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FOR THE PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES**

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FOOD SECURITY AND THE PACIFIC FOOD FORUM

1. BACKGROUND

In August 2008, Pacific leaders at the 39th Pacific Islands Forum, held in Niue, acknowledged the high importance of food security as an emerging issue. The 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”. Similarly, health ministers at the Meeting of Ministers of Health of the Pacific Island Countries, held in Port Vila, Vanuatu, in 2007, recommended a whole-of-society approach to noncommunicable disease prevention and control, a regional approach to food fortification, as well as convening a food forum with representatives from the ministries of health, agriculture, trade and economics, and finance. In response, WHO has laid the groundwork for a Pacific food forum in 2010 through discussions with potential partners and national counterparts. Commitment and support have come from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). For food businesses, interest in a Pacific food forum that integrates action on food-related health outcomes has grown over a series of meetings, the most recent of which was an industry dialogue meeting in Sydney, Australia, from 5 to 7 November 2008.

2. EPIDEMIOLOGICAL SITUATION AND ISSUES

2.1 Food security

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.¹ Food security is multidimensional, taking into account food availability (sufficient affordable 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).

Although Pacific island countries and territories (PICTs) are small, relatively isolated geographically and prone to natural disasters, they have historically managed to avoid food shortages through domestic food production and importation. However, a change in the balance between these two sources of food supply, coupled with challenging external factors, are likely to significantly affect the capacity of PICTs to meet their food needs.

Climate change will negatively impact on domestic food production. Changes in temperature, rainfall patterns, sea level and the intensity of extreme weather events, such as cyclones, will affect the type of crops and animals that can be used in production systems. Agricultural yield will be reduced as a result of greater heat stress, more frequent and intense drought conditions or waterlogging. Adapting to these changes takes time and will require a strong agricultural base within which to develop and implement adaptation systems.

Fish play an important role in supporting food security in the Pacific. Ocean warming and coral bleaching will reduce the productivity of coastal fisheries on which many island communities rely as a source of food and income.

¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Rome Declaration on World Food Security and World Food forum Plan of Action. World Food forum, 13–17 November 1996, Rome.

Domestic food production in most PICTs is not robust. International aid to agriculture was almost halved between 1980 and 2005,² as illustrated by the poor investment in agricultural research and extension, rural infrastructure and market access for small farmers throughout the world and the Pacific.

All PICTs have some dependency on imported foods, though the extent of that dependency depends on the country.³ However, several factors could significantly increase this dependency. The impact of climate change on domestic food production has already been discussed. With the rural–urban drift, knowledge of traditional farming practices and food preparation techniques is being lost. In rural areas, traditional foods, such as root crops and fish, are being replaced by imports, such as rice, noodles and tinned fish, preferred for their longer shelf-life and convenience.

Access to imported food can be seriously affected by any change in the global markets, as was demonstrated in 2008, when global food prices increased by 83% compared with three years ago.⁴ The FAO index of food prices rose by 9% in 2006, by 24% in 2007 and by 51% in the first months of 2008, affecting nearly all food commodities to different degrees. FAO forecast that the world would spend 20% more on food imports in 2008 than in 2007.⁵ This will severely strain budgets of low-income food-deficit countries, which are likely to see their import bills soar by more than 40% in 2009. Projections suggest that food prices are likely to remain high in the next few years.

Climate change and the global economic crisis are putting Pacific populations at increased risk of food insecurity and subsequent malnutrition, foodborne diseases and noncommunicable diseases.

2.2 Food quality and food safety

Throughout the Pacific, serious health problems have emerged as a result of lifestyle changes and the trend towards increased consumption of imported foods, foods of poor nutritional quality and a neglect of traditional food systems. Populations living in PICTs have some of the highest rates of obesity and type 2 diabetes in the world. Overweight and obesity prevalence range from 47% to 93%

² Overseas Development Institute. Accra 2008: The bumpy road to aid effectiveness in agriculture. Natural Resource Perspectives, 2008, 114:1–4 (<http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/1146.pdf>).

³ Pacific Island Food Security in the 21st Century: Situation, Challenges and Opportunities. Paper presented at the 2008 Ministers of Agriculture and Forestry, Apia, Samoa.

⁴ <http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/food.pdf>.

⁵ Global information and early warning systems on food and agriculture (GIEWS). FAO, Food Outlook, May 2008 (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/010/ai466e/ai466e00.HTM>).

in countries that have completed STEPS surveys. In Fiji, the number of people with diabetes is expected to double to 72 000 by 2030. From STEPS survey data in seven Pacific countries (American Samoa, Cook Islands, Fiji, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Samoa, Tokelau), over 80% of those surveyed consumed less than the recommended five servings of vegetables and fruit per day. Samoa was the only exception with approximately 44% consuming less than five servings.

Alongside the growing problem of noncommunicable diseases, micronutrient deficiencies still exist. The prevalence of anaemia is reported to be 20% or greater, in both children and pregnant women, in 15 of 16 PICTs. Studies show that iodine deficiency and goitre are prevalent in at least three countries (Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu). In addition, vitamin A deficiency constitutes a public health problem in at least five countries (Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea). Moreover, undernutrition remains a significant concern, with underweight and stunting present in many countries and particularly high in the five countries mentioned above.

In addition to providing food for local consumption, agriculture and fisheries are important engines of economic growth in most PICTs. However, increasingly strict food safety and quality regulatory requirements of developed countries have been impediments to exploiting potential export 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 labelling. Poor grading and packaging standards are reducing the quality and value of food exports. Most of these issues are related to poor investment in agriculture in recent years, 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).

3. STRATEGY FOR ACTION

The strategies to encourage and guide action on food security are: (1) national food forums; (2) a Pacific Declaration on Food Security and Pacific food forum; and (3), a Plan of Action on Food Security.

3.1 National food forums

The broad aim of the summits is to draw together government departments from all relevant ministries, food businesses and agencies that are interested in or have an impact on food security to identify and discuss strategies that will help ensure food security for countries and the Pacific region in the future. A national food forum will help stimulate an integrated approach to the development and implementation of food security, safety, quality and trade policies and plans of action. A national food forum will also affirm existing efforts to increase agricultural productivity, to enhance access to food, and to bring about behaviour change on diet and physical activity, as well as bring innovative approaches to production, processing, regulating and trading of food. Food security will only be achieved through the cooperation of the many diverse local stakeholders, and these summits will help bring them together. They will also provide an opportunity for consultation on the Pacific Declaration on Food Security and raise the profile of the Pacific food forum.

All Pacific island countries and territories are invited to consider hosting a national food forum.

3.2 Pacific Declaration on Food Security and Pacific food forum

Access to sufficient, safe and suitable food is a basic human right. All sectors impact on food security and, as such, no commitment can be made to ensuring food security without the involvement of them all. The Pacific Declaration on Food Security and the Pacific food forum will achieve this, and more, by drawing together all stakeholders with an interest in food from government sectors to industry to primary producers. They will build on what has been achieved so far, providing a strong framework for further development and coordinated actions on all food-related issues. The declaration aims to get the highest level of commitment to:

- assuring food security in the Pacific;
- reducing diet-related noncommunicable diseases and micronutrient deficiencies in the Pacific and;
- facilitating trade in and marketing of safe and nutritious food.

Commitment for a Pacific Declaration on Food Security will be sought through a consultative process from ministers of agriculture, health, trade and fisheries when they conduct their meetings in 2009. Furthermore, the need for a Declaration will be discussed at the Pacific leaders meeting in

Cairns (October 2009) and endorsement of the drafting process will be sought. A Pacific food forum of high-level officials is proposed (around March 2010) to review and finalize the Declaration. Endorsement of the Declaration will be sought from Pacific leaders at their 2010 meeting in Vanuatu.

3.3 Plan of Action

The Plan of Action will accompany the Declaration and provide countries with guidance on how to take action on statements included in it. It will be drafted as part of the consultative process described above and will focus on five key strategies:

- improving food security and livelihoods through enhanced and sustainable production, processing and trading of safe and nutritious food;
- implementing a common Pacific island regulatory approach to food legislation, including standards to promote trade and health;
- working with industry to add health value in the production, processing, marketing and distribution of food in the Pacific;
- implementing effective and consistent enforcement of food standards across the Pacific;
- strengthening leadership, regional cooperation and funding on food security in the Pacific.

The expected outcomes of these strategies are:

- recognition and acknowledgement of the magnitude of the issues;
- a commitment to addressing the issues (a signed Declaration);
- practical and achievable strategies for the assurance of food security, for the prevention of noncommunicable diseases and micronutrient deficiencies, and for the facilitation of trade in and marketing of safe and nutritious food (Plan of Action);
- resources identified for implementing strategies through increasing budgetary allocations, a commitment from development banks and other potential partners, and/or more private sector investment;

- a collective approach for monitoring these issues, including setting targets for local food production, for the reduction of malnutrition and noncommunicable disease, and for the trade of safe and suitable foods.

4. PROPOSED OUTCOMES OF MEETING

The Meeting is invited to endorse the Pacific food security and summit concept and to give support for the development of a Declaration on Food Security and an associated Plan of Action. Ministers are invited to champion this initiative by:

- 4.1 being aware of the links between food security and malnutrition, noncommunicable diseases and foodborne diseases, and, therefore, the need for coordinated, multisectoral action to address food security in the Pacific;
- 4.2 advocating for collective action on food security to ministerial colleagues in agriculture, fisheries, trade, economics and finance, raising awareness of how these portfolios influence food security, and advocating for collective action;
- 4.3 fostering dialogue with food businesses;
- 4.4 facilitating a Pacific-wide approach to addressing food security by seeking whole-of-government commitment to the preparation, endorsement and implementation of a Pacific Declaration on Food Security;
- 4.5 seeking support from their governments to have the Pacific Declaration on Food Security included on the agenda of the Pacific Islands Forum in 2010; and
- 4.6 hosting a national food forum.