



Samoa

**Theme Group
on Rural Development
and Food Security**
Established: 1998

Membership

UN: FAO; UNDP; UNESCO;
WHO

Government: Ministry of
Agriculture, Forests,
Fisheries & Meteorology

Past activities: Preparation of
World Food Summit (WFS)
Horizon 2010 Paper;
activities related to National
Plan of Action following WFS.



FAO/17261/L-WITHERS

Improving disaster preparedness and recovery

Small island developing states – remote and environmentally fragile – frequently face severe climatic conditions which pose real risks to food security. Samoa is no exception. Its location on the cyclone path covering Tuvalu, Vanatu, Tokelau, as well as Fiji and Tonga, has placed the island at particular risk of cyclones and strong winds: the highly destructive cyclones, Ofa February 1990 and Val December 1991, for example, caused wide-spread damage to the country's agriculture, economic base and infrastructure.

Such violent surges as cyclones and strong winds can occur with little or no warning, with wind and waves causing devastation to agriculture and the livelihoods of communities. A single storm event can totally destroy standing crops, kill or injure livestock and

ruin domestic and agricultural buildings, irrigation tanks, water reservoirs, pipelines, food and crop stores. To an island such as Samoa the effects can be catastrophic – its subsistence-based agriculture (including forestry and fisheries) provides a source of livelihood for over 60 percent of the population.

Preparing for and mitigating the effects of these climatic events is a priority of the UN Theme Group on Rural Development and Food Security. Its recently published booklet, *Combating the Effects of Cyclones on Food Security in Samoa*, stresses the need for cyclone

// Small Island Developing States face the threat of land loss and erosion due to climate changes and sea level rises and have particular needs for their overall sustainable development. Improvements in trade, transportation, communication, human resources, stabilization of income and higher export earnings will increase food security in these countries.

WORLD FOOD SUMMIT (WFS) PLAN OF ACTION, COMMITMENT 3



// Most Samoans know that this plant (the Pennywort) is used to prepare medicines. What most people do not know is that, like cabbage, it can be used as a vegetable. This plant is cyclone resistant since it creeps along the ground and keeps a low profile. //

‘COMBATING THE EFFECTS OF CYCLONES ON FOOD SECURITY IN SAMOA’

readiness at all times, and aims to provide the public and farmers in the country with information and practical guidance on what to do before, during and after cyclones to lessen damage to food crops and to shorten the period of recovery. Although materials on emergency preparedness do exist in Samoa, the Group’s booklet is unique in providing a reader-friendly and illustrated format for local populations. Importantly, it is also in line with the Government’s National Disaster Management Plan (1997), which stressed the importance of public education and awareness and the need for community self-reliance and self-help in coping with natural catastrophes.

The booklet was written by a local consultant in collaboration with the Theme Group, and based largely on interviews with government officers, NGOs and farmers. They shared their lessons learned on the various protective and preparatory measures to be taken before a cyclone hits. Interviewees shared their experience of growing staple Samoan crops of yam, cassava, sweet potato, giant taro (ta’amu), banana and

breadfruit – amongst the first to be destroyed in strong winds – and were unanimous in their view that yam was the ideal food reserve and one of the best crops for overcoming food shortages if a cyclone hit.

As one farmer asserted: ‘Grow as many yams as you can and save these especially for insurance against cyclones. When there is no taro, ta’amu, breadfruit or banana, the yams will be your store of food’. He went on to advise that a plot of land – at least a quarter acre in size – be allocated to cultivate yams especially for cyclone relief. If no cyclone occurs, the yams are simply left in the ground to continue their lifecycles. Evidence from the Samoan farmers indicates that the longer the yams are left in the ground, the higher the yields obtained.

But what to do after the cyclone has hit? Food and water shortages may last from two weeks to eight months. The booklet describes various coping strategies and ideas as to how to maintain food security, from reverting to quick-maturing crops (e.g. cassava and sweet potato) to recovering crops. Amongst the various storage methods highlighted, farmers

suggested a return to the indigenous practice of fermenting breadfruit and banana in soil pits (the ‘Samoan biscuit’), which would help islanders better prepare food for use in times of food shortage. Readers are also encouraged to learn to identify certain plants to cook and eat as alternative vegetables, and the booklet concludes with some preventive measures to combat pest and disease outbreaks after a cyclone.

In August 2001, the booklet was launched in English and Samoan by the Government of Samoa and will shortly be featured on-line on the Samoa UN Country Team Web site (currently under development).

By harnessing local knowledge and experience, the Theme Group’s publication contains valuable lessons for strengthening the capacities for emergency preparedness, response and recovery in other small island developing states in the same and other regions, which face precarious climatic conditions and the threat of food insecurity.

