

17. FOOD SECURITY

Drafted by Secretariat of the Pacific Community

SUMMARY

Food Security is a major health and development concern in the Pacific. Food security is multi-dimensional, taking into account food availability (sufficient quantities, appropriate quality), access (adequate resources for acquiring appropriate foods for a nutritious diet), stability (no risk of losing access to food as a consequence of events such as economic or climatic crisis) and utilization (essential non-food factors such as clean water, sanitation and health care). Access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food depends on a number of factors such as the availability of healthy food, accessibility of healthy good, and the use and health impact of food. These factors are in turn influenced by the multiple sectors, groups and environments that affect food supply and demand.

The risk to food security in the Pacific has been recognized at the highest political level. At the 39th Pacific Islands Forum Leader's meeting in Niue in 2008, Leaders "acknowledged the high importance of food security as an emerging issue which poses challenges for the future well being of people across the region" and "called on all countries to maintain open markets and, where possible, to increase the production and supply of healthy food". Leaders "committed their governments to immediate action to address food security issues nationally and where possible regionally through a range of measures across key sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, trade and transport"¹.

KEY ISSUES

Food is not only essential for life, but is a key factor in health and 'defines people and cultures' (fn). However, food security - when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (World Food Summit, 2009) - is a major current health and development issue throughout the Pacific island communities.

Increasing global food prices, fuel price upheavals, unstable economic conditions and climate change affects the availability and access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food. Pacific Island countries and Territories (PICTs) in particular are being adversely affected. These global influences are increasing food prices, exacerbating PICTs already heavy reliance on imported and processed foods and contributing to the loss of local harvesting, production and cultural knowledge. Even more important, these influences also create uncertainty around food supply. As a consequence, Pacific populations are at greater risk of malnutrition, food-borne diseases and non-communicable disease (NCD).

Food security is further impacted by the volatility in the global price of oil, and as Pacific Island countries is a net importer of oil, this has had a significant impact on local food production costs as well as transport costs for imported food. The combined impact of these factors has markedly increased the vulnerability of these island communities.

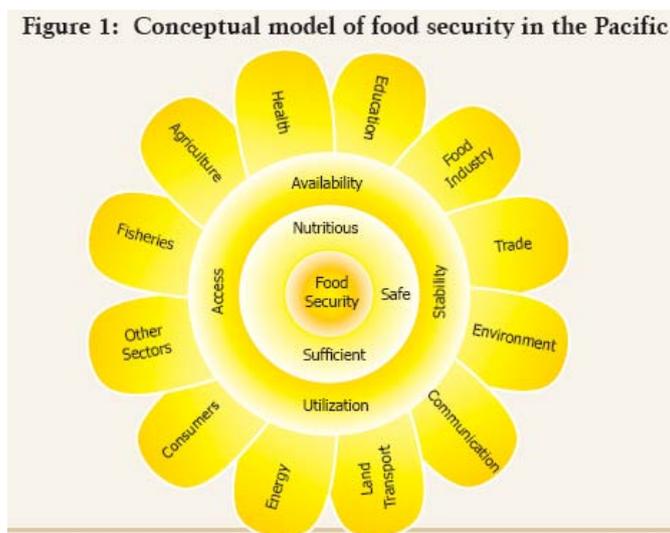
Responding to the 39th Pacific leaders call for action to improve food security in the Pacific in 2008, a multi-sectoral working group known as the Food Secure Pacific Working Group (FSPWG)² was

¹ Forum Communique, 2008, Thirty-Ninth Pacific Islands Forum, Alofi, Niue, 19-20 August, p.10

² The Industry Partners for a Food Secure Pacific (IPFSP) was formed in 2010 as a parallel private sector regional body. IPFSP draws together major food producers and distributors in the region, focuses on food safety, quality and fortification, and advocates for a more regulated market with food safety standards. The formation of this group

established to progress the food security agenda in the Pacific as an instrumental part of the Pacific Plan for strengthening regional cooperation and integration. The Group's first role was to prepare for and organize the Pacific Food Summit in 2010 and develop a Framework for Action on Food Security in the Pacific. The latter was endorsed at the Food Summit and subsequently endorsed by Pacific Island Forum Leaders in its 41st meeting in Samoa in 2010.

The Food Secure Pacific: Framework for Action on Food Security in the Pacific reiterates the multiple factors that influence food security in the Pacific (figure 1 below).



The Framework outlines strategies in seven thematic areas, all aimed at improving food security and describes a multi-sectoral, coordinated approach at regional and national level in addressing food security. In essence, the framework recognizes food security as a human right and critical development issue; promotes sustainable solutions to build self-reliance and empowerment, including food systems that are more resilient and adaptable to changing markets and environments. The Framework also respects indigenous systems of resource management and the diversity of Pacific island cultures.

BACKGROUND

Food security in the Pacific, as elsewhere, is facing new challenges as global markets experience dramatic increases in food prices. The FAO index of food prices rose by 9 percent in 2006, by 24 percent in 2007 and by 51 percent in the first months of 2008. The increase affected nearly all food commodities, but to different degrees. FAO forecast that the world would spend more than 20 percent more on food imports in 2008 than in 2007 (FAO, Food Outlook, May 2008)³. This severely strained the budgets of low-income food-deficit countries that are likely to see their import bills soar by more than 40% in 2009. Whilst world food prices began to fall in 2009 from its 2008 heights, the fall has occurred mainly in deteriorating economic environment, where the fall is countering any likely benefits that would be gained (FAO, Food Outlook, Global Market Analysis, June 2009).

acknowledges the critical role played by the private sector in improving food security in the Pacific. Similarly in 2011 the Massey University in partnership with the FSPWG created the Food Security Research Group to engage researchers in the region into developing a food security research agenda to support the FSPWG and the implementation of the Framework for Action. The focus of the research agenda is the causes of food insecurity and the means to address it. The group noted the huge potential that exists in the region to undertake the task of food security and research.

³ However, since 2008, food import bill has moderately declined, with further falls projected for 2012/2013, which are may benefit vulnerable countries. However, prevailing economic conditions and global oil price upward movements are likely to outweigh any gains from falling world food prices (FAO, Food Outlook, Global Market Analysis, November 2012)

Despite encouraging world food price trends, PICTs are particularly vulnerable as they tend to be net staple food importers. Perhaps most striking is their heavy dependence on imported cereals as a source of dietary energy and protein. Remarkably, rice and flour have now replaced root crops as the single most important source of starch and energy in Pacific Island Countries. All PICTs, apart from Fiji, PNG and Solomon Islands, rely exclusively on cereal imports, indicating their high vulnerability and dependency.

Another indicator of vulnerability is the high food import bill, which is increasing as a proportion of total export earnings. This indicator provides a measure of capacity to import food and in many countries it is declining. In some, eg Tuvalu, Samoa, Kiribati and the Cook Islands, the value of food imports has exceeded that of total exports.

Food security is further impacted by the volatility in the global price of oil, and as this region is a net importer of oil, this has had a significant impact on local food production costs as well as transport costs for imported food. The combined impact of these factors has markedly increased the vulnerability of Pacific island communities.

Some of the key aspects of food security requiring attention relate to:-

1. Food quality and the related double disease burden:-

(a) The burden of NCD in the Pacific and food trade & marketing

The populations living in Pacific island countries and territories have some of the highest prevalence of obesity and type 2 diabetes in the world (based on WHO STEPS surveys, overweight and obesity prevalence ranges from 47 percent – 93percent; in Fiji the number of people with diabetes is expected to double to 72,000 people affected by 2030). Diets are low in vegetables and fruit (< 40% of students in Fiji (35% females; 37% males), ate at least two servings of fruit per day and only 55% ate at least two servings of vegetables⁴), lacking in essential nutrients, and are vulnerable to changes in imported food supply brought about by food price and fuel related cost increases.

The non-communicable disease related issues have been a major concern for the islands' Health Ministers for a number of years, as highlighted during their biennial meeting in Vanuatu in 2007. The Ministers noted:

"Most Pacific Island Countries do not have the capacity to deal with the NCD epidemic"

"Imported food and its effect on the health of Pacific Island People remain an issue for Ministers. They requested that WHO and SPC help them to facilitate / initiate engagement with the trade sector to ensure that the health impact of trade agreements on diet is minimized"

Since the 2007 Health Minister's meeting a number of regional responses been in place, such as the FAO/WHO Food Standards to promote health and fair trade in the Pacific, regional recognition that non-communicable diseases arising from inappropriate and unhealthy diets combined with insufficient physical activity are of major public health concern in the Pacific; and proposed that food standards and trade agreements (including PICTA, PACER and WTO agreements) in the Pacific should take account of the urgent need to reduce the NCD burden and, where possible, contribute to the prevention and control efforts of the Pacific countries.

⁴ Utter J, et al. Lifestyle and Obesity in South Pacific Youth, University of Auckland, October 2008

Following the Food Summit, the 9th Meeting of Ministers of Health in Solomon Islands in 2011, reiterated the need to improve national coordination systems on food security through the development of fully costed and multi-sectoral national plans, inclusive of resource mobilisation, a national coordinating mechanism and a monitoring and evaluation strategy

(b) The burden of micronutrient deficiencies in the Pacific and food fortification

The FAO/WHO Meeting on Food Standards to Promote Health and Fair Trade in the Pacific, expressed concern about the magnitude and consequences of micronutrient deficiencies in the Pacific. The prevalence of anemia is reported to be 20% or greater, in both children and pregnant women, in 15 of 16 countries⁵. Iodine deficiency is thought to be a significant public health problem in at least some Pacific island nations. Studies show that in at least 3 countries (Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu) iodine deficiency and endemic goitre are prevalent. In addition, in at least 4 countries (Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and PNG) vitamin A deficiency constitutes a public health problem³. The Meeting of Ministers of Health of the Pacific island countries, in Vanuatu (2007) recognized that these micronutrient deficiencies are public health issues in the Pacific island countries, identified a need for the fortification of certain products in the Pacific and agreed that Pacific island countries should have common standards for fortification as part of strategies to address these deficiencies. Common standards for fortification of wheat flour and salt were proposed at the FAO/WHO Meeting on Food Standards to Promote Health and Fair Trade in the Pacific, in December 2007.

c. Synergies in addressing NCDs and micronutrient deficiencies

Strategies to address NCDs and micronutrient deficiencies can complement each other. Introducing standards to reduce salt intake and change the type of salt consumed from non-iodised to iodised would help reduce hypertension and iodine deficiency at the same time. Efforts should be made to draw on existing policy and programmes and strategies promoting healthy lifestyles. Examples of existing programmes include the KANA project, to improve food quality and ensure balanced diets for students in boarding schools, particularly primary schools in rural areas of Fiji, the UNICEF backyard home garden and the "Go Local" programme. Promotion of breastfeeding is another strategy that helps prevent both NCDs and micronutrient deficiencies and existing programmes include the WHO/UNICEF 'Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) strategy and the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI). Breastfeeding has a critical role to play in making food security a reality for children in the Pacific, as it provides total food security for infants and children up to two years. In the face of rising food prices, fluctuating fuel prices and unstable economic climates, breast milk is readily available, affordable, a nutritious food source and provide antibodies to protect children against infectious diseases. Breast milk continues to provide the growing child with essential nutrients and energy, helping to prevent malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies in the second year of life and beyond, along with other foods.

d. Food safety, regional trade facilitation and food standards in the Pacific

Protecting human health and achieving economic growth by facilitating trade in safe and suitable food in today's global food market is an important challenge for all countries but particularly the countries and territories of the Pacific. Agriculture and fisheries are important engines of economic growth in most PICTs, but increasingly strict food safety and quality regulatory requirements of

⁵ WHO Global Database on anaemia. WHO, Geneva. <http://www.who.int/vmnis/anaemia/en/>

developed country export markets have been impediments to fully exploiting potential markets. Recent examples of food safety and quality issues impacting on food trade in the Pacific include cyanide in cassava, cadmium in taro, mercury, histamine and ciguatera in fish and *Escherichia coli* in green leafy vegetables. Furthermore, food exports from PICTs have been rejected for reasons of inadequate labeling. Poor grading and packaging standards are reducing the quality and value of food exports. Most of these issues are related to inadequate capacity to ensure food safety and quality along the food chain – from farm to fork – and weak national food control and monitoring systems (including food law and regulations, management structures, inspection and certification services, and laboratory services). Compliance with international food safety and quality standards is necessary not only to gain market access for export commodities, but also to supply the lucrative tourism industry within Pacific island countries, as well as for the well-being of the local population. Controlling the safety of imported food is also an enormous challenge for the small island states and areas of the Pacific. Consumers are often exposed to food that is sold after its specified use-by date and/or has undergone temperature abuse before or during distribution to the Pacific.

Regarding food standards to promote health and fair trade, both FAO and WHO have undertaken joint mission to identify gaps in the food laws, regulations and standards of Pacific countries and areas require urgent national action to better promote health and fair trade; it is important and appropriate that countries work more closely with each other to consider a regional approach to setting standards based on the guidance of Codex and Food Standards Australia New Zealand; and food safety measures should be based on sound scientific evidence and risk analysis principles and should not unnecessarily create barriers to trade. Regionally coordinated action by PICs to facilitate trade in safe and nutritious food has been recommended. The proposed coordinated action to protect human health and facilitate trade in the global food market by addressing these goals on a regional basis is fundamental to a successful Pacific Regional Trade Facilitation Programme being coordinated by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat as well as other regional programmes implemented by other members of the of FSPWG.

REFERENCES

- World Summit on Food Security, 2009, Declaration of the World Summit on Food Security, Rome
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- World Health Organisation, 2007. Vanuatu Commitments:- the biennial Meeting of Ministers of Health for the Pacific Island Countries, Port Vila, Vanuatu
- World Health Organisation, 2011. Report on the Ninth Meeting of Ministers of Health for the Pacific Island Countries, Honiara, Solomon Islands
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KEY DOCUMENTS & HYPELINKS

‘Towards a Food secure pacific:- Framework for Action on Food Security in the Pacific’ 2010

<http://foodsecurepacific.org/>

The Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011-2015

In 2012, the World Health Assembly adopted the *Comprehensive Implementation Plan on Maternal, Infant and Young Child Nutrition*

Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), 2012: *The State of Food Insecurity in the World*