

Capturing the Experiences of Samoa: The Changing Food Environment and Food Security in Samoa during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is unlike anything most of us have experienced in our lifetimes, apart from those who survived the 1918 flu pandemic. In the pandemic of 2020, Samoa has managed to date to keep the virus away from its shores, untouched by cases within its borders but inextricably linked to the global interwoven whole to which its people belong. With effects across the health sectors, economy, and education, the closure of borders and the cessation of the tourism sector, the statistics speak volumes, but at times these statistics mask the human, individual impacts of the pandemic. This piece brings together the stories of Samoan families through the lens of the evolving food environment and food security. These stories were gathered by third year nursing students in an effort to humanize the statistics and to help students become connected with the experiences of their people.

Food is an important component of Samoan culture, and a symbol of care and respect. While traditional foods are held dearly, the variety of foods available to Samoans has increased with globalization. An influx of cheaper and processed foods, along with changing cooking practices and dietary composition have led to an increase in prevalence of diabetes and obesity in the Pacific Island nation. Most of the land in Samoa is customarily owned and managed. Many Samoans grow food to augment their own food supply while others grow food for export or sale locally. For those who do not have access to their own land or areas to plant, purchasing food is necessary. Along with unavoidable expenses such as electricity, water, rent, and school fees, this represents a significant financial burden. The stories that follow provide a personal glance into the lives of Samoans and people living in Samoa and showcase the vulnerability and resilience of its people.

These short photo narratives represent just a few of the many submissions made by the Bachelor of Nursing Year 3 class. As part of their training in qualitative research methods and in order to help connect the experiences of persons around them to data generated on Samoa, the students were assigned a photo essay project on the Samoan food environment and food security. They were also asked to contextualize their narrative with secondary data



Figure 1: Limited food stocks (Credits: Tagialofa Emiliata).

available on these topics. The assignment was further intended to give students practice in approaching the public, understanding the process of informed consent, and grounding themselves within a wider system—one in which human stories are often presented primarily in the form of statistics.

FOOD SHORTAGES AND SUPPLY CHAIN INTERRUPTIONS—STORY PROVIDED BY TAGIALOFA EMILIATA

This photo (Fig. 1) shows my family stock of rice and chicken, two products which were a common part of the diet home in Tuvalu. Since we came here to Samoa in 2018, I rarely buy these products in bulk. I usually bought one bag of rice for a month and 10 kg of chicken every 2 weeks. When it was announced in March 2020 that the country would be in lockdown for 4 months as part of a state of emergency, I immediately bought these two products in bulk and stored them in our house over that long period of time. During the lockdown, there was a food shortage of rice and chicken in all supermarkets. Four months later in July, all supermarkets still had limited stocks of these products. Individuals could only purchase 10 kg chicken per person and rice was sold out in many shops, with only small packets of 4 kg or 2 kg available. Restrictions were also in place in terms of how many packets each person could purchase. Shortages of these two products affected my family in the last few months of the lockdown. The increase in price for these two products has been particularly stressful for my family, who rely on my student allowances as their source of income.

CHANGING DIETS—STORIES PROVIDED BY PRISCILLA ASEM AND JUNIOR LEVI

A fruit and vegetable stall for 25 years

The couple Mrs. Jessie Stehlin and Mr. Sefo Aku run a small fruit and vegetable stall in front of their home and have been doing so for the past 25 years (Fig. 2). They started the business because back then, many Samoans did not have jobs and also there were not many



Figure 2: Mrs Jessie's fruits and vegetable stall (Credits: Priscilla Asem).

people selling fruits and vegetables beside their houses. Instead, people had to go to the main market which is far from their area to sell their goods. The couple also set up the business to be financially secure and independent. They really love working in their garden which they assert keeps them strong and healthy. Mr. Sefo is 70 year old and Mrs. Jessie is 55 years old. Neither has a medical history of hypertension and diabetes. They believe that if they do gardening every day for about 2 hours in the morning and 1 hour in the afternoon and eat fresh fruits and vegetables, it helps them to stay strong and healthy. During this pandemic of COVID-19, Mr. Sefo and Mrs. Jessie have seen an increasing number of families selling their vegetables and fruits at the market and in front of their house beside the roads. The competition in marketing between farmers has increased, so they decided to sell their vegetables and fruits cheaper so these could be more affordable to people. In the few past months when Samoa was in lockdown, the number of customers has decreased but they still manage to get an income in a day.

A modified food basket

Mr. Tone from Tufulele gave me his consent to take a photograph of his shopping (Fig. 3). The shopping bag contains one tin of fish (\$4.2), 4 kg of sugar (\$4.80), a Chinese cabbage (\$13.50), 4 l of cooking oil (\$5.42), and a bag of onions (\$3.45). The products in the bag were mainly for family meals and were a little costly, but it was within Mr. Tone's budget. According to his statement, 'the lockdown was an opportunity to practice and minimize the family needs surrounding food and a chance to save their budget for other important family matters'. Before, they usually included other goods such as rice and potatoes as the starchy



Figure 3: Mr Tone's food basket (Credits: Junior Levi).

food for family meals. However, that is slowly starting to change since the family are now more accustomed to using local produce from plantations or from their own backyard. At some point, they became concerned about essential food supplies and about saving money for church or village donations, and for the electric and water bills. This decision was influenced by the shortage of food supplies from overseas, which also contributed to an increase in the price of these goods.

ADAPTATION AND RESILIENCE—STORIES PROVIDED BY TAMALA IOSUA,
AGALELEI IOANE, VALU SEUPOAI, MIKA ETEUATI, PESI SOLIPO, AND
TAUTANE NUU

Agriculture student farming to support family food supply and income

Mr. Jin Fatu is an agriculture student studying at the National University of Samoa. He lives with his family of nine people. Before the COVID-19 lockdown, there were no gardens at home but since the lockdown he started planting the garden around his house to support his family. The garden was mainly planted with cabbage, taro, bananas, and papaya (Fig. 4). Everything he planted in his gardens was to support his family with their daily meals. When I arrived at his home, Mr Fatu had just harvested one basket of cabbages from the garden in front of his house. Mr Fatu mentioned that his family has enough so they have started to sell some garden produce and also share it with five families near them. They have sold baskets of cabbages three times since they need the money for their electricity and water bills, and to pay the school fees of the children in the family. Mr. Fatu mentioned that in the beginning it was hard since it was a new routine for him. But seeing the fruits of his garden and



Figure 4: Samoan families turn to agriculture for food security (Credits: Tamala losua).

how they support his family motivates him to plant more. That is why he used the lands in his backyard to expand his garden. Since the COVID-19 lockdown happened, he has had enough time to spend at home planting his garden. Since he does not work, he is now concentrating on his gardens for his family to have healthy meals rather than rely on imported foods that are now scarce and consequently very expensive. Mr. Fatu has two beds of cabbage at the back of his house as well as recently planted taro. There are also lots of papayas and bananas ready to be harvested. Mr. Fatu and his family also have family plantations up the mountains where they keep cows and pigs that supply them with meat. Therefore, his family does not need to get imported food from shops because they have enough food from their farm. Mr. Fatu encourages families in Samoa to do the same, because planting more vegetables and other plants that bear fruits will help them out through this pandemic of COVID-19.

From business to home consumption

Mr. Samasoni Uili owns a small backyard poultry farm that consists of more than 30 chickens (Fig. 5). Before COVID-19 and the lockdown, Mr. Uili used to sell his chickens to restaurants which helped with his family's basic necessities, but due to the lockdown and loss in tourism, the number of restaurant customers has reduced, reducing in turn the demand for his chickens. This has put a stop to one of the main sources of income for Mr. Uili and his family. Although he will not be getting money from his chickens, Mr. Uili is happy that he and his family have their poultry farm to depend on for self-consumption. Moreover, with container ships being late and shortages of chickens at the supermarket,



Figure 5: Mr Uili's poultry farm (Credits: Agalelei Ioane).

Mr. Uili has decided to save his chickens for family usage. Although they have enough food at home, he still wants to preserve his poultry farm for days ahead as it is unsure at this time when the world will finally go back to where things were.

Reimagining the market for family-caught fish

My father and my four brothers typically go fishing (we are from Savaii) when the weather is good, and if the tide is good. When we were young, my dad used to go fishing and tend to his plantation to provide for our family. When my brothers grew up, my dad chose to take them with him so he could show them how to fish so that they could help him out. The type of fishing they do is bowfishing, utilizing paufagota and matatao (Samoa traditional fishing tools) to shoot/catch fish. They plunge/dive under the sea with those fishing tools and look for fish. The sort of fish they generally get are small fish but not that very small, the type of fish we would like to eat, like in the image below (Fig. 6) gague, matamū, taiva, mataleele, and so on. If they catch the bigger ones, my father gives them either to our pastor or to our village highest chief. They generally catch many fish since five of them go fishing. When they are done with fishing for the day, my father consistently gives some fish to the elders in our village, especially the ones living in our neighbourhood. He sells some of the fish and what remains is for our food. Before the lockdown and the pandemic, our family did not sell around the village and nearby villages. We sold our fish to the resorts in our village (Le Lagoto and Savaii Lagoon). With fewer customers at the resorts, our family has experienced difficulty in selling fish to resorts. We decided to sell around the village and nearby villages. We sell 15 fish for \$20 and my brothers take turns selling them around our village and nearby villages. I do not know if there is a day that we did not sell all of our fish. We generally finish selling them before 2 o'clock in the afternoon because I know that there are numerous people who long for fish but there is no fisherman in their family, especially families in my village. We usually get \$100 or more a day when we sell all our fish. The money we earn covers the cost of our family expenses. For my family, fishing is a way



Figure 6: Fish caught by the Seupoai family (Credits: Valu Seupoai).

of life and a need. We do not sell fish every day in fact. There are days when my father and my brothers go to do some work in our plantation and visit our cattle. These are one of the greatest sources of food and income for our family. The fish in the photo above are the ones left from all that my dad and my brothers sold, so these fish were for our dinner on the same day. I took this picture on Saturday 1 August 2020.

Returning to fishing from working in the hotel industry

The photo below (Fig. 7) shows three cousins who just came back from fishing. Starting from your left is Anthony Fretton who is the eldest in the photo and who used to work at Taumeasina Island Resort. In the middle is their 15 year-old cousin named Kome Perese, and lastly is Karl Sale, all from the village of Matautu tai (Upolu). The eldest, Anthony Fretton, used to work at Taumesina Island Resort but was one of the few who was put on temporary leave by the resort due to the lockdown. After the measles outbreak last year and the pandemic this year, the tourism sector has been devastated. Since it was the only job that supported his family, Anthony is now fishing to provide for his family. Karl lives with his father and two younger sisters. He started working when he was 15. Since his father was growing old, he decided to work to support his family and his two sisters who are currently in school at Moataa Primary. At first, Karl was a carpenter who helped his uncle out doing different jobs at different places (apparently that's how he learned to become a carpenter) but when the lockdown struck there were no jobs available for him. Luckily, he has other talents like fishing, and since his house was close to the sea, Karl has been fishing ever since he was a child and that was helping him to support his family.

Figure 7: Aqua lads
(Credits: Mika Eteuati).



Seasonal worker home plantation

Everyone in the family has a responsibility to help the vegetable plantation succeed, according to Mr. Eteuati (Fig. 8). Each day when school finishes, his children come to collect the vegetables (such as tomatoes, cucumbers, pumpkins, and cabbages) to sell at the small stall in front of their house. Mr. Eteuati said they started their plantation last year. He was one of the people who went to New Zealand on the seasonal worker program to pick fruit for 6 months. He saw lots of different plantations in New Zealand and when he came back to Samoa last year in December, he waited for another call of the season in March 2020. While he was waiting, he decided to start his vegetable plantation for his family, without knowing there would be a lockdown in the country because of the pandemic. He said he was lucky he started his vegetable plantation before the lockdown. When Samoa had a lockdown—and also the whole world—he decided to work hard for his vegetable plantation. Eteuati said selling his vegetables was really important to him because he knows he earns enough money for his family and also for their food supply. He believes making this plantation will help his family during the hard time that the world is having now and also he believes eating more vegetables will help his family to get healthy.

From grown for home use to grown for sale

The photo below (Fig. 9) is a taro plantation owned by a widowed mother named Tuluiga Mailo and her two sons. The youngest is working as a mechanic and the oldest is still at university finishing his last papers this year. Mrs. Mailo and her sons had the plantation running for almost 3 years with her sons taking care of it. The plantation was the main source of starch for their family during the weekdays and they would only eat rice on Sunday. The



Figure 8: Mr and Mrs Eteuati's plantation (Credits: Pesi Solipo).



Figure 9: Mrs Mailo's plantation (Credits: Tautane Nu'u).

mother said that her youngest son, who is working at the moment, provides the main supply of income for her small family. Ever since the pandemic and lockdown, however, he has been getting less hours at work and therefore the income is not enough for the family to get by the week—especially with bus fares for the older brother to get to school and also the

little brother to get to work, electricity and water bills, and home necessities. So, with the struggle she has been facing, she came up with the idea to sell bags of raw taro with six taros in each bag for 5 tala a bag around the village to families that did not have plantations and hence no source of taro. The mother stated that she has been doing this for almost 6 months and it has helped her family a lot in terms of meeting their financial needs.
