Pacific Knowledge Systems and Food Security across the Pacific Region

Summary Paper



About Women Leading and Influencing

Australia Awards Women Leading and Influencing (WLI) is an Australian Government initiative developing the skills, confidence, and connections of leaders to drive positive change in the Pacific region. An on-Award (in-Australia) and reintegration (in-Pacific) enrichment program, WLI offers a range of developmental leadership offerings to Pacific Australia Awards scholars studying at Australian universities and institutions. The program builds on the preceding Women's Leadership Initiative Pilot (2017–2022) to enhance support for WLI alumni returning home to the Pacific, and the role of men supporting women as change agents.

Introduction

In August 2026, WLI hosted an online Learning & Networking event which focused on how Pacific knowledge systems continue to shape food security, leadership, and community resilience, and how they can contribute to more sustainable and self-determined food futures across the Pacific region. The event was hosted for Australia Awards scholars and alumni from the Pacific and their families, as well as development colleagues in our region. This event brought together experts, practitioners, government representatives, and community leaders, and featured a live expert panel discussion, audience Q&A, and break-out groups.

The panel

Facilitated by **Taina Rauvala**, WLI alumna and Head, Food Safety Unit, Fiji Ministry of Health and Medical Services the panel included:

- **Jane Bastin-Sikimeti**, Director, Climate Resilient Agriculture and Food Security, DFAT.
- **Margaret Fox**, Gender and Human Rights Adviser, Green Climate Fund – Regional Tuna Program, Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems (FAME) Division, Pacific Community (SPC), Fiji.
- **Professor Palatasa (Tasa) Havea**, scientist, academic, Associate Vice-Chancellor Pacific, Pacific Massey University, Tonga.
- **Pitakia Tikai**, Program Manager, Kastom Gaden Association, Solomon Islands.

Pacific knowledge systems and food security across the Pacific region

For generations, Pacific communities have relied on sophisticated knowledge systems to manage food production, natural resources, and community wellbeing. Traditional and local knowledge has informed practices such as agroforestry, customary fisheries management, seasonal food harvesting, food preservation, and communal systems of sharing, enabling communities to adapt to environmental variability and sustain livelihoods over time.

Across the Pacific, women and men play important and complementary roles in developing, maintaining, and transmitting this knowledge through families, communities, and cultural practices. Indigenous food and knowledge systems embody generations of observation, innovation, and adaptation. Rooted in local environments and cultural values, these systems provide practical approaches to managing resources sustainably, supporting community resilience, and strengthening food sovereignty. They also contribute to intergenerational learning, ensuring that knowledge, skills, and practices continue to evolve while remaining grounded in local contexts.

As communities confront these increasingly complex challenges, there is growing recognition of the value of traditional and local knowledge in strengthening food security and building resilient food systems. Drawing on Pacific knowledge and contemporary approaches offers opportunities to develop locally grounded solutions that are culturally relevant, sustainable, and community led.

A fruitful discussion

Jane Bastin-Sikimeti from DFAT shared that food security is currently a key concern for her team and across Australia more broadly. She pointed out that there are compounding factors at play including climate change, global conflict, and widespread disruption to supply chains – all of which are impacting the cost of food in multiple regions.

> Pacific-led solutions that reflect Indigenous knowledge and a systems-thinking approach that draws on multiple disciplines is exactly what's needed for the food security challenges we're tackling. This underscores the importance of culture and traditional knowledge in relation to food crops. Jane Bastin-Sikimeti

Margaret Fox, a Gender and Human Adviser for the Pacific Community (SPC) with over 20 years' experience in environmental and social science research, policy management and capacity development, spoke about the importance of bridging Indigenous knowledge and science policy to strengthen food security and community resilience.

> Pacific Islanders have relied on the land and sea for food, livelihoods, and cultural identity for generations. Indigenous and traditional knowledge is built through centuries of observation and practice, and it continues to guide the sustainable management of natural resources. Combined with community leadership and stewardship, this knowledge remains essential for strengthening food security and community resilience. Margaret Fox

Fox added: 'When local communities work together to manage and protect their fisheries resources, local food systems become stronger, more resilient and sustainable'.

Fox also highlighted that the application of Indigenous and traditional knowledge is not only confined to local communities but is also recognised through policies, for example the recently endorsed Vakamanu Strategy, which formally recognises the value of Indigenous and traditional knowledge alongside scientific knowledge and provides a framework for its continued integration across fisheries management and aquaculture in the region.

> In the Pacific, governance extends beyond formal laws and policies, and political institutions. Traditional leaders and elders remain central to decision-making and resource management, particularly in community-based fisheries management. As stewards of their people, land and sea, they draw on generations of knowledge and values to support sustainable marine ecosystems, food security, and community well-being. Their leadership reflects not only authority but also accountability, guardianship, and a commitment to future generations. Margaret Fox

Cultivating change at a grassroots level

Pitakia Tikai from Solomon Islands shared how the NGO he works for, Kastom Gaden Association, is dedicated to improving food security, promoting sustainable agriculture and strengthening rural livelihoods in Solomon Islands. Tikai has helped the program support environmentally sustainable farming practices, climate resilience and stronger local food system. He's particularly committed to community development and empowering farmers, promoting Indigenous knowledge and supporting vulnerable communities.

At Kastom Gaden Association, we are trying to maintain and promote our traditional knowledge via participatory, practical, grassroots approaches that enable village people to understand and develop their own solutions. We are not forcing people with new innovations or new technology. Instead, we work in collaboration with our farmers, with communities. We also encourage farmers to share all the knowledge they have; traditional knowledge is a food security asset. For generations our communities have developed strong understanding and connection with nature and how to cultivate the land and source food,' says Tikai.

> Local farmers understand how to save their own seeds but we're encouraging them to share this knowledge with younger generations, so this wisdom continues for future planting. Pitakia Tikai

Tikai notes, however, that due to modern life and technology, it's harder to engage young people.

'We are trying to encourage them to see their potential and integrate traditional local knowledge so it can continue to support our communities. We also work with women, and not simply as beneficiaries of food security programs but as food producers, seed custodians and knowledge holders. We also support women to sell produce to earn an income so they can support themselves and their families,' adds Tikai.

Tikai and his team at Kastom Gaden Association don't view traditional knowledge and modern agricultural knowledge as competing systems.

> We bring them together. Elders provide traditional knowledge. Farmers can test it, apply it. Technical knowledge can strengthen it. Women and youth people can adapt it. Communities can ensure it remains for the next generation. The future is traditional working together with science.
>
> Pitakia Tikai

Tikai explains how at Kastom they ask their scientists to come to the local communities, so that farmers can see firsthand what they're trying to do. 'When they see the benefits with their own eyes, our farmers will easily adopt the technology – they have the required existing knowledge.'

Tikai strongly believes that traditional knowledge is not a barrier to development but that it is 'a foundation on which we can build a more resilient food system'. He also highlighted a need for bringing traditional knowledge together with science and technology and new opportunities, involving farmers, elders and village leaders before introducing any innovations or programs on their land – recognising that they already have a rich wealth of knowledge and solutions.

> We need elders to share their knowledge, women to have greater influence in food and agriculture decisions, farmers to be recognised as innovators, and young people to become the next custodians of this knowledge.
>
> Pitakia Tikai

Strengthening food security

Professor Palatasa (Tasa) Havea is a leading advocate for strengthening food security, education, and sustainable development across the Pacific with more than 30 years' experience in food science, research, governance and innovation community development. He is a passionate advocate for reducing Pacific countries' dependence on imported foods, strengthening local production systems, and integrating science with traditional knowledge to address the contemporary food security challenge.

Havea stated that the future of the Pacific region's food security depends on Pacific people's ability to bring Indigenous knowledge and modern science together under strong pacific leadership.

> A question we need to ask ourselves, is where is the root of the problem? The problem with the issue of food security is in the foundation. I don't believe we need more knowledge, I think we know a lot already. The problem is not putting what we know into practice.
>
> Professor Palatasa (Tasa) Havea

Havea also touched on the importance of emerging Pacific leaders; and not just in a political sense.

We need entrepreneurs who can create innovative products from local crops for simple solutions.

We need education, we need to reconnect young people with food, culture and environmental stewardship. We need policy leaders who understand the connection between health, food and climate and economic development. And most importantly, we need people who can move confidently between different knowledge systems, recognising the value of both Indigenous wisdom and modern science,' says Havea.

Havea added that innovation does not always mean inventing something completely new. 'Sometimes innovation means taking a traditional practice and applying it in a modern context. It may be a local crop transformed into a new product. It may be Indigenous environmental knowledge supported by modern technology. It may simply be finding new ways to strengthen the old practices that have sustained our communities for generations.'

> And let's not forget that for Pacific people, food is much more than a commodity. Food connects us to our land, our ocean, our culture, our families and our future sovereignty.
>
> Professor Palatasa (Tasa) Havea

Ultimately, we need to focus on 'enabling Pacific communities to participate in shaping their own food future,' says Havea. 'The challenge is not about choosing between Indigenous knowledge and science. Our challenge is to build a genuine partnership between the two. If we can combine the wisdom of our ancestors with the tools of modern science – and apply that partnership through strong Pacific leadership – then we can create food systems that are more resilient, more sustainable, and more firmly grounded in Pacific values.'

Conclusion

Pacific food security will not be achieved by choosing between traditional knowledge and modern science, but by integrating both, supported by enabling policy and sustained investment. Policy leaders should centre existing knowledge, skills, and leadership offered by local communities rather than starting from external assumptions about their needs. Elders, women, and youth each hold distinct and complementary knowledge essential to food security, and policy frameworks such as the Vakamanu Strategy provide an emerging foundation for formalising this approach at a regional level. While significant gaps remain, ensuring legal protections for Indigenous knowledge and that regional agreements adequately reflect and protect community interests, the Pacific region can effectively strengthen food security and build resilient future food systems.

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