CANARI Policy Brief

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The importance of information management to civil society

All civil society organisations (CSOs) need information to effectively achieve the objectives they have set themselves. Yet, they overlook or accord a low priority to information management as a vital tool for empowering civil society.

The rapid increase in access to information afforded by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), combined with the growing role of civil society in research, policy formulation and service delivery, means that CSOs must pay greater attention to the management of the information that they receive and generate.

Both government and civil society organisations have a role to play in addressing the challenges that hinder the effective information management practices that are necessary to ensure equitable civil society participation in sustainable development.

Why manage information?

Information is data that has been processed, interpreted and organised into a form that is more readily usable, has greater significance and meaning to the user, and adds to his/her knowledge base. Information is of greatest use if it is easily accessible, relevant and timely. Information management addresses these needs and is a tool for effective collection, selection, storage, access, use, dissemination, and disposal of information.

Relevant, up-to-date and timely information can improve CSOs' awareness and knowledge of issues relevant to their objectives and can lead to:

- more informed research outputs;
- more informed decision-making;
- greater confidence in participating in decision-making processes;
- more informed contributions to policy debates;
- the generation of new information which can be shared and exchanged with government and other civil society actors.

The recognition by the international community of the role that information management can play in empowering civil society, increasing public participation and building CSO capacity has led to a number of international and regional initiatives. These all promote, support and encourage civil society access to information, participation in decision-making processes and in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies and programmes, as a basic requirement for sustainable development.

Hivos

European Commission

Information Management Initiatives

Interesting developments related to information and communications technologies and their impact on information management include the following:

World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) (www.inu.int.org)

Aimed at bringing the benefits of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to development and in particular, at ensuring that developing countries have access to all available information resources ('bridging the digital divide'). The WSIS also places special focus on non-governmental organisations, noting that "the commitment and involvement of civil society is equally important in creating an equitable information society and in implementing ICT related initiatives for development".

Small Island Developing States Network (SIDSNET) (www.sidsnet.org)

An output of the United Nations Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, SIDSNET has provided training and is building a network to collect and share information on sustainable development issues.

Inter-American Strategy for Public Participation in Decision-Making in Sustainable Development (ISP). (www.ispnet.org)

The ISP stresses the important role of information in increasing public participation, and in collaboration and cooperation between government and civil society.

Caribbean Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) (www.caribbeanngos.net)

The Caribbean Policy and Development Centre (CPDC) is implementing a project for building information capacity in Caribbean NGOs through the development of an internet-based network of NGOs.

Information management systems in civil society organisations

CSOs must first decide on the issues which they want to address and be able to access information on the areas within that scope of work. They also need information on and skills in effective use and dissemination of the information they acquire.

Key questions which CSOs need to ask themselves in order to determine their requirements for information and information management include:

- What type of information do we have, and what type do we need, for our staff to function effectively and efficiently and for us to meet the needs of our beneficiaries or other target group(s)?
- Who has the information?
- Where do they keep it?
- How do they store it?
- How can we access it?
- Where should we keep it?
- How should we process it?
- How should we store it?
- What should we keep on a long-term basis?
- What methods should we use for dissemination or sharing?
- How do we process or package the information so that it is accessible to users?
- What methods can we use to evaluate and update our information services?

These questions require CSOs to assess both their needs for information at the day-to-day operational level as well as at the broader programmatic level. Issues and considerations that may arise are:

- The need for information across multiple sectors/ disciplines;
- The format in which the information is available (e.g. printed and/or electronic format) and the implications for access (online or requiring a visit to a physical location);
- The cost attached to obtaining information. The culture of downloading free material from the website has eroded recognition of the fact that there is a cost attached to storing and retrieving information.

Information management systems help to ensure that relevant information flows easily within an organisation and can be promptly accessed by and effectively shared with those who need it. **Information management systems**

may range from the simple newsletter on a specialised subject to the more complex electronic, internet-accessible database. They can assist CSOs in:

- empowering their communities by increasing their understanding of the issues which affect them;
- accelerating learning;
- making desired changes in current practices and policies;
- creating an archive of best practices to avoid reinventing the wheel;
- making better and quicker decisions.

ICTs have greatly increased the options for, and effectiveness of information management systems through tools such as:
- Databases;
- Intranets and e-mail for in-house interaction and sharing;
- Web pages, online publishing and e-mail lists for external dissemination and sharing.

Civil society challenges in information management

Although ICTs offer many opportunities for information management, the sheer volume of information to which they provide access can be a challenge for civil society, resulting in a sense of overload and uncertainty as to what is useful and relevant and what is not.

Other common challenges identified by CSOs in managing their information include:

- **Insufficient human resources**

Many CSOs struggle to survive on a day-to-day basis and operate with few (if any) staff and a limited number of volunteers. It is therefore difficult to devote staff time to updating and maintaining information systems, even though this may be a good long-term investment.

- **Lack of expertise and training**

CSOs often do not know where to find reliable sources of information, have difficulty determining what is useful information, and lack the skills to operate and maintain an information management system. CSOs may also be challenged in the selection of appropriate systems for collecting, processing and sharing information and in turn disseminating that knowledge to its own clientele.

- **Insufficient finance**

While low-cost and simple but effective methods of managing information exist, more sophisticated methods may require a high initial investment and may be prohibitive in terms of software and equipment maintenance. Other financial costs include the hiring of a professional and the purchase of costly material or data interpreting services.

- **Lack of equipment and communication technology**

For small organisations, computer equipment is often a luxury. Lack of internet access and, in some cases, unreliable telephone service are common problems faced by CSOs.

- **Lack of storage space**

Many organisations operate out of small offices with no physical storage space for printed material.

Demonstrating the usefulness of electronic networking at the IMA

Creating an environment for effective civil society information management

Recommendations for Civil Society Organisations

- Recognise the value of an effective information system;
- Investigate and select the most cost-effective information management system for the organisation's needs;
- Collaborate with other CSOs so that human resources, training and expertise can be pooled or swapped on an as-needed basis;
- Approach larger, better-funded CSOs for advice on, or field visits, to observe information management procedures;
- Identify the best methods to share the information with users;
- Subscribe to newsletters to keep abreast of technologies used for information management and sharing;
- Continually evaluate and refine the systems to meet user demands;
- Keep informed on developments about international and regional initiatives on information issues;
- Seek to participate in the initiatives.

Recommendations for Government Agencies

Recognise and support CSO information management needs through:

- policies for information-sharing with CSOs;
- the development of greater awareness of CSO constraints in accessing and managing information;
- strategies for effectively generating and sharing information to support the work of CSOs;

Learning about how remote sensing data can be useful to natural resource management, IMA

- engaging CSOs in collaborative activities to collect and disseminate information to specialist groups;
- discussions with civil society on the role of information in development programmes and assuring their participation in these initiatives.

Recommendations for Donors

- Include ICTs and information management as a thematic area or component for grant funding;
- Enhance capacity for information management in CSOs to facilitate regional and international mandates as well as to address internal organisational needs;
- Encourage government-CSO information sharing through capacity-building and technical assistance.

Caribbean Natural Resources Institute

The Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI) is an independent, regional, technical assistance organisation with more than 20 years of experience on issues of conservation, the environment, and sustainable development in the islands of the Caribbean.

CANARI's mission is to create avenues for the equitable participation and effective collaboration of Caribbean communities and institutions in managing the use of natural resources critical to development.

The Institute has specific interest and extensive experience in the identification and promotion of participatory approaches to natural resource management.

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