

The South Eastern European Social and Political Context

The societies and environment of South Eastern Europe (SEE) have suffered greatly during the past decade of conflict and instability. The region's countries were unable to continue the reform processes started in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and were isolated from international environmental cooperation and assistance. Governments in the region were weakened by political turmoil. Already weak ministries, such as those responsible for the environment, were further marginalised as funding was diverted to other efforts, such as war and deficit stabilisation.

The major obstacles faced in the post-war reconstruction process are the loss of confidence in governments, the weak state of administrations and the limited cooperation and dialogue not only between countries, but also between public administrations and the societies they serve.

What is REReP?

The Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme for South Eastern Europe (REReP) was created in 1999 as an initiative of the European Commission, and accepted as part of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. The REReP concept was developed by the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) together with the countries of South Eastern Europe, especially FYR Macedonia, whose government hosted and chaired the preparatory meetings. REReP was built on the strong political will of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe to integrate environmental concerns early on into the reconstruction process. It was founded as a five-year programme.

Strong ownership in SEE countries made it possible for the programme to address the national and regional environmental priorities and challenges in an efficient manner.

REReP rapidly evolved into a successful assistance mechanism mobilising significant international funding. The programme enabled the countries to advance reforms in environmental policy and legislation, to strengthen their institutions, to support civil society development and to address the war damage in a coordinated and transparent manner. REReP has also become an important EU association mechanism, assisting the countries in their long-term goal of integration into the structures of the EU.

The donor community demonstrated strong commitment to environmental reconstruction in the SEE region and provided impressive support to the programme, amounting to EUR 20 million during 2001-2003, thus making REReP one of the success stories in international environmental cooperation. The programme was subsequently promoted as a model assistance mechanism for protecting the environment and developing institutional capacity in other transition countries. The future of REReP today remains in the hands of the countries of the region, the European Commission and the donor community.

Ensuring greater access to environmental information for citizens and government authorities has been the project's ultimate goal

The Project and its Goals

The Development of National Environmental Information Systems "quick-start" project (April 2001 — December 2003) set out to help SEE countries and territories to reduce technological and sociological barriers to building their own environmental information systems. The project's main goals were to:

- enhance the accessibility of current, high-quality environmental information;
- offer a framework for long-term regional cooperation; and
- facilitate participation in the Environmental Information and Observation Network (EIONET) of the European Environment Agency (EEA) and implement the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention).

Ensuring greater access to environmental information for citizens and government authorities has been the project's ultimate goal. It therefore focused on improving the collection, management and dissemination of environmental information. The project began with an initial needs assessment in 2001 to:

- analyse the current status of national/territorial environmental information systems;
- review the obstacles and challenges to future development; and
- determine future priorities within the framework of national action plans.

Targeted measures that responded to these needs were implemented in 2002-2003, and ranged from local hands-on technical assistance to international training workshops that built expertise; and from financial support for the purchase of equipment to the facilitation of dialogue with NGOs and other stakeholders. The sharing of best practices and experience underpinned all of these activities, while the national action plans have yielded a framework for activities over a five-year period at the national/territorial levels.

The project fostered international cooperation, particularly between Balkan countries, which is all the more important given the recent history of conflict. Croatia was nominated by the region in March 2000 to lead the project, and for this reason to foster regional ownership and development, particularly through implementation of a pilot project: a web-based, coastal waters GIS. The project team was assisted by an international steering committee, which involved experts from the EEA, UNEP-Grid, and Warsaw Technical University, and which ensured coordination with related international efforts (such as the Balkan Environmental Regulatory Compliance and Enforcement Network (BERCEN) and the Developing Strategies for the Implementation of the Aarhus Convention initiative).

A number of South Eastern European countries are becoming members of the EIONET. Through cooperation with the EEA, which manages the "Environmental Monitoring and Assessment in Bosnia and Herzegovina, FYR Macedonia and Extension to Croatia initiative, the project facilitated EIONET participation.

The project supported the implementation of the the Aarhus Convention by documenting and sharing relevant best practices on the use of information and communication technologies in providing access to information and fostering public participation in decision making (compliant with articles 4 to 8 of the convention). It therefore linked with the work of the Electronic Tools Task Force, established under the Convention.

What is an Environmental Information System?

Up-to-date information on the state of the environment is essential to environmental management and informed, intelligent decision making. The provision of this information to all stakeholders supports them in fulfilling their various roles as decision makers, activists and so on. Stakeholders need and expect up-to-date information on the quality of water, air, and soil, and the impacts of contamination on public health.

According to M. Haklay's *From Environmental Information Systems to Environmental Informatics — Evolution and Meaning* (1999, available at <www.casa.ucl.ac.uk/eis.pdf>), an environmental information system is a computerised system for the collection and management of environmental information. For the purposes of this project, they are considered to be comprised of networks of institutions relying on electronic tools and traditional mechanisms to support the manipulation and flow of information from monitoring stations to interested stakeholders. They vary in structure and complexity, but generally consist of monitoring networks; data correlation, management and storage systems; reporting frameworks; and a variety of tools for dissemination. The diagram overleaf provides a schematic overview of an environmental information system as envisaged by this project.

Electronic tools, such as computer networks for the rapid transfer of data and composite databases for information storage and management, in today's information society are central to ensuring effective environmental information systems. Also important are proper operational plans, adequate and well-trained staff devoted to environmental information management, supportive legal frameworks, and awareness among potential consumers about the information.

Environmental information systems are comprised of networks of institutions relying on electronic tools and traditional mechanisms to support the manipulation and flow of information

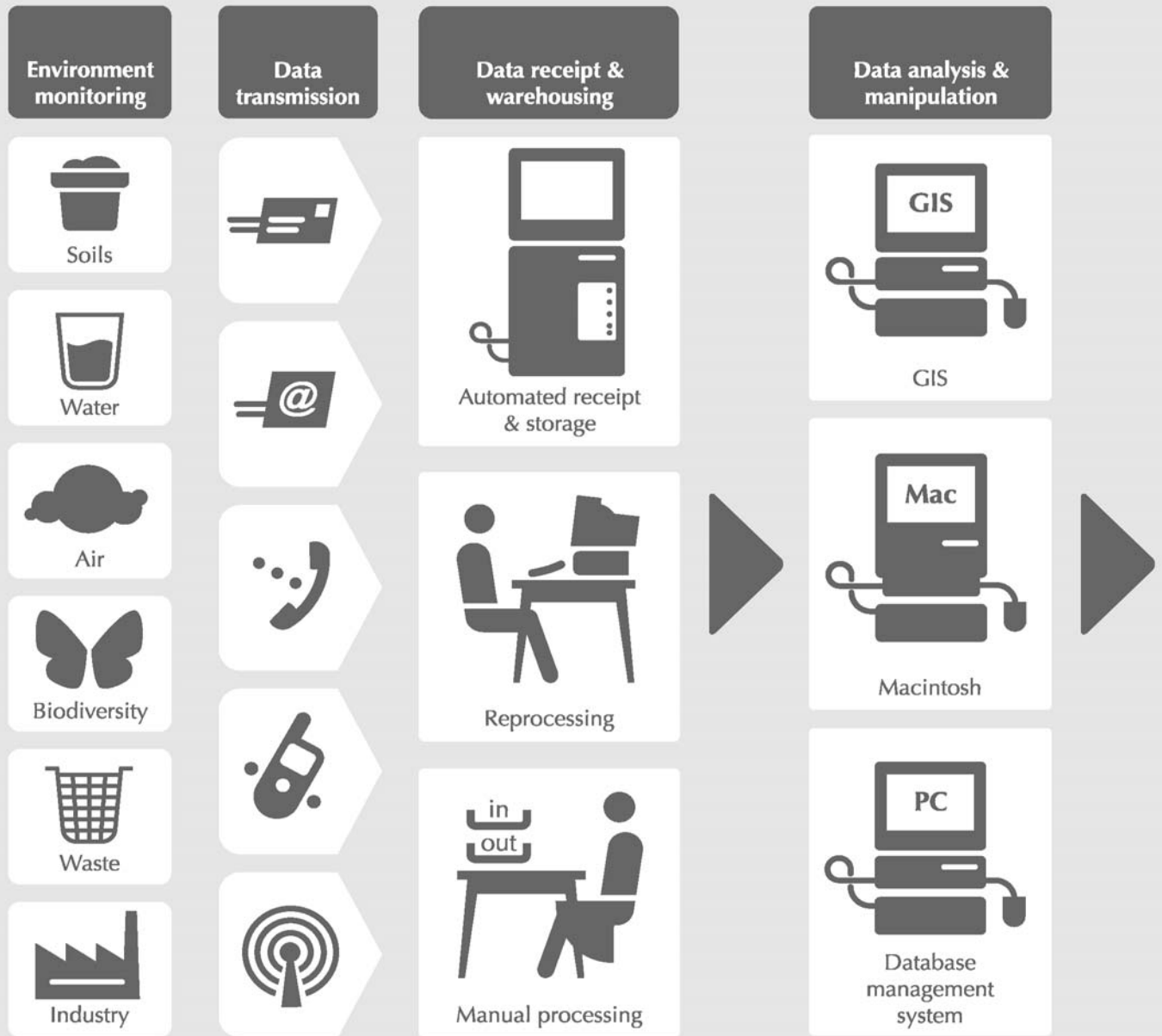
Report Structure and Target Audience

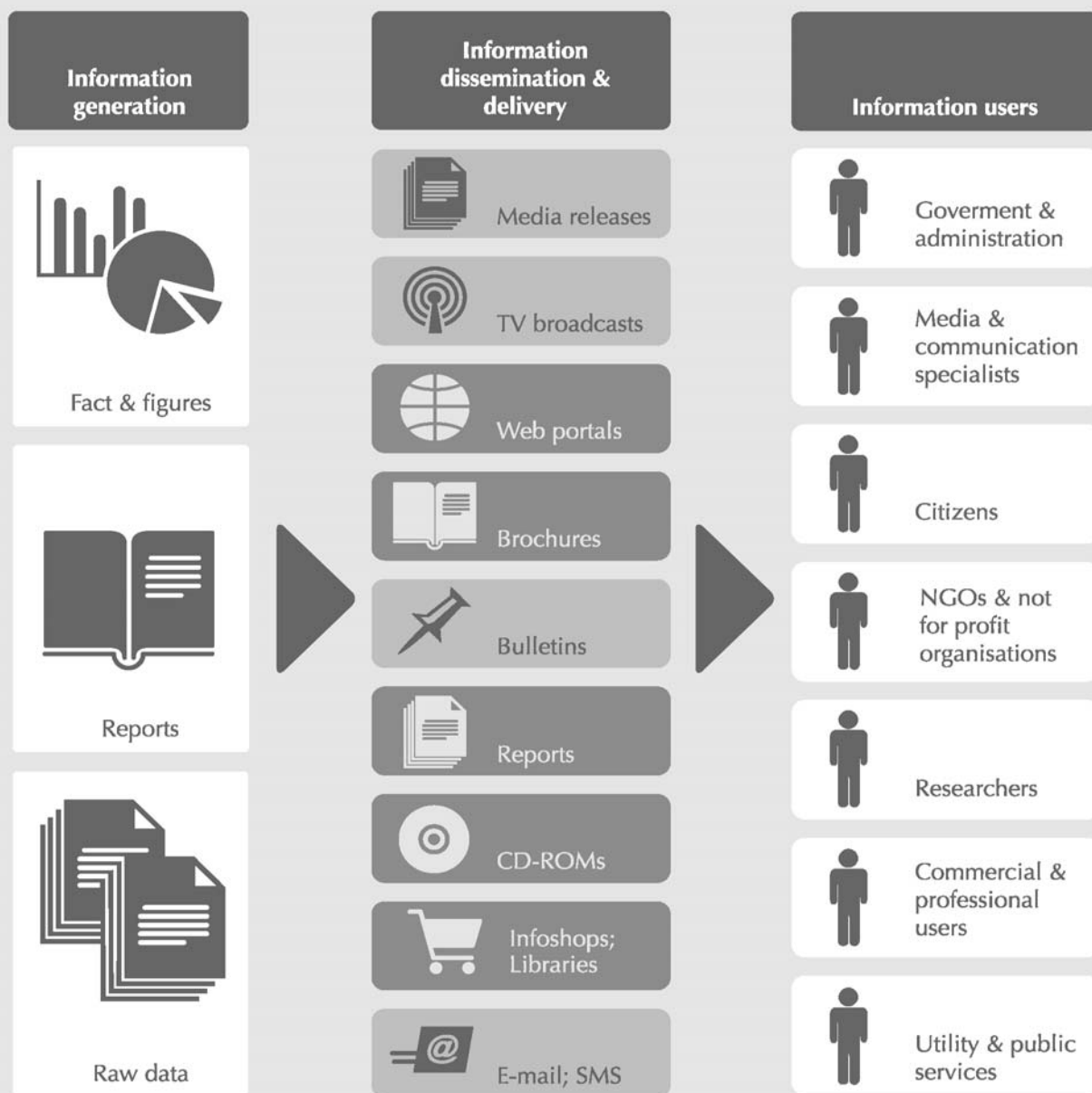
As the title indicates, the purpose of this publication is to provide a "snapshot" of environmental information systems in South Eastern Europe. Its aim is not only to report on the current status of environmental information systems, but also to reveal obstacles and challenges to system development and to map future priorities as defined by the countries themselves. By following this structure, it is hoped this document will be a useful tool for those working and assisting with environmental information systems in each country and for donors supporting their development.

This introduction outlines the projects' aims, goals, survey methodology and context, and provides an introduction to environmental information systems. The Executive Summary goes one step further, briefly detailing the findings of the project.

The bulk of this publication includes summary reports on each of the eight beneficiary countries (note: Kosovo is filed after Serbia and Montenegro). These highlight the current status of environmental information systems, including systems for data collection and management; inter-agency cooperation and public accessibility (passive and proactive); challenges and obstacles to system development; and future needs and priorities. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) — society's watchdogs — were invited to reflect on the usefulness, accessibility and reliability of environmental information and their comments have been included in the "What NGOs Had to Say" boxes. National action plans are also published within the country reports, and reveal the current status and future priorities of the environmental information system, based on its

Schematic diagram for a “complete” environmental information system





■ Proactive delivery ■ Passive delivery

The report targets international and national experts with an interest in environmental information system development and REReP benefactors and beneficiaries

legal framework, the technologies required for data collection, management and dissemination, and activities required to enhance the use of information by decision makers. They also highlight the required resources (as well as matching sources available through other REReP projects) for the plan's realisation and a timeline, which means they serve as a set of proposals. The plans were prepared by government officials, NGO representatives and environmental information system experts. Each report concludes by summarising how the funds provided by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs were used for system development within the form of a case study.

This document is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of the status of SEE's environmental information systems. Gaps exist within the country/territory reports, and as circumstances change, facts rapidly become outdated. Nevertheless, it familiarises the reader with the challenges involved in enhancing access to information and measures undertaken to tackle them in the SEE regions of June 2003.

The Conclusions and Recommendations section summarises the main findings of the country reports by highlighting key trends. It includes recommendations for continuing system development in the framework of a future project, based on discussions and project SWOT analyses undertaken by representatives of the region during a Wrap-up workshop in Sofia, Bulgaria, June 2003.

The report chiefly targets two groups. First, all international and national experts with an interest in environmental information system development: namely UNEP, OECD, NGOs, the project participants and steering committee, in addition to other countries involved in developing environmental information systems, particularly neighbouring states were targeted. The second group includes the REReP benefactors' and beneficiaries' communities.

Survey Methodology

The REC's country and field offices coordinated the preparation of the various components of the country reports in 2001 based on the contributions of subcontracted experts, ministry of environment officials, officials from other relevant authorities, and NGO community representatives. Each office identified information technology or legal experts (listed in the List of Contributors section at the back of this book) to author the needs assessments in cooperation with environment ministry officials, which were discussed and verified by members of the steering committee during the project's implementation. Relying on REC offices ensured synergy with other REReP projects, including: BERCEN, Developing Strategies for the Implementation of the Aarhus Convention, and Electronic NGO Networking.

The assessments were prepared based on several sources: information already available about a given country's situation and needs, and personal interviews with the aforementioned environment officials. NGO representatives were subsequently invited to contribute their perspectives by completing a short quantitative survey on information accessibility, quality and reliability. The interviews and survey served as tools to inform the officials of the project in detail, fully involve them in the needs assessments and to ensure NGO community involvement in the project. For the purpose of preparing this report, both country needs and NGO assessments were updated in 2003 by respective sector representatives. They were subsequently integrated with the national action plans and a case study on donor funding.