



FAO's approach to addressing non-communicable diseases

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Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) constitute the most notable single killer of the population of Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS). It is therefore not surprising that the leaders of Pacific SIDS recognize NCDs as a crisis⁽¹⁾. But just as it is in many parts of the world, addressing NCDs in the Pacific is a complex challenge for many reasons. For example, and in the midst of recurrent climate change disasters, it would be fair to wonder if Pacific SIDS and development stakeholders – and academia included - have not become overwhelmed in obtaining more clarity about the main causes of NCDs, and tackling them with the relevant prioritization, policy environments that address economic and market forces, coordinated interventions, good examples from leaders, actions driven leadership, not blaming the victims, and a lot more. Maybe it is too uncritical and simplistic to continue to make the historical argument that the population of Pacific SIDS are obese, overweight, suffer from micronutrient deficiencies, stunting, and so forth because they choose poor diets and physical inactivity, or simply because all of this is cultural.

The foregoing context demands more criticality and contributes to the rise of several philosopher kings who so easily describe NCDs as a disease that requires a health approach in absolutism. But if we were to invest more into obtaining deeper insights about the causes of NCDs in the Pacific, there could be a possibility for stakeholders to increasingly advocate for a systems approach to addressing NCDs in the Pacific. A systems approach would for example, recognize that as economic development receives more investments, people will conversely reduce walking in favor of vehicle transportation, children will spend less time playing outside in favor of watching television, more highly processed food of high salt, sugar and fat contents will be marketed and affordable than locally grown food, people will work in the service sector to the detriment of traditional gardening. A systems approach would account for a combination of biomedical, food systems, educational, religious, socio-cultural, recreational, etc . . . approaches.

As one of the development stakeholders, the Food And Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) joins efforts with others to address NCDs in the Pacific⁽²⁾. The entry point for FAO is through promoting the production and consumption fresh, safe, nutritious and healthy foods. My intervention at the 2023 Joint Conference of the Nutrition Societies of New Zealand will provide insights into FAO's work from this vantage point.

References

1. WHO (2023) Fifteenth Pacific Health Ministers Meeting. <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/374529/RS-2023-GE-44-TON-eng.pdf?sequence=1>
2. FAO (2023) Multicountry Programming Framework for the Pacific Islands (the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu) – 2023–2027. Apia. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc6726en>