

Crucial Role of GI Associations

Over the past fifteen years there has been a steady worldwide increase in numbers of associations for Geographic Information (GI), umbrella organisations that aim to play a beneficial role not only in public and private sectors but also in academia and society as a whole. What are the common features of such organisations? The answer is simple: they represent the interest of their members, often a wide multidisciplinary community within which the majority uses GI. This qualifies GI associations to uniquely articulate user needs and opinions, and their valuable non-profit orientation lies in a voluntary-based structure.

The “umbrella” nature of these organisations guarantees a wide variety of GI sectors resulting from horizontal networking. They incorporate professional organisations, education and research institutions and public agencies, offering long tradition and a rich knowledge base. Additional advantages are political and government independence and co-operation, and flexibility towards internal/external networking and communication. These values empower the associations to act as efficient mediators, lobbyists, co-ordinators, advisors and consultancy partners, especially in policy planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. National GI associations are a coalition of research and development, data and service providers, facilitators and value-adding and solution providers. They also include the end-user community, usually a network of academic institutions, industry, government and non-governmental organisations, speaking out on behalf of local communities and citizens. With one voice they promote, stimulate, co-ordinate and support GI use and appropriate information technology. Members benefit from knowledge transfer and dissemination of user-tailored information, which strengthens status and competition. Moreover, GI associations increase the visibility of their members’ activities and achievements, assist exchange of views and experience and foster links and co-operation, both internally and externally. As a priority task, national GI associations contribute to strategic planning and implementation of their country’s spatial data infrastructure, mostly from within the framework of an information society. Many European countries have a national GI association. In order to bundle their expertise and offer a platform for communication, the European Umbrella Organisation for Geographic Information (EUROGI) was established in 1993. EUROGI contributes to the development of the European Spatial Data Infrastructure and the underpinning legal framework, INSPIRE, orchestrated by the European Commission. It serves as a Spatial Data Interest Community partner of the Joint Research Centre. It has set up Working & Advisory Groups on topical GI issues such as data, user needs, and applications (with emphasis on GMES, Galileo and eContentPlus). A new Working & Advisory Group will focus on international GI affairs. EUROGI also networks with other European associations, forging links with respected GI disciplines including mapping and geosciences. Such alliances enable Europe’s regular consultations and co-ordinated action with global institutions such as GSDI, GEOSS, Digital Earth and the United Nations.

In conclusion, GI associations play a crucial role in the development of today’s emerging information society.