

**Contact:** Kyle Stice, Executive Director  
**Email:** manager@pacificfarmers.com



## Policy Brief: Farmers at the Heart of Pacific 2050: Ensuring Food Security and Sustainability in the Pacific Islands

### Introduction

The Pacific 2050 Strategy envisions a resilient Pacific region characterized by peace, harmony, security, social inclusion, and prosperity, ensuring that all Pacific peoples can lead free, healthy, and productive lives. However, the strategy lacks explicit mention of food security—a critical element for the survival and well-being of all people. Adequate nutrition is essential for physical health, cognitive development, and economic productivity, with undernourishment and malnutrition leading to long-term health and economic challenges. A triple burden of malnutrition of obesity (overweight), undernutrition (stunting and wasting) and micronutrient deficiency is sweeping across the Pacific Islands. Rates of obesity, stunting and micronutrient deficiency are some of the highest globally and nutrition sensitive agriculture linked to increased dietary diversity is critical. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of local food production, emphasizing the role of traditional farming systems in ensuring food security. Farmers and their traditional practices are pivotal to achieving the strategy's vision.

### The Pacific 2050 Strategy and the Role of Farmers

The Pacific 2050 Strategy outlines seven key thematic areas designed to support the achievement of Pacific Leaders' vision. Farmers and their organisations play a crucial role across these areas, contributing to regional cooperation, innovation, inclusivity, and sustainability.

#### 1. People-Centred Development

Farmers are essential in addressing challenges such as non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and food security. Local food production, supported by traditional knowledge, can help reduce dependency on imported foods, which are often high in sugar, salt, and saturated fats, contributing to the region's triple burden of malnutrition (Farrell et al., 2020).

Strategic Pathways:

- *Education, Research, and Technology:* Farmers can contribute to policy development by integrating traditional knowledge with scientific research, leading to innovations that support sustainable agriculture and improved nutrition (APFF, 2018). The Pacific Breadfruit Project active in 5 Pacific Island Countries is a clear example of farmer-led research to develop a traditional crop based on merging traditional and western knowledge. Farmer-led trials evaluating the performance of trees derived from different propagation types have resulted in a package of best practices for mass propagation of



breadfruit. In addition, data collection from farmer-led trials on breadfruit intercropping systems has identified crops that work well in providing an initial cash flow from a breadfruit orchard. Through this work farmer-owned demonstration orchards are now coming into production some 18 months ahead of expectations, greatly improving the expected viability of breadfruit as a sustainable, commercial crop (APFF, 2018)

- *Resilience and Vulnerability*: Local food production and stronger local food systems strengthens community resilience, particularly in the face of climate change and disasters (Iese et al., 2021; Āina et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of local food production. Communities where traditional farming was practiced and food was shared along family lines were more food secure compared to areas with cash-based economies where food insecurity was often reported.

## 2. Peace and Security

Climate change is accelerating and threatens food security both through its wider impacts on global food production and supply chains and on Pacific food production, which is integral to maintaining community cohesion. Farmers, national farmer organisations supported by regional organizations, are critical in implementing adaptation measures that ensure food availability and strengthen resilience against climate-related challenges.

The majority of Pacific islanders continue to live in rural communities and depend on agriculture livelihoods. Increasing inequality and resource pressures contribute to social instability. Strengthening agriculture as the main livelihood for the majority of Pacific people, especially those in more remote areas and those impacted by resource extraction-oriented development is important for peace and security.

## 3. Resources and Economic Development

Farmers are key to accelerating economic growth while ensuring sustainable management of natural resources. By adopting sustainable farming practices, farmers contribute to the conservation of biodiversity and the reduction of economic inequality (FAO, 2011; Sumelius et al., 2015). Farmers are active custodians of agriculture biodiversity which is particularly rich in the Pacific (which is the center of origin for genetic diversity in crops such as banana, taro, yams, breadfruit and sugarcane)

Strategic Pathways:

- *Governance*: Farmer groups drive collective action in sustainable resource management, as seen in agroforestry initiatives in Fiji (PIFON, 2018). In an effort to address problems with decreasing fertility affecting taro and kava production in Fiji's Cakaudrove Province farmers cleared new forest areas for planting, clearly a move that was unsustainable. However, farmers, after being involved in trials conducted by two farmer groups (Tutu Rural Training Centre (TRTC) and TeiTei Taveuni), are now exploring agroforestry initiatives, including the use of nitrogen-fixing *Mucuna pruriens*. The involvement of the two farmer groups was a significant factor in the uptake of the agroforestry initiatives. The positive results from the trials are now



being disseminated to farmers across Fiji and the region through farmer-to-farmer exchanges organised through the Pacific Island Farmers Organisation Network (PIFON).

- *Inclusion and Equity*: Empowering women and youth through farmer groups can enhance productivity and economic growth (FAO, 2012). Many farmer groups and farmer organisations are made up of women farmers. In PNG, the Jiwaka Youth in Agriculture Association have developed off-season production and marketing, and have contracts supply of capsicum and watermelon. The success of the Association has helped the young farmers to build more resilient houses for their families and to raise the profile and status of youth farmers.
- *Resilience and Well-being*: The sustainable management and development of resources can only be achieved by working with farmers, and their groups and organizations.
- *Genuine Partnerships and Cooperation*: Farmers have to be involved. The Nature's Way Cooperative (NWC) in Fiji clearly demonstrates how working with farmers and government economic benefits can be realised. Various measures have been determined which have greatly improved the Fiji papaya and eggplant export markets.

#### 4. Climate Change and Disasters

Farmers are on the frontline of climate change impacts. Sustainable farming practices and farmer-led initiatives are essential for building resilient communities and addressing gendered impacts of climate change (Bell et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2016).

#### 5. Ocean and Environment

Farmer practices impact both land and marine environments. By adopting ecosystem-based approaches and contributing to policy development, farmers can support sustainable management of these resources (Bizikova et al., 2020; Iyabano et al., 2022).

Global warming threatens the future productivity of Pacific coral reefs and eco systems that are a critical source of food for many Pacific people. Agriculture will be essential to bridge the gap as this resource declines.

Strategic Pathways:

- *Governance*: Farmers can influence policy by providing evidence-based insights on sustainable land use. In Samoa, the Samoa Farmers Association (SFA) has been involved in subsector consultations to discuss the challenges facing the agriculture sector from climate change. Stakeholders, experts, and SFA members identified strategies and actions to build resilience and enhance the productivity and profitability of the crop subsector.
- *Inclusion and Equity*: Farmer groups ensure that traditional knowledge and cultural values are reflected in conservation efforts.
- *Resilience and well-being*: The sustainable management and development of resources can only be achieved by working with farmers, and their groups and organizations.



## Implementation and Cross-Cutting Actions

Farmers are central to achieving the Pacific 2050 Strategy's goals. Their role is critical in:

- **Resource and Economic Development:** Contributing to economic diversification and trade.
- **Climate Change and Disasters:** Building capacity for resilience and adaptation.
- **Ocean and Environment:** Supporting efforts in the sustainable management and conservation of natural resources.

Farmer groups and organizations are effective mechanisms for capacity building, data gathering, and participatory policy development, ensuring the successful implementation of the strategy. Their involvement is essential in aligning local, national and regional actions with the strategy's vision.

## Conclusion

Farmers are integral to the Pacific 2050 Strategy, playing a key role in promoting health, economic prosperity, and environmental sustainability across the Pacific Island region. Their contributions, rooted in traditional knowledge and sustainable practices, are vital for achieving the strategy's vision of a resilient Pacific region.

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