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Information matters



Helen Bradbury

All blogs

Helen Bradbury, Team Leader of the Alliances Lesser Caucasus Programme at Mercy Corps, explains why information exchange on market systems development approaches is so valuable.

Information matters, it is our currency, the substance, the commodity which keeps our programmes running. We are aware of the need to manage information, to have enough of it and of the right kind and the need to understand its quality and to know when and what we have is enough or too little.

Market systems approaches, such as Making Markets Work for the Poor (M4P) pose challenges in this regard. For me the use of information is at their heart. M4P is finely calibrated to need high quality information and implementers able to gather, sort and feed it into the programme, implementers who aware of what they are doing, and why they are doing it.

Starting with the team: we need practitioners with the right kind of understanding, flexibility and skills to interpret information, and to plug it into the strategic framework and intervention planning. We often avoid experienced development workers with fixed frames of knowledge; seeking instead people with less direct experience but more fluidity, perspicacity, and the ability to adopt, adapt and respond.

The stages of planning and implementing involve gathering, processing, articulating and feeding back information on the many aspects of the approach with precision, rigour and common sense. Information is then used to produce systemic market change which impacts the men and women of the target group. The demands for the articulation of this information are multi-faceted. As dissemination channels

proliferate so do the needs of those in direct relation to the programmes: donors, consultants, theorists and developers of practice must fulfil their own specific functions and feed information into their own webs of outreach.

Finally to the approach itself. M4P has been seen as a challenge to other methodologies in development, although I would argue it is an illumination through comparison. The process of reassessing, even unlearning knowledge, is not an easy one and is emotional as well as intellectual. The juncture between those who in some measure know, understand and use the approach and those who do not can be tricky.

At the core of M4P is simplicity but as in all the best cases, simplicity provides the skeleton and blueprint for processes which as they build can seem like an overwhelming mass of complexity. Particularly as no two programmes, look the same. What, who and where are M4P, where does it come from, how do you do it, who does it, where can I find out more?

This is where the BEAM Exchange fits in. In our disparate, diversified, geographically spread world, an approach developed at the time of an explosion of information dissemination, needs a central point. To be able to direct someone to the right kind of information is essential in a growing field. To be able to refer to and interact with a cohesive community is heartily welcomed.

Helen Bradbury is a development professional with a career spanning market system approaches to solving problems ranging from the welfare of working horses in Ethiopia to early economic recovery in post-tsunami Indonesia. She now manages Mercy Corps' flagship Alliances programme in Southern Georgia, and advises on M4P and women's economic empowerment.

This is an edited version of her blog on the [alcp.ge website](https://beamexchange.org/community/blogs/2014/9/22/helenbradbury/).