



Information to farmers: the role of CTA in Facilitating agricultural information transfer to farmers and the work done by the Lengau Centre at the University of the Free State

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Meeting:

Session 85 — Agricultural Libraries

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 76TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND ASSEMBLY
10-15 August 2010, Gothenburg, Sweden
<http://www.ifla.org/en/ifla76>

Abstract:

The Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) was established in 1983 under the Lomé Convention between the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) Group of States and the European Union Member States. Since 2000, CTA has operated within the framework of the ACP-EC Cotonou Agreement.

CTA set up a Question-and-Answer Service (QAS) in 1985 to provide information and documentation to ACP partners. Initially the service was rendered from Wageningen (Netherlands), but is now rendered from different regions. The Library and Information Services of the University of the Free State coordinates a Question and Answer Service in Southern Africa. The service is known as the Programme for Agricultural Information Services (PRAIS) and aims to promote the use of information in order to enhance sustainable agriculture and rural development and improve food security in Southern Africa.

This paper gives a brief account of the origin, design, implementation and development of PRAIS. It identifies the key factors which have led to the success of the service and touches on problems and the issues that will impact on the future functioning of PRAIS: The publishing of a newsletter as means of disseminating relevant information is mentioned. The role of the University of the Free State (UFS) the Lengau Agricultural Development Centre is discussed. The Centre has become a pinnacle in the development of newly-settled and prospective emerging and commercial black farmers. The Centre's Agricultural Skills Development, Training and Mentorship Programme show how the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences is an engaged faculty of the UFS by means of utilising its academic

capacity and facilities to face the challenges of a sustainable agriculture in the region, country and continent.

Sydenham Experimental Farm is used for agricultural skills development and the training of emerging farmers, farm workers and entrepreneurs in agricultural business. The buildings, facilities and a portion of the land of the farm are used for animal and crop production and alternative natural and agricultural skills development opportunities in value adding and marketing.

The UFS, Mangaung Local Municipality, Free State Provincial Department of Agriculture and the National African Farmers Union embraced the programme as partners in agricultural transformation. Services range from livestock auctioneering, branding, dehorning, castration, primary herd, ordinary and advanced food gardening. The centre also serves as a centre for education of under- and postgraduates, mentors, farmers and black entrepreneurs.

The centre aims to undertake systematic small farmer training, tackle local development issues and enrich the curriculum in terms of research and training at the UFS, on a simultaneous basis.

The future co-operation between PRAIS and the Lengau Centre is discussed. Suggestions are made on the way forward for the QAS and its involvement with the Lengau Centre.

Programme for Agricultural Information Service (PRAIS) in the SADC Countries

The Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) was established in 1983 under the Lomé Convention between the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States and the European Union Member States. Since 2000, CTA has operated within the framework of the ACP-EC Cotonou Agreement. It is funded by the European Union through the European Development Fund (EDF). CTA works in 78 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries.

As stated in their 2009 annual report, CTA's mandate is to improve access to information, facilitate knowledge sharing and strengthen the information and communication management (ICM) capacity of ACP organisations. CTA works in the field of agricultural and rural development and related areas, such as commodity trade and science and technology.

CTA set up a Question-and-Answer Service (QAS) in 1985 to provide information to ACP partners. The service was rendered from Wageningen in the Netherlands, and in 1997 CTA commissioned an evaluation of its Question and Answer Service. This evaluation led to a recommendation that devolution of the QAS should take place and that appropriate institutions in the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries be involved. The QAS devolution was to favour the development of regional Question and Answer Services. CTA then developed a strategy to establish a number of QAS centres in the ACP regions.

During March 1997 CTA investigated various institutions in Southern Africa to find suitable institutions to provide the service in the region. The University of the Free State in South Africa was selected as the leading institution, with the South African Agricultural Research Council (ARC) and the South African Bibliographical and Information Network (SABINET) as backup.

Similar services exist for Central, Eastern, and Western Africa, as well as in the Caribbean area, and forty-seven countries benefit from these services.

Since August 1998 the Library and Information Services of the University of the Free State coordinates a Question and Answer Service for Southern Africa. The service is known as the Programme for Agricultural Information Services (PRAIS) and aims to promote the use of information in order to enhance sustainable agriculture and rural development and improve food security in Southern Africa.

The aim and objective of the programme is to develop regional mechanisms to provide the SADC agricultural stakeholders with an information service on agricultural matters. The information service is beneficial to especially small-scale, subsistence and emerging farmers, although requests come from researchers as well.

Lengau Agricultural Development Centre

PRAIS has the privilege of utilising the knowledge and expertise of the staff of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences at the University of the Free State, and staff is more than willing to assist with information. In this regard the Lengau Agricultural Development Centre is especially a valuable partner.

The Lengau Agricultural Development Centre operates under the auspices of the University of the Free State. The Centre aims to undertake systematic small farmer training, tackle local development issues and enrich the curriculum in terms of research and training at the University of the Free State, on a simultaneous basis. These trainees make use of PRAIS, especially after completion of their courses.

The Centre has become a pinnacle in the development of newly-settled and prospective emerging and commercial black farmers. The Centre's Agricultural Skills Development, Training and Mentorship Programme produces valuable information that can be redistributed to the countries that PRAIS serves. To this end the course content will be used in the newsletter and so give a wider platform to informal training of farmers.

One of the three experimental farms of the University of the Free State is earmarked for agricultural skills development and the training of emerging farmers, farm workers and entrepreneurs in agricultural business. The buildings, facilities and a portion of the land of the Sydenham Experimental Farm are used for animal and crop production and alternative natural and agricultural skills development opportunities in value-adding and marketing. PRAIS provides information on all level that the emerging farmers find understandable and usable, as English is usually not their mother tongue.

The University of the Free State, Mangaung Local Municipality, Free State Provincial Department of Agriculture and the National African Farmers Union embraced the programme as partners in agricultural transformation. Services range from live stock auctioneering, branding, dehorning, castration, primary herd, ordinary and advanced food gardening. The centre also serves as a centre for education of under- and post-graduates, mentors, farmers and black entrepreneurs in many aspects of livestock, crop farming and agri-business.

The Centre has as its main target area the Free State province, especially the southern regions in the vicinity of Bloemfontein, while PRAIS handles requests from the following ACP countries: Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. PRAIS acts as the regional node for the southern African area, as well as the South African national node. National nodes have been established in Malawi, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Zimbabwe, and these countries respond to requests from their respective countries.

Very few of the clients have internet access, thus the service is mostly paper-driven. E-mails mostly come from researchers. Requests are answered from books, journal articles, internet information, CD-ROMS, and online databases. Books and pamphlets produced by CTA, for example the Agro-doc series, are very useful.

It is in this regard that the material generated and used by the Lengau Centre is of also great value. The Centre's research is beneficial to the PRAIS clientele as the information can be used by small farmers in all the countries that are served by the Question and Answer service. On the other hand, the trainee farmers are among the readers who make good use of the newsletter which PRAIS compiles and distributes, and multiple copies are sent to the Centre for distribution.

Most of the courses offered at the Centre have been accredited, and some are still in the process of being accredited. The Director, Dr Léan van der Westhuizen is more than willing to assist with providing information and would be willing to do training in the countries that PRAIS serves. Funding would however be the (familiar) stumbling block.

Some of the agricultural knowhow and skills training are in the form of the following:

- Prospective trainee farmers will select a programme in beef cattle farming, dairy farming, small stock farming, pig farming, poultry farming or vegetable production. They make use of the facilities at the Centre as part of an apprenticeship programme, with a mentorship and support system in place to facilitate "learning by doing" before moving on to a commercial farm. It is then that the farmers realise the ongoing need for information and make use of the Question and Answer service.
- Skills training is provided for agricultural entrepreneurs, farm workers, young people wanting to make a livelihood in the agricultural sector, farmers in the farmer trainee programme and recently settled farmers. This is done by the presentation of short courses at the centre, a mobile training capacity to serve municipalities in the Free State Province, and educational tours to key centres.
- Farmers' unions contact the Centre when they want presentations, training or help with for instance, vaccination. The Centre buys vaccine in bulk, and farmers then buy it from the Centre according to their herd sizes.
- Every Friday livestock auctions take place at the centre. Linkages to input suppliers and markets, after care of newly settled farmers and start-up entrepreneurs are given at these events.

- The centre provides appropriate infrastructure on municipal land for small-scale farming entrepreneurs.
- An outreach programme through partnerships to extend the clientele through a “hub-and-spokes” framework to different parts of the country. This also the way that knowledge about the Question and Answer Service spreads, and new clients come aboard.
- The Centre also provides training on HIV/Aids matters and sewing. These subjects are however out of scope for PRAIS.
- Staff of the Lengau Agricultural Development Centre has been involved in training of malaria vector control officers in Mozambique. The programme will be extended to other countries in Central Africa. Reports generated after this involvement will be made available to PRAIS.

Databases

PRAIS generates databases through record keeping and indexing:

Agsearch: This database contains comprehensive information on the requests received and the replies sent. It is a valuable tool in collection development, and prevents the sending of duplicate material to a requestor.

PRAIS Database: This database holds records on agricultural information and is part of an in-house database. The database currently holds approximately 10 000 records and is being updated regularly. Frequently used material is micro-indexed, which speeds up information retrieval and delivery considerably.

Statistics are kept of number of requests received – by country, categories of users and subject.

Publications

An information **brochure** is used for marketing at conferences and other events.

Agri-Outreach is the bi-monthly distributed to clients on the mailing list. The newsletter contains articles on a variety of subjects, which are mainly derived from information requests received. Articles also give rise to requests for more information on specific subjects. Feedback from the clients is also added. A green request form is included with each newsletter. White requests forms and feedback forms are included in the information package sent.

In the inside of the back cover of the newsletter information on the various departments of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences is given. This has resulted in students from South Africa’s neighbouring countries to enrol at the University of the Free State, especially for the post-graduate courses offered by the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture. It is a course offered by distance learning with a few contact sessions at the University.

The effectiveness of the newsletter is continuously confirmed by the number of requests based on articles in it, the number of persons presenting themselves as contact persons and the number of requests received via the included request forms. Contact persons receive 20

newsletters and distribute it in their areas. It is also evident that the newsletter is the strongest marketing tool, followed by word of mouth advertising. Clients often mention that they had seen the newsletter somewhere or had heard about the Question and Answer Service from a friend.

Homepage

The newsletter is available on the internet at <http://ufs/prais>. Back issues can be accessed from this address. Feedback and photos sent by clients can also be found there.

Impact of the Question and Answer Service

CTA's overall aim is to better serve the ever-changing information needs of all stakeholders in ACP agricultural and rural development. The goal shared by the whole development community is poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

From feedback received it is evident that through the Question and Answer Services, in this instance PRAIS, the goal is being achieved.

Examples are as follows:

- Mr Shadrick Mwanza is an extension officer from Nyimba in Zambia. He teaches farmers, especially those who are illiterate or not able to read English. He has already sent more than 600 requests on various matters, and through him a vast number of people have been reached.

He introduces people to the service, for example a Mr Whitehead who needed training on care for and working with donkeys. Later Mr Whitehead sent a photo showing his wife also handling the donkeys.

- Mrs Tisatenji Phiri of Lupenga village, Nyimba, Zambia requested information on draught animals, especially donkeys. A few months later she wrote as follows:

“I am a successful woman in utilisation of donkeys and I am able to attend these tasks:

1. Fetching 40 litres of water per trip using the donkey.
2. Transportation farm produce (cotton) to the market.
3. Fire wood fetching
4. I help others – donkeys are easy to manage
5. Interested fellow farmers, I invite you to visit me by friends and supporters.”

- CTA's aim of starting with the individual who uses information, to the family who benefits and then the community, etc, is achieved as is clear from the letter that came from Mr Tungisha from a village near Kaoma in Zambia.

He sent photos with the following captions :

“Paprika is one of the crops that is being grown at Mr Tungisha's farm and as a sister crop to tomato. The crop is greatly doing well with the advice got from PRAIS and Agri-Outreach.”

After all the continuous information from PRAIS that were being received, Mr Tungisha is seen inside the local fence with chickens. A positive result has been achieved.

“Mr Tungisha’s family happy with loaded tomato crop after harvesting. The family, with orphans, are being afforded to school with the help of the tomato sells.”

Mr and Mrs Tungisha with part of the tomato grown at their farm in Shmano area – Kaoma District of the Republic of Zambia.

“Let PRAIS’ programmes be encouraged and thank you.”

- An article on wagon wheel irrigation system was used and the 2007 Grade 11 class of Etosha Secondary School in Northern Namibia used the article to set up their own wagon wheel vegetable garden. It was so successful that they could sell the produce.
- Mr James Jere, a farmer from Mzimba, Malawi, reacted to an article on sweet potatoes and sent the following useful information to be shared with fellow sweet potato producers. He wrote: “Remember: Most farmers fail to plant more hectares because they don’t know how to store sweet potatoes for a long time”. He then gave instructions on how to build a storage unit for sweet potatoes. A few months later, someone asked requested the newsletter that the information had appeared. In this way indigenous knowledge is also spread to a wide audience.
- Inmates from Mangaung Correctional Centre use information gained while serving their sentences when they are released. After his release a client wrote that he is now able to make a living by producing vegetables and would not revert to crime again.

Conclusion

The success of PRAIS can be enhanced and broadened with cooperation with the Lengau Centre. The practical nature of the Centre’s courses can especially be used in the newsletter for the benefit of the whole region serviced. The course content will be added to the PRAIS database and indexed.

The cooperation of the services will result in the empowerment of more farmers, not only in South Africa, but in the SADC countries of the target area. T

Over the past few years, we have learnt much by operating the Question and Answer Service, and it is evident that there is a need for such services. We hope to remain a major channel for providing information as an indispensable resource in developing regions. Through its various Questions and Answer Services, CTA has indeed contributed much to empowerment of especially subsistence farmers, to poverty alleviation and food security. The continued support of CTA is highly valued and appreciated.