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FEATURE

## **Empowering Fijian Communities Through Citizen Food Forums: A Path to Healthier Diets and Sustainable Food Systems**

In a concerted effort to address the pressing issues surrounding food security, nutrition, and sustainable agriculture in Fiji, the Consumer Council of Fiji, Dikoda and WorldVeg – with support from the Australian Center for International Agricultural Research (AIAR) has launched a project dubbed PIC More Veg.

### **About the Project**

PIC More Veg is a visionary 2-year scoping research study aimed at illuminating the intricate web of food environment constraints and opportunities for fostering healthy, vegetable-rich diets across Fiji's urban-rural continuum. This transformative project, driven by collaborative efforts between the Consumer Council of Fiji (CCOF), Dikoda, and WorldVeg, seeks to unravel the complexities of Fiji's food landscape and chart a course towards evidence-based food system policies and interventions.

At the heart of PIC More Veg lies a profound recognition of the invaluable insights held by Fijian citizens regarding their food contexts. To this end, the project integrates the groundbreaking Citizen Food Forums, convened by the Consumer Council of Fiji, as a pivotal activity aimed at catalyzing inclusive national dialogues. These forums serve as dynamic platforms for diverse stakeholders to coalesce, engage in meaningful dialogue, and co-create an equitable national food strategy that reflects the diverse needs and perspectives of Fijian communities.

### **The Citizen Food Forums**

The Citizen Food Forums, operating within the PIC More Veg framework, are meticulously designed to evolve over the course of the project, drawing upon standard multi-stakeholder engagement principles and the regionally-grounded Talanoa principles of inclusive dialogue. Initially serving as input mechanisms for research design and interpretation in various contexts, these forums are poised to become formidable players in shaping future food policy debates by the project's conclusion.

Beyond the forums, PIC More Veg transcends scales, seamlessly bridging local community insights with broader food system transformation efforts. Through community-grounded data collection and evidence-based policy advocacy, the project endeavors to catalyze systemic change, driving towards a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable food system for all Fijians. With the convergence of collaborative partnerships, innovative methodologies, and a shared commitment to citizen empowerment, PIC More Veg stands as a beacon of hope for a healthier, more vibrant future for Fiji's food landscape."

## **Background and Purpose**

Fiji, like many Pacific Island Countries (PICs), grapples with alarming rates of malnutrition and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) linked to poor dietary habits. The prevalence of overweight and obesity, coupled with deficiencies in key micronutrients, underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to improve food environments and dietary practices. The Citizen Food Forums aim to address these challenges by amplifying the voices of Fijian citizens and empowering them to play a central role in decision-making processes related to food systems.

## **Importance of Citizen Involvement**

Citizens are the heart of any food system, and their perspectives and experiences are invaluable in shaping policies and strategies that impact their daily lives. However, certain groups within Fijian society, particularly marginalized communities, have historically been excluded from participating in decision-making processes related to food systems. The Citizen Food Forums seek to rectify this imbalance by providing a platform for inclusive dialogue and collaboration, ensuring that diverse voices are heard and valued.

## **Addressing Food Environment Constraints**

The Citizen Food Forums delves into key food environment constraints and opportunities for healthy and vegetable-rich diets across the urban-rural nexus in Fiji. This includes examining issues such as limited access to fresh produce, high prices of fruits and vegetables, and the preference for processed and imported foods over traditional dietary staples. By identifying these constraints and their implications for public health, the forums aim to inform evidence-based policies and interventions to improve food environments and dietary practices.





### **The Inaugural Forum in Nakorovou Village**

The inaugural Citizen Food Forum took place in Nakorovou Village, Rewa, recently, where 35 community members actively engaged in discussions regarding their perspectives on healthy food, the sources of their food, and the obstacles encountered in obtaining food. This forum served as a catalyst for dialogue and collaboration, laying the groundwork for future forums to delve deeper into specific issues and

solutions.

Through discussions by the participants, the Forum was able to gather invaluable insights on their perspective of healthy foods. The participants also identified challenges in accessing healthy foods in their settings. These insights were inclusive as views from different segments of the communities were obtained such as the youth, women, elderly and other key groups.

### **Next Steps**

In the coming weeks, additional Citizen Food Forums will be held in different locations across Fiji, bringing together diverse stakeholders to continue the dialogue on reshaping the nation's food system. These forums will serve as critical platforms for community members to share their lived experiences, identify priority areas for action, and contribute to the development of an equitable national food strategy.

The Citizen Food Forums represent a groundbreaking initiative to empower Fijian communities and catalyze inclusive national dialogues towards the creation of a more equitable and sustainable food system. By harnessing the collective wisdom and experiences of its citizens, Fiji has the opportunity to pave the way for transformative change in food environments and dietary practices, ultimately improving the health and well-being of its people.