

Aid Across Islands

Taiwanese agricultural specialists strive to boost the quality of life in the Solomon Islands.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY OSCAR CHUNG

Every workday, Lee Wei-chih (李威志) tours the pigsties on the compound of the Taiwan Technical Mission in the Solomon Islands, carefully checking the status of pregnant pigs, newborn piglets, and sows that have recently given birth. The diligence with which he approaches the task illustrates the importance of the livestock to the group's work in the country. "We sell the piglets to locals at cost price," says the senior specialist. "We're here to improve people's lives."

Located on the main road in the nation's capital of Honiara on Guadalcanal Island, the compound serves as a base of operations for fruit, rice, vegetable and pig farming experts from the Taiwan International Cooperation and Development Fund (TaiwanICDF), a Republic of China (ROC) government-supported organization charged with providing aid and technical support to developing countries,



The selection of fruits and vegetables on offer at the Central Market in the Solomon Island's capital of Honiara has increased significantly in recent decades due in large part to the efforts of the Taiwan Technical Mission in the country.



primarily the nation's diplomatic allies. For decades, specialists at the site have been working to improve agricultural practices in the underdeveloped country.

The ROC established formal relations with the Solomon Islands in March 1983. It launched its Agricultural Technical Mission in the nation later that same year, with the project subsequently coming under the administration of TaiwanICDF when the organization was founded in 1996.

Of the ROC's six allies in the Pacific, the Solomon Islands is the largest and most populous. The archipelago nation spans over 28,000 square kilometers and is home to around 545,000 people. In view of the country's size, population and development status, TaiwanICDF carries out more aid and technical assistance projects in the Solomon Islands than any of the other five ROC allies in the region. The unique bond between the two nations is also evident in Taiwan's response to a crisis that occurred there 15 years ago.

"The ROC is the only country that didn't close its embassy when ethnic tensions that began escalating in 1998 peaked with violent riots in the summer of 2000," says Victor Yu (于德勝), the nation's ambassador to the Solomon Islands, referring to the conflict between natives of Guadalcanal and Malaita provinces. "Taiwan and the Solomon Islands help each other. We work to improve the quality of life in the country and they support us in our efforts to seek deeper participation in the international community."

Over the years, TaiwanICDF has expanded its work in the nation to include infrastructure development and scientific research. After the Solomon Islands was hit by a major storm in April 2014, the Taiwanese





Courtesy of Embassy of Republic of China (Taiwan) in the Solomon Islands

Republic of China Ambassador to the Solomon Islands Victor Yu, right, co-hosts the groundbreaking ceremony for the Integrated Pig and Agriculture Training Center in Malaita Province in June 2015. The facility will be operated by the Taiwan Technical Mission (above).

The Taiwan Technical Mission helped establish the Don Bosco Rural Training Center in Guadalcanal (left).



aid organization joined forces with World Vision, an international humanitarian group, to implement a number of public health initiatives in a badly affected community in southeastern Guadalcanal. TaiwanICDF has earmarked US\$500,000 for these projects, which include designing and building a water supply system to replace one destroyed by flooding resulting from the storm.

The organization also provides financial backing and logistical support for Taiwan-led efforts to survey the botanical resources of the nation, roughly 90 percent of which is covered by forests. In 2007, a group of Japanese scientists received funding from their government to launch a project to catalog the country's

plant life. In 2013, the work was turned over to a team of Taiwanese botanists from a number of institutions, notably the National Museum of Natural Science (NMNS) and Dr. Cecilia Koo Botanic Conservation Center (KBCC), which are based in central Taiwan's Taichung City and the southern county of Pingtung, respectively.

"The Japanese focused on plant species they consider useful, but the Taiwanese team's work is more comprehensive," says Fred Pitisopa, deputy commissioner of the National Herbarium and Botanical Garden Division of the Solomon Islands Ministry of Forests and Research. "They catalog plants irrespective of their potential usefulness."

The work often requires researchers to stay in remote areas for more than 15 days at a time, notes Aleck Yang (楊宗愈), an NMNS scientist and the project's executive secretary. He explains that living samples are sent back to the KBCC in Pingtung. "There's an urgent need to study and preserve the plant life in the Solomon Islands considering the threats it faces such as frequent earthquakes," he says.

Yang adds that if Taiwanese scientists find commercial applications for plant species, the resultant benefits will be shared with the Solomon Islands government, as stipulated in the memorandum of agreement on scientific research signed by the two sides.

While the scope of the Taiwan Technical Mission's work has consistently evolved over the years, agricultural technical assistance remains its primary focus. "Decades ago, the selection of vegetables and fruits available here was quite limited. Leaf vegetables were especially rare," Yu says. "But if you shop in the Central Market in the capital today, you can find a wide variety of them. This is in large part due to the efforts of Taiwan's farming experts."



TaiwanICDF helps a considerable number of communities and organizations grow staple crops like rice, sweet potatoes and cassava by offering guidance and resources. The Don Bosco Rural Training Center on Guadalcanal Island is among the institutions that have benefited from the group's expertise. The facility, named for a 19th century Italian Roman Catholic priest, was founded in 2004 with the assistance of the Taiwanese aid organization, which helped clear the land earmarked for the center and sent specialists to teach agricultural skills.

Over the years, staff members have mastered these techniques and the center now operates independently, though TaiwanICDF

Shiue Sheuan-pyng, left, and Lee Wei-chih check on the status of piglets at the Taiwan Technical Mission's main compound in Honiara.

specialists still provide consultancy services to the institution, which currently has 150 students. "We're now completely self-sufficient," says Father Joseph Thanh, a Vietnamese national who helped establish the center. "We can live on what we grow on our own."

Though the vast majority of rice consumed in the Solomon Islands still comes from overseas, experts believe there is substantial potential for growth in domestic cultivation. “The quality of imported rice isn’t good, but people usually aren’t aware of that until they taste rice that’s been grown locally with the help of the Taiwanese specialists,” says Jimi Saelea, permanent secretary of the Solomon Islands Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock.

The official also gives considerable credit to Taiwan for boosting the development of pig farming in his nation. “Pigs are very important in the Solomon Islands. Across the country, no festival would be complete without pork,” he explains.

Launched in 2004, TaiwanICDF’s pig farming mission focuses on providing high-quality piglets to locals. It also includes support programs, such as one that teaches agricultural workers how to produce feed using domestically grown crops. “It used to take eight to nine months to raise pigs weighing 40 to 50 kilograms, but today it takes only four to five months for a pig to grow to 60 kilograms,” Lee says. “That also means you can save a lot on feed.”

A veterinary medicine major, Lee designed the pig farming project 11 years ago, before leaving the country in 2008 to join TaiwanICDF’s technical mission in Swaziland in southern Africa. He returned to the Solomon Islands in May last year to expand the scheme on two fronts. First, the mission is working to develop better disease prevention strategies. Second, TaiwanICDF is increasing the scale of the project in order to offer piglets and services to farms in other regions of the country. To this end, it is currently constructing two new pig breeding centers—one in northern Malaita Province and another in Western Province—to complement its primary facility in Guadalcanal.



Botanists Fred Pitisopa, left, and Aleck Yang study samples collected from the mountains of the Solomon Islands by Taiwanese researchers.

“It’s quite troublesome and expensive for farmers living in these two areas to come to Honiara to purchase piglets from us, so our new outreach policy will make a big difference to them,” Lee says. The facilities are scheduled to become operational in the second half of this year, according to Shiue Sheuan-pyng (薛煇坪), leader of the technical mission in the country.

Though much has been achieved, TaiwanICDF’s efforts to provide assistance are often hampered by the nation’s poor infrastructure. Shiue notes that the vast majority of rural areas lack Internet access, telephone services and even electricity, requiring specialists to travel for hours to conduct face-to-face talks with local partners. “And many places aren’t accessible by car either because there aren’t any roads at all, so you sometimes have to travel by boat,” he adds.

An even more fundamental issue disrupting, or even preventing, aid initiatives concerns land ownership. According to Yu, much of the land in the country is owned by tribes rather than individuals, which makes it time-consuming and complicated to acquire plots. Additionally, it is not uncommon for multiple members of a tribe to claim ownership of a single parcel of land, leading to chaotic legal disputes. “This is the biggest problem hindering the development of the Solomon Islands. Many projects have to be halted halfway through because of land ownership issues,” the ambassador says.

Though there are challenges to conducting aid missions in the nation, the ROC is committed to boosting the quality of life in the Solomon Islands, one of its staunchest allies. “As a responsible member of the international community, we have a duty to help,” Yu says. “Decades ago, Taiwan was a recipient of foreign aid. Now, as a developed nation, we have an obligation to provide assistance to countries in need.” ■