

## Postscript to “Analysis of 2014 imports into Tokelau from Samoa”, Tokelau National Statistics Office, September 2016

The main report on 2014 imports provides objective data on Tokelau consumption patterns which, it is hoped, could form the basis of policy development and a baseline for following success thereof.

In a consultation round with the three nuku in August 2016 it was stated very clearly that the author makes no judgement and it is not the role of the Tokelau National Statistics Office to make recommendations, other than perhaps to repeat the analysis in a few years.

Nevertheless recommendations were asked for. Based on observations and discussions during this and previous visits to Tokelau, and feedback on the draft report, part 2, I offer the following suggestions. Note that the author is not a medical health practitioner, but a biologist by training (leading quite a healthy lifestyle with a healthy weight), formerly employed by the NZ Department of Conservation and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP).



*Examples of Tokelau guesthouse breakfast (fried bread, bacon, canned spaghetti); lunch (sausages and chips); dinner (chicken curry on rice): big portions high in fatty meat and starch, low in vitamins.*

**Foods:** Meals tend to be high in fat, carbohydrate and salt but low in vitamins and fibre. The above-illustrated meals in one day of a nuku accommodation are a case in point. Eating less food fried in batter would be a start (see the Samoan posters overleaf). Better food choices could be made.

Indeed there is a lot of scope for producing healthy foods on the atolls. The keyhole garden initiative by the Youth groups, led by the Nukunonu compound in Moamoa, Apia, is a good case in point. Such gardens may start produce lots of healthy vegetables for sustained use by the atoll communities.

Hydroponics have been successfully trialled for growing vegetables. In addition, the traditional practice of using some of the uninhabited motu for taro and other food crops could be revived.

Rather than families feeding their own pigs, the Taupulega could declare this an industry where on each atoll 4-5 permanent employees look after a community piggery, qualifying as public service work. Buying local pork chops from the piggery rather than from New Zealand or Fiji via Samoa would not only save money, a healthier end product could also be the result.

Likewise, a chicken farm could be looked after by women's groups to save consuming over-fed chicken from USA. Locally farming ducks has also been proposed as a healthy alternative.

The traditional lifestyle and menu contained much fresh fish, probably one of the best foods available anywhere. The imported cans of mackerel and tuna, although convenient, are a poor alternative and add to the waste solid problem.



*Samoa posters encouraging healthy eating, and World food day celebrations in Atafu, 2015.*



Snacks such as Bongo are mostly carbohydrate (including sugar) and fat: unhealthy and not really satisfying any appetite in small quantities. Fresh fruit would be the much better alternative.

Indeed generally smaller portions would be good. It may not suit the Pacific hospitality that any dinner should be less than a feast, but smaller plates and smaller piles of food may lead to smaller portions being taken and help contribute to food intake reduction. Developing strong abdominal muscles can prevent a stomach from expanding very far, thus preventing over-eating.

Dry white rice forms the main staple food in Tokelau: a good food from a nutrition, transport, weight and waste point of view. A worthwhile alternative in terms of food security could be parboiled rice. It has a preparation technique that pushes vitamins and minerals from the husk into the grain and as such is much healthier (personal communication professor Elaine Rush, AUT; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parboiled\\_rice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parboiled_rice)). If not available from Samoa at a similar price, this could be imported from elsewhere, with any additional cost met by the tax increase on cigarettes and alcohol, as is on the cards for the near future.

**Non-alcoholic drinks:** The ban of fizzy drinks in Tokelau is laudable but a high consumption of Just Juice is a poor alternative, as it contains almost as much sugar as Coca-Cola does. Milo, Zap, and energy drinks are also high in sugar. Raro, Tang, etc. could be made more dilute than the package prescribes, although plain water would of course not deliver all that extra flavoured sugar.

With an excess of coconuts available on the atolls, it is for the outsider hard to understand why the healthy niu doesn't feature more in daily life, other than in ceremonial welcomes by Taupulega.

**Sugar:** Clearly the high sugar consumption, either "pure" or hidden in other foods are a great concern. On average each Tokelauan consumes the equivalent of a 50-kg bag of sugar per year. For adults, that is at least 3 times the *maximum* amount recommended by WHO, for children 6 times. (The *ideal* quantity is actually half of that again!)

Milo is already high in sugar and does not need additional teaspoons, and perhaps the number of teaspoons of sugar in tea and coffee should be reduced. Many cooking recipes include sugar that is in fact unnecessary, e.g. spaghetti. Why traditional dishes such as uto (germinated coconut) are ruined by adding extra sugar during their 'modern' preparation is a mystery.

**Alcoholic drinks:** NZ and other international guidelines suggest that men should not have more than 3 standard alcoholic drinks a day (the equivalent of one large beer bottle) and women no more than 2 per day, both with two alcohol-free days per week. While for the average Tokelauan drinker this is a far-removed goal, it would be worth striving for. Not only in terms of alcohol intake for relaxation (i.e. intoxication), but also because 2 standard drinks provide the energy equivalent to a large piece of chocolate cake. And any excess energy that's not burnt off immediately is absorbed as body fat.

**Kaleve and home brew:** Some kaleve or "toddy" is known to be produced from tapping fronds at the top of palm trees followed by fermentation but no estimates for the extent of this practice are available. Home production of beer and spirits is forbidden in Tokelau. If, and if so how much, is in fact being produced is unknown. Apparently this happens only when the beer runs out in the stores.

**Cigarettes:** While the ideal is that all smoking has ceased in Tokelau by 2021, a realistic aim would be to use New Zealand as a short-term guide, where 15% of adults smoke, an average of 7 cigarettes per day. That's a long way off Tokelau's 50% with an average of a 20-pack per day.

**Solid waste:** Metal, glass and plastic bottles, disposable cups, plates, spoons, and nappies

**Metal recycling:** Imports of tinned foods create about 3 tonnes of tin that in principle could be recycled under an MoU with Samoa. Looking around in waste pits it is obvious that this is not happening. When queried, informants said that (1) the can crushers on the island(s) can handle only soft metal such aluminium, but as the sale of fizzy drinks has ceased this is no longer relevant; (2) promised payment for some metal shipments that took place to Apia never eventuated; (3) some of the wooden crates constructed at some expense were never returned empty from Apia.

[These appear to be some of the reasons why several cubic metres of crushed softdrink cans were still sitting in Nukunonu in August 2016): given the ban took place in 2013, a relic of now 3 years.]

**Glass recycling:** At present there appear to be only arrangements for recycling large 750 ml Vailima bottles. The extent to which this happens is not clear but could easily be established using the numbers calculated in this report as a guide. The increased imports of the cheaper Taula beer bottles are a concern as, like small beer bottles, these are apparently not recycled.

Such bottles, and glass from spirits also, could be crushed fine, eroded and used as building or roading material rather than buried (e.g. see "Rubbish is a resource": SPREP 2006).

**Disposable crockery and cutlery:** The new ferry *Mataliki* has set an excellent precedent by serving food only on hard plastic reusable plates, with normal metal crockery and drinks in tin cups. Households and particularly groups that meet regularly (Taupulega, Aumaga, Fatupaepae, Youth and Church groups) could follow this example by a one-off investment of such items. The use of disposable plates, cups and spoons would then be limited to large meetings with participants from other islands, such as at General Fono, weddings etc.



*This open waste pit near one of the nuku shows a mixture of partly burnt rubbish, used nappies of varying ages, glass bottles and metal tins. Much of this waste could be disposed of more carefully and selectively, with less damage to the environment in the long run.*

**Disposable nappies:** While a return to traditional cotton nappies is not near as much work and washing as it seems (and can save a lot of money in the process), doing without disposables is not advocated. The act of disposing of them however could be much improved. It defied the author's belief to see on one island a long trail of nappies towards the single nappy pit (with very few actually in them) that were being blown about; on another island as many as 6 waste pits within a few metres of each other, each with a range of old and newly used nappies in them. Why not one tidy pit in each case, to be used and closed when full and a new one dug? Partial burning also appears to take place which is hardly environmentally sound. Having a nappy incinerator in each nuku seems to be the best solution, provided of course that collection and processing is done in a timely and effective manner (such as incineration at the right temperature rather than smouldering).

**"Sin tax":** The proposal to the 2016 General Fono is, to dramatically increase tax on cigarettes from 195% to 300%, for beer from 142% (large bottles) or 172% (small) to 200%, and spirits from 146% to 250%, with the aim of reducing alcohol intake and get rid of smoking by the year 2021. (These percentages are relative to nett material cost in Samoa, i.e. devoid of Samoan tax, transport costs and stores mark-up). The intention is to then use this tax to subsidise the top import food items rice, flour and cooking oil, as well as fresh fruit and vegetables.

In nuku consultation the point was made that higher sin tax may lead to families cutting the budget on general food items, with social issues (poorer family feeding, stealing) as a result? It seems to me that making the selected food items cheaper actually compensate for the higher sin tax. Would it not be better to subsidise only the healthier food items (fresh food and vegetables) that are now expensive and/or in short supply?

Apparently there is currently a Samoan import duty of 20% on imported fruit and vegetables. Tokelau could join forces with the Samoa Department of Health to have this tax removed.

The captain of MV *Mataliki* suggested that it may well prove cheaper to import fresh fruit in bulk in a cooling container direct from New Zealand; the cooler could then be stored in Savalalo before being taken on board then shipped in its entirety to Tokelau. For the Transport Department to investigate?

*A personal note on life expectancy and “Tokelau imports of food, sugar, alcohol and smokes”*

The reader may wonder what drives me to spend so much time precisely calculating Tokelau’s “bad habits”. It’s not that as a palagi I want to poke fun at the Polynesian lifestyle. Quite the contrary, I would like to help you improve it by presenting the facts but without telling you what to do.

Part of my motivation is my own European family history. I am an almost 60-years-old male, fit and healthy despite the fact that I do drink alcohol too regularly. I try to burn it off with exercise.

Although I could die today or tomorrow, my New Zealand statistical life expectancy is for another 26 to 28 years<sup>1</sup>. But a brother of mine who had been a heavy smoker and heavy drinker all his life, died at the age of 63 – from lifestyle-induced colon cancer. I take that as a warning.

Strong genes run in my family: my mother passed away just last year at the age of 93. She had never smoked in her life and rarely drank any alcohol: mostly sips of communion wine in church.

My father had passed away in 1987. He had been a heavy smoker to middle age, suddenly stopped smoking and took to eating lollies all day every day. He became an obese diabetic and died of high blood pressure at the age of 73. Not only was that the end of his life: after 35 years of marriage to him, my mother lived alone for another 27 years, and my children never got to meet their granddad.

I really hope that the information I have provided here will sound warning bells in Tokelau – so we can improve the quality of our own lives and, perhaps more importantly, that of Tokelau children.

Because with the present consumption lifestyle, we are loving them to an uncomfortable life and an early death.

Ask yourself the question: do you really want to take decades off your and their life expectancy?

I hope not, and may this work contribute to that.

September 2016

*Jaap ('iapi') Jasperse, PhD*  
*Statistics Adviser, Tokelau National Statistics Office*



**Government of Tokelau**

Office of the Council for the Ongoing Government



Email: [iapi.jasperse@tokelau.org.nz](mailto:iapi.jasperse@tokelau.org.nz) Office phone: +685 - 20822 / 20823 Mobile: +685- 729 4913  
Address: P.O. Box 3298 Apia, Samoa Website: [www.tokelau.org.nz](http://www.tokelau.org.nz) Fax: +685 - 21761

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse\\_for\\_stats/health/life\\_expectancy/how-long-will-i-live.aspx](http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/health/life_expectancy/how-long-will-i-live.aspx)

In the Netherlands where I was born and raised, my life expectancy would be 25 years, of which 18 years in good health: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/visualisaties/resterende--gezonde---levensverwachting>