Busara Groundwork
RESEARCH AGENDA

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Harnessing Behavioral Science to Revolutionize Food Choices in the Pacific Islands

Busara

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There are no conflicts of interest to declare for this study.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

M&E	monitoring and evaluation
NCDs	non-communicable diseases
PIFR	Pacific Island Food Revolution
ToC	theory of change

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Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, n.d), the Pacific Islands' countries are facing a crisis of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer, and chronic respiratory illnesses. These diseases are the leading cause of premature deaths in the region, accounting for 70-75% of all deaths (World Bank, 2014). The Pacific Islands also have some of the highest diabetes rates in the world, with 52.5% of adult males in Tonga classified as obese (WHO, 2011). Similarly, in Kiribati, the Federated States of Micronesia, Tonga, and Samoa, over 50% of adult females are obese (WHO, 2011). In Fiji, NCDs contribute to 82% of deaths, with 3 to 4 diabetes-related amputations occurring every 24 hours, and an increasing prevalence of diabetes is high among younger populations (Pratibha, 2019).

Beyond the health crisis, NCDs also impose significant economic burdens on Pacific economies (World Bank, 2014). The costs, for instance, include rising healthcare expenditures, loss of human capital, and a reduction in gross domestic product (GDP) due to lost productivity and income (World Bank, 2014). A 2017 study by the University of the South Pacific (USP) estimated the economic cost of NCDs at $68 million in Fiji, $16 million in Vanuatu, and $6 million in Tonga and Samoa. These costs amount to 1-2% of GDP (Chand & Singh, 2019).

A critical intervention in combating NCDs is reducing the consumption of foreign, calorie-dense, low-nutrient foods, such as breakfast biscuits, instant noodles, and pizza, in favor of traditional, nutrient-rich Pacific foods like lovo and fresh fish (Lyons, 2020). The Pacific Island Food Revolution (PIFR) offered innovative solutions that encouraged Pacific Islanders to shift

from consuming imported, processed foods to healthier, locally sourced indigenous foods to address this growing crisis. PIFR promoted this shift through edutainment interventions involving cooking competitions that combined entertainment with public health education. PIFR was funded by the Australian and New Zealand governments and employed multiple communication channels, including television, social media, radio, and community engagement, to promote behavior change. By leveraging these platforms, PIFR aimed to reshape public perceptions and break down barriers to healthy eating.

In collaboration with AECOM Services Pty Ltd, the University of the South Pacific, and regional stakeholders, Busara commissioned a comprehensive, behavioral science-driven evaluation to assess the impact of PIFR. This research agenda summarizes key insights from the various phases of research activities conducted, including experimental studies, monitoring and evaluation (MEL) activities, social media analysis, and impact assessments across Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, and Vanuatu, from 2018 to 2023.

The primary objectives of the PIFR project were to:

1. *Identify adjustments to enhance the effectiveness of its program design.*
2. *Assess the potential impact of PIFR after two years of active implementation in the Pacific Islands.*
3. *Co-develop a learning agenda and refine the theory of change from a supply-side perspective.*

Methodology

Our engagement with PIFR followed a phased approach that consisted of a series of research activities as outlined below:

Phase 1: Refining the theory of change (ToC)

This phase involved conducting qualitative interviews with a cross-section of Fijians living in and around Suva. The objective of these interviews was to (1) understand their perceptions towards local food ingredients, cuisines, and eating habits; (2) validate PIFR's draft results framework and finalize the initial ToC (shown in Table 1 below); and (3) identify areas for interventions and how to monitor impact.

Table 1. PIFR's initial theory of change

Problem - What is the problem?	**Goal -** What is the long-term goal?	**Pre-conditions -** What needs to happen and why?
Poor health is driven by over-reliance on non-traditional, often imported, processed foods due to: 1) The **relative appeal** (cheaper, tastier, more convenient) 2) **Prevailing social norms and identities and norms** (apathy toward obesity and NCDs, culture of feasting) 3) **Greater availability** (more accessible).	**Good** health, driven by a **return** to traditional food	Traditional food is perceived as **affordable, tasty, and convenient** (because of this drive choice) Widespread **pride** in traditional food (because status drives choice) **An abundant** supply of traditional food (because this drives convenience)

Following the qualitative interviews, Busara updated the theory of change as indicated in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Refined PIFR theory of change

Problem - What is the problem?	**Widespread poor health,** particularly obesity, NCDs, and micronutrient deficiency, is driven by an over-reliance on **on non-traditional, often imported, processed food,** mainly because: 1) It is significantly more convenient than traditional food in terms of the time, effort, and skills required to prepare and cook the food. This is partly the result of younger generations not learning traditional cooking skills, a cultural shift from eating being an experience (i.e., slow eating) to something people do to get on with other things (i.e., grab 'n' go), and a disconnection with the land among urban dwellers who do not grow their traditional food. 2) Three prevailing social norms acting against healthy eating: a culture of feasting and large portion sizes versus moderation, a preference for larger versus slimmer body shapes, and an apathetic outlook toward obesity (i.e., "We are Pacific Islanders, and we are big people").
Goal - What is the long-term goal?	**Widespread good health, celebration, and consumption of traditional food.**
Pre-conditions - What needs to happen and why?	**Structural** Stakeholders, especially religious organisations, have a long-term commitment to changing food behaviour (i.e., it is a vision rather than a project). Stakeholders understand how people on the ground think, rather than making assumptions. Pacific governments provide high levels of support (e.g., regulatory pressure, sin taxes, etc.). Donors and Pacific Islanders believe that the solution to the Pacific NCD problem lies in a return to traditional food. **Behavioral** Traditional food is readily available and in abundant supply, with food gardens being commonplace. Widespread perception that traditional food is fashionable, trendy, and sexy. Widespread perception that it is easy to prepare and cook traditional food, and the taste is worth the effort. Widespread confidence in people's ability and skills to cook traditional food. Social norms: people's extended and local leadership family endorse a shift to traditional food.

Phase 2: Behavioral lab experiments and pre-post surveys

Behavioral lab experiment

After refining the theory of change, we commissioned a behavioral lab experiment. This was a randomized controlled experiment involving ~800 participants at the Institute for Applied Sciences of the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji.

Objective: The experiment aimed to assess the impact of the PIFR TV show on participants' immediate food choices, attitudes, and beliefs related to Pacific food. Participants were randomly assigned to watch either a compilation of clips from PIFR or a documentary on climate change in Kiribati. The experiment was conducted before the show had aired, which allowed researchers to control who was exposed to the show and who was not. Thus, differences in food choices could be attributed to the impact of viewing the show.

Pre- post-surveys

During this phase, we also conducted pre- and post-surveys using a mixed-methods survey instrument with 405 participants across Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu, before and after the TV show was aired.

Objective: The pre-post surveys aimed to understand better the following three themes and how they varied before and after the airing of Season 1: (1) knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to food choice and eating behavior, (2) household decision-making dynamics around food, and (3) exposure to healthy eating messaging.

Phase 3: Impact assessment

Phase 3 of our engagement with PIFR was conducted two years after the show's programming. This phase involved surveying 330 participants across Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, and Vanuatu using a mixed quantitative and qualitative instrument. We also conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with 40 people across the four countries to address outstanding questions that arose from the quantitative analysis. The impact assessment was complemented by a social media analysis that examined PIFR's Facebook page and provided recommendations for ensuring sustained engagement and impact.

Objective: This phase aimed to assess whether watching the PIFR show was associated with shifting diets from unhealthy to healthy local Pacific foods.

Phase 4: Co-creation of a learning agenda and refinement of the ToC

The final phase of our engagement with PIFR involved co-creating a learning agenda and an updated Table of Contents (ToC that incorporated the views of supply-side stakeholders, including market vendors, restaurant owners, and semi-subsistence farmers. During this phase, we conducted 11 expert interviews with key stakeholders, 30 qualitative interviews, and 75 baseline panel surveys across Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Papua New Guinea (PNG), and Vanuatu.

The figure on the next page summarizes how the various research activities were conducted.

Methodology

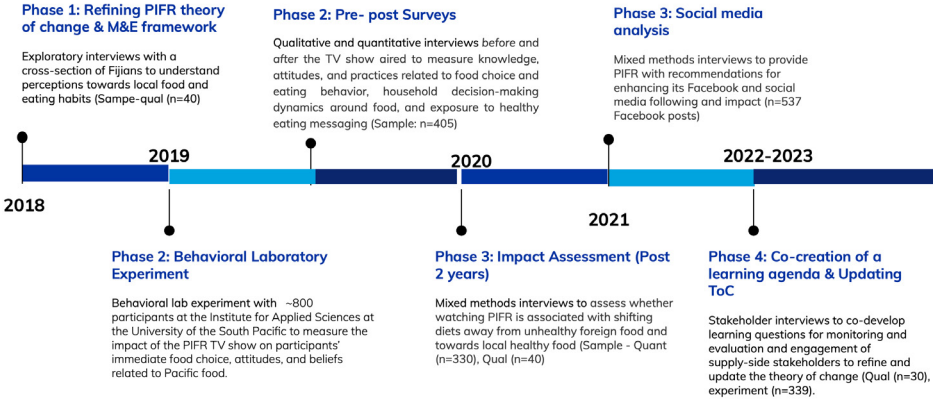

Figure 1: Sequence of research activities

Integrating behavioral science principles into PIFR's core activities

In addition to supporting PIFR's research agenda, Busara provided strategic guidance on embedding behavioral science principles into the program's key activities. This aimed to ensure that interventions were not only well-designed but also effective in shifting behavior at scale. Below is a summary of how behavioral insights were applied across PIFR's core activities:

a) Core Activity 1: Reality TV cooking competition

Behavioral science principle:
Recommendations for modifying the experience to encourage group viewing of the show. (e.g., similar to how Philippine telenovelas are viewed in Fiji).

This could generate a larger change in behavior, as watching the TV show with others allows viewers to update their beliefs about what food they should eat and also update their beliefs about what others (i.e., their fellow viewers) think they should eat.

b) Core Activity 2: Digital campaign and SMS blast messaging

Behavioral science principles:
Recommendations for personalizing social media messaging and SMS campaigns (e.g., including the recipient's name).
Sending out messaging on the different retailers selling the ingredients for the latest PIFR episode.
Considerations for *constructing an online persona* who adopted all the PIFR behaviours (e.g., ate healthily, encouraged others, retweeted PIFR posts, etc).

c) Core Activity 3: Pacific food recipes

Behavioral science principle:
Reducing barriers to accessing food recipes. For video recipes, we provided recommendations for trying to negotiate discounted data rates with a mobile network operator (MNO).

For printed recipes, handing out at religious services, distributing freely at the market or supermarkets, or setting up a system whereby someone could enter their address and find the nearest location that provided the printed recipes.

Key insights from research

Initial exploratory research highlighted key barriers and opportunities for promoting healthy local foods among the Pacific Islanders

Barriers such as the **high cost of local foods, limited availability and accessibility of local ingredients, a lack of knowledge and confidence in cooking local meals,** and **shifting social norms and preferences** were mentioned as some of the main hindrances to consuming healthy Pacific meals. These insights were critical in refining PIFR's initial theory of change and informed potential interventions to incorporate into PIFR's programming, encouraging the consumption of local Pacific foods.

The figure below summarises some of the structural and behavioral barriers to the consumption of healthy Pacific meals identified.

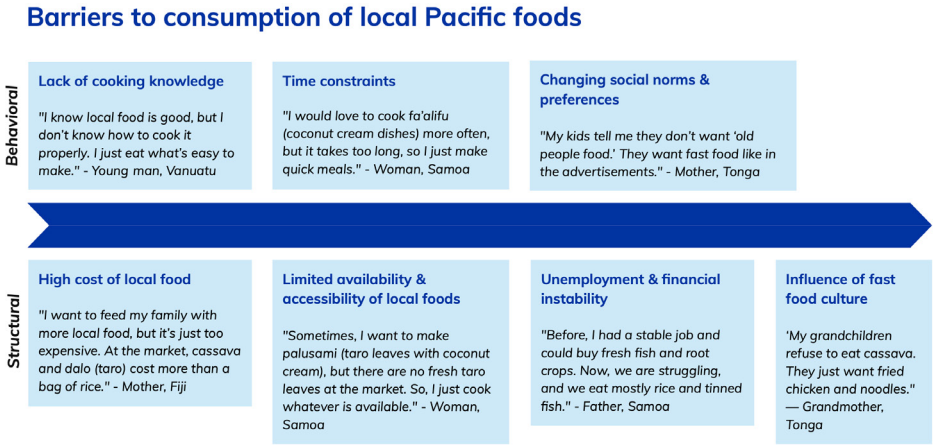

Figure 2: Barriers to consumption of local Pacific foods

Behavioral barriers

Lack of cooking knowledge - Despite knowing that traditional food is healthier, many people lack the knowledge and confidence to prepare traditional meals. This shows that knowledge of health benefits alone is not enough to drive behavior change—practical skills and confidence in cooking are also essential. Without the ability to prepare traditional meals, people may default to convenient, less nutritious options, even when they value local foods.

> *"I know local food is good, but I do not know how to cook it properly. I just eat what is easy to make."* **- *Young man, Vanuatu***

Time constraints - Preparing traditional meals is often seen as time-consuming, especially among busy families. Even when people value traditional meals, the demands of work and family life can push them toward quicker, less nutritious options, making convenience a key factor in food choices.

> *"By the time I get home from work, I don't have time to prepare proper Fijian food, so I just make instant noodles or something fast."* **- *Worker, Fiji***

Changing social norms and preferences - In many households, traditional food is viewed as less desirable compared to modern alternatives. This suggests that shifting social norms, particularly among younger generations, can devalue traditional diets and influence household food choices, making it more challenging to promote healthy eating habits.

> *"My kids tell me they don't want 'old people food.' They want fast food like in the advertisements."* **- *Mother, Tonga***

Structural barriers

High cost of local food - Local food is often seen to be more expensive than imported staples like rice and canned meats. When traditional, nutrient-rich foods are perceived as luxury items, communities are more likely to rely on cheaper, processed alternatives, undermining efforts to promote local diets and improve nutrition outcomes.

> *"We used to eat more yams and taro, but now it's a luxury. You can buy two packets of instant noodles for the price of one root crop."* **- *Tonga***

Limited availability and accessibility of local foods - Seasonal shortages and transport challenges make local ingredients scarce. Even when there is demand, seasonal availability and transport challenges can disrupt supply, making it difficult for communities to rely on traditional diets year-round and increasing dependence on imported, processed alternatives.

Unemployment and financial instability - Economic hardships due to the COVID-19 pandemic and TC Harold reduced the affordability of local foods. When livelihoods are disrupted, even individuals who prefer traditional foods may be forced to prioritize affordability over nutrition, limiting their ability to make healthy food choices.

> *"The cyclone destroyed our gardens. Now, everything at the market is expensive, and we have no choice but to eat what we can afford."* ***Woman, Vanuatu***

Influence of fast-food culture - Processed and Western-style foods are gaining popularity, particularly among younger generations. As fast food

becomes increasingly associated with modernity and convenience, particularly among young people, local foods risk being devalued, making it more challenging to promote healthy, culturally rooted eating habits.

> *"Students now prefer chips and soft drinks instead of home-cooked meals. They think eating local food is old-fashioned."* **- *Teacher, Fiji***

Opportunities to promote local Pacific foods

Despite the aforementioned challenges, the exploratory research revealed key opportunities that PIFR could leverage to promote the consumption of local Pacific meals among Pacific Islanders. The opportunities include 1) home gardening, 2) awareness and health campaigns, and 3) a strong cultural identity tied to local food, as shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Opportunities to promote local Pacific foods

Experimental studies and evaluations reveal a substantial impact of PIFR on entertainment-based behavior change

Busara's experimental studies and evaluations revealed that **watching PIFR positively influences food choices,** particularly among women. From the behavioral lab experiment in Fiji, we saw that:

People who watched PIFR were more likely to choose a healthy Pacific dish for lunch compared to those who watched a climate change documentary (see graph below).

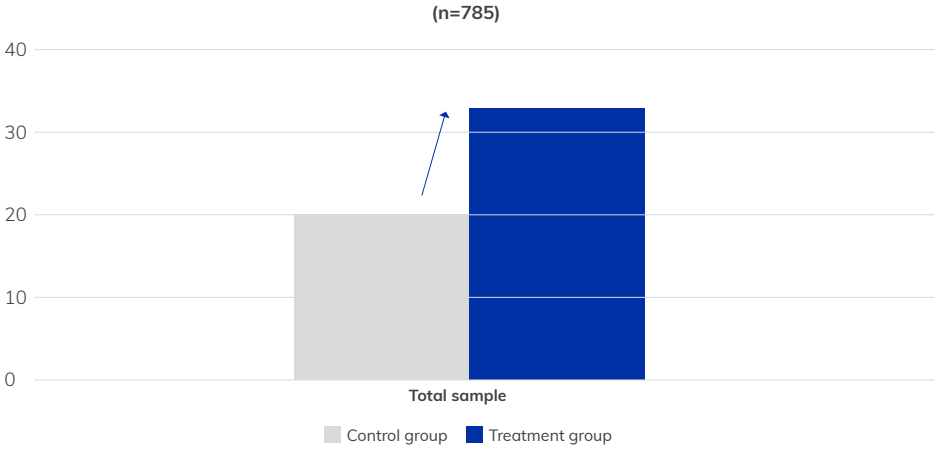

Figure 4: Share of participants choosing healthy Pacific meal, by gender and treatment status

Women were 18 percentage points more likely to choose a healthy Pacific dish over an unhealthy foreign dish after watching PIFR compared to a climate change documentary (see graph below).

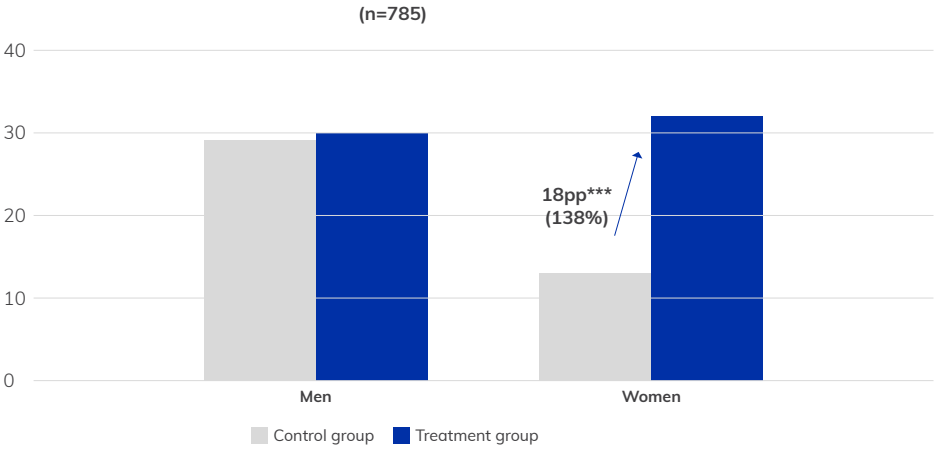

Figure 5: Share of participants choosing healthy Pacific meal, by gender and treatment status

Pre- and post-exposure surveys

Pre- and post-exposure surveys indicated a shift in dietary habits, with an increased demand for local ingredients.

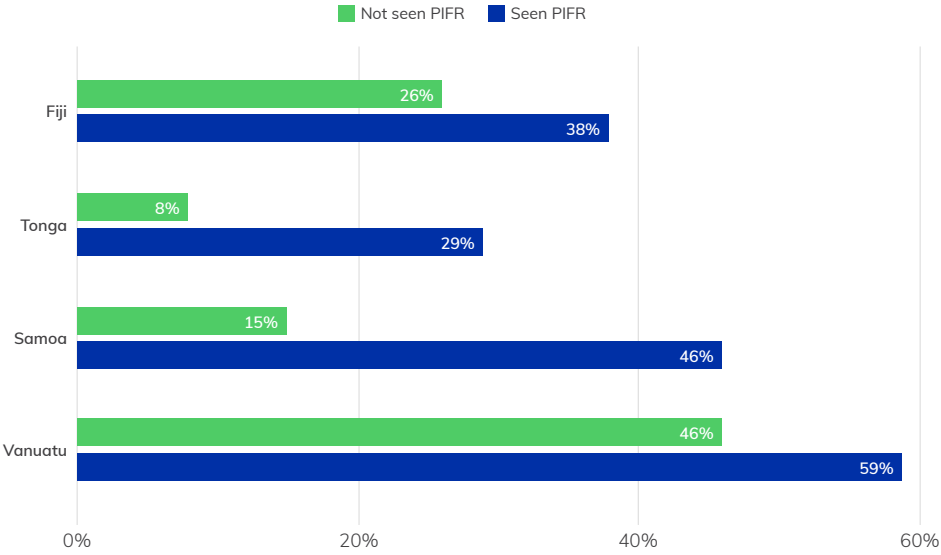

Figure 6: Share of respondents reporting shifting their diets towards more local and healthy food over the past year, by country

Findings from the pre-post exposure surveys also suggested that individuals were shifting from the contemplation stage to the preparation stage (as shown in the PIFR's behavior change model below):

Before PIFR exposure, there was high awareness of the health benefits of traditional and local food. However, in the post-PIFR exposure survey, **we observed a greater intention to shift towards eating more local food.**

We also observed a positive shift in individuals' perceptions of the barriers to eating healthy local food: After PIFR exposure, barriers appeared to be less about the taste or popularity of the food but rather about time and availability. With social norms shifting towards perceiving local food as tasty and popular, this created a key foundation for PIFR to achieve the program goals.

Social media platforms play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions and encouraging healthy eating behaviors

Platforms like Facebook are playing a crucial role in shaping how people understand and engage with information about healthy eating and indigenous foods. Social media engagement revealed that viewers who actively engaged with PIFR content were more likely to explore traditional recipes. This was corroborated by the lab experiment findings, which showed that participants who watched the PIFR show were more likely to choose a healthy Pacific meal for lunch.

The social media analysis also showed that purely educational content struggled to capture attention, emphasizing the preference for learning about healthy foods in an engaging and interactive manner. Incorporating elements such as recognizable personalities, cooking demonstrations, and storytelling, educational posts on PIFR's social media page made healthy eating more relatable and appealing. This indicates how the media can be utilized to shift perspectives through the edutainment aspect.

The COVID-19 pandemic and tropical cyclone Harold may have created a shifting environment for promoting local food

The COVID-19 pandemic and tropical cyclone Harold created a unique environment that may have encouraged shifts in dietary behaviors across Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, and Vanuatu. Restricted imports drove up the cost of foreign foods, making local, homegrown options more appealing. As a result, many households turned to backyard farming, thereby increasing their intake of locally grown foods. Furthermore, the pandemic increased awareness of personal health, with many respondents reflecting on the importance of nutrition. In Vanuatu, worries about non-communicable diseases (NCDs) further reinforced this shift. These geopolitical and socio-economic conditions may have unintentionally created an ideal opportunity for PIFR content to influence food choices positively.

Market actors' openness to local recipes presents a partnership opportunity for PIFR

Our engagement with supply-side stakeholders across the four countries revealed that market vendors and local restaurant owners play a crucial role in shaping food choices. With direct consumer interaction, they influence both the availability and affordability of local food. A majority of these market actors expressed a willingness to incorporate new local food recipes into their menus, presenting a valuable opportunity for PIFR to foster deeper grassroots partnerships. Thus, strengthening these collaborations could further advance PIFR's mission of promoting local and healthy food consumption.

Recommendations for scaling and sustainability

A multifaceted approach is needed to effectively promote healthier eating habits and strengthen the impact of dietary initiatives. This includes, for instance, exploring initiatives that aim to mitigate barriers and leverage opportunities to promote the consumption of healthy, local diets. Therefore, based on the findings from the research activities, this research agenda proposes the following recommendations to encourage the consumption of locally sourced produce.

1. Expanding media and outreach to ensure programs reach a wider audience. This can be achieved through the following initiatives:

- Developing **simplified, time-efficient recipes** that align with daily lifestyles. Research suggests that reducing perceived effort increases the likelihood of adopting new behaviors (Lally et al., 2010). By making recipes more accessible, people are more likely to incorporate them into their daily routines.
- Enhancing **radio programming** for increased reach, particularly in rural areas. Studies indicate that radio remains a powerful medium for behavior change communication in rural areas (Wakefield et al., 2010), particularly in regions with limited internet access.
- Collaborating with **social influencers** to promote healthy food choices. Social proof theory suggests that individuals are more likely to adopt behaviors modeled by trusted figures, making influencer partnerships an effective strategy for promoting healthy food choices (Cialdini, 2001).

2. Leveraging behavioral nudges to initiate and sustain behavior change through

- Utilizing **reminders** and **progress tracking** (e.g., SMS nudges) to sustain behavior change. Behavioral economics research highlights how small nudges, such as SMS reminders, can reinforce habits and sustain behavior change (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).
- **Introducing community-based cooking challenges** to reinforce engagement. Social identity theory suggests that group-based activities enhance commitment to behavior change by fostering a sense of belonging and accountability (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

3. Initiate policy and institutional support to ensure multiple reinforcement mechanisms for proposed interventions. This can be achieved through:

- Advocating for **food policy changes**, including incentives for local food production. Research on food environments (e.g., Swinburn et al., 2013) emphasizes the importance of policy interventions, such as subsidies and taxation, in shifting consumption patterns toward healthier, locally sourced foods.
- Partnering with **schools and workplaces** to integrate traditional food into daily meals. School-based nutrition interventions have been shown to improve dietary habits and reduce the risk of non-communicable diseases (Story et al., 2009). This will help encourage behavior change in target populations, such as children and working staff, who are more likely to eat unhealthy meals while at school and work.

4. Strengthening research and measurement

- Testing new formats, such as short-form digital content, can enhance audience engagement and message retention. As media consumption habits shift, shorter, easily digestible content has proven more effective in capturing attention and supporting behavior change, making it a valuable tool for promoting healthy dietary habits.

Conclusion

The challenge of addressing non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the Pacific Islands necessitates a multi-pronged approach that acknowledges the region's unique cultural and economic contexts; there is no one-size-fits-all solution that can effectively address this public health issue. As highlighted in this research agenda, the shift from imported, processed foods to healthy, traditional diets is not merely a dietary preference but a critical necessity for improving health and economic stability. The Pacific Island Food Revolution (PIFR) has demonstrated that innovative strategies, such as edutainment shows and community engagement through cooking competitions as well as the use of various media platforms, including mass and social media, can effectively influence dietary choices and promote healthier lifestyles.

However, overcoming the behavioral barriers to healthy eating remains a significant challenge. The convenience and affordability of processed foods, coupled with prevailing social norms, create a challenging environment for implementing long-term dietary shifts. To maximize the impact of initiatives like PIFR, it is essential to continue exploring and addressing these behavioral challenges through further research and partnerships to develop and implement effective strategies. While the journey toward healthier food choices in the Pacific Islands is filled with difficulties, strategic interventions grounded in behavioral science provide a promising path forward. Continued efforts to explore cultural dynamics and behavioral drivers shaping food choices will enable PIFR and relevant stakeholders to better support the communities in their journey towards better health and well-being, ultimately reducing the burden of NCDs in the Pacific region.

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RESEARCH AGENDA

About Busara

Busara is a research and advisory organization, working with researchers and organizations to advance and apply behavioral science in pursuit of poverty alleviation. Busara pursues a future where global human development activities respond to people's lived experience; value knowledge generated in the context it is applied; and promote culturally appropriate and inclusive practices. To accomplish this, we practice and promote behavioral science in ways that center and value the perspectives of respondents; expand the practice of research where it is applied; and build networks, processes, and tools that increase the competence of practitioners and researchers.

About Busara Groundwork

Busara Groundwork lays the groundwork for future research and program design. As think pieces, they examine the current state of knowledge and what is needed to advance it, frame important issues with a behavioral perspective, or put forward background information on a specific context.

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