

SEPTEMBER 2020

## COVID-19 OVERVIEW

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- A group of people, including men and women of various ages, are gathered under a large red canopy in a rural, lush green setting. They appear to be engaged in a community activity, possibly related to agriculture or food security, as they are looking at plants in a raised bed. The background shows a dense forest and a clear sky.
- EXPECTED IMPACTS IN THE PACIFIC
  - THE PACIFIC REPORT 1 FO4ACP
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  - FOOD & WATER SECURITY IN THE AGE OF PANDEMICS



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AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS  
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ON AIR FREIGHT  
FOR EXPORT FROM FIJI”*

Despite minimal incidence of COVID-19 infection, in most Pacific island countries, a report by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Co-operation ACP-EU (CTA) and the Pacific Island Farmers Organisation Network (PIFON) has revealed the economic and social impacts have been substantial on Pacific island nations.

Agricultural economist and lead author of the report, Dr. Andrew McGregor, says the impacts on food security and nutrition are likely to be considerable.

“This is has been largely driven by the fall in income to buy nutritious food.”

“There is considerable variability between Pacific island countries, and segments within each country, in the degree to which they consumed adequate nutritious food.”

“The micro states, which are the most food insecure, produce only small volumes of traditional staples and very little fruit and vegetables.”

“In the larger Melanesian countries and the mid-sized Polynesian countries, much bigger per capita volumes of nutritious food are produced and there is far greater income earning capacity to pay for the necessary food imports.”

However, he explained that despite access to extensive arable land resources, sizable segments of the population are living in urban and peri urban areas are food insecure in addition to a significant number of rural landless people (particularly in PNG).

“With exception of the micro states, there was was generally sufficient nutritious locally grown food available in the Pacific.”

“Yet, adequate quantities of this locally produced food were not consumed, due to a combination of factors, including: inadequate household income; and, a preference for imported food which is often more convenient and cheaper.

The pandemic can be expected to accentuate the situation.”

While the pandemic is unlikely to have a direct negative impact on the availability of nutritious locally produced food, Dr. McGregor said there are indirect negative impacts on the availability of locally grown food.

“These arise from food theft, and the marketing constraints arising from less resources being available for the maintenance of rural roads.”

“Offsetting these indirect negative impacts, is the apparent increasing interest in home gardening by people living in urban and peri-urban areas.”

As Pacific island nations took measures to prevent the virus entering their territory and reduce its spread, Dr. McGregor said that declining income brought on by the pandemic is now starting to be severely felt.

“The economies of countries such as Fiji, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, the Cook Islands and Palau are heavily dependent on tourism.”

“In these countries tourism is by far the largest direct employer of labour with significant multiplier impact effects throughout the rest of the economy. In Tonga, Samoa and the Solomon Islands, tourism is less important but is still of considerable significance being a major employer of labor.”

In a survey earlier this year, the Pacific Island Farmers Organisation Network revealed disruptions to supply chains required farmers to adapt to new market dynamics and allocate more resources to local food security.

View the COVID-19 Overview Report: Expected Impacts In The Pacific: <https://bit.ly/2HGwf71>

## THE PACIFIC REPORT 1 [FO4ACP]

### Farmers Organisations For ACP Programme

Due to its geographical location and composition, the Pacific region presents many challenges for project implementation.

PIFON’s senior programme manager, Lavinia Kaumaitoia believes it played a positive role in the era of COVID-19.

“Fifty percent of our member countries are free of COVID-19, which is a relief considering the region does not have the capacity in human resources and facilities to contain the spread.”

“The Pacific has been spared to some extent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has not escaped the impact of economic woes with its closed borders causing further stress on one of its mainstays in tourism.”

Serving 80,000 farmer members, the inception phase of FO4ACP in the Pacific involved extensive travel by the PIFON Secretariat to its 23 farmer organisation members across 9 Pacific island countries for discussion, dialogue and ‘due diligence’ awareness of the project.

In December 2019, PIFON hosted a the ‘Regional FO4ACP Learning & Planning Workshop’ where the project components were contextualized to the Pacific.

“It’s the intention of the Pacific component of FO4ACP that its flagship activities resonate through the Pacific in all its members countries with its Farmer Organisation members.”

“Giving it a Pacific context allows FO4ACP to be easily adopted at grassroot because of the simplicity in its message, with the ultimate focus of ‘Partnering with Farmer Organisations’.”

The Pacific region was not spared COVID-19 with four of PIFON’s nine member countries (viz. Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, and Timor Leste) recording cases, however, the economic impact resulting from the pandemic is widely felt across all of the Pacific region.

“In the midst of this global health crisis, four member countries also experienced a natural disaster with Tropical Cyclone Harold affecting Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga in April this year.”



**LAVINIA KAUMAITOTOYA**  
SENIOR PROGRAMME MANAGER, PIFON



WITH BORDER CLOSURES, FLIGHTS GROUNDED, COUNTRY AND CITY LOCKDOWNS, THE PACIFIC SAW THE COLLAPSE OF TOURISM-RELATED BUSINESSES. THIS MEANT THAT PIFON'S MEMBERS' MARKETS FOR AGRICULTURAL PRODUCE THROUGH HOTELS AND RESORTS CEASED.

“TC Harold compounded existing challenges for these countries, causing widespread structural damage to homes, vegetation and further threatening the resilience of our Pacific islands.”

“For Vanuatu, the impact was threefold, as prior to COVID-19 Vanuatu experienced disasters from volcanic ash falls and flash flooding, and continues to be isolated and locked down.”

With all regional travel closed, the effects of the natural phenomena affected FO4ACP activities with Pacific Farmer Organisations recently resuming the implementation of activities on the ground.

The Pacific Report is the first extensive report of the FO4ACP implementation in the Pacific Region and covers the period of the project from its beginning of September 2019 to August 2020.

View the Pacific Report 1 [FO4ACP]: <https://bit.ly/30j0Z4e>

## GREEN PILLARS

### **PIFON Responds To Growing Public Interest In Backyard Gardening and Farming**

With many digging into the soil for the first time, there has been a push for knowledge on home food production.

Lavinia Kaumaitotoya, Senior Program Manager of PIFON, said women were signing up and attending Bula Agro's Tel-A-Woman Programme with Sant Kumar in Nadi.

“The response has been overwhelming and we have trained 86 females between May and June. It has also been encouraging to see our youths take an active interest, of the 86 females trained, 24 are youths.”

Following the high demand for practical knowledge from first time gardeners, the Pacific Island Farmers Organisation Network have been working with Fiji One Television's Green Pillars to develop a 22 part television series with its Fiji members.

Lavinia Kaumaitotoya said gardening may be a rare positive trend to emerge from the crippling pandemic. “We’ll come out in the end and hopefully we will be eating better, gardening more and more self-reliant.”

In Tonga, MORDI Tonga Trust are also distributing home gardening resources as part of key plans in response to COVID-19 and food security.

The television series is funded by the Farmers’ Organizations for Africa, Caribbean and Pacific- FO4ACP Programme, a joint partnership between the European Union, Africa Caribbean and Pacific (ACP), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and Pacific Island Farmers Organisation Network (PIFON).

Subscribe to Green Pillars: <https://bit.ly/34namRZ>

## PACIFIC FARMERS HAVE THEIR SAY E-BULLETIN

### **Boost Food Security, Support Cottage Industries**

The coronavirus pandemic is threatening food security and nutrition.

Without large-scale coordinated action, Sant Kumar says the disruption to food systems may pose serious health and nutrition implications.

“There needs to be a national coordination unit or implementing agency, made up of individuals from both the public and private sectors of the community” said the founder and director of Bula Agro.

“They then determine the needs of the people and supply the necessary inputs to ensure food security and livelihoods are maintained so that resources are used more efficiently and effectively.”

“If you look at how we lived 30 or more years ago, very little was spent outside of the home. Perhaps on soap, salt and oil but everything else was from the land if you had land — peanuts for oil, vegetables, eggs, meat and milk.”

“The pandemic is a blessing in disguise, everyone needs to look at what they used to do, where they are now, and how they need to adapt moving forward. We all need to be self-sufficient.”

Sant Kumar says current impacts of the global pandemic has seen a rise in demand for seedlings.

“Consumers are coming directly to my farm to purchase seedlings, there has been huge demand for it. While we’re seeing a growth in backyard gardens, the challenge will be the logistics in distributing these seedlings.”

“The concern around other challenges presented by COVID 19 is serious; those without an income will steal crops and livestock, should a drought occur in the upcoming months — it will affect commercial farmers who have already lost income to COVID 19, as they’re unable to afford irrigation systems.”

“We also saw with TC Harold what it can do to our existing food security, it wiped out all replanting efforts to combat the pandemic.”

Sant Kumar says access to fresh produce is crucial and is calling on authorities for more value-adding initiatives to prolong the shelf life of local produce.

“Government must continue to supply seedlings and encourage value adding by providing assistance with the implementation of food security systems such as storage facilities and preservation facilities.”

“Bula Agro is mass producing seedlings but with the shortage of planting trays we are now looking at other economical means of planting by using materials that can be found around the house.”

“The focus needs to return to livelihoods and food security, and we must support that in any way we can through grants or loans, it’s also important cottage industries receive the support they require at this time.”

Burich Calls For Access To Finance For Women In Agriculture



Local produce at the SWAG Saturday Market at Tauese, Samoa IMAGE: SWAG

The global pandemic is exposing development challenges in the Pacific and women are struggling to cope.

Shelley Burich, the President of the Samoa Women’s Association of Growers (SWAG) says the coronavirus pandemic is increasing existing structural inequalities, as many women in agriculture struggle to fulfill multiple roles of managing their families, farms and small businesses.

“The closing of Sunday Markets has seen a huge impact for women growers and farmers who relied solely on market access for the revenue income for families and households.”

She said: “Our governments and development partners need to have better engagement with women growers and farmers, both individually and as organizations because there is still a huge gender inequality gap when it comes to women being able to access finance, business solutions and trainings, support and mentoring.”

“They should provide access to finances for women growers and farmers, not as loans, but as grants and stimulus packages that will allow them to grow their businesses and contribute to the household and family income.”

She said: “In May we started the SWAG Saturday Market in Tauese, Bella’s Kitchen were kind to assist us by offering a place to host our market and the public response has been very positive.

“We’re also strengthening our networks and outreach, while also increasing our use of social media to connect with various stakeholders.”

Burich who is also the sole proprietor of Vaoala Vanilla said the current impacts as a result of COVID-19 is a concern for growers and farmers.

“It’s seeing an increase of people growing, farming and producing homemade products and crops to sell wherever they can and by any means which is creating a problem for health and safety standards and food handling.”

She said: “The same products and cash crops are being planted and sold at the market because they’re easy to grow but it’s placing a high risk on organic farming during these times because growers want a fast return for income and are turning to pesticide use.”

“There’s also a high risk of new farmers and growers saying they are organic when in fact they are not, or that there is no one to check the validity of that.”

Burich said the biggest threats for farmers is the lack of support from governments.

“Instead of restricting market access, there needs to be more opportunities for people to sell their products and services in a safe and responsible way.”

“Exports need to open up again to allow the agriculture sector to help ease the impact of the global and local economic burden.”

“Agriculture is the way forward and we need to empower and support women growers and farmers more because they’re entrusted with looking after the entire family and are proving to be more resilient in how they cope with any crisis that arises.”

## HELP THOSE WITH NOTHING

### **A Loss Of Markets And Theft Expected To Rise**

The closure of borders in over 70 countries is affecting global agricultural value chains and food systems.

Farmers markets are important during COVID-19, but they need more support.

Rajneel Krishnan Nair of Nair Farms & Livestock says farmers can fill a critical health and economic gap amid the pandemic as food insecurity heightens and food supply chains are disrupted.

“The biggest threats as a result of the pandemic is the loss of markets for farmers, our markets have long increased food accessibility for low income areas while also boosting our economies.”

“But governments and development partners need to help everybody.”

“We’re seeing reduced sales and markets with ongoing distribution problems, planting materials like seeds and seedlings are short in supply, our traders are no longer buying from us, the price of livestock is rising and the support from extension services has been reduced.”

Nair said the rise in unemployment has also contributed to the loss of markets.

“People are losing their jobs and even more of them are returning to backyard gardening, and its resulted in less sales for us.”

“No income for people will also result in theft which is already increasing.”

Despite the challenges, the coronavirus pandemic is changing the way Nair works on his farm.

“We’re trying not to use any chemical on plants, and we’re trying to be more organic on foods and livestock.”

“We’re also increasing the use of social media to connect with those we work with, we have in the past worked with FRIEND and Sangam Organisation and so we’re using this time to also increase communication and awareness materials to build on mass communication campaigns.”

“Going forward, our message to farmers and farmer organisations is, if you have the means to help others who have nothing, please do so.”

## KEEP TRADE FLOWING

### Nadi Bay Herbs Calls For Cooperation To Keep Supply Chains Flowing

As of Tuesday 14 July, the Pacific Community have reported 465 cases and 7 deaths in 6 Pacific Island nations including Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam and New Caledonia.

While the numbers are substantially lower in comparison to the 2,687,890 cases in Europe, 3,459,602 cases in Asia, or the 3,961,429 cases in the United States — the impacts of the global lockdown has hit the Pacific region hard, leaving thousands without work and supply chains disrupted.

Kyle Stice, general manager of Nadi Bay Herbs says trade is vital to lives and livelihoods, and that international cooperation is needed to keep trade flowing.



*Nadi Bay Herbs, Fiji IMAGE: Supplied*

“The disruption to exports has presented problems with distribution channels, the continued decreased demand from hotels has also seen national sales drop by 80%, and as a result of the lockdown in Lautoka in March, we were short on labor.”

“We need to avoid creating further problems through unnecessary trade barriers and instead, boost confidence in trade and global markets — let’s keep supply chains flowing with health supplies and food.”

Stice says the uncertainty of the scale and pace of the global pandemic is an additional challenge.

“We’re not sure how long and widespread global lockdown measures will prove necessary but the biggest threats for exports is that, companies will shut down — despite an increasing demand for some crops from the non-tourist domestic market.”

“People working in export value chains will not have any jobs, and export markets will close due to customers finding suppliers in other places.”

Nadi Bay Herbs like many others are implementing key strategies to mitigate the threats of the coronavirus pandemic.

“We’re lobbying government and the airline to continue freight flights; we’re also putting into place austerity measures including reduced hours for staff and stopping of new projects,” said Stice.

“We’re reaching out to partners in government and development agencies to identify ways to support the response, we need to keep exports going and government and development agencies can provide incentives for businesses to keep staff employed.”

“This is a time to boost local production. This is a time to change peoples eating habits. Let’s come out of this better than we went into it. Let’s reduce the agricultural products import bill by eating more local products.”

COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on Wednesday 11 March.



## **Food & Water Security in the Age of Pandemics**

*By Papali'i Dr. Failautusi Avegalio Jr.*

On March 18, 2020, President Donald Trump invoked the Defense Production Act (DPA) in response to the COVID-19 outbreak putting the administration on a war time status alert.

With the underpinning of the DPA to address the corona virus global pandemic, food and water security will be the most challenging needs following medical health treatment and mitigation priorities.

In particular, the high rate of COVID-19 casualties among our elders linked to underlying health, i.e., diabetes, heart disease, renal disease, all diet related.

With the inevitable degeneration of manufacturing, supply chains, distribution centers, international and local transportation systems taxed by the pressures of the corona pandemic, the on-the-ground measure for food security in the Nation's impacted areas will be how well stocked or empty the shelves for food & accessory food items will be; and for how long.

For scale and context, the field of urban planning has a term for populated areas called conurbations.

Conurbations are created by continuously expanding cities, suburbs and towns that merge into a mass sprawl with little or no rural land in between for hundreds of square miles with populations in the millions.

There are 14 such sprawling conurbations spanning the nation from Puerto Rico's Area Metropolitana in the Caribbean, the New York Tri-state area in the Northeast, Dallas–Fort Worth in the Midwest and the San Francisco Bay Area and Greater Los Angeles Area along the west coast.

Eighty per cent of the nation's population (331,002,651) live in conurbations.

Exacerbated by unprecedented job loss and with employment opportunities at a standstill, feeding these populations in a sustainable manner for at least 8 months (projected by government leaders) will be a formidable national challenge.

The US Territories can avoid being part of that scenario and contribute at a territorial scale to help our nation in its time of need.

This is possible by minimizing the need to divert resources from COVID-19 impacted populations on the US mainland, that unlike American Samoa and most of the US Territories, are completely dependent on shelf food transported daily to survive.

### **Village, Family Plantations and Commercial Farmers First Line of Defense for Food Security**

Food, water and shelter are the basics of food security and waiting for external resources after the fact, rather than acting now with local preparations, is not only insufficient but irresponsible.

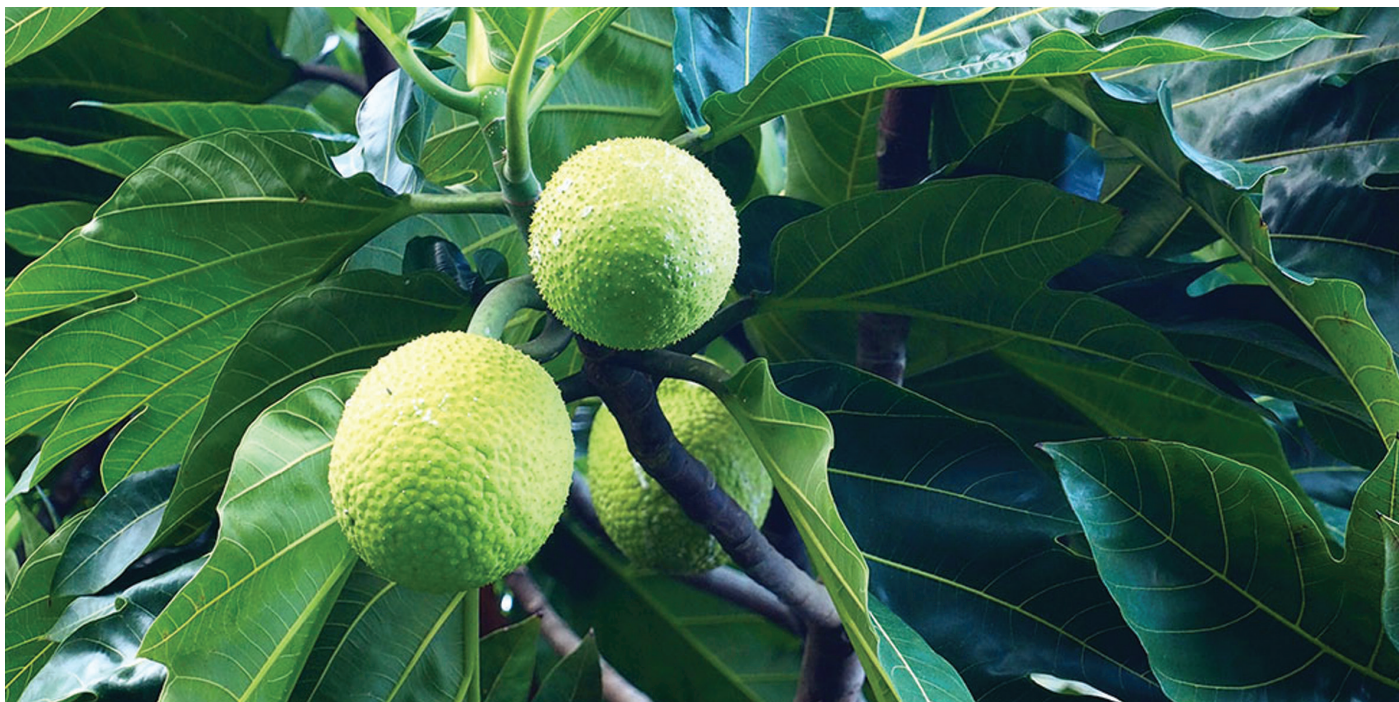
Our older generation, local retirees and veterans, many whom are local farmers and traditional leaders, together with our local commercial agricultural businesses are the first line of defense for food security.

The overflow impact of overwhelmed national conditions on the US Territories is eminent. This potential condition can be mitigated by local resourcefulness and self- reliance.

The experience of elders who, as adolescents lived the traditional manner, together with village leaders must work collaboratively with government towards strengthening village and community resilience.

Our elders in particular can lead, teach, restore or strengthen cultural practices for the younger generation modeling how to live without modern amenities or imported food. Planting taro, propagating an ulu root cutting or planting niu vai is time better spent than hours sitting in long lines in ones car, or standing in long lines hoping there will still be food on the shelf to purchase.

Unlike an ulu or a niu, once you buy something from the shelf, or get water and packaged food from a relief pallet, it doesn't grow back.



*Breadfruit is adaptable to local climates in the Pacific and has potential to contribute to food and nutritional security, income generation and the preservation of traditional food systems IMAGE: Ke Ola Magazine*

Poor diets consisting of imported processed foods and drinks that are high glycemic and high gluten contribute to the underlying health issues that increase the vulnerability to diseases and are often fatal when COVID-19 is contracted.

Nutritionists and food scientists have reaffirmed the significantly healthier ingredients of breadfruit and associated traditional foods (understood by our ancestors) to mitigate and stop the concurrent scourge of diabetes, heart disease, renal disease and obesity.

Engaging the aumaga and unemployed of the villages to establish food plantations for basic clan food security is imperative.

There is a difference between planting for food security vs planting for profit. They are not the same thing. Planting for food security and the welfare of family and village can generate profits. However, planting for profit is no guarantee of food security and will exacerbate relief to those in need.

Decisive actions to support the localization and restoration of traditional and modern food production at the aiga and village levels must be aggressively led.

With the scale and rapid spread of the coronavirus and adverse impact on the basic needs of the national population, ships that fill the food shelves and provide fuel for the remote US Island Territories will arrive farther and farther in between. Worst case scenario – it stops all together.

### RESET Fiji: A People's Post-COVID-19 Dialogue Series: Agriculture

*By Maureen Penijueli, Coordinator of Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG)*

The panel provided a sobering analysis of the current state of agriculture in Fiji and removed any romanticised notions of what it would take for an agriculture reset.

During its heyday, 20 – 30 years ago, Fiji's research and development in agriculture was rated and considered world class. Decades later, after neglect from successive governments, agriculture has been brought to its knees.

As pointed out by Wah Sing, "unlike other industries agriculture cannot just be switched on. It is a product of biological and genetic processes and it takes time to develop. Agriculture is a long-term game changer that needs to be supported by a "super billion- dollar budget".

The panelists brought home the significant challenges along with key messages as well as potential ideas and solutions for the immediate and medium term, but more significantly on how to begin the long road to resetting agriculture in Fiji.

One of the most immediate and significant economic impacts of COVID-19 has been the unemployment figures, more than 40,000 people have lost their jobs in Fiji.

Increasing numbers of people are going back to villages to farming, fishing while back- yard gardening has sprouted in urban and peri-urban centres to shore up food security and widen livelihood options.

Livai Tora, pointed out, this drift back to the land is bringing a new set of challenges and potential conflict.

Food security should not just be seen as being able to produce enough food for consumption, but also supporting people to be able to buy and preserve enough food to survive.

With so many novice farmers, back yard gardeners mostly run by women, showed that there is a need for resources on where people can go for basic help.

Growing for personal consumption can help buffer the impacts of COVID-19 but while the urban centres are critical markets for local produce and can provide livelihoods, they are susceptible to price volatility.

Increased produce means lower prices for farmers. Kyle Stice brought home the point on price volatility.

For example, prior to the pandemic, the price of cucumbers per bag was at an all time high \$140 a bag. During the pandemic it dropped right down to \$10 and stabilised at \$40 at current market price.

Key staples such as cassava while enjoying good prices now is likely to drop in the next six months. A key solution promoted is the self-organising of farmers – "farmers helping farmers" to share knowledge, ideas, skills and innovations.

There are five established, "farmer to farmer" organisations in Fiji which can and do help build greater resilience and support structures covering backyard gardeners, to semi subsistence farmers, export producers, and creating a stronger base for an expanded agricultural sector.

Lavinia Kaumaitotoya highlighted that this also provides effective avenues to promote greater involvement of women in agriculture particularly in floriculture which has many flow on effects for nutrition and gender equity.

Agriculture is at the heart of discussions for diversifying Fiji's economy but with a balance between growing foods for a domestic or foreign market.

The decline in the tourism industry has hit domestic producers as hotels are a key consumer of locally grown products, all over the Pacific Islands.

At the same time Fiji and many Pacific Island countries have distinct advantages in agriculture due to the natural environments, climate and fertile soil, providing opportunities for not only large- scale produce but also niche markets.

Agricultural exporters also face many challenges. National airlines have been for too long set up to service the golden goose of tourist markets, the pandemic has brought home the fragility of our over dependency on tourism.

The critical issue of freight access and its cost for fresh produce was raised by panelists, highlighting the importance of national airlines to respond to the current economic situation and service the needs of their agricultural export producers who can buffer our economy in the interim.

Farmers in Fiji have been able to demonstrate that they can organise and increase the freight to market from just one freight flight per week, to one flight per day to three major destinations — Australia, NZ and US.

While seemingly small these freight flights are critical for recovery. Entry into markets was raised as a key challenge as many exports from Fiji and the Pacific face duty-free and quota-free market access, but aren't able to meet other barriers like quarantine standards. The continued decline of the Fiji sugar industry brings to the fore the challenges in diversifying an economy. Panelists spoke to the dying sugar industry, but also how many small towns in the "sugar-belt" are still reliant on it.

Moving out of sugar is difficult but some farmers are innovating and trying to connect with other niches sectors such as agro-tourism or move into high-value crops which then face export issues freight etc.

There was a strong consensus on the need for greater investment and government involvement in agriculture. Livai Tora called for a "super budget" of \$F1 billion for agriculture in Fiji.

We await the outcome of Fiji's agriculture census to guide research help innovation and inform policy. Further investment in extension services like people, seeds, pest management and market information would support new farmers and existing ones. Added to this is the need to ensure social access to productive resources as well as upholding the guardianship of the natural environment to ensure that it isn't over exploited.

Agriculture is an industry that needs long term planning backed by adequate funding and technical expertise. As Fiji attempts to diversify away from heavy reliance on dominant exports like sugar it is also having to adapt to the COVID-19 challenges that declining tourism and employment are adding to the mix.

The resilience of producers in Fiji and other Pacific Islands in the face of cyclones and other extreme weather events shows that such challenges can be met. For Fiji and many PICs, agriculture is a key part of any attempts to grow a more prosperous and equitable economy.

It requires deliberate planning, foresight, research, investment and the need to place people, communities and the environment at the centre of policy-making.

*Aimed at stimulating an economy of ideas, innovations and solutions to engineer a post COVID Fiji, the television programme produced by MaiTV, Oxfam, University of the South Pacific, and PANG recently wrapped up a successful first season.*