



PERSISTENCE, A WAY OF LIFE FOR VAKABALEA



Farmer Kamal Prakash on his farm.

It takes a kind of vehement persistence to continue farming on land that is constantly inundated with flood waters annually.

In a farming settlement in Navua, two neighboring farmers have been witnesses to the heart-aching site of floodwaters slowly seeping onto their farm land with

no hope at all of stopping the incoming torrents of water.

Despite this common occurrence, the farming pair kept at it, they dug deep and found in themselves the self-belief and drive to continue the hard work that would earn their success later down the line, they

kept persevering!

If you happen to find yourself along the Queens highway, there is a roadside market at Vakabalea settlement that is hard to miss, as it is lined with an assorted range of fresh vegetables and is an instant attention grabber, evidenced by the line of cars and commuters who frequent the market to check out the specials on offer at the stall.

From humble beginnings, like most of the farmers we've featured on this space, 48-year-old Kamal Prakash in 2003 transformed his piece of land into what it is today.

"The land belongs to my father-in-law and because they have migrated overseas, he has given it to us to develop and take care of," he said.

"When I first came here, the place was overgrown with paragrass, I knew I had to start from somewhere for the sake of my family," said Kamal.

"With the assistance of a tractor owning friend, whom I befriended while he was driving past, the wet land was cleared."

He set up roots there and set out to cater to the livelihood of his young family. He then moved his family from Lautoka to Vakabalea to start a new farming life on the 5 acre land.

"I grew up farming sugarcane and the only vegetable we had growing was amaranthus and here in Navua we expanded our horizon and cultivated assorted vegetables," he said.

Trial and error was the way forward for Kamal as he moved toward his vision of the farm with a renewed sense of hope, vigor and determination.

"I knew the land was wet and muddy, but I employed the 'Tuatua concept' on the farm and apart from that I used to plant dalo and because of thefts at night I decided to just focus on assorted vegetables," he said.

"There came a time while doing farm records, we would also include the preparations for such things as thefts, as it also brought a loss to the production tally, although on the bright side, I took it as positive too because either way, I was helping to feed the hungry, regardless of where the dalo ended up."

He also supplies to the Navua market and continues operating the roadside stall, and there are no indications he plans on stopping any time soon, despite the challenges he faces regarding the weather.

"Our lives depend on farming, and we have invested in it and because of the changing weather patterns we have drawn

our planting calendar according to the now weather pattern," he said.

Kamal, who is a farmer at his core, shared the good that farming has brought to his family.

"It provided for our needs and wants and got us through some pretty tough times in our lives and since it's not only a job, but my passion as well, I will continue till I draw my last breath."

"For us farmers, whether it is raining or sunny, we are out in the field toiling, for those living in urban areas, you can make use of the spaces in your backyard for vegetables for your balanced daily meal," he said.

Meanwhile on the other side of the flipped coin, his neighbour, 39-year-old Subash Chand who is also a vegetable farmer who grows cucumber, moca, eggplant, chillies, long bean and also papaya on his 5 acre land often shares ideas with Kamal.

"I used to farm in Wainibuku as a young boy with my family, and when the lease expired we had to look for other places and that was when we found this piece of land."

"It is now 20 years that I am planting assorted vegetables here in Vakabalea and supplying to the Suva and Navua markets, selling on the roadside market and before COVID-19, I used to supply to hotels in Sigatoka, Nadi and Lautoka," he said.

"Apart from flooding and theft, our market is also affected with the pandemic and because life must go on, we keep striving despite the challenges, accepting and moving slowly with faith," said Subash.

Papaya farming is often disregarded by farmers of Navua because of flooding but the risk-taker took papaya farming with no second thoughts.

"I knew it was a risk but it is the usual me, trying out new things, in 2019 I started planting Hawaiian papaw and I planted in phases," he said.

"Whatever happens will happen, as long as new things are tried and if it does not succeed then at least I tried," he smiles.

Subash has managed to meet the expenses for the payment of his vehicle and his home appliances and the education of his daughter, these are just of the family obligations he has met all through farming, something he says any Tom, Dick or Harry can also do.

And due to their farming commitment, both Kamal and Subash were assisted with power tiller machines from the Ministry of Agriculture under the Food Security Program in the 2019/2020 financial year.

The farming pair of Kamal and Subash are a shining example and are testament to the possibilities available in farming, if you stick to it long enough and have a can do attitude, the sky will indeed be the limit.



Farmer Subash Chand on his farm.

BAU FARMERS LEARN BASIC FARMING PRINCIPLES TO ENSURE SUCCESS

Land plus labour plus correct farming advice equals success.

That was the farming equation that ensured success, shared with around 20 Bau farmers who attended a Ministry of Agriculture one-day farmers' training at Taro, Bau, Tailevu on Wednesday (3.3.21).

Agriculture Officer Tailevu, Mr Joseph Smith informed farmers' in i-taukei that while land and labour was freely available, the issue was farmers' receiving and acting on wrong information that had detrimental impact on their harvest.

He asked the farmers' for instance, what the correct measurement of manure should be administered to one dalo plant, to which one of the three responded correctly that it was one pinch. He added that while some thought that one pinch was inadequate and therefore, added more to that one dalo plant, the outcome at harvest time was predictable – something would be wrong with the dalo; either the size would be small, or it would be deformed.

Mr. Smith advised farmers' of the importance of not only planting but also to clean the farms. He said it was easy to plant but to maintain the farm and keep it clean during planting was a challenge he had

seen with farmers.

He said it was critical that farmers set goals, though sometimes impossible those dreams maybe, such as building a house in three years' time. He said farming would make those dreams become a reality. He added, that once farmers identified their goals, they as Agriculture Officers would assist them in putting together a plan on how to achieve it.

He said the plan would be detailed to the point of setting daily tasks to accomplish and once these were achieved, the rest of the day should be spent cleaning the farms.

Mr. Smith shared his experiences of meeting successful farmers' who started with nothing and through the assistance of the Ministry, were able to build themselves up to become successful commercial farmers who built their homes, bought their vehicles, and sent their children for further education.

He encouraged the Bau farmers to rally together, form cluster groups, set goals, and start working on achieving these.

He said the Ministry would always stand ready to assist farmers with the correct technical advice.

Mrs Elina Kama, 40, said she found the

training 'interesting, motivating, and given me new ideas; it's broadened my mind'.

She said for the last four years' she was focused on her nursery, planting fruit trees.

"This training has taught me about setting long term goals, and to see farming as a business. I did not think beyond my nursery but today, I have heard other options and it's really opened up my mind," Mrs Kama said.

Taro Farmers Group Advisor, Mr Setu Saua, 33, a former aircraft engineer said the training was informative.

"The equation is there; the land plus the labor plus the correct advice equals success; but we just do not have a solid foundation.

"I saw that our Farmers' Group brought the community together and we had planted, unfortunately, the natural disaster destroyed that and members started finding employment, so the numbers of our active members has reduced significantly," he said.

Mr. Saua said the way forward now was to test their farm land to find out the best crops to plant, so they could reap the maximum benefit from it.



Agriculture Officer Mr. Joseph Smith during the training at Taro, Bau Tailevu.