C3D+ CoLab: weADAPT and CIP User Labs
Final Evaluation

Marion Davis
Stockholm Environment Institute – U.S. Centre
marion.davis@sei-international.org

June 2013

C3D+ is supported with core funding from the European Commission (EuropeAid/DCI—ENV/2008/149684/TPS) with supplementary funding from the Austrian Development Cooperation and the Swiss Government.
1. INTRODUCTION

Access to scientifically robust, locally relevant data and knowledge is crucial for effective adaptation to climate change. Since 2009, the Climate Change Capacity and Development (C3D+) initiative, coordinated by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), has supported collaborative efforts to meet this need in developing countries through training and capacity-building.

One project within C3D+ was CoLab, a partnership between the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) Oxford Centre, the Climate System Analysis Group (CSAG) at the University of Cape Town, the Centre for International Forestry and Research (CIFOR), and Environnement et Développement du Tiers Monde (ENDA). At the core of CoLab were two user labs involving two online climate knowledge portals:

- **weADAPT** ([www.weadapt.org](http://www.weadapt.org)), developed by SEI with several partners, combines materials on adaptation; tools, methodologies and links to research; user-generated content such as case studies, and themed “initiatives” to encourage users to network and learn from one another.
- The **Climate Information Portal** (CIP, [http://cip.csag.uct.ac.za](http://cip.csag.uct.ac.za)), developed by CSAG, is a web interface that combines a database of observational climate data as well as projections of future climate, and guidance to facilitate the best use and interpretation of that data.

The first user lab was held in Bogor, Indonesia, on Sept. 26-29, 2011, organized with CIFOR; it included 14 CIFOR staff, seven guests from partner organizations, three SEI staff, and two CSAG staff. The second lab took place in Dakar, Senegal, on April 10-13, 2012, and was held in conjunction with a related project – “Strengthening Collaboration Between Climate Knowledge Brokers”, supported by the Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN), which links weADAPT, CIP and AfricaAdapt, a bilingual (English and French) portal developed by ENDA and several other partners to promote knowledge-sharing on adaptation in Africa, with user-generated case studies (see [www.africa-adapt.net](http://www.africa-adapt.net)).

The labs, organized collaboratively by the partners, were designed to build capacity among participants, encourage them to use the portals for their work, and systematically gather their feedback to inform both technical and content-related improvements. This document evaluates the labs’ effectiveness at achieving their goals, looking at the resulting changes to the portals, the impact on participants, and the broader impact of CoLab. The target audiences of this evaluation are UNITAR, as the project funder, and the project partners; however, many of the insights gained could be more widely applicable.

The evaluation drew on multiple sources of evidence:

- Reports on each of the user labs, as well as mid-term and final project reports;
- Separate focus-group interviews with SEI and CSAG (both researchers and the developers of the portals), and follow-ups by email and in person (the latter with SEI only);
- Interviews (on Skype) with four Bogor lab participants and two Dakar lab participants;
- Online survey, in April 2013, of all lab participants (21 from CIFOR, 6 replies; 20 from ENDA, 7 replies);
- Direct interaction with the weADAPT and CIP websites, including a new release of CIP;
- CoLab materials in SEI’s Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Communication (PMEC) system;
- Visitor statistics for weADAPT, supplied by SEI Oxford.
Per UNITAR’s direction, the guiding questions for the evaluation were:

- How relevant and effective were the delivered products?
- How efficiently were the outputs produced?
- How was knowledge increased, skills improved, or awareness raised?
- How sustainable are the results likely to be?
- What evidence of wider impact exists?

In addition to this, an effort was made to identify the greatest strengths and weaknesses of the project as perceived by lab participants and by the SEI and CSAG teams themselves, and to gather feedback for the development of future labs and/or for the continued improvement and promotion of the portals.

2. THE STARTING POINT

weADAPT, CIP and AfricaAdapt are part of a growing array of climate-related knowledge portals that aim to support adaptation research, policy and practice, particularly in developing countries. weADAPT, which had been launched in April 2011, building on a previous SEI project called wikiADAPT, had an established user base but wanted to engage more users in Africa, especially in terms of user-generated content and networking. Google Analytics data show that in the three-month period immediately before the Bogor user lab (July 27-Sept. 27, 2011), weADAPT received 1,495 visits from users in Africa, including 231 from western Africa.

CIP, which builds on lessons learned from the Climate Change Explorer tool that was developed as part of weADAPT, was far less well-known than weADAPT at the project’s start, and the CIP team noted that most users only engaged with the portal for individual projects, but did not keep coming back. This evaluation did not examine the impact of CoLab on AfricaAdapt, as the work with that portal was part of a separate project; it is only mentioned to the extent that it came up as part of the discussion of the Dakar user lab.

Figure 1 shows users’ level of engagement with the portals prior to the labs, as reported in the survey.

Figure 1: How often had you used weADAPT prior to the user lab in which you participated?

![weADAPT Use Prior to Labs](image)

![CIP Use Prior to Labs](image)

Source: User survey responses (while 13 responded to the survey overall, only 12 answered this question).

Given that all the user lab participants – and survey respondents – are actively involved in adaptation research and/or practice, the data suggest that both portals, especially CIP, were not achieving their goals of reaching target audiences and becoming go-to resources for them.

Aware that the proliferation of knowledge portals in recent years was at least part of the problem – users can’t keep up and don’t know where to go – the partners had specifically set out to connect their
portals, to provide multiple entry points to their resources and to make related materials available together (e.g. local climate data for a specific place, plus a case study, plus links to relevant research). However, although they often collaborated and had done several trainings together, prior to CoLab, SEI and CSAG did not have a formal structure to facilitate technical collaboration and portal linkages. weADAPT and CIP also lacked a mechanism for systematically gathering, analyzing and responding to user feedback, even though they had done several training workshops with stakeholders. This had sharply limited their opportunities to learn from users about the effectiveness of the portals’ design, the clarity and helpfulness of the guidance, or the usefulness of the content – or to get ideas for further improvements. The CIP team noted that prior to the user labs, their primary interaction with users had been through CSAG’s Winter School program, which uses CIP as part of teaching about the process of decision-making around climate change, including how to use climate data. But while the program taught participants about CIP, it didn’t solicit their feedback on how to improve the portal.

3. PROJECT GOALS

SEI’s report on the Bogor user lab describes it as “a joint initiative between SEI Oxford, CSAG, and CIFOR that aims to advance the development, refinement and cross-linkages between weADAPT and CIP”, working in the context of specific climate change adaptation projects implemented by CIFOR in Africa. The stated objectives of the lab were to:

- Support CIFOR and partners in developing and planning climate change adaptation projects, using the best available climate science information and leading vulnerability and adaptation tools and methods;
- Train CIFOR staff in how to use both portals through practical application in case studies from CIFOR projects;
- Refine and further improve weADAPT and CIP based on user feedback and lessons learned from the user lab;
- Develop content in weADAPT and CIP relevant to the local realities and needs of the case studies used in the user lab;
- Support CIFOR to become a central node in the creation of climate adaptation networks and learning spaces using the portals.

The expected outcomes for the first user lab were increased capacity among CIFOR staff to use both weADAPT and CIP to plan and implement adaptation projects; improvements to the two portals in terms of content, linkages with each other, a growing user base, and refined functionality; and active engagement with the portals by CIFOR partners and a wider community of development and environment practitioners, with CIFOR, together with SEI and CSAG, established as “central nodes” in the creation and maintenance of climate adaptation networks to support mutual learning.

The stated objectives and expected outcomes for the second user lab were very similar, this time training ENDA staff by applying weADAPT and CIP to case studies in Africa relevant to their interests. In addition, the second lab sought to support the CDKN-funded collaboration with AfricaAdapt by helping to identify useful crossover points and opportunities for integration between all three portals. And the Dakar session offered the teams a chance to get user feedback on changes made since the Bogor lab.

4. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE USER LABS

The user lab reports provide detailed descriptions of each lab, including outcomes and user feedback. This section covers only enough of this material to ensure an understanding of the project as a whole and key elements of the partners’ approach. Figure 2, taken from CoLab project proposal document,
shows the overall structure of CoLab: an iterative process to develop materials for the user labs, work with users and gather their feedback, improve the portals in response to this feedback, then start the cycle again.

**Figure 2: The CoLab project design**

The user labs themselves followed a common structure, with a curriculum developed in advance, but daily user feedback, time for the SEI and CSAG teams to reflect on that feedback, and adjustments to ensure that users’ needs were being addressed. The Bogor lab report describes it as “a participatory and iterative process of guided exploration and discovery”, not a traditional training seminar:

Participants will first be introduced to the different tools and content in the CIP and weADAPT portals. Second, they will use the portals in hands-on exercises to address different pragmatic questions or challenges that relate to issues they want to explore in their case studies. Third, the experience – including usability – of using both portals to find support material, tools and approaches to address their questions will be discussed during feedback sessions at the end of each day. Fourth, the feedback will be incorporated in further development and refinement of the portals for them to be more specifically tailored to users’ needs.

Each lab consisted of four half-day (morning) sessions, each with a detailed program of activities, including specific objectives, expected outcomes and outputs, and feedback requests. In the afternoons, the CIP and weADAPT teams met to discuss their observations and the feedback received.

Both labs started by introducing participants to the portals (in Bogor, to weADAPT and CIP; in Dakar, also to AfricaAdapt) and to three case studies in which they would be applying the methods and tools to be discussed. The second day’s work focused on assessing current vulnerability – including the use of observed climate data from CIP; the third day focused on assessing future vulnerability, and the fourth, on adaptation planning. Thus, the basic structure of the labs was the same, but the actual content, discussions and activities, as described in the user lab reports, differed considerably, reflecting the very different interests, needs and skill sets of the two groups.

Particularly, the Dakar program had to be adjusted because of language barriers; this being Francophone Africa, many participants had difficulties keeping up with instructions in English.
the first day, ENDA arranged for interpreters, but starting on Day 2, a team member who is fluent in French had to step in to translate. The Dakar report notes that the participants “were much more comfortable when information was presented in both languages, although it necessarily increased the time taken for certain presentations”. Although this appears to have been an unexpected challenge, it also provided a learning opportunity by drawing attention to language barriers in the use of weADAPT and CIP.

Striking a balance: Structure vs. specific users’ needs

It is important to stress that the groups involved in both labs were enormously diverse. The backgrounds of the Bogor lab participants include geography, ecology, environmental sciences, economics, livelihoods and governance, among others. The Dakar group included experts in rural development, geographers, people directly involved in training and capacity-building, an environmental inspector, a climate negotiator and a population scientist, among others. The ways in which a scientist with a Ph.D., working on academic research, might use weADAPT and CIP would almost certainly differ from how a policy-maker or a practitioner would use them – and each would need different kinds of help and different types of materials.

From the portal developers’ perspective, that diversity was an asset: “This was a really good way for us to test the portals across our range of possible users,” an SEI team member said. The instructors also made a point of giving only limited guidance. “weADAPT should be intuitive to use – it shouldn’t require hands-on training,” said another SEI team member. “The whole idea was to see where the system stumbles.” Thus, the focus of the training sessions, especially in Bogor, was on content, such as approaches to vulnerability assessments, with far less time spent on instructions for the portals themselves. The curriculum was also fairly generic, not tailored to specific categories of users (e.g. researchers or practitioners), but rather designed to provide an overview of the full range of resources available through the portals. For example, day 3 in Bogor involved:

- Identifying which livelihood group is currently most vulnerable in the case study area or selecting a priority livelihoods group to work with for the purposes of the exercise.
- Prioritizing one climate stressor and one non-climatic stressor (external to the system being assessed) to consider in terms of future vulnerability of the livelihood group, and identifying what variables can be used to characterize these stressors.
- Using CIP to explore what can be said about the possible evolution of the climate stressor into the future.
- Using another resource, or expert judgment, to say something about the possible evolution of the non-climatic stressor into the future.
- With the upper and lower bounds of the future projections envelope for the 2 stressors delineating the “possibility space”, using 2 scenarios to describe what currently makes people in the livelihood group vulnerable to possible impacts of these combined stressors.
- Based on these factors of vulnerability, identifying 3-5 possible adaptation options/measures that could be undertaken to reduce vulnerability to the combination of the 2 stressors and describing these according to the goal the measure aims to achieve, the sector(s) it relates to, the cost category, and the scale at which it will need to be undertaken.

At the end of the exercise, participants were all asked to reflect on the following questions:

- How well did this work as a stakeholder engagement exercise to explore adaptation options for reducing vulnerability to multiple stressors?
- What stakeholder groups could such an exercise be used with?
- Could it be used to help address and deal with conflicting interests and perceptions of vulnerability?
What does this exercise reveal about the dynamic nature of vulnerability and the limitations of using vulnerability indices?

The somewhat less-structured nature of the Dakar user lab, which was not consistently attended by all participants and which, as noted above, encountered significant language barriers, may have resulted in more tailoring. The SEI and CSAG teams both noted that on-the-fly adjustments had been made in response to challenges encountered by users as they tried to complete the exercises; a training module on weADAPT’s Adaptation Decision Explorer (ADx) tool, for example, was dropped to free up time for more hands-on instruction and support on CIP, which was requested by participants. As in Bogor, however, the tasks were not adjusted to individuals’ interests or needs – all followed the same program.

Lessons from the Bogor user lab

Participants gave the Bogor user lab relatively positive reviews, though they rated the program’s value in teaching about the portals far higher than its value in teaching about specific applications, such as how to link climate data with local perceptions of the climate. Figure 3, taken from the user lab report, shows handmade H diagrams used to visualize the ratings.

Figure 3: Participants’ evaluation of the Bogor user lab

The Bogor lab participants offered extensive feedback on both the lab itself, and the portals, such as:

- Conceptual links between CIP and weADAPT need to be strengthened and more technical links created on this basis.
- Portal users are people with different levels of experience. It would be helpful to create different entry points or spaces for beginners and for advanced users.
Finding relevant information in weADAPT can be difficult, because the system contains a lot of information that is poorly structured/organized and a lot of repetition. Users suggested adding search filters, cleaning and re-organizing the initiatives, adding tables of contents, etc.

weADAPT content (which, at the time, still included many materials from the less carefully curated wikiADAPT) is not always scientifically rigorous and needs editing and cleaning, as well as re-organizing to cater for users with different expertise and levels of experience.

CIP targets more the scientific community, and could be wider used if it would be less technical.

Climate model data in the CIP grid could be integrated with impact model data to provide a broader picture of the conditions.

The approach taken for the user-lab was interactive and promoted participation and learning, but more exercises on actually using the portals (i.e. create content, add a placemark, use CIP data to create own plots) would be necessary to test them and better understand how to use them.

As noted in the introduction, all user lab participants were sent a survey in April 2013, as part of this evaluation process. Figure 4 shows the six Bogor respondents’ answers to a multiple-choice question about their use of the portals since the lab; note that there was only a 29% response rate.

Figure 4: Since the user lab, has your use of weADAPT and/or CIP increased?

Next, participants were asked an open-ended question: How do they use the portals? The answers were very diverse even within this small group; weADAPT was described as a way of keeping up with new tools and initiatives, and as a useful reference; a South African university professor said she refers her students to both portals, and they find CIP very useful; at least two have used CIP climate data in their research. Some also use weADAPT as a communications tool, to share their own work.

Participants were also asked whether the lab had changed how they used weADAPT or CIP, and what they considered the most significant change resulting from the lab. Several answers focused on increased technical proficiency with both portals, especially CIP – they can now access and use climate data that is very valuable in their work. Some are also sharing content on weADAPT and using it to network and make connections across Africa and Asia. One respondent, one of two clear weADAPT “champions” who have emerged within CIFOR, said the most significant change resulting from the lab is CIFOR’s active engagement with weADAPT. “It is like having CIFOR [as] part of an adaptation community, which I feel was not the case before.” One of his colleagues (the other “champion”) routinely gathers and posts materials from CIFOR on the portal, including case studies and new publications, and she also serves as the editor of weADAPT’s Forests and Climate Change initiative (see weadapt.org/forests).
The SEI and CSAG teams themselves recognized several things they could have done better in the first lab – most notably, provide more hands-on exercises to help users understand how to use the portals in their daily work and create and upload content. The Dakar program was modified accordingly. “I think the first [lab] enabled us to do a better job on the second one,” a CSAG team member said.

Lessons from the Dakar user lab

As in Bogor, reviews of the Dakar user lab were generally positive; the lab report notes that when participants were asked to volunteer for further engagement, 13 volunteered (which was the majority present on that day). Participants also said they had a better understanding of adaptation and vulnerability assessment tools, including how to use CIP and how to interpret climate projections. Figure 5, from the user lab report, shows selected H diagrams of participants’ ratings of the user lab.

Figure 5: Participants’ evaluation of the Dakar user lab

How satisfied are you that the workshop met its aims and objectives?

Not satisfied ☹️ Very satisfied 😊

Do you feel you have a better understanding of what vulnerability and adaptation tools to use in your assessment?

No better understanding Much better understanding

Do you feel you have a better understanding of CIP and how to interpret climate projections?

No better understanding Much better understanding

How well prepared do you feel to apply these tools in your work?

Not prepared ☹️ Well prepared 😊

Source: Dakar user lab report.

Participants’ feedback on weADAPT and CIP themselves was noticeably different from Bogor’s – in part because issues raised in Bogor had already been addressed, but also because of the make-up of
the group, which was arguably closer to weADAPT’s target audiences than the more academic CIFOR group. The comments, as synthesized in the user lab report, are reproduced in full below:

- More links and easier transition between weADAPT and CIP would save time. A joint log-in to both portals was seen as being valuable.
- Linking to AfricaAdapt would integrate less technical content and help the participants in their work.
- The information on CIP is technical and it can be difficult to interpret. Participants suggested summaries of the graphs and generally trying to make it more widely accessible beyond the scientific community.
- Both sites should be multi-lingual; although the option to translate into French exists in weADAPT, this wasn’t obvious to participants and should be made clearer.
- More data coverage, and projections for the near-term in CIP would be valuable. The participants recognize, however, that in some cases this is simply not possible.
- In order to get the most value from the user lab experience there should be continued follow-up by email, perhaps through an email group or similar.
- In weADAPT, more information on the vulnerability tools used during different case studies would be useful.
- There were also specific requests for information relating to sea-level rise and coastal erosion to be included in CIP alongside rainfall and temperature data.

Like the Bogor lab participants, the Dakar group was sent a survey in April 2013, and 35% replied (seven of 20). Figure 6 shows the answers to the question about their use of the portals since the lab.

**Figure 6: Since the user lab, has your use of weADAPT and/or CIP increased?**

![Portal use after since labs – ENDA](image)

The ENDA responses to the question of how they use the portals suggest that the Dakar lab was very successful at teaching participants how to find useful materials, and getting them to see the portals as resources for daily use. Below are three of the responses given to this question, in full:

I use it as reference to work to improve it. It helps clarify issues relating to environment and biodiversity activities. I share it a lot with partners.

I get information from the weADAPT and CIP (downloading and reading online) for my work on adaptation planning and impact assessments and in the identification of adaptation options. CIP is useful for information on baseline climate, climate variability and climate scenarios and projections. weADAPT is helpful for information on vulnerability assessment tools, experiences on community based adaptation options.
My work is on community-based adaptation, I conduct vulnerability assessment to climate change and lead community members to develop adaptation plans. In doing this I read materials from weADAPT on similar works that has been done and I also share my findings there. CIP helps me to get climate information on the case study location of my work.

Interviews with two ENDA researchers indicate that there, too, the portals have now gained “champions” – and because these users are closer to the portals’ core audiences, they’re also better positioned to raise awareness of the portals among people who could benefit from them. These “champions” also have a clear and well-articulated sense of the value of the portals as resources for vulnerability assessment and planning, sources of crucial information, and in the case of weADAPT, as a hub for peer-to-peer learning.

One interviewee, who helped organize the Dakar user lab and whose survey response is the third shown above, noted as an example that she’s involved in a bottom-up vulnerability assessment in Gambia. “If I have this output in weADAPT, it is automatically going to help others learn how to do … I do think that people can learn a lot of things from each other.”

None of the ENDA staff who contributed to this evaluation (through a survey and/or an interview) mentioned any problems with the language used in the work sessions – not even an interviewee who clearly found it difficult to be interviewed in English. It is possible that this is a common challenge for Francophone Africans, or that the problem wasn’t perceived as that serious because an SEI staff member quickly jumped in to translate. But the experience made a big impression, especially on the CSAG team. “We did learn that there’s a huge barrier if you don’t engage the users in their own language”, a CSAG team member said. A CSAG report put it even more strongly: “It may seem obvious but engaging users in their mother tongue has more positive effects than just overcoming the language barrier. It engenders a positive attitude and a willingness to engage. In some parts of Africa (such as West Africa) failure to engage users in French can result in a total refusal to engage.”

5. EVALUATING COLAB: WERE THE USER LABS SUCCESSFUL?

As the feedback presented above shows, there is strong evidence that the user labs made a real difference in at least some participants’ work, established real “champions” for both portals within CIFOR and ENDA, increased engagement with the portals, and strengthened the connections among the partners. The user labs also resulted in numerous, often substantial changes and improvements to the portals, informed by and often directly responding to the participants’ feedback. These include:

- An overhaul of weADAPT’s search engine, so now users can filter results by type (articles, members, organizations, case studies, etc.); for example, see the results for “forests”: http://weadapt.org/search?q=forests.
- weADAPT “user journeys” videos for beginner and advanced users, and for different types of climate professionals, were created; see http://weadapt.org/knowledge-base/guidance/pathways.
- Existing Google Translate functionality on weADAPT has been enhanced, and the site is now multi-lingual in both its front and back ends. Figure 7 below shows a translation to French generated by selecting the language in a menu in the top right corner. (Of course the translations are awkward, but they’re usually good enough, an ENDA interviewee said; where this isn’t enough is with highly technical materials, such as CIP guidance.)
- weADAPT content was edited, reorganized and, when outdated, removed, and new content and guidance materials have been added focusing on topics of interest to the user lab groups, such as vulnerability assessment tools and methods.
CIP guidance has been revised to make it considerably less technical and more “user-friendly” for practitioners and non-native English speakers; a new release of CIP is also set up to be multi-lingual, and materials are to be translated into French.

New content has been added to CIP in response to user requests, to the extent data is available.

New Google forms in English and Spanish have been added to weADAPT that allow users to “QuickShare” their work by filling out a short questionnaire that prompts them to supply key information; see http://weadapt.org/knowledge-base/guidance/create.

weADAPT has launched a newsletter to alert users to new content; SEI staff have seen this result in significant increases in visits to the portal after each new issue.

weADAPT has significantly increased its social-media activity, on Twitter and Facebook. A weADAPT group was also created on LinkedIn within days of the Dakar user lab; however, as of June 2013 it has only 18 members, including seven SEI and CSAG staff.

The single biggest change to both portals was the integration of weADAPT and CIP – completed first on the weADAPT side, and more recently (in a March 2013 release) on the CIP side. In weADAPT, this is done through the Adaptation Layer, which maps all case studies on the site – and now, on CIP – using Google Maps (this was previously done with Google Earth, and can still be switched to use Google Earth, but Google Maps works better on slow or unstable internet connections; there is also a text-only version of the Adaptation Layer).

Figure 8 shows a screen shot of the Adaptation Layer in weADAPT. Each of the orange circles is a climate station for which CIP has data available, while the white circles and light bulbs denote weADAPT case studies; the numbers indicate the number of stations or case studies available for a single location.
Figure 8: The Adaptation Layer in weADAPT

The new release of CIP integrates weADAPT content as one of several data sources that can be displayed on the map, as shown in the screen shot in Figure 9.

Figure 9: CIP map incorporating weADAPT content

The integration is still relatively new, so only limited user feedback is available. The linkage on weADAPT was launched at COP18 in Doha, and many users are aware of it, and a short guidance document was recently posted (see weadapt.org/using-climate-information) and advertised in the April weADAPT newsletter. A case study in Cape Town meant to showcase the linkage, however, is still being completed, due by the end of June. Users who have seen the integrated portals and tried them offered positive feedback, as shown in Figure 10.
Not surprisingly, asked what they like/not like about the integration, several survey respondents focused on the time-saving, ease-of-use and efficiency aspects. Some offered more detailed feedback:

The integration is a good step forward. The only thing which is an obstacle and which I observe here in Mali and Burkina is that due to the unstable and slow internet connections, it’s always a challenge to use the portal.

The integration created more options now than before. If someone wants to focus on current vulnerability he can use weADAPT and if he wants to see how the climate will evolve in the future and study its implication he can use CIP. I recommend that more capacity building for users on how to use the portals is critical.

To an outsider with no training on using the portals together, weADAPT’s version of the integration seems more intuitive and user-friendly. At the same time, a CSAG team member expressed some frustration with the limited amount of information provided in some weADAPT articles, and stressed the need to at least link to longer documentation. On both sides, the integration needs to be backed up by clear, scientifically robust guidance, and more capacity-building would clearly be helpful.

For the portals themselves, meanwhile, it’s clear that the linkage has great value: the combination of climate data with case studies and expert materials is quite powerful and creates a strong incentive to keep coming back to the portals. The CSAG team noted that the linkage with weADAPT, which has far more regular users, has been very beneficial for CIP in sustaining engagement with its users.

How should CoLab’s effectiveness be measured?

A fundamental question in evaluating CoLab is what should be the measure of success: Did the project yield tangible results and improvements? Did it meet its stated objectives? Did it do as well as it could have done? Or, more ambitiously, did it succeed in realizing the portals’ potential to meet the knowledge, data, capacity-building and networking needs they are built to address?

As evidenced by the section above, the answer to the first question is a clear YES. On the other questions, the answer is less clear. The SEI and CSAG teams’ own assessment is mixed: they achieved a great deal, but not as much as they wished – for a variety of reasons. For example, one of the most valued aspects of the user labs for the CSAG team was having been able to get feedback from users and try to incorporate it right there, and then get feedback on the changes. But the weADAPT developer, who is not SEI staff, wasn’t at the labs. The CSAG team considered this a disadvantage – and when the weADAPT developer was asked for his views on “demand-driven portal
development”, he was at a loss; he hadn’t really experienced the process, but had only gotten the feedback second-hand.

There is also the question of what happened with the 28 people (68% of lab participants) who did not reply to the evaluation survey: Have they all forgotten about CIP and weADAPT, or did they simply not fill out the form? CIFOR now has 10 registered weADAPT users – more than the six who replied – but three have not even filled out basic profile information; at the same time, another CIFOR staff member with a blank profile made it clear in the survey that she uses the portals routinely. The same questions arise with ENDA. Looking more broadly at the adaptation practitioners in West Africa, where she works, an ENDA staffer said she doesn’t know of people “using both portals widely”, despite the fact that she finds them “very important to us for vulnerability assessment and planning”.

Google Analytics data for weADAPT, meanwhile, show a major increase in traffic from Africa, as shown in the graph and table in Figure 11.

**Figure 11: Visitors to weADAPT from Africa for 3-month period prior to first lab and last 3 months**

![Graph showing increase in traffic from Africa](image)

Source: Google Analytics data supplied by SEI Oxford. In the graphic, troughs correspond with weekends, when traffic is lower.

The user labs alone are unlikely to have produced this level of change; the SEI team’s own perception is that several factors came together – the user labs and CIFOR’s and ENDA’s increased engagement with and promotion of the portal; two side-events at UN climate change conferences (COP17 in Durban and COP18 in Doha); enhanced communications efforts, including a very effective newsletter and active use of Facebook and Twitter; search-engine optimization, and the site improvements themselves, which have made weADAPT more useful. The CSAG team also stressed that the labs were part of a multi-faceted effort to improve CIP and to consistently engage with users. So even if they lost touch with many of these lab participants, they are confident that the changes in the portal and in their work will be sustained.

The question of how efficient the CoLab process was is also complex. Both the SEI and CSAG teams described it as efficient, stressing the huge value of being able to alternate between working with users in the morning, and working together in the afternoon to address users’ feedback and lessons learned. “The amount of face to face time we got to spend working on [the portals] was far more efficient than trying to bounce things back and forth,” an SEI team member said. “We moved an awful lot farther… so in that sense, it was really efficient.”
From a user perspective, however, it is not as clear that the labs were as efficient as they could have been. Given the diverse backgrounds, interests, and technical skill levels of the participants, it is hard to imagine that all benefited equally from this relatively uniform set of exercises. The changes in Dakar did reflect a recognition that the ENDA group had different needs than the CIFOR group, but users at future labs might appreciate shorter, even more customized programs that focus on their specific interests. (This is more of an issue for weADAPT, which has a broader range of content, than for CIP; it is also noteworthy that the SEI team has already taken this approach with its “user journeys” videos.) There are trade-offs to consider: the approach taken in CoLab was optimal for connecting with large partner organizations that have diverse teams, and it probably created more opportunities for mutual learning among users. However, shorter, more narrowly focused user labs might be more attractive to potential participants, and they would also be less costly.

6. BEYOND COLAB: USER FEEDBACK AND STAFF REFLECTIONS

Like the user labs themselves, this evaluation of CoLab has gathered extensive feedback from users about the portals – especially weADAPT – and led the SEI and CSAG staff to reflect on their own work and their ambitions going forward. This section presents some broad themes that emerged in interviews, in the SEI and CSAG teams’ own reports, and in follow-up conversations.

What are these portals, and who are they for?

A fundamental question that arises with weADAPT and CIP is who they are built for. This issue arises in different ways with each portal: CIP is far more narrowly focused, but it is not particularly accessible, even in its latest iteration, for people with limited scientific knowledge. However, the people who have the knowledge to quickly read and process the CIP data may not need it; one CIFOR researcher who works with such data said he goes straight to the original sources.

The CSAG team is aware that its target audience wants materials to be simple and accessible, and struggles with how to balance “the simplicity of the message and the complexity of the science”:

Users call for clear, concise, decision-relevant messages from the climate information. This is an understandable need although it is very difficult to strike an appropriate balance between communicating a clear, simple message that can be used by decision-makers and the robust use of the science. It is not always possible to provide clear and simple messages without glossing over very important complexities in the climate information. This may ultimately lead to ill-informed uses of the climate information or a reluctance to use the information as it is presented on CIP.

weADAPT, on the other hand, risks coming across as a portal seeking to be “all things to all people”. The mix of materials, from basic tutorials to more expert discussions of tools and methodologies, plus case studies, short articles, videos and presentations, offers a great deal of value to many different audiences, but can also be a turnoff. CIFOR staff noted, for example, that some researchers might not feel weADAPT is a good venue to share their work, because they perceive it as too basic-level, or too geared towards practitioners. Policy-makers who could learn about adaptation on the site might be turned off by the more technical content. And as this evaluator has experienced, it’s easy to just be overwhelmed on weADAPT – which can also lead to thinking, “This is for someone other than me.”

Focusing on a narrower set of audiences might be more effective, especially to the extent that outsiders already perceive weADAPT as mostly geared to those audiences, and that weADAPT has particular potential to add value to those audiences. A CIFOR staff member offered this feedback:

I think it’s best suitable right now for practitioners and planners – for example, for promoting synergies across organizations that work on the same topic or the same area.
Many times you will start planning an adaptation project in an area where one is already running, but if weADAPT becomes the go-to place for uploading adaptation projects, I think it would be extremely valuable.

The creation of the “user journeys” has begun to focus the SEI team’s attention on who weADAPT’s target audiences are (or should be) – specifically, on narrowing down the list and figuring out how best to address each audience type. There are no immediate plans for tailoring users’ experiences based on their stated interests or expertise level, mostly because this could be technologically challenging and resource-intensive. SEI staff also expressed concerns about the feasibility of categorizing content by expertise level, which might be a subjective judgment and keep audiences away from content they would want to see. Still, these issues continue to be discussed; print promotional materials for weADAPT are also being revised and will reflect insights from these discussions.

Bandwidth: A continuing challenge

A persistent issue with online resources geared to users in developing countries is that high-speed, broadband internet service is unavailable in many places, and unstable in many others. In fact, several interviews for this evaluation could not be completed by Skype, because of poor connections. One CIFOR staff member said weADAPT works well for her in Indonesia, but when she is in Cameroon, she cannot download videos, or use the Adaptation Layer.

The developers of both portals are aware of this issue; this is why, for example, the Adaptation Layer in weADAPT now uses Google Maps rather than bandwidth-intensive Google Earth. Yet when SEI created “user journeys” to introduce weADAPT to users at different levels and with different interests, what it produced was videos – which are very engaging, but are likely to be far less accessible than, say, a downloadable PDF slideshow, or a text with screen shots. The SEI team is discussing potential low-bandwidth alternatives to offer along with the videos.

Given that mobile technology is rapidly proliferating across Africa, and many people who’ve never had a land line are “leapfrogging” to mobile phones, creating mobile-app versions of the portals might also be a promising option – the SEI team has discussed it. Several interviewees spoke favorably about this, but they also offered caveats: most people don’t have smartphones yet, so the tools might have to be tailored to lower-tech phones, and in some countries, data service is limited and pricey. For those situations, CD-ROMs or USB sticks might be the most viable options, one user suggested.

Understanding and engaging with users

For all the tangible improvements to the portals, and the new skills gained by user lab participants, it is arguably the SEI and CSAG teams who gained the most from the CoLab project – who learned the most, and whose work may have been most significantly and sustainably changed. An SEI staff member who often writes articles and guidance for weADAPT described her experience thus:

This program was an opportunity to spend a bit more time than usual to work with people in a slightly different space than we are, more on the development or biophysical side, or in local development. That gave us an opportunity to better understand their work context, the kinds of questions that they ask. For me that was very useful because the better sense I have of who I’m talking to through weADAPT, the better I can write or pitch some of the guidance articles that we write. Every time I do this kind of thing I learn more about the variety of people that are working in this space and the different needs they have.
The user labs also enhanced the trainers’ own skills, the SEI staff member said:

Having a week of that very intensive, outward-facing work together [with CSAG], where we were presenting a session side by side, our ability to work in an interdisciplinary way, adaptation and climate science, was greatly enhanced.

A CSAG staff member offered a similar perspective: “Working with the SEI team was very, very helpful and brought a different dimension that we don’t necessarily have in our group. They’re much more focused on adaptation planning, while the CIP team focuses more on climate science.”

As noted earlier, for both teams, the labs were their first opportunity to systematically gather feedback from portal users. Both teams expressed a strong interest in continuing to do this kind of work; CSAG has already applied similar approaches at other training sessions since the Dakar lab.

Scaling up

Near the end of the evaluation, the SEI team leader posed the question: How could use of these portals be scaled up? What are the best approaches? The evidence gathered through this process does not point in a specific direction, but some users did provide feedback that could be helpful. One key point is that partnerships are important; making connections, as SEI and CSAG have done with CIFOR and ENDA, is far more effective than going it alone. Building on the idea of “champions”, it might be useful to train people in different organizations to be able to teach and support new portal users. One interviewee suggested looking at universities for potential partners in this regard.

Yet none of this should distract from what this evaluation clearly shows: SEI and CSAG are already many good things. To a great extent, the key to successful scaling up may be to keep doing it.