



The Association of Geological Surveys of the European Union
(EuroGeoSurveys)

in their position as

custodians to their national natural resources

and

guardians of their terrestrial environment

present their contribution to the

Green Paper: "Public Sector Information: A key resource for Europe" COM (1998) 585

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1 Introduction

EuroGeoSurveys is a European non-profit association. It is constituted by the Directors of the national Geological Survey organisations (GSOs) of all fifteen member states of the European Union plus Norway and can draw on the expertise of over 7000 professionals.

The main aim of EuroGeoSurveys is to provide the entire range of European Union institutions with expert, balanced and practical pan-European advice and information (such as geological maps, resource maps, data bases, statistical series, etc) as an aid to problem-solving and policy formulation in areas such as the use of natural resources (minerals, water, energy and soils), and the sustainable management of environmental issues and natural hazards.

Hence the GSOs, and EuroGeoSurveys are particularly interested by the dissemination policies of public sector information at European level, and the Commission Green Paper on this topic is really welcome.

The Green Paper addresses the public sector but should also address public information, as it may happen that the GSOs – although public sector bodies- handle confidential or private information.

Further details of EuroGeoSurveys are given at Annex A.

2 General remarks on the Green Paper

There was a real need for development of common views on this important subject of dissemination of public data. We regard the Green Paper as a comprehensive, well-written, concise and timely analysis of the role of public sector information in Europe. The Green Paper rightly distinguishes administrative data from non-administrative data, but fails to establish a distinction between these two groups when describing EU policy proposals. This distinction is essential and the two types of data need separate treatment. EuroGeoSurveys presents its views as a pan-European network of major national applied science centres which are individually mandated to curate and maintain very large banks of public domain information on natural resources and the environment, i.e. essentially technical and scientific data, mainly geographically located and sometimes in three spatial dimensions. An important part of each GSO's mandate is to provide information of various origins they continuously collect and which must be made available at reasonable cost to a wide variety of public and private sector users. This specialised activity, which justified the original creation of such specific public bodies, also justifies that high value added public data should benefit from an adapted treatment which is distinct from that for ordinary administrative data.

The financing of the supply and maintenance of technical information of such high quality and liability must be considered as an important and specific issue by the Commission.

3 Comments on the text and answers to Questions 1-10 (Chapter III)

Question 1 Definition of public sector

There are several official views on the definition of public sector services in Europe. The Communication 96/C 281/03 paper "Services of general interest in Europe" (26.09.96) defines useful distinctions of services of public interest, services of general economic interest, public service and universal service. The Green Paper defines three approaches within the public sector:

functional, legalist/institutional and financial. Although the national GSOs carry out mostly public service tasks, their national legal systems may entitle them to act with a legalist/institutional or financial approach.

Basically all GSOs belong to the public sector and their activity is largely centred on scientific and technical backing for public policies and economic development: data collection, storage, modelling, and release under the most suitable form for public use.

But although policy varies from country to country, most surveys will charge the end-user for data processing and dissemination. Many of these data are covered by rights of intellectual property, which do not allow for a systematic rediffusion by private operators regardless of these rights.

The fundamental “core” activities of GSOs are publicly funded but they are expected to develop products for public dissemination from elaborated data sets and to carry out externally funded work (e.g. for agencies, regions, EU programmes and institutions, international donors, development banks, etc). These externally funded activities may cover up to 50% of a GSO’s income.

The information handled by the GSOs is almost entirely non-administrative, consisting for example of geoscientific, geographic, and statistical data on: environmental pollution, natural hazards, resources of minerals, water, energy and soils, etc). This information may be applied to develop or support either the administrative information needed for policy making or decision taking - for instance in civil protection (natural hazards) and environmental (pollution) scenarios, or private developments (construction programmes, energy storage, raw materials, minerals, or water extraction, etc).

Question 2 Do different conditions for access to public sector information in the Member States create barriers at European level?

III.2 The general principle for public access to GSO data was long handled independently by each national GSO. But recently common policies have tended to develop through cooperation by GSOs in joint EC funded (DGXII, XIII, III) projects. For instance, the GEIXS and EUMARSIN projects (see Annex B) are built so that the holder provides public access metadata free of charge. However the related raw data is provided to the customer under licence subject to agreeing the time, quantity and format and reasonable related costs of data transfer, printing or reproduction from the individual GSO (at actual cost-recovery rates) as well as agreeing to acknowledge the source. At present, there is no central EuroGeoSurveys control of pricing policy, but there is clearly a need for further reflections on this line. At this stage, an important consideration from our experience is that at the European level it is realistic only to provide data “down to the level of detail to which standardisation/harmonisation is practical.” But there is a common feeling that there is a need for further thought on this line, to be undertaken sector by sector. Concerning geological, soil, water, and environmental data, EuroGeoSurveys would welcome support from the Commission to develop further common work on this important issue.

In other words, if the Green Paper’s views are welcomed and help to conclude the debate concerning administrative data, EuroGeoSurveys would encourage further work at European Commission level concerning the sector of technical and scientific information of significant added value.

Question 3 Could the establishment of European metadata help European citizens and businesses in finding their way in the public sector information throughout Europe?

III.3 Most of the GSOs provide public sector geoscience information to citizens and businesses alike (e.g. resource companies, lifeline companies, construction companies, insurance companies etc). From November 1999 this very large body of information will be made available as metadata through a central Web site being set up by the 1996-1999 GEIXS-ESPRIT concerted action project managed by DG III and DG XIII (described in Annex B). An important point is that these metadata should be multilingual and should share common concepts, and eventually labels, with a secure guarantee of quality.

The indication from prototype testing of the EuroGeoSurveys GEIXS system through its Web site "one-stop" gateway indicates that there is a big public demand for access to EU-wide public sector data catalogues.

For example, during March 1999, the GEIXS Web site received an average of 700 questions every day (not just simple "hits") amounting to over 20,000 requests monthly, from enquirers in Europe and an increasing number of enquirers outside the EU.

We suggest that the categories of data should be limited to metadata because our experience is that it is realistic only to provide data "down to the level of detail to which standardisation/harmonisation is practical at the European level."

Question 4 What impact do different pricing policies have on the access to and exploitation of public sector information?

III.4 The individual GEIXS enquirer seeking data in more detail than metadata is directed to approach the individual national GSO to arrange acquisition of information under that GSO's usual commercial arrangements. Individual GSO data pricing policies vary from country to country and will be the subject of a FOREGS* workshop in Vienna in September 1999, the conclusions of which EuroGeoSurveys will copy to DG XIII/E-1.

This contribution may however not be conclusive, and EuroGeoSurveys feels that there is a real need for further work at European level concerning public policies of technical data dissemination, to be engaged in major concerned sectors before a unique position is determined in a second "Green Paper" devoted to technical data, after this first paper on administrative data.

Most GSOs curate "business-in-confidence" informations as a service for other partners, whether from public or private sector organisations, on the condition that they use it only for "in-house" RTD or general interest purposes, but with specific and restricted conditions for dissemination of original data. This important opportunity for public general knowledge improvement should not be ruined by unrealistic policies directed to public institutions regardless of their specific missions, and in particular their financing equilibrium, as sales may cover not only dissemination costs, but also maintenance, quality control, and eventually data acquisition.

Question 5 To what extent and under what conditions, could activities of public sector bodies on the information market create unfair competition at European level?

III.5 In the earth resource and environmental fields it is unlikely that the private sector can match the objectivity and continuity of data collection by the GSOs, which have worked continuously to gather and curate data from their own operations and those of other public, private and academic organisations over an average period of 120 years - in some cases over 160 years. In addition, most private sector organisations can not justify to stakeholders the cost of maintaining long term data curation facilities. There is thus no

*Forum of Directors of the European Geological Surveys. A discussion network which meets annually to discuss forward policy for the national GSOs of the 40 Council of Europe countries.

unfair competition, market distortion or abuse of dominant position, because each GSO is a nationally mandated body which maintains data in the same way as a national registry, national library or topographic survey.

Public bodies like GSOs diffuse not only basic data, but also specialised products and services, with enriched data comparable to the production of private operators. They therefore use rules of analytical accounting which allow transparency of costs and tariffs.

Sustainable development in Europe will not be possible without public institutions specialised in sustainable observation, data handling, modelling, and information diffusion, backed by an appropriate financially sustainable procedure.

Question 6 Do different copyright regimes within Europe represent barriers for the exploitation of public sector information?

III.6 Copyright issues

The GSOs require adequate cost recovery from data rather than regarding it as a major source of income. Their main sources of income derive from the information products (maps, reports, technologies etc) which they derive from the data. They need to preserve the integrity of original data sets and this can be done by licensing conditions attached to data transfer agreements. The imprudent or uncontrolled dissemination of certain types of information to the public or media (e.g. natural ground radioactivity, natural hazards or soil pollution) could result in public alarm. On this issue as on others, there is a need for further common work at European level.

Question 7 Do privacy considerations deserve special attention in relation to the exploitation of public sector information?

III.7. GSO geoscientific data is not usually of a personal nature but local community-level records (e.g. village, town district) might be used in a generic way to help alleviate public health and environmental problems:

For example, medical records might be used to trace the geographic distribution of environmentally-related diseases in order to assist their alleviation (e.g. radiation sickness, arsenic poisoning from contaminated land, etc).

GSOs also handle information at local level, of personal or private interest, such as detailed data of natural hazards, underground cavities or local soil pollution which may require specific attention. For example, information on the geological substructure beneath individual buildings is used to derive risk indices to guide both homeowners and property insurance companies.

Question 8 To what extent may the different Member States' liability regimes represent an obstacle to access or exploitation of public sector information?

III.8 There is a need for further common work on this line.

Question 9 To what extent are the policies pursued by the EU institutions in the field of access and dissemination of information adequate? In what way can they be further improved?

As suggested in Chapter II of the Green Paper, most citizens outside specialist institutions and governmental bodies still find EU information remote and difficult to access, despite the production of numerous publications and the various Internet sites. The remedy probably depends mainly on improving the means of communication and dissemination of the information, but there is a need for further sectoral work at Europe-wide scale to further improve the dissemination of technical data.

A further general comment is that EU Web sites are not accessible to a high percentage of the European population and relatively few individuals in the public, institutions or schools access them regularly. The content and visual aspect of EU Web sites do not appear immediately relevant or appealing to most ordinary citizens. Some overlaps between the information supplied by different EU institutions (e.g. Commission DGs) can give confusing, mixed messages even to experienced, regular users.

There is a need for further work on integration and harmonisation of technical data at European level. This important issue should be achieved by the Commission in cooperation with specialised institutions such as EuroGeoSurveys.

Question 10 Which actions should be given priority attention at European level?

We recommend that the EU should set up as a first priority a more widely accessible information line on administrative information and issues likely to interest ordinary citizens (e.g. social, consumer, financial, environmental issues and ERDF information, general roles of the EU institutions) and should commission a marketing campaign to plan how such a line should operate and what information it should relay.

Policies on technical data dissemination need further work at European level on a sectoral basis, in cooperation with specialised institutions such as EuroGeoSurveys before precise policies can be erected.

With this first Green Paper providing a focus on administrative data, we recommend that the Commission and Member States should undertake a second phase of joint work concerning technical data.