

RAIN: A new African agricultural information initiative gets off the ground

by Dorothy Mukhebi



Operational since 2003, the Regional Agricultural Information Network (RAIN) is one of the 17 regional network programmes and projects (NPPs) operating under the umbrella of the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA) in 10 countries in eastern and central Africa (ECA) – Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.

RAIN absorbed AfricaLink, whose main objective was to improve access to agricultural information by integrating new Internet technologies into the ICM (information and communication management) operations of research networks and systems in the ECA region. RAIN continues to support access to IT hardware and software to selected National Agricultural Research Institutes (NARIs).

Beginning with a priority-setting exercise and consultations with stakeholders and experts, a 5-year strategic plan and work programme (2004–2008) has been published and a Regional Steering Committee (RSC) established to provide operational guidance to the network. It has representatives from all the ten NARIs and other experts in ICT/ICM.

The focus of the Network's future activities include:

- strengthening capacity and influencing future targeted training;
- catalysing national agricultural information policies and strategies that should lead to regional policies and strategies;
- contributing to national ICT Policies;
- working with researchers (referring to ASARECA NPPs) to improve information dissemination;
- motivating (encouraging, inducing) generation of scientific information;

- developing information management standards;
- catalysing networking/partnerships among key information professionals and organisations to promote information sharing regionally and globally;
- marketing agricultural information products.

As part of enhancing regional capacity in information and communication management RAIN has initiated several activities. The most noteworthy is a training needs' assessment in ICM/ICT. The study focuses on human capacities and training needs to elicit more investment in focused capacity building with a longer-term vision. RAIN has also been involved in conducting training workshops in ICT/ICM. In addition a baseline study has been undertaken, so that progress of the network will be measured.

In order to ensure wide stakeholder participation at country level, RAIN has organised national workshops to identify and prioritise national strategies/activities that respond to RAIN regional priorities. Six country meetings have already been held in Burundi, Kenya, Tanzania, Sudan, Rwanda and Uganda involving key stakeholders.



Dorothy Mukhebi, Coordinator at her desk

RAIN undertakes public relations activities for itself as well as for ASARECA and the NPPs. These include publications – brochures, posters and the ASARECA InfoPack which describes ASARECA and its NPPs. The key documents are available in English and French.

The RAIN web site <www.asareca.org/rain> features both English and French interfaces. It includes a contacts database for ASARECA that focuses on individuals and institutions. Data are available over the Internet in a selective manner, depending on the access rights of the users. This facilitates wide access and at the same time maintains control over the sharing of sensitive information (e.g. email addresses, restricted reports, etc.).

RAIN is also active in collaborating with other sub-regional organisations (SROs) namely CORAF (Conseil Ouest Africain Pour la Recherche et le Développement Agricole); SADC-FANR (Southern African Development Community /Food Agriculture and Natural Resource Department), and FARA (Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa) which is the apex body for Africa's agricultural research. This has resulted in the formation of a Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Agricultural Information System (FARA-RAIS) which operates under the aegis of the GLOBAL ALLiance of the Regional Agricultural Information Systems (GLOBAL.RAIS) which is a project by GFAR.

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