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Lessening import dependence in Solomon Islands

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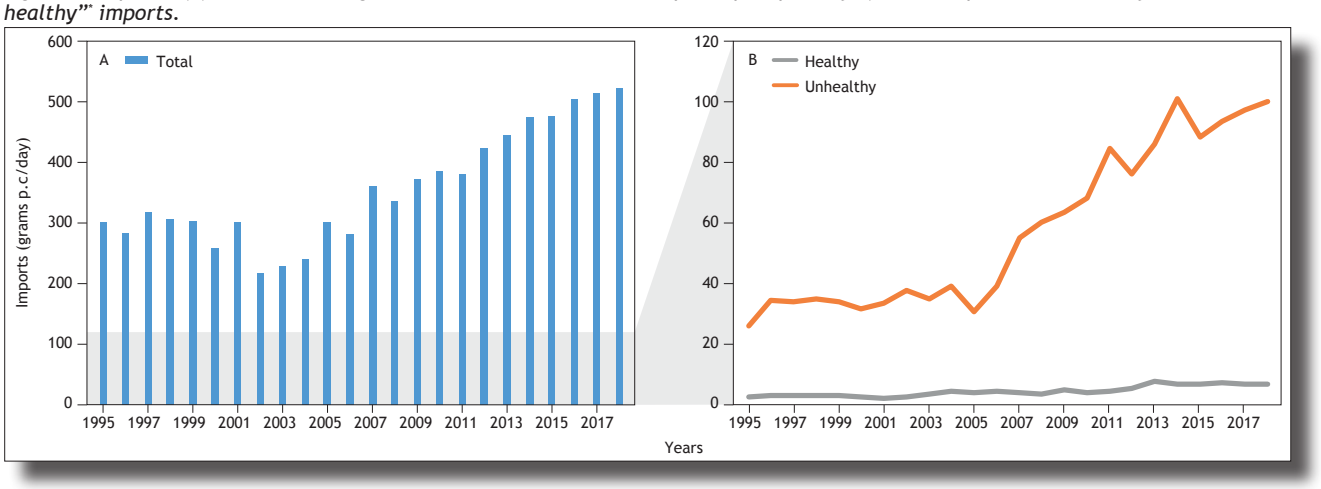
Key messages

- Food imports have increased significantly since 2001, with the urban population being the major consumer. The Solomon Islands Government has repeatedly recognised food import dependence as a challenge to food security and economic growth.
- Import substitution has been a long-term policy priority, including policy measures within the agriculture, trade, commerce and health sectors.
- There is an opportunity for further policy investment to both lessen dependence on food imports and support healthy diets based on traditional, locally produced foods.
- Drawing on a food systems approach, our analysis identified three potential avenues to enhance existing policy efforts to reduce food import dependence in Solomon Islands; (1) new measures to incentivise urban households to grow food crops, (2) improving transport and storage of domestically-produced food to increase sellers' access to markets, and (3) stimulating demand for local foods.

Context

Figure 1. Imports of food and beverages into Solomon Islands. Grams per capita per day of total imports and "healthy"** and "unhealthy"*** imports.*



Note:
** Total (Rice (HS1006), wheat and wheat flour (HS1001, HS1101), sugar and confectionary (HS17), cereal, flour, starch, milk preparations and products (HS19), animal sourced food (HS2), other (other includes: fruit, vegetables and nuts (HS07 & HS08), preparations of meat, seafood, vegetable, fruit and nuts (HS16 & HS20), animal and vegetable fats and oils (HS15), sugar sweetened beverages (part HS22), dairy, eggs and honey (HS4), and other)).*
*** Healthy (fresh fruit, fresh vegetables including staple root crops, pulses, nuts, and seed, other).*
**** Unhealthy (Fatty meat imports, energy dense beverages, savoury ready to eat snacks, sweet snacks, sugars and other caloric sweeteners). Other healthy foods including lean meat are not included here due to ambiguity of food definitions within the Harmonised Coding System used for commodity classification.*

Source: **Brewer, T. D. *et al*.** 2022. *A method for cleaning international food trade data for regional analysis: The Pacific Food Trade Database*. Version 2.1. Pacific Community working paper.

Food imports have increased significantly since 2001, particularly rice, wheat, chicken, beef and pork. The volume of healthy food imports has quadrupled since 2001, with a threefold per-capita increase. However, there has been a fivefold increase in the volume of unhealthy food imports since 2001, with a four-fold per capita increase. This includes increases in imports of fatty meats, sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), savoury and sweet snacks, and sugar.

The primary consumers of imported foods are urban households, with much lower consumption by rural households. Food acquisition data from the 2012-13 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) indicated that urban households purchased nearly twice as much rice, flour, instant noodles and biscuits as rural households, although only 50 percent more sugar. Urban households purchased around ten times as much chicken and SSBs.

The Solomon Islands Government (SIG) has repeatedly recognised food import dependence as a challenge to food security and economic growth. Import substitution has been a long-term policy priority for the SIG, including policy measures within the agriculture, trade, commerce and health sectors. Current policy supporting food import substitution includes agricultural production measures, including for home gardening, investment in domestic infrastructure and markets, linkages to enhance access to domestically produced foods, measures to encourage food processing by small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and efforts to strengthen consumer demand through public awareness.

Recommendations

Given the significant policy commitment to import substitution that already exists, together with the multiple benefits of locally produced, traditional foods in achieving food system policy goals related to health and environmental sustainability, there is an opportunity for further policy investment to both lessen dependence on food imports and support healthy diets. Traditional, locally produced foods are more climate resilient, amenable to traditional agricultural practices, and are often plant-based and rich in nutrients compared to imported processed foods.

There is global consensus that a "policy package" that addresses import dependence at multiple points of the food system is the most effective approach. This includes policy measures to enhance production, accessibility and consumer demand for (healthy) local foods. This type of multi-factorial approach has been operationalised in other Pacific Island countries.

As described above, Solomon Islands has in place policies that addresses many aspects of a multi-factorial approach to food system policy. Drawing on a food systems approach, our analysis has identified three potential avenues to enhance existing policy efforts in Solomon Islands to reduce food import dependence:

1. New measures to incentivise urban households to grow food crops;
2. Improving transport and storage of domestically-produced food to increase sellers' access to markets; and,
3. Stimulating demand for local foods.

Operationalising these avenues will require integration with the existing policy measures outlined above, as well as improved multisectoral cooperation and coordination.

Women showing arc clams in Malaita, Solomon Islands, 2017.

References

Farmery, A. *et al*. 2022. *National assessment of the Solomon Islands food system*. Honiara, FAO.

About

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