

The FAO David Lubin Memorial Library, AGORA and Information for Developing Countries

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Abstract

The Mission of the FAO David Lubin Memorial Library is explained in relation to work with developing countries. An important new program, AGORA, Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture, similar to the Health Information Network Initiative of the World Health Organization, (HINARI) is presented and future directions discussed.

The Foundations

The Mission of the David Lubin Memorial Library is to provide comprehensive and specialised technical library, information and documentation support to FAO staff, input to specific FAO programmes, and services to bona fide external users and thus to support the role of FAO as a centre of excellence in food and agriculture. The FAO Library is named the David Lubin Memorial Library after the founder of the predecessor institute to FAO and comes therefore from a long tradition of democracy in access to information. The FAO Library plays a major technical role in serving as the back-up resource library and information service for the FAO field network, and, insofar as resources permit, through communications, electronic virtual access, briefings and training, co-ordinates and standardises quality and levels of FAO library services around the world.

It is important to understand the plight of our users and we in the FAO Library have considerable experience in working with scarce resources and low (or no) bandwidth. Only a few short years ago, in 1994, the David Lubin Library had no web pages nor did it have any electronic journals. It did not have stable access to internet nor did it have an integrated library system. There were only two rather unstable email accounts. Work processes were largely manual, and some small efforts at automating specific processes had been made but no integrated approach was adopted. At a time therefore when North America had already embraced microcomputer-based library and office automation for over a decade, and where email was commonplace (although hosted by mainframe computers), the FAO Library had only four rather unpredictable microcomputers shared among forty-five staff. Our memories are vivid of those pre-connectivity days and this is a strong factor helping us understand the challenges faced by our fellow librarians and researchers.

Within the United Nations, the UN libraries have banded together to form a consortium to extend our purchasing power. This consortium has annual meetings and fairly frequent email communications so we were aware that something very exciting was brewing at the World Health Organization (WHO) Library. However it was not until the pre-Launch announcement in July of 2001 that we realized the ground-breaking extent of the Health Inter-Network Access to Research Initiative (HINARI)¹. In addition, at the same time, Cornell University Mann Library was also looking for a transition path for its CD-ROM based product The Essential Electronic Agricultural Library (TEEAL). The Boston 2001 International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) Conference provided a point of convergence for the interested parties. The groundwork laid by HINARI, the good will and

¹ Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative at <http://www.healthinternetwork.org>

collaborative spirit over the past two years has enabled us to extend the boundaries to a food and agriculture based initiative, and the IFLA 2002 Glasgow Conference provided us the opportunity to meet with publishers to test our ideas. With positive interest from publishers there followed a number of planning and brainstorming sessions, concrete proposals, and much hard work to build databases of the most needed and useful journals in the field, and of potential institutions, to construct the secure website and authentication procedures and to build upon what was already done by HINARI. We have now reached the point where FAO as the lead agency for agriculture and food and nutrition is able to launch this new initiative October 14th, 2003. The initiative is Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture (AGORA), a programme of FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) in collaboration with major scientific publishers, Cornell University, Mann Library, World Health Organization (WHO) and selected donors.

Responding to User Needs

We are very much aware that many food and agricultural libraries in developing countries have not received any learned journals in over ten years. Many libraries have been destroyed by war or economic and political havoc. Without access to current scientific information, scientists struggle – to keep up with advances in science and technology, to publish their own findings in peer-reviewed journals, to update their teaching curricula, to find funding, and in many other arenas. The demand for access to scientific literature in developing countries has gone unfulfilled for many years, and has led to the isolation of a generation of scientists from their peers. Without these vital communications, research outputs are dwindling or duplicated, energies wasted and researchers are cut off from scientific developments.

While we were certain that the need was there, early in 2003, we conducted some very basic needs assessment surveys in the 69 countries with the assistance of our FAO country offices. We had compiled a database of potential user institutions using a number of sources, including the World of Learning, TEEAL users, and various mailing lists and specialized directories. We contacted the FAO country office in each of the 69 poorest countries and asked them to forward to each of the identified institutions in their respective countries some very simple questions to find out what international research journals they receive now, five years ago and which would they like to receive if they could. The answers confirmed our assumptions but they also surprised us because they helped us to prioritize the journals in our want list and even add some titles.

Delivering Relevant Information within an Economical Framework

If you work in food and agriculture information you will know that there are an enormous number of useful and authoritative journals in this very broad field. Is there any subject which does not touch upon food and agriculture in some way? Some quality and priority selection is critical to provide meaningful access to information over expensive low speed communication lines. In recent annual reports the United States National Agricultural Library in Beltsville Maryland reported it subscribes to approximately 25,000 journals. Of this huge number evidently there is a subset which is most relevant and necessary for developing country research activities. While the FAO Library has less than 1000 subscriptions, (many priced journal are received on exchange), our own journals (print and electronic) number over 7,000 titles. While many of the FAO titles would be relevant we could not automatically say that FAO titles are the primary subset for developing countries.

This is because FAO as an Organization does not conduct research in food and agriculture but instead sees information and technology transfer as its role.

However the Consultative Group on Agricultural Research (CGIAR) does conduct research in internationally funded research institutes and they have good print and improving electronic libraries. The FAO Library obtained the assistance of a Visiting Expert from one of the CGIAR institutes. This individual has worked for many years in agricultural information in Asia and Africa and is well versed in developing country information research needs. Using primary tools in the field, journal lists from CGIAR Centres and websites to verify electronic availability, the visiting expert carried out the same sort of process one would use to establish the model food and agriculture electronic library to support developing country research. Even after intensive selection the core list of electronic journals numbers over 700 titles.

An economical framework for relevant information was the objective and the expertise of the visiting expert was also very helpful in meeting this challenge. Not only should the user find useful targeted information but should do so in a cost-effective manner. A no-frills website, lacking unnecessary decorative touches should have no duplication of elements or processes. It should be clear and intuitive. With the AGORA website at <http://www.aginternetwork.org> we believe we have achieved this objective but we are certainly open to suggestions for improvements.

The Program

The long-term goal of the AGORA programme is to increase the quality and effectiveness of agricultural research and training in low-income countries, and in turn, to improve food security. AGORA thus provides access over the world-wide-web to a research level collection of key journals in agriculture and related biological, environmental and social sciences to the poorest countries in the world. It offers to researchers, policy-makers, educators, students, technical workers and extension specialists, an electronic collection of relevant literature comparable to that available to their counterparts in the developed world.

We believe the AGORA programme addresses specific needs of researchers engaged in agricultural development and food security. Furthermore, collaboration between the agriculture and health sectors will result in cost savings for systems development and efficiencies in training and outreach.

FAO and its partners are initially working with a small number of the major commercial publishers² to establish the core collection of several hundred journals in agriculture and related biological, environmental and social sciences. Over time additional publishers will be approached to contribute content, including other commercial publishers, learned societies, governmental and international organizations.

Potential users will be required to register with FAO, and access to AGORA will be password controlled. Access will be restricted to qualifying not-for-profit institutions in eligible countries. Although details still have to be finalised by the publisher partners, for institutions in most countries where the annual per capita Gross National Income (GNI) is

² Founding publishers for AGORA are Blackwell Publishing, CABI, Elsevier, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins, Nature Publishing Group, Oxford University Press, Springer Verlag, and John Wiley & Sons.

US\$1000 or less, access is to be free. Access to the AGORA catalogue for institutions in eligible countries where the per capita GNP is between \$1001 and \$3000, is likely to be at very low cost. It is possible that special conditions will apply in a small number of cases, where they will not be eligible for some or all of the content.

The AGORA website includes an indexed database for searching AGORA's content linked to a gateway providing access to full-text journal articles. FAO is responsible for management and maintenance of all functions of the AGORA website, with the support of Cornell University and WHO. Financial assistance is being provided to Cornell by the Rockefeller Foundation and other funding organizations are also involved.

Capacity building and outreach are critical components of the AGORA programme, which will ensure that individuals in participating organizations can access and use AGORA effectively. The partners supporting the development of AGORA and HINARI are collaborating to develop a joint international training and reference/technical support system, looking to establish a programme to "train-the-trainers" at national and sub-national levels. FAO and WHO will ensure the sustainability of this component of the AGORA Programme by working with their collaborative networks and collaborating resource organizations which have traditionally supported capacity building in agricultural and health information in developing countries.

AGORA Development Timeline

August 2001 - November 2002	Preliminary Meetings between Partners	- Italy, Switzerland, USA
December 2002 – September 2003	Development of system software, content array, and training materials	- Italy, Switzerland, USA
October 2003	System Launch	- Phase One Countries
July 2003 – December 2005	Service Delivery, Training, Outreach, Monitoring and Evaluation	- Phase One Countries

For more information, contact: The AGORA Programme Team at AGORA@fao.org or see the AGORA website at <http://www.aginternetwork.org>

Completing the Circle - Delivery of FAO Publications

FAO Library now provides access through its catalogues to over one million books, over 6,000 printed journal titles received regularly, over 2,000 electronic full text titles, a total of over a million quality pages online complementing the quality free Internet resources identified by the Branch and Reference Librarians. Through the Online Catalogue FAO has now over 8,400 of its own publications available in electronic form, online, free of charge. The FAO Library is aware of the continuing importance of all formats and evaluates and optimises the utility of individual books, journals, databases, Internet sites and CD-ROM databases to ensure the harmonisation of print and electronic information resources.

The FAO Library also developed AGLINET partnerships with large local and international Libraries to ensure free print and electronic document exchange with other Libraries for the benefit of all users. AGLINET is ready to welcome more members and new countries are encouraged to join. (See <http://www.fao.org/library>)