

A Developing Perspective

The tenth GSDI International Conference for Spatial Data Infrastructure was held in St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, from 25th to 29th February 2008. A great deal of effort went into organising a forum like this in the Caribbean, in addition to focusing the interest of the Global Spatial Data Infrastructure (GSDI) community on the subject of 'Small Island Perspectives on Global Challenges.' The organisers, particularly GSDI executive director Prof. Harlan Onsrud, did a terrific job. The rewards are evident. Not only in terms of the attention paid by local people and their counterparts in many nations to the need for building sub-regional capacity relating to territorial and maritime mapping of the surrounding oceans, but, and mainly, because of GSDI concentration on developing nations and their requirements. And concomitant attention for the building of sound and sustainable spatial infrastructures in accordance with regional and global trends and needs.

Delegates from Latin America and the Caribbean showed growing and maturing interest in earth-observation capabilities and potential increasing numbers of applications for new and massive volumes of remote-sensing data. In the words of ambassador Albert Ramdin, assistant secretary-general of the Organisation of American States (OAS), "It will [...] be necessary to allow such information to be accessed at a minimum cost and in a timely manner. Therefore, even as we encourage our member states to participate in GEOSS, we will have to explore appropriate partnerships to facilitate their participation and ability to benefit from such mechanisms [...]". Here lies the challenge for the Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS) and for GSDI, given the relevance of having satellite data available, accessible and, most of all, applicable to the pressing economic and social needs of developing nations.

The majority of international geographic organisations experience difficulties in trying to collect small dues from developing-nation members, and getting the professional community active in accordance with each of their aims and scope. It is therefore important once in a while to consider membership benefits and to clearly express the reasons behind the connection between these organisations and the professional community in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific. I was impressed at this conference by the number and quality of young professionals from the Caribbean who presented, assessed and debated the need for a strong SDI to respond to situations associated with natural disaster, development of the tourist sector and climate change.

The convenience of paying growing attention to the future SDI generation, and differences observed each successive year in building regional and trans-national SDI capabilities, also sends a message to the organisers of the eleventh GSDI conference to be held in Rotterdam, the Netherlands from 15th to 19th June 2009. This meeting, entitled 'Building SDI Bridges to Address Global Challenges', will itself pose a challenge for the new GSDI president, Prof. Bas Kok, or, as the locals named him, the "novel coach" for the SDI global team.

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