ENHANCING ACCESS TO ONLINE INFORMATION BY RESEARCHERS AND EXTENSION AGENTS IN RURAL UGANDA THROUGH A VOUCHER SYSTEM

END OF PROJECT REPORT

NOVEMBER 2010

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2.0 Acronyms

CD-ROM - Computer Disc Read on Memory

FAO - Food and Agricultural Organisation

ICTs - Information and Communication Technologies

INASP - International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications

KDFA - Kayunga District Farmers Association (KDFA)

MUK – Makerere University Kampala

NARO - National Agricultural Research Organisation

OARE - Online Access to Research in the Environment

OUP - Oxford University Press

PDF - Portable Document Format

PERii - Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information

QAS – Question and Answer Service

REN - Rural Empowerment Network

VS   – Voucher Service

3.0 Executive Summary

This is the end-of-project report for the project 'Enhancing Access to Online Information by Researchers and Extension Agents in Rural Uganda through a Voucher System' implemented by The Rural Empowerment Network (REN), in partnership with the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications' (INASP) Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERii).

The project was based on the voucher concept of information service delivery which sought to enhance researchers' and extension agents' access to online information. This approach of information service delivery responds to specific identified information needs using various actors and tools to capture process and disseminate appropriate and timely information. The voucher system is an important tool to enable information services to gauge the information needs of users and also provide appropriate responses to these needs.

During the course of the project, two hundred (200) requests were received and responded to. The project covered two districts: Kasese and Mityana. An analysis of the information requests reveals that 103 requests were from Mityana and 93 were from Kasese. 105 of the requests were by researchers and 95 were by extension agents.

The initiative to enhance access to online information by researchers and extension agents through a voucher system in rural Uganda has been able to fill the gap created by lack of access to online information and the unavailability of relevant information in most rural areas of the country and the voucher system is going to continue enhancing researchers' and extension agents' access to INASP and other online information.

This report gives recommendations for the proper implementation of the voucher system of information service delivery.

4.0 Background to the Project

Dramatic changes have taken place in the way academic, research and development communities' access and exchange information worldwide. Electronic access to information, especially via the Internet, has grown rapidly over the past few years. This development is providing a new opportunity for promoting, exchanging and distributing scholarly and research information. Researchers and extension agents across the world are now finding it increasingly important to have fast and easy access to national and international information resources like journals and other information gateways in order to improve efficiency and enhance their work.

The Rural Empowerment Network (REN) is a non-profit organisation in Uganda whose aim is to provide development information to rural communities in Uganda. REN in partnership with the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications' (INASP) Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERii) implemented the project 'Enhancing Access to Online Information by Researchers and Extension Agents in Rural Uganda through a Voucher System'. This included the conducting of sensitisation workshops to explain the voucher concept of information service delivery so as to enhance access to online information, and the provision of responses to requested information.

The initiative to enhance access to online information by researchers and extension agents through a voucher system in rural Uganda was an attempt to fill the gap created by lack of access to online information and the unavailability of relevant information in most rural areas of the country.

The voucher system was developed by REN in response to a realization that information users were lacking adequate access to the information they required. Information needs assessment studies were conducted by REN and one of her partners, Kayunga District Farmers Association (KDFA), to inform on the best way to serve information end-users. The methodology involved the use of basic research using questionnaires and focus-group interviews. These methods however, had limitations

because they did not draw out all the needs of information users since the responses from the users could not be corroborated for accuracy. In the cases when they drew them out, they did not have a system to respond to them.

It was therefore important to develop a system that not only drew out the information needs of users but also provided an appropriate response to them. This involved developing a questionnaire that was tested, fine tuned and adopted as a voucher.

This project has proven that the voucher system is an effective approach to effectively draw out the information needs of users and address them. This is because the voucher systems approach:

- Turns information needs into demand
- Provides equitable access because vouchers can be targeted to specific target groups – in this case researchers and extension agents
- Gives high returns for investment as compared to other systems of knowledge transfer because only requested information is made available
- Ensures the mining of relevant content from various information sources and therefore facilitating the use of research findings.
- Maps information sources
- Builds an archive for all questions and their answers for present and future use.

One of the objectives of the project was to provide participants with the knowledge and skills to access and effectively utilise information products and services provided by INASP/PERii Uganda Programme, REN and other online information services.

Two districts in Uganda which are rural based, from different agro-ecological zones and therefore present different challenges were selected to participate in this project. Participants from the Kasese and Mityana districts who had to be researchers or extension agents and were willing to participate in the voucher process training workshop and expressed a desire to access online information.

At each site, the training targeted 25 researchers/scientists, and 25 extension agents and it was assumed that all participants had at least a basic appreciation of computers and had used the Internet before.

After the training, 200 information requests (vouchers) were responded to.

This project was necessary in pioneering the use of the voucher system to enhance researchers' and extension agents' access to INASP/PERii and other online information.

5.0 The Voucher Process

5.1 Receiving Completed Information Requests

All information requests were received by e-mail. An attempt was made, at the training workshops, to create e-mail accounts for project beneficiaries who did not have them. A soft copy of the information request - (annex I) was also given to them.

5.2 Data entry into the INASP-REN Database

Once the request is received, staff at the REN resource centre allocate a unique code to it and it is entered into the database. Details of the name of requester, their gender, their location, the detailed information request, the urgency, date of receipt, and the reason for the request.

5.3 Response to Information Request

The staff at the resource centre use online resources provided by INASP/PERii and other related online databases to research and find a response to the request.

The response is normally a journal article, a bibliography, or an internet document.

The response is then sent by e-mail to the requester. A soft copy of the evaluation form – (annex II) is also attached to enable the requester to evaluate the response for

relevance, timeliness, and presentation. If the evaluation form is returned, an appropriate entry is made into the database.

5.4 Archiving a Copy of the Response

A copy of the answer is also printed and archived for purposes of future reference. The unique code allocated to the information request is also noted on the printed answer and filed in the archive.

6.0 Analysis of Information Requests

During the course of the project, two hundred requests (200) were received and responded to. The project covered two the districts of Kasese and Mityana. An analysis of the information requests reveals that 93 requests were from Mityana and 107 were from Kasese. 105 of the requests were by researchers and 95 were by extension agents.

The requests data was captured in an access-based database – INASP-REN QAS database and all the responses were printed and stored in an information archive at the REN resource centre.

A detailed analysis of the information requests reveals that 172 stated that the reason for the request was for research purposes, 6 for community education, 6 for agro-processing, 3 for primary production, 3 for product development, 3 for lecture purposes, 3 for policy development, 2 for personal use, 1 for marketing information, and 1 for proposal writing.

136 of the requests were received from males and 64 from females. 180 of the requests indicated an urgent need for a response, and 20 did not indicate urgency.

7.0 Project Outputs and Outcomes

The outcomes of the project are:

- An increase in the knowledge on and about the voucher system process and knowledge about online resources that can be accessed by researchers and extension agents. This knowledge is expected to lead to an increase in access, utilisation, and exchange of information resources by them.

- A fully functional INASP-REN QAS database with 200 information requests and requester information. This database is continuing to be used to enter information requests that are received from researchers and extension agents. Staff at the resource centre now query the database whenever a new information request is received. Currently, the process of tagging the existing requests to their responses so that a more accessible shortened version of the responses can be easily accessed by other users. Once accomplished, the database will be uploaded to our website when internet speeds are favourable.

- Project outputs for example the database is enabling REN to analyse data parameters with regard to information requests. The analyzed data is going to be used in developing different work plans for the organisation.

- An archive, which is a file with printed copies of the answers for purposes of future reference. The archive together with the database prevents the duplication of efforts and saves on response time for future requests.

8.0 Partner Visit to REN Resource Centre

In September 2010, Trish Sheehan, INASP, visited the REN resource centre in Kayunga, Central Uganda, to acquaint herself with the progress of the project and to interact with the REN programme coordinator and some project beneficiaries.

Some of the Participants to the INASP-REN Training Workshop 30 November–1 December, 2009, Kasese International Hotel, Kasese, Uganda

Among the project outputs she looked at were the INASP-REN QAS Database and the Information archive. She also discussed issues pertaining to the project with one of the beneficiaries- an extension agent from Mityana – one of the project sites.

9.0. Recommendations and Suggested Way Forward

Based on the project experience, some of the suggested recommendations are:

1. In the next phase of the project, we recommend that the current sites be maintained so that more researchers and extension agents from these sites continue benefitting from the project and additional sites should be included from four other districts in the country.

2. To further increase the utilisation of the already mobilized information, the project recommends that a CD-ROM with requests and their answers be produced and shared among different resource centres.

3. The nature of the voucher system is that it is easy to target specific users and therefore we suggest that the system should be allowed to target more users beyond research and extension for example students and policy makers.

4. Development initiatives in other sectors for example health, education, environment, and natural resource management need to adopt the voucher system concept as an important needs assessment tool.

10. Conclusion

The voucher system of information service delivery should continue to be tested, and documented in order to demonstrate its viability as a useful tool to expose more and more people to scholarly information on the internet and therefore needs to be supported by development partners.

This project is an important intervention in contributing to improved research outputs and agricultural productivity. It has demonstrated its potential to increase access to information leading to improved farmer incomes and contributing to food security.
It is therefore important that these activities continue to be supported in order to consolidate the gains realized so far.

Enhancing Access to Online Information

INFORMATION REQUEST FORM

The International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) has for years continued to provide access to national and international scholarly information and knowledge by responding, with particular emphasis, to the needs of developing and emerging countries. The Rural Empowerment Network (REN) is a non-profit organisation in Uganda whose aim is to provide development information to rural communities in Uganda. This Voucher (Request Form) entitles you to submit a request for information that addresses your problem and in return receive a customised response from an expert.

Please complete this form and submit it to REN.

State your question here.

_____

_____

Reason for request; (Choose one)

☐   Primary production (Crop, Livestock, e.t.c)   ☐   Policy Development

☐   Research   ☐   Community Education

☐   Agro-Processing   ☐   Health

☐   Marketing Information   ☐   Business / Agribusiness

☐   Lecture / Address   ☐   Other

PERSONAL INFORMATION

I am a: Researcher   Extension Officer   Other

Gender

☐   Male   ☐   Female

District   _____

Type of organisation you are affiliated with:

☐   NGO/CBO/FBO   ☐ Farmer Group / Association

☐   Commercial Company   ☐ Government Organisation

☐   University / College   ☐ Health Unit

☐   Research Institute   ☐ Other

How can we get in touch with you?

Title: ☐ Mr.   ☐ Mrs.   ☐ Ms.   ☐ Dr.   ☐ Prof.

Name: _____

Postal Address: _____

Tel/Mob: _____   E-mail: _____

URGENCY:

Your request is usually processed promptly. Should you need the information sooner, please indicate

☐   Urgent   ☐   Not so urgent

Date request submitted   _____

Please return this form to:

Rural Empowerment Network (REN) Resource Centre

Plot 14, Sekagya Road – Kayunga

P.O. Box 18264 Kayunga, Uganda

Tel: 256-782-671846; 256-783-972091

E-mail: ren_empower@yahoo.com; ren@isicad.org

Official use only
Request Code : _____
Staff receiving : _____

Enhancing Access to Online Information

RESPONSE EVALUATION FORM

Prof./Dr./ Mr./Mrs.//Ms _____

On _____, we received a request for information from you as follows:

This was your request:

_____

We would like to know whether the information we are dispatching to you meets your needs in terms of: **Level of relevance**

☐ Very relevant   ☐ Relevant   ☐ Not relevant

Presentation

☐ Good   ☐ Fairly Good   ☐ Poor

If not, how could it be improved? _____

Timeliness ☐ Timely   ☐ More or less   ☐ Not timely

Have you any suggestion(s) on how we can improve the service?

_____

Please return the completed form to the address below.

Rural Empowerment Network (REN) Resource Centre

Plot 14, Sekagya Road – Kayunga

P.O. Box 18264 Kayunga, Uganda

Tel: 256-782-671846; 256-783-972091   E-mail: ren_empower@yahoo.com; ren@isicad.org

| **Official use only** |
| Request Code: _____ |
| Staff forwarding response: _____ |