



STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL AFFAIRS

Review of the Consumer Council of Fiji 2017-2018 Annual Report



PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI
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COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP



Chairperson

Hon. Viam Pillay MP

Government Member



Deputy Chairperson

Hon. George Vegnathan MP

Government Member



Member

Hon. Alipate Nagata MP

Government Member



Member

Hon. Salote Radrodro MP

Opposition Member



Member

Hon. Dr Ratu Atonio Lalabalavu MP

Opposition Member

CHAIRPERSON'S FOREWORD

I am pleased to present the report of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs on the annual review of the Consumer Council of Fiji for the year ended 31 July 2018.

This review was undertaken in accordance with Standing Order 109(2)(b) which mandates the committee to look into issues related to health, education, social services, labour, culture and media. The review covered the period 01 August 2017 to 31 July 2018 and looked at nine key areas, namely, the Consumer Council's administration; structure; budgetary allocation; programmes and activities; policies; challenges; highlights; priorities for the coming years; and its implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The committee first met on 2 and 3 September 2020 to deliberate on and formulate questions pertaining to the 2017-2018 Annual Report of the Consumer Council of Fiji. We were unable to conduct a public hearing with the Council due to COVID-19 restrictions put in place. In order to comply with health directives and protocols on public gathering and social distancing, the committee accepted a written response from Consumer Council in lieu of a face-to-face hearing.

Following our deliberations on the written response, we wrote to the Council requesting for further clarification on other related matters. Upon receipt of all relevant information from the Consumer Council on the committee's queries, the committee compiled its findings and subsequently endorsed its report in February.

At this juncture, I wish to thank the Chief Executive Officer of the Consumer Council of Fiji Ms Seema Shandil, and her staff for their assistance in this review process. I also extend my gratitude to my Committee colleagues namely: Hon. George Vegnathan (Deputy Chairperson), Hon. Alipate Nagata, Hon. Salote Radrodoro and Hon. Dr Ratu Atonio Lalabalavu for their contributions during the committee's deliberations.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, I commend this Report to Parliament and request all members of this august House to take note of the Report.



Hon. Viam Pillay
Chairperson

LIST OF ACRONYMS

- MP - Member or Parliament
- MSAF - Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji
- SDGs - Sustainable Development Goals
- SSNC - Swedish Society for Nature Conservation

RECOMMENDATION:

The Standing Committee on Social Affairs has conducted the annual review of the Consumer Council of Fiji for 2017-2018, and recommends that the House take note of its report.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The 2017-2018 Annual Report of the Consumer Council of Fiji was tabled in Parliament during the July 2020 meeting and referred to the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for its scrutiny.

Standing Orders 109(2)(b) allows Standing Committee on Social Affairs to examine matters related to health, education, social services, labour, culture and media.

Furthermore, Standing Orders 110(1)(c) authorises the Standing Committee to “*scrutinise the government departments with responsibility within the committee's subject area, including by investigating, inquiring into, and making recommendations relating to any aspect of such a department's administration, legislation or proposed legislative program, budget, rationalisation, restructuring, functioning, organisation, structure and policy formulation.*”

1.1 Committee Procedure

We met on 2nd and 3rd September 2020 to deliberate on and formulate questions pertaining to the 2017-2018 Annual Report of the Consumer Council of Fiji. We were unable to conduct a public hearing with the Council due to COVID-19 restrictions put in place around the country. In order to comply with health directives and social distancing measures in place, we requested for a written response from the Consumer Council in lieu of an annual review hearing.

Following our deliberations on its written response on 3rd and 4th February 2021, we wrote to the Council requesting for further clarification on other related matters. Upon receipt of all relevant information from the Consumer Council on the committee's queries, we compiled our findings on the Annual Report and subsequently endorsed it in the latter part of February.

We received written and supplementary responses from the Consumer Council for this annual review. They are available on the Parliament website, at the following link: <http://www.parliament.gov.fj/committees/standing-committee-on-social-affairs/>

2.0 ABOUT THE COUNCIL

The principle purpose of the Council is to provide the protection and promotion of consumer interests, informing consumers of their rights and responsibilities and mobilising consumers to achieve fairness and safety in the marketplace.

3.0 COMMITTEE'S OBSERVATIONS AND AREAS OF CONCERN

3.1 Need for Greater Advocacy to Consumers

One of the major challenges faced by the Council to improve consumers' ability to make informed decisions is changing the mindsets of Fijian consumers and encouraging them to become more assertive in exercising their rights and responsibilities. The Council has tried to address this challenge by arming consumers with practical knowledge and skills through mobile units, community visits, workshops, school visits and creating awareness on the different medium's consumers can use to get in touch with the Council. Through school visits, the Council ensures that young consumers are also aware of the rights and responsibilities – ensuring that there will be smart consumers now and also in the future.

The Council also has a toll-free number which consumers can use to contact the Council free of charge. Another medium that the Council has recently launched is the Consumer Council of Fiji mobile app which provides consumers an easy and convenient platform to lodge complaints and access latest consumer advisories and news.

Recommendations

1. That the Council strengthen its partnership with relevant Ministries, Departments, and other agencies in advocacy programs and to ensure improved compliance of best and fair practices by the traders for the protection of consumer rights.
2. That the Council continue to strengthen its ongoing consumer advocacy programs and to increase better and effective outreach.

3.2 Educating and Informing Traders and Service Providers about Consumer Protection

Consumer protection relies not only on having educated consumers but also ensuring that traders are compliant with consumer legislation. Therefore, it is not only imperative to inform consumers of their rights but also educate traders about the role they play in consumer protection. It is in the best interests of traders to ensure that they engage in fair trade practices.

The Council informed us that in the 2017-2018 period, a total of 168 traders were discovered with issues relating to misleading and incorrect pricing, price control violations, improper labelling of products, food product quality and safety, and unhygienic practises. In the course of the year, the Council continued to conduct workshops for traders and service providers to educate them on their legal obligations, redress mechanisms and examples of unjust trade practices. These workshops were designed to provide traders with a platform to understand the expectations of the consumers and how to improve their services.

Recommendations

1. That the Council strengthen its partnership with relevant trading associations, traders and service providers to ensure a high level of compliance with consumer legislation and consumer best practices.
2. That the Council partner with relevant Ministries, Departments and other enforcement agencies to ensure that they comply with relevant consumer legislation and best practices for the protection of consumer interests.

3.3 Difficulties Faced in Providing Redress to Consumers

The Council also on some occasions encounters difficulties in providing amicable redress to consumers due to some traders being very unethical showing disregard to consumer rights. We note that such matters are escalated to relevant enforcement authorities for relevant actions. Furthermore, the Council makes submissions to the government and relevant stakeholders for policy changes in order to protect the rights and interests of Fijian consumers.

Recommendation

1. That the Council strengthen its capacity and ability to resolve consumer complaints through Alternative Dispute Resolution, advisory services and legal representation.

3.4 High Staff Turnover

High staff turnover was another challenge faced by the Council in the course of the year. The rate of unplanned staff turnover in 2017-2018 was 52%. The Council informed us that it is an equal opportunity employer and also recruits new graduates and providing a variety of platforms to equip them with skills and knowledge – making them highly desirable by other employers. We note that the staff turnover has minimized to some extent but cannot be stopped completely as staff continue to move out for their own career developments and greener pastures.

Recommendation

1. That the Council review its Human Resource policy to include attractive packages so as to ensure high staff retention.

3.5 Poor Standard of Inter-Island Shipping Services

Issues relating to shipping services is a growing concern for the Council as in many instances, such issues have placed a financial burden on consumers and also compromises the health and safety of consumers utilizing shipping services. Therefore, the Council has approached shipping service providers on multiple occasions in order to conduct workshops and awareness sessions however, we note that no positive response has been received from these service providers. The Council continues to be adamant in creating awareness on such consumer issues using different media platforms in order to relay the rights of consumers and issues being faced by consumers in regards to shipping services.

The Council informed us that it has met with MSAF and the Ministry of Transport and made submissions recommending their intervention to address growing shipping services issues as well as possible amendments to the Maritime Safety Act in order to protect the rights and interests of consumers. Flagged with all the issues, the Ministry of Transport has formed a taskforce to develop a Maritime Travellers Rights Policy. Furthermore, the Council is also part of the National Steering Committee which will comprehensively cover all consumer issues relating to shipping services and develop their rights accordingly.

Recommendations

1. That the Council, as a member of the National Steering Committee, aggressively pursue and lobby for support to bring about necessary changes to resolve shipping services issues.
2. That the Council provide an update from the National Steering Committee in its next Annual Report.

3.6 Pending Response to the Standing Committee's Report on the Council's Performance for the 2016-2017 Financial Year

We asked the Council to explain why it had not provided a substantive response, through its line Minister, to the standing committee's report on its performance for the 2016-2017 Financial Year, as provided for in Section 121 (6) (b) of the Standing Orders of Parliament. The Council confirmed that it was enquiring with its line Ministry on this issue and that it would revert to the

committee upon the receipt of a response from the Ministry. As at the date of the compilation of this report, the committee had not received any response from the Council on this issue.

Recommendation

1. That the Council continue to pursue with its line Ministry on the substantive response and include it in the next Annual Report.

4.0 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

This section of the Report will focus on how the Council has endeavoured to progress the Sustainable Development Goals and how it has mainstreamed the SDGs into its programmes and activities.

Goals Relevant to the Council's Work...

Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

The Council makes submissions and policy recommendations to government ministries and relevant bodies to bring about changes in policies regarding prices of essential items or basic necessities. For instance, in the period under review the Council made submissions on the control of prices for basic food items and pharmaceutical products and price control during natural disasters. These submissions ensured that Fijian consumers are able to afford basic food items and reduce the level of poverty.

Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

The Council is a strong advocate of providing healthy and hygienic environment to Fijian consumers whether it be while shopping, in public places or in public transport. The Council also receives complaint regarding such issues as well as regarding expired, spoiled and unmerchantable food products which comprises the health and safety of consumers. Additionally, the Council conducted a project on non-communicable diseases in the period under review. The Council is also the Board member for "Alliance for Healthy Living".

Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

In 2017, 71% of women were in managerial positions. Five of seven managerial positions were held by women.

Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Through its awareness campaigns the Council has been advocating on and educating consumers to make sustainable choices. The Consumer Council of Fiji is part of a global campaign and a rising movement against unsustainable consumerism along with Consumers International - the membership organisation for consumer groups around the world.

...Challenges faced in their Implementation

The challenge was mainly in terms of changing the mindset of consumers towards making more sustainable choices.

...and how the Council is Prioritizing Action on the SDGs

The Council has become a strong advocate of sustainable development and has conducted a number of projects to promote it. This includes:

1. Combating Non-Communicable Diseases – Anne Fransen Grant 2017
2. Reducing Exposure to Pesticides – Consumers International 2016
3. Harmful Effects of Plastic Bags on Fiji’s Marine Ecosystem – Green Action Fund 2019
4. Project Solesolevaki

Through this grant, United National Development Program and the University of the South Pacific aimed to place the Pacific in a better position to address needs of the future and enhance regional and international cooperation. In doing so, it promotes inclusive growth *Leaving No One Behind* including the participation of women, youth, and people living with disabilities.

This grant was a one-off fund allocated to support meaningful conversations that have impacts on the lives of our people in response to the Sustainable Development Goals such as the climate crisis, inequality and other major development challenges. The Council was one of the six winners to secure the fund of \$USD5000 and used the grant to implement the *Project Solesolevaki* to educate urban and rural consumers to be self-sufficient and assist others in the community to beat food insecurity during crisis such as COVID-19 and Tropical Cyclones. The project was successfully implemented in the Serua Province.

5. Back to my Roots

The Back to my roots project, funded by the Green Action Fund, was a collaborative project by Consumers International and the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation. The project was implemented in the Lomaivuna Sector in the province of Naitasiri. Through this project, the Council created awareness on the responsibility of communities towards the environment, educated them on good practices towards improving and restoring ecosystem by employing sustainable farming techniques that promotes biodiversity and the importance of sharing knowledge in villages. The project not only helped create a sharing community that fostered food security and alleviated financial distress but will also equipped Fijian consumers to better face adversities posed by any crises. The current

COVID 19 pandemic has taught Fijians of the need to be resilient in the face of crises and this is the essence of this project.

5.0 THE COUNCIL'S OVERALL PERFORMANCE

We applaud the work of the Consumer Council of Fiji in protecting and promoting consumer interests. The Consumer continues to expand its means to reach consumers so as to inform them of their rights and responsibilities and helping achieve fairness and safety in the marketplace. We note the many achievements of the Council in the 2017-2018 financial year such as, resolving various consumer complaints, providing redress to consumers, and conducting workshops for traders and service providers on consumer protection.

This report also highlights areas that the Council can improve on so as to make a bigger impact in its advocacy role. To this effect, a total of nine recommendations have been made by the committee and we urge the Council to consider these so as to provide optimum service delivery.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS' SIGNATURE

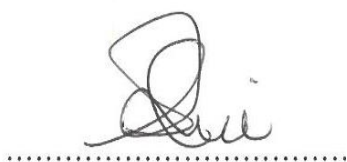
We, the Members of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, hereby agree with the contents of this report:



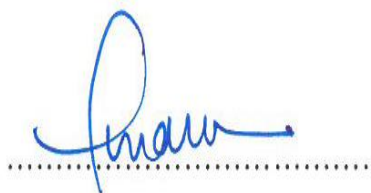
Hon. Viam Pillay
(Chairperson)



Hon. George Vignathan
(Deputy Chairperson)



Hon. Alipate Nagata
(Member)



Hon. Salote Radrodoro
(Member)



Hon. Dr. Ratu Atonio Lalabalavu
(Member)

APPENDIX

Published written evidence

Written evidence and supplementary information was received from Consumer Council of Fiji and can be viewed on the Parliament website at the following link:
<http://www.parliament.gov.fj/committees/standing-committee-on-social-affairs/>