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Farmers to benefit from online help in pest war

Written by Liz Ng'ang'a



A farmer in Limuru tends her crops

and where ecologically sensitive approaches and action form the decision-making common ground for leaders, politicians, entrepreneurs and farmers".

In brief then, BioVision is about promoting development through the sustainable use of natural resources, using the plant and animal diversity as the basis of all life, to improve the living conditions of people in Africa.

The Foundation functions as an intermediate between research institutes, local communities and farmers' groups, ensuring that the benefits of science reach the people most in need of them.

We also facilitate and support participatory development and dissemination of methods and technologies that address community driven needs.

Our main partner in the region is Icipe, whose wholistic approach, the 4Hs paradigm of human, animal, plant and environmental health, we have chosen to use as a guideline for our activities.

Q: Why has the BioVision Foundation opted to work in these particular areas?

A: We believe that the challenge of creating food security and improved livestock production will require a unique approach involving the blending of traditional farming methods and indigenous knowledge with new cutting-edge scientific strategies.

We also recognise that this objective demands more than just land and agricultural inputs.

A more important prerequisite is farmers who are healthy, as sick people cannot work.

Moreover, healthy animals are vital, for milk and meat, and for draught power in the tedious tasks of land tilling and the transportation of harvest, water and fuel wood.

And finally, for purposes of productivity, a healthy environment — one that has fertile soils and access to water — is mandatory.

Q: How does the idea of infonet-biovision fit into this?

A: BioVision is well aware that there are many elements that must fall in place to assure the sustainable livelihoods of farming families in East Africa, such as better infrastructure, access to water and electricity, credit and markets, as well as issues of fair trade and so on.

While most of these concerns should be tackled at the government level, we want to contribute by working directly with farmers and researchers in the more down-to-earth challenges.

Since we work close on the ground, we have an obligation to listen to farmers and respond to their needs accordingly. As a matter of fact, the trigger for infonet-biovision came from a farmer, Raphael Okoth, of Nyabera District in Kisii, Western Kenya.

In conversation with BioVision project manager, Monique Hunziker, he expressed his frustration in getting the right information when he had problems with his vegetable crops and wished there was a hub where he could find such material as per need.

By coincidence, Ms Hunziker had the exact opposite problem: as a biologist with specialist knowledge in international agriculture and tropical health, she always has at her disposal a flood of scientific information.

She saw Mr Okoth's plea as an opportunity to utilise this material, by filtering the facts that are relevant to farming in East Africa, and then creating a platform where farmers could, at the click of

November 29, 2007: Recently, the African Insect Science for Food and Health and the Biovision Foundation launched an Internet platform that will give farmers in East Africa free access to information on sustainable control of disease vectors and pests. Business Daily Correspondent Liz Ng'ang'a spoke to Biovision CEO, Andreas Schriber, regarding the \$350,000 project.

Q: What is BioVision Foundation and what is its involvement in Africa?

A: BioVision is a Swiss non-profit foundation started in 1998 by Dr Hans Herren, who was from 1994 until 2005 the Director General of Icipe, and is currently the president of the Millennium Institute in Washington DC.

Having spent half his life as a scientific researcher in Africa, Dr Herren, a 1995 World Food Prize winner, had a vision of "a world where there is enough food for all, produced in a healthy environment, by healthy people, where natural resources are sustainably used

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the mouse, access it.

Q: How does infonet.biovision differ from other online sites or services?

A: infonet-biovision is different because it has been designed with farmers, and their trainers in mind. Our approach has been to see things from their perspective.

For instance, imagine a tomato farmer whose crop is invested by disease. In order to protect the plants, he needs to identify the disease first. If he types in "tomato diseases" in one of the general search engines available on the world wide web (www), the result might be millions of pages.

Most of them will be characterised by heavy scientific jargon, and the farmer will have a difficult time sieving through all of them. In contrast, what we have done on www.infonet-biovision.org is to collate all the various possible diseases of tomatoes in the region, and their visual symptoms, either through photographs or illustrations.

All the farmer will have to do is identify the picture that most closely represents the damage on his crop, and he will be guided to carefully selected and edited methods, tips and strategies, on how to go about the problem.

So far, we have compiled information on over 40 major pests of vegetables and fruits from those that affect the production in the farms, such as aphids, to those that damage the harvest in storage.

Q: How has the platform been developed?

A: To ensure that the information is scientifically accurate, it has been compiled by local and international experts in collaboration with a network of partners, both individuals and organisations. More importantly, it incorporates farmers' perspective.

BioVision provided the initial finances for the preliminary work. Later the Liechtenstein Development Service provided further funding.

Q: Given the limitations of internet access and usage, how practical is the idea of an internet platform?

A: We are aware that many farmers in Africa still do not have access to the internet, but we know that situation is changing rapidly and that the trend will continue. In the meantime, we have an offline version of the content for people who have computers, but not internet access.

Our initial pilot tests of infonet-biovision have been encouraging and many of the farmers, including those who had never used a computer before, took only just about 20 minutes to get used to it.

Also, while Infonet-BioVision is tailored for the rural population in East Africa, we believe that many other people will find it useful as well.

In addition to providing information on the management of disease vectors and pests, the platform will also have tips on income generation activities, interlinked with sustainable use of the environment. We are also encouraging our users to give feedback, so that we can continually improve the content.

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