



INITIATIVE ON

Aquatic Foods

Photo credit: Jillian Tutuo/WorldFish



## Imagining island food system futures with Indigenous foods

### A *tok stori* on the experiences and potential of traditional food systems in provinces of Solomon Islands

#### Background

Transition to unhealthy food choices and lifestyles is causing health problems for Solomon Islanders. Due to these circumstances, a *tok stori* was organized in 2023 to start addressing the following question: “what does a vision for a healthy and safe food system comprise?” (Tutuo et al. 2023)<sup>1</sup>. To follow up on these discussions, WorldFish and the Kastom Gaden Association (KGA) organized a second series of forums called Island Food Systems in Transition: Strengthening Indigenous Food Systems in Solomon Islands. The forums were hosted in Gizo, Western Province, on June 13, 2024, and in Buala, Isabel Province, on August 14, 2024. These forums brought together rural actors and key stakeholders (i) to talk about traditional farming and aquatic foods under a nutrition-sensitive approach and (ii) to listen to ideas about what the future of food systems in Solomon Islands could look like at the provincial level.

#### Experiences and potential of Indigenous island food systems

Speakers at the provincial forums highlighted various strengths and opportunities related to their areas of expertise. At the forum in Gizo, they emphasized the issue of malnutrition in Western Province and advocated for the promotion of Indigenous foods, including aquatic resources. They also discussed the sustainable management of fisheries as a means to address nutrition-related health issues and support the livelihoods of local communities.

“Nutrition-related health issues, particularly non-communicable diseases and micronutrient deficiencies, are prevalent in Western Province... It is timely to increase advocacy on Indigenous foods and diverse diets at the community level through counter advertisements of imported foods (especially in Gizo town), increasing production and supply of Indigenous foods (aquatic foods and local crops), and strengthening collaboration and partnerships with communities and provincial governments and NGOs under an island food system approach.”

— Eunice Mala, Gizo Hospital

“Fisheries and marine resources sustain livelihoods, ensuring food security and boosting rural economies in rural Solomon Islands, where approximately 75 percent of the population lives and relies on subsistence farming and fishing for their livelihoods. To ensure sustainability and ensuring their contribution to livelihoods, initiatives such as community-based resource management, sustainable fishing practices and marine protected areas should be supported into the future.”

— Dr. Gregory Bennett, WorldFish

“Organic farming and agriculture contribute to livelihoods and food and nutrition security in Solomon Islands. Initiatives carried out in the communities to have healthy soil and gardening include integration of crops and small livestock, pest management using plant derived pesticides, crop rotations and intercropping, the use of organic manure, and retaining farm residues. With growing KGA membership across provinces and communities, many trainings have been conducted over the years to encourage organic farming for healthy foods.”

— **Tikai Pitakia, KGA**

The highlighted opportunities emphasize the need to increase advocacy efforts for Indigenous foods and diverse diets within communities. This includes working with provincial governments to strengthen awareness and countering the advertising of imported foods in provincial stations, such as Gizo. Other key areas of focus are to enhance the production and availability of Indigenous foods. Suggested priorities included (i) conducting research on local products for pest and disease control as well as fertilizer development, (ii) providing training on organic farming, (iii) strengthening collaboration and partnerships with communities and (iv) equipping rural training centers, provincial governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Such initiatives can possibly help transform local food systems into more positive outcomes.

Speakers at the Buala forum emphasized the importance of marine and agriculture resources for fishers/farmers, users and consumers, and their contribution as sources of food and nutrition as well as employment and income generation in Isabel Province. Several challenges were also highlighted that affected the implementation of provincial activities.

“Marine resources are very important to fishers, users and consumers in Isabel because of their contribution as sources of food and nutrition, employment and income. Conducting monitoring, compliance and surveillance (including control and regulating fisheries policies), conducting awareness and training on community-based resource management, and carrying out biological research (including conservation areas and their marine stocks as well as market fish data collections) are some of the strategies to consider.”

— **Alfred Davidson, Provincial Fisheries Office, Isabel Province**

“Agriculture and extension services to communities promote nutrition and food security in Isabel Province; however, a main challenge faced at the provincial level is budget constraints, often due to redirection of priorities resulting in low implementation of programs.”

— **Emmanuel Kirio, Provincial Agriculture Office, Isabel Province**

“KGA has been working with communities over the years and has established a network of over 5000 (and growing) across Solomon Islands, including Isabel. Key initiatives like seed banks and the concept of keeping food, like in a bank, and using it later, as well as plant material exchange and seed distribution and training, are important for rural communities, including Isabel Province.”

— **Esther Lodu, KGA**

Several opportunities were highlighted. These included the need for collective action to address challenges through awareness and promotion of local foods, encouragement of backyard gardening for both market and household consumption, and integrated nutrition training.

### **Tok stori session with rural food system actors**

A *tok stori* is a culturally accepted method of sharing information, generating knowledge and learning in Solomon Islands.<sup>2</sup> The *tok stori* that is the focus of this brief gave a voice to people who are rural food system innovators. The forums 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.

### **Western Province**

The *tok stori* panel in Gizo showcased various initiatives led by individuals and groups involved in fisheries, agriculture and food processing within Gizo and the surrounding communities. The focus was on downstream fish processing, seaweed farming and sustainable management practices in both fisheries and agriculture, as well as opportunities for income generation. Participants discussed challenges such as low fishstocks, high operational costs for food processing, the impacts of climate change and also concerns regarding soil health, insect infestations and pesticide use. The stories shared addressed ongoing issues related to access to markets and the connections between farmers and fish vendors with the services that could support their initiatives. To tackle these challenges, several opportunities were identified, including enhancing marketing prospects, providing improved market spaces for seaweed and fish vendors, and implementing community-based resource management for sustainable harvesting.

“In partnership with the KGA, the association supports farmers to the extent that they can generate income to supplement family income, provide employment for families, and supplement food for nutritious diets of families around Ringi.”

— **Ferguson Vaghi, Ringi Inland Farmers Association, Kolombangara**

*The opportunity for food processing has grown over the years, with many supports from the region, the national government, and NGOs like KGA, especially in training on food processing. I have been producing healthy options of juices and ice lollies (fruity) for school children. It is healthy for them and, also, I make money.*

— **Georgina Walado, Food Processor Network, Gizo**

*The connection between national and provincial governments and NGOs plays an important role in fisheries, not only in supporting CBRM efforts but also research and compliance, raising awareness of tilapia farming and seaweed farming.*

— **Simeon Bata, Provincial Fisheries Office, Western Province**

*The abundance of fish in Gizo gives an opportunity for downstream processing. To improve this sector, we need support from the government and donors to meet the high costs related to electricity, product packaging and marketing.*

— **Schulte Maetoloa, Schulte's Seafoods**

*Through our effective management of seaweed, we continue to harvest sea grapes to support our livelihood, including school fees, church contribution, and other needs and wants.*

— **Yasmina, Sairagi Village**

There are significant opportunities to enhance agricultural and fisheries production, processing and distribution of fresh crops and aquatic foods, ensuring they are available, accessible and affordable for people in the provinces. Furthermore, the market environment should be more vendor-friendly to ensure safe conditions for both crops and aquatic foods.

## Isabel Province

The panelists in the *tok stori* described their daily experiences and challenges. Experiences were related to low fish catches, the long distance to their gardens and the effects of climate change. Concerns were raised about soil health, insect infestations and the use of pesticides. These concerns were also raised at the national forum. The stories also emphasized ongoing challenges such as transportation difficulties faced by fishers and crop vendors and also the rising costs of electricity needed to operate household deep freezers for storing aquatic foods.

Identified opportunities to address these challenges include establishing backyard or community gardens, providing training in soil and pest management (including for youths), implementing community-based resource management and using alternative energy sources (e.g. solar-powered freezers) for refrigeration and training.

## A vision for healthy and safe island food systems in rural areas of Solomon Islands

The provincial forums devised four thematic recommendations:

1. Nurture novel partnerships at the provincial and community levels: Strengthening collaboration and partnerships with communities and stakeholders is essential. This involves connecting communities with provincial, national and non-government organizations to raise awareness about Indigenous foods (from land and sea) and their impact on nutrition while considering climate change and other environmental issues. Supporting provincial governments is equally important to advocate for and provide relevant support services that enhance health promotion regarding Indigenous foods for nutrition and livelihoods at the community level, particularly in Isabel Province, where less engagement of stakeholders is observed.



2. Promote Indigenous foods: It is timely to counteract the increasing availability of processed foods in both provinces. It is necessary to increase advocacy on Indigenous foods and their nutritional benefits by integrating agriculture and fisheries for communities in both provinces. This includes practical community-based training in organic farming, community resource management and nutrition. Also, training on value-adding to Indigenous foods is recommended, though it must take into consideration positive nutrition outcomes and food safety. Providing a platform for provincial-level forums and food fairs to showcase Indigenous foods (both land and sea) and the innovations of rural actors can also help. Often, other non-Indigenous healthy foods should also be promoted.
3. Increase access to Indigenous and healthy foods: In both provinces, processed foods are easily accessible to significant numbers of households, as reflected in the high prevalence of non-communicable diseases and micronutrient deficiencies in both provinces. This has led to a call for more support on local initiatives that encourage production of Indigenous foods, including demonstration gardens in communities, schools and health facilities. Such initiatives could provide learning opportunities with skills to establish an organic backyard garden. Additionally, providing support for better markets, especially aquatic foods, would help too, as would support for value-added aquatic foods and crops for nutrition.
4. Empower women and a new generation of Indigenous food champions: Women's involvement in the two provincial forums was significant, and their roles in

marine resource management, agriculture and other initiatives were very clear. Future initiatives must recognize the involvement of women to promote healthy island food systems and ensure food security, nutrition and better livelihoods. This includes allocating targeted support and resources to empower women in food production, decision-making and leadership roles within both agriculture and fisheries, ensuring they have equitable opportunities to contribute to and benefit from our sustainable island/food systems. Equally important is providing space for youths to have hands-on training on organic agriculture, nutrition, food safety, and fisheries initiatives and innovations.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Tutuo J, Tikai P, Sanau L, Boso D, Ride A, Siota F and Eriksson H. 2023. Imagining island food system futures with Indigenous foods: A *tok stori* on the origins and potential of traditional food systems in Solomon Islands. Penang, Malaysia: WorldFish. Program Brief. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12348/5714>
- <sup>2</sup> Maetala R and Spann M. September 22, 2021. *Tok stori*, climate change and gender in Solomon Islands. *Solomon Times*. Digital. [www.solomontimes.com/feature/tok-stori-climate-change-and-gender-in-solomon-islands/636](http://www.solomontimes.com/feature/tok-stori-climate-change-and-gender-in-solomon-islands/636)

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