



PRESS-RELEASE

English

Joint media network for agricultural and rural development An initiative to strengthen agricultural markets in ACP countries

Geneva, 9. December 2003 – The initiative “joint media network for agricultural and rural development” has been launched by the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Development (CTA) and the German Centre for Information and Documentation in Agriculture (ZADI). The aim of this project is to strengthen agricultural markets in African, Pacific and Caribbean (ACP) countries. The initiative is being presented for the first time on the ICT for development platform of the WSIS in Geneva.

Due to population growth and environmental change food security and rural development can only be achieved if production and distribution systems are constantly intensified and improved. This depends to a large extent on the society’s capacity to generate and transfer knowledge. The joint media network for agricultural and rural development wants to speed up the innovation process by developing and linking various ACP information and communication services to support producers, traders and policy-makers involved in production and distribution systems.

One of the projects initiators is Koda Traore, programme coordinator of CTA’s Communication Channels and Services Department. He explains how the idea was born: “We work together with many partners in ACP countries and we have launched a number of successful pilot projects for improved information access, for example question and answer services for farmers or rural radio initiatives on agriculture. We thought, if we could join these projects into one network, share know how and use synergies, this would be big step towards an effective and sustainable information network.”

The network will be developed in a step wise process. Price information on commodities is essential to all parties involved in the agricultural sector. Therefore most countries have established networks to monitor prices. As a first step the project will work to join these national systems together in order to provide regional price information to ACP civil society (producers, NGO’s etc.) and small scale traders. The project will seek to harmonise procedures between countries and to improve the efficiency of national systems by exchanging and upgrading technology for data collection, processing and dissemination via SMS, Print, Rural Radio and the Internet. As a result of the regional integration process a network of rural nodes will emerge. This network will be used to establish a common online platform for the existing question and answer services in the regions.

The German Centre for Information and Documentation in Agriculture (ZADI), second initiator of the project, is experienced in developing communication technology for these purposes. “Our information systems are following a pragmatic approach”, says project manager Marc Bernard. “Our technical solutions are adapted to the local infrastructures and are focusing on the target group and their specific information needs, in this case the actors of the agricultural markets. The tools are basing on open source software. The technology can be used and further developed by all members of the network.” The ZADI

will therefore provide technical and conceptual support to develop and improve services, provide training, assist southern partners during the establishment phase and assure technical co-ordination.

As operators of the price information systems and the question and answer services, organisations in ACP countries will play the central role. They will be the driving force to achieve regional integration of the two services and to promote the project through their networks. "In the long term view" says Traore, "we want to use the network for additional services: for collecting and disseminating development statistics, marketing of agricultural products and inputs and strengthening civil society organisations." The Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR) will have an advocating role in this process to assure an effective linkage to other initiatives.

To lower transaction costs and to assure that the services provided are driven by demand, the initiative will use an innovative funding mechanism - the "voucher system". The Voucher System is the means by which the beneficiaries will gain access to information services (questions and answers, market prices and analysis etc.) through various media (radio, internet-based platform, SMS). The voucher system has been tested in a pilot project in Benin. It assures equitable access to services, facilitates verification of outputs and favours the development of networks that have a decentralised and dynamic organisational structure.

Agricultural Service providers and development agencies are welcome to use and support the network.

For more information on the initiative visit us at stand number 250,
go to **www.isicad.org/wsis**
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