

**MINISIS USERS' GROUP
MEETING 1991**

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This series includes meeting documents, internal reports, and preliminary technical documents that may later form the basis of a formal publication. A Manuscript Report is given a small distribution to a highly specialized audience.

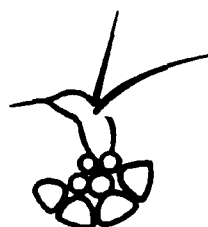
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Esta serie incluye ponencias de reuniones, informes internos y documentos técnicos que pueden posteriormente conformar la base de una publicación formal. El informe recibe distribución limitada entre una audiencia altamente especializada.

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MUG '91

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and the University of the West Indies (UWI)

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(UN-CEPALC)
et la University of the West Indies (UWI)

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Authors

MINISIS: Future Directions

Martha Stone

Let me begin my comments this morning with some words of thanks. The first is to you, for permitting me to speak at the end of this very full meeting rather than at the beginning as originally planned. As you know, I was required to attend a meeting of the management team of IDRC in Ottawa earlier this week. I truly regret not being here during the week. I have heard from many of you that the discussions were lively, stimulating and informative. I only wish I could have participated. I also wish to thank both ECLAC and UWI for hosting this MINISIS users' group meeting and providing the environment for those discussions to take place. I believe that they are to be congratulated for that achievement.

During the past week, you have been discussing the use and application of the MINISIS software within your respective institutions. You have also been hearing a great deal more about Version H of MINISIS, the next step in the evolution of the MINISIS software. Terry Gavin and his colleagues have noted your comments and to the degree possible will incorporate your suggestions into their on-going implementation schedule for Version H.

The Information Sciences Division uses these meetings as a forum for collecting input on the future directions of the MINISIS software. Although we cannot always immediately put into place all the recommendations you make, we try our best to implement those enhancement requests that

will be of most benefit to the majority of the user community.

Because of these enhancements recommended by the user community, MINISIS has continued to evolve. As the director of the Information Sciences Division and a board-appointed officer of IDRC, I am pleased to say that IDRC is extremely proud that we are able to assist those involved with information management, particularly those in developing countries, to have access to appropriate tools to meet their specific requirements. These requirements include having access to tools that are equivalent to the tools accessible to their counterparts in developed countries. They also include having access to software that can be operated, manage data, and produce useful

information products in their own language and character set. The new version of MINISIS, Version H, will continue to meet these challenges and provide a solid foundation for the future evolution of the software.

As we enter this new and exciting phase of MINISIS development, we should stand back for a moment to examine what brought us to this point. We must keep in mind that MINISIS development and support is only one of the major components in achieving the objectives of IDRC and fulfilling the mandate of the Information Sciences Division. In general, the business of IDRC is to assist developing countries to generate, share and use knowledge for the benefit of their development.

In 1976 the international board of governors of IDRC approved our proposal to develop computer software which became known as MINISIS. This decision was consistent with IDRC's efforts to explore ways of strengthening the information management capabilities of developing countries. This seems to have been a sound decision, as the MINISIS software is now used by approximately 360 organizations in 58 countries. The applications of the software range from bibliographic databases to project information systems to germplasm databases to inventory systems. These organizations currently receive the MINISIS software, training and support from a network of 5 MINISIS Resource Centres, 6 commercial distributors and IDRC itself.

Ten years later, in 1986, a senior consultant was commissioned to provide input on the future directions of the MINISIS software. The recommendations of this study persuaded us to propose to the IDRC board and executive management a long term, measured plan to restructure the software in response to user input and involve the user community in the dissemination and support of MINISIS.

This was done within the context of the mission statement of the Information Sciences Division

which is: "to promote the social and economic advancement of developing regions by providing researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners in developing countries access to the scientific, technical and other information they require for the application to the problems of development". The specific objectives of the division for meeting this mission are:

- 1 To improve systems, services and tools for managing and using information relevant to development research and change;
- 2 To build indigenous capacity within developing countries for the effective management and application of information for development; and
- 3 To foster cooperation and coordination in development research through information sharing.

MINISIS, as it has continued to evolve, has demonstrated itself to be an appropriate tool for meeting the information management needs of many organizations in both developing and developed countries. The sharing of information has certainly been facilitated through the use of a flexible software and international standards.

During this evolutionary process, IDRC has ensured that the MINISIS user community is involved in the MINISIS development process. To this point, the users, particularly those in developing countries have played an active role in the decision making process in determining the direction of the software. One of the most important MINISIS developments has been the decentralization of the dissemination and support of the software. The MINISIS Resource Centre program is a crucial component in the future of MINISIS. The MINISIS Resource Centres will play an increasingly important and independent role in the future development and support of the software.

In 1988, Ivan Head, the then president of IDRC, in the realization that MINISIS was the ideal tool for a quite directed application, asked what resources

were necessary to accelerate the schedule for the development of a microcomputer implementation of MINISIS. This request and the resulting temporary increase in resources, caused us to change speed and compress our development plans into a shorter time period.

Last year, another senior consultant was commissioned to undertake a situation analysis of the current MINISIS program. His task was to centre on the commercialization of MINISIS and to gather data that could be used to propose strategic options for managing the MINISIS program in the future. The objective analysis of the data he collected from members of the user community, commercial DBMS developers, and others will be synthesized with information from other sources to define a direction for MINISIS for the future.

We are now at the stage where the technical staff of the computer systems group are actively implementing the software and writing the documentation for Version H. Earlier this week, you saw a prototype of some of that software. My understanding from talking to Terry and from some of you, is that the prototype was well received. By the next meeting, you will see a live demonstration of Version H. At that time, rather than seeing a slideshow, you will be able to actually use some of the real software.

I have described briefly the past and the present of MINISIS. Now, what are the future directions of the MINISIS program within IDRC? When considering that question we must keep in mind that the objectives of ISD and IDRC go far beyond the development, dissemination and support of a software product called MINISIS.

The mandate of the centre is to support the development, utilization and application of appropriate technology by developing countries for their own development. In planning for the future, we must ask ourselves some very difficult questions:

1 Is the direct participation in software development the most appropriate method for IDRC to be responding to the issues of information management in developing countries in the year 2000?

2 Is it more appropriate to be facilitating the use of MINISIS and other appropriate software developed by others?

3 Has the time come for IDRC to change its focus from being a leader in a specific type of software development to being a leader in supporting the utilization and application of appropriate software?

It is the task of IDRC to answer these questions objectively, define a strategy, design an appropriate infrastructure and implement a plan for realizing our objectives in the future. Definitely, MINISIS will continue to evolve. We are committed to finding mechanisms to ensure that the user community is involved in that process.

We must also be aware of the financial realities of our time. The economic situation of IDRC, as is true of all donor agencies, is not an optimistic one. IDRC faces serious financial reductions. How the centre will face the challenge of these reductions was the subject of the meeting that I participated in this week. Therefore, within this environment, we as an organization, must rise to the challenge and find ways of maximizing our resources and focusing our activities to efficiently meet our objectives. This will obviously result in some changes and although MINISIS will remain integral to the program of the Information Sciences Division, it is clear that there will be changes related to it as well.

There are strong indications from our board of governors and executive management that IDRC cannot be directly involved in software development unless it is to meet a clearly defined development issue. The focus of IDRC's MINISIS activity, therefore, must change. However, this is not to be construed as a negative change. It will be one of growth and enhanced responsiveness to the present

and potential user community, specifically in the developing regions of the world.

Version H of MINISIS will be the last major restructuring of the software. Once the new release of the software has stabilized we will focus our attention on the development of applications rather than the development of a DBMS tool. This upcoming release of the software will provide users, MINISIS Resource Centres, commercial distributors and IDRC with a flexible tool to build applications to meet their specific textual information management requirements.

The existing MINISIS software has frequently been evaluated by individuals and organizations against major software products. Time and again, these evaluations have demonstrated that there does exist a market niche for MINISIS. There is still a definite requirement for tools to efficiently manage information systems dealing with textual information, particularly when there is a requirement for multilingual or alternate character set processing.

Specifically, what does this mean for the MINISIS community?

- 1 By the end of next year, the Version H of the MINISIS software will be ready for release.
- 2 IDRC recognizes that software must be maintained and supported. We remain committed to that activity and there are many modalities which will be explored to do that.
- 3 Once the MINISIS software has stabilized and an appropriate support program has been put in place, IDRC will focus its attention on exploring other aspects of use of MINISIS to solve information management problems.

In order to plan for this new direction of IDRC's MINISIS activities we will analyze input received from a variety of sources. One such input will be

from a study that is currently taking place within the Information Sciences Division. It is an evaluation of the division's support for projects in which computer software was a primary product of the research. Among other things, this study will evaluate the different modalities of IDRC support for software development and assist divisional management in determining what proportion of resources to devote in the future to projects creating software as the primary product.

Studies that have been undertaken by senior consultants as well as input from our project officers will be considered. In addition, we will be examining the relevant activities of other donors such as the recent establishment by the United Nations University of the International Institute for Software Technology.

The most important input, however, must come from you, the MINISIS user community. We need to collect information on your use and application of MINISIS, applications you would like to see developed with the software and, in general, future directions you would like to see application development take. This information is crucial for us to make our plans for future activities.

Version H of MINISIS represents a major plateau in information management software development for IDRC. We have come a long way together and there is still work to do. Version H will provide the foundation for the development of new applications and, possibly, the addition of future enhancements. We must work together to find the most effective and efficient method of ensuring that those applications are developed and the enhancements made for the benefit of the entire MINISIS community.

Meetings such as this one demonstrate that we are a diverse group. We come from different backgrounds, different cultures and different organizational interests. However, we share a common interest—the desire to ensure we have

access to an appropriate tool to effectively meet our information management requirements. Together, in the MINISIS users' group, we have established a mechanism for providing mutual support and sharing experiences among colleagues. There are

still great advantages to all of us in strengthening this partnership to ensure that the MINISIS software retains its level of excellence into the future.