

Impact

For much of this economic crisis, the sharp edges of the downturn have been blunted, as far as the geospatial business is concerned, by governments all over the globe providing extra investment for projects that need geoinformation. Yes, construction has been at its lowest point of activity in decades, both in the United States and the European Union, and other infrastructural projects have been slowed down by the recession, all of which has had an impact on sales in the geospatial industry. But certainly in the first phase of the credit crunch which began in 2008, the mantra was 'invest, invest', in line with the old theory of economist Keynes, with governments intervening in the free market to support growth or soften the fall. Recently, however, the shift from credit crunch to debt crisis is forcing governments to rethink their investments. Two of the most striking and potentially most dangerous outcomes of this shift in thinking are cutbacks concerning the Enhanced View programme in the United States and budget restrictions on the EU's spatial programmes which are threatening the Global Monitoring for Environment and Security (GMES) programme.

Enhanced View, a public-private partnership in which the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (NGA) and commercial satellite-imagery providers such as GeoEye and DigitalGlobe work together, was created in 2010. Enhanced View set out to increase the availability of high-resolution imagery and the associated products and services. However, with Enhanced View now under threat due to budget constraints in the United States, the situation is looking worrying not only for GeoEye and DigitalGlobe, who have both invested heavily under obligations of the partnership, but also for the suppliers to the companies concerned.

The situation in Europe is very similar. The Global Monitoring for Environment and Security (GMES) programme also provided for the launch of several Earth observation satellites. The EU is now talking about making cutbacks to the programme, which will mean withdrawing support after 2013. Director-General Jean-Jacques Dordain of the European Space Agency, the party responsible for developing and launching the Sentinel satellites, is threatening to only send those observation satellites into orbit when he is sure that there will be money available from the EU to back the enormous costs, both in 2013 and beyond.

Both cases carry the risk of causing major setbacks to the geospatial industry. It is of the utmost importance to keep the projects running, because cutbacks will simply prolong the crisis, putting Europe and the United States in arrears for years to come, and will have an insurmountable impact on the worldwide chain of suppliers in the industry. It's now time to call for a little Keynes again, in combination with the free market: keep investing, but also negotiate and engage in dialogue to investigate possibilities for keeping Enhanced View and GMES - and maybe other, smaller projects that are at risk - afloat. A little less panic and a more straightforward approach to policy-making would help too; the commercial sector needs a trustworthy partner in governments, not partners who are willing to change their policies every couple of years. Above all, this market needs both the governments and the commercial geospatial organisations. If one side should fail the other, the impact doesn't bear thinking about.