

UN GGIM Side Event: Towards the Standardisation of Socioeconomic Impact Assessment for Geospatial Information  
User Requirements: Panel Session Notes

**Panel Facilitator**

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**Panellists**

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**Introduction**

Three questions were initially posed to the panellists and then interventions invited from the audience.

**Q1: Why do we need to undertake Socioeconomic Impact Assessment for Geospatial Information investments?**

The value of open data is often difficult to justify except by looking at previous before and after evidence. A classic example from the Earth Observation (EO) community is a comparison of the revenue from sales of Landsat data before and after the decision to make it open and free. In the years leading up to this policy change maximum revenues USD 5m per annum were achieved. After the estimates of benefits realised have been estimated as USD 2 Billion per annum. This experience is not limited to EO.

Focusing on solving real world problems that mattered to government was the most important factor in being able to gain approval for NSDI strengthening in Serbia. However, calculating the Return on Investment was necessary to gain the buy-in of the Ministry of Finance. The socio-economic impact assessment was also highly valuable in building the relationship with stakeholders and getting them to think about the value of geospatial data.

Calculating the value of geospatial information to government, business and wider society is important in selling the concept. Senior decision makers in Government move roles frequently and each time, selling the dream to Ministers, Chief Executives and their advisors, must be repeated. Having the “numbers” available makes this easier. In New Zealand, the value of having fundamental spatial data free, is a particular example.

Further, timing is everything – with creating national 3D data, the business case for investment had to be made on several occasions before being successful but the ROI work could be reused each time.

**Q2: What are the most important lessons learned from your experience of presenting projects for investment approval?**

It is very helpful if you can get others to tell the story.

Having a benefits baseline established before starting a project facilitates being able to demonstrate the actual benefits achieved once underway and to adjust the project direction in the light of these results, as often the benefits are not where they were originally expected.

Often the storytelling is more prominent in selling the concept than the numbers themselves. Explaining the human impact can evoke emotion more naturally than metrics and are a key part of building the business case.

In Serbia the WB methodology for SEIA was adopted from the start. The SEIA and Action Plan are intimately linked as the level of investment must be supported by the predicted benefits. There were many possible entry points – policies where geospatial could help to achieve positive outcomes. In this case at this time disaster risk management and agricultural reform were prominent but also the identification of properties in informal settlements where taxation for services were not being collected. The key lesson learnt was the need to be “braver” in what you ask for, being seen to be a key innovator requires geospatial leaders to step out of their “comfort zone” but the rewards are worth it.

### **Q3: Is it necessary (or possible) to standardise Socioeconomic Impact Assessment for Geospatial Information?**

The experience of New Zealand is that standardisation is not easy – each business case has different scope, and this dictates different approaches.

However, there was general agreement that guidelines on processes and choice of methodological approaches would be useful.

The availability of readily accessible studies covering different sectors may help harmonisation in the long-term. The more studies are published the less risk-averse commercial investors and government decision makers will become.

### **Interventions**

It was suggested that the most useful action to facilitate understanding and use in developing countries would be mentoring local economists.

Business cases need to move beyond economics to include non-market benefits such as value of preserving bio-diversity and supporting disadvantaged communities.

The need to turn the argument for standardisation “on its head” and learn from other sectors was expressed. Sectors such as transport, utilities and environmental management have already standardised how they present their business cases to align with established practices from economics and finance. The geospatial sector needs to do that same.

Focusing real world examples was felt to be critical. This required more sustained engagement with stakeholders to ensure asserted benefits were reality checked.

The criticality of establishing credibility with Ministries of Finance was recognised. The objective here was to build their awareness of the value of geospatial and ensure presentation of the business case reflected nationally specified project appraisal guidelines.

A Community of Practice would be a useful forum in which to continue these discussions.

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Date: 5<sup>th</sup> August 2022