
FARM-TO-TABLE VIA COLLECTION CENTRES IN FIJI

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Every year, €215 million worth of fruits and vegetables are imported to Fiji, mostly to supply the local restaurant and hotel industry. In 2016, the Pacific Islands Private Sector Organisation (PIPSO) launched a project to address the challenges faced by Fijian farmers and to establish agricultural collection centres to improve the amount of ‘farm-to-table’ produce used in the country’s tourism sector.

Cover One of the main challenges which all farmers face is getting their products to the market

The Pacific Islands Private Sector Organisation, PIPSO, has a programme dedicated to agritourism and agribusiness, which works with farmers and producers to increase their business competitiveness. One key intervention concerns assessing value chains, looking at the supply of local fruits and vegetables (e.g. watermelon and lettuce), root crops and tubers (e.g. sweet potato and taro) and seafood (e.g. fish and freshwater mussels) into the domestic market, including to local hotels and restaurants. In 2015, at the first Pacific Agritourism conference held in Nadi, Fiji, local hotels, restaurants and chefs expressed concerns about the inconsistent supply and the quality of local fruits and vegetables and other produce that were being supplied by local farmers. At the same meeting, farmers and growers also shared the challenges related to getting local produce to market. These included the cost of agricultural inputs, poor access to roads, costly transportation and produce loss and wastage – all of which limit their ability to make sufficient earnings.

The conference acknowledged the key role that chefs can play in developing national and regional agritourism. There was an acknowledgement that the role of chefs in agritourism is still in its infancy and needs to be developed further, particularly in getting hotels to not only utilise local produce and products, but to integrate local cuisine and fanfare into their meals, creating culinary fusion between traditional

foods and contemporary meals. Furthermore, chefs should promote local agriculture and have farmers as key partners in the agritourism programme by having them participate in events, showcasing their products. This can help define culinary tourism based on the “from farm-to-table” concept and further develop key relationships between the farming and culinary communities, so that more locally-sourced foods are available in restaurants and hotels.

The project

In 2016, PIPSO, in partnership with CTA, commissioned a study on collection centres in Fiji. These are central points for the collection of fruit and vegetable crops for processing, distribution and selling; a commercial link between producers and buyers for domestic and export markets. The feasibility study, *Enhancing Market Linkages in Agribusiness in Fiji*, was an effective way to explore and analyse the challenges that agritourism in Fiji faces and to identify solutions and specific recommendations which farmers, the private sector (including local hotels and restaurants) and the government could contribute towards. As the manager of CTA’s office in Brussels, Isolina Boto, said, “the goal of the study was to look at the potential of establishing collection centres in rural areas, where nearby private sector companies could buy salads and vegetables for hotels and supermarkets.”

The study was conducted in five agricultural areas – Nabouwalu, Nadarivatu, Navosa, Ra, Taveuni – and was done in a participatory and inclusive way. As the collection centres were meant to be community resources, it was important to ensure that the study was all-inclusive in soliciting views and suggestions. This was an important way of capturing feedback from various people involved in agricultural activities, including women and youth. Furthermore, the project allowed hotels and restaurants to specify what produce they required and allowed them to see if there was a local supply to meet their demands.

A key finding from the project was that collection centres established in the past had failed because of a lack of experience and commercial expertise. Farmers that had used the facilities felt isolated and did not find any ongoing engagement and communication between the communities and the collection centres. Cohesive and genuine partnerships were therefore not fostered.

This project looked at ways in which to support the local farmers and to reduce their costs and increase their market access; strengthening the link between the agriculture and farming communities and the tourism sector. Increasing local supply to the local markets and (potentially) for export, and reducing the levels of reliance on imported foods, was a target of the project. In looking at the challenges as business opportunities, it is envisaged that this will encourage the private sector to consider operating collection centres and to act as the market link between farmers and consumers (hotels and restaurants). In this way, consideration can be given to more structured ways of doing business, such as promoting contract farming, farmers forming business clusters and farmers establishing local industry coalitions. In 2016, Fiji was estimated to be importing over €215m worth of fruits and vegetables, of which at least 50% was being brought in to meet the needs of the local hotel and tourism industry. In working with farmers to enhance their market linkages, there is scope to replace imports with locally sourced produce.

The challenges and the solutions

How many of us have eaten at a hotel only to find out that the produce being served is not locally sourced? Or visited the local supermarket only to find out that the majority of the produce is imported? The challenges that this project aimed to tackle are already common and widely known.

- **High transportation costs:** Transportation is one of the largest expenses that farmers face when taking their produce to market. Road conditions are generally poor and, where roads are developed, poor maintenance is often an issue. This restricts farmers



Above Chiefs can play a key role in encouraging the use of local produce

from delivering their produce to towns and hotels. For those that can secure local vans to transport produce, the charges are high because drivers would take into account the long distances, the poor road conditions and the effects these will have on their vehicles. Similarly with maritime transportation, boat hire fees are expensive due to high fuel costs.

With the project establishing collection centres, transportation is anticipated to be less of a problem. The collection centre is expected to enhance the local farming sector by reducing their costs and increasing their market access. The collection point is near and the produce is collected or deposited at a centralised area, meaning that the farmers do not have to travel far at all. In some instances, collection centre vehicles will even collect the produce in clustered areas and transport the produce to the collection centre for the farmers.

- **Post-harvest and supporting infrastructure:**

Farmers harvest produce with the expectation of selling those items within days, especially with fresh produce. Unless farmers are knowledgeable about post-harvest losses and have food storage facilities, waste and loss of income will continue. The study noted that crops are often rejected in the market. Damages come from poor handling in the post-harvest process and inappropriate means of transportation to the market. There are a lot of farmers who have no formal training and their approach to handling crops after they have been harvested is often unsuitable.

With the establishment of collection centres, farmers are no longer under pressure to risk their harvest rushing it off the fields and to the market. Instead

the collection centres and supporting facilities (e.g. packing sheds and properly fitted transportation vehicles) will be available to farmers.

- **Diminished returns:** Farm gate sales, where farmers sell their produce direct from their farms, is common because it is the most convenient way for farmers to make quick cash. However, when farmers take their produce to markets, the returns are slightly higher.

The newly established centres, somewhat, guarantee farmers a buyer at a good price because hotels and restaurants who source local produce via a collection point guarantee themselves consistent supplies all year round. All the farmers have to do to get a better price is utilise the transportation provided by the centres. Save Waqainabete of Joe's Farm, a local agribusiness, found that "farmers are able to save on transportation costs and don't have to worry about storage facilities or being guaranteed a buyer for their produce, which they receive upfront full payment for."

- **Disease:** Another issue that quite prominently in Fiji is the high incidences of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and the increasing rates of diabetes, heart disease, and malnutrition. According to a 2012 World Bank Report, NCDs account for a staggering 75% of all deaths in the Pacific Islands and the 2014 Fiji Ministry of Health Report provided the same statistic.

A major contributing factor to the high number of NCDs in the Pacific is the large consumption of imported foods and the reduced consumption of local, healthy produce. As farmers sell their produce to the collection centres, they no longer need to travel the long distances to the markets, allowing them more time to work on other agricultural and community-based activities. This includes households spending more time to prepare wholesome meals using the produce they have grown. It is well known that with increased disposable incomes, people have more purchasing power and a greater tendency to buy processed foods. It is hoped that the establishment of collection centres will influence communities to appreciate local foods more and note the importance of consuming them.

Supporting a broader agenda

Health practitioners also argue that with more fresh produce going to hotels and local outlets, the opportunity to eat healthier foods will be more prevalent. One of the conclusions within the PIPSO Promoting Nutritious Food Systems Project, is that we recognise that a focus on agritourism can also support the broader agri-nutrition agenda in Fiji. We can use the tourism industry to our advantage and through initiatives, such as the collection centres, we can promote healthy eating and the consumption of local produce.



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