

ASSOCIATION FOR AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS IN THE NEAR EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (AARINENA)

EXPERT CONSULTATION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A WEST ASIA & NORTH AFRICA (WANA) AGRICULTURAL INFORMATION SYSTEM

20 – 21 MARCH 2000, BEIRUT, LEBANON

1. BACKGROUND

Agricultural production is becoming increasingly knowledge-based and science intensive. New strategic research areas have emerged and developed, with significant effects on the potential to produce food in a sustainable way. Among key areas of knowledge that may play an important role in increasing the capacity to cope with problems of poverty, resource degradation and food security is Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Given the complexity of the knowledge involved and the investment requirements in reproducing processes that may lead to new products the role of ICT in active knowledge exchanges is widely acknowledged.

At the end of March 1999, the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR) organized with the support of FAO and the World Bank a consultation on: "*Information Initiatives in Agricultural Research: Enhancing Global Cooperation*". The main conclusion of the consultation was to establish an enabling global framework for agricultural research information for development as a first step towards a "*Global Knowledge System in Agricultural Research for Development*". The participants also recognized the key role the Regional and Sub-Regional Fora have to play in assessing the information needs of the different categories of end-users at the local, national and regional levels. They also urged the NARS Secretariat of the GFAR to assist the Regional Fora in identifying and implementing priority actions in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), especially in the formulation of Regional Information Strategies or in the strengthening of Regional Agricultural Information Systems.

AARINENA, like other Regional Fora, recognized that "Access to information requires appropriate information and communication infrastructure, equipment, instruments and networks. Adequate capacities will be needed at national and regional levels to effectively link up with the global knowledge system. But considerably more effort is needed in this vital area".

As a result of discussions between AARINENA, FAO and the NARS Secretariat of the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR), AARINENA decided to call an expert consultation involving representatives of the five West Asia & North Africa (WANA) sub-regions as well as of the main regional and international institutions active in agricultural research for development (ARD) in the WANA region in order to launch the process of formulating a WANA Agricultural Information System (WAIS).

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE CONSULTATION

- To review the present status of the Information & Communication Management (ICM) and ICT situation in each WANA sub-region (Maghreb, Mashreq, Nile Valley & Red Sea, Arabian Peninsula, West Asia), identifying: i) information requirements; ii) information facilities or services which already exist; iii) existing projects or proposals aimed at strengthening information systems and/or services.
- To identify constraints which could prevent the implementation of an effective, efficient and sustainable information system in WANA and to brainstorm on possible ways and means to alleviate them.

- To discuss a draft WANA Agricultural Information Strategy and a project proposal for the establishment of a WANA Agricultural Information System (WAIS). These two documents will be prepared by the AARINENA Secretariat with the assistance of a consultant.
- To formulate recommendations on the establishment of a WAIS for consideration by the AARINENA General Assembly.

3. EXPECTED OUTPUTS

- Exchange of information on the ICM and ICT situation between the five sub-regions, including information on projects that are being considered;
- Identification of constraints to an effective, efficient and sustainable WAIS and proposals to alleviate them;
- A WANA Agricultural Information Strategy and a project proposal for the establishment of a WAIS submitted to the AARINENA General Assembly.

4. DURATION, LOCATION AND PROPOSED DATES

Considering the importance of the topic, a duration of two full days is proposed for this ICT consultation.

Location and proposed dates: Beirut, Lebanon. 20 – 21 March 2000 (immediately prior to the AARINENA General Assembly and at the time of the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East)

5. PARTICIPANTS

It is proposed to invite two participants from each of the 5 WANA sub-regions: one ICT specialist with an in-depth knowledge of the ICT sub-regional situation and the AARINENA Executive Committee member. The latter will bring to the meeting an ICT "user" perspective and will facilitate the follow-up on the conclusions and recommendations of the consultation.

In addition to these ten persons and of the AARINENA consultant, it is proposed to invite one representative of the main institutions involved in agricultural research and ICT in the WANA Region (e.g. ACSAD, AOAD, CABI, CIHEAM, ESCWA, FAO-RNE, ICARDA, ISNAR, NARS Secretariat of GFAR). As much as possible the participation of "outsiders" should be limited in order to facilitate interactions between the five sub-regions.

6. PREPARATORY WORK

Each sub-region will have to prepare a short document (approximately 5 pages) with the following outline:

- Analysis of the ICT capacities in the sub-region (analysis of the questionnaire already circulated by the AARINENA Secretariat)
- Identification of the major actors in the sub-region which should be part of a Regional Agricultural Information System.
- A quantitative and qualitative analysis of the major information flows between the countries within the sub-region, with countries of the other sub-regions and with international information providers
- Current ICT initiatives to develop information databases and information management systems in the sub-region (including those receiving donor support)
- Views on key issues/constraints in developing a WANA Agricultural Information System
- List of relevant documents relating to any of the above points (copies should be brought to the consultation)

The representatives of the institutions invited to participate will also prepare a short (2–3 pages) statement on their on-going and planned activities in ICT in the WANA Region.

Finally, a regional consultant recruited by the AARINENA Secretariat will prepare a draft WANA Agricultural Information Strategy as well as a project proposal for a WAIS as the two major background documents for the consultation.

7. PROPOSED AGENDA

Monday 20 March 2000	Tuesday 21 March 2000
<p>1. <u>Opening session</u></p> <p>09:00 AARINENA representative GFAR/NARS-SEC Representative FAO-RNE Representative ICARDA Representative ISNAR Representative</p> <p>09:30 Adoption of the agenda</p> <p>09:35 A framework for a Global Agricultural R & D Information System (GFAR/NARS-SEC)</p> <p>10:00 Discussion</p> <p>10:30 <i>Coffee break</i></p> <p>2. <u>The ICT situation in the WANA Region</u> (20' presentation + 10' clarification per sub-region)</p> <p>11:00 Maghreb Sub-region 11:30 Nile Valley and Red Sea Sub-Region 12:00 Mashreq Sub-region 12:30 Arabian Peninsula Sub-Region</p> <p>13:00 <i>Lunch break</i></p> <p>14:30 West and Central Asian Sub-Region 15:00 Presentation by regional/international institutions (10' each)</p> <p>16:00 Discussion</p> <p>16:30 <i>Coffee break</i></p> <p>3. <u>Elements of a WANA Agricultural Information Strategy</u></p> <p>17:00 Presentation of the draft WANA Agricultural Information Strategy</p> <p>18:00 Discussion</p> <p>18:30 End of the day</p>	<p>4. <u>The ICT constraints and prospects</u></p> <p>08:30 Roundtable on communications</p> <p>09:00 Roundtable on information systems a) Access to scientific information b) Database & Management of Information Systems</p> <p>10:30 <i>Coffee break</i></p> <p>5. <u>The WANA Agricultural Information System</u></p> <p>11:00 Roundtable on amendments to the draft Strategy document</p> <p>12:30 <i>Lunch break</i></p> <p>15:00 Roundtable on the project proposal for the establishment of a WAIS</p> <p>16:30 <i>Coffee break</i></p> <p>5. <u>Conclusions</u></p> <p>17:00 Summaries of the different sessions</p> <p>18:00 Next Steps</p> <p>18:30 End of the consultation</p>