

# Knowing and growing

Nidhi Tandon, Principal of Networked Intelligence for Development, discusses the convergence of organic farming, women and ICT...

As in many other regions in the world, Caribbean women play a vital, if under recognised and unsupported, role in food production. They have less access to land, extension training, affordable credit and loans than men do. Studies, however, indicate that they make up to 65% of on-farm and 80% of marketing decisions. There is also a growing level of expressed interest and commitment to organic farming methods among women. Organic agriculture is the fastest growing of all sectors in agriculture worldwide. The organic sector is, on average, under 0.5% of the total agricultural sector in most countries, the exceptions being Germany and Austria, which have between 2% and 3% of their agricultural area under organic production. The major organic products sold in global markets include, in order of importance: dried fruits and nuts, processed fruits and vegetables, cocoa, spices, herbs, oil crops and derived products, sweeteners, dried leguminous products, meat, dairy products, alcoholic beverages, processed food and fruit preparations. Non-food items include cotton, horticulture and livestock. The National Marketing Institute and the Organic Trade Association (US and Canada) project that, by 2005, retail sales of organic produce will reach \$20bn. In 1990, sales were \$1bn, and by 2000, had reached \$7.76bn.

Opportunities exist to tap into local and regional tourism markets, but women farmers tend to be isolated from regional and global market information, are not producing to organic export standards, do not recognise themselves as entrepreneurs or farming as a business, and thus cannot translate their interest and farming practice into real economic return. A number of women farmers would like to make this leap but lack the opportunity. The market for organic products from the Caribbean is potentially a large one. There are regional opportunities, which could be explored by targeting the Green Globe certified hotels and the growing ecotourism market.

Caribbean women own and control less land than men, and the majority are small farmers. Despite policies intended to assure equitable development, women still receive less extension training and access fewer loans for farm development, product development and marketing.



Although there are few figures on hectares in organic agriculture in the Caribbean, it is indicated that, in every territory, a high percentage of women farmers show an interest in farming in traditional and holistic fashions, but have no access to standards and the production processes required for certification.

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ICTs can be one of the tools that assist organic farmers to optimise production, distribution and marketing plans, and to make effective use of scarce land by planting for market demand. Because organic production is extremely knowledge-based, ICTs also provide access to a range of information on likely markets, planning, management, techniques, standards and certification – which are critical to effective organic farming.

## Interface between organic farming, ICTs and business management training

Organic farming is a highly knowledge-intensive method of farming relative to other methods. Everything – from farm management, pest control, use of indigenous herbicides, crop monitoring and soil culture promotion to organic standards, certification and marketing – requires constant monitoring and information. As well, organic farmers often farm in isolation and do not benefit from the larger community-based networks that support non-organic farmers.

In this context, the uses of ICTs are tremendous – arguably even more so in contexts where travel between countries is extremely costly. If organic farmers in the Caribbean are to be an active player in the global trend towards organic farming, then it is almost an essential requisite that they are connected to the worldwide web.

‘Knowing and Growing: ICT tools for organic women farmers’ provides a confluence of interest between women entrepreneurs who need capacity building both in farming businesses and in computer skills. ICT

training has more immediate outcomes when the training is offered within a context that lends itself to the benefits offered by ICTs – particularly in networking and communications between and amongst interest/user groups. There is additional value in bringing dispersed groups together for technical training because participants often find common solutions to common problems, explore technical skills together and learn from each other, and the learning process and communication channels offered by ICTs bring them closer together long after the training workshop ends.

Immediate workshop objectives and changes resulting from the project include:

- Provision of awareness raising and training in the use of ICT tools and services to facilitate access to, and exchange of, information, and to promote effective business management and marketing;
- Establishment of the beginnings of a regional information and marketing network of organic farmers, to help local farmers market themselves on other virtual networks, and to find out in which fields and in which sense there is a need for further co-operation;
- Introduction of women farmers to organic farming techniques and standards in the region;



- A raising of awareness of the relevant issues posed by WTO, CSME, fair trading and organic standards requirements;
- Unearthing the business needs of this particular constituency through facilitated discussion amongst a broad range of stakeholders who would ensure the sustainability of this initiative;
- Strengthening the regional network of women entrepreneurs whose combined expertise will enable them to supply organic produce to local markets and bring about changes to the commercial environments in which they conduct business.

### The training methodology

NID and Jamaica Organic Agricultural Movement delivered a tried and tested training methodology that strikes a balance between:

- Bringing in local content and local stakeholders to contribute local context and analysis;
- Ensuring that every participant is brought into the dialogue and discussion right from the beginning as equal contributors of value, knowledge and experience;
- Providing some structure to the overall programme, while allowing for fluidity and changes as determined by the participants and other local stakeholders.

In the context of women entrepreneurs in any developing economy, we usually begin by conducting a simple survey that asks women what it is they want to know. The responses may often be over simplistic. The programme framework is based upon these initial responses, which we build upon by:

- Finding out and analysing what they need to know in greater detail;
- Providing the physical and intellectual space for dialogue that will enable enterprising participants to form alliances with ISPs, business support services, financial intermediaries and other businesses;
- Providing online 'laboratory' conditions, including field visits for participants to experiment with and experience.

In this way, a comprehensive training programme is designed and developed in collaboration with participants, resource persons and local 'mediator' or 'service' agencies wherever possible. This ensures full and active participation on an ongoing basis between participants and local resource persons, and maximises the learning process. The focus of the training is people-centred rather than goal oriented, and is guided ultimately by the process of self-discovery. This method of training encourages confidence building, skills in problem-solving and self-empowerment. It is a particularly effective mode of training for women, who value the creation of networks and peer groups to build alliances and to share ideas.

The training programme strikes a balance between technical hands-on training, in this instance, in organics and ICTs, and broader discussions on regional policy issues. This regional workshop provided space for six different components for training interaction:

- Online training sessions in a computer lab equipped with 40 computers, all with connectivity. These sessions involved group and individual exercises. Presentations covered basic ICT terminology and how to set up email for basic users, as well as creating a web page and downloading digital photos for advanced users;
- Generic presentations by a number of key representatives in order to present a comprehensive overview of the organic sector, ongoing policy developments and local ISP providers;
- Context specific discussions by experts with regards to cluster networks, WTO negotiation issues and capital financing;
- Field trips – one full day was devoted to a field trip to three organic farms;
- Question and answer periods at the end of each section for participants to critique and evaluate;
- Videos provided examples of what some organic farmers and their communities are facing in today's world.

A brainstorming and strategic planning session took place on the final day of the workshop, where advisors provided their observations on the progress made during the training workshop, as well as advice on the next steps to be taken both nationally and regionally.

### Participant profile

Farmers in the Caribbean region, who farm organically, are in the process of transition or conversion, or who have expressed an interest in organic farming. Participants came from Antigua, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, St Lucia, St Kitts, St Vincent & the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica.

A minority of participants came from established networks, such as the Jamaica Organic Agriculture Movement, Caribbean Regional Environmental Program (CREP), Inter American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), Jamaica Sustainable Development Network (JSDN) and University of West Indies (UWI).

All 47 participants who registered for the workshop completed the entire course. Over 40% had used the internet before; however, only 5% were proficient users. 25 participants had already established email addresses and, at the end of the workshop, all 47 participants were connected with their own email address. Of the 47 participants, 28 ran their own farming businesses.

### Age range of participants

Under 20 years	1
20 - 30 years	8
30 - 40 years	9
40 - 50 years	17
Over 50 years	12

List of websites and other web resources:

Networked Intelligence for Development (NID): [www.networkedintelligence.com/pipe.html](http://www.networkedintelligence.com/pipe.html).

Jamaica Organic Agriculture Movement (JOAM): [www.joam.org](http://www.joam.org).

Jamaica Cluster Project: [http://www.biofach.de/library/pdf-doipkadp-de-2003-12-22\\_16-50-56.pdf](http://www.biofach.de/library/pdf-doipkadp-de-2003-12-22_16-50-56.pdf).

The Natural Marketing Institute: [www.nmisolutions.com](http://www.nmisolutions.com).

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