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ABSTRACT: The small Pacific island of Nauru has the highest rate of obesity in the world; this has partly been attributed to a dietary transition from local to imported foods. Nutritional health interventions have included programmes to encourage the establishment of household kitchen gardens and local community farms to supply the people of Nauru with fresh produce. In this chapter, I draw on long-term ethnographic fieldwork to explore why these alternatives to the industrial food system have not only failed to thrive in Nauru, but have also become spaces for contestation and social friction. Further, rather than improve diets in a sustainable way, these donor-funded development initiatives have appeared to instead strengthen existing power and health inequalities. I suggest that such initiatives may be unsuccessful because in focusing on food they do not take into account long-term social ties, relations and hierarchies that structure food networks over time. In order to understand the successes and failures of a nation's efforts to produce healthy food for its citizens, it is necessary to interrogate the politics and social relations underpinning (post)colonial patterns of land use, food supply and demand.

6 Local food, imported food, and the failures of community gardening initiatives in Nauru

Amy K. McLennan

It was a hot, dusty day in Nauru, a small island nation in the mid-Pacific Ocean. The small puffs of sea breeze were a welcome contrast to the still, sun-baked air. From where Talena and I sat, under the shade of a sheet of corrugated iron perched on four metal poles, we could see the ocean glittering in the distance. The tide was out and water lapped at the edge of the reef about thirty metres offshore. To our left was her house; large concrete bricks rose almost all the way to the roof, but stopped short. The family had run out of money during the economic downturn, before they could finish construction of the family home. Talena had agreed to share her life story with me, to help me as I sought to understand the changing Nauruan lifestyle. The high rates of lifestyle-related health concerns such as obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease experienced by the local population made the changing lifestyle a central interest in my research.

I completed my formal preamble and consent questions. The local community was so familiar with my research by this stage that this explanation of my interest in Nauruan history and health, particularly obesity and diabetes, seemed a bit superfluous. Before I could ask a question, Talena made a comment that had become a familiar response to my introduction: Nauruans have health problems today because people cannot access or afford the sorts of foods recommended as 'healthy', especially fruits and vegetables. She explained how, during the wealthy days following political independence in 1968, money from mining royalties, land rental payments and salaries allowed her to purchase the sorts of foods so regularly talked about by the Department of Health:

There are exports from overseas, fruits and veggies. I used to buy vegetables! I collect[ed] all my children's salary (government salaries are collected by employees or a nominated family member on a fortnightly basis). I even spent \$400 [per fortnight] on my veggies, because we really like veggies. Me, I used to come back from when I get pay, I used to have punnets of oranges and pears and apples and . . . My fridge is even full of veggies [which] has come from overseas.

(Talena)

However, the good times did not last. Corruption, lack of education and poor investment advice combined to nibble away at the long-term investments intended to provide for the people of Nauru once the phosphate mines were exhausted. When mining revenues slowed in the late 1980s, the economy began to turn. Salaries plummeted, and the National Bank of Nauru struggled into the 2000s. The cost of living did not change. Imported perishable foods quickly became luxury items that many could not access or afford.

The fruit didn't come [any more], the prices have increased. We can't even afford them! I know I can't afford them, because I [was] the only one working in [an] office. Even [now] my kids [are] working [again], one or two or three . . . two of them working, I can't even say, 'give me some money to buy that', because they, too, need their money. If I boss them with their money, they will get tired of [frustrated with] working!

(Talena)

Talena explained that she wanted to be healthy and to purchase healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables. However, as the sole breadwinner in her family, she could not afford such luxuries. Once her children began working again, she could not take their salaries as she had in the past. She recognized that her children would get 'tired' (a literal translation from a Nauruan term, *kenongenang*, which in practice is often used to mean 'frustrated' and 'sick of the situation') if they could not choose how to spend their own money. Instead, as I have elaborated elsewhere (McLennan 2013), she would purchase individually-packaged food products or take-away meals for herself, and her children did likewise: this was the fairest approach that helped maintain good family relations. Her story of no longer being able to access or afford fresh foods was familiar among those who had experienced the economic prosperity of post-war Nauru and the relative scarcity of recent decades.

Government-sponsored interventions have recently been implemented in Nauru to address the shortage of fresh produce, including programmes to encourage people to grow fruits and vegetables in home kitchen gardens or community farms. Such initiatives that encourage local food production have increased across the world over the past twenty years (Hawkes 2013). Since the 1990s, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has promoted 'micro gardens', 'urban gardens', 'school gardens' and 'home gardens' worldwide through the World Food Programme, with the objective of improving food security. Since the early 2000s, and following a shift in emphasis from nutrient- to food-based dietary guidelines (WHO 1999), the World Health Organization (WHO) has formally considered local gardens to be potential avenues for improving diet and diet-related health (WHO 2003). Community gardening has been linked to improved wellbeing (McCormack *et al.* 2010) and community empowerment and involvement, particularly in the United States (Blair *et al.* 1991; Armstrong 2000). Research from the United States has shown how gardening has contributed to strengthening social relations (Sommer *et al.* 1994), improving psychological

wellbeing (McBey 1985) and increasing physical activity levels and fresh food consumption (Blair *et al.* 1991; Alaimo *et al.* 2008). It has also demonstrated that community gardening can reduce food costs (Armstrong 2000) and decrease the consumption of sweet foods and drinks (Blair *et al.* 1991).

Community gardens are framed by organizations such as the WHO and FAO as alternatives to mainstream industrial foodways insofar as they can supply communities, especially low-income communities that have long been dependent upon food imports, with fresh food that would otherwise be unaffordable or inaccessible to them. The local food supply provided by community gardens is removed from the global capitalist marketplace, where multinational brands provide cheap calories and unhealthy options. In other words, community gardens facilitate a transfer of power away from global entities and towards more 'sovereign' local communities. Evidence about community gardens in the United States is largely positive, and so it is generally assumed that similar models will be equally effective in non-Western settings. The failure described here of community garden initiatives in Nauru calls such assumptions into question. As Tsing argues with respect to the adoption of environmental movements of Western origin in Indonesia, 'unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power' (2011: 5). While Tsing is largely optimistic about the possibilities of global connection that enable alternative movements, the example of community gardens in Nauru illustrates how new arrangements that arise through globalizing practices and knowledges are not necessarily positive.

On the tiny island nation of Nauru, household kitchen gardens and local community farms feature prominently in the National Sustainable Development Strategy 2005–2025. Such initiatives are intended to ensure food security, improve health and wellbeing, promote gender equality, strengthen community participation and contribute to economic development. Through the Department of Agriculture, in collaboration with the Department of Women, the Department of Health and the Department of Commerce, Industry and Environment, the Government of Nauru aims to increase domestic agricultural production with the goal of 70 per cent of households successfully establishing kitchen gardens by 2025 (Government of Nauru 2009). Yet the interim milestone – for just 10 per cent of households to establish kitchen gardens by 2008 – was not achieved.¹

This chapter explores why alternatives to the industrial food system such as kitchen and community gardens not only fail to thrive in Nauru, but also become spaces for contestation and social friction. I begin by describing historical changes in food supply and dietary health that have occurred on Nauru over the past century. These changes have culminated in a diet of imported, industrially-processed foods, contributing to a significant burden of obesity and nutrition-related non-communicable diseases in Nauru since the 1960s (Taylor and Thoma 1983; Government of Nauru and WHO 2007). I then explain complex customs of land ownership in Nauru which affect current initiatives intended to increase fresh fruit and vegetable production and consumption. The first two sections on Nauru's food supply, diet and customs of land ownership provide an essential background for the subsequent ethnographic examples, which explain why local

and internationally-driven food growing initiatives on the island became contested – and later abandoned – spaces. As Wilson also suggests in Chapter 7, in order to understand the successes and failures of a nation's efforts to produce food for its citizens, it is necessary to interrogate the politics and social relations underpinning (post)colonial patterns of land use, food supply and demand.

This chapter is based upon ten months of ethnographic fieldwork in Nauru conducted between 2010 and 2011. Data collection predominantly consisted of participant observation and life history interviews (over fifty in total, with Nauruan people aged from twenty to eighty-three years old; pseudonyms are used to describe all interviewees). The ethnographic research was complemented by extensive archive searches in libraries in Australia, Nauru and the United Kingdom.

Historical changes in the Nauruan food supply and dietary health

The Republic of Nauru, located in Oceania, is the world's smallest nation. It is a single coral atoll measuring approximately six kilometres long and four kilometres wide. Most of the atoll is composed of high-grade phosphate covered with a thin layer of micronutrient-poor topsoil which makes it unsuitable for growing crops. Moreover, a legacy of twentieth-century phosphate mining has left a large proportion of the island's surface a rocky and uninhabitable 'moonscape'. The comparatively fertile coastal rim is densely covered in housing; the majority of the island's population of 10,000 people lives on this thin strip of land which measures less than four square kilometres in area.

Pre-colonial Nauruan island ecology was characterized by a narrow diversity of food sources, but a comparatively rich array of food products (Wedgewood 1936). Fish were, and remain, central to the Nauruan diet.² Two fruit trees in particular were also important: *epo*, the pandanus tree (*Pandanus tectorius* and *Pandanus pulposus*);³ and *ini*, the coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*).⁴ There is strong evidence that many products based on these seasonal foods were made and stored for years at a time through preservation practices such as cooking, drying and sweetening, and through social norms for storage and distribution. Preservation was a collaborative event that required family and community to gather together, often for months at a time, in the otherwise uninhabited centre of the island (Kayser 1934; Wedgewood 1936; McLennan 2013).

The colonial impact of the late nineteenth century changed these foodways dramatically, giving rise to a rapid increase in reliance upon imported foods. In Europe, new trade policies, railway and shipping links, and the development of methods of mass industrial food production were linked to a growing presence of imported provisions in British colonies such as Nauru. Nauru is of particular interest in investigating intersections between local and global food networks, for Nauruan households have relied almost entirely on imported foods since this time. The historical dominance of imported foods is firmly embedded in contemporary

Nauruan foodways: white rice is considered the 'traditional staple' of Nauruan people, even though rice has never been cultivated on the island. The people of Nauru incorporated foreign foods into their lives and culture, which were changing as a direct result of colonial, religious and ecological influences. As in other colonized island economies (for example, Trinidad and Cuba, see Wilson, Chapter 7) imported foods included fruits and vegetables, polished white rice, white flour, refined sugar and tinned preserved meat (Administration of Nauru 1922). They were tasty, convenient, linked to social status and offered, as colonial health authorities emphasized, much-needed dietary variety. The foods were sold in the European supply store on Nauru and their consumption was encouraged by colonial officials. They were affordable to Nauruans who earned money via salaried employment, land-related income derived from mining or other purposes (such as land rental for expatriate accommodation or government offices) or through trading *copra*⁵ or fish.

By the mid-twentieth century, coconuts and pandanus, along with the skills and knowledge required to process them into a variety of preserved food products, had been largely forgotten (Wedgewood 1936). The Japanese occupation of Nauru during the Second World War starkly highlighted the island's almost complete dependence upon imported food. As supply ships were frequently torpedoed, the island's large population of Japanese soldiers and Nauruan people survived predominantly on Japanese-farmed pumpkins (which had to be fertilized using large amounts of human excrement), rice rations and fish (Government of Nauru 1994). Regular food supplies resumed after the War, when colonial authorities intensified phosphate mining activities. These were accompanied by aggressive policies for Nauruan population growth, as the War had led to a significant population decline. At the same time, the people of Nauru began to fight for greater financial compensation for their resources, more autonomy and, eventually, political independence.

Political independence in 1968 gave the people of Nauru control over phosphate mining. Mining revenues escalated in the 1970s as phosphate began to be sold at world market prices rather than at cost-price to colonial authorities. The population continued to increase, resulting in the rapid urbanization of the coastal rim, as well as housing shortages. Political independence and associated social, political, economic and legal changes, combined with increased mining-related wealth, both limited Nauruans' access to land and permitted them to freely import goods from all over the world. Electricity was introduced in the 1960s, and refrigerators and freezers meant that fresh foods could be chilled for transport to Nauru for retail or private use. Retail stores and restaurants, particularly those operated by Chinese traders, expanded across the island. Eating in local Chinese restaurants and consuming individually-packaged, processed food when busy lives permitted became increasingly common (McLennan 2013).

The economy slowed during the 1990s and collapsed in the early 2000s. In many cases, salaries fell and even stopped. While historical household incomes are difficult to estimate, they broadly fell from several thousand Australian dollars

per month to several hundred (where AU\$100 is equivalent to approximately GB£50 or US\$75). Yet imported food prices remained constant. Imported perishable foods are much more expensive to transport and store than industrially-processed alternatives, and so fresh foods became a comparatively rare and valuable commodity. Whereas a can of ship-imported corned beef might cost fifty cents or one dollar, a bunch of Chinese cabbage grown locally, or several imported (wizened) carrots, would cost in excess of five dollars, if available at all.

Despite a long legacy of public health research and intervention (for example, Taylor and Thoma 1983; Government of Nauru and WHO 2007), and an even longer history of recommendations to alter food imports in Nauru,⁶ the rate of increase of obesity in Nauru between 1980 and 2008 was four times higher than the mean global increase (Finucane *et al.* 2011). Today, Nauru has some of the highest levels of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases in the world. As a result, life expectancy has remained stagnant since the 1960s, at approximately fifty years for men and sixty years for women (Carter *et al.* 2011). In the early 2000s, poor dietary health led to a mounting emphasis on kitchen gardens and community farms in Nauru. Local food-growing initiatives were driven by donor agendas focusing on health (increasing the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables), economic development (increasing household incomes by increasing the sale of fresh fruits and vegetables) and community empowerment (especially by increasing the participation of women and young people). Kitchen gardens were included in Nauru's National Sustainable Development Strategy 2005–2025, and they remain on the development agenda. Aid organizations have concentrated on improving awareness of the necessity for local, fresh produce for health reasons as well as income generation; they regularly provide tools and materials for developing gardens, and prizes to reward the best ones. A focus on these initiatives in Nauru illustrates the extent to which the official promotion of fresh foods and local networks of production, distribution and preparation are contested and largely unsuccessful in achieving intended health, social or economic gains.

Historical analysis illuminates the complex colonial and postcolonial underpinnings of the contemporary food supply and nutritional health in Nauru. The following section outlines how political, economic and social relations of land ownership and land use add to this complexity. These historical conditions and relations are central to understanding the failures of projects for local food production in Nauru, which are described in ethnographic detail later in the chapter.

Politics and social relations of land ownership

Issues of land ownership are central to understanding land use, food cultivation and distribution in Nauru. The whole island is divided into irregularly-shaped and individually-named and numbered plots of land, usually of less than one hectare. In the pre-colonial period, valuable land resources were considered to be underground wells, fruit-bearing trees, building materials (predominantly coconut, pandanus and *iyō* – also known as tomano or hard-wooded beach mahogany,

Calophyllum inophyllum) and ponds for rearing *ibiya* milkfish (*Chanos chanos*). When a person owned the land, they also owned whatever resources were on (or in) it. The exception was fruit-bearing trees, which could be owned independently of the land in which they grew. Land was tended regularly and had low boundary walls (Wedgewood 1936), suggesting long-standing local customs of land division.

Land division in Nauru today is reportedly based on pre-colonial land divisions formalized by German colonial powers in the late nineteenth century in order to collect taxes and enforce curfews. In the early twentieth century a land ordinance was established that allowed the British Phosphate Commission to lease land for mining and related purposes, such as constructing processing plants or houses for labourers (Keke 1994). While claiming to have maintained traditional boundaries, colonial powers began to impose their own values upon Nauruan land ownership customs. For example, they did not recognize subtle Nauruan distinctions between the ownership of land and the ownership of plants grown on it; owners of a portion of land were assumed to also be owners of the food-producing plants on it, and so mining compensation was paid to them for the loss of both. This continued into British colonial rule following the First World War.

Colonial authorities made it a requirement by law that all landowners had a collective responsibility to keep their land tidy whether they lived there or not; those that did not comply were fined. Owners had to clean, sweep, rake, pick up litter, and maintain any dwellings or structures on their land. They reportedly did so with pride. People like Hana noticed that changing laws, along with changing ways in which profits were derived from their land – from food provision (Stephen 1936) to *copra* farming (Rhone 1921) to phosphate mining – led to changing attitudes towards the land itself.

HANA: It used to be pretty clean here . . . in the olden days. Not since the phosphate boom. My grandma used to say that Nauru was really clean because they had this . . . it's like a penalty thing. . . . Say I'm from here, and I had a piece of land over there, I had to clean it. So they penalized the landowners that didn't clean up. Before, they had to go and clean up . . . the family, on the weekends. . . . I think that's how people knew their boundaries, and where their land[s] are. Because they cleaned it up!

AKM: Why did people stop cleaning it up?

HANA: They became too rich! They became too . . . life [was] too easy, they don't have to live off the island any more. They just receive the money from it.

Today the government, supported by donors, offers sporadic financial incentives and competitions which reward individuals for caring for their land at particular moments in time. The changing economic value of land – from a cared-for site of food production and family gatherings to a source of revenue if rented or mined – changed people's relationship with it. Where families would once come together to care for their land, today they debate about the division of it and the distribution of money from it. Changing relations around, and with, land are

amplified in contemporary economic conditions of uncertainty and insecurity. As illustrated in the ethnographic examples in the following section, these changing relations are central to the successes or failures of local food production.

While land is considered individually-owned, a system of collective ownership exists in practice. Like the division of land, this system is thought to have pre-colonial origins and to have been formalized by the colonial authorities. Today, land is generally inherited in equal shares apportioned to each of the deceased's children. The share that each child inherits is dependent upon the total number of children the deceased person has: if a mother of three children owns a one-tenth share of a portion of land, upon her death each of her three children will inherit one-third of the mother's share, or one-thirtieth of the total portion – and so on, such that increasing numbers of people own increasingly small shares of a portion of land. It is now rare that a portion of land is owned by fewer than twenty people. In many cases, hundreds of people might jointly own just one hectare of land (Keke 1994, 2010a, 2010b). This is not to say that the land is physically divided up; land boundaries do not officially change, although there is suspicion that corrupt officials may have re-drawn them in the past.

Inherited land shares determine the proportion of money earned through land rental payments, mining profits and other activities that generate income from the land. Major decisions about land use (for example, if one sibling wishes to construct a house on it) may only go ahead if the majority of owners (generally at least 75 per cent) vote in support of it. If the widow/widower of a landowner survives, they are granted lifetime ownership (LTO) of their deceased spouse's land and its profits until they pass away, at which time the land and its profits pass back to the descendants of the landowner and not to the descendants of the spouse or other members of the spouse's family. This applies equally whether the deceased is male or female.

In practice, the current application of Nauru's system of land inheritance is far from straightforward, perhaps as a combined result of mistrust and inter-kin tension relating to monetary disputes and economic insecurity, a growing population and administrative corruption or errors. People apply the principle of equal inheritance by all children to complex family trees as they attempt to reinterpret or reconfirm current ownership arrangements. Today, few people leave wills which stipulate alternative arrangements for land inheritance or which detail, for example, an arrangement where an adopted child might receive a greater land share. One reason for this is that people fear that if they prepare a will it will hasten their death. Another reason is that so many deaths in Nauru occur unexpectedly early from accidents, stroke and heart attack (for example, see Taylor and Thoma 1983) that there is simply no time to prepare a will. Occasionally, landowners might make verbal or written agreements (this occurred especially during the Second World War); many of these are currently being challenged by other family members who consider themselves disadvantaged and for whom oral accounts are considered insufficient or untrustworthy evidence. Official records are sometimes vague or unclear, and so they are informally or formally contested. Disputes about land ownership are also rooted in different

interpretations of relatedness, where scientific notions of biological or 'blood' relatedness are sometimes at odds with ideas of kin relatedness linked to adoption, family divisions associated with divorce, re-marriage, having children out of wedlock and so on. This is further compounded by poor social memory, which is largely the result of low life expectancies and limited inter-generational knowledge transfer. Moreover, the Nauruan language is predominantly oral and aural rather than written, thus written records are not always available. Many also argue that land ownership records have been changed over time, either intentionally or accidentally, and so official records are often challenged. Disputes about land ownership are frequently unresolvable, and land claims cases are commonly contested in the Nauruan court. One result of these disputes is that the present ownership status of some plots of land is officially 'undetermined'.

Many land-related disagreements have their basis in emergent (neo)liberal values which emphasize economic self-interest. In such disagreements, individual economic interests become at odds with the interests of others and broader social interests. During 2010, for example, mining in one area was interrupted when the owners of an already mined portion of land refused to allow a road to pass through their land to permit access to a mine site on others' property further inland. They demanded financial compensation for the use of their land as a passage for traffic. Mining operations were suspended for days, and it was widely known that the Nauruan government was incurring mounting costs and debts to foreign shipping companies as cargo ships were kept waiting offshore to be loaded with phosphate.

Contemporary land ownership in Nauru is dynamic and complicated. It is shaped by historical forces but continues to be fiercely contested in the context of current relationships. This has implications for what is grown in it and on it. There is no clear agreement on whether current land ownership structures extend to food grown on the land. In practice, only the people who grow produce on the land are considered to 'own' it, but in theory, all landowners in the family may claim rights to access food grown on their land. Such competing values have implications for home and community gardening initiatives intended to address nutritional health, to which I now turn.

Ethnographic examples of local food production

Local food growing initiatives emphasized in Nauru's National Sustainable Development Strategy 2005–2025 aim to encourage people to grow fresh fruits and vegetables locally, on their own land. It is suggested that fruit and vegetable consumption, and so both food security and nutritional health, might be improved if people grow their own produce. Such initiatives may also contribute to food sovereignty and ecological sustainability, although this is not explicitly acknowledged. The sale of fresh produce should also contribute to economic security. Talena (cited on p. 127) was one of many people I met who had tried to establish a kitchen garden. Hers had been more successful than many; for a short while it had even been used by the Government of Nauru as a showcase to which donor representatives and development consultants would be brought to demonstrate the

potential for successful investment. As we talked, she glanced at the rocky, dusty space of earth nearby, remembering what it had looked like as a garden and how she had had to climb up a ladder to tend to the beans: 'Yeah, in my kitchen garden I [used to] grow cabbages, beans, long beans, snake beans . . . cucumbers, um . . . and Chinese cabbage and . . . I . . . [had] some pumpkins there . . . some water-melons' (Talena). I asked her why the garden didn't exist any more, and she sighed, explaining matter-of-factly:

[The plants] die[d] when I got tired [frustrated] (laughs) because I don't want to do [it] . . . it [was] only me and my husband doing the digging, so . . . yeah. I just come and pick them and I share to my family, brothers, sisters. I share to the community. And because I used to call it . . . um . . . the 'community's kitchen garden'. But no one comes to help in it. Only me, my cousin who's living down in the corner of the bit there . . . It's me, herself and her husband, we're doing it and then, when we collect, we harvest, we feed *all* the people. And it's not fair, like we call it the kitchen . . . the community kitchen garden, but nobody comes to turn up to help.

(Talena)

Frustration with unfairness is not unique to Talena's experience. Other gardens I watched being carefully planted and cultivated failed for similar reasons. When the produce was ripe, people who had not been involved in tending the garden arrived to take their rightful share of the produce. Some gardeners, like Talena, felt a strong obligation to share with the community; a value much more common among older Nauruans I met and which is reflected in other ethnographic accounts on concepts of sharing in Nauru (Wedgewood 1936; McLennan and Ulijaszek 2014).

Reasons for a claim to garden produce varied. Some insisted that they had a right to a share because they were landowners. Others claimed a right to the produce as extended family members; sharing amongst family members is commonly practised in many Pacific island communities. Others cited past debts. Of those who did get fresh produce, some would take it home to eat but others would sell it to Chinese traders or foreigners, who paid good money for fresh produce. They could then use the money as they wished; often to purchase (imported) food as well as other goods. While in the past, status was attributed to giving fresh food to others in the community (Wedgewood 1936; McLennan and Ulijaszek 2014), now status is attached to brand-name foods, electronic equipment, clothes and cars (McLennan 2013). At the same time, these same claims left the people who had cultivated the gardens feeling angry, upset or frustrated, as if their produce had been stolen from them. As Barton explained: 'if you have a garden, then your cousin, your brother, wants his claim of vegetables . . . they don't want the other guy to succeed if they don't succeed with them . . . but they want him to do all the hard work.' There was little point in putting in hard work, he reasoned, if it was all just going to be unfairly taken by others who did not contribute.

Home gardens like Talena's are framed by donor representatives (such as those described throughout this chapter) as alternatives to the global capitalist food economy and the unpredictability and unhealthy foods which it brings. In this reading, gardens provide food sovereignty insofar as they give local people power over their own food supply by developing what the WHO (2003) calls 'small-scale [food] production'. However, as human geographers have previously argued, 'alternatives' often (necessarily) enter into wider capitalist relations and spaces (see, for example, Fuller and Jonas 2003). In the case of Nauru, while the foods produced are materially separated from global markets and the inequalities inherent in them, the local cultivation and distribution of these foods is steeped in commercial economic values of immediate and measurable material profit, loss and fairness. At the same time, donors and other external organizations are encouraged to actively contribute to, and be involved in, this project of local food production (WHO 2003). Thus, while food is produced in a space imagined to be 'alternative' to global capitalist food networks, it is certainly not free from capitalist systems of accumulation, appropriation and power. Instead, and echoing what Morris and FitzHerbert argue in Chapter 1 with respect to Māori potato growers, the premise that the people of Nauru live in either a capitalist or a non-capitalist system oversimplifies the complex ways in which both systems underpin food production, distribution and consumption. Cultural values of accumulation underscore Nauruans' attitudes towards their, and others', gardens, as much as values of sharing and reciprocity. As everyone feels entitled to more than it is possible to grow and share, frictions result.

Even seemingly 'successful' kitchen gardens highlight these tensions. I knew of one garden tended by a woman named Ginasii, which was thriving quite well in 2010. When I enquired about Ginasii's secret to success, I found repeated iterations of similar tensions. Ginasii's garden supplies had been largely imported by expatriate friends willing to help by either carrying goods in from overseas, or including goods like bags of potting mix in larger consignments. I also discovered that Ginasii was not very close to her extended family – they had fallen out over disputes about money and how it ought to be spent – and so she felt no obligation to share her fruits and vegetables with people beyond her nuclear family. When I asked her whether her family could help to maintain the garden in exchange for some produce, she smiled and shook her head, commenting that 'even if your family did help you, they would ask for payment'. So, while Ginasii had fewer people demanding a share of her produce, she also had fewer people to help tend the garden. This made it extremely difficult to maintain, especially given her full-time employment, and it would go through cycles of disrepair and flourishing. Ginasii's garden would frequently lapse, because when she had busy periods at work she had no time to tend her garden and water it regularly.

Similar social trends and tensions underlie the failure of community farms. In the late 2000s, the Taiwanese government, then a major aid donor to the country, supported the establishment of a national fruit and vegetable farm in Nauru. The farm was located alongside the shady Buada Lagoon in the interior of the island. It included two large plots containing fluffy Chinese cabbages, bright red tomatoes

and swollen cucumbers. The two plots were separated by a dirt track. This land was selected for a range of reasons: it was in a part of the island that remained shady and vegetated, it was owned by only a few landowners and the majority of them had agreed to the lease, and the ruling political party had connections with the landowners. Personal connections make negotiating permission for lease more straightforward, while facilitating the lease of land to overseas donors channels lucrative revenues to family and friends. During my fieldwork between 2010 and 2011, I enjoyed visiting the garden every so often. Little seedlings rapidly flourished into lush vegetables as the highly-skilled Taiwanese graduate staff taught local trainees to tend neat rows of vegetables. Research was being carried out to identify the best species for the Nauruan climate, and school classes regularly visited to learn about gardening, farming and cooking. I had not visited for around four months and decided to walk past. I was surprised to see a stark contrast between the plots on either side of the track. Although one remained green and fertile, in the other the plants were withered and brown. I asked around to find out what had happened, and learned that the landowners had waited until the produce was big and then decided to raise the land rental price because they wanted to take over the farm, grow the produce themselves and either keep it for their family or sell it. So they raised the rent, which forced the Taiwanese government development workers off the land, and took over the garden. 'But', said one person, scowling, 'they [the landowners] didn't want to do the work'. They also lacked the skills and knowledge necessary to cultivate foreign plants.

The story was not quite as simple as it first appeared, however. The landowners had not simply desired to take over the farm to reap the profits for themselves. They had also taken a dislike to where the produce from their own land went. Produce from the Taiwanese farm was distributed widely; some was sold, some was given to expatriate diplomats and officials (especially the Taiwanese Ambassador), some was given to school children when they visited the farm or through a national free school meal programme, and some was given each month to Members of Parliament to distribute through their communities. I heard mixed opinions about this distribution. Some people felt it was fairly distributed. Others disagreed. But all agreed that people with money or political connections had the vegetables and the power to choose who had access to them. The landowners had responded to a situation they perceived to be unfair to them, in a way that others perceived to be greedy, selfish and not community-minded. Conflicting ideas of fairness, entitlement and value meant that, where this community farm was concerned, no one could agree on what would be the fairest way to proceed.

Friction did not only arise over established farms and gardens. It also complicated attempts to establish them. A community dialogue between donors, landowners and youth group leaders about a proposed community farm project brought some of these tensions to light. The informal meeting was being held on a sunny afternoon, but the meeting room itself was cool and dark. Sheets hung over the louvred windows to keep the heat and dust out, and an air conditioner hummed in the corner. People sat around the room on moulded plastic chairs. Most had already heard about the proposal in initial consultations; this

meeting was intended to start discussing details with landowners and young, unemployed people.

The project manager, a foreign volunteer, was enthusiastic about the multi-donor cross-sectoral collaborative project. She outlined the basic agreement: donors would pay money to rent land, provide equipment (such as seedlings, gardening tools and chicken feed), and pay young people to farm and manage it. The salary would be set at AU\$70 per fortnight for the first three months, then AU\$140 per fortnight for the first year (the standard national wage for a Nauruan person at the time was AU\$150 per fortnight), then up to AU\$450 per month, with increases as the young Nauruans progressed with their training. It would essentially be a national apprenticeship programme, with formally certified training in agriculture, animal husbandry, business management and related fields, with the young people involved taking on different specializations, roles and training. The produce would initially be used to supply free infant school and primary school breakfasts in all twelve districts (a donor-funded initiative that was, at the time, using imported foods); in this way the money allocated for school breakfasts would be directed away from imported foods and towards locally produced alternatives. Any excess food could be sold by the farm to begin to build a profit base. Only three of Nauru's twelve districts would participate in the pilot scheme initially; if they were successful, donors were committed to extending the project to other districts.

The young people in the room sat quietly; shy, but also silently recognizing that the power to speak in the room rested with one particular landowner and community leader. The people of Nauru are often wary of foreigners promising money. To understand this, one only has to look to their history of colonial and postcolonial exploitation and of opportunists peddling dubious investment opportunities (for example, see Connell 2006). The foreign project manager aimed to secure the commitment of one landowning family initially to trial the scheme and demonstrate to others that it could be successful. The community leader reacted aggressively towards the project manager as she presented the project on behalf of the donors. He manoeuvred his sturdy body as if to intimidate the petite foreigner, which emphasized the clear gender imbalance in the room. Why should his community be providing 'free food' to children in schools outside of his community? Why could donors not simply give him the money so that he could choose what to do with it, rather than have a foreigner manage the project? He argued that 'this sounds like you're just taking our young people for slave labour'. And he could not understand where the money would come from in the longer term. His aggressive and angry comments were focused clearly on money and power: who would get the donor money and who would get the profits?

The community leader was not representative of everyone, but his concerns appeared to be shared by many, who sat nodding quietly in agreement. The project manager, exasperated that this man seemed selfish and ignorant of the 'bigger picture' envisaged by her and the donors, became increasingly irate as she responded to his repeated questions. They were still angrily debating when some of the people around the room, especially younger people, clearly began to

disengage, staring blankly at walls or flipping out their phones. Some even left, slipping outside to wait in cars. I eventually recognized that the discussion inside was going around in circles, so I followed the others outside. They broke their silence as they began to chatter. One person wanted to punch the outspoken leader. Another wondered why the donors were dealing with such an idiot if there were lots of other districts who wanted to be involved. Others remained silent and contemplative; some seemed almost resigned in their agreement with the community leader. Most young people there said that they were keen to be involved in the programme, but they also recognized that it was not their decision to make. They could see their chance being taken away from them.

While such programmes are developed in collaboration with the Department of Women and are intended to encourage the participation of both women and young people in community activities, the way in which this programme was designed and implemented challenged community cohesion and emphasized disempowerment of these groups. Women had largely not even attended the meeting, as donors dealt mainly with people recognized as leaders through colonially imposed frameworks of community leadership. Ironically, there is evidence of female community leadership in Nauru until the arrival of colonists and the installation of an all-male Council of Chiefs in the early 1900s (Williams 1971).⁷ And young people, who had gone into the room feeling optimistic about the project, had departed feeling powerless and disengaged. In the end, the project was never initiated.

As with some food sovereignty movements, the establishment of kitchen and community gardens in Nauru is not a local or autonomous response to (post)-colonial or corporate foodways. Rather, gardens are bound up in regimes of local and global power. As initiatives imposed by development partners, they remain rooted in capitalist frameworks which emphasize foreign values and de-emphasize local values and networks of social relations. Over time, these foreign values become entangled with local ones, creating new and hybrid moral landscapes. Nauruan home and community gardens illustrate this entanglement, and show how important aspects of Nauruan life, such as land ownership, attributions of status and social relations, underpin the successes or failures of foreign-designed projects geared towards the production of local, healthy food. People such as Talena lose interest in gardening because they cannot see how it benefits them: frustrations arise from trying to reconcile remnants of an economy formerly based on sharing with more individualistic values and relations which inhere in introduced colonial or donor programmes. This friction does not just impact diets, but also community cohesion.

Conclusion

As Born and Purcell (2006) contend, it cannot simply be assumed that local or 'traditional' food systems are preferable to global ones. One reason for this is that food systems are fundamentally relational, and relations and values which underpin them change over time. In Nauru, the introduction of industrially-processed

imported foods in the colonial era led to separations between local food producers and consumers, and the establishment of new relationships with global suppliers. These relationships were initially mediated by colonial powers, but in the post-colonial era such mediation was largely abandoned in favour of market freedoms and the transfer of power to private corporations. Today, relationships between producers and consumers at the local level cannot simply be re-established because networks of social relations and the values underpinning exchange relations and rights to land and food in Nauru have changed profoundly.

Moreover, it cannot be assumed that nutritionally healthy foods, wellbeing, economic development and community empowerment are always positively associated. Relationships between these are made even more complex by local and global social histories as well as changing social relations and values. In the Nauruan case, encouraging economic profit within the community appears to undermine efforts to improve health. Fresh food – understood from a nutritional perspective as nourishing – serves to both strengthen existing power and health inequalities and reduce community cohesion. This, in turn, can have negative health consequences (see, for example, Holt-Lunstad *et al.* 2010). Further, locals who do not (or cannot) consume fresh, local produce risk being criticized for failing to consume it, which may also have negative health consequences (see Brewis 2014).

Relations of power are central to the successes or failures of kitchen gardens and local farms in Nauru. In all examples presented, fresh, locally grown produce appears inherently unfair as it is not necessarily available to those who do the work, but is instead distributed to those in certain positions of power: those who own land, those who have the money to purchase fresh produce and/or those who have social connections to politicians or foreign aid workers and employees. Gardens fail because in local settings power relations inherent in locally grown food are transparent and experienced on a daily basis as fundamentally unfair. Talena at once sensed pride at growing a garden and then disappointed that nobody else came to help. Ginasii was happy that she could provide for her own family and enjoyed watching things grow, but was also frustrated by her extended family's constant demands. Landowners involved in local farms were often angry at the ways in which the state or donor agencies dictated food distribution, even in cases when food was distributed to some of the most vulnerable (such as through the national infant school breakfast programme). This frustration has the potential to destabilize local structures of governance.

In contrast, the relations implicit in global, imported foods are opaque and distant in Nauru. From a local perspective, these foods are more democratic; they are uniform, individually-packaged and available to all at what is perceived to be the same fair (and comparatively cheap) cost to everyone. As Talena, and many others, found, family friction was reduced if everyone purchased their own foods on their own terms. At the supermarket, fairness and equivalence could be clearly calculated and negotiated, and power relations were not experienced or felt when food came from such a long way away. In addition, the supermarket was reliable and trustworthy, unlike gardening, and so could buffer the unpredictability of gardening for people such as Ginasii.

While injustices of the global food system are evident to the ethnographer, this global political economic view does not necessarily translate into everyday lived realities for people as they seek to feed their families, conspicuously consume certain products and maintain good relations with their community and friends. Recent efforts to introduce locally produced food focus on the resources required – seeds, water, skills and so on – but not on the producer–consumer relationships at the heart of food production, distribution and consumption. Food-based approaches to health in Nauru may be unsuccessful because in focusing on food they do not take into account long-term social ties, relations and hierarchies that structure food networks over time. In places like Nauru, the reconfiguring of relationships – between people within the community, between people and their land, between food producers and consumers and between locals and well-intentioned outsiders – underpins the failure of sovereign spaces of food production and consumption to emerge. While food once served to reinforce and strengthen these relationships, changing power relations and cultural values mean that it now creates friction instead.

Notes

- 1 In the 2002 census, there were 1,677 households in Nauru (living in a total of 1,652 private dwellings); 70 per cent would be approximately 1,174 households, and 10 per cent would be approximately 168 households.
- 2 Fish are eaten raw, smoked, sun-dried or cooked (Kayser 2003). There is no evidence of pre-colonial fermentation practices on Nauru.
- 3 Pandanus fruit was an important staple carbohydrate in Nauru until regular trading was established with European ships in the late 1800s. It was 'considered a more important food than coconuts, so much so that if a man possesses three acres of land he will plant two of them with pandanus' (Stephen 1936: 53). The preservation process was a community event held in the centre of the island (Kayser 1934). Two key products were *edongo*, dried pandanus-cake which looked like a strip of leather and reportedly tasted like dried figs, and *ekareba*, pandanus flour.
- 4 Coconut food products include the soft jelly-like flesh and sweet milky liquid of the young green fruit. Mature, brown coconuts yield sturdier flesh which can be grated and squeezed for a cream rich in fat. The spathe of the coconut, or pod that forms around a palm flower, can be tapped to collect a sweet sap called toddy. Nauruans preserved toddy through a cooking process which concentrated the sugar and resulted in a thick red-coloured syrup, *ekamwirara*. If coconuts are stored for over three years then the flesh becomes soft and yellow. In the past Nauruans ate this as a snack called *emette* (Wedgewood 1936). Coconut flesh can also be dried in the sun and pressed to extract coconut oil.
- 5 Rhone (1921: 561) reports that the product called *copra*, sun-dried coconut flesh used specifically for oil (fuel) extraction that was Nauru's primary export pre-1905, was not made in the Pacific before 1872.
- 6 George Bray's (1927) dietary survey reported that everyday foods were coconut products and fish, as well as navy biscuits and refined white sugar. Foods such as tinned meats, rice, flour and fruits were also being imported and incurred no customs duty (Administration of Nauru 1922). Bray made a series of recommendations to the colonial authorities. A toddy emulsion rich in Vitamin B was given to infants and quickly improved infant mortality rates; however, his recommendations to ban sugar and make wholemeal flour and brown rice the staple cereals of the island were not implemented.

Nancy Kirk's (1957) dietary survey found the staple foods in all Nauruan houses to be white rice, white bread, sugar, tea and tinned meat. Negligible amounts of locally sourced fresh food were consumed: only one family surveyed caught fish regularly, and this was often sold to other families or foreigners. While the recommendation to introduce powdered milk in schools was followed, the recommendations to subsidize vegetables and fruits and to increase imports of brown rice were not. Such studies highlight the historical depth of dietary change in Nauru.

- 7 Since colonial records began, only two women have ever held formal national leadership roles (District Chiefs in the colonial period, or Members of Parliament in the post-independence period): Ruby Thoma (née Dediya, 1980s) and Charmaine Scotty (2010s).

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ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN NEW POSTCOLONIALISMS

Postcolonialism, Indigeneity and Struggles for Food Sovereignty

Alternative food networks in subaltern
spaces

Edited by
Marisa Wilson

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