

CIARD

CIARD is one milestone in the path of information management for agricultural development. CIARD emerged, as Johannes, my colleague and fellow traveler on this path will further detail, from a long line of activities led by FAO and other agricultural development stakeholders since the 1970's. CIARD is a movement of volunteers, individuals and organizations from around the world, most of them actors in the management of data, information and knowledge. CIARD believes that information is a critical factor for innovation and change in agriculture and a major contributor to agriculture's development. CIARD has taken upon itself, that as a movement, it will organize to advocate, contribute to building capacities, improve governance and flow and use of data, information and knowledge related to agriculture. And as a movement, it believes in not only working through collaboration and partnerships but also in building them for the purpose of improving availability, access, applicability and effective use on information and knowledge.

Those who have traveled with CIARD have been learning and experiencing the issues in opening data, information and knowledge and enabling its effective use. Opening access to knowledge (and that includes data and any type of information) is not only about technology alone. However, many organizations and individuals in the business consider information management as an "engineering" issue and throw technology at it. They start with technology for infrastructure especially hardware, some graduate to the technology of content management and then face the problems associated with integrating data and information from within their own organizations and from external sources. Very few today, even when throwing technology to an issue that is largely Institutional and organizational look at how they can make data and information they have available useful. They are often perplexed and confounded about the concept of "openness", an essentiality for sharing information. CIARD has tried to clarify "openness" with all its nuances. On the way, it has learnt that "openness" is equally about technology, institutions, organizations, people and their communities and that you cannot separately consider one alone from the other. Thus, CIARD developed a manifesto for its partners and a checklist that guides organization towards better information management and "openness".

A major issue in bringing about "openness" which is a key objective of information management in agricultural institutions engaged in innovation and research is its advocacy. CIARD actors, usually the actors who physically manage the information, have found that this is a difficult task. Penetrating the higher echelons of policy making with a complex idea such as "openness" requires not only effort but time and perseverance. It needs to build trust and patience to explain the issues that range from investments, capacities to privacy, security and collaboration that go with "openness." And, more important it needs political acumen and strength. Similarly, the same issues need to be tackled with those who generate the information but in a different way to get the data generators participate. It became clear soon that the CIARD partners had a very difficult task at hand.

CIARD has chosen its areas of action after significant consideration; at one end, creating an organization of volunteers who value opening agricultural information as it leads to faster and

better innovation and research and at the other, building capacities in organizations and communities for a fast changing universe that interacts with technology, institutions and communities through its pathways. Along the way, it realized that this universe would be better served with a single window that enables access to information to it. It developed the CIARD.RING. Another major need, as technology now progresses towards “big data” and machine to machine communications has been to make data and information “interoperable” and re-useable. There are two major issues here. The first is of standards and the second of what is termed “Linked Open Data” (LOD) and the development of a web of data, similar to the web of information that we now have. While CIARD does not lay down the rules of generic level “interoperability” it certainly plays an important need for guidelines and standards to manage data and information that is shareable, “interoperable”, re-useable and amenable to LOD through AIMS.

CIARD continues to learn and experience. It is realizing that “openness” requires very high level political commitment to bring in appropriate policies, Institutions, organizations and in enabling communities to participate. This is a public function but it is learning that in many cases Government and public sector Institutions, who should be playing the critical role in organizing, improving, supporting and governing the open flow of data and information are not yet prepared for or even vacating their space and responsibility in this role. CIARD find itself short in this area by the very nature of its partners and looks forward to GODAN to also play a key role in the advocacy of open data and information at higher levels of policy making and governance. Another area is the role of communities in open information sharing. There is an immense shift occurring in how scientific and technical information especially data is now being and in future will be shared. CIARD with GODAN has to understand and facilitate this development.

CIARD also realizes that ultimately, it is not opening availability and access to information but also enabling its effective use by all who have a stake in agriculture, food, nutrition, forestry, environment etc. This is where the challenges for CIARD, and with GODAN, lie.

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