Learning from experience

Report of the Gwaunafiu meeting of the Melanesian Farmer First Network 2004

evaluating what has worked,
what has not worked

Compiled by
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Contents

Abbreviations

APHEDA Australians for Peace, Health, Education and Development Abroad
ASD Agriculture Science Department, (of PEDC) Vanuatu
CBHC Community Based Health Care, Tari, Papua New Guinea
DAL Department of Agriculture and Livestock (Solomon Islands)
DAL Department of Agriculture and Livestock (Papua New Guinea)
DARD Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Vanuatu)
DPI Department of Primary Industries (Papua New Guinea – now DAL)
DSAP Development of Sustainable Agriculture in the Pacific
FAO United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization
FSA Farm Support Association (Vanuatu)
KGA Kastom Gaden Association (Solomon Islands)
MFFN Melanesian Farmer First Network
NGO Non-Government Organisation
PEDC Paruparu Education Development Centre (Bougainville)
PMN Planting Material Network (Solomon Islands)
PNG Papua New Guinea
SPC Secretariat of the Pacific Community (based in Fiji)
UN United Nations
CRMF Christian Radio Missionary Fellowship (PNG)

Learning from experience

The Network

The Melanesian Farmer First Network started in late-2002 with the aim of assisting participating organisations develop their capacity to plan and manage projects in sustainable agriculture, community health and development.

In 2004, a meeting of Network member organisations at Gwaunafiu, Solomon Islands, assessed the strategies and approaches they had used and drew out learnings about what has worked and what has not worked.

Assessing the usefulness of strategies, approaches and techniques is important to development organisations if they are to learn from experience and improve their work.

The Network

The Farmer First Network was formed in 2002 following discussions between two NGOs (non-government organisations):

- Kastom Gaden Association (KGA), Solomon Islands
- Paruparu Education Development Centre (PEDC), Bougainville, Papua New Guinea.

The organisations developed the idea of sharing their experience with others involved in sustainable agriculture in Melanesia. They wanted to do this in cooperation with members of TerraCircle, an Australian consultancy focused on food security and community health, members of which work with KGA and other development organisations.

It was anticipated that the exchange of skills would demonstrate how networking could develop the capacity of the KGA and PEDC as well as other organisations.

The network born

A concept paper written in 2002 described the work of the partners and how the proposed network could build capacity, share experiences, provide support to local NGO programs and link them with important national, regional and international organisations. The paper introduced two additional NGOs — the Farm Support Association, Vanuatu, and Community Based Health Care, Tari, Southern Highlands, Papua New Guinea.

The Deputy Director General of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), Dr Jimmie Rogers, supported the concept. Within SPC there was concern that technical expertise and resources were not reaching the rural communities most in need, particularly isolated communities in Melanesia. SPC wrote to the Sub-Regional Representative for the Pacific Islands, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations in Samoa to assess whether the two organisations with mandates to assist agriculture in Pacific Island countries could help in the development of the network. A meeting to bring all stakeholders together to prepare a design document for the Melanesian Farmer First Network — as it then became known — took place.

Preceding the SPC/FAO discussions, KGA and TerraCircle approached Oxfam Community Aid Abroad with the result that a three year project was started in late-2002. Components of the project include:

- training
- staff exchange and capacity building
- rural email service
- support for the key initiatives of each partner.

In addition, Union Aid Abroad, the overseas humanitarian agency of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, agreed to the support smaller scale activities of the network.

Analysis reveals deficiencies

Analysis at the time found that a number of successful Melanesian NGOs were implementing livelihood and food security activities among remote rural communities but were finding difficulty in sustaining their work for a number of reasons:

- difficulty in complying with donor requirements
- a lack of skills to set sound policy and provide financially-proper records
- lack of access to appropriate technical information
- difficulty recruiting staff of appropriate calibre and training those already employed.

New approaches were needed If these organisations were to continue their work. MFFN partners organisations and TerraCircle saw a need to work sub-regionally as a network of organisations, to nurture local NGO successes and widen their impact.

Gwaunafiu — assessing experience

Later, FAO agreed to bring the partners together but as the program had already started the purpose of the meeting changed from developing a design document to documenting the lessons already learned and the strategies and approaches that had been successful in improving livelihoods of remote rural communities.

This document is a report of that meeting which was held at Gwaunafiu, Malaita, Solomon Islands, 4-7 August 2004.

Network Partners

Kastom Gaden Association, Solomon Islands

KGA was established as an independent organisation in 2000 after five years as a program of an Australian NGO, the Appropriate Technology for Community and Environment Inc (APACE).

KGA specialises in community development, promoting better livelihoods through core competencies in village food security and participatory technology development. The organization works in all nine provinces of Solomon Islands.

KGA programs include:

- support to a national farmer's network — the Solomon Islands Planting Material Network (PMN) — that exchanges seeds and planting materials, shares information and provides training in agriculture
- support to youth through a family-based livelihoods training program and an attachment program at the organisation's Honiara base
- farmer field schools
- pest management advice.

KGA has 14 permanent staff, a network of over 1000 members (including members of the Solomon Islands Planting Material Network) and many volunteers. In recent years the KGA has expanded rapidly as it has demonstrated a capability to respond to the demands of rural communities affected by the recent ethnic tensions, in particular.

Paruparu Education Development Centre, Bougainville

The PEDC was established during the Bougainville crisis to provide basic services and solutions to the problems faced by people in the Avaipa district, central Bougainville.

PEDC has a number of departments including an Agriculture Science Department (ASD) that trains voluntary extension officers, helps schools teach agriculture, produces seeds, and integrates agriculture into other vocational training programs offered by the organisation.

The ASD focuses on:

- fixed-site agriculture methods
- improved management of local livestock
- inland fisheries
- agroforestry using integrated indigenous species
- alternative cash crops (mostly cardamom, vanilla and chilli).

PEDC is one of four NGOs belonging to the Bougainville Partners Group. Through this, an informal network called the Bougainville Food Security Network has been formed which is loosely modelled on the PMN. The ASD has six staff and many volunteers.

Farm Support Association, Vanuatu

The Farm Support Association (FSA) has been operating for over 20 years. It grew out of the Plantation Support Association set up to help indigenous landowners who took over plantations when Vanuatu became independent.

The focus is now on families and individuals rather than communities. The FSA mission is to help Ni-Vanuatu become successful commercial farmers. It does this through a network of active volunteers and lead farmers who work on a farmer-to-farmer basis, disseminating skills as required.

Programs include:

- the improvement of soil fertility through alley cropping
- improved fallow using legume trees
- a spice network
- an organic certification scheme
- promotion and support for small scale poultry production
- the breeding of work horses
- the collection and sharing of 'wild' yams for improved food security.

FSA has been the local partner in a number of regional and government projects including those of FAO and SPC Development of Sustainable Agriculture in the Pacific (DSAP). FSA works closely with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Vanuatu, in the implementation of its programs.

Community Based Health Care, Tari, PNG

Community Based Health Care (CBHC) supports communities in Tari, Southern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea through the provision of basic health services including:

- sanitation and water supplies
- improved food production
- improved management of the environment
- increased savings
- assistance with the marketing of cash crops.

CBHC resulted from a merger of the Nazarene Health Care Ministries CBHC program, based in Western Highlands Province, and a local group called the Family Health Rural Improvement Project, previously part of the Institute of Medical Research.

The CBHC works in an area where there has been much social unrest and where government services are wanting.

Learning from experience

Gwaunafiu

The 2004 Melanesian Farmer First Network meeting took place at the Gwaunafiu Farmer Field School in the Solomon Islands. The following two pages offer a synopsis of the discussion.

Four Busy Days

After an adventurous journey by boat, truck and foot a total of thirty-one people (Fig.1 & attachment) attended the MFFN meeting at Gwaunafiu Farmer Field School, Central Kwara'ae, Malaita Province, Solomon Islands,

The difficult journey brought into focus the problems confronting rural communities in Melanesia. The isolated village venue was a fitting background to the meeting.

Late arrival delayed the start to the meeting and reminded participants that punctuality is not always possible in hard-to-access rural areas and that the concept of "Solomon time" is a reality. Even though late, the participants were given a warm welcome by the community.

Day one

On the first day participants introduced themselves and shared information about the work they were doing now and had done earlier.

After introductions there were discussions on the history and purpose of the MFFN and the objectives for the meeting. Then, in small groups, participants discussed key strategies, approaches, success and failures associated with improving livelihoods in remote rural communities.

Combined group experience totalled 277 years in sustainable agricultural development in Melanesia.

Day two

On day two, participants developed definitions of sustainable livelihoods in the remote rural communities of Melanesia. They gave feedback on the previous day's discussions of strategies and lessons learned.

A second round of working groups looked at the relationships between NGOs and government agencies and the impact this is having on rural livelihoods. The groups used a Strengths/ Weaknesses/ Opportunities/ Threats (SWOT) analysis to highlight issues.

In the afternoon of day two and the morning of day three the groups started to work through a series of important themes identified prior to the meeting. These were training, marketing and crop diversity. Following keynote addresses from different partners, participants broke into groups to discuss these areas in greater detail, to see what lessons had been learned and to identify the future needs of the network.

In the evening of day two, video presentations and slide shows looked at communications, providing examples of strategies used by the partners and the lessons learned. There was a presentation by PestNet, an NGO providing on-line assistance for pest and disease management in the Pacific and Asia.

Day three

On day three, after a discussion on crop diversity, participants did an impact assessment. Groups worked with members of the Gwaunafiu community to look at the changes that had affected agriculture in recent years and tried to quantify them. This was followed by a discussion on how the partners can improve impact measurement in order to show evidence of change.

Day four

On day four, partners planned for the future using Bennett's Hierarchy — a method for:

1. targeting outcomes
2. tracking progress toward achieving targets
3. evaluating the degree to which programs impact social, economic, and environmental conditions.

The Hierarchy assesses both program planning and program evaluation at the same time. Groups used the Hierarchy as a tool for planning their future programs. They then added key areas where the MFFN could contribute to meeting social, economic and environmental outcomes.

The exercise was not completed in the time available and it was agreed that partners would continue the process later. These hierarchies will form the basis of the five-year project design document.

Reporting the meeting outcomes

This report was prepared based on diagrams, notes and video footage from the meeting.

The data was coded and analysed on a theme chart. The themes and codes were summarised. Where there were gaps, the partners were asked for information. A draft was sent for comment and amendments incorporated into this final version.

Fig. 1 Members of the Melanesian Farmers First Network and friends attending the Gwaunafiu meeting

Common problems, different solutions

Livelihood strategies in the remote communities of Melanesia are diverse.

This is of necessity because:

- family and extended family groups engage in seasonal and non-seasonal forms of production using the results for domestic consumption, social obligations and sale at local and distant markets
- families manage complex farming systems that integrate numerous plant and animal species and that often require difficult management decisions.

Improving livelihoods involves addressing key problems while being careful that changes in one area do not undermine successes elsewhere.

In response to this, MFFN partners focus on improving self-reliance. They are engaged in programs to strengthen and improve rural livelihoods at the individual, family, clan, and community level.

Self-reliance is seen holistically, encompassing different aspects of livelihood development that run the gamut of income generation, family food production, health, resource management, community integration, security, infrastructure, and more.

The success of MFFN partners is as much a result of their diversity as to what they have in common.

There is always the danger of generalising and assuming that what works in one place can work in another. Melanesia is a very diverse region and there will always be a need to take many different approaches to improving livelihoods. Lessons can be learned, but there is no simple blueprint that fits all places and points in time.

What we present here are the experiences of a small but successful group of organisations coming from different backgrounds and working in very different circumstances.

MFFN partners fill need following unrest

Three of the MFFN Partners (the exception being FSA) are operating in areas where civil unrest has resulted in partial or almost total withdrawal of government services.

The NGOs have filled the void that was left and demonstrated their ability to succeed in strengthening people's livelihoods under difficult circumstances.

KGA and CBHC have responded and adapted to civil unrest, while PEDC grew from the crisis that engulfed Bougainville during the conflict over independence.

The partners have demonstrated their capacity to help rural people take care of themselves when needs arise and when there is no outside help.

Sustainable livelihoods for rural communities

Sustainable livelihoods

Sustainable livelihoods in the remote rural communities of Melanesia are generally family based and are designed to meet multiple short and long-term objectives.

Key to the partner's definition of sustainable livelihoods is the relationship between:

- self-reliance
- involvement in the cash economy
- community/social obligations
- the management of resources (including the environment).

Fig. 2, below, describes how the MFFN partners define the terms 'sustainable' and 'livelihoods'.

Remote rural communities

Communities are 'remote' when they lack access to services (for example: transport, health, education, banking) and economic opportunities, including engagement with government.

At the same time there are some positive aspects to isolation including social cohesion that comes from traditional leadership, less pollution and corruption and other negative influences of many present-day societies. Isolation can be seen as a continuum with various levels (Fig. 3).

SUSTAINABLE	LIVELIHOODS
Flexibility and learning	Access to health and education
Awareness of resources and the positive and negative consequences of using resources	Money (may be a tool rather than a need)
Long term and continuing	Meeting basic family needs (food, shelter, water, clothes, gardens, animals, crafts, fishing, stories, festivals, forests)
Resources available to sustain life today and tomorrow	Self-reliance and self-sufficiency (including not relying on external inputs)
Future generations	Communal needs and social obligations
Holistic approach to life	Community awareness of resources and decisions about their use today and tomorrow
Management of resources	Productive activities
Traditional knowledge	Meeting personal needs
Fulfilling aspirations	Waste management

Fig. 2 Sustainable and Livelihood: key points in their definition for remote rural communities of Melanesia

The level of isolation is subjective. For example, Gwaunafiu village, where the meeting was held, is an isolated rural community when compared to coastal villages. But it has a road (no matter that it is in a state of disrepair) and is less isolated than those communities further inland, several hours away by forest track.

By contrast, communities on the urban fringe that might be considered the least isolated in terms of distance from services often suffer 'remoteness' because people may not have the wherewithal to access them.

Fig. 4. describes the relationship between communities and their distance to physical and social parameters and information access, as a bearing on remoteness.

Thus, isolation in terms of distance for obtaining a sustainable livelihood can be physical but it can also be related to social factors or access to information/education.

Social aspects include tribal warfare, alcoholism, marginalisation of women or being part of an economy based on resource exploitation (for example, a dependence on logging or mining royalties).

Communities may also be entrenched in traditional structures and find it difficult to make changes to the point that it becomes a constraint to progress.

Others have what is referred to as 'aid dependency': waiting for handouts instead of doing what is required themselves.

Lack of information or poor access to it can also have a bearing on sustainable livelihoods. Where this relates to eduction, the question of what is taught — its appropriateness to a rural situation — becomes an important factor.

RURAL COMMUNITIES

Less Remote	Qualities	More Remote
More access	Communication, government services and NGO networks	Less to no access
More flexible - option of more involved in external cash economy	Self reliance	Essential
More	Interference, pollution, conflict, corruption	Less
More	Options for earning money	Less
Low	Cost and difficulty of travel	High
Close	Distance from urban centres / roads / transport links	Far
Easy	Terrain	Difficult
More	Access to markets	Less

Fig. 3 Levels of remoteness of rural communities of Melanesia

In general, the partners felt that more remote communities showed greater self-reliance even though they had fewer choices and opportunities. Particularly in times of disaster or stress, they were often better able to fend for themselves as their social structures were still intact. By contrast, urban or peri-urban communities may be more vulnerable as they have become more reliant on government services which may not always be there.

For example: when there was no rice in Arawa, Bougainville, for two months due to transport problems, people were not able to sustain their basic food needs, whereas inland communities did not have a problem.

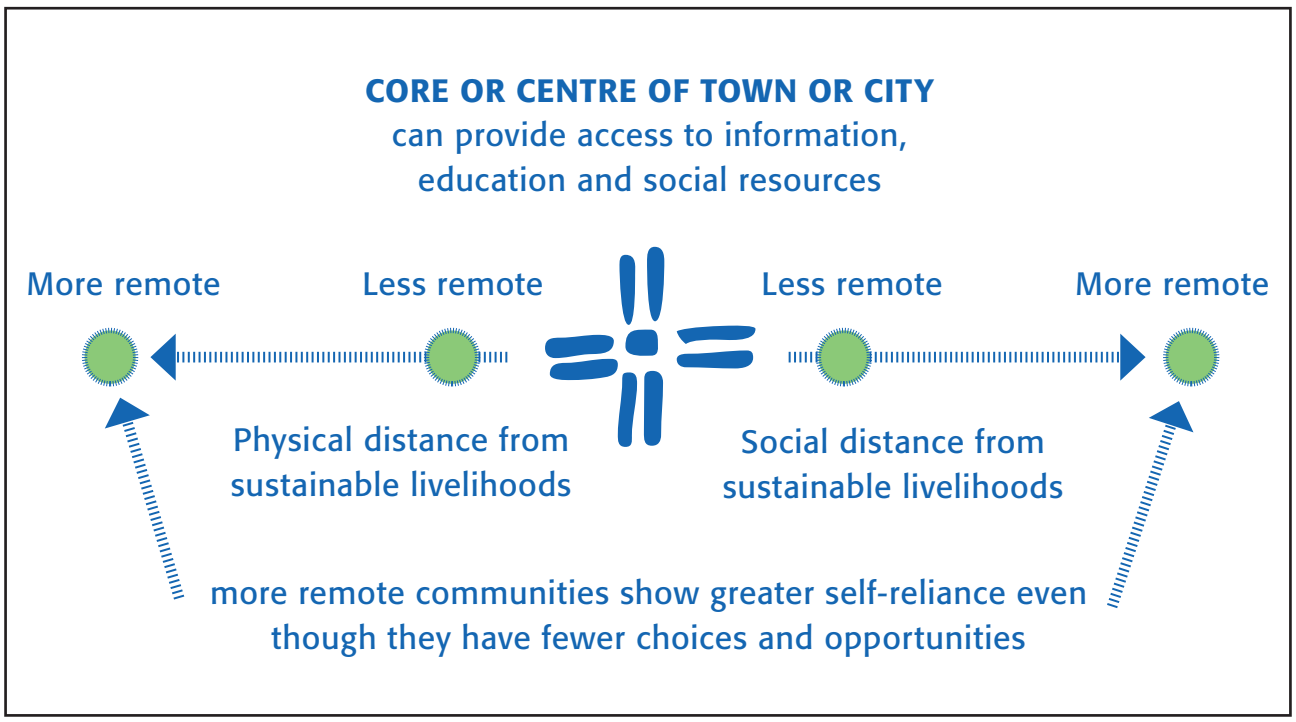

Fig. 4. Remoteness from sustainable livelihoods can be physical and social

Future change – what is likely?

To donors and observers of Melanesia it seems inevitable that more remote (and perhaps not so remote) communities will be drawn into the cash economy. However, in the view of MFFN partners, the cash economy is unlikely to be much of a panacea for change.

In the face of civil unrest accompanied by economic decline and consequential environmental stress, there is an increased need to resort to higher levels of self-reliance in societies where opportunities for diversification from traditional commodities remain poor.

In many parts of Melanesia, development, in terms of services and opportunities, is in reverse as economies, once buoyed by short-term exploitation of resources such as minerals, oil, timber and the like, collapse. Populations continue to rise rapidly, diseases proliferate and environmental degradation takes its toll. To MFFN partners the future is going to be increasingly bleak and definitely uncertain, so diverse strategies will provide the greatest security and buffer communities against the abrupt changes that are likely to occur.

Rural economies of Melanesia, which are mostly subsistence based, have proven to be very resilient, even in times of stress.

Ideally, people in remote communities should have options to earn cash and to enter national or international markets when opportunities arise, however this should not be their primary goal. While export crops have their boom times they often leave farmers more vulnerable when prices drop. Examples are many: the fall-out from the recent drop in coffee prices in the highlands of Papua New Guinea or from vanilla market boom-and-busts in parts of the PNG lowlands and, to a lesser extent, in Vanuatu.

In the view of the partners, strengthening self-reliance by promoting sustainable resource management, supporting time-tested social structures and seeking locally-based income generation are seen as complementary strategies that are the best way forward.

Learning from experience

What works

Monitoring how strategies, approaches and techniques perform is important to organisational learning. An NGO or other organisation that builds up a body on knowledge based on its experience can make use of it in planning the implementation of future projects. The knowledge is useful to other development organisations in the region as they can trial the different strategies and approaches and, in turn, assess their performance. This makes possible the replication of what works.

What works — strategies and approaches

MFFN partners have diverse strategies and many commonalities.

A number of successful strategies were identified by the Gwaunafiu meeting.

Learning 1:

Be there for the long term; be patient

Success in improving agriculture and rural livelihoods takes time.

The key is to:

- take a long-term approach
- view projects as evolving over time
- accept projects gradually extending into other sectors
- take account of the complexities of rural life.

Success requires an understanding that rural people have full lives, that they are busy. NGO projects that place too great a demand on people's time and energy are likely to encounter problems. The ideal approach is to make slow and steady progress over a relatively long time frame, within people's capacity to assimilate, especially when they are expected to assimilate new ideas or technologies.

Example: FSA Vanuatu has worked for 20 years on a program to breed working horses for agricultural use by smallholders.

The program involved many years of effort and has now moved to the stage were people are starting to buy the horses and put them to work to improve agricultural productivity.

Example: A number of youths in a KGA Solomon Islands livelihoods program were dropping out and were reported as failures as they drifted to town. Later, however, they returned and restarted their ventures.

They had gained maturity, skills and sometimes cash and were returning to farming with a new commitment.

The period of time used to measure the project's success had not been long enough.

Learning 2:

Integrate across sectors

All MFFN partners are looking at comprehensive change. They have moved into areas outside of agriculture per se in order to make their programs more relevant.

This means:

- MFFN partners might look at people's health as well as income generation
- include forestry and livestock with crop development
- support eco-tourism (FSA)
- savings and childcare (CBHC)
- food processing and marketing links (KGA).

The integrated approach takes account of people's complex and multifaceted lifestyles.

Example: In PNG, CBHC encouraged families to develop income generating activities to improve their livelihoods, including raising small livestock. But it was difficult for families to get loans – banks had closed in the Tari district (population 150 000) due to declining economic prosperity and increased insecurity.

CBHC responded by setting up a micro-bank for communities, issued passbooks and trained people to operate the system.

A PNG highland family and their CBHC, low cost, water tank

Learning 3:

Link food security and family health

A key strategy identified by MFFN partners was the production of a diverse range of foods for home consumption with sales of surplus at local markets.

Feeding the family first and maintaining good nutrition and health is emphasised by all MFFN partners. Export crops are also encouraged: cardamom, coffee, pepper and vanilla but they are considered a means to achieving other goals rather than an end in themselves.

Example: FSA Vanuatu has a spice network and trains farmers to grow pepper, vanilla and other spice crops.

At the same time the program encourages farmers to continue to maintain their food crops for domestic consumption and to plant only an amount of cash crop that they can maintain without taking too much time away from other family commitments.

Example: KGA Solomon Islands promotes sup-sup or kitchen gardens to make a wide variety of foods available to households.

Farmers can obtain open pollinated vegetable seeds from the Solomon Islands Planting Material Network for subsistence and other gardens.

Some farmers sell their produce in local markets but the main focus is to grow more local food for a healthy diet.

Learning 4:

Maintain a family focus

All MFFN partners work with families — the key unit for livelihood activities across Melanesia.

Many programs have taken a different approach and worked with entire communities. This has not always been successful, especially when income generation is involved. By contrast, organising a community by mobilising families into new livelihood activities can work.

In rural Melanesia families are the main units of production and a whole-family approach to livelihoods is very important. This is so even in programs that target youth or women, as they rarely succeed in the long term unless the entire family is involved.

Rural economies in Melanesia are mostly subsistence and local economy based and have proven resilient, even in times of stress.

Different approaches to working with families

MFFN partners:

- work with women, men or youth individually or as leaders of their families, or
- work with all family members as part of a larger community program.

The Partners use three distinct approaches: community mobilisation, clan-base development and networks that develop a 'community of common interests'.

A community meeting to celebrate CBHC programs

A PEDC-trained farmer with a clan-owned fish pond in Bougainville

Community mobilisation - CBHC

The community mobilisation approach is practiced by CBHC, PNG, and occasionally by other partners.

The approach is based on the whole-community development model:

1. CBHC engages with a community (which may be a number of clans) on invitation only
2. a committee is formed by the community
3. CBHC trains and supports individuals and families who become role models and resource people, specialising in different areas as required by the community (Fig. 5).

Certain activities involve the entire clan or community, such as repairing roads or selecting a village birth attendant for training. Other activities are aimed at families; for instance, individuals within each clan are chosen to become model farmers and demonstrate different livelihoods options to others.

For a community to be declared a 'CBHC community' all the families in the community must be practicing a range of activities related to improved health and quality of life — following a simple checklist that monitors progress of individual families.

Clan-based development, PEDC Bougainville

In central Bougainville communities are made up of a number of related clans living in dispersed hamlets. For PEDC's ASD, therefore, the clan rather than the community is the focus.

Clan members join an awareness program where they are encouraged to choose people for training as agriculture extension agents and to allocate parts of their land to different activities such as:

- reforestation
- permanent gardens
- livestock
- inland fisheries
- conservation of the environment.

The agents are expected to work only for their clan and not for the whole community.

This model has led to a very high rate of adoption of new agricultural technologies that were developed during the crisis with virtually no outside resources or assistance.

In both the CBHC and PEDC ASD models the clans and communities are expected to influence others by practical example and by actively helping one another.

Fig. 5 Community approach to engagement and spread of interventions

Community of common interest

KGA in Solomon Islands and FSA in Vanuatu focus more on individuals than the community.

They seek to interest active individuals and their families. Over time, these families form a 'community of common interest' in a widening network linked by a common endeavour.

The assumption is that they will gradually influence others in their vicinity and beyond (Fig. 6).

Members of the network work mostly as individuals but will respond to requests from other groups or entire communities. A key point is that the individuals or the community must request involvement in the program.

Strengths and weaknesses

The approaches have strengths and weakness.

Community mobilisation approach

The community mobilisation approach reaches more people faster and can lead to large-scale change.

For example, it has greater potential to build roads, schools or lobby for political change. It can also raise unrealistic expectations, create jealousy and disputes and result in failure, as has been the experience in Solomon Islands and elsewhere.

Community of interest approach

The community of interest approach allows for a more rapid expansion of programs into different areas as individuals hear about them and choose to become involved as needs arise. Individuals do not need to convince the whole community or get involved in frequently-complex decision making among community leaders.

A risk with the community of interest approach is that individuals may feel isolated in doing things differently from those around them and the result may not be as they had hoped. To avoid this, individuals in the same or different villages may form a group to carry out a common activity.

Either way, both approaches aim change the way of life for an increasing number of rural people.

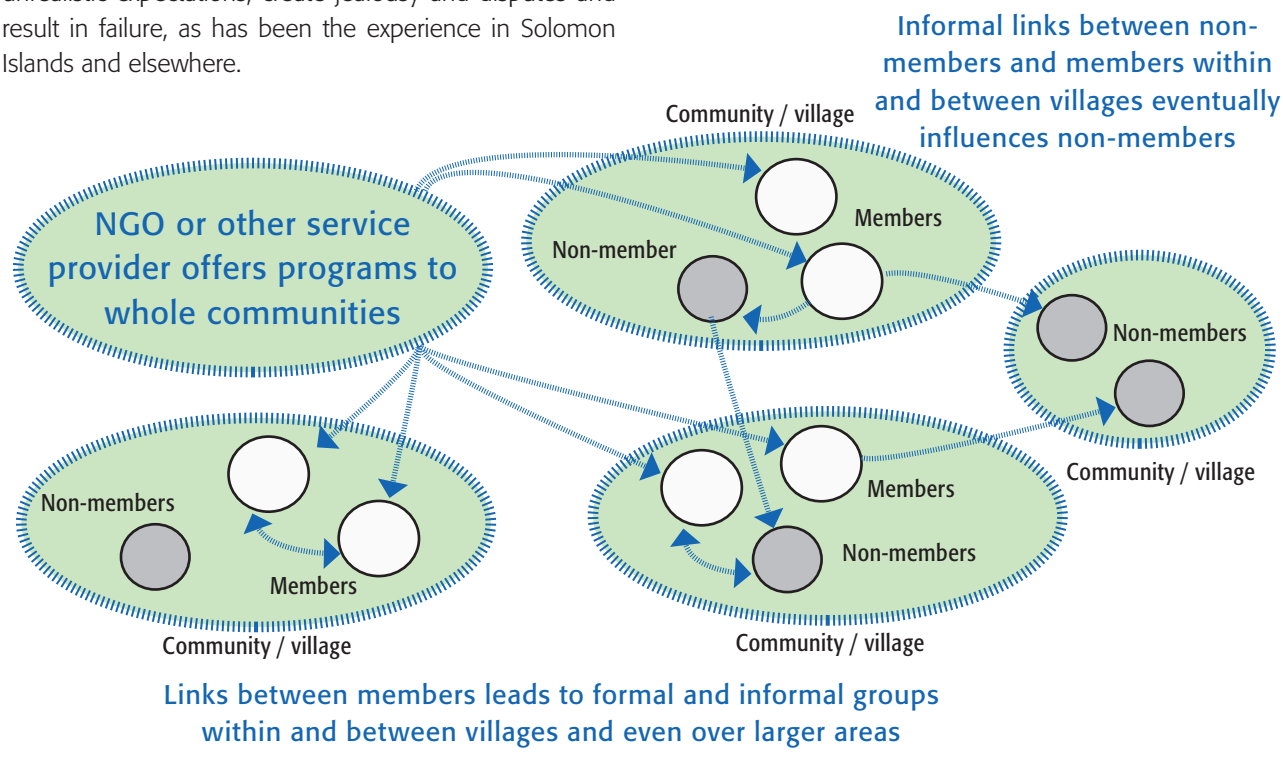

Fig. 6 Community of interest approach to community engagement and its spread

Identify an entry point

MFFN Partners have found different entry points that have served the purpose of responding to family and community needs:

- for CBHC the entry point is through its health program, with communities joining the program with the aim of improving the health of the community through a series of practical steps; later, CBHC explores more complex health issues including community well-being, mental health and socio-economic issues that might have a bearing on ill health
- for FSA the entry point is a request from farmers; FSA does not promote crops or technologies, it only respond to farmers' expressed needs; nor does FSA market produce: they only facilitate linkages between farmers and the private sector.
- for KGA the entry point is often through the supply of seeds after individuals have joined the KGA-supported Planting Material Network; after becoming PMN members farmers have the opportunity of joining programs on crop diversity and sustainable agriculture; the starting point is simple and practical — seeds that are useful for village agriculture and can be saved and replanted by farmers.
- for PEDC ASD the entry point is through awareness programs that lead to some clans sending members for training; it is partly demand driven but starts with an awareness program on environmental issues and self-reliance.

Learning 5:

Maintain a practical focus - do real things

The MFFN partners are identifying problems and addressing solutions, not just providing ideas. For example, each is advocating crop diversity and improved nutrition but they are doing this in practical ways — for instance, by linking supplies of vegetative planting material and seeds to the promotion of kitchen gardens.

The practical nature of the programs, which provide new technologies and hands-on training, has been critical to their success. Technologies need to be simple, appropriate, and strengthen self-reliance — not create dependence on inputs not available locally.

Examples of practical approaches include:

- KGA's sup-sup or kitchen garden program; KGA worked with the health services to provide practical training in setting up vegetable gardens to increase production and consumption of local foods, emphasising their nutritional benefit; infant growth was measured to record the impact of the program.
- FSA's small-scale egg program for farmers in remote areas; the program delivers 20 layer chickens and locally made feed to farmers and provides information on how to manage egg production and what profit farmers can expect to make.

A key finding of the partners has been that keeping programs small works well.

One of the difficulties identified at the Gwaunafiu meeting was that, when organisations become successful and programs grow, they face a 'creeping bureaucracy' that brings the risk of moving them away from their practical, hands-on work towards a more managerial style of operation.

Keeping a focus on small-scale, practical activities, while growing to meet increasing demand for their services is a challenge.

Learning 6:

Share planting materials through farmer networks

The sharing of planting materials — seeds, suckers, cuttings and tubers is an important strategy. Sharing involves collection, evaluation and redistribution and the introduction and screening of potentially useful exotic material.

KGA has put a lot of resources into developing a national farmer's network that shares planting materials. Other MFFN partners are adopting the KGA model, although on a smaller scale.

Learning 7:

Develop farming systems that introduce new methods

In collaboration with growers MFFN partners are testing new methods of food production which include:

- alley cropping
- clearing land for cultivation without burning the debris
- the integration of livestock into cropping systems.

An example is found in the PNG highlands where CBHC has developed the Koli demonstration farm where new methods are being tried that integrate cropping with the use of animal manures are being tried.

Koli farm serves as a resource centre for breeding livestock and multiplying planting materials.

On a smaller scale, individual farmers are being encouraged to develop community-based resource centres that will function as income-generating ventures that provide training and materials to other families.

In general, the partners prefer to use farmers to test and demonstrate new ideas rather than develop models or demonstration farms. This ensures that ideas are well tested and gives other farmers the confidence to try them.

Learning 8:

Train leaders and volunteers

A volunteer base is very important and is especially appreciated by partners as the present leaders were once volunteers.

MFFN partners nurture volunteerism in different ways:

- in Vanuatu, for example, FSA has established a network of 'lead farmers' who train other farmers on their farms and through their own example
- KGA has a voluntary attachment program for young people and makes use of the volunteer efforts of PMN members
- CBHC volunteers are identified within each community to assist the development of agriculture and healthcare systems; CBHC carries out training and awareness raising about their programs among local elders as a way of disseminating information about the projects, clarifying what support is available and about the responsibilities of participating communities.

An FSA lead farmer discusses a new taro variety with other farmers

Learning 9:

Youth: Influence attitudes through training opportunities

The inclusion of young people in the Partner's programs is always important. This is especially so in Melanesia where the youth 'bulge' forms such a large part of the population. In Solomon Islands, for instance, 70 per cent of the population is under 30 years of age.

A young man from Malaita with a local poultry house he has constructed by putting into practice lessons learned during KGA training on improved management of chickens

There are perceptions that young people, particularly young men, are not interested in village agriculture. The experience of the partners is that this is untrue. They have found that young people respond well to opportunities to engage in agricultural livelihoods and that the problem may be more the lack of viable options for young people who have been in education systems that do not prepare them for rural life.

Young people frequently become caught between the unrealistic expectations formed during years of formal education and the realities of an agricultural livelihood. The frustration that develops can lead to antisocial behaviour.

MFFN partners have developed different approaches to working with youth:

- the KGA approach has been to work with youth as leaders of their families
- FSA has an informal apprenticeship program for young farmers
- PEDC has a vocational training program for young people.

After two years of training young people as leaders of family-based livelihoods in livestock and agroforestry, KGA found that 80 per cent were continuing with their small business ventures. With the success came increased confidence, self-reliance and less desire to go to Honiara.

Learning 10:

Develop self-reliance and local markets

The partners focus on sustainable home food production first, with sales at local markets if there is any surplus to family needs. Such an approach is often missing in government programs.

The programs have a strong engagement with women because, traditionally, food production is more their responsibility. Export crops are not ignored but there is careful screening of options before any are recommended.

Marketing

There are fewer lessons to learn from marketing yet as it is a relatively new venture for all MFFN partners.

CBHC, KGA and PEDC are under pressure to assist farmers find links to markets and KGA and CBHC are developing various programs to link farmers with markets through different arrangements. It is uncertain how sustainable these approaches will be.

FSA has taken a different approach by drawing a clear line between farmer-to-farmer extension and marketing. The approach is to facilitate private sector partnerships, a move which has proven successful within the organisation's spice network. FSA trains and support farmers in production techniques developed by Venui Vanilla. The company offers to buy farmers' products provided they can reach the quality required.

The FSA opinion is that NGOs should not get involved in buying and selling but facilitate links to the private sector instead.

Learning 11:

Improve communication - the potential of email

Good internal communication and good communication between MFFN partners and donors is important.

Communications technologies for development

CBHC, KGA and PEDC have all made extensive use of HF (high frequency) radios to link field workers, farmers and volunteers in a communications network.

More recent are experiments with email. For PEDC and CBHC, an email service has been facilitated through support from MFFN working with Solomon Islands service providers PFNet (People First Networks), a provider of rural email that makes use of HF radio, and CRMF (Christian Radio Missionary Fellowship) in Papua New Guinea.

PEDC has an email facility that makes use of HF radio powered by solar power to communicate in an area without telephone or postal services

In the Solomons, through close collaboration with PFNet, KGA has linked one of their field offices with PestNet, a regional technical information service for the management of plant pests and diseases.

Learning 12:

Support initiatives in the field

The partners provide various types of support to help people adopt and adapt new technologies and ideas.

This includes:

- follow-up visits after training by lead farmers
- volunteers
- resource people or field workers
- farmer look-and-learn visits
- farmer meetings
- conferences
- diversity fairs of plant genetic resources.

All Partners provide on-farm demonstration that utilise the help of volunteers, lead farmers and farmer field schools. One-off workshops have very little impact on livelihoods and food security and supporting and encouraging farmers when back in their villages is essential.

PEDC has an email facility that makes use of HF radio powered by solar power to communicate in an area without telephone or postal services

Learning 13:

Make clear agreements

A final lesson was about making clear agreements with individuals and organisations with which the partners form an association.

Various types of agreements are used to detail the responsibilities of participating parties. When agreements are made with a sense of mutual trust and common objectives, the agreements help to prevent unrealistic expectations and provide a reference for resolving disputes and misunderstandings.

Agreements should be:

- simple
- written in language understood by all parties.

Different types of agreements are used by MFFN partners, depending on the circumstances within which they work:

- with organic farmers participating in their spice network, FSA makes use of an agreement that specifies what type of agricultural practices farmers will use; they follow-up with regular inspections and record keeping by FSA field workers
- KGA uses 'family agreements' when selecting young people for training; these outline commitments, roles and responsibilities within the family to support the young person and detail when the trainees will apply what they have learned and what they can expect from joining the KGA program; KGA always insists on detailed project agreements when entering into partnerships with other agencies; these provide the longer-tern vision, immediate objectives and outline the commitments of the partners to the collaboration.

Chairman of a farmers' organisation signs a partnership agreement with KGA

What works…

Be there for the long term; be patient

Integrate across sectors

Link food security and family health

Maintain a family focus

Maintain a practical focus - do real things

Share planting materials through farmer networks

Develop farming systems that introduce new methods

Train leaders and volunteers

Youth: Influence attitudes through training opportunities

Develop self-reliance and local markets

Improve communication - the potential of email

Support initiatives in the field

Make clear agreements

What does not work

Learning for development organisations comes from understanding what does not work as well as what is successful. Understanding why a particular strategy, approach or technique fails to succeed reveals limitations attributable to utility, costs, time constraint, appropriateness to situation and culture. For NGOs, this saves expense, time and energy by knowing what to avoid in future.

What does not work — problems in the field

Finding 1:

Poor information

Community expectations of the benefits they will receive from working with NGOs can be unrealistic. Sometimes, this is caused by exaggerated or incorrect information from the NGO reaching the village or from lead farmers.

Field workers, farmers, volunteers and others in contact with the community need to take care when presenting information and ensure that it is done in a way that does not create false or misleading expectations.

For many rural people, aid delivered through government services has created expectations of a 'handout', a subsidy or a free-ride. This creates aid-dependency and a 'cargo' mentality (as demonstrated by the Melanesian cargo cults of the past). Many aid programs, or people's opinion of them, have led to the belief that personal gain is the objective rather than raising family or community standards.

MFFN partners struggle with these issues. They try to give accurate information and create realistic expectations. Partners attempt to separate those who are only interested in handouts and to nurture those individuals or communities with a real commitment to self-development and a willingness to help themselves and others. It is a difficult balancing act.

Finding 2:

Poor leadership

Maintaining good quality work among field workers is difficult.

Field workers need more than technical knowledge — they need to be leaders, to be sensitive to gender issues and have a strong commitment to the strategies that the organisation has found to work, especially farmer-to-farmer approaches.

This is not easy for small organisations. The partners have found that volunteers who develop increased skills through experience will eventually become paid staff, good quality leaders and trainers. There is no fast way to instil these values and approaches — they are best learned through experience and mentoring.

Finding 3:

Failure to measure impact

Measuring changes to livelihoods, the environment, food security, health and the sustainability of a program is difficult despite its importance to all of the partners.

Changes in societies may be linked to wider trends that are only partly influenced by NGO programs.

The range of skills required to set up monitoring systems, to collect qualitative and quantitative data and to analyse it is often absent at the field level or elsewhere in NGO management. The partners often assess impact by relying on their intuition without evidence collected objectively to support it.

None the less, monitoring can be done and is a feature of several of the partner's programs. Interviews are possible, surveys can be carried out and stories and case studies collected.

More evidence of the effectiveness and benefits of these grass-roots organisations would be useful in confirming or dispelling assumptions and to prove what they are doing is worthwhile.

Finding 4:

Difficulty in sustaining short-term projects

A key problem in development assistance is to bring about long-term change within the short-term funding opportunities provided by donors.

Most NGOs are unable to raise funds by local or overseas subscriptions, so rely on donor funding. Donors often expect rapid results, although the lessons learned by NGO's indicate that sustainable change takes time to achieve.

Another problem is that the expertise of NGOs is mostly field-based, being made up of farmers with little ability to write proposals and liaise with donors to get them funded.

Finding 5:

The different agendas and approaches of international donors and NGOs

International donors and NGOs have their own priorities, ideas and procedures for getting the work done.

The relationship between donors and the smaller NGO funding recipients can be problematic and lead to duplication of effort as each follows its own methods. There is the possibility that key staff of local organisations will be recruited by the larger organisations, seriously damaging local capacity.

Perhaps a more serious issue is that local NGOs become 'donor driven' rather than responding to the priorities important to their constituents. They veer towards the donors' interests, which may not necessarily be the same. This can be a challenge for MFFN partners, especially as they seek funds to maintain their organisations.

Finding 6:

Difficult in getting gender balance

With the exception of KGA, men dominate the MFFN partners' organisations. This is unfortunate because women carry out the majority of agricultural operations in Melanesia, especially those to do with food production.

In general, women find it easier to work with other women so there is a need to train women as field workers. Organisations should be aware that employment for women brings more difficulties than it does for men due to social and other constraints. They should be sympathetic to these differences.

The partners have tried to address these issues in different ways, but there is a need to continue to create greater gender balance:

- KGA has an informal policy of recruiting women as extension workers, especially in programs involving food crops — the core work of KGA
- CBHC believes that the family links of their mostly male volunteers facilitates more open communication and dissemination of the project's aims and benefits among women in the community; they have found social barriers to women's movement and communication, a problem that they are trying to overcome by having more female staff.

Field workers, farmers, volunteers and others in contact with the community need to take care when presenting information and ensure that it is done in a way that does not create false or misleading expectations.

Learning from experience

NGOs & government

Government has responsibility for the delivery of services over much of Melanesia, however the capacity of government to deliver has diminished. In these circumstances it is important that NGOs and government work together.

The relationship of NGOs and government

Since colonial times it has been the responsibility of government to provide extension services in support of agricultural development. However, across Melanesia, there has been a gradual and at times drastic reduction in government capacity to do this. Services are in decline, especially in remote areas. In response, NGOs, including the MFFN partners, are attempting to meet farmer's needs.

The relationships of the partners and government varies:

- in Vanuatu there is close collaboration between DARD and FSA
- by contrast, PEDC and CBHC in Papua New Guinea have little connection to government agencies for agricultural development (CBHC has strong links with the Department of Health)
- the relationship between government agencies and KGA is different again — KGA is recognised by government but there is a lack of close collaboration.

This situation has, from time to time, created misunderstandings — particularly over access to donor funds. NGOs argue they are the organizations with the capability to reach rural people while the government agencies of agricultural development claim that this is what they are mandated to do to. In reality, the two should work together although differences in operation could bring conflict.

Lessons learned by the partners in working with governments are summarised below, as are ideas to improve matters.

Lesson 1:

Realise that times have changed

In Bougainville and Southern Highlands provinces, PNG, and in Solomon Islands, communities are still recovering from years of civil unrest that brought the collapse of government services. During these times, NGOs, including MFFN partners and others, filled the vacuum.

In many instances, NGO efforts have been well supported by communities but, unfortunately, this is not always recognised by government departments in the post-conflict era. Many departments have yet to realise that the situation has changed and would like to see a return to the status quo.

There is little recognition of the failures of previous government policies and programs and of the desire for change in rural communities. The attitude of government departments is still 'give us the resources and we will do the job'. Further progress can only be made if the problems that existed before the crises, which prevented services reaching rural areas, are analysed and understood.

The need for change is demonstrated in rural Bougainville where the Government withdrew during the civil war and DPI (now DAL) became defunct. NGOs such as PEDC took up the challenge and developed new ways of operating and developed a volunteer network. They were remarkably successful; however, in the post-crisis environment, government services have been resourced but they have yet to reach remote rural areas.

Many NGOs have not been adequately recognised and feel marginalised, even through the draft Bougainville constitution, the result of extensive consultation with rural communities, requires government departments and NGOs to work together to provide services and for NGOs to be funded and involved in policy decisions.

Lesson 2:

Move towards better consultation and planning

Governments need to consult more with communities when developing plans for rural livelihoods and food security. They should ask NGOs to facilitate the process — there are examples in other sectors where this is happening with positive outcomes.

> Example: CBHC has collaborated in the development of the National Village Health Volunteer System, a component of the National Health Program.

CBHC is a member of working groups established to draw up the program which is modelled on that developed by CBHC in Tari and Western Highlands.

A difference of approach

The traditional government agricultural extension focus is on cash crops, often because of pressure to increase economic growth. This has potential to undermine food security and rural livelihoods, especially when markets change, conflict arises and other disruptive changes occur.

The approach of NGOs is more diverse and their efforts straddle a number of sectors of the economy as well as government departments ranging from health, agriculture, youth, commerce, trade and environment.

Governments do not always acknowledge that the views and policies of NGOs are a reflection of the concerns of rural peoples.

Different approaches are demonstrated:

- in Bougainville where there has been no effective consultation with the people on how to develop agriculture in the post-conflict period; the people's choice is clearly for an integrated approach but donors have not supported this; for instance, UNDP is supporting cocoa rehabilitation on a scale that is of concern to people involved in sustainable livelihoods and food security
- in Solomon Islands where the policy of the government is to work cooperatively with NGOs in the agriculture sector, KGA would like to make greater use of the technical expertise of DAL; at the provincial level KGA has been able to form useful relationships with DAL, sharing equipment and logistical support; for its part, KGA would like to develop joint programns with DAL.

Lesson 3:

Remove obstacles to donor support for NGOs

Although not universal, many donors require government agreement before they will fund NGO projects or programs. In some countries, getting this endorsement can be problematic.

There should be clear guidelines how this is done. There is a need for transparency. Additionally, in a large country like Papua New Guinea it may be hard for rural NGOs to get on the agenda of national agencies involved in planning.

Lesson 4:

Improve NGO-government coordination

Across Melanesia, donors are encouraging NGOs and governments, national and provincial, to improve coordination and there have been some positive results in all the island states.

Some MFFN partners have demonstrated that effective partnerships with government are possible. In Vanuatu, good will between FSA and the government and a desire to get on with each other has resulted in mutual understanding and close collaboration. This may be a lesson for all the MFFN partners. Perhaps, where this is not happening, mediation could help.

FSA and the DARD work so closely that the separation is sometimes hard to see. FSA members:

- sit on national steering committees
- have good working relationships with senior staff on administrative and policy matters
- work with field officers in the rural areas.

Both groups recognise each other's strengths and weakness as well as the advantages that a close relationship can bring.

As mentioned already, CBHC has had considerable success in collaborating with national and provincial governments in the health sector in both the PNG Southern and Western Highlands. However, CBHC has had less engagement with the livelihoods/agriculture sector due to the absence of functioning agricultural agencies in these provinces.

Together, CBHC and the Papua New Guinea Government have:

- collaborated in the development of the National Village Health Volunteer System, a component of the National Health Program, with CBHC a member of the working groups established to draw up the program
- run collaborative training courses for health volunteers
- agreed to collaborate in a 44-ward model health program in Western Highlands

- agreed that CBHC will receive funding from the Ministry of Health for activities in Western Highlands.

The problem of coordination is not only between NGOs and government agencies; it is also between NGOs, both local and international.

All MFFN partners work with vocational training centres or with the private sector and with international NGOs. Sometimes, relationships become strained due to different policies, different ways of working and other factors. There is also a tendency for government to be more accommodating to international NGOs than local ones, as they have the funds.

Attachment

Attached is a register of participants who attended the Melanesian Farmer First Network Gwaunafiu meeting, 2004.

Participants

The 2004 meeting of the Melanesian Farmer First Network at Gwaunafiu Farmer Field School, Malaita Province, Solomon Islands, was attended by members of participating organisations from four regions of Melanesia: Solomon Islands, PNG, Bougainville (a province of PNG) and Vanuatu.

Vanuatu

George Bumseng, Farmer Support Association
Pedro Loughmon, Vanuatu Department of Agriculture Extension Service

Papua New Guinea

Southern Highlands
Joseph Warai, CBHC Tari
John Vail, MFFN adviser — TerraCircle consultant
Herbert Dimbalu, Southern Highlands Provincial Government

Bougainville

Linus Sia, PEDC
Martin Kewari, PEDC
Otto Namson, PEDC
Joachim Miarama, BOCIDA

Solomon Islands

Kastom Gaden Association:
Roselyn Kabu, Inia Barry, Elson Mona, Nancy Malu, Emma Stone, Karen Lummis
Busurata Farmer Field School:
Lionel Maeliu, John Sala, Janette Takari
Community Based Rural Training Centres — **Brother Jack Kalisto**
Church of Melanesia, Auki Diosese (Wednesday and Thursday mornings only)

Australia

Graham Jackson, Pestnet and TerraCircle
Michel Fanton, Seed Savers Network, Terracircle associate
Chris Chevalier, APHEDA, TerraCircle associate
Genevieve Walker, John Keller, Oxfam Australia

Workshop facilitation and logistics team:

Tony Jansen — TerraCircle
Kirsten Maenu
Ben Okali
Steve Amasi
Dorreen Kavaku