

## The Food Security Challenge: Pacific and Australian Perspectives

### Summary Paper



Fiji COVID-19 project in Nalele Village. Image source: Aloesi Dakuidreketi

## Introduction

While access to food is a basic human right, the United Nations estimates that almost 750 million people experienced severe food insecurity in 2019 – a figure estimated to grow by 83-132 million due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In October 2020 the *Women's Leadership Initiative* (WLI) held a virtual panel discussion to examine the issue of food security in the Australia-Pacific region and explore how it can be effectively and sustainably managed in times of emergency – such as COVID-19 and Tropical Cyclone (TC) Harold, which struck the Pacific Islands concurrently.

The panel consisted of three women actively involved in food security and food waste in Australia and the Pacific Islands:

- **Adi Maimalaga Tafuna'i**, Executive Director, *Women in Business Development Inc.* (W.I.B.D.I.) (Samoa)
- **Fiasili Vae'au-Lam**, Policy Officer, *UN Food and Agriculture Organization* (FAO) Subregional Office for the Pacific Islands (Samoa/Pacific region)
- **Simone Carson AM**, Co-founder and Director, *SecondBite* (Australia)

Panellists shared their perspectives on the food security challenge at regional, national and community levels in the Pacific and Australia, and what they have learned through their work.

Small group break-out and Q&A sessions allowed audience members (including Australia Awards scholars, WLI mentors, DFAT staff, and other members of Pacific and Australian development communities) to share their own insights and experiences on the issue.

Key findings and recommendations arising from this event, including what communities and regions can do to help build more resilient food systems, are summarised below.

## Current Challenges

The panel discussion focused on the wide-ranging impacts of COVID-19 and TC Harold on food security. Lockdowns, travel restrictions and reduced economic activity cause disruptions at each phase in the supply chain – from production and processing to distribution, retail and consumption.

### Impact on Supply Chains

- Negative impacts vary depending on the country and levels of government support
- Agricultural diseases – such as swine and avian flu – are concurrently threatening the Pacific Islands
- Farmers: struggle to find non-tourism industries and businesses to supply food to; are no longer able to rely on volunteers to pick their fruit and vegetables; and could likely experience massive food waste
- Consumers: panic-buy and reduce supermarket stores in Australia – driving prices up and further disadvantaging people with less resources who can't shop as frequently
- Distributors experience unmanageable demand for service alongside reduced capacity
- Food prices surge – fruits and vegetables not on control lists rose in price by between 11% and 76% in some Pacific Island countries

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“With all the hotels closed, our farmers, most small holders, don't have the markets. So, the money earning part is impacted” – Adi Maimalaga Tafuna'i

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### Reliance on Imported Goods Highlighted

- Supply chain disruptions highlight the Pacific's huge reliance on imported goods, from production to consumer level
- Around half of a typical Pacific Islander's food intake is imported
- Farmers and other Pacific producers can no longer access imported materials (e.g. fertiliser, equipment) needed to produce food and other goods

### Economic Impacts

- Pacific Island countries' reliance on tourism has forced many people into unemployment – e.g. in Cook Islands' where tourism represents 76% of GDP and 35% of the employment population
- The heavy reliance on overseas remittances has been affected, with unemployment in other regions (inc. Australia, New Zealand and the US) increasing
- Many Pacific Islanders are returning to traditional ways of farming and agriculture to survive
- Australian relief agencies are “worried about the number of people who will be needing to access food relief” due to rising unemployment and financial insecurity, as well as the demand on agencies that supply that food

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“In Tuvalu half of the funds spent on remittances were usually spent on food, so the option is to go to that cheaper, unhealthier import as opposed to fruits and vegetables” – Fiasili Vae'au-Lam

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## Community Health Implications

- The Pacific Islands already experience extremely high rates of obesity and non-communicable diseases that risk being exacerbated without access to healthy food
- Increased fresh food prices and losses in employment/ income make healthier foods unaffordable – individual “purchasing power” is reduced when cheaper, less nutritional imports become the only option
- While the agriculture sector is “pushed” to produce and the health sector upscales advocacy in nutrition, there’s not enough “merging” between these sectors – potentially risking loss of “sight of the nutrition part of our fight for food security”

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“Regular access to good quality food is integral for health and disease prevention” – Simone Carson AM

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## Environmental Risks

- The Pacific’s limited arable land and ocean resources need protection now more than ever
- As more people return to traditional/ subsistence farming, there is risk of increased chemical use to speed up production
- Formerly certified organic farmers also risk adopting chemical-based approaches to increase production and reduce customer cost

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“We need to look after our land and ocean resources – everyone is now running out to produce. We need to put in place sustainable land management, and marine as well” – Fiasili Vae’au-Lam

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Members of Delailasakau Women’s Group, Fiji Women’s Fund  
Photography: Raw Fiji

## Opportunities and Considerations

Reduced movement, income and access to imported goods also present opportunities to return to local foods and practices, use technology, and form local connections. Opportunities to build back food systems that centre sustainability and community health are also presented.

### Case study: SecondBite forms to stop food waste and alleviate insecurity

Australian non-profit food distribution organisation *SecondBite* was able to form in 2005 when ‘The Good Samaritan Act’ passed in Victoria. The Act allows food suppliers to donate fresh and leftover food to charities without “risk of being sued”. This perfectly edible food otherwise headed for landfill is redistributed by *SecondBite* to food relief organisations and people who need it around Australia. Co-founder and Director Simone Carson AM said, “In the first few months we worked with restaurants cooking up soup, but I was seeing if we could get the markets involved. Within three to four months we were getting callouts from agencies around the state ... We went to people who we thought would be interested and kept building that group of likeminded individuals. Ultimately, the key change was partnering with supermarkets.”

## Returning to Traditional Foods and Practices

- Pacific Island and Australian communities see a rise in local and small-scale fishing, agriculture and subsistence farming
- Local foods and products enjoy a resurgence in popularity in the Pacific – e.g. Samoan chicken, local root vegetables
- Older community members pass agricultural knowledge (that isn't written down) to younger generations

### Case study: Virtual Market launches to support farmers in Samoa

In Samoa, W.I.B.D.I. took their organic food and handicraft market online. It was launched with the help of SkyEye, a social enterprise that develops mobile and geospatial technology services to solve local problems. The market helped connect vulnerable farmers and suppliers to local customers – and enabled payment through the mobile phone-based 'mobile money' app. The initiative also distributed seeds to farmers so they could increase production.

## Finding New Ways to Connect People with Food

- Government and non-government actors are collaborating to find solutions to food insecurity – though building political will in nutrition education is extremely important
- In Australia, small scale neighbourhood food sharing programs are popping up, with people sharing surplus food with others in the area
- There is precedent for the private sector to fund local food security projects – e.g. Google funding an App to support food distribution in a local French community
- Digital innovation in food security is growing rapidly, including at policy level, but will need to consider regional internet speed/ access issues

- Social media is increasingly being used to share information with producers and agencies

### Case study: Regional Pacific Food Security Cluster activates during emergency

The Regional Pacific Food Security Cluster is a network of Government and non-Government actors that supports in-country food security coordination in six regional Pacific countries: Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. Originally designed as a humanitarian response plan, the Cluster can be activated when needed – including to identify need and enhance local production and distribution amid COVID-19.

## Conclusion

This paper summarises the challenges and opportunities highlighted by panellists and event attendees on food security in the Pacific and Australia, particularly in the current COVID-19/post-disaster context. It is intended for sharing with event participants and interested members of wider Pacific and Australian food security and food waste communities.

- This online event was hosted through WLI's Learning and Networking events program.
- [Download the discussion](#) and learn more about upcoming Learning and Networking events you can be part of: [australiaawardsleadership.org/learning-and-networking-events/](https://australiaawardsleadership.org/learning-and-networking-events/)

### Interested? Want to know more?

For more information on the *Women's Leadership Initiative* and how you can get involved, visit <https://womensleadershipinitiative.org.au/> or email: [info@australiaawardsleadership.org](mailto:info@australiaawardsleadership.org)