



ECEHH Research Insight:

Strengthening local food systems for nutrition and resilience

A bite size summary of research, Aug 2023

Barriers to strengthening local food production in Small Island Developing States are socio-cultural, political, economic and historical.



Who is this relevant to?

Policy makers, practitioners and researchers in health, nutrition, food systems and agriculture.

Background

Researchers from the Universities of the West Indies, the South Pacific, Exeter and Cambridge together with NGO partners aimed to understand contemporary challenges and opportunities to strengthening local food systems in Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

SIDS share high burdens of nutrition-related chronic diseases associated with an increasing reliance on imported, processed foods. This is linked to complex vulnerabilities in their food systems. Agriculture in SIDS is often geared towards food monocrops like sugar cane, oil palm, and fruit and vegetables produced for export, and in many SIDS, current agricultural production reflects at least in part the legacy of colonial exploitation which instigated the production of cash crops for export, especially in the Caribbean.

Improving health through increasing the production and consumption of local, nutritious foods is a policy objective of many SIDS governments.

Findings

There are multiple social, economic and political factors that challenge local food production SIDS, from limited investment in weak economies to mistrust of actors in the local food production network and dominant import markets.

Agri-food systems in SIDS use predominantly top-down approaches, with minimal participation from consumers, farmers and NGOs, and a growing dominance of food imports and supermarkets. Transnational food industry strongly lobbies governments against regulations.

Participants experienced increasing shifts towards buying foods at markets, supermarkets and other food outlets, which provide foods otherwise not accessible and increasingly desired.

However, home gardens remained meaningful sources of healthy and affordable produce, and were seen to demonstrate hard work and communal values.



Recommendations

Our findings highlight the importance – and persistent social value – placed on food production practices and how these are connected to local healthy diets, but communities experienced rapid transformations in SIDS' food practices and food systems.

Strong governance structures are needed that prioritise local produce over corporate and import markets, assist collaboration and co-learning, and support alternative approaches to agro-food practices.

Community and civil society efforts such as demonstration farms, Indigenous shared farming practices and governance structures, policy advocacy and informal networking between local food producers and processors make small inroads in strengthening local food systems.



References

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