

A Global Strategy

for the conservation and use
of Coconut Genetic Resources

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3.1 Strengthening communication and commitment to conservation and use of coconut genetic resources

As pointed out in sections 1.1.7 and 1.2.2, the main objective of COGENT communication strategy is to increase the commitment to conservation and use of coconut genetic resources.

From the institutional perspective, global communication regarding the coconut value chain has been mainly conducted by the Asian and Pacific Coconut Community (APCC), COGENT and the national institutions from its member-countries, and to a lesser extent, by ACIAR, Bioversity International and the Crop Trust.

The communication strategy of the APCC has been mainly oriented towards consumers and processors. It focused first on promoting coconut food products as natural, healthy and nutritious. ACIAR also effectively applied a similar strategy (Foale 2003). Both were fruitful. Nowadays, marketing by private companies and the abundant supply of coconut water products are mainly based on the health-giving, natural qualities of coconut water. Recently APCC developed a broader vision, enabling policy support and implementation of programmes that will create market demand and promote greater access to a wider range of coconut products both in the domestic and export markets, as well as in traditional and non-traditional market destinations¹. APCC strengthened its role in coordinating market matching activities, buyers and sellers meetings, including the participation of the private sector especially the coconut processors and exporters in high impact Trade Fairs and Exhibitions.

3.1.1. Targeted audience

The markets for high-value coconut products are currently expanding, strongly driven by coconut water and VCO (Prades et al. 2016). It is highly likely that in the future these markets will become more and more competitive. Producers, processors and exporters will have to make the difference by ensuring and maintaining a high quality of their products. The way coconut palms are cultivated in respect to environment and health of consumers, the special characteristics of the varieties which are cultivated, and the notions of "terroir" or "branding by origin" will become increasingly important in marketing coconut products.

The APCC strategy is efficiently orientated towards consumers and processors. To be really coherent, the COGENT strategy should preferably be complementary to that of the APCC. Thus, it will focus mainly on national and international research institutions, international organizations, farmers, decision-makers and to a lesser extent to landscapers and the tourism industry.

¹ See: Creating Market Demand and Promoting Market Access for Coconut Products "The Cocommunity" - Monthly APCC Newsletter Volume 43, Series No. 10, 1 October 2013.

3.1.2. Concepts for communication

The communication strategy will be based on the three following concepts:

- **'Coconut is not coconut'. All the coconut palms are not the same.** They do not grow the same way; they do not attain the same yields. They are not linked to the same cultural and environmental contexts. Food products made from different varieties and in different places do not have the same taste and the same nutritional qualities. Coconut diversity exists. Coconut diversity matters. Conservation and use of coconut genetic resources are therefore highly marketable.
- **Give back diversity to seedling producers and to farmers.** Coconut is crucial for the livelihood of millions of stakeholders. The agricultural and market contexts have strongly evolved during the last decade. Thanks notably to Brazil and India, the profitability of well-managed coconut plantations producing high-value products is now clearly demonstrated. Indeed coconut breeding takes time. Indeed coconut conservation is challenging, as not everything can be achieved in a 3-year period, which is the duration of most international projects; nevertheless a longer-term vision, and a sense of general interest and working for future generations need to be vigorously promoted.
- **Coconut is an emblematic, aesthetic and attractive plant.** Landscapers in tropical countries could greatly benefit for integrating conservation of coconut genetic resources into their plans. No other plant is as closely linked to tourism activities under the tropics than the coconut palm. For the tourism industry evolving in a competitive environment, it becomes more and more important to stand out from the standard fare that tourism offers (Bourdeix et al. 2011a). Many tourists are no longer satisfied by golden exotic beaches bordered by anonymous palms; and those who are will more likely choose the cheapest destinations. Coconut palms should no longer serve as symbols of anonymous exoticism. They tell true stories, specifically related to islanders' cultures, in the framework of an ecotourism approach. The wealth of amazing cultural and agricultural coconut stories should greatly interest the media and especially TV channels and radios.

3.1.3. Implementing the communication strategy

The COGENT website (www.cogentnetwork.org) is a crucial tool for implementing the communication strategy. This website has been significantly improved in 2012 and 2013, by adding numerous components such as numerous FAQs², a new section "Research ideas", databases of geo-referenced photographs (on Flickr) and videos (new YouTube and Vimeo channels). However, this website is not yet fully developed due to lack of financial and human resources in support of COGENT secretariat. For the same reason, COGENT is not yet represented within online social networks. More resources should be devoted to COGENT communications in the coming years. COGENT needs a full-time position for a communications assistant who will manage

² Frequently Asked Questions, see the URL: <http://www.cogentnetwork.org/fag>

the website, coordinate exchanges with media and help produce short videos such as those recently released on coconut climbing techniques.

All the photographs presented in this Strategy were produced as very high definition images. They have been made available for downloading from the COGENT website or in the new website “Planting Material for the Pacific Region”³. These plates can also be printed in poster size format. They will be used to promote the various aspects of coconut genetic resources and use.

Communication with farmers

Recommendation 3 of the 2012 COGENT Steering Committee meeting includes:

- Encouraging local stakeholders (men and women farmers, private enterprise, NGOs and CBOs) to become more involved in supplying quality germplasm, and to teach farmers and other stakeholders how to autonomously produce quality seedlings of hybrids and other varieties, using the *Polymotu* concept or any other adopted method.
- Assessing farmers’ knowledge regarding the reproductive biology of the coconut palm and the use of genetic markers such as sprout colour for breeding purposes. This study should be conducted by 1) drafting a standard gender-sensitive questionnaire by ethno-biologists and geneticists, 2) training local researchers to implement the survey, and 3) interviewing at least 100 farmers in each of at least 20 countries of the 39 COGENT member-countries.
- Developing a communication strategy to increase farmers’ knowledge regarding coconut reproductive biology and breeding methods, including training tools, video guidelines, media communication, and an approach for marketing of genetic resources.
- Conducting a similar survey with the same questionnaire five years after launching this process, in order to assess progress regarding the farmers’ knowledge.

As it will be discussed in section 3.7.2 and 3.9.3, the access to a database “seednuts for farmers” will be added to the main page of the COGENT website. As not all farmers can access internet, the database will include downloadable and multilingual technical documentation which will be easily printed and distributed if needed.

Communication with media

Researchers cannot replace journalists, but they can greatly assist them in providing unique raw material. Journalists generally work on a reportage for only a few days; many researchers are in the field, interacting with stakeholders almost every day. So researchers can capture images that journalists could never portray. Each research centre should have at least a small High Definition camera able to record professional quality images, videos and audio recordings. Researchers should receive a 2-4 hours training to be able to produce good quality footage and stills. Journalists will obtain the best footage by mixing their own recordings with those made by researchers.

³ See the URL: <https://replantcoconut.blogspot.com>

In 2013, twenty-five short videos have been released by the Secretariat on the COGENT website, of which eight were prepared by COGENT itself. During the next five years, COGENT plan to make and release about 50 more short videos. They will last from one to about 13 minutes each and deal with various subjects, such as: guidelines for controlled hand-pollination and fields observations; presentation of the *ex situ* collections and their curators; How do coconuts reproduce? How to distinguish a Dwarf from a Tall coconut? The amazing diversity of the coconut palm, etc.

A provisional list of these videos is to be prepared, published on the COGENT website, and submitted for approval during the next COGENT SC meeting. The COGENT secretariat, together with the NGO Diversiflora International⁴ has already made HD shootings related to the all coconut value chain in more than 15 COGENT member-countries. At least 60% of the shootings needed for making these 50 videos are already available.

Communication with decision-makers

The communication with decision makers of COGENT Secretariat and collaborating institutions in COGENT member-countries should follows the official channels existing in the various national, regional and international institutions collaborating with the network. These channels and the identities of decision makers at the successive levels must perfectly be identified in order for COGENT communication to be as targeted and efficient as possible.

As part of the “early warning system” for identifying threats to germplasm, an interesting exercise could be to simulate, in each country, the worrying situation that happened in Indonesia a few years ago. As mentioned in section 2.3.1, fifteen hectares of coconut accessions were destroyed with bulldozers to build a horserace track. When a genebank gets under threats, the curator should precisely know who to contact at national level in order to solve the problem. She/he also should contact immediately the COGENT Secretariat. Thus, the COGENT secretariat should be able to react and alert the accurate people in national and international organizations in order for warning calls to be instantly given to the Ministry level(s) in the country concerned.

International recommendations emitted by the COGENT SC⁵ provide also an efficient way to communicate with decision-makers on crucial aspect of conservation and use of coconut genetic resources. This was for instance applied with the recommendation 3 of the COGENT SC held in 2012, which includes:

- Decision-makers at the local, national and international levels to adopt effective portfolios of strategies and gender-sensitive guidelines for conservation and sustainable use of coconut genetic resources to meet the needs of men and women stakeholders, and especially to ensure both effective conservation and availability of good planting material for coconut replanting programmes.

⁴ See: <https://diversiflora-international.blogspot.com>

⁵ It could be interesting for COGENT to associate with APCC for emitting joint international recommendations.

- National Agricultural Services and breeders to allow farmers to make their own decisions, and consider not advising farmers to grow a single coconut variety, be it Tall, Hybrid, Dwarf or whatever.
- Seednut producers and agricultural services to provide farmers, at the national level, a range of at least six different coconut varieties, including Talls, hybrids, Dwarfs and eventually composite varieties, and to explain to farmers the specificity of each variety regarding environmental adaptation and cultural practices. Most farmers are very likely to choose to plant more than one variety.

Communication between research institutions and stakeholders in charge of agricultural development (National institutions and NGOs) need also to be strengthened notably through an approach “train the trainers”. This approach should aim at more participation and evolves in a situation of “learning and training the trainers”. Practical and traditional knowledge of agricultural officers and farmers should and will also benefit the researchers!

Communication with consumers and processors

To be really coherent, the COGENT communication strategy should preferably be complementary to that of the APCC. Anyway, COGENT communication will also target consumers and processors but with a unique and precise objective: promoting the branding of cultivar-specific high-value products. The way coconut palms are cultivated in respect to environment and health of consumers, the special characteristics of the varieties which are cultivated, and the notions of “terroir” or “branding by origin” will become increasingly important in marketing coconut products.

The markets for high-value coconut products are currently expanding, strongly driven by coconut water⁶. It is highly likely that in the future these markets will become more and more competitive. Producers, processors and exporters will have to make the difference by ensuring the highest quality of their products.

As far as we know, there is presently only one case of branding a coconut cultivar. The Thai coconut variety named “Ham Hom” is the most famous for aromatic water. It is now gaining international acceptance and Thai coconut water is being increasingly exported to the USA and Canada and several other countries. The Tahiti Monoï is made only from coconut growing on atolls soils of French Polynesia; it is branded by geographical origin but not by variety, as farmers in the Tuamotu Archipelago cultivate different varieties, such as various Tall-types and the hybrid between the Brazilian Green Dwarf and the Rangiroa Tall.

⁶ From Dr Vinay Chand, international coconut expert, in Coconut google group, 24th October 2013: “One billion coconuts processed when fresh generate US\$2 billion in export earnings. Three million tons of coconut oil extracted from 20 billion coconuts exported earns less than US\$3 billion. Of course, there are not enough established markets to absorb another 20 billion coconuts of wet process products. But should we not be taking active steps to promoting markets for wet products?”

Communication with landscapers and the tourism industry

Communication with landscapers will include sending them catalogues of coconut varieties, publishing papers about coconut diversity in their specialized journals, and through direct interaction. In five to ten COGENT member-countries, interns should work on how to integrate coconut conservation in landscaping of both public places and tourism locations. In many tropical cities, the municipality could be engaged in a municipal coconut planting programme from accessions conserved *ex situ* or well-identified varieties from farmers' fields. The city will communicate about its role in conserving genetic resources and will develop a positive and popular image about this role. The same kind of "marketing of genetic resources" could be used for interaction with hundreds of sites and stakeholders including: tourist centres, university campuses, research institute sites, municipal parks, botanical gardens, golf courses, and farms and farmers.

3.1.4. Impact assessment of the communication strategy

The objective of COGENT communication is to increase commitment to conservation and use of coconut genetic resources. For evaluating such a wide objective, impact assessment should be conducted by taking into account the targeted audiences of the communication actions.

Indicators common to all targeted audiences will be those linked to the frequentation of the COGENT website, and of the pictures and videos channels. These indicators will be: numbers of unique visitors; numbers of links from and to other websites; and the number of download of technical documents.

Other indicators to measure the impact of the communication: to the farmers, could be the diversity of planted material in the fields; to the research community would be the number of scientific journal articles citing COGENT; to the media, the number of articles in the press (paper, radio, TV...); to the decision makers, the amount of money dedicated to coconut genetic resources conservation compared to other crops, taking into account the level of importance of the coconut tree cultivation for the country; and to the landscapers, the urban planners and the tourism area, the number of new plantations citing or including coconut trees.

3.2. Revisiting the concept of the Global COGENT coconut collection

The present global system, based on five international genebanks and 19 national genebanks, has been shown to be only partially effective in terms of both germplasm sharing and quality of conservation (as stated in sections 2.6.3 and 2.8). In the 2013 COGENT survey, only 40% respondents agreed that international genebanks are effectively playing their role in distributing germplasm at international level, and 73% believed that the number of international genebanks should be doubled in order to increase the efficiency and number of germplasm movements.