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**AskARIES FIELD TEST**

**Preliminary Report: Draft**

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**These results are preliminary inasmuch as many of the Part B  
Questionnaires have not yet been received.** [REDACTED]

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### *The ARIES Project and Capacity Development*

To assist intermediary organizations to improve their capacity to work more effectively with small enterprises, the U.S. Agency for International Development created the ARIES project. Under prime contractor Robert R. Nathan Associates, the project supplies technical assistance, training and applied research, with HIID bearing principal responsibility for the applied research component. This consisted of a "Strategic Overview Paper," a series of management training cases, and a computerized database.

The HIID team began by assessing the ways in which existing capacity was regarded as deficient. To facilitate this task, capacity was divided into four broad categories: strategic, administrative, technical, communications. Through a process of literature review and interviews with management and staff of resource institutions, information was developed on capacity shortcomings within each of these four domains. Operationally, this resulted in a sort of inventory of the problems which the institutions frequently encountered. These problems were then examined for similarities, patterns, ways in which the problems could be categorized and clustered. The result was a typology of "recurrent problems."

### *AskARIES Knowledgebase*

The purpose of the database was to assist in organizing and analyzing the large amount of information available within the literature relevant to small enterprise development programs. The idea of "recurrent problems" proved to be a powerful concept around which to organize the database so that information could be related effectively to the project's capacity development mission. Specifying problems led to inquiry as to the causes of the problems, directions in which solutions might lie, and implications for the project -- particularly with respect to training. This problem-solving

orientation gave to the database a character very different from the traditional annotated bibliography, although it does contain document summaries as well. However, much of its utility derives from its problem focus, not from its conventional bibliographic document summaries. This emphasis on problem solving gives it much in common with the knowledgebase component of an expert system, hence its title. While the project called for delivery of the database only to USAID, early feedback from the small enterprise development community suggested that it would be useful to a wide range of organizations and individuals. To facilitate reaching this wider audience, HIID supplemented ARIES resources to develop the database and its supporting documentation for commercial publication standards. Under the title The AskARIES Knowledgebase the product was published in June, 1989 by the Kumarian Press of West Hartford, Connecticut. The strategic overview paper and 21 cases were also published by Kumarian Press as Seeking Solutions: Framework and Cases for Small Enterprise Development Programs. By the end of the year, approximately 40 institutions had purchased AskARIES including USAID which purchased 21 for distribution to AID missions and Peace Corps Offices.

#### *The AskARIES Field Test*

In the context of its future programming for small and microenterprise development, USAID desired to have systematic feedback from its mission staff and Peace Corps users of AskARIES on the usefulness of the system to them and, more importantly, their views on the importance of updates, system extensions and improvements. Accordingly, AID asked members of the original HIID AskARIES team to conduct a series of field tests with key members of fourteen AID and Peace Corps offices in twelve countries.

Information from the field test was collected by means of the AskARIES Survey Instrument, developed jointly with Lee White, Andrea Baumann, and others at USAID.

This Instrument comprises two parts, one that was completed during the HIID field visits (Part A) and one to be completed after the staff member had gained more experience using AskARIES (Part B).

The team member first worked with office staff to assess the degree of difficulty experienced in installing and using AskARIES. Then, given a well-defined, real-world problem from one of the cases in Seeking Solutions, the user explored AskARIES to "seek solutions" to this problem, formulate judgments as to the quality of the content embodied in AskARIES about this problem, and discuss difficulties encountered in carrying out this exercise (substantive and technical). Finally, the HIID team member asked the field tester to reflect on how AskARIES might be applicable to work in their own institution and to the work of local resource institutions active in small enterprise development.

For discussion at the ARIES training materials workshop on March 8, 1990 in Washington, D.C., this document presents the preliminary results of this field test. Additional information will be developed from the discussions at the workshop and from additional copies of the Part Bs expected within the coming few weeks. A final report then will be prepared.

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 presents a discussion of the results obtained from the quantitative "opinion scales" used in the survey instrument. Chapter 3 draws upon the qualitative feedback from the testers to summarize what testers liked about the system and what they did not like. Chapter 4 summarizes testers' views on future features, including their relative importance. Detailed qualitative statements from all questionnaires are contained in Appendix A and trip reports by the HIID team members in Appendix B. Due to the length of the Appendices, they are included only on the copy of the report submitted to AID.

## CHAPTER 2 FIELD TEST RESULTS: THE OPINION SCALES

### *Part A*

The Part A field test is divided into three general sections. Questions 1 through 8 probe the ease of installing, accessing, and using the program NOTEBOOK II that underlies AskARIES, and also seeks evaluation of the clarity and conciseness of the AskARIES User's Guide. Questions 9 through 12 address the substance of AskARIES: whether users think that the database will be useful for solving problems facing the SME staff who participated in the field test, and whether they think it will be useful for local organizations working in the SME field. In addition, this section asks for feedback on specific portions of records -- the quality of document summaries, analyst comments, and the bibliographic information. The final section of the evaluation, Questions 13 through 16, seeks suggestions for potential future development of AskARIES. Responses were solicited on these various topics by means of scales ranging from 1 to 5 to allow testers to express a range of opinion.

There were a total of 27 field testers. Of these 21, were AID or Peace Corps professional staff, and six were secretaries and computer department staff in those organizations interested in having support staff trained to pull out information as needed by professional staff. (For the latter, only the first section for these evaluation forms was completed, dealing with installation and ease of use.)

Below is an overview of the results from the opinion scales. Note that the tables are numbered according to the questionnaire numbers; e.g., Table A15.2 contains the data from the second part of Question 15 in the Part A evaluation.

As shown on Tables A1 through A4, field testers found it easy to install AskARIES and move around in the database with the basic Notebook commands. Generally the

guide itself received favorable ratings, although there were several testers who felt the documentation was not clear enough. The number of testers experiencing difficulty increased when it came to creating "views" of the knowledgebase. As shown in Table A5, only about half found it easy to create a view, with the rest experiencing varying degrees of difficulty (3 to 5). The written comments (See, Appendix A, Section 5) on problems encountered creating views ranged from confusion with the Notebook commands (e.g., why "select" instead of "view" to create a view, and when to use arrow keys, tab key, and space bar) to difficulties knowing which AskARIES keywords to use to find the kind of records they wanted. Finally, Tables A6 through A8 show that people found it easy to create a new database and enter new records, and the majority found printing easy to do. To the extent that printing was found difficult, the comments reveal that the problems related to creating custom print formats in Notebook II, a subject covered only in the Notebook II documentation, not in the AskARIES User's Guide.

The second section of questions addresses the substance of AskARIES. We see in Table A9 that most testers were generally positive (2-3) about the usefulness of AskARIES for problem-solving. The degree of enthusiasm increased when people rated specific aspects of AskARIES in Tables A9 and A10: the usefulness of analyst comments (1-2) and document summaries (1-3). There was less interest (ratings of 3) in its usefulness for bibliographic research.

Turning to Table 11-12, almost all testers rated AskARIES as quite useful and applicable to their institution (1-2). The written comments reveal interesting and important clarifications to this favorable response (see Chapter 3 for summary and Appendix A for all comments). There was a general consensus that AskARIES is most useful to: (1) staff doing hands-on project management (including Peace Corps volunteers), especially those who are relatively new to the field of SMED; and (2) to academically-interested staff and research/proposal-writing units. AskARIES was

believed to have less utility in its present form to professional staff with substantial SMED experience. The applicability to local institutions was given mixed ratings and a range of comments. One salient issue was limited applicability due to language barriers - the lack of English speakers in local PVOs with whom many of the field testing organizations work in SMED programming.

Turning to the third section on future features for AskARIES, Table A13 presents a clear consensus that updates are considered virtually essential for AskARIES to be useful now and in the future. Table A14 reveals substantial interest in Help Aids, while Table A15.2 indicates an even split between those interested in full document retrieval and those not interested. Finally, we see in Table 15.3 a lack of interest in (or suggestions for) other software to run AskARIES.

TABLE A1  
Ease of Installation

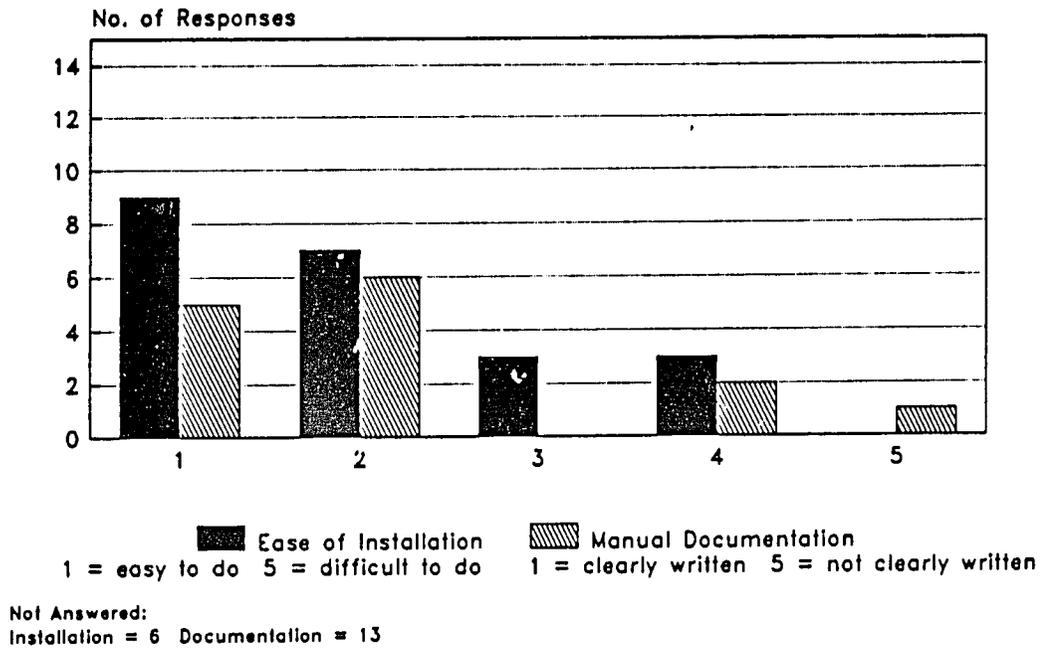


TABLE A2  
Ease of Accessing Records

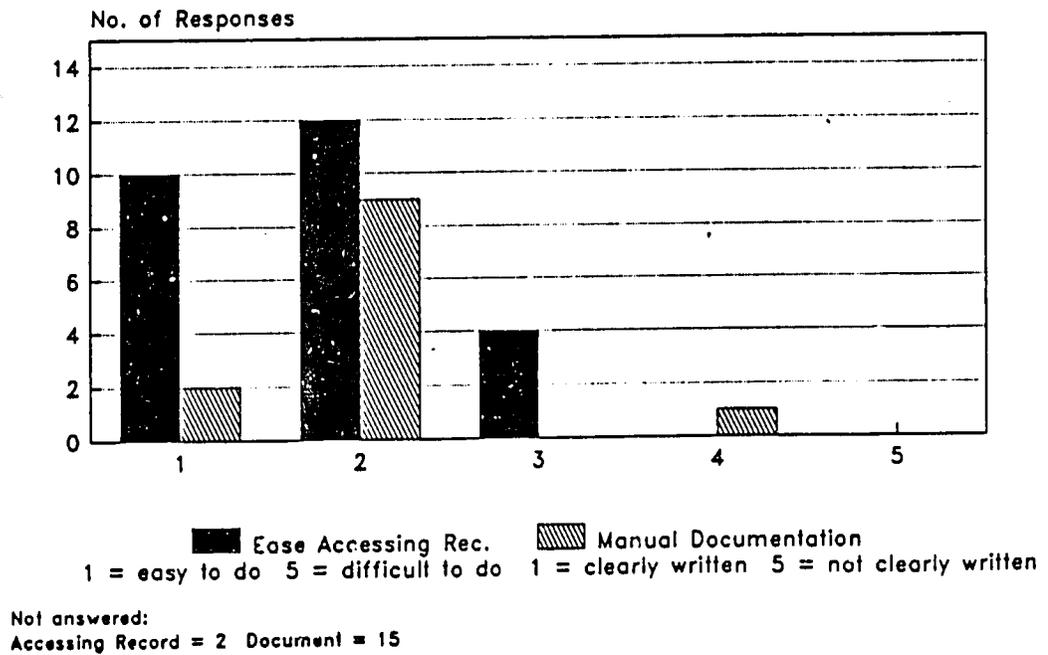


TABLE A3  
Ease of Moving within a Record

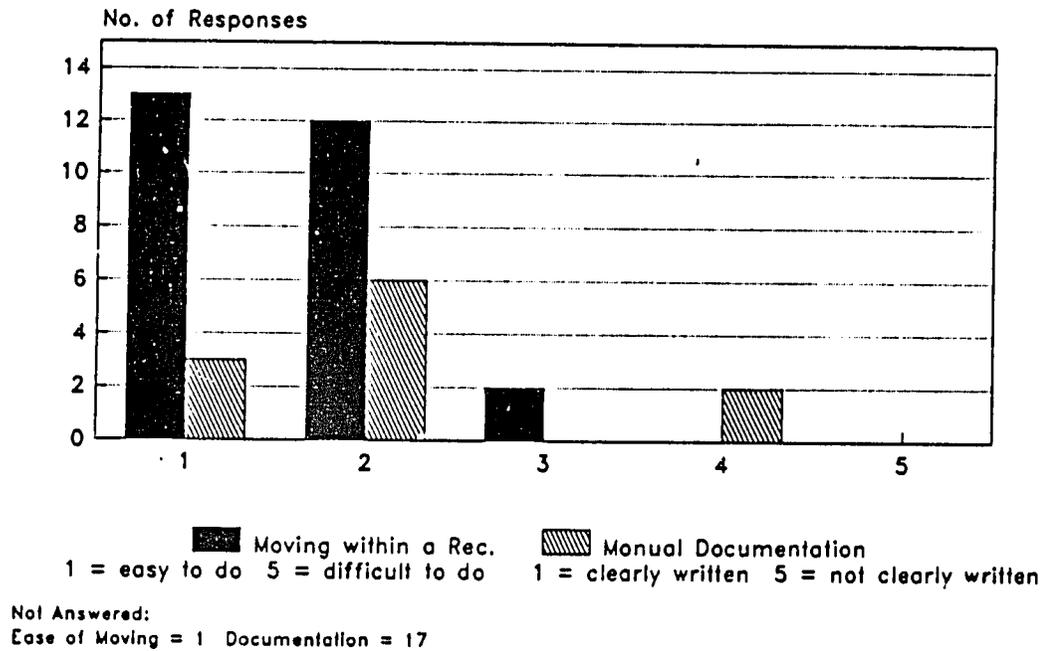


TABLE A4  
Ease of Moving between Records

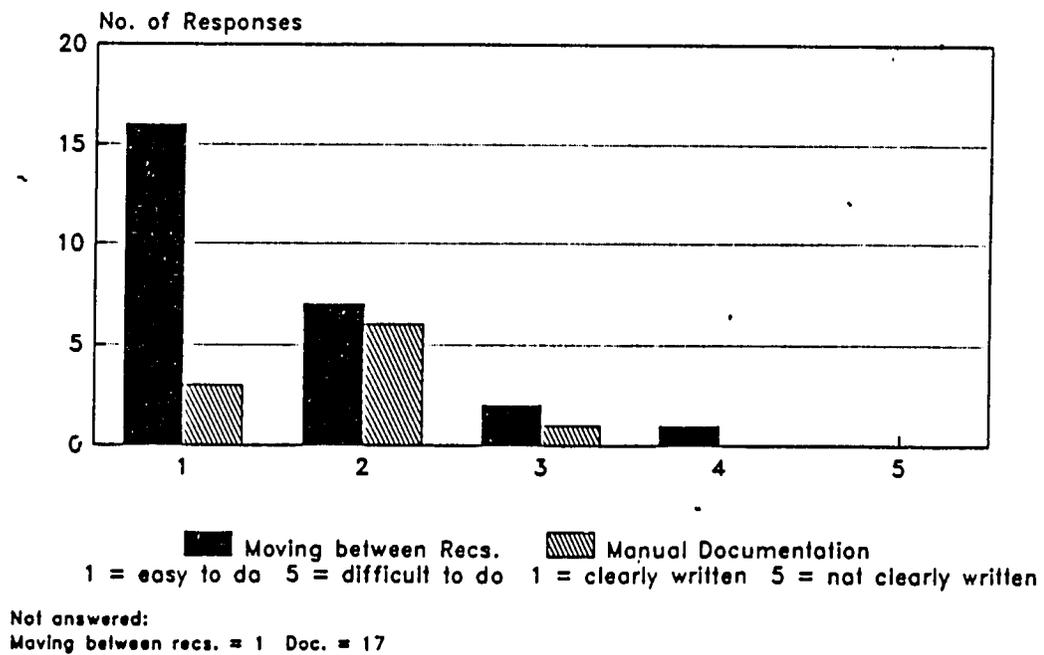


TABLE A5  
Ease of Creating a View

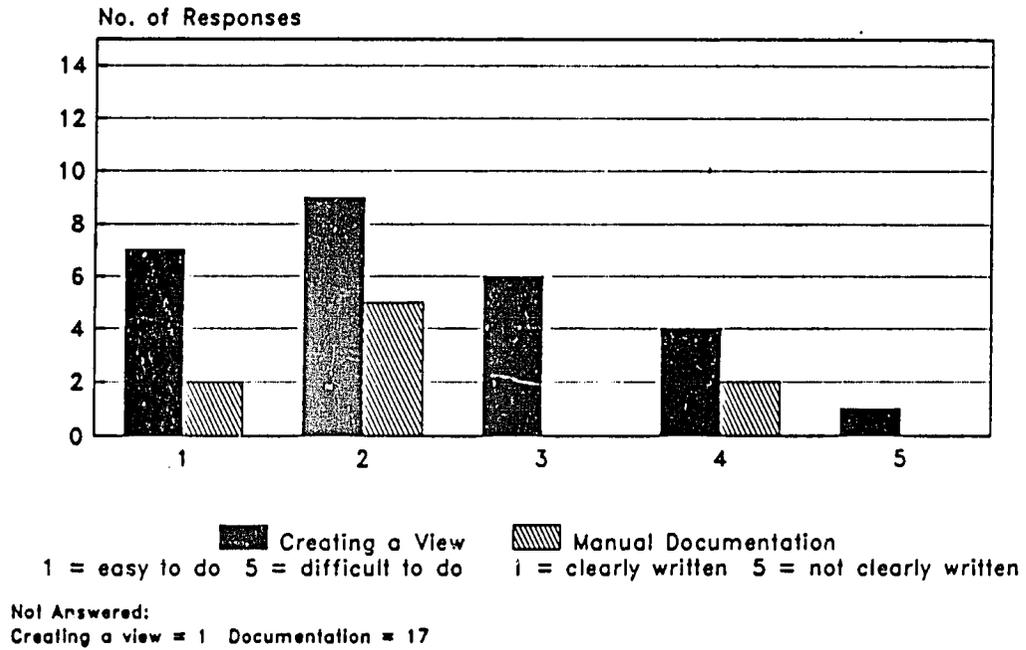


TABLE A6  
Ease of Creating a Database from View

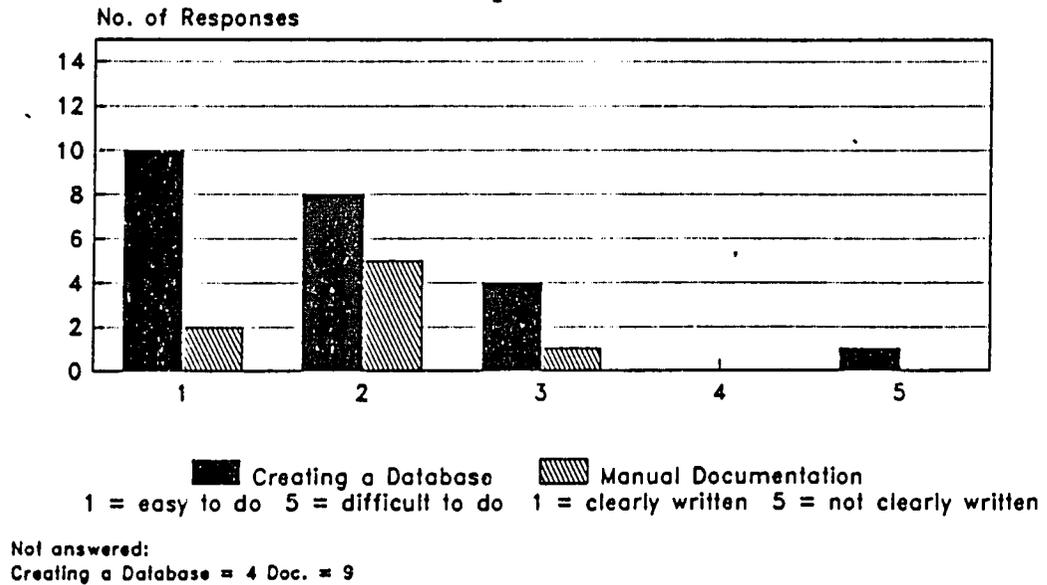
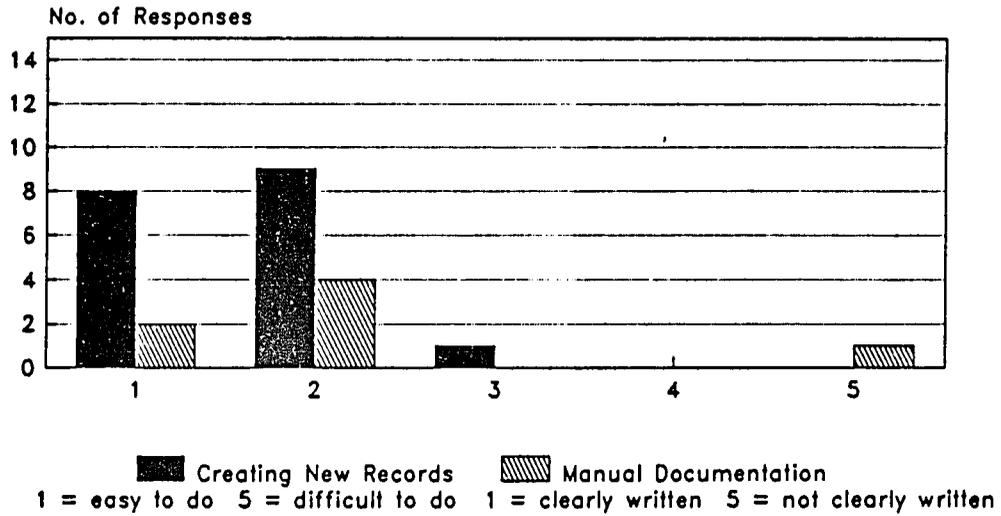
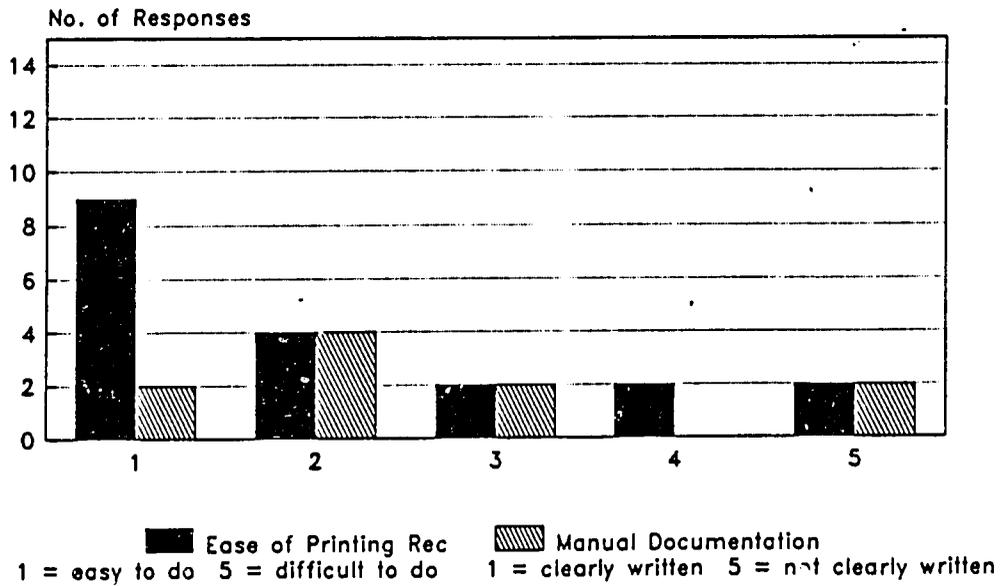


TABLE A7  
Ease of Creating New Records/  
Adding Entries



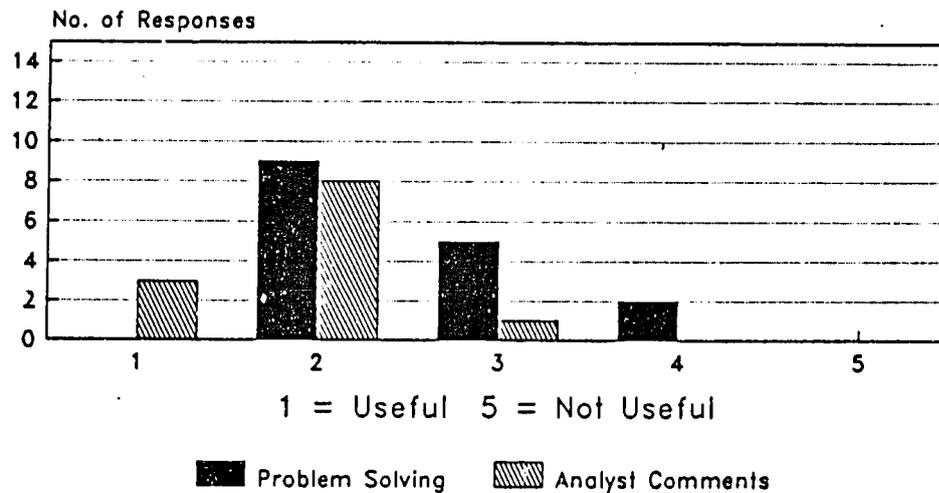
Not answered:  
Creating New Records = 9    Doc. = 20

Table A8  
Ease of Printing Record



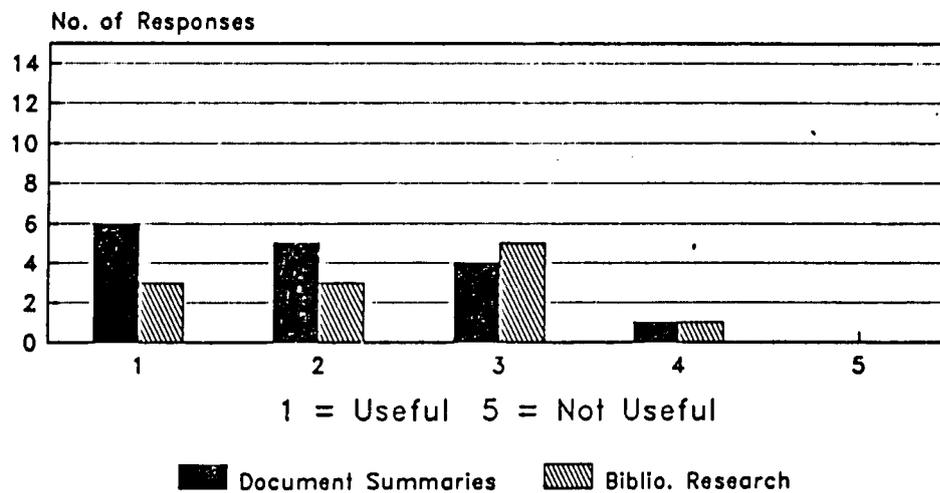
Not Answered:  
Ease of Printing Rec. = 8    Doc. = 17

TABLE A9  
 Usefulness for Problem Solving  
 and Usefulness of Analyst Comment



Not Answered:  
 Problem Solving = 5 Comments = 9

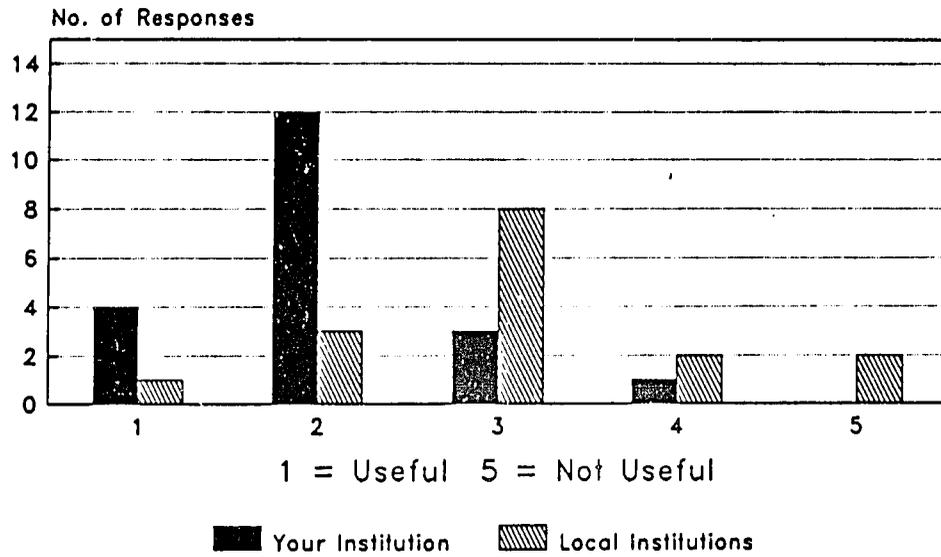
TABLE A10  
 Usefulness of Summaries and  
 Bibliographic Information



Not Answered:  
 Doc. Summaries = 6 Biblio. Res. = 10

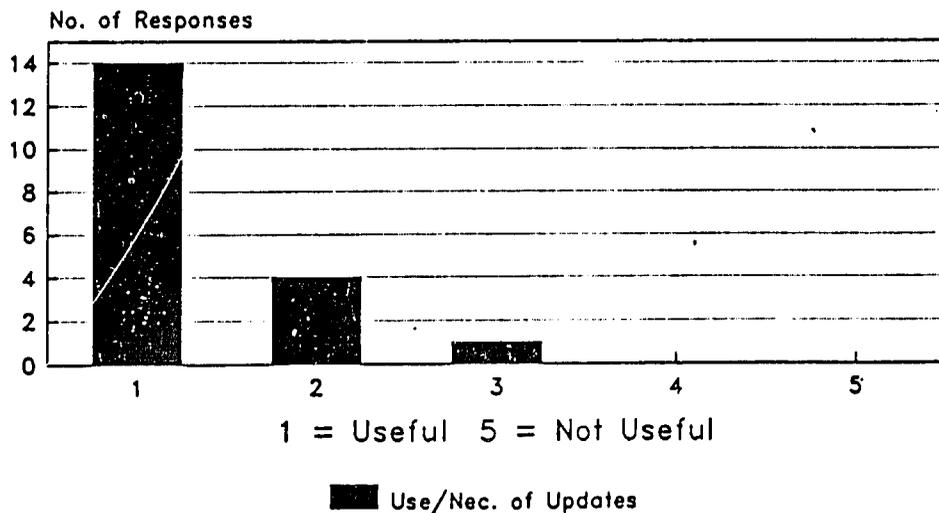
11

TABLE A11-12  
Use/Applicability to Institutions



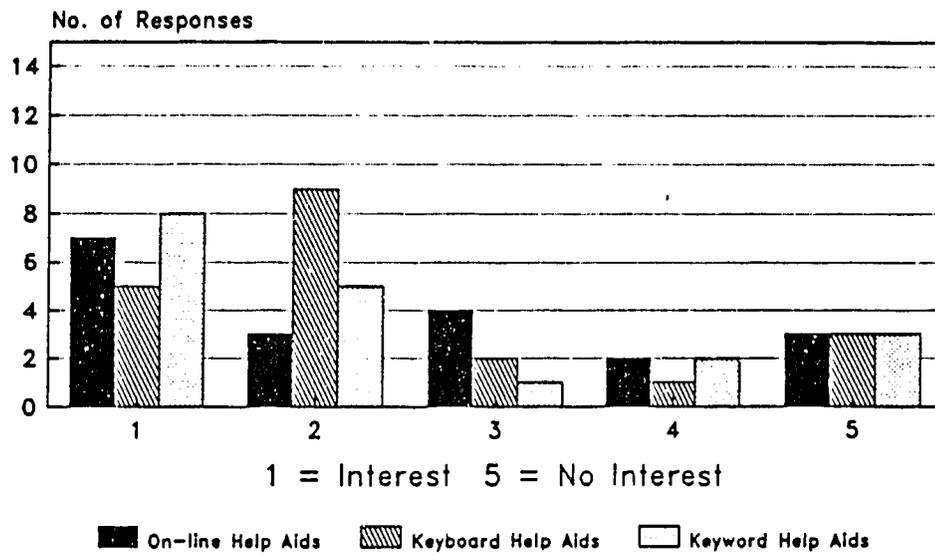
Not Answered:  
Your Inst. = 2 Local Inst. = 5

TABLE A13  
Usefulness/Necessity of  
AskARIES Updates



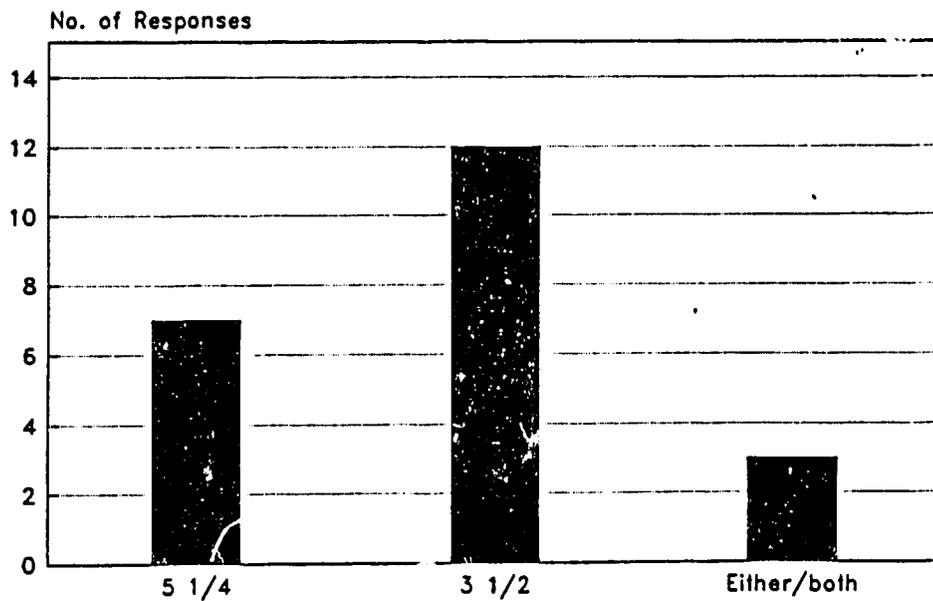
Not Answered = 3

TABLE A14  
Future Features



Not Answered: On-line Help = 5  
Keyboard Help = 4 Keyword Help = 5

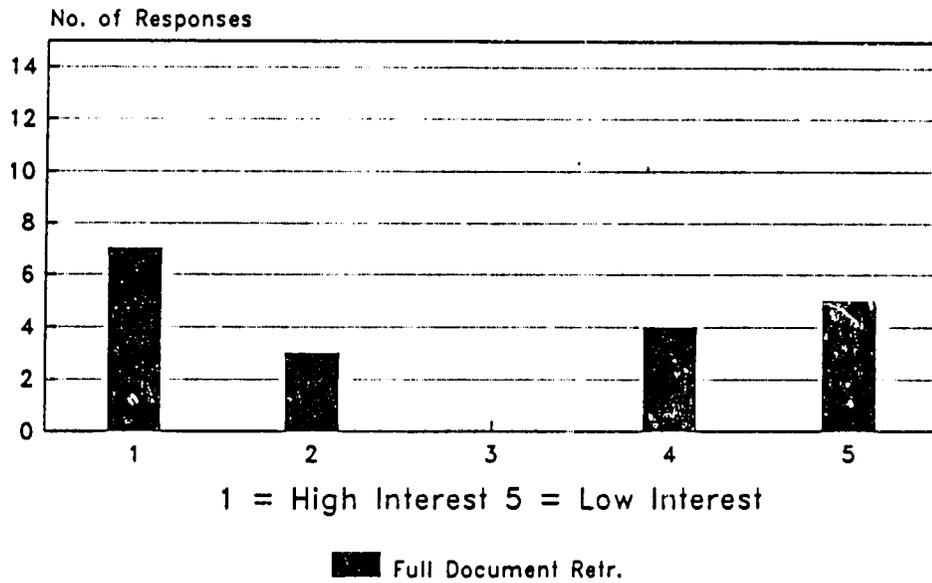
TABLE A15.1  
Disk Drive Preference



Not answered = 2

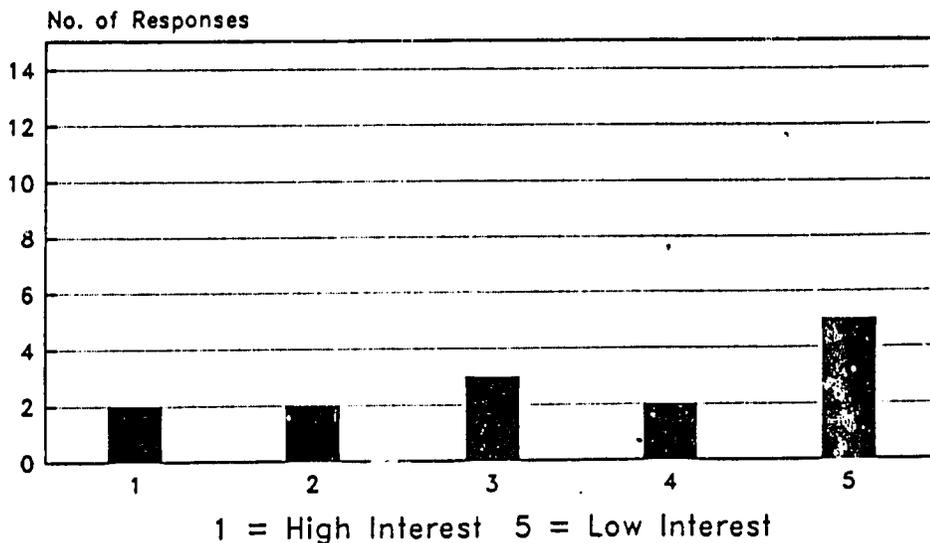
2

TABLE A15.2  
Interest in Full Document Retrieval



Not answered = 5

TABLE A15.3  
Interest in Use of Other Software with AskARIES



Not answered = 10

14

## Part B

As noted above, Part A of the survey instrument addresses the logistics of installing and using AskARIES, the substance of the annotations, the applicability of the knowledgebase and future features. Since this part was filled in during the HMD visit, it captures testers' initial impressions. Part B of the survey instrument seeks tester feedback based upon more substantial use of AskARIES following the site visit. Accordingly, Part B seeks a more in-depth response to the substance of the information contained in AskARIES and its use/applicability to the field test institutions and local institutions. As of February 28, there are a total of 11 Part B evaluations. Others are promised and will be reflected in the final version of the report. Below is an overview of the results of the opinion scales. See Chapter 3 for a summary and Appendix A for all field tester comments and explanations of the ratings chosen.

Table B1-3 indicates that half of the people rated highly the quality of the problem discussions, while the other half were neutral or felt they were not useful (3's and 4's, no 5's). Their assessment of the analyst comments was similar, with one person believing that they were not at all useful. As to the document summaries, Table B2-4 reveals that a majority of people considered them to be excellent. There was a difference of opinion about the usefulness of AskARIES for general research, with responses spread across the scale.

Table B5-6, shows that 4 of 10 people believed that AskARIES was useful and applicable to their institution. The others were neutral (3s) or felt it was not useful. The field tester comments in Section 3, Appendix A do not really give us a feeling why this is so. However, discussions during the field visits suggested that testers saw AskARIES as extremely useful for those new to MSE (particularly Peace Corps volunteers) and less useful to experienced professional staff. Unfortunately, the survey questions did not make this distinction, so that the "usefulness" responses are difficult to

interpret. Hopefully the workshop discussions will permit further clarification on this point. The assessment of the usefulness/applicability for local institutions is seen to be somewhat less than for own institutions. To some extent, this seems to reflect the fact that few potential users in the local institutions can read English. Finally, in Table B8 we see that the majority felt that the price of AskARIES was about right.

TABLE B1-3  
Usefulness of Problem Discussions  
and Analyst Comments

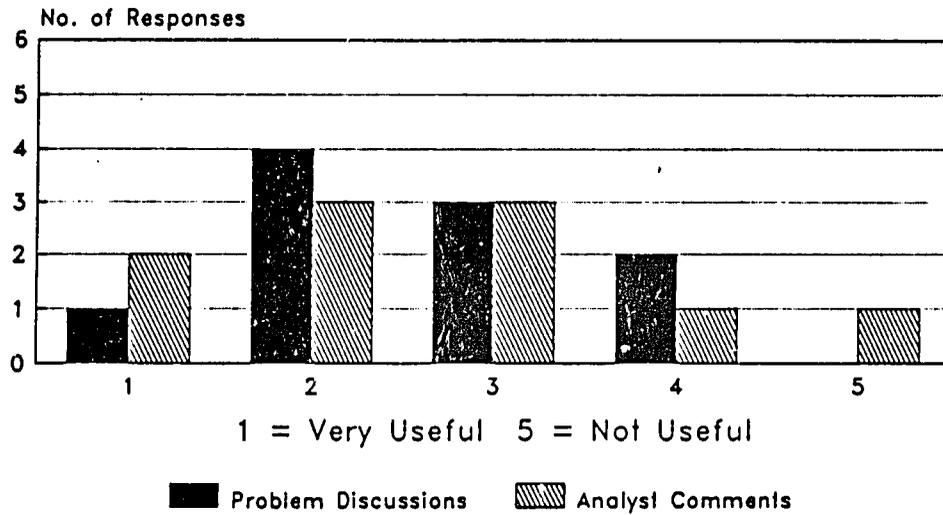


TABLE B2-4  
Usefulness of Document Summaries  
and Usefulness for Research

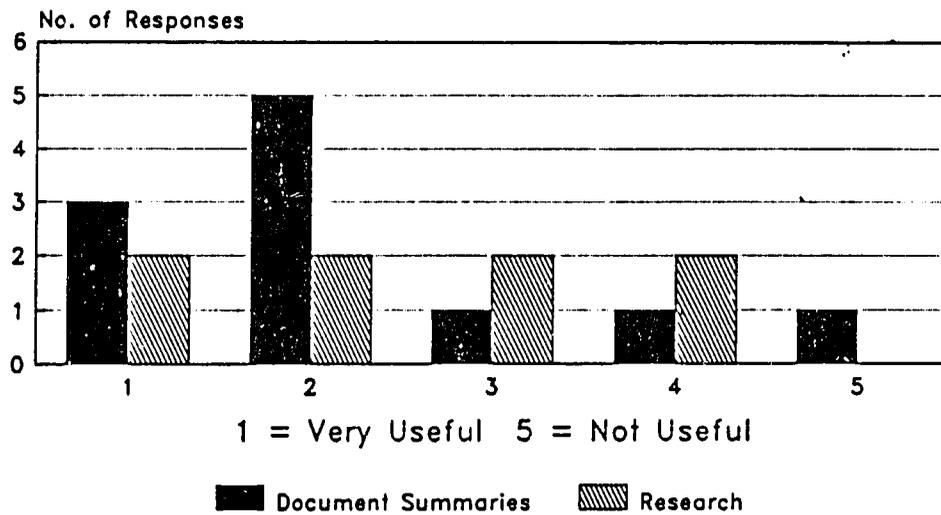


TABLE B5-6  
Use/Applicability to Institutions

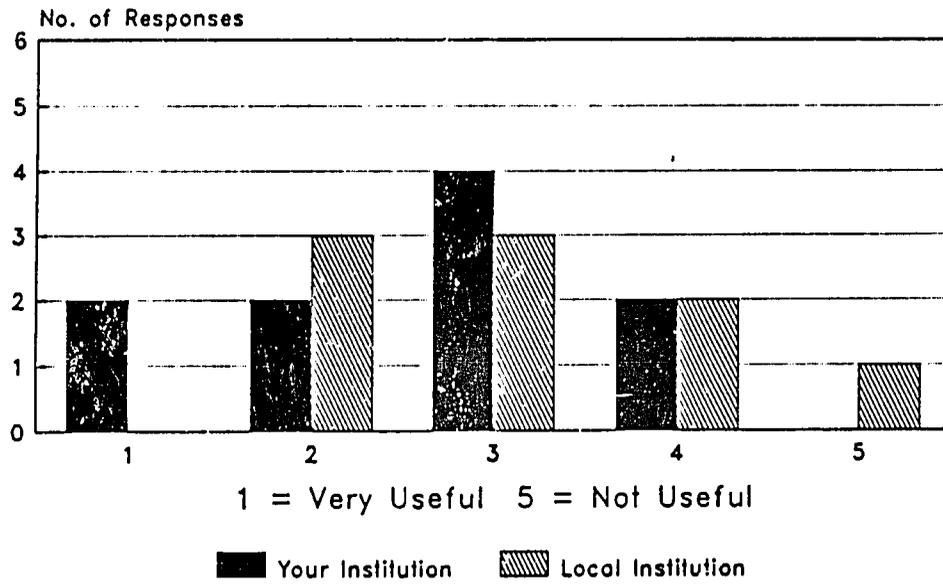
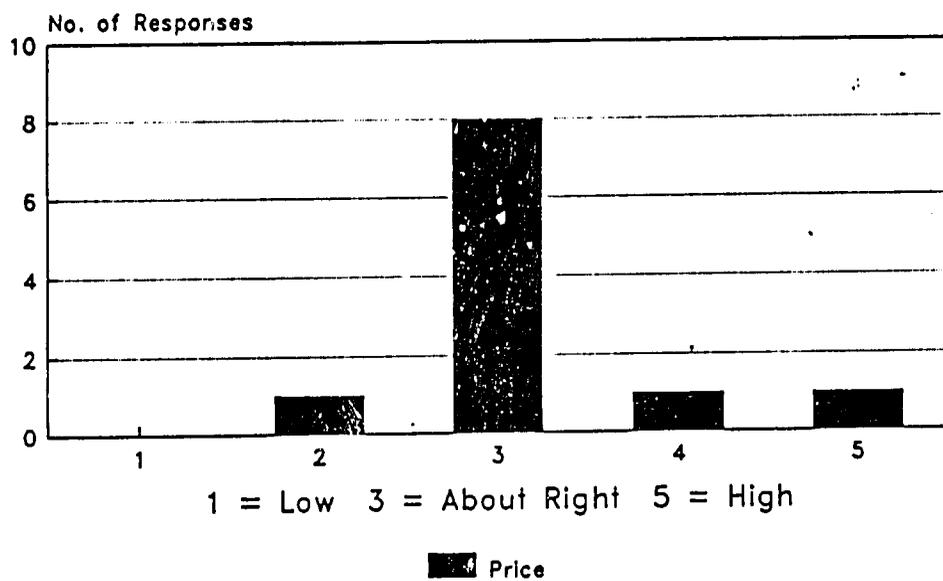


TABLE B8  
Price



## CHAPTER 3 QUALITATIVE RESPONSES

### *Summary of Key Positive Responses*

#### *Project development*

In Jamaica, Gary Vanderhoof sees AskARIES as a central information tool in his job as Private Sector Officer. He believes AskARIES serves only a limited role in daily project management, that is, for issues that arise and have to be dealt with immediately. However, to the extent that operational problems manifest themselves to be bigger than day to day problems, he might turn to AskARIES to "seek solutions" to what other project managers and administrators have done to resolve similar problems.

He envisions using AskARIES primarily during the "signposts" in a project's life -- in the project design phase, during mid-term and final project evaluations, and in cases of a modification of funding source (a change, reallocation, or addition). We focussed primarily on the role of AskARIES in the project design phase.

In making strategic choices about project design, Gary sees AskARIES first as a valuable tool for "brainstorming." It also will help him to learn in advance the lessons and pitfalls that other projects have faced. "But how much time can I take to read and become informed before starting to write the strategy document? It would be useful to have at my fingertips a source of numerous summaries/problem discussions related to the issues I'm considering. In that way, I could have access to ideas I would never have considered. Thinking through other issues will help to sharpen my focus in my strategy document." Also, the point will come when decisions will have to be made about how the strategy document will be implemented [John's problem in the Senegal case]. Obviously, it benefits everyone involved if the strategy document is written clearly and concisely.

In the Dominican Republic, Anne Beasley also believes that AskARIES will be useful in the project development phase. Although Anne finds much of the information contained in AskARIES to be outdated already, she found some of the analyst comments to be particularly helpful. She envisions using AskARIES as an analytical tool (the Knowledgebase component of AskARIES) to extract information on particular subjects in which she is interested. She also could draw from the lessons learned from other experiences in MSED.

Several users also commented on the usefulness of AskARIES to reinforce their proposals and as an information resource for writing proposals. Gary Vanderhoof commented that he could use AskARIES to provide the documentation necessary to support his proposals to other audiences. It might be particularly important to share information from AskARIES with other members of the Project Committee to help make more informed decisions. Anne Beasley said she could use AskARIES as "ammunition" to reinforce her viewpoints.

### *Training*

Field testers responded with remarkable consistency that AskARIES is an important information tool for people new to the field of micro-enterprise. As Anne Beasley said, "[AskARIES] is an excellent way to obtain a great deal of knowledge quickly." This was especially true for the Peace Corps program staff, who saw AskARIES as an excellent learning tool for the relatively less trained Peace Corps volunteers. For them, AskARIES is an excellent way to gain a relatively rapid overview of the key issues in the literature of MSED. Volunteers have the interest, the time, and in many cases, the academic inclination to really exploit the information in AskARIES.

In their assignments, Peace Corps volunteers work directly with individual entrepreneurs, cooperatives, and first level resource institutions that have direct client contact. In the Dominican Republic, Barbara Stahler estimates that of the two hundred Peace Corps volunteers in the DR, about forty work in the small business development program. Although many of these volunteers have business backgrounds, AskARIES could play an integral role in initial training in MSED issues and as an information resource as they begin their project work.

The usefulness of AskARIES for local resource institutions varied widely. For many users, language is a significant barrier. However, we received numerous suggestions for its use by local institutions, especially in English-speaking countries. In Jamaica, for example, Gary Vanderhoof listed several local research institutions which would benefit from the knowledge in AskARIES. For example, Gary said that AskARIES could be an important resource for the 200 students at the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of the West Indies. He noted that it would be helpful not only for students researching issues related to informal sector activities, but also would be useful for students who eventually will own their own businesses. He said, "Even if only ten of these students end up owning their own businesses, these studies would give them a much stronger basis for understanding problems related to this field."

Charles Mann received similar feedback from Ralf Hertwig in Botswana, who said that AskARIES could help establish a relationship with the local academic community, especially local universities. He also thought that this would help to legitimate interest there in small-scale enterprise issues.

A third suggested training use is by local resource institutions themselves. In the Dominican Republic, USAID is working with other donors to establish FONDOMICRO, a

proposed new "second level" institution serving as the umbrella organization to a number of local resource institutions and the bridge between resource institutions and commercial banks. After becoming established, one of FONDOMICRO's first tasks will be to give technical assistance and training to "first level" resource institutions (such as ADEMI). Anne thought it would be extremely useful for FONDOMICRO to use AskARIES when implementing this aspect of its project work, in order to be aware of problems that other resource institutions and implementing agencies have faced. What lessons have been learned? How can FONDOMICRO use this information to help avert problem areas in their work? Anne noted that "to have all of this information at their fingertips would be invaluable."

To combat the problem of limited use/applicability to local resource institutions with non-English speaking staff, Barbara Stahler suggested that Peace Corps volunteers could play an important role in translating the information in AskARIES for use by local institutions.

#### *Using AskARIES as a Framework to Document Projects*

Barbara Stahler thought AskARIES would be a useful way for volunteers working in MSED to document their experiences in MSE and with local resource institutions (this could be built into their assignment). To create program continuity across volunteers within the Peace Corps, volunteers could document their project experiences using AskARIES so that succeeding volunteers would have the benefit of their knowledge. Another direction this might go is the "community notebook" concept within the Peace Corps, whereby volunteers in Senegal could share the experiences of a volunteer in the Dominican Republic. This might be an important avenue for training volunteers in MSED and would provide comparisons across countries.

Using AskARIES to document project experiences also may stimulate volunteers to think analytically about their experiences. This also may stimulate program officers to use the documentation as a way to structure evaluations.

Several users noted that they also are interested in documenting their project activities using the case method. In the Dominican Republic, Peace Corps Deputy Director Jim Schenk said that he may use AskARIES and Seeking Solutions to train volunteers in case writing. In the Peace Corps in Honduras, both Alex Corpeno and Naomi Till expressed a great deal of interest in using Seeking Solutions as a model for developing their own case studies of their projects.

### *Summary of Key Negative Responses*

#### *Use by Experienced Professional Staff*

By far the most resounding message we heard from experienced planners was that AskARIES already is somewhat outdated. As professionals with a great deal of accumulated knowledge, they were looking for information in AskARIES to be "on the cutting edge." They said that updates were essential if the information contained in AskARIES is to be kept useful to practitioners. New findings are constantly emerging with the huge amounts of new programming and projects in MSED. Not to have these reflected in AskARIES would rapidly diminish its usefulness.

Lee White at USAID says that he sees no problem in AskARIES becoming a standard resource that his staff will use, together with other resources, to do their work. Lee was concerned, however, with the issue of "updates." "Old knowledge is not bad, but it needs to be updated with new experiences." As Lee put it, "One time databases have a low shelf life. How do you accommodate that in AskARIES?" Tom

Timberg at Nathan Associates, stressing the importance of AskARIES and the need for further development, summed the matter up, "...essentially, this [the updates] is a USAID decision and a question of competing resources."

Mari Clark, Urban/Labor Development Officer at AID/WID, had the perspective of a researcher. She had used AskARIES some months ago while trying to find articles on "women in small and micro-enterprise development." AskARIES, she explained, was a useful resource for her because her job entailed conducting research and developing research agendas on the gender aspects of unemployment and small and micro-enterprise development issues. She explained that a lot of her time is spent on "tracking down the latest reports and findings" on these subjects. "New things are happening all the time." Therefore, Mari expressed a real need for updates. "Generally, if a resource is not too up-to-date, I tend to not use it. I also like to have the original [underlying] articles for my own reference and notes. However, there is a lot of merit to a good old book, and AskARIES, in some sense, is like that."

We also found that new programming efforts in MSE have led to changes in the field. The international network has grown denser with the emergence of new "second level" institutions such as FONDOMICRO in the Dominican Republic, and donor institutions such as AID have become one more step removed from direct contact with local resource institutions. Given this relatively recent phenomenon, the literature documenting these changes has not been captured in AskARIES.

A problem common to project staff is the severe limits to their time. Although users did not find AskARIES (Notebook) hard to use, the selecting and reading many entries on a given topic or problem is time consuming, especially for users whose native language is not English. Although one can make views and scroll through the records fairly quickly to obtain an initial reaction as to whether or not a record is relevant, the

user is still left with the task of reading record on the screen. As Gary Vanderhoof explained, "although AskARIES is a timesaver, it still is quite time consuming."

Lee White at AID responded somewhat differently. For him, AskARIES was a kind of database whose framework needed to be understood by any user who wanted to benefit from it. This poses a problem, according to Lee, for a person (particularly in the field) who either has his or her own, distinct way of organizing information, or who has little time to understand the nature of, and the rationale for, the AskARIES framework. AskARIES users, according to Lee, may not realize how important in the first place it is to understand the AskARIES' recurrent problem framework. "They could be trained, of course, in these matters. And I think that training and support are essential in the case of AskARIES."

Dan Seyler, a research analyst in Lee's Division, felt that the kinds of requests for information he had to respond to in his work do not lend themselves to a quick search. The extent to which AskARIES may then get used, becomes a function of how much time a person has to search and how familiar the person is with the contents of AskARIES records.

The time problem seems to have had implications for the AskARIES field test itself. When requested to complete the survey form, Terra Guidance at AID and Steve Thalheimer at Peace Corps said they were "swamped with work." "All this is surely relevant and useful, but I don't know when I will get to it."

#### *Content of AskARIES Misses Some Targets*

Numerous practitioners commented that they would like for there to have been more "project based" (vs. "document based") records in AskARIES. Projects are covered only to the extent that they have been written about in the included literature. While

there are about 150 project evaluations included, the database did not intend to be a project based collection of data, but a literature based information resource. This is the motivation for calling it a Knowledgebase, rather than a Database.

Except for the current Peace Corps' moves to recruit subject matter specialists for MSED, most professional PC staff are oriented towards developing and administering programs for the volunteers, with relatively few trained in development economics or related subjects. Therefore, there is limited interest in "the literature" of MSED, as encapsulated in AskARIES. Indeed, if a PC staffer spent too much time with it, this might be seen as detracting from the main business of administering the Peace Corps' programs. Again, this reinforces the need to continue development of AskARIES into a sort of consultancy tool to provide a "menu of what goes in the soup" of successful MSED program.

Charles Mann noted that the vehicle now used to develop such consultancy tools is the expert system shell; a class of computer programs designed to apply the "rules of thumb" of experts to a knowledgebase via an inference engine. It may be possible to develop such rules of thumb from some combination of the literature results in AskARIES and interviews with practitioners in successful programs. The Expert System format seems the most promising one within which to pursue the sorts of objectives that Peace Corps staff see for AskARIES to make it more useful to them.

Several field testers, particularly staff members who are active in MSED project design and implementation, commented that AskARIES lacked information with step-by-step detail of MSE programming. In Bolivia, Bill Tucker wanted concrete details on different ways to train micro-entrepreneurs. Are courses useful, and if so, what should the course content be? What training materials should be used? How many days are optimal? Which courses work best?

Users noted that there are several different levels of planners and practitioners in MSED, namely planners away from field offices [in Washington], planners in field locations, practitioners, and scholars/researchers. While AskARIES is not designed and partitioned according to these different "users," future updates could address the need for different levels of "solutions" for different users.

#### *Use by Local Resource Institutions*

Recurrent in our discussions with AID and Peace Corps staff was the question of usefulness to local resource institutions. As mentioned above, non-English speakers will find AskARIES extremely difficult to use. Gary Vanderhoof also commented on prospective uses by local institutions. He said that often smaller resource institutions do not spend much time strategizing -- they often have only enough staff and resources to conduct daily operations, and rely heavily on operational experiences rather than on outside assessments. "Realistically, local institutions are even further out on the road [than AID] as implementing agencies, with very little time for planning. They will likely view AskARIES as something 'academic' and 'nice,' but of little use to them in daily project activities."

#### *Users Must Realize the Importance of the AskARIES Framework*

Understanding the framework on which AskARIES is based is critical to effective use of the Knowledgebase. The importance of asking the right "question" is important to obtain the desired information -- otherwise the user ends up with information not germane to the topic being researched. The resulting problem is that AskARIES could contain the information requested but not be retrieved because the users do not realize how to get it. There is somewhat of a contradiction, then, in training support staff to use AskARIES. While managers may want secretaries and computer staff to manage and use AskARIES, this requires staff to have a good knowledge of the problem framework.

## CHAPTER FOUR RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FIELD TESTERS

### *Updates*

To expand the variety of documents covered in AskARIES, field testers provided a wealth of ideas for further development of AskARIES. In Jamaica, Gary Vanderhoof would like to extract entries relating to donor-funded projects. In this way, he would be able to learn from other USAID projects in MSE, which would be helpful to him in project design and evaluation stages. Currently, AskARIES has two ways to access the information. However, these searches often yield hundreds of records which may or may not be relevant. Gary Vanderhoof suggests making a heading specifically listing donor affiliation (if relevant) so that users might search specifically on that field (in conjunction with others).

He also would like to expand the variety of documents in future updates. Specifically, he would like to have access to project evaluations and other documents from various donors to learn of different approaches to MSE other than USAID. He would like to see project evaluations from World Bank and IDB projects, as well as from Dutch, German, French and other donor-funded institution results. Just as GTZ was interested in obtaining AskARIES because of their difficulty in obtaining US documents, so too would Gary like to have access to what the Europeans, Canadians, and others are doing.

In the Dominican Republic, Anne Beasley suggested that more documents be included with data about the financial viability of resource institutions. She notes that these source documents might be difficult to obtain (there is not much of this kind of work being supported currently). She also would like to obtain more information on running MSE projects in highly inflationary environments. The question for which she would like information is: is it possible to have a self-sustaining program in an

inflationary environment? How can institutions avoid decapitalization of their portfolios? Also in the Dominican Republic, Barbara Stahler would like more information on generating/financing pension plans for MSE institutions.

At AID/Washington, researchers like Mari Clark, Urban/Labor Development Officer at AID/WID, also expressed interest in particular kinds of documents. For instance, Mari suggested strongly the need to expand AskARIES to capture current issues related to "women in development." In Latin America, Anne Hornsby received frequent requests for more information on training methodologies, new credit methodologies, and information on working with trade associations.

Users also provided rich feedback with suggestions as to the mechanism for providing updates. Gary Vanderhoof thought updates should be handled by a central institution but saw users playing an integral role in this process. He would be responsive to receiving a cable once a year requesting new documents and would respond by sending documents he believes are relevant and are compatible to the AskARIES framework, such as PIDs and PPs. In this way, AskARIES would be updated with current documents generated in the field. This also may be a way to provide more project-based documents. Anne Beasley agreed that there needs to be more project-based documentation and case studies of particular projects. She suggested this be done on a buy-in basis or perhaps included with some other project activity (for example, a training workshop). Users should receive updates not only on new project activities, but also follow-up information to earlier projects.

Lee White at AID/Washington also was concerned with the relevance of the information in AskARIES after few years, but was quick to point out that did not mean a central agency ought to be responsible for managing an updating system and entering new information. He emphasized the idea of a decentralized operation where, given a

common framework/field structure/keyword system, agencies and field offices could enter their own information, exchange amongst themselves, and contribute to AskARIES that kept growing as a result. Discussion along these lines suggested the need to study in detail the technological alternatives and administrative implications of such an operation. Furthermore, given that AID staff routinely use commercial databases, it was felt that the study ought to look at how such private sector firms deal with updates and exchange of information.

### *Developing AskARIES as a Consultancy Tool*

Charles Mann found a consistency in discussions that AskARIES would be more useful to the experienced MSED manager or planner if there was more synthesis of the information from various documents. As Ralf Hertwig of Peace Corps in Botswana explained, for the experienced planner, the real potential of AskARIES is in providing the sort of guidance you would expect from a senior professor in a subject. "If you went to Milton Friedman to get some advice on starting up a small enterprise program, you would expect from him a distillation of his knowledge and experience of the subject. If he handed you a pile of books and said, Read these, the answer is in there, you would not consult him again. In effect, that is what you are doing with AskARIES." For planners, the information in AskARIES needs to be far more synthesized. It would take a very long time to do this synthesis for oneself, and that is what would be needed. The planner's world is one in which the boss comes in at 8 AM and says: Let's start an enterprise development program. By 1PM I'd like ideas on the main elements we should have in such a program."

For the planner, thought Ralf, AskARIES is still unfinished. The essential first step has been taken of accumulating and ordering a vast amount of information. Now a more analytical process must start. A model or theory must be used or developed to allow a greater ordering and synthesizing of the data. "You must have some ideas of how the

various variables are related to one another; some hypotheses to test. The objective would be to define the operational ingredients necessary for a successful enterprise development program. What are the common denominators of successful programs? Very likely, these will have to be presented in terms of probability statements, rather than flat statements."

With his quantitative analytical background, Ralf would like to see if some or all of the following techniques might be relevant in trying to synthesize the data: regression analysis (especially with dummy variables), analysis of variance, weighting and summing weights, contingency tables leading to frequency distributions from which probability statements could be made. Since AskARIES contains substantial information on client characteristics, numerous cross tabulations are possible. In terms of program improvements, Ralf suggests that if we have any success with synthesis, we should think about more use of graphics, matrices and summary tables, innovative ways of presenting trends and tendencies.

#### *Software Related Suggestions*

At AID/Washington, Lee White's comment echoed a recurrent comment about Notebook II. He pointed to the lack of on-line help screens and menu driven features. "Ideally, a person using AskARIES should not have to refer to the User's Guide or the software manual in order to know what keys to press at any stage during an AskARIES session." According to Lee, every level within AskARIES should have such explicit help features.

Comments from other skilled computer users--like Jeanne Tift, Director of the AID Documentation Information Center, and Dan Seyler, a research analyst with the Division--indicated a different source for this software problem. Given their proficiency with computers, Jeanne and Dan tried to use AskARIES without looking at the User's

Guide. Understandably, they felt impatient about the lack of help-screens. "Yet another software to learn to handle requests..." They then understood why we had been insisting that it was important to read the User's Guide. This tendency to not consult the User's Guide/Notebook II manual is understandable and is thus an issue that cannot be ignored. Discussions suggested that this factor may tend to overshadow some people's assessment of the content of AskARIES.

Charles Mann commented that it would have been helpful to have more standard views and custom print formats, so that hard copy of key areas of SED could be distributed to users. One area which should be explored further is the custom print format. In retrospect, we could have included on disk some custom formats already prepared, then referenced them in the User's Guide. The default Notebook format is not well-suited to most users' needs. A diskette with selected custom formats would be a nice thing to distribute with a users' newsletter. It could also include names and addresses of a network of users, with a print format for address labels to print them out. This would also stimulate people to see other non-AskARIES uses for their Notebook programs.