

Bia-I-Cake Women's Co-operative: Paving the way for sustainable community livelihoods

The Fiji Commerce and Employer's Federation's (FCEF) business accelerator program, the Fiji Enterprise Engine (FEE), with support from the Australian Government, is helping the Bia-I-Cake Women's Co-operative to achieve its business goals and support its community in Vanua Levu.

The Bia-I-Cake Women's Co-operative started as an informal women's club with 10 members coming together under the traditional *solesolevaki* (coming together for the common good of the community) practice to help each other during the height of the Covid pandemic in 2020. It has now become a fully-fledged business boasting 28 members located in Bia-I-Cake, a settlement in Nagigi Village on Vanua Levu.

"During Covid, many of our community members lost their income sources and relied primarily on communal farming and seafood for sustenance and survival. The club helped raise funds to meet our members' needs, especially for children's school supplies and rotated *solesolevaki* activities to support households on a weekly basis," 40-year-old Alisi Lutu, the group's current Chairperson shared.

"The pandemic showed us that we needed to create alternative and sustainable livelihoods for ourselves and our families. Most of our members are mothers with young families who needed support and be good examples for their children," Alisi shared.

"We knew that with the right project and the right business model, we could make a big impact in our community and decided to make this the focus of our women's group."

To help them realise their group's vision, Alisi and Veniana Nawaco (a board member) registered for the 2022 FEE programme. FEE is the first private sector led business accelerator programme delivered by FCEF in partnership with Australia's Market Development Facility (MDF).

"FEE came in at the right time for us because we were just transitioning to an established business entity and ready to take our projects to the next level. We felt this programme was a worth-while investment for our group and so far, we have had no regrets," Alisi said.

The Bia-I-Cake Women's Co-operative became a registered club in late 2020 under the Ministry of Women and Poverty Alleviation and soon after became a recipient of a two-year grant from the United Nations Development Programme Global Environmental Facility's Small Grants. The grant was used to establish two income-generating projects in aquaculture and coconut processing.

For their aquaculture project, the women established a new 600sqm fishpond, installed a water piping system and purchased material for maintenance, fish-feed, and set aside money to cover recurring operational expenses. They also invested in upskilling their members through training on the care and management of their fish stocks, including tilapia and grass carp. Supported by the Ministry of Fisheries, the group has now also become a member of an aquaculture farmers' cluster in Savusavu. To date, the club has reaped five successful harvests of tilapia, earning over \$450 per harvest. While a roadside stall was set up near the pond to assist with fish sales, the majority of sales have been through direct and onsite, word of mouth and online marketing through Facebook.

This year, they intend to integrate duck farming and stock freshwater prawns as an additional aquaculture product and expand their marketing to target business clients.

"As a vulnerable coastal community, our aquaculture project is aimed at creating a sustainable revenue generating stream that our members are familiar with and to ease their dependence on our ocean resources for income," Alisi said.

“When we started, it was difficult getting our members to commit to a schedule that involved managing the fishponds and our other activities, as they had to balance this with their daily family commitments and community responsibilities to the church and the vanua.

This has changed over the last two years as the community adapted and we realised our long-term vision through the short-term impact of our work in the community. This has been an eye-opening experience for us. It has become part of the household responsibility and many family members are now actively contributing to ensure our members fulfil their roles for the group.”

For the coconut processing project, the group conducted extensive desk and market research on the different types of value-added coconut products. Supported by the Ministry of Agriculture in Savusavu, a survey of its coconut plantation was done and a coconut rehabilitation programme was initiated. They also engaged a food technology scientist to conduct online training for some of their members in food-handling, harvesting and production techniques to improve their coconut processing skills.

“Coconut is our green gold in Vanua Levu. We have this resource in abundance, but we have yet to see it utilised to its full potential,” Alisi said.

“The coconut value-added production will be a bigger project for us hence our focus on research and upskilling, so we are well prepared to implement this project.”

Most recently, they were awarded a grant from the Women’s Fund Fiji (WFF) with assistance from the Australian Government, Equality Fun and Mama Cash to support their ongoing work to empower women in rural and remote communities.

The Bia-I-Cake Women’s Cooperative is one of the 14 MSMEs graduating from the FEE programme this week after an intensive 6-months of classroom learning, one-on-one mentorship, site-visits and business networking.

“FEE has been a big help for us as a new business and was the beginning of many blessings we’ve experienced,” Alisi said.

The programme was able to secure a partial scholarship for some of the FEE participants, including the Bia-I-Cake Women’s Cooperative. And apart from the great curriculum and information, the co-operative has also leveraged the networks created through the other participants, local business trainers and organisations in (or linked to) the FEE programme.

A fellow FEE participant helped the co-operative design a unique business logo, while another participant helped them establish their monthly “market-day” events at the Bia-I-Cake settlement as an additional revenue stream to their existing projects. On these market days the women sell infused coconut oils, sasa brooms, mats, handicrafts, food, tilapia fish and fresh fish.

They were also introduced to the National Council for Persons with Disabilities Centre where the women were able to source a wheelchair for a four-year-old child in their village. They also secured an affordable office space at the newly established Williamson Business Centre, which now supports the co-operative’s Suva-based operations, in-line with their growth plans.

“The friendship and networks FEE has created have been our biggest takeaway. Every time we share our experiences or issues with the business trainers or fellow participants, someone always comes through with a solution or supportive shoulder to lean on,” Alisi said.

The programme has helped Alisi and Veniana to develop a revenue generation strategy, human resource plan and understand their financial needs to implement their plans for the coconut processing project.

The Bia-I-Cake Women's Co-operative has established a clear pathway to achieve its goals. They are now looking for partners to help build their coconut processing facility in Vanua Levu and have identified potential businesses to approach to secure markets for their products.

For more information on the Bia-I-Cake Women's Cooperative visit their Facebook page (@biaicakewomen) or email on biaicakewomen@gmail.com.