

# ***Sharing Information on Development***

## ***Working Paper 1: Organizational issues and the exchange of information***

### ***1 Getting a corporate commitment to information sharing***

**1.1** Without a strong corporate commitment to share information, it is often difficult to exchange information about an agency's activities with other development organizations. Building a corporate commitment depends primarily on the way in which the benefits of information sharing are perceived by various levels of agency staff, from senior executives to development officers directly responsible for the management of activities.

**1.2** Senior executives and administrators are aware of the need to avoid duplication and the importance of learning from past experience in developing projects and programmes. However the benefits of information sharing are often indirect and difficult to quantify, so that they do not always realize that managing and sharing their development information can lead to more effective development activities. Yet without the support of agency executives, it is difficult to develop information policies that will translate into real benefits for the organization.

**1.3** Corporate commitment also depends on how less senior staff perceive the benefits of information sharing. Usually information about development activity is collected at the level of the development officer directly responsible for a project, programme or credit transfer. These officers must take the time to collect the information, ensure its accuracy, complete forms or reports, and then verify that the data has been correctly recorded in the internal information system. They must

constantly ensure that the data is updated as the activity progresses. Frequently they have many other tasks which may seem of more immediate and direct benefit to the goal of development. As a result, they may put off, forget or avoid information-related tasks, thereby affecting the accuracy, currency and validity of the information the agency has to share. Like senior executives and administrators, they may not perceive the considerable, but indirect, benefit of sharing accurate and current information.

*1.4 Within your organization, how can you help create a corporate commitment to sharing development information? What can you do to make the benefits of information sharing apparent to senior staff? How can development officers of your agency be motivated to cooperate in the collection and processing of development information?*

## **2 Implementing a corporate commitment to share information**

**2.1** Even in those organizations that appreciate the benefits of information sharing and that have made a commitment in principle to share their information with other development agencies or institutions in developing countries, information sharing must compete with other projects or programmes for limited resources the agency has at its disposal. The motivation to share information may be there, but not the financial or human resources.

**2.2** It is true that the costs of information sharing are considerable. First of all, information needs to be collected and managed within the organization throughout the life cycle of an activity. While critical information on projects is often available from a central office during approval or evaluation phases, during other stages in the life cycle of a project, information can only be obtained from the operational unit directly responsible for the activity. Considerable investment of time and effort is required to collect this information in a comprehensive, timely fashion.

**2.3** Even where the information collection takes place on a regular basis, the information as collected for internal use may be unsuitable for the use of other organizations. The information may be stored in different places, in incompatible systems or in unusable formats. Therefore the information must often be collated, reformatted,

validated and checked for confidentiality before it can be shared with another agency. All this activity—which involves considerable human effort—translates into costs which must be borne by the originating agency.

**2.4** Once there is a commitment in principle to share information, how do you mobilize resources within your agency to collect and compile the information? What specific costs need to be budgeted for?

**2.5** Information sharing can be facilitated if there is a focal point or contact person at each agency. A contact person can manage and encourage the exchange of information. This person can assist in communication between internal staff and contact persons or focal points at other organizations. For example, such a contact person could answer questions from external sources about the agency's projects; he or she could also get answers to questions by internal staff about the data received from other organizations. Yet few agencies have established such a focal point. This may be due to the unfamiliarity of the concept, budgetary constraints, or the difficulty of defining the relationship of such a focal point with other operational units within the agency.

**2.6** *Should a specific position or unit be established for this activity? What roles will such a unit play as a focal point for information exchange? What relationship will this unit have with other units or departments within your organization?*

### **3 Getting commitment from other organizations**

**3.1** Once an agency is ready to exchange data with other organizations, only half of the information sharing equation is in place. An agency may share its information with other organizations, but are those other organizations able or willing to share their information? For an agency to derive benefits from information sharing, and to prove that the investment made in collecting and sharing information is worthwhile, other organizations must be willing to share their development information as well.

**3.2** Participation in an exchange of information is entirely voluntary. Agencies are free to share information or not as they choose. However "peer pressure" in the form of encouragement from a number of

similar organizations can help to encourage this “voluntary” participation. This pressure can make itself felt through the number of requests for shared information, the level at which requests are made, and by organizational participation in formal and informal groups and associations.

**3.3** *How can you encourage other organizations to share their data? What means are available to put pressure on others to exchange development information?*

#### **4 Confidentiality and the sharing of Information**

**4.1** Some of the information about projects, programmes and capital transfers may be considered to be confidential. In the case of proposed projects, reporting planned financial commitments may raise the hopes of recipients who are then disappointed when final approval is not given or is given for a lesser amount. Project evaluations and audits may contain information indirectly critical of persons, groups or organizations. Information may be considered confidential to avoid misinterpretation, particularly in the case of financial information, where derived figures such as totals may give an inaccurate or unfair picture of budgets and funding allocations. The availability of detailed information about activities may in some cases assist persons or organizations critical of development activities or the particular programmes of an organization.

**4.2** Yet the issue of “confidentiality” may be used in such a way as to prohibit altogether the exchange of information. Information may be labelled “confidential” on the theory that if no one has access to the information, they cannot misuse or misinterpret it. Senior managers are especially sensitive to information which is to be shared in electronic form; data in this form may be treated as confidential, even though the same information is available in printed form such as annual reports or project lists.

**4.3** Whole blocks of information may be declared confidential because a single data element is of a sensitive nature. Yet experience shows that with properly designed systems and procedures, it is perfectly feasible to make some “public” data elements available for sharing, and to keep other “private” data elements confidential and for internal use only. It is not necessary to declare whole classes or types

of information to be declared "confidential" because one or two data elements are of a sensitive nature.

**4.4** *What are valid criteria for determining confidentiality? Do the criteria change depending on the stage of the activity, the format of the information, and the organization receiving the data? What procedures are available for allowing easy access to the greater part of the descriptive data on a development activity, while restricting access to a small number of confidential data elements?*