

SKILLS FOR AGRIBUSINESS

Narrative Report: January - June 2022

INTRODUCTION

This report provides an update on the activities implemented by Vanuatu Skills Partnership's (hereafter the Partnership) Skills for Agribusiness (SfA) workstream, in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), during the period January - June 2022.

Since the closure of international borders in March 2020 and the significant reduction in income from the tourism sector, the Government of Vanuatu has prioritised the agribusiness sector as a source of recovery and adaptation.

In February 2022, the SfA workstream planned a series of skills activities to be delivered through the provincial Skills Centres and on Ambae between March and June 2022. Our planned activities were designed to support the production of vanilla, pepper, seed banks, fruit and vegetables and honey, as well as to promote farm management, market access, inclusive agriculture, and meal improvement/ healthy eating.

CONTEXT

In early March 2022, Vanuatu recorded its first case of community transmission of COVID-19. In response, the Government of Vanuatu declared a nationwide lockdown, restricting domestic and international travel. These restrictions have had a significant impact on the implementation plans of the SfA workstream over the reporting period and many activities had to be suspended. This includes:

- Coaching activities with the inclusive Agriculture Farmers
- Farm-to-School (F2S) coaching activities with Ambaebulu School
- F2S workshop and coaching with Kamewa Bilingual School
- Coaching with vanilla farmers at Aneityum

While several key activities could not go ahead, the SfA workstream was able to re-orient its focus to assist the National and Provincial Agriculture and Food Security response activities in partnership with the provincial DARD team, particularly over the period from March to May. In addition, local farmers continued working on their farms during the crisis and many have been unaffected. In fact, some of the farmers the Partnership is supporting, have seen an increase in their farm activities as they were asked to provide food crops to the emergency response teams.

PARTNERSHIP STATUS & CO-CONTRIBUTIONS

On 27th May 2022, the Partnership signed a partnership agreement with DARD to jointly develop these areas of production with DARD contributing a total of 5,400,000vt. In addition, the following co-investments were made:

Tafea co-contribution:

- DARD Tafea - 290,600vt in tools and equipment towards the vanilla workshop on Tanna

Torba co-contribution:

- Department of Fisheries – VT 30,000 for tilapia fish
- CLO – 12,000vt for license for fishing association
- Community support – 10,000vt for nursery clean-up

Malampa co-contribution:

- DARD Malampa supplied 1,550 pepper seedlings to Patrick Joe, Partnership pepper coach, to distribute to Lavalsal, North East Malekula pepper farmers x 300vt = 465,000 vt.
- DARD Malampa supplied 1,000 poly bags to Metkun pepper farmers x 9vt = 9000vt.
- VRTC supported a small pepper nursery in North West B to assist farmers in this area. So far 500 pepper seedlings have been distributed to farmers x 300vt = 150,000vt.
- Department of Industry Malampa supplied a grinding machine and a sealer machine for farmers in North West A Malekula as well as packaging materials and new labels for the Malekula pepper products = 38,000vt.
- For Malekula seeds, DARD Malampa supported the initiative with the allocation of a field assistant who works with the farmers to support their work. The Malampa Handicraft Centre Manager also supports the initiative by providing a space for farmers to weigh their seeds, convene, and sell their products.
- Malampa Skills Centre covid support was up to VT 794,510 – VT 500,000 invested in Malampa seeds and distributed as part of recovery

Sanma co-contribution:

Please see Skills for Health workstream report for details of partner contributions to the Farm to Hospital initiative in Santo.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE SKILLS FOR AGRIBUSINESS WORKSTREAM JAN-JUN 2022

Participation in Partnership-supported skills training and market access activities

Participation	Skills Providers Engaged
66 women	5 men
120 men	
4 people with disabilities	
(1 woman, 3 men)	

SUMMARY OF KEY RESULTS ACHIEVED IN THE FIRST HALF OF 2022

Development of the pepper sector and the production of White and Black Pepper on Malekula island

Since 2020, DARD and contracted skills providers under the Partnership have invested in the development of the pepper sector in Northwest of Malekula, particularly around the community of Malua Bay. After almost two years of investment, we have observed a considerable increase in the area being used to cultivate pepper and more and more farmers are expressing interest in joining the sector. There are currently 64 registered active pepper farmers (12 women, 52 men) compared to 42 farmers just a few years ago and 43 additional interested farmers yet to be registered. There are now 7,716 plants planted over 53 hectares, with the age of the plants ranging from just a few months to 5 years old.

The 34 farmers with grown pepper harvesting farms are already producing pepper, selling 230 kgs in 2021 and 300 kgs in 2022 with a generated income of roughly VT 710,000. This pepper was sold at VT 2,000 per kilogram of black peppercorn and VT 5,000 per kilo of ground black pepper.

There are 3 people with a disability involved in growing pepper. There is a growing interest in the cultivation of pepper by young people and all farmers acknowledge the current high price of pepper per kilo, which is supporting increase in incomes and livelihoods.



Kwaliti Havest + Kwaliti Proses =

Kwaliti Pepa Maket (Malua Bay-Malekula 2022)

Figure 1: Pepper producers applying pepper drying techniques for product quality

“Thank you so much for the pruning scissors, pot, strainer, file and knife that will assist me greatly in taking care of my crops and processing my harvested pepper.” Joseph Kalmadu, Pepper farmer with a disability, Northwest Area B of Malekula

Development of seed production and the seed bank model on Malekula island

Immediately after TC Harold in April 2020, Vanuatu experienced an unprecedented food shortage. Since then, the Government has made every effort to support the agricultural sector to increase production and strengthen Vanuatu’s food security. Soon after TC Harold, two of the 6 provinces (Torba and Malampa) expressed their interest in developing and promoting the idea of a seed bank that will allow them to be autonomous in seed supply, especially following natural disasters when seed prices typically rise.

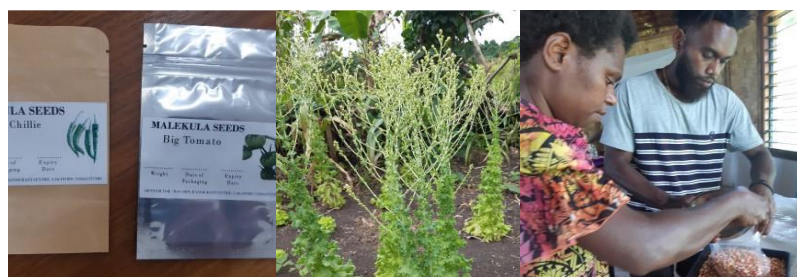
The province of Malampa has been working to develop a seed bank in partnership with DARD Malampa and the Malampa Skills Centre. The support of the Malampa Skills Centre and the technicians in the field has included two update meetings on the production of seeds and the design of the label. The Malampa Skills Centre also supported a client with a disability, providing him tools and equipment. This support has led to the following results:

- There are now 14 farmers involved in seed production from Central, South-Eastern and North-West of Malekula, including 8 women. These farmers currently focus on 12 species of fruit and vegetables among the 73 listed in Vanuatu's seasonal crop calendar with different varieties.

- The sales records show that from June 2021 (when launched) to November 2021, 25 kilos of seeds were sold at a value of VT 479,540.

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In the first half of 2022, 12 kilos of seeds have been sold through the Malampa Handicraft Centre earning VT 230,180 and producers have received a total of VT 709,720. The main customers are local farmers in Malekula, the Farm to Hospital project on Santo and government officer.



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Figure 2: Vegetable seed producers applying seed extraction processes from harvest to packaging

"My name is Ketlen Atta and I am from Central Malekula. I have been a vegetable farmer for over 10 years. Two years ago, I was invited to join Malekula Seeds. Producing seeds is not totally new to me, however with this initiative I have learnt a lot and am now producing more varieties of seeds and better-quality seeds too. In addition, I can confirm that producing seeds is easier than growing food for the local market and we make more money. I am optimistic that as we continue to grow this initiative, it will be an attractive business because it will bring in greater income for our farmers."

Development of vanilla production in Tafea

The vanilla sector has grown in the province of Tafea since the Partnership's technical interventions in 2019, which included coaching and training 15 farmers on Anietyum who have now mastered the production of high-quality vanilla. Furthermore, in late 2021 the Partnership organized for two large vanilla buyers (Organic Paradise and Venui Vanilla Ltd) to meet with local vanilla farmers and to purchase vanilla beans. These buyers purchased approximately 153 kgs of vanilla at a value of VT 2,351,925.

In June 2022, the Tafea Skills Centre with its provincial partners such as DARD, the Department of Industry, local non-governmental organisation, Nasituan, and the Association of Vanilla Producers, trained 95 growers on vanilla farming husbandry as well as on the vanilla curing processes upon which the yield and quality of the final product is based. 31 farming couples received curing equipment, including a thermometer, strainer, vanilla booklet, and transparent plastic for vanilla sweating. Tanna farmers will continue to receive a series of three coaching activities until December 2022.

The 95 farmers around Isla area (including 31 couples) have planted around 9,715 vanilla plants aged from a few months to 5 years old.

Vanilla curing proses long Isla - West Tanna



Figure 3: Practical session on Vanilla curing processes

Increased production from the farm supplying the Northern Provincial Hospital, Sanma (Farm to Hospital)

With the support of the Sanma Skills Centre and in partnership with the SfH workstream, the Skills for Agribusiness has been supporting the implementation of a Farm to Hospital (F2H) initiative at the Northern Provincial Hospital (NPH) in Sanma. The objective of the F2H initiative is to support the NPH to create a sustainable farm that can supply organic food and protein to the hospital kitchen which is then used to feed patients. The farm at NPH currently has three different production units including a poultry hut that accommodates chicken layers for eggs, two tilapia fishponds, and production of vegetable and roots crops.

In the past 6 months, with the support of the Partnership, the farm has been able to increase its production of chicken, eggs, fish and fruit and vegetables such as tomatoes, long beans, capsicum, pumpkin, cucumber, short beans, island cabbage and carrots. This is generating savings for NPH as they supply more of their own food requirements, while also providing a source of healthy, nutritious food for patients in the hospital. Training and mentoring for the farm manager and the two farm assistants has been facilitated by the Partnership in areas such as poultry husbandry, fish husbandry, and pest and disease control.



Figure 4: Fresh produce from the NPH farm supplied to the NPH kitchen

Support for Food Security and Agriculture Clusters across Vanuatu as part of the emergency response to COVID-19

Following the country-wide lockdown imposed by the Government in March (due to community transmission of COVID-19), the SfA workstream pivoted from its planned pipeline of activities and supported the national and provincial governments to implement their emergency response plans.

SfA played a key role in supporting the Food Security and Agriculture Clusters (FSAC) in Sanma, Malampa, Tafea and Torba, as well as Ambae, through the Partnership Skills Centers and the Ambae Recovery office. Highlights of the support provided through the FSAC with the support of the Skills Centers and SfA, include:

- Ambae Recovery office spent VT 105,000 on vegetable seeds and seedlings which were distributed to local farmers in Ambae.
- Malampa Skills Centre injected VT 794,510 into the Malampa Handicraft Centre to purchase seeds from seed processors and distribute them to local farmers as part of the National Recovery plan.
- Sanma Skills Centre contributed VT 400,000 to help develop a Mobile Market service from farmers to urban areas as part of the emergency response. This involved arranging the pick-up of produce directly from farmers and fishermen and then on-selling it to members of the community, delivering directly to their homes.
- The Torba Skills Centre procured five drums of fuel to assist with the transportation of root crops and vegetables from East Vanua Lava Agribusiness clients as well as tools for target agribusiness clients from East Vanua Lava and Mota Lava.
- The Tafea Skills Centre coordinated demand for seeds and planting materials from local communities.

CHALLENGES AND / OR LESSONS LEARNED

- The major challenge affecting the agricultural sector in the first half of 2022 was the COVID-19 crisis. The restrictions on domestic travel introduced by the Government meant that we were unable to travel or meet face-to-face with our partners and clients leading to several of our planned activities being postponed.
- To ensure some level of support for our clients during the lockdown period, the Partnership was able to contract some local coaches through our provincial teams and we will continue to support our clients in this way in the future, even though restrictions on travel have eased. We have also learned to use technology to connect remotely with our coaches, which will help us deliver our priorities in the future.
- The SfA team has been working on other mechanisms to transfer skills by developing DVD tutorials and booklets (in all production areas including vanilla and pepper) that can be shared with local provincial coaches to continue to implement activities if faced with another lockdown in the future. Once the resources are completed, we will conduct a workshop with all provincial local coaches on how to use these resources.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS TO DATE IN 2022

Progress less than expected and significant change is required	Progress less than expected but challenges are being overcome	Progress as expected (our plans are on track)	Progress is exceeding expectations
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Overall, considering the plans we made for the year in February 2022, the progress we have made so far this year has been less than we expected. As mentioned, several of our planned activities could not be delivered because of restrictions on travel and gatherings due to community transmission of COVID-19.

Despite these challenges, the Partnership has been able to continue communicating with farmers without physically visiting them, and we have seen that farmers have still been able to increase production of important crops such as pepper, vanilla, and seeds. We have also made exceptional contributions to the emergency response, including through our support for the FSAC across most provinces of Vanuatu, facilitating the provision of seeds, seedlings and planting materials to farmers and communities, ensuring that farmers had access to markets for their produce.

In the second half of 2022, with restrictions on travel lifted, the Partnership will be working hard to progress several of the activities that were delayed earlier in the year. Despite the slow start, we are confident that we will still be able to deliver most of our planned activities by the end of 2022.

FORWARD PLANNING: JULY-DECEMBER 2022

- Continue with vanilla development on Tafea and Sanma: increase skills and production and develop a market chain which will be led by a central buyer who will purchase green beans from farmers and operate a vanilla curing unit, ensuring good quality vanilla is produced.
- Continue with pepper development – Malekula: register more farmers and conduct a refresher workshop on pepper crop management and processing, expand production across the island.
- Continue with the Honey development – Sanma: train more beekeepers as the demand is continuing to increase.
- Continue with F2S on Torba, Sanma and Ambae: Conduct a ‘lessons learned’ session with all stakeholders from these F2S initiatives.
- Continue developing the seed bank model, focus on the marketing and distribution chain and work with the Vanuatu Agriculture Research and Technical Centre to test quality of seeds, collect data within the storage unit and continue to promote the concept to other islands.
- Torba - white rice farming development.
- Contribute to Agri-Tourism sector, such as Farm to Table on Sanma and Ambae.
- Continue with F2H and hand over of the farm to NPH (Sanma).