

Off to a flying start



A poultry research facility at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (above and far right).

Poultry is important to Solomon Islands villagers' diet, but farming practices are poor. Whitney Macdonald reports

'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.' Substitute 'poultry farm' for 'fish' and this Chinese proverb accurately depicts the nutritional plight facing many village families in the Solomon Islands.

Poultry (especially chicken) is the primary source of protein for most families, but few eggs are produced and only one bird is eaten each month, due to suboptimal feeds available for chickens and the small flock sizes maintained by families.

As a result of this low protein consumption, many islanders suffer from malnutrition, causing nearly 30 per cent of infants to be significantly underweight. Add to this the poverty affecting many of the islanders and it is easy to understand how people would greatly benefit from a little dietary help and an increase in income.

Enter the wisdom of a Chinese proverb that reflects a new collaborative project funded by ACIAR that aims to lift islanders' poultry production capacity. The project is helping village poultry farmers

identify alternative forms of poultry feed rations from within their own gardens as the start of a chain leading to improved health and welfare overall.

The three-year project – led by Dr Phil Glatz from the South Australian Research and Development Institute (SARDI) Pig and Poultry Production Institute in Adelaide – was designed to address the plight of village families in the Solomon Islands.

By establishing a local poultry production research facility, islanders will be able to produce more poultry and also acquire the research capabilities to develop further sustainable farming practices, with the prospects of continually optimising their feeding resources for chickens in the future.

As part of the project, Dr Glatz and collaborators are helping the Solomon Islands establish their own poultry production research facility to test and identify local feed resources suitable for village poultry.

“By improving the rations for village poultry, village farmers will be able to raise poultry production and increase their income as well as lift consumption of eggs and meat by village families,” Dr Glatz says.

“We anticipate that this will greatly help many families who currently rely on sweet potatoes as their main source of nutrients. Unfortunately, these contain very little protein. Given that most children in remote areas walk two hours each way to school every day, a diet low in protein is inadequate to supply them with necessary nutrients.”

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TONY JANSEN



Phil Glatz with a village lady taking food scraps to feed poultry at a village near Buscarate in Malaita Province, Solomon Islands.

PARTNER COUNTRY: Solomon Islands
PROJECT: Feeding village poultry in the Solomon Islands (LPS/2003/054)
DESCRIPTION: Village poultry are a vital source of food security and supplement incomes for smallholder farmers. Improving poultry production would boost health and overall wellbeing
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Kastom Gaden Association, one of the Solomon Islands' local non-government organisations working with SARDI, predicts that if families are able to produce between 20 and 40 chickens, they will have enough poultry resources to maintain healthy nutrition and still have enough extra eggs to sell, substantially increasing their income.

"We have made good progress in the first year with help from the National Agricultural Research Institute in Papua New Guinea," Dr Glatz says. "So far, we have developed and built the research facility. We have also transferred research protocols from PNG and Australia and trained local Solomon Islands staff."

Basing the research facility at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education meant that local students can reap the benefits of this knowledge, with the added advantage of strengthening ties between lead staff members from the college, the Department of Agriculture and Livestock and Kastom Gaden Association – both positive outcomes for a society rebuilding its community ties in the wake of recent political turmoil.

As part of this long-term research, a variety of crops, including sorghum, pigeon peas and cowpeas, have been planted to measure the various nutritional values of locally-available feed resources. These feed resources along with fresh coconut, pigeon pea leaves and paw paw leaves are being used in a demonstration trial to compare the benefits of a mixed diet with a free-choice diet.

The team has also established 'model farms' – places where villagers can visit and spend the night, learning new poultry feeding options. Three farmers have been hosted already at a model farm in

Burns Creek, with one farmer returning to his village to introduce a moveable shelter for the poultry (enabling the poultry waste to be used as fertiliser) and another creating a feed garden for his poultry flock.

Integrating these research techniques and results into the local villages in the Solomon Islands is a key priority of this project and the team undertook a comprehensive survey to gather information on current poultry practices within the villages. About 80 villagers contributed information on their poultry farming practices, including their general attitudes, needs and obstacles in maintaining small-scale poultry farms.

The results of the survey will be used to shape the research and extension programs.

Poultry farmers in Australia will also benefit from the results of this research into feed rations. Organic poultry farmers in Australia use creative alternatives for feed compared to those used by industrial poultry companies. The team is assessing the nutritional value and palatability of some of these alternatives, such as herbs, and will convey the results to small producers and the commercial industry as options they can use in the development of innovative feeding systems.

Although it is still early days for this project, its potential to improve the overall quality of life for many Solomon Islands villagers is undeniable. Dr Glatz says: "It's only when you go there and see how tough these people are doing it, that you realise how important these types of projects are." ◀