

MEDIA RELEASE

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OVERCOMING THE SILENT EMERGENCY OF CHILDHOOD MALNUTRITION IN PNG

A decline in the consumption of traditional vegetables in Papua New Guinea (PNG), as in many developing countries, has adversely affected family nutrition and is increasing the rates of obesity. Boosting their supply and consumption will help address childhood malnutrition, a silent emergency in PNG and the likely cause of up to 76% of total deaths of children under five.

This will be a key message of Philmah Seta-Waken, an agronomist at the National Agricultural Research Institute in PNG and Tania Paul, Horticulture Team Leader and Research Fellow at Charles Darwin University, in their presentation on what is needed for behavioural change to improve nutrition. They are co-presenting at *“Reshaping Agriculture for Better Nutrition: The Agriculture, Food, Nutrition, Health Nexus”*, the Crawford Fund annual conference in Canberra on 13-14 August.

“Childhood malnutrition is a silent emergency in PNG. Malnutrition is the likely cause of up to 76% of total deaths of children under five across the country,” said Ms Paul, who is the Crawford Fund’s NT coordinator with experience in Timor Leste, PNG, Indonesia and in NT indigenous communities.

“Traditional vegetables, such as slippery cabbage or aibika, rungia, amaranth, nightshade and pitpit, are better suited to the local climate, require lower inputs, and are nutritionally-superior to globally popular vegetables. Boosting consumption and supply of these vegetables will improve food and nutritional security, particularly in remote and isolated communities and poor urban populations,” said Ms Paul, who leads the project of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) which is promoting traditional vegetable production and consumption for improved livelihoods in PNG and northern Australia.

“Our research found that people lacked awareness of the nutritional value of traditional vegetables. They consider them as ‘backward’ and ‘poverty’ food, but conversely traditional vegetables connect strongly to culture and ‘home’,” said Ms Seta-Waken, who is in Australia studying a Masters with the support of ACIAR.

“We trained smallholder farmers to manage pests and diseases, and save the seeds of traditional vegetables to reduce their input costs. We worked with families and communities to increase their awareness of the nutritional value of these vegetables and showed them how to grow and cook their own nutritious produce with recipes specifically created to suit the local varieties,” she said.

Ms Seta-Waken explained that some growers have applied their seed saving skills to setting up small-scale seed businesses, and this will allow increased availability of these vital local vegetable varieties.

“Education is key to behavioural change. We plan to continue our work with a focus on young mothers so they understand the importance of traditional vegetables, and how they can make nutritious cheap food from their own gardens, and a focus on schools involving teacher education, school gardens and incentive-based lunch boxes, also relevant to our work in the Top End,” said the researchers.