

# ***Sharing Information on Development***

## ***Working Paper 2: The format of development information***

### ***1 A common format for development information***

**1.1** A common format is an agreement between two or more organizations on the form of information that they decide to send each other. The development of a common format does not mean that information will be stored centrally in one large database, and use of a common format does not require a central agency to manage those exchanges. Rather, like international telephone standards which allow easy and instantaneous transfer of messages between different telephone systems in different countries, a common format allows agencies to exchange information in a form which is meaningful and easy-to-use for both parties.

**1.2** The use of a common exchange format can result in substantial cost savings for development organizations. A donor agency exchanging development information with three or four organizations can send development information in exactly the same format to each of its exchange partners. When the same agency receives information from the other organizations, time and effort can be saved if the agency can process the information from each organization in the same way. As the number of agencies exchanging information increases, the overall savings due to the common format increase dramatically.

**1.3** The results of the initial survey of the Informal Working Group show that many donor agencies already use similar data elements to describe development activity. While not all the elements associated

with development activity can be standardized, most of the important data elements for informational purposes can be included in a standard definition of characteristics and processes.

**1.4** *Do the data elements described in Proposed Common Exchange Format for Development Activity Information adequately cover the critical elements of development activity for your organization, including projects, programmes and capital transfers? Are there additional data elements that you consider critical?*

**1.5** The aim of an exchange format is to facilitate the exchange of information. It is not to impose standards on the way information is processed internally by an organization. Considerable time, effort and cost has gone into developing existing internal systems: people have been trained, forms designed, procedures developed, and reports created to collect, process and disseminate information in a certain manner. Making such systems compliant with a standard exchange format may be a difficult undertaking.

**1.6** There are different approaches to making an existing system compatible with a standard exchange format. One way of ensuring compliance is to map the format of internal data into the format required by the exchange format. This processing may in some cases be very simple, and easily accomplished, especially with the assistance of a computerized system. In other cases, the processing may be complex, time-consuming and difficult; in still other situations, it may be virtually impossible to make current practices support the common format. However no system is static, and where change is being introduced for other reasons, it may be possible to add or modify existing data elements (or to change the way they are collected and processed) in order to move closer to a common format for data exchange.

**1.7** *How can existing systems be made more compliant with standard formats? Do you see particular problems associated with sharing your institution's data in the format proposed?*

## **2 Language and translation**

**2.1** Much of the information about development activities is in the form of written text such as titles, abstracts or descriptions. The donor agency that originates the activity, and hence the donor agency that collects the information about the activity, will normally create these descriptions in the working language (or languages) of the institution. In the case of bilateral institutions, the working language will undoubtedly be the national language of the country. In many cases, the national language may not be well known outside the boundaries of the country. A project description written in Nederlands<sup>1</sup> will be of very limited value to a donor agency in France: the textual information that describes the project needs to be translated into French to be useful to French users.

**2.2** International or multilateral organizations often designate one or more languages as working languages; the working language or languages (frequently English according to survey results) are used to describe development activities. Yet no single language is universally understood; even development information in a well known European language will not be easily comprehensible to all potential users of the information without translation into a national or another working language.

**2.3** In what languages should development information be translated? If a U.S. agency is exchanging information with a Netherlands agency, must the U.S. agency translate project titles and descriptions into Nederlands? If a bilateral agency in the Netherlands wishes to exchange project information with similar bilateral agencies in Great Britain, Germany, France and Sweden, then must project descriptions be translated into four different languages? Clearly this represents an enormous investment in translation, planning and organization.

**2.4** The work involved in translation can be reduced if one language is designated as a "common language" for the sake of information exchange, much like a working language of an international organization. An institution could be made responsible for providing

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<sup>1</sup> Nederlands is the official name of the language spoken in the Netherlands, commonly referred to as "Dutch."

at a minimum certain data elements in this “common language”. In the IDRIS system, for example, each participating agency agrees to supply at a minimum a project title in English, though this may be supplemented by the project title in another language. In this kind of system, it is often up to the receiving agency to add translations in the national language if required. It is also possible for two or even three languages to be designated as “common languages”, though of course the total cost of translation borne by all donor agencies increases substantially with the addition of each new language.

**2.5** Whether a common language is designated or not, who will be responsible for the translation of development information? If it is the agency responsible for the activity, then the translation can be completed more quickly, since it can begin while the project or programme is being developed; the translation may be more accurate, since an in-house translator has easy access to additional information or clarification; duplication of the translation effort in several different agencies will be avoided; and the translation will be consistent, since the development activity will be referred to by the same translated title in all organizations with access to the information. However it could be argued that since it is the receiving agency that will benefit from the use of this information, it seems only reasonable that this agency bear the cost of translation. Translation facilities for certain language combinations, including both qualified personnel and equipment to support different scripts or characters, may be more easily found in some parts of the world than in others.

**2.6** *Should a certain language or languages be designated as common languages as part of the standard format; or are questions of translation best left up to the specific agencies involved in an exchange? If development information is to be translated, who will be responsible for the translation—the originating agency or the recipient? Should only certain data elements be translated? If so, what are those data elements?*

### **3 Standardized forms of description**

**3.1** The issue of standardization, while always important, is of particular importance when information is being exchanged and used in machine-readable form. Dates, for example, may be stored in various forms according to the practice in the region, country,

linguistic group or organization, so that the same date may be expressed as 1 juin 1991; June 1, 1991; 1991-06-01; 06/01/91; or 01/06/91. An organization may be known by several different forms of name, and several different acronyms, especially when the organization has official names in different languages. When a user wishes to search a computer database containing information from a number of different institutions, the form of data elements such as these plays a critical role in how easily and effectively the user can find information relating to a specific activity.

**3.2** Standards exist for the description of countries. There are ISO standards for country codes as well as code lists developed by organizations like UNDP and WHO that are used by a number of institutions. The use of standard codes in an exchange format will allow the exchange of information between organizations in a format that is independent of variations in country name or language. Whether you use the French or English form of the Central African country known as Cameroon or Cameroun, the country code established by the ISO standard is CM.

**3.3** Many development activities have a regional, rather than a strictly national, scope. Standardization of regional descriptions is considerably less well established. Donor organizations sponsoring development activities at the regional level will use descriptions that reflect the management structure, outlook or philosophy of the organization itself. Africa, for instance, may be broken down into various linguistic and geographic regions. One donor organization might characterize African regional projects as Anglophone, Francophone or Lusophone (i.e. Portuguese-speaking) Africa. Another might classify regions as West, East, North and Southern Africa. Yet another might have five regions for the same area—West, East, Central and Southern Africa—and include North Africa as part of a Middle Eastern region.

**3.4** Of course, organizations will not change their structure, philosophy or operations simply to use regional descriptions prescribed by some standard. But it might be possible to develop standard geographic descriptors that could be used to supplement the geographic regions that reflect the operations of the donor agency.

*3.5 What standards are needed for the description of development information? What existing standards are appropriate? Is standardization of organization names, acronyms, or regional classifications possible? Would your agency support standardization by contributing to the development of such standards or by using standards that have been developed?*

#### **4 Subject description**

**4.1** Even more problematic than the use of standard regional terminology, is the use of standard subject descriptions of development activities. Descriptors express what a development activity is about, i.e. its topic or subject. The use of a standard terminology such as a list of subject descriptors, a thesaurus, or a common classification scheme, helps to improve the consistency of description of development activities, and increase the precision with which information can be retrieved. A standard list of subject descriptors available in several languages or a language-independent classification scheme also eliminates the need to translate individual descriptors for each activity described.

**4.2** While there are often common goals and themes to development activity, there are significant differences in the ways organizations approach their activities. One agency may deal principally in large programmes covering broad areas and involving many millions of dollars; another may have many small projects, operating at a very specific technical level involving limited sums of money. The terms chosen to describe activities will be very broad in the case of the first organization and very specific in the case of the second. Organizations will also have technical areas of expertise which, for internal use, will have to be expressed as part of the activity. A health organization will need specific terminology relating to diseases and treatments; an organization largely involved in agriculture will wish to describe projects in terms of specific crops and conditions; an organization that operates in the world of finance will have needs for terminology in credit transfers quite different from an organization specializing in water and sanitation.

**4.3** While differing needs argue that it is difficult to anticipate much standardization in the area of subject description, some standardization may still be possible. Many development organizations already use

thesauri such as the Macrothesaurus or the UNBIS Thesaurus. An agency which uses some other terminology may be able to map its specific terms to a standard language such as the Macrothesaurus or a common classification scheme; this translation of internally-assigned descriptors to descriptors in a standard language could even be automated. Alternatively, an agency could describe its activities using a broad, standard vocabulary in addition to whatever specific terminology was required by the organization related to its own specific use. The cost of describing activities twice (once with agency-specific descriptors, and once using a general, standardized scheme of descriptors suitable for exchange partners) is considerable. However if other organizations accept the same responsibility, then users can rely on the standard language when searching information from other agencies, and not have to learn six or eight different ways of describing activities.

**4.4** Is the standardization of topical descriptors feasible? Assuming such a standard tool were available, would your organization be willing to use this standard tool, in addition to or instead of the subject descriptors you currently use? Are there specific tools which you would find suitable for the description of development activities?