Rapid Social Response Program has been supporting South-South learning exchanges on practical ways to build effective social safety nets. At a Learning Forum in Arusha, Tanzania, in June 2010, professional staff from the governments of 44 countries shared their first-hand experience on implementing public works—an increasingly popular safety-net tool to generate temporary employment and income for low-skill workers during crises. A year later in May 2011, another forum was organized in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where policymakers and civil servants compared notes on building resilient safety nets in low-income countries and fragile states.

The two events represent a continuation of a series of learning forums in the past, including a series of events on conditional cash transfers (Mexico 2002, Brazil 2004, Turkey 2006), and the Cairo Forum 2009 on safety nets in response to the triple wave of food, fuel, and financial (FFF) crisis.

The Arusha forum was a response to growing demand among officials from low-income and fragile countries for greater understanding of how to design public works projects and implement them in a variety of circumstances—such as sudden shocks, chronic poverty, and the aftermath of violent conflict. Participants from many countries offered their experiences. Officials from Argentina and Rwanda shared their views on challenges of program implementation, including the setting of wages to promote inclusion of the poor and to avoid labor market distortions. Other speakers discussed the delivery of public works projects, from environmental rehabilitation on the Loess Plateau, China, to social accountability structures in Andhra Pradesh, India. Representatives from Yemen, Tanzania, and Armenia found...
an agreement on the need for a clear division of roles and responsibilities among government agencies engaged in public works efforts. Liberian officials presented the payment systems their programs have deployed, providing insights to other countries that are recovering from conflict.

Most of the 225 participants who were sharing knowledge during the four-day forum were from low-income countries although middle-income countries were also represented. In addition to intensive peer-learning in plenary and break-out sessions, participants had an opportunity to witness through field trips how public works programs are actually implemented in Tanzania (organized by Tanzania Social Action Fund TASAF) Growing out of the forum, the forthcoming Public Works Toolkit will describe step-by-step to the broadest possible audience how to design and implement public works programs, featuring the case studies presented at the forum.

The second forum in the following May, “Building Resilient Safety Nets in Low-Income Countries and Fragile States” in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia provided another opportunity for policymakers and practitioners to share their experience. The over 260 participants from 54 countries discussed day-to-day operational issues of social safety nets, as well as innovations on how to design and implement safety nets in a variety of challenging environments.

An innovation at the Ethiopia Learning Forum was the Global Café—a series of simultaneous group discussions among small groups of country and donor practitioners. To provoke conversations, the sessions were anchored around a specific country case study which was presented by a table host, drawing on prepared country profiles.

By the end of the forum, a new community of practice (CoP) had emerged, building on the experience from Latin American and Caribbean countries, where such an initiative was launched six years ago to foster continued interaction between safety net program practitioners. The new CoP has since flourished through a series of regional video conferences, which will be followed by face-to-face meetings in Tanzania and in the UK this spring. An online community of practice is also under development to provide an additional and continuous platform for interaction.

“We believe that forums like this can help us design our programs in a shorter period of time and to begin from where others end.” Participant at the Learning Forum, in Arusha, Tanzania.

“The presentations during the Global Café were very informative. They helped interact with people who are really involved in defining strategies and implementing the programs.” Participant at the Learning Forum in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia