



# Barriers to market for subsistence farmers in Fiji – A gendered perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Previous studies of barriers and challenges for Fijian farmers engaging in agricultural markets have primarily focused on supporting semi-commercial farmers to better engage in higher-value domestic and export orientated supply chains. Despite substantial levels of hardship and poverty faced by subsistence based farmers living in rural Fiji; the barriers and challenges for engaging in markets for this cohort of farmers have not been identified.

This finding is consistent with our review of contemporary literature on this topic, which highlights an international research intensity focused on small holder farmers' transitioning from subsistence to commodity or market based agriculture. There is in contrast, relatively little known about the initial barriers restricting subsistence farmers from engaging in local agriculture markets. This area of research is particularly important, as engaging in markets has been promoted as a vehicle through which those in need can escape poverty and hardship. The aim of this article is therefore to understand, through qualitative research methods, the main limitations and barriers confronting rural communities of subsistence farmers across the island of Viti Levu, Fiji. From this broad base, we explore the additional challenges restricting rural women. Our research findings indicate that in addition to numerous infrastructural and physical challenges impeding female farmers, there is skepticism amongst the communities regarding the actual benefit of engaging in the market, given the high risks involved.

## 1. Introduction

Agriculture is an important component of Fiji's national economy. Agriculture makes a significant contribution to Fiji's \$6.7b GDP, contributing about 8.3 per cent (Fiji Government, 2016c) which has decreased from 12.1 per cent in 2001. The negative trend has been mostly attributed to the impacts of extreme weather events, lack of private funding in the sector, inadequacy of infrastructure, and market deficiencies (Xing, 2015; Fiji Government, 2016a; Lagataki et al., 2016). Despite this, enhancing the agricultural sector has been widely promoted as a primary vehicle through which rural and remote communities are able to emerge from hardship and poverty (Gounder and Xing, 2012; Oduol et al., 2017).

The *Pacific Island Gender Equality Declaration* similarly intends to 'target support for women entrepreneurs in the formal and informal sectors' (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2012, p14). It calls for a recognition of the importance of produce markets in creating opportunities for women to engage in the cash economy, and for improvements in the facilities and governance of local produce markets. This approach is consistent with numerous development strategies promoted

historically by the World Bank, including *Enhancing Women's Participation in Economic Development* (World Bank, 1995), and *Global Monitoring Report 2007: Confronting the Challenge of Gender Equality and Fragile States* (World Bank, 2007). In these, and other strategies focused on gender and economic development, the reasons proposed to invest in women, and in gender equality, narrowly reflect the ability of women to absorb greater workloads and responsibilities leading to increased productivity, and efficient use of resources. This in turn, results in improved child survival, reduced fertility and intergenerational payoffs. The predominant focus on participation has been criticized for not considering the impact of these activities on women's and girl's current workloads, including unpaid workloads which sustain families, communities and societies (Razavi, 2012; Chant and Sweetman, 2012).

Given the importance of engaging in markets outlined above; the objective of this study is to present the main restrictions and barriers that rural Fijian subsistence farmers identify as preventing or limiting their engagement in regional agricultural markets. This includes an analysis of factors that restrict an expansion of agriculture, which would enable further engagement in the market.

Although the term *subsistence agriculture* has become synonymous

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with concepts like traditional, small scale, low income, resource poor - low input or low technology farming (Brüntrup and Heidhues, 2002). The simple definition offered by Todaro (1995) employed in this study, is to identify subsistence based farmers as those who raise produce (be it crop, livestock, or other activities) primarily for personal consumption. The level of market integration varies between subsistence farmers, but predominantly they produce food for their own consumption. Clearly though, there is a strong association between subsistence farming, and poverty (Davidova et al., 2009).

It is due to the lack of research focus on barriers to entry of markets that we have taken a semi-structured approach and present empirical data compiled from group discussions with communities of subsistence farmers in Fiji's rural and remote communities. We anticipate that a gender sensitive identification of factors will contribute to the current evidence base from which rural agricultural development policies are developed. In addition to challenges experienced by the communities, we also present the additional challenges and obstacles identified by rural women.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. The importance of rural development in Fiji

The numerically largest farmer sub-group consists of iTaukei Fijians who own Mataqali land (Fiji Government, 2009). Mataqali land is the traditional native land-holding unit that is administrated by the Native Land Trust Board. Land is traditionally passed to the male members of the Mataqali. The second largest farmer cohort consists of Indo-Fijians who have either purchased freehold land or lease land from large scale plantation owners or from Mataqali (Fiji Government, 2009). Additionally, there is a small proportion of landholders of European descent.

As poverty levels in rural and remote Fiji escalate (Narsey, 2012; Gounder, 2013; Campbell, 2015; Fiji Government, 2016b), a focus upon connecting vulnerable and marginalised communities of subsistence farmers to a vibrant regional agricultural system has become more important than ever.

In 2008–2009, the levels of rural and urban financial inequality in Fiji captured by the *2008–2009 Household and Income Expenditure Survey* found that 37 per cent of rural households experienced poverty and hardship, compared to 15 per cent of households located in urban areas (Narsey, 2011; Fijian Government, 2009). Narsey (2012) identified that between the periods of 2002–2003, and 2008 to 2009, the average household income increased by 26 per cent in urban areas, yet decreased by 14 per cent in rural locations resulting in a 43 per cent increase in the number of rural households experiencing poverty. Fig. 1 displays variable levels of poverty across Fiji's most populated islands, Vanua Levu and Viti Levu (see Fig. 1).

Within the Fijian islands, rural communities rely heavily on subsistence activities, as economic opportunities outside of agriculture are rare (FAO, 2011; AusAID, 2013). Across Fiji, about 18 per cent of the population over the age of 15 years identify their primary economic activity as solely subsistence based, with up to 36 per cent of rural populations comprising solely subsistence based farmers (Fiji Government, 2016a). Of these, iTaukei communities represent 24 per cent of this cohort, whilst Indo-Fijian communities comprise 11 per cent (Fiji Government, 2016a). The lower proportion of Indo-Fijian subsistence farmers are most likely restricted by land ownership laws, resulting in most Indo-Fijian farmers leasing Mataqali land or in some cases, purchasing limited freehold land (Fiji Government, 2009). Subsistence farming provides food security for families and communities but also enables rural producers to increase or decrease their involvement in the cash economy as opportunities arise or decline (AusAID, 2013; Campbell, 2015).

Increasingly so, adverse weather and climate conditions have directly compromised subsistence farmers' levels of food security, and

have undermined their capacity to develop sustainable livelihoods (Ahmed et al., 2009). So, despite the high level of the subsistence activities, Barnett (2011) identified that few households in Fiji actually meet all of their own food needs through their own production, and rely to some extent on purchasing food from markets. Participation in the cash economy is therefore important if bartering or informal trade arrangements cannot be made (Bammann, 2007). Meeting church, family and school obligations also necessitate participation in the cash economy (McKinnen et al., 2016).

### 2.2. Factors known to impede access and engagement in markets by subsistence farmers

Subsistence agriculture is predominant in many transitional economy countries as it is a strategy by which people with access to land can survive under difficult and risky conditions, and cope with high or uncertain transaction costs in fragile economies (Brüntrup and Heidhues, 2002). Davidova et al. (2009) examined the impediments to market integration and commercialization of subsistence farmers located in Bulgaria, Poland, Romania and Slovenia, and found that the participants were strongly influenced by market prices, which many perceived to be too low to warrant an increase in production and sales. As many of the farmers received income support through Europe's common agriculture policy (CAP) scheme, this provided an additional variable that influenced their level of market engagement. Predominantly, insufficient capital, low levels of technology and lack of knowledge and skills regarding market processes provided the main barriers to further market engagement (Davidova et al., 2009).

These findings are very different to those returned from a project in Papua New Guinea (PNG), another South Pacific island nation undertaken by Seta-Waken et al. (2013), highlighting the importance of understanding local contexts when identifying policy responses to lack of market participation. Seta-Waken et al. (2013), identified difficulties such as transport challenges, lack of access to finance, and lack of support from family to provide adequate labour as some of the main issues impeding women's participation in agricultural markets. Inability to access farm inputs/outputs, mechanical and technical infrastructure and training opportunities were other challenges that women faced in PNG. Access to training and information for women was also a problem highlighted in a study in Malawi, as elsewhere around the world (Mudege et al., 2017). This is largely because agricultural development interventions are embedded in local and social contexts that determine the work that men and women do, their inclusion in groups and networks and their access to services and resources (Quisumbing et al., 2014).

Studies on Fiji's value chains have identified numerous barriers and restrictions, yet none have included direct consultation with rural communities of subsistence based farmers as active participants in this process. Veit's (2009) study concentrated on smallholder semi-commercial enterprises located in the Nasigatoka Valley, however, some of the findings from the study could be transferrable across other regions in Fiji. Veit (2009) found that the domestic supply of fruit and vegetables is often insufficient, inconsistent or not of an appropriate standard of quality, leading to the importation of produce in markets, which is available locally. He also identified that smallholder farmers experience difficulty in accessing markets and obtaining relevant market information.

Land rights are a substantial barrier for an Indo-Fijian and iTaukei women in accessing land to produce food. Women in Fiji have no rights to land other than those extended to iTaukei women through their father or husband's actions and as such, do not customarily receive land rents (UN Women, 2016). The inability to own land or derive income from land ownership fundamentally restricts women's ability to cultivate commercial crops and engage in agribusiness endeavors. Land ownership arrangements are complex, and have also been recognized as a 'crucial foundation of social protection for the South Pacific region,

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