

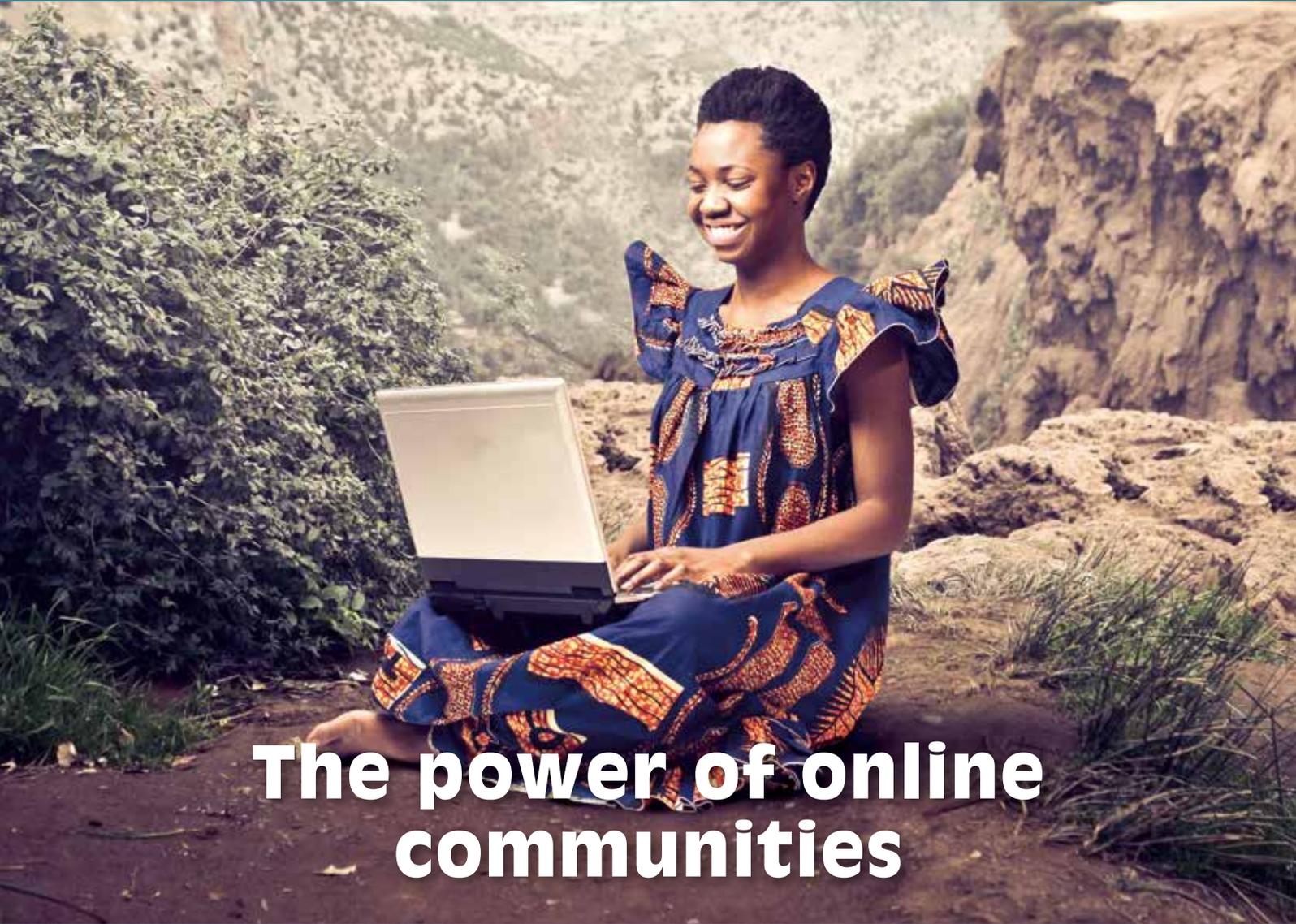
# Update

current awareness bulletin for ACP agriculture

Women have traditionally been the backbone of rural economies, and now they are at the forefront of knowledge sharing

Bev and Etienne Wenger-Trayner discuss communities of practice and the notion of identity in knowledge management.

Communities of practice can strengthen smallholder farmers' ability to influence policy and improve their farming practices



**The power of online communities**

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## Guest editor

# The power of online communities

Smallholder farmers need to absorb a huge amount of information that will directly impact their work. Communities of practice can strengthen their ability to influence agricultural research and policy and improve their farming practices.

**W**elcome to this issue of *ICT Update* from CTA on online communities.

Used by a number of development organisations, online communities aim to facilitate a collective learning process. Since they were first used as a knowledge management tool by the private sector in corporations such as Xerox and Boeing, online communities of practice (CoPs) have been attracting a growing interest in international development. One of the most active online communities is Dgroups, which currently engages more than 700 groups, with more than 150,000 registered users.

*CoPs have been rapidly transformed into a powerful tool of knowledge sharing and collaboration*

### What exactly are CoPs?

There are many ways to define CoPs, but one basic aspect is that they provide an open forum for dialogue on new and emerging issues, and they also provide a platform that encourages debate and the exchange of good practices, resources, ideas and information between people all over the world who get together on a voluntary basis, either face to face or in a virtual space.

CoPs are characterised by mutual informal learning, reflection, shared practices and resources, while promoting problem solving around a specific subject. Initially conceived as closed groups restricted to a defined geographic area, with the emergence of new technologies, CoPs have been rapidly

transformed into a powerful tool of knowledge sharing and collaboration between individuals within and across organisations. In light of their potential benefits, CoPs can be seen as a source of learning and innovation, also in the agricultural sector.

At the global level, Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) is a powerful resource. The community traces its origins back to 2000, when participants from two workshops wanted to continue the discussion among themselves and created an electronic forum where this could take place. Since its inception, the KM4Dev community has grown to 4,226 members (in October 2015) and includes various types of organisations and networks from all over the world.

Smallholder farmers, who constantly face the prospect of having to absorb a huge amount of information that will directly impact their work, can benefit from CoPs to strengthen their ability to influence agricultural research and policy and improve their farming practices.

### CoPs as a learning tool

CoPs, like most online tools, are meaningful when implemented for the right purposes. Though there are no standard procedures for creating effective and active CoPs, if we are to make the most of their potential to create sustained value, several factors need to be taken into consideration. Eagerness to participate and trust within the community are two necessary conditions for a CoP to thrive.

The facilitators of CoPs not only determine the sustainability of CoPs, they are also the internal driving force among their members. Indeed, in addition to supporting community members in their exchanges, they also

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encourage equal participation among all members and provide them with useful information in a clear, reliable and timely manner. Understanding members' needs and capacities enables facilitators to determine the most appropriate support strategies that can help to close the gaps between knowledge, policy and practice. Information should be filtered and shared through the most appropriate format in such a way that it meets the different needs of the participants.

### CTA's commitment to CoPs

CTA is committed to building the capacities of its partners and networks so they can make better and greater use of CoPs to advance food security and nutrition across the ACP region. Dgroups and Participatory Web 2.0 for development (Web2forDev) are just two examples of CoPs through which CTA is working to improve information sharing and the collaborative production of content in the agricultural sector.

Along the same lines, CTA has been working with the Pan-African Farmers Organisation (PAFO) to build an online platform to support discussions and the exchange of information on policy with their 250 members across five regions. The e-consultations helped PAFO to formulate policy ideas on several broad themes – land acquisition, links between climate change and agriculture, rural youth

in agriculture and the uneven progress towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals in African countries – before presenting them to the African Union conference.

As an outcome of the Workshop on Building Resilience on Climate Change hosted in Vanuatu in 2012, CTA supported the establishment of the Melanesian Spearhead Group Green Growth Knowledge e-Platform. Created in 2013, this online platform aimed to facilitate knowledge acquisition, the sharing of ideas and the exchange of best practices on green growth.

The Caribbean Network of Rural Women Producers (CANROP) identified online tools as one of their knowledge management pillars to accomplish their mission of helping rural women to integrate into economic activities and improve their socio-economic position. CTA organised a knowledge management workshop to help CANROP to review, and strengthen its management and communication.

As a result, CANROP developed a strong presence in social media, featuring a dynamic Facebook page with a private group for networking and exchanging experiences.

The articles in this issue of *ICT Update* portray the huge potential of CoPs for leveraging learning and innovation in the agricultural sector, as provided by the experiences of various partners in establishing CoPs along with some case studies and lessons learned. ◀



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### Starting a CoP

Following are some tips for starting an effective CoP:

- Find willing communities and areas with potential. At this stage you might want to interview some potential members to understand the issues to be discussed in the community and identify a facilitator. You will also need to establish appropriate communication and collaboration channels.
- Set your CoP's strategic value proposition and identify expected results. You are now ready to gather a core group and initiate a launch process.
- It is really important to always motivate the CoP's members by promoting the exchange of knowledge. At this stage the facilitator has a pivotal role in promoting the generation and dissemination of knowledge while encouraging CoP members to take increasing responsibility for their shared knowledge. The facilitator needs to gain the trust of the CoP's members and subsequently lift the discussions to a higher level.
- A CoP is made by and for its participants and members. Its real value lies in the sense of belonging, engagement and commitment triggered within it.
- When a CoP starts to acquire more relevance, attention needs to be devoted to new knowledge goals. This phase can be challenging because participants may start to lose interest, which will cause activities to stagnate. This phase can be overcome by building a new cycle of knowledge generation and a new plan of action based on the evaluation of results, lessons learned and an assessment of members' needs.

Source: adapted from *Cultivating communities of practice. A quick start-up guide* by Etienne Wenger and *Communities of Practice Guide* by UNDP



### Related links

'Communities of practice: a brief introduction' by Etienne Wenger  
→ <http://goo.gl/ySvQ6S>.

'Communities of practice: linking knowledge, policy and practice' by Simon Hearn and Nancy White  
→ <http://goo.gl/h3Uesl>

'Using a dgroup with third party online applications for a cause' by Giacomo Rambaldi  
→ <http://goo.gl/3KijyC>

'Communities of practice: questions and answers' by the World Bank  
→ <http://goo.gl/32dx1J>

Dgroups: development through dialogue  
→ [www.dgroups.info](http://www.dgroups.info)

Knowledge management for development  
→ [www.km4dev.org](http://www.km4dev.org)

# Animating online communities – a facilitator's experience



Web2forDev Discussion Group. Distribution map of the trainers

## The power of online communities

When the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation ACP-EU (CTA) asked me to animate the English-speaking Web2forDev Trainers' Community discussion list, I had no difficulty in accepting the assignment because I was already facilitating an online course that had a range of discussion platforms embedded in the programme. The importance of discussion fora of any sort is anchored on the fact that these are widely used as channels for sharing information, seeking and providing advice, evaluating the progress of ongoing group actions, and finally building a sense of partaking and shared visions.

The CTA Web2forDev Trainers' Community of Practice consists of more than 100 individuals residing in 34 countries. Members acted as trainers and co-trainers during CTA's supported Web 2.0 and Social Media Learning Opportunities. Most of them benefitted from ad-hoc training via their attendance in distance-learning courses run by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and are employed by the organisations which hosted training events in the various countries. Indeed, they represent the human capital that ensures the replication of CTA's Web 2.0 and Social Media Training Curriculum and the further spread of online innovation among their institutions and constituencies.

Created in June 2014 upon recommendations made by evaluators who assessed the impact of CTA's capacity building efforts in the domains of Web 2.0 and Social Media, the

Johnson Opigo describes his personal experience facilitating CTA's Web2forDev Trainer's Community of Practice

objectives of the community can be summarised as follows:

- keeping members in touch with one another;
- coordinating actions to further develop trainers' skills;
- sharing experiences in course delivery based on CTA's curriculum;
- seeking advice on topics related to the curriculum and suggesting improvements;
- sharing updates relevant to the content of the curriculum; and
- supporting replication of the curriculum through institutions affiliated to the trainers.

On the other hand, I do animate time-bound online discussions, which are an integral part of the 9-week distance-learning course offered by UNITAR known by the title 'Innovative Collaboration for Development'. As part of each course, trainees have to participate in topical discussions which are tailored to the module they deal with in a particular phase of the course. Four of these modules include a subject-specific discussion where participants are required to:

- share perspectives on the subject matter of the module;
- share real-life experiences in relation to the subject matter; and
- create a common ground to explore prospects for collaboration beyond the training period.

While they vary in terms of duration and purpose, a common denominator of both the Web2forDev Trainers' Community discussion list and the online discussions taking place during the UNITAR courses is their asynchronous nature, which presents its own peculiar problems and challenges. Participants of both fora recognise the benefits of learning from others, but the learning experience can only be complete through regular participation in discussions.

## Achievements and challenges

Getting members of the Web2forDev Trainers' Community to be involved in discussions has been a hit-and-miss experience for me. As a discerning group, I suspect that they have a sense of the discussion topics they consider important and those they prefer to treat with benign nonchalance. But it is interesting to note that once a conversation addresses a critical topic, it takes on a life of its own and ultimately gets to a point where the discussants take a stand.

For instance, CTA's curriculum on Web 2.0 and Social Media is delivered over a period of 5 days. A discussion on whether to extend the training period beyond 5 days or not elicited strong reactions from members. In the end, a decision was reached to maintain the 5-day training period as a standard, allowing variations in terms of duration (number of days) and sequencing (contiguous or intermittent days) due to the fact that the curriculum is modular.

With regard to the curriculum, after discussing the topic 'Training for a purpose', which hinged on capturing the emotional states of participants before and after training, a slight adjustment was made to one unit to accommodate a 'Hopes and fears' exercise, which is intended to assess expectations and finally boost the confidence of trainees to make good use of the skills gained.

The curriculum also benefited from a discussion on 'The dangers of sharing personal data'. Discussants were unanimous that it was necessary to give prominence to privacy issues for the simple reason that the internet has become an integral part of our daily lives and work. It was agreed that the curriculum should be enriched with an educational video that conveys the message in a very effective manner.



Another achievement of the exchanges at the Trainers' Community of Practice is the CTA Alumni Hangouts, which is an informal setting for trainers and alumni from particular cities or regions to meet periodically to review personal experiences and catch up on recent developments in the Web 2.0 and Social Media landscape. Web 2.0 and Social Media applications are clearly undergoing constant changes and revisions, so the hangouts come in handy in bridging the information gaps.

Some of the helpful topics that have been covered in the exchanges from July 2014 to date include:

- Do we still need Wikis in the curriculum?
- Five things I learned as a facilitator;
- Should we mentor our participants?
- Innovative uses of democracy walls;
- On web 2.0 training and bench warmers;
- Let's help an NGO out;
- Let's talk about LinkedIn;
- Setting up a multiplier process for Web 2.0 and Social Media;
- Trainer reminder series;
- Google Maps for Business, How to ...
- How do you deal with status-conscious course participants?
- Web2forDev on Twitter (your bread and butter); and

- Expanding the curriculum to include mobile versions of elected applications.

As regards the UNITAR distance-learning course, participation in time-bound discussion fora is obligatory. As a complement to other compulsory activities and tasks, it encourages an acceptable level of attendance because it forms part of the mechanism within UNITAR's marking scheme for participants to take advantage of what is known as the Grade Recovery Option. This scheme essentially recovers a failed module for a participant if the facilitator adjudges his contributions in the discussion fora as substantial enough to make up for the lost marks. In addition to that, the activity level here is also determined by the available time and workload of the module.

Participants tend to come to the discussion forum more often when they are dealing with easy modules than with difficult ones. But one thing I find going for the UNITAR forum is that discussions can be robust. Participants are sometimes forceful in interrogating assumptions, questioning conclusions and advancing their views. Often when

I pose a hypothetical question in an effort to expand the scope of conversation or to seek to identify the most important issues to elicit a synthesis of ideas, I am never in short supply of reactions.

### Getting people to participate effectively

This is not to say that there have not been lull moments. There have been. A strategy I adopt when this happens is to use funny emoticons or a separate announcement spiced with appropriate humour to encourage participation. At other times I institute a writing competition and award beautifully designed virtual plaques to the winners. I am happy to report that this has proved magical in getting the desired level of participation.

There is a contextual difference between the exchanges on the Web2forDev Trainers' Community discussion list and UNITAR's discussion fora, and this has largely determined the type of challenge I have had to contend with over the months. The Trainers' Community of Practice, as the name suggests, is a channel for trainers to fulfil all those objectives mentioned above. But a member may, in spite of these lofty

objectives, decide not to partake in discussions without any repercussions. As an animator, with a problem-solving mindset, I am left with moral suasion as the only viable tool to deal with the situation.

Again, because members of the Trainers' CoP are not bound by deadlines, they accentuate one of the downsides of asynchronous

the topics come from him/her or not. I therefore believe that a major drawback in the exchanges occurring during the Trainers' Community discussion list is the lack of incentive – particularly negative incentives which have a way of generating positive results. So the absence of a mechanism to measure a person's effectiveness in the discussion group

- Learn how important it is to have incentives, in whatever form – both negative and positive
- Summarise the inputs and outcomes of a topical exchange and feed the summary back to the group.

### Strategies for stimulating group participation

There are strategies I have learned along the way when animating and facilitating conversations in both scenarios. Having discovered first hand that a major challenge facing online discussions is the failure of members to engage in deep conversations that elicit productive outcomes, these strategies have worked for me. They are by no means exhaustive:

- Constantly motivate members to dialogue on the platform;
- Contact members privately to solicit contributions;
- Provoke discussions by playing the devil's advocate;
- Ask simple questions – it works like magic;
- Maintain communication within the group – to avoid gaps; and
- Provide summaries of specifically well-discussed topics.

### The power of online communities



discussion spaces which typically allows members to make contributions at times of their own choosing instead of all at once. The time lag tends to diminish the tempo and essence of the discussions considerably. This, of course, calls into question the feasibility or desirability of maintaining a forum without some form of strict rules with regard to time.

It is possible, on the other hand, to argue that if members of a discussion forum find the conversations to be stimulating or educative, or the facilitator knowledgeable enough, that they will participate without needing to be prodded. But this type of thinking appears to isolate members from feeling equally responsible to enrich the forum with their ideas and suggestions whether or not their expectations are met.

The role of an animator is limited to energising the conversation whether

or compel attendance can only promote a poor engagement rate.

### Lessons learned

Animating the Web2forDev Trainers' forum gave me the opportunity to learn valuable lessons I can apply when facilitating other workshops. Here are some of the lessons that I learned:

- Never be presumptuous with fellow trainers – they know what they are doing
- Expect the unexpected – a topic I never imagined would make a spark caused a firestorm!
- Commend contributors, no matter how terse or tepid the engagement
- Learn to allow others to take the lead whenever possible
- Solicit help from fellow trainers whenever you run out of ideas
- Never be discouraged by poor 'attendance' – silent members may actually be excellent post readers, and they are an important part of the community; the challenge is to try conversion techniques to get them to be commenters as well
- Be courteous, keep your sentiments at bay
- Challenge yourself to develop better persuasive skills

In spite of the shortcomings described above, there are tremendous benefits in maintaining and animating a discussion list for the Trainers' Community. We were able to fine-tune the training curriculum from views harvested from the members, and there are already plans for a new version. The exchange of information has left many trainers better informed about the importance of their online reputation, integrity and presence.

For business people, the positive impact of Google Maps for Business on their businesses was very well articulated in one of our discussions. Some participants including myself, had the opportunity for the first time to place our businesses on the world map for the world to see.

The sharing of information and experiences is therefore one of the key points of the Trainers' forum. Members share information freely and give important tips on how to handle difficult training-room situations, improve training methods, learn different approaches to delivering the course content, and foster the spirit of camaraderie among trainers. In my view the Trainers' forum has largely achieved its objectives. ◀

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# Building an online platform for African farmer organisations

The Pan-African Farmers' Organization was created in 2010 to organise farmers and defend their interests by promoting valuable knowledge management tools

**A**lthough an increasing number of farmer organisations communicate via mobile phones and radios, most national farmer organisations still rely on print, media and face-to-face meetings to reach their audiences. Although there is not a one-size-fits-all solution, a combination of these communication tools is an effective way for farmer organisations to reach and communicate with their audience.

## A promising foundation

The Pan-African Farmers' Organization (PAFO) was formally created in November 2010 in Malawi, after joint efforts by five regional farmer organisations from across the African continent: EAFF (East Africa), Propac (Central Africa), Roppa (West Africa), SACAU (South Africa), and UMNAGRI (North Africa). This continental consultation process emphasised the need to organise farmers and agricultural producers, effectively engage members in advocacy, and promote their participation in the formulation and implementation of continental development policies that affect agriculture and rural development. Since the beginning, PAFO has recognised the value of knowledge management (KM) in its work. Indeed, it is one of the key pillars of their strategy.

Since 2012, CTA has been working with PAFO to build a knowledge platform that will support discussion and the exchange of information on policy with PAFO's members, by strengthening its website and developing a discussion forum to stimulate information sharing. E-discussions have been held on the PAFO website's group space, with the PAFO knowledge management team (composed of the different KM and communications officers from regional farmer organisations) providing support and guidance.

The e-discussions on the PAFO platform have helped to build up and formulate policy ideas on several broad themes, such as land acquisition, links between climate change and agriculture,

and rural youth in agriculture. These ideas were eventually presented during the first PAFO Continental Briefing, which took place in Yaoundé, Cameroon in December 2013.

Based on the main achievements of the e-discussions, the KM and communications officers also held a half-day session during the conference presenting the main achievements and challenges for farmer organisations in knowledge management.

Following this first positive experience, a second e-discussion started in June 2014 that nurtured the debate for the 2nd PAFO Continental Briefing under the theme 'Revolutionising Finance for Agri-value Chains', which was held in July 2014, in Nairobi, Kenya. The preparatory consultative work was structured through an e-discussion with regional fisheries organisations (RFOs), farmers and members of the PAFO group space platform to highlight and identify specific needs with regard to financial access.

In total 55 e-discussions were generated around topics such as the main challenges and opportunities for RFOs in accessing financial services, and what actions farmers could take to engage with finance actors. Likewise for the first continental policy briefing, the main findings were presented at the conference and the KM managers were given the opportunity to present their work during a panel on knowledge management as part of the briefing.

As part of the development of PAFO's knowledge platform the regional farmer organisations were supported in developing their websites to ensure content would be available across the network as a whole. Roppa, for example, won the award for best NGO website in Burkina Faso for their new website. Perhaps the biggest transformation has been with PROPAC, which not only has a new web platform now but also new social media sites with support from this project and training from the web 2forDev project of CTA.

Most recently, the PAFO KM team were at the forefront of a massive



Twitter campaign called #includeagriCOP21 at the 3rd PAFO Continental Briefing, in the context of the Africa edition of the Global Forum for Innovations in Agriculture (GFIA). The Twitter campaign was launched to demand the inclusion of agriculture in the agreement text of the COP21.

## The road ahead

Although the results vary with the different RFOs, the achievements in the last years are encouraging. Strengthening farmer organisations' knowledge management skills, through initiatives such as the PAFO knowledge platform, represents an effective way not only of disseminating relevant information and creating space for dialogue and exchange, but also helps to create a network of people and build the skills to capture information and foster communication. ◀

## Related links

- <http://pafo-africa.net>
- <https://www.facebook.com/pafoafrica/?fref=nf>
- <https://twitter.com/PAFOAfrica>

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# Women at the forefront of knowledge sharing

**W**omen are the backbone of the development of rural and national economies. They comprise 43% of the world's agricultural labour force, and as much as 70% in some countries. Yet the gender gap continues to be a challenge due to women's limited access and control over land, productive resources, markets and services. Targeted knowledge management initiatives are an opportunity to help rural women to improve their socio-economic position by integrating into economic activities and reducing inequalities.

Established in 1999, the Caribbean Network of Rural Women Producers (CANROP), is an umbrella organisation that collaborates with national chapters of rural women's associations in the Caribbean. As a non-profit organisation, CANROP's mission is to empower rural women producers in the Caribbean region to improve their livelihoods. In order to realise its mission, CANROP targets interventions to reduce the level of inequality among rural women and improve their socio-economic position.

These interventions comprise training, cultural exchanges, networking and promoting inter-regional and intra-regional trade. The network facilitates access to specialised credit, seeks to create sustainable employment opportunities and undertakes advocacy to sensitise society to the needs and contributions of women in agriculture. CANROP has regional affiliations in Barbados, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago.

CANROP is a member of the Alliance for Sustainable Development

of Agriculture and the Rural Milieu and is supported by the Offices of the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) in the Caribbean. The network has existed for 15 years but limited communications have hindered the full development of the network. To bridge these gaps, CANROP started a series of activities in 2014 with the support of CTA and IICA to facilitate networking and communication among the network's members and to strengthen their knowledge management skills.

A knowledge management scan developed by CTA and Co-Capacity, a knowledge management advisory firm based in Wageningen, the Netherlands, has helped the network to set new priorities in terms of knowledge management and communication and find new sources of support. The first priority was to improve the network's communication capacity and reach external supporters and markets.

One of the initial results was a Knowledge Management & Storytelling workshop led by Danaqa and organised in Trinidad in July 2014.

The workshop aimed to raise awareness among CANROP stakeholders about the potential of using knowledge management to drive entrepreneurship and develop greater food and nutrition security. The workshop sought to gradually build on participants' experiences and knowledge. During the three-day workshop, participants worked together to identify key issues and opportunities that need to be addressed and also used the opportunity to share their experiences and learn from each other.

Faumuina Tafuna'i of Women in Business Development Incorporated, for example, shared her experience in Samoa, where her organisation has used a positive news approach to help elevate farming as an honourable, exciting and innovative occupation. One of the key topics discussed at the workshop was how to use a storytelling approach to reach farmers, markets and governments.

Workshop participants also agreed that there is a need to develop a common vision and value, create a database, and



decide how to use social media tools and who would undertake specific tasks to have a more profound impact on policy.

Drawing from the workshops' recommendations, CANROP started a series of activities to improve their members' communication and knowledge skills. These included:

- The establishment of a website directly managed and maintained by CANROP members, as a main showcase for sharing best practices, promoting products, news and events, and publications
- The development and creation of a dynamic Facebook page and Twitter account as key tools for both internal and external networking and keeping stakeholders informed about the latest activities
- Continuous ICT training to ensure

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that members are able to update the network's social tools

- Improving stakeholder connections through stakeholder analysis, strategic alliances at leadership level, and becoming more aware of stakeholders' needs and demands

Hilda Vaughan, an agriculturist from Jamaica and member of the Jamaica Network of Rural Women's Producers (JNRWP), who attended the workshop and eventually became an administrator of the CANROP Facebook page, said that 'I have come to realise that my life's work is really to be a change-maker, impacting my corner of the world one person at a time.'

During the 2014 Caribbean Week of Agriculture, CANROP actively promoted its network through

presentations to ministers and media, and showcased products at its exhibition booth. This was also a good opportunity to meet with decision makers and funders, who have helped CANROP to expand to new markets.

On International Women's Day in 2015 – the theme of which was 'make it happen' – CANROP showcased a series of 'image messages' in recognition of the work of Caribbean rural women producers. Since then, CANROP's work has put more emphasis on the importance of knowledge management as a tool for supporting information and sharing experiences among its members.

Find out more about the women of CANROP on Facebook and follow the twitter conversation with the hashtag #weareCANROP. ◀



# Tools to keep communities of practice ticking

Krishan Bheenick discusses various online interaction platforms for exchanging information, from email-based platforms and Dgroups to knowledge management blogs.

**H**ow did we manage online communities prior to the advent of social media?' you may ask. Very much the same way a lot of stakeholders in agricultural and rural development still do it today – using email-enabled online discussion forums.

One of the better known email-based online interaction platforms that is currently being used is the Dgroups.org platform. It started as a shared platform among development organisations to help inform exchange between their communities of practice, without advertisements!

This platform includes more than 700 active communities, 150,000 active users, working in international and intergovernmental organisations, government agencies, national and international NGOs, and ICT- and knowledge-focused institutes. Over 400,000 email messages are delivered each day through the Dgroups servers, and over 50% of these emails are exchanged with and within African countries.

## How does Dgroups work?

The basis of Dgroups is that it combines the features of a mailing list with that of a discussion forum into one tool, with the advantage that you can create sub-communities within a larger one. Prior to the explosion of social media people used email as the main channel for exchanging information, and quite successfully too. This method has been useful for most countries in the ACP regions, where email is still the dominant means of electronic communication.

The Dgroups platform is specially designed to be used in low bandwidth conditions, where people do not have full-time access to the web: it converts large attached files into links so as to avoid clogging up personal mailboxes. Furthermore, shared documents are also placed in a 'library' that the community can access at any time, and newcomers can always revisit past discussions of the group. Obviously, social media enhances the quality of the knowledge exchange where it is possible, and the Dgroups platform has also adapted by providing a web interface. Current improvements include the development of an application program interface for Dgroups. The platform is managed by a consortium of development partners (see box about dgroups.info) and is also proposing that projects could use the platform as their communications platform, in addition to social media platforms.

The current solutions used at CTA and its regional partners combine a mixture of both email based communications and social media. The Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa has been using Dgroups on a large scale, coordinating multiple communities and their subgroups, which include sub-regional, national, thematic and institutional sub-communities. Discussions are

being held with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community's Land Resources Division to look into shifting its Pacific Agricultural and Forestry Policy Network into a Dgroup Community with several sub-communities so that multiple e-discussions can take place. Similarly, the emerging online communities on extension and rural advisory services, coordinated by the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services may also consider using Dgroups as an information sharing platform.

## The KM4ARD blog

From a knowledge management (KM) perspective, communities of practice represent the pool of tacit knowledge and experience about a particular domain or topic. Etienne Wenger, who is associated with the term 'community of practice', provides an overview of how COPs share their knowledge (see the brief at <http://bit.ly/1i5elm1>).

CTA is itself establishing a community of practice among ACP stakeholders working in the field of knowledge management for agricultural and rural development (KM4ARD). As part of its Knowledge Management and Communications programme, CTA is establishing a blog to relate stories and experiences with applying KM4ARD in the ACP region.

Launched in late 2014, during the month of #knowvember (a month dedicated to reflecting on and recognising initiatives in knowledge management) this blog is regularly updated with news and online resources on knowledge management for agricultural and rural development (KM4ARD). Over 50 stories are featured in the KM4ARD blog on knowledge management experiences in ACP countries.

Various resources developed by CTA over the past few years are also featured on the blog, the latest being the adaptation of the knowledge

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management scan for individuals to carry out a self-assessment of their capacities for KM. The tool also provides the user with feedback on which resources they could use to improve on their weaker areas that have been identified. You can access the KM scan by simply registering on the KM4ARD blog.

**e-learning materials**

CTA has also developed a set of training materials to introduce Knowledge Management for Agricultural and Rural Development, which will be offered at regional training workshops in 2016. The participants at KM workshops will be grouped within a Dgroups community to continue to share their experiences across the ACP regions. The community of practice will also be monitoring other existing communities for insights to be shared and will also contribute its exchanges to the other communities.

CTA is also one of a group of 13 institutions collaborating on the creation of e-learning materials on

information and knowledge management, constituting the Information Management Resource Kit (IMARK). The main objective of this partnership-based e-learning initiative is to develop the capacities of individuals and support institutions worldwide in the effective management of information.

This consortium of institutions offers a range of online learning resources for free, on CD-ROM in French, English and Spanish, and as a downloadable package. Each IMARK module focuses on a specific area of information management, with a curriculum designed, developed and reviewed by experts in the subject matter. The modules are being developed using the latest methods in e-learning, providing an interactive environment for self-paced learning, and one of these deals with the issue of building and maintaining communities of practices. So support is available for the continuation of email-based online communities of practice, which can be complemented by social media. ◀

**Related link**

*Knowledge Management and Organisational Learning: An International Development Perspective. An Annotated Bibliography* by Ingie Hovland  
 → <http://goo.gl/iju0J8>



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# KM4Dev: after-hours online forum

What is KM4Dev, and how does it work? Sarah Cummings explains how it came to life and what makes the KM4Dev community tick.

**K**M4Dev is an established community of practice (CoP) for development practitioners, policymakers and researchers engaged in knowledge management (KM) and knowledge sharing (KS). The community has one main mailing list on the KM4Dev-l Dgroup but also has 55 sub-groups. Taking these together, it has more than 4,000 members. The sub-groups focus on specific themes, e.g. social media, community radio and on specific cities or countries such as a KM4Dev for Nigeria, Addis Ababa/Ethiopia and Nairobi.

## The origins: a brief history

The community traces its origins back to two face-to-face workshops dated in 2000. Workshop participants wanted to continue discussions among themselves after the workshop, and asked the Bellanet Alliance (an international network of organisations working to foster global and regional collaboration through a more effective use of ICTs) and the International Development Research Centre to create an electronic forum where this could take place.

The KM4Dev mailing list and website came into life in the summer of 2000. A volunteer core group was created in May 2004 to further support the community and help respond to its needs. Currently, the core group consists of 15 community members. Along the years, the KM4Dev community has been sustained and steered on a volunteer basis, receiving ad-hoc financial support from several development organisations such as the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and IFAD.

## The power of online communities

### The evolution of a community

As a community, KM4Dev has evolved following these supporting principles:

- open and interactive;
- supporting and encouraging a mix of individuals coming from all over the world and from different organisations; and
- international development as a basis to further explore KM/KS issues and approaches.

Current working groups and projects include:

**FAQ renewal working group:** This project seeks to renew the existing website FAQ. The project is working to

review historical forum debates and contributions from the last five years, and synthesise this information into richer knowledge to inform practitioners, project staff, researchers and policymakers of the value of the KM4Dev approach.

**Toolkit project:** The toolkit project aims to design, implement, evaluate and facilitate a collaborative initiative to create a space within the KM4Dev community that allows and encourages development practitioners to share experiences with the use of KS tools and methods, learn about new tools, and use resources and materials for training purposes. The project's objective is to combine efforts of interested development organisations in order to deepen the knowledge on the use of KS tools and approaches

**Stories4dev proposal:** To extend the reach of the existing 'Practitioner's Story Guide', the KM4Dev core group are inviting members of the community to join as partners in this multi-actor endeavour. The final goal is the creation of a web-based interactive online resource or 'platform' for development practitioners, containing downloadable tools, discussion areas, stories and other learning resources.

Among other activities, the KM4Dev community has been organising regular (at least one per year) face-to-face workshops since 2000. These have served to bring together development practitioners to discuss and share their ideas and experiences related to KM.

Linked to the community is the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*, which was started in 2005 and is now in its 11th year of publication. Published three times per year, it focuses on practice-based cases, analysis and research concerning the role of knowledge in development processes. It provides a forum for debate and exchange of ideas among practitioners, policymakers, academics and activists worldwide, and is a peer-reviewed, open access e-journal.

### So how does it work?

Three different types of enquiry are ordinarily posted to the community.

A particular paper or issue may have been raised for discussion. An interesting example was the recent World Bank paper on how infrequently PDF reports on their website are read. This led to a heated debate as to the value of conventional reports as a good knowledge-sharing format. The resulting discussion was then summarised on the wiki by one of the participants.

Another type would be an announcement of an event, a job opportunity or seeking a consultant.

The third would be a request for background information on a particular KM tool or approach – a recent example of which is how do you measure how effective an organisation is at establishing links and contacts with others? Or what is good web seminar (webinar) software? The latter resulted in an excellent write-up on the wiki.

So the community practices what it preaches and capitalises on the discussions which lead to wiki write-ups and a reference base but can also result in ideas for articles in the KM4Dev journal or occasionally face2face meetings.

To join the discussion, send a blank email to: [join.km4dev-l@dgroups.org](mailto:join.km4dev-l@dgroups.org). ◀

## Testimonials

What members of the Knowledge Management for Development Community (KM4Dev) have to say:

'I feel so moved by all the positive reactions I received every day since I posted my request. Just as if I have numerous secret hidden friends ready to give a hand! It's a feeling not easy to express; the kind of strength you sense when you're not alone and that makes you dare and never afraid of taking new challenges ... merci beaucoup.'  
Yennenga Kompaoré,  
Performances, Burkina Faso

'I'm proud of being part of this collaborative community. Thank you all! Marcelo Yamada, Promon Engenharia, Brazil



Sarah Cummings ([sarahcummingswork@gmail.com](mailto:sarahcummingswork@gmail.com)), Founder Editor and currently editor-in-chief of the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*, has over 20 years' experience in the field of information and knowledge management with a focus on the international development sector.

# Communities of practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

## How have communities of practice changed over the years, especially with the advent of internet and social media?

**B:** Communities of practice themselves haven't changed, but the ways in which they can come together have increased. So you've got more places for meeting.

**E:** The internet and social media allow you to cut through time and space. So you can have a community of practice with people all over the world. You can connect across time zones, so this is quite different than in the past because you can find your learning partners anywhere in the world.

**B:** So that means that you're more likely to get more diverse communities of practice because you can come from different places around the landscape. So I guess it has changed in that way.

**E:** I think it has changed in another way too. With the internet, it has become possible for a lot of people to participate in certain communities who don't participate particularly actively, the so-called 'lurkers'. So you have communities of practice with large numbers of people not all of whom are particularly active but still benefit from learning.

## If nobody shows up then it is not a community of practice

### So it has become too easy?

**B:** It has actually become very difficult. Just because you set up the technology doesn't mean that you set up a community of practice. It's mistaken, because a community of practice is about people and learning.

**E:** You know, people open up a community of practice but then no one shows up. Let's face it, if nobody shows up then it's not a community of practice, even if the space is open. So sometimes people neglect the social task of bringing people together because they think they can just open a space somewhere.

### Describe the role that communities of practice play in knowledge management.

**E:** Historically, the field of knowledge management was saved by communities of practice. At a certain point it started

becoming heavily technology oriented, with knowledge bases and that kind of thing. The concept of communities of practice allowed them to start thinking about knowledge not just as information but as the property of communities, a result of people being together. In the late 1990s, that really transformed the field of knowledge management by giving people a new way of conceptualising how knowledge exists in an organisation. And that transformed communities of practice too, because people started realising that they could start and cultivate a community of practice themselves. It became something much more active, which it wasn't originally. So you were less of an observer now and more of a doer.

### What are the necessary conditions to make a community of practice thrive?

**B:** Well, the most important thing is that they care about something and that they recognise that the other people sitting around the table are people who also care about the same thing.

**E:** In the end, value creation is the key. You have to have people who need each other as learning partners because it creates value for them, for what they're trying to do. It also creates value for their organisation, which also needs the capacity to be successful in what it's trying to do. So maybe that's also a danger of technology. It makes it easier to bring people together, but they pay less attention to why they should come, to what's being created.

**B:** And if you don't have the value creation, if people don't see the value in coming together then no amount of trust or emphasis on interaction will ever work.

### What's the link between learning and human identity?

**E:** The theory that communities of practice came out of is one in which learning is viewed as the 'becoming' of a certain person. Belonging to a community where you can claim to be a competent member will definitely help you to build an identity with respect to that domain.

**B:** So now the theory is expanding to say 'yes, we have an identity in relation to the community of practice, but now we live in landscapes of practice where there are multiple and competing communities of practice

where we have to decide which ones we belong to and how much effort we put into each one?' And so you're modulating your identity in relation to those different communities of practice in the landscape. So learning is a journey through those communities of practice and it's about creating an identity through those communities.

**E:** A big aspect of living in the 21st century is the breaking of the parallel between identity and community. I think that is transferring some of the burden of identity to the person. It's like living in a small village 300 or 400 years ago. Imagine, you live your whole life in that village within one practice and the community does a whole lot of work for you. It defines what it means to be a good person, what it means to know. All you have to do is belong, and you inherit all that work that the community has done. But if you are constantly traveling from one community to the next, then it's a much more personal thing to know what it means to know, what it means to be knowledgeable. I think the whole notion of identity has been neglected in the field of knowledge management. Knowledge management has to involve who we are, because what it means to be knowledgeable is a lot of work on the part of the person, who has to learn what to pay attention to. That's a really interesting thing about the 21st century. ◀

### Further readings:

Wenger-Trayner, E., and Wenger-Trayner, B. (2014) *Learning in landscapes of practice: a framework*. In Wenger-Trayner, E., Fenton-O'Creevy, M., Hutchinson, S., Kubiak, C., and Wenger-Trayner, B. (Eds.) *Learning in landscapes of practice: boundaries, identity, and knowledgeability in practice-based learning*. Routledge.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. and Snyder, W.M. (2002), *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA.



Bev and Etienne Wenger-Trayner (be@wenger-trayner.com) are social learning theorists and consultants. Bev's expertise encompasses both the design of learning architectures and the facilitation of processes, activities, and use of new technologies. Etienne is a thought leader in the field of social learning and communities of practice. He co-authored *Situated Learning*, where the term 'community of practice' was coined.

The power of online communities



## Farmafripedia

Farmafripedia is a platform for different stakeholders in the agricultural sector from the African continent to collectively learn and share from each other, especially on issues pertaining to best farming practices using local content. By submitting articles, it is possible to share news and information on local and global knowledge on this platform. Based on the Wikipedia model, it is possible to easily add and edit articles.

Contributors can submit content by clicking on one of two links: crops or livestock. Existing pages can be edited by clicking on the 'edit with form' link at the top of every page. Farmafripedia also has a support team to help potential contributors upload content or take the process off their hands.

→ <http://goo.gl/2EmvTQ>

## PAFPNet

The Pacific Agriculture and Forestry Policy Network (PAFPNet) is a regional network that helps to connect the people of the Pacific by facilitating the sharing of experiences on issues related to agricultural and forestry policy at home and further afield. PAFPNet strengthens communication and engagement among stakeholders and encourages open and constructive discussions. These discussions make it possible to share information at the local, national, regional and international levels and improve the way activities are coordinated. Each Pacific member country and territory has a National Focal Point to facilitate and coordinate national networking.

Members of the network have access to various types of information on issues related to agriculture and forestry policy, including communications on research and development, regional and international events, workshops, meetings and conferences in the region; updates on national and regional activities and developments in the agriculture and forestry policy sector; national and regional policy documents and sector policies and plans; information about network members and experts; and information about and contact details for related networks, organisations and groups at all levels.

PAFPNet also facilitates capacity-building initiatives on agriculture and forestry policy processes.

→ <http://www.spc.int/pafpnet>



## The case of Ayuda Urbana

Ayuda Urbana is a constellation of communities of practice focused on urban issues and challenges in Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean region. The Ayuda Urbana initiative generated from a conversation between the World Bank's urban specialists and several mayors of municipalities of these countries. It represents a clear example of the efforts to assist 10 huge cities in the Central American region to improve their technical expertise and municipal effectiveness by connecting mayors and their staff into forming communities of practice. The members of the network include the mayors and their staff, specialists in various areas of urban development and management.

Eight topics – from e-government to disaster prevention – were selected by participants and seven CoPs were started, bringing together 128 members from 10 cities. Different cities volunteered to coordinate one or two communities of practice. They were each launched through a two-day workshop, facilitated by a team of the World Bank. A web-based tool was made available to continue online conversations and stay in touch. Furthermore, there was a website serving as a repository.

→ <http://ayudaurbana.org>

## Want to start a CoP?

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) produced a Communities of Practice Guide describing the design, promotion, facilitation and monitoring of CoP. It provides recommendations about how to facilitate the performance of such communities within the framework of development initiatives. As an integral part of the institutional strategy on knowledge exchange, it outlines how to start a CoP, which consists of the following steps:

- A **design stage** in which the main goal is to define the subject matter, the strategy, the rationale of the CoP and its operative framework; in this stage the types of participants are outlined, as well as the means of communication and the action plan.
- A **motivation stage** in which the main goal is to call for participants, to promote the exchange of knowledge and to establish communication and collaboration channels. This stage also includes finding consensus on the subject and action plan, instrumental activities to trigger action among the CoP members.
- A **development stage** that encourages the use, generation and dissemination of knowledge.
- A **stage of evolution** in which the CoP acquires recognition and becomes a reference point on the subject matter. Here, strategies are reviewed, new goals are set and a new action plan is designed.



## CoP on food loss reduction

The Community of Practice (CoP) on food loss reduction launched in 2014, serves as a global convener and an integrator of knowledge related to post-harvest loss reduction. It offers a platform to facilitate linkages and information sharing among stakeholders and relevant networks, projects and programmes such as SAVE FOOD and SDC-funded projects on post-harvest management.

Implemented by FAO, IFAD and WFP, this platform includes background information, relevant news, events, online discussion fora, resources (online libraries, databases and repositories with relevant materials) and links to partners. A number of online trainings and e-learning modules on post-harvest management are also available on the platform. To join the CoP on Food loss reduction click register @ <http://www.fao.org/food-loss-reduction/register/en/>

→ <http://goo.gl/V00AdP>



## Ag2Nut CoP

The Agriculture-Nutrition Community of Practice (Ag2Nut CoP) emerged in 2010 to facilitate communication and discussions on the link between agriculture and nutrition. The CoP is designed to be a virtual space for sharing resources to build a common evidence pool, facilitating communication across sectors, and developing key message to communicate to the broader development community. The group has facilitated face-to-face meetings at various conferences and events, held periodic thematic discussions by conference call, and disseminated research findings, tools and guidance materials.

The CoP includes more than 1,000 members from national and international NGOs, UN organisations, universities, independent professionals, bilateral institutions and donor organisations from 73 countries. You can join this community by registering @ <https://knowledge-gateway.org/ag2nut>



### Related links

- <http://goo.gl/3Y3WkD>
- <http://capacity4dev.ec.europa.eu>
- <https://dgroups.org>
- <http://web2fordev.net>
- <http://cap-net.org>



# Blogging for women in agriculture

Marthe Montcho tells us how she set up her blog in Benin to showcase agricultural innovations and raise the profile of women in the agriculture sector.

### The power of online communities

I am a 26-year-old woman from Benin who holds a postgraduate degree in the agricultural sciences with a specialisation in animal resources management. I also have a master's degree in sociology and anthropology. In October 2013, I became involved in sharing information on the activities of women farmers in Benin when I set up my blog, *l'agriculture au féminin*, or 'women in farming'.

At the time, I had fairly limited knowledge about how to use social networks. But today I run a versatile online community that consists not only of agricultural professionals but

also a network for sharing knowledge supported by Web 2.0 and sharing competences that independent or isolated individuals or institutions cannot obtain.

My role as a moderator of online discussion groups has given me access to a large amount of information. Moreover, it has enabled me to learn more about different agricultural themes and hot topics. I constantly have my finger on the pulse of

agricultural news these days, at the national, regional and global levels. To ensure that the blog remains a success, I am always on the lookout for news and innovations in the sector. Keeping up to date makes it easier for me to facilitate and intervene in discussion groups.

Overall, the experience has enhanced my knowledge of networking tools and strategies, such as adaptive digital and social technologies, and also acquire solid experience of knowledge sharing via the internet and social networks.

### Inspiration for the blog

I got my inspiration for creating the *l'agriculture au féminin* blog from my desire to fill an information gap and share a reality and an agricultural power through the internet (the blog) with the rest of the world that not everyone is familiar with yet. This reality is the important contribution women make to agricultural development.

There are many innovations which have long gone unnoticed in African countries, innovations which deserve to be widely disseminated and shared. One example is a tribute to the ingenuity of Beninese women, who process *nére* nuts into a finished product, a local mustard. Other examples include the technology to transform palm nuts into edible palm nut puree, packaged for commercialisation, or the processing of fonio to produce highly valued couscous, or the agri-food production of sorghum as a Beninese vegetable yogurt.

The objective of my blog is to showcase all these innovations and to raise the profile of women in the agriculture and agri-food sector.

They boost agricultural development, ensure food security and do excellent work. Their role deserves to be highlighted. I also believe that women and ICTs are well matched to support agricultural development, which is why I named my blog *l'agriculture au féminin*.

### Impact of the blog on rural women in Benin

My blog has raised awareness among rural women in Benin that they are doing excellent work, and as a result they have more self-confidence. They want to do better and go further. Many of them have succeeded in packaging their products and now export their agri-food products throughout the sub-region. There are also groups of women engaged in the small-scale production of red palm oil who have benefited from gifts such as engine-powered palm nut presses. This has reduced their manual work and improved their output.

In my role as a female blogger, my presence in certain rural communities in Benin has enabled me to understand that there are women who experience on a daily basis the negative burden of tradition. For example, many of them are unaware of women's rights, land rights, opportunities for accessing agricultural credit.

As some women in Benin are unaware that there is an International Women's Day each year on 8 March, I organised a celebration on 8 March 2015 with a rural community located in Toffo in the Atlantique department in Benin. It was a moment of great joy to share experiences and information on agricultural innovations. I plan to continue organising such events and helping women farmers through my blog. ◀



Marthe Montcho ([marthemontcho@gmail.com](mailto:marthemontcho@gmail.com)) runs a Benin-based blog called the *l'agriculture au féminin*, or 'women in farming'. She is a social entrepreneur and activist in the sphere of e-agribusiness, agri4food security and women empowerment in Africa. Marthe won first prize in the individual category of the 2014 edition of the Youth in Agriculture Blog Competition for her blog.