

Special Event on “Innovation, Science and Digitalization: Transforming agrifood systems in Asia and the Pacific region”

Greetings from Palau. We are a small-island nation with big broadband connectivity. We are already using it to capitalize on the global digital economy with the advent of a Digital Residency program and a partnership with Ripple cryptocurrency to create the world’s first government-backed stablecoin. However, converting digital gains into food systems gains is only just beginning.

Conditions are ripe for such a conversion. Researchers have shown that visitors to Palau are willing to pay a premium for sustainably caught fish, and likely for locally-sourced agricultural products, when their origin can be proven. With food production centers located far outside tourism centers, this means that provenance must be proven and tracked digitally along the supply chain. Organizations have piloted programs to tag and scan fish as they travel to stores and restaurants, so that every fish can be tracked back to an artisanal fisherman and a specific harvesting location. Consumers can then scan QR codes to learn more about their food. Strengthening regional connections to tag and track pelagic fish could lead to fascinating knowledge and further increase the economic value of such products.

Such a system requires many moving parts, from a trained and equipped fisherman, to tags and scanners that work, to willing and compliant distributors and retailers, to consumers who care. The technology and processes are in place, but the rapid change in access and behavior it needs still lags and technical support is needed. Modernizing and increasing the overall economic value of Palau’s food systems will improve livelihoods for everyone and catalyze increased food production overall.

We need to improve smallholder access to the benefits of innovation and digitalization. Recognizing that many of our food producers operate in cash and traded goods, and that many of our buyers operate on credit and peer-to-peer or bank transfers, we created an App to connect suppliers and buyers. Through this innovative program, suppliers can register and promote products on the Alii Pass app; and buyers can pay with a click. Suppliers are paid in check or cash by a trusted intermediary and buyers can immediately access purchases. Again, the technology and processes are in place, but the human element remains a challenge. Sustained efforts to build trust, consistency, and capacity among suppliers are needed.

It is important that innovation and science be inclusive. There is virtually no data on nutritional values of Pacific Island foods traditionally harvested or prepared by women, such as taro, invertebrates, and gleaned fruits and seeds. We also cannot push for expansion in the pelagic food chain at the expense of youth and women of childbearing age. Continued partnership with technical agencies is critical, and given the strong similarities in diets around the region, could be a topic for strong regional cooperation.

Finally, transforming our food systems goes beyond connectivity, and requires society-wide cooperation. In Palau we have launched an initiative called “Keled A Ngercheled” (Our Food is Our Responsibility). Through combined branding, cross-government planning, promotion, and policies, and coordinated upscaling of successful and sustainable ventures, we will boost eco-friendly local production, transform to more culturally-conscious consumption, and increase access to nutrition, thereby achieving Food Security by 2030.

Thank you.