

Sharing Information on Development

Working Paper 3: The use of development information

1 User needs and development information

1.1 The potential users of development information are varied and their needs are diverse. In general, policy-makers and planners need summaries or high-level analyses of information, based as much on the activities of their own agency as of other organizations. Technical staff need detailed information about the activities of other institutions in a very specific field, but will need little information about their own organization. Staff members with regional responsibilities will want an overview, for their geographic area, of all current activity of both their own and other organizations. The way different users interact with an information system will also be different: some users will want to be actively involved in locating information for their own use, while others will prefer to leave the work to an information intermediary. Some users will have clear ideas of their requirements and positive attitudes about the kind and quantity of information they will receive; some will need to be coaxed to make their needs known and may expect too little or too much in terms of what is available. Yet the design of a development information system must take into account all of these differing needs.

1.2 A very important user community, yet one that is often neglected, consists of officials in developing countries. Information on past development activities may stimulate developing country officials to see new possibilities for future activities and to assist them in applying for assistance to agencies best suited to support the activity. Senior government officials need information concerning the entire range of development projects and programs to ensure that levels of activity in different sectors within their country are in accordance with

local priorities. Yet while they have needs for information, very often developing country governments and organizations lack the financial resources, sophisticated equipment or human skill base necessary to make the best use of the information they can obtain. And information providers may have difficulty in identifying exactly which officials in the developing country to target for their information.

1.3 What are the most important needs of potential users of development information? How can your agency develop services designed to meet those needs? How are the needs of developing country institutions different from the needs of other donor institutions? What influence will or should the needs of developing countries have on the design and delivery of such information systems?

2 Enhancing the use of development information

2.1 Users want information not for its own sake, but in order to solve a problem or to assist them in their work. In some cases, development information in its raw form may do just that: a development officer working to develop a water treatment project in Peru may ask what similar activities are currently being undertaken in South America and be satisfied with a list of similar programs in the region. However in many cases, unprocessed information provided as part of a query-response service is not enough. In order to answer the user's need, the value of information must often be enhanced; this process represents both an opportunity and a challenge.

2.2 Some of the ways in which development information can be enhanced or reprocessed are simple. For example, information about development activities can be translated into other languages to make it more easily or more widely understood. Translation can be costly; it can substantially delay the use of important information; it can introduce errors and inconsistencies; but it can also make otherwise useless information meaningful.

2.3 Information can also be repackaged and disseminated in a different form to make it more accessible. A current awareness service may publish reports in which development information is selected and sent to the user based on a profile of the user's probable interests. Directories may be compiled and published containing information

received on exchange from a number of different agencies. An agency may allow online computer access of development information databases by researchers or other interested organizations. These are excellent ways to make information more useful, but they raise concerns about the ownership and control of development information. Though unchanged in its literal content, the information that appears in different formats or in different contexts may have its original meaning subtly but significantly altered. And in these new forms, the information may be available to a far wider audience than was originally intended.

2.4 In what ways can development information available within your agency be translated, repackaged or disseminated to meet user needs more effectively? What rights does the originating agency still have on development information that has been enhanced or made available to parties beyond the specific agencies involved? What obligations does the receiving agency have in relation to this kind of information use?

2.5 Development information contains not only textual data but numeric or financial data, and this kind of information is particularly susceptible to information analysis. Information on development activities may be aggregated to provide totals or averages for geographic areas, sectors, types of activity or categories of donor agency. Changes in funding levels over a period of time could be plotted for a particular organization. Organizations could be compared, in terms of the level of financial support or number of activities in a certain country. Finally, reviews of activities, based in large measure on this kind of numeric or financial information, could be prepared as position papers for decision-makers. The problem with this information analysis is that it is fraught with potential errors of misinterpretation due to incomplete or inconsistent data. While personnel in the originating agency are probably familiar enough with the data to avoid these errors, staff in an agency receiving this information on exchange may not have the same awareness. The results of incorrect or poorly based analyses may not only be troublesome for the organization using them, but extremely embarrassing for the originating agency.

2.6 In what ways could your agency's information be analysed to provide new or more useful information? What problems do you foresee in analysing your agency's data? What can be done to help avoid the misuse or misinterpretation of development information?

2.7 After information about development activities has been disseminated, there may be follow-up requests for additional information to enlarge on or expand the original information provided. A follow-up request may take the form of a request for specific documents describing a project, or formal or informal publications produced as a result of the development activity. In other cases, the information being sought may not exist in written form, but may only be available through personal contact with someone involved in the development, management or evaluation of the activity. To fully answer all such requests may involve considerable direct and indirect costs for an organization.

2.8 How would you suggest that your agency handle requests for follow-up information? What would you expect from someone requesting this kind of information from your agency? What would you expect of someone in another agency of whom you were making this kind of request? What are reasonable limits on the amount of time, effort or cost associated with such requests?

3 Human resources for information use

3.1 If development information is to be a useful and valuable resource, skilled and well-trained people are required to collect and maintain the data. The abilities needed are wide-ranging. Strong organizational skills, a personal commitment to accuracy and detail, and a sense of discipline are needed to ensure the data is current and correct. Knowledge of past practices is necessary to ensure the consistency of the data over a long period of time. Interpersonal skills are required to interact with colleagues who supply the raw data. An ability to see development information in a broad context is just as important as attention to detail: understanding the different ways in which development information can be used, and the needs of potential, as well as current, users of the information is required to make decisions concerning the way in which information is recorded and stored.

3.2 Information intermediaries are people who retrieve and analyse information not for their own use but for the benefit of others. These intermediaries (who may serve as contact persons for the exchange of information with other organizations) also require specific skills and knowledge. Subject specialization is required to understand subject-related queries and descriptions of technical cooperation. A knowledge of the administrative process of developing projects and programs is needed to understand the reliability and significance of different data items as activities progress from “the pipeline” to approval, completion and evaluation. Skills in numeric manipulation may be needed to analyse the information available. Increasingly, computer skills (in the form of basic understanding of computer hardware and familiarity with database, spreadsheet and word processing software) are needed to retrieve, manipulate and format information.

3.3 What skills and experience are required for data collection, validation and maintenance, and what kind of training should be made available to help people to fulfill these roles? What professional background is appropriate for someone serving as an information intermediary? What kind of skills and experience do you think are essential in this position, and what opportunities are there (inside or outside your agency) for training those who lack these skills?

3.4 Finally, to make effective use of development information the end users (those who need information to solve their problems) will also need to be trained and educated. Training programs for users can be designed with different, sometimes even contradictory, goals. One goal is to make users better able to locate and find information on their own, independent of any intermediary. If users can answer their own simple questions, intermediaries can concentrate on more difficult research problems or complex analyses of data. A second possible goal for a user training program is improve the user’s understanding of the development information and how it can be used. This kind of program can not only explain the meaning of particular data elements, but demonstrate their usefulness to the development process. Finally, user training also has a promotional goal, making users more aware of the information resources that are available and creating an interest in using those resources to solve the particular practical problems that users encounter.

3.5 What kinds of training programs for end users are available in your agency? What kind of programs would you like to see implemented, and what would be the goals of these programs? Could user training programs be developed in co-operation with other development agencies?

4 Promoting information use

4.1 In addition to user training, other promotional programs will be required to reach out to all the potential clients of a development information service. Potential users need to be informed about the availability of services, and need to be convinced of the benefits of using them. Newsletters, finding aids, posters, open houses and meetings with groups or individual users are all useful means of promoting development information, though none is perhaps so effective as the recommendation of a satisfied client. The results of this activity—how successful such promotional programs are at encouraging the use of information—will largely determine whether the efforts of defining user needs, creating information services and developing human skills will have been worthwhile. Yet this “marketing” of development information is not a one-time effort, but rather is an on-going activity, continually redefining the goals, services and promotional efforts of a development information service.

4.2 What methods are effective in promoting the use of development information? How can development information services be better marketed to users inside and outside your agency? How can cooperation between development agencies further promote the use of development information?