Alliance of Agricultural Information Services – SIDALC

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ABSTRACT

IICA recognizes that information management and knowledge sharing are fundamental for improving agriculture and rural life in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Both information and knowledge are essential in decision making, research and education, as well as in achieving competitiveness, innovation and sustainable development. SIDALC is an international alliance of information services in which institutions from 22 countries in the Americas share their agricultural, livestock, forestry and environmental information. Created in 1999, today SIDALC is one of the most important sources of knowledge and information for agriculture in LAC both on the web and offline. SIDALC's success lies in the fact that it has taken advantage of the intellectual capital of 172 national institutions and national networks that, acting as intermediaries in the management and dissemination of information, continually expand and modernize their services in light of the new paradigms of the "knowledge society". Because of this, SIDALC is the largest community of information specialists interested in providing services openly around the globe. They collaborate with one another, "sharing a little so that all can have more," while conserving their identity and policies. SIDALC is open to the public, at www.sidalc.net (no subscription required), permitting on-line searches of 2.6 millions of records and available digital collections including more than 225.013 full-text documents. Furthermore, SIDALC is linked to other information systems and networks in a number of countries of the Americas, which provides stakeholders in agriculture and rural territories with a direct response to their information needs from reference desks around LAC.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1943, the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) has implemented several information and knowledge management initiatives, including the establishment of the Orton Memorial Library, the Scientific Exchange Service, the Inter-American Association of Agricultural Librarians, Documentalists and Information Specialists (AIBDA), the Inter-American Agricultural Information System (AGRINTER) and the Inter-American Agricultural Information and Documentation Center (CIDIA).

Based on the abovementioned initiatives, and in response to specific demands from the region, in 1999 IICA received funding from the Kellogg Foundation to create an appropriate technological platform with the aim of facilitating access to agricultural information in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In the 15 years since its foundation, SIDALC has worked closely with its member countries to provide access to information for its users in Latin American and Caribbean agricultural sector. On a daily basis, IICA and its partners work to update their databases and offer new technological options that ensure better access to related information and services from a single point, delivered in an efficient manner.

1. What is the Alliance of Agricultural Information Services (SIDALC)?

SIDALC is an international alliance of information services on agriculture, livestock, forestry and the environment, through which ministries, universities and research centers in 22 countries in the Americas share information and services, thereby creating one of the most important windows for accessing knowledge in LAC and the world.

The Alliance provides access to information produced in the hemisphere and duly organized in libraries and other specialized information centers in the areas of agriculture, livestock, forestry, the environmental information and related topics. It offers access to nearly three million reference materials and to more than 250,000 full-text documents, including books, magazines and journals, graduate theses and reports.

Access to SIDALC's information system is open and its databases are freely available to the public, with no subscription required, at www.sidalc.net. On average, it receives nearly 10,000 online consultations daily from search engines, benefiting more than two million people annually.

Its success lies in the fact that it has taken advantage of the intellectual capital of 172 institutions which, acting as intermediaries in the management and dissemination of information, continually expand and modernize their services in light of the new paradigms of the "knowledge society" and the advances of the digital world.

Furthermore, the integration of information networks and agricultural, environmental and forestry information systems from various countries in the Americas, provides stakeholders of the agricultural sector and rural dwellers with access to timely and relevant information in those thematic areas.
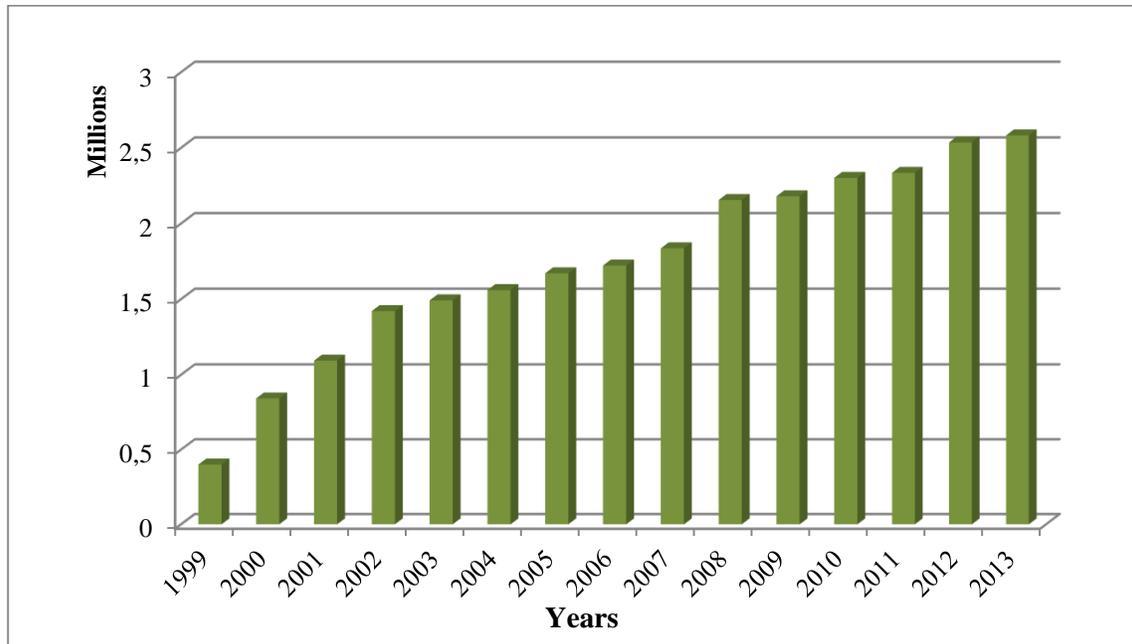

Figure 1: Data entries contributed annually

2. The platform of services

The following services are currently available:

- The "agricultural meta-database" which contains specialized collections on agriculture, the environment, forestry and related areas, with references and online resources. It is also indexed by Google Scholar.
- The scientific exchange service (SIC), staffed by specialists in agricultural information management from throughout the hemisphere ready to respond promptly to queries.
- Localization bar for agricultural information: publications, journals, digital libraries, open access repositories and thematic resources in a single place.
- A directory of agricultural libraries and documentation centers.
- Distance learning courses on information and knowledge management, supported by the IMARK global initiative (www.imarkgroup.org).

Figure 2: Structure of the platform of services of the SIDALC Alliance.

3. The collaborative structure

SIDALC functions as a community of specialists in agricultural information interested in facilitating open access to knowledge at global level. This community has been instrumental in developing a virtuous circle of collaborative networks that operates in a dynamic and participatory manner and where "each shares a little so that all can have more." Each institution involved preserves its own identity and policies on the delivery of specialized information services.

At the same time, SIDALC makes it possible to mobilize human and information resources between countries and regions. In doing so, it promotes and supports national and international initiatives for the management of specialized information and encourages the dissemination and transfer of successful experiences.

The Scientific Exchange Service receives an average of 15,500 requests for information annually and, thanks to the collaboration of the participating institutions, it is able to support the research of specialists in the region.

That is precisely the greatest competitive advantage of SIDALC, as an open system of hemispheric scope that encompasses both national and international institutions, creates spaces for technical cooperation, and facilitates horizontal cooperation and collaborative research.

The following graphics show the trends in the use of the Scientific Exchange Service between libraries and requests from users to those libraries. If we take the year 2013 as an example, with an average of four and two information items or documents requested, respectively, this amounts to a

total of 55,858 items/documents distributed, equivalent to a large volume of research generated by specialists in the region. The generation of these services has had a positive impact on the participating libraries, both at the internal and the external level.

Another factor that has increased the visibility of the records, as well as the number of requests to the participating libraries and institutions, is that starting in 2007 the records were indexed in Google Scholar, which has showcased the information contained in these institutions at a global level.
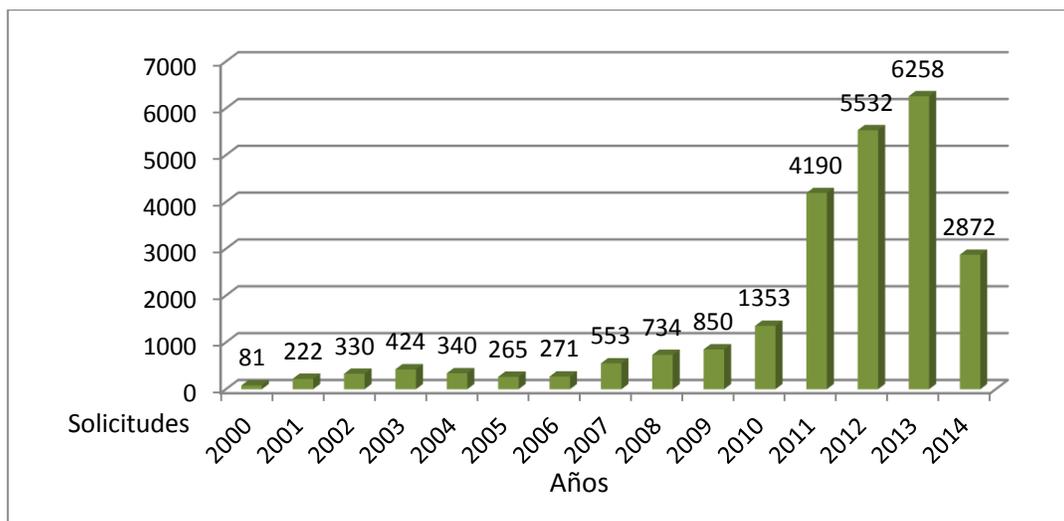

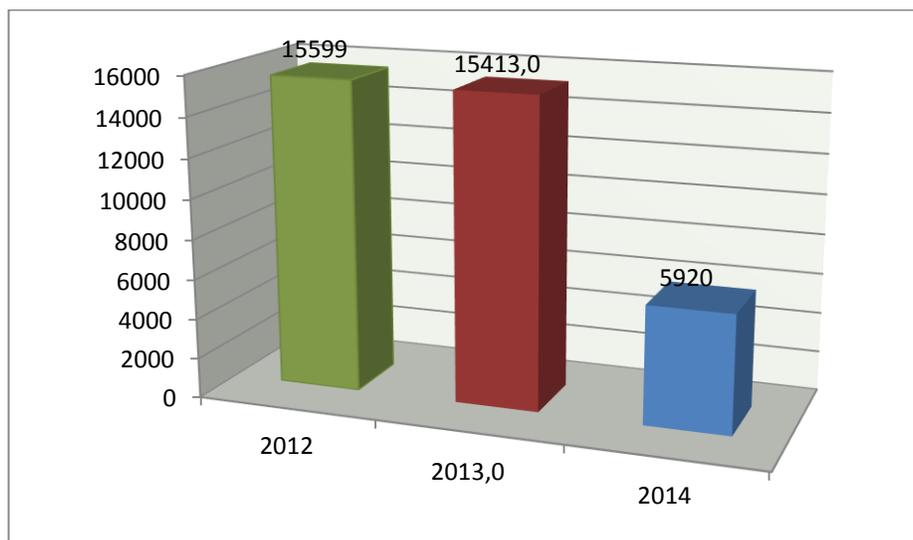Figure 3: Performance of the scientific exchange service between participating libraries, 2000 – July 2014

Figure 4: Requests from users to the participating libraries, 2012 – July 2014

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Below are some comments from participating institutions on the increase in requests for information:

"Prior to 2006, our Unit did not receive requests because our databases were not linked to SIDALC. In 2011, when the INIAP databases were uploaded to the SIDALC platform, monthly requests averaged 25 and there were approximately 300 requests annually. Nowadays, the monthly average is 75 requests and annually it is 1000 requests, since we have been linked up. This has been the best period experienced by our Documentation Unit, given the number of external users who request information of a scientific nature."

Eliana Velásquez Lucas.
Carlos Navas Coello Library
Instituto Nacional Autónomo of Investigaciones Agropecuarias – INIAP
Quevedo, Ecuador

"Another point that is worth emphasizing is that SIDALC is included as a consultation platform for courses on the use and management of information resources that we impart to teachers and undergraduate and post-graduate students at the university. It is an obligatory resource that we teach them how to use, and students consult it when they present their bibliography at the end of the course. As a result, more people know and use the platform and therefore there are more downloads of online publications and an increase in requests for our services and those of other participating libraries."

Ruth Velia Gómez Centeno.
National Agricultural Information and Documentation Center - CENIDA
Universidad Nacional Agraria - UNA
Managua, Nicaragua

"In these past years of major technological changes, clients have shown more interest in having rapid access to the library's resources. Offering information on specialized topics makes the Library unique in its class and the specialists who look for this type information have a very good source of knowledge for their well-prepared work. For this reason, I can say that putting our databases online through SIDALC's resources and other sources has been the best opportunity to showcase all that great knowledge and specialized information.

At present we have around 180 requests from SIDALC (http://www.sidalc.net/es/honduras) to search for very specific information."

Marcio Perdomo Laínez.
Honduran Foundation for Agricultural Research - FHIA
Cortés, Honduras

4. What has the SIDALC Alliance accomplished after 15 years?

- The creation of one of the largest collections of information resources on agriculture, the environment, forestry and related areas.
- Exchange of experiences and approaches to information and knowledge management through networks and forums of experts participating in SIDALC, including 12 web seminars organized in conjunction with the AIMS community promoted by FAO.
- Increased demand for reference services by users and a positive impact on the use of SIDALC's specialized libraries.
- Effective application of tools and methodologies for information management on agriculture, including courses related to these topics.
- Increased recognition, both at national and international level, of each country's information networks, libraries and other information centers.
- Increased involvement in projects related to information and knowledge management for agriculture.
- Greater visibility of institutional collections through SIDALC.NET and Google.com, without the institution losing its identity.
- Backups of catalogues and information collections in IICA's servers located in Costa Rica, which has facilitated the retrieval of data when national equipment has failed.
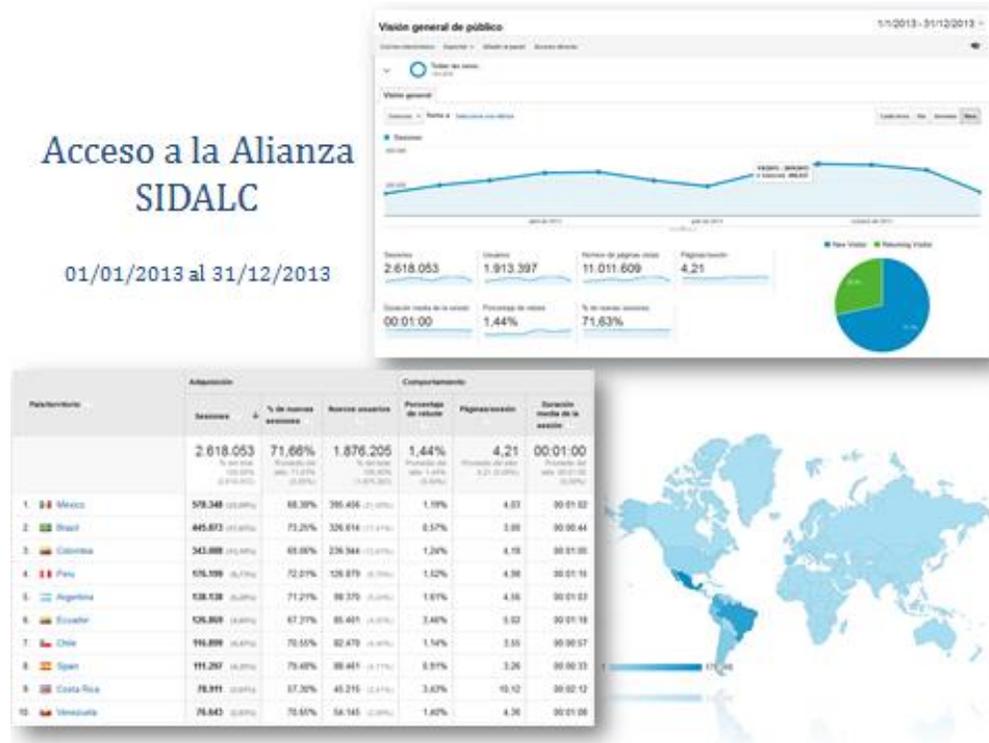

Figure 5: Statistical data on access to SIDALC for 2013

5. Conclusions and lessons learned

The services offered by the participating libraries to external users has increased the use of the information and knowledge generated by the organizations. Similarly, the availability of their collections in SIDALC has allowed for a greater recognition both at the national and international levels.

Integration and cooperation efforts with national information networks are, and will be, the key elements in the organization and provision of services to the region's specialists; therefore, these networks will require monitoring and accompaniment at the various stages of their development in the formulation of policies, methodologies, tools, repositories, etc.

In the absence of a mechanism such as SIDALC, much of the international cooperation or collaborative work would remain uncoordinated or incoherent. Creating common ground helps to avoid the development of systems that not interoperable, or are devoid of standards and in many cases are duplicated.

Taking into account the situation of most of the participating libraries and documentation centers, programs are under way to update aspects such as repositories, free access, free software and library management tools, one the one hand to improve the organization of the information and on the other to ensure its sustainability.   For this reason, SIDALC has forged partnerships with other networks to strengthen its specialists, leading to an improvement in the provision of services.

Implementing networks has given greater visibility to the libraries and their specialists, and has resulted in increased recognition by institutions of information and knowledge management processes.

6. Bibliography

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