

Insights from the relaunched Sweetpotato Knowledge Portal

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Sweetpotato
Profit and Health
Initiative
Reaching 10 million
African households by 2020

The Sweetpotato Knowledge Portal was relaunched on 15 February 2016. A comparison of the user statistics from the period 15 February-31 July 2016 against the same period in 2015 shows an upward trend in user engagement.

Fig. 1 Christine Bukania and Caroline Namara register new users during the 2016 FARA Science Week in Kigali - June 2016. (credit A. Ndayisenga)

What is the problem?

The Sweetpotato Knowledge Portal was launched in December 2010 as a platform to harness and improve access to technical, scientific, local and development knowledge on sweetpotato across sub-Saharan Africa. It was also intended to link stakeholders from research with policymakers, development and private sectors, farmers, consumers and students. Initially, the portal was built using Plone, open-source software that is renowned for its security features, but which requires a high level of technical proficiency. As a result, user engagement with the portal did not grow at the expected rate over the five years of SASHA 1 (2009-2014). Moreover, the users have varied knowledge and functional requirements, and operate in rather diverse technical, cultural, socio-political, and administrative contexts. The

challenge therefore, has been to redesign the portal to adequately address these factors.

What do we want to achieve?

We want to transform the portal into a platform that links upstream and downstream actors in the sweetpotato value chain to harness and support innovation, diffusion and adoption of new technologies and best practices that are required to drive sustainable sweetpotato production and utilisation.

How are we making it happen?

As a result of a Sentinel Grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), the SASHA project received support from Agriculture Learning and Impacts (ALINE), a consulting firm contracting by the BMGF and a technical group they hired, NETMIDAS, to redesign the portal, which was relaunched on 15 February 2016. Since then, efforts have been underway to increase registration (Fig. 1) and provide members with the skills to fully utilize its functionalities (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Participants attend an orientation on how to use the Sweetpotato Knowledge Portal. (credit S. Quinn)

The publications repository contains open access publications and abstracts of copyrighted journal articles with links to the sites where they can be accessed. Current content covers breeding, seed systems and crop management, value chains, and nutrition and use. To improve discovery and use, some metadata fields have been made mandatory; and publications can be linked to multiple topics, folders and author profiles.

The projects feature describes ongoing and completed projects and lists of the members. Each project is designed as a collaborative space where teams can store their work and share it publicly or privately.

News and events are posted by any registered member and are highlighted on both the homepage and the topic pages for easier discovery.

Networking is boosted through detailed member profile pages, institutions contacts, and the 'Find Experts' feature. In a bid to increase access to clean planting material, we added the geographical location of 411 male, 141 female and 16 groups decentralised vine multipliers onto the portal.

Four discussion forums reflect the Communities of Practice (CoPs) that are supported under the SPHI: SpeedBreeders and Genomics; Marketing, Processing and Utilisation; Seed Systems and Crop Management; and Monitoring, Learning and Evaluation. Registered members can contribute to any public discussion, and such public discussions can also be viewed by unregistered visitors to the portal. This opens up the sphere of participation and dissemination considerably.

Social media integration: The portal takes advantage of web 2.0 technology and social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, G+ and Pinterest. We use MailChimp for e-newsletter and subscription management, and Flickr and YouTube for managing media galleries.

✦ What have we achieved?

Although the old portal had 635 registered users, only 81 could be migrated to the new portal. Since then, the number of registered users has grown to 403. While this is a significant reduction from the original number, it is a rapid increase within only six months, of truly active and current membership. The migration also provided us with the opportunity to reclassify and weed out duplicate content. Figure 3 shows the number of content items per category.

To get a better understanding of the performance of the portal since its relaunch a comparison of the period 15 February-31 July 2016 was done against the same period in 2015. This comparison shows an upward trend in user engagement. Although the total number of registered members has reduced by 37%, the number of new visitors to the portal has increased by 15.8%. The total number of sessions¹ went up by 45.7% and the duration of each session almost doubled. The total number of page views is higher by 75%.

✦ Who are we working with?

The portal is a user-driven platform; content is contributed by any registered member. Design, maintenance, support and capacity building is supported by the International Potato Center (CIP) through the SASHA project.

✦ What is next?

The discussion forums were envisioned to transform the virtual interaction by the four CoPs. While they meet face-to-face at least once a year, the online space opens up opportunities to connect with users who are not part of these meetings. The level of uptake has been mixed. It would be worthwhile to study factors influencing online collaboration by the four CoPs and examine ways in which this feature can be put to better use. It is recommended that future research be conducted to evaluate the reach of the portal and its impact on knowledge capture, discovery, sharing and application.

¹ A session is the period time a user is actively engaged with a website. New sessions is an estimate of the percentage of first time visits to a website.

Fig. 3 Major categories of content items on the portal as at July 2016



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