

Changes and adaptations in village food systems in Solomon Islands: A rapid appraisal during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Background

As of 1 June 1 2020, Solomon Islands had no coronavirus cases; however, there was a national economic recession and restrictions were placed on people's movement, gatherings, education and business activities. Key exports from Solomon Islands (fish, logs, copra and cocoa) have all taken a downturn, with government revenue being cut by 11% as a result. Street side and suburban marketing, which is a source of income for many households, has been banned in Honiara, the nation's capital. For rural areas, two of the biggest changes have been the increased circulation of people (i.e. those who moved out of Honiara and back to the provinces) and reduced cash flow.

Objective

The objective of the report was to document changes and adaptations in village food systems in relation to how the COVID-19 situation is experienced in a selection of villages in Solomon Islands.

We sought to meet the objective by answering three questions:

1. What strategies are villages employing to ensure there is enough food?
2. How are fisheries and community-based resource management influenced?
3. How are village populations demonstrating adaptations and practices that indicate resilience?

Findings

The rapid survey included 35 community leaders from 20 villages in Western Province and Malaita Province, and was conducted between 25 April and 28 May, a key period of disruption.

During this period, informal markets in Honiara, schools and gatherings were suspended and many urban residents went to villages. The closing of informal marketing is a severe measure in the Solomon Islands context. Women are less likely than men to hold positions in industry and government, so they are more reliant on informal marketing for their livelihoods and comprise the majority of informal market sellers.

Thirty-one respondents said that village populations had increased, and about half reported that there were food shortages in their village. The most widespread adaptation was to increase agricultural production, particularly of root vegetables. Increased fishing was reported by half of respondents.

Food trade was impacted by a lack of cash in circulation, meaning reduced marketing of foods in villages (a sector

dominated by women) and a rise in bartering of fish for other foods. While most respondents reported extended family and community support to increase production and distribution of foods, some reported theft from gardens.

Changes in the marketing of fish varied between villages. Reduced volumes of fish for sale were reported by 26% of respondents, while 31% reported more fish for sale. Similarly, fish seems to have become cheaper in some places (26% of responses) and more expensive in others (21% of responses).

Respondents reported that people from town were either inexperienced fishers or did not have fishing gear, so the influx of people did not necessarily lead to more fishing but to more demand for fish and agricultural crops. However, disruptions in cash flow had also led to reduced demand in some villages for produce at the market.

In a small portion of communities (15%), conflicts prior to the current situation had meant management rules were being broken. In most communities, community-based resource management committees had responded by raising awareness about fisheries rules. In a few cases, communities had increased enforcement or organised activities, such as group harvests to support key activities such as supplies for the clinic.

One respondent reported that more youths are engaging with coastal marine resource collection by gleaning the mangroves and reefs. This is a common method for low-input harvesting, making it important for community members who do not have access to fishing gear, such as youths and women.

Implications

While access to tribal lands and coasts for subsistence agriculture and fishing has always been the "safety net" in Solomon Islands, providing food in times when employment, royalties and other sources of sustenance are lean, there are legitimate concerns about the current state of food and nutrition security. This survey suggests significant capacity for people in provinces to adapt to the situation and feed both usual residents and those coming periodically from urban areas. However, because of reduced cash flow and the ongoing situation with COVID-19, there is also a growing strain on food systems. This strain is likely to be experienced differently by men and women. The study suggests further research on this, particularly in relation to increased burdens of work and reduced income. We highlight six ongoing initiatives that can be springboards for further action by government, non-government and international actors regarding fisheries to increase resilience and improve the ability of rural communities to respond to the current situation.

The full report can be found at: <https://www.worldfishcenter.org/content/changes-and-adaptations-village-food-systems-solomon-islands-rapid-appraisal-during-early>

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