

Bridging the digital divide

Electronic Networking for Rural Asia/Pacific (ENRAP)

ENRAP, a pilot project, set out to support and encourage internet use (including email and electronic newsletters) and develop an electronic knowledge network linking IFAD-supported projects in Asia and the Pacific. Improving access to local research and strengthening project ability to identify, document and share good practices require better communication, interaction and dialogue between projects and with IFAD: ENRAP is a tool to assist IFAD-supported projects in achieving their development goals. What kind of information and knowledge do ENRAP project managers, implementers and client communities need? How might their needs be met by ENRAP's second phase?

The evaluation assessed e-communication activity, email use, web-browsing, documentation of good practices, content of the ENRAP website, and development of individual project websites. It provided recommendations for the second phase, including:

- **Network of networks** – rather than rely on a regional hub spanning out to the countries, ENRAP may be more useful if it became a decentralised network of networks driven by local needs and interests.
- **Internet connectivity** is costly and often difficult in remote areas: development of digital technology and support for traditional forms of communication should go hand in hand. Community telecentres could help build local capacity for ICT use and spread prohibitive connectivity and hardware costs.
- **Rural communities** currently lack the skills to find relevant farming information on the internet. Until villagers can do it themselves, trained community workers with access to the internet could filter and feed information back to the people.
- **Closer integration** between ENRAP II and core IFAD-supported project activities – such as monitoring and evaluation and knowledge management functions – would establish ENRAP as a key component of each project with the aim of making poverty alleviation more effective through knowledge sharing.

Project Data

Project area	15 projects in 8 countries: Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka
Implementing agency	International Development Research Centre (IDRC)
Total project grant	USD 750,000
Grant effectiveness	May 1998
Closing date	April 2001
Main partners	Bellanet, IDRC, Nexus, Pan Asia Networking, TeleCommons Development Group
Evaluation field work	July 2001

Main achievements

ENRAP has succeeded in raising awareness of and building capacity in Internet use, website design, and managing information. Project staff now recognise the importance of capturing and sharing local knowledge and good practices and that effective communication leads to stronger impact. Communication between projects and with IFAD has improved but still has a fair way to go. A strong foundation for networking between projects is there although further support is needed to achieve sustainability. Learning to use new information technologies is a gradual process requiring time, attitudinal and behavioural change. Users of ENRAP will need support through the entire cycle – using computers for simple tasks, using email on a regular basis, and surfing the web for specific information – before being able to create, share, and use knowledge effectively. The ENRAP site receives 5,000 to 7,000 hits a month, but 55 percent of users are from the USA, 17 percent from the ENRAP region; and 3 percent from developing countries. Yet, even within this small scale pilot project, increased email use has enhanced communication and the use of computers and the Internet is increasing.



Networking for knowledge

The ENRAP pilot phase was based on each IFAD-supported project being connected to each other via the ENRAP website. Ideally, ENRAP needs to become a network of networks within Asia and the Pacific: a regional network consisting of several national, sub-national, thematic and project-level networks. Linking these local networks beyond IFAD with like-minded projects and organisations working in similar communities would also be beneficial. National networks should be linked to each other and to other organisations working on similar development problems. Inter- and intra-regional sharing enhances the skills and knowledge of project personnel and ensures programmes are implemented more effectively.

Softly softly approach

Becoming familiar with ICTs is a gradual learning process requiring behavioural change over time. Projects recognise the need to capture and share local knowledge and good practices – indeed some key project workers had begun to share newly-acquired skills with colleagues and partners. Yet the culture of acquiring and documenting knowledge, sharing information, and learning from the experience of others needs strengthening before ambitious electronic approaches are used. Documentation of good practices should focus on how things are done rather than on results so that project staff learn how projects can be successfully implemented. Projects used ENRAP in the first phase to broadcast their own achievements but not necessarily to learn from the experience of others. ENRAP needs to identify and consolidate existing grass-roots information and knowledge networks through training and support for appropriate, robust, low-cost ICTs.

Courting the web

Project Management Units, and to a lesser extent field units are beginning to use email for ad hoc purposes and special events even without adequate budgets for Internet Service Providers and telephone charges. For example, organisation of the ENRAP international workshop in Pune, India was completely facilitated by email, although notices of regular meetings are not conveyed via email, even though participating organisations have the facility. Project staff need the financial resources to pay for service provider and call costs as well as training in computer skills, in how to document knowledge in a way that is useful and accessible, and in why seeking information and knowledge from external sources is so useful. So too, the ENRAP site needs to be more dynamic and interactive: documentation of field experiences, online discussions, and moderated list servers would greatly improve this resource. Basic ICT access and institutional capacity building should come before any ambitious plans for knowledge sharing. Yet, it is crucial that new

technologies do not replace traditional methods of communication such as face-to-face interactive events or local language newsletters, for example. Successful coupling of new digital media with tried and tested approaches to communication and knowledge sharing should be a strategy for the project's second phase.

The need for go-betweens?

In addition to prohibitive connectivity and hardware costs, people living in poor rural communities have had very little if any exposure to the world wide web or to email use. Poor people lack the necessary skills to sift through vast amounts of information and identify what is relevant to their everyday farming needs. Help with filtering information, testing potential solutions for problems and adapting them to specific needs is crucial. There is a need to build the capacity of grass roots workers or go-betweens to gather ideas and requests for information from rural farmers and then surf the internet to find relevant information and interpret it for the use of the farmers and rural communities. ENRAP could also experiment with telecentres which provide communities with Internet connectivity and other telecommunication services at public access points. Finally, in promoting electronic communication among project staff, field workers and client communities, IFAD should emphasise and support the use of local languages ■

Further information

Thematic Evaluation – Electronic Networking for Rural Asia/Pacific (ENRAP), December 2001. Office of Evaluation and Studies, International Fund for Agricultural Development, Via del Serafico 107, 00142 Rome, Italy.

The full report is online at www.ifad.org/evaluation; Email M.Keating@ifad.org; Telephone +39 06 5459 2048.



The Hills Leashold Forestry and Forage Development Project in Nepal is part of ENRAP: a woman carries fodder to her livestock