

**A Workshop on Regional Information System for
the West Asia and North Africa Region
October 2 - 4, 2000**

organised by

Central Laboratory for Agricultural Expert System (CLAES), Egypt
with Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
and the Association for Agricultural Research Institutes in the Near East and North Africa
(AARINENA)

WORKSHOP REPORT

This report has been prepared jointly by Dr Ahmed Rafea (CLAES) for AARINENA and Dr Stephen Rudgard, FAO.

WORKSHOP SESSIONS

Workshop opening

The workshop was opened on behalf of AARINENA by Dr Fawzi Mahrous, Deputy Director of ARC, Egypt. The workshop was attended by 12 participants, whose details are given in Annex 1, and the agenda and schedule are given in Annex 2. After short statements from Dr Stephen Rudgard for FAO and Dr Ahmed Rafea for CLAES, Dr Rafea proceeded to summarise the strategy for a WANA-RAIS adopted by AARINENA in March 2000 and presented some elements of a pilot system completed at CLAES in collaboration with FAO.

Presentations

Presentations were made by representatives of the national agricultural research organizations of Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, and United Arab Emirates. They presented a wide range of systems development and capabilities in ICT management, which clearly reflect the spectrum of current situations in the other AARINENA members. Representatives of the international and regional organizations then explained the ways in which existing information, human resources, training materials, logistics, and management skills could be applied in the context of developing the RAIS.

Discussion sessions

The discussion sessions focused on the development of the Regional Agricultural Information System (RAIS), which it was agreed should be undertaken in two phases. It was suggested that the co-ordination of the system should be the responsibility of AARINENA, but that it would be managed as a collaborative mechanism to bring together a wide range of stakeholders across the broad range of subjects that comprise "agriculture".

The first phase would comprise two essentially interim activities which should be completed by April 2001, in time for the next AARINENA meeting which will be held in Kuwait. The first activity would be the redesign of the existing website and inclusion of a range of relatively easily accessible material relevant to the WANA region, and the second activity would be preparation for the second phase including the drafting of a project proposal. Phase

II would comprise the implementation of a more comprehensive development of a WANA-RAIS.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE WANA-RAIS

Phase I: Preparation for the RAIS

Activity I.1 Redevelopment of the AARINENA Website

It was agreed that the renewal of the AARINENA website will be based primarily on resources from international/regional organizations, based on the generous offers of resources by those present. The task will be undertaken by a Webmaster to be appointed by ICARDA in close consultation with IPGRI, and that this person will co-ordinate inputs from the various parties. FAO look into registration of the domain: www.aarinena.org. The main elements to be developed in this first phase will be the Management Information System and the Regional Reference Centre. Metadata will be developed for as many items/objects as possible.

| | Content | Development partner |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| 1. | Description of AARINENA and its membership: redesign of background material from existing websites, including descriptive elements of narrative text, and development of sub-regional sites. | AARINENA, GFAR, ICARDA |
| 2. | Introduction to the RAIS, including basic structure of the website. | AARINENA, GFAR |
| 3. | Translation of key texts into Arabic | UAE |
| Management Information System | | |
| 3. | Directory of NARSSs and their human resources | ICARDA, FAO, CIHEAM |
| 4. | Directory of research networks, covering projects, activities, people, and organizations (cross-linked to 2. and 6.) | AARINENA, CGIAR, FAO, CIHEAM, IFAD |
| 5. | Events calendar including meetings, workshops, conferences etc | Various |
| Regional Reference Centre | | |
| 6. | Structured set of annotated links to stakeholders' websites and specific content in the WANA region. e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NARSSs (including especially members institutes) - Min. of Agriculture/Forestry/Fisheries/Irrigation - Major agricultural universities and colleges - Private sector, including agribusiness and markets - NGOs - Donors and development assistance agencies - Farmers' organizations - Regional/international organizations, including other RAIS | National focal points (especially in the pilot countries) |
| 7. | Full text versions of selected documents, with links as appropriate from bibliography. | Various |
| 8. | Indexed bibliography: using data taken from AGRIS, SESAME, CAB ABSTRACTS, and other sources. | FAO, CIRAD, CABI, AOAD, CIHEAM |
| 9. | Scientific and technical content, focused on themed topics taken from 2-3 regional priorities to be selected by AARINENA- - (including reference tools such as the SINGER database, and with appropriate cross-links as above) | CGIAR |
| 10. | Statistics on agricultural production and markets | FAO, AOAD |
| 11. | Databases and maps of key natural resources in the WANA region e.g. soils, land-use, etc | FAO, ICARDA |
| Knowledge network/forum | | |
| 12. | Development of electronic forum based on one or two of the regional networks covered in 4. above | ICARDA |

Activity I.2 Preparation for Phase II

The participants agreed on the scope and objectives of the RAIS to be as follows:

Scope and objectives:

The RAIS will serve as an information repository and exchange mechanism at the regional level, aiming to strengthen, co-ordinate, and add value to contributions from national programmes and regional and international centres, including covering regional projects under the supervision of AARINENA and other agencies such as the CGIAR. It should also serve as a gateway to the knowledge system for ARD in WANA, and the global system incorporating other RAIS. The gateway should be designed to help users resolve their development problems through the sharing of knowledge and information resources from various sources.

The Regional Reference Centre will provide a document repository for regional projects and networks and include data from National Agricultural Information Systems (NAIS), including agricultural research institutions and other stakeholders, focusing particularly on scientific and technical publications, projects, and human resources.

The RAIS should aim to contain all key resources in two principal languages, namely English and Arabic, with the option to present some resources in French. Standards, methodologies, and common software systems that have been investigated in Phase I should be agreed and adopted, supported by training materials at the national level. Existing resources in NAIS should be migrated wherever possible into the standard formats and presentations in order to improve consistency and accessibility. Given the unavailability or unreliability of connectivity in some parts of the region, offline versions of the system or parts of it should be made available on CD-ROM.

The preparatory actions for the main programme for development of the RAIS would comprise several types of activity as follows:

| | Outputs | Responsible parties |
|----|--|--|
| 1. | Definition of RAIS stakeholders and their needs (following on from investigations completed by AARINENA in early 2000) | AARINENA, GFAR |
| 2. | Development/testing of standards including the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Thesaurus (Arabic version of AGROVOC)- Metadata format- Software tools | FAO in consultation with WANA partners |
| 3. | Development of an amended project proposal, working from the original draft completed in April 2000, comprising the following elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Concept note (2-3 pages covering major elements)- Logical framework for development of the RAIS- Full project proposal with budget and administrative arrangements | AARINENA through its Consultant, assisted by FAO |
| 4. | Assessment of available training materials in information management, and testing of those materials if appropriate | FAO, CGIAR Centres, national programmes |

It was suggested that AARINENA should secure the services of an experienced consultant in the preparation of the proposal, and it was recommended that Dr Ahmed Rafea should be invited to complete the task that he started at/after the workshop in March 2000 in Beirut.

Furthermore, it was recommended that discussions with prospective donors should be pursued as soon as the concept note and logical framework are ready, and that the proposal document should not be presented until one or more donors have expressed interest in principle. It was agreed that approaches to donors should be co-ordinated and/or led by AARINENA, but it was suggested that the services of an experienced adviser could be contracted to provide AARINENA with detailed knowledge of the main funding agencies with interests in agricultural development in WANA.

Participants agreed that letters should be sent by AARINENA to senior officers and decision makers in NARSs and other principal stakeholders in order to raise their awareness to the impending development/expansion of the RAIS, and to seek their active participation and collaboration.

Phase II: Implementation of the project

It was suggested that the project should be implemented in two components as follows:

Component I: Pilot Implementation (Years 1-2)

This component will contain the following elements:

- Stakeholder consultation workshop at national level in 5-6 countries for design of NAIS, and consideration of issues such as management of intellectual property;
- Training and human resource development for all categories of stakeholder as necessary;
- Full implementation of NAIS (Management Information System and National Reference Centres etc) in those countries covering all sectors and subjects accorded sufficient priority by stakeholders, but particularly development of pilot participatory knowledge exchange systems at community level;
- Partial implementation of the Regional Reference Centre with coverage in all 21 countries of possibly two technical topics, such as desertification, a particular commodity (e.g. date palm), or management of plant genetic resources;
- Assessments of requirements for NAIS in other WANA countries;
- Completion of international component of RAIS.

Component II: Main Implementation (Years 2-4)

This component will comprise the following elements:

- Stakeholder consultation workshop at national level in remaining countries for design of NAIS;
- Training and human resource development for all categories of stakeholder as necessary;
- Full implementation of RAIS and NAIS in all 21 countries covering all sectors and subjects accorded sufficient priority by stakeholders, but particularly development of pilot participatory knowledge exchange systems at community level;
- Completion of national networks for participatory knowledge exchange systems at community level.

MANAGEMENT AND CO-ORDINATION OF WANA-RAIS DEVELOPMENT

Workshop participants recommended that the activity for Phase I be co-ordinated by FAO in consultation with AARINENA, and that the latter take charge of Phase II. An agency at the regional or international level should be identified to manage and administer the RAIS initiative, especially if external funding is obtained and AARINENA is unable to act as the signatory of a contract. It was felt that the RAIS Co-ordinator should be co-located with the AARINENA Secretariat once that has a fixed location.

National focal points should be appointed, and it was agreed that these would normally be the AARINENA member institute, unless there were strong reasons not to make it so.

It was agreed that a Steering Group should be convened to guide and oversee the initial stages, comprising 10-12 individuals taken from among the NARS and regional/international resource agencies. It should meet at least annually and potentially more frequently in the initial stages of development of the initiative, and also be convened electronically.

Annex 1

Details of Workshop Participants

| No. | Name | Email, Tel, & Fax |
|-----|---|--|
| 1 | Mr. Placido Plaza, Principal Administrator, CIHEAM, 11 Rue Newton, 75116 Paris, France | plaza@ciheam.org Tel: 33 1 53239100 Fax: 33 1 53239102 |
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| 3 | Mr. Stephen Rudgard, Officer in charge, WAICENT Outreach Programme (GILF), FAO, Rome, Italy | stephen.rudgard@fao.org Tel (office): 00 39 06 570 56171 Tel (home): 00 39 06 661 57726 Fax (office): 00 39 06 570 54049 |
| 4 | Dr. Kheder Durah, Regional Network Manager/Information Specialist, International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI- CWANA), Syria | K.DURAH@CGIAR.ORG Tel: (+963) 21-2231412 Fax: (+963) 21-2273681 |
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| 11 | Dr. Ali El-Sherbini ARC, Egypt | Ahes@netscape.net Tel. 3356175 – 3372193 Fax. 3486163 |
| 12 | Mr. Ali Salem Al-Mutawa Director of information & Public Relation Ministry of Agriculture, Dubai, U.A. E. | Farmar5@hotmail.com Tel: 04/2958161 Fax. 04/2957766 |
| 13 | Mr. Tayeb Al-Marzouki Agriculture Extension Section, Ministry of Agriculture, Dubai, U.A. E. | Farmof@hotmail.com Tel: 009714/2958161 Fax. 009714/2957766 |
| 14 | Dr. Ahmed Rafea Supervisor of CLAES ARC, Egypt | rafea@esic.claes.sci.eg Tel. 202 3604727 Fax. 202 3604727 |

Workshop Agenda

Monday October 2, 2000

- 09:00 - 09:30: Registration**
09:30 - 10:00: Opening Ceremony, Opening Remarks and Workshop Objectives
AARINENA: Dr Fawzi Mahrous
CLAES: Ahmed Rafea
FAO-WAICENT Stephen Rudgard
10:30 - 12:00: Presentation of Information Strategy for the WANA Region & Demonstration of the pilot Regional Information System
Ahmed Rafea (CLAES)
12:00 – 12:30: Information and Communication Technology: Status and Requirements -1
Syria, United Arab Emirates
14:00 - 15:30 Information and Communication Technology: Status and Requirements - 2
Lebanon, Morocco, Egypt
15:30 - 16:30: Closing discussion on RAIS/NAIS interaction

Tuesday October 3, 2000

- 09:30 - 11:00: Role of International and Regional Organization in the WANA Regional Information System – provision of information and capacity building**
GFAR, FAO-WAICENT, ICARDA, IPGRI
11:30 - 12:00: Role of International and Regional Organizations (cont.)
AOAD, CIHEAM
12:00 - 12:30: Closing discussion on Role of International Organizations
- Round Table Discussions on issues related to the development of a Regional Agricultural Information System (RAIS) for West Asia and North Africa (WANA)**
- 14:00 - 15:30: Discussion Groups on Information Needs and Resources Available**
Group 1: National representatives. Group 2: Regional/International organizations.
15:30 - 17:00: Round Table : Feedback from Groups and Moderated Discussion

Wednesday October 4, 2000

- 09:30 - 11:00: Round Table : Redesign of AARINENA Website**
Moderated discussions.
11:30 - 12:30: Round Table : Discussion and Revision of Proposal for RAIS Development
Moderated discussions.
13:30 - 14:00 Demonstrations of Information Systems
14:00 - 15:00 Closing session