

Improving production and accessibility of agricultural information through capacity-building, networking and partnerships in the South Pacific

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Project Title: Development of Sustainable Agriculture in the Pacific (DSAP) Project

Project Objective: The overall DSAP project objective is to increase sustainable agricultural production of farm families in the 16 participating countries of the Pacific region. There are three main project components aimed at achieving this objective. The first is to develop appropriate agricultural technologies based on farmer livelihood needs. The second component is to improve access to agricultural information, and its production, by improving country capacity in the area of information and communication technologies (ICT). Thirdly, the project aims to build institutional capacity and partnerships with National Agricultural Research and Extension systems (NARES), NGOs, information providers, and farmer and community groups. In order that technology identification and knowledge dissemination will be sustained beyond the end of the project.

Supporting Agencies: The Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and the European Union (EU).

Project Component Director: Bernadette Masianini, bernadettetm@spc.int, Agricultural Information Officer (AIO), is responsible for capacity-building and development of ICT strategies within the DSAP Project

Project Description:

The Pacific is unique compared to other regions of the world. It is defined by large expanses of ocean. Over five times the size of Europe, with scattered and isolated areas of land of varying size, the so called 'tyranny of distance' has presented considerable complexities and challenges for information dissemination. At the same time, sustainable agricultural systems in the Pacific are coming under increasing pressure due to population growth and other factors. In the high volcanic islands farmers are moving away from shifting cultivation, where soil fertility was maintained and erosion controlled, to cropping plots of land more frequently. This increase in the intensity of land use is resulting in deforestation, soil erosion and declining yields. High population growth rates, unfavourable age structures and increasing urbanisation on islands with limited land and water availability are a reality particularly the low-lying atolls. This has serious implications for these fragile island ecosystems. Further, the lack of trained local researchers and extension officers with skills in sustainable farming systems and combined with the poor access to ICTs,

and information in general, has resulted in promotion of inappropriate technology and further degradation of the natural resource base. The lack of involvement of rural communities in the development process compounded by weak NARES and poor linkages between farmers, NARES, NGOs and information providers have all contributed to the problem. Rural communities have been the losers and opportunities to enhance their ability to cope in such vulnerable contexts have been squandered.

At the early consultation and needs assessment stage of the project a broad range of ICT-related constraints were identified in the region and participating countries. Overall there existed weak extension services, NGOs and farmer group's extension activities. This resulted largely from poor institutional and individual capacity in the production and utilisation of information materials resulting in production of inappropriate information and promotional materials, resulting in few, badly designed and produced extension communications materials. Information was not being translated into a format that is understood by local communities. And although much information is freely available, it was largely irrelevant material. Access to necessary ICT equipment and software was poor, as well as the necessary training. There was limited collaboration and networking between NGOs and NARES in the same country despite targeting the same audience. Surprisingly, there was limited collaboration between Information Units and research and extension staff within the same Ministry. Added to this, there was poor collaboration and networking between regional and international information providers operating in this environment. In effect, this meant in most countries there was no network in place to disseminate agriculture information to those who most needed it.

Recognising these shortcomings, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) together with NARES, NGOs and other regional stakeholders from 16 countries collaborated in the development of an initiative to address many of the issues constraining sustainable agriculture and rural livelihoods in the region. The outcome of these consultations was the Development of Sustainable Agriculture in the Pacific (DSAP) project, funded by the European Union. DSAP aims to increase sustainable agricultural production of farm families in countries covering Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. Importantly, DSAP is as much about process as product, and employs participatory approaches with farmers and rural communities to identify and validate appropriate technologies to solve agricultural problems.

As part of this strategy, and in order to scale-up and disseminate these technologies, DSAP aims to strengthen national capabilities in the production and use of a variety of extension-related ICTs including traditional media such as television, radio, posters, handbooks, pamphlets and video. To support these activities DSAP focuses on intensive training and capacity enhancement and encourages linking countries with relevant information providers at a national, regional and international level. Some indicative project activities to help achieve this include:

- Recruiting Graduate Research & Extension Assistants (GREAs) and Extension Communications Assistants (ECA) in participating countries and providing them with the necessary training and skills to achieve the above aims;
- Conducting training courses and workshops for national partner staff in effective communications, desktop publishing, radio and video production and editing and other relevant ICTs;
- Establishing and upgrading agricultural libraries in participating countries and improving linkages to information sources regionally and internationally;
- Establishing Information Resource Centres in rural areas to improve access to information by farmer and community groups;

- Preparing information on appropriate agricultural technologies in a form suitable for extension workers, farmers, and NGOs and ensuring materials are tested with representative target groups; and
- Drawing together all relevant DSAP ICT experiences, including lessons learned and good practices, in the format of a DSAP Training Manual that can be used for training and awareness purposes after the end of the project.

Some DSAP achievements to date include:

- The DSAP project has compiled and documented surveys of ICT needs assessment for the Pacific region, which provide an in-depth understanding of the target audience;
- All participating countries have received computers, software and other relevant equipment necessary for the production of effective extension materials;
- DSAP project staff and relevant staff from NARES and NGO Information Units in all 16 participating countries have been trained in desktop publishing and imaging training;
- The project has supported SPC Agriculture Library staff to travel to participating countries to train library staff and assist in the set-up and cataloguing of libraries within Ministries of Agriculture;
- Rural Information Resource Centres have been opened in Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga and Kiribati with more planned. This includes purchase of computers and, if appropriate, email and internet services. The project has also supported the SPC Agriculture Librarian to assist with the setting up of these centres and their linkages to relevant information provided by SPC;
- Ongoing evaluations of services provided by Resource Centres have been carried out and information gaps have been addressed;
- Intensive one-to-one video production and editing training has been provided to participating countries as well as video equipment;
- The project has produced 4 generic promotional DVDs covering sustainable agricultural technologies tested and verified by the project. The technologies include simple, low-cost irrigation systems, composting and using neem and derris as organic pesticides;
- DSAP Tonga hired a film crew from the Tonga Broadcasting Commission to produce a television programme on the benefits of velvet bean and simple irrigation systems. This was the project's first-ever television programme, broadcast twice on national television. Subsequent television programmes on market gardening have been broadcast in Wallis and Futuna; and
- Other countries are producing weekly radio programmes that promote and disseminate information and news about agricultural technologies developed by DSAP.

The above activities and outcomes do not say much about networking and partnerships, many of which have arisen as a result of better linkages and collaboration between NARES and NGOs. This has strengthened their links and networks to community groups, farmer groups, womens groups and youth groups. Improved linkages now exist between diverse information providers including local agricultural offices, health offices, schools and NGOs. The project has also helped bring about an improved level of collaboration between regional and international information providers including the University of the South Pacific, FAO, SPC and CTA. One such initiative, involving CTA and DSAP, has been the First Voice International Multimedia Service (FVI-MMS), which enables agricultural workers in the Pacific to access important information on agriculture, and related topics, by simply connecting a PC or laptop to a satellite receiver. Further measures

are underway to strengthen and broaden such collaborations further. This will be important in supporting and sustaining the ICT capacity-building outcomes that DSAP has achieved to date.

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