

## Background

The Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community (POETCom) is a not for profit membership organisation with active members (farmers associations, farmer support organisations, NGOs, private sector, and research institutions) working with many governments and countries in the Pacific Island region. The POETCom Secretariat is hosted by the Land Resources Division of the Pacific Community (SPC) in Suva, Fiji. POETCom has the vision of Organics and ethical trade: the key contributor to sustaining our cultures and communities, improving farmer livelihoods, people's health and the environment in the Pacific. POETCom serves as the peak body providing a unified voice for the organic and ethical trade movement in the region. Through coordination, information sharing, net- working, and capacity building programmes as well as establishing a regional certification scheme to support market access and trade.

On the 4th May 2020, POETCom sent out a survey to all its members, supporters and key partners in countries to better understand the impact of the COVID19 crisis on its members, supporters and partners. The findings of the survey helped develop recommendations for short-term interventions aiming at coping with and mitigating the COVID-19 impacts. Key recommendations are presented at the end of this report.

The COVID-19 outbreak started in the city of Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, in early December 2019 and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020. The declaration of pandemic signifies widespread outbreaks affecting multiple regions of the world. As of 26 May 2020, 6 countries (Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam and New Caledonia) in the Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) have reported 295 cases and 7 deaths. As at 26 May 2020, more than 5.4 million cases and 340,000 deaths have been reported worldwide, with a 6.3% case fatality proportion. Beyond health risks, COVID19 continues to affect economies globally is either in lower trade and investments, a demand in slump associated with lockdowns or a continental supply shock affecting domestic and international trade.

National Governments have implemented measures to contain the virus and protect their people ranging from promotion of hygiene and physical distancing to complete lockdown. These measures have resulted in supply chain and market disruption. POETCom conducted the online survey to gather information from members, supporters and partners regarding the impact of COVID-19 on their agricultural activities, to identify immediate needs, and to get baseline information that can help with long-term strategies to address such challenges. The survey was sent using the Office Forms platform and was open from 4 - 22 May 2020. POETCom acknowledges and thanks all the participants for their responses to the survey and for their confidence in POETCom to use their feedback to develop its COVID-19 response.

# COVID-19 Survey Report

JUNE 2020

# RESPONSE RATE

The survey was sent out to a total of 117 individuals and organisations (47 members and 70 non-members). 49 out of 117 responded giving a responses rate of 42% (51% of the responses were received from members while 49% were from non-members).

Majority of the participants were from Fiji (34%), 14.3% were from Vanuatu while the remaining were from other PICTs as noted in Fig 1 below. Women made up 41.3% of the survey respondents while men made up 54.3%. 4.3% of the respondents reported their gender as 'Other' (Figure 2). The majority (42.9%) of the respondents were over the age of 50 years, 20.4% were in the age range 35 - 50 while only 14.3% were below 35 years of age.

The main produce/ products that these individuals and businesses were engaged in included root crops, a variety of fruits and vegetables, honey, handicraft, livestock, tamanu oil, vanilla, charcoal, compost, coconut, sea salt, coffee, virgin coconut oil, fertilizer, Microgreens, massage oils, bee products, noni, flowers, information services, brokerage services and organic trainings/ certifications. Most of the respondents are targeting domestic markets including local markets, supermarkets, restaurants, school cafeterias, hotels, resorts. 42.9% are also targeting export markets (Figure 6). Similar markets are being targeted by women and men producers.

Figure 1: Survey Responses By Country (%)

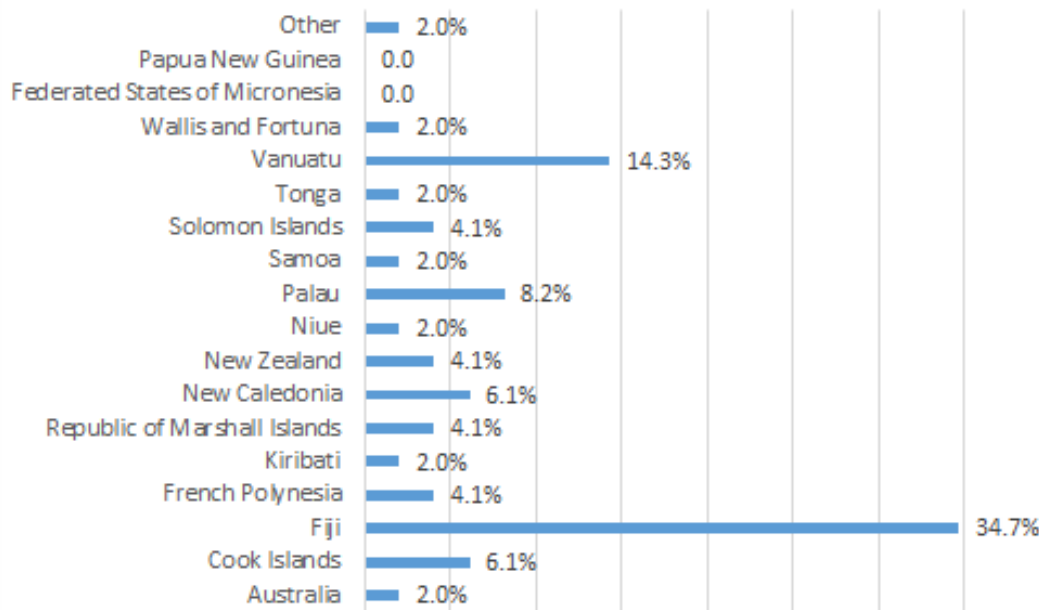


Figure 2: Survey Responses By Gender (%)

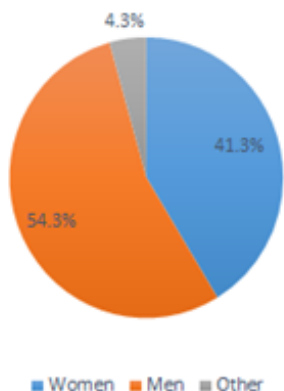
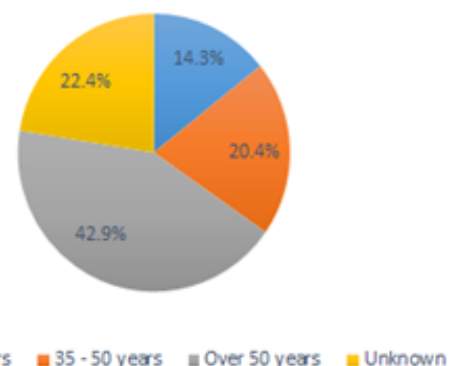


Figure 3: Survey Responses By Age (%)



# FINDINGS

Findings revealed that farmers are now having difficulty accessing markets with loss of local village-level income sources due to increasing unemployment among community members especially in the case of Fiji. Inter-island supply chain logistics significantly affected during lock down periods, and some farmers are unable to access inputs. Domestic sales have dropped dramatically due to the lack of tourists while regional and international sales have diminished due to border closures. Respondents also noted that auditors cannot travel but accreditors insist on continued surveillance. The main reason preventing farmers from getting to their farms was travel restrictions (including inter-island travels), lockdowns, and government recommendations to stay at home. There has been however an increase in demand for organic inputs as people are now realising the importance of agriculture more than ever before and turning to gardening (at least for home consumption).

Findings show similar trends between female and male respondents. However, it is worth noting that majority of the participants responded on behalf of organizations. This could have partly overshadowed responses at individual level which are more likely to reveal gender issues.

## Impacts of COVID19 pandemic on farms, businesses and markets

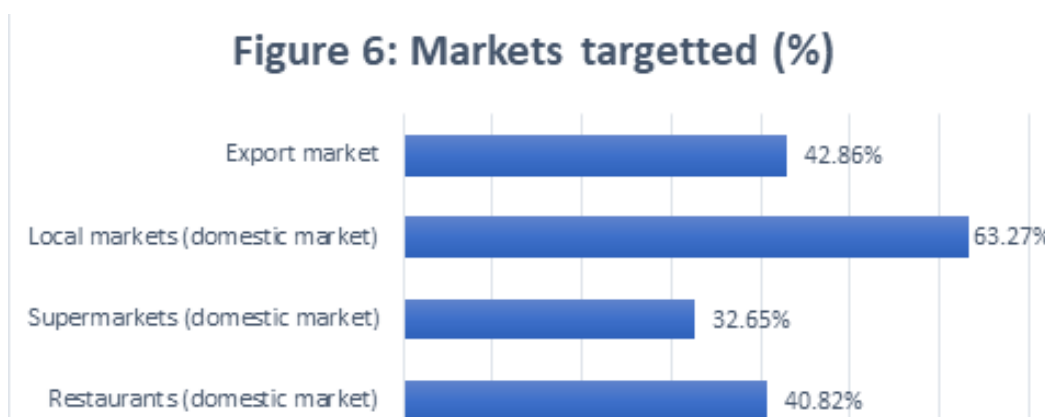
POETCom asked farmers what the impacts of COVID -19 has been on their farming activities, businesses and markets. This was to understand the current situation of the farmers/ businesses.

### Production

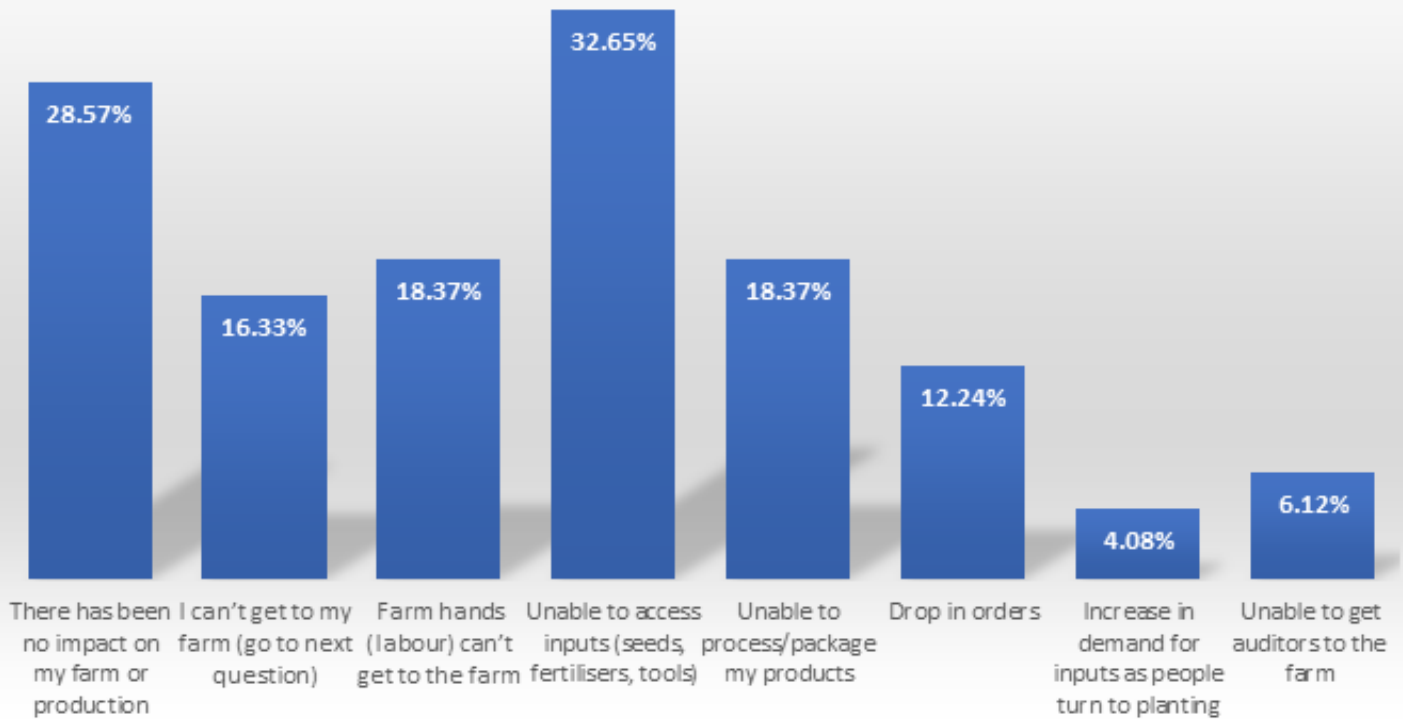
71.4% of the farmers and businesses noted that they have been affected in one way or the other, with the majority (32.7%) noting that they are unable to access inputs including seeds, fertilizers, and tools. 18.4% noted that the farm hands cannot get to the farms, 14.3% cannot get to their own farms. 18.4% are unable to process and package products. Only 28.6 % of the farmers/ businesses noted that there is no impact yet on farms and productions (Figure 4).

### Sales and markets

83.7% of the respondents note that their markets and/ or sales have been affected in one way or the other, with only 16.3% noting no impact on markets or sales. 38.8% of the respondents noted that there is a decrease in sales due to lack of demand and that there are restrictions, so people do not come to the markers to buy/ produce/ products. Many farmers (32.7%) also noted that due to restrictions they cannot get produce to the markets, and that there is a decrease in sales due to people not having enough money to buy products/ produce (26.5%). 10.2% noted that there is a decrease in sales due to oversupply as people do not have money to buy produce/ products (Figure 5)



**Figure 4: Impacts of COVID19 pandemic on farms and businesses**



**Figure 5: Impacts of COVID19 pandemic on markets**

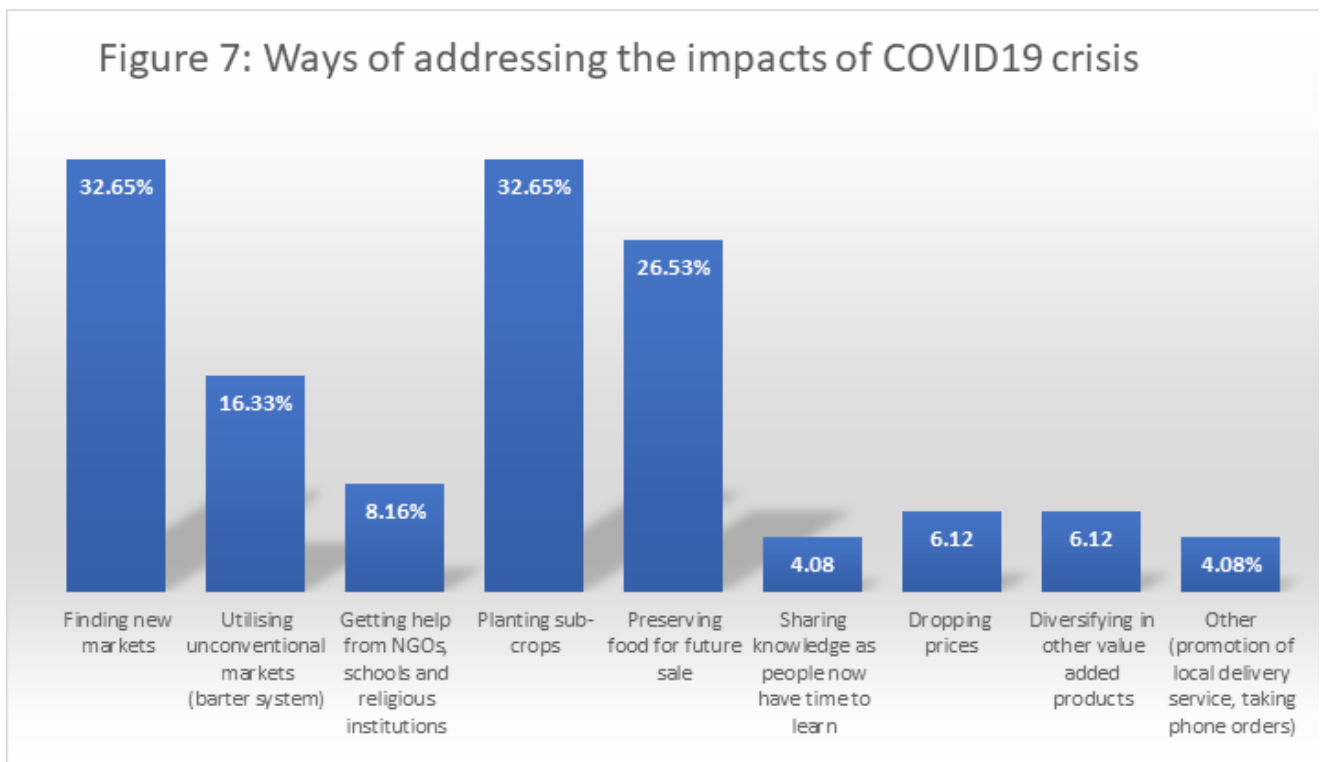


# Coping Strategies

POETCom asked members and stakeholders about how they are addressing the impacts of COVID-19 crisis. This helped POETCom to map out the existing avenues/ strategies available and to identify gaps and potential support needs.

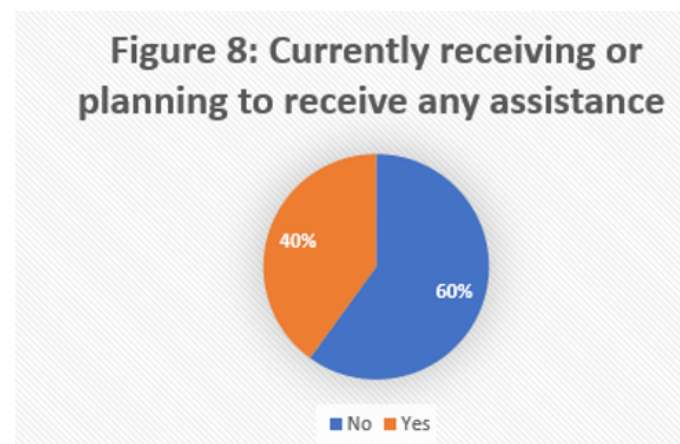
## Adjusting priorities

Many of the respondents (32.3%) are now findings new markets, planting sub crops (30.6%) and preserving food for future sale (24.5%). 16.3% are utilising unconventional markets (mainly barter system) and 8.2% are getting help from NGOs, schools and religious institutes. At least 3 farmers noted that they are reducing prices of produce to attract local customers, and to recover costs for whatever is possible. Two respondents also noted that they are now sharing knowledge on organics and providing training opportunities as people have time to learn.



## Getting assistance

40% of the respondents noted that they are currently receiving or planning to receive some form of assistance noted above. Most of these were assistance from governments either in the form of grants, seeds or planting materials/ equipment and technical trainings. Respondents noted that different proposals for funding are being developed that hopefully will get funded (Figure 8).



## → Government

Government is providing backyard garden seeds, superannuation, loan payment deferrals, subsidy, loans, potential cash grants, free seedlings, trees and pruning services, platform for connecting producers and consumers, financial support, compensation for loss of turnover, assistance for employees, economic stimulus package. (63% of respondents noted availability of some form of assistance from the government, 37% noted none).

## → Community

Community – a few communities are providing peer support, sharing of planting materials and seedlings, labour, support groups have been formed within communities. 61% of the respondents noted availability of some form of assistance from communities.

## → Non-governmental organisations

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – a couple of NGOs are providing seeds for backyard gardening, equipment and materials, nursery, exploring ways for continued surveillance of certified farmers and processors, advise, grant, connecting the networks and support systems. 27% of the respondents noted availability of some form of assistance from NGOs.

## → Extended family

24% of the extended families are available for assistance. This includes providing shared produce, shared labour on farms, support groups, barter system, financial support.

## → Religious institutions

10% of the respondents noted availability of assistance from religious groups. This included prayers and support groups. One religious group went online to offer spiritual guidance.

## → Family abroad

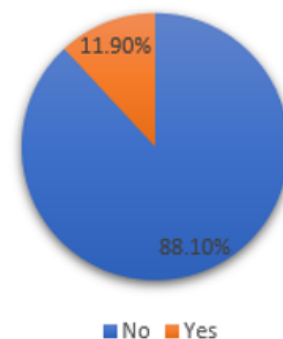
Only 4% of the respondents noted availability of assistance from family abroad (mainly financial support). The remaining 96% did not note availability of any assistance.

## → Others

The only other assistance available was from donor agencies who were offering small grants to address the crisis.

**11.9% noted that the current available assistance threatens the organic production (Figure 9). This was mainly as a lot of inputs (including seeds and weedkillers) have been distributed by Ministry of Agriculture.**

**Figure 9: Does any current available assistance threaten your organic status**



## Suggestions from participants to strengthen sustainable farming in preparation for emergency situations

Participants were asked to provide any suggestions on how to strengthen sustainable farming in preparation for emergency situations. Most of the responses were around developing sustainable seed supply systems (as mostly suggested by women), crop diversification and information sharing and preparedness.

Respondents noted the following:

### Production

- Promotion of local traditional crops and domestic value chains
- Planting a variety of crops, fruits and vegetables for sustainable supply
- Proper drainage systems in farms, maintaining soil fertility  
Increase number of supplier farms – diverse range of foods
- Composting, developing the production of local inputs
- "Sensitize people to build their own immune system in farming, eating, living organically : this is the true vaccine! In Agroecological Organic systems can be also integrated medicinal plants like *Artemisia afra* (or annual) and this measures make this virus and others really insignificant. This has been proved in Africa (mainly in Madagascar)"
- Developing and structuring value chains
- "By incorporating an inter cropping regime into all agricultural pursuits in emergency zones"
- "Cultivate a market garden where fruit and vegetable for home use is nurtured primarily for home use with excess sold or bartered in exchange for things that cannot be produced on the farm. 2. Promote organic/traditional farming to all farmers to enable continuity and sustainability."

### Storage and value addition

- Increasing inventory and reserve stock of value-added goods
- Increasing self-life of local crops and storing these in emergency evacuation centres whether communities can access in times of disasters.
- Contingency backup plan ready (including simple tools, seedlings etc)
- Developing a seed bank
- Improving processing and marketing
- "Always store your own seeds so you don't run sort in emergency situations. 2. Keep making your own compost from the resources around your farm.

### Knowledge sharing

- Information on how to mitigate damage to certain crops, local seeds and input supply
- More support groups with frequent follow up visits
- A good network of farmers for support in providing food for families and communities.
- Strengthening ICT networks
- Continued training and information sharing
- Building model farms with multiple crops/income streams and a crop variety of short term crops medium term crops and long term crops grown with rotations/cover crops etc



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the survey, POETCom provides the following key recommendations to its members (and stakeholders). POETCom encourages focussed interventions on these priority areas:

## **1. Strengthen the importance of local food systems**

The COVID 19 crisis has clearly demonstrated the importance of the local food systems in each of the Pacific Countries. It will be fair to say that populations resorted to left over imported supplies and the increase consumption of locally grown food sources. Further research maybe needed to substantiate this claim. Local farming systems are categorised by multi mixed cropping systems that have shown resilience to withstand major disruptions. It is therefore imperative that the promotion of these multi cropping/agroforestry systems should become a high priority. In particular the sourcing of local food crops and planting materials should be undertaken right away and distributed widely. Specifically for organic farmers the sourcing of vegetative propagated planting materials from within, the sourcing of open pollinated seeds varieties which will result in the establishment of organic PGS Guaranteed nurseries and gene banks should be implemented.

## **2. Organic Inputs source evaluated and made available**

It has been the normal practice that after a natural disaster and in times of crisis's Governments and development partners will import and widely distribute agricultural inputs like chemicals and artificial fertilizers. This is a high risk for organic farmers in the Pacific region as the use of these inputs jeopardise their organic status and could lead to a loose of a valuable market. The COVID 19 crisis presents POETCom with an opportunity to work with local agriculture input suppliers to identify, source, evaluate and make available inputs that are allowed under organic systems. The key is a partnership with existing suppliers in each country and work with the Ministry of Agriculture and relevant authorities to allow its use in each country. The long term impact of this activity is the availability of certified organic inputs that usually environmentally friendly and effective. This will reduce the negative impact of soil and water contamination and leads to overall improve food safety status.

## **3. Focus on value added products/ product diversification/import substitution**

There is now a need to identify private sector agro business partners to support them in their value addition efforts. The main advantage of value addition is increase shelf life for a perishable commodity while providing product diversification. The aim is to identify efforts that will also play a part in import substitution as in the case of virgin coconut oil which can replace imported vegetable cooking oils into the Pacific. Seasonal fruits and vegetables could be dehydrated improving its shelf life and providing nutritional food products for the populations. If transportation of imported goods is disrupted by the crises then it's imperative that we look internal for high value alternatives. reorienting value chains to domestic and alternative markets. Where needed and possible conduct rapid socio-economic and market assessment to assess social and commercial feasibility. Associated with this effort is the need to research Green Sources of Energy for dehydrators and value adding equipment. The cost of fossil fuel powered equipment at the moment is quite high and make the profitability of value adding activities not feasible.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **4. Using of online platforms – either to share knowledge/ training with other farmers or to use as a marketplace for selling/ buying produce.**

Due to the COVID 19 restrictions, some very innovative social media platforms has sprung up in Fiji for example with the Seed sharing and Bartering Facebook based innovations. The beauty lies in its simplicity but effective nature in engaging and creating connection between offer and demand. For Organic Farmers in particular the use of these Social media plat forms for Questions & Answers, instant communications, organic training and PGS certification management and implementation will be improved and made available. Digitising of the POETCom PGS system with proven and cost effective service providers will be important. Use of these plat forms for e-marketing of organic products will become important. Organic farmers participating in local market outlet like the WIDI Organic night markets, NIOFA Organic Markets, ROCK Markets etc. Basket schemes with a centralised collection centre for organic products supplied by organic farmers should be evaluated.

## **5. Engaging the tourism sector and laid off workforce**

There is no doubt that the tourism sector in most of the Pacific Islands have been the most affected in terms of layoffs. Small business have closed leaving many people unemployed. Training in organics as an alternative could be provided along with the necessary tools and resources to establish and maintain home gardens. With people with land as an issue container planting utilizing waste products should be encouraged

## **6. Support National governments**

National governments need to be supported to create sustainable solutions that do not jeopardise organic status of farmers align with organic principles. This is based on the survey findings that reveal that a substantial percentage of farmers feel that some of the assistance that they receive mainly from governments (example seeds) is actually a threat to their organic status.

## **7. Support to POETCom membership**

For the Organic movement POETCom has members in most of the Pacific Island Countries that will need financial resources to lead in the implementation of any COVID 19 assistance. POETCom Secretariat will be able to provide remote assistance and monitoring from Headquarters. Support will be provided also to strengthen the management of PGS groups, engaging and building on existing community peer support groups.

## **8. More Emphasis on Sustainable Organic Agriculture by PICTs**

The current situation has now clearly brought up the important role of Agriculture in the Pacific Islands. The heavy reliance on the Tourism Industry has now shown its limitation in times of global shocks. The role of Agriculture in feeding its populations has been in the back ground compared to the high visible export and tourism sectors which contribute a higher percentages of GDP. When it comes down to what is important – its feeding your own populations first and foremost. We now have to relook at policy and training the future generations to prepare for these global pandemics which will become frequent. We must target schools with sustainable organic food production as a compulsory human right skill to achieve.



**POETCOM gives a hearty thanks to all the survey participants for their valuable contribution!**