

**Web Portals 4 Development Research -
Example of regional and national information architectures in Agricultural
Research for Development (www.eiard-infosys.org)**

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Electronic media applications have changed the face of science and research within the past two decades considerably. Advances in complex modelling in nearly every scientific discipline have spearheaded this development. In the past decade, however, the Internet has added even a new quality to this development, as timeliness, ubiquity of information becomes increasingly the key asset of knowledge driven innovation systems in research. The increasing digitalisation of information products creates a fundamental transformation of the traditional information processes. Electronic stock keeping of books and articles, however, will detach the traditional lending of books through the on-line retrieval of full text documents. Instead of card catalogues, the access to information will be provided in the future exclusively by on-line databases.

The impact of such developments on the knowledge systems within the scientific community has never been quantified but many experts assume a silent revolution taking place, as the Internet community clicking the mouse to retrieve information, to exchange ideas or to simply communicate via the Internet grows day by day tremendously, world wide.

Creating innovations in agriculture works in a way similar to the mental learning process: selecting, condensing and linking new relevant information with existing (and local) knowledge. However, two basic commodities "information" and "knowledge" are still far from being managed and utilised in a systematic and structured way. Much of the scientific knowledge and expertise in agriculture relevant for development lies scattered within Europe. A better use of what is already available is urgently needed to speed up innovation processes. Web-roadmaps or meta-information systems like EIARD-InfoSys and EGFAR which leads the way to the different sources of information and knowledge in ARD in a transparent and structured way are assisting in this process .

Unfortunately, such “roadmaps” and knowing the European “information surface” in ARD is not enough. The multitude of factual information (news, projects, research results, funding, training, research impact information etc.) needs to be considered, whereas the easy accessibility of such science related information is the essential building block in the construction of the bridge between the users and producers of information and knowledge. The acceptance and reputation of research for development in our society is largely dependent from the strengths of such bridges. This complex task is best handled using a systematic approach. The information system of EIARD at the regional scale - with its national nodes in all European Countries - and EGFAR at the global scale. represents an important effort in this direction.

Within the framework of the European Initiative for Agricultural Research for Development (EIARD) and in close collaboration with the European Forum (EFARD), a decentralised, web-based regional information system is being developed, providing road maps to scattered European ARD information sources through a single search interface. EIARD-InfoSys exemplifies how to organise web-based information in specific topical areas like agriculture, fisheries, environment, socio-economics, etc.. The system was initiated 1998 with the support of the EIARD Member States and financial contribution of the European Commission. The system is supplied by a network of National Nodes from all EIARD Member States. The present information system (www.eiard-infosys.org) contains more than 3200 records on relevant ARD-URLs. It facilitates information sharing and supports the transparency of European institutional and human ARD capacities. Further InfoSys provides various communication, news, events and training information facilities. Future developments will increasingly facilitate cross platform data-exchange and management within the framework of the European contributions to research for development. A similar gateway will be build up for the German research community. Supported by the BMVEL a project has recently started at ZADI (EIARD-InfoSys-DEU) to integrate German development research information sources in a comprehensive system, working complementary and in cooperation with already existing gateways like ATSAF and BEAF.

Apart from the increasing accessibility and permeability of the knowledge systems of the North and the South it will become much more important in the future to foster scientific web research information systems in the South. Recent experiences in

developing co-operation clearly demonstrate that merging the knowledge systems of the North and the South increases the impact of technological innovation in agriculture, benefiting the poor to a far broader extent than a one-dimensional technology transfer. However, still major North-South intellectual efforts are needed to achieve a "global knowledge and innovation system"; web-applications might become a fundamental assistance in this process.