The Jèkafo Gèlèkan Project

Making Communication between Local Farmers' Commitees easier

The Jèkafo Gèlèkan project uses computers and the internet to improve communication to and from the local farmers' committees in the region of Sikasso, the southern-most region of Mali. Members use the internet for email, exchanging documents and searching for specific agricultural information. Another key aspect of this project is the realisation of a local radio connection where farmers hear news about changes in agricultural laws and how this affects them.

Giving farmers a voice in the political debate about agriculture

In 2006, the Regional Committee for the Coordination of Rural People (CRCR) in Sikasso began a project called Jèkafo Gèlèkan, meaning "let's speak together under the palaver tree." Its aim is to improve communication and information between local farmers' organisations in the province of Sikasso and the regional and national authorities.

The project contributes to allowing the farmer's voice to be heard in the ongoing political debate about agriculture. Local Committees for the Coordination of Farmers' Organisations (CLCOPs) in seven main towns and villages of the Sikasso province form the anchor points for a communication system for farmers' organisations affiliated to CRCR.

A wide range of activities

Jèkafo Gèlèkan covers 215 local organisations, and reaches more than one million beneficiaries (51% female). The project uses computers and the internet in small internet centres for farmers. The computers in these centres improve the flow of information to and from the CLCOPs. The internet is mainly used for emailing other committee members or other people working in agriculture.

The internet is also used to exchange documents and search for specific information relating to agriculture. Ten computers have been bought for the project, together with digital cameras and solar panels. The solar panels can provide power for the centres in those areas without electricity.

More than two hundred farmers' organisations in Mali's Sikasso region are participating in the Jèkafo project.

Local radio is also a part of this project. It is mainly used to inform farmers about activities, workshops and meetings. A regular programme is also produced about issues concerning agricultural legislation and the potential implications of changes to this legislation. All local radios in Sikasso are involved in this communication system.

User impact

Rural people often lack access to the information and communication tools that would help them get answers to questions about important issues such as legislation, technological innovations, and the experiences of other producers. The CRCR is trying to resolve these problems via its local committees. Through a bottom-up consultation, it tries to enhance farmers' participation in the policy-making process and empower them so that their voices can be heard at both the regional and national level.

The direct project users are the heads of local farmers' coordinating bodies and the regional committee CRCR, and a few individual producers. These are the individuals who will use the ICT services in the offices of the Local Committees and the CRCR, and who will pass the information on to local unions of farmers' organisations, or from the local unions to CRCR and beyond. This capacity-building effort should benefit farmers. Through a more structured communication system, the farmers will be more informed about policy issues and production and market opportunities.

Goals

The main goal is to put farmers in contact with one another and engage CRCR members in the agricultural policy debate. More specific goals include:

- *Improving the information system* - Improve the information system linking producers.
- *Internet access* - Give farmers direct access to information through the internet.
- *Strengthen cooperation* - Strengthen cooperation and trust among farmers.
- *Information flow* - Facilitate the flow of information between the regional committee and the local coordinating committees of farmers' organisations, and among these organisations themselves. Additional goals include organising annual debates for farmers, facilitating cooperation between support structures and farmers, and enabling male and female farmers to provide and receive information that is useful for their activities.

Results so far

The visibility of the regional committee to other related institutions and organisations has increased considerably. This has resulted in a number of new partnerships and funding opportunities.

One important lesson learned is that farmers feel less of a barrier with a structure such as that of the regional committee centres than they do with traditional cybercafés or telecentres. Moreover, the computer centres make it possible for farmers to get together on a regular basis, to get information on important issues and to develop more structural organisational ties, both internally and with external partners

In some cases, based on the feedback gathered through the information system, CRCR has been able to quickly respond to the new legislation proposals for agricultural legislation and to influence the process and propose textual changes In addition, the efficiency and speed of the farmers consultation process in the Sikasso province has dramatically improved. While in the past, it could take months before information would reach farmers, now most farmer representatives can be reached within hours or at the most a few days.

Finally, one point of concern is that, at the operational level, the lack of any appropriate connectivity and energy infrastructure is still a major obstacle to successful implementation. This implies that, for the time being, much attention should be given to technical issues relating to the project.