

SESSION 3. TAILORING R&D TO DELIVER LOCAL ON-GROUND OUTCOMES

An overview of the Pacific Regional Research Collaborative Framework

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ABSTRACT



The 7th Pacific Heads of Agriculture and Forestry Services (PHOAFS) meeting highlighted the need for better research coordination and resource sharing to address development issues in Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs). Funded by the Australian Centre for International Agriculture Research (ACIAR), consultations were held to develop a Regional Research Agenda (RRA) framework. The RRA vision is to identify common forestry and agriculture development challenges, establish Pacific research partnerships, and define research strategies. The RRA was presented and endorsed at the 8th PHOAFS meeting held in 2023. The RRA is broken down into three main components: Hearing Pacific Voices, Peer Review, and Partners in Research. The Pacific Community (SPC) as the secretariat is working closely with nominated Peer Reviewers from PICTs to test each component of the RRA. The testing has identified the need for platforms to hear Pacific Voices and ensure that research from the region is shared and documented. These initial findings have led the Peer Reviewers to recommend a biennial conference to bring together researchers, to share their work. Data access was also a challenge highlighted during the testing process. The Peer Reviewers are now working on a Regional Journal to support Pacific Island researchers to publish their work. The project team are currently testing the final component of the framework using the researchable priority of promoting climate resilient crops. The results from this will be shared with the PHOAFS in May 2025 at the Pacific Week of Agriculture and Forestry which will be held in Tonga.

I am speaking today on behalf of a group of peer reviewers who make up the team working to test the Pacific Regional Research Agenda. Our Peer Reviewers and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) are working together to test our Pacific Regional Research Collaborative Framework, which I will refer to as the Regional Research Agenda (RRA) throughout this presentation. Through this opportunity to speak at this Crawford Fund conference it is our hope that we can find ways to better collaborate going forward, as we complete our testing process, and start to implement the RRA so as to achieve sustainability in our research work in the Pacific.

First, a bit of background on the original research agenda for the Pacific. The 7th Heads of Agriculture and Forestry Meeting in 2021 identified the need for better research, coordination and resource sharing across the Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) to address common research issues. With funding from the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), consultations were held virtually and face-to-face through workshops to come up with a framework for an RRA that could be tested. This framework was then endorsed at the 8th Heads of Agriculture and Forestry Meeting in March 2023, and SPC was tasked to work with member countries to test the framework. The testing process started in April 2023, with SPC as the Secretariat working closely with 17 nominated peer reviewers to test the RRA.

The vision of the RRA is that it identifies common forestry and agriculture development challenges in the Pacific region. It establishes research partnerships and defines strategies to overcome these challenges. The RRA brings decision making, leadership and planning into an inclusive Pacific process. Essentially, the RRA needed to be Pacific-designed, Pacific-owned, and a framework that could be implemented by the Pacific, where countries could bring complementary resources to the table to solve problems or address issues they have in common.

During the development of the regional framework (Figure 1), the following were the key components of the RRA: i) Hearing Pacific Voices; (ii) Peer Review; (iii) Partners in Research.

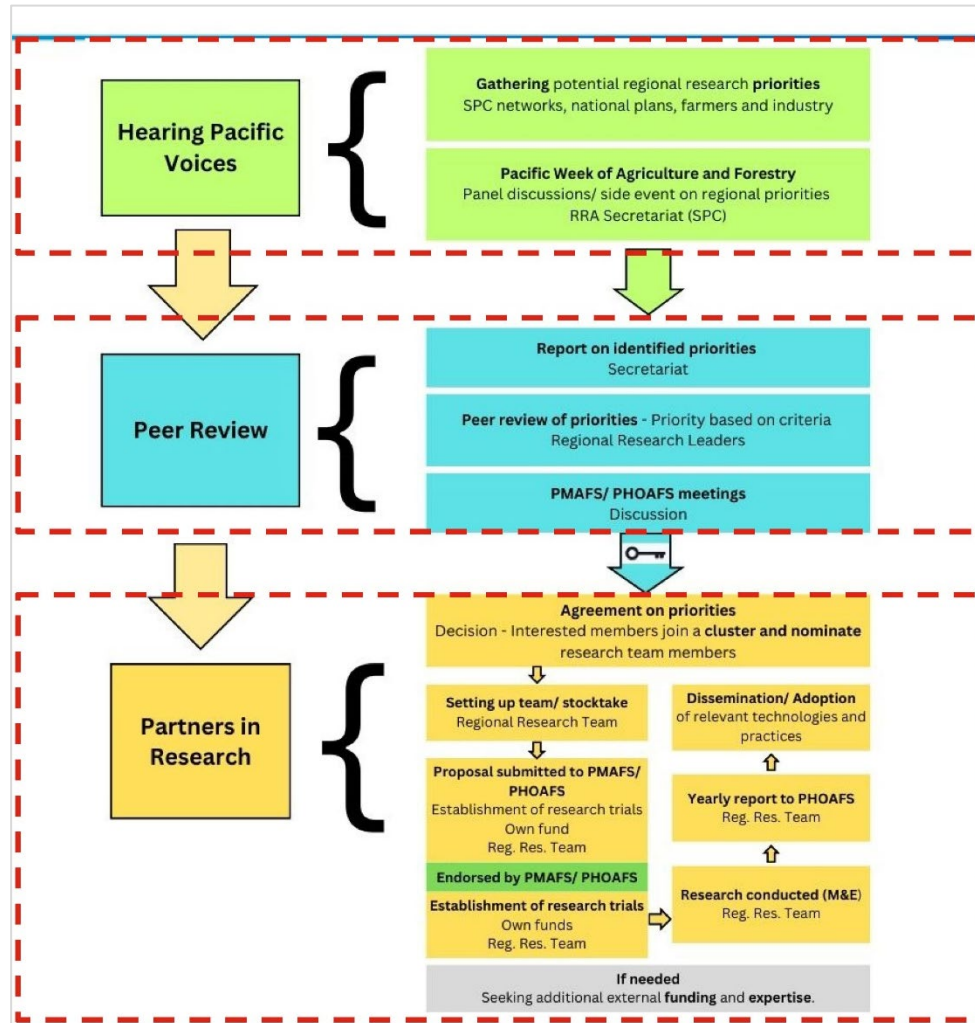


Figure 1. The Regional Research Agenda Framework. (Source: SPC 2022.)

Hearing Pacific Voices

This component looks at gathering the researchable priorities from member countries. It is an ongoing process and will involve SPC networks (Figure 2), national agriculture and forestry policies and plans, farmers and industry, civil society and research organisations. It is anticipated that these will also be collected and identified during panel discussions during regional meetings such as the Pacific Week of Agriculture and Forestry.

Peer Review

This part of the framework focuses on a system to set up the criteria to select the peer review group. That group is made up of leading researchers and experts nominated by the Pacific Heads of Agriculture and Forestry. The Peer Review Group will be key in driving and testing the RRA framework, as they will work with the Secretariat to sift through researchable priorities collected from the 'Hearing Pacific Voices' component.

Partners in Research

This part contains several key areas. First, once the researchable priorities are identified through the sieving process, the peer reviewers will set up a Regional Research Team made up of experts with expertise in the area highlighted as the researchable priority, which the RRA will be tested on.



Figure 2. Existing and active networks within the Land Resources Division of SPC.

Then, a stocktake of the resources required to address the researchable priority will be made, with contributions from countries that have the required resources such as infrastructure, technical expertise, etc., to address the problem. In this regard, any other resources required will be sought out by the Regional Research Team who can look for funding by putting together concept notes to access funding to implement research needed to solve the problem. Then results will be presented to the Heads and Ministers for endorsement in 2025.

To date, the ‘Hearing Pacific Voices’ and ‘Peer Review’ components of the RRA have been tested and the team is now working or moving to test the final component, which is ‘Partners in Research’. The rest of this presentation, therefore, gives an overview of the lessons learned from the testing process, and opportunities for collaboration.

Testing

In testing the ‘Hearing Pacific Voices’, 12 regional research themes and 49 researchable priorities were identified across the Pacific, from PNG in the west to French Polynesia in the Far East.

While the review was extensive, the main lesson learned was that not all countries’ voices were heard. Not all countries had national agriculture and forestry strategies, policies or plans in place. Other countries had strategies in place but consultations with the farmers, foresters and the private sector and other stakeholders may not have been thoroughly done. Therefore, it was important for a space to be created for more thorough consultations on the identified priorities so that voices from the different stakeholders within the agriculture and forestry sectors could be heard, to inform the researchable priorities of the PICTs.

Under the ‘Peer Review’ component, the first step was to establish the Peer Reviewers to lead the testing of the framework with support from the Secretariat. They went through the list of priorities and highlighted four main ones to focus on in the next steps of the process. In selecting a priority, one of the Peer Reviewers’ considerations was the timeframe for trialling the research.

The theme ‘Climate Resilient Crops’ was identified as the most suitable priority to be used to test the ‘Partners in Research’ component of the framework. It was identified as a priority because partnerships could be

established quickly, and pilot activities could be tested in less than a year, in order to report results to the next Pacific Heads of Agriculture and Forestry Services Meeting in Tonga in 2025.

The trialling of the final component of the framework 'Partners in Research' has progressed. Five countries are part of the trials: Cook Islands, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Nauru and Tonga. A total of 69 publications were identified, and impacts to research, policy and communities, as well as research gaps, were identified. The key part of the research is to work as a region to fill knowledge gaps, with a significant focus on our farmers; specifically: What are the common challenges farmers face? How can we involve them in the research process? How can the resources of a regional public good such as the Centre for Pacific Crops and Trees (CePACT) be used efficiently and effectively to address these challenges? Who has used these resources? What has been planted? Can we learn from each other to identify resilient crops or varieties? How can we bridge the gaps between researchers, farmers, CePACT and governments?

This testing process is important as it will allow us to see how we work in partnership and collaborate as a region to carry out such research. Lessons from this regional research will also be presented in May 2025.

Opportunities for collaboration

The RRA needs to be driven by the Pacific, for the Pacific, and to meet research needs of the Pacific, and therefore to sustain opportunities for collaboration. One is to create a consistent platform to hear Pacific Voices. The Pacific Week of Agriculture and Forestry (PWAf) is suggested as the platform for an RRA side event where countries and stakeholders can be heard.

Also, there is potential for collaboration on a biennial conference to bring together Pacific Island researchers to share information and highlight the research and work that is being undertaken around the region, and to encourage equally important young scientists to be part of this process to foster collaboration in agriculture and forestry research.

Thirdly, the review highlighted the difficulty in accessing data and relevant literature from the Pacific. This was because a lot of the research carried out had not been published. Many researchers around the PICTs are more focused on the management aspects of their work and have little time to analyse and publish the findings. Therefore, a platform suggested by the Peer Reviewers is an annual 'writeshop' which will give researchers the support to analyse and write up their papers in preparation for the conference which is proposed as the side event of the PWAf.

The Peer Reviewers also highlighted that a regional journal was needed to support Pacific Island researchers to publish their data and research. The Peer Reviewers will trial the establishment of a Regional Research Journal to publish researchers' work, with papers from the conference feeding into the journal.

In summary, there is the opportunity for us to work together in these areas, particularly in supporting the sustainability of a biennial conference focusing on supporting our young researchers in the Pacific islands. We look forward to collaborating with you on how we can work together to support our Regional Research Agenda.

Mark Vurobaravu is the Deputy Director of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), Republic of Vanuatu. He currently holds a Bachelor of Agriculture degree from The University of the South Pacific, and a Master of Arts in Natural Science from the International Christian University in Tokyo, Japan. His area of expertise is in agriculture and climate change adaptation in island communities. He joined the Public Service in Vanuatu in 2008 as a Plant Protection Officer with the Department of Biosecurity, prior to joining DARD in 2012 as Principal Agriculture Officer responsible for agri-technical services. He was promoted to the position of Deputy Director in 2021. His 15 years' experience in the public service has also yielded strengths in leadership management, planning and public policy. Mr Vurobaravu is a current peer-reviewer representative of Vanuatu in the Pacific Regional Research Agenda for Agriculture and Forestry.