

"Information is vital in the fight against hunger."

Jacques Diouf, Director-General
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations



Bridging the rural digital divide



Bridging the rural digital divide

The programme is committed to ensuring that rural poor people and the organizations that serve them are better able to use technology to exchange information and to communicate more effectively within their communities, with decision-makers and with others concerned with development. Tangible steps towards alleviating hunger and poverty through effective application of ICTs are already being made:

The Government of El Salvador has developed an Internet-based early warning information system for natural disasters, which captures data from a range of local and national sources.

Radio producers throughout anglophone and francophone Africa are able to enrich the content of their programmes for rural audiences, including women listeners, with information on food and agriculture obtained from the Internet.

Researchers in more than 100 of the poorest countries are now obtaining up-to-date agricultural information directly from scientific journal Web sites without paying prohibitive subscription charges. This is an aid to their work on increasing agricultural production.

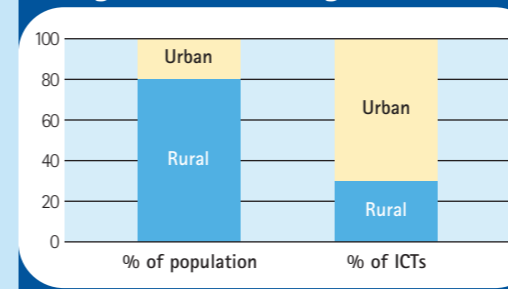
Agricultural researchers and extension workers in Egypt are now actively communicating important technical information between rural villages and district and national offices via the Internet, in seconds rather than in days or weeks.

In Asia, rural finance institutions are benefiting from low-cost microfinance software, resulting in more efficient banking operations and lower transaction costs, enabling the institutions to lend to small borrowers such as farmers who want to expand production.



The information revolution has completely bypassed nearly one billion people. They are the rural poor, who constitute 75 percent of people in the world living on less than one dollar a day. Most rural communities depend on agriculture and related enterprises. They need constantly up-dated information on everything from new farming methods and inputs to market prices. Rural people and institutions could make effective use of the world's resources of knowledge and information if they had the means to access them. Such communities also have a wealth of local agricultural knowledge to contribute.

Uganda's Rural Digital Divide



Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) enhance existing means that people use to communicate, exchange knowledge and access information. It may not be realistic to talk about universal access to ICTs in rural areas, but clearly the billions of dollars invested globally in ICT infrastructure could and should also benefit marginalized rural people.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), together with governments and other international agencies, is implementing the **Programme for Bridging the Rural Digital Divide** to enhance the role of knowledge exchange and access to information in combating hunger and poverty. The programme addresses the first Millennium Development Goal of eradicating extreme hunger and poverty, and the Plan of Action of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), which undertakes to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society.

What is the rural digital divide?

The rural digital divide is the disparity of access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) between rural and urban areas, separating those in rural areas from the world's information and knowledge resources.

This condition is caused by a complex range of problems, including lack of telecommunications and other connectivity infrastructure; lack of skills and institutional capacity; lack of representation and participation in development processes; and lack of financial resources.



For more information on FAO's activities in bridging the rural digital divide, contact:
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Programme objectives

The Programme on Bridging the Rural Digital Divide is a novel approach in this fast-moving field aimed at harnessing innovation through collaboration. Governments and international agencies, as well as FAO, are investing in the programme. It has three main objectives: to increase the availability of information content in digital form; to develop innovative mechanisms and processes for information exchange and communication; and to develop networks for exchange of information on food and agriculture.



Partners and stakeholders

The programme is being implemented by an active partnership among various types of organizations specializing in agricultural and rural issues, in collaboration with organizations from other sectors, such as telecommunications, where appropriate.

The programme involves the following stakeholders in developing countries:

- ▶ rural communities and households;
- ▶ providers of agricultural, financial, and communication services in rural areas;
- ▶ policy-makers and their advisers.

Policies and guidelines

The programme is developing a model set of policies and guidelines for governments, institutions and communities, which is aimed at improving the impact of information and communication.

The policies and guidelines will address the following key issues:

- ▶ **locally adapted content and context**, ensuring that information is sourced appropriately and presented suitably;
- ▶ **building on existing systems**, enhancing rather than replacing existing channels of communication;
- ▶ **addressing diversity**, responding to the different information and communication requirements of men and women, youth and other groups that have specific needs;
- ▶ **capacity building**, strengthening the capacity of institutions and people to provide the right content and to access a wider range of information;
- ▶ **access and empowerment**, ensuring that information reaches and empowers poor people, and enables them to participate in decision-making processes;
- ▶ **strengthening partnerships and participation**, building horizontal and vertical links, as well as shared ownership among communities, organizations and sectors;
- ▶ **realistic approach to technologies**, building sustainable systems that enhance existing structures, can be extended and exploit the full range of existing media;
- ▶ **costs and financial sustainability**, evaluating and financing provision of suitable information infrastructure and content, particularly in remote areas.

Actions

In order to bridge the rural digital divide, the programme focuses on two main actions:

1 Information and communication approaches

The programme is analysing current mechanisms and processes in developing countries for accessing and exchanging information using ICTs in order to compile a set of good practices. Larger-scale national and regional initiatives related to bridging the rural digital divide are also being monitored and evaluated. The lessons learned will help the programme formulate policy and operational guidelines.



2 Developing international networks of professionals

The programme will also support development of international networks to enable people working in information and communication in agriculture and rural development to share resources, new ideas and examples of good practices. Members of this international community provide mutual support, build the capacities of other stakeholders and constitute a roster of international experts able to provide technical advice. Community members include information and communication specialists, policy-makers, planners and development practitioners.

