



POLICY REVIEW

FARMING THE FUTURE – YOUTH-INCLUSIVE AGRICULTURE POLICIES, RESOURCING AND PROGRAMMES FOR A RESILIENT PACIFIC



Young people in Wagina (Solomon Islands) tending their vegetables. Photo by Emmanuel Oti

Purpose

The aim of this policy review is to:

- demonstrate the potential of agriculture for sustainable youth livelihood, improved food security and employment; and
- identify the policies needed to ensure increased youth engagement in agriculture.

Introduction

Agriculture plays an important role in the lives of Pacific Island people. It is the source of livelihood and the premier source of income for most of the Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs). Agriculture is woven into Pasifika people's identities, cultures and traditions, histories, resilience narratives and ceremonial practices (Kavaliku, L. 2005). Agriculture not only provides food and raw materials, but also employment opportunities.



In **SAMOA**, the agriculture and forestry sector represents **6.5% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP)**, provides around 24% of household earnings, and constitutes **7.3% of the country's exports** (Ministry of Agriculture, Samoa 2016).

Similarly in **FIJI**, agriculture has been one of the mainstays of its economy, contributing **around 28% to total employment** in the formal sector, indirectly employing many more, and **contributing 9% annually to the nation's GDP** (Investment Fiji Organisation 2016).

In **VANUATU**, at least **75% of the population residing in the rural areas** depend on agriculture for their livelihood and productivity, particularly in the subsistence sector (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Vanuatu 2014).

Some of the PICTs have rich natural resources that support major economic industries in agriculture and trade. For instance, Papua New Guinea's copper gold mine operations provide a range of employment opportunities for its people. Fiji's sugar industry has permitted the country to expand into a more diversified economy. For the remainder of the developing islands, semi-

subsistence economies prevail, with agriculture providing the subsistence needs of most of the population and constituting a significant proportion of national exports. PICTs primarily export cash crop agricultural commodities that require labour-intensive processing, such as palm oil, copra, coconut oil, vanilla, coffee and cocoa.



Issues

- i. As PICTs place increasing emphasis on agricultural exports, food security becomes a real concern for the region, particularly in countries where the traditional staple diet consists of root crops. This leads to unbalanced diets, with minimal consumption of vegetables and fruits and a high intake of processed foods and sugary drinks, leading to unhealthy, overweight and obese populations. The State of Pacific Youth Report 2017 (SOPY 2017) noted obesity and overweight as an increasingly common and serious problem amongst youth, with a prevalence of 50% in some PICTs. This represents a very significant public health crisis for the Pacific region.
- ii. Limited opportunities for youth to engage in work is a real challenge for the Pacific region. Countries in the Pacific stand to benefit from a demographic dividend, however the labour markets are simply not producing enough jobs (ILO and ADB 2017). The gap between the number of labour force entrants and the number of new jobs is alarming (ILO 2017). For instance, in Fiji, 27,000 enter the labour force with 600 new jobs created annually. In Kiribati 2,000 enter the labour force with 400–600 new jobs created every year. In the Solomon Islands 10,000 enter the labour force with 400 new jobs created. These trends have resulted in a 23% youth unemployment rate in the Pacific region compared to 13% globally (ILO 2017). Many young people are driven to informal employment or subsistence living without social protections and rights. Limited employment opportunities for youth have significant implications for their livelihood and that of their families, as well as for countries' broader economic performance and political stability (World Bank 2014). High youth unemployment and underemployment carry the increased risk of conflict and violence (UNICEF and SPC 2011).
- iii. There is no statistical data available for vulnerable youth employment in the Pacific region. However, it is recognised that youth are generally overrepresented in subsistence, precarious, and informal employment in the region (ILO 2013; ILO 2014). While there are significant data gaps, it is understood that underemployment and vulnerable employment are a significant problem for youth in the region (ILO 2014). Those who do find work are often employed in poor quality jobs with limited earnings. Most school leavers across the region have little choice but to enter the urban informal economy or work in subsistence agriculture or fishing (ILO 2017). In Solomon Islands a youth employment scan found that young people face significant challenges obtaining formal employment (Barbara and McMahan 2016). The formal labour market is small, reflecting the fragility of its economy and the dominance of subsistence and informal sectors. The primary sector, which encompasses agriculture (including subsistence agriculture) and timber production, dominates the Solomon Islands economy. This sector provides informal, irregular and precarious employment opportunities for youth and is not a preferred option for them or their parents. Public sector jobs carry high status and are the priority objective of the country's education pathways.
- iv. Youth migration from rural communities to capital cities in search of employment opportunities is a growing concern for PICTs. Migration is drawing young people away from their villages and countries, and there is fear that without creating more opportunities, they will not return, resulting in a significant loss to the region. As noted above, the Pacific region has rich natural resources that provide the potential for major employment opportunities in agriculture; however, the region is not maximising these resources for local innovations or as a means to employ and retain its young people.

- v. Young people don't own land in the Pacific region. This lack of access to the land is a barrier driving young people away from considering a career in farming. This raises the need to create innovative approaches, such as hydroponic farming and virtual education, to entice young people to pursue an agricultural livelihood.
- vi. The economic, social and psycho-social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will have far-reaching implications for Pacific economies, families and communities. The crisis has already further marginalised young people, particularly young women and lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) youth, through the resulting loss of jobs, especially in tourist industries, such as hospitality, retail, recreation, catering, entertainment, and shipping and transport. It has also affected those dependent on

semi-subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods and survival. In places like Fiji that depend on the tourism sector, the drastic and unprecedented impacts of the pandemic have led to widespread termination of employment. On the other hand, as noted by the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education and Youth in Tuvalu Dr. Tufoua Panapa, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught Pacific governments and youth the importance of returning to the land and the sea for survival. It has further demonstrated the need to maintain focus on the development of the agriculture and fisheries sectors, including identifying other sources of local and sustainable livelihoods to support the well-being of families and communities. This is a great opportunity for the region to develop a robust, sustainable, youth-centred and Pacific-oriented food security system.



Suggestions for policy actions and priority activities

Priority activities

- SPC and PICTs to implement short-term innovative agricultural-based projects that are low cost but high impact to respond to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Pacific youth.
- SPC to support PICTs with tools that will enable them to create agricultural skills training and employment pathways for youth.
- Increase active engagement of youth in the Pacific Week of Agriculture to promote, highlight and encourage youth participation in agriculture.

Policy actions

- National youth policies to encourage the active participation of youth in all their diversities in agriculture strategies, action plans and policies; specific targets identified and monitored to ensure the increased and sustained engagement of youth in agriculture production and value-adding processes for increased livelihood and employment export opportunities.
- Increase government incentives for youths to move into small-medium-large-scale farming with corresponding support for extension and field work, including technical assistance with finance and business management. E.g. government offering tax incentives (tax-free zones) for commercial farming initiatives.

- Mainstream agriculture into the education system beginning in early childhood. Increase the number of scholarships offered to youth to study in agriculture.
- Adequately resource agricultural training centres, outposts and research institutions to foster innovation in the areas of precision agriculture, permaculture, and hydroponic farming. Governments should also invest in virtual agriculture training, and provide technical support for young farmers, particularly in rural, remote and outlying island communities.
- Foster the creation and establishment of self-employment in agriculture through entrepreneurial programmes for young people, including people living with disabilities (PLWD), LGBTQI and other marginalised communities. Successful young entrepreneurs or youth enterprises can help create jobs for more young people.
- Strengthen data collection and analysis of youth unemployment trends, including PLWD and LGBTQI, to ensure that all stakeholders have access to reliable information to inform policies and programmes and measure progress.

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