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Coconut Risk Management and Mitigation Manual for the Pacific Region



Compiled by R. Bourdeix, J. M. Sourisseau and J. Lin

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37. RELIABLE INFORMATION ABOUT FARMING AND TECHNOLOGY

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Description

The risk is that farmers and extension officers do not have access to, do not access, or do not understand and use the information that they really need. This can be caused either by a lack of available information, by an inappropriate information format, or by an overabundance of unreliable or inadequate information. Missing the right information, farmers will not solve their technical problems and the production of their farms will not increase, penalizing the whole industry.

Sometimes too much information from too many sources is available. It makes it challenging to find the information you really need. When found, it may remain difficult to know if this information is trustworthy or not.

Occurrence and severity

In the Pacific region the case of coconut hybrids offers a perfect example of how the limitation of knowledge or understanding of accurate information can lead to the dissemination of the incorrect information.

Some Pacific countries have stopped the production of hybrid seednuts during the last decades. It happened that some farmers came to the extension division and asked for hybrid seednuts. Instead of simply saying that hybrids are unavailable, official national nursery provided seednuts harvested on Dwarf x Tall hybrids and presented those as ‘hybrids’. Farmers were planting them thinking they were real hybrids and good planting material. They will obtain a heterogeneous mix of fast and slow growing coconut palms, with small and large fruits, and with some good and many low producers. Their opinion about hybrids will become worse and worse.

The coconut industry also advises farmers against hybrids: the kernel oil content is higher for Tall-type variety. Copra millers and oil producers are winning more profit when buying a ton of coconut or copra from Tall varieties than when buying the same from hybrid varieties such as MRDxRIT¹⁰. Indeed, they recover a larger quantity of oil from the local Talls. However, if you look carefully from the farmer’s side, the issues are very different. On average, when planted in appropriate conditions, Tall-type varieties will produce about 1.8 tons of copra yearly containing about 1.2 tons of oil per hectare per year; on average, Hybrids (MRDxRIT for instance) will produce 3.6 tons of copra yearly containing 2.0 tons of oil per hectare. Therefore, farmers, please make your own calculation, please prioritize your own profit, and do not blindly follow advice from other coconut stakeholders.

Another reason why some agricultural extension services do not promote hybrids is insufficient resources. It is complicated and quite costly to produce hybrids. It is so much simpler to go to any farmers’ field – without conducting any analysis to assess the real value of the variety and the mother palms - and buy seednuts from the farmers – especially if those farmers are your relative.

¹⁰ Hybrid Malayan Red Dwarf x Rennell Island Tall.

Another example is pest and disease management in nurseries. In some Pacific countries, many farmers no longer trust national nurseries. Even if the seednuts are provided free, they will not accept seedlings for planting that come from those nurseries.

In the smaller island countries, extension services lack information to adequately disseminate to their farmers. In Papua New Guinea, many coconut farmers are rural subsistence farmers with limited educational qualifications. Some of them cannot read and write. This creates a barrier in the uptake and adoption of information and practices.

Mitigation and adaptation

Ministries and extension services should make the relevant technical information fully available for farmers; they should ensure that a maximum number of them will be aware of this information, will read it, will believe it and will use it. Governments should adopt a diversified and pluralistic national strategy to promote agricultural extension and communication for rural development. Videos published in local languages may help to sensitize illiterate farmers.

Who is the person to contact if I am a coconut farmer needing technical help? Where are nurseries located close to my farm? Such information should be made available with only 2 to 3 'clicks' and simply searching the word 'coconut' on the website of the Ministries of Agriculture. Such information should include all relevant contacts and should be developed in a user-friendly context, accessible via farmer's organization and other related communities.

In Timor-Leste, factors related to adoption of the improved varieties have recently been studied. The factor most strongly related to adoption by farmers was having a relationship to a grower of improved varieties and the closeness of this relationship. Dissemination strategies should embrace social relationships.

Actions to undertake

Extension services should not try to make decisions and think instead of farmers. When well informed, farmers are perfectly able to make good decisions by themselves. Extension services, when facing an agricultural risk or problem, should not propose a unique solution, presented to farmers as a panacea. They should propose a diversity of responses to farmers, explaining to them the advantages and risk of each option.

All information linked to nurseries is highly sensitive. A periodical multi-crop report regarding the phytopathological status of national nurseries should be published online. This report must be signed by a designated service and a designated officer who will fully assume responsibility for its contents. Nurseries should preferably be certified, both for quality and organics.

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