Hart, Laurence

A regional workshop on *Microfinance for East Asia and the Pacific* was held in Manila, Philippines, from March 20 to 24, 2000. The workshop was organized by the Governance, Regulation and Finance Division (WBIGF) of the World Bank Institute, in collaboration with the Foundation for Advanced Studies on International Development (FASID) of Japan. The four and a half day workshop aimed at bringing together microfinance practitioners from the East Asia and the Pacific region, including policy makers, central and commercial bankers, and NGOs, to discuss the sustainability and best practices of microfinance operations. The agenda of the workshop focused on four key areas of discussion: evolution of microfinance practices and changes in the markets; different approaches, methodologies, and delivery systems; policy and regulatory environment for microfinance institutions (MFIs); and institutional capacity building. A full-day field trip to local MFIs in the Philippines was also organized during the workshop.

There were four specific objectives for the workshop: 1) providing participants with the information and tools necessary to develop microfinance operations in their countries based on best practice standards; 2) helping participants to identify specific activities to improve the policy and regulatory framework and support institutional capacity building of MFIs; 3) providing an opportunity for networking among microfinance practitioners; and 4) facilitating dialogue between policy makers and MFIs. The workshop was attended by a total of 116 participants from 16 countries. They included 5 Bank staff and 19 resource persons who served primarily as presenters or speakers. Resource persons represented academic/research institutions, as well as selected MFIs/NGOs operating in South East Asian countries.

The WBI Evaluation Unit (WBIES) conducted an on-site Level 1 (participants' reaction) evaluation using a participants' feedback questionnaire. The evaluation targeted specifically participants from the East Asia and the Pacific region, who were the primary audience of the workshop (N=92). The feedback questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section asked the extent to which the respondents were satisfied with workshop content and delivery. The second section asked the level of respondents' knowledge about specific topics before and after the workshop, based on self-assessment. A 5-point Likert type scale that ranged from 1 = "minimum" to 5 = "maximum" was used for the majority of the questions in this section. In addition, a 5-point scale of 1 = "insufficient" to 5 = "excessive," with a score of 3 being "adequate," was used to rate such questions as the level of interaction among participants and the number of participants. The third section was respondents' open-ended comments about the workshop. The questionnaire was completed and returned by 71 out of the 92 targeted participants (a response rate of 77.2%). Twenty-three respondents (32.4%) were women.

**Respondent Background**

- The 71 respondents who returned the questionnaire represented the following organizations:
19 (26.8%) from MFIs/NGOs; 13 (18.3%) from donor countries or agencies; 11 (15.5%) from local or state level governments; 10 (14.1%) from Central Banks or state-owned Banks; 5 (7.0%) from academic or research institutions; 2 (2.8%) from commercial banks; and 10 (14.1%) from other institutions. One respondent did not answer this question (1.4%).

- Participants to the workshop were found fairly new to the subject of microfinance. About 72% of all respondents reported having had five or fewer years of professional experience working in a relevant area. This was particularly prominent among the donor and government participants, who responded having dealt with issues on microfinance for either less than one year (58%) or one to five years (42%). Respondents from MFIs/NGOs, on the other hand, reported having had more experience with the subject. About 42% of this group had below five years of experience, 37% had six to ten years, and 21% had over 11 years of work experience involving microfinance operations.

**Workshop Content, and Delivery**

- Results of closed-ended responses indicated that participants' level of satisfaction with the workshop was above the midpoint of the 5-point scale, or 3.0, on all measures of design and organization. For example, the mean scores of six key performance indicators were the following: relevance of the workshop to participants' current work or functions (3.93); the extent to which information provided was new to participants (3.57); usefulness of the information acquired (4.03); the degree to which the content focused on participants' learning needs (3.48); the achievement of the announced objectives (3.81); and the overall usefulness of the workshop (3.93). The percentage of respondents who gave a higher rating of either "4" or "5" on the overall usefulness of the workshop, an indicator of quality performance used by WBI, was 70% for the workshop. This was well below the "85%" benchmark expected for all WBI training activities. However, the result varied among respondents. Donor respondents were more likely to have viewed the workshop as useful (92% giving a rating of "4" or "5"), compared to government respondents (73%) or those from MFIs/NGOs (63%).

- The workshop had 4 specific objectives. The objective that achieved the highest rating among respondents was the extent to which participants developed a useful network with other microfinance practitioners during the workshop (mean=4.04). The perceived benefit of this aspect of the workshop was particularly positive among representatives from academic/research institutions (4.5), donors (4.2), and MFIs/NGOs (4.1). On other objectives, however, the ratings were clearly lower. For example, the applicability of different methodologies presented to respondents' countries were was among the lowest in score (3.29), particularly among government participants (3.0) and MFI/NGO participants (3.2). The extent to which the workshop helped participants to identify their next specific activity plans (3.69) was perceived more favorably among donors (4.0) and commercial bank participants (5.0) than among MFI/NGO participants (3.4). On the opportunity for dialogue between policy makers and MFIs (3.54), 80% of the respondents from academic/research institutions felt the workshop was highly successful, giving a rating of "4" or "5" (3.6). The percentage on this item was much lower among government participants (40%, 3.3) and MFI/NGO participants (47%, 3.5).

- On key discussion areas from four plenary sessions of the workshop, respondents were asked to rate their levels of understanding as they perceived them before attending the workshop and after having completed all of the sessions. Respondents' pre-workshop ratings ranged from 2.48 (Institutional capacity building: supporting the development of microfinance and sector tier structures) to 2.64 (Different approaches, methodologies, and delivery systems) on a 5-point scale. Their post-workshop ratings indicated a positive gain of 49% to 54% across thematic sessions. The mean scores at the end of all plenary sessions ranged from 3.72 (Institutional capacity building: supporting the development of microfinance and
sector tier structures) to 3.96 (Evolution of microfinance and changes in the MF markets). The results should be interpreted with caution, however, since they measured respondent impression of their achievement, based on self-assessment. They did not reflect respondents' actual learning gains.

- On the structure of the workshop, three issues were highlighted. On the number of workshop participants, for example, about half of the respondents (48%) felt the size of the workshop was "excessive" or "somewhat excessive," while the other half (49%) reported the number of participants as "adequate." Similarly, nearly half of the respondents (44%) felt the time allocated for question and answer sessions was "insufficient" or "somewhat insufficient" (49% rated "adequate" on this item). Interaction among participants was perceived sufficient by 53% of the respondents, whereas 30% rated this item as "insufficient" or "somewhat insufficient".

- Overall, the workshop received positive feedback from respondents. Over 95% of the respondents (64 out of the 67 respondents) reported that they valued the experience of the workshop and would recommend this type of activity to their colleagues in the future. Three respondents who reported they would not recommend this workshop to others were participants from central or state-owned banks (2) and a donor representative. They did not provide any specific reasons to justify their responses, except that one respondent reported the lack of relevant microfinance programs in his country.

- A number of respondents provided specific comments and suggestions as to how the workshop can improve in the future as a training activity. There were two major points. First, the workshop should take more interactive approaches in delivering its messages (N=19). This would include allocating more time for discussions and debate, more small group activities, and providing more opportunities for participants to exchange success/failure stories from their experiences on microfinance operations. Another issue raised was the need for improvement in the focus of workshop contents (N=18). Respondents preferred that the workshop either deal with fewer topics in greater depth, or target specific type(s) of microfinance practitioners at a time. One suggestion provided in this area was that, when inviting participants from a wide variety of institutions and backgrounds, the workshop should provide separate sessions that focus on specific issues and give participants a choice of selecting the relevant sessions to attend according to their personal needs.

- A large majority of respondents (62 out of the 66 respondents, or 94%) expressed a positive intention of applying the knowledge and experience obtained from the workshop to their day-to-day work. Three key areas of utilization mentioned by respondents were the following: 1) using knowledge obtained from the workshop in facilitating their own research on microfinance and improving their work plans and activities (34, or 55%); 2) taking specific actions on existing microfinance programs in their work place, such as making recommendations to authorities to review programs, formulating or redesigning financial products to better meet the needs of clients, and improving or updating training modules on microfinance for clients (19, or 30.6%); and 3) disseminating information and materials obtained from the workshop to colleagues, authorities, and microfinance practitioners (9, or 14.5%).

Implications

- The workshop was successful, primarily in gathering various types and levels of microfinance practitioners in one forum to discuss issues relevant to the region. The provision of an opportunity to expand and improve networking among the practitioners was the most valued aspect of this workshop. If a similar workshop is to be planned in the future, however, there are few points to be considered. One is that the workshop would need to provide or ensure a more participatory learning environment for all participants. During the workshop, it was often observed that participants from the same countries, particularly those from South East Asian region, were more outspoken and asked questions to speakers, compared to those from the East Asian and the Pacific region. The question
and answer session was provided at the end of each plenary session, but only a few participants asked questions. Second, **an effort should be made to ensure meeting the learning needs of all groups of participants**. In the Manila workshop, the ratings on workshop performance given by certain groups of respondents, particularly those from MFIs/NGOs, tended to be less favorable, compared those given by donor and government respondents. One solution may be that separate workshops be organized for different types of players of microfinance (e.g. government policy makers, financial institutions or credit lenders, and representatives of NGOs), as well as for practitioners at different levels of development (e.g. those from newly established MFIs with less experience on microfinance operation, and those from already established, experienced MFIs, etc.).

- In order to assess the effect of this regional workshop, a tracer study has been proposed. Participants to the Manila workshop will be contacted in six months for the study and will be asked if there have been any changes in the microfinance institutions in their countries or in their work environment. Results of the assessment will be released upon completion of the study.