The power of open data

Empowerment comes from the capacity to make better choices. However, people can only make a sound choice if they have had access to the necessary information. This is where the GODAN initiative comes in.

The Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition (GODAN) initiative seeks to support global efforts to make agricultural and nutritionally relevant data available, accessible and usable for unrestricted use world-wide. The initiative is a network of partners that join GODAN voluntarily; the only requirement for becoming a member of the initiative is to agree that open access to research and open publication of data are vital resources for food security and nutrition. The network includes farmers, farmer organisations, researchers, extension experts, policy-makers, governments and other private sector and civil society stakeholders, which all participate in 'innovation systems' and along value chains. GODAN gives these stakeholders a community of practice to exchange their knowledge and experience. With a shared agenda enabling an increase in the supply, quality, and interoperability of data, alongside action to build capacity for the use of data by all stakeholders, we can make open data work for agriculture and nutrition.

■ A focus on South-South exchange of experience

The trigger that led this initiative was a discussion that took place at the 2012 G8 Summit. While these world leaders were debating the various challenges faced by our populations, food security was identified as one of the most serious and pressing threats

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to humankind. It was then mentioned that by 2050 the world would need to increase the availability of food by 60 per cent compared to its current production levels. Yet it was noted that already, some of the most important resources such as fish were fully or over-exploited in many parts of the world. The discussion also looked at the issue of water becoming scarce, making agriculture production more and more difficult, a problem exacerbated by global warming, climate change and inefficient practices.

However, it was emphasised that the two regions that are being most affected by rapid population growth and climate change are precisely those with the greatest potential for food production increase, namely Africa and Asia. Therefore the conclusion was that a global solidarity effort should be made to share best prac-

The GODAN initiative

Launched in October 2013, the GODAN initiative today includes more than 500 members across the globe, representing governments, international organisations, the private sector, research and civil society, united by the common pledge to work together, share knowledge and innovate beyond the traditional silos. The voluntary association focuses on building high-level policy and public and private institutional support for open data, the ultimate purpose of this effort being to stimulate innovation as key for the world to meet the food security challenges emerging in light of demographics and climate change.

For more information, videos on the examples mentioned in the text as well as on further specific partner initiatives, please take a look at the GODAN website:
➤ **www.godan.info**

tices, data, knowledge and expertise in all its forms with them. That was the original concept. However during the two years that followed, and until the actual GODAN inception in 2015, the idea evolved towards a global knowledge/data sharing network of partners emphasising south-south experiences as one of the fastest routes towards adoption of improved agricultural practices and innovation.

■ The partnership in practice

The many initiatives that GODAN partners are involved in are diverse as the composition of its network is; data integration projects, for instance, involve satellite experts, drone operators, governments, farmer associations and insurance companies, aiming at improving predictability and hence the capacity to better protect the agriculture sector, mitigate the impact of climate change and enhance economic activity in the sector. Other examples noted by GODAN sometimes arise from its working groups, virtual gatherings of global experts such as the working group on soils, with experts from Japan, China and India, looking at ways to improve soil quality and, as a result, agricultural productivity. Other groups look at interoperability, either from agricultural standards (so that data and knowledge becomes interoperable and can flow and be understood) or technical means (improved search engines, dataset protocols, etc.).

■ What difference can this make?

A lot. Recently, in Hyderabad, India, the representative of a co-operative announced the results of an assessment done across its members, comparing their productivity/yields one

The app designed by Abalobi shows the fishermen where best to fish. It also helps them keep track of their expenses and daily income.
Photo: Serge Raemaekers / www.abalobi.info

year after they had made weather and market data available through mobile phones, as compared to how it had been three years before, without open data. The difference was a 30 per cent increase in the yields and income of these farmers.

In Africa we have many similar examples, where again weather, market and also geospatial data allow farmers to use fewer resources to produce more and better crops, pay less for their inputs and get more revenues from their products. Esoko, an initiative from Ghana illustrates this; started as a non-profit NGO sharing weather data with farmers, it now includes market and other information that helped increase farmers' income by 10–25 per cent. As a result of this success, the Esoko concept is now used by thousands of farmers across more than ten countries in Africa.

Another example is a fishermen's co-operative in South Africa (Abalobi), which had the same problem that most subsistence farmers face: never having had a payroll statement (they are self-employed), the fishermen have little or no access to credit in the traditional banks. The co-operative they joined forces in had a basic app developed for them, allowing them to know when and where best to fish, keep track of their expenses and daily income and print the results on a formal income statement, well-received by local finance institutions.

Access to information is often also a question of literacy. Especially among illiterate people, the way and shape of providing the data is crucial. For example, the Government of Ethiopia created a hotline for farmers, where a person speaking their language directly provides them with important knowledge as weather, market data etc. During its first three months, the hotline received more than half a million calls and currently has more than a million subscribers.

■ What does the future look like?

The mission of GODAN is to contribute to making open data the standard. We believe that open data is the right approach to empower people, be it consumers, merchants, farmers or political or private leaders alike. Empowerment comes from the capacity to make better choices. GODAN also understands that open data is challenging and is working on tools and advice to ensure that data is opened responsibly.

This is what GODAN is all about, and this is why so many partners have joined this alliance in true record time. We believe that this trend is there to continue and in fact snowball in the coming years as more and more 'champions' emerge in all corners of the world, sharing freely how open data have made a positive difference in their lives and those of their communities, business, regions and countries.