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### Healthy food, healthy people, healthy islands

**PORT VILA, Vanuatu, 15 April 2010**—Mention the Pacific, and most people think of sandy beaches, market stalls heavy with fruit and vegetables, seas teeming with fish, and happy, smiling people. Very few think: food crisis. And yet that is what is happening right now.

Malnutrition, chronic obesity, sky-high levels of diabetes—these are the everyday realities of life in the Pacific islands.

The Pacific Food Summit, to be held from 21-23 April in Port Vila, Vanuatu, is seeking to change this. The first gathering of its kind, the Summit will be attended by 130 senior government officials, food industry representatives, development agencies, and community group representatives from across the Pacific.

The Summit will put healthy islands, healthy people and healthy food back on the Pacific agenda, calling on governments to ensure that everyone, everywhere has access to safe, affordable, nutritious food for active and healthy lives.

Food security in the Pacific is threatened in many ways: declines in traditional food crops and fishing; increased dependence on imported foods; growing vulnerability to climate change; volatility in international commodity prices; and challenges to enact and enforce food safety and quality standards.

Collectively, these and other threats are contributing to greater risk of noncommunicable diseases, vitamin and mineral deficiencies, and food-borne diseases in Pacific populations.

Dr Chen Ken, World Health Organization (WHO) Representative for the South Pacific, commented: "People don't have access all the time to safe and healthy food. The principal consequences of this are noncommunicable diseases such as obesity and cardiovascular disease, as well as micronutrient deficiencies such as anaemia, and foodborne diseases. We're now seeing extreme diabetes rates, and people ill and dying from diseases that were once uncommon in the Pacific, but which are preventable.

"When people think of the Pacific, they have a certain image in mind: a tropical paradise. And it is, but we want this to be the reality not just for the tourists who visit us, but also for the people who live here. We want to preserve these islands as healthy islands. And that means getting serious about improving food security, about making sure that good quality, nutritious and healthy food is available and that it's affordable for everyone."

Dr Chen urged governments to see the downstream effects of not addressing these issues: declines in workforce productivity with a consequent impact on trade and development across the Pacific. "It is a clear humanitarian and development priority, as well as a political imperative, to use our regional strengths to build flexible and resilient food systems to protect food security," he said.

Dr Chen thanked the Vanuatu Government for hosting the inaugural Pacific Food Summit and said he was encouraged to see so many stakeholders coming together to tackle the issue of food security.

The Government of Vanuatu, in partnership with the Food Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Global Health Institute (Sydney West Area Health Service), Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO), has convened the Pacific Food Summit to work with key stakeholders to review national and regional threats to food security and finalize a Framework for Action on Food Security in the Pacific.

"Ultimately, the Pacific Food Summit is not about producing pieces of paper, but about coordinated action that will see the Pacific become healthy once again," Dr Chen said. "We want healthy islands, healthy people, and healthy lives in a healthy Pacific."

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*Pacific Food Summit: 21-23 April 2010. Supported the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, the Global Health Institute (Sydney West Area Health Service), Government of Vanuatu, Pacific Island Forum Secretariat (PIFS), Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO).*