
Co-learning and co-creation within knowledge exchange platform

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Mr. Jean – Jacques Andrianaivo is a farmer leader in Madagascar. He leads a group of farmers from 20 families within 5 villages. His farmer's group used to worry on how they could sell on time and at good price the vegetables they harvest on a weekly basis. With the use of mobile phone and SMS, they are able to identify buyers, assure quality of their produce and increase income up to 500-2000 USD per week for their vegetables. He realized the benefit of ICT tools in improving his farming and agribusiness. He recently created his own e-rails website, where he published the various processes their farming community conduct within the growing season. They know their challenges, and that it can be solved if they can get access to timely information and right services from research, agribusiness and extension services.

This is just one story on the growing awareness of the importance of information and knowledge in increasing agriculture productivity in Africa. The African Ministers of Agriculture, Science and Technology realize the necessity to strengthen the community knowledge base and call on all African governments to increase their investments in tools and approaches that can facilitate dissemination and exchange of information and knowledge (April 2011). The report on agribusiness for Africa's prosperity (2010) showed the case that emerging Africa's economic leaders are ahead because they invested in research and evidence-based decision making. Few of these countries include South Africa, Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritius. Although most of the African countries still need more solid indices or hard data that can provide reliable trend analysis and other data on technology, knowledge and innovation systems. Some countries have notable number of research publications such Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, Kenya and Tunisia.

Africa is also noted for the record speed it has absorbed the use of mobile phones. It has spread not just within cities but also at the country side. It is increasingly used for market access by farmers. One of the reasons for this success is the poor telephone infrastructure in Africa. It usually takes several months or years before a telephone landline can be installed if at all possible. Once installed the cost is also unaffordable. Telecentres have grown like

mushrooms in the countryside due to the mobile phone business. Farmers are realizing the potential of information in improving their livelihoods. They are now seeking information not just for prices of farm products but on valuable advice to improve their productivity.

With these trends, are the agriculture research, education and advisory services ready to respond? Unfortunately, most of these institutions have their continuing challenge of infrastructure and resources especially internet access. Their culture of knowledge sharing is also limited. Scientists are still limited in their ability to publish either in scientific journal or through informal communication channels such as internet.

For the past 6 years, the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa, have been establishing a Pan-African platform that can catalyze and facilitate knowledge exchange for agriculture innovations. Based on the demands of their stakeholders, they've a platform was created called the Regional Agricultural Information and learning systems (RAILS). It had 3 main objectives namely; advocate for increased investment in information and learning systems by African governments, strengthen the capacity of Africa's institutions for knowledge exchange, facilitate learning among national and international partners.

Approach and methodologies

To achieve such ambitious objectives, RAILS is not re-inventing the wheel, rather it builds on existing systems, partnerships and institutions. It operates on the concept of co-learning and co-creation at all levels and for all processes undertaken. The basic concept is to empower the people and institutions as the main reason for creating systems and tools. Engagement and initiatives are based on the actual needs of countries stated by national focal points. The RAILS pan-African platform is built and maintained by the national partners. Coordinated plans and actions are critical to achieve results.

In each of the 34 countries involved, national learning teams were established. They have guidelines on how to integrate learning in the process of establishment, planning and operation. The right people and institutions are to be involved. Priority activities are identified with specific timeframe and well defined expected results. Online discussion groups are established at continental and national level. The continental online platform serves as an information exchange gateway to share among the learning teams across the continent their challenges and opportunities related to knowledge management. National online platforms are more focused on operational issues such as project management or simply content management of national portals. Face to face meetings became essential as members get more acquainted with the systems and ownership is achieved.

An information gateway was co-created among the members called eRAILS (www.erails.net). The objective was to facilitate access to consolidated agriculture information not just from research but other agriculture service providers such as farmer's group, extension, civil society and agribusiness. The eRAILS was developed using a participatory approach. National and subregional partners were engaged in the process of creation using an open source systems. Partners were involved in the conceptualization, testing, maintenance and continuous monitoring. The simplest system was necessary to accommodate the challenges Africa has in internet connectivity and content management. Features and tools are decided based on demands of users and national administrators. Regular assessment is conducted with national administrators and users whenever training is conducted. Each training on use of the eRAILS are prepared through meticulous selection of participants having the skills and potential to share their knowledge after the training. Training is based on actual information available brought by the participants to the training centres.

Despite the huge allocation of investments to build national infrastructure for internet access, the establishment was limited due to availability of the right equipment at the local level and ease of donor's procurement procedure. National partners were provided with desktop computers, netbooks, printers and internet connectivity.

Moving forward

Despite the enthusiasm of African leaders to a real African ownership, there are major challenges faced in establishing the RAILS platform, namely, i) finding the right people with the basic skills and resources (mainly time) given the right mandate, ii) limited knowledge of group dynamics and culture of knowledge sharing, and iii) poor infrastructure and organized information that can be easily shared and iv) lack of supporting institutional and national policies to promote knowledge sharing not least information sharing.

The RAILS national learning teams are established in 80% of the target countries. Leadership and membership is based on endorsement from the national research systems which can sometimes delay the process. Current membership goes beyond research to involve extension, farmer's groups and agribusiness. Activities and dynamism of teams depends on the ability of national focal to lead and understand group dynamics. It is observed that leaders with the knowledge management background are faster in engaging different stakeholders and implementation of activities. The potential of the RAILS platform is immediately identified as an added value to ensure research relevance to development agenda. While leaders, with more scientific background hesitate on the kind of information to be published and the categories of members to be engaged. They insist on information quality control and strict process of account management and uploading information.

The online group discussions are useful in motivating national teams, especially when progress of one country is shared within the platform. Small steps are encouraged especially in the area of content management. Opening an eRAILS account is easy, but publishing interesting information or articles becomes a challenge. Small news on how one country is progressing keeps the other motivated to innovate. A period of lax quality control was needed to encourage members to develop their skills and instincts to publish online.

Despite the co-creation of eRAILS by RAILS members, its added value was hard to be understood. National partners found it difficult to distinguish the purpose of having the institutional websites against the eRAILS sites or accounts. It was later appreciated that eRAILS serves as a faster way of communicating agriculture innovations by individuals or local communities. The Madagascar innovativeness in the use of eRAILS resulted to farmers being trained to open and maintain an account. Through his eRAILS account, Mr. Andrianaivo is able to communicate outside his country. He is considered as a model farmer-leader within the broader FARA network. He is currently identified as a lead speaker in the upcoming international conference on advisory services. His network has expanded beyond his village and country.

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