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Funding the Spatial Data Infrastructure

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Summary

The value of geographic information to users and society underlines the importance of user-orientation. For example, the forestry industry needs information for valuation of forest properties and for transport planning, telecom companies must know which landowners are affected when trenches for wide-band cables are to be dug or when base stations are to be built. Companies that plan to carry out market research need to know what the population distribution looks like.

Information from the national mapping agencies – as well as from other national cadastral, statistical and other agencies – is of fundamental importance for all of these groups. A huge amount of work is being put into making the data of even better quality and easier to access in order to support as many vital interests in society as possible.

Most countries have chosen to have a model for financing this infrastructure with a combination of funding from governmental grants and user-payment. Typically, the basic investment costs for establishing data are financed by governmental grants, while costs for maintenance of the data as well as for products and distribution are financed totally or partly by the users.

The idea with user-payment is to make those who really benefit from the data to take part in the financing – instead of laying the financial responsibility on those who never use the data. This also gives the data providers a strong driving force to supply the market with products for which there is a real user need – a rather well-known principal in the economic world. Users who have to pay (all or some parts of) the costs are much more demanding and by that they stimulate the producers. This principal also enables different actors to compete in a fair way – providing the system is just and transparent.

It is important to find the right balance between financing from government grants and user fees, not least in order to optimise the use of the information. I am convinced that the model for financing and pricing of fundamental geographic and property data in Europe – in general terms – is sound and fair for all involved parties. However, it is always possible to improve the model in order to stimulate an even wider use of geographic information and to achieve an optimal distribution of the costs. An example of this is to adjust the model for pricing in order to reflect the user benefits to a higher degree. Another example is to introduce Internet based services where it is free of charge to have a look at the data, but the users have to pay for downloading different products.