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Options and Aid: What the Future Holds for the Displaced Sugar Cane Families of Labasa, Fiji

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Options and Aid

What the Future Holds for the Displaced Sugar Cane Families of Labasa, Fiji



Lieselot Whitbeck

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SIT Fiji: Fall 2006

Abstract

In 1997, a large number of agricultural leases in the Fijian sugar belts began to expire without renewal. Stepping away from the debates over who should have access to land under what legislation and for what purpose, this paper concentrates on the people who are being directly affected by lease expiration: the cane farmers and cutters themselves. Through the collection and analysis of information gathered through personal interviews and associated literature, this paper focuses on the present moment in Fiji and identifies the needs of displaced cane families, the options available to them, and the different types of aid that is currently being offered. The conclusion drawn is that the programs in place are insufficient to meet the needs of this population and that more needs to be done on both macro and micro levels.

Resources:

- Ecumenical Center for Research, Education and Advocacy (ECREA)
- Bethany Girls Hostel, Laucala Bay, Suva
- Complete listings of all Fijian Governmental offices can be found in the Fiji Telephone Directory

“It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.”

I dedicate this paper to those who light candles,
and to those still trapped in the dark.

Acknowledgements

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Bahut Dhanvaad. Vinaka Vakalevu. Thank you very much.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of Indo-Fijian sugar cane farmers have lost their land leases and have been forced to find other ways to make a living. I set out to discover what options and what forms of aid were available to these displaced cane families through both governmental and non-governmental sources and evaluate whether this was sufficient to meet their needs. In the pursuit of this information I discovered that displacement is having a big impact, not just on individual families but on entire communities as well.

Currently in Fiji there is a lot of discussion about the expiration of land leases and what should be done. Debates rage in the media and academic circles about the future of the sugar industry in Fiji. However, there has been little research into what is happening in the aftermath of lease expiry, it is an area of inquiry that has not been investigated to any significant degree.

My research focuses on a few basic questions: What happens to a family who is forced to leave land they have farmed for generations? What do they do? Where do they go? Who do they look to for help? What help do they find? Is that help sufficient to meet their needs or should more be done? This paper is an effort to answer those questions.

1.1. Methodology

The research presented herein comes from a combination of reading of available literature and interviews. Texts read include newspaper articles, academic articles, Non-Governmental (NGO) publications, reports by Overseas Development Agencies (ODAs), and governmental forms, reports, and documents. Interviews were conducted face to face, with voluntary participants and with translators present when necessary. Although recording was not feasible, detailed notes were taken. Interviews took place in the offices and homes of the participants and usually lasted about one hour. Interview subjects included academics, civil servants, active farmers, retired farmers, displaced farmers, NGO employees, Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) employees, and others. Additional information was solicited and obtained through e-mail.

The majority of the research was conducted over a three-week period from the 6th through the 24th of November 2006. Research concentrated on the situation in Labasa, the center of the sugar industry in Vanua Levu, and was conducted in Labasa, the city of Suva, and the towns of Nausori and Navua in Viti Levu, where many displaced cane families from Labasa now live. The scope and depth of the project was limited by time constraints, inability to access remote locations, my position as an outsider, and my lack of knowledge of Fiji-Hindi. The project was greatly facilitated by local translators and the assistance, generosity, and openness of those I interviewed.

2. Background

The Indo-Fijians are a landless population. Their ancestors first began arriving in Fiji in 1879, brought in as indentured laborers to work on the plantations of what had recently become a British possession. Today, although Indo-Fijians make up about 38 percent of the population,¹ they own only 1.7 percent of the land.² The vast majority of land, 86.8 percent, belongs to indigenous land owning units called *mataqali* and is administered through the Native Land Trust Board (NLTB). Indo-Fijians can access this land through long-term leases, which range from 20 to 50 years for agricultural leases and 50 to 99 years for residential leases.

The first Indians came to Fiji as indentured laborers, or *germits*, in the late 1800s, and many were assigned to work in the cane fields, cultivating the sugar cane that grows well in the dry climates of Northern Vanua Levu and Northern and Western Viti Levu. At the end of their indentures, many continued farming, renting land first from the Colonial Sugar Refining Company Limited and later through the NLTB which was established in 1940. Today, Fijian sugar and molasses exported to markets all over the globe, and sugar is the second biggest sector of the economy after tourism as well as the source of the livelihood for one quarter of Fiji's population.

Although things are much different from in the harsh days of the indenture period, which ended in 1920, life as a cane farmer in the rural districts of Fiji continues to be hard. Much of the labor of planting, weeding and harvesting is still done manually, and 43.1 percent of rural Indo-Fijians live below the poverty line.³ Nevertheless, for generations families found ways to get by, renewing their leases under the tenets of the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act (ALTA) every few decades until 1997.

¹ Field, 2006

² NLTB, 1995 cited in Naidu and Reddy, 2002

³ Barr, 2006

Between the years 1997 and 2006, 1471 leases expired in the district of Labasa alone⁴ and for the first time in Fijian history, a lot of them were not renewed. Landholders expressed various reasons for not renewing. Some had families that had grown and they now needed more land to support them. Others were hesitant to have their land tied up in another 30-year lease. Still others were dissatisfied with rental payments which were set below market price.⁵ Since 1997, an unprecedented number of farmers have been evicted from land their families had farmed for generations.

The options for these farmers are limited. Many are uneducated and, contrary to popular belief, few have managed to accumulate significant savings. The non-renewal of leases, which has caused significant trauma to individuals as well as to entire communities as families leave rural areas in search of work, is also affecting the sugar industry itself. A lot of the reclaimed land is no longer being cultivated as landowners allow it to go to bush. In addition, the agreement with the European Union that pays elevated prices for Fijian sugar is due to expire in 2007 and there will be a total price decline of 36 percent by 2009.⁶ These two forces of displacement and price reduction are putting considerable strain on an industry that generates 10% of Fiji's GDP.⁷ The livelihoods of thousands of farmers, the viability of entire communities, and the future of a major industry are all at risk.

⁴ "Expiration of leases in Labasa Sugar District: 1997-2006." Table.

⁵ Gounder and Latchmi, 2003

⁶ Prasad, 2006

⁷ Tait, 2006

3. Needs

When a farmer's lease expires and the land is reclaimed, he is in an insecure position. Not only has he lost his occupation and source of income, unless he has been able to secure a lease on his housing bloc or some other alternative, he is homeless as well. Cane families usually have a limited amount of savings and are often burdened by debt.⁸ With the help of FSC Field Superintendent Vishwa Nadan in Labasa, I was able to calculate that, after deductions for harvesting, transport, fertilizer, debts and rent, an average farmer growing 200-400 tons would get about \$28 per week⁹ with which to support his family and pay school fees for his children. When even that small source of income is eliminated, Indo-Fijians have multiple needs.

3.1. Housing – For those being evicted, where to live is an immediate problem. Land holders are required by law to allow the removal of any homes built on the land with the permission of the NLTB, but this regulation is often breached, and even then, what is the use of having a home if you have nowhere to put it. The one year grace period granted to expired leases is a time used by families to harvest their final crop and find some place to live, but there is a severe shortage of suitable, low income housing in Fiji, so many end up living in makeshift homes in informal settlements that lack basic amenities. In 1999, when the Labasa area was badly hit as 276 leases expired simultaneously, many homeless, displaced families ended up at Valelawa in what was virtually a refugee camp partly coordinated by the National Farmers Union and Fiji Labor Party. Many others end up in squatter settlements.

⁸ Although the perception of cane farmers as wealthy people is true in some cases for big farmers, it is not true for all, especially those who have small farms or are laborers.

⁹ Vishwa Nadan, 17 November 2006

3.2. Food – Many farmers not only grow cane but also supplement their family’s diet with homegrown vegetables and rice, while his wife will often keep some chickens or goats both for income and personal consumption. This subsistence is jeopardized with displacement; squatter settlements and other urban housing situations, to which ex-farmers gravitate, lack garden plots. This need is often met by churches or other community organizations in the short term, but in the longer term it is imperative that they find a wage-earning job, for all foodstuffs must be bought.

3.3. Employment – Thus, employment is another vital necessity, but can be very hard to find. In urban areas, jobs are scarce; in 2003, 14.1 percent of the urban work force was unemployed.¹⁰ For those that find jobs, many do not pay well. According to a study in 2002, “55 percent of those in full-time employment were earning wages below the poverty line.¹¹” Another obstacle is lack of knowledge. The farmers and cutters who are being displaced have been working in the cane fields most of their lives. Although some have skills as carpenters and are able to find work in construction, many others do not. Yielding another need: education.

3.4. Education – Education is highly valued among the Indo-Fijians. They see education as the key to advancement. In the case of displaced cane families, education is needed on multiple levels. The first, to which I alluded to, is education to re-skill the adult workforce. This is needed both for farmers who are moving to urban areas and for farmers who are moving into new types of farming. For example, cane cannot be grown in the resettlement areas near Navua, so farmers must be taught how to grow other crops like dalo or cassava in the wet climate.

¹⁰ Government of Fiji, 2002

¹¹ Narsey, 2002, cited in Barr, 2006a

Another form of education that is quite necessary is education about governmental and NLTB procedures. Farmers who want to renew their leases may be unsure about how to go about doing that. Although the Sugar Cane Growers Association does offer some aid in navigating this bureaucracy, additional communication and education is needed to prevent misunderstandings.

Aid in providing for the education of the next generation was one of the most frequently cited needs of my interviewees. Although for primary and secondary school students the education itself is free, schools require substantial fees from students for things like building upkeep and books. Some needy students receive remission of these fees, but they are still inhibited by transportation costs. Putting a child through school can cost up to \$300 per year in fees alone, with transportation costing an additional \$10 per week for the two children of Rakesh Chan.¹² These fees can be a major hardship for low-income families, but not one they are willing to forgo, for they see education as their children's ticket to a better, more secure life. In a study by academics V. Naidu and M. Reddy, 93.4 percent of respondents stated that they would like to see their children seeking employment in the non-agricultural sector¹³ and the only way to achieve that goal is through education.

3.5. Infrastructure & Investment – The drivers of Fiji constantly complain about roads. Roads throughout Fiji are riddled with potholes and often prone to flooding, affecting the transportation vital to maintenance of current economic activity. Much of Fiji's cane gets to the mills on trucks, so impassible roads becomes a major hindrance. Other utilities like water and electricity are also badly desired by rural inhabitants of all races and occupations, but infrastructure

¹² Rakesh Chan, 12 November 2006

¹³ Naidu and Reddy, 2002

construction is beset by delays and lack of funds, thus inhibiting economic growth. No one is willing to invest in building a factory where he is unable to efficiently produce his goods or get them to a market.

Currently Labasa has little industry or sources of employment beyond the sugar mill, two lumber mills, and some small businesses. In recent years there has been a mass exodus as displaced cane families are unable to find work and so leave for greener pastures on Viti Levu. Without investment to create jobs, remote areas like Labasa, which lacks a significant port and is serviced by a small airport, will continue to decline. At the moment, *Survivor*, the American TV show is currently being filmed near Labasa and is expected to bring in \$6 million dollars and create 230 jobs,¹⁴ and the reality of an airport that cannot support night landings and rough roads has created ongoing difficulties for the production.¹⁵ Without infrastructure it will be increasingly difficult to attract the investment that is essential to the future of Labasa and other communities throughout Fiji.

3.6. Security – In the end, this all amounts to a need for security. Families need to know that they will be able to feed themselves; that they will be able to make ends meet. Indo-Fijians suffer as non-landowners from the insecurity of their land tenure. First as tenants and later in the squatters where many end up, there is always the possibility that their home and their livelihood will be taken away. If land tenure was secure, the issue of displacement would not exist. This is the one need that encompasses all the others.

¹⁴ Government of Fiji, 2006b

¹⁵ Subrail Prasad, 20 November 2006

4. Options

I interviewed Rakesh Chan and his family at their home in Koronivia, near Nausori.¹⁶ Four years ago, Rakesh and his family lived in Waiqili outside of Labasa, growing about 400 tons of cane on their 22-acre farm. At the price of \$50 per ton, that would earn them \$20,000, but after paying input costs, rent, wages for harvesters, and debt payments (most of which is deducted directly from the FSC payments) they only earned \$900 per year or about \$17 per week.

In 2003, their lease expired, the same year they finished paying their debts, and so with no savings to help him start over, Rakesh brought his wife and kids to Suva to find work, leaving his parents in Labasa. One year later, his father died from a heart attack that they attribute the stress of displacement and the strain of worrying about Rakesh's family in Suva, and so Rakesh's mother came to live with them as well. They all now live in the home of a retired farmer whose family is overseas and whom they take care of in lieu of rent.

While his mother and wife watch over the house and work in their small garden and his two children attend the local secondary school, he usually drives a truck for a timber company earning about \$150 a week. Recently they have had no income because Fijians who own the logging land have been blocking the roads, and so he has been unable to work.

This story is one that is repeated over and over with different variations throughout Fiji. The earnings of the average cane farmer, like Rakesh, place them significantly below the poverty line,¹⁷ and for cane cutters that rely on wages from the seasonal harvest work, the situation is much worse. When leases expire, there are three main options for farmers: lease renewal of some kind, resettlement through the department of agriculture, or making their own arrangements.

¹⁶ Rakesh Chan, 12 November 2006

¹⁷ Jagnath Sami, quoted in Baba, 20 January 1996

4.1. Renewal

Full renewal of the existing lease is often the ideal option. To renew a lease, the farmer must first obtain the consent of the *mataqali*. Negotiations for consent can begin up to ten years in advance. When the expiration date approaches, the *mataqali* fills out a consent form that the farmer turns into the NLTB who then determine processing costs and premiums which can range from a minimum of \$1125.50 up to \$3000.¹⁸ This sum must be paid within 6 weeks for the new lease to be issued. If the tenant does not have the funds, he can apply for loans through banks or the Sugar Cane Growers Fund.

This process is not always seamless. *Mataqalis* have been known to change their minds at the last minute; even after numerous “good will” payments have been made. Additionally, the period of payment is prohibitive for farmers who rarely have significant savings. There are also problems with clarity in the process. Of the forms available at the NLTB, none were in Fiji-Hindi, and one form needed to prove that the *mataqali* has given permission for renewal is only in Fijian, which most Indo-Fijian farmers do not speak. This can result in farmers not fully understanding what they have to do to obtain an extension. One contact at the NLTB gave me a copy of their Estates Operations Manual which outlines the process of renewal with the rejoinder, “Don’t let any Indian man see this,¹⁹” suggesting that ambiguity is institutionalized.

Other than full renewal on the same piece of land, a second option is renewal of the housing bloc alone. This is often offered as an alternative and usually involves the signing of a long-term, 50 or 99 year lease for the quarter acre of land on which the farmer’s house stands. This allows the *mataqali* to use the land while allowing the previous farmer to retain his home. Rent for such plots in rural areas is about \$300 per year, well below urban rents, and it is sometimes possible to have a small garden.

¹⁸ “Mrs. S”, 6 November 2006

¹⁹ Ibid.

This is far from ideal however. Farms in rural areas are far from places where there are jobs and without the income from the sugar cane, having wage paying work is a necessity. For example, Rakesh Chan was offered this option but chose not too because there was no work nearby. Dan, another farmer who lives close to Labasa, did take that option, as he was able to find work in town.²⁰ However, he is unable to have a garden on his plot because 3 other homes for family members share the same quarter acre, leaving no room.

Another option is to buy someone else's agricultural lease or farm, or to purchase a new farm, but finding a new farm that will be profitable and that the *mataqali* is willing to rent or that is freehold, not owned by a *mataqali*, and can be bought (which for many is the ideal), can be very difficult. In addition, life as a cane farmer is so hard that many people would prefer finding other livelihood. This was confirmed by ex-cane farmer Sherin Lata, who took advantage of the opportunity to resettle in Viti Levu.

4.2. Resettlement

Sherin Lata lives with her husband and children in the settlement of Raiwaqa ALTA near the town of Navua. They worked her father-in-law's cane farm in Floating Island or *Kurukuru* outside of Labasa until it expired in 2000, and she had no desire to stay.²¹ Eventually they came to Navua and were given a 5-acre plot of land to farm, a quarter acre for their home, and a \$10000 Farming Assistance grant. She farms and sells their dalo in the market and her husband works constructing a new resort on the coast to earn extra income. It's difficult but they are getting by, and, "you have to work hard no matter where you are,"²² she says.

²⁰ Dan, 23 October 2006

²¹ Sherin Lata, 14 November 2006

²² Sherin Lata, 14 November 2006

Between 1998 and 2005, the government established seven resettlement areas with plots ranging from 5 to 21 acres.²³ Before they are opened to displaced farmers, the department of agriculture puts in roads, water, power, and drainage. When the infrastructure is complete farmers who held ALTA leases that expired can apply through the Farming Assistance Scheme (FAS). If approved, they are then given a thirty-year lease through the Lands Department and \$10000 in the form of local purchase orders that can go to moving expenses, farm equipment, seed, and fertilizer. As of 2005 there were 109 lots available though out Fiji.

Overall, the scheme is working. The majority of the farmers interviewed in Navua expressed satisfaction with the arrangement.²⁴ However, the program is not perfect. For many, it came too late. Although leases started expiring in 1997, work on resettlement areas did not begin until 1998. When Sherin arrived at her site, they had no water for the first year and are still waiting for their lease contract from the lands department.²⁵ Other settlements like Navudi in Vanua Levu have bad soil and are far from schools, health centers, and markets, according to Niraj, the Senior Technical Assistant at the office of the Department of Land Resources, Planning and Development in Labasa.²⁶ He also admits that some of these settlements came in as an emergency solution to a problem that had not been foreseen, and so some settlements are less than ideal. Residents of Vakabeli near Navua complain that the trucks driving on their dirt road raise too much dust and drive to fast due to lack of speed bumps. They also worry about flooding, since their settlement is in the flood plain of the Navua River, but at least they are able to make a living.

²³ Government of Fiji, 2005

²⁴ Navua Vicinity, 14 November 2006

²⁵ Sherin Lata, 14 November 2006

²⁶ Niraj, 17 November 2006

That is not the case for everyone displaced by the loss of cane leases however due to the other major imperfection in the resettlement scheme. Although for every lease that is not renewed, 5 families face eviction,²⁷ only the official tenant can apply for resettlement. These other families, including relatives of the leaseholder who also depended on the farm and laborers whose families live on the farm and subsist on wages from cutting cane, must make their own arrangements.

4.3. Own Arrangements

For those who depend on leases that do not get renewed, if staying in a house bloc, finding a new farm, or resettling is unfeasible or impossible, the only other option is to find their own situation. Migration overseas is an option for some of those who are more educated, and since 1987, an estimated 100,000 Indo-Fijians have left for greener pastures causing the once feared Indo-Fijian majority (51 percent of the population in 1966) to dwindle to a mere 38 percent in 2004.²⁸ Migration is expensive though. When asked if he would like to go overseas, one 60-year-old displaced farmer who now sells vegetables by the roadside replied that it would be impossible because the cost of living is so much higher in places like New Zealand and Australia.²⁹ Even if he was granted a visa, he could never afford it.

Although the self-sufficiency of the Indo-Fijian ethos discourages relying on others for help, some families move in with relatives, but relations often have families of their own, or are displaced farmers themselves, and so this is often impossible. Sometimes cutters can stay in the same areas by finding other agricultural work, cutting cane for a farmer who still has his lease, but a significant number of farmers and laborers end up leaving the agricultural sector and

²⁷ Barr, 2006a

²⁸ Field, 2006

²⁹ Ex-Farmer, 21 November 2006

migrating to urban areas (with the associated social upheaval that such dramatic change incurs). In Vanua Levu, some come to Labasa, but still more go to Viti Levu, where they gravitate to towns like Lautoka where there is still the possibility of work in the sugar industry, or the increasingly crowded Suva-Nausori corridor outside of the capital.

Those lucky enough to have some savings, or who had a trade beyond sugar before their lease expired, are able to buy land or rent a house and find a job when they arrive in the city. But few are that lucky. Many of the migrants have little to nothing in the bank, a limited education and have spent most of their lives in the cane fields. They do not have the ability to buy or rent a home in the city, where monthly rents can exceed yearly rents in rural areas, and so end up in one of the numerous squatter settlements. Although many would cite this as their last option, it is often the only option for a displaced cane family.

The squatters surrounding Suva are rife with people from Vanua Levu.³⁰ Although no one is certain of the exactly how quickly the number of squatters is growing, new homes are springing up weekly. Squatting is very appealing for many families; it is less expensive than other urban housing and still provides the urban advantages of easier access to schools, hospitals, markets, and employment. There are major drawbacks though. Squatting is a very precarious existence. Because it is illegal, it is possible that any day a squatter could be forcibly evicted. Often, squatters will have an informal agreement with the local chief who will charge about \$500 a year to build a shack on his land, but will demand additional goodwill payments, as M. Reddy told me, sometimes \$50 here, \$20 there every 2 months or so under threat of eviction; it amounts to extortion.³¹ Meanwhile, living conditions are often squalid, often with little sanitation and no

³⁰ In the squatter settlements, it is possible to identify a family's origin by looking at the metal people use to build their homes. People from Viti Levu build with the lines running vertically; those from Vanua Levu have them running horizontally.

³¹ Mahendra Reddy, 9 November 2006

access to water or electricity; but for the people who live there, the advantages mitigate these negative aspects. One of the biggest attractions is the availability of access to employment, and for a squatter access to employment is a necessity, since urban squatters have little room for the gardens or chickens that are a staple of rural subsistence.

People who move to urban areas in the hope of finding work often face a harsh reality due to an urban unemployment rate that went from 7.8 percent in 1996 to 14.1 percent in 2002.³² The jobs that are available pay poor wages, but when there are no other options, someone like a displaced cane farmer or cane cutter will take whatever they can. As one ex-farmer told me, “If you can’t have the full roti, at least have the quarter to fill your belly.”³³

³² Government of Fiji, 2002

³³ J. Prakash Raj, 12 November 2006

5. Aid

In Fiji, there are a wide variety of programs designed to help the needy. The following sections describe and assess three forms of aid from different parts of the Government of Fiji as well as other efforts by Overseas Development Agencies (ODAs), and domestic and foreign Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

5.1. Governmental Aid

In light of the difficulties faced by displaced farmers, I asked people who should help; over and over again I got the same response. The Government. The reply came from displaced farmers, retired farmers, and businessmen. They hold the government responsible because it is the main body responsible for the social welfare of its citizens. Others assert that responsibility for assisting farmers lies with the government because the NLTB is connected to the government and the government enforces the laws governing land. The perception is that they get the taxes so they should provide the help. Governmental aid in Fiji comes in three major forms: Social Welfare, Housing, and Farming Assistance.

5.1.1. Social Welfare

Program – The Department of Social Welfare is the major source of governmental aid to the destitute through the Family Assistance Scheme. Its purpose is “to assist families with no means of supporting themselves,³⁴” through a stipend of \$60-\$120 per month, still placing recipients well below the poverty line. Those eligible include elderly, permanently ill and disabled, deserted spouses, single parents with no source of income, and prisoners’ dependants. Once receiving Family Assistance, other services become accessible as well, such as remission of

³⁴ Government of Fiji, 2006

school fees and the Poverty Assistance Program, which gives approved applicants one-time grants of \$5000 for home improvement or starting a business.

Assessment – The Social Welfare department is severely hampered by lack of funding. Although 272,000 people in Fiji are in poverty, only 22,000 or 8 percent of them receive family assistance.³⁵ Eligibility restrictions prevent single fathers or seasonal workers from applying and even for the eligible, applications can take years to approve and often are only granted if you know someone on the inside according to M. Yakub, a Labasa businessman.³⁶ When I visited the Social Welfare Office and said that I was looking at aid to displaced farmers I was told, “displaced farmers are not poor.”³⁷ By the department’s standards of poverty, necessitated by lack of funds, this is true. Although displaced farmers are certainly disadvantaged and many are very poor, unless they fit into one of the Family Assistance’s 7 categories, social welfare is not an option for them.

5.1.2. Housing

Programs – One major need faced by displaced farmers is housing. Although some landowners allow farmers to take their homes with them when they are evicted, this is often not the case. In terms of housing assistance, there are four major government supported bodies involved: Squatter Resettlement Unit, Housing Assistance & Relief Trust (HART), Public Rental Board (PRB), and Housing Authority.³⁸ The Squatter Resettlement Unit provides utilities to approved squatters but their overall goal is to discourage new squatters. Currently they are working to develop other areas that will be used to resettle squatters while the old settlements are made more

³⁵ Barr, 2006b

³⁶ M. Yakub, 20 November 2006

³⁷ “Ana”, 8 November 2006

³⁸ Although the Squatter Resettlement Unit is the only purely governmental body, the other three receive substantial governmental support.

habitable. HART aims to “provide basic, temporary housing for the destitute poor and to meet the social welfare and community development needs of its tenants³⁹” of whom the majority are Family Assistance recipients. PRB provides housing options ranging from \$7.60 a week to \$78 per week for low-income families. Housing Authority sets up subdivisions in suburban areas that can be bought for low prices (\$5000-\$7000) and provide low interest loans.

Assessment – In theory, these programs work together as a ladder, allowing a family to work its way out of poverty. Although this is the theory, things rarely happen that way. On every step of the ladder, there are families that have lived there for decades. There are also times when the wait for affordable housing is prohibitive. For example, the wait for a PRB flat in Suva is currently 3000 families long due to delays in replacement of 5 condemned housing blocs.⁴⁰

Ex-cane families enter the system at various points depending on their status when they are displaced (except for HART which serves only the poorest of the poor, thus not reaching most cane families). The Hindu religion espouses upward social mobility and many interviewees expressed the desire to enable their children to live a better life. These cultural influences could affect the rate at which Indo-Fijians move through the system, but no comprehensive efficacy study has ever been done. As one PRB official told me, “We hope it works...⁴¹”

5.1.3. Farming Assistance Scheme

Programs – The FAS provides four options to farmers who used to hold ALTA leases. Grants of up to \$10,000 are given to cover NLTB costs of lease renewal, NLTB costs of obtaining a Rural Residential Lease, costs of purchasing a new farm of greater than 2.5 acres, or assistance in kind for moving to and starting farming operations at a government developed resettlement

³⁹ Barr, 1998

⁴⁰ Dhiraj J Singh, 10 November 2006

⁴¹ Ibid.

location. Grants are also available to incoming landowner farmers or incoming non-landowner indigenous Fijian farmers.⁴² By giving aid to displaced farmers who intend to continue farming in some way, and by giving aid to Indo-Fijians and Fijians entering cane farming, the FAS seeks to protect the sugar industry and support other sectors of agriculture.⁴³ This program, which replaced the preceding \$28,000 program that gave grants in cash to farmers regardless of intent, only gives its grants to cover costs or in kind, in the form of local purchase orders that can be used to purchase seed, fertilizer and farm equipment.

Assessment – This program does reach a limited number of cane families and those that are assisted are grateful. I asked one farmer who left behind an expired lease in Lagalaga, Vanua Levu and resettled in Vakabeli near Navua who should help displaced cane families and he replied that the government should help them, just as they had helped him, with a little land and some money to start off with.⁴⁴ Also, giving grants in kind rather than in cash does insure that it is used only for agricultural purposes as it was designed to do, but some farmers believe that there should also be aid for those who no longer wish to continue farming in any form. Also, this money is often used by Indo-Fijian farmers who are transferring from farming cane to cultivation of other crops like dalo, or by Fijian farmers who are transferring into cane cultivation. Despite this dramatic change, very little education, beyond quarterly training sessions that reach some replacement farmers in the cane belts, is available to them.⁴⁵ Although the assistance is useful, without education on how to astutely use it to produce a viable crop and livelihood, it can be ineffectual.

⁴² Government of Fiji, 2005

⁴³ Eliko Tikoidraubuta, 7 November 2006

⁴⁴ Gyana Nand, 14 November 2006

⁴⁵ Government of Fiji, 2005

5.1.4. Summation

“A developing country such as Fiji cannot afford a comprehensive welfare state, where government takes over full responsibility for the welfare of the poorest of the poor.”⁴⁶

There are programs available to help the impoverished, however, due to the constraints of a developing economy, these are unable to reach all those in need. As homeless, occupation-less people, displaced cane families are in need, but few of the existing programs run by the Government of Fiji have the resources to meet those needs. Many still go without assistance in finding a place to live, finding employment, or paying for school fees. One woman who has lost faith in the government told me, “you can’t cry to the people now, you must cry to the lord.”⁴⁷

5.2. Overseas Development Agencies

Programs – In Fiji, two major ODAs, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the European Union (EU) are presently involved in providing assistance to this sector of society. As of 2002, the ADB was proposing a massive loan to fund the “*Fiji Islands for Preparing the Alternative Livelihoods Project*” to provide retraining for ex-farmers.⁴⁸ As I write, the EU is in the process of approving grant funds of F\$8 million to support the sugar industry⁴⁹ which will soon be hit by a massive decline in profits as EU subsidies are phased out over the next three years. India is also offering technical assistance to increase the efficiency of sugar production at the Labasa mill.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Government of Fiji, quoted in Barr 1998:3

⁴⁷ Marian, 20 November 2006

⁴⁸ Dwyer, 2002

⁴⁹ Van de Velde, 7 November 2006

⁵⁰ Vishwa Nadan, 17 November 2006

Assessment – From the point of view of the industry, the aid from the EU and India is much needed if sugar is to continue to be a viable crop in Fiji. However, \$8 million dollars for the sugar industry at some point in the future is of little help to a farmer who is losing his lease today. Even some ODAs are admitting that things maybe too late. One article on the ADB website concedes that, “Assistance will come too late for Ram Sundar and his wife Taramati, as the lease on the 15-acre lot they have cultivated for 20 years expires this December.⁵¹” When you talk to farmers about where they look to for aid, they are not aware of the actions of these bodies. ODAs have the ability to give massive amounts of aid, but it can take years for programs to be approved and funds to trickle down to the people through layers of bureaucracy. At this moment in Fiji, aid from ODAs is relatively ethereal.

5.3. Non-Governmental Organizations

Programs – There are multiple NGOs working on issues of social justice, poverty alleviation, and empowerment that could indirectly benefit displaced farmers. FRIEND, the Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises ‘N’ Development, is an NGO based in Lautoka that recently was the overall winner at the 2006 Fiji Development Bank Small Business Awards.⁵² They provide a variety of programs including income generation through a boutique that sells items made by local communities, Youth Development, a micro-savings scheme, and the Grassroots Opportunity for Action and Leadership (GOAL). FRIEND, which emphasizes dignity and self-motivation, frequently collaborates with other NGOs “developing partnerships to alleviate poverty.⁵³” Arita, who works at their store in Suva, said they never advertise for participants because they believe that the impetus must come from within the individual, the desire for

⁵¹ Gill, 2006

⁵² Ragi, 24 November 2006

⁵³ Arita, 13 November 2006

change must touch the heart. ECREA, the Ecumenical Center for Research Education and Advocacy, also espouses this grassroots, empowerment-based approach, focusing on community development in squatter settlements and villages.

Other NGOs like Save the Children, the Women's Crisis Center, and the Citizen's Constitutional Forum (CCF) are active throughout Fiji. Meanwhile, individual churches and cultural organizations are also involved in providing assistance and are often the first line of support, supplying food, clothing, and other necessities to members in need. Also on the smaller scale, about ten minutes outside of Labasa an American couple runs an occupational training center, teaching classes in sewing, car mechanics, and other useful skills.

Assessment – At the moment, there is no NGO in Fiji working explicitly for the needs of displaced cane families (groups like the National Farmers Union and the Sugar Cane Growers Council only assist current farmers), but the methods they are using could be motivated to aid this other sector. Programs like ECREA and FRIEND are being very successful on the grassroots level, and the Farmers Union and Sugar Cane Growers Council keeps data on where the most leases are expiring and when. The answer may lie in the synthesis of these abilities. If someone was able to use data from existing records to trace displaced farmers and accurately assess their whereabouts and needs, then NGOs could use their methods to address those needs.

The benefit of working through NGOs rather than Government or ODAs is that their structure allows them to be more personalized, and more versatile. Rather than imposing solutions on a universal situation, like poverty, they can prescribe solutions that fit the individual situations, like desire of the residents of the Vakabeli settlement for speed bumps. Further more, their flexibility allows them to respond to situations much faster, without the limitations of politics or bureaucracies that delayed responses to this crisis.

5.4. Evaluation

These aid programs address a variety of problems both directly and indirectly, but there is more that must be done to address the specific needs of this displaced population. The need for suitable housing continues, the search for jobs that will ensure an acceptable standard of living continues, the problems with children unable to attend school for lack of bus fares continue, and so the work must continue.

Often the tendency with aid is to throw money at a problem, and yes money is useful and money is necessary, but it will take more than money to provide the required aid. Money must be used in a way that will become self-sustaining; following the old adage that if you give a man a fish he will eat for a day, but teach a man to fish and he will eat for a life time. Indo-Fijians do not want to be handed a fish, they want to work, driven by a work ethic deeply imbedded in their society. On the wall in the office of Rosan Lal at the National Farmers Union in Labasa I saw a list of Gandhi's ten deadly sins, and the first sin was "wealth without work." This ethic was reiterated by struggling ex-farmer Rakesh Chan who said if he was given the choice between a \$200 social welfare check for doing nothing or a \$200 paycheck for his labor, he would much rather take the paycheck and the work.⁵⁴

The complexity of this issue defies any single approach, thus multiple tactics must be utilized on both the macro and the micro levels. On the macro level, efforts of the Government of Fiji and ODAs must continue to be used to find a long-term solution to the issue of land tenure through re-examination of laws and reform of bodies like the NLTB, and endeavors to create an atmosphere of security. Increased funding for infrastructure, social welfare, scholarships, as well as programs to promote investment and ease transitions to alternative livelihoods must also be done on this level. On the micro level, NGOs must continue to work on programs that promote

⁵⁴ Rakesh Chan, 12 November 2006

empowerment, provide micro-loans and support for small-scale economic enterprise, and aid individuals and communities in sustainable ways.

It is said that if you give an Indian a rock they can survive, but they need that rock. When a cane lease expires, five families are displaced with little in the way of capital or other means to start over. These hardships, although significant are not insurmountable. Displaced cane families are willing to work; they just need a little help to make a new life, and the current programs in existence are not enough to provide that aid.

6. Conclusion

When cane families are displaced, they lose more than their livelihood. Families that are forced to relocated leave behind family and friends. Muslim Indo-Fijians leave behind the graves of their forefathers. Families see the efforts of generations vanish into thin air; and this doesn't just affect the farmers. It affects cane cutters and truck drivers who no longer have cane to cut or haul. In small towns like Labasa it affects shopkeepers and vegetable vendors who no longer have customers to buy their wares. Displacement of cane families is causing rural depopulation and is exacerbating urban crowding. Meanwhile, less cane is being produced as reclaimed land turns into bush, affecting the Fijian economy. This displacement results in massive social and economic change that affects individuals, communities, and the entire country.

There is light in the distance though. The population can be re-skilled to take up wage earning jobs or to grow other fruits and vegetables for the growing resort sector. Infrastructural improvements and tax incentives can be used to attract investment. It is possible for society to adjust to the effects of this social change. All this will take time, dynamic approaches in terms of aid, and a lot of hard work, but there is hope.

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Interviews

Labasa Vicinity – First Visit

Father Rakesh, Anglican Minister, Labasa, 22 October 2006
 Wainikoro Informal Focus Group, Wainikoro Medical Center, 23 October 2006
 Uday Raj, Cane Farmer, Kurukuru (Floating Island)
 Vijay Nand, Cane Farmer, Daku
 Vendor, Male, Wainikoro Medical Center
 Vendor, Old Female, Wainikoro Medical Center
 Dan, displaced farmer outside of Labasa, 23 October 2006

Suva

“Mrs. S”, Estate Assistant, NLTB, Eastern Division, Suva, 6 November 2006
 Elike Tikoidraubuta, Senior Agricultural Officer [Farm Management], Ministry of Agriculture, Suva, 7 November 2006
 Angie, Squatter Unit, Ministry of Local Government, Housing, Squatter Settlement & Environment, Suva, 7 November 2006
 Jone, Citizens’ Constitutional Forum, Suva, 8 November 2006
 Rupeni Fatiaki and “Ana”, FAS Administrators, Social Welfare Department, Suva, 8 November 2006
 Dr. Mahendra Reddy, Associate Professor of Economics, USP, Suva, 9 November 2006
 Dhiraj J Singh, Coordinator Human Resources and Administration, Public Rental Board, Suva, 10 November 2006
 Inquiry Desk, Housing Authority, Suva, 10 November 2006
 Arita, FRIEND (Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises ‘N’ Development), Suva, 13 November 2006

Nausori Vicinity

Jai Prakash Raj, Ex-Farmer and retired worker, Nakasi, 11 November 2006
 Anin Kumar, Vegetable Farmer, (J. Prakash Raj – Translator), Nakavi, 12 November 2006
 Bisun Deal, retired farmer, (J. Prakash Raj – Translator), Koronivia, 12 November 2006
 Rakesh Chan and Family (Sneh, Shushela, two school aged children), displaced farmer from Labasa, (J. Prakash Raj – Translator), Koronivia, 12 November 2006

Navua Vicinity

Nitya Nand, displaced vegetable farmer from Nausori, Vakabeli Settlement, 14 November 2006
 Gyana Nand, displaced cane farmer from Lagalaga in Labasa, Vakabeli Settlement, 14 November 2006
 Sherin Lata, female displaced cane farmer from Floating Island/Kurukuru, Raiwaqa ALTA village, 14 November 2006
 Raj Wati, female displaced rice farmer from Bua, Raiwaqa ALTA village, 14 November 2006

Labasa – Second Visit

Vishwa Nadan, Field Superintendent, Fiji Sugar Corporation, Labasa Mill, 17 November 2006
 Niraj, Senior Technical Assistant, Department of Land Resources, Planning and Development, Labasa, 17 November 2006
 Rosan Lal, Executive Officer, National Farmers Union, Labasa, 17 November 2006

Rajendra Prasad, Senior Executive Officer, Sugar Cane Grower's Council, Labasa, 20 November 2006

M. Yakub, Active Citizen, Bulileka, Labasa, 20 November 2006

Marian, Squatter, Single Mother, Family Assistance Recipient, Labasa Area, 20 November 2006

"Priya", Displaced Farmer's Widow, Labasa, 20 November 2006

Subrail Prasad, Businessman, Justice of the Peace, Labasa, 20 November 2006

Shiuram, Farmer, Labasa, 21 November 2006

Ex-Farmer, roadside vegetable seller, Labasa, 21 November 2006

Appendix 1 – Charts and Graphs

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (LZW) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Source:

NLTB, 1996 cited in NGO Coalition of Human Rights. “Submission to CERD.” 2002:104.

Number of Leases Expiring
in Labasa Sugar District

1997	24
1998	42
1999	276
2000	433
2001	96
2002	145
2003	151
2004	84
2005	68
2006	152
Total	1471

Source: Fiji Sugar Co.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (LZW) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Appendix 2 – The Future of Labasa

This short essay includes ideas mentioned in passing in the preceding paper and synthesizes them to provide a better examination of the future of this one community.

Labasa is the biggest town in Vanua Levu and the center of sugar production for the northern division of Fiji, with the island's sugar mill about a twenty-minute walk from town. During the seven-month cutting season, the whistle from the mill can be heard throughout the day and night, while the breeze coming from the east carries the sugary smell of molasses across the town. During the day the cane trucks rumble down the main street to queue up for unloading, often spending hours in line before their turn. Labasa is truly a sugar town.

Here, expiration of sugar leases is having a big effect. In recent years, according to Rajendra Prasad of Sugar Cane Growers council, roughly 40% of leases have not been renewed.ⁱ This is visible as you drive through the rural areas around Labasa; many fields that used to produce cane is no longer being cultivated, left to return to bush. This is affecting production levels, which have dropped significantly in the years since this expiration began in 1997. It is also causing depopulation. As leases are not renewed, families are leaving because there are few jobs. Beyond sugar, there are two timber mills and a few shops, but few other sources of employment. Although the other cane centers in western Viti Levu have a lot of tourism to generate replacement jobs, Labasa has no tourism to speak of. So, as leases expire, while some are finding work locally, many others are leaving the northern island all together and migrating for better opportunities in Viti Levu's urban areas. As cane families leave, other sectors suffer: shopkeepers, fertilizer merchants, and even schools are being affected by the de-population. One man who sells snacks across from the medical center in the rural village of Wainikoro told me that he is finding it harder to make a living as more people leave and less remain to buy his sodas

ⁱ Rajendra Prasad, 20 November 2006

and Indian sweets. Despite all this, the sugar mill is planning on massively updating its systems to increase efficiency. But what is the use of an efficient mill if there is no cane?

I asked one informant at the Fiji Sugar Corporation about the future of Labasa if the cane industry was unable to survive. It must carry on, he told me “otherwise there is no Labasa.”ⁱⁱ He believes that the future may lie in mechanical harvesters, but according to local businessman and Justice of the Peace Subrail Prasad, Labasa should be looking beyond sugar. He proposes that the government invest in promotion of alternative livelihoods and the cultivation of other crops. What cane there is should be converted into the bio fuel ethanol.. He also advocates the creation of tax-free zones to encourage investment.ⁱⁱⁱ

Labasa is a quiet town that moves slowly, where I spent Sunday afternoons drifting off to sleep in the heat. It is a town that has thrived on sugar for generations with leases past from father to son. People want to stay, they want to work, but they can't. Now in Labasa people speak of an air of frustration. Although the trend of lease expiration is beginning to slow down, the feeling of uncertainty it engendered will be hard to reverse. People are no longer sure what will come in the next few years. With the sugar agreement set to expire in 2007, no one is sure what the future will bring, but if things continue as they have, Labasa could be unrecognizable within a generation.

ⁱⁱ Vishwa Nadan, 17 November 2006

ⁱⁱⁱ Subrail Prasad, 20 November 2006

Appendix 3 – Reflections on Research

Some thoughts on my ISP experience.

I have found that research is about chasing a squirrel half way up a tree only to discover you should have been chasing that rabbit down his hole; and then finding yourself deep underground wishing you had asked that squirrel just one more question. I have discovered that you can't structure your paper and then find the information to fit that structure; you first have to do the research and allow it to find its own structure.

This issue is one that existed long before I set foot on the islands of Fiji, some would even say it started back in the late 1800s when the first Indian *germits* arrived in Fiji. What I have tried to do is capture this one moment in time, this one ethnographic instant. I know I haven't seen the complete picture. I know there are parts of this situation that I am totally unaware of, but I have tried my best.

Doing this project required me to completely abandon my comfort zone. I, someone who gets nervous even answering the phone, had to walk up to total strangers and ask for their life stories. I should never have worried. People were eager to share their stories with me. From academics to civil servants to poor farmers, I was never turned away, merely asked to come back tomorrow a time or two. At the beginning I would show up at a front desk hoping to make an appointment to see someone later, only to be surprised when I was ushered back into the office immediately to talk to someone. I greatly appreciated the friendliness and openness of everyone I met and interviewed. It was amazing.

One of the hardest parts of this project was to limit it. This is a subject that could be the inspiration for multiple books. In fact, every story I heard from every farmer could be a book in its own right. Other issues pertaining to land tenure in Fiji were also fascinating to me, but I chose to limit myself to what you see here because of its humanity. It is not some academic debate. These are real stories of real people. I have tried to capture the reality of their lives.

When I first approached this subject, I planned to just present facts and data and abstain from analysis. But then, thanks to a well-timed reality check, I realized that neglecting analysis would not just be shirking my duty as a scholar but shirking my duty to those whose lives I was presenting. Research is not just about collecting and organizing data, it's about doing something with that data. In this, my first major research experience, I don't know if I have done the right thing; other people may look at the information I have collected and draw different conclusions; other people who have access to more data may have critiques of my conclusions. Thus, I see this as a work in progress, one that is open to debate and commentary. I see both these 3 weeks of research, as well as the entirety of my experience in Fiji as ones that I will continue to process and learn from for years to come.

Lieselot Whitbeck
Labasa, Fiji
26 November 2006