



# Working across sectors is crucial for food security and nutrition in Fiji

## COPING WITH MULTIPLE FORMS OF MALNUTRITION

Fiji, a middle-income country considered a small island developing State, has achieved important economic and social development goals in recent times. Despite the efforts made, food security and nutrition remain a concern in the Pacific archipelago. The country's particular geographic, agricultural and economic context pose a challenge for the population's access to affordable, nutritious, safe and diverse foods throughout the year.

At certain times of the year, lettuce, cabbage and other fruits and vegetables need to be imported, which means that these popular products among Fijian families become seasonally unaffordable for large shares of the population. This example illustrates the difficulties many households face in accessing fruits, vegetables and other fresh foods, especially in the most populated islands. In these areas, Fijian households (especially the poorest ones) tend to choose cheaper, highly processed foods with poor nutritional values available at cheaper prices, which is one of the main drivers of the high overweight and obesity rates in the country.

Obesity, closely linked with other non-communicable diseases (which cause eight out of 10 deaths in the country), already affects one in three adults and it is especially worrying among poor women in urban areas. On the other hand, isolated islands with less exposure to cheaper processed foods, that are high in fats, sugar or salt, show much lower rates of obesity and overweight among the young population.

On top of that, Fiji suffers from the triple burden of malnutrition: widespread rates of anaemia affect all age groups, and undernutrition, overweight and micronutrient deficiencies get to coexist on the same family.

## ABOUT THE FIRST PROGRAMME

The Food and Nutrition Security Impact, Resilience, Sustainability and Transformation programme (FIRST) is a partnership between the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the European Union (EU).

Through its network of policy officers embedded in the relevant government bodies, FIRST aims at ensuring that policies set the right conditions for investments in agriculture and food systems to have a real impact on reducing hunger and all forms of malnutrition while contributing to solve other issues.

FIRST works hand-in-hand with the governments of over 25 countries worldwide – including Fiji – and supports them in by:

- **Assessing the effectiveness of policies, plans and programme related to food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture.**
- **Supporting capacities through policy assistance.**
- **Promoting inclusive policy dialogue.**
- **Enhancing learning and knowledge management to achieve impact.**

### Nutrition in Fiji at a glance

▶	<b>Prevalence of undernourishment</b>	<b>3.7</b>
▶	<b>Prevalence of obesity in adults</b>	<b>30.0</b>
▶	<b>Prevalence of anaemia (women rep. age)</b>	<b>31.0</b>

SOURCE: FAO (2019)



Fresh fruits for sale in a market in Suva (Fiji). © Kyle Post.

## Multisectoral approaches: moving from theory to practice

Addressing these challenges to end all forms of malnutrition – as stated in the SAMOA Pathway (2014) – will necessarily require a multisectoral approach: increasing agricultural production only will not solve the food security and nutrition problems that Fiji and other small island developing States (SIDS) face.

In this regard, designing and implementing comprehensive programmes and coherent public policies that address both the supply and demand sides, as well as the food environment where consumers make their food-related decisions, is the only way to achieve real impact.

The food systems approach can facilitate the identification of leverage points along the continuum from production to consumption. The approach also requires that different sectors mainstream nutrition and work together to push for transformations of the different parts of the food system. As food security cannot only be addressed as

an agricultural issue, obesity, overweight or anemia cannot be seen as a mere health problem.

The Fiji Policy on Food and Nutrition Security is a big first step, as it aims at bringing together the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA), the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MOHMS), the Ministry of Education, Heritage and the Arts (MOEHA); the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation (MOWCPA); the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism (MITT); and the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MOYS).

The approval of this policy would set the scene for multisectoral coordination, but for it to actually be implemented, more practical commitment is needed. Specifically, reviewing the different actions proposed for each of the six ministries included in the Action Plan of the Policy on Food and Nutrition Security is a necessary step to identify interventions with bigger potential and prioritize accordingly. The different ministries' work plans would need to take into account the Policy and be aligned with the general strategy, including adequate budget allocation.

Finally, developing capacities to properly address nutrition issues across the staff of different sectors will also help in moving forward. In this regard, learning from other countries and their experiences in this domain – ideally from other small island developing States or countries in the Pacific region – can be very insightful.

### **Promote investments in nutrition-sensitive agriculture**

The absence of evidence or experience on practical interventions addressing nutritional issues from the agricultural sector – an issue shared by many countries – is a big gap that hampers investments in nutrition-sensitive agriculture. However, Fiji has a good entry point to promote this kind of approach.

As the Ministry of Agriculture plans to support postharvest and food processing initiatives to help producers add value to agricultural produce, an opportunity arises to mainstream a nutrition perspective along the value chain, providing participants with capacities to integrate nutrition in their activities. For example, post-harvest handling, processing and storage of perishable agricultural products need to extend their shelf-life, enhance food safety and retain their nutritive value.

With this set of interventions, government actions would be favoring a more profitable and thriving agricultural sector – thus fostering further investments – and at the same time encouraging producers to increase the availability of locally-produced diverse and nutritious foods.

Any opportunities of this kind to engage with private actors regarding nutrition-sensitive agriculture should consider private actors (from smallholders to bigger companies) as key drivers in the food systems and therefore as key to achieving the desired transformation. It is important to create an enabling environment that encourages private investments, as they can fill the gaps that public investments fail to close.



© Ministry of Agriculture (Fiji).

## Support the accessibility of and demand for diverse and nutritious foods and discourage unhealthy options

An increase in the domestic production of diverse and nutritious foods, however, will not automatically allow the poorest urban population to access them. If the costs of production remain high, or if the tourism industry or exports absorb the additional production, those foods will probably still not be affordable for those suffering from obesity and malnutrition.

It is thus crucial to assess the local food systems and their interconnections thoroughly, in order to generate practical evidence on how their capacity can be enhanced, not just to increase domestic production, but to make fresh, diverse, safe and nutritious foods accessible to all Fijians.

At the same time, it is important to continue encouraging the consumption of healthy diets. One example is better marketing these foods, using similar techniques as the private sector's campaigns that promote highly processed foods. The education system, where school gardens sensitize students and their parents around the importance of eating healthier, is another way to educate about nutrition.

Finally, it is important to consider that many of these highly processed calorie-dense foods are quite popular among the Fijian population: they do not only tend to be inexpensive but are also more available and convenient as they last longer and can require less time to prepare.

In this regard, applying excise taxes on food products that do not meet nutrient profiling criteria and using the revenue generated by this taxation to support the implementation of the measures recommended by the Policy are some of the options already discussed with national key stakeholders.



Vendors in Suva Central Market. © FAO / Itziar González Camacho

## SOME KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ Thinking multisectorally is not enough: every sector needs to take action
- ▶ Mainstreaming nutrition in agriculture and making it profitable as a first step towards achieving a healthier food environment
- ▶ Higher availability is not enough: evidence is needed on the capacity of the Fijian food system to provide accessible diverse and nutritious foods for all
- ▶ Accessibility to nutritious foods needs to be paired with awareness and demand for healthier diets