

THE AGRICULTURE INDUSTRY IN FIJI AND ITS CHALLENGES

The Agriculture industry currently ranks as one of Fiji's premier business and commercial earners, currently second only to the Tourism industry. With the agriculture sector oriented more along commercial lines it is a major contributor to Fiji's overall economical and social development. Furthermore, by its very nature, the Agriculture industry encompasses a wider spectrum of society than what is norm; away from the thriving urban centers of Fiji the agriculture industry essentially is, for all intents and purposes, the only life-support mechanism rural communities have of sustaining and developing themselves. However, this is not to say that the industry is not without its fair share of quandaries; on the contrary it is plagued by a plethora of challenges and hurdles that continuously will require innovative and effective approaches that are specifically formulated to address these problems. Quite a few of these challenges have a principal underlying cause that potentially are capable of generating spin-offs that are capable of further undermining the agriculture sector. Two such challenges that lie at the core of what rural communities in Fiji are being confronted with are the expiry of land leases and the lack of skilled and specialized personal.

The land issue currently being faced by Fiji's agriculture sector is both complex and multi-faceted primarily due to the fact that over 80% of Fiji's landmass is owned by indigenous communal units and these areas are known as native land. A huge proportion of this native land has been leased out for agriculture purposes to mostly Indo-Fijian tenants and recently these leases over the past decade have begun expiring. The major constraint being placed upon the agriculture industry by this situation is the unlikelihood of these leases being renewed by indigenous landowners which, judging by recent statistics and the eviction of tenants by some landowning units, seems highly probable. This alone places enormous strain on a system that is already short of labor as farmers are being evicted with a scarcely negligible influx of individuals capable of sustaining the industry.

With the future viability of the industry being jeopardized by the increasing cases of non-renewal of land leases, this crisis is only being further exacerbated by the current lackadaisical attitude and disinterest in pursuing a career in agriculture. This change is being brought about largely by farmers perceiving that their capital and personal investments in the agriculture industry will most probably be not be capable of generating significant financial returns or benefits if they are evicted hence they provide their children with formal education so they seek off-farm employment. The continuous displacement of individuals through the rural-urban migration, whether for education or employment purposes, further drains the human labor pool resource in rural areas which in turn provides another challenge for the agriculture sector and its shareholders.

Another key issue that challenges the agricultural sector is the lack of skilled and specialized personal in the agriculture system capable of applying their knowledge specific to the context of Fiji's agricultural needs. Specialized areas of agriculture in Fiji currently are sorely lacking in individuals with the relevant skills such as animal/plant pathologists and veterinarians. This bottom-heavy scenario (an excess of generalized/unskilled labor in comparison to skilled personal) could hold dire implications for the industry, and by extension, the country if it is not addressed swiftly. An agricultural system with resources but without individuals capable of directing and utilizing them effectively would stagnate and ultimately collapse. For example, Fiji only had one veterinarian employed by State who has since moved on to join the private sector in late 2010. Even during his tenure as the only State-employed veterinarian, rural communities in Lekutu, Bua had raised their concerns through the media about the lack of vet officers capable of administering the necessary services to their animals and poultry (Fiji Times Online - 21/10/09) – a prime example of a human resource being stretched too thin. Such situations could potentially develop into more sinister scenarios such as whole livestock and poultry farms being wiped out by disease due to the lack of veterinarian care. Events like this could further lead to the detriment of the agriculture sector especially to communities heavily reliant on animal and poultry production.

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Realistically, due to the complexity of these challenges, there is no uncomplicated panacea to dealing with them. The land tenure issue would ideally have to have a three dimensional approach – a solution dealing with the immediate expiry of a land lease such as making farmers aware of the options available to them such as relocation or compensation, a short-term package that addresses any concerns of the choice they have taken and a long-term plan that would tackle any uncertainty and ultimately prompt farmers to further re-invest in the agriculture industry.

The concern of having shortage of skilled labor in the system can be addressed by simply training current staff through the implementation of relevant training programs or schemes and through the use of formal education for them to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge. As a short-term solution to addressing the need for rural agricultural communities, extension officers could be dispatched to conduct basic agricultural workshops and awareness campaigns whose work can be complimented by the services of skilled personal as they finish their formal training. However, it would be worth noting that in the Pacific region and Fiji, custom and traditions also add a new dimension and hence the relevant authorities should be sensitive towards rural communities in this regard.

The challenges being faced by the agricultural industry are many and varied with only two of them being highlighted in this essay. Fiji's unique economical, agricultural and social structure directly translates to these challenges being unique in their own right. As such, before the implementation of plans aimed at countering these issues are executed through the various levels of the industry, consideration of these factors should be taken into account. Adopting a blanket approach to such issues in the sense that what works in a particular country should work in Fiji would be a highly risky endeavor that the policy makers of the industry should refrain from committing. As stated, culture does play a pivotal role in rural communities in the Pacific and especially Fiji and orienting the communal psyche and mindset to any particular solution and/or agricultural practice could essentially decide whether an endeavor could ultimately succeed or fail.

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Applications should be accompanied by this form and addressed to Ms Miriama Kunawave, PAFPNet Secretariat, Land Resources Division, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Private Mail Bag, Suva to arrive no later than 22 October, 2010. Communication will be limited to winners only or those requesting the return of original materials. Applications may alternatively be submitted by Fax (No. +679 338 6326), hand delivered to the SPC Suva office or emailed to Irdhelpdesk@spc.int. Please call +679 3370733 – ext 35344 for further details.

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