Agriculture Investment Data Needs: Donors

Background

The Initiative for Open Ag Funding[1] works to support efforts to end hunger and food insecurity by ensuring organizations have the information they need to make smarter investments in the agriculture and food security sector. While organizations need various types of data to make better decisions, this initiative is focused on improving the quality, availability and timeliness of data concerning *investments* — in other words, data that seek to answer who is doing what, where, with whom, and to what effect.

As a starting point, the initiative conducted research to answer two questions: (1) what agricultural investment data are currently available; and (2) what data do organizations actually need to make better use of resources?

An analysis of the current data landscape, prepared by Open Data Services, is available here.[2] To answer the second question, Development Gateway, the Foundation Center, and InterAction conducted consultations with donors, foundations and NGOs. These consultations addressed the following questions:

1. What do organizations need to know in order to make investment decisions?
2. How do they get the answers they need?
3. What are some of the current challenges with accessing or using data?
4. How do individuals prefer to access data?

The consultations also assessed organizations' familiarity with the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI). IATI is a multi-stakeholder initiative that makes information about development and humanitarian resources easier to access, use, and understand.[3] In theory, it should be a key source of investment data for organizations. A major focus of the Initiative for Open Ag Funding is to ensure that data published to IATI reflect the needs of the agriculture and food security community.

This report presents the findings of Development Gateway's consultations with donors. The findings of our consultations with foundations and NGOs are available here.[4]

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[1] The Initiative for Open Ag Funding is led by InterAction in partnership with Development Gateway; Foundation Center; the CGIAR Research Program on Policies, Institutions, and Markets (PIM), led by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI); Open Data Services; and Publish What You Fund (PWYF). Additional information about the initiative is available at https://www.interaction.org/project/open-ag-funding/overview.

[2] https://www.interaction.org/sites/default/files/Agricultural%20Investment%20Data%20-%20Landscape%20Analysis.pdf.

[3] For more about IATI, see http://www.aidtransparency.net/.

[4] https://www.interaction.org/project/open-ag-funding/resources.

Key Findings

Development Gateway conducted interviews with 20 individuals from multilateral and bilateral donor organizations including the U.S. Agency for International Development, the African Development Bank, the World Bank, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), the U.K. Department for International Development, and the World Health Organization to understand their project-level data needs of these large organizations and how they use data at all levels.

Our research found that multilateral and bilateral donors need this type of information. The most critical takeaways from the consultations include:

1. Data on who is doing what are most important during the project design phase when the organization is selecting specific activities and value-chains, where to implement the project, and which partners to work with.

2. When deciding how much to allocate to a country, donors rarely investigate what other organizations are doing; such information is usually only procured when the donor is determining which specific projects to fund within a given country.

3. Donors rely heavily on country office staff to determine this type of information. Those staff members must collect the information if it is not on hand, often through donor working groups, aid information management systems, or talking one-on-one with other donors.

4. Some of the hardest information to track down is results data, which include information actual outputs and outcomes as well as expenditure data.

5. Few interviewees were familiar with IATI. Those that were familiar with it and had tried to use the data said the data were difficult to use.

6. How users want to access data depends on their role. Technical data users need raw data in Excel format, while those at the more programmatic level want to see data displayed on a map or in charts and graphs and want data easily accessible online.

What do donors need to know in order to make investment decisions?

Consultations with donors highlighted the need for quick access to project investment data within agriculture and food security, as well as a larger need for organizations to share indicator data more broadly across the sector. This data is especially needed during the project planning phase so that donors can determine: (1) how much to invest; (2) what and how to implement; (3) with whom to work; (4) who the beneficiaries of assistance should be; and (5) where to implement.

1. How much to invest

The question behind every development project is “How much does it cost?” Deciding how much to invest in agriculture and food security is critical, but it is never a cut and dry process. During the project design phase, donors typically undertake an analysis or feasibility assessment to determine the best path forward. For example, the MCC’s Constraints Analysis, which is done at the beginning of each compact to determine a country’s largest constraints to economic growth, would determine if agriculture is a part of the compact’s activities.

For some organizations, much of their funding is already earmarked for specific activities based on organizational priorities; when this is the case, the country office is only able to determine where and how to spend only a small portion of the available funds. Sometimes a portion of a donor's funding for agriculture is based on international priorities to which the organization is committed, such as the Nutrition for Growth compact. For some donors, each country is given an envelope of funding, and the donor might use a risk management analysis to determine the size of the envelope.

Donors often must justify development efforts with baseline data about the needs they aim to address. This can be especially important for bilateral organizations that report back to taxpayers, but is important for all organizations when they are developing country strategies.

At the country level, once an organization is considering funding a project, it looks at the resources already being directed towards the issue, by both other donors and domestic sources. This helps the organization determine if this is an area they should direct investments to or if it is already well supported by other sources. One respondent mentioned an incident in which a government was seeking funds for a large agriculture program. Donors coordinated to help determine who would fund which parts of the program.

2. What and how to implement

The country office usually works with the government to determine the country priorities and how available funds will be spent. Often, the government will approach the agency with an idea and ask for funding for that need. However, whether approached by the government or not, the organization will undertake an initial analysis that typically collects and uses data to help determine the design of the project. Respondents generally cited project planning as the stage during which they most need data on what other organizations are doing.

During project planning, an organization seeks to learn who else is already working in the sector and what kind of activities they are undertaking so it can better determine which activities to undertake and which value chain to focus on. As one respondent explained:

> *If all the other organizations are working in maize, we might work in soy or another crop to boost nutrition. Or we'll look to see if we can create a complementary program to what others are doing.*

This also helps ensure that they are not focusing on contradictory activities. Organizations in our research group indicated that they need to know the budgets and timelines of other agriculture projects in order to determine the current level of effort and with whom they need to coordinate.

Respondents commonly mentioned that they need results data from other organizations to learn both what not to do and what they should do when implementing their project. These data are often very difficult to get and are rarely shared across organizations. One participant explained:

> *We want to know if they were successful, what did they do? If they weren't successful, what shouldn't we do?*

3. With whom to work

Organizations also mentioned the need to know which local partners they should work with. They often rely on their local staff to know off-hand who this would be; however, this might limit an organization to only the partners with which it has already worked. Some respondents mentioned that local NGOs can also provide important information on best practices for working in a community. As one explained:

> *Identifying local partners others are already working with so that we could get a feel for their capacities-what they can and can't do, and how many implementers there are in the country would be important. Local entities are more knowledgeable about the realities and we would want to speak with them during our consultation process.*

4. Who the beneficiaries of assistance should be

Donors indicated a need to determine who their target beneficiaries should be. Knowing which groups of people other organizations are targeting — such as households, youth, or mothers — helps them determine if there is an overlooked group they should focus on. If the selected target group overlaps with a group or groups targeted by other organizations, the donor can learn from those organizations the best way to engage with the overlapping beneficiaries.

5. Where to implement

Deciding where to implement the project is an important step, and donors listed a variety of data they need to make this decision. Sometimes the government determines the location, but other times donors can make the decision. To do that they look at where other projects are taking place that are similar or would affect the project; the latter might include, for example, understanding other projects that put demands on water sources. Knowing where other projects are taking place is also important. While most respondents indicated that having this knowledge at the second administrative level would be sufficient, some said they needed to know locations at the village or even household level. The following comment from one respondent reflects the general underlying concern:

> *We want to allocate in a strategic way. If they're funding water in one area, we might want to fund water dependencies in another area.*

How do they get the answers they need?

In order to determine what other organizations are already doing in agriculture and food security, the organizations in our study most often mentioned relying on country office contacts, meeting individually with the biggest donors to discuss what they are doing, using donor working groups to coordinate, or using the country's Aid Information Management System (AIMS). However, meeting one-on-one with each donor is time consuming, and the quality of the donor working group and the data in the AIMS varies widely from country to country. No matter the original source of information, all mentioned they would still spend time talking one-on-one with key players to learn more about their efforts in the sector. While this indicated a willingness to take time to conduct this research, respondents also expressed a desire to quickly determine the most important projects and to whom they should speak.

What are some of the current challenges with accessing or using data?

Common complaints include how difficult and time consuming it can be to find this information, and trusting the quality of data sources, as illustrated by the following quotes from three respondents:

Generally we will come and talk to 12 different donor organizations; if we could cut that down to the biggest three we could save a lot of time.

Sometimes we will be mid-implementation and find out about another similar project nearby that didn't come up during our consultations.

You need to know the right person to find the information you need.

Although sector working groups often exist for this purpose, the information provided at these meetings is rarely consistent and does not tend to include the specific types of data requested. Respondents repeatedly mentioned the importance of results data for better project planning. However, such data are not shared externally and are hard to find. One interviewee remarked that not having standardized indicators across organizations made it difficult to track overlap between donors:

In agriculture there is no systematic way to see who is giving. There have been attempts to share within donors … but they are incomplete and hard to interpret what is included and what isn't.

You can't even find expenditure data. It's easy to find budgets, but not what is actually spent in the end.

Donors often feel that the available data sources are incomplete and hard to trust.

How do donors prefer to access data?

Preferences for accessing data largely depend on who is accessing it and what their goals are. For example, field staff and analysts prefer to consume information in spreadsheet or dataset format so that information can be easily manipulated and analyzed. Higher-level administrators, however, often prefer summary reports of the information in the form of graphs, dashboards, or maps so they can gain quick insights for large-scale planning.

Data tool ranking by number of responses

Ranking	Tool Type
1	Excel
2	Map
3	Interactive website with visual tools
4	Synthesized report with visualizations

When asked for examples of good data tools, a number of respondents said they use the World Bank Data Catalogue, which they described as user-friendly and trustworthy. No matter the data format, respondents often mentioned that knowing the metadata and how they were collected was important for determining if they could trust the data.

What is the level of awareness about and use of IATI data?

Only a handful of the respondents had heard of IATI, and even fewer had tried using the data. Those who had done so said the data were complicated and unfriendly to use, and that the API (Application Programming Interface) was unreliable. A number of respondents also noted that there is no easy way to connect the flow of funds within a project from organization to organization. Some said they might use the data if the data were easier to extract in a way similar to the World Bank Data website, or if they could use the API confidently to pull data out.