

01 September 2026

PRESS RELEASE

New Policy Brief Launched: Vegetable-Rich School Meals for Fiji

A new policy brief launched today in Suva reveals that investing in healthier, vegetable-rich school meals could deliver more than FJD 3 in benefits for every FJD 1 invested, while generating an estimated FJD 10–25 million in additional annual income for local farmers and fisheries.

The brief, titled *Vegetable-Rich School Meals for Fiji: Healthier Learners, Stronger Local Food Systems*, was officially launched by the Honourable Minister for Health, Hon. Dr. Ratu Atonio Lalabalavu, during the policy dialogue *Putting Children First: Building Healthier Food Environments through Home-Grown School Meals*. The dialogue convened leaders from government, civil society, academia, and development partners to explore scalable models for school food reform.

While officiating the event, the Minister for Health and Medical services Hon Dr Atonio Lalabalavu emphasized the importance of creating food environments for children that can influence their dietary patterns. “Improving access to nutritious foods, particularly vegetables and other locally produced foods, is not only an investment in child nutrition. It is part of our broader effort to prevent diet-related illness and strengthen the health of our population. From a health perspective, we cannot look at nutrition only at the point where a child receives a meal. We have to look at the entire system that determines what food is available, affordable and accessible.”

While delivering her welcoming address, Consumer Council CEO Seema Shandil shared how strengthening local food systems can form an important part of building greater resilience. “If we can create reliable pathways between local production and school meals, we can help create a system that delivers benefits across multiple areas: better nutrition for children, opportunities for farmers, stronger communities and greater support for locally produced food.”

Fiji currently faces significant public health challenges among youth. According to the policy brief, children in Fiji consume less than 40 grams of vegetables daily on average, and one in three children aged 10–14 is overweight or obese. The proposed Home-Grown School Meals model introduces a daily 120-gram serving of vegetables per student, meeting roughly 60% of a child’s recommended daily intake. The investment case indicates that girls and children from the poorest economic quintile stand to gain the strongest health and equity benefits from the program.

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Dr. Ee Von Goh, Principal Investigator at the World Vegetable Center, says that “School meals are more than a nutrition intervention. They are an opportunity to invest simultaneously in children's health and education, while strengthening local food systems.” By shifting procurement directly to Fijian agricultural and seafood producers, the initiative aims to create stable, institutional demand that reduces reliance on imported produce.

The policy brief builds on key findings from the *Colour My Plate* initiative and recommendations from the May 2025 High-Level National Food Policy Forum. Project stakeholders emphasize that addressing youth dietary habits requires altering the broader food environment.

Additional key perspectives shared during the panel dialogue included:

- Mr. Amit N Prasad, Principal of DAV College, Suva, highlighted the need for practical kitchen, staff, and preparation support at the school level.
- Mr. Ritnesh Vishal Prasad, World Food Forum Fiji National Chapter Lead, urged stakeholders to give young people a direct voice in shaping school meal menus.
- Mrs. Ilisapeci Vakacegu, Policy Officer at the Pacific Island Farmers Organisation Network (PIFON), noted that structured demand gives producers greater confidence to invest, though success requires closely aligned procurement planning, production support, and supply-chain coordination.
- Mr. Asaeli Naika, Co-Investigator from Fiji National University and Dikoda, emphasized that sustainable dietary shifts require easy access to healthy options alongside education.

The policy brief proposes a phased rollout overseen by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways. Implementation models under consideration include localized school kitchens and centralized kitchen hubs serving multiple facilities.

Estimated program costs range between 3% and 7% of the Ministry of Education’s annual budget, depending on the scale and model selected. Stakeholders recommend initiating a small-scale pilot to refine logistics before expanding nationwide.

The complete policy brief is available for download online via the World Vegetable Center repository: <https://worldveg.tind.io/record/76380>

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