

The Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP),

by Raul Zambrano 1994

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Access to adequate sources of information for both decision makers and members of civil society is key for the understanding and implementation of sustainable development. However, for a variety of reasons, access in developing countries is limited and finding information on crucial topics is difficult.

The rapid development of information technologies and information systems has facilitated access to information sources at relatively low costs. A few developing countries are now taking advantage of the new situation by connecting to the Internet. But still access to all sectors of society within each country remains a problem. The Sustainable Development Networking Programme is a UNDP initiative that addresses these issues.

SDNP links users and suppliers of information related to sustainable development via computer mediated communications on a participatory basis.

Background

The concept of SDNP was initially developed in 1989. At that time, the key problem was to provide access to adequate information sources for policy and decision makers. The 1992 UNCED (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) conference changed this perception. In the first place, the conference adopted Agenda 21, a plan of action on environment and development signed by almost all members countries.

Chapter 40 of Agenda 21 directly addresses the information and networking concerns that SDNP had as initial goals. Secondly, NGOs and other civil society sectors became main actors in the process of sustainable development. Thus, SDNP incorporated them into the project. In 1993, UNDP launched Capacity 21, the initiative that follows up the implementation of Agenda 21 in developing countries. SDNP has been linked to this initiative since then. Most SDNP African projects are being financed from this fund.

Principles

The implementation of SDNP in any developing country is based in the following principles:

- Participatory process: involves all sectors of society (government, NGOs, business, etc.)
- Complementarity: seeks national partners with similar goals; avoids duplication of efforts.
- Appropriate technology: countries are provided computer and networking technologies that are adequate for existing infrastructure and available of qualified human resources.

- Catalytic funding: UNDP's financial support is limited; sustainability of the project is emphasized since its very beginning;
- Ownership: project is owned and run by nationals.
- Round table approach: provides a meeting place for stakeholders to meet and discuss relevant issues.
- Capacity building: creation of the necessary body of expertise at the national level.

Organizational Structure

The participatory character of SDNP requires of an organizational mechanism that provides representation and access to all sectors of society. With this purpose an SDNP Steering Committee (or a similar entity) is formed in which perhaps one or two members of each sector of society are represented. The SC works on an ad hoc basis and has a variety of activities ranging from simple administrative tasks to policy issues and matters related to sustainable development. Usually, the SC meet once every two or three months. The SC also represents all the users and providers of information that are part of SDNP. Users with specific demands and problems can then bring proposals, etc., to the SC for implementation.

The project has a National Coordinator which is the person that runs the whole operation. The National Coordinator is essentially the project manager and has some professional background on sustainable development issues. The Coordinator has under his supervision a small staff of people consisting of a networking specialist and, if needed, an information systems specialist. Implementation Process SDNP has developed a methodology for the implementation of the project at the national level. One of the first steps is the elaboration of the pre-feasibility study. An international consultant (or an SDNP staff member) visit the country that has previously shown interest on SDNP and requires assistance in starting the process.

With the help of the local UNDP office, a meeting in which all sectors of society are invited is organized. The consultant presents and explains to this group of people the SDNP concept and determines the level of interest, etc.. The consultant will also try to identify potential national key players potential members of SDNP's Steering Committee, and potential candidates for the implementation of the full feasibility study. A positive evaluation of the pre-feasibility study by UNDP leads to the implementation of the feasibility study. For this study national consultants are used.

The study itself does the following: survey of users and suppliers of information; identification of key institutions involved with sustainable development; survey of national connectivity and networking efforts; identification of potential host sites for SDNP node identification of costs for a national SDNP.

The study is usually implemented by two national consultants and takes, on average, 2 months to be finalized. The study is then presented to the Steering Committee for discussion and evaluation. The SDNP unit in New York will also provides comments and revisions if necessary. A UNDP project document based on the results of the study is written and approved by UNDP New York. The national coordinator is recruited and the project implementation starts according to the work plan established in the project document.

Connectivity and Internet Access

To date, about 40 developing countries are connected to the Internet. In several of these, access is limited to the academic sector and perhaps government institutions.

There is almost no access for other sectors of civil society. In addition, some countries can only get 9.6k connections to the Internet which seriously limit both use by many users and access to the more sophisticated Internet tools. Internet connectivity in developing countries faces the following problems:

- High costs: on the average, a 64kbps connection to the Internet (if available) costs US 8,000 per month. Several countries with no capacity for 64k circuits offer instead 9.6k connections for roughly the same amount. Equipment costs are of at least US 30,000. Existing infrastructure: many developing countries still lack the necessary infrastructure to support Internet connectivity (digital telephone lines, digital circuits, etc.). PTT/PTOs play a crucial role here.
- Human resources: most developing countries do not have a national body of expertise to support and disseminate networking and information systems. Not there is any support for education end users.
- National networking: Internet connectivity per se is not the solution to information access to all sectors of society. Building a national network is even more crucial for both national development and long term sustainability.
- Entry barriers: PTT/PTOs tariffs and policies can prevent many users from accessing services; in a few countries the NGO sector is seen as part of the commercial (non-academic) sector and is thus subject to commercial rates and no access at all. Tariffs set by the PTT/PTOs might be even higher if large capital expenses are required for upgrading national telecommunications infrastructure.
- Information sources: information exchange and dissemination is the key element in the process - and not just basic Internet connectivity. The identification and dissemination of both national and international information sources in what gives the process its real content.
- Connections to the Internet should be seen as a process in time in which these and other factors play a substantial role. In particular, connections should be sustainable in the long run and should be paid by nationals who can share the existing resources. Alternative access methods to the Internet (UUCP, other store and forward systems) are excellent short run solutions that help start the process of creating a critical mass of users that will eventually help support and maintain Internet access.
- Capacity Building: As mentioned before, one of the main targets of SDNP is the creation of the national body of expertise to implement, support and sustain the process of information dissemination and exchange in the context of sustainable development. This includes the following: Training in the use of information technologies for specialized personnel; training of end users trainers. Training of end users in information sources (where to look for information, etc.).

SDNP nodes emphasize meta-information to facilitate this and creates catalogs and directories of information relevant to sustainable development, according to the needs and requirements set by the feasibility study. Training of end users in how to use information obtained through the network. Capacity building at all these levels will provide the necessary basis for long term sustainability and national ownership of the process. SDNP in Africa. At the moment, SDNP has 4 operational nodes

in the African continent. They are:

- Angola, E-mail FIDO
- Chad, UUCP (planned)
- Morocco, UUCP (planned)
- Tunisia, E-mail Internet

Activities have already started in three other countries as follows:

- Cameroon, Feasibility Study, June
- Malawi, Pre-feasibility Study, September
- Mozambique Pre-feasibility, September

Three additional projects are expected to start within the next few months. Country selection will be made on the basis of the recommendations that the Capacity 21 unit will make in the near future. Thus, a total of 10 African initiatives will be supported by SDNP for the next two or three years with the required funding.

Conclusions

Many international organizations are now starting to work in networking and related initiatives at both the national and regional levels. This is, without doubt, long overdue and excellent news at the same time. However, there seems that duplications of efforts is indeed occurring. Thus then need for donor organizations to initiate a collaborative effort in the field -and not at headquarters. SDNP has been active for almost three years now and has sought, whenever possible, partnerships and other collaboration efforts with other institutions at both the national and international level.

Donor funds are now more scarce than ever before and the forecast for the next 3 to 5 years is also bleak. In a climate of decreasing funds and budget cuts it will be difficult to support all on going activities and well as those in the pipeline. Now more than ever collaboration (and probably direct cooperation) between donor organizations is becoming a necessity. Channelling funds and projects in this way will produce better results and, at the same time, maximize the effective use of scarce funds. And this is of crucial importance for the African continent.

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