

# **Exploring the Perceptions of Agri-Tourism among Highland Farmers & Business Owners in Fiji**

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## Section 1: Introduction

### *Research Problem/Question & Theoretical Framework*

Agriculture and tourism are two of the biggest pillars in the Fijian economy. As of 2018, agriculture employs 28% of the country and is the third largest sector for the country's GDP at 9% (Investment Fiji, 2019). Tourism employs less people (12%) (Fiji Embassy, 2019), but it is the largest source of foreign exchange and contributes more than any other industry to Fiji's GDP at 34% (Chambers, 2018). At the crossroads of agriculture and tourism is a relatively new, but growing phenomenon: Agri-Tourism. There is not a universal definition of this concept—for this study, I recognize Agri-Tourism as a form of tourism based in an agricultural setting with an educational component (Gil Arroyo, Barbieri and Rozier Rich, 2013).

Given fluctuating prices and climate change, farmers are often in vulnerable economic positions, particularly in Fiji. Agri-Tourism serves as a bridge between the agriculture and tourism sectors and offers farmers new economic activities, which could provide additional financial security during shocks. There is a growing demand for experiential Agri-Tourism where tourists are seeking opportunities to explore the cultural essence of the country they visit (Phillip, Hunter and Blackstock, 2010).

### *Literature Review*

Existing literature surrounding the experiential side of Agri-Tourism within Fiji is limited. The majority of previous research on Agri-Tourism is focused predominantly on food (i.e. culinary tourism, farm to table, etc.). Further, there is little literature dedicated to Agri-Tourism in Fiji specifically. This geographic dearth points to the issue that Agri-Tourism research in Fiji is still in its stages of infancy.

There is an abundance of research on tourism development in Fiji. Yet, finding sources focused overtly on Agri-Tourism in Fiji is difficult and points to a fundamental issue: Agri-Tourism as its own standalone concept is not being examined separately or as thoroughly as tourism. Part of this may be due to the fact that there is not a singular understanding of Agri-Tourism. Also, I struggled to find studies that interviewed businesses that participate in Agri-Tourism. Failing to explore this demographic limits researchers' understanding of Agri-Tourism. Further, I did not locate research that sought to connect business owners and farmers that engage in Agri-Tourism.

While research on Agri-Tourism in Fiji is lacking, there are other applicable sources I examined. For instance, there are many studies that examine Agri-Tourism as a tool to foster rural economic development in developing countries. (Though Agri-Tourism is only successful as an income diversification strategy when farmers have sufficient business knowledge) (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2014). In addition, there is research exploring the vulnerabilities that smallholder farms experience, namely underinvestment in agriculture and the impacts of climate change (Addinsall et al., 2016). These studies were not conducted in the Pacific, but the subject matter discussed (potential for Agri-Tourism to bolster rural incomes and the challenges that farmers face) is relevant to farmers in Fiji.

### *Justification*

This study aims to bridge the gap in knowledge by building upon existing research and examining similar studies in rural, Pacific contexts. The results will be useful for future FAPP projects focused on strengthening the Agri-Tourism sector in a way that enhances sustainable livelihoods and fosters income diversification and risk management for farmers. This study aims to fill this gap in research by exploring relevant business knowledge that could be shared with farmers in the Agri-Tourism sector. Linking lessons from successful businesses to farmers could facilitate easier Agri-Tourism start-up projects for the latter. Ultimately, this research is valuable because it is related to rural development and strengthening sustainable livelihoods.

### *Paper Overview*

In this paper, I share a cursory overview of farmer perceptions of Agri-Tourism in the remote interior of Fiji as well as insight from business owners involved in Agri-Tourism operations. The goal of this paper is to stimulate interest in further research, policy development, and program implementation that targets farmers to assist in developing Agri-Tourism operations as an income diversification strategy.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 details research design, methods, and methodologies; Section 3 details my data collection for farmers and businesses; Section 4 is an analysis of my results; and Section 5 offers concluding remarks and recommendations moving forward.

## **Section 2: Methodology and Research Methods**

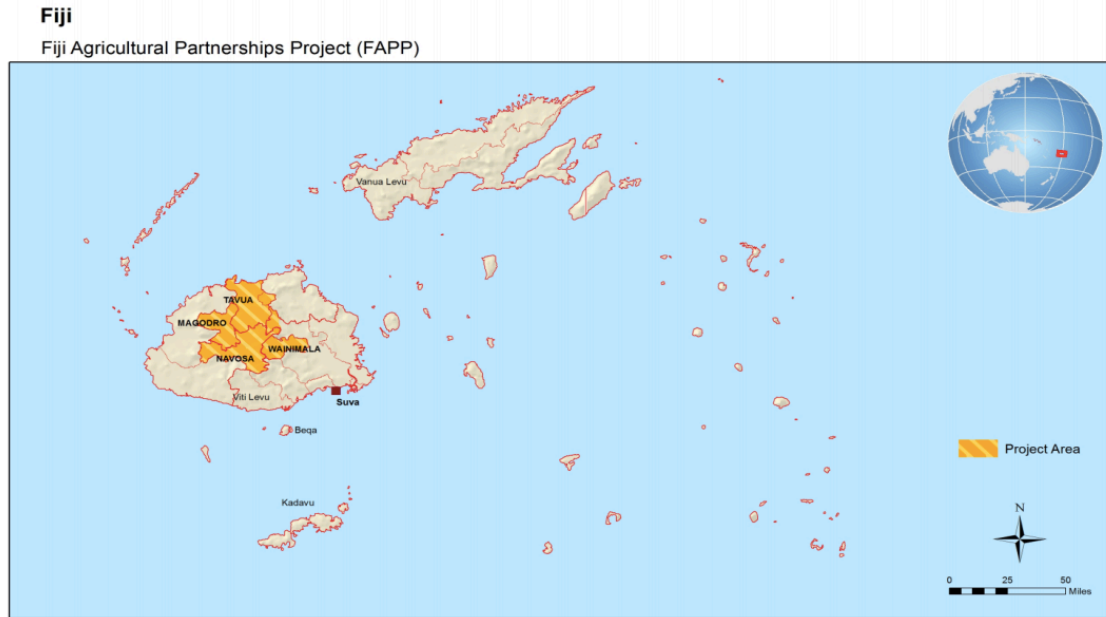
### *Theoretical Basis for Methods of Data Collection:*

For my focus groups with indigenous farmers, I chose to employ the Fijian Vanua Research Framework (FVRF) (Nabobo-Baba, 2008) per the recommendation of PARDI 2 (Pacific Agribusiness Research in Development Initiative Phase 2). This indigenous framework is culturally appropriate in the context of my research setting. Not only does FVRF constitute a shift toward decolonizing methodologies, this framework emphasizes the agency, self-actualization, worldviews, customs, and cultural knowledge of Fijian people (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). Since my research is largely epistemological in that it gauges perceptions of Agri-Tourism, FVRF was compatible in recording Fijian attitudes. Additionally, FVRF validates Fijian culture and practices (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). By participating in an indigenous framework, my research was more culturally sensitive which encouraged participants to share their perspectives with me, thus allowing me to collect richer data. For the focus groups in the rural Highlands, my research team presented *sevusevu* (kava that is given by both the visitors and the village) to the village chief and we engaged in *talanoa* (story-telling) with the participants while drinking *yaqona* (kava). By asking questions to the focus groups via *talanoa*, I requested knowledge from the farmers in a more appropriate way (compared to formal interviews).

### *Sample size & Sampling Method:*

#### *Farmer data:*

I conducted focus groups with farmers in seven villages (Rewasau, Naga, Koro, Mare, Wema, Naiwarabe, and Tabalei) in the Highlands of Viti Levu, the island where I was researching. I selected each of the seven villages to ensure that all three FAPP project area provinces (Ba, Nadroga-Navosa, and Naitasiri) and all seven FAPP project area districts (Magodro, Savatu, Nasikawa, Nabobuco, Navatusila, Nadrau, and Noikoro) were represented. Across the seven focus groups, I had a total of 58 respondents (32 men, 26 women). I thought it was important to emphasize the geographic diversity of the FAPP project area districts, since villages share different microclimates and landscapes, which could influence their perceptions of Agri-Tourism. Additionally, I chose these villages based on insight from employees at the Ministry of Agriculture. Since they are familiar with the FAPP project and have conducted many field visits, I felt their local knowledge was critical in ensuring I chose the appropriate villages. Further, the Ministry helped select villages by calling residents ahead of time to gauge how many farmers could be present for focus groups. I chose villages with more available participants to generate a larger sample size. My data collection also relied on snowball sampling, where participants would call other farmers in the village to attend the focus groups.



Map 1: Fiji Agricultural Partnerships Project (FAPP) area (Operations IFAD, 2015)

***Business data:***

I conducted three 30-minute, semi-structured interviews in person with founders Aileen Burness of South Sea Orchids (SSO), Eileen Chute of Bulaccino Farms (Bulaccino), and Sashi Kiran of Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises & Development (FRIEND). I received recommendations for these businesses, as well as a few others, from stakeholders, including the Ministry of Agriculture and PARDI 2. In part, I chose the businesses based on responsiveness and availability. (Some businesses were unavailable during my research stint or nonresponsive.) I also selected SSO, Bulaccino, and FRIEND, because they are located in Nadi and nearby Lautoka, which is the largest tourist area in Fiji. This proximity to tourism lends these businesses extensive experience, making the founders key interview subjects. Finally, the variety of the type of Agri-Tourism experiences they offer was essential to selection. I elected to do semi-structured interviews to have a few uniform questions I could cross-analyze and to also have free room for discussion, since each Agri-Tourism model greatly differed between businesses.

***Limitations of Fieldwork, Data, & Analysis:***

There are a few limitations of this study. Given the time and resource constraints of my study, random sampling was not possible among farmers. Instead, I chose a purposeful sample that targeted participants based on geographic relevance (covering all FAPP project area districts) and sector relevance (choosing farmers and business owners involved in Agri-Tourism). Additionally, accessing the remote interior was time-consuming (due to limited infrastructure) and required Ministry attendance and support. (The research team had to stay for several days at a time in the Highlands). Therefore, follow up interviews were not possible during my 2.5-month research period. For data collection, language proved to be a constraint in villages where the farmers had limited levels of English. Though I had translators, the meaning of respondents' answers can naturally be partially lost when siphoned between the native language (Fijian) and the translated language (English). Further, my focus group questions for farmers were largely epistemological. I asked participants if they had heard of Agri-Tourism and if so, what does this concept mean to them. These questions and responses are predicated on exposure to a relatively new English term (Agri-Tourism). In focus groups among farmers who did not speak English, my data for this part of my questionnaire was thus limited. As with all self-

reported data, my data is limited in that I must trust at face value the veracity of respondent answers. With focus groups, there is also potential for participants to give answers they feel are compatible with their fellow respondents. However, the nature of my research is not sensitive, so this is not a likely issue.

### Section 3: Results:

This section highlights data related to my aims and objectives for my study, which are the following: (1) to understand perceptions of Agri-Tourism among farmers and businesses; (2) to document motivations for participating in Agri-Tourism; (3) to record types of Agri-Tourism activities offered; and (4) to investigate common barriers in Agri-Tourism. My results are split between farmer data (village focus groups) and business data (interviews with heads of organizations). I further explore the implications of the results in the next section.

#### *Farmer Data:*

*Key Figures, based on seven villages:*

Agri-Tourism and tourism data:

100% (7/7) are aware of tourists visiting Highland villages.

100% (7/7) want to host tourists in their villages.

86% (6/7) have not seen tourists in their villages. 14% (1/7) host tourists in their village (Naga).

71% (5/7) have not heard of Agri-Tourism. These villages are Koro, Mare, Wema, Nawairabe, and Tabalei. 29% (2/7) have heard of Agri-Tourism. These villages are Naga who hosts tourists and Rewasau who do not host tourists. One respondent in Rewasau defined Agri-Tourism as “from the town to the village”.

*Tables and Graphs:*

### PROPOSED AGRITOURISM ACTIVITIES BY FARMERS

Village:	Cultural Conversations (Talanoa, Kava)	Eco-Tourism (hiking, waterfalls, caves)	Recreation (horseback riding, hunting)	Cultural Experiences (cooking, dancing)
Rewasau		X		X
Naga	X			
Koro		X	X	
Mare		X	X	
Wema		X	X	
Nawairabe		X	X	
Tabalei		X	X	X

*Figure 1*

Only one village, Naga who hosts tourists, proposed cultural conversations as an activity. All of the other villages suggested forms of ecotourism for prospective visitors. More than half of the villages also recommended recreational activities for tourists. Just over a quarter suggested cultural experiences for tourists.

### AGRI-TOURISM CHALLENGES ACCORDING TO FARMERS

Village:	Access/ Transport	Marketing	Hosting Duties	Village Schedule Interference	Climate Change	Adequate Facilities	Start- up Costs
Rewasau	X	X				X	
Naga			X	X	X		
Koro			X			X	
Mare	X					X	X
Wema				X			
Nawairabe	X						
Tabalei				X			X

Figure 2

The most frequently mentioned challenges—access/transport, community schedule interference, and adequate facilities—are cited three times each. Hosting duties and start-up costs are mentioned two times by different villages. Marketing and climate change, the least frequent challenges, are each recorded once by different villages.

### FARMER MOTIVATIONS TO HOST TOURISTS

Village:	Economic Development	Educational Opportunities	Relationships/ Networking	Donations
Rewasau	X	X	X	X
Naga	X	X		
Koro	X	X	X	
Mare	X		X	
Wema	X	X		X
Nawairabe	X	X		X
Tabalei	X	X	X	

Figure 3

All villages want to host tourists in order to supplement their incomes. Nearly all villages, except Mare, expressed they want to host tourists because of the potential for educational exchange. More than half of the villages are interested in forming relationships and networking with tourists. Just under half of the villages are interested in hosting, because tourists often bring donations.



Picture 1: *Farmer in Nadarau* (Smith, 2019).

*Business Data, based on three interviews with heads of organizations (SSO, Bulaccino, FRIEND):*

#### BUSINESS INFORMATION

<b>Business:</b>	<b>Year Founded</b>	<b>Year Agritourism Started</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Number of Employees</b>	<b>Agritourism Activity</b>
SSO	1996	1996	Nadi	7	Orchid and anthurium nursery tour
Bulaccino	2006	Operations beginning 2019 or 2020	Nadi	7	Farm tours, cooking demos
FRIEND	2002	2017	Lautoka	60	Farm tours, beekeeping demos

*Figure 4*

#### *Key findings:*

##### *Perceptions of Agri-Tourism and Motivations for Engaging in Agri-Tourism:*

Aileen Burness of SSO believes Agri-Tourism is growing in Fiji (2019). She recognized offering tours of the 12-acre property aligned with the organization's mission to preserve history. In addition to tours, hosting events and workshops are other ways SSO supplements their income (Burness, 2019).



For Eileen Chute of Bulaccino, Agri-Tourism became a part of the business coincidentally (2019). Motivated by the desire to create something beautiful from the land she acquired, which was previously a degraded sugarcane plantation, Chute designed a farm that is aesthetically pleasing and then later had the idea to host tourists (Chute, 2019). She also heard of the concept of Agri-Tourism through PARDI 2 (Chute, 2019).

Sashi Kiran of FRIEND stated the company has had a strong Agri-Tourism operation for a few years (2019). Agri-Tourism at FRIEND developed, in part, to accommodate tourists from cruise ships by offering tours of their organic farms and beekeeping demonstrations (Kiran, 2019).

*Challenges in Agri-Tourism:*

For SSO, one of the main barriers to their Agri-Tourism operations is that floriculture is not recognized as agriculture—rather, floriculture is classified as a cottage industry (Burness, 2019). SSO has additional biosecurity and regulations due to this. The business also struggles with natural disasters, especially during hurricane season (Burness, 2019).

For Bulaccino, natural disasters are one of their biggest obstacles too (Chute, 2019). They also experience theft of crops and animals at their farm. Lastly, designing the farm to be pedestrian-friendly—in order to be operationally ready for tours—is challenging (Chute, 2019).

Similar to the aforementioned businesses, FRIEND also cited natural disasters as a challenge to Agri-Tourism (Kiran, 2019). Their other obstacles include: transportation (of tourists to farms), value-chain producing, and marketing (Kiran, 2019).



Picture 2: Bulaccino Farms (Bulaccino, 2019)

#### **Section 4: Discussion:**

In this section, I analyze data collected from focus groups with farmers and data from interviews with business owners.

*Farmer Data:*

One of the most salient observations I gathered from my focus groups is that no villages proposed showing tourists any type of agricultural activities (see *Figure 1*). All of the residents in the Highland villages rely on farming, yet it did not occur to the respondents that tourists might be interested in seeing farms or learning how crops are planted and harvested. Perhaps, this can partially be attributed to the nature of tourism in Fiji. The dominant narrative is that tourists visit Fiji for its beaches; tourists seeking out more culturally immersive or educational types of experiences are a small minority. Because the vast majority of tourists visit the country for its natural beauty, most respondents suggested taking tourists on hikes to see nearby caves, waterfalls, or scenic vantage points from mountaintops. Additionally, several villages proposed

taking tourists on adventurous activities, including horseback riding and hunting. This suggestion makes sense considering adventurous tourism is popular in major tourist destinations around Fiji. Overall, the suggestion to showcase natural beauty and recreation and to omit agriculture and cultural activities is interesting. Tourists interested in coming to the Highlands would likely be more interested in witnessing agriculture and culture more than the typical tourist. In the future, if more villages start hosting tourists, changing the mindset of villagers that think they can only offer beautiful landscapes and recreation will be necessary. What many farmers consider mundane parts of their daily lives would fascinate tourists who have never witnessed this traditional way of living.

The data for challenges of participating in Agri-Tourism (see *Figure 2*) was more varied compared to proposed activities. Because of this range of responses, I focus my analysis on the most common answers. Three out of seven villages cited limited accessibility/transport, community schedule interference, and insufficient facilities as potential barriers for hosting tourists. Respondents concern of accessing villages in the mountainous Highlands is valid, since travel is difficult given the state of underdeveloped infrastructure in the interior. While hosting tourists could disrupt village schedules, planning community events around times when tourists are not visiting could partially circumvent this. Due to perceptions of the types of tourists that come to Fiji, it is understandable that respondents are worried their houses are not up to standards of tourists. However, tourists interested in visiting the Highlands are different than those seeking luxury resorts and would prioritize cultural exchange over extravagant accommodation. (It should be noted that access and facilities are not issues for Naga, which I explore in the next paragraph.) In addition, two out of seven villages expressed that hosting duties and initial start-up costs to host tourists are potential challenges for Agri-Tourism operations. These issues further echo the idea among respondents that tourists who come to Fiji have lavish expectations.

Naga deserves its own spotlight and analysis since the village hosts tourists through Talanoa Treks, a hiking company that brings clients through the interior. Interestingly, Naga's main challenges (see *Figure 2*) are fulfilling hosting duties, tourists potentially interfering with village schedules, and climate change. Hosting duties are not difficult, according to respondents, but this extra set of responsibilities can sometimes conflict with village schedules, so farmers have to plan in advance. Because of erratic weather patterns, harvest times and yields can be unpredictable at times, which means residents in Naga are sometimes forced to go to the markets several hours away to buy food for tourists. Marketing is not an issue, since they were approached to become hosts and access is not an issue, since tourists are hiking to their village.

For farmer motivations to participate in Agri-Tourism (see *Figure 3*), the most notable trend is that 100% of respondents want to engage in Agri-Tourism as an income-generating opportunity. This response rate speaks to the perceived potential of Agri-Tourism among farmers as a catalyst for economic development. It also indicates that farmers are looking for opportunities to supplement their incomes outside of their traditional livelihoods. In addition, six out of seven villages are interested in Agri-Tourism because of the educational exchange and resources that tourists offer. Several respondents specifically noted that their children could benefit by practicing English with tourists and/or by learning about other cultures. Aside from education, more than half the villages see Agri-Tourism as a pathway to form relationships with tourists. Some respondents expressed that they would like to visit tourists they previously hosted in the future if possible. This desire to network aligns with tourists seeking culturally immersive stays. Lastly, three out of seven villages named receiving donations as a motivation to participate in Agri-Tourism. Several respondents informed me that it is common for tourists to bring donations (i.e. books) or to give money for community-based projects (i.e. constructing churches or community centers). Ultimately, all of these elements together (extra income,

education, new relationships, donations) point to a desire to increase overall community development in the villages.

*Business Data:*

There are a number of commonalities across the businesses (SSO, Bulaccino, and FRIEND) I interviewed (see *Figure 4*). First, they are all located in Nadi or Lautoka, which are the main tourist areas of the island. Given the proximity to the international airport, these businesses are likely to serve many tourists by virtue of location. Next, all of the businesses have been running for at least 13 years, but Agri-Tourism was not an original part of operations. Agri-Tourism is a supplementary activity for each business. Third, SSO, Bulaccino, and FRIEND all cited natural disasters (and the increasing frequency due to climate change) as one of their biggest obstacles for Agri-Tourism. For instance, SSO loses FJ\$40,000 annually from hurricanes and floods. Burness says, “If we have a hurricane, it takes us weeks to get everything in order. Therefore, we lose money from tourists not visiting and then we lose money paying for everything to be rebuilt” (2019). According to Burness, flooding and hurricanes are more frequent in recent years compared to when the business first opened (2019). For Bulaccino, frequent flooding stymies the progress of design footpaths and making the farm pedestrian-friendly (Chute, 2019). Natural disasters as a consequence of climate change will continue to be major obstacles that challenge long-term viability for Agri-Tourism operations.

Despite the shared characteristics that SSO, Bulaccino, and FRIEND have, there are a number of distinct differences too. The fundamental differences are business type and type of Agri-Tourism activities offered. SSO is a floriculture company and their model of Agri-tourism is centered on tours of the orchids and anthurium nurseries. Bulaccino runs several cafes and supplies organic food via their farm; their Agri-Tourism operation will be hosting farm tours and cooking demonstrations in the near future. Meanwhile, FRIEND is a collection of enterprises ranging from disaster relief rehabilitation to food processing by rural women; they participate in Agri-Tourism via tours of farms and beekeeping demonstrations. Additionally, each business started participating in Agri-Tourism for specific reasons. SSO started offering tours, in part, to share traditional knowledge and preserve history (Burness, 2019). Bulaccino wants to offer farm tours to show visitors the beautiful property (Chute, 2019). FRIEND broke into Agri-Tourism after demand from cruise ship passengers who seek “more adventurous types of tourism” (Kiran, 2019). Aside from natural disasters, the businesses also face distinct challenges. SSO experiences bureaucratic difficulties; floriculture is not considered agriculture in Fiji, so there are additional biosecurity and regulations the business experiences making it more difficult to export flowers. Bulaccino often endures theft of crops and animals on the farm. FRIEND’s Agri-Tourism challenges are more operationally related—their issues are transportation of tourists to the faraway farms, value-chain producing, and marketing. These issues vary in part perhaps due to the nature of each business and when the businesses started. FRIEND’s Agri-Tourism is relatively new, so marketing is in its earlier stages compared to SSO who has been established longer.

**Conclusion:**

*Lessons from Agri-Tourism Businesses:*

As I was comparing business interviews, I noticed several successes and lessons that could potentially help villages looking to break into Agri-Tourism. First, SSO, Bulaccino, and FRIEND are community-based initiatives that emphasize marginalized groups’ empowerment. For instance, SSO teaches women in nearby households to grow their own orchids to sell to the business (Burness, 2019), while FRIEND regularly employs disabled workers and teaches them to make handicrafts (Kiran, 2019). This spirit of uplifting marginalized groups could be applied to the villages too. Hosting tourists does not merely have to be a way of supplementing incomes; it can be a pathway for rural inhabitants and the collective community to be empowered by learning new skills too. Secondly, the businesses preserve knowledge in some form. Both

Bulaccino and FRIEND educate visitors on the indigenous crops that they grow. Farmers can also do this; tourists are interested in learning about traditional Fijian knowledge, since they would not otherwise have this educational opportunity. Lastly, each business is built on unique characteristics that increase their marketability. For example, no other business in Fiji grows orchids and anthuriums at the same volume as SSO, while also offering colonial history tours among other activities (Burness, 2019). In addition, Bulaccino's organic farm is full of animals that are not common in Fiji, including sheep and ducks, making tourists interested in visiting the farm (Chute, 2019). For residents in the Highlands, instead of working against the grain, such as by designing facilities that are more ornate than their traditional homes, residents should focus on amplifying the rare characteristics only they can offer to tourists. For instance, showing tourists how kava is produced is a unique experience that would attract visitors interested in learning something culturally immersive. Farmers in the FAPP project area can easily embrace all of these lessons, which would help with starting Agri-Tourism operations.

*Recommendations Moving Forward:*

For Agri-Tourism to be successful in the Highlands, it is important to target relevant tourists. The average stay for tourists is 11 days. Since the journey to the interior is time-consuming, it is important to pursue tourists with extended stays. Further, targeting tourists that are interested in cultural immersion is critical. It would also be beneficial for residents in the Highlands to undergo training or workshops prior to starting Agri-Tourism operations, since this phenomenon is unfamiliar to most participants.

This solution is likely not feasible on a national scale given the huge cost, but investing in more developed infrastructure in the interior would benefit residents. This cross-cutting initiative would not only reduce the journey between towns and villages (and thus attract tourists), but it would also benefit farmers by having shorter and smoother journeys where their produce is less likely to be damaged. Granted, Fiji and IFAD are aware of road conditions. This type of project would likely require international support, since it is an expensive undertaking.

In the future, this research can be expanded upon by more thoroughly examining national policy. The majority of land in Fiji is communally and indigenously owned. Land tenure laws need to be compared with legal frameworks to understand what processes people must go through in order to start Agri-Tourism operations. With more time, it would be also helpful to supplement this study by doing follow-up focus groups, adding new focus groups (especially those that host tourists), and conducting more interviews with business owners. Interviewing tourists that seek out Agri-Tourism to understand their perceptions and motivations would contribute to a fuller analysis too. Further, reviewing successful Agri-Tourism models in similar contexts (i.e. Pacific countries) would offer Fiji insight. For instance, Vanuatu advertises Agri-Tourism experiences on their national tourism website (Vanuatu Travel, 2019). Vanuatu has also budgeted for an Agri-Tourism officer, which signals that Agri-Tourism is a national priority and that this concept will be regularly explored (Vanuatu Agritourism Plan of Action, 2016). Furthermore, the continuation of this research in the aforementioned ways would give a more holistic and contextualized analysis that would assist the Ministry of Agriculture in understanding Agri-Tourism as an income diversification strategy for farmers in the Highlands.

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