



INITIATIVE ON

Aquatic Foods



Island food systems in transition: Strengthening Indigenous food systems in Solomon Islands

Key messages for our partners

- This brief defines a vision for an island food system centered on rural food system actors and Indigenous foods. It provides the foundation for a new partnership program between the Kastom Gaden Association and WorldFish in Solomon Islands. This partnership will work towards implementing the island food systems vision.
- Solomon Islands has unique food system characteristics based on traditional practices and Indigenous foods. There are opportunities to strengthen these for better health outcomes and food sovereignty.
- Traditional food system practices and Indigenous foods can be invisible in strategic planning for food system transformations. The partnership we introduce here will strive to make these practices and foods visible in agricultural, fisheries, food, nutrition and health policies and programs.

Localizing the global food systems agenda

Food systems framings have taken a prominent position in how the world views sustainable development and change.¹ Often, the focus for this desired change, while sometimes difficult to fault in theory, seems detached and generalized (e.g. build value chains, improve handling and processing, increase access to markets). These ideas are not new and are often tangled up in complex economic terms that underpin models of growth and top-down planning. Global agendas for food systems transformation need to be localized to make

practical sense. We ask how calls to transform food systems fit into the way people live their lives, particularly in contexts where informal economies dominate the socio-economic landscape. Foods, livelihoods and culture are inextricably linked in the food systems of Solomon Islands.

Island food systems in transition

The traditional local food system involves the transportation and distribution to consumers of highly perishable fresh foods from the garden or sea. This can be difficult and expensive in Solomon Islands where transportation from province to province spans long distances and is unreliable. These challenges open island food systems to the influx and acceptance of refined foods like rice and flour or long-shelf-life convenience foods. Both types of foods tend to outcompete domestically grown crops and fish in price, access and availability in urban settings. Shifting from domestically produced, nutritious crops and fish to imported and nutritionally unrewarding foods is symbolic of a contemporary transition to “modern” and convenient foods that has been underway for some time, with negative public health consequences.² Such changes in dietary patterns are associated with increasing levels of nutrition-related chronic diseases, described as the “nutrition transition”, which highlight the importance of understanding how changing food system drivers are shifting diets.³



Food is produced in the village

In his 1975 writings about an alternative development plan for Solomon Islands, John Roughan framed the traditional agricultural sector as “the life blood of the rural area”.⁴ This remains true to this day. Almost 50 years later, 80% of the population still live in rural areas and 93% of households cultivate gardens.⁵ Food is produced in villages throughout the country, and governance over these productive spaces is generally held at the village level. A national response to the COVID-19 pandemic was to advise people to travel to their home villages and grow foods and fish.⁶ Despite the increase in imported food items, rural food systems remain a critical avenue for the production, distribution (trade, barter and gifting) and consumption of Indigenous foods, as well as an expression of cultural identity.⁷ Plans for change must be centered on these rural spaces and practices.

Human geography – the way humans interact with their environment – is a salient feature of rural Solomon Islands food systems, where scarcity and complementarity have evolved in these systems of exchange, which has adapted through the centuries and supported rural food and nutrition security.⁸ For exchange to make sense, different peoples must produce different things. The exchange of fish and crops between peoples of the sea and land is the iconic heartbeat of the Melanesian food system and is deeply embedded in the history, culture and identity of its people.⁹ Plans for change must build on traditional practices and knowledge to enable people-centered sustainable development.

Agriculture and fishing are powering village economies

Self-reliance and participation have been guiding features of national development planning since the 1970s.¹⁰ In 2010, the Solomon Islands Government adopted community-based resource management (CBRM) as the principal strategy to support sustainable development.¹¹ This priority was reinforced in 2022.¹² The emphasis on village-level governance and practices is well recognized and supported in national policies.

Mapping rural food system actors

Different actors have different roles to play in seeking a positive change for a healthier and food secure future for Solomon Islands. There is a tendency to focus on the formal aspects of the food system. For example, in programs and in the literature, the town markets, and government agencies and their policies, feature frequently. These are important but given the prominent role of rural practices in the Solomon Islands food system, we here seek to place our focus on the roles that village-level actors can play (Table 1). We see these rural food system actors as potential food system change-makers rather than recipients of international development or policy goals.

Actors	Role
Producers (farmers, fishers, wild harvesters)	Harvest crops and aquatic foods and rear livestock for income generation and household consumption
Food processors	Process local foods like smoked fish and other prepared or cooked foods
Churches	Educate on religion and spiritual morality; play an important role in community cohesion, information sharing and village economies (e.g. fundraising for community services)
Chiefs (community leaders or decision-makers)	Maintain customary and traditional laws and practices; manage conflict, reconciliation and who may or may not own land
Landowning groups	Decide on land allocation and usage
Rural youth	Undertake youth activities in their communities, empowering other youths to get involved; participate in community activities (e.g. community-based resource management)
Women’s groups	Organize women’s activities and programs; mobilize the community during important events
Village entrepreneurs	Engage in business opportunities (e.g. selling at markets, fishing, providing transport, etc.); mostly family or individual based
Rural training centers and other skills-training providers	Provide basic training on life skills topics (e.g. agriculture, health, business, etc.)
Community-based resource management committees	Work on basis of representation and consensus-making; responsible for ensuring that collective ideas for management are implemented and followed

Table 1. Rural food system actors in Solomon Islands village communities.



Strategies to support positive change in island food systems

The identification of these actors as key custodians of rural food systems is an important first step towards an agenda that seeks to strengthen island food systems using Indigenous foods. We prioritize five strategies in partnership with rural food system actors. Through this work, we seek to raise the visibility and value of using aquatic foods and other Indigenous foods in support of positive food systems change.

- 1. Celebrate and share traditional food practices, including aquatic foods.** Campaigns can be designed to draw attention to traditional foods and cuisines and highlight their contribution to cultural identities and to balanced diets and health. Recipe collections can be developed and distributed to revive traditional knowledge and encourage use of diverse Indigenous foods, as part of a healthy and sustainable foods movement.
- 2. Integrate agricultural and aquatic food demonstrations.** A nutrition-sensitive approach to Indigenous foods must include food groups from land and water. Blending traditional agricultural practices with contemporary agriculture tips, mixed crop planting, soil management and inclusion of aquatic foods is a credible pathway to more diverse diets and enhanced livelihoods.
- 3. Emphasize Indigenous and aquatic foods in agricultural training.** Despite relatively high rates of aquatic food consumption in Solomon Islands, there is very little training and information available on handling practices and tips for ensuring safe access. On the other hand, there is a movement of upskilling in traditional agriculture. Incorporating aquatic foods in this movement is an opportunity for more nutrition-sensitive services and trainings.
- 4. Strengthen local food system networks.** The many village-level food system actors have a role to play in co-creating sustainable and healthy food futures for island food systems in transition. Such development pathways can be shaped through forums that produce tribal or local language outputs for small-scale actors. Such forums can also generate scientific outputs informing policymakers and researchers, which support inclusion of rural food system actors in development planning. We will seek to build such a platform where food system actors interact, share and learn to strengthen linkages with community, provincial and national stakeholders.

5. Define the many features of the food system transition.

The rich traditional practices and influence of human geography on island food systems are important but often overlooked features of modern-day food systems. While town markets, and systems that produce foods for them, often dominate research and are the focus of programs, we will place emphasis on changes in the less visible and less understood rural areas.

About the Kastom Gaden Association – WorldFish partnership

The Kastom Gaden Association is a local non-profit organization working with Solomon Islands communities to improve food security through self-reliance and improved food production. It focuses on sustainable organic farming practices and family nutrition by providing community education and training, and supporting farmer-to-farmer extension, through its network of around 5000 farmers across Solomon Islands.

WorldFish is an international non-profit research and innovation organization reducing hunger, malnutrition and poverty across Africa, Asia and the Pacific. The WorldFish program in Solomon Islands focuses on four research pathways – climate and the environment, society and the economy, nutrition and public health, and program integration. WorldFish operates a transdisciplinary research-in-development program with the Solomon Islands Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources.

To support improved nutrition and public health, the Kastom Gaden Association and WorldFish have formed a novel partnership seeking to co-produce sustainable and nutrition-sensitive development pathways with Indigenous foods, traditional agriculture and aquatic foods in island food systems. With this partnership, our organizations will work to elevate small-scale food systems actors, including rural women and youths, through research-based approaches to advocacy, awareness raising and training on practices with Indigenous foods, including aquatic foods.

The partnership will also provide an opportunity to establish a demonstration garden at Nusatupe research and innovation hub, focusing on traditional practices and Indigenous foods. The garden will feature fishponds and ocean-based aquatic food activities, to demonstrate an integrated “Island food systems” model for communities and a research opportunity for nutrition-sensitive approaches. Throughout the partnership, activities and outputs will be shared and debated under a national forum series on “Island food systems in transition” to build momentum and networks that co-create sustainable and healthy food futures.

Notes

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- ⁴ Roughan JJ. 1975. Solomon Islands Development Plan 1975–1979: An analysis and another development plan. Accessed March 18, 2023. <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/e2ee7e5f-2949-41c7-a4a9-e98020582b2b/content>
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- ⁶ Eriksson H, Ride A, Notere Boso D, Sukulu M, Batalofo M, Siota F and Gomese C. 2020. Changes and adaptations in village food systems in Solomon Islands: A rapid appraisal during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Penang, Malaysia: WorldFish. <https://digitalarchive.worldfishcenter.org/handle/20.500.12348/4195>
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- ⁸ Ross HM. 1978. Baegu markets, areal integration, and economic efficiency in Malaita, Solomon Islands. *Ethnology* 17:119–138.
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- ¹¹ Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Meteorology and Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources. 2010. Solomon Islands Coral Triangle Initiative National Plan of Action. Honiara, Solomon Islands: Solomon Islands Government.
- ¹² Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, Disaster Management and Meteorology and Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources. 2022. Solomon Islands Community Based Coastal and Marine Resources Management Strategy 2021–2025. Honiara, Solomon Islands: Solomon Islands Government.



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