21 August 2026 **FEATURE ARTICLE**

Why Sole Service Providers in Rural Fiji Must Act Ethically?

For many consumers in urban centers like Suva, Lautoka, or Labasa, choice is a taken-for-granted luxury. If one shop inflates its prices, sells expired goods, or treats customers poorly, shoppers can simply walk down the street to a competitor. Choice naturally disciplines the market.

However, in rural settlements, island communities, and interior villages across Fiji, the economic reality is drastically different. In these areas, an entire community often relies on a single shop, one fuel supplier, or a sole service provider.

When a business holds a monopoly or near-monopoly in a community, the traditional checks and balances of market competition disappear. In these situations, ethical business conduct is not just a marketing ideal, it becomes a vital obligation to the community.

1. Strict Compliance with Price Controls

Price control regulations set by authorities exist to ensure that basic essential items remain affordable for every Fijian. In areas where consumers have no alternative shops, adhering strictly to these legal price caps is critical.

The Councils surveillance in remote areas shows a widespread disregard for regulated prices, especially in smaller kiosks, shops and canteens. The findings include inflated prices beyond the maximum allowed retail price for items such as canned goods, rice, sugar flour and many other basic food items that people rely heavily on.

Artificially inflating prices above control limits or adding unauthorized "transport markups" onto regulated goods directly exploits consumers who cannot travel elsewhere. This is particularly concerning, because price regulations are set while taking into account the added cost of transportation to remote and rural areas.

Sole providers have a legal and moral duty to charge fair, compliant prices, ensuring that living in a remote area does not come with an unfair financial penalty.

2. Fair Margins on Unregulated Goods

While price controls cover key staples, many day-to-day items fall under free-market pricing. In an urban setting, competition prevents traders from setting unreasonable profit margins. In a sole-provider environment, however, traders face no such market pressure.

The Council frequently receives calls from consumers comparing neighborhood shop prices against major urban supermarkets. Many ask why a simple five-pack of noodles costs $3.95 at a supermarket but jumps to $6.60 at their local store, a stark pattern the Council consistently uncovers during market surveillance.

Operating ethically means resisting the temptation to extract excessive profits simply because customers have no alternative. Charging fair, reasonable margins on non-controlled goods demonstrates good faith and protects the purchasing power of the local community.

3. Reliable Stock Management & Product Variety

When a community depends on one business for its daily needs, a stockout can leave families without essential food, sanitation products, or medicine.

Ethical traders in rural areas prioritize robust inventory planning to keep basic necessities on the shelves consistently. Furthermore, offering a reasonable variety of products ensures that consumers are not forced to buy higher-priced premium brands simply because cheaper, standard alternatives were not ordered.

4. Quality, Safety, and Good Faith

Being the only trader in town is never an excuse to lower standards. Essential consumer rights such as receiving safe, unexpired food, accurate weights, and clear receipts, apply equally everywhere in Fiji.

Ethical business operators routinely check expiry dates, store perishable goods properly, and ensure measuring equipment (like scales) is accurate. Selling compromised or expired goods to a captive market breaks the basic trust between a trader and the community it serves.

5. Flexibility in Payment Methods

Financial access across Fiji's rural and peri-urban communities varies greatly. While mobile wallets and digital payments have expanded, household cash flows still fluctuate around farming harvests, remittance transfers, and payday cycles.

Sole service providers who operate in good faith adapt to these economic realities rather than taking advantage of them. Through market surveillance and consumer reports, the Council has identified widespread exploitation around mobile money transactions in remote areas. Some local shops charge exorbitant cash-out fees, sometimes up to $10, for consumers converting mobile funds into physical cash. Others impose unauthorized surcharge fees ranging from

$0.40 to $2.00 on every digital purchase. Conversely, some shops have completely abandoned mobile wallets in favor of "cash-only" policies to avoid vendor transaction fees, leaving digitally reliant consumers stranded.

True payment flexibility means embracing digital solutions fairly, without penalizing consumers with hidden surcharges, and offering clear, reasonable credit terms during tough times so families can always access basic necessities.

A Shared Responsibility for Rural Development

A local business in a rural or maritime community is more than a commercial enterprise; it is a key pillar of the local economy. With that unique position comes a heightened responsibility to act fairly, transparently, and ethically.

What Consumers Can Do

Limited competition does not mean consumers have no rights. Consumers can take practical steps to protect themselves and help promote fair business practices in their communities.

Know the Prices

Consumers should familiarise themselves with the prices of commonly purchased essential goods, particularly items that are subject to price controls. If a price appears significantly higher than the regulated amount, ask the trader for clarification and keep evidence of the transaction.

Where possible, consumers can also compare prices with those charged in nearby towns or through other available sources. Price differences do not automatically mean that a business has acted unlawfully, as operating and transportation costs can vary. However, unusual or unexplained price increases should raise questions.

Check the Goods Before Buying

Always check expiry dates, packaging and the condition of products before making a purchase.

Do not purchase items with damaged packaging, unusual odours, signs of spoilage or other indications that the product may be unsafe.

Consumers should also pay attention to the quantity or weight of goods purchased, particularly where products are sold by weight or measurement.

Ask for a Receipt

A receipt is more than proof that you paid. It provides an important record of the transaction.

Consumers should make it a habit to request and keep receipts, particularly for higher-value purchases. Where a receipt is not provided, consumers should ask the trader for one.

If a dispute later arises, having evidence of the purchase can help establish what was purchased, when it was purchased and how much was paid.

Ask Questions Before Paying

If a price, charge, product condition or payment term is unclear, ask before completing the transaction.

Consumers should not be afraid to ask a trader to explain an additional charge or clarify the terms of a purchase. Asking questions can help prevent misunderstandings and gives consumers an opportunity to make informed decisions.

Keep Evidence of Concerns

Where consumers suspect unfair practices, they should keep relevant evidence. This may include receipts, photographs of displayed prices, photographs of products, screenshots of advertisements or records of communication with the trader.

Evidence can help the Consumer Council of Fiji assess a complaint and determine the appropriate course of action.

Report Unfair Practices

Consumers should not remain silent if they believe they are being unfairly treated simply because the business is the only provider in their community. Concerns may include suspected overcharging of price-controlled goods, misleading pricing, unsafe or expired products, inaccurate measurements, unfair trading practices, hoarding or other conduct that may disadvantage consumers.

Reporting concerns does not mean every disagreement is automatically a violation of consumer law. The appropriate authorities can assess the circumstances and determine whether further action is required.

If you suspect unfair trade practices, illegal price increases, or poor business conduct in your area, contact the Consumer Council of Fiji on our toll-free line (**155**) or submit a complaint via our email Complaints@consumersfiji.org.