

Connecting people to catalyze African agricultural innovations

Myra Wopereis-Pura¹, Dady Demby¹, Francois Stepman¹, Krishan Bheenick², Kone Anatole³ and Jacky Nyagahima⁴

¹ FARA, Accra, Ghana; ² SADC-FANR, Gaborone, Botswana; ³ CORAF, Dakar, Senegal; ⁴ ASARECA, Entebbe, Uganda.

Africa has several institutions working on agricultural information generation and dissemination, all geared towards contributing to improving agricultural productivity, competitiveness and access to markets. These information systems vary in terms of information gathered, targeted end-users and accessibility. There are international service providers gathering information on national agricultural productivity data or research conducted in Africa. The African national research institutes have their own research databases with limited access. Over the past 5 years, Africa has seen rapid growth in the use of market information systems and a growing number of community information hubs. Much value would be added to these initiatives if they were inter-linked, creating a platform for mutual learning and an 'information value chain' adding knowledge through different uses of information.

Addressing this gap, FARA has established a platform for regional agricultural information and learning systems (RAILS). RAILS allows linkages among various information generators and users and, creates an information value chain allowing multiple information access, processing and uses. The platform facilitates the complementarities and synergies in the establishment and use of information systems that can catalyze agricultural innovations. RAILS provides an open space where agricultural information systems link ARD innovations to users and learners. RAILS is being implemented within 38 African countries. RAILS catalyzes the creation of learning teams capable of analyzing information gaps of individual members and institutions and facilitating innovation together with users and generators of information.

The RAILS learning teams are formed to be facilitators within the agriculture information value chain. They are provided with infrastructural support to ensure that they have reliable information and communication systems. They are linked with appropriate government institutions and have strong backing of a network of individuals contributing to the agricultural information value chain.

The teams are equipped with a tool-box containing popular tools (e.g. Dgroups) for interaction. They are trained to establish an integrated information system that can collect information tailored to specific individual and institutional needs. Each team member is skilled to add or remove features within the system as and when they need it. Specific topics from outside the network are only added if there is demand. The concept is to put online as much information as required from as many diverse resources which will allow various unique applications resulting in agricultural innovations. Online access is supplemented with radio and mobile phone to reach local communities.

Madagascar is spearheading the establishment of national portal while other countries are focused on building national learning teams for each 38 participating countries in Sub Saharan Africa with funding from the African Development Bank. Early lessons learnt showed great diversity in each participating countries, resulting to variances in implementation. Regular online discussions among the RAILS focal points, facilitates sharing of lessons learnt from each country. The framework approach facilitates the flexibility and adaptability of the system based on national conditions and resources.