are slower decision-making and less central control, but the expectation is that the process itself will lead to changes in cultures of information use that are more deeply rooted in national and local societies. These changes in their turn should, in the long run, lead to more effective, information-based policy-making and planning.
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3. The Origins of SDN

16. The SDN concept was first articulated by Maurice Strong as a result of the preparatory work for UNCED. This process clearly revealed that if developing countries did not have access to information about the environment and its linkages with development issues it would be extremely difficult for them to be responsible and accountable for decisions affecting environmental sustainability. Institutional capacities would need to be enhanced and human skills developed to deal with information as well as with substantive environmental issues. In Strong's view, UNDP should take the lead in establishing a Sustainable Development Network which would assist developing countries in the move towards a form of sustainable development responsive to their own needs by facilitating access to "policies, technologies, know-how, management practices and human resources". The SDN should be a tool to: coordinate and mobilize national, regional and international resources; effect the communication linkages and consultative processes required to promote sustainable development; and support capacity building. The UNDP Administrator took up this theme and stated that the SDN would "link sources and users of information on sustainable development in government, research, non-governmental, and entrepreneurial

organizations on a global scale".

17. Chapter 40, the 'information chapter' of Agenda 21, called, inter alia, for the development of user friendly information services, shared information sources, the strengthening of electronic networks and the better use of indigenous knowledge.
 18. Unfortunately SDN was left dormant for a period in UNDP while other priorities, including preparing for UNCED and establishing the Global Environment Facility (GEF), took precedence. It was not until 1992 that the SDN Programme within UNDP was fully launched and attempts were made to elaborate the concept put forward by Mr Strong and reinforced by Mr Draper. The revival of SDN enabled UNDP to reaffirm its interest, in a relatively modest way, in building capacities to apply information to environment and development questions. When it did reenter the field in 1992 it found an increasing number of other institutions pursuing a similar goal.
 19. The development objective of SDN was defined as assistance to countries to access the sources of information and sound technologies that would enable and empower them to take care of their environments while improving economic growth for present and future generations.
 20. This objective was to be achieved through the establishment of networks linking institutions working on environmental and development issues at the national level for the purpose of facilitating access to national and global sources of information and promoting consultative processes among different segments of society.
 21. SDN will not build databases but will facilitate access to them; wherever possible, it will not create new networks but will link to existing ones.
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4. The Project Definition Process

22. SDN begins with the selection of countries to participate in the programme. The original criteria for participation were identified as: geographic spread; a mix of command, mixed and market economies; a variety of sectors and subsectors; a positive attitude on the part of host institutions; and a variety of levels of sophistication with respect to data handling capacities. Once the Capacity 21 Programme had been launched priority within that programme also became an important criterium. Before the SDN programme was operational in 1992, two commitments had already been made for UNDP assistance with information networking to Angola and the Philippines and these two countries were retained in the programme.
23. Within the above criteria it is the responsibility of the Resident Representative to explore with government and other institutions their interest in establishing an SDN based on

broad principles and guidelines:

- the problems to be addressed by the SDN must be clearly defined and widely shared by stakeholders in the development process;
- SDN will build wherever possible on existing networks; it will not create structures that compete with existing ones;
- the principle must be accepted that the network is to be demand driven; the needs of consumers of information must be identified and the network must respond to those needs;
- UNDP resources will be available for a limited period of time; countries will progressively assume responsibility for the financial and human resources needed to operate their national SDN; and
- planning will be participatory, to enable NGOs, private sector institutions, local and community representatives to fulfil their roles.

24. If the response from national institutions is positive, a consultant then visits the country, typically for two to three days, to explain the concept in more detail and to prepare the way for a fuller feasibility study.
 25. Ideally, at this stage, national institutions select members of an interim Steering Committee to define the terms of reference of the feasibility study and identify suitable national consultants to carry it out, with UNDP funding. The feasibility study will survey users, prepare an information needs assessment, identify the host organization for the SDN and prepare a project document outlining activities over an eighteen month to two year period.
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5. Regional and National SDNs

26. SDN projects are operational in Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Korea, the South Pacific, Angola, Tunisia, Bolivia, Honduras, Nicaragua and Estonia.
27. Projects are close to the operational phase in Cameroon, Chad, Morocco, Mozambique, China, India, Lebanon, Syria, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Mexico.
28. Projects are managed by SDN coordinators, selected by open competition. Host organizations for SDN units are selected on the basis of the feasibility study, with the agreement of the Steering Committee. They vary widely (IUCN in Pakistan, an NGO (the YMCA) in Korea, an office within the Ministry of the Environment in Indonesia and Bolivia, the UNDP office in Tunisia, a university in Angola, the National Library in Estonia, for example) but must have the confidence of participants in their neutrality vis-a-vis all sectors and their willingness to open up their own information resources.
29. Priority has been given in the first phase of SDN activity

to creating organizational structures and to establishing network connections that will allow participants to exchange information and ideas among themselves and access international sources of data, information and expertise. The technical aspects of networking, adapted to the level of communications infrastructure available in the countries, has taken early priority. But evidence is now beginning to show that the technology is being exploited to answer specific questions of immediate concern in countries where SDNs are more advanced. Bolivia for example recently received through its SDN comprehensive information about environmental legislation in Peru requested in connection with the government's new land use planning approach. The Philippines SDN has set up a Bulletin Board Service on biodiversity around four theme papers: the national strategy for biodiversity conservation; the Philippine wildlife trade; national integrated protected area laws; and the draft design of the biodiversity conservation information system.

30. UNDP inputs include salaries for the SDN Coordinator and staff of the SDN unit, equipment costs, training and, for the time being, in almost all cases, communication costs. UNDP's financial input for the first operational phase of SDN varies, but is usually between \$90,000 and \$125,000 annually.
 31. Since all SDN projects are considered to be activities within the overall project under which the headquarters unit operates, no project document is required against which project expenditures are approved. However, the SDN Director has insisted that project documents be prepared nevertheless to provide a guide to project implementation and to facilitate monitoring.
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6. The headquarters support role

32. SDN in UNDP headquarters supports national SDNs through international workshops, trouble shooting and technical support and through the identification of information, information sources and the variety of technologies needed to make SDNs operational under different circumstances.
33. Three international workshops have been held, a first to reexamine and redefine the initial SDN concept and two subsequently for the exchange of experience and training. Nineteen countries have participated in one or both of the training workshops.
34. SDN recognizes that trouble shooting should only be handled by New York as a last resort and is therefore identifying sources of support closer to the SDN sites. An agreement has recently been reached, for example, with the Economic Commission for Africa's Pan-African Development Information System (PADIS) to handle trouble shooting in Africa in cases where problems cannot be solved within the country. Networking support however is available from headquarters

where communication costs are often considerably lower than in the developing country SDN units; the SDN node connects on a daily basis to several SDNs to provide a mail drop-off and pick-up capability; UNDP is billed for the communications charges and it, in turn, bills the project.

35. In the early days of SDN, the intention was to provide standard sets of information and technologies (starter kits) to all SDNs but experience revealed that conditions and requirements varied too much, and technologies changed too fast, for this approach to be feasible. SDN has thus opted for the production of an Information Series which identifies appropriate hardware and software components and information sources. The first issue was published in 1994. Updates are planned.
36. UNDP has established an information service ('gopher') on the Internet, the world's most extensive network of institutions, information sources and individuals, which provides access to the full texts of a variety of UNDP and UN documents for SDNs which have interactive access to Internet and an entrance to other Internet information services.
37. The headquarters unit has, apart from its technical role, an important promotional role, within UNDP itself, within the UN system, among the many organizations supporting information work on the environment and development, and within countries. The introduction of communication and information technologies changes work methods and bureaucratic procedures in international organizations as elsewhere. Adaptation is required and the promotional approach needs to take this into account.
38. The SDN unit in New York includes three staff members: the director, a technical specialist who also handles all project work related to Latin America, and an administrative assistant. A 'stable' of consultants has been identified which allows for continuity and coherence in the preparatory work on national SDNs and the development of activities and tools which benefit the SDN community as a whole.

7. SDN in relation to other actors on the environment,
development and information scene

39. Twenty five organizations participated in a recent informal consultation on the above theme convened by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Many other organizations could have been invited. A number of networking activities are developing to facilitate coordination of the programmes dealing with the package of issues related to environment, development and information. UNDP should monitor these networks but does not have the capacity to take an active role in defining them or in developing inventories of existing initiatives.
40. The report of the meeting is useful for its identification of problems and descriptions of activities of all the participating institutions. But its real interest might lie in its demonstration of the increasing complexity of work

underway on information as it relates to environmental and development issues and the consequent need to develop partnerships in order to reduce risks of duplication and competition for the attention of countries. No single organization can implement its response to Chapter 40 of Agenda 21 independently; complementary approaches and collaborative partnerships will be required.

41. SDN has close working relationships with a number of organizations active in networking for development:
 - with IDRC, which has funded meetings, provided inputs to the first issue of the Information Series and is co-funding the Pakistan and India SDNs;
 - with the Rockefeller LEAD Programme in China where the same node will serve LEAD and SDN; LEAD is also interested in cooperating with SDNs in Russia and Indonesia where its promotional efforts have been helpful;
 - with CIESIN (the Consortium for International Earth Science Information Network) in China and Estonia; in the latter country SDN is hosted by the CIESIN network; and
 - with UNEP to provide access to INFOTERRA databases in African SDNs.
42. Approaches have been made to a number of other organizations, particularly donor agencies, to seek joint funding opportunities and partnerships.
43. The meeting noted a number of issues related to the implementation of the information components of Agenda 21 which had not yet been satisfactorily addressed and identified the following criteria for improving existing systems:
 - a meaningful participatory approach;
 - effective feedback loops to encourage two-way flows of information;
 - cost-effectiveness through a better understanding of benefits and costs;
 - attention to particular needs of different types of users; and
 - the development of the 'information broker' role to help interpret, manage, filter and add value to available information.
44. The meeting singled out SDN as fulfilling these criteria and recommended it as a functional model. UNDP is, therefore, in the opinion of its peer organizations, meeting an important need with SDN.
45. While UNDP is active on this particular international scene, there are doubts among the other players about the 'sustainability' of UNDP's effort. The niche that it has identified for itself is concrete country level programmes; other models have not been developed to effectively address questions at this level in a participatory fashion. But the process is a long one and the coverage very far from worldwide. The international community is looking for indications as to whether UNDP is willing to target enough countries, and to support SDNs long enough, for there to be clear results in terms of the value of network participation and the new information tools in a development decision-making context which is profoundly multisectoral and which involves a wide range of actors at the national level.

46. UNDP could strengthen its hand by forging partnerships close to home. It could, for example, work more closely with CSD (Committee on Sustainable Development) to ensure that all country reports and other CSD documentation are available to SDNs through the UNDP's Internet 'Gopher' or on diskette. This would be useful to national institutions and to UNDP's own country offices. It should similarly ensure that all UN bodies that are publishing relevant information in electronic form are offered the same opportunity to bring their information to the attention of national and regional SDNs.
 47. In addition, UNDP could put more emphasis on encouraging all UN country offices to participate in national SDNs. These two steps could represent a real breakthrough in terms of the delivery of information from UN information sources to the countries which, after all, contribute substantially to the development of these resources.
 48. UNEP represents a special case both because of its area of responsibility within the UN system and because of the emphasis it has put on building information services. Care should be taken that SDN and UNEP initiatives never compete at the country level and that INFOTERRA participate in the building of SDNs. Current levels of cooperation clearly work well in some countries but not in all. Top level leadership in both organizations may be needed to encourage partnership at the country level and override technical differences.
 49. But, in the final analysis, SDN will not attract additional partners unless UNDP is seen to be standing behind the programme for a reasonable period of time.
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8. Operational Issues for consideration by UNDP and

Management

50. The SDN concept has earned respect on the international scene and the national SDN networking process is beginning to show information results in countries where the earlier SDNs were established. The proposals made here are for adjustments to SDN methods and not for a new approach. They are not prescriptions but ideas to be explored with participating institutions in the process of developing SDNs.

8.1 SDN and Sustainable Development

51. The broad issue of sustainable development is the focus of the networking activity supported by the programme and UNDP encourages a close link between the SDN and the country's national programme for Agenda 21. But the nature of the institutions making up the networks determines the information flows. As long as the networks are created through a participatory process within the country which is not controlled by UNDP, the definition of development that

drives the flow of information through the network will similarly reflect national interests. UNDP might want to consider whether it will accept the degree of autonomy in SDNs which now exists or whether it should take a more active role in ensuring that network members correspond to a profile that more nearly reflects its own conception of sustainable human development. In the final analysis, the participation of the Resident Representative in the Steering Committee will help ensure overall consistency between the SDN and UNDP's broad goals.

8.2 Focus and coverage

52. SDN lives in the real world of limited resources. With eleven operational SDNs and thirteen more close to the end of the pipeline, funds for any one country are necessarily limited. The question then arises as to whether to narrow the focus of the programme to provide substantial support to a few countries where maximum demonstration effect could be achieved or whether to aim for broad coverage but with more limited inputs. The danger of the former course is that countries with a relatively sophisticated technological infrastructure would tend to benefit most. SDN participants have expressed strong reservations about this approach and recommended that UNDP support a range of countries at varying levels of economic development and with different networking needs.
53. Networking is primarily a human activity which can be supported, but not substituted, by computers and communication technologies; a broader more flexible approach reflects the need to address networking issues from both human and technical perspectives. Instead of focusing only on the countries with the best chances for sophisticated networking success, therefore, the SDN Office should continue with a broad and varied approach, but make every effort to contain costs, to enter into partnerships with other international organizations and to use the increasing pool of SDN coordinators to replace international staff in prefeasibility and other consulting missions. The interest of countries, of the Resident Representatives and of the newly appointed sustainable development advisers should to be critical factors in selecting SDN countries.

8.3 Information and Information Technologies

54. Much of the emphasis in the existing SDN has been on the creation of connectivity among national institutions and the provision of communication links to the outside world in order to provide access to information and to electronic mail and conferencing services. This is an important condition for the exchange of information which enables institutions to tap into external expertise and some sources of information. However, much relevant development information is available locally, some of it stored in databases, on occasion built through technical cooperation projects. In defining SDN projects it may be time to encourage participating institutions to move more actively towards incorporating local information sources, in machine-readable, audio-visual and paper form, more effectively into the information exchange mechanisms.

8.4 Salaries

55. Criticism has already been leveled at SDN for taking on too much load in the way of salaries for project staff. Most national SDN offices are staffed by one or two people; two are considerably larger: Pakistan with an intended staff of ten and the Philippines with five. Apart from questions of cost, the more staff that are covered by UNDP budgets the less likely it is that the SDN will be sustained after UNDP resources are withdrawn. UNDP recognizes this potential problem and has thus insisted that SDNs be managed on a business-like basis and seek possibilities for cost recovery, but, under the most optimistic scenarios, it will be difficult to generate sufficient income in the early years to sustain services, particularly if large numbers of staff are involved.
56. Ideally, SDNs should be located in existing institutions where staff are already available and where the SDN mission conforms to the existing mandate. UNDP resources would then be allocated to the strengthening of human skills and technical infrastructure rather than to salaries. While this approach will not always, or even perhaps often, be feasible, whenever it is it should be the option of choice.

8.5 National Telecommunications Policies

57. Attempts to broaden access to telecommunications services is likely on occasion to challenge national telecommunications policies. Telecommunications costs are high, in some cases because high-end services subsidize the broad spread of basic infrastructure to areas not yet served at all. The issues are complex and the developmental implications of electronic communications not yet fully understood. The SDN Office has had preliminary discussion with ITU in an attempt to seek guidance on telecommunications policy issues. It is time to try to bring ITU more formally into the process so that advice and technical support can be obtained for SDNs on complex policy issues as required.

8.6 Evaluation of SDN

58. SDN is both a process and an outcome. The process of building consensus in support of open access to information challenges cultures of information management and secrecy and of lack of information use. The process therefore is likely to be a slow and the results difficult to evaluate. The recent Independent Review of Capacity 21 suggested that effecting permanent changes in public attitudes and behaviour can take as long as a generation and that UNDP may have underestimated "what was required to support longterm national dialogues involving not just governments but broad segments of civil societies". To expect that SDNs would already show measurable results in terms of the impact of information use on development decision-making is therefore unrealistic. It is not, however, unrealistic to build into SDN projects indicators of success in terms of numbers of network members, their representativity, their activeness in network management and policy, the scope and quality of their databases and information collections, the numbers of questions processed through the networks, the degree of satisfaction with the results, users willingness to pay for services and so forth. Some of these indicators have been identified in project documents. Future feasibility studies should systematically address the question of the means by

which the success of the network can be measured and monitored; the resulting information should be made available to UNDP so that the programme as a whole can be evaluated at some future time.

8.7 Management

59. Overall management of the SDN project is in the hands of the New York unit which authorizes expenditures for review and execution by OPS. Management of the substantive work of the national SDNs is the responsibility of the coordinator and the Steering Committee. Both the size of the New York secretariat and the capacity building nature of the project work in favour of a decentralized management approach. The UNDP country office is a participant in the national SDN and a member of the Steering Committee. It therefore has a particular responsibility to ensure that the process remains participatory and to alert the New York unit when its intervention may be needed to reinforce this requirement, for example for regular Steering Committee meetings and project reports.

8.8 Language

60. The language of SDN is English. Producing all SDN materials in other international languages would add considerably to costs and administrative overhead. A case can be made that English may be adequate to the technological aspects of the project but it will not be sufficient to ensure that key information is made widely available within countries, nor that particularly interesting material in national languages receives an international audience. Some capability should be built into SDN units to summarize critical material in the national languages or in English, depending on the direction of the information flow.

8.9 Communication of the SDN message

61. SDN has issued a number of brochures and organized presentations in UNDP to explain the concept and the programme. However, SDN is not yet well understood and is often perceived as a technology-driven rather than an information-driven activity. More work needs to be done to explain the supporting nature of technology and the developmental value of communications facilities and the information and expertise to which they provide access. Better communication within UNDP could also lead to more opportunities for joint action, for example with the UN Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO).
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9. Organizational issues within UNDP

62. SDN is a small programme but it deals with global issues within UNDP and thus can benefit from exchanges with many parts of the house on substantive and on logistical questions. UNDP interest in the programme is seen as a measure of its broader interest in exploiting information

and communication technologies in support of sustainable development. What follows is not an exhaustive catalogue of all units within UNDP whose involvement with SDN is or could be beneficial (OPS, for example, is not included although it plays a crucial role in delivering expertise and material to SDN sites) but it attempts to identify the main players and the main issues of concern on an organization wide basis.

9.1 SDN and UNDP's Corporate Information Role

63. SDN has, from its inception, involved UNDP country offices as key participants in national networks; in rare cases the UNDP office serves as the node for the national SDN.
64. Other UNDP initiatives are moving in the direction of a more active information role for country offices, in particular the Administrator's call for them to provide a service to countries on behalf of the UN system as a whole. UN information services are built in many cases on information and data provided by countries to contribute to global comparative databases, to meet reporting needs on international conventions and agreements and to provide input into development research. Much of this development information is more easily available within the international system than within the countries that supplied it originally. The system of UN Information Centres (UNICs) and depository arrangements with libraries and documentation centres has not succeeded in providing effective local access. UN information is largely wasted in terms of development decision-making at the national and local levels.
65. The availability of much of the system's information in electronic form affords new opportunities to solve this old problem. UNDP is uniquely positioned because of its network of country offices, its communications infrastructure and its central role in the UN development system. The SDN experience, with its emphasis on participatory processes involving users and producers of information to promote access to information sources, could provide a helpful model. Any new services offered by country offices will benefit from an organized and experienced user community. Identifying UNDP offices as SDN coordinators in a select number of countries with different levels of technological infrastructure could maximize UNDP investments in computer and communication technologies in its field structure by reinforcing its substantive information role, in its own interests and those of its national constituencies. This linkage between SDN and the country offices to promote UNDP goals would necessitate more active interest in the programme from the regional departments and senior management.

9.2 Capacity 21 and SDN

66. Capacity 21 is a broad international programme in support of countries' efforts to achieve development without destroying the resources on which it depends through national programmes that adopt the principles of Agenda 21. The programme is managed by UNDP with the backing of the UN system and major donor agencies. It involves policy review, analysis of institutional capacity, the development of participatory processes, and consensus building. In countries where Capacity 21 is active it has found its work

impeded by lack of information. Many SDN countries are also priority countries for Capacity 21. It is logical therefore that there should be close links between Capacity 21 and SDN and these links exist. When Capacity 21 identifies that SDN responds to a country's own vision of its development needs it earmarks funds for an SDN programme. Capacity 21 has provided critical financial and conceptual inputs into SDN. The SDN Director sits on the Capacity 21 Management Committee. The Directors of both Capacity 21 and SDN believe that the existing level of cooperation works well.

67. The question nevertheless arises as to whether SDN, which is a small programme currently housed with UNDP's Global and Interregional Programmes, would be more effective if it were housed in Capacity 21. This would have the advantage of clarifying the relationship between the two programmes which appears to cause some confusion in UNDP and therefore probably also at the country level.
68. The disadvantage of this association is that it would link SDN more closely with an environmental approach to sustainable development when the reality of its networks at the country level represents a broader concept.

9.3 SIDSNET and SDN

69. UNDP has been asked by the Global Conference on Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) to undertake a study to help these countries: gain access to relevant information to support policy-making and planning related to sustainable development; develop the capacity to use these resources; and increase collaborative mechanisms through which experiences and resources can be shared in areas of common concern. SDN is managing this study within UNDP and is carrying it out with a number of consultants from existing SDNs. SIDSNET at the moment is consuming 100% of the time of the Director of SDN. If SIDSNET takes off and follows the SDN model it could put an additional workload on the SDN Office in New York that would be difficult to absorb. SIDSNET and SDN are closely related but they are not the same. Specific approaches developed in the context of small island states are not likely to be broadly applicable elsewhere. If SDN is expected to take responsibility for follow up to the SIDSNET study additional resources would be required if SDN activities in the rest of the world are to be maintained.

9.4 DAIS and SDN

70. The Division for Administrative and Information Services is responsible for UNDP's central computer and telecommunications service and support. SDN at headquarters has purchased its own computer to support its own communications needs and those of national SDNs. During frequent missions to the field, and because of the UNDP country offices central role in some SDNs, SDN staff are asked to provide technical advice and support to the field. This leads to occasional tensions with DAIS which is required to maintain UNDP corporate standards and recover costs from user units. These tensions are a part of the transition in today's world from central to decentralized approaches to computing and communications. They need to be controlled through frequent communication and mutual

understanding rather than through regulation.

71. DAIS has no desire to swallow SDN. It accepts that a certain amount of diversity is a feature of today's landscape; it is the provision of services and facilities that is important, not by whom they are provided. However it is important that once services are in place, particularly at the field level, that all parts of UNDP can take advantage of them and that competition ceases. Some mechanism, although probably not a formal one, needs to ensure that information flows regularly between SDN and DAIS on technical issues.

9.5 The location of SDN

72. SDN is now located within the Division of Global and Inter-regional Programmes. This Division, in the current restructuring of UNDP, will cease to exist and will be replaced, at least in part by a Division of Science and Technology which will be one of four substantive and advocacy divisions within the Bureau for Programming, Planning and Support. The other divisions cover management technologies; poverty, NGOs and participation; and the environment and natural resources. The present suggestion is that SDN be attached to Environment. An alternative would be to attach it to Science and Technology. The disadvantage of the former is that it might associate SDN too closely with environmental issues whereas in fact it represents a broader approach to sustainable development. The disadvantage of the latter is that it might reinforce the view that SDN is driven by technology rather than by information needs. A third alternative might be to locate SDN at the Bureau level where the documentation and statistics function is located and which would associate SDN conceptually with all four programme areas. The advantage of all three locations is that SDN could share clerical support with a larger unit thus perhaps obviating the need for additional clerical staff within SDN itself.
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10. SDN Costs and Funding

73. SDN is a global project within the framework of which individual country projects are identified and funded. Three project documents illustrate the financial history of the project. INT/92/028 provided \$245000 from DGIP to carry the headquarters component of the project from May 1, 1992 to June 30, 1993. INT/92/204 provided \$1200000 from January 1, 1992 to December 31, 1993 from the Special Programme Reserve (BPPE) for pilot national programmes to be designed and managed by the resident representatives. An additional \$126000 supplemented this project to bridge country operations from July 1 to September 30, 1993. INT/93/006 combined the headquarters and field components into a single project with a total of \$1588000 allocated for the fifteen month period from October 1 1993 to 31 December 1994 of which \$1004000 were to come from the Special Programme Reserve (BPPE) and \$584000 from DGIP, Capacity 21 and CEO. Of this total allocation, \$411000 covers the salary costs of

the three New York-based staff.

74. The project has thus received a total allocation of \$3159000 for the three year period from 1992 to 1994.
 75. Additional resources have been made available, notably through the IPFs which are expected to cover 25% of the cost of SDNs in their countries. SDN would like to see a larger proportion of SDN costs covered by IPFs as a demonstration of national commitment to the networks. CAP 21 funds are allocated in countries where SDN corresponds to the countries' own assessment of their needs in relation to national Agenda 21 programmes. Other organizations have also contributed: IDRC to the first issue of the Information Series and to the Pakistan SDN (and the planned SDN in India); CIESIN in the form of the basic network infrastructure in Estonia; Rockefeller, equipment in China.
 76. The problem of the SDN is less one of financial resources and more one of financial stability. The less-than-three-year period during which the project has been staffed and operational has seen two projects of fourteen and fifteen months, with a bridging period of three months between them. Management has therefore spent a good deal of time and energy presenting the case for continued funding. When management constitutes fifty percent of the professional staff this represents a considerable drain on project activities. It has also contributed to the doubts that are expressed by UNDP's partner organizations in its capacity to sustain the concept of SDN for a sufficient period of time to test the benefits it can bring to countries struggling with new approaches to development.
 77. The case was put earlier in this report that it is too soon to evaluate the substantive results of SDN. Indications were also provided to suggest that the focus of the more established SDNs is beginning to move from the technological infrastructure to the use of communications facilities to obtain information to meet defined needs. UNDP therefore should stand behind SDN with a project of sufficient duration to allow for confidence to build, within the SDN Office itself, in countries, in UNDP country offices and in other international organizations. A three year commitment beginning in January 1995 is probably the minimum that is required. The operational budget should reflect the need to sustain existing SDNs and initiate a realistic number of new ones. What is realistic will be conditioned, inter alia, by UNDP's overall posture with respect to information and communications and the need to implement SDNs in enough countries in different circumstances to allow for assessment of transferability of the models developed.
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11. SDN Staffing

78. SDN has three staff members: a Director, a Technical Adviser and an Administrative assistant/Secretary. Even for a unit which relies extensively on electronic means for producing

documents and communicating information, resources are not adequate to sustain programmes that are underway, administer initial consultancies and feasibility studies and promote the programme at the country level and in the international community. The programming and administrative workload is such that the technical adviser is now spending most of his time on this rather than on technical support. Remaining up-to-date on technical issues is important if SDNs are to be built in as cost-effective and efficient a manner as possible.

79. To sustain any kind of growth in SDN country coverage will require an additional technical adviser, with more skills in the area of information to complement the technology skills of the adviser who is presently on the team. An additional junior clerical staff member is also required to allow the present administrative assistant to take over the administrative tasks currently handled by the two professional staff.
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12. Recommendations: Elements of a Strategy

80. The following recommendations are, for the most part, spelt out in more detail in the report. The first set is addressed to UNDP. The second set deals with the relationship between SDN and the rest of the international community, including the United Nations. The final set summarizes the operational aspects of SDN dealt with in more detail in section 8.

12.1 Recommendations addressed to UNDP

81. UNDP should continue to fund SDN on a project basis for a minimum period of three years. The staff resources should be increased by 1 professional post and some general service assistance. Both measures are needed to provide credibility not only for SDN, but also for UNDP's overall commitment to actions to improve access to information for development decision-makers from all sectors and at all levels in developing countries. Depending upon the rate of growth of the programme, additional staff resources may need to be considered before the end of the three year period.
82. This three year period should be followed by an evaluation of SDN and a decision as to whether it should be 'mainstreamed' within UNDP through the more systematic integration of information and communication tools into development approaches.
83. UNDP should create an advisory group through which SDN experience can be more effectively shared with related programmes and SDN can learn of relevant initiatives elsewhere. This group should include GEF, Capacity 21, the Regional Bureaux, DAIS, UNSO and the Documentation and Statistics Office of BPPS. It could contribute to an integrated UNDP approach to information and provide useful input into definitions of a future information role for

UNDP.

84. UNDP should consider creating pilot SDNs in which its country offices play a major role in order to progressively test their capabilities with respect to information service and different approaches to information access.

12.2 Recommendations in respect of the International Community

85. SDN should make maximum use of networks that share information on the activities of the international community working at the intersection of development, environmental and information issues.
86. SDN should continue to develop partnerships with institutions that share its basic principles of participatory approaches, broad institutional involvement and sustainability.
87. SDN should not take a lead in coordinating international activities.
88. SDN should reinforce its links, in directions identified in this report, within the UN and in particular with UNEP, ITU and CSD.

12.3 Recommendations concerning the operation of SDN

89. The SDN approach to network building is participatory. UNDP should accept that this will lead to information exchange related to broad and varied concepts of development determined by network members and that those concepts will change over time.
90. The selection of countries to participate in SDNs should not be limited to countries most likely to implement successfully high level networking technologies. Countries at all levels of development should be included in the programme.
91. More focus should be put on the information components rather than the technology components of the network, and, in particular, on drawing local information into the exchange process. More information expertise should be used in advisory missions.
92. Efforts should be made to identify existing organizations whose mandate matches that of SDN coordinator in order to reduce the salary component of project costs.
93. Indicators allowing for evaluation should be identified at the feasibility stage and implemented in SDN work programmes.
94. UNDP country offices should monitor SDNs and alert SDN/NY to any project difficulties.
95. SDNs should try to recruit national offices of other UN system organizations into the network. SDN/NY should offer to incorporate UN system information into the services it provides centrally.

96. SDNs should include a capability to translate key materials between international and national languages.
 97. SDN/NY should continue its efforts to explain SDN within UNDP.
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13. Conclusions

98. SDN is proving itself to be useful and appreciated in most countries where it is operational. Enthusiasm exists in countries where initial contact has been made. The programme has earned the respect of its international partners.
 99. Two realities suggest that it is worth continued UNDP investment.
 100. New approaches to development recognize that effective decision-making requires broad community participation and multidisciplinary inputs. SDN creates a space for interaction and information exchange for actors from all sectors of society and provides opportunities for cutting across disciplinary lines.
 101. New technologies have the potential to link people, institutions and information and break down institutional, disciplinary and geographic barriers in ways that we are only beginning to explore but which may radically alter approaches to problem solving and planning. These tools are easily available in the North. SDN is experimenting with them in the South.
 102. UNDP is the only international organization that has a comprehensive structure of field offices with basic communications infrastructure in place and a mandate to support the UN system's operational activities for development.
 103. It is almost inevitable that UNDP will develop a corporate approach to information for development within the context of the UN system. That will take some time. In the meantime, SDN should be maintained and the lessons learned incorporated in any future UNDP programme. The cost of stopping SDN and developing a new approach from scratch will be much higher than the cost of sustaining the programme and using the experience gained to nurture future initiatives.
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UNDP

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ANNEX 2: Request for information to be sent by fax to all SDNs listed in Current Events:

Pakistan, Philippines, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Honduras, Suva, Angola (?), Indonesia, Estonia (?)

Consultation with SDNs

UNDP is undertaking an internal study of the SDN operations in order to help it better define its future role in the SDN programme. Because of the limited time available site visits are not included in this exercise; we would however very much like to solicit the views of those involved in national SDN processes on the issues that are identified below. The consultant who is preparing the review is Kate Wild, who has long experience with information systems and development issues in IDRC and the ILO. She will be at UNDP from July 19 to the 29th and will try to contact you by phone during that period. It would however, be extremely useful if you could fax your responses to the following questions in order to facilitate further discussion.

1. When did discussions on SDN begin in your country or region?
2. What motivated those discussions: desire to increase access to information about sustainable development; desire to improve the technical infrastructure and human skills required for communication within your country or region; desire to initiate a process of consultation and dialogue on sustainable development issues? Other motivations?

If your response includes a mixture of the above points can you assess the relative weight of each?

3. How frequently does your SDN Steering committee meet? How many meetings have been held? Have other forums been used to bring SDN members together?
4. How many members does your SDN contain? How many are active providers of information to other members of the SDN and active users of information from SDN sources? Please give several examples of information queries dealt with within the SDN. Can you indicate the number of queries dealt with through the coordinating centre of your SDN each week?
5. Of the total membership, how many are:
 - government organisations;
 - ngos;
 - universities;
 - other research centres;
 - private sector institutions.

6. Please identify the priority sustainable development issues to be addressed by your SDN.
 7. In addressing those issues can you give priority to information from local, national, regional or international sources?
 8. Please identify the main networking problems faced by your SDN; are they:
 - technical: absence of telecommunication links, computer hardware, software, etc;
 - financial: lack of resources to invest in communications infrastructure etc;
 - human: lack of skills to make use of computer communications technologies; lack of time to devote to networking issues; little culture of information sharing and use, etc.;
 - organisational institutional barriers to the free exchange of information;
 - any other problems?
 9. Please identify the main achievements of your SDN in terms of:
 - information provision; and
 - the process of consultation.
 10. Please identify any major disappointments you have encountered in developing your SDN.
 11. Please describe the reasons for your own commitment to SDN.
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ANNEX 3: Documentation produced by SDN HQ

UNDP, Workshop on the Sustainable Development Network, 8-10 September 1992, New York, Workshop Report; NY 30 September, 1992

Brochure: The Sustainable Development Network; UNDP; March (?) 1993. Inserts: Current Events and Future Happenings, 3 to date.

UNDP, IDRC; Sustainable Development Network. Starter Kit and Coordinators Workshop, 8-12 February 1993 Ottawa, NY April, 1993

UNDP; Sustainable Development Network; Starter Kit and Coordinators Workshop; 6-11 December 1993. Bombay.

UNDP, IDRC; Sustainable Development Network, SDN Information Series. First release, March, 1994

Electronic Sources of Information provided by UNDP

UNDP Gopher Server: through UNDP documents option in main gopher menu; for users with full Internet connectivity;

SDN FTP Server: experimental for users with full Internet connectivity

SDN Mail Server. for all sites that have e-mail access to Internet.

selected information on diskette

ANNEX 4: Selection of Other Documents Consulted

Information and Agenda 21: Report of an Informal Consultation on Environment Development and Information, 11-12 April, 1994, IDRC, Ottawa, 1994

Independent Review of Capacity 21, prepared for Capacity 21 by M. Khalikane and H. Macdonald Stewart, May 1994

The Sustainable Development Network: Progress Report with Recommendations, C. Rajana, S. Ruth, May 1993

Study on the Optimal Configuration of the UNDP Sustainable Development Network for the Philippines (SDN-Philippines), prepared by S. D. Talsayon, Asian Center, University of the Philippines, UNDP, Manila, 1991

Feasibility Study of a Sustainable Development Network, Egypt, S. Youssef et al American University, UNDP, Cairo, 1993

Study on the Development of a Sustainable Development Network, Tunisia, E. Ben Hamidi, M. Cracknell, ENDA Inter-Arabe, UNDP, Tunis, 1993 (?)

Capacity 21 Management Report, synopsis of Programmes, UNDP 1994 (?)

The Sustainable Development Network, Progress Reports 1-8, June 1992-April 1994, SDN

Summary Report of the UNDP Global Meeting, Rye, 21-25 March, 1994

UNDP: A Charter for Change, Part I, Vision and Goals, Part II, Management Challenges, Working Paper by a Transition Team of UNDP Staff. October 1993

