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CASE STUDY: Using Wikipedia to enhance global knowledge on climate change

Background: why this activity matters

Wikipedia is the single most used open access source information in the world, and is a cornerstone of the global knowledge commons. For climate change, over the last year alone there were approximately [87 million pageviews](#) of climate change related Wikipedia pages.¹ Despite this widespread reach of Wikipedia's content, to-date the platform has been significantly under-estimated as a tool to make climate change information more accessible and relevant to practitioners and policymakers.

However, Wikipedia lacks diversity both in terms of who contributes to the platform and the nature of the content. Only about [20% of Wikipedia editors are female](#), and it is thought around [20% are from the global South](#). Africa in particular has the fewest Wikipedia contributors per capita of any other region. A [2014 survey](#) found that Africa contributes only about 1.3% of the world's edits on the platform on a monthly basis.

Within this context, CDKN identified Wikipedia a powerful tool to ensure that the climate-related information in the online global knowledge commons is reliable, up-to-date and reflects how diverse countries and communities around the world are affected by, and are responding to, the climate crisis. CDKN therefore set out to:

- Enhance the quality and accessibility of information on climate change on the world's largest online encyclopedia, particularly related to the Global South;
- Enhance the confidence and skills of climate change researchers and practitioners to edit Wikipedia;
- Increase awareness amongst climate change researchers and practitioners of the value of contributing to the platform; and
- Build a community of climate change editors, particularly women and editors from the Global South.

¹ This is calculated from 7 December 2019 to 6 December 2020

What did CDKN do?

In collaboration with the Future Climate for Africa (FCFA) and the Wikimedia Foundation, CDKN hosted two edit-a-thons in 2019 and 2020, conducted a [webinar](#) to raise awareness about Wikipedia, and compiled the [guide](#) *How to contribute climate change information to Wikipedia: A guide for researchers, practitioners and communicators*. The two edit-a-thons included:

- [Africa's first edit-a-thon on climate change in August 2019](#) to tackle what's been called the '[Africa gap](#)' on Wikipedia

This three-day face-to-face event brought together 30 African researchers from East, West and Southern Africa representing 10 countries: Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Namibia, Botswana, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe and South Africa.



Picture: Africa's first Wikipedia climate change edit-a-thon – ensuring that evidence from Africa features strongly on the platform

- [Wiki4Climate: A week of editing climate change topics on Wikipedia](#) held over seven days from 23 November to 1 December 2020. CDKN held this event online due to COVID, but this also allowed CDKN to experiment with the virtual medium. 275 people from over 60 countries signed up for the event. 68 participants actively edited during the event - 72% of whom were from the Global South and 51% were women. The largest number of participants were from Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Lebanon and India.

CDKN also produced a hands-on “how to” guide on contributing climate change information to Wikipedia, targeted at the broader climate change community, including researchers, practitioners and communicators. This guide provides step-by-step guidance on how to edit articles on Wikipedia, along with tips and suggestions on style and structure to make the editing process a smooth one. This guide also provides the reader with guidance on how to get involved with the Wikipedia editing community, and shares CDKN’s experiences organising an edit-a-thon.



Picture: The Wiki4Climate event - adapting to Covid-19 and taking advantage of online engagement to reach a wider set of Wikipedia editors

Impacts

Enhanced quality and accessibility of climate change information on Wikipedia, particularly related to the Global South

Both the edit-a-thons resulted in improvements to a total of 281 Wikipedia articles, over 2500 edits and an addition of 140 000 words.² In addition five new articles were created at the Wiki4Climate edit-a-thon. Since the Africa edit-a-thon in August 2019 there have been [15.5 million views](#)³ of the articles edited. For Wiki4Climate there have been [14.6 million views](#) since

² Wiki4Climate: 229 articles improved, 2300 edits and 119 000 words added. Africa event: 52 articles improved, 280 edits and 21 000 words added

³ The dashboard does not stop the count of the page views when the event ends. So it depends on how long after the event’s end this figure is reported. The dashboard also records edits made to all articles by edit-a-thon

the event in December 2020. Participants were asked to focus on enhancing the representation of research, project examples and images from the Global South on Wikipedia pages. For example, a small but important change for the article on [Smallholding](#) was to swap the image in the lead from a historic Egyptian one to a current African one to make it more relevant to readers.

At the Africa edit-a-thon participants leveraged their collective research expertise and formed groups to work on a small number of high-impact pages, namely those with high page views and priority rankings. The face-to-face nature of the event helped to facilitate this collaboration. The pages worked on include: [climate change in Africa](#), [climate change adaptation](#), [climate change and agriculture](#), and [drylands](#). Other pages included [climate resilience](#), [climate change and ecosystems](#), [adaptive capacity](#), [downscaling](#), as well as some regional pages. The African researchers focussed on making the overall framing of these important topics relevant to Africa as well as adding more Africa-specific content, helping to bring more Africa-specific climate issues to the fore.

The online nature of Wiki4Climate made the edit-a-thon open to more participants and from a wider geographic range, which meant that a large number of edits were done to a diversity of pages. The full list of the 229 articles improved is available [here](#). The most notable improvements were made to [agriculture in Nigeria](#), [Climate change in South Africa](#), [Climate change and agriculture](#) and [Smallholding](#) and [Water in Africa](#). For example, the Water in Africa article was improved by adding relevant images, restructuring and re-writing sections of the introduction, adding information on groundwater, surface water and more detail on the impact of climate change on water scarcity. New articles included [Climate change and cities](#), [Climate change in Kenya](#), [Climate change in Nigeria](#), [Climate change in Tanzania](#), and the [High Council on Climate](#).

The large number of edits as well as the diverse range and extensive reach of climate-related articles tackled, illustrated how the quality and quantity of climate change information on Wikipedia has been enhanced through this initiative.

Increased confidence and skills amongst climate experts in the global South

At the edit-a-thons a total of 69 new editors⁴ from the global South were trained by experienced editors from Wikimedia South Africa and Wikimedia Foundation and other volunteers. Evidence of the impact of these events on enhancing participants' editing skills and sense of empowerment were captured in unsolicited personal blogs written by participants (see [“What I learnt from Wiki4Climate online edit-a-thon, By Sumana Banerjee from India](#)) a [video](#) sharing reflections of new editors at the Africa event and numerous testimonials collected through event evaluations.

participants. Therefore, cumulative views for a small number of articles that are non-climate related are also included in this figure. The vast majority of articles, however, are climate related.

⁴ 30 and 39 new editors from the global South were trained at the Africa event and Wiki4Climate events respectively

“I generate a lot of information and material through my research work and sometimes I am not able to reach as many participants but with the new knowledge on how to edit Wikipedia I will be able to reach a wider audience.” Kenyan participant, Africa climate change edit-a-thon, August 2019

“Truth be told, I was nervous before editing and worried that I might end up worsening the quality of information on a page....Then I took the big leap keeping my apprehensions aside and started with topics which I was confident about...The sense of empowerment came from the thought that “even I can make a contribution and it is so easy”. I also shared my glee on Twitter that it was thrilling to see the local evidences being shared on a global platform which was freely accessible, and thus empowering in itself.” Indian participant, Wiki4Climate

“It was very useful to be guided through the process on how to edit and everyone sharing the experience of editing together. In some instances it was difficult for me to navigate through myself but the edit-a-thon assisted with experienced editors and the guides.” Wiki4Climate participant

A number of participants also went on to train others after the Africa event:

“I got an opportunity in our Department of Meteorology, University of Nairobi, to share my experience on Wikipedia edit-a-thon through a seminar with fellow postgraduate students and lecturers. Now 10 postgraduates students and three lecturers in our department have created a Wikipedia account and they are willing to start sharing their work on Wikipedia especially on the following pages; Climate Change and Water Scarcity, Climate Change and Agriculture and Climate Change and Malaria in Africa. I believe this will be a great step towards promoting Africa-related Wikipedia pages by fellow African researchers.”

Created a diverse community of climate change editors, particularly women and editors from the Global South

Partnering with Wikimedia South Africa and the Wikimedia Foundation helped to ensure that our initiative was embedded within the broader Wikipedia movement and its goals. An important outcome of the Africa event was the creation of the [Wiki Project Climate Change Africa Task Force](#), which participants signed up to so as to further help the development of Africa related climate change content on Wikipedia.

Participants noted the value of attending the edit-a-thons for the opportunity to engage and share with other climate change practitioners and the wider Wikipedia community. During Wiki4Climate, online editors from the [WikiProject Climate Change](#) were very helpful in providing advice and assistance to the new editors, helping to welcome them to the Wikipedia community (both on Slack and during the daily coffee chats on Zoom).

It was important for us to have a virtual platform for the Wiki4Climate event that allowed round-the-clock engagement and discussion amongst participants, so they felt like they were part of something that was bigger than themselves. We had 172 people sign up for the Slack channel and there was constant interaction and engagement throughout the event, and even a separate channel created for Spanish-speaking participants who wanted to edit Spanish articles together. This Slack channel will continue to be used for future events and for editors to communicate with each other, and the newly created Wiki4Climate “brand” will be used by the Wikimedia Foundation for future climate change related campaigns.

In addition, a handful of Wiki4Climate participants also joined the User Group, [Wikimedians for Sustainable Development](#), and have been actively engaging with editors in that sub-community on Telegram and Facebook.

Our events have helped introduce more new female editors and those from the global South into the Wikipedia community. The proportion of female editors at Wiki4Climate was approximately 51% (much higher than the proportion of female editors on Wikipedia itself, which is only around 20%). The proportion of editors from the global South was even higher, at 72% (compared with around 20% for Wikipedia itself). However this needs to be further supported to ensure they continue to engage in the long-term. Continuing the Slack channel and securing the Twitter handle @Wiki4Climate are steps in the right direction for building a close-knit community of climate change editors, which includes adequate representation of women and people from the global South.

Increased awareness amongst climate change researchers and practitioners of the value of contributing to the global knowledge commons

CDKN has had some success in promoting Wikipedia amongst the global climate community through a variety of channels, including the edit-a-thons themselves, social media outreach, webinars, and making the case for contributing to Wikipedia through website articles and the CDKN-FCFA guide. Working closely with FCFA as well as the Wikipedia Foundation (specifically a senior programme strategist at the Wikimedia Foundation, who is also a regular and passionate Wikipedia editor on climate change topics), has helped to amplify our awareness-raising efforts and opened up new opportunities for sharing the Wikipedia tool with new audiences in the climate change community (such as the “Thriving online” webcast below) .

As an outcome, UNDP South Africa expressed interest in supporting the Wiki4Climate event through social media and encouraging participation and inputs. Specifically, they said: “We strongly believe in your initiative and hope we can support annually.” CDKN was also requested

to speak about the edit-a-thon and Wikipedia by Andrew Revkin, veteran New York Times journalist, and now at the Earth Institute at Columbia University, in his weekly webcast “Thriving online”. The session can be watched online [here](#). Andrew also shared the guide and the #Wiki4Climate event on twitter with his 88 000 twitter followers.