INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

SUMMER 2004

A SCAR ON THE CONSCIENCE OF THE WORLD

ANNA TIBAJUKA ON THE WORK OF THE COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

Defra and OGCbuying.solutions present: Implementing Sustainable Procurement 2004. Turn to Outside Back Cover

DRIVING RENEWABLES CREATING THE CLIMATE FOR CHANGE KLAUS TOEPFER P.12

SPENDING REVIEWED FUNDING AID DELIVERY HILARY BENN P.14

HUMAN RIGHTS FIGHTING FOR GLOBAL VALUES IRENE KHAN P.18
AIMS-NO END TO THE OPTIONS

David Saunders of the Afghanistan Information Management Service talks to Annabelle McGuinness regarding the role of the project in building information management capacity both in government and to organisations across Afghanistan.

In the developed world, we take for granted the benefits technology delivers in terms of enabling effective communication, delivery of information and enabling change. One of the growth areas in recent times has been in the application of geographic information systems and management information systems, improving efficiency, accountability and transparency in the civil service and aligning external resources with national plans and priorities. In the developing world, such applications have particular relevance regarding the effectiveness of reconstruction and development.

One such country is Afghanistan, where the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is funding the Afghanistan Information Management Service (AIMS). The UNDP AIMS Project is building information management capacity in government, delivering information management services to organisations across Afghanistan.

AIMS was established in 2001 by UNOCHA through the merger of the new Humanitarian Information Centre for Afghanistan (HICEA) and the existing Projects Management Information System (ProMIS). In 2002, AIMS collaborated with UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan) and was administered by UNDP. In 2003, AIMS became a Directly Executed (DEX) project of UNDP, administered and managed by UNDP and reporting to the Resident Representative. This current phase of the project began in April 2004, and will run in its present form until July 2006.

Afghanistan is currently undergoing radical change, with government reforms seeking to "establish effective line ministries and implementing large national programmes in all areas promoting poverty reduction, good governance, democracy & human rights, infrastructure reconstruction and development."

David Saunders is Project Manager for AIMS, his team is dedicated to building specialised capacity in specific ministries, such as GIS or digital mapping in mapping departments, and providing support to specialised database or MIS departments in government, such as the Ministry of Finance, or activity tracking systems in infrastructure ministries.

By helping government to define data standards, information can be shared between government bodies and among the humanitarian and development community. The project has also enabled UN, NGOs and other ministries to develop mapping capability and database skills, providing customer services to share information maps, data, and standards information.

"AIMS distributed over 20,000 maps last year, and supported 18 ministries and government departments with different services. Customer services also play a key role in sharing information between organisations." Saunders said.

The practical benefit this delivers on the ground is in enabling government and other organisations to improve planning and coordination, avoiding duplication of data, targeting funds better and reducing wastage with information handling at the heart of developing long-term ability to manage the functions of government more effectively. As Saunders explains succinctly, "If you can't measure, you can't manage."

AIMS has adopted a strategic approach to develop information management capability, with the project structured like a modern organisation or start-up company. AIMS has customer-facing staff who manage relationships and who also have technical expertise, offering help and advice on mapping and project services. The Customer Services aspect of the project then feeds information through to the Government Services department, building GIS...
capacity in line ministries and advanced digital mapping capability, and in Regional Services – they have five offices around the country.

Saunders describes the set up, “AIMS has a Technical Services team (GIS, database: standards, ICT, Web) that support the front office. In this way we create temporary ‘crack teams’ that will work together on specific projects. Advanced database developers can be counted on one hand in Afghanistan, so we need to provide training and networks of people to increase this capacity. Thus, AIMS provides flexible teams that can mix and match to support specific ministry needs. Kharaji cannot solve the problems. Afghans have to take the future into their own hands.”

**IF YOU CAN'T MEASURE, YOU CAN'T MANAGE**

Examples of his team's work include: establishing a GIS laboratory in a mapping department, with ongoing training in digitisation and GIS; collaborating with organisations to develop numerous thematic maps, for example, on road construction; implementing a website for Central Statistics Office so they can publish information collected; organising lessons in English and computing to build base capacity; training teams in basic GIS, then provide backup through project tuition (more than 200 were trained in government last year); a database developers network for professionals was set up with database training initiated.

I asked Saunders to identify the key factors that need to be taken into consideration when embarking on a project such as this? He replied, “Teams need to be lead, and need to know how to act in changing environments. This requires developing a vision and culture that encourages initiative and innovation. All information must be shared openly, we can often learn more by our mistakes and failures than by successes. And most importantly, without a political roof, all information management projects become a political football to be controlled or removed at will.”

While politics will always be a considerable barrier to project development, in terms of both organisational and national development: progress therefore requires transparency and cooperation in decision-making. Building information management capacity depends on “entrepreneurialism, it is rarely planned or budgeted for by others – organisations need to be banded hand and led through the maze.”

“Financing is not a problem, initially with small sums value can be proved, so further financing will follow.”

However, cost recovery of customer services activities is a priority area and delivers a number of valuable roles: customers who buy products provide critical feedback for further development; sales revenue focuses attention on the provision of quality services; this in turn acts as a good advocacy tool for the organisation and the expertise on offer revenue is used to cover training and production costs. Free consultancy services at present, will become a paid-for service in some areas in the future. So what are the lessons that can be drawn from this project and is there any limit to the future role of AIMS?

Saunders concludes, “Information management covers of whole host of areas both technical and non-technical: GIT databases, MIS, web - internet, intranet and extranet - knowledge management networks and e-government. AIMS role is to help integrate information management approaches and systems into government, ensuring that government priorities are met rather than those of the consultants, avoiding huge integration problems. In short, there is no end to the options.”

David Saunders is Project Manager of the UNDP AIMS programme.

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