

Food security: where's the plan?

If PNG gets food security 'right', it will not only ensure the country has a reliable and sustainable supply of nutrition, it will deliver new sources of economic growth. But while there's been lots of talk about a new national plan for agriculture, nothing has yet been made public. It's time the plan was finalised so both industry and government can get on with the job of securing our 'food future'.

Despite an extensive system of subsistence agriculture, up to a quarter of PNG's food energy and protein requirements is dependent on imported products, mostly in the form of processed food – costing the country around PGK 4bn (USD 1.3bn) every year.

But with the right support, coordination and investment, agriculture has the potential to not only ensure PNG's 'food security', but also make a more significant contribution to the economy. The opportunity lies in bringing a higher degree of commercialisation to subsistence farming systems and by increasing the level of value-added processing locally.

Encouragingly, examples of this kind of development are starting to emerge.

In February, PNG's first large scale locally made dairy products hit the shelves, selling for half the price of imports from Australia and New Zealand. The producer, Ilimo Dairy Farm, is an innovative venture aimed at working with local communities to create dairy self-sufficiency in the region and has the potential to be a template for dairy development projects elsewhere in the country.

The government is also playing a role, ramping up efforts to build skills and capabilities in agriculture. Earlier this year, PNG signed an agreement with the Philippines to train local farmers in rice, grains and industrial crops production, aquaculture and inland fish farming, livestock breeding and improvement, as well as in agribusiness development.



PGK 4bn

worth of food products imported in PNG each year



But wait, it's more complicated

While all these initiatives are helpful and welcome, of themselves, they are not enough to drive the transformations necessary to ensure food security and grow PNG's agriculture sector. There are many challenges that need to be overcome, but two of the most significant barriers are the lack of infrastructure to transport goods domestically and inconsistent product quality.

As a matter of urgency, there needs to be a more strongly coordinated approach to improving transport networks, supply chains and connectivity so that products can be moved cost effectively, efficiently and safely.

In addition to 'hard' assets like roads and storages, farmers also need better digital connectivity. Digital technologies can make production processes more efficient and sustainable, for example, by helping farmers monitor and respond to fluctuating weather and growing conditions, including El Nino events and climate change. Digitalisation can improve market access by alerting farmers to market opportunities and connecting them with processors and customers directly.

Farmers also deserve better access to a broad spectrum of training opportunities, from new production techniques to skill development in agribusiness and marketing. Training must be supported by a growing 'ecosystem' of institutional support regarding finance and funding, regulation and research and development.

Securing PNG's food future

1

Improve transport network



2

Harness digital technologies



3

Build capacity through training and support



So where's the plan?

Because of the complex and interconnected nature of agriculture, PNG needs a current and comprehensive planning framework to nurture the development of the sector. This fact is recognised in the country's Medium Term Development Plan 2018-2022, which refers to plans for both food security and agricultural development. In fact, these are both priorities under the national plan.

The problem is that the publicly available national agriculture development plan is dated 2007 to 2016, the subsequent plan has not been released. So the link between developing the agriculture sector and the importance of securing food supply as a concept has not been fully established at the planning stage.

And without a robust planning framework, it's difficult to make the connections between the various elements of governance and local initiatives on the ground. This means that actions that will result in lasting change are either uncoordinated or just not implemented.

It also means that stakeholders in the agriculture sector – organisations such as the Fresh Produce Development Agency, the Poultry Industry Association, or the PNG Fishing Industry Association – are unable to make a contribution to the planning process to ensure their goals are aligned with the national agenda.

A robust planning framework also provides greater certainty and direction, which encourages private interests – both big and small – to boost investment and commit to the sector over the long-term. It helps fill the gap between top-down intention and bottom-up actions, which is critical to ensuring ideas like 'inclusive growth' evolve from concept to reality.

So, it's time for the agriculture plan to be finalised and released so that the many opportunities offered by a stronger agriculture sector can begin to be realised. It's time to get on with the job of securing our country's 'food future'.

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