

A research, development and training network for the sugarcane sector in Réunion

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Abstract

Many innovations have been proposed by research institutes and agricultural development bodies in the French overseas territories [*Départements* Outre-Mer (Dom)] – Réunion and Mayotte in the Indian Ocean, Guadeloupe and Martinique in the Caribbean, and Guyana in South America. The lack of transfer of these innovations remains a weak point of agricultural development in these territories. In particular, this has applied to the sugarcane sector in Réunion, comprising 3,000 cane growers operating on 24,000 hectares of land. To counter these difficulties, a network for innovation and agricultural technology transfer (*Réseau d'Innovation et de Transfert Agricole*, RITA) has been established to bring together growers and other participants - from research to training - according to their specialised areas of expertise.

In order to meet the growers' requirements, a survey was conducted to identify their specific needs. The results revealed a strong demand for agronomic guidance in terms of fertiliser practices, weed control, choice of varieties, irrigation management, etc. Small-scale trials were subsequently established to identify technical improvements within particular study areas and encourage growers to take advantage of these innovations.

The transfer mechanism of trial results is based on a dynamic network of participants who are acquainted with the day-to-day realities of farming, thereby facilitating the adoption of the innovations. Growers, in collaboration with an assigned extension technician, can implement a changed practice (based on research results) in a particular block of cane, by comparing it with their usual techniques. This process provides growers, extension technician, institutional agronomists and researchers with fresh opportunities to interact, share their expertise and identify further needs. The demonstration trials also enable the extension technicians to meet and improve their technical recommendations. They also allow researchers to more fully understand real-life situations in the field, which sometimes, are quite different from those encountered during their experiences in research trials.

This network, that allows solutions to be developed through the breaking down of barriers, facilitates the exchange of information and involvement of all participants within the agricultural sectors of the five overseas territories within Dom. It also allows interaction of several agricultural sectors within the same network. Each network, based on a common organisation managed by local governance, a steering committee, and a coordinator, adapts its operations to the specificities of its territory or, where necessary, of its sector. A national coordinating unit facilitates exchange of information between networks, particularly via the implementation of working groups on themes of mutual interest on an inter-Dom and/or inter-sector basis. For example, the sugarcane sector takes part in working groups on fertiliser management, cover crops, etc., the running of an information system (<http://coatis.rita-dom.fr>), and the organisation of inter-Dom technical days.

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