

IMPACT OF INSPIRE STARTING TO BECOME VISIBLE

Alessandro Annoni Talks In Terms of Challenges



Since its inception in 1997, INSPIRE has been one of the European Union's leading IT projects. The Directive mandates EU member states to issue all their environmental data in such a way that they can be discovered, viewed and accessed easily, by both public bodies and other interested parties, in order to help in decision-making and policymaking. Alessandro Annoni is head of the Spatial Data Infrastructures Unit of the Institute for Environment and Sustainability and, in this position, is responsible for technically guiding INSPIRE. GIM International talked to him to obtain an update on the status, the impact so far and the future of one of the world's biggest projects in terms of opening up spatial data: INSPIRE.

What is the status of INSPIRE as of today?

We have started the operational phase. The member states had to deliver their Discover and View services last November and the EU launched the INSPIRE portal at the same time. Through this portal, we can now see what the member states have come up with. We've already learned a few lessons - that adopted standards do not always assure interoperability, for instance. So while the whole system is not yet in place, we are able to evaluate and learn now that the portal is live.

Countries within the EU have been working together on INSPIRE, mostly on a regional level - the Nordic countries, for example, and some Eastern European countries. Are you seeing unexpected combinations as well?

Yes, the countries that are having difficulties implementing INSPIRE, and I don't want to name them here, are talking to the countries that are ahead of the game. The big difference is that there are some countries that didn't have the capacity to develop all the products INSPIRE requires and there are other countries who already had fully fledged cadastres or land registration organisations. The latter have experienced fewer problems and are now helping the others.

We are still in the midst of the economic crisis and severe budget cuts are being implemented throughout Europe. How does that impact INSPIRE?

I prefer to regard this as a challenge. You could see INSPIRE as a burden, but the fact that you have less money forces you to think about economies of scale. A central database could be cheaper; not every municipality or province needs to develop their own spatial data. The economic crisis forces collaboration, and this has always been one of INSPIRE's key goals - it may well be that budget cuts are optimising and accelerating the process.

Have you had already received indications from countries that are having difficulties complying because of budget cuts?

Not at country level. We have picked up some signals from individual organisations, that they have less money and that they might need to look at other ways of obtaining funding. But again, this could be viewed as a challenge as well: there are opportunities to apply for funds from the European Union, but to do so they would need to work together with parties from other countries, which might be a good thing. Also, we are seeing organisations exploring different business models and looking for cooperation with private enterprises.

Does that open up an opportunity for public parties to include commercial data in INSPIRE as well?

This is a very interesting point. INSPIRE is not regulating what type of data should be collected - it is merely setting rules on how to present data that fall under the responsibility of public bodies. While it didn't foresee any explicit link to the private sector, if commercial data is under the umbrella of those public bodies, the INSPIRE Directive will apply to such data as well. Right around the world, we have seen that public-private joint ventures have become key. The Spanish coordinator of INSPIRE told me that he was approached by several private companies to develop value-adding services on top of the publicly available data. Spain opted for an open-data policy, so there's no cost for the private sector, and this is creating new jobs, new markets and new economic perspectives. This shows that INSPIRE can have a positive effect on the economy.

Is this something that the European Union needs to push?

Definitely. We currently see public authorities involved in projects whereby they are collecting data that have already been available for a long time in commercial datasets - in utilities or road works, for instance. That is something we should be trying to avoid, because buying such data might be cheaper than collecting it. So far, the public sector has missed various opportunities to gather data in partnership with the private sector, but maybe this will be undertaken more often from now on, in particular because of the challenge I mentioned earlier.

What is the most important step forward at this moment?

We are starting to see INSPIRE now. For a long time, everybody thought that INSPIRE was something for 2020 - when the last deadline from the Directive is set - but we are already seeing data becoming available. It may not be harmonised, because that process is just beginning now, but it's there to discover and view. That is a major step. From December this year, users will have the opportunity to access data through the download services, so that will mark another milestone. I think it's quite revolutionary, even in comparison to Google. Google is providing excellent discovering and viewing facilities, but it's not giving real access to the data. We will do so.

Will users only then start to be a part of the process?

Well, to be honest, yes. Don't forget that we are not talking to the user community, but to organisations on a national level. But I know that the national organisations, in turn, are talking to users. Ordnance Survey in the United Kingdom, for instance, seeks input on a regular basis. The biggest test will come in December 2012, though, when users will inevitably start to give feedback on the quality. This is a very good thing, because the user is the only one to introduce quality as a criteria for the data.

In view of its governmental nature, is it possible for INSPIRE to keep up with the technological developments in the outside world?

The responsibility to keep up with developments in technology lies with the EU's Joint Research Centre in Ispra, Italy. There's a balance we need to find. In a way, it's difficult to keep up with all the developments and require them to be implemented within the different member states - some states are not as far as others. On the other hand, INSPIRE is also innovative and leading the way, for instance in finding new solutions or weaknesses and flaws in standards. In this respect, I think that there's no other project in the world that is testing and operating on such a large scale and in a comparable way to INSPIRE.

Are standards developers such as OGC showing an interest in INSPIRE ?

OGC sees that INSPIRE is doing the same as it is and more - we are developing standards through testing, exercising and exploring. We carry out extensive consultation with stakeholders through 600 registered groups - more than 100,000 professionals are asked about their opinion. I am sure that OGC would like the same amount of discussion in its working groups. But we are offering the feedback that we receive from our immense testing to OGC so that it can improve its standards for the benefit of other communities.

Is there a lot of interest in INSPIRE in other parts of the world?

INSPIRE is a fantastic model for countries that have some form of spatial data infrastructure in place, and this is the case in South America, for example. Chile and Columbia have good SDIs, and Argentina has started to build one, so they are looking at INSPIRE very keenly in order to see how the countries in South America could work together in order to reach common objectives. This could be the case for Asia as well in the future, although we haven't yet had much interest from that part of the world. But you could imagine that a Maldivian SDI would be very similar to the one in Cyprus, while India's SDI would be completely different from the SDI for a small island state. Nevertheless, such countries might want to work together, and INSPIRE can be used as a model for that.