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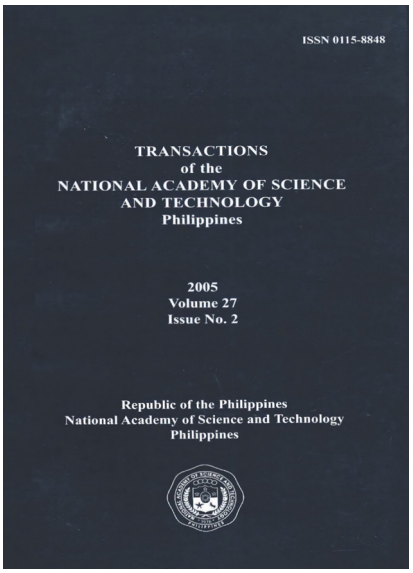

The National Information Network of the Department of Agriculture

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Information and Communications Technology for Philippine Agriculture

THE NATIONAL INFORMATION NETWORK OF THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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I have noted that the discussion in the use and application of ICT in support of agriculture and fisheries development in the PA 2020 document was very limited. These limitations indeed are a challenge to ICT in a sector where it is used mainly or regarded as an enabling tool in support of a sector's modernization rather than as a catalyst for a sector's development. Let me brief you on the National Information Network (NIN) which is being presently implemented by the Department of Agriculture (DA).

The Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act (AFMA) of 1997 mandated the DA to set up a national information network. This is the enabling mechanism that links the department to the regional, provincial and municipal levels as well as provides our stakeholders ready- access to agriculture-related information on technology, market, and prices among others. This mandate is further elaborated in the national mobilization plan which was approved in 1998. The plan focuses on three major implementation requirements. Basically these are: information systems that were prioritized by a group of consultants, the required network infrastructure and the required institutional aspect to implement NIN. The law stipulates the provision of P800 million for the first year of its implementation and about P700 M per year for the next succeeding three years. Unfortunately, less than 5% of the total proposed budget of the program was actually released for its operationalization. With this limited amount, however, the DA was able to establish and operationalize its communication structure. It was able to link all regional offices as well as establish two remote sites, one at the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice) in Muñoz and its office at the University of the Philippines Los

Baños. All the DA's bureaus and attached agencies within Metro Manila are linked by leased lines. However, the implementation of theneeded information systems has lagged behind. This budgetary constraint has been further compounded by the fact that there is no formal unit in most agencies of the department to manage and administer the IT databases as well as IT resources. All are actually operating on an ad hoc basis. However, the department continuously explores some options in improving its services with the use of ICT, particularly, in the delivery of its final outputs.

Let me inform you of some of our initiatives right now. In the DA's performance of its regulatory functions, the aim is to computerize all existing manual procedures in the issuances of permits, licenses, certifications and other related instruments. This is in response to the call of the public for a more transparent transaction in the government. Starting next month, we will be developing an on-line import permit application to be piloted in four DA regulatory agencies namely: BFAR, BAI, NMIS as well as BPI. In the marketing assistance/support function, we hope to launch next month an electronic commercial portal for the Philippine agriculture and fisheries sector. This is consistent with our goal of transforming our existing website to a more dynamic and interactive one and providing ready access to the farmers and other stakeholders in the agribusiness sector of the much needed timely, relevant market and price information. In support of its extension function, we are supporting PhilRice in implementing an open academy for agriculture establishing a key learning facility project focused on rice and to be piloted initially in five provinces. We hope to expand this to cover other crops as well.

Corollary to this, we are presently collaborating with the University of the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education, and the National Library in establishing the e-library project. Although this will not directly benefit farmers, however it will provide support to agricultural researchers, technicians as well as academics involved in the sector.

To supplement the effort of DA in its information dissemination, we have recently forged an agreement with Globe Telecoms in the application of SMS technology. The idea is to build a community of texters among stakeholders, wherein each sector can share information on all aspects agriculture, including prices, problems or issues, and comments affecting the sector. Recently, we launched with PAGASA, ULAT PANAHON and ULAT DAGAT. This is now available through the Globe mobile service using the number 2256. We also launched the DA *Presyo*, which provides

retail prices of selected commodities in Metro Manila on a daily basis. We intend to expand coverage to include other major trading and market centers nationwide. In support of these information services, we are also looking at the possibility of setting up call centers as well as information kiosks in major production and trading centers.

In the planning and advocacy function we are developing our GIS capability to further enhance our physical planning capability in the determination of priority rural infrastructure and in the identification of additional two million hectares of land for production expansion. We hope to consolidate all these information into a database repository or the NIN Knowledge Center. The NIN can facilitate the exchange and sharing of information and other allied databases among the DA data users. This is a challenging task considering the fact that DA has about 45 agencies nationwide.

Finally let me assure you that DA is supporting the NIN, by integrating its components in the regular programs and budget of various agencies of the department. We will continuously design new programs that will leapfrog the DA well into the ICT age. Thank you.