

COOPERATION BETWEEN LIBRARIANS OF A NORTH-SOUTH NETWORK OF FRENCH-SPEAKING DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH CENTRES

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Introduction

The North-South cooperation presented here does not only concern libraries and librarians. It concerns cooperation within a network of institutions in which librarians are working and whose main objective is to promote the adoption of information and communication technologies by demographers in French-speaking Africa.

1. History

(a) Centres involved and origins of the network

This cooperation was implemented between six demographic research centres of which five are located in French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa and the other in Paris. Their activities are quite similar. Affiliated to national universities, they develop research activities in the area of population-development and train students in demography; most of them have a library managed by a professional. They are relatively small, with less than fifty employees (teachers, researchers and administrative staff) and welcome PhD students.

Most of the French-speaking African centres were created in the 1970s, with CEPED the most recent in 1988. These centres include:

- Benin: Centre de Formation et de Recherche en matière de Population (CEFORP) in Cotonou
- Burkina Faso: Institut Supérieur des Sciences de la Population (ISSP) in Ouagadougou
- Cameroon: Institut de Formation et de Recherche Démographique (IFORD) in Yaoundé
- Côte d'Ivoire: École Nationale Supérieure de Statistique et d'Économie Appliquée (ENSEA) in Abidjan
- France: Centre Population et Développement (CEPED) in Paris
- Togo: Unité de Recherche Démographique (URD) in Lomé

Cooperation between the different centres has been in existence for a long time. Research centres in French-speaking Sub-Saharan Africa are few and

their researchers often attended the same training centres in France, Belgium, Quebec or IFORD (Cameroon). One of the missions of CEPED, in addition to research projects jointly carried out with partners from the South, was provision of library support if necessary. Ever since the creation of CEPED, there were regular contacts between myself and the librarians of each of these centres for exchange of documents, training, audits or the implementation of computerisation of bibliographical catalogues, but all were bilateral arrangements between CEPED and a specific centre.

The expansion of internet use transformed this collaboration some twelve years ago. Although the commercial use of the Internet was not so well developed and the Internet had not yet transformed our every day life, it was already clear that using the Internet in our work changed ways of retrieving scientific information, accessing databases and transformed communications through email. Contact with African researchers showed that without reliable connections, it was impossible for them to have proper access to this environment and that the so-called "digital divide" was getting wider.

International organisations have quickly realised the magnitude of this problem and have undertaken various initiatives to try to remedy it. The most publicised of them was certainly the United Nations Organization which approved at the end of 2001 the holding of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in two phases, the first in Geneva in December, 2003 and the second in Tunis in November, 2005.

The birth of our group of French-speaking centres willing to share and provide information on the Internet dates back to 1998 by means of a call for tender of the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF) to develop what was then called "new information and communication technologies" and to create content to constitute a "French-speaking Virtual University." The "Fonds Francophone des Inforoutes" (FFI) was created during the VIIth Francophone Summit at Hanoi in November 1997 to continue this initiative. It aims at favouring the appropriation and use of information and communication technologies by the creation of French-speaking digital content.

The idea of this first project was to create a network of web servers of French-speaking research centres in the demography field in developing countries, leading to structured sets of scientific information and reflecting the characteristics of French-speaking teaching and research. This project, which received a "quality seal" but unfortunately was not funded, served as a starting point for another venture with the United Nations Population Division.

b) The cooperation within the network Demoneta

In 1999 the UN Population Division launched the project "Internet for public research: capacity-building in public data, statistics and analysis for the implementation of United Nations conferences in Developing Countries" for

demographic research in the South. The "Internet Population Initiative" was designed to help Southern researchers strengthen their skills in information and communication technologies to avoid marginalisation, to participate in the development of demographic resources on the Internet, particularly in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and to stimulate South-South cooperation. The Population Division relied on the francophone project and organised the first workshop in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) in October 1999 which gave birth to the so-called Demoneta network¹.

Five workshops have been held so far, the last two organised only by CEPED after the withdrawal of the Population Division from the project. I was involved in all these workshops, except the last one which directly concerned researchers.

The first Ouagadougou workshop

The 1999 workshop was attended by the director and a researcher of each African centre and the organiser of the Population Division, CEPED and some consultants. During the workshop, the participants themselves developed and launched a small website and an electronic forum for Demoneta. This enabled us to start developing what is called the "Internet culture" within the network.

The Niamey workshop

The second Demoneta workshop was held in Niamey, organised by representatives of the Institute of Research for Development (IRD) in Niger, in April 2000 with the UN Population Division, the Department of Demography of the University of Montreal (Canada) and CEPED. The Niamey workshop gave to the participants (pairs of demographer-computer scientists) the necessary knowledge to develop, upload and manage a website for their institution. Following the workshop in Niamey, several Demoneta centres were visible on the Internet through their own website.

The Lomé workshop

The third workshop was held at the University of Lomé in February 2003, organised by the Population Division and URD, in collaboration with CEPED. Its purpose was to give librarians and computer scientists of the institutions a good training on the documentary software CDS-ISIS and GENISIS. This workshop has enabled the mounting of online bibliographic catalogues of four major population libraries of the region, which were among the first in French-speaking Africa on the web.

The second Ouagadougou workshop

The fourth workshop, held in 2006 with the librarians of Demoneta and CEPED in Ouagadougou, aimed to create the network's website. This site was created with the free content management software SPIP and continues to be fed by librarians.

The Cotonou workshop

This workshop was organised in November 2008 in Cotonou (Benin) by the Coordination of the Network in collaboration with CEFORP (Cotonou) and with the financial and scientific support of CEPED and INED (France) to provide researchers with training on European Union funding for research in Africa.

As shown, this network brings together the staff of various research centres (mainly researchers, librarians and computer scientists) around information and communication technologies.

The second Ouagadougou workshop was the only one attended only by the librarians of the network. We plan to meet together again around a project of digitising the publications of our centres and our holdings when a funding possibility arises.

2. Current and future projects within the network

Problems in acquiring funding to develop information activities are common to all libraries. Being directly connected to a research centre in a small organisation may lead to an approach around projects closer to researchers.

(a) The IREDA project supported by CEPED

The CEPED holdings are particularly rich in reports, works and documents related to African censuses and demographic surveys, which are often no longer accessible in their originating country. The preservation of African demographic surveys (documents as well as computer files) had been long neglected by their producers, but the situation has changed and initiatives supported by international donors are ongoing. That is why I was able set up with a researcher the project "Inventory of population censuses and surveys in Africa" called IREDA. The first stage for the development of methodology and infrastructure received international funding from International Household Survey Network (IHSN, which belongs to a consortium including the UN, OECD, the World Bank, etc.), supplemented by the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE).

The aim of the IREDA project² is to produce a summary description of all African national demographic surveys, both past and present, to provide information on existing resources and to promote access to these resources, so that the data are available to researchers for their use in the context of comparative studies. This represents more than 600 past and present surveys and population censuses. The resources of interest to the project include all available written and electronic documents concerning pre- and post-data collection phases (official publication of results and analyses made by researchers, technical documents, questionnaires, interviewers' manuals,

maps, coding manuals, database documentation, etc.). They were designed by data producers as well as researchers using the data. The IREDA project includes the construction of a centralised website and an OAI-PMH open archive containing the resources which will be digitised as far as possible and put on-line (with the agreement of the producer). The strict use of standards, such as the Data Documentation Initiative (DDI) and Dublin Core, ensure accountability and interoperability with other existing projects.

In essence, such a project cannot be done alone and must involve partners who hold the necessary documents to prepare the survey description records with the bibliographic resources. Thus it was obvious from the very beginning that it was important to involve our Demoneta network partners by giving them the opportunity to value their own demographic surveys which are not national but are in the same archiving process and by making them available, and to find international donors together.

(b) The IREDIF project supported by IFORD

The first opportunity came through a North-South bilateral librarian collaboration with IFORD in Cameroon, a member of the Demoneta network. The purpose was to support a new librarian in relaunching activities after a long period of slow motion without a permanent head:

- Present situation of the library
- Urgent actions to be undertaken
- Welcome of the librarian in Paris
- Valuation of holdings

But if the funding of my mission was assured by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the relaunching of activities by a specific IFORD budget, another solution had to be found for the valuation of holdings which are particularly rich in demographic surveys. Beside the participation in the IREDA project scheduled from the very beginning, it was decided to adapt this methodology so that IFORD can also archive its own surveys. Funding for this project of "Inventory of IFORD population censuses and surveys" called IREDIF has been granted by the same agency (IHSN) as a pilot project; it associates a demographer and a librarian. This project may be used later with the other Demoneta network centres to archive their own demographic surveys to compatible standards.

(c) The ISPADAF project supported by the network in 2011?

To continue the IREDA project that CEPED could not continue to carry alone, it was necessary to find new funding sources to involve our partners. The opportunity was found through the "Fonds Francophone des Inforoutes" which each year launches a call for tender for funding projects in the field of information and communication technologies.

One of the conditions is to involve partners from at least three different countries of the "Francophonie" [Association of French speaking countries]

among which two at least are located in the South. Thus it was intended to set up a new project involving the Demoneta network centres with libraries, which would promote the activities and visibility of each other.

The challenge is to build a project that will suit all parties which inevitably do not have the same priorities. A balance has been reached with the participation of all in the IREDA project supported by CEPED, enhancing a component to implement tools and training to develop further archiving of their surveys and another component concerning the digitalisation of publications issued by the centres and documents related to demographic surveys with the creation of one or more OAI/PMH archives. Those involved in the project are demographers, librarians and to a lesser degree computer scientists.

The answer to the call for tender will be known by the end of 2010, but the substantive work carried out for the feasibility of this project of inventory and preservation of the demographic patrimony in French-speaking Africa called ISPADAF will sooner or later bear fruit.

3. The characteristics of this collaboration

As we have just seen, the collaboration of CEPED with librarians from the South has existed for a long time and fits particular features.

(a) North-South Partnership: a mission of CEPED

It was from the very beginning, in 1988, one of the missions of the CEPED to implement activities in partnership. At first it was obviously concerned with the research activities in the domain of population-development but also with those related to libraries. The status of CEPED changed in 2008; it became a joint research unit (UMR) affiliated to University Paris Descartes, to the National Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) and to the Institute of Research for Development (IRD); its Research Support Bureau promotes five major types of activities: promotion of the work of international working groups, dissemination of scientific information, documentation, expertise and training.

The African continent was at first the region most often concerned for historical reasons related to colonisation and because the former CEPED researchers had all worked in French-speaking Africa. The situation was the same for the library I created at that time, which received donations from researchers, in particular much grey literature on Africa and stenciled documents reproduced in few copies.

Before starting a second career in documentation at CEPED in Paris, I taught demography for ten years at IFORD (Cameroon), where I took part in the training of more than a hundred French-speaking African demographers. Undoubtedly this personal experience greatly facilitated the relationship with

researchers at Demoneta network centres, often former students and with their librarians. But this has probably also directed the nature of projects I initiated in which the concomitant presence of demographers and librarians was necessary.

(b) Various North and South requests that lead to joint projects

African libraries have few resources and staff often find it difficult to follow the very rapid technological developments in this area due to a lack of local training courses and of time. I therefore responded to specific requests for cooperation, such as the computerisation of a library. But I also noticed that slow, unreliable Internet connections in Africa, were penalising researchers; in some countries in the late nineties they could just use their e-mail, while in the North we were surfing on the web for long periods.

Intellectually close to these two communities of researchers and librarians, I had no hesitation in designing the first project around the Internet by creating a network of websites (a very familiar concept to librarians, and a long time before Facebook and other social networks) with a structured set of information skills and scientific contents, showing the specific characteristics of Francophone training and research in this field (in which the expertise of demographers was necessary).

After the creation of the Demoneta network, the choice of workshops has been decided by mutual agreement as we go along. The trainees came from the network centres but other local institutions could be invited for free. Consultants often came from the North but there were local resource people also. Besides, due to the disposal of commercial documentary software, I benefited myself from the training in the documentary software CDS-Isis in Lomé with my colleagues, while providing training on other parts of the course.

Proof that all initiatives do not come from the North, is demonstrated by the fact that three African centres of the network jointly answered to one of the calls for tender of the "Fonds Francophone des Inforoutes".

The setting-up of the ongoing projects came from CEPED, and the prior use of the Internet has probably played an important role, but IFORD itself took responsibility for the methodology tested at CEPED and has invested in its own IREDIF project archiving demographic surveys, once funding for additional staff was obtained (and certainly facilitated by the "network effect"). If the answer to the call for tenders is in favour of the ISPADAF project, it is planned to train the teams in the common methodology, with a local committee for follow-up. The project will be supervised by a steering committee including representatives of each centre to correct the methodology if necessary.

(c) *Activities involving librarians, researchers and computer scientists in a sustainable network*

Demoneta workshops are mainly intended to provide tools needed for a better use of the Internet; they are addressed alternately or by pairs to researchers, librarians and computer scientists. It is amusing to note that during the assessment which I presented to the directors of the centres at the conclusion of the first three workshops, they considered Demoneta as a librarian network while the first workshop concerned researchers, the second pairs of researcher-computer scientist and only the third pairs of librarian-computer scientist. Librarians apparently knew better how to value their involvement! The global balance of the results was mitigated at first, but the situation considerably improved, according to the progress of speed of the Internet connections, whose slowness and breakdowns were hampering the most willing. The most recent project, ISPADAF, closely links demographers and librarians in all centres, including CEPED. One African centre chose the librarian as local project manager, which shows that dynamic librarians can play a leading role.

The Demoneta network has been in existence for more than ten years and has led various groups of people to meet and work together within their centre and between centres, but it is not a research network since the main objective of Demoneta is to promote the adoption of new information and communication technologies. Librarians certainly possess more than any other the culture of networking, and know the benefits of pooling actions to make themselves more visible. We are well aware that a network without a motivated facilitator decays, but it appears that the take over will come from young African librarians for whom the Internet is at the heart of their job and opens up large areas of work rather than researchers who are more dispersed according to their research fields.

(d) *The advantages and disadvantages of such a North-South Network*

The CEPED African holdings related to French-speaking countries' demographic data collection in the last century are particularly rich and hardly have their equivalent elsewhere in the world, but they are necessarily incomplete. Their valuation makes sense only through collaboration with other centres with similar holdings, that is to say the centres of the Demoneta network (because most of national statistical institutes had been little interested in documentation until now). It is thus in the interest of the centres of both the North and the South to cooperate together to find international funding for the project; if it is possible for the centres of the South to receive funding from the North, the reverse also exists sometimes when the main objectives of the project benefit the South.

Specific constraints are imposed in designing and implementing the project, both in its general conception and in technologies to be used, especially when it concerns a work in a network using Internet connections.

A project accepted only by a partner because it provides funding or equipment will not survive. If a project is to continue to live after the first few years, it has to be adopted and considered as very useful and rewarding for the participating centre. It has to be integrated into the working routine to continue to be supported after the departure of the temporary staff hired at start-up.

It is not realistic to use expensive software that centres cannot update to continue the project. The use of free software is strongly recommended for duplicating the process to other interested centres without additional cost. It is not specific to this type of project, but it is strongly recommended, if not compulsory, to use standards in order to reuse or share the results. These factors are a guarantee of interoperability.

We cannot always implement very sophisticated processes requiring fast and reliable Internet connections that are still very expensive in some African countries. So much the better if it works, but it is preferable to provide a locally working fallback with an exchange of data by attached files or CD-ROMs. The equipment must be reliable and not too fragile; it can be complicated to repair on site and work would be immobilised for a long time if it needed to be sent abroad. It is also necessary to implement solutions to ensure the preservation and permanent archiving of data, which is a delicate subject, in the South as in the North.

Conclusion

The example of collaborative activities and networking initiated by the CEPED library is specific because the mission of CEPED is precisely to develop projects in partnership. It shows at least that a North-South network enables the development of varied, rich and enhancing activities for all partners, in which librarians have an important role to play.

Notes

- 1 <http://demoneta.ird.bf/>
- 2 <http://www.ceped.org/ireda>