



National agrifood systems and COVID-19 in Solomon Islands

Effects, policy responses, and long-term implications

This country profile covers responses and effects up to end of August 2020

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has put significant pressure on health systems all around the world. The drastic measures established to contain its spread are creating serious impediments to economic activity (including agrifood systems) and, consequently, to livelihoods and food security and nutrition.

The COVID-19 outbreak demonstrates both how health and food systems are linked to one another, and how local food systems are linked to global systems. High rates of urbanization and the globalization of trade and travel have contributed to the spread of the virus across countries. Lockdowns and movement restrictions within countries and across borders have disrupted national and local food and agricultural output and input markets and have caused sharp reductions in overall economic activity globally. In poorer countries, disruptions have further exacerbated the fragility of systems (including agrifood systems) and livelihoods.

The Global Report on Food Crises 2020 found that 135 million people in 55 countries and territories are facing acute food insecurity at “crisis” level or higher – a situation that requires urgent action. The report further concluded that over 183 million people were experiencing a “stressed” level of acute food insecurity and bore a high risk of sliding into a “crisis” level if confronted by with additional shocks (FSIN, 2020). The situation is particularly worrisome in light of the evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the situation evolves, the question arises as to how, or whether, food, health and financial and economic systems could become better prepared to prevent similar outbreaks from escalating into a full-blown economic and social crisis.

This report is part of a series of country profiles that describe: (i) policy measures enacted by governments to contain the spread of the virus; (ii) policies and measures to stabilize the functioning of agri-food systems; (iii) potential effects of policies on agri-food systems and vulnerable groups. Finally, the profiles also assess longer-term options for agri-food system policies and investments so as to make them more resilient.

1 · POLICY MEASURES TO CONTAIN COVID-19

What major measures have been taken to contain the spread of the virus? How are they evolving?

Solomon Islands is one of the few countries in the world that is completely free of COVID-19. Nevertheless, the government has taken a proactive approach to the pandemic, designing a three-phase response plan: preparedness and response; lock down; and lockdown and recovery. Currently the country is in Phase I.

A four-month state of public emergency (SoE), declared on 25 March, was extended by two weeks once it expired. An additional four-month extension was endorsed by the parliament in its July session due to the increasing number of COVID-19 cases in surrounding countries. The government recognizes that the incidence of COVID-19 would be catastrophic, given the limited health and other resources available in Solomon Islands.

Mass gathering of individuals were restricted under the first SoE declaration; this included the closure of all schools. Schools and classes reopened in May. The government closed all borders at the beginning of April and the measure is still in force. The ban continues on incoming commercial passenger flights, with the exception of cargo flights and special repatriation flights for citizens stranded abroad. Solomon Airlines (the national carrier) has extended the suspension of commercial flights until 24 October. The airline laid off half of its workforce in early June and will re-employ staff as needed. Cruise ships are still forbidden to berth anywhere in Solomon Islands.

Non-essential government public services have been scaled back and city dwellers have been repatriated to their home villages. All public servants in non-essential services that were furloughed in March on half pay were recalled to their duties on 15 June at full salary.

The Honiara City Council (HCC) closed all market outlets in Honiara City – except for the central market – in March. However, 80 percent of the food outlets (food shops, restaurants, etc.) in the country are open and providing normal services. Both people and goods are currently permitted to move with minimum restrictions inside the country. Inter-island shipping services are almost back to normal and have been delivering goods and services to rural villages throughout the country since the beginning of June. Most other businesses resumed normal operations in early June, and some have rehired their workers. However, about 95 percent of all hotels are affected by the ban on tourism and are either closed or operating with reduced activity. Church services continued throughout the SoE.

2 · AGRIFOOD POLICY MEASURES TO RESPOND TO THE EFFECTS OF THE CRISIS

What are the major measures (in place or expected) to be enacted aiming at the food system directly?

Based on a rapid food assessment conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAL), in March, it was estimated that there was a five-month supply of food (rice, flour, etc.) in supermarkets and shops and up to a three-month supply of beef, pork and chicken. Local root crops and vegetable, mainly produced by smallholders and not yet harvested, were expected last for five to six months.

Food imports have continued throughout this crisis and commercial food stocks have been regularly replenished. The government has taken measures to facilitate import licences on food and agricultural inputs. Biosecurity Solomon Islands is relaxing import licensing, especially on livestock products, by granting single entry licenses to importers.

In May, the Solomon Islands Government (SIG) proposed an SBD 309 million (USD 37.9 million) economic stimulus package to be *funded by SIG's own resources through the issue of bonds and from budget support¹ and other assistance provided by development partners* (SIG, 2020). An Oversight and Implementing Committee was established in the Ministry of Finance and Treasury to ensure that the stimulus package achieves its objectives and reaches the target populations.

The economic stimulus package targets the agrifood system as follows:

Budget support grants

- Recruitment of women, young people and students to monitor SoE regulations, especially those related to supervising price controls and taxes, aiming at injecting cash to the economy and enforcing current regulations: USD 610 000.
- Special package to support rental expenses of small and medium enterprises: USD 610 000.

Immediate recovery measures and capital injection into productive sectors

- Value added/production of target products: noni, cassava, taro, potatoes, coconut and cocoa, with a specific package for copra and cocoa price or freight subsidies for exports: USD 8.5 million through budget support credit and grants.
- Targeted investments in the forestry, fisheries and tourism sectors: USD 5.3 million through budget support credit.
- Support from the Development Bank of Solomon Islands (DBSI) for economic activities and employment in rural areas: USD 1.2 million through budget support credit.

Recovery support and equity injections for key companies

- Solomon Water, to continue activities and implement tariff relief measures: USD 610 000 through budget support credit.
- SOLTUNA,² to continue production and rural employment: USD 610 000 through budget support credit.
- Kolombangara Forest Products Ltd (KFPL),³ to continue production, employment and exports (yet to be confirmed).
- Commodity Export Marketing Authority (CEMA), to enhance marketing and testing capabilities: USD 244 000 through SIG bonds.
- DBSI: USD 2.44 million through SIG treasury bill bonds for capital and equity targeting rural areas and small businesses.
- Concessional financial products to support large industries/tax payers through DSBI: USD 2.2 million through SIG Bond to encourage production, employment and exports.

¹ The budget support mechanism works through the Core Economic Working Group, established in 2009 by the SIG to improve coordination and dialogue with its development partners. Currently, it is supported by Australia, New Zealand, the Asian Development Bank, the European Union and the World Bank.

² This is the only tuna processing facility in Solomon Islands. The majority is owned by multinational tuna trading company Tri Marine, with just under half of the shares owned by the Solomon Islands Government. The company employs over 1 800 workers, 64 percent of whom are women (IFC, 2016).

³ This is Solomon Islands' largest sustainably-managed forestry company.

Medium term support to stimulate growth and infrastructure under the different sectoral SIG Development Plans, including:

- Construction of two major wharves linking agriculture hubs: USD 4.7 million through SIG bond.
- Construction of major bridges to improve connectivity in rural areas, USD 3.6 million through SIG bond.

Under the economic stimulus package, farmers, fisherfolk and foresters were requested to present proposals – by 31 July – for consideration by the Oversight and Implementing Committee. The proposals included agricultural activities, such as crops and vegetable production; livestock activities, such as raising chicken broilers and layers, ducks and pigs; fisheries and forestry. The main focus was on existing businesses and state-owned enterprises, some of them directly related to agriculture.

To guarantee the continued production of root crops and vegetables for Honiara and the provincial markets, the Livelihood Sector Committee (LSC), led by the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAL), has identified a number of farmers with large areas for growing food crops in Guadalcanal and the other eight provinces. They aim to assist farmers with bush clearing and to provide quality planting material and gardening tools. In addition, they can facilitate contacts with both local and export markets, although prices would not be necessarily better than current market prices. The SIG hopes to encourage participation by private investors that may be interested in being part of the market value chain.

The government sponsors a Food Bank initiative through the LSC in collaboration with farmers and development partners, such as the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The initiative aims to cultivate cassava on 40 hectares of land, and sweet potatoes, vegetables and other crops on 20 hectares at the Sape Farm, Guadalcanal Plains. Crops are produced by outgrower farmers, who are provided with a tractor and trailer and cultivating implements in a community-based scheme. Sixty-five percent of production will target domestic food security and 35 percent will target export markets. Sape Farm will grow its own produce as well as purchasing the produce from outgrowers as part of the Food Bank Initiative. This is a pilot commercial farm model that will be rolled out to other provinces if successful. This is expected to be apparent by the third quarter of the year; hopefully, the results will be assessed before the end of 2020.

The government plans to monitor and harmonise existing food reserves at private businesses to support food distribution and to ensure against unreasonable food price increases. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Labour and Immigration (MCILI), through its Price Control Unit, is responsible for monitoring retail food prices and ensuring that the Price Control Act is administered effectively and efficiently by placing restrictions on prices of controlled commodities, especially grains, meat and dairy products. The MCILI does not regulate the prices of locally-produced agricultural products in the markets.

The LSC plans to build food reserves to support food supply and distribution in case of a lockdown in a potential Phase II. Proposed food bulking and distribution centres are being identified by the committee. Although the government did not have food reserves prior to the crisis, under the COVID-19 stimulus package this item has been included in the budget.

Under the European Union-supported Enhanced Capacities for Agriculture Trade Project for cassava and taro (SI-ECAT) and through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade (MFAET), two private exporting companies have been granted funding to supplement and support their COVID-19 preparedness and response activities.

On 18 June, DBSI was re-launched with the aim to provide sustainable financial services to all Solomon Islanders, in particular for the development of the rural areas, micro, small and medium enterprises, and commerce and industry. The bank was allocated USD 3.1 million in the national budget, according to government sources (Solomon Times, 2020).

The Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF) is a new potential source of assistance for farmers. Formerly concentrated on funding infrastructure and other non-food production items (except for fisheries), due to COVID-19, food and nutrition security have become priorities in the RCDF budget.

What policy measures are in place or expected that aim to mitigate the effect of the crisis on vulnerable groups and their livelihoods?

The LSC has promoted food security and nutrition since the beginning of the crisis through a Facebook page that provides farmers with training materials, demonstration video clips and technical advice on crop production and vegetable gardens. Plans are in place to upload recipes to show people how certain food items can be cooked and including their nutrient content. DFAT, with UNDP facilitation, has made USD 107 000 available to the LSC to purchase tools, seeds and seedlings that will equip 347 Honiara households to grow vegetables in their backyards. The LSC has distributed vegetable seeds/seedlings from the MAL farm to households in Honiara city. The LSC is also assisting squatters, especially in Honiara City, by using the little land spaces around their settlements to grow vegetables. With support from the LSC, households are using disposable water bottles, cans, flower pots and plastic containers to grow organic vegetables, as demonstrated in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Manual on Organic Container Gardening. In addition, the LSC has provided Fish Aggregating Devices (FADs)⁴ to communities and has supported the rehabilitation of fish market facilities with new ice machines and other equipment under the supervision of the Ministry of Fisheries.

Should the country move into a Phase II lockdown, the LSC would activate a programme to provide people, especially in urban areas, with food kits and water. Only the most vulnerable families will be given free kits; for the rest, these items would be sold at subsidised prices. The LSC will also facilitate the use of so-called mobile markets, trucks that can be used by market vendors to sell fresh produce door-to-door. The system was trialled during the May lockdown in Honiara city using three SIG trucks, each with a police escort. The trial proved to be so successful that it will be used again should a lockdown be necessary.

The Ministries of Agriculture, Health, Fisheries and a number of food-related businesses are promoting nutrition awareness talks over the radio, through phone texts and newspapers. Under the Food Bank Initiative, the government is supporting four secondary boarding schools by developing crop and vegetable gardens able to supply nutritious meals for the students. Each of the schools must provide five hectares of registered land. Through the national SAFENET domestic violence network, the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs put measures in place to prevent the increase of gender-based violence during the crisis, anticipating that movement restrictions and overall tension could lead to a spike in numbers. The network works closely with the Pacific Partnership to End Violence against Women and Girls and is funded

⁴ Fish Aggregating Devices (FADs) are permanent, semi-permanent or temporary structures or devices made from any material and used to lure fish. Anchored FADs are an important tool for the development of sustainable artisanal and small-scale commercial fisheries that provide food and livelihoods to coastal communities in developing countries. FADs make a valuable contribution towards food security by helping meet increasing demand for fish and are influenced by population growth and the effects of climate change. FAO, 2012. Advisory note – Anchored Fish Aggregating Devices for artisanal fisheries.

primarily by the European Union with support from Australia, New Zealand and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women).⁵

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as World Vision, Kastom Gaden Association (KGA) and Zai Na Tina, are providing materials, including gardening tools, vegetable seeds and seedlings, to vulnerable communities free of charge or at reduced rates. These communities are identified through MAL, the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) and other government agencies.

There is no social security scheme for unemployed people in Solomon Islands. In villages and rural settings, social assistance in terms of money, food and in-kind support usually comes from extended family members and from neighbours. The Solomon Islands National Provident Fund (SINPF) is a pension fund under the Ministry of Finance with current members including 23 percent of the population. The SINPF allows members to withdraw 20 percent of their savings to help during the crisis. Very few people have private life insurance or similar schemes.

Commercial banks, including the ANZ Bank, BSP Bank, BRED Bank and Pan Oceanic Bank, and financial institutions are giving between three and six months of moratoria and relief packages to customers. This includes reducing overdraft rates, decreasing interest rates on personal and home loans and for businesses, and extending loan repayment periods.

The Solomon Islands Electricity Authority is reducing the electricity rates by 16 percent for domestic usage and for businesses.

How is the government funding the measures described above?

- In March, USD 16.64 million from the government's limited financial resources were reallocated to support the response to COVID-19 by essential sectors, including health, police and national security, agriculture, forestry, fisheries and infrastructure.
- In addition, in May the USD 37.7 million economic stimulus package was announced by the cabinet. Financing for the package will come from a range of sources: USD 2.4 million from the SIG budget, USD 2.4 million from DBSI and a domestic development bond for USD 14.7 million. Secured contributions from development partners include USD 26 million from the Asian Development Bank (ADB); USD 20 million from the World Bank and USD 8.4 million from DFAT (SIG, 2020).
- As donor and multilateral programmes and investments are currently funding the vast majority of capital expenditure, discussions are underway to decide how key planned expenditures should be financed, as well as how to raise additional infrastructure funding for the medium and long term. The grace period for major infrastructure loans by development institutions will have to be renegotiated.
- The ADB has released USD 6 million from its Pacific Disaster Resilience Program and is processing an additional USD 20 million (a USD 10 million grant and USD 10 million in concessional loans) for a so-called COVID-19 Rapid Response Programme. The ADB has also approved an additional USD 10 million to fill any financing gaps left by other funding agencies.
- The World Bank approved USD 5 million under the COVID-19 Fast Track Facility for Solomon Islands and in addition, green-lit the first Solomon Islands transition to sustainable growth

⁵ Pacific Women, a programme of the Australian Government, report that 64 per cent of women in the Solomon Islands report intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence. These figures from before the pandemic are expected to rise (Pacific Women, 2020).

development policy operation for USD 15 million (USD 11.8 million in grants and USD 3.2 million in loans). This amount will fund the first national Transition to Sustainable Growth Development Policy, which will introduce:

A fairer and more efficient tax framework for Solomon Island taxpayers and promote greater transparency and accountability through the introduction of anti-corruption legislation and the establishment of the Solomon Islands Independent Commission against Corruption (World Bank, 2020a).

- Australia has provided various financial aid packages, including USD 8.4 million for health, police and national security, education and, most recently, agriculture to boost the response efforts of the SIG to the pandemic.
- The International Monetary Fund (IMF) Report for Solomon Islands, released in May, includes disbursements under a Rapid Credit Facility/Rapid Financing Instrument (RCF/RFI) blend that has approved USD 28.5 million to support the country's balance of payments needs stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic preparation and response programmes (IMF, 2020).
- As mentioned previously, some infrastructure investments have been prioritised under the SIG's economic stimulus package. Development partners and donors are redirecting their support to such investments through various grants and credit assistance. The government aims to fund infrastructure included in the National Transport Plan to create employment and boost tourism and transportation in rural areas. Other priorities relate to health and police and national security. The DFAT, FAO, UNICEF and UNDP are focusing their assistance on food and nutrition security and agriculture.
- In June, DFAT – through Save the Children – offered a USD 684 000 grant to help 50 communities improve hand-washing and other hygienic habits in schools, while maintaining children's education.
- New Zealand has offered a package of rapid financial support for the health sector, including building capacity for preparedness. By the end of April, USD 1.8 million had been made available.
- Japan has donated US 347 000 – through UNICEF – to assist the health sector to boost ongoing COVID-19 preparedness and response efforts.
- The European Union is focused on two main interventions: i) ongoing budget support for rural water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), which will be fast-tracked with the result that a Euro 6.5 million disbursement will be made soon without major requirements; ii) a regional programme to support the health sector that be implemented with a total budget of Euro 22 million, possibly through an international/regional organization. Other European Union programmes will reallocate funds to support existing programmes, for example, the Sunlight Initiative, which works to eliminate violence against women and girls. This programme is administered by the UN's Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, with the support of UNDP, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN Women, and is overseen by the Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General.
- The fact that oil and fuel prices have decreased alongside global prices is helping people to cope with the crisis. Domestic electricity rates have dropped, which has greatly benefitted customers.

3 · IMMEDIATE EFFECTS OF THE CRISIS ON MOST VULNERABLE PEOPLE AND THE AGRIFOOD SYSTEM

What are the immediate effects of the crisis and the different sets of measures on agrifood systems?

The Central Bank for the Solomon Islands (CBSI)'s report for the first quarter of the year found that domestic economic activities slowed from January to March, most likely due to the initial impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. The report used indicators related to manufacturing, electricity usage, construction, visitors' arrivals, and wholesale and retail markets (CBSI, 2020).

The closing of many formal and informal markets in Honiara has had a negative impact on many vendors, mostly women. In addition, these closings have led to overflow crowds at the Honiara Central Market, which has remained open throughout the crisis. This prompted the HCC to consider reopening the Kukum Market (currently under renovation) for fruits, vegetables and other food items. Market closures in Honiara have affected other provinces, such as Malaita, Central Islands, Western, Isabel and Temotu, which often send their produce to the Honiara markets for sale. To mitigate the disruption in the food value chains caused by the market closings, farmers and vendors gradually established new informal roadside markets for fruits and vegetables in the Guadalcanal provincial areas. These markets lack services, such as water and sanitation, and infrastructure, such as proper stalls and fences, hence their safety and hygienic conditions are very poor.

The fisheries value chain has been affected by transport delays and unreliability, storage capacity and on shore distribution aggravated by the short-shelf life of products. This has affected many fisherfolk that depend on sales of fish products. A survey conducted in 20 rural villages by a partnership between national fisheries agencies, WorldFish and the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS) found that almost half of the respondents lacked adequate food supplies. In addition, 25 percent of respondents reported reduced local fish trade due to cash-strapped buyers (Development Policy Centre, 2020). An effort to grow fast-yielding root crops and fishing seems to be the coping strategy adopted by the rural communities during the crisis.

Agriculture and forestry are the two largest contributors to rural incomes and government revenue (CBSI, 2019) through the export of key commodities. The soft demand for these commodities since the beginning of the pandemic affects exports and this has been exacerbated by delays in international shipping and COVID-19 restrictions and their impacts on growers and producers. Data from the CBSI Q1 Report (CBSI, 2020) indicates that copra production increased by 22 percent following favourable international prices while cocoa production dropped by 71 percent against the figures reported in the previous quarter because most trees were in the flowering season at the time of reporting. Crude palm oil picked up strongly, increasing by 8 percent after the harvest season in comparison with the two previous quarters,⁶ and palm kernel grew by 5 percent with very favourable international prices as well. In general, the prices of agricultural commodities have remained unchanged or decreased slightly due to the low demand in importing countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, and China (Trading Economics, 2020; World Bank, 2020b). The prices of fresh foods in the markets and in the shops have not increased,

⁶ Exports of cocoa, fats and oils and oil seeds as copra were around 7.5 percent of the total country exports in 2018 (Observatory of Economic Complexity, OEC, data base consulted in August 2020).

except for during a very brief period at the beginning of the pandemic when some price spikes were reported due to panic buying. The government issued warnings to the vendors responsible.

After initial frustrations and uncertainties when many people were encouraged by the government to return to their rural villages because they had lost their jobs in Honiara, the former city dwellers are slowly adjusting to the new situation. Many have established home gardens and fishing activities, supported by the government with seeds and equipment. On their own initiative, people with online access are using the internet to buy and sell food items through Facebook and other social media. The LSC provides technical support and training materials online through its Facebook page. In May, the LSC distributed vegetable seedlings (initially of eight crops: pak choi, saladeer, choi sum, tomatoes, eggplants, lettuce, capsicum and beans) to Honiara city households as part of an initiative to support families wishing to grow nutritious vegetables. Many private agriculture companies have increased the local production of seeds and seedlings during the crisis to meet increased farmer demands for these inputs. However, an important barrier to the promotion of community gardening relates to land constraints.

According to the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR), national fresh fish production dropped significantly, especially at the beginning of the pandemic (March to May) due to a fall in demand in the Honiara market and irregular shipping schedules to and from the provinces. Fish production and sales have improved significantly since then as a result of relaxed restrictions on movement, improvements in internal shipping schedules, reduction in the price of fuel and the absence of competition from national and foreign fishing vessels (Purse Seine fleet, Long Line, and Pole and Line vessels), which usually anchor in the Honiara harbour and sell fish to the public.

What have been the immediate effects of the pandemic and the various measures taken on people's livelihoods, food security, malnutrition status and future prospects?

Tourism and entertainment, shipping industries, fishing, retail, building and infrastructure operations have been severely affected by the pandemic. The closure of these sectors or scaling down of their operations and the furlough of workers has had a major impact on families and individuals.

In March, the government began to encourage city dwellers to return to their home villages, significantly increasing the number of mouths to feed in the rural areas. Many villagers expanded their home gardening activities and worked with community and church groups to help each other by sharing their land and productive inputs.

The migration strategy is no longer being enforced and most people have now returned from the villages to Honiara and other urban centres. Food reserves are no longer a major issue since international shipping has resumed. Although remittances are not particularly relevant for the Solomon Islands economy (contributing less than 2 percent of GDP over the past ten years), this source of income has dried up as many seasonal workers are locked down or unemployed abroad or have returned to no job prospects. The situation is aggravated by the fact that Solomon Islands does not have many active social assistance programmes in place. Solomon Islanders traditionally enjoy a 'wantok system' based on extended family system whereby the family serves as a sort of social safety net.

Which groups are most likely to be severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated measures?

The pandemic is likely to disproportionately affect women for a number of reasons. Many women work in formal and informal roadside markets in urban areas and depend heavily on the income generated from selling their produce every day. The closure of these market will affect their ability to feed their families. Women are responsible for gathering and preparing food as well as caring for the elderly and children, responsibilities that have grown due to the lockdown and curfews. Pregnant and lactating women are also likely to be affected due to difficulties in reaching doctors and clinics during curfews and other restrictions. Both rural and urban women are affected but rural women are more likely to have limited access to hospitals, transport and bank services. Although no official figures have been released, there is evidence in the Pacific region to suggest that gender-based violence may have increased during the crisis as greater restrictions are placed on households and people that have lost their jobs are forced to spend more time at home (UN Women, 2020).

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), as of 2018, vulnerable informal employment in Solomon Islands, which includes both own-account workers⁷ and contributing family workers⁸, accounted for 80.3 percent of the labour force (ILO, 2019). Casual and day-to-day agricultural labourers, food vendors, food system workers, processing workers, private industry workers, tourism industry workers and others cannot afford to be isolated at home since they depend on their daily income and have few if any savings. Small-scale farmers and villagers are affected by the lack of access to markets, especially in Honiara since roadside markets are now closed. However, in the provinces, markets are available at the provincial centres with smaller irregular markets opening in communities. Squatter settlements (Maebuta and Maebuta, 2009) have been deeply affected due to loss of income, closed markets and the non-availability of casual labour. Should COVID-19 spread to such settlements, where people live in close contact and cannot easily practice isolation or find space for quarantine purposes, the consequences would be devastating.

4 · FOOD FOR REFLECTION: LONG-TERM POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This section serves to initiate thinking and dialogue on the longer-term implications of COVID-19 in terms of management of the food system to prevent a health crisis and that a health crisis turns into a food security and nutrition emergency.

What structural factors are exacerbating the impacts of crises such as COVID 19? What are the long-term policy implications?

Existing climate-related challenges have been exacerbated by COVID-19. A good example can be found in the destruction and damage to property inflicted by Tropical Cyclone Harold in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga in April. It has been difficult for emergency relief and assessment teams to reach key locations due to the movement restrictions imposed under COVID-19.

⁷ ILO defines own-account workers are those who, working on their own account or with one or more partners, hold the types of jobs defined as "self-employment jobs" and have not engaged on a continuous basis any employees to work for them. Own account workers are a subcategory of "self-employed".

⁸ ILO defines contributing family workers as those workers who hold "self-employment jobs" as own-account workers in a market-oriented establishment operated by a related person living in the same household.

About 85 percent of the population of Solomon Islands live in rural areas, representing a large share of the unskilled labour force. Restrictions in labour mobility throughout the region due to COVID-19 have reduced opportunities for unskilled seasonal workers, affecting their access to the Australian Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) and Pacific Labour Scheme⁹ or the New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) programme.¹⁰

The closing of borders to shipping, flights and travel has shown how heavily the country depends on imported food supplies and agricultural inputs, medical supplies, industrial inputs, etc. Such heavy reliance on other countries for food means that serious supply fluctuations could occur if exporters decide to curtail or ban exports. About 80 percent of lands in Solomon Islands are under customary land tenure system, with the result that thousands of hectares are currently under-used or not used at all. The country badly needs land reform so that these customary lands can be released for the production of food (FAO-FIRST, 2020).¹¹ In the meantime, Solomon Islands lacks large-scale food production (semi-commercial and commercial), making it difficult to increase production, strengthen rural employment and promote import substitution.

How might the food system evolve or change following this crisis?

The SIG is likely to help farmers engage in commercial agriculture by providing incentives for small and medium enterprises and facilitating access to land. As seen in Section 2, the MAL is already providing farmers with machines and tools in a community commercial farming scheme on Sape Farm in the Guadalcanal plains. The potential for digital platforms to improve access to agricultural market information, such as prices and availability, needs to be thoroughly explored. The use of innovative, technology-based marketing approaches, such as mobile deliveries, are likely to increase in future.

While semi-commercial or larger farms may be the way of the future, subsistence farming will continue to be important for many rural families. Many have not been prepared to deal with the COVID-19 crisis, making programmes that provide inputs for backyard farming essential. Such programmes can also serve to promote home gardens in urban and peri-urban areas as important for healthy and nutritious diets. Achieving a greater degree of self-sufficiency in food will be critical if Solomon Islands is to improve its preparedness for health and other crises in the future.

Climate change, environmental degradation and the over-exploitation of natural resources add substantial pressures to the food system. Moreover, scarcity in supply and price fluctuations related to climate related disasters can be higher than those on the world market. There is a need to better incorporate risk management in national food security and nutrition policies and to be more proactive in facing future crises. The Agriculture and Livestock Sector Growth Strategy and Investment Plan, which is a major policy for MAL, is currently under preparation with support

⁹ The Seasonal Worker Programme aims to hire short-term, unskilled or low-skilled seasonal workers. The Pacific Labour Scheme commenced on 1 July 2018 and allows people from Pacific island countries to work in low and semi-skilled jobs in rural and regional Australia for up to three years. In May, the Australian government announced that workers under both schemes whose visas are about to expire can now stay in Australia for up to 12 months.

¹⁰ In March, over 16 000 Pacific seasonal workers were working on farms under SWP and RSE programmes in both countries.

¹¹ Land tenure is historically and culturally a highly sensitive and complex issue. Around 83 percent of land is formally governed by customary tenure, which revolves around stories of ancestors or kin groups and can in some areas be negotiated. Policy Effectiveness Analysis for Solomon Islands. FIRST. 2020.

from FAO and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and most likely will incorporate plans and activities in this regard.

5 · INFORMATION AND GOVERNANCE

The government took firm control at the outset of the crisis, establishing the Joint Oversight Committee (OSC) for COVID-19 under the Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to provide coordination and strategic direction. The OSC is the overall coordination body for all COVID-19 matters, with responsibility for the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) for COVID-19. There are six multi-sectoral committees actively engaged in managing the crisis: the Livelihood Sector Committee (agriculture), the Health Committee, the Camp Management Sector Committee (institutional quarantine sites), the Infrastructure Sector Committee, the Education Sector Committee (education), and the Protection Sector Committee (police) are sharing information, data and assessments. The committees share information, data and assessments and communication and dialogue within and between them has been highly effective.

The National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) remains on 'full activation mode' to support the coordination of national COVID-19 pandemic preparedness and response plans. Provincial Disaster Operations Committees (P-DOC) in all nine provinces and Honiara Municipality, which are overseen by the NDMO, have stepped up preparations for response to COVID-19. FAO and FIRST play active roles through in addressing food and nutrition security issues through the LSC and the government has now seen the critical role that the agriculture sector can play supporting the country in its economic recovery. The LSC has conducted food assessments of local food production, which has allowed it to identify areas requiring support. Nutrition security support is also a responsibility of the LSC, including the provision of fresh nutritious food to the population in case of a lockdown.

The main development partners and donors (Australia, New Zealand, China, Japan, Korea, USA) financial institutions (WB, ADB, IMF) and international organizations (FAO, UNICEF, IFAD, WFP, UNDP, WHO) are supporting the government in all key development areas. Joint meetings are conducted and organised by the LSC.

REFERENCES

- Asia Foundation.** 2020. *Timor-Leste COVID-19 survey*. San Francisco, CA. (available at <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Timor-Leste-COVID-19-Wave1-Survey-English.pdf>).
- Central Bank of Solomon Islands (CBSI).** 2019. *CBSI 2019 Annual Report*. Honiara. 64 pp. (available at http://www.cbsi.com.sb/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CBSI-Annual-Report-2019_FINAL.pdf).
- Central Bank of Solomon Islands (CBSI).** 2020. *Quarterly Review March 2020*. Honiara. 65 pp. (available at <http://www.cbsi.com.sb/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Q1-MARCH2020.pdf>).
- The Development Policy Centre.** 2020. Coastal fisheries in a pandemic: Solomon Islands and Vanuatu experiences [online]. *Blog post*, 20 July 2020 [online]. Canberra. [Cited 6 October 2020] https://devpolicy.org/coastal-fisheries-in-a-pandemic-solomon-island-and-vanuatu-experiences-20200729/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=coastal-fisheries-in-a-pandemic-solomon-island-and-vanuatu-experiences-20200729
- FAO.** 2015. *Training manual for organic agriculture*. Rome (available at http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/nr/sustainability_pathways/docs/Compilation_techniques_organic_agriculture_rev.pdf).
- FAO.** 2012. *Advisory note - Anchored Fish Aggregating Devices (FADs) for Artisanal Fisheries*. Samoa. (available at <http://www.fao.org/3/a-ar482e.pdf>).
- Food and Nutrition Security Impact, Resilience, Sustainability and Transformation programme (FIRST).** 2020. *Food and Nutrition Security Policy Effectiveness Analysis for Solomon Islands*. Honiara. (available at http://tools.foodsecurityportal.org/sites/default/files/country_profiles/PEAR_Solomon_island.pdf).
- Food Security Information Network (FSIN).** 2020. *Global Report on Food Crises 2020*. Rome. (available at <http://www.fao.org/emergencies/resources/documents/resources-detail/en/c/1272014/>)
- International Finance Corporation (IFC).** 2016. *Case study: Soltuna – tuna processing*. Washington, DC. 20 pp. (available at https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/3432dc32-806a-4830-81c4-e231eaeeba8c/soltuna_updated_May2017.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=IMod8jG).
- International Labour Organization (ILO).** 2019. *Solomon Islands. Employment and environmental sustainability fact sheets 2019*. Bangkok. (available at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_627566.pdf).
- International Monetary Fund (IMF).** 2020. IMF Executive Board approves a US\$28.5 million disbursement to Solomon Islands to address the COVID-19 pandemic. *News release*, 1 June 2020. In: *IMF [online]* Washington, DC. [Cited 6 October 2020] <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/06/01/pr20229-solomon-islands-imf-executive-board-approves-disbursement-to-address-the-covid-19-pandemic>
- Maebuta, H. & Maebuta, J.** 2009. Generating livelihoods: a study of urban squatter settlements in Solomon Islands. *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, 243(3): 118-131. (available at: <http://devpolicy.org/PEB/2019/06/29/generating-livelihoods-a-study-of-urban-squatter-settlements-in-solomon-islands/>).

Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC). 2020. Country profile Solomon Islands. In: *OEC* [online] Boston. [Cited 31 August 2020]. <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/slb/>

Pacific Women. 2020. Ending violence against women. In: *Pacific Women* [online]. Suva. [Cited 31 August 2020]. (available at https://pacificwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/EndingViolenceAgainstWomen_PacificWomenProgram_January2020.pdf).

Solomon Islands Government (SIG). 2020. *Solomon Islands Government economic stimulus package to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic*. 20 May 2020. Honiara. 27 pp. (available at <https://solomons.gov.sb/solomon-islands-government-economic-stimulus-package-to-address-the-impacts-of-the-covid-19-pandemic/>).

Solomon Times. 2020. Government affirms commitment to DBSI. *Solomon Times*, 9 June 2020. (also available at <https://www.solomontimes.com/news/government-affirms-commitment-to-dbsi/9913>).

Trading Economics. 2020. Markets: Commodities [online]. In: *Trading Economics*. [August 2020]. <https://tradingeconomics.com/commodities>.

UN Women. 2020. Across the Pacific region, crisis centres respond to increased cases of violence against women amid COVID-19. *News release*, 22 June 2020. In *UN Women* [online] Bangkok. [Cited 31 August 2020] <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2020/06/across-the-pacific-region-crisis-centres-respond-to-increased-cases-of-violence>).

World Bank. 2020a. New \$15 million operation to build sustainable growth in Solomon Islands. *News release*, 6 May 2020. Washington, DC. (available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/05/07/new-us15-million-operation-to-build-sustainable-growth-in-solomon-islands>).

World Bank. 2020b. World Bank Commodities Price Data, 2 July 2020. (The Pink Sheet). In: *The World Bank* [online]. Washington, DC. [Cited 31 August 2020] <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/722721593705473133/CMO-Pink-Sheet-July-2020.pdf>.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This country profile is part of a series produced by the Food and nutrition security Impact, Resilience, Sustainability and Transformation (FIRST) Programme. In developing these profiles, the FIRST Programme – a strategic partnership between FAO and the European Union – responds to calls for support from governments and development and humanitarian partners. In some countries, FIRST has joined forces with the Global Network against Food Crises.

The process to produce this profile was led by **Itziar González**, FIRST policy officer, and **Nichol Nonga**, in close collaboration with the FAO Subregional Office for the Pacific Islands and the European Union Delegation for the Pacific. The profile has benefitted from the contributions of the FIRST management team.

This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of FAO and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.



CO-FUNDED BY THE
EUROPEAN UNION



Some rights reserved. This work is available under a [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/) licence

Recommended citation: FAO. 2020. *National agrifood systems and Covid-19 in Solomon Islands. Effects, policy responses and long term implications*. Rome <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb1345en>