

Pacific agriculture and forestry leaders encouraged to embrace 'e-agriculture'

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Anju Mangal of the Secretariat of Pacific Community (SPC) Land Resources Division (LRD)

Pacific Heads of Agriculture and Forestry Services (HOAFS) were encouraged to embrace information and communications technology (ICT) and 'e-agriculture' in delivering products and services to stakeholders involved in the sector during the 4th HOAFS meeting in Nadi, Fiji Islands recently.

E-agriculture is the use of ICT to deliver services to the stakeholders of the agriculture sector. It is one of the key initiatives of the Framework for Action on ICT for Development in the Pacific (FAIDP), together with e-government, e-health and e-education.

Some of the FAIDP priorities were relevant to the agriculture and forestry sector, including: access to ICT in rural areas and remote islands, websites, telecentres/community learning centres, financial inclusion (e.g. transfer of funds via mobile phones), and linkages to the energy sector.

Anju Mangal of the Secretariat of Pacific Community (SPC) Land Resources Division (LRD) said that communication tools for sharing and disseminating relevant information to farmers and LRD stakeholders are imperative for the development of agriculture and forestry.

"Some possible options include having websites/online content management systems and social networking and media tools such as blogs and wikis with up to date, relevant information to assist LRD stakeholders.

"In addition, having access to the Internet provides LRD stakeholders with relevant agricultural information and facilitates better market access.

"Financial inclusion would also help revitalise rural development, as under such a programme farmers can receive payments via mobile phones," Ms Mangal said.

"SPC approaches focused on the use of ICT and collaborative approaches to implement activities focussing on good practices and success stories and on the different policies that have an impact on agriculture/forestry activities," she said.

Mr Siaosi Sovaleni of SPC added that having power in rural areas is essential for ICT development.

FAIDP was formulated in response to a call from Pacific leaders at the 40th Pacific Islands Forum in Cairns (August 2009) for the Pacific Plan Digital Strategy (PPDS) to be reviewed and updated.

This direction reaffirmed the continuing importance of ICT as a tool for development in the region and further supports the Wellington Declaration, in which ICT ministers declared, "We recognize that information and communication technologies (ICTs), while not an end in themselves, have a key role as a basis for economic development, while also promoting and enhancing social cohesion, cultural enrichment and environmental conservation".

"The framework uses a new regional approach to developing and improving information and communication technology (ICT) services to support development and governance and improve the livelihoods of communities in the Pacific region", added Mr Sovaleni.

The Pacific region faces challenges such as the 'tyranny of distance', poor infrastructure, lack of capacity, and diseconomies of scale. The use of mobile phones and community learning centres can help improve the dissemination of information to farmers. These tools can be used to disseminate agricultural information, advice and weather forecasts.

LRD, in collaboration with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), is implementing the Market Information Systems (MIS) in Fiji Islands with the Ministry of Primary Industries to improve the provision of quality market information to stakeholders. The proposed MIS for Fiji Islands will be piloted in the Sigatoka Valley and will aim to provide weekly price and marketing information to subscribers via SMS text messages to their mobile phones. This service will then be rolled out to incorporate new areas as required.

The provision of market information aims to increase the efficiency of agricultural markets and help overcome issues of market failure based on asymmetric access to commodity price data. In its simplest form, the provision of spot prices aims to assist farmers in making better decisions on where to sell their produce and negotiate prices rather than simply accepting proposed prices.

In Tonga, LRD is currently supporting the establishment of an agricultural information call centre in Tonga whereby mobile phones will be used for information dissemination and sharing. It is also supporting publication of at least 90 extension leaflets on selected crops and livestock subjects in electronic format.

A helpdesk system will also be established within the Ministry of Agriculture in Tonga to ensure the ministry is more responsive to queries.

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