

Local Content in Mali: In times of abundance, operation abilities are still limited

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Mali is a country where culture is described as being mainly oral. A priori, this situation is not in favor of the written production of cultural goods. The holders of local knowledge are people considered by the communities as a resource in charge of passing on this knowledge according to tradition. In spite of this de facto situation, there are many initiatives of change developing here and there. According to this new approach, local content is produced by institutions or commercial organisms, by civil society and mainly by the media.

Most of the production is due to civil society. In the areas of health, we can point out the Medical Portal of Mali, the medical e-magazine and a bibliographical database that gathers the thesis about health that have been written in Mali, among others. In the area of culture, we want to point out the existence of several Web sites belonging to internationally well known artists as well as several journals written in French, such as the national daily newspaper l'Essor. In the area of Linguistics, the site of the African Academy of Languages (Académie Africaine des Langues) and the web site of the Fondation Karanta.

Finally, in the area of basic research in computational linguistics, the most important achievement has been the creation of courseware in national languages by Pr. Emile Camara and, in the area of applied computer science, the creation of the software Makdas multifunction entirely in bamanan language by Pr. Doucouré. It is also important to highlight the historic fact that all these steps forward are being developed thanks to the accompanying measures of a democratic environment.

The era of democracy and freedom of the press

In the 90s, with the arrival of democracy, a process of liberalization of the media was started, in written and audiovisual press. In such an environment, many free radios were created all over the country. Nowadays, there are near 200. One of the expectations created by this liberalization was that it would foster the circulation of local knowledge, by means of technologies like the radio, which is very accessible and, what is more important, that takes into account linguistic concerns. Today, we can affirm that the impact attained by these radios is considerable, as they have been the real vectors for the distribution of local information.

By way of example, we have the Jamana Cooperative that gathers a network of radios all over the country. Information collected and distributed by the radios in the rural environments was recorded in cassettes or CDs in order to allow people to consult this material in the libraries. Furthermore, the Cooperative has a printing office and performs many publications.

In 1996, Mali was finally connected to the global network. Since then, the Internet has been very helpful for the distribution of local content. The network Jamana has entered in a frame of partnership with the UNESCO in order to create a web site for its journal published in the national language, bamanan, and called Jèkabaara. From that moment on, the journal has been available on line for literate people.

Since the year 2000, the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) has been supporting the web site mali-ntic.com. This site is in fact a means for the dissemination of local and national information regarding the different possible uses of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Among other advantages, the existence of the site increases the standing of the different initiatives for the creation of local content on the Internet.

Since the year 2000, the authorities of Mali have been making efforts to provide Internet connectivity to all the parishes in Mali. In order to meet this objective, many information centers have been set up all over the country, thanks to the support of partners such as the IICD, The UNESCO, USAID, etc.

The impact of such initiatives, mostly aimed at fostering the appreciation of local content, is highly noticeable. Many multimedia Community Centers have been created inside the local radios. UNESCO and USAID have provided financial support for more than twenty of them. The couple radio- Internet has produced a convergence of media that has facilitated the creation of a database, fit for distribution and easy to consult on line over a long period of time. Previously, the radio by itself did not have the means for the storage and processing of all the collected and distributed content.

CLICs are at their peak

Local information and communication centers (CLIC) represent another form of communication centers. At the very core of this project, financially supported by USAID, is the need to supply people with services and value added contents. Precedence is given to local information to be shared with the rest of the CLICs in the network. The content is organized in different fields such as health, education, agriculture, entrepreneurial management, local governance, art, culture and any other subject related to local development.

The CLIC Project is addressed to local, national and international non governmental organizations (NGOs), to community organizations, to public services, and others with the idea of providing them with valuable information covering many areas: case studies, reports, educational brochures, posters, booklets, etc, all this can be produced in different formats such as hard copies, analog or digital images and audio, CD-ROM, DVD, HTML and other electronic means. The total amount of the information collected by the partners of USAID is handled and processed and made available for all the USAID partners. The staff of the project also works in collaboration with each one of the CLICs. They work together in the collection, processing and distribution of local information.

The Gender Approach

The project CLIC-Mali has put a special emphasis on gender equity, by making sure that women have the same opportunities to participate in the management and animation of any CLIC, just as men do. Communities also participate actively

in the development of the content that is later distributed in the network formed by the CLICs. The information produced at this level is perfectly harmonized with the needs and aspirations of local people.

The IICD supports a Web site that covers all the current situation of ICTs for development in Mali. The site contains several headings or columns, among which there is one devoted to the guest of the month. Moreover, and always as part of the program of knowledge sharing in partnership with the national network ToguNet, other tools have been developed, such as a quarterly information newsletter. Also, a film showing the process of the drying of onions has been produced, starting from the experiences of women in the AGVF Association in Bandiagara (in the region of Mopti). The film is highly appreciated any time that an information center takes the initiative to show it in a public performance on a big projection screen.

Problems posed by the gathering and appreciation of local content in Mali

What is hard to find in Mali is not content. The country lacks of time, of energy and it still needs to develop the appropriate skills to find and process this content.

And this situation is valid for the media. We are speaking about the capacity of the media to use the content that is at stake. It is extremely difficult for the State in Mali to get involved and try to help, as its actions are strongly restricted by lack of resources. We must also say that there is no evidence whatsoever that the State really wants the development of the press in the country. One thing is to support civil society and a completely different thing is to support the Press. Civil society starts up projects that last from one to five years while the work of the Press is constant. This is, in fact, a matter of education, something that has to be built in the long term.

Axe formation, a structure oriented towards the creation of content.

This organization has a staff with a limited number of people at its disposal. They have developed several Web sites like penserpouragri.org, initiatives.net.ml, etc.

Among many other important activities, the organization has worked on the subject of decentralization; in partnership with the network « Réussir la décentralisation » that gathers together groups of study, several organizations of civil society, partners for development, and technical services. The network « Réussir la décentralisation » specializes in all the questions referred to decentralization and the management of natural resources. This partnership started in 2006.

The network has produced different kinds of information. Studies about decentralization have been conducted there, as well as about local governance, about the management of natural resources and about real estate conflicts. This resulted in very good quality products, showing a careful meditation on the subjects and accompanied by many references. The information gathered has been published on the Web site Penser pour agir (Think and then act). Once the texts are sent, the editors of Penser pour agir pay attention first of all to the on-

lining. They have to work on the title, the articulation of the chapters, etc in order to offer to the guests a digest version of the document. Sometimes, it is necessary to simplify the text, others, they have to put some parts as attachments. The information is there, but it has to be properly displayed. They have to edit it.

The network publishes also a quarterly newsletter informing about the common activities in their area of competence. Usually activities on the subject of development, training activities, workshops or even an inventory or a program ready to start. Often, there are also postings that show the development of different activities. All these publications are useful pieces of information that have been processed by the staff, in order to be entered on the Web site Initiatives mali. There are also PDF documents and .doc files. Therefore, an important work in the shaping of the articles is made, in order to pay attention to the requirements of the different search engines. People have access to a printable html on line version or to another version that can be sent via the Internet.

Axe formation has also developed a Web site dealing with the subject of the Law of Agricultural Guidance. For this, and during several months, the team has kept up with the process of rural agreements, prior to the drafting of the law. Information was released as they got over the different stages of evolution of the works. This is another kind of experience, which deals with exclusively one subject by means of several publications, in this case, the subject of agriculture and the development of rural areas in Mali.

Once more, it is important to bear in mind that all these initiatives must not make us forget that the production of local content is faced with very serious problems, such as the lack of communication infrastructure, the lack of means for the production of content (Internet access and hardware), absence of good quality training, lack of normalization for the written code of almost all the local languages (Unicode, ASCII and HTML) and, finally, a very high rate of illiteracy, not only formal but also technological.

In conclusion, the production of local content is a major challenge for the identity of a community as it helps to translate global knowledge and to make it relevant for the local situation. It is also the best way to promote the distribution of local and traditional knowledge, taking into account all the social and cultural determinants of the community.

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www.iConnect-online.org is a knowledge sharing platform for Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in sustainable development. iConnect draws content from its partners, links resources and expertise and encourages collaboration. For the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), the host of iConnect, this is a way to share experiences, lessons learned and ideas, and interact with communities and people with an interest in development and the applications of ICTs. These experiences can lead to a better understanding of the actual benefits of ICTs for Development (ICT4D). The core of iConnect will be a series of locally written articles on the impact and the use of ICTs for development. The articles have a strong focus on fact finding; objective information on ICT4D practices from a southern perspective: Southern content written by Southern people. i4d is the iConnect partner for Asia, and ECA is the iConnect partner for Africa, disseminating the articles to their public.
