



# **Food Systems in the Pacific**

## Addressing Challenges in Cooperation with Europe

Céline PAJON

### ► **Key Takeaways**

- **Food systems in the Pacific are crucial for the health, sustainable development, and cultural identity of local populations.**
- **Improving food systems in the region requires addressing the challenges of climate change and high food costs, while also taking advantage of opportunities to increase local food production and promote sustainable agricultural practices.**
- **To address these challenges, innovative solutions can be found by promoting regional cooperation, networks, and cluster-based collaborations.**
- **Expanding exchanges of views and cooperation between Oceania and Europe is important to benefit from lessons learned, best practices, and to design tailored solutions.**

## Introduction

More frequent climate disasters, rising sea levels, the economic fallout of Covid-19 lockdowns, border closures, supply chain constraints, and the global impact of the war in Ukraine have aggravated the challenge of maintaining sustainable and resilient food systems for Pacific Island Countries (PICs). Food systems in PICs are of great importance due to their impact on the health and well-being of Pacific peoples, local livelihoods, and national economies. Between 50 and 70% of Pacific people depend on agriculture and fishing activities for their livelihoods. The Pacific is home to extensive crop biodiversity, and Pacific countries are developing unique value chains for markets and international supply. However, they also face unique challenges in realizing equitable benefits in the global food system. Additionally, the Pacific needs to tackle issues like malnutrition and non-communicable diseases. Urgent global and local action is needed to manage climate change and other risks and ensure resilient food systems.<sup>1</sup>

Europeans are also confronted with the global food crisis and are actively working with their Pacific partners to find and fund solutions to address current and future risks by investing in local sustainable food systems. This Briefing explains the complex issues at stake regarding food systems in PICs and explores ways to address these challenges, both at the local level and in cooperation with Europeans.

This Briefing is based on discussions that took place during the webinar "Food Security in Times of Crisis: Connecting the Pacific and Europe," organized by the French Institute for International Relations (Ifri)'s Pacific Islands Program in partnership with the Pacific Community (SPC) on December 8, 2022.<sup>2</sup> Contributions from panelists will, therefore, be highlighted.

## Food Systems in the Pacific Island States: What's at Stake?

The stakes of food systems in the Pacific Islands are high and cover areas such as food security, health, economic and social sustainability, and development. Challenges include the impact of climate change, changes in lifestyle and access to healthy food, as well as establishing networks at the local, regional, and global levels and reducing food waste.

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1. F. Davila, E. Boydell, K. Mapusua and M. Sharp, "Blue Pacific Food Systems", Pacific Community, Noumea, available at: <https://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/z96wz>.

2. "Food Security in Times of Crisis: Connecting the Pacific and Europe", Ifri-SPC, webinar organized on December 8, 2022. Panelists were Alisi Tuqa, Food Systems Programme Lead, Pacific Community; Isolina Boto, Head of Networks and Alliances, COLEACP; Transform Aqorau, Chief Executive, iTuna Intel; Patricia Valdenebro, Chief Executive, TCI Network – Global and Mirjana Prica, Chairperson, TCI Network – Oceania. Program and video available at: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

- **Access to Food:** Many Pacific Island countries heavily rely on imported food due to their small land masses and limited resources for agriculture. This reliance on imports can make these countries vulnerable to fluctuations in food prices and availability, and the cost of importing food can be high, putting a strain on already limited resources. Ensuring a stable and reliable food supply is, therefore, a critical concern for these countries. The Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have disrupted value chains and transportation of supplies, including in the agrifood sectors. It is crucial to consider reorganizing to promote shorter supply chains in the Pacific and Europe.
  
- **Health:** Poor diet and nutrition contribute to a range of health issues in Pacific Island countries, including obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. Transform Aqorau has described the spread of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) as a major crisis akin to an epidemic.<sup>3</sup> These NCDs cause a significant number of premature deaths and disabilities, accounting for 70 to 75% of fatalities in the region. In the past, food was primarily sourced from the sea and land, and diets were healthier and more wholesome. However, lifestyle habits have changed, leading to greater consumption of imported processed food, which is often cheaper to buy than local food products. Promoting the consumption of locally grown and produced foods, as well as increasing availability and price access to healthy options, can help improve the overall health of these populations.
  
- **Impact of Climate Change:** Alisi Tuqa reminded us that climate change, which is ultimately the biggest threat in the region, has significant implications for food systems in the Pacific Island Countries (PICs).<sup>4</sup> Changes in the frequency and impact of climate hazards, such as cyclones, floods, droughts, and storm surges, have long-term impacts on food production. The loss of arable land is accelerated by coastal erosion, sea-level rise, and saltwater intrusion, making less land available for crops. In the case of fisheries, climate change has led to increased sea temperatures and current flows, resulting in shifts in the distribution of marine fish stocks, with some areas benefiting while others lose out.
  
- **Economic Development and Blue Economy:** Many Pacific Island countries have limited resources and fragile ecosystems, making it important to adopt sustainable food systems that minimize negative impacts on the environment. This includes promoting sustainable agriculture practices and

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3. Transform Aqorau, Chief Executive, iTuna Intel, speaking at the “Food Security in Times of Crisis: Connecting the Pacific and Europe” Ifri-SPC conference, December 8, 2022, *op. cit.*

4. Alisi Tuqa, Food Systems Programme Lead, Pacific Community, speaking at the “Food Security in Times of Crisis: Connecting the Pacific and Europe” Ifri-SPC conference, December 8, 2022, *op. cit.*

reducing waste and pollution in the food supply chain. The food sector can be a significant contributor to the economies of Pacific Island countries, providing employment and income for many people. Supporting the development of local food systems can help to boost economic growth and improve livelihoods in these countries. At the same time, food systems have to provide sustainable and profitable revenues to local companies. In the PICs, local markets are small, and economic players are mostly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent represents the ongoing commitment of the region to work together to build on its shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean, natural resources, environment, cultures, and livelihoods. Underpinning the 2050 Strategy is inclusivity and the acknowledgment that efforts will require the contribution of all stakeholders. A key constituent group is youth, and regarding food systems, it is crucial to consider how to engage this demographic to both benefit from and contribute to national and regional initiatives.

## Building Blocks for Sustainable Food System

A key point is to increase resilience and reduce dependence on imports in the agrifood sector, including fertilizers and chemical inputs. To achieve this, not only should organic fertilizers be supported, but more importantly, locally produced fertilizers. Indeed, the effects of climate change, biosecurity risks, pathogens such as pests and invasive species are big threats to crops and lead to declining agro-ecological diversity, one of the traditional strengths of the region.

Another key objective is to aim for high-quality products. Food producers must abide by technical barriers, sanitary and phytosanitary measures that are critical today to

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**Another important point to ensure sustainable food systems is to strengthen the circular economy.**

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enter new markets. But quality should also be offered to local markets. Producers must target luxury goods retailers, artisanal and specialty food shops, and gourmet stores to sell local and original products. This requires not only quality and safety but also strong branding and the ability to tell the story of the products. This has worked very well in Europe, where there are geographical indications of origin for food products. The European Union (EU) market is certainly leading on the sustainability path and certification.

Another important point to ensure sustainable food systems is to strengthen the circular economy. While producers are encouraged to produce more, food waste along the process and by consumers also increases. Reducing waste, recycling products by making

byproducts out of waste is a critical part of greening the economy, both in Europe and in the Pacific. Regarding food waste, we have to find economic incentives to reduce it, according to Isolina Boto.<sup>5</sup> Processing can cut a lot of waste. In terms of income, processed food is more profitable than fresh food. For example, food waste from mangoes or pineapples can be turned into bio-organic fertilizers or can be used to produce energy. These simple technologies are now accessible locally. Finally, cutting food waste requires access to data about where and how the food is actually wasted. Policies deployed in some European countries could be replicated as a model for the Pacific, according to Mirjana Prica.<sup>6</sup>

Affordability and access to healthy food are big challenges for the Pacific. Research should be promoted to understand where people are sourcing their food from and what their preferred diet is, taking into account changing lifestyles and convenience. Ensuring access to local, high-quality, nutritious food should be a priority, according to Alisi Tuqa.

It is also key to attract new generations to work in agriculture by showing that the sector is innovative and remunerative. SMEs are very often run by young people who are not necessarily coming from the agricultural sector but who see an opportunity in that sector to develop bioenergy and circular economy. The role of women in agriculture and the agrifood sector is also important and should be promoted.

E-commerce should also be developed in the Pacific. It helps to provide creativity but also to reduce food losses because you can anticipate better with different patterns, of course, with the use of ICTs, which is critical. Connections should be created between Europe and Oceania around market development and growth opportunities, supply, and demand.

Finally, access to finance should be facilitated, especially for SMEs. There is a missing middle in terms of financing, as it is difficult to find small amounts that go beyond microfinance. This is quite critical because companies in the Pacific are very small and struggle to find appropriate financing, according to Mirjana Prica.

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5. Isolina Boto, Head of Networks and Alliances, COLEACP, speaking at the “Food Security in Times of Crisis: Connecting the Pacific and Europe” Ifri-SPC conference, December 8, 2022, *op. cit.*

6. Mirjana Prica, Chairperson, TCI Network – Oceania, speaking at the “Food Security in Times of Crisis: Connecting the Pacific and Europe” Ifri-SPC conference, December 8, 2022, *op. cit.*

## Cooperation and Collaboration to Unlock Potential

Regional cooperation among diverse actors is crucial to improving the situation and building a sustainable food system. Several types of collaboration contribute positively to the Pacific food system through regional organizations, networks, and clusters.

The Pacific Community (SPC) is a regional intergovernmental organization with 26 member countries and territories in the Pacific region. One of its areas of focus is food security and agriculture, and it has several programs and initiatives in place to improve the sustainability, resilience, and inclusiveness of food systems. This SPC platform also raises international awareness of the under-recognized contributions of the Pacific to food systems, particularly on food systems solutions grounded in culture, gender and social inclusion, and people-centered approaches. The program also supports the conservation of plant genetic resources in the Pacific region through the establishment and management of seed banks. The Pacific Seed Bank holds over 2,000 varieties of the region's staple crops, and the largest collection of taro varieties in the world.

An example of networks is that shared by Isolina Boto of COLEACP. Setting up and nurturing networks is a good way to share good practices and improve the competitiveness

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### Business clustering is another modality for regional cooperation.

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and sustainability of agricultural and agri-food supply chains. COLEACP, an organization based in Brussels, has been providing technical assistance and training to small and medium-sized enterprises for more than 40 years and works with governments, private sector organizations, and others to promote the development of policies that support the growth and development of sustainable agriculture in

Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. COLEACP shared a number of lessons and recommendations learned through the extensive experience of her institution to promote resilient food systems.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, business clustering is another modality for regional cooperation. TCI Global and TCI Oceania demonstrate the importance of clustering and cooperation among stakeholders and across regions. In the context of food systems, clusters can facilitate the production, processing, and distribution of locally grown and produced food, strengthening the local economy and increasing food security. A cluster is a group of interconnected businesses, suppliers, and other organizations that work together to achieve a common goal. Patricia Valdenebro explained that the TCI Network gathers more

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7. Isolina Boto, Head of Networks and Alliances, COLEACP, speaking at the “Food Security in Times of Crisis: Connecting the Pacific and Europe” Ifri-SPC conference, December 8, 2022, *op. cit.*

than 500 members working in clusters and innovation ecosystems all over the world.<sup>8</sup> Most TCI members are working on a collaboration to help SMEs. There is a need for small units to make connections in local and international networks to enter international value chains with better branding.

An organization like TCI is key to building bridges between Europe and Oceania. Europe has been using clusters for many years for economic growth and development and has served as an inspiration for the development of similar clusters in Oceania. The Oceania chapter of TCI started informally eight years ago and has recently been formalized. It is trying to develop a vibrant, inclusive innovation ecosystem across the Oceania region by encouraging clusters as platforms for collaboration, as described by Mirjana Prica. The aim is to drive awareness of the benefits of collaboration and cooperation to ultimately support regional economic development. Clustering promotes growth in local economies. Advocating for regional clusters to pool resources enhances business competitiveness in the agrifood and fisheries industries. Using agriculture and value-adding as a priority post-pandemic can unlock great potential and address food system challenges.

One of the main benefits of clusters is that they bring together a range of expertise and resources, enabling members to share knowledge, technology, and other resources that can help improve efficiency and effectiveness. This can be particularly important in the Pacific, where many small island states have limited resources and infrastructure. By working together in a cluster, businesses and organizations can overcome these challenges and create a more resilient and sustainable food system. Clusters are a critical mechanism to address the challenge of having a large number of small companies making economies of scale and to help access knowledge, capability, and connections.

Europe and Oceania must build up on their complementarity to exchange best practices and experiences and design tailored solutions.

## Conclusion

Food systems in Pacific Islands Countries are complex and diverse, reflecting the unique geography, culture, and history of the region. They are characterized by a high degree of dependence on subsistence farming and fishing. Many Pacific Islanders rely on traditional agricultural practices. Fishing is also an important source of food, with many communities relying on the ocean for a significant portion of their protein intake. However, the food systems of the Pacific Islands are facing a number of challenges. Climate change is having a major impact on the region. Another major challenge facing the food systems of the Pacific Islands is the import of processed foods from outside the region. These foods are

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8. Patricia Valdenebro, Chief Executive, TCI Network – Global and Mirjana Prica, Chairperson, TCI Network – Oceania, speaking at the “Food Security in Times of Crisis: Connecting the Pacific and Europe” Ifri-SPC conference, December 8, 2022, *op. cit.*

often less expensive and more convenient than locally grown produce, but they are typically less healthy. As a result, many Pacific Islanders are experiencing an increase in diet-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.

Addressing the challenges facing food systems in the Pacific Island countries will require a multi-faceted and collaborative approach that involves governments, civil society organizations, the private sector, and local communities. Efforts to improve food security and sustainability will require investments in research and development, infrastructure, and capacity building, as well as the implementation of policies and programs that support the development of local food systems and promote the use of sustainable and resilient food production practices. In this regard, increasing interactions and cooperation between Oceania and Europe will play an important role.

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**Céline Pajon** is a Researcher specializing in Japan and the Indo-Pacific at Ifri's Center for Asian Studies. She is Head of Japan Research and also coordinates the research program on the Pacific Islands. In addition, Céline Pajon is a Researcher at the Japan Program of Vrije Universiteit Brussels (VUB) and a Research Fellow at the Canon Institute for Global Studies (CIGS) in Tokyo. Her Twitter account is @CelinePajon.

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27 rue de la Procession  
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