Introduction

Once a rarity in the Pacific islands, farmer organizations are emerging to make an important contribution. They provide relevant information so farmers can effectively participate in supply chains. Previously, the extensive involvement of governments in the sector stifled the development of effective farmer organizations. This is changing with the realization that the financial constraints that face public-sector agricultural extension services will persist. There is a strong need to extend the reach of important services that support farmers to generate higher incomes.

It is now widely accepted that farmer organizations are critical in empowering rural people to take advantage of livelihood opportunities. Effective farmer organizations can contribute to alleviating the problems caused by small size and isolation that confront many Pacific island smallholders.

This situation led to the development of The Pacific Island Farmers Organisation Network. It serves as an umbrella group for national farmer organizations to coordinate capacity building, share success stories and lessons learned, and support regional exchanges of expertise between farmer organizations, the private sector and donor agencies.

History of farmer organizations in the Pacific

Formal producer cooperatives are the most common form of farmer organization in much of the world, and some of the most substantial agribusinesses are, or started life as, farmer-owned cooperatives. The Pacific islands do not have a tradition of producer cooperatives, with a few significant exceptions: the Nature’s Way Cooperative (NWC) in Fiji, the Friendly Islands Marketing Cooperative in Tonga, and the Vanuatu Organic Cocoa Growers Association. This lack of farmer organizations may be explained by historically

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far-reaching government involvement in extension services and commodity marketing, which limited their development. This is no longer the case, and farmer organizations are now starting to address a range of needs:

- improving linkages between small commercial farmers and produce marketers, e.g., the Vanuatu Farm Support Association (FSA)’s Spices Network;
- facilitating the supply of high-quality planting material, e.g., the Samoa Farmers Association, which supplies Tahitian lime germ plasm;
- training in farm management and business skills, e.g., the Tutu Rural Training Centre in Fiji;
- promotion of sustainable commercial farming systems, e.g., Teitei Taveuni’s soil schools and FSA’s vetiver grass (*Chrysopogon zizanioides*) programme;
- advocating on behalf of farmers with ministries of agriculture and other agencies, e.g., NWC negotiations on the national airline air freight configuration;
- improving the quality of produce delivered to consumers, e.g., the NWC field crate and papaya seed programme;
- facilitating the supply of appropriate technology to farmers, e.g., the NWC quarantine treatment;
- developing new markets, e.g., exports of organic cocoa by the Vanuatu Organic Cocoa Growers Association, Tonga’s Islands Marketing Cooperative for vanilla; Fiji’s Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprise and Development for niche processed products, and Samoa’s Women in Business fine mats; and
- assisting informal farmer groups to become formal farmer associations, e.g., the Kastom Gaden Association in the Solomon Islands.

**Focusing on smallholder involvement**

The vast majority of Pacific Island people live in rural villages, securing a subsistence living and some cash income from traditional land and marine resources. In Papua New Guinea, for example, around 4.5 million people (81% of the population) live in rural areas.

The main responsibility of the smallholder in the Pacific is to secure food for the family. Self-sufficient food production through traditional farming and fishing systems continues to be the basis of food security in the region. This provides resilience against external shocks, either economic (price spikes, global recession) or natural (cyclones, floods, droughts, pests and diseases, etc.). The farming systems of Pacific island countries have generally provided a high level of food security and have been the hidden strength of these otherwise weak economies. McGregor, Watas and Tora (2009) have highlighted the importance of traditional smallholder farming systems in safeguarding food security and maintaining economic stability.
A key challenge for the region is developing ways to commercialize traditional farming systems. This would increase cash-generating opportunities for rural households and spur economic growth, without sacrificing family and community cohesion, environmental sustainability or ultimately, food security. Such commercialization options are described in a series of agricultural growth case studies undertaken by FAO for Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu (Rogers, Morrison and Bammann 2010). These studies identified a number of benefits to small-holder farmers when a commercial crop is part of, or can be easily integrated into, traditional farming systems. Most of these case studies involved the participation of farmer organizations as a key component.

For most Pacific island countries, agriculture still provides the best opportunity for generating broadly based livelihoods that go beyond mere subsistence. There are particular areas where growth is possible (McGregor 2007): supplying increasing urban, niche and tourism markets; increasing tree crop commodity exports; exporting to Pacific island and Asian community markets; and exporting niche market products based on fair trade and organic certification. To a large measure, the future economic well-being of Pacific islanders will depend on the degree to which smallholder farmers are able to take advantage of these opportunities. Farmer organizations can make a key contribution to these initiatives.

Types of farmer organizations
It is not known exactly how many farmer organizations there are in the Pacific, because many of them are informal village-based groups. In the Solomon Islands, for example, 175 informal groups are registered members of the Planting Material Network that is supported by the Kastom Gaden Association. But on many islands, only one or two leading organizations are recognized nationally and regionally.

The authors surveyed 18 of the leading farmer organizations in the region, representing seven Pacific Island countries. The core business of a farmer organization as defined in the survey was “your main business for the benefit of your members – the main reason you exist.” Although some organizations had a specific answer, most stated that they were still unclear as to their core business, indicating the wide range of their activities. Some recurring themes were improving livelihoods, empowering farmers and improving income.

The authors identified four primary categories of farmer organizations, based on core business or activities. Many organizations fit into more than one category.

Service providers
This is the most common type of organization. It provides a range of services: extension, field services, and applied research; production and marketing training; environmental services (such as soil conservation); management services for implementing publicly
funded projects; advocacy and representation for members; and conservation and diversification of plant genetic resources. The Farm Support Association in Vanuatu is one example. It generates income from its clients, which include local agribusinesses, NGOs, training institutes and aid agency projects.

**Direct marketing**

There are two distinct types of direct-marketing organizations. One works over the long term and considers its core business to be the marketing of produce. The second engages in start-up marketing, with the view of passing the business on to the private sector when appropriate. The Vanuatu Organic Cocoa Growers Association is an example of a long-term business. It has a strategic partnership with a large agribusiness that sources organic cocoa and acts as a facilitator between the growers and the buyer.

**Agro-processing**

These organizations assist with the processing of commodities such as coconut oil and coffee or with niche market processed products such as jams, chutneys and dried fruits. The Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises and Development in Fiji provides facilities, equipment, packaging materials and expertise to rural women to help them process and market their products. The marketing arm of the foundation also sources raw materials from rural communities and processes them into finished products. Samoa’s Women in Business, for example, facilitates the processing, packaging and marketing of virgin coconut oil by organizing and training village groups.

**Input supply**

Some farmer organizations supply targeted inputs, either as their core business or as a supplementary activity to assist their members and generate income for the organization. The *Syndicat Agricol du Vanuatu* has supplied agricultural inputs for nearly a century, initially importing agricultural machinery, breeding stock and even plantation workers from northern Vietnam, and now selling farm supplies to its members at a low cost.

**Structure and support**

The organizations surveyed had a range of management structures and used a variety of names for their decision-making roles and bodies; 70% of the groups had paid management, with 30% managed by volunteers. The number of staff members ranged from 1 to 40, with 40% of organizations staffed entirely by volunteers, and the others having at least some paid positions.

All organizations receive some donor funding; for most groups this was their main source of funding. Other income came from the sale of products, service fees, membership fees and contractor fees. Organizations carried out a range of measures to ensure their
sustainability, including developing and following a strategic plan, increasing income-generating activities, good communication with members, and maintaining donor confidence.

Challenges
In the Pacific islands, agricultural research and extension were previously carried out by a government department and provided as a free service. They were not effective. In the face of budgetary constraints, the resources devoted to agricultural research and extension have declined significantly. The research that is undertaken often lacks focus and tends to be out of touch with the requirements of smallholders who seek to intensify and diversify production to enhance household income. The area of domestically marketed food and new crop development (such as spices and horticulture products for export) is weakest in terms of research and extension capability. Farmers require improved planting material. They also need to be able to manage the pests, disease and soil fertility problems associated with more intensive land use and to deal with the impacts of climate change.

Alternative approaches now need to be pursued to facilitate smallholder participation in commercial agriculture activities and adjustment to environmental changes. Emerging farmer organizations are starting to make a key contribution in both these areas.

Future needs
As farming becomes more commercial and market oriented, small-scale farmers struggle to maintain their income and develop new markets. In particular, they are constrained by a lack of access to practical information. Farmer organizations can help with these challenges and can help to overcome the isolation faced by many Pacific island smallholders.

Farmer organizations can be an important part of linking farmers to input suppliers, traders, processors and consumers along the supply chain. This creates opportunities to capture value and distribute benefits to their members. National organizations are particularly well placed to assist local-level organizations and their members to obtain seeds, fertilizer and other inputs, engage in bulk buying of inputs, utilize and manage water for irrigation, facilitate farmer-to-farmer learning, and link farmers to markets. Collective action is fundamental to generating economies of scale, reducing transaction costs, and increasing power through coordinated bargaining. Farmers are given a greater voice through organizations that advocate for their rights and concerns.
For more information

Despite the diversity of the island nations that make up the Pacific, farmer organizations face many common challenges and opportunities. Through the Pacific Island Farmers Organisation Network (PIFON), member organizations are learning from each others’ successes and failures.

PIFON provides a platform for sharing information through face-to-face meetings and various uses of technology. The strength of the network, like that of all farmer organizations, comes from the unity of its members and their willingness to work together. See www.pacificfarmers.com.

References

