

F. Greco Speech

Workshop on Crop Monitoring as an E-agriculture Tool in Developing Countries 9:00, 2 November 2011

Vice Chairman Wu Jingsong,
Professor Hu Zaisheng,
Director Yang Bo,
Professor Wei Guo,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to speak at this workshop on Crop Monitoring as an E-agriculture tool in developing countries. This is a project supported by the European Union under the Information Society Technologies (IST) Programme managed by DG Information Society of the European Commission. This is appropriate, since the focus of the project is the adaptation of new information and communication technologies (or ICTs) to agriculture. I will talk further about this general topic later on.

On the details of the e-Agri project, I look forward to listen to the distinguished experts present at this workshop. I would like first of all to thank the Development and Reform Commission of Anhui Province for organizing this workshop and salute all Chinese project partners (the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences, Anhui Institute for Economic Research and Jiangsu Academy of Agricultural Science), as well as their European and African counterparts, too many to mention here. You are all vital elements for the successful conclusion of this project.

Let me first recall that, over the years, Europe's cooperation with China has evolved into a strategic partnership based on common interests.

Our overall cooperation has been gradually strengthened to face the joint challenges that confront both, Europe and China, in an ever more globalized world, such as climate change, pollution, energy needs but also the ever-growing global population.

Last week the UN announced that it had reached 7 billion, an increase of 1 billion in just 12 years. Both Europe and China can be justly proud to have overcome famine, although the memories of widespread hunger of the last century are still with many of us.

However, tackling the need to nourish the increasing population is particularly acute in the developing world, and is a priority for these countries' governments. An active partnership with more developed countries is essential in this undertaking and Europe and China are both engaged in supporting the efforts of developing countries to feed their populations.

Whilst in many countries famine is not an issue anymore, the countryside is increasingly confronted by other issues: depopulation, insufficient wages, lack of adequate service provision, a rapidly-ageing population... The European Union already works together with China on all these important challenges.

Helping farmers and the agro-food sector to meet ever-changing market requirements, improving production yields and quality and

making agriculture sufficiently profitable to motivate people to remain in the sector are all important goals for policy-makers at all levels. ICT has a key role to play in achieving these goals.

The agricultural sector can be sub-divided into three main "phases":

- **Pre-cultivation**, including crop and land selection, calendar definition and access to credit;
- **Crop cultivation and harvesting**, including land preparation, fertilisation, sowing, and water and pest management;
- **Post-Harvest**, with produce marketing, transportation, packaging and processing.

Each of these steps can benefit from specific ICT solutions, which increase the information available in the process, thus improving decision-making.

For instance, production forecasts and yields can be optimised by the use of Earth observation technology, whilst networking tools and e-commerce can be used to improve access to credit, and to facilitate the operation of the supply chain from the producer to the consumer.

Interest at the highest political level is essential to make progress in this area.

The Chinese government has long considered this issue important, and has been addressing it under its overall national informatisation policy. The recent 12th Five-Year Plan has identified the construction of information infrastructure in rural areas as a priority to improve production and living conditions in these areas.

I would also like to recall the high-level international political commitments already addressing this topic, such as the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) of 2003 and 2005 sponsored by the United Nations, which aimed for a global effort to reduce the "digital divide", the increasing gap in ICT know-how between developed and developing nations. WSIS identified e-agriculture as one of the actions lines to be pursued by the members of the United Nations. In this area, two UN agencies, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), have been active with other stakeholders since then.

The G20 group of countries is also increasingly involved in agricultural matters. The first meeting of G20 agriculture ministers took place in July this year and agreed a plan to step up food productivity and create an agricultural market information system that would collect information on stocks, and the supply and demand of crops, providing an early warning system to monitor commodity market information and limiting price volatility. This plan is expected to be endorsed by the leaders of the G20 group later this month in France.

The European Union has also been actively working on e-agriculture, with China as an important partner. For instance, in the last few years, the EU Delegation to China has managed two major projects in this area:

- The EU-China project *Crop Growth monitoring and Yield forecasting in the North China Plain*, from 2005 to 2007, had a similar focus to and paved the way for the e-Agri project, with the aim to transfer from Europe to China of know-how on the acquisition of agricultural information generated by Earth observation and communication technologies, notably crop monitoring and yield forecasting technology (CGMS). The shared policy goal of this project was to strengthen global monitoring of production and stock levels of agricultural commodities, as well as of food security.
- The EU-China *Information Society project* (INFSO) from 2004 to 2009 was a major collaborative activity (total budget of over 22 million €) to promote economic and social reform through informatisation in China. One of the main activities of the INFSO project was tackling the urban-rural digital divide and assisting China's rural areas to have adequate access to the on-going information revolution. In this context, the project undertook a study on ICT for rural development in China and in the EU. The study served to exchange experiences and compare the situation in Europe and China, and helped local and central decision-makers to develop practical policies and strategies on how to best use ICT for rural development in China. One of the study's main recommendations was to increase government support to rural and agriculture ICT research.

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The e-Agri project fits well within the international policy activities and goals I have mentioned before. It is a useful step in the general introduction of ICTs in agriculture which is being supported by central and local governments across the world. If the project's approach is successful, one could see the benefits of expanding this experience nation-wide in China as well as in other countries. We will follow its progress and results with interest.

The introduction of ICT into agriculture and rural areas is an issue where the benefits are mutual and Europe will be glad to continue working with the Chinese government through expertise and knowledge transfer.

It is my strong wish that e-Agri will become a good example of China and EU working together to tackle common challenges. I wish all present a good and instructive workshop.