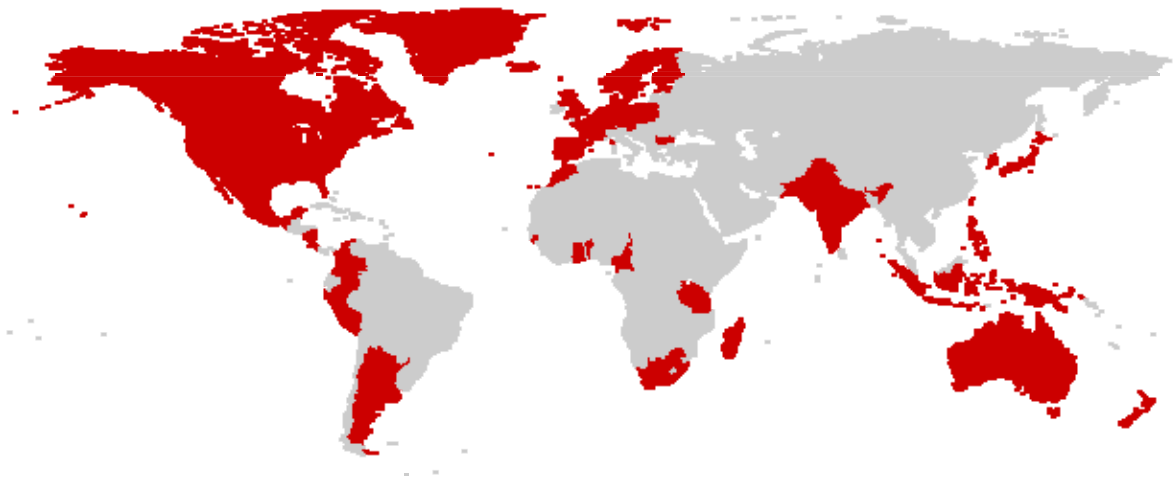


Executive Master Thesis in Public Administration

Managing the imaginary

*Recommendations to the Nodes Committee of the
Global Biodiversity Information Facility*



**Copenhagen Business School
January 2006**

Supervisor: Professor Kim Viborg Andersen

Authors:

Liaison Officer Else Østergaard Andersen
Global Biodiversity Information Facility & University of Copenhagen

Advisor Peter Larsen
Danish Ministry for the Environment

The map on the front page illustrates the geographical coverage of members of the Global Biodiversity Information Facility.

The map is produced the 5th of January 2006 on information generated from http://www.gbif.org/GBIF_org/participation and a mapping facility on the Internet: <http://www.world66.com/myworld66/>

Managing the imaginary

Recommendations to the Nodes Committee of the Global Biodiversity Information Facility

By: Peter Larsen^{*} & Else Østergaard Andersen[†]

This set of recommendations is based on our Executive Master thesis in Public Administration (MPA) at the Copenhagen Business School: “Managerial challenges in a global, imaginary network – a case study of the Global Biodiversity Information Facility”. The thesis is based on interviews with 5 Node Managers from voting and associate countries in GBIF and theories of Imaginary Organizations and Sense-making. The study does not pretend to cover all aspects of managing a GBIF Node, but should be seen as assistance to Nodes in their organizational challenges.

It is vital to see a global, ICT-based network such as GBIF as an “Imaginary Organization¹”. The organization is imaginary because the cohesive force, which keeps GBIF together, is a vision of the benefits of sharing biodiversity data freely and openly via the Internet for science, society, and a sustainable future. Most actors in this endeavour belong to other organizations and are “involvees” rather than employees of GBIF. The perspective of the Imaginary Organization casts light on the power that lies in imagining and understanding what might be invisible to others.

In fact, each of the GBIF Participant Nodes can be seen as an Imaginary Organization, each with a few employees and many involvees (e.g., data nodes and users) – or even no employees at all! The perspective of the Imaginary Organization thereby offers assistance to a GBIF Node Manager in developing the local network of data providers despite of limited resources.

^{*} Advisor, Danish Ministry for the Environment, Rentemestervej 9, DK-2200 Copenhagen N (pln@cfk.dk)

[†] Liaison Officer, GBIF Secretariat, Universitetsparken 15, DK-2100 Copenhagen O (eoandersen@gbif.org)

An organization such as GBIF, which deals with global changes in ways of working, needs to facilitate sense-making². People develop some sort of sense regarding what they are up against, what their own position is relative to what they sense, and what they need to do. The challenge is to avoid a sudden loss of meaning induced by interacting electronically and at a global scale. This can be avoided through awareness of the fact that sense is made outside the technological context, in combination with social activity and under the limits of the human processing capacity. Unless attention is drawn towards the mental process of sense-making there is a potential risk that e.g., GBIF Node Managers, find themselves unable to make sense of what they do to make the GBIF vision come true.

Combining the perspectives of the Imaginary Organization and sense-making with qualitative interviews of five GBIF Participant Node Managers has resulted in five recommendations to the Nodes Committee:

- Imagine the invisible.
- Focus on the whole.
- Break down into small and feasible wins.
- Learn from your colleagues – and from yourself.
- Set up E-intervision programmes.

We hope, these recommendations will be a valuable resource for GBIF Node Managers in your efforts to fulfil the GBIF mission and make additional sense to your role.

Imagine the invisible

A large number of people who are involved, while not employees, must be made to care about what happens to GBIF as a whole. Therefore, find out whom to involve among the owners and users of biodiversity data and other critical stakeholders within your given area of responsibility – which are the organizations, who are the people? Find out how they work, and whether they have resources available for GBIF-like activities (e.g., digitized data, manpower, or funds for digitization). Get a feeling for how you could build a trusting relationship with them. These involvees of GBIF and your node might be as important as any employee. The

involvees must care enough about the well-being of GBIF to think about and get involved in the future of the global network.

Bear in mind that your relationship with these involvees must not be allowed to become a “zero-sum game”. All involvees must find that collaborating produces a benefit which exceeds the value of their input, at least in relation to their other options. Consider carefully what different involvees might want to obtain from collaboration (e.g., new knowledge, improved processes, new contacts, new data, new tools), and see if you or others within the GBIF network can provide this.

Focus on the whole

Managing an Imaginary Organization like a GBIF Participant Node consists of many aspects. Try to focus on the whole rather than on a single problem. For instance, getting data holders to share data through the GBIF portal is a core element of being a GBIF node. However, without the ability to see the resources in building trusting relationships with a number of stakeholders, it can become difficult to make any data available.

The perspective of the Imaginary Organization consists of four dimensions: Transactions, Relations, Learning, and Processes. All of these dimensions are interdependent. For instance, the key to a certain transaction (e.g., making data from a data node available via www.gbif.net) may lie within understanding the processes of the other organization involved, as well as knowing how to build trusting relationships across the organizational – and maybe also cultural – boundaries.

Break down into small and feasible wins

Being able to see the whole might not in itself make it obvious to act upon. A strategy of breaking down the whole into small and feasible wins is a way in which you can assist the cognitive process of making sense of what you do. It is perfectly fine to take the easy way out, so if a win situation can be identified – go for it!

For us to understand the four dimensions of the Imaginary Organization ourselves, we have broken the dimensions down to a number of categories. Thereby we have ourselves used a strategy of small and feasible wins in the process of focusing on the whole. The categories do not necessarily represent any solutions of a “one size fits all” nature. Our intention with these categories has been to learn and interpret the managerial challenges of an Imaginary Organization like GBIF.

As an inspiration to your future work with these challenges, our categories are attached as an appendix. Potential “wins”, which we would like to pass on to your committee, could be to focus more on: 1) GBIF seen as a provider of a public good, 2) the potential of learning from other Nodes, 3) the general social rule of reciprocity, 4) and the process of sense-making in a global ICT-based network. We hope that these categories can inspire you and facilitate the management of GBIF Participant Nodes.

Learn from your colleagues – and from yourself

Within the community of the Nodes Committee a broad range of skills and experiences exists. By learning from a colleague, what has worked – and even more importantly what has failed, not everyone would need to start from scratch. One benefit of a global network is that no matter which problem arises, there is a chance that someone else has tried something similar. Our result shows that even within a very limited number of Node Managers, we found experiences with all dimensions and categories (see the appendix).

Cultural differences mean that you cannot simply apply all of the successes or failures of your colleagues to your own situation. But you will be better than anybody else to figure out what might work under the particular conditions you are facing.

Verbalizing your lessons learned is not just something that is of value to a GBIF colleague. It is also of immediate value to you. Verbal reflections on your own experiences are a valuable resource for learning and for the process of “committed interpretation” towards your own making sense of being part of the organization. Even though such committed interpretation is

highly valuable, it is often forgotten under hectic work conditions.

Set up E-intervision programmes

Meetings once or twice a year in the Nodes Committee might be too rare for learning purposes. Also, as more members join GBIF, the committee becomes a very large group of people. To encourage additional learning we would recommend the Nodes Committee to develop a forum other than these meetings for exchanging experiences. We suggest that the committee considers setting up an “intervision”³ programme to cover all Participant Nodes. Each Node Manager could for instance be an “intervisor” for a colleague Node Manager, and have another colleague to approach for “intervision”.

GBIF is an organization at the forefront of technology. Therefore, we find that GBIF with relatively little effort could extend the use of technology into intervision relationships. An intervision programme might be designed via electronic means as “E-intervision”. The amount of time needed to manage the intervision relationship as well as travel costs would thereby be minimized. E-intervision might be as simple and low-tech as structured conversations via e-mail or chat. However, we would not put forward any detailed model of such intervision programme. Such conditions on e.g., how to communicate, or under which terms (fixed or open-ended), should preferably be decided through discussions within the Nodes Committee.

¹ In their book “Virtual Organizations and Beyond: Discover Imaginary Systems” from 1997, Hedberg, Dahlgren, Hansson, & Olve (1997) describe a new perspective on organizations, which they call “the Imaginary Organization”, where the use of information technologies, alliances, and other networks both inside and outside the organization is used to describe the entire system.

² In many books and papers since the 1980’ies, K. E. Weick has examined the phenomenon of “Sense-making”: The cognitive processes that people use in their struggle to adapt to work in environments where important events are unpredictable and chaotic. See e.g., Weick, K. E. (2005): Making Sense of the Organization. Blackwell Publishing, United Kingdom 8, 2005.

³ The word “intervision” is used here to describe a counselling among professional partners. It is a structured dialogue between two equal colleagues, where the person in focus is assisted through questions in finding his/her way. It is a way of examining the work-related situation intended for mutual support and learning. The philosophy is like: “When I have said what I think, I can think of what I have said”.

Dimensions	Categories	Why are the categories relevant to a GBIF Participant Node?
Transactions	Data	The mission of GBIF is to share data freely and openly through the Internet. The Participant Nodes are central in the identification of and contact with data providers.
	Funds	In an Imaginary Organization only limited amount of funds are needed for equipment, housing, and salary for core staff. Most of the costs are borne by the partners or involvees (e.g. manpower, digitization, etc.).
	Public good	Data and knowledge is a public good in the sense, that use by one person does not minimize other people's use of the same. Also, the demand from the market is too small compared to the direct public benefits of the produced good.
	Technology	The expertise, infrastructure, hardware and software have to be in place to initiate and maintain data sharing.
Learning	Learning through reflections	This shows whether the node manager sees him/herself in a learning process and makes room to learn from other's experiences.
	Learning during work in GBIF	It can be of considerable value to oneself to regularly stop up and reflect upon what has worked and what has not.
	Learning from other nodes	It is useful and beneficial to draw on experiences of the others and learn from the other node managers errors and successes. This is an important potential of the global network.
	Ability to "intervise" others	The ability to assist colleagues in their learning process through counselling among professional and equal partners.
Relations	Global	It is of great value to build relations to other parts of the network, especially because of the potential of learning from these.
	Local	Creating and maintaining contact to local data providers is a core activity of the Participant Nodes to make GBIF succeed.
	Trust	Trust and faith are important resources within a network and might be crucial for the Participant Nodes.
	General reciprocity	The norm of reciprocity is a very important part of human relations in all cultures: The belief, that "if I help you today, some day down the road, you would help me". Be aware of what you could provide in return for data.
Processes	Make sense	For a node manager and any data providers to act, it is crucial that the GBIF initiative be understood and that it makes sense. When action makes sense there is a positive movement towards further action.
	Create identity among GBIF-actors	A shared identity can create organizational cohesion which can be used to focus on chosen areas of action – Where are the threats, where are the possibilities, and where can we just follow the same path are all important questions to answer. The answers are more easily generated from a shared identity.
	In different systems	GBIF involves many different cultures and there have to be focus on how these cultures have effect – perhaps even within the same country. This calls for a comprehensive management approach.
	Decision making	Managerial challenges in a global, imaginary network have to take care of relations to involvees by leadership and involvement in the decision making.