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### **Fiji, the road to restoration**

What do you think when you are thinking of Fiji? Most would answer “a tropical getaway”. A beautiful island full of culture and history. A place for relaxation. Most of these are true but there is a darker side to this island--an unseen problem many tourists visiting do not even notice. A large number of rural Fijians live in poverty. The Fijian economy is shifting from the sugar and textile industry to the more modern tourism industry. With this economy shift more and more Fijians are moving to the urban areas. Though some industries remain regardless of this shift, such as bottled water, sugar and tuna, a tourism-based economy is what the island is left with. Many Fijians are leaving their traditional lifestyles to make garments for tourists like necklaces and baskets. The population of Fiji is 883,125 people. Over half of Fijians call an urban area home while 48% remain in the rural parts of Fiji. A growing number of children are becoming dropouts, or in some cases, push outs, when a community cannot afford to keep its local school. Every Fijian parent strives to keep their child in school with good grades so that they may get a better life and job. Children drop out of school because they feel it is not important to their future; they need to help their parents or they cannot afford to go to school. Though Fiji has a decent number of schools, many rural Fijians have trouble reaching the school. Roads in rural Fiji are a disaster. A typical road is made of gravel or dirt, has no regular repairs, obstacles like fallen limbs or other travelers dot the path, cars are almost nonexistent and regular floods wash away what is left of the road. Those who live in these rural, hard-to-reach areas have difficulty reaching the market. These markets are Fijians’ income and food source. When asked, a typical Fijian would say that things would be a lot better if roads were improved along with transportation. But what else does a Fijian person’s life consist of? What does a Fijian person do?

When a Fijian man comes home, he is most usually coming home to a home built out of salvaged material. He doesn’t have much land to live on (sometimes the land isn’t even his) and his toilet consists of a pit in the ground. He is unsure of whether or not he should go on welfare. He most likely faces debt and his income is unpredictable. His parents, whose home he most likely inherited, take care of his children while he is away. His wife does the chores, helps him on the farm, sells what food he caught fishing, and is responsible for obtaining the best education they can afford for their children. The children of Fiji are becoming more disobedient in these modern times due to parents not having the time to be with their children . But when raised traditionally (the father disciplining them strictly), they learn to be grateful.

A typical meal usually has fish or meat, rice, noodles and fruit. Imported foods are now beginning to replace traditional foods. Water is usually unsanitary so it must be boiled before drinking. Healthcare in Fiji was, for a time, effective in helping the people but has fallen out of order in recent years. The original plan was for each community or village to have a health worker for the locals to consult if they had any health issues. This way villagers would not have to travel hours to find a doctor. But there is a lack of people qualified to be doctors or nurses. With the number of young Fijian dropouts, there is a shortage of doctors for these communities. With all these problems, farmers face a whole island of problems.

With tourism on the rise, Fijian agriculture has been gradually decreasing. Fijian agriculture accounts for only 8.9% of Fiji's gross domestic product. Though it only counts for a small percentage of the Fijian economy, many people still rely on this industry to make a living. Farms are usually small and so is the income. Many farm workers seek additional employment by working in the market and fishing. Most of the impoverished Fijians make between 20 to 60 Fijian dollars a day which is about 10 to 30 American dollars a day. The local agriculture, along with a plethora of cheap imported foods, allow most Fijians to eat just enough to get by; food uses up most of their money. Though Fiji stays warm all year long and has plenty of rich, fertile soil which can support agriculture, cheap imported foods are dominating the market for food. Additionally, recent floods in Fiji have wiped out entire farms there, making it difficult to get a good harvest. In their agricultural practices, many farmers will apply tons of herbicides and pesticides, not realizing that they are over polluting their water supply--the same one every villager drinks from, with little or no purification before drinking. The Fijians need to learn how to use safer chemicals in their fields. They need to understand what damage chemicals can do to their health and the environment. So what are these crops the farmers work so hard to grow? Most farms grow sugarcane and coconut. But other crops include cocoa, tobacco, watermelon, cereal, rice, corn, ginger, pineapples and bananas. But even after farmers have gone to so much trouble to grow these, they often have a difficult time reaching the market. Most rural Fijians do not own a car and travel by boat or ox driven carts. And a majority of the roads are gravel or dirt. This factor, farm to market transportation, is what a majority of the rural population needs.

A lack of farm to market transportation affects agricultural productivity because it prevents perfectly good crops from reaching their destination. With added delay in transportation, many crops can be spoiled or damaged. Crops could sit in heat for days, fall over and bruise, break, or be lost entirely. Food needs to make it to the market and so do the people who sell it. If a person cannot make it to the market they will not be able to sell their food or buy another Fijian's food. If food cannot reach the market then people will not have access to it. With no access to the market families cannot sell their crops and cannot purchase food themselves. This causes malnutrition. When people do not receive the proper nutrition, a variety of things can happen: starvation, illness and/or disease, theft increase, rise in crop prices and a larger dependence on imported foods. Community support, involvement and fundraisers help in feeding the community. Currently Fijian communities are working together, raising money and gathering volunteers to help build roads, gradually lessening the severity of the situation. Other than pollution, Fiji's transportation issues are not affecting the environment severely. Rural and impoverished Fijians are the people that suffer the most from lack of transportation. In recent times the situation has been improving for the locals with the villagers gaining more access to water, food and markets. When the Fijian government conducted surveys in rural areas, more people reported that things were getting better. More Fijians are now able to access their markets. With this improved access to markets Fijian families can increase their income and get better food. With better transportation locals would not have to pay to leave the village, wasting fuel. Rather, a large amount of food would come to them, feeding the entire village. If the village can reach the food, then they can buy the food. When more people have access to markets more people can get involved in business, allowing for better economic growth. Small Fijian farms could finally have room to grow and expand their business to other markets. But urbanization may keep these farmers from helping the economy. With such a large dependence on imported foods, rural Fijians may be forced to abandon the countryside for city life. But perhaps there is hope for them yet.

So just how will Fiji improve? How does Fiji go about improving the roads? India, a country similar to Fiji in biome and poverty, has a diverse transportation system. Thanks to this extensive network of roads, trains and boats, citizens can get from point A to point B easily. They can bring goods to the market, sell, then return home. And thanks to these roads, buses, taxis, bikes and trains, the Indian economy has boomed substantially! Simply following India's example could improve Fiji's situation dramatically! The community itself has long wished for new roads. It would be an investment that would pay for itself with a new, stronger economy. Cities and villages could trade goods among each other; women could buy goods to bring home or work part time. Children could reach schools and pursue a higher education. Farmers could sell crops and villages could trade with other villages. Community support is already there; it is merely a process of getting the government to go through with it. Looking at India's sprawling economy, the government could be convinced to go through with it in order to improve their own economy. Fiji is very capable of building these roads; it is merely a matter of convincing the government.

So can the situation in Fiji improve? Floods seem to destroy a lot of the hard work Fijians do, such as destroying crops and roads. Flood barriers could help improve this situation. These barriers could block the brunt of the waves--as would more permanent roads such as asphalt or concrete. Fijians are generally happy to help each other and their community. Village fundraisers to pay for new roads and their upkeep would not be out of the question. A local project to bring more health workers to rural areas could reach more villages if the roads improved. Many impoverished Fijians already grow their own food but theft is on the rise. Improved security or neighborhood watch programs in villages could keep food with its proper owner. Community support to build safer homes and improve transportation to markets would increase economic growth. Perhaps villagers could invest in a van or bus available to the village and carpool to markets. The people will work hard to improve the situation for their children. Fijian life is already improving. The government and foundations like the Asian Development Bank, Moms Against Hunger and Fiji Kids are working hard to improve life for the Fijians so that they can provide for themselves and their families. The Asian Development Bank works to help Fijians recover from floods, build new roads and restructure their economy. Moms Against Hunger helps those whose food and crops have been washed away by floods, using relief programs to help those who are starving. Fiji Kids sponsors children who cannot afford school and helps them gain a better education. Though the government wants the people's lives to improve, it has cut off support for a majority of its projects. "Some community members were aware of government initiatives to help address causes of community hardship and poverty, including youth and women's programs, the Village Improvement Scheme, Healthy Islands Project, social welfare, and the Poverty Alleviation Fund. Some of these initiatives, although intended to be high impact, have since stopped. Community members stressed that continuation of these initiatives is required to ensure longterm benefits to effectively address hardship and poverty (Asian Development Bank)." If the government could follow through with these plans, the Fijian livelihood could improve considerably. The Fijians' lives should improve a great deal if they keep up the work. Fiji is on its way; a few more improvements and the hard-working people of Fiji will have a more secure lifestyle.

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