



Feeding our Future: school food and local agriculture in the Pacific

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Utilising local and traditional foods in schools presents a significant opportunity within our region to ensure food and nutritional security, support local livelihoods by driving markets and employment opportunities, increasing food literacy, and help students to understand the role of, and develop a preference for these foods. School meals programs (SMP) are increasingly touted as a strategy for food system transformation⁽¹⁾, however, are not widely used in the Pacific Islands⁽²⁾. Yet, there is increasing interest and momentum towards understanding school food and nutrition environments and the use of SMP in this region, especially with models that support and promote the integration of local, traditional climate-resilient, nutrient rich foods. When a large scale SMP may not be possible, other school food and nutrition activities can be utilised to support nutritious food choice. Evidence collected over the last five years provides information on the current situation, activities, and capacity for providing food in schools across the Pacific Islands^(2,3,4). Activities across the region vary from national SMP to gardening programs, nutrition education, providing canteens/tuckshops and other ad hoc activities, for example events for World Food Day. Some activities have a requirement for the use of local food, while some prioritise local foods in gardening programs and work with local farmers. Recently it has been shown that youth are exposed to, and have access to significant amounts of ultra-processed foods (UPF) around schools⁽³⁾. Mapping of the foods available to students within a 400m radius of 88 schools in Fiji found that sugar sweetened beverages were available in 80%, and lollies/confectionary in just over 60% of outlets. Fresh fruit was available in just over 20% of outlets, while fresh vegetables were available in less than 20% of outlets⁽³⁾. While there are many challenges to providing local, traditional, nutritious foods in schools, including access to financial, human, and physical resources, stakeholders have told us that one of the most significant is how modernisation and colonisation of food systems have resulted in a preference for hyperpalatable UPF and how this makes it more challenging to incorporate local produce in a way that is accepted by students. This provides an opportunity to further explore and share ways to integrate local, traditional, climate-resilient, nutrient rich foods in schools to support children and adolescents to value, utilise, prefer, and advocate for these foods. There is a need to support the utilisation of traditional, local foods in schools by advocating for policy (at various levels, right from a school level upwards) that drives the use of these foods and creates more supportive school food environments.

References

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