

Nurturing island leaders: Youth training and innovation in Solomon Islands

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Engaging youth in positive island food system transitions is an emerging regional priority. The Nusatupe Innovation Hub in Solomon Islands, operated by WorldFish, is focusing on fostering a new generation of island leaders through youth-focused training in sustainable livelihoods and marine resource management. Following its inaugural internship programme in 2024, the initiative is being expanded in 2025, strengthening partnerships and capacity building to support resilient island food systems across the country.

Introduction

Youth unemployment in Solomon Islands has become an increasingly pressing issue, with a large number of youth lacking the practical training and hands-on experience needed to secure meaningful employment (CBSI 2021). This challenge is not unique to Solomon Islands but is pervasive across Pacific Island nations, where many youth face similar barriers (PIFS 2020). A gap between education and employment highlights the value of vocational training programmes that complement formal education and provide essential skill-based learning.

In Solomon Islands, a network of Rural Training Centres (RTCs) offers agricultural, carpentry, mechanical and life skills to empower young people. There is also a range of youth development programmes that have emerged in recent years. Some, like the Pacific Community's Youth@Work initiative, have made efforts to expand to provincial centres, bringing skills in new sectors such as hospitality and digital literacy. These trades, along with life skills, are vital for both local economic development and integration into broader regional and international markets. But demand remains greater than supply so not all needs are met.

In rural communities, youth unemployment is compounded by limited access to both formal education and employment opportunities. Traditional livelihoods and natural resources are under increasing pressure from climate change and economic constraints. There is a growing need for targeted interventions that not only offer skill-building opportunities but also address broader systemic barriers that can enable youth to engage with both local economies and global markets.

WorldFish, a research for development organisation, has worked in Solomon Islands for over 30 years, partnering closely with local communities, researchers and government agencies to strengthen coastal livelihoods and enhance climate resilience through action research. Central to these efforts is the WorldFish Nusatupe Research Station (now referred to as the Nusatupe Innovation Hub), located in Solomon Islands' Western Province (Fig.1).



The WorldFish Nusatupe Innovation Hub. Image: © WorldFish

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Over the years, the Nusatupe Innovation Hub has hosted a wide range of projects in collaboration with international scientists, nongovernmental organisations, government institutions at the national and provincial level, and local community members. The direction of programmes has evolved over time. A 2019 WorldFish science workshop that emphasised the importance of specialised training and youth participation in decision-making, particularly in the co-management of fisheries and aquaculture (WorldFish 2019) brought about a recent shift in focus toward rural youth.

The Nusatupe Innovation Hub is strategically integrated with national partnerships that include key national and provincial stakeholders, including the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR), the Western Province Government, Solomon Islands National University, Kastom Gaden Association, RTCs, and island communities. It is emerging as a central platform within the Island Food Systems programme of WorldFish and CGIAR³ for advancing training, practical demonstrations, co-learning, and applied research on sustainable and climate-resilient island food systems, addressing the recognised need for bigger frameworks that address the integrated food system challenges of islands (CGIAR 2024). By strengthening collaborative partnerships, aligning with relevant national and provincial policies (e.g. MFMR 2019; Western Province government 2024; Hunnam et al. 2025), and leveraging the partner's complementary technical expertise, the hub facilitates targeted knowledge transfer through practical demonstrations, hands-on skills training, and the co-production of knowledge with local partners (Bennett et al. 2023).

The Nusatupe Innovation Hub provides an accessible, biodiverse marine environment that serves as a living laboratory for applied learning. The station on Nusatupe Island is fully solar-powered and features accommodation facilities, office space, a conference room, storage, and technical infrastructure, thereby providing a secure and well-equipped environment for researchers, students and visiting professionals. Just offshore lies a 14-hectare marine protected area that has been actively conserved for over two decades. This vibrant ecosystem, home to giant clams and diverse coral habitats, offers an ideal setting for immersive learning and field-based research in marine science, conservation, and climate adaptation. When

combined with demonstration gardens established on the island by partner organization Kastom Gaden Association, the hub offers a platform for young people to gain hands-on experience in sustainable resource management, agroecology, and community-based resource management.

The modality for leveraging that platform is through an internship programme, the first of which was completed in 2024. This article highlights the design, structure and outcomes of the inaugural internship programme that was focused on experiential learning, mentorship and community engagement, all aimed at contributing to a new generation of leaders committed to building resilient food systems and sustainable livelihoods across Solomon Islands.

Youth internship programme

In 2024, the internship programme at Nusatupe started offering a hands-on learning platform aimed at contributing to addressing critical gaps in vocational training, technical skill development, and work experience. Targeting graduates from RTCs, regional universities and school leavers, the programme aimed to bridge academic knowledge with real-world applications.

Key objectives of the internship programme include:

- Providing experiential learning in organic backyard gardening, coral restoration, seaweed farming and coastal resource management.
- Enhancing participants' employability through structured internships that combine technical skills and supporting skills such as community engagement.
- Empowering youth to contribute to sustainable livelihoods, food security, and climate resilience initiatives within their communities.

The inaugural programme engaged 16 participants (eight males and eight females) across five cohorts throughout 2024. Each cohort completed a six-week placement. While based at Nusatupe the internship programme was generally structured as follows:

- Orientation and training: Participants are introduced to environmental stewardship, sustainable fisheries, and the role of community-based resource management.

³ Formerly known as the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, CGIAR is an international partnership of research centers and scientists working on sustainable agriculture and food systems to reduce poverty and ensure food security globally.

- ◆ Hands-on learning: Activities include coral nursery maintenance, coral planting, seaweed farming techniques, and climate-resilient backyard gardening techniques.
- ◆ Mentorship and networking: Interns interact with local experts, provincial fisheries officers, and representatives of nongovernmental organisations, thus building their professional networks.
- ◆ Reflection and community engagement: Interns consolidate their learning, and prepare to transfer skills and knowledge to their home communities.

Innovation in action: Seaweed farming as an example

Seaweed (*Kappaphycus alvarezii*, also known as *Eucheuma cottonii*) farming is a relatively well-established coastal enterprise in Solomon Islands and is an example of one of the hands-on activities that the 2024 interns were able to experience. Following the formation of a new government in Solomon Islands in May 2024 (the Government of National Unity and Transformation), MFMR reaffirmed its commitment to advancing the blue economy, placing a strong emphasis on the development of commercial fisheries.

This included the expansion of seaweed farming, recognised for its potential to create inclusive livelihood opportunities, particularly in coastal communities with limited access to other income-generating activities. The Nusatupe Innovation Hub can play a role in supporting the government’s goal of continuing to increase seaweed production (SIG 2025).

To prepare for this, staff at the hub facilitate training events with fisheries officers from the Western Province government and a skilled seaweed farmer from Rarumana community – where seaweed farming is already a part of the blue economy – to establish a small-scale seaweed farming trial at Nusatupe. This ensured that a practical seaweed farming component could be included in the internship programme (Fig. 2).

Interns received hands-on training in site selection, line preparation, planting and tying techniques using locally available materials. They also learn about monitoring growth, optimal harvesting practices, and the sustainable use and maintenance of farming tools. The opportunity to participate in in-water activities reinforced theoretical learning and gave participants the opportunity to gain direct experience with tools and techniques suited to sustainable seaweed farming.

A community-based seaweed farming workshop was organised in October 2024 at the hub. The event brought together aspiring farmers and resource users from Kolobangara, Gizo Town, and surrounding communities. The workshop was led by fisheries officers from the Western Province, and a seaweed farming champion, who shared their knowledge and practical insights (Figs. 3 and 4). Participants included youth, elders, and three women actively seeking new livelihood opportunities. They received similar training to the interns, some of whom were actively involved in the workshop, supporting facilitation and engaging directly with participants. This helped the interns to reinforce their own technical knowledge and also gave them valuable experience in community engagement. The opportunity to share their skills and interact with community members boosted their confidence and strengthened their readiness to return home as local experts and advocates for sustainable seaweed farming.

Seaweed farmer (far left) and a fisheries officer (second from left) from Rarumana explaining the art of planting seaweed to interns.
Image: © Gregory Bennett, CGIAR





Training included line preparation and planting seaweed. Image: © Gregory Bennett, CGIAR



Practical aspect of seaweed training. Image: © Gregory Bennett, CGIAR

Summary and way forward (2025 and beyond)

The inaugural 2024 WorldFish internship programme at the Nusatupe Innovation Hub provided 16 young Solomon Islanders with practical skills in marine conservation, seaweed farming, and climate-resilient food systems. The inclusion of seaweed farming is an example of how the programme is able to align with national priorities of MFMR, and with initiatives that have proven to be both practical and relevant for rural coastal areas. Feedback from interns suggests that they have gained increased confidence, technical knowledge, and a strong sense of purpose to share their skills with others. As one intern reflected, “I’m ready to return to my village now, equipped with practical knowledge and hands-on experience that goes far beyond what I learned in the classroom. I can finally train my community to cultivate seaweed, sharing the skills and insights I’ve gained to help them thrive.”

The internship programme now aims to be a regular feature at the Nusatupe Innovation Hub. At least 20 interns are expected to complete the programme in 2025 supported by a developing partnership with Solomon Islands National University’s Centre for Island Futures. In the future, the programme aims to expand its reach by strengthening partnerships with government, education institutions, and community groups and to be resourced through a range of projects and programmes that will enable the inclusion of other topical marine resource management and development opportunities.

The goal is to train more rural youth and support them as they apply what they have learned to improve food security and sustainable resource management across Solomon Islands. In the process of implementation, WorldFish researchers adopt an adaptive learning approach to improve understanding about effective youth engagement and capacity development. This unique knowledge-sharing environment is an important feature in strategies to improve the relevance and effectiveness of WorldFish as a credible research for development partner in Solomon Islands.

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