FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY IN THE
UNITED STATES-AFFILIATED PACIFIC ISLANDS

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People everywhere should give attention to their food security, but islanders have special concerns. This essay focuses on the United States-affiliated Pacific Islands—Hawai‘i, American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Federated States of Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands—and suggests ways in which their food security might be strengthened.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO 1996, para 1).” It is comprised of three major elements, availability, access, and utilization. Food availability refers to the overall supply of food from domestic production and net food imports. Food access refers to the household’s ability to get food from its own production, in the marketplace or from other sources such as barter or gifts. Access depends largely on household purchasing power. Food utilization is determined by food safety and quality, how much a person eats and how well a person converts food to energy, all of which affect proper biological use of food, nutritional status and growth.

The challenge is not simply to ensure adequate food supplies, but to ensure that everyone is well nourished. Thus, attention needs to be given not only to food supply but also to issues such as child feeding and food habits. Overweight and obesity are of great concern, especially because of their association with cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. The overall objective should be to ensure food security and good nutrition for all.

HAWAI‘I

This essay focuses mainly on the situation in the other U.S.-affiliated Pacific island groups, but before moving on it may be useful to consider the situation in Hawai‘i. It is different in many ways from the other island groups. Hawai‘i is much wealthier than the others. Some might think that this means that Hawai‘i has no serious food and nutrition issues, but that is not so.

The cost of living in Hawai‘i is very high. There are many homeless people. The official poverty rate hovers around ten percent (USDA 2008). Among the different ethnic groups, native Hawaiians have the lowest average family income (Kana‘iaupuni 2005).

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1 This essay is available at http://www2.hawaii.edu/~kent/fnsusapi.doc
The state government has never done a systematic study of poverty. However, a study by the state’s Department of Health found, “food insecurity was prevalent in Hawai’i: one in six (16.4%) households and 1 in 5 (19.2%) individuals experienced either being at risk of hunger or experiencing hunger in 1999-2000. The poor, children, single adult households, and Pacific Islanders were particularly vulnerable.” In some parts of the state more than thirty percent of the people live in households that are not sure how they will get their food. Because of the high cost of living, many people who are not officially poor suffer from food insecurity (Baker 2001).

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has “developed household food security measures to empower local communities to assess their food security levels” (http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/ut/p_s7_0_A/7_0_1OB?parentnav=FOOD_NUTRITION&navid=FOOD_SECURITY&navtype=RT) but the state’s Department of Health no longer collects information on food security.

USDA data for 2006 (http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err49/) show that in 2004-2006, 7.8 percent of Hawai’i households had low or very low food security (compared to 11.3 percent for the U.S. as a whole), and 2.8 percent had very low food security (compared to 3.9 percent for the U.S. as a whole). Thus, in the aggregate the prevalence was not high. A breakdown into different categories would show much higher prevalence in some groups. Overall there has been a trend toward reduction in food insecurity in the state, but that trend may reverse as a result of the deep economic stress starting in 2008.

More than $300 million comes into the state each year for federally funded nutrition programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly the Food Stamps Program), School Meals, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

Through its partner agencies, the nongovernmental Hawai’i Foodbank feeds over 100,000 different people each week. In 2007 it distributed over 8 million pounds of food to needy people (http://www.hawaiifoodbank.org/page003.aspx). Many of their clients have difficulties in choosing between paying for food and paying for rent or utilities.

The Foodbank periodically raises the alarm about widespread hunger in the state when it conducts its food collection drives, but the state government says very little about the issue. This leaves people uncertain as to whether food security is really a serious problem in the state.

The state should address food security issues for the entire population, and not only for the poor. Between 1990 and 2006, Hawaii's rate of overweight increased 25 percent and the rate of obesity doubled (http://www.healthtrends.org/status.behave.overweight.aspx). Hawai’i has been fortunate so far in not having had any major food safety incidents, but the risks are there. More critically, there is a need for concern about possible emergencies in the delivery of food supplies, especially because more than eighty percent of the food supply comes in by ship, and little food is stored in the state. The major supermarkets use just-in-time shipping, so there is less than a week’s food in the state at any given time. There have been several cases in which threatened interruptions in shipping have led to hoarding, with people rushing to the stores to stock up. There is no evident plan for dealing with such contingencies. There may be an assumption that if
things become really difficult the United States government would come to Hawai‘i’s rescue, but it is not clear whether the state has any assurance of that.

Some people feel that Hawai‘i should move to food self-sufficiency. That probably would not be wise. There are few foods that Hawai‘i could produce as cheaply as it obtains imports. Moreover, it could not produce the wide variety of products it now imports. Full self-sufficiency would be impossible, and approaching it would require radical changes in lifestyle.

Since Hawai‘i as a whole is relatively wealthy, having the potential of drawing from many different suppliers around the world is a good source of security. Depending on just one vulnerable supplier could put the state at greater risk, even if that supplier is the state itself. Some unanticipated disturbance (such as bee mites) could interrupt the state’s agricultural production.

Pineapple and sugar production have fallen sharply, and have been replaced more by new housing tracts than by new agriculture production. Many people are concerned about protecting what remains of agriculture in the state, but much of it is in ornamentals, coffee, macadamia nuts, and seeds, rather than basic food. The state should increase its capacity to produce its own basic food to some degree in order to maintain its resilience for dealing with changing circumstances. While moving to full self-sufficiency would be unwise, the state should move toward it, reducing its reliance on imports for basic foods.

In 2002 and 2003 some people thought that the state might be ready to address the issue of food security in all its dimensions. With prodding from interested citizens, the state legislature asked the Office of Planning in the state’s Department of Business, Economic Development, and Tourism to convene a Food Security Task Force to examine the best ways to ensure food security for Hawai‘i’s people (Food Security Task Force 2003). As a result, in 2003 the state legislature considered bills to create a permanent State Food Security Council. The idea was that the council would bring together all concerned parties to formulate a coherent strategy for addressing the problems of food insecurity in the state. However, the legislature did not approve the proposal. Thus the state still has no agency that takes the lead in dealing with its food security issues (Kent 2006).

**DESCRIBING FOOD SYSTEMS**

Work to improve food and nutrition security can take place in three distinct phases: describing existing food systems, critically assessing them, and, based on these foundations, improving them.

The first task is to understand the islands’ current food systems. Information should be collected about patterns of local food production, imports, and exports. Attention should be given not only to foods that are marketed, but also to homestead food production, foods that are harvested in nature, and locally bartered or gifted food.

Prevailing “food ways” should be described, regardless of whether they are judged to be good or bad. This account should distinguish ways of feeding special groups such as children, the elderly and the ill, and it should also describe what is usually done when food supplies fall below their
normal levels in terms of quantity or quality. Attention should be given to the ways in which the
shift from traditional to modern foods might have affected people’s well-being.

Nutrition profiles for American Samoa, Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, the Marshall
Islands, Northern Mariana Islands, and Palau are provided by the World Health Organization’s
Regional Office for the Western Pacific at http://www.wpro.who.int/sites/nut/data/ They describe
the malnutrition, but do not explain it. Much of the information is outdated. Nevertheless, they
show clear patterns, especially in relation to high levels of anemia, diabetes, overweight and
obesity, and child mortality.

Additional health and related information about these island groups may be found in the World
Health Organization’s Global Health Atlas at http://www.who.int/globalatlas/dataQuery/default.asp Some information may be obtained
through the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency’s World Factbook, at
https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html These sources provide
only brief sketches of the islands. Details to fill in the pictures must be obtained locally. However, the global databases can be useful in providing standards for comparison on some
dimensions.

The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has given a good deal of
attention to some diseases in the islands, such as tuberculosis, but little systematic attention to
nutrition. For a time it focused on Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander Populations, or
NHOPIs, as described at http://www.cdc.gov/omhd/Populations/NHOPI/NHOPI.htm Here too,
the CDC’s focus was on specific diseases, and not on the role of underlying factors such as
malnutrition.

The CDC’s data on the health of Pacific islanders are not always clear about whether they refer
to islanders living in the fifty states of the United States or islanders living in the islands. Some
reports on health in the United States talk about Pacific islanders in the states, but not about the
affiliated islands (http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/hus07.pdf)

In describing local food situations, it is important not to limit attention to aggregates and
averages. The conditions of the general population, or what might be called its middle class, are
likely to be very different for those who are at the bottom, those who are marginalized. The
middle class may be doing quite well, but there is always a less visible group that has difficulty
getting adequate food on a regular basis. The undernutrition of those who are marginalized
makes them especially vulnerable to serious infectious diseases.

Food and nutrition security is not only about the needs of people at the bottom. There is also
likely to be a middle class group that is significantly malnourished, demonstrated mainly by
overweight and obesity. This often results in serious non-communicable diseases such as heart
disease, cancer, and Type 2 diabetes. Food and nutrition security also encompasses concerns
about child feeding practices, food safety, and the need for reliable food supplies in emergency
situations. All of these issues need to be considered.

The study of the food systems in the island groups should include a review of the policy
frameworks that shape them. What are the roles of local government, the U.S. government, local
businesses, multinational corporations, etc.? What is the influence of the latest version of the United States farm bill? What is the role of various agencies of the U.S. government? What roles do regional and global organizations play?

U.S. social service programs play a significant role in maintaining food security in the islands. For example, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, known as SNAP (formerly the Food Stamp Program), and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, known as WIC, may be important. Other social service programs, though not centered on food, may play important roles as well.

In June 2008, 97,845 people in Hawai‘i participated in the Food Stamp Program. In Guam, 28,579 people participated (http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/29fslatest.htm).

In fiscal year 2004, the average monthly Food Stamp benefit for each participant in Hawai‘i was $128.32. In Guam it was $155.87 (http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/18fsavgben.htm). In 2007 the Food Stamp program provided over $150 million in benefits to people in Hawai‘i.

American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands receive Nutrition Assistance Grants that provide benefits analogous to the Food Stamp Program.

It is important to understand the legal status of the entities under study. The Pacific island groups discussed here have the special advantage of being under the protection of the United States to some degree. For all except Hawai‘i, relationships with the United States government are administered under the Department of the Interior’s Office of Insular Affairs (http://www.doi.gov/oia/) OIA gives a great deal of attention to the development of businesses in the islands, but little attention to health and nutrition. The “Major Indicators for the Islands” that it has assembled provide no information about health (http://www.doi.gov/oia/commerce/sumislstat/comstatpage.htm). The high level of attention to business development is likely due to the fact that OIA is administered under the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management, and Budget.

The CDC explains that the U.S.-affiliated Pacific islands . . . include the U.S. territories of Guam and American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands, and three U.S.-affiliated nations: the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. The U.S.-affiliated nations have Compacts of Free Association with the United States; under these compacts, the countries are fully sovereign in domestic and foreign affairs, but give responsibility for their health, education, defense, and other essential operations to the United States (United States Centers 2006).

The U.S. government treats affiliated territories and affiliated nations differently. Those differences need to be examined. When the three nations “give responsibility” for health to the U.S., what does that mean? What obligations does the U.S. government acknowledge?
ASSESSING FOOD SYSTEMS

Assessment is the task of determining whether the patterns that have been described should be judged as good or bad, with emphasis on the question, what needs to be improved? Views may differ, depending at least in part on how the viewer is positioned in the system. The person who runs the local food market is likely to see the advantages of importing food more clearly than the disadvantages, while health workers take the opposite stance. Sometimes discussion can lead to agreement on more nuanced assessments. Maybe it is only the imports of particular foods that are problematic.

In some cases the linkages between food distribution patterns and malnutrition may not be obvious. The harms that follow from bad diets are not immediately evident. The linkages may need to be explained, based on solid evidence.

Current food systems should be assessed to determine how well they serve various subgroups. It might be found that people in the urban center generally do well, while those on outer islands show serious signs of malnutrition. While most people in the center may be getting enough good food, there might be a group with very low income who cannot manage on their own, and need help. There may be some groups that suffer from discrimination, and thus cannot provide for themselves adequately. Young children may show signs of malnutrition, perhaps by being underweight or short compared to the norms for their age and gender.

In addition to looking at how well food systems operate from day to day in normal times, it is important to also ask how resilient the system would be under various kinds of shocks. What would happen if the ships that normally bring in food did not come? What would happen if the local food supply were to be contaminated, whether accidentally or deliberately? What would happen if some sort of disease or climate disturbance interrupted local food production?

There is a need to consider how the system would cope with sudden disturbances and also with slow disturbances. There are possibilities not only for tsunamis but also for slow sea level rise. Fuel prices could increase slowly and steadily to the point that imported foods become unaffordable. How would the existing food system deal with such contingencies?

Attention should be given to how the U.S. government might—or might not—assist under various contingencies, in the U.S. mainland or in the affiliated islands. For example, what would happen if the U.S. government discontinued some of its current support programs for the islands, such as food commodities or cash supplements? Such changes in U.S. policies might seem unlikely, but the possibility cannot be excluded, especially if the U.S. economy weakens.

If there were sudden and serious food shortages in the islands, what would the U.S. government do to help? Every state and U.S. territory has stocks of commodity foods that include the National School Lunch Program and the Emergency Food Assistance Program. In an emergency, USDA can authorize states to release these food stocks to disaster relief agencies to feed people at shelters and mass feeding sites. If a Presidential declaration occurs, states can, with USDA approval, distribute commodity foods directly to households (including the use of disaster food stamps) whenever normal commercial food supply channels such as grocery stores have been disrupted, damaged or destroyed (http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/programs/fd-disasters/). Are these
stocks and the associated policies adequate to cope with the serious contingencies that can be imagined?

The USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service field office in Honolulu is responsible not only for Hawai‘i but also for American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the Marshall Islands (http://www.fns.usda.gov/cga/Contacts/FieldOffices/Hawaii.htm) Thus the Honolulu office would be their contact point in emergencies. Would USDA treat them all the same? What would be USDA’s role in Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia, and who would they call?

The islands face some threats that don’t apply to most of the states, such as shipping strikes, tsunamis, and sea level rise. In some islands, the collapse of fisheries could create major problems in terms of nutrition and income. Is the USDA prepared to deal with such contingencies? If the islands became uninhabitable, whether slowly or quickly, would any agency of the U.S. government move people out? What assumptions are made about these things? How would key decisions be made? What written policies and agreements cover these sorts of scenarios?

The affiliated islands should clarify the roles not only of USDA but also other U.S. government agencies that might be important in emergencies. For example, to what extent would Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) services cover them? To what extent do the emergency plans established by the U.S. government for assisting the 50 states apply to the affiliated islands?

The International Emergency and Refugee Health Branch of the United States’ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has assessed public health and emergency plans in the Pacific islands (http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ierh/Countries/PacificIslands.htm), but it is not known whether assessments have been made of vulnerabilities in relation to their food systems.

Back in 1949, when it was still a territory of the U.S., Hawai‘i suffered through a shipping strike, and wondered aloud about what the U.S. government would do to help (Time 1949). What answers do we have now, whether for Hawai‘i or for the other U.S. affiliated Pacific islands?

**IMPROVING FOOD SYSTEMS**

Systematic assessments help in identifying the ways in which food systems need improvement. What are the current food and nutrition problems? What are the vulnerabilities regarding future contingencies? In addressing these questions, there are serious cultural issues that must be addressed. Outsiders tend to be critical of islander diets. Locals, including local policymakers, might have different ideas of what should be viewed as problematic. In any case, work on strengthening the islands’ food and nutrition security should begin with identification of the main issues that need to be addressed. This should be done in close consultation with the local people, and also with outside experts.

Many different kinds of improvement should be considered. Some don’t require detailed prior analysis to justify them. For example, knowledge about how to produce food around the home
could be encouraged simply by arranging to have people who have experience doing it share their knowledge with those who are interesting in learning how to do it.

In many places there is excessive consumption of fat, sugar, and salt. Things can be done to make fatty, sugar, and salty foods less available, and healthier foods such as fruits and vegetables more readily available. Health-based pricing can be used, taxing bad foods and subsidizing good foods. In New York City, it is now illegal for restaurants to use trans-fats. Various jurisdictions are considering ways to limit salt intakes (Economist 2008). Efforts are underway worldwide to control food and beverage advertising that is targeted to children (International Obesity Task Force 2008). Some interventions might go against ingrained food habits, but when health problems become serious enough, it makes sense to press for changes in those habits.

The World Health Organization says:

As a global public health recommendation, infants should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life to achieve optimal growth, development and health. Thereafter, to meet their evolving nutritional requirements, infants should receive nutritionally adequate and safe complementary foods while breastfeeding continues for up to two years of age or beyond (WHO 2003).

Child feeding practices are sub-optimal in all the islands. One of the simplest and cheapest methods for improving child health would be to improve breastfeeding practices. Several organizations have developed good programs for doing that.

Attention should be given to the most glaring weaknesses of the food system, but at the same time thought should be given to ways in which the overall system might be strengthened. For example, methods might be found to help policymakers track its current status, so they are less likely to be surprised.

If policymakers want to ensure continuing improvement in food and nutrition status, they will have to monitor it. Various tools can be used for that purpose, as suggested in the USDA’s discussion of food security measurement at http://www.fns.usda.gov/fsec/Measurement.htm and also in the USDA’s Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit, at http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/EFAN02013/ The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations also offers methods for assessing food security (http://www.fivims.org/). FAO has launched a Special Programme for Food Security that offers a variety of resources on the issue (http://www.fao.org/spfs/en/). These agencies offer many good ideas, but they would have to be adapted for the situations in the Pacific islands.

Collecting new data can be expensive and difficult to sustain over time. Rather than initiate new data gathering exercises, Pacific islands policymakers should begin by using data that are already collected on a regular basis. Public health data generally include indicators that relate to nutrition status.

There are many ad hoc studies relating to food and nutrition in the Pacific islands, but little regular monitoring. It would be useful to pull together available information on health and nutrition status in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific islands, and perhaps also provide regular support and
advice to designated food and nutrition agencies in the governments of each island group. The U.S. Office of Insular Affairs might support the effort. The University of Hawai‘i could help through its project on Agricultural Development in the American Pacific (http://www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/adap/), and also its Pacific Islands Studies Program (http://www.hawaii.edu/cpis/) and its Public Policy Center (http://www.publicpolicycenter.hawaii.edu/). The World Health Organization’s Regional Office for the Western Pacific (http://www.wpro.who.int/home.htm) should be involved as well.

Each island group should have a clear legal framework under which its food system is managed. In this framework, people should have clearly articulated rights to adequate food, and the obligations of the local administration and the U.S. government should be spelled out (Kent 2005).

Food systems always need improvement. Policymakers should not embark on planning for food and nutrition security with the idea that they can undertake a burst of activity, produce a document, do something, and be done with it. There may be a need for a surge of work at the outset, but the follow-up would require a standing group that steers food and nutrition activity on a continuing basis.

It would be a mistake for the islanders to depend on any outside agencies to look after their health. No one has as much concern for their well-being as they do. Thus it is important to ensure that every island group has a permanent, broadly representative, well-supported agency whose primary responsibility is to ensure steady improvement in food and nutrition security. They could be government agencies or quasi-governmental groups such as Food Policy Councils that bring together all relevant parties (WHY 2008). Without a good lead agency, the issues are likely to be neglected, and forces of change that originate elsewhere will shape the situations in the islands. Establishing such permanent agencies probably is the single most important action that could be taken to improve food and nutrition security in the islands over the long run.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


