



INITIATIVE ON

Aquatic Foods



Imagining island food system futures with Indigenous foods: A *tok stori* on the origins and potential of traditional food systems in Solomon Islands

Background

Transition to unhealthy food choices and lifestyles is causing health problems for Solomon Islanders. In contrast to before the 1950s, imported foods are today widespread across the islands. Many of these foods are unhealthy – high in sugar and other carbohydrates, unsuitable fats and salt. This is creating an epidemic of obesity and non-communicable diseases.

Solomon Islands remains a highly agricultural society with high rates of consumption of traditional subsistence garden produce and aquatic foods. Imported foods have a role to play, but only if they are viewed as complementary to the local foods produced from gardens and seas rather than being a major component of the diet. Imagining food futures based on strengths in Indigenous food systems is important to change the course of island food systems in transition. This raises an important question: What does a vision for a healthy and safe food system comprise?

A forum on *Island food systems in transition: Strengthening Indigenous food systems in Solomon Islands* was hosted on 31 May 2023 by WorldFish and Kastom Gaden Association. This forum brought together rural actors and key stakeholders to talk about traditional farming and aquatic foods under a nutrition-sensitive approach and to listen to ideas about what the Solomon Islands food systems future could look like.

Patterns and origins of Indigenous island food systems

Speakers at the forum highlighted areas of strengths and opportunities based on their fields of expertise: forest foods and their role in rural food systems; aquatic foods and innovation in processing for community-level product development; and the historical journey of change and its influence over the food transition in Solomon Islands.

“Aquatic seafood plays a vital role in the culture and economy of Solomon Islands. However, the sustainability of the country’s fisheries resources is threatened by overfishing, illegal fishing, and destructive fishing practices. Efforts are underway to promote sustainable fisheries and protect critical habitats, but more needs to be done to ensure the long-term viability of the country’s fisheries resources. By working together, the government, NGOs, and local communities can promote sustainable fishing practices and protect the marine biodiversity of Solomon Islands for future generations.”

– Professor Transform Aqorau, Vice Chancellor,
Solomon Islands National University



Kastom Gaden Association
food futures & nutritional health for Solomon Island communities
training | food security assessment | supporting family nutrition



The forest is an integral component of the traditional or island food system and plays a significant role in the food security, culture, livelihoods and economy of Solomon Islanders. However, this food system is threatened by logging and large agriculture developments, loss of traditional knowledge and introduction of new modern foods. This transition of the food system contributed to the rise in lifestyle diseases. Revival of traditional forest knowledge and skills, forest conservation, nutrition sensitive agriculture and value adding of nutritious forest foods are some strategies to enhance the resilience of the Island Food System.

– Dr Shane Tutua, Zai Na Tina Farm

Together, the speakers highlighted how Solomon Island food systems are embedded in traditions and Indigenous food values and practices. This is a point of departure from conventional approaches to innovation and food future visioning. Forests and seas are integral components of the island food systems and play significant roles in the nutrition, food security, culture, livelihoods and economy of Solomon Islanders. However, evidence of transition has been perceived through different phases: theological or natural, post-contact, Indigenous and tradition, and world systems and modernization. These have contributed to the weakening and/or dysfunction of the island food systems.

There are huge opportunities to strengthen agricultural and fisheries production processing, and distribution of fresh crops and aquatic foods, and make them available, accessible and affordable for all Solomon Islanders.

Tok stori session with rural food system actors

The *tok stori* – a culturally accepted method of sharing information, generating knowledge and learning in Solomon Islands¹ – gave voice to people who are rural food system change agents. They comprised champions, trainers and entrepreneurs in organic farming and fish processing. The panelists shared stories about how traditional foods and practices have provided resilience and supported nutrition across villages in Solomon Islands. Their stories illustrated how Indigenous foods and traditional practices have been the foundation for their innovation.

Novel ways of producing foods were illustrated using examples of grassroots innovations, such as experimenting with integrated growing practices (trees, crops, fish) and processing of fish by Indigenous women's groups. The important role of training farmers through practical work and farmer-to-farmer *tok stori* in traditional organic farming techniques was highlighted for innovations using traditional practices to generate sustainable increases in food production. Novel processing and products were also shared, along with some of the obstacles to being a food entrepreneur in Solomon Islands, such as the difficulty in transporting fresh foods.

The *tok stori* panel summarized challenges around agricultural threats to rural food systems. Experiences with the effects of climate change and concerns about soil health, insect infestations and pesticides were discussed. Stories also highlighted the continuing problems of access to markets and linkages of farmers and fish vendors to services supporting their ideas. Opportunities identified to tackle these challenges included strengthening networks among farmers and aquatic food actors to learn and share experiences. Another area of opportunity was a specific focus on supporting the next generation of rural food system actors – young women and men – and highlight their societal role as food producers and distributors.

Training of local farmers is very important in Solomon Islands; it builds farmers' knowledge and skills in organic farming which is good for the land management as well as it produces healthy crops for consumption and income generation.

– Esther Lodu, Kastom Gaden Association

Integration of fishponds and farming in Malaita has provided opportunities for men, women and youth to be trained in traditional agriculture and building fishponds for food supply and also selling vegetables and fish for income. Small farmers like me need more support from the government and NGOs so we can reach more farmers.

– Lionel Maeliu, Farmer, Malaita

Establishing a private business buying fish has contributed to making fish and marine foods available and accessible in urban areas. It also provided income for fishers including women and youth to meet their needs.

– Anna Kera, Manager, Prime Fresh

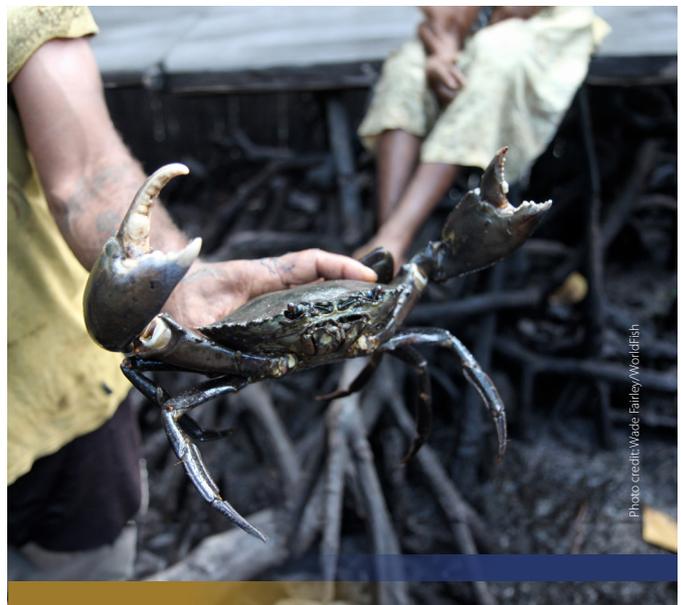


A vision for healthy and safe island food systems

Healthy and safe island food systems will ensure healthy diets for all Solomon Islanders. To achieve this vision, the forum devised four thematic recommendations:

Nurture novel partnerships: Solomon Islands is rich in skilled and experienced innovators. In addition, there are government agencies, academic institutions, rural training centers, non-government organizations, and small- and medium-sized enterprises that together constitute a large complementary pool of services. This national technical expertise could be utilized more effectively to service food actors through innovative ways of working together as partners to support positive food system change and ensure healthy diets. The forum highlighted that novel partnership opportunities exist between several sectors of society and government, both at national and provincial levels. But identifying what these opportunities look like in practice and “who should do what” requires dialog and deliberate planning together around common goals. That is why a shared vision is so important. The forum could become a growing annual event to celebrate and share traditional food practices and increase visibility and value of aquatic foods and other Indigenous foods as part of an evolving vision for Solomon Islands food systems.

Innovate using Indigenous foods: Indigenous foods and traditional practices form the basis of innovation in the island food systems future vision from the *tok stori*. It should be a



priority to improve services to enable novel processing and value-adding efforts of Indigenous foods by rural women, men and youths and linking them to national marketing opportunities. The government has an important role to invest in these services and particularly to help reduce the barriers to safe and affordable food transportation for farmers and fishers. One way to improve the design of programs and services is a continuous and wider discussion with stakeholders, including rural communities, on relevant national policies, challenges and opportunities facing food systems in Solomon Islands. Rural food system actors have been the heartbeat of food sovereignty and resilience for generations, and this is a strength to build on to address national food supply and to counter unhealthy imported foods.

Increase access to Indigenous foods: A major obstacle to increased use of Indigenous foods is the infrastructure to support reliable, safe and affordable distribution. Produce from gardens and the sea is costly in urban centers and consumers can easily turn to cheaper, imported unhealthy foods to the detriment of rural food producers. Investing in better roads and more regular and reliable shipping services, as well as marketing opportunities that allow for safe and hygienic food practices, could do much to improve this situation. Such improvements would also facilitate increased marketing opportunities for rural women, men and youth involved in agriculture and fisheries activities. In addition, supporting small farmers to conduct farming as a business can help power village economies. Most Solomon Island people live in villages, so it is important to note that rural services are not only about transporting and marketing foods in urban areas. Ways to diversify foods in the village to counter the imported convenience foods, and how that can enable new opportunities for producers, should be a more prominent topic of conversation about the food future.

Empower a new generation of Indigenous food champions: The future of Solomon Island food systems relies on an inspired and skilled new generation of food producers and innovators. Countering the food system transition to processed and convenience foods must therefore also include a strong emphasis on how to support youths to engage in food production, distribution and marketing to create employment and reduce urban drift. This is a



multifaceted challenge and should include the creation of novel pathways for youth to enroll in academic institutions specializing in agricultural fields such as soil management and food safety. Another pathway for youth engagement involves the revival of traditional knowledge and imparting skills to younger generations, including training in forest foods and their edible portions, seasons, nutrition and how to prepare these traditional foods. It is equally important to: document forest foods and their nutritional analysis; be proactive in forest conservation initiatives, such as creating forest reserves or protected sites; and emphasize nutrition-sensitive agrobiodiversity. These are areas where youth are already showing leadership and advocacy, which should be encouraged and strengthened.

Note

- ¹ Sanga K and Reynolds M. 2021. Bringing research back home: exploring Indigenous Melanesian tok stori as ontology. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 17(4): 532-542

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