

## SESSION 4 CASE STUDY 1

### Genuine partnerships for transformational agricultural research and development

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#### ABSTRACT



Samoa has had years of investment from donor countries and partners, though it can be difficult to grasp the impact of some of these initiatives particularly in the agriculture space. Agricultural production in Samoa continues to decrease, dependence on imported food increases, and the contribution of the agricultural sector to exports remains inconsistent. For the donor dollar to have real impact, the research and development initiatives need to be developed through genuine partnerships so that they focus on the real needs on the ground; and for such efforts to be sustainable, capacity building needs to be incorporated in these approaches. This talk will focus on the importance of cultural awareness, supporting local champions of change, and recommending a way forward for capacity building for agricultural researchers from Samoa and the Pacific.

This presentation outlines our experiential learning from not just one project but across several projects in which we have been fortunate to be partners, and our experience and some strategies that have worked well for us on how we can build genuine partnerships for transformational agricultural research for development. I'll present to you some of the current, perhaps not ideal, realities of how research is conducted in the Pacific; then make some recommendations on how we can move forward, and finish with some concluding thoughts.

We heard earlier today about the sombre statistics of food insecurity in the Pacific. We are highly reliant on imported foods. There is a declining rate of food production at the local level coupled with climate change and shifting labour availability. The scene is not optimistic, and it is compounded by the nature of how we do research in the Pacific.

A lot of the time, the research projects that come into the Pacific have a research agenda focused on academic learning, academic knowledge-finding. The research priorities of the Pacific are often secondary. Pacific partners are often seen as service providers, as sources of information and data, and are not genuine partners in the project. In cases where we do identify local champions, we fail to recognise, sometimes, the fine line that our local champions tread. Further, we in the Pacific have a declining interest in engaging in agricultural research as a career pathway.

Below are some strategies that have worked well in some of our projects, and there are some strategies that perhaps could be considered in moving forward.

#### Essential strategies: 1. Improve cultural and social awareness by project partners

The first strategy is to look at *improving our project partners' cultural and social awareness* when they come into the Pacific. It is acknowledged that each Pacific Island country has its own unique culture, but at the core of many of our Pacific Island cultures are our:

1. value of family,
2. love and respect for each other,
3. service to our community, and
4. religion is very important, particularly for our Polynesian Pacific Island countries and territories.

Food is synonymous with culture, and food features in a lot of our cultural events. However, health is very low in our list of priorities.

Therefore, it is important for projects that come to the Pacific intending to address food insecurity to first understand the social and cultural barriers that are creating the gaps that we are hoping research will address.

We would also like to advocate for our project partners to *beware of perpetuating colonialism and of 'forcing' Western standards onto the Pacific*. It is imperative that we identify first if the Western standard is addressing an actual issue in the Pacific, before bringing in Western solutions (which may or may not work). And despite the best intentions of people, even those who have worked in the Pacific for a long time, there is still a risk of arriving with privileged mindsets.

We think that reflecting on this is important, so that we do not reinforce colonial practices and continue to cause harm.

### **Essential strategies: 2. Work with local champions; use local co-leadership**

The second strategy that I would like to put forward is *working with local champions and local co-leadership*.

Here is a quote from a book that some of our partners use before they come into the Pacific: 'Genuine participation/partnership means bringing Pacific scientists and Pacific communities in at the start of the research process'.

Local champions need to be genuine members of the project leadership team, not just a token local representative to 'tick a box', but someone who will actually be involved in the strategic discussions and decision-making of the project as it progresses.

Local champions work particularly well when you are trying to engage with local government ministries and local NGOs. Sometimes there can be a bit of animosity from local government ministries towards researchers coming in from other countries, and then having that local champion on the team is very important: they can use their local network and reputation to help the project. However, I want to stress that there is also a reputational risk to the local champion, particularly when these collaborations don't go very well.

The local communities will require the local champions on your project team to translate and to rally their support and their engagement. We have also found that some communities respond well to seeing our Australian and our New Zealand and other foreign partners with them in the field. That is a bonus.

However, when we have built genuine partnerships and we have supported our local champions, the champions are at a real risk of being seen as 'tall poppies' and then being undermined or disregarded by their community. So, where we build friendships with our local partners, we strongly encourage our project partners coming in from Australia or New Zealand to be supportive of our local champions as well, when they navigate these negative impacts of building collaborations.

### **Revamping capacity building.**

When overseas researchers come into the Pacific, a lot of the local researchers that you will work with will be graduates with bachelor degrees, and like new graduates everywhere they will require a lot of mentoring, coaching and training to start them thinking more critically about the research that they're doing and are asked to be a part of, to move them away from just 'doing as they are told'. We do recognise that this requires commitment from the project partners as well as from our local researchers.

Agricultural research is not considered a career pathway by our top tier students. Our local universities offer agriculture degrees, and if our top students want to undertake agricultural degrees, they will have to study at these local universities, which means they cannot travel out of Samoa to study. I suggest to our donors that you consider sponsoring exceptional students who are interested in agricultural research to study in Australia or New Zealand, where they can get that wider solid foundation of learning about agricultural technologies, strategies and new knowledge; then encourage them to consider PhD or Masters research projects on topics relevant to, and valuable to, the Pacific. Then when they come back to the Pacific, they would be able to use this knowledge and these skill sets.

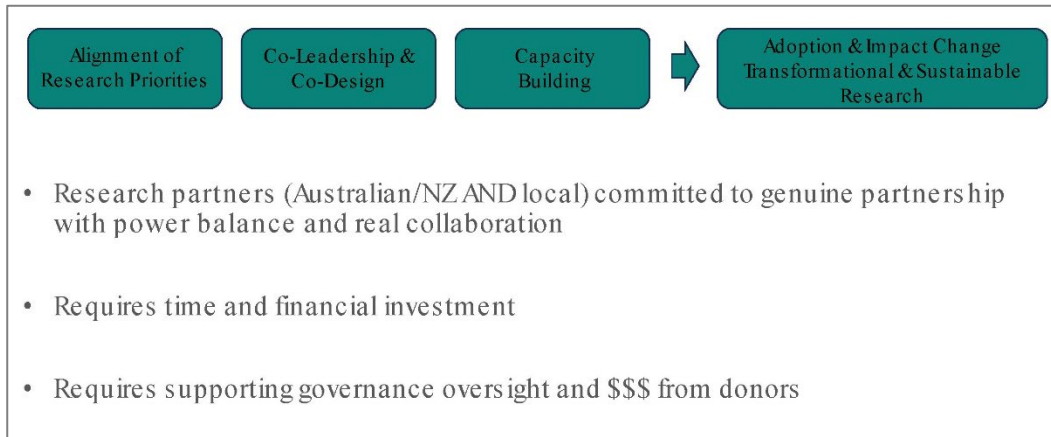
## Summary

When you have an alignment of research priorities, along with co-leadership and co-design, and you incorporate capacity building in your research projects, this is a fantastic starting point to achieving adoption and impact change in your research project, and transformational and sustainable research in the Pacific.

We recognise that research partners, both Australian and from New Zealand and the Pacific, need to be committed to genuine partnership with an equal balance of power and real collaboration.

We do understand that it takes time, effort and financial investment.

Thank you to ACIAR, DFAT and the Crawford Fund for supporting us financially, because this is needed.



Dr Seeseei Molimau-Samasoni is a researcher at the Scientific Research Organisation of Samoa (SROS), where she has worked since 2009, and an Adjunct Associate Professor at the University of the Sunshine Coast Australian Centre for Pacific Islands Research. Although formally trained in molecular bioscience and chemical genetics, Seeseei has spent most of her time in recent years leading and managing projects in agricultural R4D in Samoa with close partnerships across the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand. Seeseei is the first Pacific Project Leader to lead an ACIAR project in the Pacific, when SROS became the first Pacific national organisation to be a commissioned organisation for an ACIAR project. In her management of this project, Seeseei encourages the Pacific partners to be the driving forces in leadership decision making for the project. Seeseei also advocates for capacity building initiatives that will lay a strong foundation for a new class of agricultural researchers in the Pacific.