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Producing Markets, Producing People

Local Food, Financial Prosperity and Health in Samoa

Jessica Hardin & Christina Ting Kwauk

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Abstract

In the context of rising rates of metabolic disorders and global attention to the “obesity epidemic” in Oceania, public health in Samoa tends to focus on multi-sectoral efforts to increase vegetable consumption and production. To understand better what non-health officials thought about food environments and health, we sought out a group of food actors (food trade and agricultural entrepreneurs, distributors, producers and food policy practitioners) who were actively creating a “healthier” food environment in Samoa. They posited that the market was both the problem with, and the solution to, the “obesity epidemic.” These food actors positioned themselves as social entrepreneurs or, more aptly, as altruistic capitalists, who aimed to transform the food environment by fixing the market, a practice they felt would in turn produce healthier and more prosperous Samoans. We argue that while alternative food movements in the global north tend to link local production with local consumption, Samoan food actors

have focused on local production as a way to provide Samoans with financial prosperity, which in turn would provide opportunities for healthier consumption. This article is based on qualitative interviews with food actors and an ethnography of food, public health and development in Samoa.

Keywords:

local food health Samoa agricultural development obesity

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Disclosure Statement

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Notes

1. The rapid rise in obesity and related disease in Samoa is referred to as the “NCD crisis”. We opt to refer to this cluster of disorders and diseases as metabolic disorders. We find that the category of non-communicable diseases, just as lifestyle diseases, reifies the notion that these disorders are caused by individual risk and choice (see Ferzacca 2000; Montoya 2007; Rock 2003; Yates-Doerr 2012b). We use “metabolic disorders” to refer to the clustering of particular kinds of weight-related disorders that

reflect complex interactions between environment, culture and inequalities (see Singer 2014; Wiedman 2012).

2. Across the Pacific, starchy crops are “considered satisfying (like a Western “meal”) only if … served with one of a number of accompanying dishes” (Pollock 1992: 29). These complementary foods are the main meal of the day in the evening, although “leftover” starchy foods are often eaten for lunch. Other food items, while considered edible, including fruits, fruit soups and, today, sandwiches, processed snack foods and instant noodles, can be eaten anytime but are not essential to mealtimes nor are they considered “real” food (Pollock 1985).

3. The food actors also focused on the geopolitical position of Samoa in exacerbating issues of price and supply. Samoa is a small, geographically distant market with a highly price-sensitive economy. The food actors felt at the mercy of the global food system. Shipping and transportation costs, import duties, as well as trade relations of larger industrialized markets were all cited as common challenges for supplying Samoa with affordable healthy foods. Samoa’s participation in the global market was portrayed as constraining the local Samoan market in unhealthy ways by creating trade barriers, while unhealthy foods were dumped on its shores. Representing this global market, they felt, was “a large contingent of Chinese” shop owners, who were seen as intent on “using and abusing society.” Embedded in this view is a much deeper racialized sentiment against the Chinese “Other foreigner” in Samoa, specifically the recent influx of new Chinese migrants who have begun to move into the local business scene. These new entrepreneurs were often portrayed as shrewd capitalists neglecting “the Pacific way” and taking over the Samoan market. In this milieu, Chinese merchants have come to symbolize the exploitive uncontrollable specter of the unhealthy global market.

4. At the time of writing this paper, one Samoan tala was roughly equal to US$2.22.

5. Interestingly enough, growing for an export market in China is rarely ever mentioned —although there have been efforts to do so (see McNicholl 2012).

Additional information

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