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Web 2.0 tools to promote social networking for the Forest Connect alliance

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Introduction

Connecting practitioners working on similar issues across the world is the theme of this article. The aim is to explore how a social network was developed and how effective it has been. Described here is the use of a new Web 2.0 platform to share new approaches and tactics, currently used by supporters of small and medium forest enterprises (SMFEs). The new Forest Connect website makes it possible for a growing number of these practitioners (currently in excess of 300 from 48 countries) to upload information, event announcements and work opportunities, discuss key issues, access reports and practical manuals, share photos and videos and send personal messages to other site users.¹ For those new to this area of development, it provides a way to quickly and easily get access to information about state-of-the-art practice in small forest enterprise support (see Box 1).

Launched in January 2008, the Forest Connect website has seen a steady increase in membership and use among government, non-government and private sector organisations that support SMFEs.



¹ See: <http://forestconnect.ning.com>

Box 1. Ram Subedi (Enterprise and Marketing adviser, Asia Network for Sustainable Agriculture and Bioresources, ANSAB, the Forest Connect country partner for Nepal) comments on the Forest Connect networking website

SMFEs face a number of problems such as excessive bureaucracy, unstable policies and regulations, poor access to credit, poor market information, inadequate technology, poor infrastructure, and insufficient business know-how. Forest Connect members link these enterprises with markets, service providers and government in several countries. Amongst various other activities, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) have developed a dynamic web portal where every one can share/exchange their ideas with other Forest Connect members around the world.

The global context provides hints as to why this might be the case. SMFEs (forest enterprises with 10-100 employees) make up 80-90% of forest enterprise numbers and 50% of formal forest sector employment in most developing countries (Macqueen, 2008). If the much more numerous informal enterprises are factored in, for example the many timber or non-timber forest product enterprises which operate without formal business registration or outside legal forest licensing laws, it can be that SMFEs dominate forest outcomes. Globally, they add value to an estimated US\$130 billion per year. With the twofold clamour to avoid climate-threatening deforestation and reduce poverty, making SMFEs sustainable in environmental, social and economic terms is increasingly seen

Sharing information about Ethiopian SMFE business training events with Forest Connect partners through the website.



Photo: Duncan MacQueen

as a priority. As a result, new SMFE initiatives are springing up all over the world. With them comes the need to develop the capacity of practitioners working to support SMFEs who frequently come to the theme of enterprise and markets fresh, often without any vocational training beyond a technical background in forestry. It is understandable therefore that new practitioners would seek out a website that can bring them up to speed on this area of practice.

Background

Diagnostic work on SMFEs highlights their dominance in the forest sector and the challenges they face (Kozak, 2007). Principle among these challenges is the widespread isolation of SMFEs from four groups of actors: other enterprises with whom to pursue scale efficiencies and bargaining power, markets, business development and financial service providers, and decision makers who determine the business environment (MacQueen, 2007). This isolation was identified by numerous SMFE managers and support organisations at an international meeting on Small and Medium Forest Enterprise Development for Poverty Reduction at the The Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center (CATIE), Costa Rica from 23rd–25th May 2006. As a result of these

discussions, IIED and the Community-Based Forest Enterprise Development Programme (CBED) of FAO developed a response. Together with inputs from various country partners, they developed an alliance called Forest Connect dedicated to addressing the isolation of SMFEs. The aim was to strengthen the capacity of national partners to facilitate better linkages between SMFEs, markets, service providers and decision makers. Funded project activities began in early 2007 with partners from Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guatemala, Guyana, Mozambique and Nepal. By 2008 in-country demand had led to the addition of China, Ethiopia, India, Mali and Laos.

Early Forest Connect activities included diagnostics to raise awareness of the extent and nature of small forest enterprises in each context. Financial and business service providers have been mapped and in some cases, benchmarked. Communication platforms, hosted by Forest Connect partners, that aim to maintain contact with SMFEs are now active or are being established using newsletters, bulletin boards, trade fairs, mobile telephone price and payment services and the Internet to facilitate better links between small forest enterprise associations, markets, service providers and policy makers. Specific training courses to

improve forest product design and business practice have been carried out.

While still in its early phase of development, it has quickly become clear that there is strong demand for greater sharing of knowledge. This demand was articulated in emails and at meetings, both by Forest Connect partners who wanted to know what each other was doing, and by numerous practitioners who support SMFEs in countries that the Forest Connect alliance is unable to provide financial support to. In early 2008, IIED decided to explore the potential of using an Internet platform to develop a social networking website with registration open to all that would enable partners and other interested parties to share information more easily. Funding came from the UK Department for International Development (DfID), Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DANIDA), Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Norwegian government (NORAD).

Methods and processes

The potential to be more creative in networking partners has emerged through developments of Web 2.0 platforms. Web 2.0 is a term describing new World Wide Web technologies and web design that allow greater information sharing and collaboration with options for both public and private communication between users. Web 2.0 concepts have led to the development and evolution of web-based communities and hosted services, such as social networking websites, video-sharing websites, wikis and blogs. IIED reviewed and then selected one social networking platform that appeared most useful, Ning.com. The advantage of Ning was that it had pre-designed modules (e.g. for member profiles, messaging between members, text boxes, blogs, discussion forums, video- and photo-sharing) that even the electronically challenged could click and drag to make a presentable and functional website. The blog and discussion forum tools provide a means to publicly add written text, while the messaging tool allows members to communicate directly with one another (albeit in a way that others can see if they look at individual member profiles). Although it does not have a dedicated document repository facility, the website has the capacity to create a virtual library of useful documents through a link to another useful social bookmarking website, Delicious.com.²

² Social bookmarking website Delicious allows users of a Ning website to create a list of documents already available on the Internet and tag each one with explanatory terms or keywords. These tags can then serve as an index for other users. For example, a document might be tagged with words such as 'manual' or a country name such as 'Guatemala' to allow website users interested in a particular topic or region to find information more easily. See also Social bookmarking, p.119 (this issue).

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The co-managers of the Forest Connect alliance targeted a particular audience – civil society groups, government departments and private sector representative bodies – who acted to support SMFE development. Content was designed to build capacity of those organisations by providing guidance on approaches and tactics to supporting SMFEs, as well as national summaries of SMFE activities. The website was not deemed appropriate for SMFE managers themselves, many of whom do not have Internet access, and whose needs are more context-specific. For SMFEs themselves, more accessible country communication platforms have been developed as described above.

Initial discussions within the co-management team were held to determine what features the website should contain and what it would look like. The actual process of converting that design into reality took less than a day, with one IIED team member developing the main framework and then the IIED Forest Connect co-manager stocking the site with a few useful reports and manuals on SMFEs, example blogs and discussion topics, photos and videos to stimulate interest. Forest Connect country partners were then invited to join in late January 2008. In addition, links were made to several existing websites of Forest Connect partners, the content of which had been driven by in-country decisions on the most useful national information on SMFEs in consultation with the IIED and FAO co-managers. Once initial feedback was received from these initial Forest Connect country partners, a wider group of SMFE practitioners and known resource persons were invited to join the website. All new members received a welcome message to encourage them to spread word to others who might find it useful. In two weeks 100 new members had registered, followed by a further 50 more after nine weeks – and another 50 after 20 weeks. In the first two weeks membership came primarily through existing Forest Connect links and relationships, but this dynamic rapidly broadened out to include distant chains of 'contacts of contacts' and those who found the website independently

using Internet search engines when looking for relevant material on SMFEs.

The IIED co-manager of Forest Connect and IIED website administrator at IIED, who had developed it without any prior training, noticed after the first few weeks that repeat visits were limited. In order to encourage repeat visits and new members alike, a threefold strategy was adopted. Firstly, a concerted effort was made by the IIED co-manager of Forest Connect to upload a regular stream of useful new information drawn from the many other institutional websites dealing with SMFEs. Secondly, the project developments within the Forest Connect alliance were edited by the IIED co-manager of Forest Connect into news features (e.g. workshop proceedings, country developments and managerial decisions such as the election of an international steering committee). Thirdly, a short bimonthly email digest was initiated to inform existing members of recent additions and developments, under the headings of: news, resources, discussions, blog posts, photos and videos. By highlighting such contributions, repeat visits by members have greatly improved.

Lessons learnt, critical reflections and analysis

By March 2009 the Forest Connect social networking website had in excess of 300 members, many of whom visit the website regularly (or at least occasionally following the bimonthly digests). Members have started to add blog posts with useful reports, or to post or participate in discussions. Many also use the website to send individual messages to other members. Some post messages announcing financial or consultancy opportunities. Many have added photos of their work. A number have downloaded reports or manuals from the document library. Comments, such as those in Boxes 1-3 indicate that at least some members find the website useful.

Box 2. Yarri Kamara (Enterprise support manager for TreeAid West Africa, the Forest Connect country partner for Burkina Faso) comments on the Forest Connect networking site

The Forest Connect network site is a very useful hub site that allows one to keep up to date on important developments amongst the other Forest Connect project partners without having to necessarily visit all the separate project websites. I also particularly appreciate the different resources that members of the network put up on the site. On relational aspects, having photos of members that rotate on the home page of the site creates a greater sense of a shared community especially when you start recognising some of the faces.

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A number of lessons have been learnt through this process, which others with similar visions might find useful:

- Keeping the confines of content and audience clear has helped to assemble a membership that is genuinely active in this field with useful experience to share.
- IIED management of this online social network (by the co-manager of Forest Connect) has taken considerable energy and time (at least one day per month). The Forest Connect alliance has evolved very much as an organic response to a perceived set of partner country issues, with funding raised along the way, rather than as a top-down and pre-designed project. Given the retrospective understanding of how useful this activity has been, it would be useful to budget time for website management into a Forest Connect alliance project, but this has not yet proved palatable to donors.
- Few members have taken on a proactive role in uploading material unless actively promoted and chased to do so. The IIED site managers suspect that many supporters of SMFEs would appreciate wider exposure of their ideas and materials, but are inevitably time-constrained. While it may be possible in future to build in contractual requirements for funded Forest Connect partners to share their materials on this website, beyond this small contractual group the website manager's knowledge of – and time to pursue – the main actors in the field will be critical to broadening future contributions.
- Keeping the website fresh with new information and periodic updates to members has encouraged greater use and information sharing. The greatest interest seems to relate to new country reports, practical manuals and announcements of financial or consultancy opportunities – these can help to attract repeat visits.
- The document library available through the Delicious platform has been useful (in common with other document archives). However, the existing platform is not fully searchable and requires a careful use of the tags described in the previous footnote to make resources easily available. With hindsight it would have been useful to have given careful thought to the most useful category tags in advance. For example, it now seems best to have a few broad document tag categories such as ‘manual’, ‘report’, ‘case study’

A screen shot of the Forest Connect social networking website.

Image: Forest Connect Alliance.

'review' supplemented by more specific geographical tags such as 'Ethiopia', 'Burkina Faso' or content-specific tags such as 'finance', 'marketing', 'business development' etc. Setting up such a hierarchy carefully in advance would have avoided the need to retag numerous documents later on, a process which is currently happening, rather laboriously.

- While one or two documents have been made available in Spanish and French, the website itself is entirely in English – primarily because of lack of funds to pay for translation and the lack of an easy format in which to provide translated content. Administrators are currently fundraising for this, but have neither encouraged nor discouraged users from uploading documents in their own languages to date. With members from 48 countries, the linguistic shortcomings of the website are obvious.
- It is a challenge to provide the necessary guidance on how to

use the two main avenues for contributing written materials to the website, blog and discussion tools. Several members tried and gave up, either through lack of familiarity or time taken using slower connection speeds, opting instead to send files to the website administrators to upload. Others find the website a bit difficult to navigate, which could be addressed, time-permitting, by adding a 'how to use this website' manual as a featured publication (see Box 3).

- There have been a few instances of mistaken uploads or deliberate attempts at self or institutional promotion, but these can easily be dealt with through private messages to those concerned to indicate why certain types of use might clog the site with inappropriate material – followed by mutually agreed deletion of unwanted content.

The inability to search or sort members alphabetically or by country or institution on Ning websites is a major drawback for those wishing to identify potential contacts in differ-

Box 3. Sharon Ousman (Researcher at Iwokrama International Centre for Rain Forest Conservation and Development, the Forest Connect country partner in Guyana) comments on the Forest Connect website

I have found the website to be very useful in terms of the practical literature and manuals on support to small and medium forest enterprises. This means that many countries don't need to spend an enormous amount of resources to recreate these manuals for training and other capacity building efforts. They just need maybe minor tweaks to make the literature adaptive to particular countries and targeted groups. I do feel like I am navigating in a maze – it is bit cluttered and confusing – however I do eventually get through.

ent institutions or countries. Presently, a search involves page by page scrolling through many hundreds of members.

Ideas for ways forward

Fundraising for time to develop the website further is an obvious priority – for example, providing better guidance for users, doing more translations and chasing up potential resource contributors would help move the website beyond an information source towards the true social network that is still embryonic at present. In addition it might prove possible to build in responsibilities into the terms of reference of Forest Connect alliance partners for scanning and uploading regional documents. This too might help to encourage broader sharing of information. In addition, there are plans to experiment with more opinionated discussion starters to try and invoke more active debate on the website. While the website has not been used for any formal e-conference, this would potentially be possible using a set of considered discussion topics and summaries to which participants could respond.

The limited experience of managing this networking website to date suggests that the technology could potentially be used by other 'communities of practitioners' in other fields. It seems most appropriate to well-connected interme-

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diary organisations rather than local community or private sector groups. Feedback would be welcome from others using alternative Web 2.0 platforms that might provide some of the functionality that constrains the utility of Ning. Budgeting the time for managing such sites is an important consideration.

Box 4. Phuong Thao (Ministry of Industry and Commerce, Department of Production and Trade Promotion, the Forest Connect country partner in Lao PDR) comments on the Forest Connect networking website

I found the Forest Connect website a useful source of information on SMFEs and sector development. The way the website is structured is very much user-friendly. Only in one minute, I can already make a quick scan on what is new and what is interesting for me.

Conclusion

The Forest Connect networking website has allowed institutions supporting SMFEs to share useful information pertinent to their field of work. It has put members in touch with one another and helped to create a virtual archive of resources and ideas for practitioners. The technology involved could help other groups of practitioners hoping to achieve similar aims. Launching such websites is relatively easy. Finding the time, budget, and incentives for participating users to contribute and keep them going is more of a challenge!

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