The 1997 conference of the Mediterranean Development Forum, which comprises the World Bank and a number of partner institutions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), was held in Marrakech, Morocco, during the period May 12-17, 1997. The conference had a number of objectives, including the sharing of ‘best practice’ approaches to development in the region, and the creation of a dialogue involving senior government officials, the development community and the private sector within the region. The conference consisted of 12 core workshops and a large number of other events on a broad range of specialized topics, such as financial market development, water management, education reform, economic journalism and telecommunications. The conference was attended by over 650 participants. The evaluation of the conference, which was conducted by the EDI Evaluation Unit, focused on a number of key issues: whether conference participants had learned new information and best practices which they could use in their work; the extent to which regional networks had been fostered by the conference; the lessons which could be learned from the wide diversity of approaches followed in the 12 workshops; and other lessons concerning the organization of regional conferences. A number of data sources were used in undertaking the evaluation: an earlier review of organizational/administrative lessons learned at the conference; questionnaires completed by participants at the start and end of the workshops which they attended, and at the end of the conference; individual action plans; interviews of the task managers of individual workshops; back-to-office reports prepared by task managers; interviews of support staff; and examination of a quantity of available published material and websites.

• The conference was successful in attracting a large number of participants from the region, many of them government Ministers and senior civil servants. Participants reported that they valued the opportunity which the conference provided to establish and renew network contacts throughout the region, including the exchange of information and the sharing of experience.

• There was a high level of participant satisfaction with various aspects of the conference, and participants judged it to have been generally successful as a means of learning more about best practices and their application. Satisfaction levels were lower for the conference as a whole than for the workshops which formed its core, however. A key reason for this was the heavy agenda from scheduling numerous whole-of-conference activities, and the consequent fatigue experienced by many participants: the ambitious agenda included the workshops, plenary sessions, open space activities, master lectures and panel discussions. Some participants had workshop and conference events scheduled from 8am to as late as 8pm on a number of days. A result was that participants were tired, and had little time or energy to network with others outside their own workshop.

• Participant reactions, as well as observations from the task managers, indicate that the conference was successful in achieving depth of coverage of a broad range of specialized topics via the workshops. However, because the workshops covered a disparate range of topics and were organized largely as stand-alone events, they did not achieve much in the way of synergies between different subject matter areas. Future regional conferences would benefit from a clear and shared articulation of their objectives, and of the unavoidable trade-offs to be made between depth and breadth of coverage of conference themes and topics.
• Participants also valued the opportunity to hear expert speakers from developed countries -- this can be a useful means of understanding good or best practices -- but also reaffirmed the message that they place a high value on having a number of regional speakers at workshops. This helps to ensure that the issues raised are topical, are dealt with in a credible manner, and are directly relevant to the region.

• Some workshop task managers took the lead in setting up networks and other vehicles for regional collaboration, such as websites; but other task managers expressed the view that this was outside the scope of their core work. There are opportunities for EDI task managers to become more involved in developing and participating in regional networks, and this could be seen as entirely consistent with the role of an organization such as the World Bank. However, this would entail time and resource costs, and would need to be explicitly considered by EDI management. A number of the task managers at Marrakech devoted some time in their workshops to exploring such options with participants.

• There were widely differing levels of participant satisfaction with different workshops. In response to a question on the relevance of the workshop to the participant's job, for example, the average score for workshops (on 6-point scale from 1= minimum to 6= maximum) ranged from a high of 5.4 to a low of 4.3. There are many influences on such scores, a number of which are outside the control of task managers. But the diversity of approaches to planning, content and delivery which were followed in different workshops, plus the differences in participant reactions to different features of workshops, provide a rich source of understanding about what did or did not work well.

• Some task managers achieved an understanding of the market and audience they were endeavoring to serve, via their close network links in the region; others achieved it by conducting a needs analysis. Several task managers suggested the desirability of allowing them to more tightly target participants, to ensure that only those with the greatest potential interest and contribution are invited.

• It was evident from participant responses that some task managers had relied excessively on a lecture style, 'talking heads' format, and had crammed more and more speakers into whatever time was available. This appears to have taken place at the expense of discussion directly involving participants in activities such as question and answer sessions, case study assignments and presentations, and examination of regional implications. This problem also relates back to the issue of depth versus breadth in conference design, and the extent to which individual workshops should be designed as stand-alone events or as part of a wider conference.

• The many successes of the Marrakech conference and the opportunities for further improvements in future regional conferences are encouraging. They reaffirm the importance of this type of activity as a vehicle for EDI to pursue, in helping client countries to build their capacity to learn and use knowledge, so that they can continue to build their skills and refine policies over time. Thus one option which merits consideration is that each of the six regional groupings within the Bank could consider organizing a major regional conference on a periodic basis. The average cost per participant in Marrakech was about $4100; it will also be important for EDI management to consider the relative cost-effectiveness -- especially the costs and learning effects -- of regional conferences vis-a-vis alternative learning/training activities, such as smaller conferences, workshops, ongoing networks, distance education approaches, and so on. Such comparisons will become easier as evaluation findings are progressively acquired for a range of other EDI activities.