2 INSTITUTIONAL SURVEY

2.1 Overview

When large numbers of organisations are involved in a survey, it may become very **demanding in both cost and time.** Taken from the design of the questionnaire to the analysis of the final results, a survey conducted at the national level, for example, covering upwards of 50 organisations, could take up to six months to complete. For this reason, it is essential to engage the **full support and resources** of the network's partners, by making it clear to them why the survey is being conducted and how it will be used to benefit them. Specifically, participating organisations can expect to:

- develop ties with other organisations;
- help plan the development of the network;
- understand better where to obtain data and information on complex, cross-sectoral issues, such as conservation and sustainable use of living resources; and
- review (and, potentially, address) internal strengths and weaknesses in information management capacity.

To ensure that the survey is taken seriously, it also needs to be recognised as being completely **impartial** (i.e. beneficial to the network as a whole, not specific organisations). Thus it is desirable for the survey to be overseen, if not actually implemented, by a steering committee, body or other group which **represents the interests** of the network's partners (e.g. a network hub). This group can be charged with the task of initiating the survey, and ensuring that its results are employed to the maximum effect.

In many cases, a comprehensive survey of capacity may be unnecessary. The main requirement is to determine the availability of **necessary capacities**, rather than all capacities, some of which may not be needed. A key question to bear in mind when conducting the survey is 'what capacities will be needed by the network to deliver its goals?', as well as the more elementary question of 'what capacities currently exist?'.

2.2 Factors to Assess

The survey should empower managers to review and, perhaps, restructure their information management activities in such a way that their corporate goals are consistent with those of the networks in which they operate. It should address all of those capacities outlined in Box 1, plus additional capacities where these are relevant or specific to local conditions. Aspects of an organisation which might be considered for inclusion in the survey are summarised below (these are expanded in the sample questionnaire presented in Annex 2).

- **Institutional details**

Basic institutional details need to be recorded, for example the full name (with acronym if applicable), address and further contact details. The overall mission of the organisation, plus details of specific programmes and projects, should be described as they relate to the network's goals. In particular, brief suggestions on how the network is expected to contribute to the organisation, and *vice versa*, should be solicited. Finally, details of the individual or group completing the survey should be obtained, for example their role within the organisation, and their contact details for follow-up.

- **Direct assets**

1. Datasets

Summaries of the datasets for which the organisation acts as custodian, for example their theme, scale, completeness, currency, reliability, precision and pricing strategy, plus an indication of how they were collected, their intended uses, and the data standards and quality-assurance procedures which have been employed. Particularly important datasets (i.e. essential datasets – see Volume 3) should be highlighted, as should priority data needs.

2. Expertise

Descriptions of the expertise available to the organisation which is of most relevance to information production, for example the number and education/ training-level of researchers, data managers, librarians, statisticians, analysts, designers, publishers or communicators. Particularly strong or relevant expertise should be highlighted, as should priority needs.

3. Facilities

Descriptions of the main facilities accessible by the organisation to enhance information production, for example measuring equipment, computer software and hardware, data input and output devices, and physical facilities (e.g. dedicated premises, transport). Particularly useful or relevant facilities should be highlighted, as should priority needs.

- **Indirect assets**

1. Management systems

The best evidence for effective management systems is productivity, and a good means of measuring this is by reviewing the organisation's portfolio of projects as they relate to the provision of data and information to users. Particularly impressive or illustrative projects should be highlighted. Weaknesses in management systems, where these are widely recognised, should also be described.

2. Partnerships

Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) provide indirect evidence of external partnerships, although these do not guarantee cooperation in themselves. Further indicators include the extent to which data and other commodities are shared with other organisations (e.g. lists of data sources), the number of joint projects, and the degree to which common standards and policies for information management are employed. Organisations should be encouraged to prepare diagrams illustrating the nature of their linkages with other organisations, in particular those which involve the transfer of data and information (see Section 3.4). Productive partnerships should be highlighted, and weak ones also noted.

2.3 Method of Assessment

One of the earliest tasks for the group undertaking the survey is to define its scope, in terms of both the **number** and **type** of organisation to include. In the simplest case, this may be the membership of an existing network focused on conservation or environmental issues. Under such circumstances it may be desirable nevertheless to include additional organisations — both nationally and abroad — where these have important contributions to make (e.g. data holdings).

Where no existing network is established, a policy of **inclusion** is normally the best strategy. This may lead to a larger, more diverse survey, but avoids the possibility that some organisations will feel neglected. In countries with rich institutional structures, where a policy of inclusion would lead to an impractically large workload, the survey may be conducted in two stages. Initially, a **letter of invitation** is delivered to all potential organisations explaining the purpose of the survey and inviting them to decide whether they would like to participate. The letter may also invite each organisation to describe briefly how it expects to help mobilise biodiversity information. Many organisations will decide not to participate at this point, saving both themselves and the survey team much work at a later date.

Once the task of selecting organisations has been completed, the next challenge is to identify specific people within them to take charge of the survey. These people are sometimes referred to as **focal people** or **focal points**. Various options are then available for implementing the survey. The simplest option is to produce a questionnaire and distribute this to focal points in the selected organisations. The main problem with questionnaires is that they have a notoriously poor response rate. Various techniques exist to improve this (see Section 2.4) but, even when these are employed, the response rate still may be too low to be effective. Some form of active engagement of the organisations is usually necessary. Various suggestions are presented below.

- Before distributing the questionnaires, invite participants to a workshop to discuss the purpose, time-scale and method of completion of the questionnaire. This provides an opportunity to engage them in the process and assist by reviewing the questionnaire.

- Telephone or visit each of the selected organisations after the questionnaires have been distributed, or invite them to a 'surgery' where their reservations or difficulties can be addressed.

- After most of the questionnaires have been returned, invite participants to a further workshop to review the survey's findings, and consider how these can be transformed into strategic capacity-building plans.

In complex cases, more intensive site visits may be necessary to assist with the completion of questionnaires. For instance, it may be necessary to conduct individual or group meetings, brainstorming sessions and other fora in order to generate the required level of commitment. Interactive dialogue is especially useful when addressing the more subjective aspects of the survey, such as the requirements the organisation has of the network, or the success of its external partnerships. Ideally, the survey encourages staff to review their personal and corporate strategies with respect to information management and consider how efficiencies can be made.

2.4 Questionnaire Tips

Typically, a response rate of less than 10 percent is likely from a questionnaire sent out 'blind' without any forewarning, involvement or contribution by the receiving organisation. This figure can be improved upon substantially by anticipating the problems which may occur. One of the simplest ways of improving response rate is to ensure that the questionnaire is written in an **appropriate language**. Naturally, this applies mainly to international surveys, but also applies to individual countries where multiple languages are spoken. Further ways to improve response rate are described below:

- **Generate interest**

  Organisations are unlikely to commit a lot of time into filling out questionnaires unless they perceive that tangible benefits will be gained. Benefits should therefore be made explicit in a covering letter, together with an indication of why the involvement of the organisation is essential to the survey. Annex 1 presents a sample covering letter based on several excellent examples drawn from surveys world-wide (for example, see Government of the United Kingdom 1995 or Government of Sri Lanka 1996a). Where possible, questionnaires should be sent to a specific unit or individual focal point in the organisation who can be relied upon to take appropriate action.

- **Make it brief**

  Questionnaires should be kept as short as possible and should remain focused on questions which directly support the network's developmental goals. Wherever possible, questionnaires should be completed as far as possible before they are distributed (e.g. the name and address of the organisation is already printed). It is far easier and more compelling for recipients to correct existing data than to enter details from scratch.

- **Make it clear**

The thematic scope of the survey should be made clear, the questions simple, and jargon or confusing terms avoided. For example, the term 'biodiversity' would need to be defined since it commonly has several meanings, including all lifeforms, the diversity of lifeforms, or simply the conservation of living resources. A good way of clarifying how the questionnaire should be completed is to include an 'example' questionnaire which has already been filled out by another, perhaps fictitious, organisation.

- **If all else fails . . .**

On rare occasions, questionnaires will not be returned due to lethargy, low priority or suspicion of motives. One solution is to publish an interim set of survey results showing blanks where organisations did not respond. When these are sent to the organisations concerned, accompanied by details of a final publication date, a rapid response may be forthcoming, since few organisations would wish to be seen as uncooperative.