

5 ACHIEVING COMMON OBJECTIVES

5.1 Overview

A tangible measure of network success is the number and quality of information products delivered to its users. The question is: how can partners be organised to deliver these products when each custodian has its own objectives, and each user its own agenda? Clearly, the function of the hub is to identify **common information objectives** and enable partners to achieve them.

Within an active network of custodians and users, coordinated by a hub, most of the requirements for information production will be available. For example, amongst custodians many essential datasets will be available, some in better states of integrity and accessibility than others. Much expertise may also be found in the areas of data analysis, integration, and advice on how the data should and should not be used. Amongst users, extensive knowledge of policy and management goals may be available, encompassing all that is needed to design effective information products.

Given the complexity of environmental issues, the capacity to design, generate and use many information products may not be available in single organisations, whereas the network as a whole may have all the data, skills and facilities required. The task, then, is to explore ways of managing the various contributions in an efficient, cost-effective manner, which recognises and sustains the commitment of individual partners. One approach is to establish **multi-partner teams**.

5.2 Multi-partner Teams

Multi-partner teams (hereafter just teams) are a network's **main tool for generating products and services**. They enable the network to deliver a programme which may, for example, be modelled on the information cycle introduced in Volume 1. Teams are referred to in a variety of ways according to the terminology of the network in which they operate. Common names include task forces, project (or technical) teams and working groups. They may be applied to any task which the network, through its organising hub, views as priority. They are, by definition, vehicles for cooperation between the network's partners.

The responsibilities of the teams should reflect the objectives of the hub (see Box 3). For example, a team might be established to review the network's goals, in terms of which environmental issues and users to treat as priority. Another team might develop strategic plans for the design and development of information products, based on a thorough analysis of information needs. A further team might review approaches to data collection and management across the network, including the issue of custodianship, and make recommendations on how methods can be standardised and made more efficient. Alternatively, teams may be thematic in nature, each dealing with a subset of the network's interests. Although they may lead to new tasks after they are completed, most tasks undertaken by teams are of finite duration.

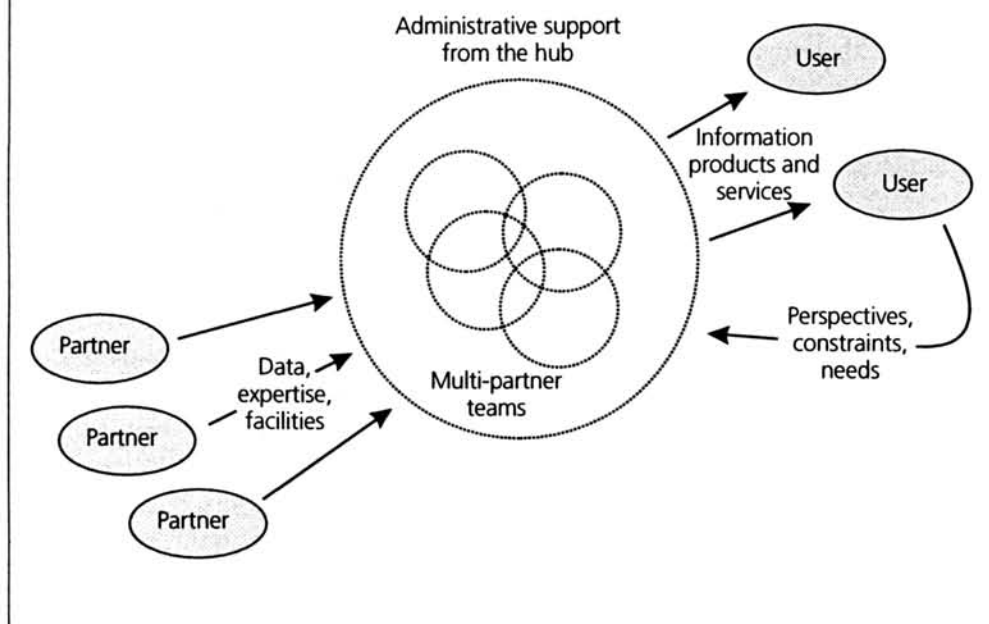
The network forms and manages teams through the administrative support of its hub (see Figure 5). Since this would normally be directed by a committee of partner representatives, the interests of all partners are taken into account when deciding which tasks the teams will undertake. The particular resources required by a team depends entirely on the task it is trying to achieve. In general, however, teams are likely to contain representatives from several partners, each contributing a mixture of data, skills and facilities to the tasks being undertaken. The nature and level of support provided by partners to the teams is a matter for the over-arching hub to decide, and for its secretariat to follow up and arrange.

Users of the network's products and services have an important role to play in the work of its technical teams. As a minimum, they should be consulted with regard to their perspectives, constraints and information needs, when considering how to deliver the network's programme. Preferably, **users should be incorporated as active members of the teams**, contributing resources, expertise and added relevance to their work (see Figure 5).

5.3 Network Sustainability

Information networking concepts are applicable at all levels, whether international or local, and on any theme. The Internet, for example, literally has tens of thousands of listservers and newsgroups serving particular interest groups. Admittedly, these are not fully-fledged information networks because they are mainly based upon a loose collection of individuals with access to electronic communications. They may have no agenda as such, nor any ambition to influence decision-making. However, their

Figure 5 Operation of multi-partner teams



mere presence is an indication that there is huge untapped potential in participatory information management. Indeed, a revolution in this area is currently in progress.

Successful networks have a **recognised and easily understood purpose**, and are operated only as long as this purpose remains valid (naturally, the purpose of a network may evolve over time). All partners, whether custodians, the hub or users, need to be fully aware of their role within the network, in terms of the benefits they can expect to receive and the contributions they are expected to make.

A key factor sustaining their success is **effective dialogue with users**. The capacity of information to influence decision-making increases when users are aware of why and how information has been developed (see Volume 1). Preferably, they have been involved actively throughout the process of information production, from issue definition to publication. Understanding the perspectives, constraints and information needs of users is vital to engage the support of decision-makers in network activities.

Successful networks will **build on existing resources and capabilities**, rather than developing totally new solutions, ensuring synergy and reducing duplication of effort. Building a network requires more negotiation and interpersonal skills than sheer technical ‘know-how’.

Initial investments should be sought on the basis of promised benefits, but successful delivery of these, including notable products and services and the positive effects which result from their use, need to be monitored closely and made visible to potential investors. Investment is likely to be needed in a concrete form for the functioning of a secretariat, for workshops, and for specific enhancements in information management capacity across the network.

Finally, information networks must remain **flexible**. Organisations frequently change their priorities or scope, and are often merged with others or split into separate parts. The composition of a network can be expected to change similarly, with new partners being added, roles changing, and other partners dropping out. The way that the hub delivers its services may also change, for instance the location of its secretariat or the degree of its coordination. Multi-partner teams — the driving force of information production — are inherently flexible in structure, and this flexibility should enable the network to respond to the needs of decision-makers as and when they emerge.