Informatics and Social Action Funds in Sub-Saharan Africa

Informatics is gaining ground as a significant development tool, especially in the design and implementation of Social Funds. Here, informatics transcends the narrow and misleading definition of an input-output data exercise on a computer. In its application to developmental activities, it refers to the complete cycle of collection, analysis, distribution and use of project-related information. At the project level, informatics supports the optimal management of information, its monitoring and evaluation, smooth information flows, stronger institutional linkages and changed work processes.

Informatics in Social Action Funds differs from other sectors (such as Finance, Energy, and Transportation) in that it is more decentralized and diffused, with scattered offices and work sites (often in remote areas with little or no access). This calls for an appropriate informatics solution that provides the right information at the right location at the right time to the right person to facilitate decentralized community based development and decision-making.

The Ethiopian Social Rehabilitation Development Fund (ESRDF), the Social Recovery Project (SRP-II) in Zambia and the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) are three of the largest Bank-assisted Social Action Funds in Sub-Saharan Africa and the informatics component in each of these Funds has played a key role in the dynamics of project implementation. However, the design and understanding of the informatics component has naturally varied in each case.

Impact

- Prioritization and efficient allocation of resources through improved and timely decision-making (Ethiopia, Malawi).
- Improved poverty profiles and targeting and better inter-agency information flows leading to a more significant impact in cross-sectoral areas such as gender, HIV/AIDS etc. (Zambia, Malawi).
- Improved communication amongst and more timely inputs from the various actors (stakeholders, donors, etc.) leading to better project monitoring and evaluation (Ethiopia, Zambia, Malawi).
- Faster appraisals, clearances and supervision of sub-projects through the automation of routine tasks by leveraging computer technology, including access to electronic tools and best practices (Ethiopia, Zambia, Malawi).
• Work process changes and decentralization of some tasks (now performed closer to the communities), changing the dynamics of the work at the Central Office (Ethiopia, Zambia, Malawi).

• Enhanced sustainability of intervention through the increased availability of information for intermediaries and communities (Ethiopia, Zambia, Malawi).

• Increased accountability within communities through access to better information (Ethiopia, Zambia, Malawi).

• Overall institutional benefits from improved tracking of financial and physical progress through the use of an MIS system.

Lessons Learned

• The early identification and incorporation of local practices into the informatics design will strengthen the smooth functioning of Social Action Funds and avoid costly correction efforts (disbursement practices in Ethiopia).

• Poor choice and definition of indicators leads to inconsistent information. For example, usage indicators for hand pumps in Ethiopia varied across regions, depending upon the specific Project Officer's understanding of the indicator criteria.

• The issue of multiple donors tied to their own procedures introduces a level of complexity that must be addressed at the informatics design stage. In Zambia, for example, the SRP and MPP funded by IDA and EU share a common Microprojects Unit (MPU) but categorize activities differently. This reinforces the need for an integrated design approach.

• The design and development of the MIS system needs to be flexible, factoring in, to the extent possible, future telecommunications improvements and resulting server-centric computing needs, thus avoiding costly re-work.

• The presence of appropriate informatics expertise is a critical element for the sustainability of the informatics component. Due to the diverse geographical nature of these Social Action Funds, technical expertise was spread too thin at the regional levels and IT professionals had little incentive to take up jobs in these remote locations. This often resulted in the informatics component being handled by a Project Officer (in addition to his regular "project work"). Informatics was thus assigned to a non-informatics person resulting in its becoming ineffective. This situation resulted in increased costs in time and resources.

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