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## **How Elevating the Position of Small Farmers Will Ameliorate the Obesity Epidemic in Fiji**

Formed through volcanic activity and bounded by hazardous coral reefs and offshore rock formations, Fiji's simultaneously beautiful and perilous topography mimics the richness of its culture thriving amidst socioeconomic turmoil. Located in the South Pacific Ocean, Fiji hosts a mere 926,276 people across its 110 inhabited islands, 55.9% of which live in urban areas and 44.1% of which live in rural areas (CIA, 2018). An intensely pluralistic society, Fiji is governed by a prime minister, a president, and a parliament as well as by local councils in urban regions and a hierarchical administration of chiefs in the countryside. The unique Fijian system of governance was borne out of a series of military coups that attempted to preserve Fijian political autonomy while maintaining some aspects of the parliamentary democracy of Great Britain, with which it severed ties in 1970 (CIA, 2018).

However, despite no longer belonging to the British Commonwealth, Fijian connections to the global west remain strong, particularly in the islands' dependence on western-imported food. Marred by frequent political upheaval and a fierce dependence on the agricultural sector to employ 50% of the population, Fiji remains a developing country. Severe economic downturns have led Fijians to turn to highly processed, calorie-dense foods to increase work productivity and save on grocery costs. This increase in processed food and soft drink consumption has catalyzed an obesity epidemic leaving 32.1% of Fijian adults obese (CIA, 2018). In an attempt to rectify the situation, the Fijian government has implemented taxation-based strategies that raise tariffs on sugary products as well as promoted outright bans on certain convenience foods. Although well intentioned, exerting executive power and leveraging the economy to prohibit processed food infringes on the constitutional rights of Fijian citizens and disadvantages Fijians who live in poverty. A more long-lasting and constitutional solution to Fiji's obesity epidemic would be to elevate the status of small farmers by extending farm leases and encouraging investment in small farms, thereby decreasing reliance on unhealthy imported food, improving environmental sustainability, and stabilizing the Fijian economy.

Maintaining the traditions established by the original Austronesian settlers of Fiji, modern Fijian households are kinship-based and patriarchal. The average family size in Fiji is 4.8, with citizens primarily residing in traditional straw and wood cabins called Bures (UN, 2018). With rich natural resources and a booming agricultural sector, common jobs for the male breadwinners in Fiji include work in the tourism industry, farming, growing sugarcane, fishing, and gold mining (CIA, 2018). The taxing manual labor performed by a majority of Fijian citizens yields an average salary of just \$24,079, highlighting the economic challenges faced by the island nation (Jansen, 1991). Despite facing economic and political obstacles to development, Fiji has high access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities relative to other developing nations, with 95.7% and 91.1% of the population accessing these services respectively. However, while water and sanitation remain accessible, Fiji's lack of education and

healthcare contribute to the growing prevalence of obesity-related illnesses. In 2013, only 3.9% of Fiji's GDP went to education while in 2015 the physician density was 0.84 physicians to 1,000 members of the population (CIA, 2018).

Lacking adequate medical care and education on the adverse effects of an unhealthy diet, the switch from a traditional coconut and tuber based diet to a western-style one has skyrocketed rates of diabetes and heart disease. Historically, Fijians ate three meals per day, supplemented by steamed puddings and drinks made from powdered roots. Bread and tea composed a typical breakfast while boiled cassava, fish stews, and dalo leaves were eaten for lunch and dinner (Jansen, 1991). Although modern Fijians still enjoy these dishes on special occasions, research has shown a precipitous decline in fruit and vegetable consumption and a rise in sugary beverage, canned food, and processed meat intake.

Fiji's obesity epidemic has been spurred on by a constantly fluctuating economy forcing residents to turn to the cheapest food option. Ironically, despite importing large amounts of convenience food, the agricultural sector in Fiji accounts for 9.5% of the GDP and employs nearly half the population (New Agriculturalist, 2019). Supported by a warm, tropical climate with rains brought on by the Southeast trade winds, the 23.26% of Fijian land cultivated for agriculture supports a vast array of crops such as papaya, mango, cassava, and yams. Despite losing the critical support of the European Union in favoring Fijian sugar exports in 2017, sugar remains a major source of revenue for Fiji, amounting to roughly 10% of export income (New Agriculturalist, 2019). In addition to raw export products, larger scale Fijian companies refine gold, petroleum, cars, and frozen fish which accounts for a large amount of export revenue (CIA, 2018). However, most Fijian farmers operate small scale farms (approximately four or five hectares of land) through unstable contracts with the Native Land Trust Board who offer no guarantee of renewing their leases. Farmers' low income and lack of guaranteed employment have compelled them to consume predominantly imported food. Fijian native Temo Waqanivalu, a program officer at the World Health Organization, highlighted this issue in a 2015 interview with CNN, noting that farmers prefer high energy sodas over water and fishermen often use their earnings to purchase canned tuna. Overall, Fiji's dependence on imports and its subsequent negative trade balance have facilitated an unstable economic environment that forces residents to consume the least expensive food options.

At present, the epidemic of obesity and obesity-related illnesses in Fiji affects women, children, and native iTaukei people most severely. Likely due to a more sedentary lifestyle when compared to their male counterparts, 35.3% of Fijian women are obese whereas the male obesity prevalence is 25.1% (Hendriks, 2015). Similarly, a less active lifestyle and greater access to imported foods means that urban children have higher rates of obesity than do rural children. Although the obesity epidemic spans the Pacific Islands, Fiji has lower rates of obesity than similar nations such as the Cook Islands and Samoa because of its large Indo-Fijian population who have a much lower risk of becoming overweight. Although its effects are not evenly distributed among members of the Fijian population, obesity remains a universally critical issue in the region.

Realizing the urgent need to create a food-secure Fiji, the government took preventative measures by prohibiting the sale of certain convenience foods and raising tariffs on unhealthy products, a strategy that is both ineffective and unconstitutional. In their most sweeping action, the Fijian government banned mutton flaps under the Trading Standards Act and has made attempts to ban food vendors around schools as well as soft drinks. Fiji's draconian prohibition is similar to the ban on high-fat turkey tails in Samoa, a nation with a dire obesity epidemic (Snowdon, 2013). Despite noble intentions, these actions violate the Fijian 2013 constitution's "Right to Adequate Food and Water" by undercutting the efforts of impoverished people to secure food. Because of their dependence on imported convenience foods, banning these products outright could cause many Fijian families to become undernourished by cutting off their food supply. Additionally, actions such as the levying of taxes on sugary beverages, palm oil, and monosodium glutamate have raised prices on some convenience food, risking decreasing Fijian's food access (Snowdon, 2013). Although on the surface it would appear that outlawing convenience food would ameliorate the obesity crisis, weak enforcement of the ban has led to continued importation and the relabeling of mutton flaps without a significant impact on health. Not only is raising tariffs and prohibiting certain convenience foods unconstitutional, the risk of plunging Fijian families into sudden food insecurity is too great to justify the ban.

Rather than raise tariffs and ban certain foods, the most effective way to decrease the high rates of obesity and obesity-related illnesses in Fiji would be to elevate the status of small farmers and empower them to provide healthy, fresh food to their local communities. Presently, the greatest impediment to the success of small farms are the leases they sign under the Agricultural Landlord & Tenant Act (ALTA), many of which expire after just 30 years with no guarantee of renewal. Without formal property titles or tenure security, small farmers have trouble investing in modern farming equipment or using their land as collateral when seeking loans (New Agriculturalist, 2019).

In order to remedy this issue, ALTA must be amended to extend the length of land leases. Through cooperative action between grassroots organizations in the Pacific Islands as well as the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, citizens and policymakers could appeal to the Native Land Trust Board to extend contracts. Presently, the Pacific Farmer Organisations acts as a hub for agricultural advocacy groups in the Pacific Islands. With member organizations such as the Fiji Crop and Livestock Council and Tei Tei Taveuni (a sustainable farming group) already in conversation, appeals to the Native Land Trust Board through their Policy Engagement and Partnerships program would be coordinated and effective. Additionally, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has already provided technical and policy planning support to the Fijian agricultural sector and must continue to do so if change is to be made. If NGOs in the Pacific Farmer Organisations acted in conjunction with the UN FAO to pressure the Native Land Trust Board to extend leases, the board would likely comply.

In addition to extended lease contracts, if Fijian small farmers had easier access to capital, the highly erratic agricultural sector would stabilize, empowering farmers to grow for domestic markets rather than rely on imported food. The most efficient way to provide small farmers with the finances they need is through a Public-Private Partnership (PPP). Under a PPP initiative, the Fijian government would contract

with a private entity in order to raise investment funds for farming infrastructure and transportation. Applying the PPP model to the agricultural sector is a low-risk way to improve small farmers' financial standing that has already been successful in other areas. In 2018, the Fijian Ministry of Economy contracted with a private hospital operator to provide modern technology and training at hospitals in Lautoka. According to estimates, the investment created by the public-private partnership will bring improved medical care to 380,000 Fijians (MOA, 2014). If a similar partnership were implemented in the agricultural sector, the World Bank would provide technical assistance as it did in the healthcare sector. The eagerness of the Fijian government to roll out a PPP in the arena of health suggests that it is likely to do so in agricultural as well.

If the Agricultural Landlord & Tenant Act were amended to lengthen small farmers' leases and a Public-Private Partnership implemented to provide farmers with capital and infrastructure, the rates of obesity in Fiji would plummet because traditional Fijian dietary patterns would reemerge. In a world where small farmers have access to adequate capital and are able to operate their farms locally, traditional crops that sustained the health of Fijian people for centuries would proliferate. Additionally, the Fijian economy would stabilize because their largest sector (agriculture) would be based on well-funded and self-sufficient small farms, rather than on expensive imports to supplement the rapid unemployment and farm closures facilitated by short ALTA leases. In a more stable economic environment, Fijians would have enough discretionary income to purchase locally grown fruits and vegetables that thriving farms would supply. Additionally, with financially self-sufficient farms, employment would be more stable and new jobs would be created. Availability of traditional Fijian foods at an affordable cost and the economic solidity brought on by a stable agricultural sector would increase food security and decrease rates of obesity and the non-communicable diseases it is linked to.

With a thriving agricultural sector composed of small farms growing for local markets, the environment would benefit as well. By operating biodiverse farms, genetic diversity is preserved through growing a vast array of produce. In addition, the fossil fuels emitted by trucks and ships importing food across long distances would be greatly reduced. The environmental benefits of transitioning to a more locally-based agricultural sector would add incentive for NGOs and governments to support the project, especially because one of the largest revenue sources in Fiji is ecotourism.

In a nation where the leading cause of death is cardiovascular disease (Snowdon, 2013) and thousands suffer from non-communicable diseases as a result of the dire obesity epidemic, the world must take action to empower Fiji. By amending the Agricultural Landlord & Tenant Act and increasing Public-Private Partnership to support small farmers, the coalition of Pacific Island farmers and the Fijian government could alleviate overnutrition, help the environment, and stabilize the Fijian economy.

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