From needs assessment to strategic priorities: strengthening agricultural information and communication management in the Caribbean and Pacific

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Abstract

In 2004 and 2005, information needs assessments were conducted by national consultants in eight Pacific island countries and 13 Caribbean countries on behalf of the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Co-operation (CTA). The countries in both ACP regions have in common their small size, with small populations and economies that are largely based on agriculture. The studies were undertaken on CTA’s behalf to improve and better target interventions and activities, and thereby enhance programme delivery and outcomes. There was also a need to reassess information and communication management needs in the light of new information technologies, new government priorities and new global threats that can influence the rate of agricultural development. On presentation of the results, CTA was faced with the challenge of how best to respond to the expressed information and capacity-building needs given the finite resources at their disposal.

This paper focuses on how CTA and its consultants advanced from the initial information needs assessment to a considered plan of action, with recommendations for CTA’s 2007–2010 strategic plan. In the process, an innovative approach evolved to validate the initial findings, include a wider representative cross-section of stakeholders, and determine the priority needs for information and communication management in the Caribbean and Pacific regions. The subsequent priority-setting exercise in 2006 was undertaken in 16 Pacific and Caribbean countries with the participation of 129 institutions and 332 persons. It is very likely to be the largest ICM assessment undertaken in the two regions. Based on the results, four strategic interventions were identified. These proposed interventions would address all the priority needs in both regions, at the national and institutional levels. The development of a framework for monitoring, evaluating and assessing the impact of these strategic interventions has just concluded, and implementation of pilot activities will commence in late 2008.

Keywords: Information needs assessments, Information and communication management, SWOT, Caribbean, Pacific
**Introduction**

At the outset, it is pertinent to note that this paper is not about the results of an information needs assessment, nor is it about a SWOT analysis, neither does it focus on resulting strategic priorities. This paper is about the process for doing all of these things. In essence, we were driven by a mixture of curiosity and professionalism to respond to the inevitable question, the one most likely to follow exercises of this kind, which is “What is the next step?” This question was asked not just by the people being consulted, but by staff of the commissioning agency and, most of all, by ourselves. There is – and to a large extent, there ought to be – a degree of humility in responding to this question. We don’t always have all the answers; our original response may not always be the most appropriate or even right; and unless we treat the question with respect, we are unlikely to emerge with the right answer. For us it’s been five years since we began this journey; this is our story. We hope you will find in it something to engage your mind and be useful in your work.

**Background**

The focus of the EU/ACP Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA)\(^1\) is to develop and provide services that improve access to information for agricultural and rural development, and to strengthen the capacity of African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries to produce, acquire, exchange and utilise this information. In this regard, the Planning Corporate Services Department assists the operational departments in CTA by gathering agricultural intelligence on the ACP environment. This intelligence is used to identify emerging issues and trends and to guide the direction of programme activities in effective implementation.

In CTA’s Strategic Plan (2001–2005), the Centre was charged with identification of a wider cross-section of partners and beneficiaries that would also include new target groups e.g. women, youth, non-government actors and the private sector. Specifically, in the Pacific there was an added need because of the new signatories to the Cotonou Agreement\(^2\). In the Caribbean, changes in governments, personnel and greater use and application of information technology required an up-to-date assessment of information and communication management needs. Consequently, in November 2003, CTA commissioned information needs assessment studies in the Pacific region, followed by those in the Caribbean a year later, in November 2004. The objectives of the studies were:

- to identify agricultural information needs of key actors / beneficiaries for CTA products and services;
- to identify needs of potential actors / beneficiaries of CTA activities and services in terms of building capacity for information and communication management;
- to identify potential partners / beneficiaries for CTA activities and services;
- to develop some baseline data to facilitate subsequent monitoring activities.

CTA expected that as a result of this study, the operational departments and CTA’s local representatives would be more informed about the information needs in the Pacific and

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1 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, it has operated within the framework of the ACP-EC Cotonou Agreement.

2 New signatories to the Cotonou Agreement included countries with close ties to New Zealand (Cook Islands and Niue), to Australia (Nauru), and to the United States (Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands and Palau).
Caribbean. This information would enable CTA to develop appropriate strategies and a suitable framework for its 2007–2010 strategic plan. Ultimately, CTA would be able to achieve better delivery of products, services and interventions aimed at partners and beneficiaries that include women, youth, the private sector and civil society organisations.

Below is a chronology of the milestones in the search to determine strategic priorities from the results of needs assessment studies in the Pacific and Caribbean.

**Fig. 1 Chronology of events**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date/s</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nov 2003</td>
<td>Recruitment of national consultants in Pacific countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dec 2003</td>
<td>Development of research instruments, methodology and report format</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dec 2003 – 2005</td>
<td>Execution of information needs assessments in the Pacific</td>
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<td>Nov 2004</td>
<td>Briefing for Caribbean national consultants</td>
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<td>Nov 2004 – 2005</td>
<td>Execution of information needs assessments in the Caribbean</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov 2005</td>
<td>Caribbean overview report prepared</td>
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<td>Jan 2006</td>
<td>Debriefing of Pacific and Caribbean co-ordinators at CTA Headquarters; launch of information needs assessments in post-conflict countries in sub-Saharan Africa</td>
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<td>Apr 2006</td>
<td>Preparation of Pacific overview report</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apr 2006</td>
<td>Completion of SWOT analysis of all country reports; preparation of strategic option statements; development of methodology for priority-setting exercise</td>
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<td>Apr – Jun 2006</td>
<td>Execution of priority-setting exercise in Caribbean and Pacific</td>
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<td>Aug – Nov 2006</td>
<td>Analysis of results and regional reports</td>
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<td>Jan – Jun 2007</td>
<td>Development of a structure for combined report and project profiles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 2007</td>
<td>Launch of information needs assessments in Southern Africa &amp; Ghana</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 2007</td>
<td>Launch of information needs assessments in West Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug – Oct 2007</td>
<td>Finalisation of combined report on priority-setting exercise, including regional priorities and regional project profiles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov 2007 – Feb 2008</td>
<td>Development of a framework for data and information management for monitoring and evaluation purposes, specifically for regional project profiles</td>
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**Information needs assessments**

In the period November 2003 to October 2005, national information needs assessments were conducted by local consultants in eight countries in the Pacific – Cook Islands, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Tonga. Just prior to commencement of the data gathering, a regional co-ordinator (Walton) had been selected by CTA to assist in the development of the assessment methodology and to determine a structure for the reports. Guidelines on the scope of the study and research methodology for the local consultants were prepared and distributed.

In the Pacific, it became apparent that despite a report template being provided, the country reports reflected not just national circumstances, as intended, but also the divergent experience and perspectives of the local consultants. Whereas this is a positive thing, on the one hand; on the other, it led occasionally to reports being skewed towards one specific institution
(often CTA’s traditional partners, i.e. departments of agriculture) or the reports became the equivalent of ‘shopping lists’. The Caribbean adapted the Pacific guidelines for use in its study when a similar information needs assessment was launched in November 2004. At the regional briefing session all the local consultants had the opportunity to get to know each other, and were able to go through the research instruments and methodology, guided by the regional co-ordinator (Gumbs) and CTA project manager (Webster). This was a much better way to begin the information needs assessments and probably resulted in more focused studies. The following 13 countries participated in this phase of the study: Antigua & Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St Kitts & Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent & the Grenadines, Surinam, Trinidad & Tobago. The Caribbean country reports were completed by the beginning of 2006.

Both the Pacific and Caribbean regional co-ordinators were invited to present a summary of the findings to senior CTA staff in January 2006 (to coincide with the launch of information needs assessments in post-conflict countries in sub-Saharan Africa). As might be expected, an initial analysis of the country reports indicated there was a need for more training in information and communication management (ICM); and for more training and advice in harnessing information and communication technology (ICT) in the service of better information management and dissemination. Whereas there were several specific requests, it was noticeable that in many respects, it was training and advice at a fundamental level that was most often requested, despite a history of such interventions over the years. Consequently, two important recommendations emerged from this meeting with CTA staff. The first was the need to validate the results and in so doing incorporate a wider audience at country level. The other was that given limited resources for implementation of all requests, recommend at least three or four strategic priorities for consideration by CTA. It was clear as to what the next steps would be.

**SWOT analysis**

In preparation for validating the results of the initial study, the CTA team and the regional co-ordinators decided that the country reports should be used as the basis for conducting a SWOT analysis – strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Additional material was provided by the regional co-ordinators where appropriate (‘gap-filling’ rather than additional perspectives, based on experience). Whilst it would have been too easy to have simply fashioned programmes and activities which responded to the SWOT analysis, we were sceptical a) that this would be an adequate response, given the concerns with how some of the country reports were written; and b) that strategies determined in this way could not be justified in development terms.

Mindful of the request to validate the original findings, and desirous of including a greater number and broader cross-section of individuals and institutions in the validation process, it was decided to go back to the countries to conduct a ‘priority-setting exercise’. The raw SWOT analysis was used to formulate a set of ‘strategic option statements’, i.e. responses crafted to address a shortfall or opportunity identified in the SWOT analysis. In general, six to eight statements were prepared per country, with each statement accompanied by precise explanations. The intention was for each country to use its strategic option statements to invoke discussions on the relative merits and needs for each strategy, after which all statements were required to be ranked. Institutions which were consulted in the initial assessment, as well as institutions not previously included were sent copies of the strategic option statements. Cognisant of the fact that not every institution would identify with all strategic option
statements, or not see a statement which reflected a need specific to that institution, an opportunity was provided for the institution to add a statement of its own with accompanying justification. With an eye on the regional dimension, statements were prepared in such a way as to be similar from country to country. This in no way detracted from the particular country needs, since explanatory notes accompanying each statement drew attention to the specific reason such a strategic option might be needed, with local examples.

Priority-setting exercise

The priority-setting exercise was predicated on maximum involvement of stakeholders, to add strength to the validation process and provide the most justification for the findings. At this point, we should also add that we were motivated to a great extent by putting into practice the intent of the Paris Declaration, “to reform the ways we [donors] deliver and manage aid” (OECD 2005). What impressed was the need for donors to “commit to respect partner country leadership and help strengthen their capacity to exercise it” (II. §15). We saw this as being best exercised by ensuring that decisions regarding priorities could only be made on the basis of credible, appropriate information. CTA’s own preference is for the greatest possible stakeholder participation in decision-making. Thus it was agreed to encourage staff in institutions to meet as a group; and for encouragement to be given to institutions to form groups with other institutions, and to meet together. Given that many of the individuals participating in these discussions may not have first-hand knowledge of ICM, or may be too lowly in organisational structures, we sought to support the quality of the discussions through the use of the explanatory notes accompanying each statement. As the explanations were drawn from the country reports, and could be considered local intelligence, it was thought that more informed discussions would result.

Much consideration was given to how the priority-setting exercise could be implemented, given the organisational aspects. Earlier thinking that the exercise could be run remotely, by the regional co-ordinators using email, foundered quickly. We recognised that in dealing with the complex issues of effective ICM, a great deal of explanation was needed in order for any eventual discussions to be fruitful and produce meaningful results. In most cases, we again used the services of local consultants to distribute the forms, act as guides to the process, and collect the responses and collate the results. It was not intended that the local consultants would be needed whilst the groups met, although this happened in some instances; it was also not intended that the local consultants would have to sit down with individuals (and some groups) and ‘interview’ them to collect results, although this happened as well.

The priority-setting exercise was conducted in 11 Caribbean and five Pacific countries in total, and included the participation of 129 institutions and 332 persons, from April to June 2006. This exercise is thought to be the largest ICM assessment undertaken, in either region. Preliminary analysis was undertaken at the end of 2006, which is when we faced our greatest challenge, a mathematical one. During the group meetings at which the strategic options were discussed and priorities set, all that was required of the participants was that they compare one option with another, and decide as a group which one was the more important, based on their own situation. All options were compared in this way. At the end of the process, there would be some options ranked higher than others based on a simple tally of occurrences. From the group’s perspective, their job was done; for the analysts, required to compare results from up to 10 or 12 groups in some countries, there was a dilemma: should the overall results simply be added up; or should some weighting be given to those groups with more participants or groups which included more than one institution? We reasoned that since we had urged the
decision-making to be done collectively, we were obligated to reward groups based on their size and inclusiveness. We investigated formulas which could be applied and in consultation with the CTA team, adopted a proportional representation formula which we used to analyse the results and determine strategic priorities for each country, and for each region.

In the 11 participating countries in the Caribbean, the top four priorities that emerged are:
- Development of institutional strategic information plans (11 countries)
- Train participants from the public and private sectors in the development of an agricultural information and communication policy (9 countries)
- Mount short courses for qualified personnel who are responsible for information and communication management in their organisations (8 countries)
- Train extension personnel in the preparation and design of extension material for various levels of non-technical groups (4 countries).

In the five participating countries in the Pacific, the top four priorities that emerged are:
- Conduct and information audit of resources and capacity (5 countries)
- Provide training in the use of information and communication technologies (5 countries)
- Provide training in information and communication management (5 countries)
- Develop an information and communication management policy and strategy (4 countries).

Since we had crafted the statements with a degree of similarity between countries and regions, we were able to identify the top four regional strategic priorities. The top four regional priorities are:
- Information and communication management policy and planning.
- Audit of information resources and ICM/ICT capacity.
- Training in ICM and ICT
- Marketing CTA in the Caribbean and Pacific.

The fourth priority, marketing CTA in the Caribbean and Pacific, emerged as a CTA priority (and was included in its strategic plan 2007–2010, p. 17) because it was clear that despite two decades of engagement in both regions, there was limited awareness of CTA’s products and services, something which could be described as both unexpected and to an extent detrimental.

The next step in the process for possible inclusion in CTA’s strategic plan 2007–2010 was to present each of the four strategic options in project profile format (Walton & Gumbs 2007a), using the CTA project profile summary sheet as a template. Each profile comprises the following headings: background, problems, beneficiaries, overall objective, project purpose, results and activities.

At this point, we again asked ourselves (and were asked), “Now what?”.

**Framework and evaluation**

Under a later commission, the regional co-ordinators were asked to prepare a document for CTA outlining a framework for collection and management of data and information needed to assist CTA officers implement, monitor and evaluate the interventions as defined in the project profiles. Particular emphasis was to be given to data which can be used to assess impact.
The four project profiles developed earlier were the basis for this exercise. The regional co-ordinators conducted an analysis of each activity in each project profile to determine core data required for project implementation and the sources of such data. In determining the requirements for Monitoring and Evaluation, each identified result for each project profile was analysed to identify suggested indicators and potential sources. Finally, under Impact Assessment, the project purpose was examined and restated, with suggested indicators and potential sources of information for such indicators.

Too often, there is comment made on reports which, once presented and accepted by donor institutions and development agencies, merely sit on shelves and are never consulted again. The data and information the reports contain are not used and, at great expense, are often re-acquired several years later. The intention behind establishing a framework for monitoring and evaluation at the outset is that valuable data and information obtained during the initial information needs assessments is captured, documented, organised and made accessible. The ideal – which we are striving towards – is that as new data are added, databases will be updated, and that every individual within the CTA organisation can contribute to building an organisational knowledge resource.

Implementation of the first project under this framework – ICM policy and planning – will be launched in the Caribbean in November.

Discussion

At the beginning of this paper we stressed that the emphasis would be placed on the process itself and our experiences in determining steps in that process. Figure 2 illustrates the steps in the process in moving from the needs assessment studies to determining strategic agricultural information priorities for the Pacific and Caribbean regions.

Fig. 2 Flowchart

At the outset, it was assumed that an information needs assessment conducted at the country level would be the most appropriate way of gathering data and information on which to determine suitable interventions and programmes, in this case, by CTA. After five years, we have shown that this is just the first step.

When undertaking information needs assessments at the country level, it is not always possible to obtain the services of experienced information managers. Where the local consultant was an information professional, it was definitely easier to explain what was required, and largely, the overall result is better. At the opposite end of the spectrum, it was necessary to carry out masterclasses in ICM, so that the local consultant could become more aware of what was being asked, and would gain confidence. Since one of the issues in developing countries is a lack of experienced professionals, the commissioning agency must be prepared to widen the scope of the training and awareness provided, to ensure the best possible outcomes.

Undertaking the priority-setting exercise was all about people, not ticks in boxes. Where the exercise worked best was where the institutions were supportive of group decision-making. In discussions observed by the authors, with clear explanations of exactly what was intended with each strategic option statement, the discussions were lively but focused; although it shouldn’t have been, it was remarkable how quickly the group grasped that
some interventions needed to be done before others, and based their prioritising on this. Naturally, not all groups were the same, and it often came down to culture, not societal but institutional. Despite our best efforts, in some cases, priorities were set by one or two individuals (at the corporate level) working in isolation. There was also considerable confusion between the terms ICM and ICT; and, it must be acknowledged, that the perception that the discussion was about ICT probably resulted in higher participation than if we had insisted on ICM.

It will be interesting to measure the success of the project profiles as they are implemented, and whether they have the desired effect: that it leads to the acquisition and development of skills and capabilities that previously were lacking, and that this is sustainable. We are encouraged to think that other development agencies and projects can use the work as background and justification for their own strategic interventions. In other words, that development agencies actively look for opportunities to ‘add value’ through partnerships rather than striking out on their own; that the participation of the beneficiaries in decision-making is not an after-thought but that they are included from the outset – all of this is included in the Paris Declaration.

**References**


