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**REPORT ON GHANA - QUESTION AND ANSWER
SERVICE MANAGEMENT AND REPORT
WRITING WORKSHOP HELD IN CSIR-INSTI,
ACCRA FROM 10TH – 15TH JANUARY 2011**

BY

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I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) and CSIR-INSTI for the opportunity to participant in the Ghana – Question and Answer Service Management Workshop. Finally, I am also grateful to the Director of CSIR-Food Institute for nominating me to attend this workshop.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is on the Ghana – Question and Answer Service Training workshop held in CSIR-INSTI, Accra from 10th – 15th January 2011, which was sponsored by CTA. The main objective of the programme was to strengthen the capacity of QAS partners through training based on CTA`s new orientation, documentation of Question and Answers, improving QAS partners access to information resources and promoting the QAS.

In all, 25 participants attended the training workshop and resolved to implement the strategies adopted to strengthen the QAS network.

INTRODUCTION

In 1985, The Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) established a Question and Answer Service (QAS) to provide information and documentation to ACP partners on request. In 1997, CTA, commissioned an evaluation of its QAS that recommended the devolution of the service to appropriate institutions in ACP countries. In Ghana, following a study in 2000, the Ghana Agricultural Information Network System (GAINS) was identified as the best placed institution to implement the QAS in Ghana.

The Ghana Question and Answer Service (QAS) project is implemented through the Ghana Agricultural Information Network Systems (GAINS), of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). The Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) of the Netherlands support for the QAS in Ghana begun in 2000. The Ghana QAS has evolved from phase one to the current phase seven.

CTA has so far supported the Ghana QAS project through 6 phases. This current phase of support covers 12 months between November 2010 and October 2011. The general objective for phase seven is to contribute towards improved agricultural productivity, food security and rural livelihoods in Ghana. Specifically, the purpose of the project is to provide timely and accurate responses to agricultural questions on best practices particularly to farmers and fisher folks in Ghana.

The current phase will focus on strengthening the capacity to run the Ghana QAS through training of partners managing the QAS based on CTA's new orientation, documentation of Questions and Answers, improving QAS partners access to information resources, strengthening partners needs for equipment, promoting the QAS, Producing and disseminating the GAINS NEWSLETTER, and producing and airing QAS radio programmes.

In all, 25 partner organisations are involved in this project which is made up of 11 key partners and 14 new partners. They are new partners because they were brought in for the execution of the phase seven. The 11 key QAS partner organisations are:- Community-based FM Radio Station (Radio Peace, Winneba, Royals FM, Wenchi), District Agricultural Information Centre (Agona Swedru), CSIR Institutes (Animal Research Institute, Food Research Institute, Institute for Scientific and Technological Information, Plant Genetic Resources Research Institute), College of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences, University of Ghana, College of Agriculture and Renewable Natural Resources, KNUST, Kumasi, College of Agriculture Education, University of Education, Winneba, Mampong Campus, Faculty of Agriculture, University for Development Studies, Nyankpala.

The new members are Farmers Associations – Vegetable Producers and Exporters Association, Peasant Farmers Association of Ghana (PFAG), Farmers Organisation Network of Ghana (FONG), CSIR-Crops Research Institute (CRI), Savanna Agricultural Research Institute (SARI), Forestry Research Institute of Ghana (FORIG), Oil Palm Research Institute (OPRI), Soil Research Institute (SRI), and Water Research Institute (WRI). The rest are Cocoa Research Institute of Ghana (CRIG), School of Agriculture, University of Cape Coast, Community-based FM Radio

Station comprising Lorlonyo FM in the Volta Region and Rite FM in the Eastern Region and District Agricultural Information Centre in Hohoe, Volta Region.

The following communication channels: - email, direct visits, post, telephone and interactive radio programmes will be used by partner organisations to manage the questions and their answers to increase the number of beneficiaries of QAS, to facilitate the provision of practical-oriented information, to facilitate uniformity in the provision of information and to improve the quality of responses to questions.

The project aims to reach over 700,000 farmers, fisher folks, extension agents, researchers, students, policymakers and the listeners of the radio programmes across the country.

DAY 1: MONDAY 10TH JANUARY 2011

1.0 KICK OFF WORKSHOP

The CSIR-INSTI through GAINS organized a one-day sensitization workshop on the activities of Phase seven for all the partner organisations (both old and new) of the Ghana Question and Answer Service (QAS). The sensitization workshop dubbed “The Kick Off” Workshop brought all the partners as a team and unfolded to them in clear terms their roles and responsibilities under the project for its smooth take off.

The partners were taken through the project objectives, scope, time frame, expected results and the project activities. Participants were sensitized on team spirit building which go a long way to enable them contribute as expected to strengthening the network of QAS partners as well as making them understand their roles and responsibilities as partner institutions. Partners were made to understand their obligations under the project which included:- promoting the QAS within their locality, encouraging people to use the service, receiving, documenting questions and responding to them, management of resources entrusted to them for the provision of the national service, timely submission of reports to CTA through CSIR-INSTI, collection of frequently asked questions by conducting community consultation and consulting with CSIR-INSTI, producing and broadcasting QAS radio programmes and follow-up on some of the people who asked questions to find out how knowledge gained is helping them.

In all, 25 information practitioners, researchers, lecturers, policymakers, farmers drawn from the partner institutions attended the kick off workshop. The resource persons were Dr. Joel Sam, Mr. Clement Enstua-Mensah from Ghana and Mrs. Vivienne Oguya from CTA.

DAY 2: TUESDAY 11TH JANUARY 2011

2.0 CONCEPT OF A QUESTION AND ANSWER SERVICE

Since the implementation of the Ghana QAS project in 2000, it has been observed that many of staff who were trained in QAS methodologies have deserted the partner institutions and new staff who have little or no knowledge in the project have taken over. Quite apart, the new partners who have been brought on board in phase seven need to understand these methodologies. The objective of the course was to provide partners with the requisite approaches, tools and techniques that would enable them to manage the QAS adequately, thereby, serving the right clients with the right information in the right format at the right time.

During the workshop key issues that was considered by the participants were: - what the QAS is about, who are the target groups, who are the potential stakeholders and partners that we can work with within our operational areas? And the scope of services.

In order to strengthen the QAS Network of partners, a brainstorming session was held and the major strategy adopted was the need to work as a team since it would be extremely difficult for partners to go solo and be able to achieve the desired aim of meeting the information needs of farmers and other stakeholders. Participants resolved to implement the strategies adopted to strengthen the QAS network.

DAY 3: WEDNESDAY 12TH JANUARY 2011

3.0 ANALYSIS OF USER NEEDS

The participants at the workshop were taken through a step by step approach of analysis of user needs. Participants were made to understand that the changing information environment calls for continual assessment of user needs, and therefore the need for information professionals to acquire the needed expertise and guidance to cope with operational management of information resources. Some of key areas covered were:- what are information needs, the motivation factors for information needs, identification of the needs, steps in the process of identifying information needs, Ghana QAS:- who are our users and what are their needs and the study of the type of clients.

DAY 4: THURSDAY 13TH JANUARY 2011

4.0 NETWORKING STRATEGIES

During this session of the workshop, the participants were introduced to networking strategies. The main highlights of this session were: - what is networking, why networking, what should be the nature of networking and what are some of the benefits of networking?. Overall, participants were made to understand that networks may create a number of benefits, however, they may not be the panacea for all information and knowledge sharing problems; and also the benefits can only be realized if the network is managed in an effective and efficient way, and that is why all the QAS partners are gathered at the current workshop to adopt strategies to strengthen the QAS network.

DAY 5: FRIDAY 14TH JANUARY 2011

5.0 REPORT WRITING

Participants at the QAS Management Workshop were also introduced to a session on report writing. Report writing is crucial for project accountability, it was noted that QAS project has passed the accountability test through the provision of project reports. However, notwithstanding this achievement, some lapses and difficulties were realized in the presentation of timely reports. The report writing session was a strategy adopted to strengthen the human resources base of partner institutions. The session on report writing will also contribute to the submission of well written reports which will in turn contribute to the overall timely implementation of project activities. The session exposed participants to general principles for effective and efficient report writing, selection of information, structure of project reports, clarification of the purpose of project reports, performance indicators, presentation of QAS statistics, objectives of project reports, presentation and graphic devices and other essential elements of report writing.

DAY 6: SATURDAY 15TH JANUARY 2011

6.0 INFORMATION RESOURCES, INTERNET RESOURCES AND PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES

The workshop introduced participants to numerous Information and Internet resources that are available to aid the QAS practitioners undertake a successful management of a Question and Answer Service to their numerous clients at their respective QAS Centres in the country.

Participants were also taken through to promotional activities that could boost interest of clients to the Question and Answer and Service. Promotional activities are an important element in the adequate functioning of a QAS. Too little promotion may lead to only few clients making use of the service. Too much may imply that many clients approach the QAS, which may not be able to cope and keep its standards (e.g. Response time limits). If promotion is not directed towards the right target group, many requests may have to be turned down, which affects the image of the programme. Therefore, a good promotional strategy is essential and should be directed towards getting the right clients and not only as many as possible.

CONCLUSION

The training workshop, on the whole was successful and beneficial to the 25 participants who attended the QAS Partners programme. Participants at the end of workshop resolve to implement the strategies adopted to strengthen the QAS network. Some participants also expressed appreciation to CTA for improving their skills in project report writing and also equipping them with substance information and knowledge and desired skills that would enable them to adequately promote the Question and Answer Service to clients.