



Welcome to the Reserve Bank of Fiji's Public Awareness column. Over the next few weeks we will cover a series of articles on financial education in Fiji and how it contributes to financial inclusion.

PLANTING SEEDS OF CHANGE

Could teaching Financial Education in Fiji's schools help tackle non-communicable diseases (NCDs)? While the link may not be obvious, that's proving to be the case.

Swami Vivekananda College in Nadi has combined a crop cultivation programme designed to promote healthy eating with Commercial Studies lessons that teach students to be financially independent. As part of this initiative, students are given vegetable seeds and encouraged to start backyard gardens to grow vegetables, determine prices, prepare and package their vegetables for sale and to reinvest or save the proceeds.

Roshni Panda, a Year 10 student at Swami Vivekananda College, caught the gardening and entrepreneurial bug after being given vegetable seeds to plant. She has found that her small backyard garden has a number of benefits. It provides a bonding and de-stressing activity for the whole family when they work on it together. Whilst, gardening gets each family member outside every day to do some physical activity, the Pandas also have access to fresh fruit and vegetables for their diet. Both contribute towards helping reduce the risk of NCDs. The garden also helps reduce household expenses and the sale of surplus produce brings in supplementary income for the family.

The gardening activity has helped Roshni build her confidence around money and she has set a goal of saving for her tertiary education. Roshni plans on becoming a pharmacist. Today, in addition to growing and selling vegetables, she babysits the neighbourhood kids, and makes and sells artwork. On average, she's able to save around \$50 a month, which she banks. "Even though I'm not taking a career path in Commerce, Financial Education is going to help me," she says. "I can teach my children how to save money, how to maximise income and live a healthier lifestyle. Financial Education is going to stay with me for life."

Taught in primary and secondary schools throughout Fiji since 2013, the Australian government-funded Financial Education (FinEd) programme aims to produce financially competent individuals by teaching them how to look after their money, save and make it grow. FinEd lessons have been integrated into English, Mathematics, Social Studies, Commercial Studies, Accounting and Economics and taught at consecutive school levels from Year 1 through to 12.

Like Roshni, many other students in Fiji are growing and selling vegetables for additional income, and foregoing or reducing junk food consumption in order to meet financial goals. While health is not a core focus or objective of FinEd exercises, it has emerged as a welcome byproduct.



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Primary school students Merewai, Asenaca and Solomone Dilevulevu at Nasekula District School in Labasa took what they learned in class to help their mother save up towards a new family home. The family minimised their household food costs by starting a backyard garden growing fruit, vegetables and root crops and now have a variety of healthy foods for each meal. In addition, the sale of surplus produce helped bring in additional income for the family.

Achieving this lifelong dream wasn't without sacrifice, says Mrs Dilevulevu, but she's glad she did it with her three children. "They learned how to struggle, how to budget money and what comes first in life: the important things," she says. Once their new home was built and paid for, the Dilevulevu children didn't stop there. They're continuing to work in the family garden, growing and selling produce and saving towards their education. And it's making them healthier in the process.

Non-communicable diseases or "lifestyles diseases" such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart attacks and strokes are brought on by unhealthy diets and lack of exercise. For a number of years now, Fiji and other island nations in the Pacific region have been battling NCDs, where people are dying at a much younger age due to these preventable diseases.

The poor are often worst affected as families with low household incomes choose cheaper, nutritionally inferior foods. NCDs are seen as a multi-sectoral issue and not just a "health" issue. Tackling them requires all sectors, including education, to work together. This is where Financial Education is playing a small but important part.

FinEd is an initiative under the Pacific Financial Inclusion Programme, a regional effort helping low-income households gain access to sustainable financial services and to empower consumers through Financial Education. In Fiji, FinEd is led by the Reserve Bank and implemented by the Ministry of Education, who believe that through improved financial competency, young women and men will leave school with the necessary skills, knowledge and behaviour to enable them to interact confidently with the financial economy and to contribute positively to their families, the community and the country.

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