Sharing knowledge for development

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If the information needs of the developing countries are to be met, their key personnel (planners, researchers, administrators, etc.) must have access to two types of service. A "Type-One" service provides an essentially comprehensive inventory of the information available in a particular field. As even in a defined field, many hundreds of thousands—even millions—of documents may exist, the inventory must be indexed to a sufficient degree to enable one to pick out those items that relate to a specific need, i.e., information on a particular specialized topic or a particular situation. A "Type-Two" service is one that takes the inventory information on a relatively specialized topic, evaluates it, selects what is significant, brings together complementary material from different sources, and puts out products that convey needed information in the language of the client and at their level of understanding.

The Type-One (inventory) systems have been with us for many years in the more industrialized countries. Chemical Abstracts has for decades provided chemists with a virtually complete index of all available chemical information. Index Medicus provides an inventory of the medical information acquired by the National Medical Library of the United States. Developing countries are now beginning to play their part in the operation of Type-One systems but, as none of these countries could be expected alone to manage anything on the scale of Chemical Abstracts or Index Medicus, their involvement comes through participation in international cooperative systems.

The model for the international cooperative system is one that was started in 1970 by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), known as the International Nuclear Information Service (INIS). Any interested country is invited to participate by reporting the new agricultural information issued in their territories, and a consolidated, indexed inventory is put at the disposal of each of them. The IDRC has invested heavily in supporting developing countries that wish to participate in AGRIS. Most of this support has been channelled through regional resource centres established by the developing countries themselves. In Latin America, the Centro Interamericano de Documentacion e Informacion Agricola (CIDIA), San José, Costa Rica, provides training and advice for the Latin American countries; it has also prepared Spanish-language versions of the AGRIS instruction manuals. The participating countries report the new items of information issued in their territories, from which CIDIA first constructs a Latin American file with Spanish-language indexes. This file, known as AGRINTER, is processed on a computer in San José. On behalf of the participating countries, CIDIA also forwards the Latin American records to FAO so that they can be merged in AGRIS. Participating countries throughout Latin America therefore now have access to inventories of agricultural information prepared both regionally (AGRINTER) and globally (AGRIS).

A similar situation prevails in Southeast Asia where countries have set up an activity at the Southeast Asian Regional Centre for Research and Graduate Study in Agriculture (SEARCA), in Los Banos, Philippines. Known as the Agricultural Information Bank for Asia (AIBA), this program provides training and other resources to the individual participating countries, processes records of information collected in the region, produces a regional indexed inventory (Agrisia) and forwards records for inclusion in AGRIS. AGRIS is now adding more than 10,000 items a month to its inventory. Thus, in the last 2-3 years, the developing countries of Latin America and Southeast Asia have acquired much more ready access to an accumulated store of knowledge in agriculture — what is for them the most important of all fields of economic activity and employment.

Other areas of activity, both economic and social, are also of great interest to the developing countries. Proposals have been advanced for the establishment of cooperative information systems dealing with topics such as public health, water and sanitation, education, economic and social development planning, etc. IDRC is working with the various groups that are seeking to design and implement such systems. Perhaps the most interesting recent example comes again from Latin America. With some financial support from IDRC, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) will, during 1979, design and demonstrate a system that would serve the information needs of Ministries of Planning of the region.

Although Type-One services require cooperation to ensure that all sources of information are taken into account, in Type-Two (customized) services, the most important requirement is that the staff involved are themselves highly knowledgeable in the subject matter. It is necessary, therefore, to make such services highly specialized and to locate them at what is a "centre-of-excellence" for research into the subject matter. The concept of the "information analysis centre" dates only from the 1950s and, hence, very few can be found in the developing countries. IDRC has devoted considerable resources to the establishment of specialized information analysis centres in the developing countries on topics of priority interest to these countries. Most of the new centres deal with agricultural topics, the model being the Cassava Information Centre at Cali, Colombia. This centre is hosted by the Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical (CIAT). The Cassava Information Centre has made a comprehensive collection of relevant information, and is in communication with most of the cassava scientists throughout the world. It issues bulletins identifying new information, publishes a newsletter, produces state-of-the-art reviews and manuals, and operates a question-and-answer service responding to enquiries from various sources.

IDRC has also supported the following Type-Two centres: Grain Legumes Information Centre, Ibadan, Nigeria; International Irrigation Information Centre (IIIC), Bet Dagan, Israel; Sorghums and Millets Information Centre, Hyderabad, India; Coconut Information Centre, Lunuwila, Sri Lanka; Asian Packaging Information Centre, Hong Kong; Asian Information Centre for Geotechnical Engineering (AGE), Bangkok, Thailand; International Ferrocement Information Centre, Bangkok, Thailand; African Soils Information Centre, Bangui, Central African Empire. Progressively, host institutes are recognizing the value of specialized information analysis centres and are incorporating them into their regular programs. John Woolston is Director of IDRC Information Sciences Division.