



Building Advisory Service and Information Network

The Story of an International Knowledge Network in the Field of Sustainable Building

FACT BOX

Established:	1988
Goal	To provide information and advice on cost-efficient and appropriate building technology and to create links between know-how resources.
Partners	GATE/GTZ, Skat Foundation, ITDG, CRATerre, Shelter Forum, CEVE, Development Alternatives, Pagtambayong, EcoSouth
Budget and Donors	Network partners must find funding for their basin activities and services independently. There is no central, consolidated budget for the network.
Tools for Knowledge Sharing	Technical enquiry service (Q&A service), magazine "basin news", publications, consultancies and project implementation, capacity building, training and conferences, information system (website connected to database)
Countries	Host countries of partners are: United Kingdom, Germany, France, Switzerland, India, Philippines, Kenya, Argentina, and Nicaragua. All partners are active in many other countries.



Key Events in the Development of the Network

1988	The three founding partners of basin - SKAT (now Skat Foundation, Switzerland), GATE/GTZ (Germany) and ITDG (Great Britain) - agree to jointly set up the Building Advisory Service and Information Network (basin). The overall goal is to provide information and advice on appropriate building technology and to create links with know-how resources for all those in need of relevant information.
1990	Due to a growing percentage of enquiries in the topic of earth construction CRATerre, the International Centre for Earth Construction in France was incorporated as a new basin member.
1992	basin is formally constituted as an association of non-profit-organisations under French law with its own set of statutes.
1993	In France, the first basin course on appropriate building technology is held.
1996	Following an external evaluation, basin decides to formally admit the first southern organisation, Shelter Forum, as a full member.
1997	basin sets up a comprehensive Internet based information system including a website and a database.
1997	Two other southern partners, Development Alternatives (India) and CEVE (Argentina) join the network.
1999	Sustainable Building Technology Seminar held in India
2000	EcoSur (Nicaragua) and Pagtambayong Foundation (Philippines) become basin partners.
2003	basin commissions the second external evaluation with the goal to develop new perspectives.
2004	The second International basin Conference takes place in New Delhi, India with the title "Sustainable Habitat and Livelihoods for the Poor".

Formation and History

Like most good ideas, basin was conceived out of necessity. There was a need in the building sector for more information on appropriate and cost-efficient building materials and construction technologies in the developing countries, while the flow of knowledge between North and South and within the South was sparse. Research and development activities were duplicated, and the knowledge of well meaning organisations was insufficient. A hub for collecting and distributing knowledge did not exist.

In 1984, the German Agency for Technical Co-operation (GATE/GTZ), the Swiss Centre for Appropriate Technology (SKAT – now Skat Foundation), and the Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG) in Great Britain started a formal co-operation in the building sector. For many years, the three organisations had provided enquiry and answer services for a range of building and construction technologies. SKAT was well known for its work on micro concrete roof tiles (MCR), ITDG was a recognised specialist in various

technologies including cements and binders, while GATE/GTZ had an experienced team of specialists concerned with tropical building issues. Faced with a significant increase in technical enquiries and having already established mechanisms for cooperation, the three agencies initiated the creation of basin in August 1988. Due to a growing percentage of enquiries concerning earth construction, CRATerre, the International Centre for Earth Construction (France) was incorporated as a member in October 1990.

In 1992 basin was formally registered as an association of non-profit-organisations under the terms of French law. In the following years, basin expanded the network to include southern members. In 1995, Shelter Forum (Kenya) was formally accepted as a basin partner. In 1997, CEVE (Argentina) and Development Alternatives (India) also joined the network. The last expansion took place in 2000 when EcoSur (Nicaragua) and Pagtambayong Foundation (Philippines) became basin partners.

Vision, Objectives and Guiding Principles

Vision

The founders of basin have always sought to share knowledge and experiences on appropriate and cost-efficient building practices for developing countries and to give professional advice. After an external evaluation in 1996 basin formulated the following vision:

“basin is to become the leading network on information and resource management on building construction, technology and processes for all those involved in solving building problems by using local resources and taking into consideration the local conditions, cultural traditions and socio-economic requirements.”

The network is primarily concerned with the effective management of local resources and interacts with a wide array of actors from around the world, ranging from government officers, financiers, architects, planners, and producers of building materials.

Objectives

basin pursues the following objectives:

- Promotion of the free-flow of information between individuals and organisations concerned with building technologies in all parts of the world.
- Provision of practical information and qualified technical advice and assistance to individuals and organisations involved in building construction.
- Promotion of proven, affordable, environmentally sound and energy-efficient building materials and construction methods, focusing on the economic sustainability of the technology.

- Development, introduction and dissemination of promising innovative technologies.
- Identification of gaps in information or technical expertise, in order to prepare particular publications for dissemination or to undertake specific research and development in problem areas.
- Maintaining contacts with experts, resource centres and specialised organisations to exchange information, to tap into their services in special cases, and to co-operate on projects of mutual interest, thereby avoiding duplication of work.
- Maintaining a database with relevant documents, ongoing projects, building equipment, organisations and consultants working in the field of appropriate building technologies.
- Advocacy to increase the awareness of decision makers on appropriate and cost-efficient technologies.

Guiding principles

The partners of basin have committed themselves to work for an equitable sustainable world by

- reaching the highest possible levels of professionalism
- sharing information
- meeting the demands of clients
- increasing awareness creation
- empowering partners

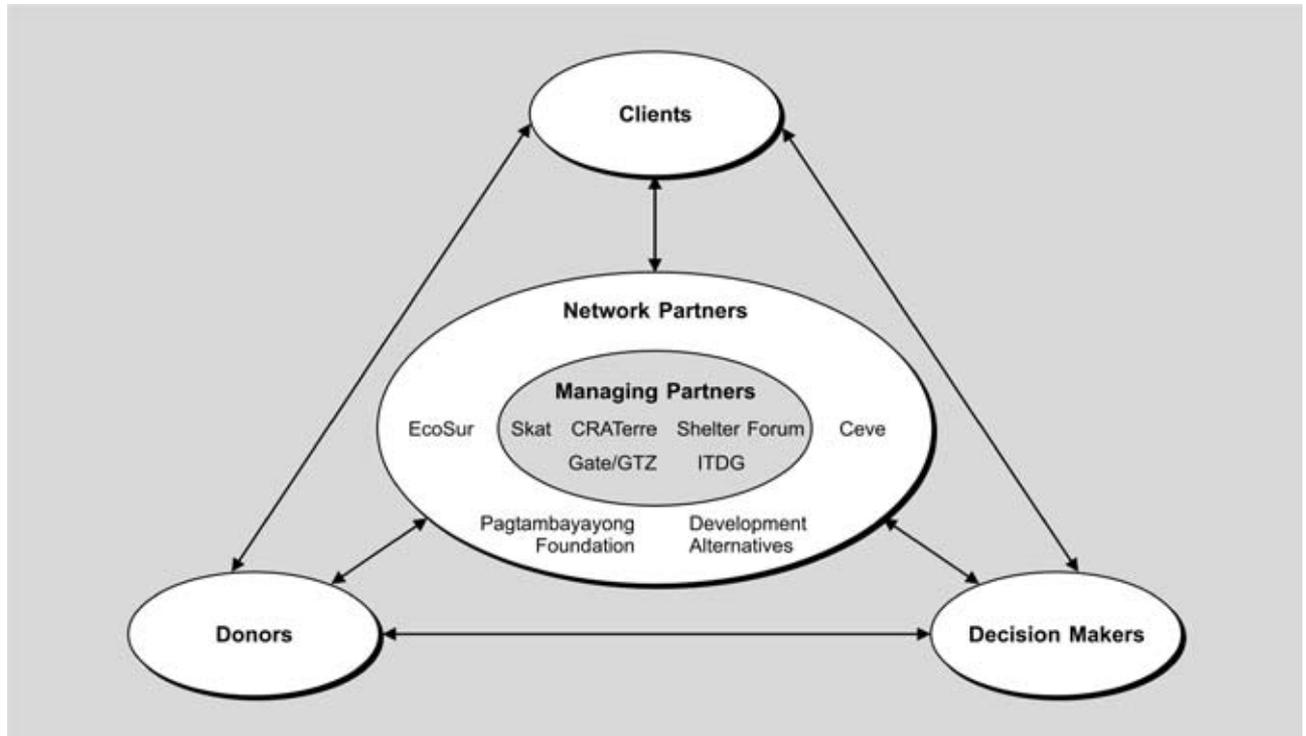
and by respecting cultural diversity, socio-economic conditions, traditional skills, the natural environment, and the autonomy of network partners.

Management

basin is a coalition of resource centres with expertise in various fields of appropriate and cost-effective building. It is a decentralised network of nine partner organisations that are spread all over the world. It has a loose, federal structure; the network partners function independently from one another in terms of internal organisation and finances.

Network Structure

Initially, basin was a loose and informal network of three partner organisations. In 1992, the founders decided to establish basin formally and to register the network as an association under French law. As part of this process, appropriate statutes were



formulated. One important reason for the registration was to enhance credibility with the European Union for fundraising purposes.

The structure and organisation of the network reflects its global character. Initially, a distinction was made between managing and network partners. The four northern institutions and Shelter Forum made up the managing partners; the network partners consisted of the other four southern partners. Later, this distinction was abandoned because it made no sense.

The leading authority of basin is the "general assembly", made up of one representative from each institution in the partnership. The general assembly meets twice a year to assess results achieved in the periods between assemblies, and to regularly update 2 year operational planning. These biannual assemblies are always organised by a different network partner. Once a year, the assemblies are held in connection with an international conference. In this way, travel costs can be reduced. Even if not all of the partners can participate at the assemblies, all partners have the possibility to hand in desk papers, comments and proposals in advance.

The "administrative board", is also made up of one representative from each institution in the partnership. It is re-elected every two years in its entirety. From the administrative board, the network chooses a President, a Secretary General and a Treasurer.

The distinction between the general assembly and the administrative board did not turn out to be very practical. In recent years, a more pragmatic way of discussing upcoming issues with partners was chosen.

basin decided not to have a full-time secretariat. This decision means that the workload within the network has to be shared amongst its partners. In this way, all partners are responsible for the success of basin.

Although basin has a policy governing the division of work amongst the network partners, the northern partners have tried to hand over more responsibility to southern partners in recent years. This change has been in response to intensifying funding difficulties for agencies based in the North, a corollary of the southwards shift in the allocation of donor funds. However, many of the network's southern members still look to their northern counterparts for initiative and funding support, and their capacity to make the first move in new areas of opportunity is limited. On a positive note, responsibility for managing the network's website is now being transferred from GTZ to Development Alternatives.

In addition to the decision that the workload should be shared evenly amongst the partners, basin also decided that each partner should specialise in a different topic of interest to the network as a whole:



- GTZ/gate for wall building - except earth construction
- Skat Foundation for roofing
- ITDG for binders
- CRATerre for earth construction
- Shelter Forum for general shelter subjects
- CEVE for prefabricated elements
- Development Alternatives for livelihoods
- EcoSur – network for ecologically and economically sustainable construction
- Pagtambayayong for appropriate building technologies for low-income housing

However, to gain more flexibility and to be capable of reacting to the various demands of donors, basin decided in 1996 that all partners should have the opportunity to work in other fields as well. Although network partners now operate more as generalists than as specialists in the above fields, expertise on specific topics is still located according to the 1996 delineation; coordination between basin partners therefore still takes place on specific topics.

Roles of the Partners

In principle, basin is a democratic network where all partners have the same rights and duties and where the workload is shared evenly whenever possible. However, as in all networks, the commitment shared by the partners is not balanced. In particular, northern partners still represent the core of basin, where the drive and commitment towards reaching basin's vision is centred. In contrast, the involvement of southern partners in the development of the network has traditionally been more modest. At the same time, northern partners are faced with dwindling funding opportunities and southern partners are faced with capacity issues.

Although southern partners are gradually taking over more responsibility for the network, this process is quite challenging as it is interconnected with a significant paradigm shift in development cooperation. Collaborating in a network should always be a win-win situation for all participants. This means that all partners must contribute to the network so that it runs well. Within basin, members have had to remind themselves several times of this basic principle.

Statutes and Operational Guidelines

For its official registration basin formulated clear statutes describing the goals, the activities and the organisation of the network. In addition, basin has operational guidelines that govern the practicalities of collaboration between network partners and

the nature of their work. One objective of basin has been to develop shared methodologies, approaches and strategies between network partners in order to reduce costs and to increase efficiency. However, each partner joined basin from a different starting point in terms of institutional identity and culture, and it has not been possible to establish common methodologies, approaches and strategies.

Funding

Due to the decentralised structure of the network and because there is no full-time secretariat, the overall costs of basin are quite low compared with the activities and services that basin offers. In the early years, the northern partners received specific funding for building up the network and for particular activities like the publishing of the basin news magazine. Some southern partners also received support to upgrade their computer systems. However, basin has no central, consolidated budget and currently all partners must find funding for their basin activities and services independently. Throughout the history of basin, there have been numerous attempts to secure central funding for the network, including one trial with a professional fundraiser. All of these initiatives failed for a variety of reasons, but a common factor seems to have been that appropriate building practices were never very high on the agendas of major donors.

Evaluation

In 1996, basin reached something of a watershed. The network was struggling with problems such as funding shortages, an unsatisfactory outreach and incompatible information systems. In response, the network partners decided to commission an external evaluation. The resultant recommendations included a further expansion of the network, decentralising the management of basin's information and improving the interfaces for communications and information exchange. In attempting to implement the recommendations of this evaluation, basin took considerable steps towards becoming a global network of professionals working for appropriate and cost-effective building.

However, the situation changed in 2002 when the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) discontinued funding allocations for basin and the Skat Foundation was no longer able to finance its network contributions. Other network partners were confronted with similar problems. In 2003, another assessment was commissioned with the goal of ensuring basin's future and of mapping out new and promising strategies.



Knowledge Sharing

Since its establishment, basin has continuously improved its knowledge sharing and learning mechanisms. Today, a well-developed knowledge management system combines several approaches: face-to-face meetings and seminars, a regular newsletter and other publications, and information and communication technologies – such as a website with a comprehensive database in the background.

Internet

The Internet has become an important backbone for communication and interaction among the basin network partners. Although bi-annual meetings and conferences remain important for face-to-face interaction, most of the communication within the network is conducted via e-mail. In addition, the website www.gtz.de/basin has developed into a virtual home for the basin partners. The site is an access point for documents, news, upcoming conferences and workshops and a wealth of other information. In addition, it is possible for anyone with Internet access to tap into basin's knowledge base at almost no cost. According to the 2003 web statistics, 40'788 separate visitors passed through the basin website a total of 66'720 times, launching 121'614 page views.

Knowledge base

Soon after the 1996 evaluation, basin started to establish a comprehensive database that would be publicly accessible via the basin website at no charge. The basin knowledge base comprises four categories of information: a collection of answers to often-raised questions, yellow pages with information concerning organisations and professionals, downloadable documents and reports, and information on building equipment. The whole database can be searched with a powerful search engine. The web statistics show that the basin knowledge base responds to a real need and is frequently used. In 2003, a total of 318'129 document downloads were requested through the basin website.

Meetings and Seminars

Face-to-face meetings and seminars remain an important way for people to share information and to learn from each other. basin holds regular meetings twice a year; in one of the meetings, the managing partners of the network come together and in the

other, all partners of the network convene for a major seminar or conference. Recent seminars took place in India (1999), Cuba (2001), Argentina (2002), and India (2004). The seminars are always combined with excursions to complement the knowledge sharing and to help the participants to focus their endeavours.

Question and Answer System

The basin database comprises a wealth of information and knowledge. However, many problems are very specific and need a tailored answer, so basin started up a question and answer service. Enquiries can be sent to any partner by mail or e-mail. Once inside the network, queries are re-routed to the partner who has the best knowledge to respond. Frequently raised questions and answers are also stored in the common database and can be accessed via the Internet.

Publications

Even if new information and communication technologies have become excellent ways to disseminate information and knowledge, more traditional ways of knowledge sharing (e.g. publications) are still needed. This is confirmed by practical field experience - many institutions and organisations in developing countries do not have access to the Internet and in such cases the circulation of a book, a report or a magazine can be very effective. In addition to such hardcopies, basin publications can be downloaded from the basin website at any Internet access point and then locally printed and circulated. They can also be ordered on CD-ROM by post for similar processing.

basin produces manuals, guidelines and technical information on appropriate and cost-effective building in several languages. In addition, basin collects and publishes best practices on appropriate and cost-effective building in the form of case studies, giving a short overview of the most important aspects of an undertaking and further contact details.

Twice a year, basin publishes "basin news", a periodical with a circulation of 2,000 copies. Every edition of basin news is dedicated to a specific topic of interest in terms of appropriate and cost-effective building. The basin partners agree together on the choice of topic for each issue, and the responsibility for gathering the corresponding content rotates among the partners from one issue to the next. All issues are also available in electronic form on the basin website.

Topics of the recent issues of „basin news“

basin news 25 - Knowledge Sharing

basin news 24 - Financial Services for Social Housing Projects

basin news 23 - Disaster Prevention and Mitigation

basin news 22 - Changing Education for Sustainable Construction

basin news 21 - Local Development and Jobs from Housing

Lessons Learnt

Has basin been a success? The network's output and impact are quite difficult to quantify. However, this is a problem that most networks share and qualitative indications are positive. Firstly, basin has helped to reduce the cost of getting information for the involved partners, and the coordination within the network helped to avoid duplication in the sector. Additionally, improvements in the quality of products and services provided by network partners can be observed as they continue to learn from each other. Coordination within the network increased the quality of its advisory services considerably. By attempting to develop common methodologies, approaches and strategies, basin realised many synergies among its partners. Last but not least, the mutual trust and support among the partners of basin facilitated the information and knowledge flow.

Even if basin has been a success so far, the network is still confronted with many challenges. First of all, the funding situation is difficult for the network and for its constituents. Although several initiatives have been undertaken in the past to resolve this situation, none have made much headway. A (linked) major challenge facing the network will be the shift of more responsibility from northern to southern partners. Although basin was initiated from the North, the northern partners can no longer access the necessary funds to sustain it. It is to be hoped that southern partners can take on more responsibility and that the northern partners are able (and willing) to assume the roles of facilitators and coaches. This significant shift in responsibilities and capacities will certainly not be achieved overnight.

Outlook

The services of basin are being used extensively. Appropriate, cost-effective building in developing countries is and will remain an issue of high importance. Perhaps the term „sustainable building and livelihoods“ describes the future orientation of activities more accurately. The populations of the South are still growing very quickly, the living conditions of the South's poor are deplorable, and the slums around urban centres are growing unchecked as rural-urban migration continues unabated. From an environmental perspective, the building sector cannot be ignored; it represents a large segment of any country's economy and the production of building material not only requires a great deal of energy but also makes up one of the largest contributions to national CO₂ emissions and air pollution.

2004 is likely to be a make-or-break year for basin. The future will depend on basin's ability to adapt - both in response to the imminent challenges ahead and in response to its own changing environment. The challenges facing the network have already been mapped out. The ongoing external assessment and the development of future perspectives will give ideas and recommendations in which direction the network should try to develop. In addition, the 2004 international basin conference in India (entitled "Sustainable Habitat and Livelihoods for the Poor - Strategic Imperatives and Practical Solutions") will also give new ideas to the network. The challenges and opportunities facing basin will all be mapped out in 2004; the responses of the partners over the next 12 months will either decide its future, or seal its fate.



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