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Sugar, power and policy: The political economy of a health and economic ‘win–win’ in Fiji’s sugar-sweetened beverage tax

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Abstract

Background In 2006, the Fiji Government introduced a 0.05FJ\$ (0.03USD) per litre excise tax on domestically produced sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs). Since then, the tax has been abandoned, reintroduced, or adjusted at least ten times, while tariffs on imported SSBs have also undergone reform. These rapid iterations of Fiji’s SSB tax raise questions about which interests and motivations underpin the tax, what instigated the multiple adjustments, and implications for its impact on health versus economic and political considerations.

Methods Using case study methodology, this study maps the history of SSB tax adjustments in Fiji and examines the political economy forces that have shaped, and continually re-shaped, this policy landscape. We used policy analysis and theories of power to analyse the intersection of ideas, interests and institutions, drawing on policy documents ($n = 304$), key informant interviews ($n = 32$) and direct observations of socio-political events ($n = 7$) as data sources.

Results Findings from this study indicate that the introduction of the SSB tax and subsequent adjustments were motivated more by economic, than health, imperatives. The relationship of mutual dependence between the Fiji Government and domestic SSB industry actors led policymakers to make multiple adjustments, seesawing in an attempt to balance the immediate need for revenue and long-term economic development through strengthened local industries. Early SSB tax lobbying from health actors alone had minimal impact. However, a subsequent alliance between government health actors and politically savvy and well-positioned civil society actors proved persuasive in both increasing the tax rate and ensuring a health and rights focus, arguably achieving a health and economic ‘win–win’.

Conclusion Global adoption of SSB taxes is increasing. Examining the protracted history of Fiji’s SSB tax reveals the political ebbs and flows that alter how prospective population health ‘wins’ are weighed up against other policy imperatives. For health-interested actors, these insights point to important strategic in-roads around the explicit use of political economy analysis to complement technical policy insights. Building and maintaining coalitions that extend beyond government and into civil society also proved pivotal. Health system leadership that champions political thinking and cross-sectoral partnerships holds great promise for enhancing health actors’ engagement with SSB tax-specific policy making and other multisectoral reform in Fiji and elsewhere.

Keywords Fiji, Noncommunicable diseases, Pacific, Policy, Sugar-sweetened beverages, Tax

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Background

The World Health Organization (WHO) increasingly advocates for the adoption of targeted taxes on health-harming commodities, such as alcohol, tobacco, and sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), as important policy levers in responding to the global rise in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) [1]. Encompassed in packages like the WHO's NCD Best Buys, these policy recommendations rarely acknowledge the ways in which health interests must often compete with (not just co-exist alongside) economic interests [2]. Instead, the NCD Best Buys outline a series of so-called 'win-win' policy recommendations, framed as beneficial to both health and economic outcomes, and provide largely technical guidance on structuring policies to achieve these dual goals [3]. In relation to taxing SSBs specifically, these policy recommendations and supporting evidence base suggest that well-structured taxes have the potential to achieve three ends: i) discouraging consumption, ii) encouraging healthier product reformulation and iii) creating new revenue streams for governments and the potential for reinvestment into the health sector.

SSB taxes have now been adopted in more than 103 countries and territories, [4] showcasing the growing political appetite for these 'win-win' health and economic policy responses. Yet despite growing uptake, there remains considerable heterogeneity in the way SSB taxes have been designed and implemented across countries, with considerable variation in tax types, rates and the breadth of commodities targeted [5–7]. The global diversity of SSB taxes indicates that they are neither inherently apolitical nor universally applicable. Rather, their design and implementation are shaped by distinct policy processes and political economy dynamics, ensuring they align with local interests and political realities [8–11]. The evolution and effectiveness of a SSB tax as a policy instrument, and whether or not it achieves the health and economic 'win-win' promoted by the Best Buys, are effectively shaped by the interaction between local and global interests, diverse actors, and broader sociopolitical institutions. While rapidly-increasing literature demonstrates the positive health and economic outcomes that may be achieved through well-structured SSB taxes, [12–14] little research to date has focused on the political economy shaping motivations for, and actual design of, SSB taxes.

In the Pacific region, SSB taxes have been widely implemented, with some form of tax on SSBs now present in 16 of the region's 22 countries and territories [4, 15]. Considerable research has mapped this growth in SSB taxes and their impacts across the region [15–21]. In particular, Thow et al.'s seminal work analysing the uptake of SSB taxes by the governments of Fiji, Samoa, Nauru and

French Polynesia drew attention to the heterogeneity of taxes and their emergence from, and shaping by, contextually unique sociopolitical circumstances [20]. More recent findings by Teng et al. have added further granularity to Thow et al.'s heterogeneity insights by mapping changes to SSB tax structures enacted across all Pacific jurisdictions over time and, through discrete case studies, modelling their impact [15–20].

Despite the diverse designs among Pacific SSB taxes and the Western Pacific NCD Roadmap's emphasis on understanding and managing political economy forces that influence their adoption, [22] research on the political process behind these taxes remains limited compared to studies evaluating their impact on price, imports and sales [17, 19, 21]. This study thus builds on early Pacific political economy research in the SSB tax and broader nutrition spaces, [20, 23, 24] and aims to provide a deeper understanding of the evolution of SSB taxes in Fiji by identifying the political economy forces that shaped how and why the policy was introduced and adjusted over time.

Fiji is a useful case for examining the political economy of SSB taxes given the Government of Fiji has long been at the forefront of SSB taxes, having introduced a 0.05FJ\$ (0.03 USD) per litre excise tax on locally produced SSBs back in 2006 [20]. Since its inception, taxes on SSBs in Fiji have undergone several iterations, coincided with critical political and economic junctions as well as a national escalation in the burden of NCDs. Through an in-depth focus on the discrete SSB tax policy *process* in Fiji over its extended history, this research will: i) systematically map the iterations of Fiji's SSB tax, and ii) explore how diverse ideas, interests and institutions have shaped the policy processes and, ultimately the outcome, of the taxes over time.

Study context

Geography, demography & politics

The Republic of Fiji is a Pacific Island nation of 925,000 people and more than 330 islands spread across 3,000,000km² of Pacific Ocean [25]. Political structures and governance in Fiji have undergone considerable transformation since independence in 1970, with a rising Indo-Fijian presence colliding with the nation's rich iTaukei (Indigenous Fijian) history. As a result, complex and interconnected ethnic, land rights and political tensions sparked four military coups between 1987 and 2006 [26]. In particular, Commodore Bainimarama's 2006 coup saw a redrafting of the constitution in 2013. This reform altered contemporary political and chiefly structures in Fiji. Entrenching the political power held by the iTaukei-dominated military and instilled a culture of fear in political and civilian life, political upheaval in Fiji has

had longstanding implications on the national economy and the culture of policy making [26–28].

Economics, trade & the SSB industry

Economic policy in Fiji shifted considerably between independence and the mid-1980s. Once focused on supporting domestic industries in order to offset dependence of foreign imports (an import substitution strategy), by the mid-1980s the Government of Fiji instead pivoted towards export-orientated economic development [29]. This shift saw domestic industries gain government support and economic protections to foster a more competitive export market. Ongoing structural changes including the 1984 International Monetary Fund structural adjustment package and a 1986 policy, which provided customs exemptions and tax concessions to investors exporting >95% of their outputs, supported this reorientation of the national economy [30–32]. Fiji also signed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1993 and became a World Trade Organization member in 1996, signifying an increased eagerness to engage in international trade. With Fijian economic development increasing contingent on the competitiveness and success of its industries in the global market, domestic industries expanded and became increasingly powerful in influencing government policy.

The Fijian food and beverage industry in particular grew significantly through the shift to a more export-orientated economy [33, 34]. In the context of the SSB tax, five major domestic producers now account for over 90% of SSBs produced and consumed in Fiji [35]. Fiji-based producers of SSBs include Coca-Cola Europacific Partners, formerly Coca-Cola Amital (producing and distributing Coca-Cola products); Tappoo Group (Pepsi); Motibhai (Sprint); Frenzo (Pops); and Printo Industries (Swaad). United Nations Comtrade data suggests the value of *imported* SSBs was only at 971,000 USD in 2017, [36] meaning the projected value of the *domestic* SSB industry was approximately 9.7 million USD. Through domestic sales, export and employment, the domestic SSB industry is a valued economic contributor in Fiji and the industry has often worked collectively, under the ‘Fiji Beverage Group’ umbrella, to secure political influence.

Health status

Fiji has undergone a significant epidemiological transition since the mid-twentieth century [37]. With NCDs responsible for 80% of mortality, this disease burden threaten Fiji’s health, social and economic wellbeing [38]. Successive Fijian governments have sought to address rising NCDs and Fiji has played a key role in setting the *Healthy Islands Vision* for the Western Pacific region, [39] proactively adopting several NCD measures aligned with global and regional frameworks [40]. In

health advocates’ eyes, Fiji’s 2006 domestic SSB excise tax appeared a straightforward decision to introduce policy aligned with national and regional NCD commitments.

Methods

Methodology and theoretical positioning

The research applied case study methodology to map iterations of Fiji’s SSB tax and explore the political economy forces influencing that policy between 2006 and 2020. Permitting the examination of a phenomenon of interest *within* its surrounding context, [41] case study design has been usefully applied in situations where boundaries between a phenomenon (e.g. SSB tax) and its context (e.g. the Fijian sociopolitical context) are blurred [42]. Case studies are often orientated towards addressing ‘how’ and ‘why’ style questions and typically collate multiple sources of evidence to construct an in-depth empirical account of the phenomenon within its real-life context [43–45]. Given its concentrated focus yet methodological and analytic flexibility, [46] case study design was considered the most appropriate approach for building a rich and multidimensional understanding of the passage and iterations of Fiji’s SSB tax. Further, as part of a broader project analysing the adoptions of SSB taxes in Melanesia, case study design allowed for case comparisons between settings [47, 48].

Political economy analysis is an area of study that is used to explore political landscapes and map the power and position of key actors involved in a phenomenon of interest [49, 50]. Applied to this research, political economy analysis allowed for the explicit consideration of political forces and power dynamics influencing policymaking. Building on its application in other health policy and systems research, [51, 52] the ideas, interests and institutions (3Is) framework was selected as an appropriate heuristic for exploring how power and politics shaped interactions between people and processes through the various iterations to Fiji’s SSB tax [42, 53]. By drawing attention to knowledge and information (ideas), diverse agendas pushed by various actors (interests) and the socio-political context governed by rules and norms (institutions), the 3Is framework helped us to explore and unpack the interrelationship between these interconnected domains [51, 54, 55].

In aligning with the constructionist epistemology of the research team, critical theory and, in particular, postcolonial theory was also used to inform considerations around the entrenched power dynamics underlying widely-held global health norms [56, 57]. Postcolonial theorists argue that our contemporary understandings of the world cannot be separated from the history of imperialism and colonial rule, [58] and indeed, that conscious consideration of the legacies of imperialism are critical to

identifying the overt and subtle forms of domination that remain in the globalised neo-colonial present [59, 60]. Given the study's grounding in the analysis of power and policymaking and its contextual setting in post-colonial Fiji, intentional consideration of the implications of the imperial past and neo-colonial present were integral to developing an in-depth understanding of contemporary political economy forces at play. Applied to this study, postcolonial theory was used in the identification and interrogation of power disparities, to consider the structure and function of global and domestic institutions, and it also functioned as a reflexive tool for the authorship team. Finally, Bourdieu's forms of capital was pivotal in conceptualising the diverse forms of power, where they reside or are embodied, and how such power dynamics influence policy processes and their outcomes [61]. Bourdieu's work disaggregates between economic, social and cultural conditions and resources that afford actors varying degrees of power [61]. Bourdieu's articulation of cultural and social capital provided a useful expansion on more traditional, economic-centred conceptions of power. Moreover, when intermeshed with the study's grounding in critical and postcolonial theory, Bourdieu's capitals held specific utility in relation to contextually specific nuances of power, particularly those related to cultural capital and actors' ability to navigate social norms [62].

Data collection

Data were collected between July 2020 and April 2021. A multi-method qualitative approach was used, combining iteratively collected and analysed key informant interviews, document analysis and direction observations. This type of multidimensional analysis allows for the capture of diverse perspectives and interpretations,

producing rich insights and enhancing credibility of findings [63, 64].

Thirty-two interviews were conducted with national and regional informants using purposive and snowball sampling. The first and second authors initially generated a prospective interview list based on expert knowledge with updates added based on participant recommendations and concurrent documentary analysis. Efforts were taken to ensure representation from diverse sectors and perspectives including policy makers, bureaucrats, representatives from statutory bodies, academia, civil society, industry and development partner organisations (Table 1). Walt and Gilson's policy triangle informed the semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 1), with questions on policy process, content, actors and context [65]. All interviews were undertaken in English by LME and lasted one-hour on average. Given the impact of COVID-19 on Fijian border closures between March 2020 and November 2021, all interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded with informants' consent and transcribed verbatim. A total of 304 archival records and documents relevant to the policy and surrounding events were also collected iteratively (Table 1), with some sources provided by informants during or after interviews and others obtained through online searches. Seven unstructured research memos were also generated documenting observations regarding socio-cultural and political events and debates from informal interactions, parliamentary broadcasts and remote attendance at regional forums and dialogues (Table 1).

Analysis

NVivo version 12 supported coding, triangulation and thematic analysis of all data. A data familiarisation phase included all sources being re-read and recordings

Table 1 Number and type of study informants, archival records and observations

Informant types	#	Document types	#	Observation types	#
Government health	3	Government of Fiji reports & policy documents	84	Informal interactions	2
Political	1	Media reports	28	Parliamentary broadcasts	2
Statutory bodies	2	Press releases, communiqués & committee reports	12	Regional forums and dialogues	3
WHO country & regional office	2	Regional reports & policy documents	16		
World Bank	2	Global reports & policy documents	12		
Regional development organisations	7	Fiji development partner reports	10		
Civil society	2	Fiji specific academic papers	62		
Industry	2	Regional & global academic papers	24		
National development partner	2	Corporate documents & websites	9		
National & regional academics & commentators	9	Parliamentary Hansard	14		
		Acts of parliament	33		
Totals	32		304		7

replayed. Thematic coding was undertaken by the first author in consultation with the second and last author and was initially inductive to minimise misinterpretation, and dates and events from all three data sources were triangulated allowing for early process tracing [66]. An initial set of inductive codes were discussed amongst authorship team. Subsequent rounds of deductive coding and thematic analysis drew on the policy triangle and policy cycle heuristics and Bourdieu's forms of capital, while later rounds constructed themes using concepts found in the ideas, interests and institutions literature [54, 61, 65, 67]. Member checking was undertaken informally through subsequent discussions and written follow-up with key informants. Peer debriefing throughout the data collection and analysis phases also allowed authors to test theories and derive meaning iteratively. Unstructured research memos were pivotal to drawing out observations across sources during this phase. Drawing on synthesised data, we explored the policy process and diffusion of central policy ideas over time and between contexts and actors. Process tracing informed a narrative of the policy process and allowed for the exploration of political dynamics, and subsequently, emerging themes. Additional layers of analysis used memoing to link commonalities across the case and drew on theories previously described to explore political economy forces and their impact on the SSB tax process and outcome.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the Fiji National University College Human Health Research Ethics Committee (CHHREC) (176.20) and James Cook University

HREC (H-8055). Free and informed consent was sought from all informants. Participation was voluntary and non-remunerated.

Results

Findings are divided into two sections aligning with the dual aims of the study: i) a descriptive account that maps *how* Fiji's SSB tax has been adjusted between 2006 and 2020, and ii) an exploration of the ideas, interests and institutions that have shaped the tax policy process over time, providing explanatory detail on *why* such changes have occurred since the tax's 2006 inception.

i) The iterative introduction of Fiji's SSB tax

This section consolidates data from interviews, documents and direct observations (see Table 1) to build a comprehensive map of SSB taxes in Fiji between 2006 and 2020. Table 2 summarises the types of taxes used in Fiji and their applicability to SSBs. Table 3 outlines changes to the domestic excise on SSBs over time, illustrative of the frequency of changes across all taxes. The domestic excise tax has been highlighted in this table given it most closely represents the health-promoting or 'sin tax' typology typically discussed in health literature, [1, 68, 69] however adjustments to other tax types between 2006 and 2020 can be found in Appendix 2.

Fiji's initial domestic SSB tax was introduced through an Excise Tax Act amendment in December 2005, with a 0.05FJ\$/L tax on 'carbonated soft drinks' commencing January 2006 [75]. This SSB tax proposal had been tabled by the Fiji Islands Revenue and Customs Authority given its revenue-raising potential [20]. The introduction

Table 2 Definitions of four types of tax and exemplars from Fijian legislation

Associated legislation	Tax type	Defined
Excise Act	Domestic excise	Domestic excise duties are imposed on particular products manufactured domestically in Fiji [70]. These duties are considered 'indirect' in that they are paid by the manufacturer or distributor, with the subsequent sales price often increasing to recover this cost [69]. Excise duties are typically applied to a narrower scope of products than other taxes and more frequently apply a specific (also referred to as <i>ad quantum</i>) 'per unit' volumetric or content-based tax rate (\$ per unit/per litre/per gram of sugar) rather than an <i>ad valorem</i> tax (% of the product's value) [69]
Value Added Tax Act	Value added	Value added tax (VAT) is an incremental tax levied on products at each stage of production where value is added (i.e. supplying, manufacturing, distributing and retail) [6]. VAT is generally an indirect <i>ad valorem</i> tax that is applied to a wide range of goods and services [69]. In Fiji, VAT is charged at 0%, 9% (removed July 2023) or 15% depending on the product [71]
Customs Tariff Act	Fiscal	Fiscal import duties are imposed on products imported into Fiji [72]. Typically, an <i>ad valorem</i> tax, these duties are often applied to groups of products and charged based on four duty bands (0%, 5%, 15%, and 32%) [73]
	Import excise	Import excise duties are concurrently applied to products imported into Fiji alongside fiscal duties [72]. Import excise duties are often levied against individual (although not all) goods as an <i>ad valorem</i> 'sin tax' ranging from between 5–15% in Fiji
	Export	Export duties are imposed on domestically produced goods that are being exported to another country [72]. Globally, export duties are increasingly rare, and in Fiji they are applied to a very limited range of commodities, not including SSBs

Table 3 A timeline of adjustments to Fiji domestic excise on SSBs between 2006 and 2020

Year	Domestic Excise Changes [^]
2006	A 0.05FJ\$/L (0.03USD) duty added to carbonated soft drinks
2007	Duty on carbonated soft drinks is reduced to 0.03FJ\$/L (0.013USD) before being removed entirely 10 days later
2008	0.2FJ\$/L (0.13USD) duty is added to mineral water and removed 3 weeks later
2010	0.05USD/L (0.03USD) duty is reintroduced to carbonated soft drinks
2014	Wording is adjusted to 'Sweetened beverage with added sugar or artificial sweetener' in the Excise Act
2015	Duty is increased to 0.1FJ\$/L (0.05USD). Applied to both 'carbonated soft drinks' and 'sweetened beverages with added sugar or artificial sugar'
2016	Duty is increased to 0.3FJ\$/L (0.15USD)
2017	Duty is increased to 0.35FJ\$/L (0.18USD)
2018	Wording in Excise Act is further clarified to 'Carbonated soft drinks not containing alcohol and sweetened beverages with added sugar or artificial sweetener'
2020	Wording in Excise Act is changed to exclude the taxation of sweetened or flavoured milk

[^] USD value of excise figures are based on historic exchange rates at the 1 st of August each year [74]

of the SSB tax followed trade disputes in 2004 and mid-2005 between Fiji and regional neighbours, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, over biscuits, kava and canned meat products traded between the nations [76]. The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Free Trade Agreement, a regional pact liberalising trade between Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, had curtailed signatory governments' ability ban imports in order to protect domestic producers [76, 77]. The MSG trade conditions highlighted to the Fiji Government the vulnerability of local manufacturers, and by extension the nation's tax base, to the impacts of trade liberalisation [76]. With MSG signatory nations committing to further trade liberalisation through an additional iteration of the MSG Free Trade Agreement just two months before the SSB tax's introduction, shoring up alternative government revenue streams thus became a priority. Political tensions and uncertainty around land rights following a series of coups had also curtailed investments in the Fijian economy, increasing economic needs [30].

By 2006, political uncertainty (Fig. 1) and a controversial proposal to offer amnesty to those involved in the 2000 coup, culminated in another coup led by Commodore Bainimarama. In what would become known as the oxymoronic "good governance coup", this political upheaval was the beginning of what would be 16 years of Bainimarama-led governments [78].

In February 2007, 13 months after the initial introduction of a domestic SSB tax, industry lobbying initially resulted in the tax being reduced to 0.03FJ\$/L, before it was scrapped altogether in March 2007 [20, 79, 80]. However, a significant budget deficit combined with coup-related military expenditure and weak investor confidence meant that revenue generation remained a government concern [81–83]. In response, a series of

austerity measures were introduced targeting civil service reform and expanded revenue collection. Against this backdrop, the repealed domestic SSB tax was replaced with a targeted 0.2FJ\$/L excise tax on mineral and natural waters in July 2008 [84]. This measure remained in place for just three weeks before industry backlash, including a production halt by major exporter Fiji Water, forced the government to repeal the measure [85, 86].

While Fiji remained without a domestic excise tax on SSBs (or mineral water) until January 2010, the period between the repeal of the mineral water tax (July 2008) and the return of a 0.05FJ\$/L domestic SSBs tax (early 2010) was filled with political controversy. Between mid-2008 and early 2010 Bainimarama was reappointed as interim Prime Minister by President Iloilo; the constitution was abrogated; a state of emergency was declared extending policing powers, censoring media outlets and instilling governance through fear; and following global condemnation, Fiji was suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum [87, 88].

The state of emergency saw allies and investors further distance themselves from Fiji and delayed the sign-off on economically important aid and trade commitments [89, 90]. As part of a package of measures to recoup funds, in 2011 the excise duty on *imported* SSBs rose to 15% under reforms slated to protect domestic industries by taxing imported products at equivalent rates to those produced domestically [91]. Value Added Tax (VAT) also increased from 12.5% to 15% in the 2010/11 national budget, increasing the price of goods and impacting both the domestically produced and imported SSB markets [92].

Despite the political turmoil in Fiji between the 2009 state of emergency and 2014 general elections, bureaucratic functions continued. The Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MOHMS) carried out and released an

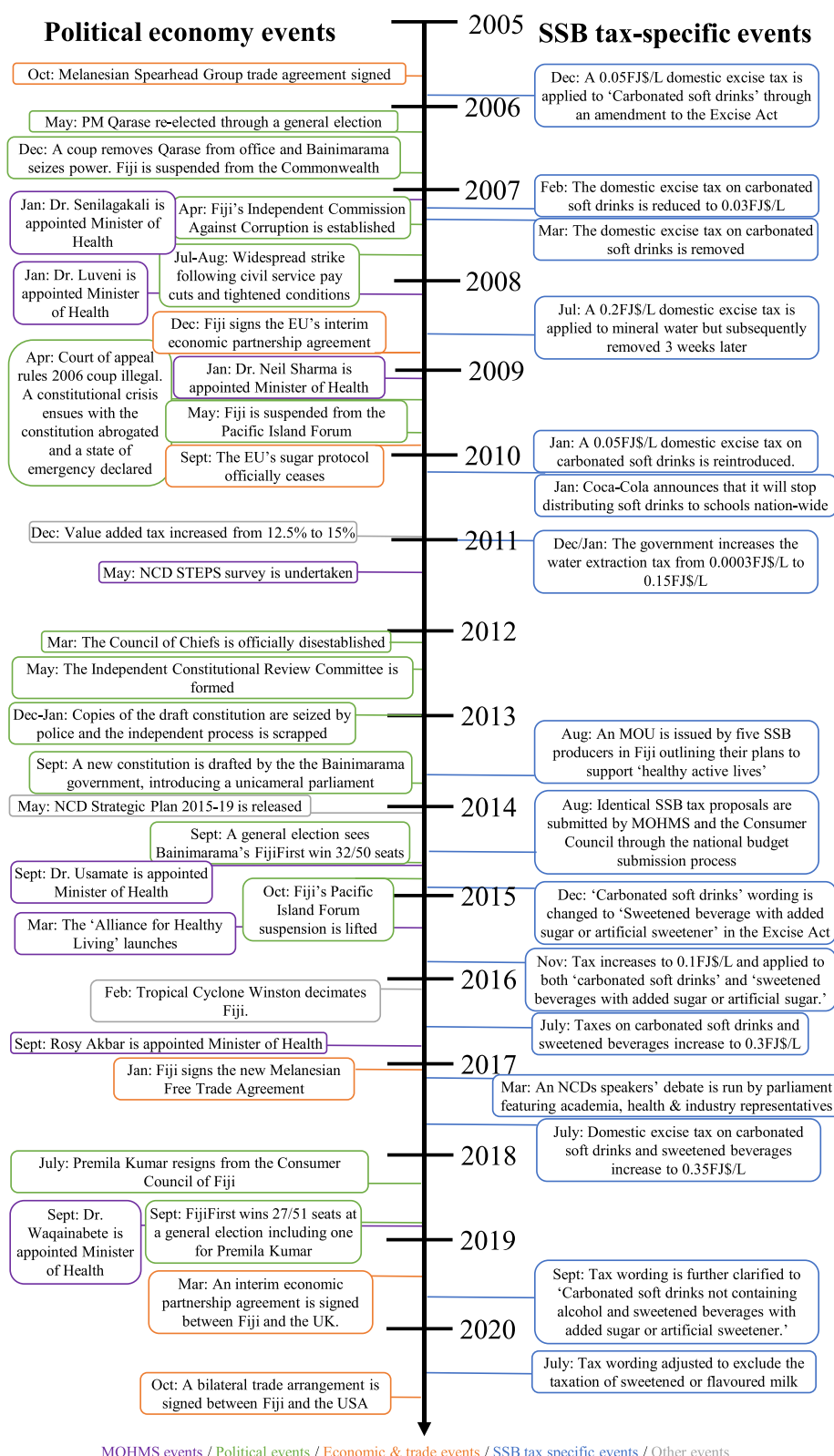


Fig. 1 Timeline of events surrounding the political economy of Fiji's domestic excise SSB tax

NCD STEPS survey, began scoping a renewed NCD Strategic Plan and undertook several initiatives to address commercial determinants of NCDs, including increases to tobacco and alcohol taxes [93]. Study informants indicated that efforts to curb tobacco and alcohol consumption were viewed as a wakeup call by domestic SSB producers, and in August 2013 the Fiji Beverage Group issued a memorandum of understanding outlining their commitment to “supporting healthy active lives for people in Fiji” [94, 95].

The Fiji Beverage Group was correct in their projections, with restrictions on marketing to children and targeted taxes included in the renewed NCD Strategic Plan [93]. The MOHMS had also partnered with the Consumer Council of Fiji (herein ‘the Consumer Council’) – a statutory government body focused on protecting consumer rights – and the civil society group Diabetes Fiji to draft identical health-focused submissions to the government’s 2014 national budget consultation. These submissions outlined shared concerns regarding NCD trends and proposed that Fiji introduce marketing regulations restricting the advertisement of unhealthy foods and beverages to children and increase the domestic SSB tax by introducing a tiered measure based on sugar concentration [96]. The tax proposal specifically highlighted the presence of a discriminatory tax structure between imported and domestically produced SSBs, with much higher import duties applied to SSBs (a 32% fiscal duty and 15% import excise) than the 0.05FJ\$/L excise duty assigned to those produced locally. To remedy this misalignment in the taxes and better address population health needs, the proposal explicitly outlined the evidence supporting the adoption of a broad tiered tax. Yet despite shared backing and evidence, the only adjustment made to the domestic SSB tax in 2014, occurring just after Bainimarama’s FijiFirst party won a landslide election, was a terminology clarification: expanding the domestic SSB tax to cover “Sweetened beverage with added sugar or artificial sweetener.”

In 2015, the MOHMS, the Consumer Council and Diabetes Fiji convened more formally under the banner of “the Alliance for Healthy Living” (hereafter ‘the Alliance’) and continued to lobby for NCD-related measures. In a triumph of collective action, the 2015/16 budget doubled the domestic SSB tax to 0.1FJ\$/L, applying it to both ‘carbonated soft drinks’ and ‘sweetened beverages with added sugar or artificial sugar’. Less than three months later, Tropical Cyclone Winston made landfall in Fiji, causing widespread damage to infrastructure and the economy. The 2016/17 budget was consequently heavily focused on recouping costs associated with the disaster and, in July 2016, the domestic SSB tax rose to 0.3FJ\$/L. In July 2017, in alignment with other tax increases and

following a parliamentary speaker’s debate on SSB taxes featuring industry and health experts, [97, 98] the domestic SSB tax rose again, this time to 0.35FJ\$/L.

No further adjustments have been made to the domestic SSB tax rate during the study period (although the tax rate was subsequently increased to 0.4FJ\$/L in July 2023). In mid-2018 however, the fiscal duty on imported SSBs was increased to ‘32% or 2FJ\$ per litre (whichever is greater)’ as part of annual budget adjustments. In Hansard, this increase was described by the Minister for Economy as aligning import with domestic taxes; addressing concerns that imported equivalents were cheaper than could be produced domestically. In September 2019, wording of the domestic tax was also adjusted to specify ‘Carbonated soft drinks *not containing alcohol* and sweetened beverages with added sugar or artificial sweetener.’ And in July 2020, following COVID-19’s decimation of Fiji’s tourism-dependent economy, the wording of domestic SSB tax was again clarified to exclude sweetened or flavoured milks following concerns regarding the financial accessibility of calcium sources. Taxes on alcoholic beverages were also halved citing the need to protect the domestic beverage and tourism industries [99].

ii) The political economy of Fiji’s SSB taxes

This section outlines the intertwined ideas, interests and institutions emerging from analysis. It draws together interview, document and direct observational data (see Table 1) to illustrate the complexities associated with the introduction of, and adjustments to, taxes on SSBs in Fiji.

‘Nobody wants to bite the hand that feeds it, right?’: Interests, institutions and the mutual dependence of industry and government

Frequent changes to SSB taxes are illustrative of the delicate balance the Fiji Government sought to strike between shorter-term government revenue interests and longer-term economic development aspirations which tied national interests to that of the domestic industries. Post-independence, government attention focused on attracting and retaining investors to build a robust Fijian export sector. Embedded in a series of structural adjustments and tax and trade reforms, creating favourable investment conditions has long become a cornerstone of the Fijian economic landscape:

‘I think we have a very attractive tax system in terms of investment in Fiji, quite low if you compare it to the Pacific and most of the countries in the world’ – Statutory body representative.

In the early 2000s, internal and external conditions again challenged Fiji’s economic development, as

government debt as a proportion of GDP escalated from 32.7% in 1999 to 49.2% in 2006 [83]. Successive coups caused economic and diplomatic damage with higher-than-expected military expenditure, inefficiencies associated with shifting political agendas, a hesitant investment climate and stalled regional and global aid and trade commitments [100, 101]. The global financial crisis in 2007/8 then further destabilised Fiji's economy and spooked prospective investors.

These events occurred in the context of a close-knit but cautious relationship between domestic industries and the Fiji Government. The government wanted to retain Fiji's status as a regional export hub and was heavily reliant on domestic industry for employment and revenue. As such, the Fiji Government had supported the growth of domestic industries including through start-up tax breaks and entering into trade disputes with Fiji and Papua New Guinea in 2004/05 to protect local biscuit and corned beef industries, respectively [76]. The Fijian economy's reliance on profitable domestic industries granted industry actors considerable power in making requests of government and pushing back against decisions that were seen to challenge business interests. The public threat of halting production, downsizing or shifting offshore was not an uncommon industry response to unfavourable policy decisions, often seeing policies renegotiated in close consultation with industry representatives [85, 102].

However, informants noted that the government's support for the domestic industry was conditional, and critique of government decisions was poorly tolerated, particularly in the Bainimarama era:

'I don't see so much opposition when government makes decisions. Before the coup, yes. Now it's a slightly different environment.' – Government health representative.

Industry informants, and those familiar with the Fijian food and beverage industry, acknowledged that many key industry players were foreign, often Indian, nationals. In the Bainimarama era, where fear was a central tenant of governance (see below), the threat of expulsion played a key role in silencing otherwise influential (particularly international) industry players:

'I'm an Indian national and I work here on a work permit which is revocable, you know, instantly, and have me on a plane within 24 hours. So I have no choice but to maintain a balanced view between industry and government.' – Industry representative.

The back-and-forth tax iterations between 2008 and 2016 demonstrate of the government's attempt to balance revenue generation mandates and the need to remain

responsive to domestic industry interests. Successive restructuring of the domestic SSB tax and other taxes on beverages and protective import tax measures demonstrate domestic industry actors' power in shaping policy. Aptly summarising both directions of the relationship between the Fijian Government and the domestic industry, one WHO representative observed: *'nobody wants to bite the hand that feeds it, right?'*

The MOHMS' interest in a domestic SSB tax

The MOHMS' early and consistent advocacy for the domestic SSB tax was pivotal to its progress, although not always in a direct manner. Informants acknowledged that growing recognition of Fiji's NCD crisis, Fiji-specific evidence on SSBs' contributions to poor diet, [103] and notable success in taxes targeting tobacco and alcohol, [104, 105] meant targeting SSBs was the obvious *'next card'* for the MOHMS to play (Government health representative). Successive taxes imposed on the nation's lucrative *'Fiji Water'* export were also indicative of political appetite for increased taxes even if industry actively opposed such measures. Moreover, with domestic SSB excise taxes promoted by global NCD frameworks, Fijian health bureaucrats were hopeful that tax proposals would be perceived as an apolitical evidence-based behaviour change strategy:

'We were also thinking – because it [the SSB tax mechanism] is well embedded in the WHO – it was just a matter of application.' – Government health representative.

Nonetheless, while significant strategic and programmatic headways had been made in addressing NCDs in Fiji, [93, 106, 107] several informants identified the pro-industry and pro-trade leaning of successive governments to have complicated the enactment of, and ongoing support for, multisectoral NCD reform.

'This government is very pro trade and pro economic development and the national development plan for the next 10 years speaks about that in volume. There's not much mentioned [in the national development plan] about health, or at least the NCD crisis in Fiji.'—Regional development organisation representative.

Yet, the MOHMS' support of a domestic SSB tax was considered a strategic decision. While grounded in responding to NCDs, proposing a tax on SSBs also allowed the MOHMS to gain political favour with the economically-interested government and key decision makers, including the powerful Minister for Economy.

'It was almost like that Health can do something for

Finance instead of simply being a drain on the public purse.’ – Academic/regional commentator.

Health bureaucrats also stood to gain international kudos from a domestic SSB tax, with the measure’s alignment with global and regional NCD commitments likely to elevate Fiji as a leader in the region. Given the industry opposition faced by governments introducing SSB taxes elsewhere, there was anticipation that a Fijian SSB tax would be perceived as a ‘triumph of the underdog’ in the battle against large multinational corporations, whether or not such a battle ever existed.

‘It’s deliciously messy’: Power, silence and a culture of fear in Fijian sociopolitical institutions

The introduction of, and adjustments to, SSB taxes in Fiji and the reception they received from government, civil society and industry actors were governed by largely unspoken sociopolitical norms. There was limited feedback or critique from MOHMS, and later, Alliance advocates when permutations of the domestic SSB tax failed to reach their health promoting potential through inadequate product capture or lower than expected tax rates. Informants linked this silence to sociocultural respect for superiors which was amplified by a culture of fear and a centralised power structure under the Bainimarama administration. Respect for elders and authority figures is a longstanding Fijian sociocultural norm, often translating into acquiescence with superiors’ decisions. At a minimum, silence is considered more respectful than questioning or critiquing decisions:

I think it’s the way in which we’ve been brought up, the culture that we’ve been brought up – you’re not groomed to ask a lot of questions. In fact – it’s looked down upon, it’s frowned upon, you know, when you interrogate or critique things, it’s seen as very disrespectful... Even if you disagree with things, you will not say it in open space... I think it’s also the culture of silence, you know, growing up in that space... And I think a lot of those norms become a part of your daily living and I see it all the time carried through to the Civil Service... – Regional development organisation representative.

Concurrently, under Bainimarama’s rule respectful silence became enmeshed with a culture of fear. The militarisation of government and the installation of the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption saw dissenting views dissipate under the threat of punitive action:

People are frightened to speak out... with the communication policy that we have in Fiji, whoever sticks out will not be surprised if they have visitors

coming to their home from the military or from the police. So people are, they feel hesitant to talk freely.’ – Academic/regional commentator.

‘There’s continuous fear within the executive arm of the legislature... executives are fearful; [if] you do anything, you get the income tax coming after you, you get the anti-corruption unit coming after you.’ – Political representative.

Informants cited the culture of fear as counter to democracy, with bureaucratic leadership and innovation stifled, including in the case of the domestic SSB tax. For example, a lack of dialogue between bureaucrats and politicians meant that evidence underpinning the suggested design of various iterations of the domestic SSB tax was rarely incorporated into the final tax policy. Lack of dialogue also prevented technical experts from explaining rate and design recommendations, meaning political decisionmakers were often unclear on how deviations would impact the policy’s achievement of dual health and economic goals. As a government health representative involved in the tax proposal outlined:

‘It’s more like top-down approach. Like, they [politicians] are not listening to us when we give them advice on things to do. So, they just said we want this done, and that’s that.’ – Government health representative.

Fear and silence were also corrosive to senior public service leadership with frequent turnover impacting institutional memory and, in turn, sustained advocacy for SSB tax measures:

‘You’ll have seen there’s this constant churn of permanent secretaries, so nobody stays because you don’t get to make any decisions. Even in your own portfolio.’ – Academic/regional commentator.

Within the MOHMS, for example, frequent leadership turnover relegated advocacy for the domestic SSB tax to the NCD Unit and National Food and Nutrition Centre. While bureaucrats in these departments possessed significant technical expertise, they lacked the authority of the Permanent Secretary to keep the tax on the government’s agenda. Silence, fear and a widening disjuncture between the bureaucratic and political functions of government also prevented evaluation of or evidence-informed adjustment to the tax. Over time, interests in the domestic SSB tax spanned revenue generation, consumers rights and health promotion, yet the absence of a unified definition of success across actors contributed to a lack of consensus on measuring the tax’s achievement.

Further, a regional development organisation representative remarked that understanding and navigating the power dynamics is crucial to accomplishing tasks effectively in Fiji. The culture of silence and fear within Fiji was closely linked to specific power dynamics that granted exceptional influence to a prominent figure in Fijian politics, referred to colloquially as the 'Minister for Everything' [108]. From 2014 to 2022, this minister held the significant positions of Attorney General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Justice, Elections, and Anticorruption.

During Prime Minister Bainimarama's 16-year tenure, there was widespread acknowledgment across various social strata of the Attorney General's significant influence. Informants identified that his power derived from, and was reinforced by, a combination of social status, vocational training, popularity amongst constituents, loyalty to Bainimarama and, as such, continual acquisition of central political appointments.

Scholars and regional commentators also highlighted the dominance of the Ministry of Economy, overseen by the Attorney General, in Fiji Government affairs underscoring the immense power and micromanagement associated with overseeing the portfolio:

'All roads lead to Ministry of Economy in Fiji. And every other civil servant lives in fear of the Ministry of Economy and particularly the Attorney-General, who heads that ministry.' – Academic/regional commentator.

'So essentially nothing happens in the Fiji government unless the AG approves it ... He's across everything and he's a micromanager. But he's also a bully.'—Academic/regional commentator.

Over the years, relationships between the Attorney General and tax advocates, particularly those within the Consumer Council, significantly impacted the framing and progress of Fiji's domestic SSB tax. The health and rights-based framing of SSB tax adjustments during the Alliance years shielded the tax from being perceived of as anti-business while concurrently increasing revenue available to the government. Given the political importance of being perceived to successfully balance the immediate needs of industry with Fiji's longer term economic development requirements, this framing was particularly favourable to the Attorney General in his capacity as the Minister for Economy. Informants stressed that the tax would not have been introduced or adjusted without the Attorney General's personal endorsement, emphasising the importance of the relationship fostered between the civil society group and the Attorney General. The strength of this relationship was also exemplified by one of the tax's major advocates

resigning from the Consumer Council to successfully contest a seat for FijiFirst at the 2018 election.

'A people's movement rather than a political one': The ideation of the Alliance for Healthy Living

In the three-year period between mid-2014 and mid-2017 sustained advocacy by the Alliance, that is the MOHMS, the Consumer Council and Diabetes Fiji cross-sectoral coalition, raised the profile of NCDs as a public health problem and reframed an expanded domestic SSB tax as part of the solution. Combined with other factors (including the need for revenue post-cyclone) this period saw greatest interest in the domestic SSB tax, with a 700% increase in the tax rate, from 0.05FJ\$/L to 0.35FJ\$/L.

The Alliance's impact was the product of its careful framing of the SSB tax as an apolitical, civil society-driven initiative led by the Consumer Council and Diabetes Fiji with technical input from MOHMS. Conscious of the limited traction gained by previous MOHMS-led proposals for the SSB tax between 2005 and early 2014, Alliance members aimed to de-politicise the tax proposal and position it as an idea that any government responsive to community demands would engage with. Thus, the tax was positioned not as a political demand, but as a grassroots push to address NCDs.

'The things [policy proposals] that get through [parliament] are the things that have no political aspect to them at all.' – Academic/regional commentator.

'A people's movement... we shook the roots and this is what people were passionate about, NCDs' – Government health representative.

The Consumer Council was particularly instrumental in reorienting the domestic SSB tax discussion away from a solely health-focused initiative and towards a broader human rights issue, given its remit to protect consumers' rights. Partnering with Diabetes Fiji, a community organisation supporting people living with diabetes, further instilled the proposal's human rights orientation:

'We [the Consumer Council] are not actually up for taxation which will increase the prices of goods and services. But we supported it [the SSB tax] because, in the long run, if you weigh the advantages and disadvantages of SSBs on the health of consumers... it becomes more detrimental to the consumers.' – Statutory body representative.

The close relationship between several members of the Consumer Council and government officials was also instrumental in moving forward the tax proposal. Although nominally an independent statutory body, the Consumer Council board's appointment by and reporting to the Minister of Industry and Trade provided pivotal

connections and insights into government priorities and processes.

‘This SSB tax has been passed in Fiji because you know, it got to the right person and those that were involved in the process of getting it across understood, you know, the power dynamics and who is the most influential.’ - Regional development organisation representative.

Discussion

Findings from this study reveal how political economy forces can, and are, strategically mobilised by various actors to position health taxes to meet disparate health, economic, political and commercial interests. The idea of a domestic SSB tax in Fiji has undergone multiple iterations since its 2006 introduction. Early versions of the tax were the product of a delicate balancing act between the immediate interests of government, insofar as generating revenue, and the longer-term interests of government and industry in attracting and retaining investors through an industry-friendly environment. Political instability further influenced these shifts, stifling open dialogue between civil society, bureaucracy, and the legislature. Adjustments to Fijian SSB taxes between 2006 and 2020 reflect the fluctuating influence of various advocacy coalitions, the strategic deployment of capitals by those same coalitions; and relatedly, their proximity to key decision makers, namely the Attorney General. Industry backlash led to the repeal of early iterations of the tax, with industry partners using economic framing and their own economic capital to influence decision making. However, later increases to the tax followed coordinated advocacy efforts by a coalition of health and consumer rights bureaucrats and advocates that mobilised considerable social and cultural capitals to position an expanded SSB tax as politically palatable. By mapping these SSB tax policy changes alongside the broader political and economic dynamics in the Fijian setting, this study highlights the central role of politics, multiple stakeholder interests, and diverse forms of power in shaping health tax design, implementation and, ultimately, the outcomes they achieve.

Building on this, the sustained focus permitted through case study design also illustrates that health tax design and implementation processes themselves are not discrete events. In fact, findings from this research demonstrate that SSB tax design and implementation are rather continuous, non-linear processes. The use of the 3Is heuristic to analyse policy evolution in Fiji underscores how ideas, interests and institutions interact dynamically over time, producing and reproducing different policy outcomes depending on the unique combination of

strategically deployed capitals. Initial economic motivations for the tax made it vulnerable to domestic industry opposition, while later iterations gained traction through strategic framing of the tax as a people-driven and apolitical initiative. Political acumen, networks and coalition building (forms of social and cultural capital) were instrumental in broadening the tax’s scope beyond an economic frame to encompass a health and rights-based considerations.

These political dynamics must be accounted for in international health policy guidance. Many frameworks and policy recommendations by multilateral agencies have emphasised technical detail in promoting the WHO’s NCD Best Buys. Yet, while this detail is essential, little attention has been paid to political orientations or insights, [2, 6, 7, 109] which may crucially shape policy trajectories. Indeed, the Fiji SSB tax case demonstrates that the policy process itself, and the dynamic interactions between more stable ideas but rapidly shifting interests and institutions, is integral to determining the technical detail of tax content and thus whether both the health and economic ‘wins’ are realised. Over time, political conditions that had previously hindered policy action enabled the tax’s reinforcement, demonstrating that political economy factors determine whether health and economic objectives can be simultaneously achieved.

Understanding power structures is key to influencing policy [110, 111]. The Fiji SSB tax case demonstrates how power dynamics go well beyond the legal and discursive authority of government and the economic might of domestic or multinational corporations. Applying Bourdieu’s capitals framework revealed how social and cultural capitals played a significant, yet underexamined, role in shaping tax design [61]. The militarisation of government and cultural norms around respecting superiors dictated the terms of engagement for public servant, civil society and industry in the tax debate. The Attorney General’s power stemmed from institutional authority but also from embodied and institutionalised cultural capitals, political skill and networks. Similarly, the Alliance leveraged social capital – particularly its ties with the Consumer Council – to gain access to decision-making processes that the MOHMS had lacked in prior lobbying efforts. By contrast, the economic capital of the domestic SSB industry was counterbalanced by its interdependent yet strained relationship with the government. The role of social and cultural capitals in influencing policy outcomes remains relatively underexamined in contemporary literature and warrants further study to enhance future analysis of, and for, health policymaking [112, 113]. In-depth exploration of these social and cultural capitals was enabled through intentional application of postcolonial theory. By revealing perspectives

that contrast with, or remain under-examined within neo-colonial and Western dominated paradigms in global health, it demonstrates how broader engagement with postcolonial approaches can enrich understanding and inform responses to global health challenges.

The call to better understand policy processes and ensure health-interested actors proactively engage with the politics enmeshed in intersectoral policy is not new [114–117]. However, in the SSB tax space, and indeed many health tax discussions, political economy considerations have tended to concentrate on the influence of industry – particularly external, multinational entities – with less attention given to other actors and mechanisms of policy influence [69, 118–120]. Although economic power grants industry actors significant leverage, corporate power and commercial determinants of health literature suggests that corporations' direct use of their economic resources is far from the only way, nor a linear predictor of, how they exert influence [8, 121–124]. This case illustrates how other political economy forces – including coalition-building, framing strategies and social capital – can shape health tax trajectories. Understanding these dynamics offers leverage points for future pro-health tax advocacy [8, 11, 125]. In Fiji, a broad multisectoral coalition played a pivotal role in reviving and reshaping the tax, reinforcing the political science literature's recognition of coalition-building as an effective strategy for advancing health reforms [126–128]. Moreover, the explicit use of political economy analysis to complement technical policy advice has also been identified as an effective means of influencing change in both development studies and political science literature [129, 130]. Domestic health actors are well positioned to understand the nuance of their socio-political context. Yet the intentional use of these forms of knowledge and way of working to complement more technical health detail must be championed by health system leaders locally and globally [129, 130].

These insights align with broader research on health tax policymaking. Descriptive literature on SSB tax policy processes highlights the importance of political framing; [8, 131] policymaking cultures and socially and culturally informed hierarchies within government; [47, 132, 133] the emphasis on neoliberal, economic-centric approaches to governance; [11, 131, 133] and the role of bureaucratic, political and civil society leadership [8, 11, 47, 125, 131–133]. These findings also contribute to the growing research evidence on health taxes, which underscores the complexity of political dynamics shaping policy processes [134–136]. As demonstrated by the Fiji case, political economy forces will influence health tax policies in ways that vary across time and context, challenging efforts to universalise of political economy

considerations and highlighting the limitations of tightly timebound policy advocacy and monitoring efforts. Elevating political economy analysis more consistently to the level of technical input in health policy design and advocacy will strengthen efforts to achieve the health and economic goals of reform such as WHO's NCD Best Buys. Given the integral role political economy forces play in shaping policy appetite, design, and implementation, these considerations must be central to future research, policy recommendations, and evaluations of SSB and other health taxes' impact.

This research expands on previous work to understand the Fiji SSB tax by cataloguing policy iterations and providing a rich picture of the political context over more than a decade [15, 20, 23]. Significant design and analysis input by the study's Fijian co-authors was integral to enhancing findings' richness and validity. Extensive document analysis also provided a nuanced understanding of sociopolitical institutions and multisectoral pressures faced by the Fiji Government during successive iterations of the tax. However, the time since the tax was initially introduced and remote interviews (given the impact of Covid-19 on travel during the study period) may risk omissions or misinterpretation by informants or the research team. The political nature of the SSB tax and the cultural difficulty of questioning political decisions in the Fijian context may also have influenced informants' engagement and disclosure. LME conducted interviews as a non-Fijian to limit political risk to informants. However, it is inevitable that this strategy risks a less in-depth understanding of context and dynamics during interviews [137]. Triangulating data across sources sought to overcome these potential data gaps, while longer interviews were also prioritised to establish trust with informants.

Conclusion

Iterations to the Fijian domestic SSB tax over time demonstrate dynamic and contextually unique political economy forces and their influence on how policy mechanisms are constructed and the ends they seek to achieve, beyond what is usually accounted for in global policy recommendations. Despite the dual health and economic 'win-win' framing of SSB taxes, the Fiji case reveals that conscientious engagement with the political process by powerful and health-interested policy actors is imperative to ensuring both motives remain on the agenda. Fiji's domestic SSB tax continues to evolve, and other jurisdictions are increasingly adopting SSB taxes. This research supplements growing technical evidence advocating for SSB tax policies by shedding light on the interests and institutions that must be navigated to ensure health objectives remain central through the

political machinations that transform ideas into intersectoral policy.

Abbreviations

EU	European Union
MOHMS	Ministry of Health and Medical Services
MSG	Melanesian Spearhead Group
NCDs	Noncommunicable diseases
SSB	Sugar-sweetened beverage
WHO	World Health Organization

Supplementary Information

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Supplementary Material 1.

Supplementary Material 2.

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Authors' contributions

This study was designed by LME and SMT with input from SLD. All data was collected by LME with interviews facilitated by GDW. LME led the data analysis and interpretation phase with critical input from GDW, ALAR and SMT. The first draft of the paper was compiled by LME with critical revisions provided by all authors. The final version of the paper has been approved by all authors.

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Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval was obtained from the Fiji National University College Human HREC (176.20) and James Cook University HREC (H-8055).

Consent for publication

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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