

PROJECT UPDATE

“Implementation of Sustainable Farming Practices in Trinidad’s Northern Range Communities” (EcoAgriCulture)

February 2013

A View from Project Management

The Cropper Foundation (TCF) is pleased to update you on the progress of our work with farming communities and other stakeholders in support of sustainable agricultural production in the Northern Range. Your interest and support in the EcoAgriCulture project is very much appreciated, and we look forward to your feedback and support as we continue the work in the Northern Range.

Activities that were designed as part of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) funded EcoAgriCulture project came to an end in November 2012. Our partner organisations working on this project, are pleased with the results and outcomes, and have indicated their interest in deepening the work with the Maracas and Caura farming communities, and working with TCF to expand the EcoAgriCulture Initiative into other areas of the Northern Range. [More on the extending the EcoAgriCulture approach on page 4.](#)



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An evaluation of the EcoAgriCulture Project was done by an independent consultant hired by the IDB, and notes that the EcoAgriCulture project was highly effective in meeting its development objective, and in being a sustainable initiative. [More on the project evaluation on page 2.](#)

This is not to say that the work ends here, the team notes that a significant amount of work still needs to be done towards mainstreaming the use of sustainable farming practices even with the Maracas and Caura Valleys. [More on recommendations from EcoAgriCulture on page 3.](#)

The Maracas Valley Farmers’ Association used funds from the FAO’s TeleFood funds for the establishment of a composting enterprise in the Maracas Valley. The group has since completed one compost heap, which they will pilot test amongst themselves, and are already established two other compost heaps, from which they intend to sell the compost. [More on the involvement of the EcoAgriCulture Project team in the compost project on page 4.](#)

Project Evaluation

An evaluation of the EcoAgriCulture project was undertaken by an independent consultant in order to determine to what extent the objectives, outcomes and impacts of the project were met, and to assess the project's sustainability beyond the lifetime of the project. The outcome of the evaluation against the achievement of indicators is as follows:

Components Indicators	Status	Comments
Pilot Project on Sustainable Farming Practices		
Baseline assessment of conditions completed	Complete	Assessment undertaken March – July, 2010
Demonstration of sustainable agricultural practices implemented in at least 4 sites within 2 watersheds	Complete	All participant farmers implemented some form of sustainable farming practice
At least 60% of farmers in selected communities are exposed to sustainable farming practices	Complete	A participant farmers in communities exposed to sustainable farming practices
At least 20% of farmers in selected communities continue to implement sustainable agricultural practices	Complete	At least 65% of participants continue to implement sustainable farming practices
Strengthening of Local Networks and Dissemination of Results		
Increased stakeholder/public awareness of the negative impact of unsustainable agricultural practices on the environment and community life	Complete	3 Stakeholder Workshops held, exposing participants to project objectives and encouraging dialogue
Movement towards clarification/improvement in land tenure and access rights of farmers; regulation and enforcement of policies	Semi-complete	Discussions concerned tenure issues; difficult to determine whether challenges could be clarified/ improved within project scope.

Source: Final Evaluation Report, 2012

The evaluation also designed the following recommendations for replicating the EcoAgriCulture approach in other areas of Trinidad and Tobago, and across the Caribbean.

Understand the Systemic Nature of Sustainable Farming Practices

- It is important to consider the broad farming system. This includes, but is not limited to, each individual farm and farmer, the communities, the local ecosystem, as well as influencers and

- these farmers. As such, a wide all-inclusive participatory base including all relevant stakeholders and institutions would be important for the most comprehensive knowledge about the system. Moreover, such support and contribution by this wide base should go far towards the depth of impact and success of the project concerned.

The “Sustainable Agriculture Continuum”

- It is important for projects that are similar to this one to note the value of small steps and the respective contribution and difference that those steps make towards the wider goal. Put another way, projects should not rush into looming, big changes for these farmers, as this not only provides a disincentive for change, but it minimises buy-in and confidence in the partner organisation.
- As The Cropper Foundation has outlined in their sustainability trajectory, the need to understand the perspectives of these farmers and create an active desire within them to value the need for change, become involved and make personal choices should be core objectives that should be resonant before anything else.
- The need to revisit the historical paradigm of agriculture as being central to societies is important, as there may be a shift of thought towards agro-processing and marketing, and there is a need to complement projects like this one with ways of deriving more income from the agricultural value chains, diversifying livelihoods and building capacities within communities.

Encourage the Responsibility of Communication

- The efforts of this project to transfer capacity to the farmers to become “doers” and to recognise the value of communication of knowledge have played vital roles in the success of this project. For other projects with similar intentions, it is worthwhile to mention that by inculcating this responsibility within the beneficiaries, this sends the message that each agency plays a contributing role in strengthening the sustainable agriculture community.

- The dissemination and communication of success stories and challenges should be built into the project at all stages, rather than as an addendum to project objectives, to ensure that the relevant messages are communicated loud and clear.

The Role and Benefits of Additional Research and Complementary Projects

- Research in small-scale farm agricultural practices and the risks associated with the transitioning of farms to sustainable farming practices (including the potential role of donor agencies in their willingness to absorb financial risk of farmer transitioning to sustainable farming practices), the potential benefit of projects about payment for ecosystem services, which could have the impact of encouraging farmers to practice in a sustainable manner towards receiving related payments for such services, as well as the potential for niche market development (these latter research areas could help address the concern of improving returns from farming as well as the financial attractiveness of farming).
- Complementary activities or separate projects could be developed to involve farmers in the research and demonstration of outcomes as well as general encouragement of showcasing this information. This stems from some concluding remarks about this project, which note that the benefits of sustainable farming practices need to be better articulated and supported by evidence, and that there is the need for greater effort by extension agencies and research institutions to translate research output into meaningful information for the farmer.



Recommendations from EcoAgriCulture

In moving forward, TCF has noted that while the project has been a rewarding experience for the technical team, and that the project's objectives have been met, work remains to be done to ensure the sustainability of these hard earned accomplishments. We have identified key areas in which we need to place significant effort:

- Ensuring that all project activities have a participatory focus. Participatory approaches are necessary for both understanding the myriad of challenges that small farmers face, and for devising solutions for these challenges. Participatory approaches that involve participants in project design, implementation and evaluation foster greater ownership of the project among participants.
- Improve governance arrangements in Farmer Groups. farmer Groups are often challenged by fragmentation of the farming population due to issues of distrust and perceptions of corruption among members, which reduces the effectiveness of the Farmer Group for improving local farming conditions. There is need for the development of robust governance systems within farming communities to help counter these issues.
- Long term (5 – 10 years) technical support and capacity-building is needed in farming communities for mainstreaming sustainable farming practices; such support can be provided through a robust institutional framework that supports agriculture at the local and national levels.
- Policy support needed for effective mainstreaming of sustainable farming practices.



Extending the EcoAgriCulture Approach

In February 2013, TCF secured a grant from the GEF/UNDP Small Grants Programme to extend the EcoAgriCulture approach in three new valleys of the Northern Range: Santa Cruz, Lopinot and Aripo. Building on the experience and implementation of the EcoAgriCulture project in the Maracas and Caura Valleys, TCF and its partners have developed project interventions to achieve certain critical goals within these farming communities. These are to:

- Build a common understanding among stakeholders
- Identify leverage points for interventions
- Analyse different scenarios
- Form the basis of decision support systems
- Assist in stakeholder negotiations
- Identify systems performance indicators
- Establish measures to evaluate impact

Project activities have been designed to be implemented over an 18 month period. These include:

1. Baseline assessments of farming conditions in the three Valleys
2. Design of Intervention Strategies for engaging approximately 90 farmers across the three farming communities, building capacity and providing technical support for the implementation of sustainable farming practices in the farming communities
3. Design and implementation of a pilot approach for enhancing community governance arrangements in the selected farming communities
4. Implementation of sustainable farming practices in one of the selected farming communities

Composting in the Maracas Valley

Farmers in the Maracas Valley Farmers Association (MVFA) are implementing an initiative to produce compost for their personal use and for sale within the Maracas Valley and environs. With funding provided by the FAO's TeleFood Special Funds, the EcoAgriCulture project partners worked with the MVFA for the past six months to provide training in the production of compost, and advice on managing a cooperative compost business.

The farmers have since established one compost heap made of materials that have been collected from their farms and from grass and tree cuttings within the Maracas Valley. A wood chipper was also purchased, and the farmers are incorporating wood chips into their other compost heaps. A decision was taken to pilot test the compost from the first compost heap among the participating farmers, and also to distribute samples to other farmers in the Maracas Valley. Compost generated from subsequent heaps will be sold.



For more information on the EcoAgriCulture Project, The Cropper Foundation or any of the Project Partners, visit www.thecropperfoundation.org or <http://tcf-sustainablefarming.weebly.com/>

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