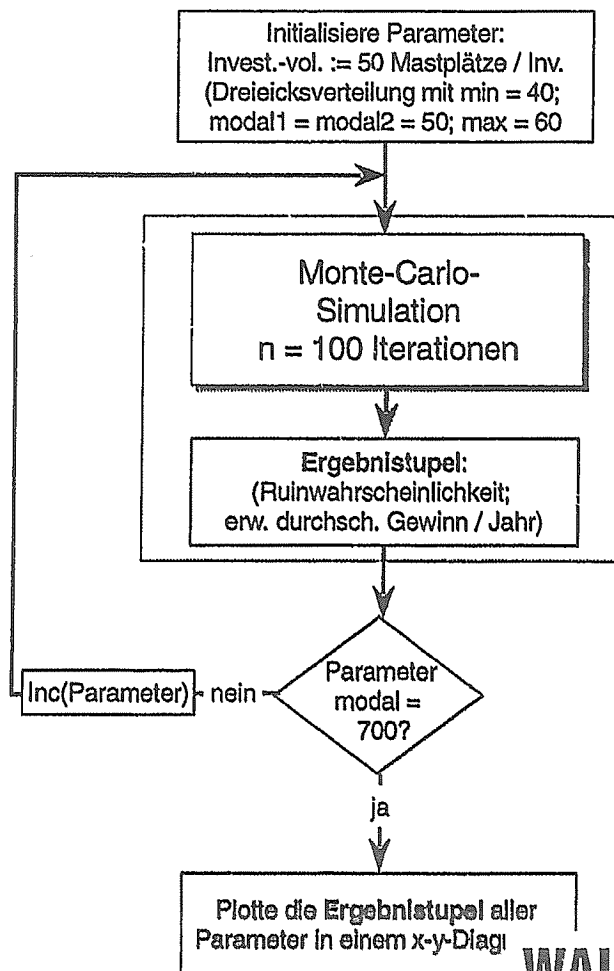


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WAICENT der FAO

Risikoanalysen von Investitionsstrategien

Multiple Mittelwertvergleiche in SAS

Organ der Gesellschaft für Informatik in der Land-,
Forst- und Ernährungswirtschaft (GIL)

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The World Agricultural Information Centre of FAO

WAICENT - World Agricultural Information Centre - has been operating since the beginning of this year under the auspices of the Information and Documentation Systems Division (GIL) in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

WAICENT is a corporate information system, made up of a set of databases. It was launched in 1989 by the then Director-General of FAO, as a much-needed response to the increasing problem of consolidating some 40 independent databases developed throughout FAO over the years. There is no doubt that it was this same spirit of independent initiative that brought these databases into being - covering all aspects of agriculture, all over the world. Had the decision to create them been a matter for central administration (following the pattern of most large bureaucracies), these projects would probably never have got off the ground. But the moment came when the information was so voluminous as to create difficulties for both internal and external users, duplication was inevitable and sometimes updated information itself was lacking in one field, while excessive in another. There was no central database, no central administration and no policy which could channel the information and render it homogeneous, and this was the principal reason why WAICENT was conceived.

WAICENT was presented to the FAO Conference in November 1991. A great deal of work went into ensuring a flexible architecture, across-platform portability and multimedia potential - all those qualities a successful information system must have. Royalty-free distribution and an open-path approach enabling it to include new databases in the future were two vital additions. There is no predetermined limit to the possible extensions of WAICENT, and this, at the risk of repetition, is very important in a system that operates within - and for - the United Nations environment for a clientele inhabiting the most, and the least, privileged parts of the globe. WAICENT is a centralised information structure which represents the consolidated, on-going effort to standardise and bring together, as if under an umbrella - that is, protective rather than censorious - agricultural information in the scores of databases in FAO, in the most accessible, comprehensible and "hassle-free" way possible. The decision to bring WAICENT under the Information and Documentation Systems Division was a first step towards establishing the centrality of its mandate; it is no longer a divisional system but the Organization's (FAO's) central database.

How does this fast-growing, corporate information database work? There are two principal components which are interactive and complementary: FAOSTAT, for the storage and dissemination of statistical information, and FAOINFO, which covers hypermedia information (viz. text, images, audio and



video). Two further components were added recently: FAOSIS, incorporating the specialised databases produced in the divisions throughout FAO, and the Virtual Library, which involves making available FAO's institutional memory. In this way FAO too, began to take part in the ongoing revolution that is Information Technology. These initiatives are all closely connected because it is through the vehicle of WAICENT itself, especially on the Internet, that users worldwide will be able to access both the databases and the Library.

The operational side of WAICENT is quite simple: the departments within FAO prepare the text which they intend to display along with the images, statistics, and information they wish to place on FAO World Wide Web. They coordinate with other departments for any "linking" between documents needed to highlight more information or provide details of a related programme or initiative which is the domain of another department. This operation has often proved beneficial to the staff and work of FAO, since the need for a modern "horizontal" approach towards Web presentations has led to increased in-house co-operation and stimulated interest in the work of other departments.

To quote the paper on the current status of FAOINFO, the foundations have been laid. FAO is present on the Internet, and on the Gopher. A large majority of the developing world does not have the technical (i.e. appropriate or sufficient telecommunication facilities) or financial wherewithal to use the Internet, and the Gopher is an economical, if visually poorer way of accessing information. In the language of the Web, 25,000 interested Internet navigators "hit" FAO's web pages every 24 hours. FAO's Internet pages have received awards and recognition from bodies who monitor Web sites regularly (NBNSOFT Corporation, NHK Satellite Broadcasting). Recognition depends on many factors: utility, ease of access, speedy comprehension, etc.), and the function of WAICENT is both explained in a brief introductory illumination, and illustrated as the newcomer clicks through from link to link, via the WAICENT indicators.

Maintaining a database of this type means elaborating a useful structure, indexing, standardising, facilitating searches, and cross-referencing with a very vigilant eye so that no item of information remains outside the range of search, or worse still, inaccessible. FAOINFO has in fact its own task force, made up of staff members working throughout FAO whose experience, daily tasks and terms of reference combine to

contribute constantly to the development and improvement of the system.

The development of FAOINFO is a good example for the WAICENT - approach: The Virtual Library project mentioned above is a good starting point. The David Lubin Memorial Library, founded in 1905 at the Institute of Agricultural Research in Rome, and incorporated into FAO when the latter was established in 1946, is the principal repository of FAO's agricultural knowledge. At present the Library acts both as the institutional memory of FAO with respect to its output of technical documents and publications, and as a conventional library service both to FAO and to the world agricultural community. WAICENT will transform these roles: the institutional memory will shift from being a microfiche-based archive to an electronic archive - the FAOINFO document database. The example of the Virtual Library extends to all the databases and sources of information in FAO. AGRIS, the International Information System for Agricultural Sciences and Technology, and CARIS, the Current Agricultural Research Information System, which are

both an integral part of the work and scope of the GIL Division are further examples of systems that, like the David Lubin Library, will be enriched and extended by the development of the WAICENT project.

WAICENT is fully functional, but this is not to say that the work is complete. Its mandate is to facilitate and expedite access to FAO's sources of knowledge and expertise. This is an on-going project, and as each difficulty or query is posed by internal or external users of WAICENT, the task force attempts to find ways and means of solving it. The effort to centralise and standardise the information available in FAO has received appreciation and encouragement: the saving in time and costs in on-line searching for the user are evident. WAICENT is proving very successful but it is not perfect by any means, but there again, perfection implies a static state. WAICENT, on the contrary, must keep moving, keep improving, and keep bringing the benefits of a consistent, homogenised, centric and multi-disciplinary database to all those involved in agricultural information.

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