JOINT OECD-DAC/DEVELOPMENT GATEWAY FOURTH AiDA OPEN MEETING

Main Findings Summary Report

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MAIN FINDINGS
SUMMARY REPORT

JOINT OECD-DAC/DEVELOPMENT GATEWAY
FOURTH AIDA OPEN MEETING

BRINGING DEVELOPMENT ACTORS TOGETHER
TO NETWORK AND SHARE INFORMATION

1. Over 60 participants - from 11 DAC Members, Bulgaria, Mali, Morocco, Poland, Romania and Togo, 14 International Organisations (including 6 from the UN family) and 12 NGOs - attended the 4th AiDA Open meeting at the OECD in Paris on 12 and 13 June 2003.

2. The objectives of this meeting were to:

   • Provide a forum for networking among the AiDA community;
   • Contribute to building partnerships with national governments and other development actors;
   • Share recent developments and expand participation;
   • Compare lessons and collect feedback from work with donors, NGOs and Foundations;
   • Help establish and promote standards among the development community;
   • Pursue efforts in improving both the usability and content of AiDA;
   • Define steps forward;
   • Explore tools and technology to better share and present information in AiDA.

I. Setting the Scene.

3. The development business has united behind the need to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The challenge must be shared. Success will require partnerships and networking to avoid duplication of efforts among the development actors. The Development Gateway Foundation (DG) and OECD-DAC share common goals to support development practitioners achieve harmonisation of practices, promote ICT for development, and increase aid effectiveness through co-ordination support for locally-owned development strategies.

4. AiDA¹ is a key component of the DG, alongside a growing number of country gateways, the dgMarket supporting e-procurement and the topic pages to promote knowledge sharing. It is a public good that allows participants to network and share information, lessons learned and best practices. It can serve to

¹ For further details on “What is AiDA, how it works and where does it stand today?”, see Marc Tocatlian’s presentation: Overview of AiDA (PowerPoint file, 507KB, in English, available at http://www.developmentgateway.org/download/194375/AiDA_Overview.PPT)
increase visibility, demonstrate transparency and accountability through improved usability and access to data built on agreed standards for sharing information.

5. A critical mass of participants now share information through AiDA. With growing support and demonstration of added value, AiDA can be leveraged to deliver information to support development co-operation and co-ordination. As AiDA works towards meeting these goals, it must distinguish those aims it can address and those issues beyond its control that should be referred to other fora. AiDA needs to be demand driven and shaped by its users while remaining focused on what it can realistically achieve to best help development practitioners work more effectively.

II. Field Work: Helping Shape AiDA to Better Respond to Local Needs.

6. The significance of field work is undeniable. NGOs are key actors in development co-operation, promoting local ownership and debate. Offering them a place to share information about their activities and to find out what other actors are doing, where, when and how, is a key value-added by AiDA. Connectivity is a real issue and one must remember that AiDA cannot be successful in countries with no or poor access to the Internet. Work on the ground is serving as a strong reminder that AiDA must explore alternative solutions to capture and disseminate information (e.g. the use of offline tools, CD-ROMs, web-to-email technology, “intellectuals” that can access, digest and translate information and spread it in line with “oral traditions”).

7. There are many co-ordination challenges for NGOs and good lessons to be learned from the field. The experiences with Mali and Togo are exemplary: they provide an impetus for a dialogue with practitioners in the field to understand their needs and meet long awaited opportunities for field based organisations to share detailed information about their activities. Local partners have taken ownership of this work and are helping shape AiDA to best respond to local and precise needs. The challenge now is to make this work sustainable.

8. The Malian example helped identify a number of issues and demonstrated how AiDA can help development actors at the local level. The initiative is seen as a way to bring closer together local partners, bilateral and international organisations. Organising the work around the responsibility of a “comité de pilotage” and using tools to share information with AiDA have proven to be crucial in creating the necessary dynamic and momentum around this work. AiDA can be used to support responses to efforts to better coordinate aid activities locally and will help save time and money to those using it.

9. Results from work in Togo showed that AiDA can be a means for development actors to better know what each other are doing, including the bilaterals and multilaterals, thus helping adapt development policies and financial assistance. AiDA is seen as a tool that assists communities move from an oral to a written tradition. By capturing local projects using the online tool and sharing them with AiDA, the latter is seen as a window to the world that can help participants gain visibility, and ultimately, additional sponsorship. With proper resources, documentation and human support, AiDA could play a role in fighting poverty in Togo.

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10. Discussions revealed the key role of people as intermediaries, since technology is not universally accessible. Local animators or assistants are essential to keep the motivation and momentum going, especially in countries where connectivity is poor or prohibitively expensive, and the use of information technology is not yet a habit.

11. The Country Gateways form a network of locally-owned and managed public-private partnerships. They are the country-level components of the Development Gateway. Their mission is to facilitate innovative and effective use of the Internet and other information and communication technologies (ICT) in the country to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development. Currently there are 44 Country Gateways in various stages of development and many have integrated project/activity databases or AiDA country views in their sites.

12. Ongoing work with Country Gateways has been a rich source of lessons for AiDA. For example, the Moroccan Country Gateway experience re-confirmed that language is a real barrier. The two official languages are Arabic and French whereas most of the information available in AiDA is predominantly in English. The forthcoming challenge will be to provide relevant local content in the appropriate languages. The Moroccan Country Gateway platform is technically independent from the Development Gateway Portal and uses open source software. With the use of online tools to better capture local content information, AiDA is seen as an important component of the Moroccan Country Gateway.

13. In Bulgaria and Romania, within the framework of their Country Gateways, a needs assessment was conducted to better grasp project/activity information requirements. A number of information gaps and issues were identified and improving AiDA can be part of the response to these needs. Donor competition tends to be more common than donor co-ordination, especially at the regional level. It is difficult to find partners, experts, and project evaluations. This is not due to lack of good will, but rather a lack of knowledge that impedes effective local co-ordination. With improvements in data availability from major donors such as the EC, use of local aggregators to complement the database with in-depth information, and offering value-added services, AiDA would have the potential to become an effective way of promoting regional projects and collaboration within these two countries.

III. Working with DAC Members: a Win-Win Situation.

14. Discrepancies between reported activities of donors and implementing organisations and what you can track on the ground are not uncommon. Local practitioners need access to precise, detailed and timely information, on who is doing what, where, when and how. AiDA can be a way to bridge this gap if certain preconditions are met. A bottom up approach will help to network networks but information generated this way may not be precise enough. AiDA must be user friendly if it is to be used on the ground and it must link up with processes that provide means for reality checks.

15. AiDA and OECD’s DAC Creditor Reporting System (CRS) are complementary. Both initiatives benefit from each other: AiDA from the quality of CRS data and use of its standards; the CRS from an increased exposure through AiDA. AiDA is helping complement the CRS by allowing more use of this information at the operational level while introducing solutions to avoid duplication and double counting.

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of activities. CRS data are universally recognised as being the unique and official source for statistics on aid activities. The “statistics button” on AiDA links to the CRS database. The DAC Secretariat is working in 2003 to improve the speed of response, ease of use, support documentation, and metadata of this database. And in the longer term it is working to complete the coverage of the data (currently 85%) and their timeliness. As an AiDA partner, OECD-DAC is exploring ways to complement CRS reporting with more precise and detailed information such as contacts, specific links to donor web sites, precise project location, start and end dates, documents such as abstracts, logical frameworks, lessons learned and evaluations.

16. In the past eighteen months, six DAC members have begun collaborating with the AiDA initiative to complement CRS information. Sharing of lessons has been beneficial to all parties involved. The timing is right, as there is a major push for more transparency – both through “open government” initiatives and campaigning for the MDGs - about what donors are doing, and many agencies are upgrading their information systems.

17. For example, DFID⁶ is using AiDA as a public information tool for connecting people and building a foundation for knowledge sharing and collaboration. A view to DFID projects in AiDA is now available on their web site, allowing them to share information in a timely and efficient manner. This public exposure has improved the quality of data entered in internal systems. As DFID is moving towards collaborative working, AiDA is the first step of using the web to enable discussions, sharing documents and using discussion group (chat) technology to develop virtual communities.

18. As all other DAC Members, the Australian Agency for International Development, AusAID, shares data with AiDA via its CRS reporting. AusAID is currently developing the Australian Knowledge Warehouse (AKWa) which will include logical frameworks for activities, evaluations and best practice as well as a new aid management system. When these resources become operational, Australia will be in a very good position to share more detailed information with AiDA and the Australian Development Gateway, which is looking to act as a regional portal.

19. Japan has recently enacted legislation encouraging openness and transparency in administrative institutions. Participation in the AiDA initiative is timely and seen as a cost-effective way of increasing visibility, transparency and accountability for Japanese ODA activities. A step-by-step approach will be taken to complement CRS reporting and provide additional information to AiDA. Japan is currently preparing its technical co-operation data to share with both the CRS and AiDA. Language issues (content not often available in English) and technical constraints are additional challenges that require attention.

20. New Zealand is updating the IT systems of its aid agency and will resume its reporting to the CRS, thereby will be sharing its data with AiDA. The focus is on providing reliable, accessible, and useful information that adds value. AiDA is seen as an additional window for NZAID activities.

21. The United States Agency for International Development, USAID, draws on the annual congressional report as the source of information that it shares with AiDA. The challenge is how to successfully map this data with CRS activities. In addition to USAID, there is other bilateral assistance in the US. One of the issues is how to consolidate the reporting of other US agencies with information from USAID and then incorporate it into AiDA. The key to this will demonstrate the value of AiDA and CRS, notably for field use. The challenge is to put the data into a format that makes sense to users and to

provide sufficient contact information and links to allow them to get in touch with the appropriate resources for further details or information.

IV. Other Participants: Lessons and Motivations.

22. The World Conservation Union\(^7\), IUCN, is about to share its project activity information with AiDA. There is no technical barrier to doing so as IUCN has a comprehensive information system with strong technical staff. The challenge is on the political side, making sure there are enough resources to participate and that the information can be de-restricted. There was also concern that sharing data could lead to more work as resources are necessary for quality control purposes.

23. The United Nations Capital Development Fund\(^8\), UNCDF, is using AiDA and its tools to gain exposure and improve access to its data. It is linking its Management Information System to the UN’s Enterprise Resource Planning system hosted by the UNDP. This system may be a means to share more UN data with AiDA and the CRS. There is enough information in AiDA to stimulate interest and share experiences from one region to another. Quality results are very important and the ultimate aim is to be able to access detailed project level data from the field and in the appropriate languages.

24. The Association for Development of Education in Africa\(^9\), ADEA, builds partnerships and works through networks of people. Participation in AiDA is an opportunity to gain exposure and share experience in using standards for its data. ADEA leverages existing information on Education activities of twenty two funding agencies. This underscores the need to look for coherence and consistency in how information is shared. Through its network, ADEA also helps to bring visibility to AiDA and engage new participants.

25. The presentations and discussions demonstrated the value of the AiDA network and highlighted ways AiDA can help development practitioners co-ordinate activities with others. The initiative encourages communities to dialogue and better co-operate to know what other people are doing. The use of simple tools and good documentation to assist partners share information with AiDA is essential prior to engaging collaboration with communities that are not information technology oriented.

V. Challenges for AiDA.

26. Colleagues from the Academy for Educational Development\(^10\), AED, made suggestions to help AiDA generate value. The key is to understand demand based on precise audience knowledge. Access is one of the most obvious problems and information needs to be prepared in such a way that it is available from multiple sources (internet, CD-ROMs, email) and easy to use. In addition, relevance, quality and


timeliness of information are crucial to generating value and empowering users of AiDA. Reinforcing collaboration, the use of standards and best practices are other crucial elements of success.

VI. Cost Benefit: Making the Case.

27. AiDA brings together many development actors and what has been achieved so far is seen as excellent. Sharing lessons has proven to be extremely beneficial in helping participants move forward. There is openness to share information and clear returns in doing so. Lessons learned shows that the quality of data improves when being shared with a wider public. The use standards and promoting norms to share information are also an important element to the AiDA initiative.

28. AiDA must link with other initiatives as synergies are evident. AiDA helps to know what is happening on the development scene and this is essential to harmonisation and donor co-ordination. AiDA provides core information requested for effective co-ordination and must remain focused on what is essential to development practitioners working in the field. A small improvement in the effectiveness and efficiency of the annual 50 billion dollar aid business will save millions of dollars. AiDA can play a role in achieving this.

VII. Sustainability Issues.

29. For AiDA to become sustainable, it must be used. Participants need to communicate and share information in multiple languages (at least English, French and Spanish). There is a wide diversity of challenges in participating to the initiative such as data quality issues, de-restricting information, using the technology to share data, working with poor connectivity and in multiple languages.

30. Sustainability needs to be considered at different levels – international, national and local – and targeted solutions must be implemented. Sub-regional approaches should also be considered. AiDA needs to work with new groups to take the message forward and help support the initiative. Providing concrete examples of long term and tangible benefits may help solve participation constraints.

31. Questions were raised about financing and how can additional resources be found. Among the suggestions that were floated were: fees for services offered by Country Gateways and exploring interest of donors or sponsors to adopt a country to provide seed money for activities. When there are clearly defined needs, the Development Gateway Foundation can assist by reviewing the proposals and help to approach donors for support.

32. Good tools adapted to specific needs are part of the answer in making AiDA sustainable while capturing local content. Filtering information by level of users is seen as a good way of disseminating information from AiDA. More use of the AiDA Participants site should be encouraged to increase dialogue and information exchange. AiDA is a public good and this factor should be used in sustainability and funding arguments.

VIII. The Road Ahead.

33. AiDA is a network of networks. Every participant is an equal player and has a role to play. The positive spirit and constructive collaboration during this fourth AiDA Open meeting is a step towards the success of this initiative. There is much enthusiasm and good will, something that needs to be pursued and channelled into concrete actions and results. Building links and partnerships with other initiatives, such as the new DAC Working Party on Aid Effectiveness and Donor Practices, is essential.

34. The interest in AiDA is growing fast and a lot of questions are being asked as AiDA is entering a new phase of existence. For instance, AiDA has begun working with a large variety of local partners,
making AiDA a focal point for development at the country level not only for donor co-ordination but to promote development activities in a more coherent way. AiDA has many possible routes ahead and it is vital keeping it focused on what it can best achieve and deliver. Communication must be clear. A prospectus of future plans and a simple user guide are needed.

35. This new and extended agenda for AiDA has implications and necessary recommendations will have to be put forward to the Development Gateway Foundation. It requires a two-step approach. First to consolidate improvements to the interface, the search facilities, specific views and data coverage. Once these are in place there should be a major publicity drive to promote AiDA. Second to put AiDA at the disposal of development actors as a tool for harmonisation of their practices to reduce burdens of aid management and improve effectiveness. In carrying forward this agenda, an evaluation of what has been achieved so far and setting out clear, measurable objectives for future work would serve to build and maintain support.