

Cultural Differences Matter for SDI

Current National Spatial Data Infrastructure (SDI) activities clearly demonstrate the many ways in which SDIs reflect local political, institutional and cultural factors. In Great Britain, the Northern Ireland plan is attached to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure as a project that lets "diverse groups discover values, purposes and projects they hold in common." Scotland calls its own strategy "One Scotland - One Geography." The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan limits incorporation of technologies, including spatial capabilities, to those consistent with the survival of its culture, religion, language, environment and people. This is nothing new, as culture results from the interaction, among other things, of beliefs, technology, values, languages and norms such as standards. SDI is no exception; as an innovation it is just another aspect of today's evolving Information Society.

INSPIRE

In the early days of SDI, about 1996, the SDI concept was for many merely technology, without much cultural content. Since then many studies have shown the impact of building SDI upon non-technical factors. For instance, the process behind INSPIRE (The INfrastructure for SPatial infoRmation in Europe) indicates the complexities of the many languages, regions and belief systems within the European Union. Experience surrounding the building of environmental seamless databases in Central America shows that SDI development goes well beyond technology transfer. This need to overcome cultural challenges associated with SDI implementation, and the convenience of promoting differing views within the processes of building spatial data infrastructures around the world, was the subject of a successful VI Think Tank held last August at the MIT facilities in Cambridge, USA. Participating were the Atlantic Institute and GSDI. The latter has proved itself an association supportive of diversity, where multiple approaches to technology are considered within a context of respect towards multiple cultures and efforts towards SDI are viewed by professionals representing different ethnic, national and disciplinary perspectives.

The Americas

The next conference, GSDI 9, to take place in Santiago, Chile from 3rd to 11th November 2006, will assemble the GI community under the theme "SDI as a Tool for Reducing Poverty", a subject directly associated with the cultural dimension. In spite of the difficulties in building up regional SDI for the Americas at the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH), positive national achievements are growing in number. Mexico's IDEMEX, for example, in promoting strategic alliances for building the SDI sharply understands the national character and the way in which international semantics, standards and interoperability protocols are introduced. Chile's SNIT initiative too reflects national understanding of the role of geospatial information for territorial planning.