

What advice would you give to a young person wanting to start up their own agricultural enterprise? Who can best support them and how?

Essay (a)

By Alana Tukuniu

Agriculture is not an occupation that comes with a desk, PC, and a comfortable fallback chair. No, Agriculture is so much better than this, it comes with a connection, to our ancestors, to the earth, and most importantly, and too often overlooked, to the very core of human survival – eating. Without food we will not survive. My generation is one that has been weaned on processed baby food from a bottle made in another far away country, the Nane that was instrumental in my grandmother's childhood is now a delicacy that I look for at village show days each year. Why? Because the value and importance of Agriculture is too often understated. Eating is just that, eating, and agriculture is just that, agriculture, they are separated as two different entities. It needs to be shown that eating is part of the chain that started off with the seeds sown by a farmer. Without farmers, there will be no food.

Humans can survive without a laptop, but we cannot survive without food. So what is my advice to a young person wanting to start up their own agricultural enterprise? Start small, and work your way up to expansion. Do not think of farming as a monetary commodity alone. Agriculture is much more than this, and it's this understanding of Agriculture's importance and its broader scope in our life that will help young farmers through the tough times, because in farming, let's face it there are more variables to contend with, than in an occupation such as IT. It should be known that my advice is in the context of my Niuean life.

I am not a full time farmer, but I do grow my own vegetables, some of which I have sold. I also keep a small flock of chickens and my partner raises pigs, so my advice is not from the experienced mouth of a Niuean farmer, who has practiced farming through the many changes that has occurred but I do ask my family question after question about farming and I constantly work through offered solutions. I continue to experience the challenges that face farmers each day, the persistence of pests and disease, issues surrounding soil fertility, and difficulty in accessing to capital to begin an agricultural enterprise. I do consider myself a farmer nonetheless.

My day always starts with nourishing my chickens with their feed, and ends after work each day with a trip to my plantation, As I make my way to my plantation and tend to the crops that I grow, I am often faced with depleted crops, victims to the hungry mouths of caterpillars and snails, or struggling due to a nutrient deficiency, and still, I continue to grow crops. I have experienced the monetary rewards that come with a successful harvest, and I have experienced the frustrations at a failed crop, and this is why my advice is to not look at farming as a monetary commodity alone, but instead perceive agriculture as a partnership of money, culture and our environment. You will need this perception to keep pushing you through those hard moments.

We do now live in a cash economy, and we do need income, so why is agriculture not a monetary commodity alone? Because as a farmer you are contributing so much more. Agriculture is instrumental in keeping our culture alive, in addressing climate change issues, health issues and in preserving the environment. Our culture is lived through many things, including our traditional foods, they are at the backbone of our cultural festivities such as haircutting ceremonies or the opening of the yam season, I cannot imagine boxes of KFC hanging on the kafika as gifts to those that have supported us, or cold McDonald burgers replacing the puaka as the centrepiece on the table. It's not only our cultural ceremonies, which are dependent on agriculture. Our crops are the staple in our umu; it is unthinkable to think that it could be replaced by New Zealand grown

potatoes or otherwise. Food is a cultural link, and growing it locally supports our culture as well as our environment. It's these thoughts which keep me growing.

As young people, we are becoming more aware of the effects of climate change. It is our future, in which we will live in, and therefore our future that we need to protect. When we grow food for our communities we are reducing the impacts of climate change, through the reduction in imports amongst other things. We address health issues because eating local food is much better for us than eating imported processed food. It's for the above reasons that agriculture is not a monetary commodity alone, it's the link to our culture, health and environment that will push us through the hard times, when money alone does not stand to reason for our time spent working the land. It's these thoughts which keep me growing.

Our time on the land need not be spent alone. Support is always available in its many forms. The Agricultural Ministries are always looking to support farmers. Let your local Ministry know that you want to be involved in farming programs that may run; at the very least they may be able to help with an input starter kit that enables you to start off a small enterprise. Talk to your youth council members so that they can lobby for youth involvement in agriculture/business venture programs at higher levels of dialogue. Our communities are always looking to empower our population, as young people we need to ask, and keep on asking, until we are heard and receive what we need, and this includes information and advice on farming methods.

In saying this it is easy to overlook the most basic levels of support and who can best support us. Look to our own community for support. When we investigate our history in traditional farming, our forefathers did not have mechanised tools from which to work the land, they did not need cash to produce food. Seeds were shared amongst families, and this practice is continued onto this very day, most people in our families have a pig pen, and this is a free source of fertilizer. To begin a farming venture, you only need to ask for the little things that will enable you to begin your venture. In our community there is always someone willing to help you, it may not be the first person you ask but there will be someone, because that's who we are as Niueans. Agriculture is a pathway to reclaim and conserve our heritage, sometimes we need to look to the past so that we can sustainably move forward. It's these thoughts which keep me growing.

What value do we place on possessions, when they are merely given to us? Not nearly as much as those for which we will always remember how hard we worked for, and how we laboured in order to achieve them. The most effective support will always be ourselves, as individuals and together as a community. Why? Because in the end it will be in our future in which we need to survive, and our culture which we need to preserve. The future is not in ten years, it is tomorrow, when we wake up and look in our cupboards and ask ourselves what are we going to eat today? Instant noodles or puaka and taro? It's these thoughts that keep me growing.

Being a farmer is like becoming a famous musician, you work hard, but know ones how hard you truly worked to make it, except yourself. Success can be measured when someone comes to you and buys your produce. And keeps on doing so. Making the decision to engage in agriculture is an affirmative decision for our culture, our environment and ourselves.

PACIFIC AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY POLICY NETWORK (PAFPNet)

YOUTH IN AGRICULTURE ESSAY, NEWS, ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY COMPETITION

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Biography.

Ms Alana Tukuniu.

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My name is Alana Tukuniu, and I reside on Niue. I am a Crop Research Trainee in the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, this is not just my employment it is my passion.

I didn't always like growing crops, and often baulked at my father who, liked to grow his own vegetables. My attitude shifted once I connected farming with the environment and how they could positively support each other. I currently grow my own crops, some of which I sell, at my own plantation and keep a small flock of chickens at home. My partner also raises puaka for a mixture of cultural ceremonies, income generation and home consumption. I am constantly learning about farming, and love the sight of crops growing healthily, and collecting eggs from my chickens each morning. My passion for agriculture continues to strengthen as I constantly see the benefits that are derived from it.