FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION
OF
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FAO-ITU E-agriculture Solutions Forum 2016

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

Agriculture has undergone many transformations – we have moved from being a hunter-gatherer community to an agrarian society and then to one where agriculture is handled as an industry, yet still primarily supported at the source by small holder family farms. While machines have, by and large, replaced the manual plough, modern technology, or e-agriculture applications, are only recently being employed. And so moving forward with the next transformation – an e-agriculture transformation – is what we are here today to discuss and promote.

As we know, the task of producing food for more than 7 billion people is not an easy one. This is further compounded by difficulties posed by climate change, increasingly scarce resources, continuing loss of arable land, disease and pest infestations, food loss and waste among others.

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Kundhavi Kadiresan- Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative
29-31 August, 2016

2

These challenges are immense for small-holder farmers or family farmers. Family farming is the predominant form of agriculture both in developed and developing countries. Indeed, there are more than 500 million family farms in the world.

They range from smallholders and medium scale farmers, to peasants, indigenous peoples, traditional communities, fisherfolk, pastoralists and many other groups right around the world.

Access to the right information, at the right time and through the right means, can make a huge difference to their livelihoods.

As one prime example, take the small holder producer who depends on various critical, timely, bits of information during the cropping cycle. If he or she has easy access to weather reports, and knows it's going to rain in the evening, then there is no need to irrigate the field. A fisher who knows of an approaching storm in advance can mitigate any losses or damage. While some have ready access to this through modern technology, many don't. And it is within this context that the growth of information and communication technologies, or ICTs, can be harnessed in an affordable way to benefit the majority of small holders. If a simple SMS message can alert the farmer or fisher – indeed alert the whole community – about important information, then this is a major step in the right direction. And it benefits everyone, from producers to consumers.

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Kundhavi Kadiresan- Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative
29-31 August, 2016

3

Information and Communication Technologies can transform lives and improve livelihoods – more so for people involved in agriculture and allied activities. That's why the use of ICTs in agriculture is now often referred to as e-agriculture.

Some of the other examples where ICTs play a role in e-agriculture involve bridging the gap between agricultural researchers, extension agents and farmers – and thereby enhancing agricultural production. ICTs also improve access to climate-smart solutions as well as appropriate knowledge on how to use them. A good example is the use of drones in the Philippines and elsewhere to assess vulnerable croplands.

In fact you don't need to buy a drone to benefit from E-agriculture advances, how about advanced warnings on affordable mobile devices that provide actionable information to communities and governments on disaster prevention, in real-time, while also providing advice on risk-mitigation techniques when a disaster looms.

ICTs can also increase access to financial services for rural communities, helping to secure savings, find affordable insurance and tools to better manage risk. ICTs also widen the reach of local communities, including women and youth, and provide newer business opportunities thereby enhancing livelihoods.

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) | Speech at the E-agriculture Forum 2016
Kundhavi Kadiresan- Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative
29-31 August, 2016

4

So this is all good and holds our further promise, but what's missing is more strategic implementation of ICT solutions for agriculture. As we can see, E-agriculture is cross-sectoral and involves many stakeholders to make these solutions sustainable. So a policy/strategy is important for sustainable identification, development, implementation of e-agriculture solutions.

Honourable and distinguished guests and colleagues,

This is where we can make a difference today. While the need for e-agriculture strategies is acknowledged by many stakeholders, most countries have yet to adopt a strategic approach in making the best use of ICT developments in agriculture.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) have, together with our partners, developed the E-agriculture Strategy Guide – a framework for countries to develop their own relevant e-agriculture strategies.

And it's already being used. Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Philippines and Vanuatu are the first few countries in the world that are receiving technical assistance from FAO, ITU and partners in developing their e-agriculture strategies.

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) | Speech at the E-agriculture Forum 2016
Kundhavi Kadiresan- Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative
29-31 August, 2016

5

Still, many challenges remain that are impeding the deployment and upscaling of appropriate ICT for agriculture development. This is where your knowledge, advocacy and influence can help push this forward. A national e-agriculture strategy would help identify and address some of those challenges in a comprehensive manner and help countries to leverage the best outcomes from emerging and innovative technologies.

This forum has brought us together to discuss proven ICT in agriculture technologies and solutions to create a community of practice of e-agriculture solution providers. We can explore synergies and partnerships to design, develop and implement e-agriculture solutions for Asia-Pacific countries and globally in a more efficient and sustainable manner.

We wholeheartedly welcome the technical support given by CABI in this important initiative. We thank the e-agriculture solution providers and other stakeholders attending and participating in this forum.

I would further encourage all the stakeholders present today to contribute to ensuring that the countries could identify, develop and sustain e-agriculture solutions to benefit the agriculture community and contribute to ensuring a food secure world and that benefits the backbone of our food producers, small holder and family farmers across our vast region.

Thank you.

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Kundhavi Kadiresan- Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative
29-31 August, 2016

6