

Local food and tourism in the Global South

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ABSTRACT: Many countries in the Global South import a significant share of the food served to tourists. For decades, closer linkages of local food producer and the resort industry have been heralded as an antidote to this unsustainable circumstance, further encouraged by the current consumer trend around local food. Reflections on two qualitative research projects in resorts in South Africa and Fiji challenge the notion that tourists move out of their comfort zone to eat local dishes to any greater extent. Large-scale, internationally branded and managed resorts serve predominantly what their tourists from the Global North like to eat: a Western cuisine. If farmers want to benefit from this resort industry, they have to grow food according to the Western palate, which in turn has questionable impacts on biodiversity levels and environmental health in general. The discussion around localising tourism-related food chains in countries of the Global South needs to acknowledge for whose agenda food is being produced. "Corporate resorts" endorse neither a very sustainable nor a locally adaptable culinary agenda.

KEYWORDS: agriculture–tourism linkages, cuisine, Fiji, Global South, local food, South Africa, sustainable tourism

Local food and tourism in the Global South — keep importing?

This opinion piece is a reflection on two participatory research projects in Fiji and South Africa. Both aimed at understanding the issues of hotel-farmer linkages — or rather: the lack of such linkages. The following will highlight some of the issues mentioned by earlier researchers (e.g. Rogerson, 2012; Torres & Momsen, 2004), but also pose a critical question rarely considered: what are the implications for countries of the Global South to produce the kind of food that their international visitors like to eat? Should localising the food chain indeed be a priority?

March 2012, Western Cape, South Africa

I am cutting up pumpkins for a vegetable side dish in the kitchen of a luxury wilderness lodge. The butternuts were grown next door in an organic farming and training project established by the lodge's owner for unemployed women from local townships. Eight students had the chance to learn organic agricultural practices and apply those skills in their own backyards, hopefully increasing their family's food security. The project was supposed to be financed largely by the lodge's kitchen and its need for fresh produce. The day before, the students had harvested a lot of pumpkins while cheerfully lamenting they would not know what to do with them at home and they liked chicken, rice and mayonnaise much more anyway. Upon delivery, the white South African kitchen chef looked at them piling up in his store room, mumbling: "What must I do with all this stuff?"

What sounded like a palatable tourism-led development project with a socio-entrepreneurial edge, based on the easily marketable idea of "local food", turned out to be a case study of the multi-level and complex issues of tourism-agriculture

linkages in developing countries. Those that were supposed to benefit were not interested, because they opposed agricultural labour due to its role in the country's apartheid history. The kitchen found a challenge in coping with seasonal supply and varying degrees of quality, quantity and consistency. Western tourists paid top dollar and expected their idea of "good food", which mostly involved prime meat cuts. Despite the lodge owner advocating for the project, no one felt in charge of driving it. Finally, no local culinary heritage was at hand to marry local food supply and tourism expectations into dishes that work for discerning travellers and chefs alike (see Laeis, 2016; Laeis & Lemke, 2016).

After the "organic" frenzy of the early 2000s, consumers in the Global North have turned their attention towards the "local". It seems that notions of "local" and "ethnic" foods are all over the Western culinary agenda (Legrand, Hindley, & Laeis, in press) and, arguably, play a key role in the creation of the tourism experience (Bessière, 1998; Hall, Sharples, Mitchell, Macionis, & Cambourne, 2003). In contrast to what the globalised agri-food machinery produces, local food can arguably be healthier, fresher, environmentally friendlier as well as more supportive of local, small-scale economies. Such properties, according to many researchers, NGOs and governments, are particularly relevant for the sustainable development of tourism in the Global South. The argument commonly goes: people living in rural areas are at a significant risk of facing poverty (World Bank, 2018) and their livelihoods mostly depend on small-holder agriculture (World Bank, 2016). Enter tourists: presumably they bring economic opportunities to those living in poverty, because tourists seek those "remote" environments, which offer seemingly "pristine" and "authentic" experiences, and need to be fed. The marriage of hungry tourists and local small-scale food producers through

the agency of kitchen chefs is consequently heralded as an antidote to poverty levels in rural places, while at the same time satisfying the assumed interest of visitors in local cuisines. Yet, in many destinations this rather obvious and theoretically mutually beneficial linkage between farmers and chefs remains a challenge. Many emerging economies of the Global South suffer from significant economic leakages of tourism income, not least of all due to food importation (e.g. Anderson, 2013; Lacher & Nepal, 2010; Meyer, 2007; Pratt, Suntikul, & Dorji, 2018).

May 2017, Coral Coast, Fiji

"New order's up: two fish 'n chips, one club sandwich, one burger" shouts the sous chef in charge of the pool bar kitchen of a large-scale luxury beach resort. I get busy loading the two deep fryers in front of me with frozen pre-cut potato fries — imported from the Netherlands. Every dish of this new order comes with fries, as do most other dishes ordered for lunch by the predominantly Australian guests. I, on the other hand, came to Fiji to understand the relationship between large-scale upmarket resorts and local food producers and to potentially find answers to why both parties rarely connect well. I also came hoping to learn about the local Pacific island cuisine. Fijian cuisine has recently received a fair amount of media attention in Fiji, New Zealand and abroad. TV food shows (Zoomslide, 2014), award-winning cookbooks (Oliver, Berno, & Ram, 2010; 2013) and the unfortunately short-lived *Kai Pasifika* restaurant in Auckland translated traditional Pacific island cuisine into dishes that seemed enticing to the contemporary food enthusiast. Yet, here I was, in front of two deep fryers that almost could not handle the amount of fries ordered during lunch service. I certainly did not expect to wind up in a fast-food-like restaurant on the premises of a five-star resort — not on an island that markets itself as the friendly, tropical and paradisiac heart of the South Pacific (Laeis, 2019; Scheyvens & Laeis, in press).

What happened to those South Pacific island staples, such as coconuts, root crops and fresh vegetables? Why was I serving food that could perhaps be served in any other international resort or fast-food restaurant around the world without raising eyebrows? Is every tourists really keen to try foreign foods? Do farmers not grow enough food or not the right produce? Moreover, who has the power over the discourse that shapes the understanding of "local", "authentic" and "desirable" in the globalised and globalising tourism industry?

In pursuit of these questions, it is important to bear in mind that tourism is one of the largest industries in the world and a powerful economic factor in the Global South. In 2012, emerging economies generated about five times as much income through tourism (about US\$ 386 billion) than development assistance funds directed to them (UNWTO, 2013). Yet, it remains questionable whether they indeed benefit from promoting inbound tourism (Cárdenas-García, Sánchez-Rivero, & Pulido-Fernández, 2015; Ekanayake & Long, 2011). Medina-Muñoz, Medina-Muñoz, and Gutiérrez-Pérez (2016) found contradictory evidence about tourism's value for the poor and concluded that tourism development has not been inclusive. A recent study by Oviedo-García, González-Rodríguez, and Vega-Vázquez (2018, p. 1) support this finding in the case of the Dominican Republic, where "sun-and-sea all-inclusive tourism" has neither alleviated poverty, nor reduced inequality. In the discussion around why hotels and local farmers rarely connect well, we need to realise

that tourism in the Global South is mainly driven by visitors from the Global North, namely northern America and Europe, and increasingly Asia, who travel with their very own notions of what constitutes a desirable food experience.

In Fijian large-scale upmarket resorts with international brands and management (or rather "corporate resorts"), Fijian cuisine was mostly compartmentalised to tokenistic "island night shows" once a week — supposedly authentic food served buffet-style and accompanied by a cultural performance of spear-rattling warriors and chanting women. Most local resort staff agreed that little of the food served during these weekly events was what they thought of as authentic. For the rest of the week menus kept to Western standards: steaks, pizzas, pasta, fish and chips, salads, burgers, sandwiches, wraps and continental breakfast buffets. One head chef of a corporate resort summarised: "It's fish and chips all over the show!" and guests seemed to enjoy it. According to a guest feedback review, resorts design their menus according to how their guests like those menus to be. More local food did not seem to be required and therefore resorts had no incentive to put more on their menus. Sometimes there seems to be this notion among tourists, policy makers and critics of the tourism industry that anyone who operates a restaurant should somehow by default have an interest in offering local food. But, even though there may be such cases, corporate resorts, by and large, are predominantly concerned with satisfying their guests' wishes in order to meet financial targets and, eventually, shareholder expectations.

This context leads to the importation of about 65 per cent of food to be served to tourists in corporate resorts on Fiji's Coral Coast (Scheyvens & Laeis, in press). Even items that are locally available, or could easily be substituted by local produce, are imported. A case in point is fruit. Fiji produces a variety of high-quality tropical fruit, such as pineapples, papayas and green-skinned oranges. Yet, kitchen chefs see the need to import fresh apples and *orange* oranges, arguing that guests *want* to have them for breakfast. The list continues with salmon and green-lip mussels from New Zealand, particular cuts of beef from Australia and prawns from India, not to forget frozen potato fries from the Netherlands. Why? Because corporate resorts' prime concern is making guests happy.

Since the 1980s, there has been an ever-increasing body of research that outlines all sorts of valid reasons why tourism operators and small-scale farmers in the Global South struggle to connect (e.g. Bélisle, 1983; Pratt et al., 2018; Rogerson, 2012; Telfer & Wall, 1996; Timms & Neill, 2011; Torres & Momsen, 2004). Predominantly, on the one hand authors point towards the inability of farmers to grow what is needed by the resorts in the right quality, sufficient quantity and in a reliable manner. On the other hand, it is noted that resorts seem to struggle with small-scale, fragmented supply chains, easy payment solutions for farmers, and kitchen chefs who are unaware of local produce. The fact that most of the tourism these scholars observe in their research is dominated by the (food) preferences of Western tourists is rarely acknowledged. I argue, however, that the importation of food is not only a result of unsuitable quantity, quality and reliability of local food production, as so often argued in the research cited above, but a direct result of the type of tourism currently present in Fiji as well as many other destinations in the Global South (Mowforth & Munt, 2016). If most tourists come from Australia (43.4%) and New Zealand (21.9%), as is the case in Fiji (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2018), in other

words, destinations countries with a predominantly Western culture, and seek standardised corporate resorts, then those resorts serve largely Western food, perhaps garnished with the odd localised cultural experience buffet.

Based on this argument, the question arises why Fiji's agricultural sector could not benefit from the tourists' demand for food anyway? Does it matter whether Fijian farmers grow traditional root crops, or strawberries and green asparagus? If we look at the breakdown of food imported by those resorts, it becomes apparent that mostly internationally well-established vegetables are required (e.g. tomatoes, lettuce, capsicum (peppers) and potatoes), whereas locally adapted species, such as taro, coconut, yams and breadfruit, play a rather insignificant role. Secondly, meat and dairy production hold the greatest financial opportunity for Fiji's agricultural development (Scheyvens & Laeis, in press). From an agricultural policy point of view, this situation has a few noteworthy implications for Fiji. Farmers wishing to benefit from tourism income need to produce for the tourists' palate. Currently, this palate asks mostly for a Western diet. However, the steep growth rate of Asian tourists visiting Fiji (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2018) might foreshadow a change in the cuisine preferred by tourists. In any case, foreign foods are required and not local produce from Fiji's more traditional and adapted small-scale agriculture. The various leafy greens, coconut products and root crops are the realm of indigenous household cuisine, not that of corporate resorts. This rather lopsided demand in favour of Western cuisine leads to what Crosby (1986) termed "europeanisation" of the natural environment in the Global South. Local agricultural species are being pushed aside through the introduction of plants and animals that are most desired by international visitors. Some authors argue that this constitutes neo-colonisation through tourism (Crick, 1989; Hall & Tucker, 2004; Nash, 1989). It speaks critically to the debate about the importance of biodiversity and agro-ecological approaches in food production and tourism (Legrand et al., in press; Teelucksingh & Watson, 2013; Thaman, 2008). It also challenges a fundamental paradigm of sustainable tourism development: the integrity and self-determination of host communities (UNWTO & UNEP, 2005).

Moreover, increasing production of meat and dairy might have significant environmental ramifications. The creation of land for grazing and fodder production will not only destroy natural habitats and reduce biodiversity, but also result in land erosion and subsequent siltation of waterways and reefs (Pimentel, 2006; Steinfeld, Gerber, Wassenaar, Castel, & De Haan, 2006). Threats to the fragile coastal reefs of the Pacific islands and other coastal tourist destinations need to be of particular concern. They are climate change-endangered habitats and breeding grounds for a large variety of saltwater species as well as sources of food and cultural reference for indigenous communities (see also Hoffmann, 2002). The rearing of ruminants further increases greenhouse gas emissions and would seem a hypocritical path to take for a country such as Fiji that recently presided over the 23rd Conference of Parties to the UN Climate Change Convention.

The domination of Fiji's tourism industry by visitors from Australia and New Zealand epitomises the context many destinations in the Global South find themselves in: attractive nature, pleasant climate, remoteness, and an image of authenticity draw in masses of visitors from the Global North, equipped with their very own ideas of desirable food and cultural

experiences. They may pay lip service to being interested in anything local, some may genuinely be, but observations from Fiji and South Africa suggest that many tourists predominantly prefer the type of food they know and feel comfortable with. The result in terms of a tourism-agriculture linkage is that farmers need to adapt to the tourists' palate, which in turn has questionable impacts on biodiversity levels and environmental health in general. Perhaps it is more "sustainable" for these countries to keep importing food for their tourists and not internalise the externalities of the Western diet? Continuing to import food from international markets will not solve the issue of economic leakages, nor the associated CO₂ impact. To promote stronger linkages of food producers and tourism operators, tourism policy makers need to start considering what kind of tourism they would like to see in their own countries. From my point of view, the large-scale, upmarket "corporate resorts" should not feature to a large extent on this list.

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