Overview of AgroWeb Networking in the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe

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AgroWeb Development

AgroWeb (AW) was initiated by different groups and associations to establish common web portals to identify, collect and organize the scattered and diverse agricultural information in Central and Eastern Europe. Key supports of AW include the International Association of Agricultural Information Specialists (IAALD) and the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations Sub-regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe (FAO SEUR) and Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (FAO REU). The first workshop was organized by FAO SEUR, NitraNet and the Central and Eastern European Chapter of IAALD and was held in Nitra, Slovakia, in 1998. A number of workshops have been held since then and information about these workshops can be found in Appendix I.

Structure of the AW network

The AW network currently consists of national portals, sub-regional portals, and thematic knowledge networks. It also links with several other partners in the area of agriculture and the environment. The home page is available at http://www.agrowebcee.net/ (Figure 1).

National portals – The preferred structure of the national portals can be seen in Table 1. Each national portal offers access through two languages. The basic entry point includes several top categories. The national language pages may differ from the English pages. They may include local documents that are written only in a local language and have less relevance to the general audience (Figure 2). The national sites are managed by local information professionals at the host organisations that provide space on their servers. These sites assume responsibility for the particular local contents on their pages.

The AW portal also includes a country scheme or country groups. This scheme, however, has become increasingly obsolete due to the gradual process of AW countries becoming members of the European Union.

The national AW pages are maintained by local experts, also known as AW authors. The input policy of AW authors is most often governed individually on a voluntary basis. Some AW authors are not only coordinators but they also produce their own Web documents or publications, such as glossaries or thesauri. The support of the host institutions or host countries for the AW vary. In some cases the national portals are hosted by agricultural ministries, in other cases the pages are managed by an agricultural educational or research institution. There are also temporary arrangements. In general, the national input costs are covered by participating national portals or countries. The AgroWeb Central and Eastern European (AW CEE) net-
work as a whole is technically supported by an IT Working Group, with central support provided by the FAO staff in Budapest. On certain coordinating occasions, such as expert meetings, additional support is provided by the FAO staff in Rome.

### Sub-regional portals

The accomplishments of the AW group soon prompted the establishment of two separate sub-regional portals, AgroWeb Central Asia and Caucasus (AW CAC) and AgroWeb South Eastern Europe (AW SEE), in order to facilitate sub-regional information exchange (Figure 3). These two sub-regional portals exhibit different levels of development. The SEE group was quite active in the beginning but the ongoing political disturbances in the south-eastern part of the former Yugoslavia have impeded the stable development of this sub-network. Some national networks are updated on more consistent principles, some other national networks show activity only within certain categories, such as that of Food and Nutrition at the AW Serbia. The AW CAC also exhibits various levels of activity with the Caucasus section, but with particular strengths being found on the Armenian and Georgian pages. The Central Asian section is currently not updated on a regular basis.

### Thematic Knowledge Networks

Thematic or expert networks (Table 2) began to be developed to complement the existing national or sub-regional portals. Some thematic networks are active in their own right and organise international meetings. These networks, which also serve as specialised regional focal points, are coordinated by representatives of the national AW portals.

These networks cover the relevant issues in the entire broader region and may link to global associations, as is the case with the Farm Animal Welfare Network (Figure 4).

### Other Partners

AW is constantly looking for possibilities to link to and exchange information with other networks that are active in the area of agricultural and environmental sciences, especially under the auspices of the FAO. AW information professionals have established good contacts with some other associations, most notably the ESCORENA (European System of Cooperative Research Networks in Agriculture). Within the frame of ESCORENA activities, two specialised networks are active in their links with AW: RAMIRAN (Research Network on Recycling of Agricultural and Industrial Residues in Agriculture) and CENTAUR (Veterinary...
Biotechnology, Epidemiology and Food Safety Network). Links are maintained with the NACEE (Network of Aquaculture Centres in Central-Eastern Europe) and links can be accessed from the AW CEE home page.

**Discussion**

AW CEE began as a network of former socialist Central and Eastern European Countries. It was subsequently joined by partners in the contiguous regions of the SEE (South Eastern Europe) and CAC (Central Asia and Caucasus). It soon became necessary to organise distinct regional networks and this led to the creation of AW SEE and AW CAC. These sub-portals became active in their own right. Overall AW development is coordinated by the AW CAC. (Manukyan, 2005).

AW is a voluntary association of information professionals and some national portals receive varying levels of support so different national pages show different levels of activity. But the AW is an ever changing regional and international endeavour which aims to create synergy in the area of web-based agricultural information. It also promotes information competencies and information literacy, thus enhancing national agricultural research.

Many countries in the region share common socio-economic problems due to sharing a similar recent history. The level of progress, is quite different and some countries have already achieved full integration into the EU. In some other AW regions the once well developed research and education network is decaying in an unstable economic environment. A systematic collection of agricultural information in the wider region of CEE, SEE, and CAC deserves support, especially as the library and information professionals frequently seem to be left on their own. It is the hope of the authors that the wider global community will recognize the importance of the agricultural information that exists in these regions and support efforts to make it more widely available. The AW network stands ready to contribute to this end in any way it can.

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