COMMUNIQUE OF THE 68TH ANNUAL NEW YEAR SCHOOL AND CONFERENCE

Introduction

The 68th Annual New Year School and Conference has again proven to be hugely successful in bringing experts, practitioners and other stakeholders to deliberate on another important national issue. The four day event was organized by the School of Continuing and Distance Education under the auspices of the College of Education, University of Ghana, from Sunday, January 15th to Thursday, January 19th, 2017.

The theme for the 68th Annual New Year School and Conference was "**Promoting National Development through Agricultural Modernization: The Role of ICT**". This theme was timely, given that the twenty-first century has seen significant inroads by ICT across several dimensions of society in improving the quality of life. Consequently, leveraging I.C.T in agricultural modernization which is an information-intensive sector, has proven to be expedient the world over, and Ghana is no exception. The agricultural sector offers a viable platform for it to be modernized and strengthened with the use of ICT The integration of ICT and agriculture will in no doubt lay the foundation for addressing the myriad of challenges that have arisen in the sector and in the long run, to promote the development of same. In this direction, e-agriculture is very important in speeding and achieving the nation's development.

The importance of ICT in agricultural modernization formed the building block of all the activities of the 68th New Year School and Conference.

Seven sub-themes were discussed. They include:

- Modernizing agriculture through information, communication and technology(ICT)
- E-Solutions and agricultural productivity
- E-extension and adoption in Agriculture
- E-agriculture and the youth
- Strengthening the agricultural value chain through ICT
- Agricultural financing and insurance
- ICT, Climate change and agricultural production

At the end of four days of deliberations by experts, resource persons, practitioners and participants, the following recommendations were made:

1. There is the need for a national e-agricultural policy: Government, through the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, in consultation with key stakeholders should as a matter of urgency formulate with a national e-agriculture policy to regulate the emerging industry and to promote speedy and wider adoption of the use of ICT in agriculture.

2. In ensuring the modernization of agriculture through ICT, adequate awareness should be created by the sector ministry in the use of docu-drama, hosting of policy fairs, creation of jingles and ring tones, some form of advertisement on social media, billboards, cinema vans and the strengthening of various community information centres.

3. National e-geospatial data base should be developed for all farmers in Ghana and this should be integrated into the systems of all agricultural agencies and other corporate bodies such as banks, telcos, etc.

4. The ICT units of ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) should be upgraded, expanded and increased capacity of personnel to drive the vision of e-agriculture. The ICT units at the various districts should also be empowered to localize the policy.

5. There should be robust and reliable ICT infrastructure in the rural domain for e-agriculture. This infrastructure should include the extension of electricity to all farming communities, upgrading of telecommunication networks to the length and breadth of the country and provision of ICT enabled gadgets such as phones, GPS monitors, broadband spectrum, computers and others.

6. The Ghana Meteorological Agency should adopt ICT tools such as mobile phones to disseminate weather information to farmers in the form of text and voice messages. Selected farmer groups should be educated and equipped with the necessary logistics to aid in the dissemination of relevant information to farmers.

7. The various platforms and stakeholders involved in the use of ICT in agriculture should be harmonised to provide a central robust platform that would be used to promote access to quality weather and market information.

8. Adaptation of content to local needs, languages and context should be given as much attention as much as possible.

9. The Ministry of Communications, the telcos and other stakeholders should promote the customization of mobile technologies (e.g., handsets and memory card) that can be designed to provide specific services to farmers and extension agents.

10. That government, through the Ministry of Communications, should promote the deployment of appropriate ICT tools and services at each stage of the agricultural value chain.

11. It is recommended that an Agricultural Development Fund be set up using a percentage of revenues accrued from export of agricultural produce to support the sector's modernization drive. The fund should also be used to subsidize interest rates and provide incentives to financial institutions that give credit for agribusiness activities.

12. To promote the adoption of e-extension, it is strongly recommended that the Ministry of Food and Agriculture should integrate ICT services in the extension services to increase outreach, scope and depth of extension services while reducing costs.

13. Financial institutions should be encouraged to develop insurance products to mitigate risks associated with agricultural financing.

14. There should be a special fund to support youth in agriculture. In particular, the state can create an 'Agri-Fund' targeted at the youth to attract them into the sector.

Conclusion

It is our hope that the recommendations made would be adopted by the Government of Ghana and other stakeholders so as to promote national development through agricultural modernization using ICT.