

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The phrase ‘information management capacity’ means different things to different people. To some, it applies only to the hardware and software necessary to build databases and information systems. To others, it encompasses the political commitment, constructive policies and public support necessary to apply information to the resolution of environmental concerns. This document employs a pragmatic definition of information management capacity, namely the direct assets available to an organisation in terms of its **data**, **expertise** and **facilities**, and indirect assets in the form of **management systems** and **partnerships** with other organisations (see Box 1).

Direct assets are relatively easy to quantify, since they are physical in nature and can be documented. Indirect assets, which serve to consolidate the direct assets, are more subjective in nature. For example, two organisations with roughly similar data, expertise and facilities may perform very differently due to variations in the quality of their management systems, although it may be difficult to quantify exactly why. An organisation’s management systems dictate the efficiency of everything from task allocation and scheduling, to project design, strategic planning and cooperation with external partners. If the systems work, then all of these aspects run smoothly; if they don’t, then productivity may suffer.

## **Box 1 Elements of information management capacity**

### **Direct assets**

- Comprehensive data on appropriate themes.
- Expertise and facilities to store, maintain and quality-assure data.
- Expertise and facilities to integrate, interpret and convert data into information.
- Expertise and facilities to compile and communicate information to users.

### **Indirect assets**

- Management systems and procedures to coordinate information production.
- Liaison, cooperation and partnerships with external organisations.

Constraints in information management capacity can seriously impede progress towards organisational goals, limiting the contribution that organisations are able to make to addressing environmental concerns. Considering the magnitude of the challenges affecting most countries in this area, building information management capacity can be seen as an issue of national importance. However, it is almost inevitable that ‘needs’ for capacity building will outweigh what can be delivered with available resources. This applies to individual organisations and networks alike, and equally to government, non-government and private organisations. Clear priorities for capacity building are needed, and the greatest challenge is deciding how and where to channel investments.

Taken as a whole, the capacity of a network of organisations depends on the individual capacities of its partner organisations. Thus, when attempting to strengthen the capacity of a network to manage information effectively, typical aims are to **address critical gaps in capacity, supplement (not duplicate) existing capacities, and seek efficiencies through closer cooperation** between the organisations concerned. These are strategic aims and, consequently, require strategic planning.

Clearly, investments in capacity building should, wherever possible, be based on a **survey** of where existing capacities are located and how readily these can be mobilised for specific tasks. This can be achieved by assessing the capacity of the network’s partner organisations, for instance with respect to the range and quality of the datasets they manage, the human resources which they possess, and their ability to access technical and physical facilities.

The survey contributes directly to the process of strategic planning, which involves identifying which types of capacity are **critically lacking**, which are in **need of** strengthening, and which areas would benefit from **closer cooperation**. This allows objectives, targets, roles and responsibilities to be assigned to organisations in such a way that their goals are achieved in concert with the needs of the network — and society in general — for information. The main justification for the effort expended on this process is to provide enhanced support to users, such as decision-makers in the public and private sectors.

A diverse range of tasks are encompassed by the phrase ‘information management’, and most organisations will take considerable time to achieve their maximum level of effectiveness in this area. Ways need to be found to accelerate this process for the benefit of the organisations concerned, and also the networks in which

they operate. Efforts to build information management capacity need to be **carefully prioritised**. They also need to be **well-coordinated**. Within an organisation this is the responsibility of senior managers; within a network it is normally achieved through a steering committee plus associated administrative support (collectively known as a hub – see Volume 4).

Figure 1 presents a three-stage process for building information management capacity within a network. The process assumes that the network’s goals have already been defined and that the information needs of its user base have been determined; in short, that the network is being effectively coordinated and managed. The aim is to transform a situation in which biodiversity information is inconsistently handled, incomplete in coverage and difficult to access, into one in which relevant and timely information products are available to defined sets of users.

