

Twenty Fourth Session of the Asia-Pacific Forestry Commission and Asia-Pacific Forestry Week, 7-11 November 2011. Beijing, China

Summary of Pacific Islands Side Event on Challenges and Opportunities in the region

The Pacific Island Countries (PICs) attending the 24th Session of the Asia-Pacific Commission (APFC) Meeting include the following, Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Samoa and Vanuatu. To take advantage of the opportunities presented by such a major regional forum which had many players from public, private and civil society attending and sharing experiences, Pacific Island Countries agreed to organize an Expert Panel Meeting to present Pacific Forestry. Each country, in line with the Meeting theme, “New Challenges - New Opportunities”, presented on developments, progress and potential areas for collaboration and investment in their respective countries. Outcomes from the Expert Panel Meeting highlighted a number of positive developments and initiatives going on in the region.

At the regional level, forests are strongly recognized for their social, cultural, economic and environmental significance and contributions. One role of forests that is being firmly promoted is its contribution to climate change mitigation and adaptation. This role can be more effective and contributing if the current rate of deforestation and forest degradation is reduced appropriately, especially in large island countries where forestry is a major economic activity. The financial mechanisms and tools under processes like REDD/REDD+ now provide real opportunities for countries to safeguard and better manage their forests. For small and medium size island countries like Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu, protecting trees and forests is critical for protecting fragile island environs, livelihoods and conserving biodiversity resources.

Experiences across the Pacific islands showed that despite a host of issues and challenges ranging from lack of funds, poor policy formulation and implementation to weak institutional setups, often intertwined with lack of political will, there are still positive lessons that can be learnt and build upon for successful forestry development. In Fiji, with a total wood-based export value of USD 28 million in 2010, over 60% of the wood originates from the mahogany and pine plantations. In Solomon Islands 1,583 small holders successfully planted 14000 ha of high grade seedlings of teak, mahogany and gmelina. Thirty five percent of these small woodlots are now more than 20 years old. Sale of these tree will pump substantial amount of cash into the local communities, create employment and generate other economic activities in the transport and retail sectors. In PNG, a lot of effort and resources has been invested in the institutional, policy and legal framework to strengthened the Government’s capacity to sustainably manage and develop the country’s vast forest resources. The recognition of the rights of customary land owners in the PNG Forestry Act is commendable. The Forest Management Agreement (FMA) and the Incorporated Landowner Groups (ILGs) sets the platform for meaningful involvement of landowners in proposed economic activities in the sector. Engaging landowners meaningfully through the FMA process reduces risks of landownership disputes and overall improve Government, landowner and investor relationships.

One topic of common interest and which was keenly discussed at the Meeting was the success of smallholder tree farms in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. In Vanuatu, sandalwood (*Santalum austrocaledonicum*) which is native to the country has now become a lucrative small-scale business for local entrepreneurs. The sandal oil and wood are high-value export products and has been a good source of foreign exchange for Vanuatu over the years. Replanting of sandalwood is now totally in the domain of smallholder tree farmers with little Government assistance and support in terms of providing inputs, incentives and promoting sandalwood as a high value species. With best

provenances of sandalwood identified and the high market price for sandalwood products, demand for sandalwood seedlings skyrocketed resulting in expanded growth in the number of private nurseries and areas planted. The high demand for seedlings has now created a steadily growing market which is being totally serviced by smallholder farmers. The Solomon Islands experience where smallholder farmers grow, teak, mahogany and gmelina, is similar in context to the Vanuatu experience however, it differs to a degree in that, in the Solomon Islands, the Government subsidizes the tree planting through provision of seedlings and small cash (around USD400) per farmer. The export of teak logs from plantations and private woodlots has been very successful in the Solomon Islands that it created a rush by smallholder tree farmers to grow teak. The success of smallholder tree farmers in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu can provide the blue-print for successful planted forests in the region.

The success of the mahogany and pine plantations in Fiji, the institutional reform and meaningful involvement of local customary land owners in PNG, and success of smallholder tree plantations in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu as well as mix planting of trees in Samoa, Tonga and Kiribati, are success forestry stories that other Pacific Islands could learn from. The key questions to ask are, what made those initiatives a success, what are the incentives provided, what are the driving forces behind the success and who are the actors and players, and what were their roles and responsibilities that really contributed to the success. Out of the in-depth discussions and exchanges, the Meeting also recognized other factors and initiatives that must be address to make forestry successful in the Pacific Islands. The following are recommend:

- National Land Use planning. Governments must carry out this at the national level. The high rate of conversion of forest lands to other land-uses is threatening the existence of all kinds of forests as well as biodiversity;
- Countries must reduce rate of deforestation and forest degradation through good forest governance and engage in emerging financial mechanisms and management tools like REDD/REDD+ processes and forest certification;
- Empowering and building the capacities of landowners to fully understand and engage in forest decision-making processes and activities is vital for the success of the forestry sector;
- Appropriate level of assistance and incentives must be given to smallholder tree farmers to increase participation in growing trees and finding the right markets for their tree crops;
- Countries are urged to grow fast growing high value species. Research should be carried out to test and identify best planting material;
- Forest certification is important and can be used to bring other benefits. Countries are urged to use existing recognized international standards or develop national standards that aligned closely with international standards and can be recognized by certifying bodies;
- Countries are urged to go into downstream processing and value-adding to maximize benefits and revenue into the forestry sector. Countries must prepare and organize policies and incentives for smooth transition and implementation;
- Conserving and protecting trees and forests is crucial to fully benefit from the different roles forests play;
- Appropriate studies must be carried out in select countries with success stories in forestry to determine why certain projects succeed and the findings should be published and shared with other countries.

The Side Event was a first for the national forestry agencies in the Pacific Island Countries to organize. The experiences gained and lessons learnt in undertaking the exercise was interesting and valuable. Some of the outcomes of the Side Event will be taken and followed up by the countries with assistance from their development partners.