

# *GIM INTERNATIONAL INTERVIEWS GDSI ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT BAS KOK*

## Building Bridges for Change



Geographic information technologies and spatial-data infrastructure play a crucial role in allowing governments, local communities, non-governmental organisations, the commercial sector, academia and the public to address pressing world problems. Approaches to building spatial-data

infrastructures (SDIs) converge in many respects, and this, particularly in respect of national standards, practices and process, will be explored by the GSDI World Conference on Spatial Data Infrastructure Convergence. It will simultaneously explore new approaches to offering geographic data and services. The conference 'Building SDI Bridges to Address Global Challenges?' takes place in Rotterdam (Netherlands) from 15th to 19th June. We spoke to president Bas Kok about the GSDI Association and this month's conference.

**I enjoyed the title of your brochure 'Geography is the Common Language. Let's Talk'. Do you speak the language of geography?**

Speaking the same geographic language and being aware that this is important for the global realisation of SDIs is an essential tool for SDI development and its implementation. It forms one of the basic conditions for the definition and realisation of a standardised vocabulary for data exchange and access. Speaking the same language also implies that people become convinced of the need for SDIs to be set up and implemented.

**The Global Spatial Data Infrastructure (GSDI) Association is a publicly supported body that in 2002 became non-profit-making. Could you outline the history of the organisation?**

In 1996 a group of people took the initiative to develop a platform for the promotion of SDI development worldwide. The first conference took place in Bonn, at which I presented SDI developments in Europe. By the end of the nineties the world was becoming increasingly aware and convinced of the need for SDIs.

GSDI is, in my opinion, an important initiator and advocate for the creation of more effective government, business generation, research and scientific innovation and enhanced public access. The Association gained non-profit status under US Law in 2002 and relies primarily on active membership participation from more than fifty countries. Collaboration is key to fulfilling our vision. We encourage policies and legislation that promote access to and use of geographic data and services globally, and engage a broad range of stakeholders in activities.

**What are the services to the member?**

GSDI provides regular news updates to 3,500 subscribers through monthly electronic newsletters regionally edited for Africa, Latin America and the Asia/Pacific, in addition to email discussion forums. GSDI has several working groups; the Technical Working Group has, for instance, just created a SDI Implementation Guide or cookbook for standards, meta-standards and services in a Wiki document (website 1), offering geographic-information providers and users the tools to implement existing SDI components.

**What are your observations, ten GSDI conferences into the series?**

We have promoted the SDI concept throughout the world, and I think nowadays almost every country works with them. I observe a rapidly growing need for communication, debate and interaction among successful international SDI stakeholders concerning

how they utilise each others? SDIs for

e-government, optimised access and business development. This is what we mean by global SDI convergence, and why we have adopted the term 'bridge-building' as the theme for our eleventh conference. International participants will discuss and debate co-operation in this convergence process.

**A special feature of this year's conference is your joining forces with INSPIRE, EUROGI, Space for Geo Information and Geonovum. Mightn't this run the risk of causing chaos?**

No. We are organising this conference in co-operation because we want to bundle successes. The INSPIRE programme is a very triumphant approach. It is well-balanced, containing a legal framework for EU implementation and rules for data specifications, metadata, network services, data and service sharing, monitoring and reporting. The implementation rules are developed in co-operation with European stakeholders in conjunction with national legal mandated organisations.

Another conference partner is the Dutch Space for Geo Information programme, recipient of Dutch government funding of EUR20 million to stimulate innovation in its national SDI. Another EUR20 million was provided by 150 public-sector, business community and science and research partners, and the project was realised in 2008, leading to structural co-operation between the business and science communities and producing excellent results. Geonovum launched the GI approach and implementation strategy GIDEON for 2008-2011.

**Is the conference focus on Europe?**

No; it facilitates the European geo-community in sharing project results, but also in interacting with other global players. Participants from other parts of the globe present their own success stories at conference. In the nineties the US took the lead in SDI development, initiating the introduction of international clearinghouses and portals, and is now active in bringing relevant satellite information to all the world's citizens. The US is an important promoter of collaboration between the geo-information sector and space community. In Canada the SDI community has more than four hundred partnerships providing user groups with accurate, up-to-date geo-information and services. In India the business community, space industry and government are successful SDI catalysts. In Australia and other countries of the Asia Pacific region the concept has been launched of spatially-enabled government, giving a tremendous impulse to making SDIs applicable for e-government purposes within administrations. At this conference presentations will be given from the 27 EU countries, from the US and Australia, and from China, India, Nigeria, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Greenland, Nepal and Russia.

**The last day of the GSDI conference will focus on youngsters (see Report on page 32). We seized the initiative by publishing a 'Young Geo Professional Magazine' and accompanying website (2). How will you promote careers in geomatics and help schools and universities attract more students?**

I highly recommend the forthcoming youth programme Geo Youth Capital, initiated by VU University Amsterdam. Masters and Bachelors students, and those attending technical college and high school, will be shown in master classes and excursions what geo-ICT is and why it offers promising and attractive work prospects. Up until now about three hundred university and high-school students have shown interest in participating. I believe it is very important we promote careers in geomatics and help schools and universities attract more students. That's one reason why we support the launch of innovation programmes in various countries throughout the world, such as Australia and Canada. We support 'GIS days'. We stimulate and support interdisciplinary research and education in advancing spatial-data infrastructure concepts.

**What would you say to those who may be considering attending but remain undecided?**

We are working towards a very attractive conference, and those still hesitating I would advise to come. We hold our GSDI conferences in Europe every seven or eight years, and this is the first time in the Netherlands. It may be another eight years before GSDI organises another conference in Europe. The next, GSDI 12, will be in Singapore, after which we will move on to other parts on the globe. So grasp this opportunity!

Our conference programme is excellent, with highly-qualified speakers coming to the modern city of Rotterdam. It is a conference of innovation, debate and interaction, addressing how to move forward in the SDI convergence process throughout the world.

**OGC is one of your founding full members. We asked its CEO and president Mark Reichardt (interviewed in GIM International in April 2009) to provide a question for you: "Given the steady progress of advancing common SDI best practices worldwide, what do you believe to be the next big challenge for the GSDI Association in terms of service to the global community?"**

The GSDI Association will work out the convergence over the coming time. There needs to be increased co-operation among international geospatial organisations, such as our activities in the Joint Board for Geospatial Societies and through bilateral co-operation with geospatial organisations. The GSDI Association will intensify co-operation and the creation of partnerships and alliances. Within the GEO GEOSS programme we work closely with the space community. We work closely with the national mapping agencies as well. The United Nations also collaborates closely with GSDI through its many initiatives and in its SDI-related conferences and sessions. GSDI has many other partnerships with successful initiatives at both global and regional scale, as well as with international organisations that foster global SDI. It is very important that the GSDI community keeps its eye on developments in a fast-changing world by co-operating with other geospatial organisations and active interaction in response to these changes. In this way we can bundle our efforts in our fight against poverty, urban sprawl, megacity and environmental problems, disease and disaster.

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