

Wi-fi web reaches farmers in Peru

A network of community computer centres, linked by wireless technology, is providing a helping hand for poor farmers in Peru.

The pilot scheme in the Huaral Valley, 80 kilometres north of the capital Lima, aims to offer the 6,000-strong community up-to-date information on agricultural market prices and trends. The Agricultural Information Project for Farmers of the Chancay-Huaral Valley also provides vital links between local organisations in charge of water irrigation, enabling them to coordinate their actions. More than 13,000 rural inhabitants, as well as 18,000 students in the region, will also benefit from the telecoms infrastructure.

The 14 telecentres uses only free open source software and affordable computer equipment. The network has been three years in the making and was officially inaugurated in September.

The non-government organisation, Cepes (Peruvian Centre for Social Studies) led the \$200,000 project, also backed by local institutions, the Education and Agriculture ministries, and European development organisations. "The plan includes training on computers and internet skills for both operators and users of the system," said Carlos Saldarriaga, technical coordinator at Cepes. Farmers are also taking extra lessons on how to apply the new information to make the most of their plots of land. The Board of Irrigation Users which runs the computer centres, aims to make the network self-sustainable within three years, through the cash generated by using the telecentres as internet cafes.

One of the key elements of the project is the Agricultural Information System, with its flagship huaral.org website. There, farmers can find the prices for local produce, as well as information on

topics ranging from plague prevention to the latest farming techniques. The system also helps the inhabitants of the Chancay-Huaral Valley to organise their vital irrigation systems. "Water is the main element that unites them all. It is a precious element in Peru's coastal areas, because it is so scarce, and therefore it is necessary to have proper irrigation systems to make the most of it," Mr Saldarriaga told the BBC News website. The information network also allows farmers to look beyond their own region, and share experiences with other colleagues from the rest of Peru and even around the world.

Cepes says the involvement of the farmers has been key in the project's success. "Throughout the last three years, the people have provided a vital thrust to the project; they feel it belongs to them," said Mr Saldarriaga. The community training sessions, attended by an equal number of men and women, have been the perfect showcase for their enthusiasm. "We have had an excellent response, mainly from young people. But we have also had a great feedback when we trained 40 or 50-year old women, who were seeing a computer for the first time in their lives." So far, the Huaral programme promoters say the experience has been very positive, and are already planning on spreading the model among other farmers' organisations in Peru. "This is a pilot project, and we have been very keen on its cloning potential in other places," underlined Mr Saldarriaga.

The Cepes researcher recalls what happened in Cuyo, a 50-family community with no electricity, during the construction of the local telecentre site. There it was necessary to build a mini-hydraulic dam in order to generate 2kW worth of power for the computers, the communications equipment and the cabin lights. "It was already dark when the technicians realised they didn't have any light bulbs to test the generator, so they turned up to the local store to buy light bulbs," recalls Carlos Saldarriaga. "The logical answer was 'we don't sell any', so they had to wait until the next morning to do the testing." Now, with the wireless network, Cuyo as well as the other communities is no longer isolated.