

# The missing link

Information about advances in tropical horticulture does not always reach the people who need it. Rebecca Thyer reports

**PARTNER COUNTRY:** Samoa **PROJECT:** Horticulture industry development for market-remote communities (SFS/2001/023) **DESCRIPTION:** Remote communities in Samoa and Cape York, Australia, stand to benefit from information to influence choices of what fruit to grow and how to deliver improvements to the supply chain

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When it can take a day to get to the nearest commercial centre, farmers and processors in remote areas of Samoa, and also in northern Australia, need to know their goods will still be saleable by the time they reach the market. Perishable goods that do not survive the trip reduce an enterprise's profitability. Yet information about technical advances that can improve both pre- and post-harvest management and give fruit and vegetables a longer shelf life does not always filter through to these remote growers, processors and retailers.

A new ACIAR project is redressing this information gap by developing and distributing relevant information to the industry. For example, the project – led by Rowland Holmes from the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries – has developed and distributed a series of peninsula garden notes, native food and ornamental crop notes to growers and communities on both Cape York Peninsula and Samoa. It has also produced and translated crop management notes on papaya and taro into Samoan. The

team decided on information packages such as these following interviews and participatory rural appraisals with industry.

It found that the main issues raised by taro growers in Samoa were identifying new varieties and managing and identifying pests and diseases without excessive pesticide use. Samoan papaya growers wanted more information on growing, husbandry, harvesting and grading standards for papaya as well as marketing information.

For Australian commercial growers, the main issue was the need to customise a wide range of horticultural information to take advantage of unique market windows and reduce environmental damage. Samoan processors were most concerned about packaging and labelling and finding and accessing information on food standards and safety. Roadside stallholders identified overnight storage and maintaining quality and shelf life as their main concerns.

Mr Holmes says the right information packages are key to delivering agronomic and commercial improvements to remote communities.

“Communities in Samoa and Cape York Peninsula stand to benefit significantly from existing information already out there,” he says. “Good

information can help influence choices about what fruit to grow and how to improve the supply chain.”

Although written resources such as brochures, leaflets and harvest guides are important, relationships with other members of the community are just as vital. “Relationships play a key role in a person's ability to find relevant information. For instance, farmers are more likely to listen to other farmers because they have shared experiences.”

Building relationships has been an integral part of the project. The team has found that relationships with individual members of the Mapoon community in northern Australia and those being established with information providers in Samoa, such as Women in Business, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the Institute for Research, Extension and Training in Agriculture, are critical for the project and its legacy.

“Too often, information developed or put together by specific projects becomes unavailable once the project finishes or project team members move on, highlighting the importance of relationships in knowing that information exists and who to contact about it,” Mr Holmes says.

Building these relationships has been helped by an understanding of how information flows in northern Australia and Samoa.

“We looked into what impact information has on decision-making, what information growers are looking for, who makes the decisions and how information is rated,” he says. “For example, is one source of information favoured more than the other?”

The project team identified information supply chains used by growers, processors and stallholders. For example, the team found that Aboriginal communities on Cape York make decisions about land use through locally elected councils and traditional landowners, who are in turn influenced by other community members. In Samoa, families are an important source of information, particularly when making decisions about traditional crops such as taro.

The project finishes this year, but Mr Holmes hopes it will leave its mark. “We aim to leave a system whereby information can continually be updated and users can access it to aid better decision-making.”



Shared knowledge: notes on cropping techniques make their way from scientists to farmers.