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Solomon Islands, Factor 20: Farm to Market

Solomon Islands: Bringing Modern Amenities to Rural Villages

When most people envision food insecurity, they picture small sub Saharan African villages, or war-torn cities in the Middle East. Few would even think to include the picturesque island nations of the South Pacific in their mental snapshots of imagined poverty. Yet this region of the world ranks second in the world in poverty and food insecurity (“New Agriculturist”). Just off of the coast of Papua New Guinea in the Pacific Ocean lies a group of islands collectively known as the Solomon Islands. With a land area close to that of the state of Massachusetts, the hundreds of islands that make up the nation are home to around 635,027 people as of 2016 and often times this minute island country goes unnoticed by the outside world (“The World Factbook...”). It is not a major spot for tourism unlike other Polynesian Islands and has dealt with major ethnic clashes that have had detrimental effects on the country’s government. In addition to this, the isolation and lack of communication between islands puts the people in rural areas at a great economic disadvantage.

The Solomon Islands has had a troubled history of political violence and upheaval. The islands are estimated to have originally been settled by the Melanesian people sometime around 2000 BCE. In the 1840’s Catholic missionaries were the first in the western world to colonize the islands and began converting the native people to Christianity. Later on the islands were divided between Germany and Great Britain until Germany gave the British Empire full control of the commonwealth in the late 1800’s. During this time the British exploited the native population for work and the natural resources of the islands. Throughout the Second World War Japan took over the islands and several crucial battles were fought on and above the island of Guadalcanal between the US and the Japanese navy’s. When the war ended, both the United States and Japan left the islands in ruins and under the control of the far-off British Empire (Laracy & Foster). In the 1970’s the islands became a constitutional monarchy under Britain and ever since the government of the Solomon Islands has undergone much turmoil, due to land ownership complications. The country’s modern government oftentimes finds difficulty in controlling these situations do to their lack of ability to effectively govern a population across such a wide expanse of ocean. People at the far reaches of the country oftentimes receive little influence or help from the centralized government. Most of the small island communities operate in clan or tribe like systems. During the island’s first 40 years of independence land ownership complications have stirred up much tumult for the nation as a whole. From 1999-2003 the country was torn apart by ethnic related violence. Two different radical groups--the Isatabu Freedom Movement and Malaita Eagle Force--formed several coups against the government over ownership of land around the Guadalcanal. A forced ceasefire was established in 2003 after the Prime Minister requested re enforcement from Australian forces. The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands--or RAMSI--sent in armed police and the situation returned to a shaky peace. Since then several smaller outbreaks over land disputes have caused chaos in the country, but

none so widespread as at the turn of the century. These disputes, often caused by miscommunication or just plain lack of communication, have kept the urban and rural areas of the island from flourishing financially.

Today though, only 23 percent of Solomon Islanders actually live in an urban setting. The country's capital and largest city, Honiara, sits on the edge of the Guadalcanal and has a population of 84,000. Several other larger towns lie on neighboring islands, however the other 77 percent of Solomon Islanders live in rural areas scattered across the hundreds of islands that make up the country. People who live in these small island villages are largely isolated from the outside world. Though the official language of the country is English, reports estimate that fewer than 2 percent of the general population actually speaks the language (Roughan & Wara). The majority of the population speaks a dialect of Pijin, though it's estimated that there are over seventy different languages spoken throughout the country ("The World Factbook..."). The plethora of languages derives from how spread out the people of the country is and how cut off many of the people are from major cities and the outside world. Despite this all legal documents and proceedings in the country are in English ("The World Factbook..."). Putting people from remote villages at a disadvantage.

The majority of the citizens living in these rural areas survive off of subsistence farming. Meals consist of anything that they can grow in their gardens and other cheap foods if they have the resources to transport themselves to areas that sell it. A diet like this leaves many malnourished. The average woman on the islands will give birth to three children in her lifetime and the average annual population increase on the islands is around 1.98 percent, which makes the Solomon Islands one of the fastest growing populations in the world ("The World Factbook..."). This rapid growth means that families now have more mouths to feed and, according to Williams-Hazelman, one out of three children under the age of five are undernourished (Anderson, et.al.). With the average islander making around \$2,000 dollars a year, feeding these children proves to be an increasingly difficult task, especially when unable to access transportation to nearby markets and larger towns in order to trade or find work. Women face another disadvantage, due to the lack of available healthcare in the countryside. If a woman from an isolated island wanted or needed to go to a hospital or clinic to safely give birth, she would have to travel for hours away from her home.

The Central Intelligence Agency keeps a running total on the amount of transportation and communication services present in all of the countries of the world. As of 2017 there is only one paved airport in the Solomon Islands. As far as roads go, the 863 miles of street in the country, however, only 21 of those miles are actually paved. Though the main source of transportation throughout the islands is by boat, this still poses a problem for people whenever they need to venture to an urban area for employment and healthcare or transport goods over large stretches of land. The Central Intelligence Agency also keeps a record of communications available to countries. In a world full of laptops and smartphones many would find it impossible to imagine a life without Internet connection; however, in the Solomon Islands 90 percent of the country's inhabitants live without any access to the Internet. In fact there are only an estimated 425,000 mobile lines and less than eight thousand landline phones in the entire country. When combined

that means that there is less than one phone per person in the Solomon Islands (“The World Factbook...”). This is a setback to the infrastructure of the country due to the lack of communication and transportation between larger islands and remote villages.

Another major issue facing the people of the Solomon Islands is one of climate vulnerability due to the lack of communication throughout the islands. The World Risk Report ranks the Solomon Islands as one of the most weather vulnerable countries in the world (Mucke). As an archipelago lying on the Ring of Fire, the country is vulnerable to many typhoons, earthquakes and tsunamis (Deen). These storms wreak havoc on rural areas in the wet season and destroy farmers’ crops. Due to the lack of modern amenities in these rural areas, the people have little forewarning about the storms and therefore even less time to brace themselves for the incoming storms. As a result, in 2007 an 8.0 magnitude earthquake that occurred just off of the coast created a thirty-foot high tsunami wave that claimed the lives of fifty-two people (France-Presse). In addition to taking the lives of several citizens, the tsunami damaged buildings and ruined the season’s crops. This created a food shortage in the area, forcing many subsistence farmers into food insecurity. The disaster in wake of the tsunami could have been prevented or at the very least lessened had the people of the island had access to better storm monitoring equipment. Today, ten years later, only 62,000 people--roughly 10 percent of the population--have access to the internet and the islands meteorology reports, meaning that those in rural areas have little to no warning before natural disasters (“The World Factbook...”).

One problem that the Solomon Islands have in common with its larger Pacific island nation counterparts is that of climate change. According to Patrick Nunn’s paper on Climate Change in the Pacific Islands, the entire region has seen a .6-degree average increase in temperature over the past hundred years. Many experts also predict that these island nations will lose a significant amount of their total land area. Though many isolated communities recognize the signs of the yearly rise in ocean levels. The knowledge of what they can personally do is outside of their reach. According to the World Fact Book only 85 percent of those in urban areas are literate. It has no information on those living in rural areas, however it can be assumed that the rate there is much lower, due to the isolation of many communities. Therefore many of the people on small subsistence farms do not know about any of the more sustainable farming methods that have been implemented in other small farming communities. When the British first colonized the islands, they created a cash crop system similar to that of the southern United States prior to the Civil war (Roughan & Wara). This system, still in place today uses old fashioned farming techniques to get a single crop, no matter the cost of the land. Another harmful farming technique utilized by islanders is the slash-and-burn technique, which is famed for its negative long-term effect on soil (Laracy & Foster). These techniques have eroded and in other ways damaged much of the soil in the country. If farmers were to be taught more sustainable farming techniques like crop rotation, they would be able to keep the soil of their homeland fertile. However this information is thousands of miles away from these small communities and they have little to no means of transportation or communication to connect themselves to it.

Several things are being done to improve the Farm to Market factor in the Solomon Islands. In 2005 several representatives of the United Nations held a conference on the effects of Climate

Change in small island countries such as the Solomon Islands. At the conference they discussed bringing better storm detection devices to nations like those in the Pacific (Deen). As a result of this conference and several others similar to it, more and more countryside villages in the Solomon Islands are being outfitted with the technology to be aware of storms days before they hit, thus giving them more time to protect their homes and crops. The government of the islands has improved since 2003. Due in part to the deployment of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands, the ethnic violence has decreased in recent years (“The World Factbook...”). The decrease in violence has given the government more time to focus on the country’s infrastructure.

Though the situation is improving, much still needs to be done in order to bring this country from the brink of catastrophe. Connecting rural areas to the outside world is a crucial first step. Several things can be done to improve communication throughout the island. The first thing that can be done is for the government to dedicate more time and resources to creating better transportation throughout the islands. Instead of paving more roads throughout the country, the government could make a wise investment in creating a system of water taxis. These taxis could connect the people of rural islands to marketplaces and urban areas. Public transportation would bring more people to the local markets, which would increase the amount of goods being bought and sold, and boost the economy. This could help families make more money, so they can better support and feed their families in the years to come. It could also improve communications between islands. Organizations such as the Red Cross and United Nations have provided funding for programs like this in the past. In addition to these organizations, many non-profit private organizations could help provide money or donations of boats to kick start the system of waterways. Many men, women and children would benefit from being able to make shorter and more comfortable journeys to the nearest healthcare provider. Meaning that the amount of deaths due to severe medical issues --i.e. the maternal death--in the country would go down with the implementations of better transportation. The government could also help build better lines of communication by making sure that remote areas have better access to radio, telephones and the Internet. Some islands in the Solomon Islands have already started asking for used cell phone donations to kick-start a system similar to this (Dunn). Another way to improve correspondence in the country would be to make Pijin an official language of the country alongside English. Then all legal documents would be required to be in both English and Pijin. Breaking down this language barrier would benefit the many people of the country who do not speak English. It would also help lessen some of the figurative distance between the national government and local governments. Simple steps and ideas such as these are key in the building of this small island nation’s infrastructure.

Unfortunately due to faults in the country’s farm to market systems, many in the Solomon Islands face food insecurity. As of 2016 the Human Development Index ranks the nation one hundred fifty-sixth out of one hundred sixty-eight countries in terms of life expectancy, average income, and education. Though things are looking better for the islanders, the recent concerns over climate change have put island nations like the Solomon Islands into the spotlight. However much still needs to be done to improve the lives of over 600,000 people. Though with some freethinkers and new ideas, hundreds of thousands of lives can be changed for the better.

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