

## **A stealth transformation: introducing wikis to the UN**

*Anna Maron, Mikel Maron*

### **A wiki at the UNDP, a wiki at UN INSTRAW**

In spring 2005, the UNDP Bratislava Regional Center, responsible for coordinating activities across country offices in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, had just formed a new community of practice for Water Governance and brought on a new regional coordinator. A comprehensive picture of activities within each country office, the knowledge of individuals, and crucially the lessons learned from others' work, was not in a very easily accessible form. Rather, these were tucked away in minds and machines spread across two continents, with sporadic connection. One author of this paper, Anna, had been brought on as a volunteer to sort out the situation (Mikel, the other author, was recruited onto the project at a later stage). Anna conducted in-depth interviews with country officers and the results were digested, tabulated, and structured in the originally suggested technology, an Excel spreadsheet.

It was quickly realized that while the spreadsheet could be useful at that point, its reflection of current reality would quickly decay without continual effort to communicate with country offices and revise the knowledge map accordingly. There was no indication that any resources would be available beyond the volunteer project. At the same time, the regular communication practices of the Community of Practice were observed languishing in email. Despite intranets, workspaces and complicated initiatives galore, email was the primary collaboration tool. Archives of discussions were not available and useful knowledge left un-extracted; moreover, collaboration on documents fell into a stream of Word document attachments, circulating among ever growing lists of e-mail recipients and fracturing into many branches where the most current revision of the work was unknown. These two factors suggested that a wiki was likely be a suitable alternative to this working method. A wiki is a website that anyone can edit, so the maintenance of the knowledge map could potentially be done directly by the members of the community of practice. Moreover, documents could be worked on collaboratively using a system specifically designed for such a task. The full potential of the wiki was left unexplained; the initial objective being to show the usefulness of the wiki as a pilot project, and from there to see if it was possible to steward further usage.

A wiki suggested itself again when Anna volunteered with UN INSTRAW in the summer of 2006. INSTRAW is a small research and training oriented agency, focused on the advancement of women and gender equality worldwide. The task was to compile a database of available trainings on gender issues, and the organizations offering these trainings. Similar research activities had recently been undertaken by staff and volunteers at INSTRAW since its inception, for instance on Gender, Peace and Security, and Gender and Political Participation, with the results published in custom designed online

databases, with later updates submitted by email and reviewed by INSTRAW. A wiki for the trainings database could easily accommodate this straightforward usage, with less custom programming.

## **Customizing wikis to the needs of the UN**

Before the authors introduced wikis as a tool within these UN agencies, they had already been rapidly gaining mental ground, with the emergence of Wikipedia and its accompanying controversies. Even so, their exact nature was not yet widely understood and certainly most organizations had not considered wikis to be employed as a workplace tool. Conversely, wiki programmers hadn't considered that either, and their use remained burdened with overly technical concepts and procedures. Wikitext for instance is the markup language used to format and stylize wiki articles; for Wikipedia, its complexity serves as a first line of defense against random vandalism. However, for a group of novice users with limited technical skills, wikitext simply proved a barrier to entry.

The open source package MediaWiki was selected for the technical infrastructure on both wiki projects. This software runs Wikipedia and is therefore guaranteed to be thoroughly tested, will continue to be developed well into the future, and future technicians on these wikis will be more likely to have exposure to MediaWiki than any other wiki software. But MediaWiki was just the starting point. It exhibits some peculiar features specific to Wikipedia, such as 'random page' and 'talk pages' options which have little use to smaller wiki efforts. As such, the interface was drastically simplified and tailored for small group use. A template system was implemented, so that new pages on the wiki could be selected from a number of preformatted pages and content filled in appropriately, avoiding the dreaded start of a blank page. The document upload feature was adapted to resemble attachments which users were accustomed to sending, and geographic mapping added so that content could be visualized in multiple ways. Authentication was integrated with preexisting systems, so that users could avoid having to register new accounts for the wiki. These technical customizations required knowledge of PHP, a straightforward and widely understood scripting language.

The customization process was an iterative one. It was impossible to predict ahead of time what would work and what needed improvement, so the process was set up in a fairly flexible and explorative manner. Dialogue was integrated into the process, allowing constantly feedback with the future users of the wikis.

## **Launching to the Community**

Besides its flexible development approach, another crucial difference on these wiki projects was approach by which they were launched, which included a strategy for encouraging users to add content. Often wiki enthusiasts mistakenly assume that they can simply put a wiki up for their group, and it will naturally start to fill up with the collective

knowledge. In reality, people will have little idea of the purpose of the wiki, and it will fill up with random junk, if anything. Wikipedia's success is largely due to its contributors having a good understanding what an encyclopedia is about, and any other application of wiki needs to communicate its purpose just as clearly. For both of the UN wikis, articles had been seeded into the wiki prior to launch, giving structure and direction on possible uses. And of course, the purpose of these wikis wasn't the wiki itself, but the topics they were set up to address. Though we had an inkling that still more was possible, a great amount of content was produced from the initially assigned research and posted on the wiki, making it a useful resource even before people started contributing. Nonetheless, despite the optimized ease of use, the well developed start in terms of content had the opposite effect of eliciting more participation, reducing the pressure on staff to contribute.

However, at the UNDP, the possibilities of what we were calling the 'WaterWiki' were, fortunately, apparent to the coordinator of the community of practice. He became a champion of the project within the organization, recognizing that its open format could make his job of facilitating work across the region much easier. A face to face introduction to WaterWiki was arranged at the yearly regional coordination meeting, and a short and simple tutorial helped the group overcome any initial reticence in using the system. The regional coordinator consistently placed his communications in the wiki, a model for others in the community to follow, and at no greater effort than sending email. When it came time to draft the UNDP's Regional Water Strategy, the core document guiding work over the next years, the wiki was the obvious and easy choice for gathering contributions.

At INSTRAW, the community was not contained within the organization itself, but comprised a large and nebulous group of organizations providing training on gender, and potential trainees, dispersed across the world. Here the wiki served a different purpose of introducing immediacy and connection where little existed before. Research databases had been deployed before, but external contributions were subject to reviews and associated delays. With the Gender Training Wiki, contributions were immediate and reviews of material dispersed among the entire community. Researchers at INSTRAW recognized that this model served their resource limited organization better, where they could become facilitators of distributed research rather than the sole filtering authority.

## **A Stealth Transformation**

While initial effects could be observed, were these deployments of new software systems deserving of the weighty appellation 'transformation'? At INSTRAW, it is still too early to tell, but for the UNDP Water CoP, this approach has clearly changed operations. In fact, the WaterWiki has been crucial in developing the community where it was tenuous before, a community moreover that is open for the world to see.

Wikis can have various levels of access, from viewable and editable by anyone like Wikipedia and the INSTRAW wiki, or closed off within an intranet. The WaterWiki is a

compromise, with editing restricted to the UNDP and invited guests, but openly viewable. Rarely has an organization, especially the UN, operated so transparently. The result is that staff knowledge is passively transmitted into the wider community of water governance practitioners, breaking down institutional barriers to information and the responsible individuals.

A wiki is not a panacea. Despite the open invitation to cut across hierarchies and work informally, many individuals within the UNDP are still wary of communicating as such in public, and may still hold back unpolished contributions to avoid unnecessary attention and judgments from superiors. Wiki is a technology which suggests a culture, but ultimately its transformative potential lies within the bounds of the organization.

Technologically, wikis have their limits. Unstructured and unfiltered, wikis commonly grow like an untended garden, and periodical wiki gardening is necessary to reorganize the raw content into something more usable. Wikipedia is unique among wikis in that the 'structure of its building', an encyclopedia, is well known; most other wikis do not share this strong structure, and allow non-technical people to become information architects. As such, the skills of librarians are needed more than ever to help organize the content, and WaterWiki has in fact employed someone for this task.

Overall, the activities of any community of practice are still even theoretically being understood, and the structure of the WaterWiki reflects this. There needs to be a co-evolution of information tools and the community using them. Individuals within a community need to know their contributions are valued, through feedback mechanisms and direct interactions with others within the system. The user profiles feature has proven popular and has led to somewhat untended growth. While this is in principle the sign of a strong community, the wiki is not ideal for this use, and a private social networking system may provide better features in the future.

Systems are often designed without a priori knowledge of user requirements or wishes, with extensive resources invested in IT systems which turn out to be based on bad assumptions. To WaterWiki's credit, both requirements of 'gardening' and 'new architectures' grew out of actual use. The deployment of a wiki is cheap, easy and flexible enough to accommodate new uses, in a sense a pilot for more advanced architectures. Deploying actual social networking tools at the UNDP in response to what users have demonstrated to be important would now be a simple matter of paving the cow paths trodden by the WaterWiki – a path that can perhaps prove attractive for other organizations to follow this lightweight approach to knowledge management.

### **Abstract**

The UNDP didn't want a wiki. UN INSTRAW did want one, but didn't know what they were getting into. The goal of these volunteer projects, implemented over two summers, was to undertake research and build 'databases' of unspecified technological shape and form. The choice of wiki to manage the results was fairly arbitrary. However, this choice

naturally led to the efforts growing far beyond the original intent, and a stealth transformation was underway.

### About the authors



Mikel Maron is an independent software developer, specializing in Open Geospatial and Wiki tech. He's been active in the standardization of GeoRSS and in the OpenStreetMap collaborative mapping project, and spoken and written frequently on open mapping technologies. As a Volunteer and Consultant, Mikel has contributed to the first Wiki projects within the UN, WaterWiki at the UNDP and the Gender Training Wiki at UN INSTRAW. Previously, Mikel worked as senior developer of My Yahoo! and researched evolutionary models of ecosystems at the University of Sussex. For the latest, Mikel keeps a weblog at <http://brainoff.com/weblog/>. Email: [mikel\\_maron@yahoo.com](mailto:mikel_maron@yahoo.com)



Anna Maron is currently undertaking a MSc in International Employment Relations at London School of Economics. She has an undergraduate degree in International Relations from University of Sussex, UK. As an intern over two summers, Anna introduced the first two wikis to the UN, the WaterWiki at the UNDP and the Gender Training Wiki at UN-INSTRAW. Anna has been involved in many local and international volunteer projects, including Friends of the Earth in the Republic of Georgia, the Neighbourhood Care Scheme in Brighton, and Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group at Gatwick. Anna worked as a personal assistant to the sales director at Yahoo! UK prior to commencing her university studies. Email: [anna\\_maron@yahoo.com](mailto:anna_maron@yahoo.com)