



PROGRAMME FOR AGRICULTURAL INFORMATION SERVICE (PRAIS) IN THE SADC (SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY) COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT: The Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) was established in 1983 under the Lomé Convention between the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) Group of States and the European Union Member States. Since 2000, CTA has operated within the framework of the ACP-EC Cotonou Agreement.

CTA set up a Question-and-Answer Service (QAS) in 1985 to provide information and documentation to ACP partners. Initially the service was rendered from Wageningen in the Netherlands, but in March 1997, CTA carried out a feasibility study of the QAS devolution involving the key information sources and services in South Africa. A pilot project was implemented involving the University of the Free State (leading institution), the Agricultural Research Council and SABINET.

Following the success of the project, CTA set up QAS centres in other ACP regions: Uganda (to cover Eastern Africa), Mauritius (Indian Ocean countries), the Caribbean and the Pacific. In Central and West Africa, QAS centres have been set up in Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria. There are plans for a centre in Papua New Guinea (to cover the Pacific region).

The paper briefly discusses the origin, design, implementation and development of the Programme for Agricultural Information Service (PRAIS), which has its target groups located in the SADC countries, namely Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

It identifies the key factors which have led to the success of the service. These include enthusiastic response to initial questionnaires, positive feedback from clients, the constant flow of search requests and the increasing number of clients repeating requests for new information. It touches on the issues that will impact on the future functioning and of PRAIS: absolute commitment by management of institutions, additional capacity building, the absence of technological and information infrastructure, strategic decisions on target groups, the utilization of different types of information sources, and the development of networking and partnerships.

Finally it gives an overview of the running of the service: the type of requests received, how they are responded to, which countries generate most requests, and what type of client is responsible for the largest percentage of requests.

The publishing of a newsletter as means of disseminating relevant information is discussed. It concludes with some responses from clients.

Origin

The Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) commissioned an evaluation of its Question and Answer Service (QAS) in 1997. The QAS was then operated from Wageningen in the Netherlands. This evaluation led to a recommendation that devolution of the QAS should take place and that appropriate institutions in the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries be involved. The QAS devolution was to favour the development of regional QAS.

During March 1997 CTA investigated various institutions in Southern Africa to find suitable institutions to provide the service in the region. The University of the Free State (UFS) was selected as the leading institution, with the South African Agricultural Research Council (ARC) and the South African Bibliographical and Information Network (SABINET) as backup.

In July 1998 the contract for the establishment of information services on demand was signed by Dr Robin Cooke of the CTA and Mrs Alida Dippenaar of the UFS Library Services. This signalled the beginning of the service called SADC Agricultural Information Services on Demand, which was set to run as pilot project for one

year. The acronym PRAIS was chosen (Programme for Agricultural Information Service).

Aim

The aim of PRAIS is

- to promote the use of information in order to enhance sustainable agriculture and rural development and improve food security in Southern Africa.
- to identify users' needs regarding international commodities trade, legislation, research world market place
- to identify information sources

Objective

The objective of the programme is to develop regional mechanisms to provide the SADC agricultural stakeholders with an information service on demand for the purpose of conquering markets, for increased production intensification, environmental protection and natural resources management, strengthening national agricultural systems and mobilising civil society.

Target Groups

The information service is aimed at the following stakeholders of the national agricultural systems:

- Governmental organisations, including research, extension officers and training institutions.
- Non-Governmental organisations in the agricultural and rural development sector
- Agricultural production bodies such as farmers' groups, associations and cooperatives and local authorities
- Clients at grassroots level

These target groups are in the following ACP countries: Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Needs assessment

It was clear from the outset that the design of an information system should be based directly on the needs of the identified potential clients. In order to gain basic information on the needs of clients, an elementary questionnaire was designed. This was sent to all clients on the mailing list, with the first batch of documentation.

Analysis of Questionnaire

From the returned questionnaires the following information was gathered:

- Potential clients could be divided into two broad groups, namely farmers/extension workers and management/research/educators/libraries.
- Most users were found to be younger than 50 years.
- Only 73 from the 334 (21%) respondents were women.
- A total of 283 out of the 334 clients had some form of tertiary qualification or diploma. (84%)
- Almost 50% of the respondents had 15 years or more working experience and most of the clients were affiliated to governmental and non-governmental organisations, while educational and research institutions made up the bulk of the rest.

The main purpose stated for the information needs were education/research/lecture, followed by primary production, processing and self-improvement, policy development, marketing, and economic advancement. Some subjects ranged from sustainable agriculture to education and beekeeping.

Most respondents indicated a demand for journal articles and books. The preferred medium of communication indicated was mail, followed by fax, electronic mail and the telephone. This is still our experience – most requests arrive by mail, with very few faxes. E-mails come from researchers.

Information service activities

Requests are answered from books, journal articles, Internet information, CD-ROMS, online databases. Marketing of the service is an ongoing process.

Databases

Agrisearch: This database contains comprehensive information on the requests received. It is a valuable tool in collection development and prevents duplication of searches on the same subject. It also prevents the sending of duplicate material to a requestor.

PRAIS Database: When the service was launched, it was decided to produce a database on agricultural information. The records are part of an in-house database called KOVSIEDEX, which covers a wide range of subjects. The database had to be converted to a new format and software, which would enhance searching on the Internet. The database currently holds more than 5000 records and is being updated regularly.

Publications

An information brochure is used for marketing at conferences and other events, such as the auction of the Lengau project for new small-scale farmers. It is a project run by the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences of the UFS.

Agri-Outreach is the bi-monthly newsletter distributed to clients on the mailing list. It contains articles on a variety of subjects which are mainly derived from information requests received. Articles also give rise to requests for more information on specific subjects. Feedback from the clients is also added. A green request form is added to each newsletter. White request forms are included in the information package sent,

In the inside of the back cover of the newsletter information on the various departments of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences is given.

A Portuguese version is also mailed to clients in Angola and Mozambique and the possibility of a Sesotho version for local (Free State) distribution is being investigated as well.

The effectiveness of the newsletter is continuously confirmed by the number of requests based on articles in it, the number of persons presenting themselves as contact persons and the number of requests received via the accompanying request forms. It is also evident that the newsletter is the strongest marketing tool, followed by word of mouth advertising. Clients often mention that they had heard about the QAS from a friend.

Homepage

The newsletter is available on the Internet at <http://www.uovs.ac.za/support/library/prais/index.php>. Back issues as well as the Portuguese translation can be accessed from this address.

QAS at present

Users complete the request forms and send them back to PRAIS. The request is then analysed to determine the type of information need. The rationale is to determine the appropriate key words to use in carrying out the search and to decide which database to use in the search. Usually, CAB Abstracts is used for advanced searches, because it is an agricultural-directed CD and South African Studies for elementary studies, because it provides a lot of background information.

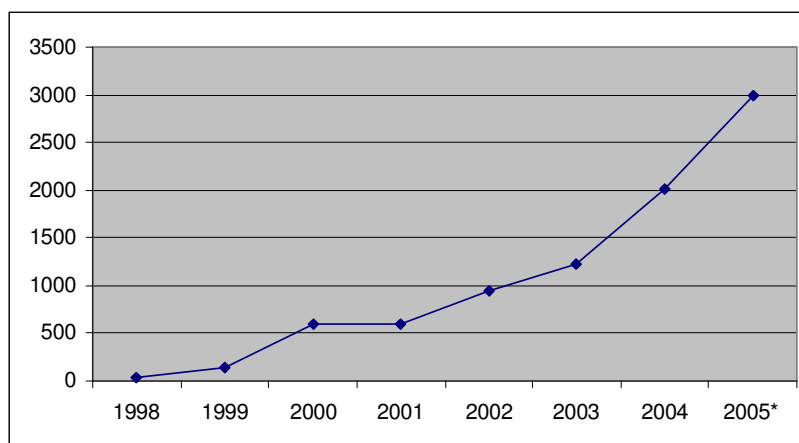
When results are obtained they are evaluated, and three relevant articles or information from books and the Internet are sent to the requestor. Books are utilised by photocopying the title page and table of contents

Requests cover all the various aspects of agriculture. Most requests come from Zambia, and most are from farmers and extension officers. Some letters bear the signs of having travelled a lot before reaching the PRAIS desk.

Regarding the animal production part, most requests are for housing of specific animals, feed formulae and disease prevention. Breeding of animals is also a frequent topic.

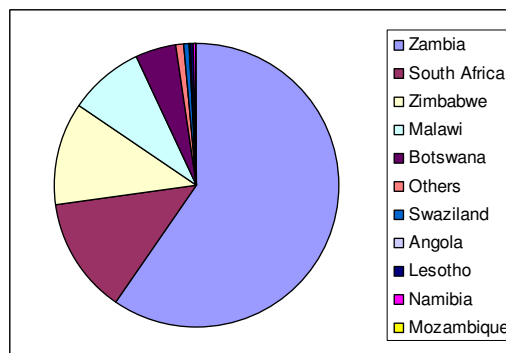
PRAIS does not try to deliver a veterinary service by mail; the motto is "prevention is better than cure" and therefore the newsletter carries articles on disease prevention, rather than remedies for some ailment.

Requestors sometimes describe the symptoms of the diseased animal, and if it is possible to match the symptoms to what is found in the literature, the appropriate information is sent, with advice to seek the help of the state veterinarian. A lecturer at the University of the Free State is a veterinarian, and is always willing to assist when there is doubt about what to send.



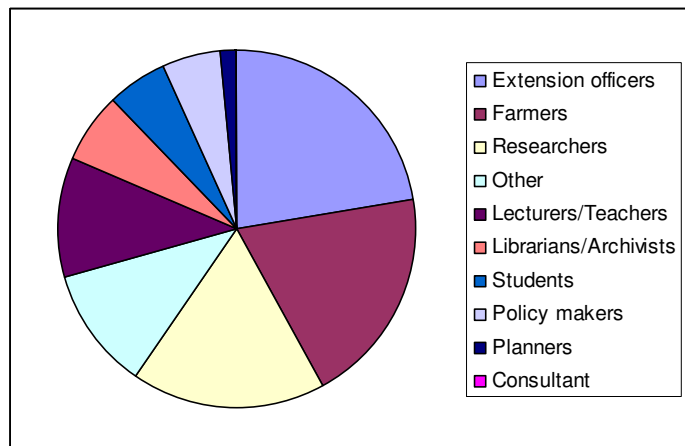
Most requests come from Zambia, followed by SA and Zimbabwe. Percentages for Malawi and Botswana will decrease in future, as national nodes have been established in 2004 and 2005 respectively.

Zambia	59.38
South Africa	13.43
Zimbabwe	11.76
Malawi	8.44
Botswana	4.64
Others	0.83
Swaziland	0.55
Angola	0.48
Lesotho	0.21
Namibia	0.21
Mozambique	0.07



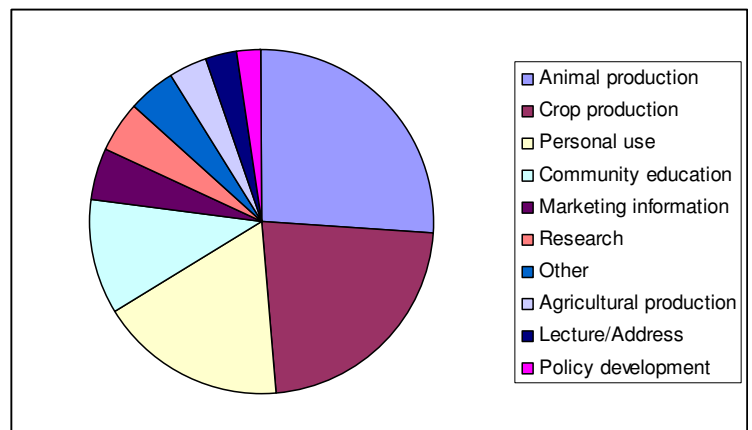
Extension officers are responsible for the largest number of requests, which is encouraging, as this implies that more people are being reached than just the requestor alone. Farmers are second in line, followed by researchers. "Others" include inmates from correctional centres, mainly in South Africa.

CLIENT CATEGORY	%
Extension officers	22.4
Farmers	19.42
Researchers	17.69
Other	11.07
Lecturers/Teachers	10.74
Librarians/Archivists	6.45
Students	5.62
Policy makers	5.12
Planners	1.49
Consultant	0
Total	100



Requests for information on animal production are about 3% more than those for crop production.

USE OF INFORMATION REQUESTS	%
Animal production	26.02
Crop production	22.56
Personal use	17.58
Community education	10.8
Marketing information	4.9
Research	4.78
Other	4.43
Agricultural production	3.74
Lecture/Address	3.04
Policy development	2.15
Total	100



Reaction from clients is positive and underlines the need for a service such as this. A few of the responses are:

- "I am a PRAIS reader and it encouraged me to start my small poultry business. My chickens are selling like sweets, because they are clean, healthy and are well sheltered because of the information supplied by PRAIS. I am very happy about the up to now information obtainable from PRAIS." (Makgale James Tefu from Mokopane, South Africa)
- Gerrit B. Bartels (Regional Coordinator, Indigenous Vegetation Project, c/o Ministry of Agriculture, Gaborone, Botswana): "I just wanted to thank you for the help you are giving our project. Mpho Mantsho has told me how helpful you've been in tracing literature for us, which we can't find here in Gaborone. This

morning again, you sent us an article that I needed urgently for review purposes. It's much appreciated."

- Mpho Mantsho (Botswana): "THANK YOU SO VERY MUCH, Really appreciate this; you don't know how much you've made my day!!"
- "Your notes were beneficial to the entire public" (Ronald Mweemba, Zambia)
- "I would like to thank you very much for the information you sent me. The information is very relevant to my profession. It is so clear and simple to understand. There are more than 300 community gardens in the district, where we some times go round holding courses and demonstrations on vegetable production." (AJ Gwarwanda, Zambia.) \

Conclusion

The successful performance of the service during the pilot phase led to the signing of a new contract for the continuation of the new service, now called PRAIS (Programme for Agricultural Information Services). Since then the contract has been renewed annually, with adaptations due to the expansion of the service.

Over the past few years, we have learnt much by operating QAS. It is evident that there is a need for a service such as PRAIS. The service has achieved much and we hope to remain a major channel for providing information as an indispensable resource in developing regions and to play a major role in the creation of an African renaissance, as advocated by President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa.