

Agricultural Extension and Farmer Organisations in the Pacific

Summary

The agricultural industries in the Pacific region are largely made up of smallholder farming households. As agriculture becomes more commercialised and production constraints increase, the need for sound agriculture advice and support has never been greater for these farmers (GFRAS, 2015). Farmers require information to be able to sustainably increase productivity and enhance profitability in the face of climate change, climate extremes and rural out-migration.

Extension services are aimed at helping farmers and their households achieve efficiency and profitability. Agriculture extension in the Pacific islands, since colonial times, has been vested with government departments and provided as a free service. However, over the years, this system has faced shortcomings in delivering services efficiently and effectively. This has been due to a combination of funding and staffing constraints and the structural limitation of government based systems to address the needs of increasingly commercially orientated smallholder farmers.

Alternative approaches are needed to supply Pacific island farmers with the information they require to effectively respond to commercial and environmental challenges. In recent years Farmer Organisations (FOs) have contributed to filling the widening information gap – often complementing, and in collaboration with, government services. This Policy Brief examines the importance of improving farmers' access to relevant useable information and how FOs are helping in this regard through their field services. The case is made for such efforts to be supported by public funds, including aid donors.

Key Message



FOs can effectively and efficiently complement the work of government and aid agencies by **EXTENDING THE OUTREACH** of support to farmers

Key information gaps for Pacific Island farmers that need to be addressed through extension services

Adopting farming as a business: Little has been done in the region to promote agriculture as a form of business with as much potential to enhance livelihoods and status as any other business or employment opportunity. This is compounded by the unwillingness of young people to engage in the agriculture sector because it is not regarded as a remunerative employment opportunity.¹

Key value chain concepts: Farmers who don't understand key value chain concepts often do not make good business decisions that enable higher and more sustainable income generation.²

Horticulture crops: For horticultural crops, information requirements tend to be the greatest and extension capability weakest. This can be explained by the fact that these are relatively new crops where much applied research in Pacific island environments is still required.

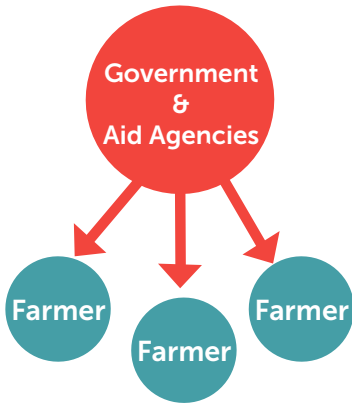
Postharvest handling: Crops begin to deteriorate as soon as they are harvested and post-harvest losses in the Pacific islands are high. Farmers need practical useable information on how to reduce these avoidable losses.

Pest and disease management: Dealing with pests and diseases is part and parcel of farming. Pests and diseases, if not managed properly, will reduce yields and seriously impact on the viability of the farm. Again farmers need useable information.

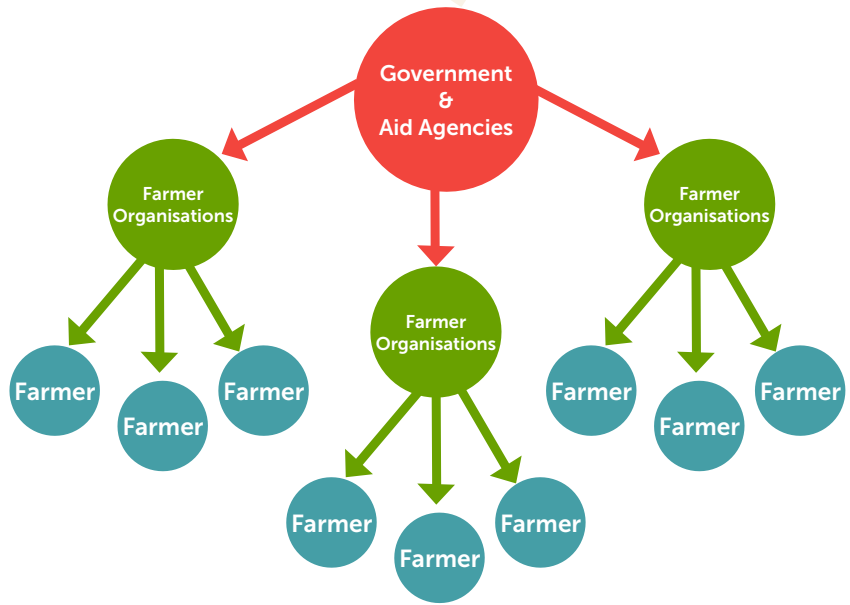
Managing soil fertility problems: Soil fertility influences agricultural productivity. Farmers need information to maintain healthy soils which is a prerequisite for sustaining economically viable crop yields.

Understanding and dealing with climate change and climate extremes: Pacific Island countries have always been vulnerable to environmental conditions, and adapting to climate change poses major challenges to Pacific island farmers. Climate change also offers significant opportunities to these farmers.³ However, to meet the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities farmers need relevant information they can readily understand.

Traditional Agricultural Extension Model



Emerging Agricultural Extension Model



Agriculture extension models in the region

The traditional government operated extension model		Emerging Farmer Organisation extension models	
<p>Publically funded extension service through Ministries of Agriculture – where extension officers are civil servants, locality based and usually generalist in their skills</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Private agribusiness companies having their own field services to support their farmer suppliers FOs starting to develop targeted extension support for their members 	
Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff have formal academic qualifications Connected to public funding, including capital grants etc. Linked to other government services – such as research, and infrastructure investment such as roads and drainage. Closely linked with regional and international agencies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extension officers are not specialised to address crop-specific needs Staff generally have no practical experience in farming Approaches to work constrained by civil servant regulations – which are often not consistent with farmer schedules and needs Short term rotation of extension officers from locality to locality Shifting priorities and government policy changes . 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Private sector and FOs tend to be more focused thus are better placed to provide specialised support. Private sector extension services have the advantage that they are direct participants in the value chain. Provides the opportunity for contract farming Tend to be much more cost effective – not bound by civil servant regulations and have lower overheads FOs tend to have a better understanding of farmer needs, demands, and contexts. FO staff tend to have had hands-on experience in farming FOs usually have the trust of their members, which gives them more legitimacy, capacity to encourage farmers’ learning and testing of innovations The proven value of “farmer to farmer” exchanges between Pacific island countries, which can be facilitated through FOs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most private agribusiness companies, outside PNG, are far too small to afford the overhead cost of operating their own extension service. Private agribusiness linking with FOs provides a workable compromise for the Pacific islands The challenge for FOs to secure sustainable long term funding for their extension operations.

Examples of Farmer Organisations successfully involved in providing agricultural extension services

Nature's Way Cooperative Fiji Ltd's (NWC) emerging field service - providing focused advice for growing and exporting horticultural crops

NWC was formed in 1996 to undertake mandatory quarantine treatment on behalf of the fresh fruit and vegetable industry. NWC currently has 290 farmer and exporter members. The research and extension arm of NWC has been operating since 2007. NWC began to assume its extension role after realising that there were many problems being faced by its members and these were ultimately having an impact on the viability of the cooperatives' business. NWC realised that it needed to take a more proactive role in order to ensure sustainability. Priority activities for the NWC Extension programme have included: expanding production of high temperature-forced air (HTFA) crops (papaya, breadfruit and eggplant) outside of the Sigatoka Valley; conducting value chain training; support for the NWC Certified Seed Scheme; support for the establishment of commercial breadfruit orchards; support for expanded organic papaya production; postharvest disease monitoring; support for hot water treatment; and a standby advisory service for new and existing NWC members (farmers and exporters).

A long-term goal of the industry has been to encourage farmers outside of the Sigatoka Valley to begin growing HTFA crops for export. Through NWC's partnership with New Zealand Aid Programme and in collaboration with the Fiji Ministry of Agriculture, the industry has shown very encouraging progress towards these goals. In 2013 there were 164 member farmers supplying HTFA crops for export. This number now stands at 216 farmers, with most of the new farmers coming from areas such as Ba, Lautoka and Nadi, outside the Sigatoka Valley. Figures such as these are encouraging for the industry and reveal that export markets might be more protected from extreme vulnerability caused by natural disasters.

As a result of the NWC extension programme support offered to new potential exporter entrants, three new exporters are now actively sourcing from farmers and sending produce overseas. Export figures have grown steadily over the programme period.

The Tutu Rural Training Centre (TRTC) and TeiTei Taveuni (TTT) - Extending sustainable agricultural practices to taro and kava farmers in Fiji's Cakaudrove Province

The TRTC is a school for aspiring young farmers who are looking to farming for their future livelihoods. The focus of TRTC training programs is self-employment in agriculture. TTT is made up of established farmers who are specifically concerned about improving soil fertility on Taveuni in order to increase crop yields. Both farmer organizations are foundation members of PIFON and have been actively involved in farmer-to-farmer exchanges throughout the region.

The two FOs combine theoretical training and practical field services to their members. Research and trials are being carried out by farmers themselves, who are able to apply what they learn on their own farms thus reducing costs and allowing greater reach of research findings.

Farmers are advised on the negative implications of current practices that adversely impact on soil health. They are taught in a hands-on fashion to address these issues in ways that are environmentally and commercially sustainable. Prior to initiatives taken by these two organisations, farmers on Taveuni reacted to decreasing soil fertility with the unsustainable practice of shifting planting into new forest areas. Now, with lessons learned from the two FOs, farmers are carrying out agroforestry initiatives including the use of nitrogen-fixing 'mucuna' beans. These messages are now being spread to other farmers in Fiji and the region through "farmer to farmer" exchanges organised through PIFON.

The Vanuatu Farm Support Association (FSA)/Venui Vanilla (VV) Ltd., Spices Network - a partnership between a private agribusiness and an FO that enables village farmers in remote locations to grow premium quality spices for export markets

FSA grew out of an earlier group, the Plantation Support Association (PSA) which was set up in 1983 to assist ni-Vanuatu landowners run plantations returned to them after independence was declared. By 1992, circumstances changed and PSA became FSA with an emphasis on providing the needs of small-scale farmers.

Venui Vanilla (VV) was established in 1987 in South Santo, with vanilla envisioned to be the main product. However, it was soon found that the South Santo climate was not well suited for vanilla production. VV then decided to extend its supply source to out-growers in more suitable areas. To facilitate the out-grower programme a long term partnership was established with the FO Farm Support Association (FSA). FSA provided the VV out-growers with training and extension, via the Spices Network. As a result some of VV's best vanilla is sourced from remote village locations such as North Ambae, West Big Bay on Santo, and Aneityum Island.

Venui Vanilla, through a partnership with the FO FSA, has been able to facilitate the involvement of remote rural households in commercial agriculture. These spice producers are driven towards a total quality approach in order to retain their organic certification. In return, Venui Vanilla grants its suppliers competitive, fair prices, alongside continuous training and support, making this an inspirational, sustainable and rewarding undertaking for all stakeholders. FSA supplies its members with up-to-date technical information and training material provides field coaching, plus theoretical and practical training through the use of pilot plots and the active participation of selected leading farmers. It also provides a quality control function on behalf of the organic certifying agency by regularly inspecting and training hundreds of farmers throughout the country's islands.

As a result of this partnership Venui Vanilla exports vanilla extract to ice cream companies in New Zealand, vanilla extract, paste and beans to Australia, vanilla and peppercorn to New Caledonia and occasionally vanilla and peppercorn to Japan. Vanuatu is now able to compete in this highly competitive international market due to the premium quality of its products and their packaging. This would not have been possible without the long term collaboration between a private agribusiness, an FO, together with appropriate donor support.



WAY FORWARD for Farmer Organisation involvement in Agricultural Extension

Way Forward for farmer organisations

- FOs need to continue their outreach approach to the promotion of commercial and environmentally friendly agricultural practices
- FOs should continue to work with agribusinesses to facilitate markets for their members and to facilitate appropriate input supplies.

Way Forward for governments and development partners

- Governments should foster and take advantage of farmer-led approaches to disseminating information through utilising FOs
- FOs should be considered as effective partners (not competitors) in extending information outreach to farmers, and public funding should be provided to that end
- FOs should be included in the design of publicly funded agriculture support activities
- There is a need to develop an enabling environment for the development of FOs
- Development partners should explore ways to provide funding and technical support to FOs to improve the delivery of support services to farmers.

Way Forward for the private sector

- The private sector should consider partnerships with farmer organisations to ensure that high quality agricultural products are “pulled” through value chains.

PIFON WHO WE ARE

PIFON is a network of farmer organisations in the region that has been operating informally since 2008 and was formally registered in 2013 by eighteen (18) foundation national FOs, from six (6) Island countries. PIFON is intended to serve as an umbrella organisation for national FOs to: coordinate capacity building, share success stories and the lessons learnt, support regional exchanges of expertise between FOs and their associated private sector and donor agency partners.

PIFON defines a farmer organisation as a group of farmers or a group working for the benefit of farmers. In the Pacific these can take many forms such as an Association, Cooperative, Farmer group, Farmer cluster, Youth group, NGO, Commodity group, Council, Federation, Club etc.

For more information visit: www.pacificfarmers.com

Important references

¹GFRAS Position Paper- Producer Organisations in Rural Advisory Services: Evidence and Experiences. February 2015

²McGregor Andrew and Livai Tora. The Tutu Rural Training: Lesson in Non-Formal Adult Education for Self-Employment in Agriculture. March 2011 AusAID. Pacific 2020. Background Paper: Agriculture. January 2006.

³Venui Vanilla – The experience of more than a decade organic spices production and marketing in Vanuatu. In CardnoAgrisystems Consortium. Vanuatu: Opportunity Analysis on Fair Trade and Organic Niche Markets. April 2012.

⁴Taylor, Mary, McGregor, Andrew and Dawson, Brian, (eds.) (2015). Vulnerability of Pacific Agriculture and Forestry to Climate Change. Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Noumea, New Caledonia.

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