

Women's — food land rights — Security

by Samjhana Shrestha-Pandey

In matrilineal Solomon Islands, land rights traditionally belonged to women who engage in food production. But the more profitable business of cash cropping is giving men more "perceived" value such that they now decide which crops to grow. The result: A once well-fed country is becoming more and more hungry.

Food efficiency at the household and national levels is one of the objectives of the government of the Solomon Islands. Due to the population growth rate of 3.5 percent per annum, the present population of approximately 330,000 is expected to double in 20 years. Although there is no visible evidence of absolute poverty in the country, there is general concern about the Solomon Islands' ability to continue to be self-sufficient in food given that food production has not increased and the changes in the nature of agricultural production systems that have occurred over the past couple of decades.

The situation has given rise to some very relevant questions are: Will the government be able to fulfill its goal of food-sufficiency? What will be the role of women in enhancing food security? Will the increased commercialization of the agricultural production system enhance or reduce food security, especially of the poorer sections of the community?

WOMEN'S FOOD GARDENS

There are two ways of securing food for rural households. Households can either produce all their requirements directly or they can acquire income to purchase food. Food gardening, livestock farming and reef fishing (in the coastal area) are the traditional subsistence modes of securing food in the Solomon Islands. But the main source of food in the Solomon Islands are the food gardens.

Food gardens are established by clearing the vegetation from primary or secondary forests. The crops may be replanted once or twice on the same grounds then new bush has to be cleared because the old plot's soil nutrient has, by then, declined. The staples in food gardens are sweet potatoes, yam and taro. They are generally planted in association with other crops such as banana, beans and maize.

There is direct linkage between food security and women's participation in the agriculture of the Solomon Is-

lands. Melanesian women are often described as agriculturists and food producers. Women spend a great proportion of their time in food gardening than men. Women are responsible for planting, weeding, general maintenance, harvesting, transportation, marketing and finally preparation and cooking of the produce.

In addition, collection of water and fuelwood in association with food production is almost exclusively done by women. Overall, women play a crucial role in securing food for their family at every stage of food production, storage and preparation.

FOOD GARDENS ENDANGERED BY CASH CROPPING

But as a result of the government's policy to increase cash crop production, there has been a reallocation of labor away from food gardening to cash cropping. Men, who once helped women with food gardens by clearing forests and fencing areas, have withdrawn their labor ever since becoming involved in cash cropping. Consequently and naturally, women now have to take on these tasks in addition to doing their own. Thus, in villages where cash cropping is intensive, women's workload in food gardening has increased by almost 50 percent.

Due to the higher profitability of cash crops, food gardens are also being pushed to marginal lands located far away from the settlements. Women have to walk three to four hours to get to the food gardens.

And because of the poor soil

quality of marginal lands, food gardens' yields have lowered. To maintain the output, women in villages like Manakwai have been forced to establish bigger food gardens that of course require a lot more effort and time to maintain.

This can make women's work extremely difficult and full of drudgery, especially in consideration of the level of technology available to women. Technology remains mostly traditional and digging sticks

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are the most common tools. Fertilizers are not used. Women carry heavy sacks of produce on their backs for hours on the hilly, steep slopes.

Yet, in addition to increased time spent in food gardening, women are also expected to undertake about one-third of activities associated with copra and nearly half in cocoa production. On top of these, because food yields have generally declined, women are also expected to seek wage employment so they can contribute to the family's capacity to buy food.

FOOD INSUFFICIENCY

On the overall, cash cropping has dwindled total food output and the diversity of food crops in the main islands such as Malaita, Guadalcanal, and Ontong Java. Increased cash

cropping has had an adverse effect on food security because it has resulted in the steady decline in the area allocated to the food crops.

Farmers who used to be self-sufficient in food now have to purchase food items. Food purchases now account for more than half the total family income. The prices of purchased food products have increased by more than 60 percent between 1984 and 1991 but family incomes have remained more or less stagnant.

Increasingly, imported rice is being substituted for the traditional diet of root crops. For example, in the 10 years between 1981 and 1991, the consumption of rice increased from 7 kilograms to 35 kilograms per person per year. At the national level, the substitution of imported food such as rice and canned fish



has worsened the deficit in the budget. The food security of the Solomon Islands is now more dependent on the volatile international price of cocoa and copra.

WOMEN'S AUTHORITY UNDERMINED

In addition to these, cash cropping has undermined the authority of women over land use. Men, because they are the ones involved in cash cropping, have taken increasing control of the land, which traditionally belonged to women in this matrilineal society. Women have remained mostly in traditional food garden production while men have moved to the production of "modern" cash crops, thus increasing their *perceived* worth as compared to that of women. The result, is a widened income gap between men and women.

With the decline in women's relative income, children's nutrition is also adversely affected. The income generated by women has greater "nutritional worth" than the income of men because women spend most of their money on the family's food needs. Men spend their money on other things.

UPHOLDING WOMEN'S ROLE IN FOOD PRODUCTION

Given the central role of women in the Solomon Islands' food production system, the achievement of the goal of food sufficiency depends critically on how well government programs and policies recognize women's role in food production. Government needs to develop ways of improving women's productivity. Re-

search on women in development in the last two decades have shown that policies and interventions that inadequately understand the role of women in economic activities fail to generate the desired impact.

The government of the Solomon Islands is now making some effort at improving

Cash cropping reallocated men's labor away from food gardens. In addition to planting, weeding, general maintenance, harvesting, transportation, collecting water and fuelwood, marketing, preparation and cooking, women now have to also clear forests and fence areas.

women's skills and know-how, at disseminating information, at raising resources for the welfare of women, and at including of gender issues in the national policy planning. However, the present approach lacks strategies on "integrating" women in development. The broad-based policy guidelines on women in development are at times inappropriate and inadequate to address critical issues needing priority government attention in the Solomon Islands.

Development policies, for example, have to strengthen

traditional desirable customs such as the existence of matrilineal societies where women can be very influential in their clan. The government of the Solomon Islands needs to assist women in their ability to retain traditional matrilineal land use rights because their ability to perform their responsibility as food producers depends on their control of land resources.

Agricultural research to improve the productivity of food gardens and to reduce women's drudgery is urgently needed.

Finally, the policy of promoting cash crops needs to be reexamined in the light of emerging food insecurity problems and its built-in bias against women.)

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