

ENHANCING BARGAINING POWER AND COMPETITIVENESS OF FIJIAN FARMERS: ISSUES OF GOVERNANCE

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Introduction

Fiji is a small islands country in the Pacific region and agriculture continues to be the linchpin of its national economy. It serves as the main source of livelihood for poor rural households. For the country facing perennial food deficit and limited financial resources, meeting the challenges of sustainable rural development and poverty reduction presents a daunting undertaking for its government. World over governments have taken cognizance of the role that agriculture plays in national development and have responded to emerging challenges such as drought, food shortages, increased food prices, and climate change. In responding to such challenges, it has become increasingly important for policymakers to rely on regional frameworks of governance to formulate proposals and actions for agricultural development.

Governance refers to the manner in which public officials and institutions acquire and exercise the authority to shape public policy and provide goods and services (World Bank, 2007). This includes the capacity of the government to effectively manage its resources and implement sound policies (Foukona, 2006). Governance includes both the 'enabling conditions' for enforcing law, as well as the capacity to manage broader economic and social factors (Magrath, 2010). For agriculture, good governance is important to formulate a conducive policy environment and effective implementation of policy agendas. Market failures are pervasive in agriculture and the successful growth of the sector depends on the state and its capacity to bring corrections. According to reports of World Bank (2008), Commonwealth (2009) and AusAID (2008^a) the effectiveness of government and its' regulatory quality matter for agricultural development.

Agriculture in Fiji suffers due to weak governance and agricultural institutions (World Bank, 2010). Problems of market failure are also common. Under the era of liberalized trade, to gain a share in the benefits of globalization, national policies have to ensure that all people realize the potential benefits of trade (UNDP, 2006). To help farmers to get benefits of trade the liberalization process must therefore be accompanied by efforts and complementary policies to improve their competitiveness and bargaining power. This would require development and effective dissemination of appropriate crop technologies, investment in post-harvest facilities and marketing infrastructures and creation of business-enabling environment (Singh, et al, 2010).

In this paper we want to highlight options that are available to strengthen the governance of agriculture to enhance the competitiveness of farmers. The study may be helpful to government agencies to learn about approaches and strategies to stimulate political and economic development and work in partnership with NGOs, farmers' organizations, civil society and the private sector. Governance is a key theme in development discourses at the moment and governance issues within the agriculture sector also need attention. This paper is organized in six parts. Next part deals with broad objectives of the study and data sources.

Major results of the study are presented in parts three and four. The former part of major results provides an overview of the agricultural sector of Fiji. It presents the salient features of the sector, the agricultural marketing situation, its competitive advantages, opportunities available and challenges faced in crop production. Part four discusses strategies for enhancing the performance of farmers. Implementations are presented in part five which highlights the ways and means for strengthening the governance to help farmers to improve their competitiveness. Conclusions and recommendations are presented in part six.

Objectives and Methodology

Against the background presented above, this paper endeavors to address two broad objectives. First, we discuss the determinants of the way the agricultural sector of Fiji is organized and highlight the weaknesses of the present governance system. Next, recent evidences of evolution of governance issues related to Fijian agriculture are discussed. We also try to assess the factors which affect the potential emergence of the sector. These factors have been used to establish a typology, draw on experiences and analyse few recent studies to support our view points.

The study is mainly based on the review of literature of recent studies and secondary data sources. As stated, recent available literature has been analysed to support our experiences and points of views. Available secondary data are collected from a number of sources such as various publications of the Asian Development Bank, AusAID, Commonwealth of Australia, FAO, SPC, World Bank, etc.

Overview of Agricultural Sector of Fiji

Agricultural sector of Fiji continues to be the linchpin of its national economy and serves as the main source of livelihood for poor rural households. Key exports of Fiji are also rural based with good potential for future development and prosperity, particularly in the tourism, agriculture, forestry and fisheries sectors. Subsistence farming and sugar cane production dominate the agricultural sector. Crops and livestock rearing activities account for about 73 percent of the sector followed by fisheries (17 percent) and forestry (10 percent). Subsistence production provides 38 percent of the total agricultural GDP, followed by sugar cane with 27 percent, other crops 16 percent and other sub-sectors 19 percent. Agriculture therefore, is an important component of the economy in terms of its role in providing subsistence in rural areas, ensuring food security and contributing to export earnings and foreign exchange. It could be a key driver for increased export earnings and import substitution as the share of the sector in total exports is large, around 43 percent. However, for several years, the sector has been under-performing. Its contribution to the national GDP has fallen from about 15 percent during the mid 1990's to only 11 percent during 2006 and about 10 percent at present. Lack of economic growth experienced by Fiji (see Table 1) is contributing to rising unemployment and hardship to its people. Budget allocation to agriculture/forest/fisheries, during 2007 was F\$28.3 million which came to only 3.7 percent of the total budget of Fiji. It shows that the Government is not giving due priority to the sector in its policy agenda and development programmes. The country has to give priority to increasing production and productivity (Singh and Bhati, 2009) across different sub-sectors: sugar, traditional food crops, tropical horticultural crops, off season vegetables and livestock. Farmers need policy support to diversify and adopt commercial production.

Table1: GDP growth of Fiji (percent year on year).

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010e	2011f
GDP (% change Y-Y)	1.9	-0.9	0.2	-3.0	1.0	1.4

Note: e =estimate; f = forecast

Source: National data sources and World Bank staff estimates.

It is to be understood that growth in agriculture cannot be accomplished by farmers alone. However, through an effective partnership with the government, development partners, research institutions and extension agencies, farmers' associations, civil society and private sector working together the needed task of achieving a higher agricultural growth can be done (Singh, et. al., 2010). It is not a question of increased agricultural production only. There is an important issue of enabling different players particularly the farmers, a large majority of whom are smallholders, to get their due share. These small scale producers need to be helped to realize better returns from their produce by making use of right kind of policies, arrangements, technologies and approaches which increase productivity, lower unit costs of production, strengthen their competitiveness and bargaining power, and promote private investment in the sector.

Fiji experiences a number of development challenges due to its geographic dispersion, limited size, ecosystem fragility, isolation from external markets and related high transportation costs and weak governance (IFAD, 2004). These problems are compounded by weak policy and regulatory frameworks which hinder economic development. As stated earlier, agriculture is important to the economy of Fiji. Land is a crucial factor of production. Land tenure, the system of land governance, is crucial for the development of agriculture. Most of the land in Fiji is under customary tenure (about 88 percent) and freehold and public lands comprise only about 8 percent and 4 percent of the total land respectively. Therefore, most of the farmers have some land they can call their own, but few can use it fully and freely without fear of dispute, constraint, or claim on the crop or its proceeds by kin or community (Crocombe, 1974). Land therefore, is being used less efficiently. Such a tenurial system produces many problems and keeps agricultural productivity low. It also leads to lack of individual responsibility, fragmentation, little incentive for improvement and conservation, no security of tenure, restricted scale of operation and problems in getting credit (Johnson, 1990). As getting land rights beyond the subsistence needs is hard, the system is an obstacle to commercialization. Relationship between land tenure, crop productivity and investment shows that access to land is crucial to escape poverty (Prowese and Chimhowu, 2007; Prasad, 1998) and any uncertainty of property rights in land affects the level of production and investment (Prasad, 1998).

A stronger performing agricultural sector is crucial for addressing to food security, poverty, inequality and the overall economic growth. Production and productivity of crops meant for commercial purposes is related to prices which fluctuate widely. Implications of wide fluctuations in prices are that the income of farmers fluctuates more than the fluctuations in farm output. In short-run, a fall in producers' prices dampens the enthusiasm

of producers to invest in farm enterprises. Consequently, production may be dampened in the long-run. On the other hand, an unrestrained rise in agricultural prices would affect the levels of living of population in other sectors of the economy. Because of such behavior of farm-produce prices and their importance, the Government of Fiji, in the past, has taken different measures to improve the bargaining position of its farmers and regulate/stabilize prices for export commodities (notably tree crops). In the development plans also, the Government has supported agricultural development projects. These projects/programmes involved the establishment of National Marketing Authority (NMA), Rewa Rice Mill Ltd, Copra Oil Mill Fiji Ltd, Copra Stabilization Fund, promotion of agricultural production /marketing cooperatives, etc. Through the vehicle of NMA and other public sector bodies the Government is involved in marketing/processing/protecting the trade of different commodities. At times it also subsidizes farm inputs and services. However, the evidence shows that many of the interventions through projects/programmes were not sustained and have failed (Commonwealth, 2006). Despite the intentions to support farmers, many interventions proved to be detrimental to farmers and development of many crop based industries.

Though, the farmers of Fiji are becoming market oriented in supplying domestic markets for roots and tubers, horticultural produce and other foods but it is widely recognized that production remains a major constraint. The issue of improved marketing of agricultural produce and market development is not new to Fiji. There are some improvements in infrastructure including communications. Barriers to imports and exports are also low. A gradual shift in the role of government from administration to development is also being observed (World Bank, 2010). But lot more needs to be done. As part of growth policy the role of government is to accelerate the growth of output of different crops and the agriculture sector as a whole.

Agricultural Marketing Situation

The crop sub-sector of Fiji is undergoing changes both in production and marketing technologies. Supplying affordable foodstuffs for growing urban populations is a challenge. Slow growth of agricultural sector is creating socio-economic problems such as high unemployment and widening income disparity¹. In spite of government efforts to help farmers to produce more food, Fiji imports substantial amounts of foodstuffs. Its farming sector has the potential to provide the growing population with employment opportunities and enough food supplies but for farmers to produce more, they need adequate returns from their produce. To promote crop supplies, concern therefore is to provide incentive to farmers through better returns.

From marketing standpoint, Fiji has constraints of inter-island transport which is infrequent and expensive. It has implications on the choice of crops to be grown and sold. Even larger and more populated islands experience communication-transport bottlenecks in the absence of good roads and expensive air freight. Its domestic demand for fresh vegetables and fruits is relatively small and processing ventures are few. Export markets offer potential

¹The poverty gap in Fiji at national poverty line was 10.1 percent during 2009 (data.worldbank.org) and the unemployment rate which was 7.7 percent during 2008 had increased to 9.4 percent during 2009 (World Bank, 2010: National Data Sources).

but wide price fluctuations in international markets are a concern. Accumulation of sufficient amounts of produce at individual export-ports is not convenient and costly as small surpluses of smallholder producers need to be transferred from small ports to major export ports. Main recipient of Fiji's crop produce is New Zealand which itself is of relatively small size. Together with this other problems being experienced by the farm sector in Fiji are: quarantine requirements, increased competition from outside the region, difficulties of irregular and unreliable supplies both in terms of quantity and quality, lack of storage and freezer facilities at collection centres, and the inability to comply with international trade obligations under WTO. Basic field statistics on crop acreage, production, costs, market information, etc., is also weak and understanding of market variables in general is poor and a constraint to development. The country is putting in little efforts in market research and studies to determine the market potential for processing and exports (Singh, et al, 2010).

In Fiji the linkages and coordination between the ministries/departments of agriculture, trade, commerce and industries are weak therefore different strategies and programmes are often contradictory and also confusing. Its land tenure system is also a constraint to commercial crop production. Agricultural marketing is mainly in the hands of private sector, except for few commodities which are managed by public sector bodies. Many of these authorities/bodies could be regarded as monopoly traders or monopsonist in trade practices. Focus of agricultural development should be on diversification of crop sub-sector which presently is predominantly subsistence/semi-subsistence in nature. Farmers and traders also lack the ability to meet the WTO obligations and are at a disadvantageous position compared to big multinationals.

Competitive Advantages, Opportunities and Challenges in Crop Production

The sub-sector of crops presents many opportunities. Taking advantage of such opportunities is important to lift aggregate growth and enhance rural incomes. During the last few years Fiji is experiencing rapid rate of urban population growth and a domestic opportunity stems from such growth. An increase in urban population has created a domestic market for traditional staples and other food products in urban areas. There is also potential to target the tourism market more effectively. A significant tourism sector offers a substantial market for locally grown produce and packaged value-added products. In terms of export opportunities, Fiji remains internationally competitive in producing traditional tree crops, tropical fruits and off season vegetables. Its smallholder horticulture is now the fastest growing part of its agricultural sector. There is also scope to expand export markets by more effectively targeting the Asian and Pacific island communities in New Zealand, Australia and the west coast of the United States, which offer a significant market for various horticultural products, including root crops. The country also has the comparative advantage in the production of niche organic fruits and vegetables which have good export demand (Singh, et. al., 2010). However, during the last few years, the agricultural sector in Fiji has not performed satisfactorily. According to the Pacific 2020 Report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006), during 1995-2002 period, the annual growth rate of agriculture in Fiji has been minus 0.7 and the traditional farming systems are under increasing pressure. Factors limiting commercial crop production include high transportation costs, restrictions on access to overseas markets, a deterioration in the natural resource base, particularly the soil fertility, and pest and disease problems; poor marketing infrastructure resulting in large post-harvest losses and weak supply chain management.

Enhancing Performance of Farmers

Issues identified in above paragraphs need action. Infrastructure is an important constraint for the development of agriculture but policies and governance are also inhibiting factors and need emphasis. Improved profitability of crop sector is crucial for enhancing the performance of farmers which in turn will accelerate agricultural growth. Farmers can be helped to get better returns from their crops by lifting the productivity and lowering unit costs of production for which the needed actions are: improving farmers' access to technology and information; removing distortions against agriculture and facilitating market access.

Access to appropriate technology and market information is limited in Fiji which constrains the abilities of its producers and marketers to make informed farming and business related decisions. For decision making reliable information is important. In Fiji the available agricultural and marketing statistics are poor and inconsistent. Further, research needs of many crop enterprises, with the exception of sugar cane, are not catered for due to funding constraints. But there are opportunities to establish twinning relationships and links with neighbouring countries, donors and international research institutions. The research and extension capabilities are weak particularly in areas of subsistence and domestically marketed food products (Commonwealth, 2006). As the link between research and extension branches is weak the offered extension services are ineffective. Farmers need improved inputs as well as knowhow. An improved cooperation between research and extension units can improve the effectiveness of extension services as a vehicle for research and development. Due to the paucity of agricultural statistics it is difficult to make assessments of the sustainability of different farming systems. There are inter and intra-island variations and available observations/data are for short periods. Fiji is feeling the pain of declining crop yields in face of increasing population pressure and inadequate land conservation measures. To fund the public services of agricultural research and extension it may pursue alternative approaches with greater involvement of private sector, commodity industries and NGOs. Regional bodies with agricultural programs, like the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, can also be used to help get technology and market information to farming communities (Commonwealth, 2006).

Development of crop sector also depends on an enabling environment and trade policies. Farmers should have a choice in who they sell to. NMA is the sole exporter of cocoa, pawpaw, cocoa and few other chosen commodities. Though, this regulatory institution enjoys monopoly/monopsony powers in the trade of chosen commodities but its performance has been poor. Such a market structure not only lacks competition but the NMA has also not focused on improving the quality standards, bringing price stability and funding and directing commodity research. It has also not helped the farmers in improving their performance, competitiveness and bargaining power. Present focus of agricultural marketing development in Fiji is on expanding value in export marketing channels. Here it should be understood that there are not enough roles for the public sector as marketing participants. Most of the farm producers are small and village-based. They sell their output independently and have limited bargaining power in product markets as well as in input supply markets. Marketing channels are also underdeveloped. There is lack of market information and farmers have to contend with poorly developed infrastructure. Therefore there is temptation for government intervention in agricultural marketing. Yet, it would be inappropriate for the public sector to intervene as direct participant in any mode of marketing or processing. Statutory authority is not a good source for innovation and productivity gains necessary to compete in dynamic and competitive agricultural markets. Appropriate role for the public sector bodies is to aid the development of contractual system in agricultural marketing. Contractual farming is not new

to Fiji and/or other Pacific Island Countries. Examples of agro-industries having formal contractual relations between crop producers and processors are sugar industry of Fiji, and oil palm industry in PNG and Vanuatu (Singh, et al, 2010). Development of producer groups, successful producer cooperatives, NGOs could form an integral part of development and evolution of contractual system. But government can play other facilitating roles of helping to nurture value-adding ventures through policies that create a more favorable general economic environment for exporters and by providing better rural and marketing infrastructure and services of public-good nature.

Quality and safety standards – sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) standards in Fiji are a weak link in its export marketing chains. As an exporting country it is faced with the challenge of ensuring that its products meet the quarantine safety standards of the export markets. As importer, it has also to ensure that its own quarantine systems are adequate to enable imports of improved varieties and prevent the entry of pests. There are many examples when growers and exporters have suffered significant losses as a result of failures in these systems. To improve its position Fiji may take a regional approach to SPS services to realize economies of scale. More work is also needed to resolve non-SPS market access barriers, such as securing import approval for new or specialized products.

Strengthening Governance

Historically, public sector interventions in agricultural markets in Fiji were often ill informed, poorly implemented, and corrupt. However, the scales of such interventions were reduced during nineties by initiating the process of structural adjustments. This had positive impact on private sector including agriculture. But it has left many market failures unresolved since the agricultural sector in general is weak. The state now has to enhance its investment in public goods like agricultural research and development, extension and training, transport and rural market infrastructure, and agricultural statistics. After structural adjustments the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests has to redefine its role and develop new capabilities. The ‘Agreement on Agriculture’ has made agriculture very sensitive to trade related issues. Efforts to increase crop production for global markets means that the sector is not isolated and rather increasingly linked with other sectors within the economy, and with other economies at the regional and global levels. It is advisable to develop regional trade agreements/be member of such agreements to supplement their supplies (i) for potential export markets or (ii) if local-domestic production capacity is limited. The Government should develop quality-safety standards and certification mechanism and position niche products having comparative advantage under a brand name. Fiji should focus on agribusiness, marketing and trade to strengthen the capability of its farmers. For the development of competitive agribusiness a positive rural investment environment is needed which can be created by financial sector reforms. Farmers’ organizations, NGOs and other civil society also have potential to overcome the market failures which are so inherent in agriculture. This third sector can facilitate the input supply, extension and marketing activities successfully as has been demonstrated in many other developing countries. Development partners can also pool their expertise and resources to support the governance reforms (Singh, et al, 2010).

Fiji has under developed capacity for policy analysis and formulation. Its system of collection, analysis and management of agricultural statistics is weak. Agricultural intelligence gathering system needs to be strengthened to enhance the capacity of policy analysis. The competitiveness of both niche and traditional crop products of Fiji is weak due

to limited grading, standardization, processing and other value adding facilities. Increased investment in market infrastructure will help in improving the competitiveness. Development partners of Fiji can also help in strengthening the capacities in needed areas. Land reforms are important but sensitive and political issues. However, they are on the agenda of many Pacific Island Countries (AusAID, 2008^b) and Fiji may also consider them.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Governance is the exercise of economic, political, and administrative authority to manage country's affairs at all levels. Good governance is especially important to agriculture to formulate a conducive policy environment and effective implementation of agendas that make it possible to use the sector for development. Important development challenges experienced by Fiji are its geographical dispersions, limited land mass, fragile ecosystem, isolation from external markets, high transport costs and poor governance. Farmers in Fiji mainly practice semi-subsistence farming under customary tenure system and its agricultural sector is poorly developed. A stronger performing agricultural sector is crucial for addressing to the problems of food security, poverty and the overall economic growth. In the development plans of Fiji, agricultural development projects are supported by the public sector authorities/bodies/agencies. But the evidence shows that many of these projects/programmes have been detrimental to the farmers and the development of farm based industries. Farmers in Fiji are becoming market oriented. The issue of improved marketing of crops and market development is not new to the country. There are improvements in infrastructure and a gradual shift in the role of government/public sector from administration to development is also being observed. But still there are many gaps and obstacles which create market imperfections. Role of state is to create favourable environment to accelerate the growth of farm output and increase in market supplies. Farming sector of Fiji has the potential to meet domestic demands and produce surpluses for the export markets, but to produce more farmers need a secure source of income from the marketing of excess production. Concern is to provide incentive to producers through better returns from their produce. The profitability of farm enterprises can be improved if producers are able to produce more at lower unit costs. With the development of appropriate crop production technologies and effective extension services, and improved market infrastructure the competitiveness and the bargaining power of farmers may be strengthened which will help them in realizing remunerative prices and better returns. Fiji follows a customary land tenure system where there is lack of clarity in property rights. Such a system constrains the development, conservation and use of arable land for commercial crop production. Security of land tenure when implemented properly provides incentives to farmers for long-term investment therefore, land reforms are important. Such reforms should be supported by rural reconstruction programmes targeted at smallholder farmers.

Agricultural development depends on the enabling environment and trade policy. Infrastructure is an important constraint for the growth of the sector and hence, agribusiness. For lifting their crop productivity farmers need access to technology and information. Limited access to appropriate crop production and post-harvest technology and market information constrains the abilities of farmers and marketers to make well informed decisions. Due to funding constraints research needs of many crops are not catered for. But opportunities are there for establishing twining relationships and links with the neighbours, development partners, donors and international research institutions. Extension services and link between research and extension departments are also weak. Farmers need improved technical know-how and better inputs which at present are being provided for few crops only. Alternative approaches may be pursued with greater involvement of private sector and

commodity industries, NGOs. Regional bodies like Secretariat of the Pacific Community can also be helpful. Quality and food safety standards - sanitary and phytosanitary standards (SPS) are weak in the export marketing chain. It has also to work to resolve many non-SPS market access barriers like securing import approvals for new and specialized niche products. In light of the above discussion the focus areas for better governance and interventions and priority outcomes can be summarized as follows. The development structure of Fiji has certain elements which include: strengthening policy, regulatory frameworks, increased agricultural productivity and food self sufficiency, improving marketing and export performance. Government has to facilitate the farmers to enhance their bargaining power and competitiveness. Needed medium and long-term actions which would be helpful to farmers may be highlighted as: investment in rural and market infrastructure and services, strengthening the research and extension capabilities, and promotion of regional brand for niche products.

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