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"TELECENTRES, BRIDGES TO AGRICULTURAL AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE CARIBBEAN"

Workshop and Prize-giving Ceremony
Dominican Republic, 28-29 April 2011

Concept Note

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In October 2010, the Technical Centre for Agriculture and Rural Cooperation ACP-EU (CTA), in partnership with the Taigüey Foundation from the Dominican Republic, launched a contest on the applications and services offered in rural and community Caribbean Telecentres. As a follow-up, the two institutions are organizing a workshop on Caribbean Telecenter services from 28 to 29 April 2011 in Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic) in partnership with various stakeholders. Parallel to that event, the prize giving ceremony of the contest will be held on 28 April. These activities will help identify and promote innovative services implemented to support agriculture and rural development as well as bring areas of potential activities to the limelight.

1. EXCHANGES ON "TELECENTRES SERVICES FOR AGRICULTURAL AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE CARIBBEAN"

1.1. Agriculture and rural development, two key sectors of national socio-economic progress

Though most Caribbean economies are largely service and urban based, agriculture plays a key role in many of them. In 2009, according to an ECLAC¹ report cited by CARDI², Agriculture accounted for 16.7% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Dominica, 30.1% for Guyana, almost 10% for St.Vincent and the Grenadines, and between 5-8% for Jamaica. Other statistics indicate that it accounts for about 25% of the GDP in Haiti and 11.5% in the Dominican Republic. It is also acknowledged that the GDP figures of agricultural contribution appear underestimated as, in many cases, they do not usually integrate the backward and forward linkages in the commodity chain. Nonetheless, for many of these countries, agriculture is the second or third labour employer. Strengthening agriculture is also directly addressed by the first United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and key areas of strategic interventions were identified in the *Jagdeo Initiative* or in the *Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Common Agricultural Policy*. Moreover, the global food crisis of 2008 and its consequences (notably high food prices) have stressed again the importance of agriculture for food security and social cohesion.

¹ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)

² Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI)

Whereas agriculture is mostly undertaken in rural areas, these areas are home to crucial problems such as poor socio-economic facilities and industrial infrastructure, high unemployment rates, especially in large Caribbean countries. The majority of people who live there are facing harsh living conditions. Thus, there is a need to improve lives in rural areas, to strengthen agriculture, which will benefit the whole national economy and social welfare.

Improving information and communication is strategically key for meeting these challenges. New information technologies, epitomized by the internet and mobile phones can, not only support better exchanges among development stakeholders, but have the potential to transform the nature of some agricultural activities. Telecentres in particular can play a role here.

1.2. Telecenter, a tool at the service of community development

Telecentres as understood here are facilities offering public access to the telephone, the internet or to a wide range of other Information and Communication Technology tools and services. They have various names, including “Community Access Points” (CAP), cybercentres, cybercafés, multimedia centers, etc. and they are also integrated in models such as the Community Multimedia Centers (CMCs) promoted by UNESCO. They can include fixed and mobile facilities. Telecentres targeted in this activity are those that offer access to community development information or services, apart from the classic email and web communication, especially in rural areas.

In developing countries where citizens and organizations still face important challenges to access new information technologies, telecentres have been recognized as effective tools supporting universal access to ICTs and as key vehicles of development information, particularly in rural areas. Indeed, through its various models, telecentres have the potential to promote access to low cost communication through the telephone, the internet, and other traditional tools of communication.

Even though ICTs are more and more developed and available at individual level in the Caribbean (compared to other ACP countries), in many countries of this region, the relevance of telecentres especially in rural areas seems undisputed.

Community telecentres in particular, basically understood as non profit facilities put in place usually by government authorities or associations, NGOs and installed mostly in rural or sub-urban areas, have been playing a key role to ensure access to ICT for local communities. More than private cybercafés, they are facing sustainability and connectivity problems indicated in previous sections. Many community telecentres are closing doors because of the development of individual access to internet or voice communication, via landline or mobile phones (which is positive technological and social transformation). Where the need still exists, strategies to strengthen them have to be identified. They include networking at national and regional level for experience sharing, mutualisation of resources, etc. During the workshop, discussions will also cover those issues.

1.3. Implementing advanced services in telecentres

Most telecentres function “just” like cybercafés and provide access to basic telephone, email or web communication for citizens who need to exchange with their relatives or consult the world wide web. This basic function is highly useful to citizens and development stakeholders who do not have individual access. However, as telecentres present more potential, in many

cases they are used to provide advanced development services, like distance education, video visioning, group training, access to CDROMs, access to library, etc. They have the potential to support the provision of development information services in the areas of health, climate change, agriculture, culture, tourism, education.

However, conceptualizing, implementing and sustaining these advanced services have proved complex and only few telecentres offer them, due to various constraints.

In the agricultural sector in particular, few advanced services are offered in or with the support of telecentres. Various experiences the world over indicate that these facilities can support agriculture production and commercialization. Adequate services can strengthen the financial and social sustainability of telecentres, a key issue they face. As stated in the report *Making the Connection: Scaling Telecentres for Development* "The sustainability of Telecentres is highly dependent on their ability to offer the right mix of services Telecentres must provide a broad range of locally relevant services to be sustainable and contribute to socioeconomic development³." How can these services be implemented, who can provide them, what cooperation between the development stakeholders and telecentres managers can be put in place, how to financially sustain those services, are some of the questions that the workshop will seek to answer.

Apart from the relevance of services, telecentres are traditionally facing many constraints which include technological aspects (inadequate telecommunications connectivity, energy problems, lack of IT capacity) but also socio-economic aspects (lack of management capacity, etc.).

1.4. Insights on community telecentres in the Caribbean

Caribbean Community Telecentres have been trying to organize themselves for the last five years. The *Alliance of Caribbean Telecentres - ACT!*, established in 2006 with IDRC support, as well the national network initiatives (JACAN in Jamaica and CAT DOM in the Dominican Republic) are some examples. Various partners have conducted initiatives, such as UNESCO (*Community Multimedia Centers Program*), UNDP (*Corics: Community Resource Centers and Internet*), the International Development and Research Center (IDRC), through the Telecentre.org programme in particular.

What is the current state of those networks and how to consolidate them are questions that will be addressed at the meeting.

2. TELECENTER CONTEST AND PRIZE GIVING CEREMONY

The telecenter competition was launched in two categories: Category 1 "Initiatives in operation" targeted outstanding services already implemented and Category 2 "Innovative Projects", targeted small innovative project ideas that will receive small grants for their implementation. In each case, services have been classified in two sub-categories: "agricultural services" and "non-agricultural services".

18 submissions were received: Jamaica (5), St Kitts and Nevis (1), Dominican Republic (11), and Haïti (1). One prize will be awarded for the first category (out of 4 entries received) and 3 prizes will be awarded for the second category (out of the 14 entries).

³ Barbara Fillip and Dennis Foote *Making the Connection: Scaling Telecenters for Development*, Microsoft, AED, IDRC / Telecentre.org, 2007)

During the event (afternoon of the first day), the four winners selected will receive each, regardless of the category, a cash prize of five thousand Euros (5,000). This support aims to contribute to the strengthening or establishment of the telecenter service.

The winners are:

- For Category 1 "Initiatives in operation": the telecentre of the Jeffrey Town Farmers Association, Jamaica

- For Category 2: "Innovative projects":

- The Community Technological Centre (CTC) of Juan Santiago, Dominican Republic;
- The Community Technological Centre (CTC) of Juan de Herrera, Dominican Republic;
- The Centre for Rural Alternatives of El Limon (CAREL), Dominican Republic.

More information on the contest and the results, see the corresponding documents and check this link <http://www.taigüey.org/cta-contest/>

3. PARTICIPANTS

Several entrants to the contest, from the four countries that participated, will be selected and invited. In addition, other key telecentre, agricultural, rural development and ICT for development stakeholders from different Caribbean countries will be invited. There will be about **40 participants** at the event (including organisers and 16 people coming from outside the Dominican Republic). The opening ceremony as well as the prize-giving ceremony will be held in the presence of local ARD and ICT authorities. Key institutions and CTA partners such as ITU unit in the Dominican Republic, CARDI, IICA, CAFAN, UNESCO Community Multimedia Centre programme, IDRC (which has supported the global telecentre.org initiative), CAMI (Caribbean Agrometeorological Initiative) and CARIMAC (Caribbean Institute of Media and Communication) will be invited. Taigüey Foundation's partners CNSIC (National Commission on the Information Society of Dominican Republic) and the CACT DOM (Dominican Community Access Points Network) will also be involved.

4. CONTACTS

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