

INSAH Reaches Out Via the Internet to Better Serve Its Clientele

During 2006 the Sahel Institute (INSAH) took a major step forward in providing the West African community and the rest of the world with Internet access to key data bases and publications related to agricultural development, environmental and resource management, and demographic and health issues. Since the 1970s, INSAH/CILSS, USAID, and partners (including the National Agricultural Research Systems of CILSS countries) have made substantial investments in developing databases and publishing research on pertinent development topics. Prior to this project, the process for obtaining information about INSAH publications and access to copies of publications and data bases was slow—hard copies or CDs sent via post—and did not serve the needs of potential users wanting rapid access to information to resolve problems in a timely manner.

All of INSAH's publications and data bases are now available electronically via its website. In addition to making these materials available electronically, INSAH made a significant investment in reorganizing the data bases so that documents can be more easily searched using keywords and data bases can provide statistics in a variety of configurations based on a particular user's needs.

The end result of this one-year effort is that INSAH has added significant value to its past research results and data collection efforts by making them readily available to both public and private sector actors. In addition, the project has built human and institutional capacity within INSAH to maintain and expand the website. Through outreach workshops to inform users of the changes and train them in efficient use of the Internet, the project has contributed to a strengthening of West African capacity for policy formulation and implementation while also improving communication between researchers, policy analysts, and public and private sector actors.

USAID/WARP funded this one-year start-up activity through a \$135,000 Associate Award to Michigan State University's Food Security III Cooperative Agreement and \$65,000 directly to INSAH through its Project Implementation Letter (PIL). INSAH and MSU designed an integrated program that co-funded the following website improvement and training activities:

- Putting four databases on line, making them interactive, and developing an Intranet to maintain and update the databases (done through an MSU sub-contract with Data Analysis Support Center of Rome).
- Training INSAH staff to maintain and further develop the website and databases.
- Helping organize a training program for librarians and researchers from Mali, Senegal, and Burkina Faso on AGORA and HINARI (systems allowing free on-line access to nearly 2000 journals); INSAH used the workshop as an outreach opportunity to demonstrate its improved website.
- Conducting a workshop in Bamako to inform stakeholders of website changes.

The data bases newly available on line include:

- All 703 INSAH/CILSS publications (available in PDF format)
- A directory of Sahelian expertise, including:
 - 766 researchers associated with INSAH's partner institutions
 - 136 institutions doing research in the Sahel
 - 224 technologies developed by INSAH and partner institutions
- A database of CILSS member country profiles containing demographic and health data, much of it relevant for monitoring poverty indicators.
- A database of over 400 pesticides approved for use within the CILSS member states.

At the time this work began, none of these databases was available through the INSAH website. The pesticides data base illustrates well the nature of the constraints that have been overcome by this project. When the locust crisis of 2004/05 hit West Africa, decision-makers across the Sahel lacked easy access to information on authorized pesticides. Now both decision makers and private sector actors have easy access to information on approved pesticides for each member country and will be much better able to respond quickly to future crises.

Participants at the Bamako outreach workshop included donor representatives, Malian government services, research institutions and universities, and project representatives. Strong public interest in the topic was shown by the surprisingly good press coverage for a relatively small workshop, with videos appearing on the evening news the same day and also being run again during the weekend. Participants were enthusiastic about the website. Several

participants made suggestions about eventually linking the INSAH website to their sites and coordinating the databases. By the end of the Bamako outreach workshop there appeared to be a general consensus on two issues:

- The website improvements represented a real accomplishment for INSAH and an important contribution to the widespread dissemination of information essential to W. African development
- The challenge of keeping the data up to date and accurate is great and has often been the downfall of similar efforts by others in the past—INSAH must not drop the ball!

In addition to activities directly supported by the project, INSAH has taken advantage of their participation in regional meetings such as the CORAF/WECARD (*Conseil ouest et centre africain pour la recherche et le développement agricole*) to publicize the improved website and assist the research and policy community in learning how to use it efficiently. Response has been very positive, with participants recognizing the potential that the Internet holds for overcoming many of the constraints that have restricted widespread distribution and use of African research results. Examples of follow-on activities currently planned as a result of INSAH having led the way in demonstrating the potential of the Internet include:

- The CILSS (*Comité permanent inter-états de lutte contre la secheresse dans le Sahel*) decision to improve their website and that of AGRHYMET by putting all their documents and data bases on-line, with appropriate links to the INSAH system; this will include a new data base being developed for monitoring and evaluating CILSS projects and about three thousand documents.
- ROPPA (Réseau des organisations paysannes et de producteurs de l’Afrique de l’Ouest)¹ has requested that INSAH attend their 2006 forum in Nigeria to introduce their members to the INSAH website, with a particular focus on information in the INSAH website of particular interest to ROPPA’s mission (the technology data base, research reports on policy issues of concern to farmer organizations) and assistance in accessing other pertinent resources such as the Food Security Information Portal.

WARP has agreed to support INSAH/MSU for a second year of activities focused on the decentralization of database maintenance to partner institutions in CILSS countries, improved organization of the country profile data base, and public outreach to increase use.

¹ ROPPA, created in 2000, unites representatives of national producer organizations in 10 West African countries (Bénin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo), acting as a source of information on production and trade issues and advocacy for farmer interests in regional and international forums. Its goal is to expand membership to all of West Africa.