

**A Report on the Proceedings of
Workshop on Rural and Agricultural Development
Communication Network Project (RADCON)
June 22 to 23, 2004**

A. Introduction

1. This workshop was the launching workshop of RADCON project activities as specified in the project document. The workshop had three objectives: to engage stakeholders in the project activities, to discuss the implementation plan for RADCON, and to identify the roles of each stakeholder. A program has been prepared to introduce attendees to the implemented VERCON (Virtual Extension and Research Communication Network) project and its expansion version, RADCON project, and to discuss the three project objectives in three working groups.

B. Opening Session

2. The workshop opening session started as scheduled and 117 participants have attended this session.
3. In the inaugural speech, Dr Rafea, CLAES Supervisor and National Project Director (NPD), explained the workshop objectives and gave a brief introduction to the CLAES that collaborates with FAO in the implementation of the RADCON project, which will benefit rural and agricultural development stakeholders in Egypt.
4. Mr Tabet, FAO Country Representative, talked about the importance of the project and how FAO was interested in it. FAO started this activity by sponsoring the VERCON project under its Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP), prepared the RADCON proposal as a result of the success of VERCON, and submitted to Italian Debt Swap program that accepted the proposal for funding.
5. Dr Zulberti, Chief, Extension, Education and Communication Service, FAO, stressed the interest of FAO in the project and in the VERCON concept, which Egypt was the first country to implement. Dr Zulberti added that some countries have started similar project in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.
6. Mr Spada, Italian Cooperation Dept. in Cairo, talked about the Italian Debt Swap program that converts the debt owed by Egypt to Italy from July 2001 to July 2006 for a total of \$149,000,000 to fund for development. Mr Spada showed that 25% of this fund has been already dedicated to projects for rural development.
7. Mr Shehab from International Cooperation Dept., Ministry of Foreign Affairs apologized for not attending the workshop because of other commitments.
8. Dr Madkour, President of ARC and National Project Coordinator, spoke about the gap between those who have access to information and those who do not, and how this gap is widening, and the vital role that ICT can play in the rural development. Dr Madkour also briefed the attendees about the development of this project, and its importance.

C. Overview of VERCON

9. Dr Sallam presented the planning, implementation and monitoring steps followed to establish VERCON in Egypt. Handouts of the power point presentation were included in the workshop folder.
10. Dr El-Beltagy presented the VERCON information system architecture, lessons learned from VERCON development experience, and future enhancements. Handouts of the power point presentation were included in the workshop folder.
11. Dr Kassem presented lessons learned from usage of VERCON in extension and statistics on users who entered VERCON, and on problems types in growers' problems component. Handouts of the power point presentation were included in the workshop folder.
12. Discussion on VERCON presentations was opened to the floor. Issues related to joining VERCON, and where sites should be located, were raised. VERCON management clarified that joining VERCON needs training of users at different levels: extension center, directorate, and the neighboring regional research station as all these users cooperate together. Accessing the VERCON information is available to every body as it is an open system. Sites were not located at the administrative district level, as the role of extension at this level in the network is not defined while designing the network. There is a need to study this point in the new project.

D. Introduction to RADCON Project

13. Dr Rafea presented the RADCON project objectives, highlights on the work plan, and guidelines for the three working groups. The first working group was to discuss issues related to Knowledge and Information Needs Requirements of resource poor-communities and how to engage these communities in RADCON, the second working group was to discuss issues related to RADCON Content Development Approaches, and the third working group was to discuss issues related to RADCON Communication Methods and Approaches. Handouts of the power point presentation were included in the workshop folder.
14. Discussion on RADCON was opened to the floor. Issues related to project work plan such as the selection of the sites of the RADCON project, or related to the working groups such as concerns of the time available to respond to the questions to each group, and formation of the group. RADCON management responded that the sites were selected based on rural and agricultural activities, and the availability of extension centers equipped with telephone lines. The organizers of the workshop, FAO and CLAES, responded that it is not expected to come up with final answers to each question. The working group participants may suggest methods to reach an answer to questions.
15. The working groups were formed in this session based on the invitations and the participants' registrations. Other participants showed interest in joining the groups and were added to the working group of their choices. The group size was approximately 15 participants.
16. The 45 participants were distributed as follows: 3 staff from FAO regional Office, 7 researchers, 13 extension workers, 3 university professors, 3 employees from central administrations in the MALR, 4 employees from NGO's, 2 from Farmers Cooperative Union, 7 ICT professionals, and 3 farmers. The participation from the

extension was the highest (28.9%) and the lowest was from farmers' organizations (4.4%). Researchers and ICT professionals occupied the second and third places with 15.6% for each. The attendees from NGO's and universities were 8.9% and 6.7% respectively. Farmers' representation was 6.7% and the same was the representation of central administrations.

D. Working Groups-Day 1

17. The findings of the first working group, which was mainly concentrating on resource poor communities information needs, and relationships with different stakeholders, were as follows:
 - a. There are many reasons for a community to be resource poor community. The group has identified these reasons to be used as measures in any study to be conducted to identify these communities.
 - b. A list of knowledge and information needs have been compiled such as modern agricultural practices, farm management, and others. However, the group stressed the need to conduct a study to better identify the information and knowledge needs for each community.
 - c. Relationships between resource poor communities and other stakeholders are defined as follows:
 - i. Universities → training, rural education,
 - ii. NGO's → proposed projects, success stories in development, directory of funding agencies working in rural development,
 - iii. Private sector → marketing and exporting information, alternatives for agricultural production inputs, investments opportunities
 - iv. Research and extension → extension documents, expert systems, and problem solving
 - d. The relationship between these resource poor communities and the RADCON management depends on the type of information flow, education level, and the community needs. The communities may receive information or can be trained to post queries and problems in a system similar to the growers problems database
18. The findings of the second working group which was mainly concentrating on information contents to serve different stakeholders and the information sources were as follows:
 - a. Components that should be considered for adding to VERCON:
 - i. Post Harvest module:
 - ii. Marketing information module
 - iii. Business/Industry directory (exporters, importers, etc)
 - iv. Prices
 - v. Quality Standards
 - vi. Recycling of agricultural residue module
 - vii. Addition of new expert system to enhance the performance specially in emergency conditions in plant and animal production

- viii. Widening the scope of expert system to cover the issue of organic farming
 - ix. Provision of information related to best agricultural practices
 - x. Available sources for agricultural credit
 - xi. Agro-Business consultation module
 - xii. Request for Services
- b. Add links that may be of importance to the RADCON community and provide a virtual library
 - c. Add new stakeholders namely: Association of Agricultural Quarantine, Chamber of Food Products, Union of Producers and Exporters of Horticultural Crops (UPEHC), Agricultural Cooperatives, and Import and Export Union
19. The findings of the third working group which was mainly concentrating on communication methods and media were as follows:
- a. Contents related to rural industries, family projects, literacy education, and campaigns against drug addiction are possible components to be added
 - b. Mass media could assist in publicizing RADCON to larger number of beneficiaries
 - c. The agents for disseminating RADCON contents in the rural areas are the extension workers in the extension centers, the workers in the cooperatives, the workers in the branches of Principal Bank for Development and Agricultural Credit, the responsible of youth clubs
 - d. Seminars, training courses, round table discussions, field days, and Radio and TV programs can also be considered as communication methods to disseminate RADCON contents.
 - e. Extension workers must be trained on computer basic skills, operation of RADCON components, and its usage in extension and communication with others.

E. Working Groups - Day 2

20. The findings of the first working group which was concentrating on implementing RADCON at the village level, monitoring its activities and measure its impact were as follows:
- a. Identify a focal point at each village that has the required ICT infrastructure, choose 2 to 4 persons according to specific criteria and train them in CLAES on operating the system, communication skills, participatory approaches, and rapid appraisals. These persons are to be responsible of disseminating RADCON contents in the village for men and women of different age groups.
 - b. Forming RADCON clubs similar to radio listening groups, conducting evening group discussions for growers, cooperate with the nearby extension centers if they do not have access to RADCON, conduct

awareness training courses to students in the schools, and agriculture faculties.

- c. Train RADCON working group in the village on preparing follow up reports containing village information needs and priorities, emergent problems in agriculture and in the community, usage rate of RADCON, how end users evaluate the relevance of the piece of information he/she gets from RADCON. The group leader should send this report to RADCON follow up unit.
 - d. Provide TV and Radio program director with material from RADCON through CAAES, and publicize the RADCON through participating in popular program like Good morning Egypt
 - e. Organize field visits to RADCON site for RADCON management
 - f. Conduct base line data survey to collect measures on education, health, and income to be used later for comparison.
21. The findings of the second working group which was mainly on identifying stakeholders who can participate in providing contents, were as follows:
- a. Information content for Post Harvest module can be gathered from the following sources
 - i. CLAES in collaboration with FAO will carry out a needs assessment study on the information requirements of post harvest. FAO already has information that might be relevant as well as country reports on post harvest. (HTML, and hard copy)
 - ii. The Horticultural Export Improvement Association (HEIA) also has a lot of information available in Arabic on post harvest which its willing to provide to the net. (Digital media, videos and reports)
 - iii. The University of Suez Canal can provide some documents on post Harvest. (Hard copy, and video film-> “ser el ard”)
 - iv. UPEHC can also provide material on post harvest. (Digital media)
 - b. Information contents for Marketing Information module can be collected from UPEHC that will provide information needed for this module. Information provided will include: wholesale prices (European and local markets), Business Directory, Marketing windows, Quality Standards
 - c. Information contents related to recycling of agricultural residue module can collected from the following sources:
 - i. FAO that has material on this subject which is willing to contribute (Digital media and hard copies)
 - ii. University of Suez Canal that has a project on handling the residues of olive, and palm processing and can provide the results of their research (In Hard copy)
 - d. Information contents related to EU-Market requirement information module can be collected from HEIA and UPEHC that are willing to provide information related to this module (EUREPGAP Protocol, MRL, Food laws legislations and regulations.

22. The findings of the third working group which was mainly on how communication could be implemented, were as follows:
- a. Forming a network at the village level among lead farmers, large-scale growers, investors, youth centers, extension centers, NGO centers, and cooperatives. This network can communicate through conducting seminars, regular meeting, exchanging emails, and telephone calls.
 - b. Publicize RADCON through preparing fliers, posters, advertising in local newspaper, and making a special episode on RADCON in “ser ela ard” program.
 - c. Provide a tutorial and an online help to explain the operation of each component in the RADCON information system
 - d. Conduct regular field surveys by AERDRI and CLAES to check the relevance, benefit and accuracy of the information provided.
 - e. Add an online module to collect feedback from users on each components of RADCON including information relevance, benefit, accuracy and ease of usage.
 - f. The enhancement in Linkages and coordination among stakeholders could be measured by evaluating the improvement in the response time among stakeholders’ requests, counting the number of users of different components, assessing the response time to update a system, and response time to recover from a crash or a certain fault.

F. Recommendations

F.1 Content

23. Conduct a study to identify resource poor communities and the information needs of these communities, taking into consideration the age group, gender, etc. Among other things, this study will assess information needs in the target communities including: whether there is a need for a post harvest module, a marketing information module, a recycling of agricultural residue module, best agricultural practices module, more coverage of information related to livestock, poultry, and fisheries and/or expansion of the usage of expert system technology. The study will prioritize the information needs of each group.
24. Based on the study carried out in the previous item, conduct stakeholder analysis to identify the contribution capacity of the different stakeholders (Universities, research institutes, NGOs, the private sector, VERCON, financial institutions, and others), as well as their expectations, constraints, information needs and future roles and responsibilities.
25. Develop a strategy for collection of Indigenous knowledge.

F.2 Communication

26. Consider how different mass media environments (ex: TV, Radio, etc) can be utilized by RADCON and connected to it.
27. Investigate other communication tools and approaches through which RADCON content could be conveyed to farmers, and identify RADCON contents that can be

disseminated through multimedia tools (ex. Newsletters, Flyers, videos, CDs, phone-in call centers, etc)

28. Build a similar system to that of the “Grower’s problem solving component” for communication between resource poor farmers, and stakeholders. The workflow and the exact specifications are to be identified.
29. Add new partners such as youth clubs, community leaders, big farmers, investors, and cooperatives

F.3 Implementation

F.3.1 Information System Development

30. Package VERCON so that it can be used by other communities
31. Conduct a Requirement specifications document for the VERCON information system enhancements based on the finding acquired so far and modify the system accordingly.
32. Design and implement the RADCON information system components based on the results of the two studies to identify resource poor communities and their information needs and the stakeholders analysis

F.3.2 Training

33. Prepare criteria for the selection of different target groups to be trained by the project and assess their training needs.
34. Prepare training material, and carry out training courses for educating system users on basic skills needed to operate the system, and supplementary computer skills in general.
35. Identify potential RADCON communication points in target communities, and form RADCON interest groups (RADCON clubs) at village level, as well as in agricultural high schools and universities.
36. Prepare training material and conduct training courses on appropriate communication skills for various groups including extension workers, RADCON teams at village level and other players. Training would include, among others, participatory approaches, interpersonal communication, group facilitation, use of multimedia including ICT, rapid appraisal and reporting skills.

F.4 Monitoring

37. Implement a monitoring system to follow up RADCON usage on the village level (Use the VERCON experience in this area)
38. Improve the follow-up system available for VERCON.
39. Develop a mechanism to get feedback at community level, to ensure that the content is relevant and useful to farmers, and that the language and format are appropriate.
40. Carry out a workshop around the same time next year to present RADCON achievements and to get attendee’s feedback on those.

F.5 Evaluation

41. Identify basic indicators for measuring progress at community level, and prepare a baseline report to document the pre-project situation, which can later be used for evaluation purposes.
42. Carry out an impact study after a period of time (18 months – 2 years) to evaluate the effect of the system on selected communities.
43. Develop a mechanism for field-testing to assess the relevance, usefulness and accuracy of the content to farmers, and that the language and format are appropriate.
44. Supplement the system with a component to obtain feedback from the users in order to assess the quality and effect of information provided by RADCON as a complementary step to the previous recommendation.