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THE INTERNATIONAL REFERRAL SYSTEM FOR SOURCES OF ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION

The IRS Focal Point

This document is provided for the information of delegates. It contains extracts from the IRS Focal Point Guide (EP/IRS/M.F.1) section of the IRS Operations Manual as referred to on paragraph 23 of the document "Development of a regional oil-combating centre in the Mediterranean" (UNEP/WG.4/2). It describes the functions of an IRS Focal Point.

A limited number of copies of the full IRS manual, which is available for distribution only to designated IRS Focal Points, will be made available (in English only) for consultation by delegates at the meeting.

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THE IRS FOCAL POINT

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The International Referral System (IRS) operates through a system of focal points as follows:

(a) National Focal Points designated by governments and co-ordinating IRS activities for a particular country;

(b) Regional Focal Points designated by inter-governmental agreement, co-ordinating some or all of the IRS activities within the group of countries concerned;

(c) Sectoral Focal Points designated by UNEP and concerned with international aspects of a specific set of environmental topics.

1.2 Major sectoral information services subsidiary to a focal point may be designated by that focal point as "Other Organizational Participants". These will have functions similar to those of focal points with some exceptions.

1.3 The IRS is a mechanism for international co-operation in the field of environmental information exchange. The material in the IRS manual is intended for your guidance in participating in IRS. The system is designed to be sufficiently flexible to allow for many focal point variants. UNEP will encourage and assist focal points to participate effectively in IRS, particularly in those cases where information handling capacity is not fully developed.

1.4 The role and activities of focal points with respect to IRS and to sources and users of environmental information are indicated below. The term "community" refers to the community of sources and users normally serviced by the particular focal point. The term "international" is used generically for IRS sources or users outside this community.

II. SUMMARIZED ROLE AND ACTIVITIES OF A FOCAL POINT

2.1 (i) To collect information identifying sources within its community, in a form compatible with that specified for the IRS International Directory; to code these and maintain, in an appropriate form, a Focal Point Directory of sources, and to transmit to IRS International Directory information on those sources which it considers should be made available for international use.

(ii) To hold and maintain a copy of the International Directory in one of the forms provided by IRS and to provide for access to this Directory.

(iii) To accept requests from users within its community and to provide appropriate lists of community sources in response to such queries, and, where appropriate, to filter and channel such requests to the international system, either performing a search of the International Directory or by referring the request to the IRS Central Unit.

(iv) To act, where necessary, as a controlling agency for referral requests to the International System and also for substantive information requests resulting from referrals generated internationally through IRS, including any necessary control over the payment of fees for such information.

(v) To channel IRS communications to and from the Central Unit and other components of the International System.

(vi) To assist in the design, evaluation and improvement of IRS, including the provision of appropriate participants for IRS meetings and the regular reporting of IRS activities to the Central Unit.

(vii) To assist in the publicity of IRS services with the aim of increasing the international community of users and sources.

2.2 The above roles and activities are amplified in section 3 of this document. For example: (ii) above is amplified in section 3.2.

III. DETAILED ROLE AND ACTIVITIES OF FOCAL POINTS

3.1 Source Information Collection and Maintenance

3.1.1 A Source is a functional unit which holds information or knowledge on a particular environmental topic or range of topics. For the purposes of the International System, the source should be willing and able to provide relevant information when requested to do so by IRS (subject to the availability indicated by the source when registering), but this may not be a strict requirement for community Directories, in which it might be necessary to record the existence of material which is less readily available.

3.1.2 No international limitation is placed on what can be regarded as an environmental topic. In effect there are no bounds to the knowledge which may prove useful in solving environmental problems.

3.1.3 For purposes of the IRS Directory, a source is to be regarded as possessing a single coherent body of information concerning a single 'aspect' of the environment and thus many organizations will find it necessary to complete a number of IRS forms, one for each such set of information in their holdings. This precaution is necessary in order to avoid incorrect pairing of subjects from different holdings which could result in inappropriate referrals.

3.1.4 The multiple address format of the International Form for Registration of a Source allows for focal point options with regard to communication channels to sources.

3.1.5 The information concerning sources for international use should be transmitted to the IRS Central Unit on either International IRS Source Registration Forms or, preferably, in machine readable form for direct inclusion in the International Directory.

3.2 Maintenance and Use of the International Directory

3.2.1 One copy of the IRS International Directory will be supplied to each focal point on a regular basis on one of the following forms:

(a) Loose-leaf book. This option may be withdrawn if and when the cost of production and mailing of what may become a bulky item becomes too great.

(b) Microfilm or Microfiche. Standard 16 mm. microfilm or 48 reduction computer output microfiche.

(c) Computer readable ½" magnetic tape. This will be made available as requested in IRS Fixed-length record and a limited number of International Standard formats. Documentation and COBOL routines will be available f. search/print programmes.

3.2.2 The interval between updates has not yet been decided, but it is not likely to be less than three months.

3.2.3 Non-computer readable versions will be accompanied by appropriate subject attribute indexes to allow for manual searching.

3.2.4 The UNEP/IRS Central Unit, and UNEP supported Regional Focal Points, will perform computer searches free of charge for focal points holding non-computer readable versions which request this service and will report selected source accession numbers in response to such requests. Focal points will be informed of the establishment of UNEP regional centres for IRS.

3.2.5 Focal points are expected to provide appropriate facilities for the supply of IRS information on selected sources to users in their community who request such information.

3.3 Acceptance of Referral Requests

3.3.1 In principle, the IRS is a freely available system however, focal points do have the option of restricting their community of users as they see fit. A focal point may wish to apply different criteria for the use of the International System from those of its internal system.

3.3.2 Each accepted request will normally result in a search of the focal point directory, followed, if required, by a search of the International Directory. As noted above (paragraph 3.2.4) IRS is prepared to perform searches of the International Directory free of charge for focal points with inadequate facilities.

3.3.3 It is the responsibility of the focal point to provide the user with the names, addresses and other directory information on selected sources.

3.4 Controlling Functions

3.4.1 As previously stated, each focal point has the option of setting up mechanisms to control:

(a) Its community of sources, with special reference to those to be included in the International Directory.

(b) Its community of users, particularly those eligible to query international sources through IRS.

3.4.2 In addition a focal point may wish to control the flow of substantive information to and from its community. In the case of substantive information requested from outside it may be necessary to consider restricting specific classes of such information for specific international users. For both inward and outward flow it may be necessary to monitor costs, particularly where monetary exchange problems are concerned. It is assumed that almost all substantive information requests will be subject to fees, that these fees will normally be negotiated between the source and user, and that the corresponding focal points will often wish to be kept informed of such negotiations.

3.5 Contact Point for IRS

3.5.1 As the system is developed there will need to be a continued dialogue between focal points and the IRS Central Unit. In particular a National Focal Point will be the normal contact point for IRS within a country.

3.6 Participation in Design

3.6.1 Focal points will be asked to contribute by providing policy level guidance to IRS and by participating in IRS meetings.

3.6.2 An important function of focal points is to assist IRS in the evaluation of the effectiveness of the system. Forms are available for periodic reporting of focal point activities to IRS.

3.7 IRS Publicity

The effectiveness of IRS will depend on widespread use and for this purpose publicity concerning IRS services will be important. UNEP will be developing training and publicity aids for IRS and it is hoped that focal points will make effective use of these.