



## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **Digital Transformation to Protect Social and Economic Rights of all Fijians**

The Fiji Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Pacific Office in Fiji have signed an agreement that will see UNDP's support for the enhancement and development of FCCC's online platforms and development of a tailored mobile application to facilitate consumer and vendor access to pricing, market information and complaint filing systems.

The agreement includes the upgrade of FCCC's digital complaints management and electronic pricing systems, which will aid businesses to fully comply with national pricing regulations and enhance protection of consumer rights - critically important given the economic impacts of COVID-19.

Additionally, a mobile application (the App) is being developed that will run on tablets and e-kiosks provided by UNDP, and importantly, will be available for download by consumers and businesses for use on smartphones. The App will empower users with self-guided legal and rights information on business responsibilities, up-to-the-minute accessibility to the Fiji Universal Price List, consumer rights and responsibilities, information on landlord and tenant rules, and more.

The user-centric digital transformation will enable Fijians to engage in fair market practice as consumers and business operators, helping foster a culture of compliance in Fiji and ensuring stability in national markets. The financial support for the digital transformation is provided by the Government of Australia and UNDP. His Excellency

John Feakes, Australian High Commissioner to Fiji, said Australia supports institutions that promote and facilitate sustainable economic growth in Fiji.

"I am delighted to see this development in our partnership with FCCC and UNDP, to strengthen FCCC's role in promoting an effective business regulatory environment. One which will also allow for the Commission to better protect the rights of Fijian consumers," he said

As part of the immediate response to the impact of COVID-19, UNDP's Pacific Office in Fiji has been supporting FCCC in protecting consumers from price gouging, businesses against hoarding, and tenants against rent hikes and evictions, and ensuring stability in the supply of basic essential goods. To support FCCC's digital transformation and expand its ability to protect Fijians' economic and consumer rights, 20 tablet computers have been provided which enhance the speed and coverage of FCCC's inspections, surveys and complaints management in the field. Currently, the tablets are being used to conduct rapid business and pricing surveys to ensure the recent tax reductions enacted in the 2020 National Budget are being passed on effectively to consumers through price reductions – as intended by the Fijian Government to spur consumer spending and economic development.

“Digital Transformation, ICT online platform upgrades for FCCC will provide the means to support more efficient and effective service delivery across the nation,” said FCCC Chief Executive Officer, Mr Joel Abraham.

“We believe that digital transformation is a fundamental part of the modern-day world. It is increasingly a key element of service delivery and in many instances, poor or ineffective ICT or Digitalization can undermine FCCC operations.”

FCCC is a rare body in the region, servicing Fiji, a Small Island Developing State with limited and tenuous supply lines, where market monopolies commonly arise with single players dominating specific sectors; this can result in market distortions to the detriment of individual and business consumers alike. FCCC has strong investigation and prosecutorial powers, designed to ensure consumers get value for money in the marketplace and keep businesses honest. In addition, they actively inspect stores to ensure they abide by Fiji's Universal Price List.

During the COVID19 pandemic, FCCC has been working behind the scenes on supply and price management for essential goods using the Universal Price List they manage for basic/essential goods and ensuring their availability at affordable prices to consumers. During the height of the pandemic, FCCC effectively prevented consumer hoarding by quickly announcing relaxed enforcement of regulations that normally prohibit stores from limiting how much people could buy. FCCC also addressed problems with shopkeepers trying to introduce conditional selling, which is illegal in Fiji. FCCC has likewise been supporting landlord-tenant issues, enforcing

the rental freeze imposed by the Government, and ensuring that illegal rent increases and evictions are not being executed; these are serious human rights, economic and potentially public order issues in the COVID-19 context, and are often not handled well, even by the most economically advanced nations. FCCC and the UNDP Pacific Office in Fiji have also been engaging in community outreach as part of the public service delivery programme, called 'Rights, Empowerment and Cohesion (REACH) for Rural and Urban Fijians', coordinated by Fiji's Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation in partnership with UNDP with support from the Government of Australia.

The REACH project coordinates multiple public service providers from government agencies and CSOs to bring knowledge and awareness of their services into communities. The REACH service delivery during May-June 2020, targeted Fiji's informal settlements across the country where knowledge of rights and redress mechanisms are low, and the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 was being felt the most.

FCCC was supported in providing information on, and access to, their services and fielding of complaints, particularly relating to pricing and landlord-tenant issues, as well as conducting inspections to ensure local stores are abiding by FCCC consumer rules. Through the REACH COVID-19 responsive mobile service delivery, FCCC delivered 1182 services to beneficiaries, including 690 (58 per cent) to women and 492 (42 per cent) to men, indicating a strong uptake and benefits to women, an excellent result.

Mr Levan Bouadze, Resident Representative of the UNDP Pacific Office in Fiji said, "Ensuring people's economic, consumer and rights to housing protection is crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It is not only critical as an economic and humanitarian strategy, but also from a safety and stability perspective where a major economic downturn and accompanying hardship for the population can serve to trigger community unrest."

"In this context, we are honoured to acknowledge this support to FCCC, and highlight this is the first UNDP engagement with FCCC and we look forward to deepening our partnership," added Mr Bouadze.

As the impact of the global pandemic has already been felt by many, and most likely increases poverty and inequalities at a global scale, a concerted effort to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is more urgent. The socio-economic responses through strategic digital innovation aim to accelerate the achievement of SDGs, with a focus on Goal 16: Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies.

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