

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY POWERS DATA COLLECTION IN THE PACIFIC

FO4ACP Success Story : Farmers' organizations in the Pacific succeed in conducting surveys despite the Covid-19 restrictions



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Farmers' Organizations for
Africa, Caribbean and Pacific

**Digital Solutions
in Agriculture**

Introduction

Digital tools including the internet, mobile technologies/devices, data analytics, digitally delivered services and apps are revolutionizing agriculture and food systems. These tools generate immediate benefits by enhancing users' communication and facilitating access to new sources of information. In the Pacific, PIFON, an umbrella organisation for national farmers' organizations (FOs) in the Pacific region, and IFAD capitalized on these benefits to pilot a survey as part of the FO4ACP programme. This was the first time a digital agricultural platform was used by four FOs who participated in a pilot survey to determine members' needs.

The mobile app and web platform was designed to be a one-stop-shop digital agriculture platform that caters to everyone in the agricultural value chain. Moving into digitalization of the data and information collection, a first pilot survey was launched between June 2021 and August 2021 to accelerate data collection from FOs to support the baseline of the programme's logical framework and collect data to determine how they may improve services to members. The survey was filled out by FOs as well as their members.

Collecting data

The initial plan was to conduct the survey in the field via telephone or through a questionnaire.

However, with the onset of COVID-19 and ensuing restrictions, implementation was delayed. FOs in the Pacific were confronted with the same restrictions faced across the world. FOs were in a state of shock and experienced slow-down and in some cases a complete halt in their activities. Government policies blocked planned activities and services like trainings, knowledge exchange and advice to producers, all of which are indispensable for FOs. As a result of these unforeseen challenges, PIFON was keen to adopt a means of conducting the survey in a manner that was quick and less taxing on FOs, hence the decision to use the TraSeable Solutions digital app, an existing app for which the survey was designed and accommodated the needs of the pilot.

For ease of use, surveys were available in English, Fiji iTaukei and Solomon Island Pidgin. Trainings on the use of the app began in May 2021 and data collection started the following month. FOs involved in this pilot were the Fiji Crop and Livestock Council, Nature's Way Cooperative, PNG Women in Agriculture Development Fund, and Kastom Gaden Association. In total, 6% of the members of the aforementioned FOs participated in the survey.

The questionnaire was designed on Google Forms and uploaded by TraSeable Solutions on the app. The app can be downloaded onto a smart phone or tablet from Google Play free of charge. FOs then conducted the survey and data was uploaded to servers managed by TraSeable Solutions. Farmers were encouraged to download the app themselves, however internet reception was not always good. In these cases, the survey was administered by paper or phone and FO representatives transferred them onto the app.

Findings

All participating FOs confirmed that the app was significantly helpful in administering the baseline and membership survey. The app proved easy to use both offline and online and enabled FOs to update their membership register and better understand their members' needs which included access to markets, and the need for agricultural inputs and trainings.

Thanks to the survey the Fiji Crop and Livestock Council was able to update the profiles of 2000 taro farmers on its register for the first time since 2016. The app also proved to be a useful tool for farmers who were not consistently updating their farm register to collect data and monitor their daily activities.

In addition, the survey exposed some of the negative impact pests were having on produce. Nature's Way Cooperative was able to respond to the negative impact of fruit flies and supplied farmers with 84 litres of protein bait to help eradicate them from at a rate that would not have been possible without the app.

Other positive results include:

- Introducing FOs to digitization and demonstrate its potential as an asset in agriculture
- Providing FOs with an updated membership list and digital profile of their members.
- Introducing an efficient mechanism to collect data from members.
- Enhancing the capacity of FOs to support members due to information collected.



Main Challenges

Due to COVID-19 restrictions all trainings were virtual. The combination of learning how to apply a new tool as well as having training administered virtually proved challenging. COVID-19 restrictions also impacted the implementation of the survey in the field. Although those that participated in the survey formed a representative sample, a 6 percent rate participation is still very low. In addition, small FOs with limited resources may not be able to afford annual subscription. PIFON currently handles the annual subscription on behalf of its members.

Despite these costs, it is worth noting the significant gains possible through the app in the long run. Investing in the app will save time and resources for FOs in carrying out administrative functions, implement activities, link members to the market, disseminate information to members and collect data.

Future Prospects

The success of the pilot study was due in large part to the dedication and hard work of FOs. FO staff were open to using the app and worked hard to understand its use. Despite challenges, they proved committed to participate in the process and collect data from the field.

The goal of using the TraSeable app was to facilitate effective execution of the pilot survey despite time and resource constraints. The app not only succeeded in this respect, but also exposed FOs to the potential of digital tools when used appropriately. As a result of this positive experience, FOs that participated in the pilot are keen to continue using the app. Furthermore, it has generated interest among other PIFON members as well. PIFON continues to encourage FOs to embrace these digital tools as it saves them a lot of time and resources when gathering much needed information directly from farmers.

In today's world, digital literacy has the potential to transform lives. It is imperative that FOs have the means to adopt ICT tools that are relevant and appropriate for their context and exercise patience and flexibility as adoption of new tools takes time.

About PIFON

PIFON is an umbrella organisation for national FOs in the Pacific region. As the regional farmer organisation network, PIFON exists to create linkages between national farmer organisations and improve the flow of relevant information and resources to facilitate the participation of rural households in income earning agriculture. Its membership comprises a reach of more than 85,000 farmers.

PIFON's objectives translate into 3 broad types of activities:

- Enhancing viability and sustainability of national FOs;
- Providing practical information to member farmers to enable them to better participate in income generating activities; and
- Providing practical information to member farmers to enable them to adopt more sustainable production practices.

For more check out: <https://pacificfarmers.com>
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