DEVELOPMENT OF METHODS FOR INTEGRATING INFORMATION RESOURCES FOR AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH NETWORKS

1. BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION

Since its origin, the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR) has recognized the major opportunities, but also the potential threats, that the new Information & Communication Technologies (ICT) could offer. The First GFAR External Review confirmed the top priority which should be given to this topic. Accordingly, in the GFAR Business Plan and GFAR Secretariat Programme of Work for the period 2001-2003, this is the only line of action for which it was agreed that the GFAR Secretariat should be proactive and play a lead role. For all other lines of action, the GFAR Secretariat’s role is that of a facilitator, the initiatives being left to the GFAR stakeholders.

In March 1999 GFAR in collaboration with FAO and the World Bank, organized an international consultation for enhancing global cooperation between information initiatives in agricultural research. The main conclusion of this consultation was a consensus among the participants on the need to “Build an enabling global framework for agricultural research information for development” as a first step towards the emergence of a “Global Knowledge System in ARD”.

During this consultation, GFAR was urged to assist the regional and sub-regional fora of the developing country NARS to develop and implement their Regional Agricultural Information System (RAIS). At the same time, the participants confirmed and requested FAO to play actively its normative role to improve information management and flows.

Since then GFAR has supported the formulation of regional, and some sub-regional, agricultural information strategies and assisted most of the NARS Regional Fora to prepare plans of action to implement them. At the same time, the World Agricultural Information Centre (WAICENT) of FAO has established a new “WAICENT Outreach” Unit which actively participates in this process.

The first priority identified by the different regional fora to start launching their RAIS was to get a better understanding of various aspects of research activities undertaken through collaborative networks with partners at the national, sub-regional and regional levels. Basically, all regional / sub-regional fora felt the need to develop a shared set of principles for managing and sharing information related to the work of their agricultural research networks.

The most urgent needs were expressed by FARA for Sub-Saharan Africa, FORAGRO for Latin America and Caribbean and AARINENA and EFARD for the Mediterranean Basin. Obviously, each forum will be able to mobilize the resources to develop its own format but there are clearly economies of scale and more importantly an evident added value if the regional fora could agree on some information management standards and flows.

GFAR and FAO-WAICENT have decided to collaborate to bring together the key stakeholders in this challenging task. These would include the International Agricultural Research Centers (IARCs) of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), the ACP-EU Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Co-operation (CTA), and CAB International (CABI).

However, it must be clearly emphasized that the objective of this initiative is to start a dialogue and thereby develop a consensus on a set of guidelines for more effective sharing and exchange of information. Each network, either at the national, sub-regional, regional or international level, would determine to what extent it wishes to follow this approach, and how it would implement it.

2. **OBJECTIVES**

The general objective of this initiative is to facilitate exchange of information and, consequently, promote collaboration between the regional and sub-regional fora.

The specific objectives are:

- To define more precisely the data/information arising from agricultural research networks and the format in which they are gathered and made accessible to users by different regional and global networks.
- To identify the commonalities and differences between these different sets of information and the systems in which they are managed.
- To develop a consensus on common standards which will allow greater transparency between databases which will facilitate information retrieval and exchange.

3. **EXPECTED OUTPUTS**

- A review of the types of content and the main information systems used in the different sub-regions and regions for the thematic agricultural research networks.
- A proposal with standards for information management and exchange for agricultural research networks.

4. **ACTIVITIES**

4.1. **Information Collection**

An information specialist in each region will analyze and document the format (database field structure and software) and content of any databases or other sources of information that describe or contain the nature, scope, and outputs of the main thematic agricultural research networks within his/her region. This specialist could either be the person in charge of developing and implementing the RAIS, or be a consultant who would work very closely with the officer in charge of the RAIS.

In addition, another information specialist would be found to undertake a similar task for some main international/global agricultural research networks.

4.2. **Expert Consultation**

A 2-day Expert Consultation would be needed to formulate a set of recommendations and develop some general guidelines. This consultation will also provide an opportunity for the officers in charge of the RAIS to meet and to share experience on broader issues of common interest.
5. **TIMEFRAME**

There is some urgency in implementing this joint initiative as many regional fora are almost ready to move on their own if nothing is done at the global level. The following timeframe is therefore proposed:

5.1. **Information Collection**

5.1.1. **Before Mid-April 2001:**
* Identification of individuals to complete the preliminary assessment for: Asia-Pacific; Europe; Latin America & Caribbean; Sub-Saharan Africa; WANA and Global
* Discussion within the regional fora on the financial implications to implement the project and, eventually, identification of additional sources of funding.

*N.B. This process can go very quickly as some regions have already expressed their willingness to go ahead and will not necessary have to wait for the others to join.*

5.1.2. **Mid-April / Mid-May 2001:** Data collection (3 weeks on average per region)

5.2. **Expert Consultation**

   **June 2001:** Expert Consultation in Rome, Italy, tentatively during the second week.

6. **BUDGET AND POTENTIAL SOURCES OF FUNDING**

The financial implications to implement this project would vary from one region to another, and each regional forum will have to decide on its own contribution and on the need or not to approach some of its partners for additional support.

For collection of the information, up to three weeks’ work for an information specialist would be required in each region. As a separate activity, GFAR would cover the costs of a consultant to analyze some “global” databases.

For the expert consultation, it is expected that each regional forum would cover directly, or with external support, the participation of the person who collected information and of their RAIS officer (if different). A maximum of 2-3 experts per region would keep the total number of participants relatively small and ensure the effectiveness of the meeting. The costs related to the logistics of the meeting in Rome would be covered by GFAR and FAO.