The report is intended for Pacific Island senior leadership, policy makers and senior security officials. It may enhance situational awareness for operational decision-makers. This report is based on open and unclassified information sources. The assessments in this report are made by the Pacific Fusion Centre and do not reflect the views of any particular government, or commit any government to action.

- Food security has long been a priority for the Pacific. However, COVID-19 poses new and significant challenges to food security in the region.
- COVID-19 related border closures, quarantines and market, supply chain and trade disruptions are likely to impact the quantity and diversity of food available to the Pacific.
- The economic downturn and rise in unemployment associated with COVID-19 may reduce the ability of Pacific communities to access food.
- While it is still too early to quantify medium to long term impacts of COVID-19 on food security, maintaining food supply chains where possible (domestic and imported), and international cooperation will be key to minimising adverse impacts.

Food security in the Pacific

According to the Global Network Against Food Crises, food security means food is both consistently available and accessible in sufficient quantities and diversity. Households must be able to store, cook, prepare and share the food in a way that has a positive nutritional impact.

Food security challenges and impacts vary considerably across Pacific Island Countries. Factors such as high population growth, rapid urbanisation, low awareness of nutrition, limited arable land and limited transportation for imports influence food security for the Pacific region.

Climate change, the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific, also poses challenges for food security. Climate change is resulting in ocean and coastal resource degradation, changing rainfall patterns (drought), sea-flooding over agricultural land and extreme weather events, rendering the Pacific more dependent on food imports often with lower nutritional value.

COVID-19 impacts for food security in the Pacific

In April 2020, the United Nations World Food Programme warned that the COVID-19 pandemic could push the number of people suffering acute hunger to more than a quarter of a billion by the end of 2020. While
there is enough food globally for everyone, the pandemic impacts significantly on both food supply and demand.

The Pacific responded quickly to the COVID-19 threat, with many countries limiting entry of persons and produce, and others closing borders completely. The Pacific makes up the vast majority of countries that have not yet reported any COVID-19, demonstrating the effectiveness of these preventative measures. However, these measures have had flow on effects for food imports, which many Pacific Island countries depend on, as well as the ability to export locally grown food.

The FAO warns that COVID-19's economic impacts, including significant unemployment in the Pacific tourism industry, may also mean that communities struggle to have the needed resources to access food. Other domestic challenges which directly impact agricultural output, such as the recent Tropical Cyclone Harold, can compound impacts of COVID-19 on food security.

### Food Availability

**Agricultural production per capita is declining across many Pacific Islands.** Foods such as root crops, fish and vegetables have traditionally sustained the region. However, Pacific Islands are becoming increasingly dependent on imported foods as the region is becoming more urbanized. With greater dependence on imported foods, COVID-19 related border closures, quarantines and market, supply chain and trade disruptions are impacting the quantity and diversity of food available to the region.

Border closures and quarantine restrictions have limited the number of flights and ships able to deliver imported food or export food abroad. The closure of markets associated with COVID_19 shutdowns has also likely impacted the ability for the local agriculture sector to sell produce, and for communities to access fresh produce. Panic buying, associated with COVID-19, also threatens availability of food for the wider community.

Further, the potential impact of the pandemic on food production in major food producing and exporting countries (such as China, the European Union and the United States) could have serious implications for global food availability and food prices.

**Labor shortages (due to movement restrictions, lockdowns and social distancing rules) are also starting to impact food supply chains** from producers to processors to traders – particularly for food products that require workers to be in close proximity.

### Food Access

The significant impacts of COVID-19 on global economies raises concerns about people’s access to food in the medium and long term. The COVID-19 global pandemic has led to economic disruptions that have slowed the global economy, with the International Monetary Fund predicting the worst downturn since the Great Depression. The significant slowdown of economies all over the world has also resulted in the rise of food security ‘hot spots’ during COVID-19

- Fragile and conflict-affected states, where logistics and distribution are difficult even without morbidity and social distancing
- Countries affected by multiple crises resulting from more frequent extreme weather events and pests
- The poor and vulnerable, including the more than 820 million who were already chronically food insecure before the COVID-19 crisis
- Countries with significant currency depreciation, (driving up the cost of food imports) and countries seeing other commodity prices collapse (reducing their capacity to import food)
Unemployment rates, particularly in the tourism industry for the Pacific. Loss of employment and income reductions will likely have negative flow-on effects for community access to food.

Less disposable income may force people to switch to cheaper, less nutritious foods. This is likely to put further long-term strain on the health systems of PICs; whose populations already have some of the world’s highest rates of non-communicable diseases attributable to poor nutrition.

Human Security Implications

If availability and access to food is negatively impacted by COVID-19, this is likely to lead to a range of human security issues.

Poor diet is a significant contributing factor to obesity and Non-Communicable Diseases in the Pacific. According to ReliefWeb, the Pacific has the highest prevalence of diabetes and highest obesity rates per capita.

People at most risk of serious infection from COVID-19 include older people, and people with weakened immune systems as well as additional comorbidity factors such as obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart and kidney disease. If COVID-19 results in Pacific communities consuming less nutritious foods, this could actually make communities more vulnerable to serious illness associated with COVID-19.

Consuming less food can also have serious consequences for development and learning in children and young people. Initial closures of schools due to COVID-19 risks may have exacerbated this issue, as many children and families depend on school meals for daily nutrition.

Food supply constraints could also lead to other human security issues such as social tensions and conflict.

Opportunities

In several Pacific countries, the governments are now providing additional support to the domestic agriculture sector to increase the local production of livestock, fruit trees and vegetables to supply healthy food to local communities. For example, the Government of Tuvalu is supporting existing agriculture projects in the capital and the outer islands, as well as providing seedlings for use in home gardens. Landowners are also being encouraged to practice customary stockpiling techniques, such as storing coconuts, drying fish and root crops, and preserving breadfruit. Similarly, the Fijian Government distributed 11,602 seed packages across Fiji, enhancing Fijians’ access to nutritional foods and sustaining domestic food supplies.
Given the mobility restrictions and social distancing requirements, utilising innovation and technology may support domestic food supply chains. Newly trained plant doctors are offering support to Pacific farmers remotely using a range of innovative technologies.

FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the World Bank and the World Food Programme have issued a Joint Statement on COVID-19 Impacts on Food Security and Nutrition calling for international cooperation. Collective action to keep food trade flowing will reduce the likelihood of global market distortion. Closer to home, the Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific released a statement on working together in the COVID-19 crisis, which included considering the impacts and recovery efforts for food security, fisheries and agriculture.

Other Pacific countries have expanded emergency food assistance and social protection programs to support those most vulnerable to food security consequences associated with COVID-19. Recommendations for enhanced social protection from the FAO include providing complementary entitlements to offset loss of income, exploring the use of food banks or vouchers, and injecting funds in the agricultural, fisheries and aquaculture sectors. The Tongan Reserve Bank has agreed assistance measures for those people who have lost their jobs because of the Covid-19 travel and gathering restrictions. The Government of Tuvalu has also issued food vouchers to ensure all citizens are able to access essential items.

Continuing to educate communities on food and nutrition also helps to mitigate adverse consequences of COVID-19 on Pacific health. SPC's Pacific Guidelines of Healthy Living is a handbook for health professionals and educators that provides guidance on types and amounts of food and dietary patterns consistent with a healthy diet and lifestyle.