



Investing in rural people

**FIJI**

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**Pacific Islands Rural and  
Agricultural Stimulus Facility**

## Boosting local food systems

In Fiji, a major consequence of the global COVID-19 pandemic was the unprecedented job loss related to the cessation of tourism-related activities. More than 100,000 airline, hotel and restaurant workers, taxi drivers and other tourism industry workers lost their jobs – about a third of Fiji's workforce. Farmers that supplied restaurants or made direct sales to tourists saw demand for their goods plummet. Movement restrictions, curfews and closures made it difficult for smallholders to sell produce in local markets while skyrocketing air freight costs and fewer flights hobbled fresh produce exports.

As unemployment increased, market access dried up and food prices increased, many Fijians fell back on agriculture to see them through tough times. Backyard gardens in urban and peri-urban areas began to proliferate, cottage industry food processing grew, and some Fijians returned to rural villages and began or resumed farming.

COVID-19 emphasized the importance of Pacific agriculture for both food security and economic development, as well as the crucial role of domestic food systems in providing resilience to shocks, self-sufficiency and insurance against food and nutrition insecurity.

In Fiji, as in several other Pacific Island countries, the need to innovate and adapt domestic and regional agrifood systems is increasingly acknowledged as a core recovery strategy, making the IFAD approaches adopted over the past decades even more relevant. IFAD, through its Rural Poor Stimulus Facility, and the Australian Government have teamed up to form the Pacific Islands Rural and Agriculture Stimulus Facility (PIRAS), a three-year COVID-19 recovery programme that emphasizes food self-reliance, improved nutrition, and the development of sustainable, equitable agricultural livelihood opportunities for rural communities in Fiji and five other Pacific Island countries.

As restrictions ease and borders reopen in Fiji, PIRAS is helping more than 3,200 farmers get back on their feet and increase their income through crop diversification, high-quality farming inputs, improved agricultural practices, engagement in food processing and expanded access to new markets.







## Strengthening local food production capacity

**Eroni Qolikitoga** is from the village of Navai in the province of Naitasiri. He has been an off-season farmer for more than eight years, growing carrots, dhanias, radish, tomatoes, purple cabbage and potatoes. Selling his vegetables in the local market provides him with the income he needs to support his family.

When the pandemic began, Eroni, like many farmers, had trouble selling his produce and making ends meet. Many Fijians who lost their jobs found themselves with reduced purchasing power. This, coupled with food price increases was enough to lower demand for fresh foods and other basic food items.

Through PIRAS, Eroni received training to enhance his farm's soil health and learn how to extract and save seeds, which improved his farm conditions and reduced his costs. PIRAS also provided new varieties of vegetable seeds including long beans, which Eroni now cultivates and sells along with his other produce in the local market.





“This intervention has been very helpful to me. Farming has become costly, and I really appreciate the help from PIRAS. It has raised our standard for how we look after our farm, especially when it comes to seeds.”

Eroni Qolikitoga



**Sikeli Kunagudru** and **Inoke Sauvocia** are farmers from the village of Keyasi in the province of Navosa. Sikeli is the chairman of the Navosa cluster farm cooperative that was established with PIRAS funding. The project supported the cooperative to strengthen its marketing and earnings potential by helping its members diversify and increase their production and to develop stronger domestic and international market linkages.

The farmers received planting materials, including cassava (a staple crop consumed locally) and turmeric (a crop with good export earning potential). However, the chemical fertilizers they had always used in their sugar cane and vegetable production were either no longer available because of COVID-related supply chain interruptions or, when they were, became prohibitively expensive. PIRAS provided the cluster farmers with a biogas unit that is enabling them to produce 100 litres of organic liquid fertilizer per day, reducing or even eliminating their reliance on costly imported fertilizers.

“One of the major challenges faced here is the continuous drought and extreme heat from the sun that kills our crops. The biogas unit has helped us extremely in adding organic matter that boosts the growth of our crops. We have seen the great impacts from PIRAS in this short period and we would like to extend this to a wider scale.”

Sikeli Kunagudru







HOMEBIOGSS









During the lockdown, life in the village was tough, movement was restricted, and many rural farmers could not afford to buy basic food items from the store to feed their families. Farming was an important fallback for many Fijians during the pandemic and seeds, seedlings and fertilizers were in short supply.

Access to farm inputs was further constrained by rising fuel prices, which made supply trips to Sigatoka more costly. It became impossible for **Mereseini** and other farmers to access the planting materials and other agricultural inputs they needed.

PIRAS provided highland farmers with vegetable seeds and training that allowed them to grow food for their own consumption and sale at local markets.

“I learned how to extract my own vegetable seeds. This is something that we can practise so we don’t heavily rely on packaged seeds, plus it is readily available.”

Mereseini Naola Takeiwai



## Promoting food sovereignty through crop diversification

For more than a decade, **Aliti Mere** was a sugarcane farmer in Marinitawa, Ba where she lives with her family in a small agricultural settlement. With support from PIRAS, a farmer cluster was formed in Marinitawa to help strengthen farmers' skills and knowledge, and improve coordination within the agricultural value chains. Aliti is an active member.

The Marinitawa cluster practices *solesolevaki* – the act of coming together to work and share knowledge – by working on each other's farms twice a week to help with planting and farm operations. PIRAS supported the Marinitawa cluster with land preparation and distribution of planting materials with the aim of increasing production capacity for the export market.

The cluster assisted Aliti Mere in engaging in new crop production by planting turmeric and cassava for the first time on her farm. She and other women farmers from the Marinitawa cluster were trained by PIRAS in food processing where they learned ways to make cassava flour and fruit jams. Aliti is now using these food processing skills to decrease her reliance on imported flour. In the future, she hopes to shift from being a subsistence farmer to a semi-commercial farmer by taking advantage of emerging opportunities to export turmeric and other products to the United States market.







“I’ve learned a lot from the food processing training. During the pandemic, the price for flour increased and I’m thankful that I now know how to make my own flour from cassava. It saves me a lot of money so I can purchase other basic items for my family.”

Aliti Mere









**Feretariki Bureqe**le is a 20-year-old fourth generation farmer who lives in Marinitawa with his father, mother and siblings. He plants turmeric, pineapples and cassava on his farm. During the pandemic, Feretariki had trouble selling his pineapples, due to the decline in tourism and drop in demand. This was a major loss during that period, and, for many farmers, a hard lesson learned on the danger of relying on a single crop. Many farmers also lack their own tools and equipment, which are important for improving production efficiency. PIRAS provided Feretariki with his own agricultural tools including a knapsack sprayer, hoes and forks so he could focus on farming rather than searching for equipment to borrow.

In addition to his own farming, Feretareki oversees the cultivation of 2,000 breadfruit seedlings in the new community nursery established by PIRAS. Once mature, the breadfruit seedlings will be distributed to other farming clusters in Yakete and Navosa. Breadfruit has great potential to address hunger and malnutrition across the region and farmers are being supported to integrate this superfood into a sustainable agroforestry system to increase food diversity and food security resilience.

“Technical advice from the PIRAS training has pushed us farmers to turn our focus towards long-term crops such as breadfruit. Farming clusters are now intercropping breadfruit with which they hope to meet growing demands for gluten-free flour and diversifying our farms, creating a ‘food forest’ to feed the next generation.”

Feretariki Bureqe



**Filipe Baituwawa** is a 30-year-old youth farmer from the village of Sawena in the province of Navosa. Prior to the pandemic he was planting kava and banana on his farm. But during the COVID-19 lockdown life in the highlands was not easy, prices of food items went up and members of the community had to cultivate a diversity of crops for their own consumption. Through PIRAS, farmers like Filipe in Fiji's rural Sigatoka highlands were provided with vegetable seeds, manure and fencing so they could grow fresh vegetables with high nutritional value for both home consumption and the market.

To support farmers' ability to cultivate and benefit from these new crops, PIRAS also extended training on farm management, seed extraction and post-harvest handling. Filipe, who is a community facilitator in his village, will share his new knowledge with other farmers in the area to promote safe food handling, preservation and distribution, and reduce food losses.







“PIRAS has opened my eyes to see that there are so many opportunities in agriculture that youths can tap into to financially support themselves and their families. We just need the appropriate training and mentorship.”

Filipe Baituwawa



“Training and technical advice provided by PIRAS were very helpful and were also a great opportunity to build relationships and exchange knowledge with other farmers in Lautoka district. As business at the local market picks up again, I am selling my dhanias, eggplants, chilli and tomatoes. Money saved goes to my son who will go back to school in February of this year.”

Sheik Ifraaz Saheb







## Increasing access to locally grown nutritious foods

As a fourth-generation farmer who was brought up on a sugar cane farm in Naviyago, Lautoka, 36-year-old **Sheik Ifraaz Saheb** had to be creative to persuade his father to move away from mono-cropping. Sheik, who wanted to try vegetable cultivation, leased a plot of land nearby where he and his wife, Farah, planted coriander or dhanian, long beans and bongo chilis. Since the vegetable growing cycle is shorter than that of sugar cane and the farm gate prices are higher, they experienced their first sales within a few months. Seeing was believing. Sheik's father gave him a 1-acre plot on their family farm to continue his vegetable cultivation.

During the pandemic, small-scale vegetable farmers like Sheik faced price increases for seeds, fertilizer and materials. PIRAS supported Sheik with shade cloth, and vegetable seedlings including breadfruit, eggplant and tomatoes to help diversify his farm. Sales from their vegetables have already allowed them to purchase new farm equipment which will reduce their labour costs.

Sheik and his wife also received training on farm management, food processing and value chains to build their farming skills and knowledge. One important practice they incorporated immediately was intercropping beans within the sugar cane rows. This young couple then shared their knowledge with other farmers in the area, five of whom have already adopted intercropping. Farmer-to-farmer exchange can be a game changer in transitioning farming practices towards more sustainable, climate-smart, nutrition-sensitive choices.



More Fijians have taken up farming since the beginning of the pandemic and need to develop their skills, utilize sustainable practices and become successful farmers. Supporting them is part of PIRAS' long-term investment in improving food and nutrition security and production for domestic consumption.

**Apisaki Nadalo**, a 62-year-old farmer in Kabisi, Nadroga, is a retired hotel worker who lives with her husband and 12-year-old grandson. For Apisaki, farming began as a hobby. Eventually, she leased a former sugar cane field where she and her husband decided to try out other crops. Initially, they were growing pawpaw (papaya) and 'Duruka' (*Saccharum edule*).

When PIRAS helped with land preparation, provided diverse fruit and vegetable seedlings and suckers, and offered training on nursery management, plant propagation, composting, and pests and diseases, it was a great opportunity for Apisaki to learn new concepts and apply them on her farm.

“PIRAS was a God-sent blessing to me personally as I was experimenting with things on my farm and had very little knowledge of farming.”

Apisaki Nadalo







Through PIRAS, Apisaki has teamed up with **Subhashni Lata**, a 45-year-old single mother of four children. Farming together eases the workload and allows them to share information and support each other. With PIRAS support they have fenced their farm to protect it from roaming livestock and have received seeds and seedlings to plant pineapple, papaya, breadfruit and citrus plants.

Both have experienced how the power of mutual support and knowledge-sharing can increase income, develop a stable rural livelihood and contribute to ensuring food security.






“The skills PIRAS has taught us we can just take and use by ourselves. I am using them, and it is fruitful for me.”

Subhashni Lata





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