

Intercultures Magazine interviewed Giacomo Rambaldi, Senior Programme Coordinator at the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation ACP-EU (CTA) in the Netherlands. Giacomo has 29 years of professional experience in development work and is actively engaged in the dissemination of web 2.0 technologies and social media. Below is the account of his interview.

What is Web2forDev?

Participatory Web 2.0 for Development—or Web2forDev—is a way of employing web services to improve information sharing and the collaborative production of content in the context of development work. Development actors can easily communicate with other stakeholders, have selective access to information, produce and publish their own content, and redistribute content. They can integrate, combine, aggregate, generate, moderate and mediate content. In a typical Web2forDev scenario, data and functionalities from a number of free or low-cost online applications are combined and served as [mashups](#) . This ensures that a wide range of online services is available at a low cost.

"The core of Web 2.0 is "empowerment," and so it can cut across many sectors. In my view, the challenge is to give a voice to the most marginalized people to the voiceless."

What is the Web2forDev gateway's mission?

The Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation ([CTA](#)) is an ACP-EU organization that has a mandate to facilitate access to, and dissemination of, information in the fields of agriculture and rural development in 78 countries in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific (ACP). We aim to contribute to food security, prosperity and sound natural-resource management in ACP countries.

Since 2009, we have been organizing Web 2.0 Learning Opportunities. These are five-day events at which participants are exposed hands-on to Web 2.0 applications for professional work. So far we have trained about 1,500 people from 14 countries in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Training goes hand in hand with the integration of participants in peer communities

like [DGroups](#) or [LinkedIn](#) .

This initiative is cost-shared: we partner with local host institutions, and provide funding for running the event, for hiring and deploying trainers and for providing the curriculum and other materials. Participants take care of their own costs of travel, accommodation and meals.

Are there certain development sectors that lend themselves more to Web 2.0 projects?

The core of Web 2.0 is "empowerment," and so it can cut across many sectors. In my view, the challenge is to give a voice to the most marginalized people—to the voiceless. I have worked with many indigenous communities and I can tell you that when Web 2.0 is nested on top of other community-based methodologies, such as participatory mapping, it "adds power" and authority to local knowledge, and enables even illiterate people to play a role on the international scene. We should not forget that Web 2.0 is relatively new. YouTube and Google Earth came into existence in 2005. The same can be said for many other Web 2.0 tools and applications.

What are the key factors in determining the success of a Web 2.0 for Development project?

Based on my experience, I would say that success depends essentially on the personal engagement of a few people who commit time to bring peers together virtually. They facilitate and nurture communities, and grow both their membership and the content generated. Communities of Practice are more than simple networks—they engage people in improving a practice.

The **online reputation** of facilitators, or "social artists" as [Etienne Wenger](#) terms them, is fundamental. The quality of the discussions and the exchanges is also critical, as it may lead to another building block, which is **trust**

Recognition is the last pillar that determines the success or failure of engagement—recognition given by the employers of the "social artists" for what they do and the time they invest in facilitating the communities. Recognition for all who contribute to the exchanges and to the betterment of the practice.

"In the Web 2.0 world, a worldwide advocacy campaign can be set up with a few hundred dollars."

What is the best approach to undertaking a Web 2.0 for Development project?

I wish I had a ready answer for that. I think that demand-driven projects are more likely to succeed and thrive in the long term. Of course, there are many ways to understand the terms "demand driven" and "participation," ranging from "passive participation" to "self-mobilization." What I think counts the most is to engage the users or potential users from the onset, at the project conceptualization stage.

What are some of the constraints?

Well-known constraints in developing countries are linked to the lack of hardware, software, and connectivity. Considering the availability of increasingly cheaper and easy-to-use multimedia platforms, I do not think that lack of literacy represents a monumental hurdle today. In the Web 2.0 world, a worldwide advocacy campaign can be set up with a few hundred dollars. But it also requires a lot of volunteer time to explore, learn, and use available online applications.

What about language barriers?

Most content on the web is available in English, but big players like Google have invested a lot in multilingual platforms. I think that the choice on the web today is so vast that people can pick and choose what best suits them, and language barriers can be overcome.

What about social media—are they being used effectively to enhance development activities?

I think that social media are great for raising awareness and for mobilizing Internet-savvy communities. There are also online tools that I would not classify as social media. Ushahidi, for example, allows individuals to contribute to creating real-time geo-spatial reports about specific situations. Front line people contribute what is termed "granular" information. The platform places it into a bigger context, and creates a broader picture almost in real time. This can then be used by aid agencies to deliver assistance more effectively during crisis situations, for example.

"When I work in the field, I always try to set up multidisciplinary and multicultural teams. I have worked in almost all continents and found that understanding local customs, values and traditions is the entry point."

How would you respond to critics who say it is wrong to ensure that a village has access to Web 2.0 technologies but still has no clean water?

I think that the parameters have changed but the question is always the same: what comes first, the chicken or the egg? I have been engaged in many participatory mapping exercises and I remember a villager in Indonesia telling me, "If you are not on a map, you do not exist." Being on a map allows you to seek out social services. Being online allows you to make your voice heard. Accessing the Internet may offer you ideas about how to purify your water or [light your house without using electricity](#)

How does cultural fluency and competency help you in your work?

When I work in the field, I always try to set up multidisciplinary and multicultural teams. I have worked in almost all continents and found that understanding local customs, values and traditions is the entry point. That said, development workers are frequently constrained by time and language and cannot sufficiently immerse themselves in the local reality. Therefore, partnering with local stakeholders or development actors and planning culturally acceptable entry and exit strategies, are good practices.

We recently published a training kit on "[participatory spatial information management and communication](#)," the core of which is ethics, attitudes and behaviours of technology intermediaries, development workers, and researchers. A great deal of experience in dealing with cultural issues, which ultimately supports the spread of good practice, is embedded in this kit.

How do you go about integrating local customs and culture?

Offering multilingual platforms or products is one way to go about it. I find that the platform [dot SUB](#) is a great example of [crowd-sourcing](#) for the benefit of cultural diversity. On dotSUB, people can transcribe and translate the subtitles of video productions. There are videos that are translated into more than 50 languages—I find this fantastic!

Do Web 2.0 models have to be adapted to different cultural contexts? If so, how granular must that be?

I think it depends on the topic and the expected user base. I am currently involved in the debate on climate services and the development of a user platform interface. I think that this is a good example of services and interactions for which scale and locality matter. Resource users make their own decisions about how, where and when to plant crops or herd animals based on a range of inputs including local knowledge and seasonal predictive capacity that has been handed down from generation to generation.

But decision-making is not limited to this, and encompasses other dimensions such as social networks, local loyalties, cultural values, intuition, beliefs, etc. The great challenge is whether scientists can share their usually broad-scale forecasts, and make these acceptable and usable by the end users. Again, scale, localization, relevance and timeliness matter.

Additional Online Resources

- Web2forDev: [DGroups](#) (community)
- Web2forDev: [Twitter](#)
- Web2forDev: [LinkedIn](#)
- Web2forDev: [Facebook](#)
- Web2forDev: [Vimeo](#)
- Web2forDev: [Wikipedia](#)
- [ICT Update](#)
- [ICT4D](#)

Republished with permission from [Intercultures Magazine](#) | [French version](#) | *Intercultures* is published by the Government of Canada, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, Canadian Foreign Service Institute, Centre for Intercultural Learning.