

APCC for the well being of coconut farmers

Excerpts from the official introduction of APCC by
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On 2nd September 2015, it will be 46 years since the Asian & Pacific Coconut Community is established under the aegis of the United Nations Economic & Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP).

To be able to submit to the United Nation Secretary General seeking recognition of APCC as a regional inter-government organization, it needed a group of nations to agree to unite under this banner. Governments of India, Indonesia and the Philippines, were the first signatories on 12 December 1968 to the agreement establishing the Asian and Pacific Coconut Community followed shortly after in 1969 by Sri Lanka, Thailand and Malaysia. Vietnam was the latest Asian nation to join in 1988.

In 1971 Samoa became the first Pacific State to join APCC and Tonga the latest member in 2011 after PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, FSM, Fiji, Kiribati and the Marshall Islands. The member countries have remained committed to this cause and their original intent to date. To date the membership of APCC consists of 18 countries: seven Asian and nine Pacific full members with Jamaica and Kenya as associate members.

The intent part of the Preamble to the Agreement Establishing the APCC reads “convinced that the present situation (1968) of and the future outlook for the coconut industry necessitates their joining together and developing a well-planned programme of concerted



action to solve their common problems and to enable them to obtain the benefits of economies of scale in the areas of production, marketing and research generally” recognising that such an organization would be of immense value in the mobilization of resources for promoting the coconut industry in the region(s) and for ensuring its rapid development.”

The APCC Secretariat embraces the intent of the original agreement hence the direction of activities towards a set of outcomes that achieve this intent. Policies and programs pursued by APCC and the member countries continue to seek inclusive growth and sustainable development of the coconut sector.

APCC Meeting and membership

In accordance with Article six of the Agreement Establishing the APCC and the Rules of Procedure of the APCC “the Community shall meet in Session at least once in each financial year and once in two years for the technical meeting independent of the Annual Session Meeting”. The Session/Ministerial Meeting is the highest policy and decision making body of the Community. “Each (full) member (country) shall be represented in the Community by one representative with plenipotentiary authority” and for Associate Members, an “accredited representative”.

With the attendance of National Ministers, the Community named the meeting a Session/Ministerial Meeting. In response to concerns raised at the 50th Session/Ministerial in FSM on the declining number of Ministers attending, in preparation for this 51st Session/Ministerial Meeting the current Chair of APCC being the Government of India has made constructive moves to empower APCC by creating awareness and promoting the Community through the following:

- (a) Introducing the format of the Session/Minutes Meeting where there would be a Ministerial Meeting section immediately following the Inaugural Session where Ministerial Statements would be delivered by Ministers present and/or specific agenda items (not exceeding maybe four

items) are proposed for discussion; and

- (b) The Union Minister of Agriculture acting in India's capacity as Chair of APCC wrote directly to Minister of Member Countries inviting them to this Session/ Ministerial Meeting enclosing the agenda for discussion to which the respective Minister can present their position in their ministerial statement; and
- (c) The Union Minister of Agriculture acting in India's capacity as Chair of APCC, for the purpose of increasing awareness and drive for new membership, has extended APCC invitation in directly writing to and inviting Ministers of 17 other coconut-growing non-member countries to this Community meeting. The representatives of the Governments of Oman and Bangladesh are attending this Community meeting as a result of that initiative.

Amongst the important agenda items for discussion at the Ministerial Meeting are issues of improving the terms of trade especially amongst APCC member countries in relation to the relaxation of trade barriers and/or restriction that would free up market options for farmers/producers and could also improve profitability that should directly benefit coconut farmers. Another agenda of importance intends to address the issues of fairer trade for coconut farmers/producers who have been traditional subjected to a 'buyer-led market' and that interventions and options be considered to create wherever possible and necessary a 'seller-influenced' market that would utilize of their economies of scale to improve their competitive edge or bargaining power to maximize returns for coconut farmers.

In August last year I was privileged to attend the National Coconut Week & 1st International Coconut Festival in the Philippines at the invitation of PCA Administrator. The highlight of that visit was attending a two days Consultative Forum at which the industry road map was the subject of consultation between the stakeholders and the Philippine Coconut Authority.

In September a week later, I had the memorable experience attending the World Coconut Day Celebrations in Bangalore, India and was able to have first-hand interaction and healthy exchange between the farmers, processors, institutions and government. As guest of the CDB through the Chairman, Shri T K Jose, I had the privilege of again attending and observing over two days the stakeholder forum with leaders of Farmer Producer Organisations in Karnataka.

In both the Philippines and India I was very much impressed by the ingenuity of industry authorities, farmer organization and stakeholders to constructively unite to seek important resolves going forward for positive outcome in the coconut sector to benefit our coconut farmers. I was impressed by the leadership in the important institution of both leading coconut nations.

As APCC Executive Director it confirmed with me two of the critical success factors in the development of our coconut sector; ie, the strength of the institution charged with the responsibility by the government to lead and manage the coconut sector ensuring its sustainability to be able to serve well the coconut farmers; and the organised state of our coconut farmers and producers that enable the responsible institutions and governments to serve them well and more effectively. Our member

countries need viable and vibrant institutions established to serve coconut farmers.

Focus on coconut farmer

An important question to answer that would impact on policy making is: How do we make coconut a priority or one of the government priorities in the member countries?

Our national statistics over decades focused on production tonnages, area of land under coconut in hectares, number of coconuts trees, export earnings and so on but there is little or no indication on the number of coconut farmers.

The focus of APCC is not the coconut but rather the coconut farmer, it is the sea of humanity made up of men, women and children that rise to the morning sun and reminiscence the day as it sets all under the coconut tree. For many years in our PNG organization we used an old APCC production on VHS video during our agriculture extension programs to promote coconut farming, it was an APCC video titled 'Under the Coconut Tree'. The movie was in these clippings showcased farmers in their natural settings with their normal activities.

Policy makers often look at the level of contribution to national GDP or share of export earnings to decide how to prioritize commodities in a given nation. The export earnings of coconut for example in Indonesia earning by coconut is as a percentage would be negligible at 0.56%. Yet the recent survey concluded indicate 5.9 million rural households or families dependent on coconut for their livelihood. That would account for nearly 24 million men, women and children, almost 10% of the population of Indonesia. Export earnings for coconut in India is 0.13% of total export earnings of India, yet

over 12 million families account for a population of some 60 million children, women and men, 5% of total population, that depend on the coconut for their livelihood. Philippines coconut contribution to national export earnings is 2.68% from 20% of the population (3.5 million households = 18 million people) that could be entirely dependent of coconut for cash income. In the Pacific PNG's coconut sector contribute to 0.01% of national export earnings (amongst windfall gains from gold, copper, oil & gas) yet 500,000 rural families depend on coconut that accounts for nearly 45% of the nation's population that depend on coconut. This scenario is similar in many other countries.

Priority setting by policy makers looks at and uses the incorrect measurements and indicators hence the failure over decades to state coconut as one of the priority crops in many coconut growing countries. If we humanized our policy approach with focus on people as in coconut farmers, our legislated authorities in

each country would establish policies targeted at development of the sector, plan more responsibly, allocate resource support accordingly and in turn the export earnings by coconut, in the best interest of the nation and the farmer would show significant improvement and continue to increase in an unprecedented manner.

Work of the technical working group

The Community made a very strategic move in 2010 to establish the Technical Working Group that would now make it possible for APCC to create and provide specialized services to member countries through projects that would benefit farmers, strengthen institutions and increase APCC visibility. A number of important projects, collaborations and interventions are going to be proposed that would enhance development of the coconut sector. This session would look at strengthening the work of the TWG.

Each member country will present a Country Statement which is an

important part of the Session in which they discuss the state of the coconut sector in each of their countries. They speak of policies and programs working for the sector and any new developments of interest. Some of the reports would highlight issues, constraints and limitations experienced in the industry be it pest & diseases, marketing, climate change effects and other matters that would be in common with other countries. There is a forum of exchange that is created in the Session. Resolutions can be made collectively as a community for resolving it.

Our international partner organizations would be presenting their work in the regions and express ways for improving relationships to collaborate well for the benefit of farmers. We look forward to a successful Session/Ministerial Meeting and the APCC Secretariat is looking forward to receiving and implementing some very good resolutions for the development of the coconut sector.



Participants of 51st APCC Session /Ministerial Meeting