

Acquisition of On-line Publishing Technology by a Network of Actors for Rural Development in Africa: The Publishing System for a Shared Internet (SPIP) of the IFAD Projects within the FIDAFrique Network.

Author: Gilles Mersadier, g.mersadier@FIDAFrique.net, FIDAFrique coordinator.

Tel+221 869 38 48 - Fax+221 869 39 69 – UNOPS 12534 BP 15702, Dakar Fann, Senegal.

Co-author: Thierry Kpehor, t.kpehor@FIDAFrique.net, FIDAFrique Technical Assistant.

Tel +221 869 39 76 - Fax +221 869 39 69 - UNOPS 12534 BP 15702, Dakar Fann, Senegal.

Introduction

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is a specialized United Nations organization whose mission is to fight poverty in rural areas. The Fund finances projects and programmes in developing countries (through loans and donations) that covers on all 5 continents.

FIDAFrique is a regional programme of the IFAD Western and Central Africa Division. It is a network of about 50 projects active in 24 countries (those of the Economic Community of West African States, of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa, as well as Mauritania and the Democratic Republic of Congo).

The second phase of the network started in 2004 and aims to strengthen the impact of projects by facilitating the production, dissemination and exchange of information on rural development and the fight against poverty.

FIDAFrique is managed by a 3-person team based in Dakar (Senegal): the coordinator, a Technical Assistant and a Secretary who also carries out accounting duties. The team is based at the Regional Office of the United Nations Organization for Project Services (UNOPS).

2. Main FIDAFrique activities

Capitalization and promotion of experiences

A capitalization methodology, including a series of tools and the required process to use them, was built in a participatory manner with the projects in order to adapt them to the specific context of the region. This methodology¹ is implemented through workshops and meetings with project staff on the ground. The aim of the meetings is to:

- provide theoretical training to project staff in the selection of tools,
- implement concrete case studies,
- plan activities and capitalization products.

All these activities are carried out by a regional organization, the West Africa Rural Foundation (WARF - FRAO www.frao.info). To date, 25 projects are taking part in this process, and 20 among them have already started to capitalize on their experiences by producing articles, data sheets and documents that are disseminated throughout the network.

Exchanges and debates

Project staffs communicate through two on-going technical forums. The largest group includes around 500 people: it is used as a channel for disseminating information and

documents on the activities of the network, the projects and IFAD as a whole. The second group is used by part of the staff (around 150 people), including project directors and heads of the "monitoring & Evaluation" and "Communication & Information" components. Its goal is to facilitate the execution of regional activities as IFAD regional programmes and initiatives (workshops, surveys, missions...). Thematic forums are held over set periods and bring together IFAD staff and the FIDAFrique coordination.

Disseminating and sharing information

The network coordination review documents that address themes that meet project needs. Additional comments are regularly added on the information sources that are freely accessible on the Web (documents, Web sites, forums, newsletters...). To date, 7 thematic areas are covered, which account for over 180 comments.

FIDAFrique Info, the monthly newsletter sent by e-mail to project staff and the general public (over 1000 people), promotes the content published on the Web site.

3. Three phases of content management skill acquisition by the projects

The FIDAFrique Web site (www.FIDAFrique.net) is a platform for disseminating and sharing all information produced by the network. It is built around a collaborative content management system that projects are acquiring gradually.

3.1 Overview of SPIP, the content management system used by FIDAFrique

SPIP² (Publishing System for a Shared Internet) is an open source system that allows for the creation of a structured web site (with topics, sub-topics and articles) to which articles are added, sometimes with file attachments (text and multimedia). With its integrated search and indexing engine, searches can be made on the full content of the site. Key words are added to articles by their authors to facilitate lateral browsing of the site, thus overlooking the tree structure.

With SPIP, web pages can be designed and managed through a collaborative process: thanks to the easy-to-use web administration interface, all users that hold relevant permissions can create and modify their own content without any prior HTML knowledge.

Three types of permissions can be given. These define three types of status:

- The administrator has access to the private area of the site and holds "all privileges" to the site: adding text, deleting text, editing text written by other editors, managing topics.
- The limited administrator has the same rights as an administrator concerning the management of articles, but only for one or several topics, and s/he can be an author for other topics.
- The editor can access the private area of the site, but can only submit texts for "reviewing" and approval by the administrators prior to publishing on the site.

3.2. First stages of acquisition: training of a focal point for each project

In January 2006, the FIDAFrique web site went online and some basic content was prepared by the coordinators for each active project.

In order to build ownership by the projects of content management system, the approach is to train one person in each project to remotely manage the web content relevant to the project. The person in charge of monitoring & evaluation (M&E officer) is generally chosen to

carry out these tasks. This person, who in most cases is represented at the Headquarters of IFAD projects, is generally the most suited to play this role in the light of the knowledge s/he has of the range of activities implemented on the ground. The M&E officer becomes the FIDAFrique focal point: s/he acts like a communication channel, a liaison agent between the network coordinators and the whole of the project staff. S/he will be in charge of updating and enriching the project web pages; s/he collects data on a regular basis, mainly from colleagues, in order to put it online in the form of articles and attached documents.

Coordinators receive practical training. The objective is two-fold:

- Learn to organize and write up content (texts and images) so that it is presented in a manner best suited to the FIDAFrique web site.
- Learn to integrate, modify and remove content through the content management system administration interface.

Given the simplicity of the system used, there are few prerequisites: participants should have a good practical knowledge of basic office software (word processors and Internet browsers), as well as various file formats.

Over a 5 day-period, twenty people equipped with a computer connected to a high-speed connection each follow a one-day theory session, and then over the four following days, work directly on the web pages relevant to their project. Supervised by a professional trainer and by the FIDAFrique technical assistant, participants put online the content that they brought with them in the form of files.

Web pages follow a basic structure:

- A homepage that provides an overview of the project (background, rationale, goals, scope of intervention, main activities...);
- Sections for each of the components describing the intervention strategies and the expected outcomes;
- A "Partners" section presenting the operators that implement the project activities and the target organizations;
- A "News" section describing the life of the project (meetings, missions, surveys, visits);
- A "Documents" section that lists all the administrative and technical documents;
- A "Capitalization" section that presents all documents used for the valorization of the whole project, a specific undertaking, a partner and their activities, an innovation, etc.

Trained people will acquire the "Limited Administrator" status: this gives them the right to publish, modify and remove articles in the section relevant to their project. Once logged into the administration interface using a username and password, they each can access every area of the site, but these rights do not allow them to remove content other than their own.

When returning to the project headquarters in their home country, the focal points take with them a CD containing the training manual as well as a few open source programmes for the processing of data that will be published online.

In 2006, the FIDAFrique coordination office trained 37 focal points during 3 regional training sessions. In addition to direct training, they all enjoyed advice and support services as well as a remote monitoring scheme. Using electronic mail, VoIP telephony or instant messaging (Skype), focal points can ask questions to the FIDAFrique technical assistant if they experience any difficulty in publishing their articles online. Once they can work independently, each new article they publish is automatically broadcast to the FIDAFrique coordination via the RSS feed³ of the content management system. If necessary, the administrator who wrote the article is asked to edit its content.

3.3 Second stage: shared content management by project staff

A second round of training sessions started in 2007. The aim was to continue building the capacities of focal points while training at least one more person within the project team. Training content and methodology basically remained identical. Some changes were introduced to take into account suggestions made by previous trainees as well as improvements made to the Web site.

Projects react in different ways to this proposal. Usually, the FIDAfrrique network focal point wants to be able to share content management tasks with someone in his/her team. A person is therefore chosen to take part in the training; this person is given an editor status, preparing articles, adding them to the project web pages and submitting them to the focal point who, as a limited administrator, validates them before they are published on line.

In some cases, projects have suggested that content management tasks are shared internally between several people. This setup was chosen by four projects that are active in several districts within the country (Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Senegal). In this case, coordinators prefer that staff in the district offices write articles from their desk, if there is an Internet connection. They also want to encourage the production and publication of content stemming directly from their activities within the districts.

In these four projects, the limited administrator status and the editor status were allocated differently. In Senegal, the internal project hierarchy of the project is followed. Two limited administrators are in charge of a component each: staff under their responsibility (both at headquarter and branch level) that have been trained become editors and their articles must be validated by their superior before being published. In Burkina and Cameroon, the focal point retains the limited administrator status for the time being. S/he validates the articles submitted by newly-trained editors, whether or not they are hierarchically dependent on him/her.

Depending on the dynamism of the project and on the modes of administration, the basic structure of the web pages can grow. Three examples can illustrate this. Upon request by an Information Officer, a "Media" section was created for a virtual library. A M&E Officer and his recently trained assistant created an "Outcomes and Impacts" section. The "News" section was subdivided into sub-sections for each of the district branches.

In 2007, two francophone regional training sessions were held (in Ouagadougou and in Douala) while an anglophone session is scheduled to take place before the end of 2007 in Accra. In total, since 2006, FIDAfrrique trained almost 100 people from 49 projects covering 16 Western and Central African countries. This community benefits from the remote advice and support service provided by the FIDAfrrique coordination office, which uses the system to encourage trained staff to regularly publish new content. So far, it all works well: 600 articles and documents have been published online since the first training.

3.4 Future prospects: autonomous web sites integrated into the FIDAfrrique portal.

At present, the FIDAfrrique web site acts like a collaborative portal for projects trained to publish online the content they create. But the SPIP system has its own limitations, whether in terms of administrative rights allocation or of the volume of content managed by a unique database. Therefore, some projects will have to become autonomous in order to avoid system overload, but also to overcome the limitations of rights management. This autonomy could prove beneficial for two categories of projects:

- Projects that have a component in charge of communication and information activities (documentation center, community radio, information services).

- Projects that cover a large part of the national area with a system of local branches, or that delegate some of their activities to civil society organizations or local authorities.

In the long run, other activities run by IFAD in the sub-region could also use their own web content management system:

- "Country programmes" that carry out IFAD's strategic activities in a given country. In addition to national projects, all IFAD national partners that receive grants to implement their activities (advocacy, research and development, learning and knowledge management) are integrated into this national framework.
- Regional programmes run by non-governmental organizations and funded by IFAD to organize research-development and capacity-building activities aimed at national projects and country programmes.

Building autonomous content management systems for these projects and programs could boost the role of the FIDAFrique portal if the functions carried out by the network coordinators fit into this context.

Teams should first be encouraged to adopt the same content management system in order to create a community that will be trained and helped to use the same techniques.

Then teams would have to apply a basic structure to all sections of the new Web sites: all new content would then be systematically sent out by each team to a page on the FIDAFrique portal, where it would automatically be displayed (RSS feed system).

Finally, the relevant resources should be made available to projects and programmes to ensure the monitoring and selection of the people that will be trained to publish content on their own web sites.

¹ The full capitalization methodology document is available online on the FIDAFrique web site: www.fidafrique.net/article467.html

² A full description and guidelines on SPIP are provided on the tool's official web site: www.spip.net/en

³ RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is a system used for broadcasting changes on sites that get updated very often. Users can subscribe to this "feed" and quickly access the latest updates without having to visit the site itself. Web sites can also display on their own pages the information received through this channel. For more details, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RSS>