

## **PGS: Revolutionising Organics in the Pacific. Enhancing Pacific farmer's access to certification.**

STEPHEN DAVID HAZELMAN<sup>1</sup>

Key words: Pacific, Islands, organic, Participatory Guarantee Systems, livelihoods, poverty

### **Author's Background**

Organic Extension Systems Officer – Pacific Organic & Ethical Trade Community (POETCom) He has many years of experience with farmer groups and small holders, is a founder of POETCom and the Pacific Islands Extension Network (PIEN).

### **Summary**

*POETCom has actively sought options that not only provide a robust and recognised certification system but also align with the holistic development objectives of the Pacific Organic Standard, serve the needs and provide opportunities for Pacific producers. Three PGS were piloted to test their relevance and appropriateness in the Pacific Island context.*

- i. To supply organic papaya (Western Fiji) to local markets and export*
- ii. To supply virgin coconut oil (VCO) from an outer island into Main Island markets (Cicia, Lau, Fiji)*
- iii. To supply coco-sap sugar from outer island communities in Kiribati for supply of regional markets.*

*The PGS has captured the hearts and minds of the communities involved. Cicia and Abaiang are both moving to declare their entire islands organic and managed under their PGS. This has engaged the traditional leaders, village governance structures, local schools, government officers and the whole community in the process. The communities are seeing organics as a way to ensure food security, provide income generation opportunities, protect their fragile islands and are already looking forward to opportunities for organic tourism development.*

### **Background**

The Pacific Organic Standard (POS) launched in 2008 encompasses such pressing issues for the Pacific region as climate change, recognition of culture, traditional practice and social justice. The prohibitive cost of 3rd party certification combined with the small production base and logistical challenges of export from small isolated islands led the Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community (POETCom) to actively seek options that not only provide a robust and recognised certification system but also align with the holistic development objectives of the POS, serve the needs and provide opportunities for Pacific producers. PGS were piloted to test their relevance and appropriateness in the Pacific Island context.

### **Main chapter**

In the Pacific region, organic production is both traditional and new. It is traditional in the sense that the majority of producers to this day use tried and tested practices handed down from generation to generation that are generally in harmony with the environment and with modern organic principles. It is new in that Pacific countries and territories are starting to understand the benefits of certification for obtaining access to markets, and the need for research and training to develop the sector and generate much needed livelihoods for their people.

3<sup>rd</sup> party certification, predominantly group certification, has expanded dramatically in the last 3-5 years but this has done little to build capacity of farmers or improve organic production methods with organic largely being defined by what farmers don't do (use chemicals) rather than by what they do (proactive soil enhancement etc).

---

<sup>1</sup>Stephen David Hazelman, Organic Extension Systems Officer, Pacific Organic & Ethical Trade Community(POETCom), c/- Secretariat of the Pacific Community, PMB Suva Fiji: stephenh@spc.int

POETCom, the peak body for organics in the Pacific region is broad based and multisectoral with representation from organic farmers, farmer organizations, traders, Governments, academic and research institutions, NGOs, private sector businesses and regional technical support agencies such as FAO and SPC.

POETcom advocates organics as a holistic approach to development which addresses many key areas of concern for our island nations: economic development; environmental protection; improved health; and opportunities for our smallholder farmers to link into global export markets. Certification plays a vital role in this but the major challenges faced by small holder farmers in the Pacific region is the distances from markets and the high cost of 3<sup>rd</sup> party certification.

For organic agriculture to move forward and reap its full developmental benefits POETCom felt that certification needed to be more tailored to our needs and to assist build capacity of the farmers involved as well build a local market base. The PGS model appeared to work well with the objectives of POETCom as active participation on the part of the stakeholders results in greater empowerment but also greater responsibility – there is a high priority placed on knowledge and capacity building of producers and consumers, ideal for the rural communities of the Pacific.

POETCom began investigating PGS as an option to address some of these constraints and provide opportunities for isolated farmers through:

- a. Reduced cost of certification
- b. Increased number of farmers and land under organic production and development of local value chains
- c. Build capacity of all involved – something that is very limited under 3<sup>rd</sup> party certification
- d. Bringing farmers together and everyone learns from each other.

POETCom has established a regional PGS programme whereby approved PGS can be licensed to use the “Organic Pasifika” Mark on their products to assist their marketing within the region – all Pacific Island countries and territories have adopted the Pacific Organic Standard and embraced PGS for trade within the region.



**Figure 1: „Organic Pasifika Guaranteed by“ PGS regional mark**

With funding support from the International Fund for Agriculture (IFAD) POETCom is currently implementing a project entitled “Enhancing smallholder Pacific farmers’ access to high value markets by obtaining the appropriate and recognised organic certification”.

Two of the communities focused on, Cicia Island in Fiji and Abaiang in Kiribati, are extremely isolated and due to their isolation, poor connection and small production capacity 3<sup>rd</sup> party certification is not a viable option. Both have a once a week small plane(14 seats) connection to their mainlands and in the case of Cicia a boat that travels there (unreliably)once a month.

The IFAD project aims to support development of organics in these islands through Participatory Guarantee Schemes to build local, inter island and regional value chains.

The projects pilot projects include:

- i. To supply organic papaya (Western Fiji) to local markets including the tourism/hospitality industry in the direct vicinity while up scaling for export

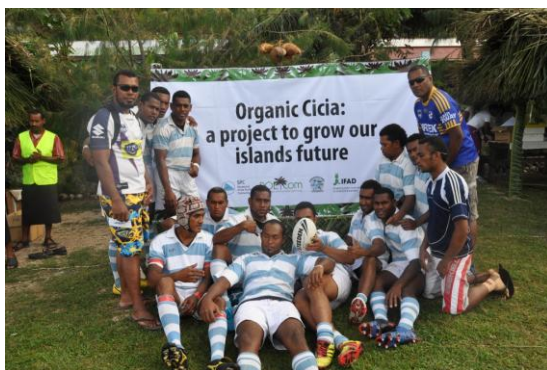
- ii. To supply virgin coconut oil (VCO) from Cicia (an outer island) into Main Island markets (Fiji)
- iii. To supply coco-sap sugar from outer island communities in Kiribati for supply of regional markets in Fiji.

While still in implementation the development of the PGS has captured the hearts and minds of the communities involved. Cicia and Abaiang are both moving to declare their entire islands organic and managed under their PGS. This has engaged the traditional leaders, village governance structures, local schools, government officers and the whole community in the process. The communities are seeing organics as a way to ensure food security, provide income generation opportunities, protect their fragile islands and are already looking forward to opportunities for organic tourism development.

### **Case Study of Community Engagement on Cicia Island:**

Following initial training in PGS a body known as Cicia Organic Monitoring Agency (COMA) was formed to implement the PGS, collecting all relevant community information that was to be used to get the island officially certified organic. The Committee engaged all sectors of the community, women, producers and the community traditional leadership, the Chairman of COMA is the local Church Minister, the Government agricultural extension officer is also engaged as the certification manager for COMA. The Principle of Cicia High School is also playing a critical role in COMA and ensuring that students are involved in all aspects of implementing the Organic work including documentation of farms and mapping and joining the organic production training workshops through the agriculture curriculum as well as doing the quality testing of the virgin coconut oil produced as part of their science programme. Senior commerce students also engaged in a process to develop a business plan for COMA giving them the real practical experience and an opportunity to monitor over time the business plan implementation and learn from this. Cicia's Virgin Coconut Oil was initially marketed to an up market resort Spa on Fiji's main island, COMA is also developing a permanent market presence in Fiji's capital city Suva for root crops and other products from the island leveraging Cicia's "Diaspora" in Suva.

The Committee initiated novel ways to raise awareness of organics including sports competitions which served to raise awareness of organic and also to improve food security. The now annual event started with 10 rugby and 10 netball teams competing for prize money and trophies, teams were invited from other nearby islands to compete and the 'entry fee' for Cicia teams was fulfilling certain farm and organic production administration requirements and planting a certain number of traditional food crops as part of a connected food security initiative.



**Figure 2: "Organic Sports" competition.**



**Figure 3: Yam planting for competition entrance fee**

The interest created by declaring the Island of Cicia Organic and linking sports has resulted in a massive planting scheme for men and women who participated with over 20,000 yams, 37,000 taro and 36,000 cassava were planted plus other staple crops. Yams and Cassava are especially important in times of natural disasters such as cyclones and extreme weather events which climate change models predict will be more frequent and stronger in the Pacific region. Other islands who participated in the event, Rotuma and Mago, are also now interested in obtaining organic certification and taking action on their own islands to ensure ongoing food security.

With the PGS certification moving to completion COMA saw the possibilities to use organics as a framework for other development activities. The island had been badly deforested by previous logging activities and to contribute to the rehabilitation of their island engaged in a national "One Million Trees" programme with the aim to reforest the island. The aim then was to build on this effort and work with the national Forestry Department for a larger reforestation project and in line with organic standards improves biodiversity focusing on native trees and trees that can provide non wood products such as nuts and flowers for essential oils.



**Figure 4: One Million Trees Project**

COMA is discussing possibilities for future development of eco/organic tourism which is in turn prompting POETCom to develop complementary standards to the POS for tourism and hospitality. While this is a medium term goal for COMA it is seen as a real opportunity for employment creation for the islands youth.

The Pacific has many development projects and small communities such as Cicia are often on the receiving end of such projects or efforts. Sometimes a sense of fatigue an even powerlessness over the impact and comings and goings of these projects, researchers and consultants can develop in communities. With their PGS in place and a strong whole of island commitment to organics COMA is now discussing developing an island development plan as a way of managing the various plans projects and activities and ensuring that interventions by Government, NGOs or donors are coordinated and address the needs and priorities of Cicia and support the islands commitment to maintaining their organic integrity and protecting the island for future generations.

### **Core messages and conclusions**

Developing organic agriculture in isolated Pacific islands is challenging and moving organics in the Pacific from an 'organic by default' mentality to a proactive farming system can be met through effective PGS. PGS can

also provide a robust organic guarantee and can assist in developing local markets. It can also be used for selected export markets.

Even more importantly it can be used as a holistic development tool, particularly when embraced by traditional leadership and governance structures and full community engagement is facilitated. PGS can serve as a catalyst for community engagement and vision building; capacity building and farmer empowerment; improved production and marketing and environmental protection. The case study of Cicia Island in Fiji captured in the short documentary "Cicia: Organic Island" provides an example of how community can use organics and PGS to form the basis of a whole island approach to development taking on their greatest challenges, using organic to galvanise resources, build community cohesion and take control of their present and future.