

## Managing information at FAO

### The problem

Imagine you have been asked to arrange your organization's collection of books into a library; what will be your first thoughts? You will probably start by listing on a piece of paper, or with the help of your computer, the different elements you might use to search or describe the properties of your books, e.g. title, author, and page numbers. In addition, your organization wants to be part of the local network of agricultural libraries. To be able to share your collection with others, without additional effort, you might decide to describe the books using the same elements: everybody will use: "title" to identify the title of the book, and "creator" to identify the author of the book.

Title = "The Euphrates pilot irrigation project, (Syrian Arab Republic). Management of workshops and parks of agricultural machinery and implements at Wadi-al-Fayd Area"  
 Creator = "Baille, A.; Marachy, M.A.; Kafi, M.W.A."

Similarly, in the context of the World Wide Web, where we are talking about millions of different pieces of different types of resources, it is essential to organize the information in order to identify easily what it is, how it is formatted, where to find it, etc. What we want, in fact, is to make the information known and retrievable in a standardized format, in order to promote data sharing, and to allow for interoperability and integration.

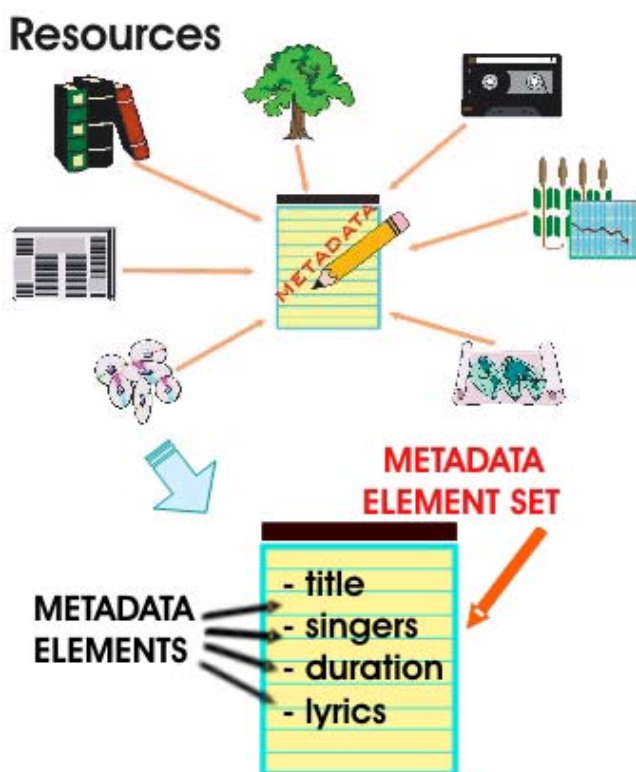
### The Solution - bringing order to information

People need to have enough information about what they are looking at in order to make an informed decision about its content. For example, imagine walking into a supermarket full of tin cans without any stickers on them explaining what is inside. We need some way to bring order to the vast amount of information around us. But the description must be made in a coherent and consistent manner.

### What is metadata?

When you describe a given object (a book, a person, a product, etc.) with some information, you are actually using *metadata*: **any type of description of an object or resource can be considered metadata**. A set of elements used to describe an object is called the **metadata element set**.

Here are some examples of metadata, or description of content about resources:



- ▲ authors, titles and publishers in a catalogue for books;
- ▲ names, addresses and telephone numbers on business cards for people;
- ▼ titles, singers, lyrics, duration of the songs for CDs; and
- ▲ ingredients, nutritional information and prices on packages containing food products.

We need to clearly understand the difference between the information *used to describe* a resource, and the *information resource itself*: the information *about a publication* is the metadata and the *publication itself* is the object described. In addition, metadata can be organized in a standardized format in order to allow data sharing.

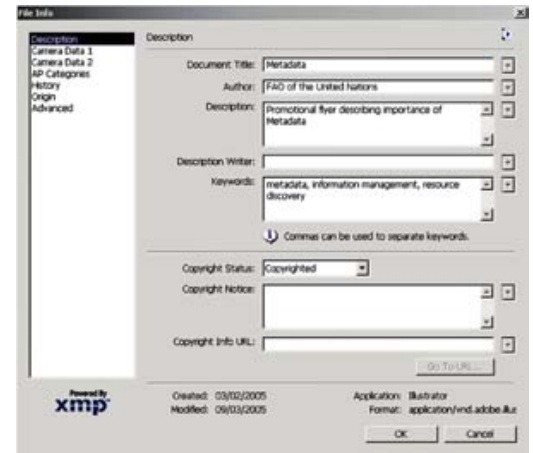
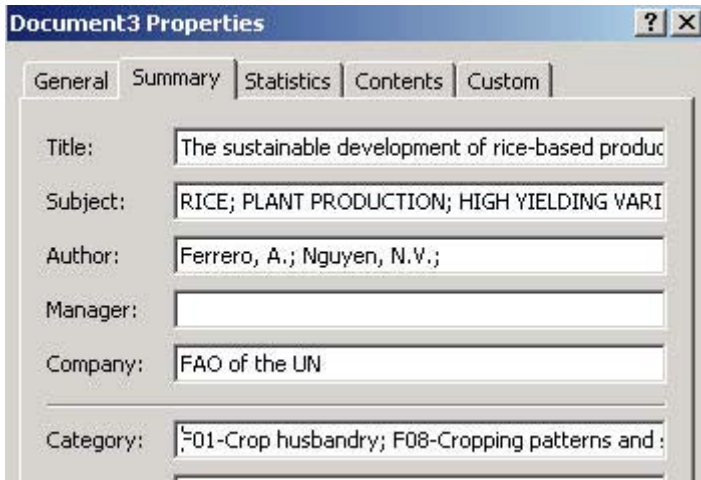
To facilitate sharing of information in the agricultural domain, FAO has developed a metadata standard called the Agricultural Metadata Element Set (AgMES).

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### How can metadata help?

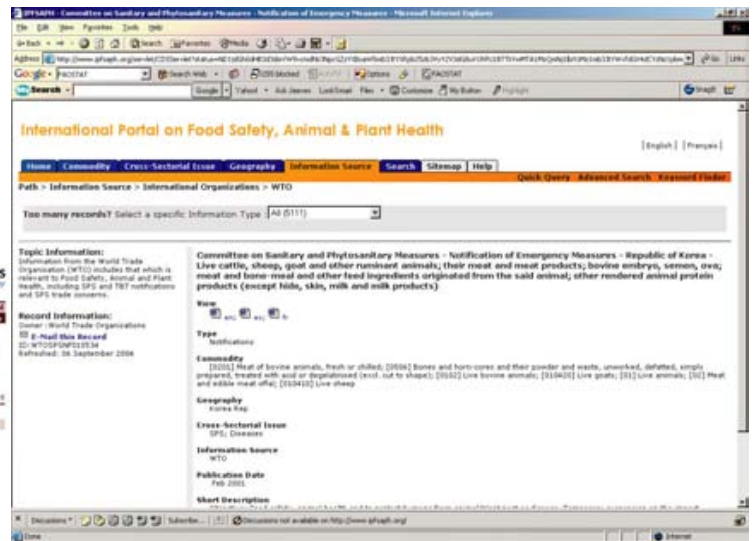
The use of metadata is essential for organizing and retrieving information, especially over the Web. For example, a search for documents about "cows" on Google gives more than 6 million results, containing disparate and not always always pertinent information. If the same search is performed on a document repository containing metadata, the search will be more efficient, faster and more pertinent.

As the amount of information within organizations has started to grow, the use of metadata to organize and access information (e.g. Microsoft 'properties' for documents, Adobe 'File info' for images, etc.) is increasing.



### Metadata applications in FAO

FAO's information systems use metadata to organize information.



### A metadata creation tool

In order to produce metadata related to agriculture, FAO has developed a tool that creates **AgMES-compliant metadata** in different formats for Web pages and other resources with document-like properties. It is available at: <http://www.fao.org/aims/>