

Technology marriage joins PNG farmers to a dedicated market

ACIAR and a Tasmanian pesticide manufacturer are working in partnership with the PNG province of Enga to improve village production of pyrethrum in a project that is directly linking extension work with commercial outcomes

BY GIO BRAIDOTTI

A Tasmanian pesticide manufacturer has come to the aid of women in the Papua New Guinea (PNG) highlands, offering itself as a buyer to encourage production of one of the few cash crops available to the women, the daisy flower from which pyrethrum is extracted.

Botanical Resources Australia (BRA) was approached in 2006 by Wakasa Mecksaeen of the Enga Provincial Government and John Kendiga of the PNG National Government, with an unusual commercial proposal: help PNG's highlands increase production and quality of their pyrethrum crop ... and then buy the pyrethrum.

Pyrethrum is used as a pesticide in insect sprays, in pet shampoo and home gardening products, and Tasmanian-based BRA is a major world producer. While the plant grows well in the cool Tasmanian climate, it is also cultivated as a cash crop in the PNG highlands, mainly by women who use the money to buy essential items like cooking oil, salt, clothing or to contribute to their children's school fees.

It is one of the few cash-crop options they have so, when pyrethrum production started to decline, the Enga Provincial Government approached BRA for help. The result is a three-year deal in which BRA has agreed to buy PNG's pyrethrum product, but this means greater productivity needs to be achieved.

Despite conducting research in Tasmania, BRA had little experience with research for development, or in PNG—areas where ACIAR could provide expertise. BRA

approached the aid agency to discuss a partnership and seeing merit in the proposal, ACIAR agreed to provide support, starting by funding the company's first preliminary visit to PNG in 2006. ACIAR's involvement means the research results will be spread to pyrethrum-growing areas throughout PNG, and not tie growing and purchasing exclusively to BRA.

"The ACIAR project kicked off in 2007," said Mr Brian Chung, Manager of Product Development at BRA. "To date Bill Casey and Maurice Kerr from BRA have helped improve the Enga processing factory and refurbished its lab. Both are now up and running.

"There are also two agricultural research partners involved—Dr Phil Brown of Australia's University of Tasmania and Dr

Sergie Bang and his staff of PNG's National Agricultural Research Institute (NARI)—so there are efforts under way to improve seed production, seed lines and growing and harvesting methods."

The company, for instance, has already hosted a visit to the BRA Tasmanian factory by a team of five key PNG officers and is keenly looking forward to co-supervising Kud Sitango, a NARI research officer awarded ACIAR's John Allwright Fellowship to undertake a Masters degree at the University of Tasmania. Mr Chung thinks opportunities may also arise to bring other key young PNG officers, such as Janet Yando, to Australia to undertake studies in extension or business development.

While the company's involvement in

A year into the project, Janet Yando tells of her experiences

GETTING STARTED

Since the industry was revived in early 2006, the Enga Provincial Government formed an executive team to work on the project.

I was working as a volunteer with the National Volunteer Service of Papua New Guinea when the opportunity came along, so I asked the management (of Enga Pyrethrum Company Ltd) to consider me for the project. I was given the position as an Extension and Promotion Officer based at Taluma High Altitude Resource Centre.

I mostly work with local farmers, particularly pyrethrum growers in several communities. Activities carried out are basically general

awareness to encourage farmers, mostly women and youth groups, to increase production. I also conduct informal trainings at their farm sites to show them better ways of planting the crop, better management practices, the right time to pick, and so on.

However, 45% of my time every week is spent at the resource centre working on clonal selection plots, poly-cross nurseries, density trial plots and other tasks. This is a collaborative work with the NARI agronomist to improve planting materials for farmers.

Information on results obtained from research trials with NARI agronomists are passed on to the farmers during field visits.



Seedling distribution to pyrethrum growing families in Papua New Guinea.

PHOTO: WAKASA MECKSAENE

a development aid project was initially unexpected, the company has since found its stride: “It is now obvious we have the skills and technology to make substantial improvements so we are in it for the long run,” he says.

To justify the company’s ongoing involvement after 2010, Mr Chung stresses the need to achieve rapid improvements in pyrethrum volume and quality. The relationship has also developed to the point that there is potential to extend the work to

other crops, such as fresh market vegetables.

Janet Yando, an ACIAR-funded extension officer from the Enga Provincial Administration, is the key link between the partners and is helping to transfer expertise to PNG’s pyrethrum-cultivating women.

Ms Yando administers one of the project’s more crucial and challenging cornerstones—to act as a bridge between the remote highland women and the outside efforts to improve production. ■



PARTNER COUNTRY: Papua New Guinea

PROJECT/ DESCRIPTION: ASEM/2006/023: Re-commercialisation of the pyrethrum industry

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USING A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

The working atmosphere in those local areas where I am working with farmers is all right without any big issues. But it is not easy. Different people have different ways of taking messages and understanding, which means some people respond positively while others do not. These experiences are challenges and I appreciate that I have made it through the first year.

Here it is worth mentioning another project—the collaborative work with NARI in PNG, to improve and develop technologies more advanced and appropriate to practical adoption by growers. I was involved with designing research trials, data collection and analysis. That was very good

experience for me because I can now design my own trials from what I have learnt.

On the reporting part, I have not learned much because there has been little feedback. Taluma is very remote with no power supply or equipment (such as computers) to report quickly. Once every two weeks, I come to Taluma to report.

IMPROVING AGRICULTURE PRACTICES

Women’s participation and involvement in agricultural practices play a major role in improving family welfare and easing other socioeconomic issues. Women are honest and trustful in their activities. They produce enough for their family units to reduce malnutrition and other social problems.

In Papua New Guinea, human instinct has allowed men and women to identify roles that each individual can play in a society. In our Melanesian culture, different groups have identified roles. Because of this, individuals feel that their roles are identified and they should not do something that somebody else has to do. For example, women are not given a chance in public decision-making.

Roles that people have are passed down from ancestors so we do not have the flexibility to make (new) rules.

Because we are still trying to resolve our roles, objectives and priorities, agriculture has moved at a slow pace. Customs, cultures and norms often clash with imported values.