Impacts of COVID-19 on smallholders in Fiji

Ropate S Ligairi and Ravindra C Joshi

Abstract
The impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is well documented in international media, especially in mainland countries, but the Pacific islands have been neglected. This is partly because currently there are a small number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 across the Pacific Island countries and territories. However, the limited land mass and arable land, geographical isolation, vulnerability to extreme environmental shocks and small economies mean that these areas could easily be devasted by COVID-19. However, all islands swiftly put in place a state of emergency, closed borders and imposed a strict quarantine to limit the threat of the virus. Here, we share the impacts of COVID-19 lockdown on smallholders in Fiji, and illustrate the strategies and programmes put in place by the Fiji government to cushion its impacts.

Introduction
Fiji has over 330 islands with a total land area of 18,274 km² in an exclusive zone of 1.26 million km². The population of just less than 1 million includes indigenous Fijians, Indians, Chinese, Europeans, part-Europeans and other Pacific islanders. Fiji is a cosmopolitan mixture of culture, race and religion. Its two largest islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, account for more than 85 percent of the total land area, and most of the businesses and urban centres are concentrated in these islands.

The country has a tropical climate with two main seasons, a mild dry season from May to October, with a warmer, wetter period from November to April. The majority of the islands are mountainous with high peaks and running streams and rivers, but there are also a number of low-lying atolls. In essence, the country has the potential to produce a wide range of tropical agricultural products. A few decades ago, agriculture was the largest contributor to the country’s gross domestic product (GDP), and used to be referred to as the ‘mainstay of the economy’. However, over the years this has slowly changed.

The global expansion of investment and trade have proceeded at such a rapid pace that transformations in Fiji have become inevitable due to increased contact and interdependence with the outside world. Fiji still sees itself as a small island state that faces a number of distinct obstacles that hinder its economic development.

Challenges
Physically, the country is geographically isolated from large metropolitan trading centres. The dispersed nature of the islands where people reside sometimes makes transportation and communications difficult within the country. Fiji has limited basic minerals and industrial raw materials. Its limited resources make it very fragile and vulnerable to natural disasters and climate change.

Economically, there is still a low level of incomes and low savings rate. Fiji is heavily dependent on tourism and other related industries, which makes the country vulnerable to fluctuations in world market prices, natural disasters and, equally, to the current global coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.
Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the nation

After the announcement of the country’s lockdown, as we would all expect, the sector that was going to be the most affected was the tourism sector. This meant that there would be no tourists in the country, no flights and, more importantly, no work for all those reliant on the sector, especially those in the hotel industry. This had a domino effect on other related industries that support the tourism sector. With high unemployment and underemployment from the tourism industry and other related sectors of the economy, there was a need to have a temporary relief support for those that had become redundant due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Relative to the tourism sector, the part of the agriculture sector that was going to be immediately affected was the agri-processors. A large proportion of the agri-processors that supplied the tourism sector were closed down and people working in the sector were laid off. It is recorded that five of these agri-processors were linked to farmers in the Sigatoka Valley. The farmers that supply vegetables and fruits directly to the hotels and the agri-processors were also affected. With the tourism markets closed, the farmers had no other option but to supply the local markets and supermarkets. The number of farmers classified under as part of this category was around 300 in the Sigatoka Valley alone, not to forget the many labourers who worked on the farms. Because of this, the local markets were oversupplied with vegetables and fruits, and the price was therefore affected.

There was a period where the two main cities, Suva and Lautoka, were completely locked down. This affected transportation into the cities from the rural areas, which in turn affected the normal supply of produce from the farms to the two biggest municipal markets. Smallholders who were contracted suppliers to vendors in these markets were not able to provide the goods for the vendors directly. As a consequence of the lockdown, limited supplies were available for the two municipal markets and the price of some of the produce increased by 50–100 percent during this period. While the Agricultural Marketing Authority was doing its best to buy from all suppliers and deliver to the vendors, market distortions could still be felt in some areas. This also gave rise to the emergence of de-centralised purchasing points and a number of new food stalls were erected along roadsides in areas where the density of the population was high. The government provided what support it could to link producers to vendors and consumers. At the same time, individual social media, online marketing and other initiatives (such as barter systems) were being revived during this crisis period.

Government assistance

To mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government provided a number of stimulus packages, especially for those that had been directly affected. These included measures to facilitate direct financial assistance through individuals or corporate bodies. There were also measures to assist businesses, either through the Ministry of Economy or other financial Institutions, such as banks, to businesses that were involved in trade.

The Ministry of Agriculture, apart from supporting the supply chain from smallholders to the market, also became involved in the important area of the provision of agricultural inputs with the following actions.

• Provision of seeds and planting materials to the heaviest hit rural farming communities in Fiji.

• Home gardening programme. Under this initiative, the Ministry of Agriculture provided seed packages to all households in urban and peri-urban areas around Fiji, especially to households who met certain criteria; 11,602 households from all over the country were given seed packages. The purpose of the initiative was to provide access to nutritionally rich foods, help households save money on food bills, offer a fallback on food security due to the potential decrease in food production and food trade, and help maintain consistent home food supply.

• Seed packages. Based on the demand from the corporate sector, the Ministry of Agriculture started repackaging seed for further distribution to urban and peri-urban rural employees who had become redundant. This was called the corporate employee seed package, and was targeted at corporate employees.

• Farm support package. FJD 1 million (USD 470,800) was allocated for this initiative with the aim of boosting the production of short-cycle crops. The Ministry of Agriculture distributed planting materials and open-pollinated seeds to farmers around Fiji without charge.

Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on families

In any disaster, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, food security cannot be ignored as it is a national responsibility to ensure that the population has access to enough food. Everything else is secondary; food is the only item that is important for all families. Where a significant amount of a country’s food needs are produced in the country, agriculture plays a critical role in sustaining a country’s socio-economic
The people of Fiji are fortunate in terms of food security due to the government’s policy on farm support. This is only a small part of the whole food supply chain, in which the subsistence sector is involved daily, and which is most often not recognised.

For the majority of people who have lost their jobs, their land – in the case of farmers - is the only asset for them to use to make a living from. Fisheries may also supply part of food needs For some, they may already have been involved in farming, but for others, this can be a good introduction, especially in ensuring that local nutritious foods continue to be included in the family diet.

**Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic in the agriculture sector**

There are many lessons that can be learned and applied from the COVID-19 pandemic in Fiji. Agriculture has proven to be important for Fiji in two major ways: food security and income security. These are the two main areas that should be prioritised in the development of macro-economic policies for the socio-economic development of Fiji. Agricultural industries and investments are very important, especially for income and wealth distribution in developing countries. Primary producers should get the highest reward for their products, so that they are encouraged to sustainably provide the quality, diversity and the quantity of products that are required for the consumer market.

All other policies and regulations should support these two main macro-economic policies. Once these priorities are established, programmes and strategies can be further developed. The points below are some of the underlying themes that can be developed to ensure that the agriculture sector provides not only the basis for national food and nutrition security, but also a wide distribution of wealth through income generation from the sector and thus further mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic for all in Fiji.

1. Encourage more sustainable local food and agricultural production through improved production and marketing systems.
2. Make agriculture more nutrition-sensitive and disaster-resilient.
3. Improve technology on modern and traditional food handling practices by strengthening the capacity of the national food safety authority, supporting food vendors, and creating consumer awareness on traditional and customary food preservation techniques, which include drying foods and root crops, preserving breadfruit and storing coconuts.
4. Train young farmers and link them to organised markets.
5. Assist livestock farms and biosecurity authorities in efforts to prevent animal diseases.

![Figure 1. Flower beds (left) converted to vegetable gardens with tomatoes (right) in the residential areas of Nausori, Viti Levu, Fiji (Photos: Ropate S Ligairi)](image-url)