

AID Conference 2004

Minutes for Session Named AID Publications infrastructure and strategy Workshop

Date: May 30, 2004

Time From: 10:15am

To: 11:35am

Minutes Taken By: Nishant Jain

Number of attendees: 16

Audio/Visual Component? No

Speaker/Panelist Names:

1. Anjali Sridhar

Anjali Sridhar, a former College Park volunteer, is the newly elected AID Publications coordinator on the executive board.

What they are speaking about:

AID wide publications infrastructure. Strengths, weaknesses and future direction.

This was an informal session, encouraging a free exchange of questions, discussions and ideas. This workshop replaced the Your Voice Counts workshop which was folded in the Media workshop by Dilip D'Souza.

Main Presentation:

There are 3 primary AID wide publications -

1. This Month in AID (TMIA) – monthly newsletter. So far, one or two people have been taking most of the responsibility to get the articles, put them together etc. This focuses on chapter activities, project work and any campaigns that AID has undertaken.
2. Dishaa – Quarterly newsletter. The focus of this is chapter activities, project work and campaigns in AID. Dishaa is more strategic than just event reporting. There also has been some effort to take out issues based on themes such as water, Eco shop, etc.

3. AID News – 1-2 times a week eNewsletter (email newsletters). Largely for chapter communication, announcements, articles, etc.

Apart from that there are several chapter-based publications. Bay Area, Cincinnati, Austin, etc have successful newsletters.

First, determine the effectiveness of the current AID wide publications. There should be a measurable correlation between the publications and the money that is generated by the enclosed donation envelopes. Also in terms of publications in India, we should start taking more active role in it. How can we make Indian publications AID wide publications? Lastly, we should start to associate with the media here. Need to submit more AID related articles to the mainstream media.

Q: Never understood the difference between TMIA and Dishaa?

A: TMIA was more reporting on the projects around AID. In terms of Dishaa – it is more op-ed, idea generating. Not directly relating to what's happening.

TMIA and Dishaa have not come out in a while. Where should we go from here? Something that is doable and consistent. Do chapters find it more convenient to send their own newsletter? Are both publications bit superfluous, that somehow we can modify?

Q: Maybe TMIA can be chapter based, and Dishaa which is more issue based could be central. Gives an overall picture of AID. Last year, chapters signed up for the TMIA and Dishaa creation at the conference itself. Actually get them commit now.

A: Good idea.

Q: Effort on both TMIA and Dishaa every month is a lot. Keep more day to day stuff can be email-based. More important issue based can be periodic. Better to develop articles and media releases to plug into the publications widely read by Indian diaspora.

A: Thinking of same thing. We can have TMIA focus on an issue/region. Get chapters working on that issue commit for articles. Having this as a resource for basic information to get to those issues.

Q what are the returns on the publication?

A: We do get good returns on the newsletter. However do not know the exact numbers, or how to get them. There is some initiative underway by counting the number of checks coming from the newsletter return envelopes. Maybe the number of checks can give us an idea, if not the exact number.

Q: With the proliferation of desi media, we have not leveraged that at all. These publications have something for all interests and age groups. Once AID gets published, we start developing some

expertise. So internal and external effort need to happen. Pick articles from chapter newsletters and Dishaa, and work on channeling those to the media.

Q: There will be two efforts – AID and external efforts. The external efforts will be very different. Need more expertise-based people to write for external media.

A: We have a media group formed. Media group will be the interface with media, and publications can be the content generation group. What about the media in the regional newsletters. Translation will be needed.

Q: Should we move away from TMIA towards a more consolidated Dishaa.

A: Until we have solid metrics, we should not. We do get lot of checks from the newsletters, so will be hesitant to move into that directions. Chapter newsletters do not replace the AID wide newsletters.

A: We should put ourselves into an audience's shoes. Analyze the pattern over the year, and form a strategy based on that.

A: Chapters are public face of AID. But each chapter might not be able to get out newsletters. Chapter-based newsletter can be clustered geographically, so chapters are not pressured to start their own.

Q: Maintaining a central list of media sources. For events, we can quickly send out the list quickly. There are lot of people who are AIDers at large where there is no chapter. They can be tapped in to contribute. Now we have cells initiatives, where Balaji is encouraging us create pamphlets.

W: What about issue based TMIA.

A: Case to case basis, if there is a predominant issue on AID's mind then yes. Not always. Or split each Dishaa into two parts – reporting and issue based.

Q: Dishaa should have some consistent sections. Chapter based newsletters should be connected. They should have access to each others newsletters.

A: Put the onus on the chapters to write articles. Not the usual few.

A: Have a section on the side where the articles can be submitted easily and conveniently.

A: More decentralized it is, the more effective it will be.

Q: India abroad and other publications, carry very frivolous articles. AID is doing very good work and needs to be promoted. Example of Swati's article in Atlanta. There is a trade-off between level of efforts. Is it more important, to get the word out, or spend time on AID newsletters.

A: That will be the media group's job. Maintain AID's media package. We will be responsible for AID pro/reactive media releases. Create packages to train volunteers to handle local media. Also do media monitoring, where and when AID is getting coverage. Projects, campaigns and fundraising agendas will be covered.

Q: Not every person is interested in development issues. We have to work in those parameters.

A: Depends how we spin it.

A: Newsletters should be a mix of various things. Invite readers' comments to provide them feedback. Seeing their name in print could motivate them.

A: In addition to our newsletter here, we have to start looking at producing booklets for outreach in India. Primers on various issues, for people who want to learn about those issues.

A: Converting to Cartoon format, as suggested by Balaji, could also be useful.

A: In terms of TN and AID it's very clear. But AID does not have the same recognition level elsewhere. So it will be difficult in those regions.

A: They have to be in an easy-to-read format, which can be widely distributed.

A: Start making connections with our partners via these booklets.

A: Still thinking about how we do and how they distribute. People in Rajasthan and Gujarat already have the mechanism and understanding in place. Has to be collaborative in nature. We have channels and issues to break.

A: Facilitate material being produced in India and get them communicated to the chapters. Two-way street.

Q: What about publications between our chapters?

A: Maybe beyond the communications team.

A: There is an organization that scans documents for profit. These booklets can be scanned and made accessible.

A: Coordinate the resources across chapters. Speakers being recorded, here at conference but no central place to access these resources.

A: We need some minimum commitment to keep producing the standard newsletters. Last 5 months, no newsletters have been produced.

Question/Answer Session:

The entire session was more or less Q&A oriented.

Additional Notes/ Observations:

It was more of a brainstorming about the next phase of AID publications. No clear action items or next steps emerged.

Summary

The summary of the session is captured by Anjali's impressions that were sent later:

During the session a lot of the discussion focused on TMIA and how we could use that better. One line of thought was that we do need to evaluate the usefulness of TMIA in both content and frequency. Some people felt that chapter newsletters were more effective in reaching out to the local donor and interested base. They felt that TMIA was a waste of resources (money and time) did not necessarily serve a purpose, and could perhaps be stopped. Others felt that for chapters without their individual newsletters, TMIA provided a good source of information and outreach to the community. It was their main means of communication. Others felt that TMIA receives significant amount of money through the donations and provides a way of keeping AID in people's minds. This group did not want to see TMIA ended. Currently, we do not have a method by which we track donations that come in through our publications. One of the suggestions was that we do keep track of roughly the number of checks collected through publications and see if this is a significant source of income and outreach.

Currently, the decision was to keep things on hold, see if we can get enough interest in contributing to TMIA on a regular basis, and then proceed.

So what were some of the options that we discussed and how would we do it?

Of course, the need to have more people involved in the writing, editing and publishing process was discussed. Nothing new, but people felt that several chapters have individual volunteers who may be willing to contribute articles on a periodic basis. Also, since several volunteers are already involved in the chapter publications, people felt that we could use the articles in the chapter publications for our AID-wide publications. In that way, people need not write twice about the same topic and we have a ready set of resources/articles. Another way of getting volunteers involved in writing and get a feel for the readership was to have a section in the publications that invites readers comments (Letters to the Editor) But the bottom line was that if we get a lot of the articles for one of the publications from existing chapter news, it would basically save a lot of time

and effort. Of course, this means that chapters should be responsible to inform us of their letters and provide us with copies etc.

Another idea floated was to take advantage of our new `cell' structure and use one of the publications to have a more issue-based focus. Something similar to what Sree did with the most recent Dishaa or on earlier TMIA on water. So, for example, we could have TMIA come out with a particular topic every month whether the focus is a region, an issue or a campaign. We could then set up a format a particular section for a background on the issue, why it is an issue, external resources/books etc, a section on our projects, a section on what we want to focus on, action items etc, progress, and contact information. Apart from this, it would have pictures of course, information on maybe a featured fundraising campaign. If we do it on a monthly basis, or once every two months, and fix the topics ahead of time, people in each `cell' would have the responsibility to actually bring that particular month's issue out.

One would also presume that the same people are not involved in all the cells. Some cells already have set up regular newsletters that they will be sending out (electronic or print) to their `constituencies'. This may be a way by which they can just use that information, tailor and consolidate it a bit more for a broader audience. In that way, this publication becomes more of a resource document, allow the volunteers to publicize their focus groups and not necessarily create redundant information. It also provides a good way of documentation.

If this is what we do with TMIA, Dishaa could be used more for AID-based information - AID-specific work, projects, campaigns etc. We may get a lot of this information from existing chapter newsletters as well as the cell letters and utilizing the existing information where relevant.

If we get this process somewhat under control, there are several other roles and avenues that AID Publications can and ought to explore. I've just listed some of the things below, with some ideas talked about.

1. AID White papers - This would outline the issue and why AID has a particular stance on the particular issue. What is the history, analysis and involvement we have experienced that has informed our decisions. What is the kind of discussion that has informed the decision etc. This would be somewhat analytical and maybe `research'. But it would be important on several of the issues where we have taken certain positions, support certain groups and work in certain ways. This would be an publication that can be used by both an audience external to AID and AID volunteers.

2. In the same context, an FAQ/Quick Tips for volunteers on how to answer questions on certain issues. All of us face tough questions regarding what we do. We should be equipped with decent resources so we can defend our stance. The resource `cell' would probably be most involved with developing these kind of resources, but we could spur them on to do so.

3. Coordinate with the Projects group to highlight/feature certain projects. A lot of this is done, of course, but perhaps can be done more systematically so we can make sure that we get something different with every issue.

4. Coordinate with the media group to provide them with consolidated resources which they can use to be more pro-active in media related work.