

COVID-19 and Food Security in Fiji: The Reinforcement of Subsistence Farming Practices in Rural and Urban Areas

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INTRODUCTION

With a population of just under a million (CIA 2020), Fiji is one of only two South Pacific sovereign nations to have documented COVID-19 cases, with just less than 30 cases as of the beginning of September 2020 (Worldometers 2020), compared to 460 cases in Papua New Guinea at the same time (*ibid.*). The economic impact of the virus, however, has been felt in all Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS), where tourism contributes as much as 70% of the overall GDP and generates up to 34% of employment in some cases (Sherzad 2020). In 2019, for instance, Fiji's tourism incomes totaled around US\$ 900 million (17.2% of GDP), Samoa US\$ 193.5 million (23%), Vanuatu US\$ 175.8 million (19.3%), and Cook Islands US\$ 238.2 million (73.3%) (*ibid.*). Because of the strict travel restrictions around the globe and in the PSIDS, a sharp reduction has been seen in tourist numbers. As a result, the tourism-dependent economies of PSIDS, such as Fiji, Samoa, Cook Islands, and Vanuatu will experience a major recession this year (*ibid.*)

In Fiji, small-scale agriculture is practiced by about half of the Fijian population, which corresponds to the number of people living in rural areas, although these numbers are declining (CIA 2020.). An estimated 87–89% of the land is still traditionally owned (Scheyvens and Russell 2012) through a structure called *Vanua*, and agriculture mostly takes place on smallholder farms. Smallholder production often includes a mixture of root crops, vegetables, fruit, and livestock for household consumption, surplus sales, and gifts, supplemented by income from cash crops such as copra, kava, cocoa, coffee, and vanilla (Sherzad 2020; Pollock, 1986). With a sharp rise in unemployment rates due to COVID-19, a reduction of the prices of primary products, as well as a decline of remittances sent to people living in rural areas, large portions of the Fijian population are at risk of falling into poverty (*ibid.*).

This paper analyzes the impact of the COVID-19 virus on Fiji's food security from a social science perspective. More specifically, it focuses on community-level and government responses to the virus, both from bottom-up and top-down perspectives. Relying on my first-hand experience of COVID-19 in urban and rural areas (*i.e.* Suva city and Delakado village) where I have been residing since the country's first confirmed case, as well as on public policy analysis, the paper argues that the COVID-19 situation has triggered a national reinforcement in the practice of subsistence agriculture and has re-valued the notion of 'self-sufficiency' across different social spheres in the nation (Figs. 1 and 2).

COVID-19 LOCAL RESPONSE: INSIGHTS FROM A RURAL VILLAGE

A general mistrust of urban areas

I flew from Sydney to Fiji on March 20. This was the same day that Australia closed its borders to non-citizens, a day after Fiji's first COVID-19 confirmed case, and, consequently, a few days before the country's own lockdown. When I was on the plane, with only eight fellow passengers on board, and all of us hiding behind our surgical masks, I knew that I would be stuck in Fiji for at least several months. After the landing and a temperature check at the airport, I was asked to go into 'self-isolation in any hotel' for 14 days, which I did in Suva, Fiji's capital. The last day of my self-quarantine period coincided with the first cases of community transmission of the virus in Suva. The government was quick to announce that stricter measures of containment would be implemented from the next day starting at 5 am. These included a 14-day lockdown of the Suva metropolitan area (which comprises about 300 000 people, or roughly one-third of Fiji's population), a national curfew from 8 pm to 5 am, and the total closure of schools and non-essential businesses for an indefinite period of time. Not wishing to remain isolated for at least another 2 weeks, I promptly required a quarantine clearance letter from the Ministry of Health (which was mandatory in order to be 'freed' from quarantine), hopped in a car, and rushed to Delakado village in Tailevu, my 'adoptive' Fijian village (where I have been staying, in and out, since 2015), about 2 hours away by car from the capital.

When I arrived together with other villagers working in Suva and coming to seek refuge in the rural community, I realized that people coming from Suva were met with some level of suspicion. I was seen as even more suspicious, as I had flown into the country from overseas just 2 weeks prior. Upon my arrival, the district nurse who had been alerted of my presence rapidly came to check me and was only satisfied after seeing my clearance letter



Figure 1: A taro (dalo) plantation in the rainforest belonging to Delakado village. Credits: personal photograph



Figure 2: The home gardening initiative. Credits: Ministry of Agriculture and Sherzad 2020.

from the government. As Ennis-McMillan et al. remind us in their article on COVID-19 and anthropology, epidemics tend to catalyse the human action of creating divides between the people perceived ‘at risk’ of transmitting the disease and the people deemed ‘safe’. As Ennis-McMillan et al. write, *‘The human tendency to divide society into “us” and “others” when fear strikes becomes especially prevalent during infectious disease epidemics and leads people to physically distance themselves from perceived sources of transmission’*. This is especially relevant in Fiji, where people were quick to take the disease seriously, unlike many Western nations whose populations were slow to adopt adequate measures (Ennis-McMillan and Hedges 2020).

Ennis-McMillan and Hedges (2020) also tell us that pandemics generally do not create completely new and independent social phenomena and responses. Instead, local reactions to pandemics are based on pre-existing social structures and worldviews: “When a new virus disease emerges, people rely on preexisting and competing cultural explanations of infectious diseases. Anthropologists have long been interested in identifying cultural interpretations of unfamiliar diseases during epidemics”. Nichter (1987) has investigated how such interpretations influenced local engagement with a viral outbreak among rural villagers of South India. While the government conceptualized the disease as one involving viruses and ticks, Nichter notes that cultural interpretations identified social and political aspects to the ‘disease of development’ that disproportionately affected the poorest part of the population,. Although perceptions of COVID-19 do not appear associated with the idea of a catalyzer of inequalities, the pandemic does seem to reinforce pre-existing ideologies and narratives that are critical of ‘modernity’ and ‘development’—at least in Delakado village. Earlier this year, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Delakado for my MA thesis with the University of Sydney. One aspect of this research concerned the perception of development projects and environmental changes in the area. I discovered that the moral politics and local interpretations revolving around the phenomenon of development were not isolated but rather embedded within broader national and regional dynamics. They also

revolved around an opposition of ‘traditional values’ *versus* ‘development values, with the latter being, most of the time, more negatively perceived than the former.

Discourses critical of development among the Fijian indigenous population can be traced back to the very beginning of colonization, with most recent critiques emerging in the 1980s from Fijian university academics. The vaka Vanua (meaning ‘the way of the land’) movement promotes the decolonization of institutions, research, economics, and ideology through the cultivation of pre-colonial societal structures and ways of life. Such structures would include, for instance, talanoa, a specific way of oral storytelling, Vanua, a more traditional way of interacting with the land, and a ‘life in the community’ (Nabobo-Baba 2006; Ravuvu 1988). Partly rooted in post-development, post-modernism, and dependence theories, proponents of the vaka Vanua movement are usually very critical of Western influence on Fijian society, and COVID-19 seems to have exacerbated the negativity of this influence in the eyes of Delakado villagers. Ravuvu’s 1988 book ‘Development or Dependence’ offers a good synthesis of this school of thought, as we can see in the following extract: “This study is an outgrowth of a longstanding concern with the problems of rural development and modernization, specifically on the declining self-sufficiency and self-reliance among Fijians as “development” efforts intensify in rural areas. I foresee increasing loss of control over one’s own destiny and resources” (Ravuvu 1988:ix). Interestingly, as we are about to see, Ravuvu’s notion of a loss of self-reliance is exactly what both local communities and the government are fighting against after the introduction of COVID-19 into the island nation.

Subsistence agriculture and reinforcement of traditional values

During the Suva lockdown period, I was occupied with my online classes and writing my MA thesis in Delakado village. The only place with a network connection capable of handling Zoom calls was from a then-empty house located just outside the village, upon a hill, where I would usually spend my days before returning to the village at dusk. From there, I could observe the unusually high number of villagers and youth that were going back and forth to and from their plantations and harvesting sites. The whole village, including the school-aged children and adolescents who were kept out of school as per the measures taken by the government, seemed to focus on one single activity, from morning until evening: farming.

This increase in subsistence agriculture, whose practitioners can be defined as “people who grow what they eat, build their own houses, and live without regularly making purchases in the marketplace” (Waters 2008:32), consisted mainly of planting and harvesting cassava roots (*tavioka*), taro (*dalo*), plantain bananas (*vudi*), yams (*uvi*), kava (*yaqona*) for recreational and traditional consumption, and sweet potatoes (*kumala*). Foraging was also reinforced and entailed the gathering of wild native plants such as moca, ota, bele, or yams. Wild boars (*vuaka*) were also commonly hunted in the rainforest with the help of dogs. Most of these primary products, which are usually occasionally sold in town by families if and when cash is needed, were consumed by the people living in the community.

The idea of caring and sharing with others and of ‘togetherness’ is an important aspect of the value systems of Fijian people, although it may have decreased over time with the introduction of modernity (Ravuvu 1983). Indeed, the members of the same community often depended (and still depend to an extent) upon one another for their various subsistence needs (*ibid.*: 81). While development and modernity might create ideological differences between villagers in normal times and thus hinder this ideal ‘communal life’ with the introduction of money and pursuits of individual wealth, the virus did the opposite. When the number of COVID-19 infections around the world exploded and hundreds of millions of

people were forced to isolate themselves at home, Delakado dwellers were working together more than ever, in order to secure a sustainable path to self-sufficiency in an uncertain world (MacGregor 2020). After watching videos of people panic-buying in many Western countries and leaving nothing but empty shelves in supermarkets, people in the village were certain that at one point, they would have to rely on locally produced goods only. At this point, the world outside the village was perceived as being completely unsafe, out of control, and threatening. At one point of my friends in Delakado told me, half-jokingly: “You have to eat cassava and *dalo* (taro root). That will be the only thing left. All of us will stay here and go to the forest, take our bath in the river (Delakado dweller, 2020)”.

Intensive farming and planting activities in Delakado village continued until schools across Fiji re-opened in July 2020, following more than two months of closure. The reopening of schools, which the government allowed because there were no new COVID-19 cases in communities for several weeks, coincided with the establishment of a ‘new normal’ in Fijians’ everyday life. This ‘new normal’ entailed the resumption of most economic activities in urban areas—albeit with pay cuts, a few COVID-19 restrictions, such as a ban on major gatherings, the closure of nightclubs (still in effect) and cinemas, swimming pools and gyms, and, most importantly, a curfew, now from 11 pm until 5 am every day (Ministry of Health 2020). At this point, agricultural activities in the village gradually returned to pre-COVID time levels of intensity. However, I noticed on several occasions that the general mistrust of urban areas, and perhaps of ‘modernity’ in general, remains present today in Delakado. This suspicion often goes hand in hand with a form of uncertainty about the future. What if there are new cases? What if it all starts all over again, as it did in many countries across the globe? Subsistence agriculture remains therefore very important and takes the form of a sustainable local response to the virus and a form of preparedness in case a second wave hits the country. A few weeks back, I wrote the following quote in my note book, coming from a Delakado villager: “Yeah we do not know what’s gonna happen. That’s why we should plant a lot. Now some people go back to the village because no more money. We just pray and see! (Delakado dweller, 2020)”.

NATIONAL MEASURES AND POLICIES TO ENSURE LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION

Two major initiatives

As briefly mentioned earlier, pandemics often exacerbate existing social realities. Social science scholars also remind us that historically, governments have played an important role in reinforcing these inequalities through their actions. For example, studies of cholera epidemics in Venezuela have shown that official discourse and action from the government created a ‘politics of exclusion’ toward indigenous people by blaming deaths during epidemics on cultural differences, for instance (Briggs 2004). In the case of Fiji, however, the government’s response to COVID-19 does not seem to have followed that pattern. On the contrary, from what I have experienced at least, national measures to ensure local food production and food security seem to align with most of the populations’ needs and expectations. For instance, the country rapidly implemented two policies that targeted both rural and urban areas in the country, respectively: the ‘Farm Support Package’ and the ‘Home gardening program’, which, as we will see, reflect Delakado villagers’ shift toward more intensive forms of subsistence agriculture as an effective COVID-19 response. I will now rapidly discuss those policies.

Farm support package

The government facilitated the allocation of one million Fijian dollars (around US\$ 452 000) for this initiative, which aims to boost the production of short-term crops. To this end, the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) distributed planting materials, open-pollinated seeds, and suckers to farmers around the country free of charge. All the agriculture extension offices started seed distribution on 30 March 2020, or 11 days after the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the country (Sherzad 2020). The distribution of seeds was restrained to 1/4 acre per crop whereby every farmer had the opportunity of being assisted with three short-term crops. The targeted crops were taro, cassava, rice, kumala, duruka, eggplant, chillies, okra, tomatoes, maize, bitter melon, pigeon pea, and cowpea (Fiji Sun 2020). Government discourses promoting local food production, self-sufficiency, and resilience are in fact similar to the way of life of Fijians during pre-colonial times, and constitute a ‘solution’ of sorts to Ravuvu’s warning of a loss of self-reliance. This is exemplified by the words of the Minister for Agriculture, Reddy:

‘COVID-19 is a reminder of the need to be food secure. Yes we get a reminder of these challenges each time a cyclone or natural disaster hits Fiji but COVID-19 has elevated this goal 10 times more.’ Mr. Reddy reiterated that “We must work together as a nation to get serious about agriculture and our goal to be self-sufficient and resilient in the way we produce and source our food system” (Reddy, quoted by Fiji Sun 2020).

Home gardening program

As the FAO reminds us, Pacific Islands countries spend billions of dollars on importing primary sector products (agriculture, fisheries, aquaculture, and forestry sectors) into the region. People living in urban areas, as in most countries, have limited access to land and do not practice subsistence agriculture. Instead, they are mostly dependent on imported foods and can find their food security threatened if they are laid off due to the virus (Sherzad 2020).

Under the initiative of the ‘Home Gardening Program’, the Ministry of Agriculture provided gardening seed packages to all households in urban and peri-urban areas around Fiji. All the agriculture extension offices started seed distribution on 30 March 2020 (Fijian Government 2020). In order to benefit from the initiative, recipients who met the selected criteria had to fill the ‘Agriculture COVID-19 Response Form’. As of 20 April, 11 602 seed packages had been distributed across Fiji (*ibid.*).

In this situation, the ‘*Vanua*’ notions of ‘togetherness’ and self-sufficiency present in rural communities also became central to the discourses of many urban households, as exemplified by the following extract:

We see that everyone is working together, they understand the value of not only working together as one, also because the crisis we are in, they understand that keeping healthy and looking out for one another is more important (Suva dweller, quoted by ABC 2020).

CONCLUSION

Whereas in some countries, COVID-19 has exacerbated inequalities of all kinds, in Fiji, the pandemic seems to have achieved the opposite. It has brought together people from different social spheres through the values of self-reliance, togetherness, and ‘sharing locally produced food’. While the long-term prevalence of this phenomenon, especially in urban areas, remains to be seen, it is likely to continue at least until the situation returns to pre-COVID times, which might take months, or even years. As Farrell et al. remind us, extreme necessity can be a time for positive policy innovation and creating space for potential positive

intersections that can in turn prompt a re-visioning of food systems in the Pacific region (Farrell et al. 2020:786) and promote a healthier organic diet (SPC 2020).

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Gregoire Randin is a postgraduate student in International Development at University of Sydney. His anthropological research investigates local interpretations and perceptions of human-induced environmental changes in Fiji, where he has been partly residing since 2015. Gregoire's research interests include sustainable development, political ecology, Anthropocene anthropology, decolonisation of research, Pacific worldviews, and policy analysis. Gregoire is a member of the Australian Association for Pacific Studies and a contributing author to the 6th Assessment Report on Climate Change by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

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