ICTS AND AGRICULTURE IN AFRICA: AN UNEXPECTED ALLIANCE

EVENT REPORT

with Hélène Quénot-Suarez, Anna Bon and Léon-Charles Ciss, June 5, 2012, Brussels.

This seminar addressed the potential benefits of ICTs over agriculture in Africa. Hélène Quénot-Suarez, Research Fellow at Ifri's Sub-African program, underlined in introduction the importance of agriculture for Africa reminding that more than 60 percent of the population still depend on it. Yet, the production remains rather inefficient. According to her, ICTs offer the opportunity to reach people in rural areas, helping them to improve agriculture in situ. However, she added that the support from local and national authorities is important, especially with respect to infrastructures that are lacking today.

Agriculture being central for Africa's development, the speakers intended to focus on how ICTs could improve African farmers' efficiency and productivity. The seminar aimed to outline a few of the existing projects as well as potential ways forward. Léon-Charles Ciss, Marketing Director for Africa, Middle East and Asia at Orange-France Telecom, and Anna Bon, senior consultant in ICTs at the University of Amsterdam - Centre for International Cooperation, developed different aspects of this unexpected alliance for Africa.

Mr. Ciss focused particularly on what Orange is doing and the projects soon to be launched. Orange has adopted a project-oriented policy vis-à-vis this issue while fostering public-private cooperation. It has developed a variety of projects and established local and global partnerships with Chambers of agriculture, agriculture organisms, NGO's and governments recognizing its lack of knowledge in certain fields.

How can ICTs improve farmers' life according to them? According to Mr. Ciss, by playing a major role in increasing productivity, modernizing the value chain, favoring local demand and promoting new financing methods. Consequently, Orange tries to increase farmers' negotiation power: it brings them accurate information about prices, improves their knowledge through the collection and sharing of data in the fields and creates a social link between farmers and experts.

Several projects have been launched, in Niger, Ivory Coast, Morocco and Mali for example. Mr. Ciss explained that farmers receive price information through their mobile phones, with a vocal access for illiterates, even in rural areas. Partnerships with local partners including NGOs and local authorities ensure viability and follow-up, to help smallholder farmers (including women, who represent about 40 percent of farmers) to improve their skills and increase fruit, vegetable and crops productivity, and to get a better market access.

Anna Bon then presented her initiative for a new World Wide Web, with a main question: how to improve the lives of people even in very constraining conditions with very low incomes, low levels of literacy, different languages spoken, no internet access, no computers, no electricity etc.?

She based her presentation on different aspects such as the correlation between GDP and mobile teledensity: the more subscriptions there are, the faster the GDP per capita will grow, according the UNCTAD. However, she reminded that, even if the initiatives focus on mobile technology, especially for social development, most of them are still text-based while most farmers, especially women, remain illiterate.

That is why she wants to introduce an alternative to the Web, through the initiative, the Web alliance for Regreening in Africa (W4RA), which gives a prime focus to voice technologies. According to Ms. Bon, this innovation would ease data sharing for farmers notwithstanding difficult local conditions, low literacy rates, and reduced access of the Internet. The radio remaining one of the most used means to gain knowledge, voice technologies should be about developing voice-web applications involving end-users, such as radio and farmers, through both GSM and internet connection.

This event offered two project-based presentations on the linkages that are growing between the opportunities offered by ICTs and the need to strengthen agricultural development in Africa. While ICTs cannot be the whole solution, both speakers have emphasized that they can be part of it hence the need to support initiatives in that field.

This report was prepared by Thomas Brisson.