

Nourishing Samoa's future starts with affordable, nutritious diets

by Alpha Bah and Seuseu Joseph Tauati

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Fugalei Market in Apia, Samoa

Photo Credit: Samoa Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries

In the Pacific, food is more than sustenance — it is identity, culture and community. Yet for many Samoan families, food has increasingly become a source of concern rather than comfort. In Samoa, the *Cost of the Diet Analysis in Samoa* report, by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), reveals the stark reality that while food may be abundant in calories, it is often deficient in the nutrients essential for health, growth and resilience.

This year's theme for World Food Day on 16 October, *Hand in Hand, for Better Foods and a Better Future*, resonates strongly across the Pacific, calling as it does for collective action to address the issues of malnutrition and improve the diets of communities in our region.

Findings from the Cost of the Diet Analysis report state that for an average six-member household in Samoa, a nutritious diet that meets the energy and nutritional needs of the household (including foods such as vegetables, coconut, fish, beef, milk, taro and rice) costs WST50 (US\$18) per day. This is four times more than the cost of a basic, energy-only diet (such as wheat, coconut and oil).

Furthermore, a comparison of diet costs of individual household members highlights the nutritional vulnerability of adolescent girls and breastfeeding women, who face the highest costs for nutritious diets.

As a result of this high cost for nutritious diets, many households in Samoa (over 40%) cannot afford a healthy diet that contributes to a healthy and productive life.

The consequences of poor diets are leading to a public health crisis — Samoa has some of the world's **highest rates** of risk factors for non-communicable diseases (NCDs) which account for over 80% of all premature deaths in the country.

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The government of Samoa, along with other Pacific governments, is recognising the urgency of the issue. If we are to halt the growth of NCDs, the time to act is now.

The report also offers a roadmap for action based on evidence and collaboration.

First, make nutritious food more affordable and accessible. The report states that diets based solely on local foods are currently twice as expensive as those that include imported items. Despite Samoa's rich agricultural traditions, the country remains heavily reliant on food imports, with 61% of household food consumption purchased and only 37% of top food items locally produced. This reflects both the limited supply and higher production costs of local nutritious foods.

Policy interventions at the national level should support the production of local fruits and vegetables to make healthy local foods more affordable. Moreover, incentivising local farmers to grow diverse local crops and vegetables would increase the supply of these in local communities. Supporting local farmers also constitutes a critical step in building a resilient food system for Samoa.

Additionally, regulating the influx of unhealthy, ultra-processed and sugary foods can eventually lead to a shift in mindset for individuals and encourage them to make healthier and cheaper food choices.

Second, leverage schools and communities. School meal programs, when designed with nutrition in mind, can significantly reduce the cost of a healthy diet for children and adolescents. On top of the nutrition and health benefits, the analysis found that providing a nutritious school meal could lower the daily food cost for a six to seven-year-old child by up to 25% when a balanced meal from the three food groups is chosen.

These programs not only improve learning outcomes and health but also support local farmers and producers when sourced locally. They are a win-win for nutrition and livelihoods.

In parallel, it is also important to raise awareness about healthy eating at the national level through social behaviour change initiatives such as awareness campaigns focusing on the value of healthy eating, while also integrating nutrition education into the national school curriculum.

Finally, community-based solutions are essential. Nutrition is a whole-of-nation responsibility. Simply establishing basic community gardens can increase the supply of local produce not only for families but also to local markets, connecting producers to consumers. Something as simple as starting a home garden to grow staples, vegetables and herbs and sharing it with neighbours can go a long way in

reducing the cost of healthy diets and adding value to home-cooked meals.

WFP and the Government of Samoa are committed to walking this path together. The *Cost of the Diet Analysis* is more than a report, it is a call to action. Behind every statistic is a child who deserves to grow up healthy, a mother striving to feed her family well, and a community seeking a better future. To achieve this, some of the next steps and actions could include training community leaders and champions to encourage local food use and healthy diets within communities and households; promoting nutrition education in schools by integrating food, agriculture and health education into curricula; supporting local producers to increase the supply of affordable, healthy food; and regulating the pricing, labelling and marketing of ultra-processed foods, while also promoting healthier alternatives.

The path to a better-nourished Samoa is clear. It begins with ensuring that every household, regardless of income, can afford a diet that supports health, dignity and opportunity. By working hand in hand across government, communities and international partners, we can make this vision a reality.

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