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THE SERVIR PROGRAM DEMAND:  
CULTIVATING USE OF BETTER INFORMATION ACTIVITY

# SUSTAINABILITY Concept Paper



**SERVIR GLOBAL**  
The Regional Visualization and Monitoring System

**MARCH 2013**

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the current thinking on what sustainability is – and how it can be achieved – for the SERVIR program. The underlying assumption is that USAID and NASA envision a network of regional hubs that continue to provide SERVIR tools and services once the “catalytic” investment of funding and direct scientific support ends, and that these in turn will contribute to improved climate change mitigation and adaptation decision-making in the regions and globally.

The topic of SERVIR sustainability is not new, and many perspectives have already been shared among different stakeholders. Several key events have helped further the discussion, including consultations with Southeast Asia government entities in September-October 2102 to assess the use of geospatial information and technology in the region<sup>1</sup>; the sustainability session at the SERVIR Summit in October 2012; the December 2012 visit CATHALAC in Panama, the first “graduated” SERVIR hub; and meetings with ICIMOD and RCMRD in January and February 2013. In addition, other materials and thought pieces provided by NASA and USAID also helped inform this concept paper.

## Aspects of Sustainability

Sustainability of SERVIR will likely encompass the following components, although others may be identified as discussions evolve with different stakeholders:

- 1) **Financial:** is there sufficient funding – for the hub institutions, USAID and NASA – to cover the costs of implementing the SERVIR program? At the hub level, this includes both USG and non-USG sources.
- 2) **Infrastructure:** do the hub institutions and other stakeholders have the hardware, software and “built environment” to support the development of SERVIR tools and services? At the NASA level, will future satellites be launched that will enable continuity of existing data, and/or are other countries launching satellites that will provide similar data (either free or paid)?
- 3) **Technical and Scientific:** Are the right kind of technical staff at the hubs and NASA, and can they be brought on easily as needed? Can external expertise be tapped into? Will the science behind SERVIR continue to evolve, and is there capacity to keep it evolving?



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<sup>1</sup> The “Lower Mekong Assessment” conducted as part of the Demand Activity was designed to understand the current state of using geospatial tools and information to help inform any future related USAID activities in the region, including opening a Southeast Asia hub.

- 4) **Relational:** Are the hub institutions solidly networked in their regions? Are they networked among themselves, with NASA, and with other similar institutions to help “push” forward new thinking, lessons learned, and information and knowledge sharing?
- 5) **Organizational:** Is there institutional “buy-in” at USAID, NASA and the including within governing boards and senior management? At the hubs, is the “spirit” behind SERVIR embedded in the institution, and is it part of their core business? Does the institution have the organizational structure – both technical and administrative – to support SERVIR?
- 6) **Reputational:** Does SERVIR (and NASA, USAID) continue to provide “brand equity” to all stakeholders such that they want to stay associated with it?
- 7) **Relevance and Demand:** Do SERVIR products and services continue to be relevant? Are they sought out? Is there capacity and mechanisms in place to evaluate products and services, and to use this information for continuous improvement and product relevance?
- 8) **Branding and Knowledge Management:** How will – and who will determine – how SERVIR will be communicated and marketed into the future? How will knowledge developed, such as the global website, be maintained and updated, and who will be responsible for this?

The aspects mentioned range from the tangible and measurable to the intangible but essential. For instance, financing for SERVIR activities once USG funding ends can come from other sources – grants, fee for services, or unrestricted income, for example.



Financing can help keep hardware and software updated and technical and scientific personnel trained and retained. Staying on the “cutting edge”, both in technology and human capacity, can in turn contribute to continued relevance and evolution of SERVIR products and services. On the other hand, “real” institutional buy-in, such that the hub will provide “SERVIR-like” support *no matter what*; keeping up demand for SERVIR

products and services; building and maintaining relevant relationships; and strengthening the reputation of SERVIR cannot be guaranteed with money alone.

### Lessons from the CATHALAC experience

As both the first SERVIR hub established to being the first hub operating without USAID funding, CATHALAC provides important lessons on SERVIR sustainability: CATHALAC continues to provide geospatial tools and services to government entities throughout the region, and continues to provide near real-time satellite imagery and derived products on the [servir.net](http://servir.net) website, which maintains a steady following of users. On the

other hand, CATHALAC faces, or will face, challenges to sustaining SERVIR, many of which exemplify the aspects of sustainability mentioned in the previous section. For example:

- Substantial investments in infrastructure: as the result of USAID and NASA investments, CATHALAC has the hardware and software to be on the “cutting edge” of technology in the region. However, the equipment originally funded by SERVIR (e.g., the servers), is more than five years old, and will likely need replacement in the coming years.



- Investments in personnel: SERVIR helped build the technical capacity of CATHALAC staff, which in turn helped build the reputation of CATHALAC to provide geospatial information and support to the region. Nevertheless, while some staff have remained at CATHALAC others have left, which has affected their capacity to maintain and update SERVIR products and services, as well as to provide support to regional stakeholders.
- Institutional buy-in: SERVIR is part of the “DNA” of CATHALAC. They have a government mandate, supported by senior management, to provide remote sensing and GIS technical support to the region, and actively do so. Will this mandate continue into the future, particularly if CATHALAC encounters financial difficulties, changes in management, or other changes?
- Other funding sources: CATHALAC is funding SERVIR activities through unrestricted funding, and actively seek grants for programs similar to SERVIR. While this demonstrates CATHALAC’s commitment to providing geospatial information and support to the region, it is also an area of financial vulnerability.

Networks: CATHALAC is well connected to some of the key stakeholders in the region, and maintains connections with NASA. For example, if a natural disaster occurs in Guatemala, relevant ministries will contact CATHALAC immediately for high-resolution satellite imagery of the affected area; and if CATHALAC cannot provide it directly they can then reach out to NASA to initiate this mechanism of support to the region. However, there may be other stakeholders with whom connections have been lost or buy-in was not maintained, for example the USAID mission in El Salvador.

- There are still unresolved branding, SERVIR knowledge management, and “ownership” issues. Looking forward, how will SERVIR avoid the challenges that CATHALAC experienced, for example, harmonizing web content, and managing and disseminating SERVIR information and knowledge for both local and global audiences?

## Next Steps

The Demand activity as a whole can help advance the sustainability of SERVIR through understanding user groups and their needs, improving communication of SERVIR, evaluating and disseminating the impacts of the program, creating sustainability plans for hubs, and facilitating a sustainability strategy for SERVIR globally. On a more operational level, the following activities will be carried out to help inform continued evolution of SERVIR sustainability:

1. **Sustainability strategy workshops** with internal SERVIR stakeholders (proposed for PY1/Q3-Q4 to PY2). Participants at the Summit sustainability session unanimously agreed that further dialogue was necessary to establish a unified, operational vision for SERVIR at the global level (although sustainability may look different in each region). These consultations will encompass four facilitated events over the coming year, including a workshop with USAID and NASA; a workshop with all internal stakeholders (CATHALAC, ICIMOD, RCMRD, NASA, and USAID), and in-country sessions at RCMRD and ICIMOD to operationalize sustainability via the hub-specific sustainability plans. The outcome of these workshops will be the key inputs for the SERVIR global sustainability strategy, as well as hub-level sustainability plans.
2. **SERVIR organizational case studies** (originally organizational assessments scheduled for PY2, will begin PY1/Q2): Following discussions with USAID and RCMRD, the studies will look at how SERVIR has fit into the different institutional models of the hub institutions, and explore some of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges that each have experienced in incorporating and championing SERVIR within their institutions and among their key stakeholders. Financial, technical, organizational, governance, and other aspects will be considered. The case studies will follow similar formats to allow for uniformity when looking across regions, but will also highlight the different organizational and operational nature of each hub. CATHALAC will be included as one of the case studies.
3. **Sustainability Strategic Plans (PY2)**: The results of the sustainability workshops, coupled with hub-level analyses, will be synthesized in SERVIR sustainability strategic plans: one for SERVIR Global, and one for each hub. These plans will encompass what sustainability means on a global network and hub level, and what the roles, responsibilities and expectations are of USAID, NASA and hub institutions during and post funding. This framework can potentially be part of the SERVIR operations manual.
4. **Visits to RCMRD and ICIMOD (PY1 and PY2)**. The consultation with CATHALAC played a key role in expanding the thinking around SERVIR sustainability. In the same vein, visits to RCMRD and ICIMOD in January and February 2013 have furthered understanding what “sustaining” SERVIR means both in theory and practice.