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Coconut Risk Management and Mitigation Manual for the Pacific Region



Compiled by R. Bourdeix, J. M. Sourisseau and J. Lin

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H. RISKS LINKED TO AND IMPACTING CULTURAL HABITS

By R. Bourdeix and J. M. Sourisseau

Pacific societies, whatever their anchorage in custom and their level of development, are exposed to all the risks analysed in the present document. But most Pacific communities are driven by specific social hybrid mechanisms, a combination of custom and willingness to adopt a western lifestyle. These specific social behaviours may all together change their exposure to risks and the very nature of these risks, the way they act to prevent these risks, the way they mitigate them and the way they are impacted by uncertain events.

The primary function of a food is to cover the energy and nutrient needs of consumers by meeting their physiological characteristics and their consumption habits. Coconut was part of Pacific diets for centuries, but things may evolve. Food self-sufficiency, if it still exists, is now only concerning a few very isolated populations. In addition, imports of commodities are more and more present on local markets and drive household's consumption toward more normative and globalized diets. In the long run, it may change the very significance of coconut within the society.

People are devoting more and more time and attention to virtual purposes on cell phones and computers. On one hand, such media may help to rapidly diffuse appropriate information. On the other hand, people are now saturated with an excess of diverse information and online entertainment. At least some of them, and more numerous in the younger generation, devote less attention to the real world. The daily use of the internet, as well as the populist political wave that seems to be linked to it, induces a kind of popular rejection of a world that appears too dizzyingly complex. People often call for simplistic solutions derived from some kind of magical thinking.

Therefore, in contemporary rural societies, the importance of the monetary detour adds commercial risks to pre-existing agricultural risks. Commercial integration and more specifically driving business in a changing society require new skills and knowledge that are still broadly lacking in the Pacific. This situation may increase farmers and traders' exposure to commercial risks. In addition, the mitigation mechanisms of these new risks are not present in the traditional society, even in a hybridization process. Farmers should be informed of the consequences of changes in farming and commercial practices. They should be requested to specify their farming practices (traceability), if these new practices are likely to significantly change the nutritional value of food.

Can increased global consumption of commodities as seemingly inconsequential as coconut products lead to armed insurgencies in parts of the world? Yes! Quite often, when insurgencies do occur, they are linked to agricultural commodities in high demand. In fact, not in the Pacific region but in Southeast Asia, rebellions and agricultural production have gone together for centuries.

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"WOW! BEEF OMELETTE!!"

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Note. This drawing illustrates the next risk which deals with the inappropriate beliefs about the coconut palm and its cultivation. It was inspired by a real story, known to some Tahitians in French Polynesia and passed down for generations. In the 18th century, a sailor disembarking from Europe received as a gift of arrival a young coconut and coconut milk to drink. Seeing this fruit for the first time, he would have said 'What a wonderful country, here the cows lay eggs'. Two hundred years later, Tahitians continue to laugh about it ...