Afribes: Towards a social network of scientific and technical information for Africa

The Brief in brief

The Afribes network is a social network of scientific and technical information on biodiversity and ecosystem services for Africa (www.afribes.net). This brief presents Afribes, its current functions and its possible evolution as a Science-Policy Interface (SPI).

Setting the scene

Afribes emerged from the consultative process on an International Mechanism of Scientific Expertise on Biodiversity (IMoSEB) and its regional consultations. The 2007 African consultation held in Yaoundé highlighted that information transfer and ownership and the capacity to find the "right information at the right place" were pressing needs of African biodiversity stakeholders. The development of a social pilot network for Africa was considered, to 1) develop a spirit of information sharing, potentially using a wiki type system; 2) create synergies between holders of traditional knowledge and scientists; and 3) promote South–South and North-South cooperation. Afribes was therefore developed as a possible SPI on African biodiversity, to help in the development of a potential future African IPBES[1] and to build collective and shared intelligence with African biodiversity stakeholders.

Its main goal is to foster better sharing of and access to relevant information on biodiversity as well as better access to African expertise and experts.

To overcome institutional and political constraints and to be a reactive network, Afribes would:

  i) Focus on personal competencies and experiences and expertise of its members;
  ii) Involve all stakeholders (scientists, policy-makers managers, private sector, local communities, NGOs…);
  iii) Have low operating costs: by using open source technologies and cooperative tools to build Afribes and copyright licenses free of charge to the public (Creative commons).

Approach taken in SPIRAL to study the test case

Building a prototype network

To build the Afribes as a real social network, a bottom-up and a 'form-follows-functions' approach were promoted. Hence Afribes started by:

  - focussing on the major needs identified by its members: Questionnaires were sent to biodiversity stakeholders. Some specific needs were underlined and a first set of key functions of the network were developed step by step.

  - promoting the concept of the network and getting feedback from potential members.

Based on the answers and feedback, a "beta prototype" of Afriseb was established using intuitive tools (wiki system, pad, maps…) easy to use and free of charge.

This first prototype was presented to several audiences (CTA[2] workshop, DIVERSITAS Open Science conference, IAALD[3], TDWG[4] conferences) in 2009-2011. The concept of a social network was generally well accepted by potential members (African and others).

Promoting and highlighting the network

Since 2011, the network has been open to everybody and several functions are available to its members. Two workshops were organized within SPIRAL. The first one in Tunis, Tunisia in April 2012 gathered around 25 participants from different countries. This workshop allowed the identification of improvements in the network and means to implement them. It also gave the opportunity of training sessions on some of the cooperative tools. Participant accepted to be Afribes ambassadors and promote the network.

The second workshop was held in Dakar, Senegal. Mixing improvements of the network and training sessions, the main points raised related to Afribes governance and the position of Afribes within the current landscape of biodiversity institutions. A task force of Afriseb members was set up in Dakar to develop options on these topics.

Afribes was also presented by its members at several conferences and discussions in Africa (Algeria, Cameroon, Gabon, Senegal, South Africa) and also in Water and Forestry Engineering schools (Gabon).

What Afribes can offer

  - A voluntary skill directory with maps where each member can add its competencies and experiences;

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[1] IPBES is the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. See companion SPIRAL Brief SPIRALing IPBES.

[2] Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation
[3] International Association of Agricultural Information Specialists
[4] TDWG - Biodiversity Information Standards

- A Web portal to share information: publications, proceedings, calls for proposals, events, jobs;

- Search engines to find information on the Afribes website (experts from countries, competencies, groups of discussion…) and also on databases, websites, open archives connected to Afribes (based on SIST Cirad technologies);

- Projects/discussion rooms where cooperative tools are at the disposal of members and projects to i) develop common actions and ii) create communities of work (thematic, geographic…).

Key lessons learned from the Test Case

Afribes is filling a gap

Even though Afribes is not yet a fully-operational SPI and is sometimes perceived as a "UFO" in the biodiversity arena, it has, with a limited budget, brought added value for biodiversity stakeholders and knowledge holders who decided to be part of the network, by increasing relations and communication and promoting their expertise. This demonstrates that the initial idea in 2007 was good and deserves to be further developed.

Developing a bottom-up approach is not easy

The development of the bottom-up approach in Afribes requires a strong members base and active coordination to maintain the dynamic network. It was hard to involve foreign and African scientists mainly due to a lack of time, even when they were interested by some functions (e.g. skill directory). An operational coordination team has to be set up to work regularly for the network (follow group activities, fostering initiatives of members). This coordination cannot be done only by a volunteer team and should be professionalised.

Developing a 'form-follows-functions' approach is not easy

Afribes was developed as a network with a very light governance (a small coordination team). Being more and more active, the governance issue appears frequently in the discussions. This was especially the case during the Dakar workshop. It appears that some actors are not comfortable when formal institutional bodies (Board, scientific council) are not established. More training on the functioning of social/participatory network should have been done (and will be done). At the same time Afribes should be clearer in its vision, mission and status and its governance should evolve accordingly.

Cooperative tools, Web 2.0 and Creative Commons, are powerful tools

Most actors involved or interested in the development of Afribes agree on one point: the tools presented and used in Afriseb (wiki, etherpad, freeplane…) are tools that fill a gap and help them to work in a cooperative way. Several training sessions on these tools have been requested and some have been carried out.

With the current blooming of the use of Internet in Africa, these tools will be increasingly used. Training to facilitate their use is an important task for Afriseb (e-learning, specific courses…).

The use of free copyright licence in Afribes also encourages the cooperation and work between members.

There is a need to better promote the network with African partners

The success of Afribes depends upon a deeper involvement in Africa. The two Afribes workshops were clearly a success in term of promoting of the platform, discussing its future and training.

The presentations and talks given in Africa at conferences or in universities have allowed some actors to discover what Afribes can do for them and to get feedback on the network.

Efforts should be done to allow Afribes members (or the coordination team) to present the network in their schools, and institutions in Africa but also in Northern countries.

Afribes should develop more small actions with rapid added value

Small actions in Afribes at local level --e.g. creation of projects groups, digitalization of existing reports/thesis-- are beneficial to demonstrate value. It allows Afribes members to be more active and to "take ownership" of the network and later develop their own actions. Afribes could therefore be used as a catalyst of initiatives (e.g. the Medivercities network which was an Afribes group before it became an official initiative).

Increasing relations with African and international biodiversity institutions

Afribes should strive to get more recognition from existing institutions and countries as a potential partner with high added value. Collaboration within GBIF[5] Africa has started. Afribes should also link with others partners from the North (development agencies) and from Africa (national/regional). Afribes contributed in July 2013 to the IPBES African regional consultation meeting and links with IPBES will be further explored.

Looking for more information on science-policy interfaces?

For more SPIRAL results, including separate briefs focussing on results from other test cases, see companion SPIRAL briefs at http://www.spiral-project.eu/content/documents

This brief is a result of research and interactions within and around the SPIRAL project. Maxime Thibon, BiodivNet, wrote this brief.

www.spiral-project.eu
info@spiral-project.eu

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[5] Global Biodiversity Information Facility