

AID-DIHF Evaluation - We Are a Little Bit Pregnant

The AID-DIHF experiment has now been in operation for several years, but not long enough to either prove its worth or conclude that we made a mistake. Indeed, we are at an awkward "little bit pregnant" stage with two regional bureaus converted to a microfiche system and a strong move in the direction of servicing ARDA requests through microfiche rather than documents while the basic question of acceptability of anything other than documents remains to be proved. It is therefore appropriate to take stock.

The first question the evaluation was asked to address was "How well has CDSI performed, considering what it has been asked to do? Outside evaluators are not in a very good position to answer this question.

1. I was favorably impressed by what little I observed of the CDSI facility, but we heard complaints from the USDA researchers about the quality of the material produced by CDSI (pages missing, etc.) and the fact that they sometimes can't locate a document or furnish the wrong document. Africa Bureau's C&R was also critical of long turnaround time and CDSI staff turnover.

2. It is clear that there is a lack of communication between CDSI and the DI researchers. Many of the festering problems could be resolved or at least improved by regular communication between the two groups. This should be initiated immediately.

3. In passing, I wish to express some reservations about the idea of contracting for researchers. Given direct hire personnel cuts it was probably necessary to "go outside" for researchers, but they have the weakness of not knowing AID programming requirements and methods very well, particularly "field realities." If staff turnover becomes high (a situation which apparently is not true at this time) the problem of serving the AID clientele would be compounded. One partial solution would be to provide funds to allow the contract researchers to visit field missions and become more familiar with their needs.

The second question to be addressed by the evaluation to which most of my comments will be addressed is "Does the present CDSI contact provide products and services which are appropriate to AID and LDC institution user needs?" Given that no field visits or questionnaires were used by the evaluators, our replies to these questions must be based primarily on past experience and a review of the written material provided.

1. The whole subject of Development Information must be placed in the proper perspective. From both the Mission and Regional Bureau perspectives, development information can be a useful adjunct to their work. However, the pressure of time, priorities to obligate funds and resolve operating problems, and respond to myriad outside requests leave relatively little time to achieving perfect project design. Add to this a certain amount of justified skepticism about the transferability of lessons learned from one project to another, or one country to another. Thus, development information is hardly in the forefront of the minds of project designers.

Any attempt to force the Bureaus or Missions to use Development Information will probably fail. First, there is a need to do a much better job of explaining the services DI can provide (perhaps personal letters to USAID Directors, program and loan officers, etc. would help). The placing of a DIU person in regional bureaus is an excellent step. Second, DI should take a more active role by reviewing ABS submissions to identify proposed new projects and sending to the field relatively brief computer printouts of related documents from which the USAID can select appropriate documents. Third, AID could consider requiring that the PID contain a list of documents consulted which, in turn, could trigger DI to provide additional documents. However, DI must be a service rather than a requirement for its users.

2. The pattern of use of DI is disturbing. It is obviously used much more extensively by PPC and S&T than the regional bureaus and Missions. If DI exists primarily as a reference library or service for AID/W central bureaus, serious questions arise concerning how much time and money should go into this effort. We may have a case of a service in search of a user. In this case, either the service must be made much more appealing, or cut back to a cost and funding source commensurate with the demand. Incidentally, DI should start refusing requests from universities if any substantial work or cost is involved. Writing term papers is not the function of DI.

3. There is also a need to re-evaluate the usefulness of ARDA, particularly as a result of the move from documents to fiche. Are many of the host country recipients simply requesting any available and inexpensive documentation? What use is being

made of the documents ordered? Should ARDA be published more frequently? Should each issue be devoted to a single subject? These are just a few of the questions which should be asked about the usefulness of ARDA.

4. Perhaps the most disturbing technical question is the decision to move from production of paper documents to fiche. I confess to being a member of the older generation, not at ease with computers, etc., but it seems to me that the decision to move to fiche ignores the basic fact that documents are essential to the work of the agency, as attachments to memoranda, etc. People will not be bound to machines to get their information. Indeed, I generally took ARDA and other lengthy documents home to peruse at night or on the week-ends, when time permitted. I would not return to the office to sit in front of a fiche reader to do this type of relatively low priority activity.

So, perhaps a fundamentally wrong decision has been made to go to fiche. As a minimum, it is essential that machines which can print pages from fiche be readily available. In the field the question of maintenance of the readers, printers, and negatives is very important -- particularly in isolated posts. In brief, the decision to move to fiche may further reduce an already small demand for DI services.

5. A brief and unscientific survey of the Africa Bureau (C&R and four project officers) revealed that

(a) C&R is unhappy with excessive turn-around time with CDSI, which often takes a month or more to micro-fiche documents. A project office said microfiches are generally not available for six months after receipt in AID/W. Space savings, however, have been tremendous as a result of the move to fiche.

(b) Very little use is made by project officers of their microfiche readers. In several cases no three-prong socket was available; in others continuing problems were encountered with getting decent focus. Some machines are not even plugged in.

(c) Every project officer also maintained a separate paper document file, generally covering the past year. This was the material used almost exclusively, with fiche utilized only to access "historical" files not readily available on paper. Paper is much more convenient to show and to discuss with people who must clear documents.

(d) Several project officers felt that the microfiche technology had already been overtaken by the WANG, which permits easy incorporation of one document into another and quick reproduction onto paper.

(e) The problem of providing fiche to technical officers has not yet been resolved, since fiches must be selected from a number of different countries and made available to the right technical officers.

In short, the major positive result of the introduction of microfiche has been to vastly reduce filing cabinets needed. There is some concern, however, as to whether the system is capturing all new documents and whether existing project files are as complete as they might be (apparently CDSI did not capture documents from some offices).

6. Finally, we come to the Phase III implementation stage. Since we are a little bit pregnant, I suppose we have little choice other than to allow the experiment to come to full term. However, a major evaluation should take place after this experiment to see if we wish to have more babies.

Again, demand seems to be the main problem. Availability of almost all the material only in English is an important limitation on the number of host countries which can participate. A further question is the technological limitations. A brief look at the MINISIS licensees showed relatively few in developing countries where AID has significant assistance program. In other cases, the appropriateness of the host country organization is questionable. (Somewhat perversely, I rather like the idea of using USIS libraries -- what is their reaction?)

Other problems which must be taken into consideration are USAID staffing (MODE ceilings are often a limitation and the question of staff continuity also is important if American PSCs are utilized), as well as the cost of purchase and maintenance of equipment. Finally, many host country institutions have grossly inadequate budgets -- they may be able to pay staff but provide little service to their end-users. The result is that a considerable financial burden may be placed on local USAIDs which, generally speaking, have thus far placed relatively low priority on development information.

Despite the above caveats, it seems to me worthwhile to try implementing the system overseas in a variety of USAID and host country situations. However, the experiment should be carefully evaluated both shortly after being installed and after several years before being extended to other locations.

Overseas, Murphy's Law prevails. We should be very careful about trying to introduce new information technologies, particularly when effective demand for information services is tenuous at best.