

Regional Networking

Regional Networks for Protected Agriculture in the Arabian Peninsula in View of the Mediterranean Experience

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Abstract

Technical cooperation networks are playing an increasingly important role in agricultural research and development. Well-conceived, adequately funded and well-managed networks can lead to effective utilization of available resources and early results. Successful networks are usually preceded by an in-depth study for their necessity and membership. Experience has indicated that networks could develop more efficiently if membership is initially made up of a small number of research centers or countries, keen on cooperation among themselves and with some ongoing research program in the general mandate area of the proposed network's activities. Expansion can follow later. The Regional Working Group on Greenhouse Crop Production in the Mediterranean is made up of 11 Mediterranean countries and was founded in 1993. It is funded by FAO and through its four technical working groups covers activities in all aspects of protected agriculture in the region. With the limited funding at its disposal and biannual meetings not regularly attended by all its member countries, it has never the less managed to coordinate and assist in training and information flow to and from the various countries. Its long-term viability is substantially dependent on continued donor support. In view of similarities of production issues under protected agriculture between the Mediterranean and the Arabian Peninsula it is suggested that consideration be given in creating a similar network for the Arabian Peninsula.

A linkage between the two networks is potentially desirable. A possible structure for the projected network comprises a National Coordination Center, a Network Coordination Board and National Liaison Centers. Funding for the network is of crucial importance for its long-term growth and viability, and may be achieved either from donors or through an annual subscription from member countries/institutions.

Summary of Major Issues Arising and Discussion

Networks aim at maximizing the use of local expertise and resources among cooperating countries, and hence place comparatively less reliance on external

manpower support. The principal advantages of establishing a research network are the fostering of collaboration among scientists in various countries and exchanging information. Agricultural networks in Africa and the UK also serve as channels for the dissemination of information about new crop cultivars. The main difficulties, however, are maintaining and funding an ongoing research-and-development program.

Networks can generally be classified into three categories:

1. Associations with a formal structure, a constitution or similar agreement and a Management Committee of some sort. Membership implies an annual fee. Generally, work programs for such networks include publications, newsletters, meetings for exchange of information, studies and training. Examples of such networks in the region include those for credit and marketing, for agricultural research, and the Interregional Cooperative Research Network on Olives.
2. Associations with less formal arrangements often involved in applied research, exchange of information, training, etc. In this type of network there is no constitution as such and members do not pay any annual fee. Instead members provide inputs in kind which may cover part of their cost. A donor or donors provide the external funding needed for the operation of the network and ad-hoc arrangements exist for selecting the chairperson (or coordinator) and other bodies necessary for the operation of the network. Such networks are often set up with a long-term operation in mind, e.g. the Regional Working Group on Greenhouse Crop Production in the Mediterranean (RWGGCPM).
3. Associations, usually of a short-term duration, specifically set up in order to undertake a specific activity. At the end of this activity the Association ceases to exist. Normally such associations are highly successful, because of their specificity, adequate funding and interest on behalf of participating institutions.

Networking advantages include:

The possibility of initiating joint programs for specific problems, often economizing in scarce human and financial resources.

The development of common standards, methodologies and approaches in many areas including commerce.

The facilitation of information exchange on a regular basis which often allows countries to utilize each others' experience and thus avoid unnecessary duplication.

The potential linkage between developed and developing countries enabling resources from the former to be utilized in support of developing-country

problems. Networks also encourage the flow of external assistance through contacts that develop.

The development of joint activities on a permanent basis for across-border cooperation in such vital areas as for example food security, migratory pest information and control, and in resolving trans-boundary issues (e.g. water resources and fish stocks).

The potential cooperation of the Arabian Peninsula countries in the field of protected agriculture could best be served through the setting up of a network for protected agriculture. The main objectives of such a network could be, but not necessarily limited to:

- Exchange of information
- Implementation of joint programs of work
- Exchange of genetic material
- Organization of joint meetings
- Organization of training courses on specialized topics
- Study tours
- Exchange of scientists (short term—aimed at examining/advising on specific problems and issues).

For a protected-agriculture network in the Arabian Peninsula it is essential that a Network Coordination Center be established in order to:

- Act as the coordination and management entity of the network
- Organize collaborative activities/joint programs
- Disseminate information and publish a newsletter
- Organize meetings, workshops and consultations, including the coordination leading to the preparation of an annual program of work
- Maintain connections with other regional and international networks in all aspects of protected agriculture.

It is advisable to start with a small number of countries and to gradually expand rather than include all countries in the Arabian Peninsula as members, if they are not at this stage ready or really interested in joining the network.

An assured source of funding will be of primary importance for the long-term viability and success of any network on protected agriculture (PA) in the Arabian Peninsula. Many of the issues that networks seek to address move slowly in the absence of donor funds and proper coordination (a point which arose clearly at the meeting that established the RWGGCPM); however, part of the sluggishness of the Mediterranean Working Group was blamed upon the large number of Technical Subgroups originally created (14).

Successful networking implies continued support from governments, institutions, scientists and the farming community. This is likely to occur only if the network

works efficiently, and produces results which reach the farmers and are applied by them—increasing productivity for the benefit of the country as a whole.



The findings of the various Technical Subgroups of the RWGGCPM are available to researchers in the Arabian Peninsula countries in the form of various publications (newsletters, meeting reports, country reports) from both FAO headquarters and the various chairpersons of the Technical Subgroups.

The poor attendance at the Second Coordination Meeting of the RWGGCPM (5 countries out of 11) was attributed to the scarcity of PA scientists in the various countries and to conflicting interests (other meetings scheduled at the same time). There was no indication that countries or representatives boycotted meetings because they thought the Working Group was a ‘talking shop’ rather than an active entity. However, it was the view of the speaker that starting a network with few members and building membership over time would be advantageous; he cited the example of an olive-cultivation network in the Mediterranean, which has successfully followed this route, although it is still dependent on donor funding.

The participants showed some interest in developing regional mechanisms to exchange experience and information, and to transfer available technologies among the countries of the region. The participants recognized the interest of exchanging information and know-how in order to speed up the transfer of technologies to develop the PA sector in the Arabian Peninsula. They agreed that a permanent mechanism for inter-country cooperation could be established to serve this purpose on a country basis. It was recommended that consideration should be given to establishing a regional network for *Greenhouse Crop Production in the Arabian Peninsula*. The network would serve as a framework for:

- exchanging information (existing technical documents, extension material and newsletter)
- developing a joint database
- hosting the regional technical greenhouse advisory committee.

Two mechanisms for the initiation of a PA network in the Arabian Peninsula were suggested. The decision of starting a network ultimately revolved around the question of whether such a network would make PA research in the region more efficient and more effective. This should be answered by the various National Coordinators within the APRP—if they decided it was the right way to go, then adoption of a network should be referred to the APRP Regional Steering Committee. The alternative suggestion was that the APRP-appointed Protected Agriculture Specialist should study the issue of networking further and present the findings to the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee would then recommend the establishment of a network to the National Coordinators for agreement and implementation. Either way, it was unlikely that a formal network would be established at this (i.e. the Doha) meeting.



Subsequent to the Doha meeting, a decision was taken to develop electronic networking through the Internet—this will be linked to the protected agriculture section of the APRP HomePage. The first networked information will be the full-text version of the proceedings of the Doha meeting.