

Pacific Regional Workshop on Promotion of Fruit and Vegetables for Health (PROFAV-Pacific 2014)



General report, conclusions and recommendations

Introduction

The Pacific Regional Workshop on Promotion of Fruit and Vegetables for Health (PROFAV-Pacific 2014) was held in Nadi, Fiji, from 20-23 October 2014. The workshop, was organized at the Tanoa Hotel by FAO and was supported by WHO, SPC, ACIAR, ISHS and IHC 2014.

This workshop was organized in the framework of the FAO-WHO Joint Initiative on Fruit and Vegetables for Health. It brought together 30 experts including policy makers, programme managers, scientists and development practitioners, representing the sectors of health, nutrition, horticulture, agriculture and education from 9 Island countries of the Pacific region which included: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Republic of Marshall Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Representatives from the organizing, supporting and technical partners were also present, including FAO, WHO, SPC, ACIAR and the University of Tasmania, Australia, and the meeting was opened by the Permanent Secretary of the ministry of Agriculture of Fiji, the Host Country.

Objectives

Within the overall aim of implementing the framework of action at national level for the promotion of fruit and vegetables in Pacific Island countries, and building on the Framework of Action on Food Security in the Pacific, the workshop had the following objectives:

1. To create awareness about the FAO-WHO joint initiative on fruits and vegetables for health;
2. To document the production and consumption of fruit and vegetables and their current position in the market in the Pacific;
3. To map existing policies, and current programmes and activities for the promotion of fruit and vegetables in the Pacific;
4. To follow up on the relevant national level actions set within the Pacific Food Summit Framework of Action for the countries that have laid this out, identifying current challenges and needs to move forward towards realization, and assist those that have yet to develop action plans, drawing on elements of the "Kobe" framework for promoting fruit and vegetables at national level;
5. To strengthen collaboration amongst sectors and actors promoting fruit and vegetable production and consumption in the Pacific;
6. To highlight critical food safety issues associated with production and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Workshop process

The workshop was conducted for four days, from 20-23 October, 2014.

During the opening ceremony, the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Fiji, and the representatives of FAO, WHO and SPC welcomed the participants and stressed the importance of the subject, and the need for an integrated and interdisciplinary effort.

The FAO/WHO framework was introduced in plenary sessions and followed by presentations on specific topics, including the importance of fruit and vegetables for public health and food safety; nutritious leafy vegetables research activity in the Pacific; the mismatch between consumer-demand, health, and supply of fruit and vegetables; STEPS methodology for surveillance of major health risk factors for Non Communicable Diseases (NCDs); and challenges and strategies for increasing production and consumption of fruits and vegetables in the Pacific Islands - that were then discussed.

Two keynote/ Case Studies were presented on (a)in Fiji (b)in Samoa. The workshop was also presented with the preliminary analysis of the pre-workshop questionnaire on the status of fruit and vegetable production and consumption in countries of the region.

A field visit to horticultural service installations and a research centre near Nadi was conducted as part of the workshop programme.

Two working groups were composed of country teams grouped together according to geographical commonalities. These working group sessions were conducted during the second and third day for facilitated discussions around selected topics, with a particular focus on integrated strategies for combating relevant non-communicable diseases and obesity, to orient the development or strengthening of national-level initiatives to improve availability and consumption of fruit and vegetables and thus contribute to the accomplishment of the objectives of the workshop.

Conclusions

According to WHO STEPS surveys on chronic disease risk factors conducted in most Pacific Island countries and in line with existing FAO data, fruit and vegetable (F&V) consumption levels are generally well below the recommended daily intake of 400g/person. This low consumption of fruit and vegetables is a major risk factor for NCDs, principally diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and also for micronutrient deficiency-related health problems.

Precise and location-specific data on production, consumption and availability of fruit and vegetables are lacking or weak for many Pacific countries.

There is a crisis in the region resulting from the rise of unhealthy consumption patterns and obesity, considering their links to NCDs. Paradoxically, excess consumption of calories co-exists with under-nutrition, constituting the so-called 'double burden' of malnutrition.

It emerged that national institutions in most countries of the region have established strategies for NCD prevention and have been implementing programmes to advocate for healthy diets and lifestyles with increased consumption of F&V within these strategies.

Nonetheless, strengthened efforts and greater integration of activities among horticulture, nutrition, health and education stakeholders is considered essential for the effective promotion of F&V for health, particularly in a multi-stakeholder approach. There is also the need for strengthened joint efforts between the public and private sectors towards improving production, availability and utilisation of nutritious F&V.

NGOs, civil society and especially faith-based organisations, can play a key role among stakeholders in increasing awareness and facilitating programmes to improve availability and consumption of F&V, and should be engaged through inclusive consultation mechanisms.

It was found that island countries of the Pacific generally face challenges in securing adequate year-round supplies of fresh F&V. Factors affecting local production capacity, and F&V availability, include an ageing farming population, land availability and access, reliable water supply, access to seeds and planting materials of adapted species and varieties, pest and disease problems, declining soil fertility, transport and high post harvest losses, and lack of compliance with guidelines and standards for food and nutrition.

Specific constraints and challenges for atoll agriculture, often coinciding with extreme pressure on limited land and water resources and climate pressure, isolation, and low availability of fresh F&V, were found to justify strengthened efforts on research for more productive and sustainable local F&V cultivation systems.

Much more could be done to enable local production, especially at household level, by considering a range of technologies and system options, including agroforestry-based approaches and container gardening, and water management technologies (water harvesting, grey water recycling, re-location of pulaka pits, etc.).

The workshop recognised the importance of stepped-up advocacy, information and community education in changing mindsets in order to enhance the appeal of F&V as a healthy diet choice. Different approaches were considered to be useful in this connection, including:

- mobilising champions and role models
- making schools healthier by serving F&V in school meals and canteens
- demonstration of garden approaches and cooking demonstrations in multiple social settings
- exposing school children to realities of good farming

- educating children about benefits of F&V from an early age as a component of school curricula and school meal programmes.

School gardens are also considered to be an important entry point for developing healthy diets, incorporating nutritious, local and traditional F&Vs.

Adopting simple incremental and reachable population goals such as “increasing F&V intake by at least one serving per day in the next 3 years” can help to bring the recommendations of national dietary guidelines down to a level of popular understanding.

Food safety of F&V produce is very important and must be addressed through integrated approaches from field to table at the same time as promoting increased availability and consumption. This would require standards setting, compliance control, and also education so that both producers and consumers will gain a clear understanding as to what is good and safe to eat.

Various programmes are being promoted in Pacific island countries on traditional local vegetables as good sources of micronutrients. These are based on local production of adapted carotene-rich vegetables and fruit, such as Orange Sweet Potato (OSP), yellow and red bananas, papaya, and leafy vegetables. These initiatives could be scaled up for enabling higher year-round production and consumption of a range of F&V, especially from home, school and village gardens.

Emphasis needs to be given to encouraging capacity building through farmer training on GAP, including IPM, for sustainability and food safety along the value chain. Useful approaches include farmer field schools, demonstration-based training and the use of farmer-to-farmer mentoring.

Measures such as farm field days, show and diversity days, produce competitions, can also be useful ways of promoting uptake of improved technology and awareness raising among farmers and consumers on benefits of F&V production and consumption.

Better management and reduction of pesticide use is needed through more widespread adoption of IPM practices, supported by effective regulatory processes and knowledge about non-toxic plant protection products and measures. It is also critical to prevent the illegal trade and use of unregistered pesticides in the region.

There should be greater use of available biodiversity enabled by research, capacity building and local selection and breeding programmes, and measures to enable exchange of plant material among countries need to be adopted.

More work needs to be done to promote knowledge about food preparation and health benefits of local, traditional and indigenous F&Vs.

It is important to address prejudices against consumption of vegetables and/or fruit and also to ensure men are targeted in F&V promotion campaigns along with women and children.

Improved F&V availability and reduced losses should be addressed also through a supply chain approach involving improvement of collection centres, better storage, including traditional methods, and communication along the supply chain making use of ICTs.

Good baseline data to characterise production, supply and consumption of F&V is needed in order to be able to monitor changes and improvements. Equally, data on people's knowledge about benefits and consumption habits should be collected and monitored.

There are a number of opportunities that can be used to advocate for the messages of “**PROFAV**”, for example the upcoming high-level health and agriculture ministerial fora in the Pacific countries, as well as global fora, ICN2, etc.

Countries need to consider means and incentives to reverse the trend of the ageing farming population and attract and retain youth in agricultural production, by changing the perceived status of agriculture from low-paid hard work to a technology-orientated and business-driven occupation.

It is important to integrate with, and add value to, existing programmes run by agriculture, health and education, especially those focused on NCD prevention and F&V supply chain efficiency improvement.

Recommendations

To participants:

To brief their respective ministries and maintain and strengthen communication among sectors with the view to establishing a multi-stakeholder country team, or identifying an existing coordinating mechanism (e.g. NCD committee), that could facilitate implementation of the workshop recommendations.

To establish a networking mechanism that will enhance the interaction across sectors (horticulture-health-education) in-country and among Pacific island countries on PROFAV, using tools such as an e-newsletter-based communication strategy, improved web-based availability of information, etc.

To identify a lead person per country to facilitate joint planning and follow up on the implementation of activities and progress monitoring mechanisms that the multi-stakeholder teams identified during the workshop.

To facilitate the completion of the PROFAV assessment through the questionnaire and its analysis.

To governments of participating countries:

To promote the PROFAV agenda in the context of all relevant national policies and strategies, as well as regional and global high level inter-governmental fora. Specific policies and resolutions made at this level will increase awareness among the international community and development partners and assist countries to adopt effective elements of the PROFAV initiative.

To implement the Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health (WHA57.17) which states that national food and agricultural policies should be consistent with the protection and promotion of public health and to promote better diets along with increased physical activity.

To build and strengthen human resources and institutional capacities that will be required to reach the goals of the PROFAV framework. This could also be a potential area for development assistance.

To utilise surveillance and monitoring systems in the development of strategies, plans and programmes on F&V and in the evaluation and impact assessment of such programmes.

To development partners

To support the planning and implementation of national and regional horticulture, education and health policies, and the PROFAV framework.

To facilitate information sharing at operational level among countries, enhance availability of existing, relevant information and resource materials, and support member countries in the development of networking mechanisms.

To NGOs, Private Sector and Civil Society Organizations

To join and support the PROFAV initiative and become active stakeholders in the definition and implementation of its agenda.

To sponsor and partner organisations of PROFAV

WHO and FAO HQ, regional and country offices, SPC and ACIAR to work together in supporting countries in advancing the PROFAV agenda and implementing the country plans identified during the workshop.

To encourage new development partners to join and support countries in the implementation of the PROFAV agenda.

To bring the countries and stakeholders that were unable to participate in the Nadi workshop up to date and engage them in the follow up process.

Agreed today 23 October 2014, Nadi, Fiji Islands.