

FACT SHEET

Background

Fast-changing diet and lifestyles in the Pacific island countries and territories put their population at great risk of noncommunicable diseases (NCD), malnutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and foodborne diseases.

The Summit

A Pacific Food Summit – in Vanuatu, 21-23 April 2010 - will bring together government, private and civil society stakeholders with an interest in food to agree on and endorse a Food Security Framework for Action. This will guide implementation of activities that will improve food security across the Pacific over the next five years.

Goal

Achieving a food-secure Pacific: making sure all people of the Pacific have access to safe, affordable, nutritious food to live active and healthy lives.

The future of the Pacific depends on how food secure the children of today are: future physical and mental well being, ability to contribute to society and economic productivity will depend on the health of our children today.

1. The situation - overview

- Food security is about everybody having access, at all times to sufficient, safe and suitable food.
- Many different sectors and causes impact on food security:
 - ◆ agriculture and fisheries (the right to arable land and the knowledge to use it; the ability to protect fishing rights and access),
 - ◆ trade (the ability to control what food comes into the country and how much we pay for it), and
 - ◆ health (the ability to access healthy choices and understand how to make them).
- Food security and health are inextricably linked. Lack of food security compromises our health. Too little food, or a lack of healthy food (with sufficient vitamins, minerals, protein, etc) can stunt growth, slow thinking, sap energy, hinder foetal development and contribute to mental retardation. Too much food – particularly the wrong food- is directly linked to non-communicable diseases like obesity, hypertension, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and some types of cancers. Contaminated foods can make us sick.

2. The impact – facts

Conservative estimates indicate that at least 40% of the 9.7 million people in Pacific Island countries and territories suffer from food-related diseases.

- **Micronutrient deficiencies, arising from poor quality of food, diets low in vegetables and fruits, lack of iodized salt and parasitic infections are a public health problem in a majority of countries.**
 - ◆ The WHO global database on micronutrient deficiencies shows that, in 14 Pacific countries, anaemia is found in 19%-60% of preschool children, 12%-54% of non-pregnant women and 19%-57% of pregnant women. Vitamin A deficiency is present in 9%-22% of preschool children.
 - ◆ Studies conducted in 8 Pacific countries show that more than 80% of those surveyed consumed less than the recommended 5 or more servings of fruit and vegetables per day.
 - ◆ In Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, iodine deficiency and related goitre are endemic, although in Fiji and PNG great progress was made recently through salt iodization. In many other Pacific countries and territories the situation still needs to be assessed.
- **The Pacific has some of the highest rates of obesity and diabetes.**
 - ◆ Obesity ($\text{BMI} \geq 30 \text{ kg/m}^2$) rates (based on published STEPS Reports): 75% in American Samoa, Nauru and Tokelau; 51% in Kiribati; 45% in Marshall Islands; 43% in Federated States of Micronesia (Pohnpei); 33% in Solomon Islands; 30% in Fiji.
 - ◆ Overweight ($\text{BMI} \geq 25 \text{ kg/m}^2$) rates in adults are more than 50% in at least 10 Pacific island countries and territories.
Diabetes rates are among the highest in the world: 47% in American Samoa; 44% in Tokelau; 32% in Federated States of Micronesia (Pohnpei); 28% in Marshall Islands and Kiribati; 23% in Nauru; 14% in Solomon Islands – all are many times higher than diabetes rates in Australia (3.6%) or the United States (4.2%).
- **Obesity and hypertension are major risk factors for heart disease, stroke and cancer and are claiming the lives of people in the Pacific in the prime of their lives.**
 - ◆ More than 2.4 million people suffer from preventable noncommunicable diseases, such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes and respiratory

diseases: these are responsible for 75% of deaths in Pacific island countries and territories.

- ◆ Hypertension rates are 34% in American Samoa; 27% in Fiji; 24% in Nauru; 21% in the Federated States of Micronesia (Pohnpei); 18% in Tokelau; 17% in Kiribati; 16% in the Marshall Islands and 11% in the Solomon Islands.

- **The Pacific's heavy dependence on imported food is a growing problem.**

- ◆ Despite proven advantages of traditional root crops with regard to vitamins, minerals, fibre and other nutrients, Pacific islands and areas rely heavily and increasingly on energy dense and/or nutritionally poor imports such as highly refined cereals, fatty meat and other products. Consumers often choose these foods because they are easily and readily available for purchase as compared to indigenous fish, chicken, and other healthier local produce.
- ◆ Purchasing imported food is taking up an increasingly large part of family incomes. The Food and Agriculture Organization index of food prices rose by 9% in 2006, by 24% in 2007, and by 51% in the first months of 2008.
- ◆ The Pacific's lack of adequate food safety standards and regulations has resulted in the importation of low-quality food (old, damaged and contaminated products as well as products with low vitamin and mineral contents and products high in fat, sugar and/or salt). This food may pose serious health risks to consumers.
- ◆ Advertising through mass media and commercial has exacerbated the Pacific's shift from traditional staples to processed foods.

- **The economic implications are severe.**

- ◆ The Pacific cannot afford the costs (direct or indirect) of malnutrition, foodborne diseases and noncommunicable diseases.
- ◆ A World Bank study (2000) found that the cost of treating NCD was between 39% and 58% of total health care expenditure, in 3 Pacific countries.
- ◆ A study among garment workers in Fiji found a significant 11% reduction in productivity efficiency among anaemic employees as compared to those with normal iron levels, who had taken weekly iron and folic acid supplements. These finding suggests that substantial losses in productivity occur in most Pacific island countries where anaemia is common.

3. The way forward

- Ensuring food security requires a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach involving governments, partner agencies, food businesses, community groups and individuals.
- Improving food security is about taking action to improve the food environment, that is, to make sure that the right products are available at the right price to everyone. The healthy choice should be the easiest, cheapest choice.

For people and organizations- how do they get involved?

- ◆ **For individuals:** Improve your access to sufficient, safe and healthy food by reading food labels to identify processed foods that are low in fat, salt and sugar; taking advantage of nutritious and fresh fruits and vegetables available at local markets; and consider having a home garden or participating in a community garden.
- ◆ **For governments:** Governments play a lead role in determining policy and creating supportive environments including encouraging business to improve the availability and nutritional value of food.
- ◆ **For community groups:** Advocate for the right for all people in the Pacific to be food secure; encourage the use of healthy and local food when holding functions; apply safe practices when handling foods.
- ◆ **For food industry:** Pressure for increased food security is not a threat. It is an opportunity to develop value-added foods, increase market share and release new products. Standards applied to importers/traders in countries like Australia and New Zealand should also be applied in the Pacific. Targets for salt, fat and sugar consumption are appropriate because of the food security issues in the Pacific.

For other sectors – how do they get involved?

- ◆ **Trade:** 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. Negotiating workable trade agreements and introducing national standards will be critical.
- ◆ **Agriculture:** Secure, long-term access to quality land is critical. Management, planning and up-skilling of farmers is essential for sustainability.
- ◆ **The media** are important partners to disseminate information. Food security should be high in the news agenda.