Regional Governance for Food System Transformations: Learning from the Pacific Island Region

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Abstract: The unsustainability of food systems is a global policy challenge. There is an urgent need for the improved coordination and integration of policies across sectors to improve food system outcomes. The aim of this study was to examine the role and opportunities for regional governance in strengthening policy for food system transformations, using the Pacific Island region as a case study. We conducted a qualitative policy analysis, drawing on data from 21 interviews with experts and participants in Pacific Island regional food system governance, and the analysis of 17 key regional commitments (policy documents) relating to food systems. The findings indicate that the Pacific Island region has made significant progress towards improved regional food systems governance. Regional governance has been used to address multiple shared and inter-related challenges associated with food systems, improve coordination across silos, and facilitate constructive engagement on policy issues between international, regional, and national actors. However, food systems outcomes related to the economy, nutrition, and environment continue to be mixed, and there are challenges to policy coordination and effectiveness at the regional level. Interviewees envisaged a regional approach characterized by being rooted in regional values, meeting multiple objectives, balancing tensions, and providing meaningful support and resources for countries. Following food systems disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, this study suggests that there is an opportunity to strengthen regional food system governance through paradigm change, the development of new modes of coordination, and increasing the dynamic interactions between regional institutions, countries, and communities.

Keywords: sustainable food system; policy; regional governance; nutrition

1 Introduction

Global food systems are critical for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [1,2]. A food system “…gathers all the elements (environments, people, inputs, processes, infrastructures, institutions, etc.) and activities that relate to the production, distribution, preparation and consumption of food, and the output of these activities, including socio-economic and environmental outcomes” [3]. A sustainable food system is “…a food system that delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised” [4].
However, current food systems are unsustainable across social, environmental and economic outcomes [2,3]. Hunger and undernutrition remain widespread; at the same time, obesity and diet-related disorders have risen [5–7]. Poor environmental outcomes from food systems have been documented globally, including losses of biodiversity, pollution, waste, declining soil and water health, and climate change [8–12]. Additionally, although food systems represent a major element in the global economy, their contribution to livelihoods and sustainable economies is plagued by inequalities and vulnerabilities, most recently exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic [13–15].

One contributor to poor food systems outcomes is a lack of integration of policy across relevant sectors and siloed governance which results in limited coordination across linked issues and between sectors [16]. Food system policy (policies that directly or indirectly influence food system elements and activities) spans government sectors, including agriculture, fisheries, resource management, commerce, health, environment, finance, and trade. It must also address multiple policy agendas and priorities, including nourishing people, advancing livelihoods and community development, building resilience, and protecting natural environments [2]. The multisectoral nature of food systems policy means that it is often challenging to ensure that it is coherent or integrated; meeting multiple agendas across sectors has proved challenging [17–19]. Food system policy priorities have often focused on the (important) livelihood and economic dimensions of food systems, with limited attention to other food system impacts, such as nutrition and the environment [20]. However, recent attention to food systems governance has highlighted the potential for ‘food systems’ as a concept to act as a unifying approach that brings together a range of sectoral priorities and concerns [16].

National and global policies have long been recognized as pivotal for food systems governance to enable transformation. However, regional governance (rules and institutions given governing authority voluntarily by states in a bounded geographical region) has largely been overlooked as a potential means to address food system policy challenges. Food security and nutrition are on regional agendas, including for regional bodies for the Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs), European Union (EU), Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC)—regional agencies made significant contributions to the 2021 United Nations (UN) Food Systems Summit and associated consultations. However, there has been little analysis of the potential for regional governance to strengthen food system policy. A recent analysis in the EU highlighted the potential for a common regional food policy to improve outcomes for sustainable healthy food systems, particularly through supporting policy coherence [21]. Regional governance often focus on collaborative approaches to addressing shared problems; therefore, it could be a potentially valuable space for strengthening food systems governance [22,23]. Furthermore, in the context of shifts in globalization, regional institutions are assuming a greater importance in mediating between global multilateral and national policy agendas [24,25].

In this paper, we explore the potential for food system governance at the regional level to support coordinated policy as a critical contributor to improved health, environmental, and economic outcomes, through examining efforts in the Pacific Island region. In this context, the Pacific Island region spans island countries and territories in the geographic region of the Pacific Ocean (see Section 3 for further detail on the regional organizations relevant to food systems). As a leader in progressive regionalism, Pacific Island countries provide a unique opportunity to examine these efforts as they have been taking collaborative action related to food systems, including on nutrition and environmental sustainability [26–28]. From 2022, the Pacific Community’s (SPC’s) ‘Food Systems Program’ will be a key focal area delivered through integrated programming with regional partners. In many ways, the region is a case study of policy success. The shared regional identity as a ‘sea of islands’ [29], most recently articulated in the concept of the Blue Pacific continent [30], has fostered an increasingly coordinated and effective network of regional institutions [25,31]. Pacific Island regionalism also reflects the somewhat unique features
of Small Island Developing States, including import dependence, narrow productive base, climate change vulnerability, prevalent natural disasters, remittance dependence, and limited market opportunities. These shared factors have made it natural for Pacific leaders to seek regional cooperation to help address development and security challenges [25]. However, despite significant progress, coordinated food system governance in the region has been patchy and hampered by a range of political–economic and contextual factors, including economic imperatives, suggesting an opportunity for research to inform improved approaches at the regional level [26,32–34].

The aim of this study was to examine the role and opportunities for regional governance in strengthening policy for food system transformations, using the Pacific Island region as a case study. By focusing on a low- and middle-income country (LMIC) region, this analysis will have significant global relevance. LMIC regions tend to embody a different form of regionalism than the ‘model’ European approach, and there is emerging evidence for shared features that have developed in the post-colonial context, as well as the use of regional architecture to address common economic, environmental, and social challenges [35].

2. Methods

This paper presents the findings of a qualitative policy analysis, focussed on food system governance at the regional (supra-national) level in the Pacific Island region. We drew on qualitative research approaches to inform data collection and analysis [36].

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The design and analysis for this study drew on theories of (new) regionalism that identify the importance of understanding the ‘demand’ for regionalism, particularly in terms of its purpose and a sense of shared challenges, as well as the ‘supply’ of regionalism, mainly in terms of institutional design and the existence of a shared regional identity [37]. Theories of new regionalism highlight internal as well as external influences, the role of state as well as non-state actors, and institutional objectives as critical analytical elements to consider [23]. We also drew on policy theories focused on learning and change, which point to the importance of actors (including their influence and perceptions), paradigms, ideas relating to policy problems and solutions, and values in creating scope for policy change within a given policy space [38,39]. Policy paradigms refer to the “framework of ideas and standards” that underpins policy goals and instruments [39]. ‘Policy space’ describes the “freedom, scope, and mechanisms that governments have to choose, design, and implement public policies to fulfill their aims [40].”

2.2. Data Collection

2.2.1. Documentary Data

We defined food system sectors based on conceptualizations of the food system as relating to supply chain activities (food production, processing, distribution, trade, and retailing), food environment, and consumer behaviour [41,42]. The key policy sectors that correspond are: agriculture, fisheries, industry/commerce, infrastructure, trade, finance, environment, health, and gender. The focus of the regional documentary data collection was formal regional commitments relating to the food system sectors, including overarching strategic regional commitments, 2012–2021. We obtained regional policy commitments by searching online using sectoral key words and via regional agency websites, and asked for feedback from regional stakeholders regarding completeness.
2.2.2. Qualitative Interviews

Potential interview participants were purposively sampled, with the inclusion criteria being that they worked in a role or had experience (1) relevant to regional food systems governance, and (2) within an institution with a regional remit. Invitations were sent to potential interviewees within Pacific Island regional agencies, development partner agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that were deemed relevant to food systems, based on advice from the project Advisory Group (comprising twelve policy actors from the Pacific Islands, including four from regional agencies) and via snowball sampling, as appropriate for policy research [43]. Interviews (n = 21) were conducted with regional policy actors between October and December 2021, by A.M.T., E.R., A.F., E.J., and P.F. (see Table 1 for a summary of the characteristics of the interviewees). Six of those invited declined to participate. Interviews were conducted via an online platform, and were 45–70 minutes in duration. All interviews were recorded with permission, except one (in which detailed notes were taken and sent to the interview for review). Interviews were transcribed in full for analysis. Ethics approval was received from the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (#2021_528).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Area of Expertise (n = 21)</th>
<th>Institutional Representation (n = 21)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oceans/Fisheries</td>
<td>Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>Land/Agriculture</td>
<td>Environment</td>
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<td>Economic/Strategic</td>
<td>Regional Agency</td>
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<td>Development Partner</td>
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A semi-structured interview guide was developed by the research team based on the theoretical framework. The interview guide included questions about the ways in which regional commitments work and how they are translated into action at the national level, priorities relevant to food systems, and opportunities to increase attention to environmentally sustainable and nutritious food systems in regional commitments. The guide was piloted twice with regional actors not part of the sampling frame, and minor amendments were made.

2.3. Analysis

To support analysis of the interview data, a codebook was developed based on the theoretical frameworks, reviewed by the author team, and then validated by three authors using three transcripts before finalization (Table 2). The coding was performed by the lead author.

Table 2. Codes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code (Group)</th>
<th>Sub-Codes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Pacific regionalism</td>
<td>Regionalism in practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>How does regionalism work in practice</td>
<td>Regional agency activities and priorities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Influences on regional agreements</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Regional–national interface</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food system policy</td>
<td>Food system priorities (regional)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Food system priorities (national)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Challenges for food systems policy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Success in food systems policy and agenda setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food systems (ideas and narratives)</td>
<td>Narratives about capacity (regional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacities</td>
<td>Narratives about capacity (national)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td>Private sector</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The coded data were thematically analysed with reference to the research aim and the study frameworks. The thematic analysis was led by the lead author, with ongoing input and review by the author team for the validation of emerging themes. The first round of thematic analysis focused on the purpose of regionalism, institutional design, narratives, and framing regarding food systems (using Bacchi’s ‘what’s the problem represented to be’ framework [44]), stakeholder roles and capacities, and opportunities to strengthen governance and balance tensions. The qualitative data and the documentary data were then analysed together; the research team examined the data from both sources iteratively to understand the existing policy content at regional level, as well as opportunities to strengthen policy coordination, governance, and stakeholder engagement.

Following these analyses, an in-depth discussion of the analysed data among the author team identified the following groupings of the emergent themes, which informed the presentation of the results: institutional structures and commitments relevant to food systems; disruptions and progress in regional food systems governance; the purpose of a regional approach to food systems; characteristics of a “good” regional approach to food systems in the Pacific Island region; and learnings for strengthening a regional approach for food systems.

3. Results

3.1. Institutional Structures Relevant to Food Systems

Regional institutions relevant to food systems in the Pacific Island region are both political and technical (Figure 1). The Pacific Islands Forum (PIFS) (with its Secretariat) is the lead agency from a political perspective, with 18 Pacific Island Member States. The Forum convenes regional Heads of States and Ministers meetings, as well as an annual meeting with ‘dialogue partners’. The Forum Secretariat also convenes the Council of Regional Organizations in the Pacific (CROP), which brings together several regional intergovernmental agencies. With respect to food systems, CROP includes key technical agencies: SPC, the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), South Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP), and the University of the South Pacific (USP). Development partners, including bi-lateral development programmes, are also an influence on regional governance in the Pacific Islands. Several food-system-relevant United Nations agencies have regional and sub-regional offices, including the World Health Organization (WHO), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).
We identified 11 key regional commitments, roadmaps, and strategy documents relevant to food systems that had been endorsed in the previous decade (Table 3). These documents broadly addressed: regionalism, sustainable development, gender equality, youth, climate change, fisheries, health, and food and nutrition security. The one noticeable ‘food system’ gap in the existing regional commitments was the lack of a specific regional strategy on agriculture, which interviewees noted is currently under development. Overall, the stated purpose of the regional commitments was to guide action at the regional as well as national level. They put forward overarching strategies, largely targeting national governments broadly rather than specific sectors at the national level. These commitments play a role in supporting policy development, design, implementation, and evaluation at the national level. The regional commitments focus on cross-border issues—notably, oceans—as well as common challenges, including sustainable development, environmental sustainability, and health, and cross-cutting issues such as gender and youth. These regional commitments and strategies also guide the provision of technical and capacity building support by regional agencies, including high-level meetings, workshops, monitoring, trainings, funding disbursement, and consultancies.

Table 3. Key regional commitments relevant to food systems, and their institutional origin.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Regional Commitment or Strategy</th>
<th>Institutional Origin</th>
<th>Stated Objective</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration endorsed in 2012</td>
<td>Endorsed by Pacific Islands Forum Leaders</td>
<td>“Leaders commit to implement specific national policy actions to progress gender equality in the areas of gender responsive government programs and policies, decision making, economic empowerment, ending violence against women, and health and education”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framework for Pacific Regionalism, 2014</td>
<td>Endorsed by Pacific Islands Forum Leaders</td>
<td>“Our principal objectives are: Sustainable development that combines economic social, and cultural development in ways that improve livelihoods and well-being and use the environment sustainably; Economic growth that</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Author/Institution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action</td>
<td>UN General Assembly</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Samoa Pathway), 2014</td>
<td>“The present Samoa Pathway presents a basis for action in the agreed priority</td>
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<td></td>
<td>areas [for the sustainable development of small island developing States]”</td>
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<td>(pp 3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Roadmap for Responding to the Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) Crisis and the Pacific (2014) DRAFT</td>
<td>World Bank</td>
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<td>“This report responds to the request by the Forum Economic Ministers Meeting (FEMM) for a ‘Roadmap’ to respond to NCDs... This proposed Roadmap is intended to help ‘operationalise’ the already agreed [global] frameworks and strategies for responding to NCDs in ways that are affordable and cost-effective.” (pp 19)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Pacific Youth Development Framework, 2014–2023</td>
<td>SPC, with Pacific Youth Council</td>
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<td>“The framework aims to be a catalyst for investment in youth, rather than a regional youth programme. It aims to facilitate shared decision-making based on evidence and contributions from relevant communities of practice, and to support Pacific Island countries and territories in implementing their development objectives for youth.” (pp 3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional Roadmap for Sustainable Pacific Fisheries, 2015–2025</td>
<td>FFA and SPC</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Roadmap sets clear goals and targets against which progress will be measured. (pp 1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Song for Coastal Fisheries, 2015</td>
<td>SPC Heads of Fisheries; Forum Fisheries Committee; Ministerial Forum Fisheries Committee Meeting</td>
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<td>“The ‘new song’ is the innovative approach to dealing with declines in coastal fisheries resources and related ecosystems... designed to provide direction and encourage coordination, cooperation and an effective use of regional and other support services in the development of coastal fisheries management. At the regional level, it brings together initiatives and stakeholders with a shared vision of coastal fisheries management” (pp III)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cleaner Pacific 2025: The Pacific Regional Waste and Pollution Management Strategy, 2016–2025</td>
<td>Secretariat of SPREP</td>
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<td>“The Pacific Regional Waste and Pollution Management Strategy 2016–2025 is a comprehensive blueprint to help improve the management of waste and pollution over the next ten years. It was developed in full consultation with 21 member countries and has captured the waste and pollution management priorities of the region.” (pp 3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Pacific Roadmap for Sustainable Development endorsed in 2017</td>
<td>Leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“The roadmap outlines how the region will track and report on its progress against regional actions and the means of implementation for sustainable development in the Pacific.” (pp 2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific: An Integrated Approach to Address Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management, 2017–2030</td>
<td>PIFS; SPC; SPREP; Special Representative of the Secretary-General; United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“The Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific: An Integrated Approach to Address Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management provides high level strategic guidance to different stakeholder groups on how to enhance resilience to climate change and disasters, in ways that contribute to and are embedded in sustainable development.” (pp 2)</td>
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</table>

Source: Authors’ review.
3.2. Evolution and Disruption in Regional Food Systems Governance

3.2.1. Existing Coordination and Integration Relevant to Food Systems

Eight interviewees and several of the regional commitment and strategy documents identified multiple existing points of coordination between regional institutions. These included coordination and collaboration among CROP agencies, and the coordination of fisheries-related initiatives, including the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission and Forum Fisheries Ministers and Leaders, which were highlighted as key organizations. In line with this, we also found extensive cross-referencing and co-development of regional documents.

Many interviewees identified positive changes and evolution in regional governance in areas relevant to food systems, particularly regarding cross-institutional commitment to gender equality, and improvements in fisheries governance. For example, with respect to fisheries, institutional structures have been created to support coordination, including the appointment of fisheries coordinators or advisors in key regional institutions. Core strengths of both the fisheries and gender agendas at the regional level were identified as civil society capacity and engagement, regional capacity to provide technical advice, and a focus on community-level action.

3.2.2. Movement towards ‘Food Systems’ at the Regional Level

More than half of the interviewees identified siloed approaches to many core food systems issues, resulting in limited “systems” thinking about food policy at the regional level. Four interviewees specifically described food systems as a relatively new term within the region. For example,

“The language around [food systems] and the approach is something which is not fully understood. … That needs to be articulated in a way which everybody can see their role within it. So … it’s useful to have this discussion, to build that awareness, to show that how people are engaged in food systems and how they can build upon it. … I think, for the region, it’s pretty new.” (#8_environment_regional)

However, despite the new language, it was also clear that the new food systems agenda was building on long-term food-related agendas, namely, food security, and that the Pacific Island region was already contributing leadership in this space. In particular, SPC was taking steps to develop a flagship program on food systems, to enhance integrated programming.

3.2.3. Recent Food System Disruption with the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was identified as causing a significant disruption to the regional food system by 18 interviewees out of 21, across all sectors. Many highlighted that this disruption had had both positive and negative implications. On the positive side, it drew attention to the importance of regional and traditional food systems and the importance of domestic food production, including promoting food sovereignty. Six out of these eighteen interviewees specifically noted that with many people returning to agriculture and home gardening due to economic impacts, the importance of production capacity and resilience was made more visible. On the more challenging side, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significant disruptions to international trade, including in relation to fisheries, and many of the economic impacts occurred via impacts on the food systems. This has engendered a strong focus on economic recovery, relevant to food system priorities. The pandemic also revealed vulnerabilities in terms of the differential access to food, with many low-income communities in urban areas experiencing increased food insecurity.
3.3. Perception of the Purpose of a Regional Approach to Food Systems

Results from the interviews and documentary analysis identified three key purposes of a regional approach to food systems policy, to improve health, nutrition, and environmental outcomes.

3.3.1. Address Multiple Shared and Inter-Related Challenges Related to Food Systems

All interviewees identified the need for regional action to address multiple shared and inter-related problems associated with food systems, which were also reflected in the regional commitment documents. These related to social, health, environmental, and economic outcomes of food systems. As one interviewee commented: “laissez faire market forces do not necessarily deliver what’s considered by governments to be the desirable food systems outcome” (#5_fisheries_regional). The specific challenges identified in the interviews and the documentary data spanned all dimensions of the food system. Production challenges were highlighted by nearly half of the interviewees, as well as in the Pacific Framework for Resilient Development, and included access to land and finance, as well as the impact of climate change and disasters. Challenges related to distribution and marketing included transport and other costs, and the vulnerability of food system actors to exploitation. Food loss and waste was identified by 10 interviewees and in Cleaner Pacific 2025 as a major challenge, including due to a lack of proper storage facilities. Eleven interviewees described an unhealthy food environment characterized by import dependence and limited availability and affordability of local traditional foods, as well as problems of food access related to poverty and food insecurity. Four interviewees also commented specifically on the additional urgency arising from the impact of climate change on regional food systems. Interviewees pointed to the benefits from pooling capacity and resources to address these shared and inter-related challenges.

3.3.2. Improve Coordination across Silos

Over half of the interviewees specifically mentioned the challenge of sectoral silos for coordinated action on food systems at both national and regional levels. Many of these interviewees indicated that a key purpose of a regional approach would be to improve multisectoral coordination. In particular, there was a need identified to reduce the sectoral approach which limited engagement between regional and national levels against specific sectoral priorities, and resulted in disconnected action on related issues. For example, siloed actions on fisheries and agriculture were seen as creating duplication and complications at the community level.

“Because invariably, those of us working in the agriculture space and in the coastal fisheries space are talking to exactly the same communities… It’s about trying to join our offerings up.” (#19_health_DevPartner)

Seven interviewees also pointed to an underlying focus on economic rather than social or environmental aspects of food systems as a challenge to overcome. For example, “…too often we concentrate on the economics and the financial gains, but we don’t factor in …sustainability [or] quality of life.” (#4_environment_DevPartner).

3.3.3. Facilitate Constructive Engagement on Policy Issues between International, Regional and National Actors

There was a strong sense that the regional institutions and commitments play an important role in brokering the interaction and engagement between international and national agendas. One aspect of this was the role of the regional institutions in translating international agendas, and another aspect was their role in coordinating and strengthening global engagement by PICTs. When done well, this was seen as also being grounded in community knowledge and priorities on both sides. For example, in reflecting on their experience in environmental policy issues, one interviewee commented:
“It started from those community workshops … Fiji, took that onto the regional meeting. And out of that regional meeting … it’s taken back to the countries. And then eventually it’ll go to the international forum. And whatever is decided at the international forum should come down to the region from the region, run down to the nations, nations, then it comes down to the government, NGOs, and to the community. That’s the pathway.” (#2_environment_NGO)

Regional institutions were also described as supporting national governments by setting and supporting new directions that reflect regional values as well as national interests and priorities. This included aspects of regional identity and traditional approaches related to food and food systems.

“A lot of traditional structures [related to the environment and conservation] have either been minimized or weakened. Bringing them back at the national level is sometimes hard. But when you have agreed … regional declarations, then it makes it easier for government to make some of these hard decisions because they don’t feel like they’re doing it alone. It’s something that we’ve all agreed we’d do.” (#4_environment_DevPartner)

3.4. Characteristics of a “Good” Regional Approach to Food Systems in the Pacific Island Region

The interview data indicated that an effective regional approach to food systems governance would be characterized by: being rooted in values, meeting multiple objectives, balancing tensions between different priorities and imperatives, and generating meaningful support and resources for countries. We have represented this visually in Figure 2, showing the disruption and evolution described above leading to the current situation where coordination has improved and a ‘food systems’ agenda is starting to coalesce; then, a future vision for a food system with reflections on mechanisms that could further strengthen and improve regional action on food systems (detailed in the final section of the Results).

Figure 2. Visual representation of the study findings, showing movement at the regional level towards improved food systems governance to date (left to centre), and mechanisms to achieve more effective food systems governance in the future (centre to right).

3.4.1. Rooted in Values

The first characteristic a regional approach to food systems was that it would need to be firmly rooted in regional values. All interviewees and documents reviewed made reference to values that would underpin a Pacific Island regional approach to food systems; in particular, values related to wellbeing. These included the importance of stable and
sustainable livelihoods, particularly in the face of natural disasters, and of healthy environments. Closely related to both of these wellbeing values were values related to resilience to natural and human-induced changes and traditional foods (and traditional culture more broadly), which was described as supporting wellbeing in multiple ways. These were underpinned by a narrative of interconnectedness of people, land, oceans, environments, etc., and the importance of communities. Most interviewees also described values related to resilience and natural environments, including land (and traditional approaches to land), ocean, and sustainable resource use. Values related to the ocean were tightly linked to the Blue Pacific narrative. This encompassed the importance of regional identity, but included an outward focus on the important contribution that the Pacific makes to the global food system. One interviewee, reflecting on the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, made the following observation:

“I think it helped us to project, from a perspective of authority as a region, that we actually contributed very significantly to the global food system. We produce over 50% of the world’s tuna…. it helped highlight our traditional capability and the resilience that that brings to our food systems, as well as the contribution to the global environment.” (#12_environment_regional)

3.4.2. Meeting Multiple Objectives

The potential for a regional food systems approach to support the meeting of multiple policy objectives was the second characteristic identified from interviews. More than half of the interviewees explicitly described food systems as being multisectoral and multidimensional. There was clear evidence of the interviewees’ familiarity with the economic, environmental, and social (particularly nutrition) objectives relevant to food systems, and many described situations in which multiple objectives were being addressed through initiatives with a food focus. For example:

“…so it’s not only looking at resources and revenue through fisheries... but it’s really what defines the Pacific people. … it’s really how that looks at livelihoods of our people, the health and nutrition that comes through this... the resources that comes from the ocean, which gives food security.” (#9_strategic_regional)

Overall, food systems were identified as an important element of the regional economy. On the production side, agriculture was repeatedly identified as a major source of livelihoods for communities, and fish as the major revenue earner for Governments and a source of income for communities. As one interviewee explained: “...that blue economy side of it seems to be an area which is going to be critically important for the Pacific, getting that right in terms of the economics associated with fishing is something which we all would need to get on top of because it’s such a big earner for many parts of the Pacific” (#8_environment_regional).

Value adding was also identified as a significant food-related economic agenda by 10 interviewees. However, there was also a sense that a food systems approach offered opportunities to integrate other objectives into the dominant economic frame. Most interviewees also identified clear synergies between efforts to achieve nutritional and environmental objectives relevant to food systems. As one interviewee explained: “There’s that nexus between natural foods and having a healthy ecosystem” (#4_environment_DevPartner). One opportunity identified for better integration was through providing strategic framing and narratives for food systems that appealed to broader Pacific objectives such as ‘wellbeing’ and ‘resilience’.

More than half of interviewees also discussed the strength of traditional approaches to food and land, which was identified implicitly as an avenue through which multiple objectives could be managed. For example, one interviewee identified the promotion of traditional crops as an opportunity to rebalance multiple objectives: “...[we need] to put in place things that help communities to be able to live healthier lifestyles but also be able to accrue some [economic] benefit. [Although] Maybe not as much economic benefit as they would have if they’d cultivated, say, rice instead of traditional crops” (#4_environment_DevPartner).
3.4.3. Balancing Tensions

The third characteristic of a regional approach to food systems was the balancing of tensions between diverse objectives. There was a clear sense that an ideal regional approach to food systems would offer scope for not only making these tensions visible, but also for achieving a better balance across sectoral objectives. Almost all interviewees observed the value of a food systems approach as a unifying concept that spanned sectors and major sectoral objectives. It was described as enabling a coordinated approach that made visible important connections and tensions between diverse but interconnected policy problems, such that a regional food systems approach could help to balance economic, nutritional, and environmental objectives. For example: “We would like to concentrate on producing good food and preserving the environment, but it has to balance with what’s economical” (#2_environment_NGO).

Specific tensions were identified by nearly half of the interviewees; particularly, tensions between environmental sustainability and economic objectives, and between nutrition and economic objectives. For example: “the food system is struggling to deliver sufficient nutritious food, but it’s also struggling to provide people with livelihoods as well… very vulnerable to external shocks, to climate change… It’s not a resilient system” (#19_health_DevPartner). Similarly, another interviewee observed a tension between sustainability and commercialization, and a role for regional guidance in (re)balancing these:

“…we’ve got two things going: one is the push for commercialization and export of agricultural and forestry products, versus sustainability. We want to have a food system that is sustainable, but we want to scale that, and export. Governments are still really promoting systems that are not sustainable, in more intensive use of agrochemicals, shift to high levels of mechanization shifts to scale. All of these things if they’re not managed well, lead to some of the environmental damage that we’ve already got, and worse.” (#7_agriculture_regional)

3.4.4. Meaningful Support and Resources for Countries

The fourth characteristic of a regional approach was the provision of meaningful support and resources for countries, that addressed capacity gaps. Based on their past experiences and observations at regional, national, and international level, interviewees reflected on the key mechanisms through which regional activity could best support food system transformations.

At a conceptual level, four interviewees from both development and regional agencies highlighted the important role that regional frameworks and commitment played in creating a norm or expectation for action at national level. This contributed to actions on cross-border issues and shared challenges through creating ‘gentle peer pressure’. It also worked through building consensus on priority actions and a clear articulation of next steps, which could also provide an external reference point for national governments in defending national-level policy decisions and guiding development partner investments.

The primary mode of support and resourcing for countries was technical support, often in the form of adaptable templates for countries, supported by training and workshops. These were seen as enabling countries to draw on pooled regional expertise to address common challenges, and as an appropriate response and support in the context of a lack of capacity (generally) at national level. For example:

“Regional frameworks …provide templates to countries who are often looking for that guidance and that expertise and we provide pooled capability to support.” (#12_environment_regional)

This support and resourcing also included technical assistance, which was framed as a resource on which countries could draw. In the words of one interviewee, “we are a lending library of expertise” (#5_fisheries_regional). Several interviewees stressed the importance of the provision of technical advice that was specific to the regional context as a significant contribution. One interviewee described this as “a regional public good to similar countries, similar members who are having similar issues because of climate change… Well, it can only be
through a regional organization. It doesn’t come from a donor. It has to be a technical service.“” (#1_strategic_regional).

Providing monitoring frameworks and data was also identified by around half of the participants as an important mechanism of support to countries. The monitoring and data provision actions undertaken, particularly by SPC, for the SDG indicators, fisheries, and NCDs (the MANA framework), were all seen as reducing duplication and enhancing the ability of national governments with minimal resources and capacity to develop evidence-informed policy. It was evident that coordinating monitoring across food system sectors at the regional level, and filling gaps in both monitoring and frameworks, would be an important contribution to supporting country-level action on food systems. For example:

“One of the mechanisms [is] creating dashboards and indicators. You might be familiar with the MANA dashboard in the public health space, there’s the coastal fishery scorecard. There are a lot of these different tools which exist.” (#14_strategic_regional)

3.5. Learnings for Strengthening a Regional Approach for Food Systems

Our analysis suggests that the evolution and disruption in the regional policy space, together with new interest and clarity on regional food systems governance, could be further leveraged to achieve more coordination and improved outcomes. Within the interview data, we identified four areas of change that would facilitate a shift towards a regional approach to food systems. These included a shift to the underlying paradigm of regional institutional architecture, capacity building, new modes of coordination, and a more dynamic interaction between regional institutions, national governments, and communities.

3.5.1. Paradigm Change

The interview data indicated a need for a paradigm change, in the form of a reorientation of regional action on food systems towards harmonization rather than adding to the existing complexity of the regional architecture relevant to food systems. The common paradigm among actors in the food systems is to follow sectoral siloes; the new paradigm would bring these sectors together into a system of interconnected actors, through the understanding that food systems are cross-sectoral and trans-disciplinary. As one interviewee put it: “The scope of further improvement from here is getting out of our boxes and joining forces in a way which is more coordinated and more holistic” (#5_fisheries_regional). Underpinning this reorientation was a recognition that food systems as a concept offer an opportunity to articulate a compelling and coherent vision for a key dimension of ‘wellbeing’ and ‘development’ (which are already stated overarching priorities) for the region. As a result, a first step towards a regional approach to food systems was identified as the development of a clear long-term vision that encompassed both the multiple objectives of food systems and the need for innovative or game-changing solutions.

“[With respect to food systems] within our region, we do need to have the more philosophic and visionary language around how we work together, and what we do.” (#7_agriculture_regional)

Central to this was avoiding ‘quick fix’ solutions that might lead to unintended or negative outcomes in the future (which then become embedded in the regional institutional architecture and hard to change).

3.5.2. Capacity Building

On a more pragmatic level, interviewees identified the need to build capacities and shift narratives among policy actors at both regional and national levels in order to embed this type of food systems vision and internalise a systems approach into regional activities, and specifically, to break down sectoral silos. For example:
“They’ve had the silos approach for so long now, if we’re to make any quantum leaps or come up with game changing solutions, we are going to have to reach out beyond our own particular mandates and it’s going to take a team building approach to integrate the programming approach, taking a holistic view.” (#5_fisheries_regional)

To enable this, three interviewees identified the importance of the detailed mapping of existing regional institutional mandates and structures relevant to food systems. Interviewees also recommended building on existing coordination between CROP agencies and integrating food systems language into existing regional commitments. Furthermore, it was clear that internalising a systems approach would also require harmonization with respect to funding flows. For example:

“You will never get a unified program of work until you get a fungible source of programmatic funds that can be moved around commensurate with the absorptive capability of the country and the different ministries that needs to be a part of that journey.” (#12_environment_regional)

Relevant to building capacity that would enable a paradigm shift, six interviewees identified the importance of the University of the South Pacific as a training ground for policy actors in the food space. As one interviewee explained:

“USP [the University of the South Pacific], I think could have a growing role in the research piece, but also in the education piece. Ideally, we’ll start to have graduates coming out of USP in the relevant sectors that are coming out with an understanding of the systems approaches, and what is needed. I think they’ve got a valuable role to play as well that’s a medium to long term change in what they’re teaching.” (#7_agriculture_regional)

3.5.3. New Modes of Coordination

There were two dimensions of ‘new’ coordination that emerged from the interview data, mainly as reflections on what interviewees had observed to work well in other contexts. One was the opportunity to strengthen coordination among regional agencies, moving from a siloed approach to a more systems-oriented approach. The second was coupling clear and coordinated strategies with capacity building to enable adaptation and translation from regional to national level.

Among regional agencies, interviewees indicated the importance of food systems work being integrated into existing structures rather than creating a new entity. As an interviewee from a regional organization explained: “The risk is if we establish something too formal [for food systems], we’ll end up with another siloed framework. We want to avoid that.” (#7_agriculture_regional). Four interviewees described the need for food systems policy coordination at the regional level to build on and enhance existing strengths and mandates. For example, more informal and adaptable institutional mechanisms brought partners together around specific challenges, which was linked to a need to identify a small number of priority areas. Four interviewees identified an opportunity for increased specificity through limiting priorities as a strategy that would coordinate resourcing and provide clearer focal points for both regional and country-level action across sectors: “Pick one or two things that are really catalytic as priorities for action” (#3_strategic_DevPartner).

The second dimension was linked to a perceived weakness of regional action: the risk of generic frameworks and strategies that proved hard to operationalise at national level, and as a result hampered coordinated implementation. Interviewees identified the need to develop clear actions, targets, and measurable outcomes relevant to food systems (and indeed, more broadly) as a priority. However, it was clear that for this to be effective for operationalization in a diverse range of countries, this needed to be coupled with new initiatives to strengthen capacity, specifically for the adaptation and translation of regional commitments to a national context, in addition to more usual resourcing and capacity building for implementation. For example: “When you say translation, it’s about making it suitable to the context of the country, where you take into consideration the culture, the accessibility, the work, the capacity of the country, and things like that” (#21_health_regional).
3.5.4. Dynamic Interaction with Countries and Communities

Several interviewees identified the potential for increasing the dynamic interaction between regional institutions, countries, and communities to generate innovative solutions and also to enhance implementation. High-level political will at national level was identified as a precursor to link regional and national policy spaces by five interviewees, and a necessary first step for establishing which specific issues will benefit from regional action. Several interviewees identified meaningful consultation, to generate regional ownership, and political will for both frameworks and their implementation, as critical. For example:

“Before we develop a regional framework or policy, we need to consult members first. And if there is a political will and interest for us to go ahead to develop these policies or framework, then …we will have discussions with every stakeholder who are interested …consultations and coordination are key. …we want to see that there is an ownership from member states that, yes, they drive that process, and they want to bring that to its implementation.” (#15_strategic_regional)

Two interviewees further identified an opportunity to create mechanisms and spaces at the regional level for sharing and learning between countries regarding priorities and strategies for implementation.

Around one-quarter of interviewees also specifically indicated that a stronger community voice at the regional level—and listening to communities about what had worked in the past—would enhance the development and operationalization of regional policy, ensure that a ‘food systems’ agenda is not driven externally, and help to identify more innovative solutions. A priority was the integration of community-level priorities and knowledge into regional policies, which would, in turn, foster the development of relevant programs and tools to enable the effective adaptation and implementation of regional commitments to meet community needs, coupled with the improved coordination of implementation at the community level and improved access to regional initiatives and tools. In order to achieve this, two-way feedback and information flows are needed, fostered by brokers who can span the regional and community spaces and articulate the issues in contextually appropriate ways. As one interviewee noted: “…you need the people who have this ability to be able to make these linkages and translate it…[to] bring down the information from the region to the nation, nation to the province, province right down to the community level” (#2_environment_NGO)

Another aspect of enabling improved interaction with countries and communities was increasing engagement with non-state actors, and particularly, civil society actors: food systems solutions require effective engagement beyond government. Two interviewees identified a recent increase in participation from non-state actors. One also identified the potential for regional institutions to model collaboration across sectors and with external actors, to encourage engagement at country level. Furthermore, there was very clear recognition of local industry actors as fostering innovation on food systems. This was tightly linked to a policy agenda to foster small and medium enterprises. For example: “a lot of these micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are the local ones. So if you want to empower local people… it’s important to look at some of these MSMEs [who] are really the genuine local producers” (#17_environment_regional).

4. Discussion

This study has described the significant progress being made on regional approaches to food system governance in the Pacific Island region. The long-term commitment to the regional governance of natural resources, shared health challenges, and the environment, in particular, have provided a strong basis for regional institutional structures to begin to evolve a more integrated and coordinated regional response to food systems. The combination of disruptions and progress seen in regional food systems governance, particularly the mixed impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food systems, has fostered movement towards an integrated ‘food systems’ approach at the regional level that builds on existing
coordination, knowledge, and integration relevant to Pacific food systems. The food system disruption resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted strengths as well as vulnerabilities in Pacific Island food systems, and pointed to the need for concerted policy attention to improve food systems [45,46]. Although in many ways the disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Pacific Island region is reminiscent of repeated food system disruptions resulting from natural disasters, in this study, it appeared that the simultaneous region-wide nature of the impact was perhaps catalytic for governance at the regional level. In the past few years, the COVID-19 pandemic and the UN Food Systems Summit have prompted new thinking and priorities within other regions as well [13,47]. However, other regional bodies have not yet formally developed integrated governance approaches for food systems. For example, ASEAN, SADC, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have clear priorities for the food sector and food security, but they remain largely siloed.

The analysis presented here highlighted key aspects of the purpose and potential benefit of a regional approach to food systems, and to other complex challenges. These include the scope to address multiple shared and inter-related challenges, improve coordination across silos, and facilitate constructive engagement on policy issues between international, regional and national actors. These outcomes can be supported by a regional approach to food systems which is rooted in regional values and knowledge, meets multiple objectives, balances tensions, and provides meaningful support and resources for countries. The close interface between regional identities and food systems evident in this study is reminiscent of the importance of Pacific identity that is highlighted in the broader regionalism literature [25]. However, it also reflects recent findings from the EU, where governance structures are proving ill-adapted for tackling the challenges facing food systems. In the EU context, a clear values-based, context-specific vision for regional food system governance was similarly identified as critical, to enable policy coordination, integration, and coherence to improve outcomes for sustainable healthy food systems [21]. A values-based approach to food systems at the regional level offers a potential for discourse and initiatives that resonate more strongly at the national and community level than a more technical policy discourse. It would also enable a shift away from the globally dominant policy discourse regarding food as a commodity or product, which has hampered integrated policy action to address multiple food system outcomes, particularly environmental sustainability and nutrition [48,49].

Our analysis pointed to three opportunities to strengthen a regional approach for food systems. The first was a new paradigm for food systems policy that moves beyond silos to harmonization in order to articulate a compelling and coherent vision for food systems as a key dimension of ‘wellbeing’ and ‘development’, and support this with a strong values-based narrative and harmonized capacity building across regional institutions. This finding echoes global calls for integrated policy paradigms to underpin food systems, which explicitly recognized the multisectoral reality of foods systems [10,49,50]. It also resonates with a One Health Approach to ensuring planetary health [51]. Second, this paradigm needs to be supported by new approaches to coordination that enable systems-oriented engagement between regional institutions to develop clear and coordinated strategies with capacity building that enables adaptation and translation. Third, developing feedback mechanisms from the community level through to the regional level was seen as a way to generate innovative solutions to food systems challenges and enhance implementation. One way to operationalise this was through increasing regional engagement with NGOs, which have a strong community reach which is too often underestimated. NGOs will be critical to developing food system solutions at the regional level that empower local people and progress community action [52]. Another way was to support constructive engagement at the regional level with food producers and food industry actors, particularly MSMEs, albeit in a way that manages conflicts of interests. In LMICs, MSMEs play a major role in food production, and although policy attention is often focused on supporting and encouraging livelihoods for food-related MSMEs, there is an
urgent need for policy to also incentivise processing and marketing of healthy and sustainable food in this space [20,53].

5. Study Strengths and Limitations

A major strength of this study is that it redresses the limited attention to the potential for regional governance to enhance food system policy, despite its important role in addressing shared challenges. Our intent is that by drawing global attention to the progress made and the emerging vision in the Pacific Island region, and by drawing on insights from experts within the region working across food systems sectors, this analysis will support the development of contextually relevant regional action by other regional institutions. This research is timely, because the importance of regional institutions as a more localized form of globalization continues to increase.

Methodologically, this study has combined theories of new regionalism with theories of policy learning and policy change, to examine the potential to enhance and strengthen regional governance of food systems. This combination of theories proved helpful in orienting the analysis towards lessons both for and from the Pacific Island region. Theories of new regionalism, and applied regional analyses from the Pacific Island region, pointed to key aspects of regional governance to interrogate, while theories of policy learning and change indicated more general issues of importance in considering change, such as evidence, problem framing, and previous success. However, we noted there was considerable consistency between the theories.

The study also has several limitations. We examined regional governance dynamics and perceptions of integration, coordination, and impact by knowledgeable stakeholders. However, we were not able to evaluate national implementation and effectiveness, and we did not include country-level interviews, which would have provided more insights regarding the translation of regional commitments into action. In addition, although we drew on documentary data and interviews to understand the regional dynamics, we did not include all possible documentary sources due to scale; numerous communiques and other documentation, have been used to examine regional priorities in other recent studies [26].

6. Broader Reflections on Regional Food Systems Governance

The Pacific Island experience suggests that an explicit regional approach to food systems governance could act to address the “missing middle” between global and national efforts to enhance governance; particularly, through enhancing the coordination and integration of food systems policy agendas. There is, of course, already governance of food systems at the regional level—as this study shows, multiple regional agendas relate to food, and many regional agencies address cross-cutting themes such as food security, nutrition, environment, and gender, which are pivotal to food systems. However, the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021 highlighted the fact that at all policy levels, food systems governance is likely to be plagued by a lack of coordination and integration. Our study suggests that not only could strengthened regional governance improve food system coordination, and thus, outcomes, but ‘food systems’ as a concept could offer a lens for more coordinated and responsive regional governance. Effectively, the Pacific experience to date suggests that with political will at the regional level, a coordinated food systems agenda can build on other related agendas, including regional (food) trade, nutrition, food security, and the environment, rather than duplicating or creating more complex institutional regional architecture.

Regional governance theories point to the importance of power dynamics within a region and of regional identity narratives in shaping regional governance. Power dynamics within a region are often related to economic size, global connections, and perceptions of mutual benefit from cooperation [54]. Identity narratives are critical for both the demand for regionalism and its supply [55,56]. The Pacific Island regional identity, built on the governance of a shared ocean and a strong sense of the need for collective action on
shared challenges, has facilitated the efforts seen in this study towards a coherent and coordinated approach to food systems. The Pacific Island approach to regionalism—with both political and substantial technical dimensions [57]—has lent itself to addressing the challenges posed by integrated food systems policy, which are both technical and political [58,59]. This study points to a fundamental potential for regional food systems governance to address integration and collaborative approaches to the major global challenge of food system transformations. However, in other contexts, an approach to regional food systems governance will need to reflect the dynamics of power and institutional structures, as well as regional identity.

7. Conclusions

This study has used qualitative policy analysis methods, drawing on theories of regionalism and policy change, to address the global priority for strengthened food systems policy. By focusing on the regional level, we have added to a limited body of literature addressing the ‘missing middle’ between global and national efforts to strengthen food system policy; by examining a regional architecture outside the EU, our findings are likely to be relevant to many other regional groupings. Our study suggests that there is potential for regional governance to translate global priority into contextually relevant action, and provide tools and resources to national governments that support food system transformations. We found that Pacific Island regional institutions have made progress in integrating and coordinating food systems policy. There is now an opportunity to further move towards a values-based vision for regional food systems policy that engenders paradigm change, built on new modes of coordination and a more dynamic interaction between regional institutions, national policymakers, and communities.

Author Contributions: The study was conceptualized by A.M.T., A.R., V.I., and A.F.; All authors contributed to protocol development and data analysis; data collection was undertaken by A.M.T., E.R., A.F., P.F., and E.J.; A.M.T. drafted the manuscript and A.R., V.I., A.F., E.R., S.M., and D.W. undertook technical review of the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: A.M.T., E.R., E.J., and D.W. were supported by the ACIAR Pacific Food Systems project FIS/2018/155 for this study. A.F. is supported by the University of Wollongong and ACIAR Pacific Food Systems project FIS/2018/155. S.M. is supported by the ACIAR funded Pathway Project titled “Strengthening and scaling community-based approached to Pacific coastal fisheries management in support of the New Song”.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions, and particularly the risk of identification of participants.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank members of the Pacific Food Policy Project Advisory Group for their input and direction, and the interviewees for so generously giving their time and expertise. The authors also acknowledge Georgie Mulcahy for contributing to the documentary analysis, and Elle McNeil and Sarah Bernays for supporting the conceptualization of Figures in the paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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