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DIFFICULTIES AND PERSPECTIVES OF AGRICULTURAL INFORMATION IN THE CARIBBEAN

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ABSTRACT

In the Caribbean as in other parts of the world and overall in developing countries, agricultural documentation is working in a context of economic and agricultural difficulties. The authors recall some aspects of agricultural information before analyzing the problems of this information sector, the importance of which sometimes is unrecognized by agricultural administrators, researchers, extensionists, and producers. Perspectives for the development and better management and use of information resources are proposed through the use of new information technologies (databases, microcomputers, software, agricultural thesauruses, CD-ROMs, etc.), networks, and the sharing of resources through cooperation at local, regional, and international levels.

RESUME: DIFFICULTES ET PERSPECTIVES DE L'INFORMATION AGRICOLE DANS LA CARAIBE

Dans la Caraïbe (comme dans d'autres parties du monde et surtout dans les pays en développement), la documentation agricole travaille dans un contrôle de difficultés économiques et agricoles. Les auteurs rappellent quelques aspects de la documentation agricole avant d'analyser les problèmes de ce secteur d'information dont l'importance est parfois méconnue par les administrateurs, les chercheurs, les vulgarisateurs et les producteurs agricoles. Puis des perspectives pour le développement, de meilleures gestion et utilisations des ressources documentaires sont proposées à travers l'emploi des nouvelles technologies de l'information (bases de données, microordinateurs, logiciels, thésauri agricoles, CD-ROM, etc.), les réseaux et le partage des ressources documentaires, la coopération aux niveaux local, régional et international.

RESUMEN EN ESPAÑOL: DIFICULTADES Y PERSPECTIVAS DE LA INFORMACION AGRICOLA EN EL CARIBE

En el Caribe (como en otras partes del mundo y sobre todo en los países en desarrollo), la documentación agrícola está trabajando en un marco de dificultades económicas y agrícolas. Los autores recuerdan algunos aspectos de la información agrícola antes de analizar los problemas de este sector de información cuya importancia es mal conocida por los administradores, investigadores, extensionistas y productores agrícolas. Luego perspectivas para el desarrollo y mejores manejo y usos de los recursos de información son propuestas con las nuevas tecnologías de la información (bases de datos, microcomputadoras, softwares, tesauros

agrícolas, CD-ROM, etc.), redes de información y partición de recursos, la cooperación a niveles local, regional e internacional.

THE CONTEXT OF CARIBBEAN AGRICULTURE

Within the worldwide economic context, the last decade has been terrible for the Caribbean economies. Agriculture, which has been considered an important (very often the most important) sector of our economies, has been strongly affected by the economic crisis. World participation in our economies has been decreasing and the remaining financial resources have been oriented to other, more attractive, economic sectors such as tourism, housing, or trade of imported products.

These trends are visible in the interest given to the financial, training, research, and information sectors of Caribbean agriculture. In many countries of our region, these important agricultural sectors receive little financial resources. Meanwhile agricultural production is more vital than ever for our populations and our economies.

Although information is one of the structures or instruments which support agriculture (through research, extension, and development), when there are budgetary restrictions, it is one of the sectors first sacrificed.

SOME REMINDERS ABOUT AGRICULTURAL INFORMATION

While some sectors of economic activities such as industries, trade, and services are aware of the importance of information and documentation, the agricultural sector too often has not understood it. Documentation is not only the material management of documents, it is also a set of intellectual operations (analyzing, indexing, reference inputs, and retrieval. These operations should be made by an agricultural engineer or technician who can understand the content of the documents, the users' questions, and their needs. This manager should also know documentation and librarian techniques and methods and/or works in collaboration with a librarian. There is library software available which makes library tasks such as cataloguing easier.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF AGRICULTURAL DOCUMENTATION

They can be classified in various categories according to their origin:

Institutions.

Because of difficulties with public financing, the budgets of many agricultural institutions have been reduced. As the role and importance of documentation are not well known, its part of the budget is often the most reduced or even cancelled.

Some of these agricultural schools or research centers can no longer afford to subscribe to scientific or technical serials or to buy books because of their high cost and/or the difficulties of paying for them in

foreign currencies. Sometimes some institutions are unaware of the importance of documentation, hence have no documentation policy. The documentation structure is not always integrated into the institution policy and there is no communication or interaction between it and its documentation service.

Managers of Information.

It is logical that institutional weaknesses have consequences on the managers of information. The lack of resources and/or policies results in lower salaries paid to perhaps less qualified personnel and poor motivation of the information managers.

Sometimes the selection of personnel is inadequate because the decision-makers are not aware of the expertise involved.

When the documentation managers have no agricultural background, they cannot properly understand the content of the documents or how they relate to the needs of the users. This results in a lack of confidence on the part of the user. He finds that the documentation structure is inadequate.

Users of Information.

Their numerical importance and the level of their requests can be classified in this decreasing order: research, planning, administration; extension, development; production, marketing, consumerism.

As a whole, the users of information are not familiar with the utilization of documentation resources. For instance, when they ask for a bibliography or for documents, they have difficulty describing the documents they already have or know.

They are not always aware of the interest of others in sharing or making known their documentation resources.

Psychosociology of Information.

Some aspects of this subject have already been described above. "Information is power" is a well known saying which can explain the psychosociological aspects of information and documentation.

The user often wants to keep his actual information needs confidential because he is in the process of doing research or creating a new process or studying a new market. Sometimes the user, even if secrecy is not an important consideration, forgets that the documents and information he has may be useful for others. One can forget that the documentation structure is a collective structure. Information users are also sometimes producers of information (researcher, extensionist, planner) but they sometimes forget that they work for the community. They do not think that their publications are part of the collective intellectual resources. So, the circulation of information is not only a matter of financial or technical resources. Sometimes the psychosociological problems can be the most important aspect.

PERSPECTIVES

Nowadays, the information and documentation evolution is linked with the computer and the electronic revolution (more and more powerful technologies, decrease of prices, help devices, etc.). Human and psychosociological aspects may exist in the "modern" computer environment, however.

"Traditional" Resources.

Even if the documentation techniques can use magnetic supports and electronic communications instead of paper materials, tools and methods such as information networks and systems, interlibrary loans depend for their success on the commitment of people who make them work. CARIS Caribbean or CAGRIS, for instance, have not reached their full development partly because the countries and institutional involvements may not have participated fully. Let us remember that CAGRIS is the "Caribbean Information System for the Agricultural Sciences" and CARIS Caribbean is the "Caribbean Current Agricultural Research Projects System." So, the modernized "traditional" resources can still be used or improved. It is not only a matter of financial resources but, primarily, a matter of institutional policy and human involvement.

The "New" Technologies.

The information and documentation technologies generated by the growing possibilities of computer and electronic technique have been continually evolving. The technical resources offered by powerful and less expensive microcomputers mean that computerizing a document center is no longer a reality only for developed countries.

Documentation software such as the UNESCO Micro-Isis linked with a thesaurus such as the FAO Agrovoc could allow to computerize most of the documentation structures in the Caribbean areas. These "new" technologies mentioned above have quickly become "old" with the arrival of the CD-ROM (Compact Disc-Read-Only Memory). It has a high storage capacity optical disc which can store about 660 megabytes of data, the equivalent of 330,000 typewritten pages. While the on-line search may be expensive because of the telecommunications costs, the CD-ROM can be locally used in connection with a microcomputer and without time limit. This remarkable storage medium is opening up access to bibliographic citations and full text.

The compact disc industry is preparing a new type of CD, the Numerical Optical Disc, on which the user will be able to record data. It is (on the day when this paper is being written) the "last" revolution in the electronic management of documents.

CONCLUSIONS

Concluding at the evolution of documentation and information in this context of permanent "technical revolution" would be an illusion! The main constraints of agricultural information still exist. The

material progress cannot suppress the lack of policy or psychosociological difficulties.

There are some risks which are linked with the new technologies. For instance, the desk top publishing equipment offers the possibility of modifying a document without having a previously written copy. The information can always be updated but later it can be difficult and even impossible to evaluate the successive changes in a theory or in research. For instance, the easy access or use of computerized databases, without a good training in indexing or retrieval procedures can generate a poor bibliographic research. If a user who has his own microcomputerized library and does not share it, he may impoverish the collective intellectual patrimony if the documents do not exist in other places such as institutional or public libraries.

The value of techniques, therefore, depends on how and for what we use them. We must not forget the final objectives of our activities in research, extension, training, or development. The "omega" of our activities is to solve the food problem, to improve our agriculture, and to give the rural people a better standard of living without destroying the environment.

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*RIBDA: Reunión Interamericana de Bibliotecarios y Documentalistas Agrícolas. AIBDA: Asociación Interamericana de Bibliotecarios y Documentalistas Agrícolas.