

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

Concept Paper

Contribution of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to the World Summit on the Information Society

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to place on the agenda of the preparatory process (PrepCom) of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the major issues which the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), would appreciate to be considered by the participating countries, in the formulation and negotiation of the Declaration and Plan of Action of the WSIS.

Introduction

There is a broad consensus in the international community that the ability of individuals and communities to engage in the global exchange of information and knowledge using new information and communication technologies (ICTs), will have a critical role in achieving sustainable development in the 21st century.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), have identified information-communication technologies as an essential component for the eradication of poverty in the world. In this context, it is important to highlight that fighting hunger and under-nutrition is a basic step for poverty reduction, and that 75 percent of the world's poor live in rural areas, 85 percent of them being directly or indirectly involved in agriculture. Therefore, the application of ICTs to poverty reduction must necessarily address their role in agriculture and related sectors as well as in food security and in the livelihoods of rural people.

It is recognized that information and communication technologies provide new opportunities for economic growth in various sectors, such as banking, financial services and e-commerce. Furthermore, these technologies have considerable potential to promote sustainable social development by empowering people to increase their ability to participate in society through networking and advocacy, build human skills, bolster small enterprises, and harness indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. However, these benefits will not be realized

unless a concerted effort is made to build up the human and institutional capacities necessary to apply ICTs explicitly for these purposes. In today's world, the failure of countries to participate in the global information-driven economy has negative effects on the development process and leads to economic marginalization.

The term “digital divide” refers to unequal access to ICTs, due to factors such as lack of infrastructure, resources and investment, high costs of connectivity and low levels of technological skills, education and literacy. From FAO's perspective, the digital divide contributes to the exclusion of countries and specific populations, in particular rural people, from knowledge and information on agriculture, forestry, fisheries, nutrition and other aspects of rural development. Such exclusion is a major constraint to the achievement of the goal agreed upon by the Heads of State and Government at the World Food Summit (Rome, November 1996) of halving the number of the undernourished in the world by the year 2015. There is a **rural digital divide** that requires a specific approach.

The digital divide is not only a problem of absence of telecommunication and other infrastructure and means of connectivity. It is, a multi-faceted problem of ineffective exchange of knowledge and management of content, lack of human resources and institutional capacity, the whole compounded, by the scarcity of financial resources. The provision of universal and affordable access to ICTs and the development of ICT applications and services, especially in remote rural communities, remains one of the biggest challenges to bridging the digital divide.

However, ICTs are not a panacea for development. There are many problems associated with the adoption and assimilation of ICTs. For example, there is a risk that the expansion of ICTs might contribute to exacerbate existing gender inequalities and to a further marginalization of women. In rural areas, in particular, bridging the digital divide requires an understanding of how people in different cultural contexts and in their various capacities as farmers, agricultural wage workers, rural entrepreneurs, homemakers and consumers, learn to use and apply ICTs. Uncritical acceptance of technology places a significant burden of learning, use, and access on users.

Moreover, there are issues relating to language diversity and the need to prevent the exclusion of very large rural populations, which are unable to communicate in the main languages of the global media, such as the Internet.

In summary, although new ICTs and the growing wealth of digital information have the potential to improve access to, and benefits from, development activities, it is evident that providing access is only one step towards enabling these populations to reap the anticipated benefits.

FAO's position on the WSIS Principles and Plan of Action

The elements which FAO would like to see included in the Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action to be adopted by the WSIS, arise from the Organization's mandate. Article I of the FAO Constitution states that “the Organization shall collect, analyze, interpret and

disseminate information related to nutrition, food and agriculture¹.” To this effect, the Organization has established the World Agricultural Information Centre (WAICENT), which provides access to the world’s most comprehensive sources of agricultural information. FAO is a clearinghouse where farmers, scientists, government bodies and agencies, traders and non-government organizations can obtain the information required for rational decision on planning, investment, marketing, research and training. FAO publishes authoritative reports on global conditions and trends in agriculture, forestry, fisheries, commodities and food security.

The WSIS should pay particular attention to the implications of ICTs in achieving the World Food Summit’s commitments to address the problems caused by hunger and undernutrition. Priorities for action to meet the WFS goal were identified in WFS Plan of Action, as well as during the World Food Summit: five years later (WFS:fyl, Rome, June 2002), as necessary to create opportunities to improve livelihoods by promoting development, through policy reform and investments in agriculture².

At the WFS:fyl, FAO introduced its Anti-Hunger Programme provided a comprehensive platform for attaining the MDGs. One of the priorities for action in food, agriculture and rural development “Strengthening capacity for knowledge generation and dissemination” specifically focuses on key priorities for bridging the rural digital divide. ICTs have a major role to play in facilitating the achievement of these priority action areas which include:

- **Improvement of agricultural productivity and enhancement of livelihoods and food security in poor rural communities.** Improving the performance of small farms in poor rural and peri-urban communities offers one of the best and most sustainable avenues for reducing hunger, by increasing the quantity and improving the quality of locally available food. This should involve local institutions and extension workers to define the types of materials needed. ICTs can facilitate the transfer of appropriate farming technologies, marketing and extension services, and delivery of micro-banking services and community revolving funds, which have direct influence on the performance of small farms in poor rural communities.
- **Development and conservation of natural resources.** Land, water, and plant and animal genetic resources enable agriculture, fisheries and forestry to contribute to food production and rural development. ICTs are essential tools in natural resources management.
- **Expansion of rural infrastructures (including capacity for food safety, plant and animal health) and broadening market access.** Investments in rural infrastructure to enhance market access will complement the levels of agricultural production, but will also provide wider and more general socio-economic benefits. Priority must be given to upgrading basic infrastructures in order to stimulate private sector investments in food marketing, storage and processing. In this context, infrastructure development must also enable affordable ways to access ICTs, in order to allow rural communities to engage in

¹ Article I of FAO’s Constitution. Basic Texts of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Volumes I and II - 2000 edition

² FAO’s actions in response to the goal of a global information society are based on the five priorities identified in the light of the World Food Summit: improve agricultural productivity in poor rural communities; develop and conserve natural resources; expand rural infrastructure and market access; strengthen capacity for knowledge generation and dissemination; and ensure access to food for the most needy.

information exchange on markets, technical and quality standards and regulations, as well as innovative experiences and solutions all over the world.

- **Strengthening the capacity for knowledge generation and dissemination (research, extension, education and communication).** Emphasis should be placed on the basic educational needs of rural people, including education on food and nutrition. It is not only necessary to improve access to technologies and mobilize appropriate information content that actually addresses the information and knowledge gaps identified by rural communities, but also to do so by using approaches, languages, literacy and media that are culturally relevant and sustainable. Moreover, in order to foster local appropriation of ICTs, rural people must not be seen simply as information consumers, but also as information producers and generators of knowledge.
- **Empowerment of rural communities and ordinary citizens.** Like many communication technologies before it, the Internet enables rural communities to receive information and assistance from outside development agencies. Unlike other communication media, however, the Internet allows every user to be a sender, receiver, narrowcaster and broadcaster. As such, the Internet offers opportunities for two-way and horizontal communication and for opening up new, non-traditional communication channels for rural communities and development organisations. Priority should be given to complementary support in terms of training and local content development, to effectively increase rural access to ICTs.

FAO inputs to the Declaration of Principles and the Action Lines

In further developing the framework of the Guiding Principles and Action Lines towards universal, sustainable and economically viable access to information and communication technologies³, the WSIS may wish to specifically address issues related to the needs of the rural poor, who are dependent on agriculture.

Action Line – Mainstreaming information and communication technologies into efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), should harness the full potential of information and communication technologies.

The importance of ICTs in the achievement of the MDGs is recognized, and information and communication technologies can contribute significantly to the enhancement of food security and rural development. This Action Line should take into account the critical role of access to knowledge and information in agricultural productivity, food security and environmental protection and therefore the need to ensure that mechanisms for the exchange of this knowledge and information exist. Mechanisms would include: improvements in telecommunications infrastructure capabilities and lowering of telecommunications costs in rural areas; improvements to country-based capacity for the development and operation of information systems and communication technologies; investments in broader language

³ World Summit on the Information Society. Guiding Principles and Action lines: a) securing the right to information and knowledge; b) promoting universal access at affordable cost; c) strengthening international cooperation; d) establishing an enabling environment; e) developing human capacity; f) promoting linguistic diversity and cultural identity; g) strengthening information and communication network security; h) improving market access, especially for products and services from developing countries; i) addressing global challenges.

coverage; adoption of international content management standards, classification schemes and agreed vocabularies.

Action Line - Establishing partnerships between institutions for the systematic exchange of information on agriculture, fisheries, forestry and food, according to agreed procedures and standards, in order to provide policy makers, policy advisers, researchers and the public, ready access to comprehensive, up-to-date and detailed knowledge and information.

FAO disseminates global information on agriculture, fisheries, forestry and food. Other agencies can provide supplementary information in terms of subject area or more detailed information on particular countries or regions. Through partnership arrangements, information can be assembled, summarized and shared more systematically at national, regional and global level, in order to provide users with more comprehensive and useful information in an easily accessible form. This information should be linked in a useful way for practical field work.

Action Line - Building partnerships and mobilizing resources for the information society: Establishing new and innovative multi-stakeholder public-private partnerships, prioritizing and mainstreaming ICTs national and regional poverty reduction initiatives.

This Action Line should be further developed, with stronger emphasis on improved of co-ordination of capacity building initiatives in information systems, communications, technology and management in various sectors, addressing, in particular, poverty reduction in rural areas. There is a need for mechanisms to promote collaboration between the main actors in ICTs to enhance access, dissemination and use of information, for example, through fora such as the Consultation on Agricultural Information Management (COAIM), which bring together key players who have an interest in information relating to food security and rural development.

Action Line - Building Human Capacity: It is important to develop comprehensive and forward-looking capacity building strategies, which would enable people to acquire the skills necessary to benefit from the potential of the information society.

In addition to the outline included in the Paper presented by the Summit President, FAO would like that greater importance be attributed to populations which are at risk of being marginalized by the digital divide. Specific measures need to be put in place to address the education, training and empowerment of rural communities and individuals, particularly those dependent on agriculture-related livelihoods. FAO notes that although reference is made to women, youth and vulnerable groups in terms of providing content and ensuring connectivity, these groups are not specifically cited with respect to capacity building.