

Empowering seaweed farmers to develop new products in Solomon Islands

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“Cottonii” seaweed is the traditional name of farmed seaweed in Solomon Islands, a country made up of six major islands and over 900 smaller islands in the Pacific Islands region. With a population of over 700,000, Solomon Islands has a GDP per capita of USD 2295.

Seaweed farming is one of the main sources of income on Wagina and Manaoba islands, and is often run as a family business. All steps of farming, including establishment of the farm, harvesting, replanting, maintenance, drying and packing, are taken care of by family members.

Since the establishment of seaweed farming in Solomon Islands in 2002, seaweed has been farmed primarily for export as a dried raw product. Until recently, there has been no value-added processing of raw seaweed (e.g. cooking or packing), which could further strengthen a small family business.

This began to change in 2018, when the Solomon Islands Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR) requested the Pacific Community (SPC) to assist its seaweed farmers in developing alternative seaweed products to supplement farmers’ daily income in rural coastal areas.

Experience shows that when a product, especially a food product, gets a value-added transformation, it increases its commercial value. A study was carried out in 2019 to identify suitable products that could be developed using locally available resources and improve their livelihood options.

“This is why SPC and MFMR have teamed up to train seaweed farmers in Wagina and Manaoba in developing value-added products, including its cost–benefit analysis and supplying simple equipment for these farmers,” explained Avinash Singh, SPC Aquaculture Officer.

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Seaweed and cheese chips made during the training. Image: ©SPC





Showing how to make several possible tasty dishes with seaweed. Images: ©SPC

During two training sessions jointly organised by SPC and MFMR in May 2021, with support from the consulting firm Aqua Energie LLC, 33 women and 16 men from Wagina and Manaoba learned new techniques and tips to boost their seaweed businesses. Using a blend of online training resources and in-person support from MFMR and SPC, participants learned to manufacture healthy, locally produced seaweed snacks, such as crackers, chips and sticks.

Responding to the continued travel restrictions in the region, trainers developed training videos on production, food safety, packaging, storage and domestic marketing. “Once the farmers have learned the basic concepts of making these seaweed products, they can experiment and try more local ingredients to reduce production costs,” explained Anna Larson, one of the lead trainers. “Introducing seaweed into diets may also provide some nutritional benefits,” she added.

While the training has provided a firm foundation in the basics of production, the farmers are keen to use their local knowledge and resources to better manage production costs while exploring and developing new flavours to suit local palates.

During the training, trainees experimented with new batches at home and tested them the following day with their peers and trainers. These experiences were quite successful, according to Sylvester Diake from MFMR, who noted that “the products were so good that the participants ate them all before they could be packed for trial marketing.”

Recognising the potential to build on this new market, Irene Billy, a farmer from the Manaoba Hatodea Seaweed Association said that “this training will revive interest in seaweed farming. I can now produce and sell seaweed chips even when there is no opportunity to export the dried form of the seaweed.”

Through expanding the uses of locally grown seaweed, there are also opportunities for the farmers to sell their products to neighbouring communities as well as in the capital, Honiara. “The training provided me with the knowledge of a new product from seaweed,” explained Daene Peter of Wagina Seaweed Farmers. “I am very happy and pleased to be part of this new direction,” he concluded.

This training has been organised through the PacAqua project, a five-year project that aims at improving food security and economic development in the Pacific through sustainable aquaculture by enhancing business acumen among aquaculture operations, reducing aquatic biosecurity risks, and increasing uptake and adoption of improved aquaculture practices.

Funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, PacAqua is currently supporting 15 enterprises, including 14 private sector enterprises and 1 farmer’s association, spread across eight countries (Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu) and two territories (French Polynesia and New Caledonia). The project also supports six farmer clusters in Fiji and Papua New Guinea.