

Reviewer 1

Project title: INTERCEPT - Interactive Contextual Environmental Planning tool for developing countries
Project ID number: 980327-276

What are the strengths of this proposal?

The proposal recognizes the difficulties inherent in accessing quality controlled and comprehensive environmental data and international "best practice" in developing countries, the flow of information frequently being solely outwards. Further, the proposal acknowledges that integration of datasets can provide real value-added to government planners in developing countries. Rather than provide raw data, the specialists available to the service providers can ensure accuracy, policy relevance and sound scientific interpretation - of immediate utility to planners and others.

The use of the Internet is the logical choice for delivery of such a service. This will allow access to continually updated data and knowledge and, by, linking various stakeholders involved in sustainable development, provide a forum for improved dialogue.

The proposal also correctly notes the long-term utility of making such information available as a service as opposed to a product. The potential exists to subsidize this through contributions from developed countries and other partners to ensure access by the poorest - where the need is often greatest. This proposal begins to address this issue, and that of financial sustainability, through the use of a tiered market strategy.

WCMC and their partners, through participation in a wide range of information initiatives, and their pivotal role in environmental data management, have access to wealth of data and expertise which can be brought to bear on this project. Further, they have successfully addressed or are addressing critical issues relating to data quality, data ownership and custodianship and web based delivery of services.

Finally, the proposal builds on, and extends, the existing Info2000 project, which minimizes risk and provides a firm technical foundation.

What are the weaknesses of this proposal?

Financial Sustainability

Key concerns exist about the financial sustainability of this venture and how these can be reconciled with the development objectives of InfoDev. While it is perhaps less critical to the success of Info2000 a detailed business plan and marketing strategy which includes an assessment of user needs and "willingness-to-pay" are an essential prerequisite to technical implementation of the INTERCEPT project and should be given more emphasis. Annex 11 does suggest that sortie analysis has been carried out as part of Info2000 and it would have been extremely valuable to view the substance of this. In particular, it would be useful to see a breakdown of the estimated costs of service provision over the medium to long-term which clearly distinguishes these from the operating costs/overheads of the agencies involved. Further, more detail is required on the proposed multi-tier strategy. To what extent can the needs of the poorest (commonly those with most need) be offset by charges to commercial organizations and other partners? Have WCMC or others investigated this aspect of service provision?

Clarification is also required concerning the dichotomy which exists between restrictions on the end use of data, arising from the custodian model, and the proposed development of in-country commercial services. How would this work, in practice? Does the custodian model accommodate the sale of data to third parties, or local licensing arrangements? This may not be an issue if the data sets involved are public domain - which seems unlikely - but is further complicated by the "user-partner" relationship which will increasingly be the centerpiece of such a relationship (i.e. information flow will be two-way). As in-country data passes to the system would the providers be compensated, or would this offset the costs of service provision? A well-worn criticism of past efforts to improve access to biodiversity conservation data is that "non-profit" agencies have compiled data from developing countries - provided on request in most cases, repackaged this and sold it back (or have been perceived as doing so).

Partnerships

Surprisingly, the proposal doesn't attempt to overcome the financial paradox described above by fully addressing the potential role of partnerships with international organizations (e.g. The World Bank) which have a responsibility (albeit a newly-defined one) to provide knowledge-based services to their clients. There is a persistent view of international organizations (WHO, WB UNEP, UNESCO) as funding sources, rather than partners with significant bodies of knowledge

on sustainable development which should be mobilized. The synergies of such relationships (Client-NGO/Service Provider-International Organization) are potentially significant, and include: (i) improved dialogue on sustainable development between stakeholders, (ii) improved policy relevance of data / services provided , (iii) advice/assistance to international organizations in mobilization of knowledge resources, (iv) identification of data gaps, if these exist, (v) coordination with in country development activities and, (v) offset of costs to poorest countries - to ensure accessibility.

A similar concern relates to the organizations participating in the project. Given the large number of conservation / biodiversity information networks which exist, it is surprising that the proposal doesn't explicitly include some of the major data providers in the proposal. Surely, these agencies (e.g. IUCN, WRI, UNEP), which are presumably the source of much of the data to be provided through the system, should be explicitly represented in the governance structure of the service (which also needs clarification). This would also improve buy-in by these agencies, provide access to existing in-country networks (e.g. InfoTERRA) and provide some insurance against financial risk.

Indeed, following the line of these arguments, the proposal clearly demonstrates the tensions which exist between financial sustainability of information services in a cash-strapped environment, and the responsibility of these same agencies to deliver on their development objectives. Clearly the best possible world would include a comprehensive partnering of technical service providers, scientific experts / data gatherers, development agencies and commercial organizations, with all bringing their resources to bear on the issues of sustainable development. This proposal is an attempt to address a small component of this problem. It may be that this proposal represents a useful, if modest, step in the development of this comprehensive relationship - but it should clearly acknowledge these long-term goals and attempt to place the project in context.

Links to InfoDev objectives

In its present form, the proposal leaves unanswered a number of questions which would provide linkage to the objectives of InfoDev (see above). Even if one assumes in-country demand, willingness-to-pay and technical accessibility, the project fails to clearly explain how it would significantly enhance in-country development, specifically: data provision / licensing of local companies, provision of training, user needs assessment and feedback mechanisms. As such, the essential local components of the project are tenuous and the proposal open to the criticism that it will support the development of capacity/revenue-generating potential of international NGOs. This is particularly true given that the advanced stage of technical development of the Info2000 project and the broad experience of the project partners - who must surely have addressed these issues at some stage.

Other points

The proposal is heavily weighted towards report-based deliverables, not to the development of useful and widely available knowledge. The effort required in this respect should be balanced with what can be achieved through standard Bank supervision.

There is little mention of the role of metadata and the essential feedback loop which this service will facilitate through its relationships between in-country data sources and international information networks. Promotion of consistent, two-ways flows of information / knowledge are essential if data quality is to improve. Again, this will require the successful reconciliation of commercial with non-profit concerns.

At three months, the timeframe mentioned for the development of partnership agreements is hopelessly unrealistic.

What questions about the proposal does the proponent need to clarify?

All of the above.

Reviewer 2

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What are the strengths of this proposal?

The strengths are that this builds on a lot of interesting work that has been done over the last few years (as part of INFO2000 and as part of other projects of WCMC, UIA, etc.). It seems to be technologically cutting-edge and some of the suggested tools seem very innovative.

What are the weaknesses of this proposal?

I think the weaknesses outweigh the strengths. There is no demonstrated demand from developing countries for this product. It does not suffice to state that it will be used when evidence is not provided that anybody is asking for it. I kept trying to imagine who would use it and why and could not imagine anyone in a third world country sitting down to a computer to explore this tool.

INFO2000 is presumably enjoying some success (although this is still under-development and the jury is not in) because it is a relatively focussed tool. Why is this one so incredibly broad and vague? A tool for sustainable development encompasses literally everything. The project would benefit from more modesty and specificity.

The fact it is simultaneously directed to so many potential end-users (government, NGOs, and private sector) also subtracts from its value. It is true of any product that the more we aim to please everybody, the less value it has to any individual user.

Mixing commercial and non-commercial goals may perhaps be plausible but I personally feel such an approach is doomed to fail. The document notes that almost all commercial ventures on the Web are currently failing - it would be even more complicated to marry this with non-commercial uses. If the commercial potential is really there, the proponents should be seeking a loan to finance this and not a grant from the World Bank (in fact, none of their funding comes from the private sector or from developing country governments which leads me to conclude it is supply-driven and not demand-driven).

Why not wait till INFO2000 is more of a proven product before leaping in to extend it to the entire field of sustainable development? I would also suggest trimming back the proposed project to be more of a logical extension of INFO2000: development of tools to extend the usefulness of data sets that have been put together under the INFO2000.

Need to better define who the users would be (and prove they want the product) and need to provide more detailed examples of the kinds of questions they are asking. For each of those questions, the proponent would need to demonstrate that a skilled infotechician could not find the answer with existing information databases and web sites.

Bottlenecks for sustainable development in the developing world are not cutting-edge web-based tools of information interactivity but rather poverty, population growth, lack of institutional capacity, lack of funding. The kind of information product that the proponents offer could perhaps be useful to highly trained professionals and specialized individuals but I suspect these people are already adept at finding and putting the information together they need. The constant information problem in the developing world is that the baseline information is not being kept up to date and is not available at a fine-enough scale - these fundamental problems are not addressed in any way under this project (and nor could they as it is a completely different scale or problem). It is worthwhile to note that this problem of up-to-date and appropriately-scaled information has plagued WCMC efforts to introduce similar types of tools (at a much simpler level) at the World Bank - there was little demand for a product like the Biodiversity Map Library even in an institution that would theoretically need that kind of information every day...

The greatest problem in developing functional information networks (as WCMC knows all too well) is the reluctance of data providers to provide data. Apart from standard statements simply stating that everybody will be happy to cooperate and provide all their data, nothing is said that makes us believe it will be any different. In fact I expect it will be even more problematic for this project to succeed because of its semicommercial odor; data providers will be even more reluctant to cooperate if they feel someone else is profiting.

What questions about the proposal does the proponent need to clarify?

see Weaknesses.

Reviewer 3

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What are the strengths of this proposal?

The main strengths of the proposal are:

- the philosophy of the general approach (information technology and network oriented)
- the experience of the proponents in terms of giving access to natural resources information (WCMC) and networking (UIA)
- the preliminary study of the users needs
- the concern about sustainability and the marketing prospections that are planned

What are the weaknesses of this proposal?

The weaknesses of the proposal are the following:

- the partnership with actors in the developing countries is not enough developed. It is not something that should come after developing the product but before, because what is at stake is the capacity of the partners to accept and appropriate the product and use it extensively. They will not be able to do so if they are not closely associated to the development of the product and trained to modern information technology required by the product.
- no training of the users is scheduled in the proposal
- capacity building aspects should be taken into account. Some local staff should be associated to the development of the product
- it is not clear how the project will associate the first category of users (policy-makers) to their activity. It is critical that the local conditions be taken into account:
in developing countries many government offices are not yet connected to the internet or do not have competence in information technology. The use of CD-roms and the use of computerized decision-making or planning tools are not yet regular.

What questions about the proposal does the proponent need to clarify?

The proposal needs to clarify the following points:

- content of the workpackages of the INTERCEPT project (with the same level of details of the workpackages presented for INFO2000) and description of the deliverables and deadlines. In these workpackages the relations between DA's activities and the other actors' activities need to be clarified precisely.
- Strategy and schedule for developing partnership with actors in developing countries : who are they targeting ? (NGOs, universities, ministries ...) how will they be associated ? (training sessions, participation to the development of the product, strengthening of the local capacities : giving access to) internet, providing them with the required equipment...
- definition of precise evaluation indicators