Participants at the Expert Consultation of October 2005 in Rome felt that a more structured global partnership was required to bring together the existing range of initiatives into a more cohesive alliance that would increase the chances of enhancing information management in agricultural science and technology, but were opposed to the creation of a new organization. It was also agreed that the accumulated experiences of the existing initiatives should be fully incorporated, such as AGRIS, “ICM4ARD” (Information and Communication Management for Agricultural Research and Development), and the Regional and National Agricultural Information Systems (RAIS & NAIS). A clear set of requirements was agreed for the partnership initiative, namely that it should have a recognizably neutral and co-owned identity, it should be supported by an alliance that applies significant resources, it should be strongly action-oriented focused on high priority issues, and that it should retain a sense of informality.

The following mechanisms for Governance and Operations were agreed on: i) a Steering Group responsible for overall coordination and channelling of resources with membership of international agencies (initially CGIAR, CTA, FAO, and GFAR) and representatives from regional and national levels, ii) three Task Forces (Advocacy, Capacity Building, and Content Management) will have responsibility for coordinating activities within the initiative, including development of communities of practices supported by electronic fora, and foster active communication to reach agreement and resolve any areas of disagreement, and iii) a Web-based Portal will be developed to provide a gateway to the various resources and a repository for the outputs of the Task Forces and the case studies of experiences at regional and national level.

The single important issue that remained unresolved at the Consultation was the identity of the collaborative initiative to which the mechanisms and activities will be contributing.

Identity

A potential barrier to success of the new initiative lies in the need to accommodate the wide range of existing identities, both institutional and operational. It is accepted that the new identity will be neutral and co-owned by the members of the alliance, while also being clear and recognizable.

The key objective will be to build capacities at national level to establish national networks and systems coherently, so that these national systems can then contribute to regional and international ones. Specifically, “AGRIS” will be used to provide the identity for the global initiative. To do this, AGRIS will be explicitly expanded into a generic brand for all initiatives regarding information systems in agricultural science and technology that is supported by all interested and active parties including international agencies (initially FAO, GFAR, CGIAR, CTA) and the range of regional and national stakeholders. This new reformulated initiative will encompass a range of information types (i.e. documents, projects, organizations, people), and will have shared products, activities and outputs, which will be AGRIS-branded where appropriate – e.g. a portal web site, bibliographic database(s), open archives of full text, tools, standards, news, consultations, workshops, courses, training materials etc. There will continue to be AGRIS Resource Centres at national, regional and international levels, working in regional and national networks and systems (RAIS/NAIS), and the central AGRIS database will be maintained and improved as a principal resource.

To ensure co-ownership and neutrality, AGRIS will be relaunched in a consultative way on a neutral platform which clearly reflects the key involvement and roles of the principal stakeholders, and which draws on the existing initiatives such as ICM4ARD, ICT-KM etc. This will be supported by a strong web-based presence as per the portal web site mentioned above, and a clear advocacy campaign.

To achieve this, the members of the Steering Group will facilitate the participatory development and launching of a new AGRIS web site as a portal on a neutral domain outside the www.fao.org domain, with clearly indicated co-sponsorship and co-ownership of the site, as well as recognition of the full range of other contributions. Also, the AGRIS Vision and Strategy will be revisited and revised to accommodate the roles of the various contributing initiatives, and the new Vision/Strategy will be given a prominent position on the website. The website will showcase the work of the Task Forces as well as the various resources/databases, and link to the AIMS website for the tools and standards. The promotion of this new AGRIS identity, including the shared vision etc, will be the principal focus of the Advocacy Task Force.