# National Budget Forum

## The People's Dialogue on the 2025-26 Budget

Dialogue Fiji

Funded by the European Union

Democracy for All
Strengthening Inclusive Governance in Fiji

**Date: Thursday, 3 July 2025**
**Time: 6:00 PM – 8:30 PM**
**Venue: Lower Hall, Civic Auditorium, Suva**

# Proceedings Report

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## 1. Background & Purpose

Dialogue Fiji, supported by the European Union under the DASIG-Fiji ("Democracy for All: Strengthening Inclusive Governance in Fiji") project, convened "The People's Dialogue on the 2025–2026 Budget" to:

- Democratise budget discourse by bringing together citizens, experts, and decision-makers.
- Foster informed public scrutiny of national budget priorities.
- Strengthen civic participation and social accountability in fiscal policymaking.
- Provide a platform for diverse voices—from grassroots to government—to discuss the implications of budgetary choices.

Since 2023, Dialogue Fiji has hosted this annual post-budget forum immediately following the Honourable Minister for Finance's budget presentation, capitalising on heightened public and policymaker attention to maximize the impact of dialogue and critique.

Nearly one hundred participants, including representatives from civil society, business/private sector, diplomatic corps, multilateral agencies, senior government officials, heads of state institutions, youth and women's groups, academics, students, faith-based organisations, media, and other stakeholders, attended the National Budget Forum.

## 2. Programme Overview

| **Agenda Item** | **Speaker(s)** |
|---|---|
| Welcome & Housekeeping | Ms. Archana Murti (Master of Ceremonies) |
| Welcome Address | Mr. Nilesh Lal (Executive Director, Dialogue Fiji) |
| Introduction of Keynote Speaker | Mr. Aman Nath (Dialogue Fiji) |
| Keynote Address: Budget Framing & Highlights | Hon. Prof. Biman Prasad (Deputy Prime Minister & Minister for Finance) |
| Panel Discussion Introduction | Dr. Shailendra Singh (Moderator) |
| Panellist 1: Private Sector Perspective | Mr. Edward Bernard (CEO, Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation) |
| Panellist 2: Civil Society Perspective | Ms. Vani Catanasiga (Executive Director, Fiji Council of Social Services) |
| Panellist 3: Industry Viewpoint | Mr. Ram Bajekal (Group CEO, Golden Manufacturers) |
| Panellist 4: Grassroots Lens | Mrs. Mereoni Taginadavui (Soqosoqo Vakamarama, Bua) |
| Open Floor – Question & Answer Session | Moderator, members of the audience and Panellists |
| Announcement of Video & Art Competition Winners | Ms. Archana Murti (MC) |
| Closing Remarks & Vote of Thanks | Ms. Archana Murti (MC) |

## 3. Biographies of Speakers

**a. Master of Ceremonies: Archana Murti** – Programme Manager, Dialogue Fiji.

**b. Dialogue Fiji: Mr. Nilesh Lal** – Executive Director, Dialogue Fiji. Holds BA (Politics), MA (Governance), and postgraduate credentials; with extensive experience in democratic strengthening and electoral advocacy, research, and policy.

**c. Chief Guest & Keynote Speaker: Honourable Professor Biman Prasad**– Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics; spent 28 years at The University of the South Pacific (USP) holding various positions, namely Dean of the Faculty of Business and Economics and Professor of Economics; Member of Parliament and Leader of National Federation Party (NFP) since 2014; and former Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee (2014-2016).

**d. Panel Moderator: Dr. Shailendra Singh** - Associate Professor & Coordinator of Journalism Programme at the USP with two decades of expertise in regional media research and training.

**Profile of Panellists**

1. **Edward Bernard** – Chief Executive Officer, Fiji Commerce & Employers Federation. Former International Labour Organization (ILO) consultant; with background in private sector/MSME development.
2. **Vani Catanasiga** – Executive Director, Fiji Council of Social Services. Accountability advocate; CSO representative on National Disaster Management Council.
3. **Ram Bajekal** – Group Chief Executive Officer, Golden Manufacturers Fiji. Chartered Accountant; Fulbright alumni (CMU); with more than forty years of experience across manufacturing, plantations and nutraceuticals industries.
4. **Mereoni Taginadavui** – Grassroots Leader, Soqosoqo Vakamarama, Bua. A breast cancer survivor; community volunteer since 2013; a former electoral candidate and an aspiring candidate in the 2026 General Elections.

## 4. Proceedings and Key Insights

### 4.1 Opening and Welcome Remarks

**Speaker:** Ms. Archana Murti (Master of Ceremonies)

- Welcomed the Chief Guest and Keynote Speaker, Honourable Professor Biman Prasad (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics), Executive Director and Board Members of Dialogue Fiji, Panellists, diplomatic corps, senior Government officials, representatives of political parties, civil society, community workers, grassroots leaders, international organisations, media and members of the public.
- Reiterated the significance of the National Budget Forum which was to foster public discourse and participatory democracy.
- Thanked the European Union for their generous support through the DASIG-Fiji project.
- Invited the Executive Director of Dialogue Fiji, Mr. Nilesh Lal, to deliver the Welcome Address.

### 4.2 Welcome Address

**Speaker:** Mr. Nilesh Lal (Executive Director, Dialogue Fiji)

- Welcomed the Deputy Prime Minister, Panellists and representatives from the civil society, private sector, academia, development partners and members of the public.
- The National Budget Forum served to contextualise the national budget as one of the most important policy instruments in a democracy. It outlines what a government prioritises, how it allocates national resources and direction in which it steers the country's development.
- Stressed that the budget must not only be presented, but also interrogated, debated and understood by the people it ultimately affects.
- The National Budget Forum aimed to provide, as a public platform, diverse voices form civil society, private sector and ordinary citizens to examine what the 2025-2026 budget means for all of us. That is what we mean by the people's dialogue.
- This is the third consecutive year that Dialogue Fiji is hosting a public budget forum of this nature following announcement of the national budget.
- Conveyed appreciation to the Hon. Minister for Finance for attending all these forums since 2023 whereby his presence reflects his ongoing commitment to dialogue and engagement with the civil society.
- Asserted that at the heart of the scientific method is falsification—claims must be tested and subjected to scrutiny. Similarly, budget policy should not be beyond question as it must be open to alternative views.
- Emphasised that getting the economic policy right is absolutely critical. One bad policy choice can have very serious long-term consequences. It can derail growth, reduce investor confidence and hurt the most vulnerable.
- Concluded by expressing gratitude to the European Union for supporting democratic governance and civic participation in Fiji.

*Executive Director of Dialogue Fiji, Mr. Nilesh Lal, delivering the Welcome Address*

**4.3 Introduction of Chief Guest and Keynote Speaker**

**Speaker:** Mr. Aman Nath (Dialogue Fiji)

- Introduced **Hon. Professor Biman Prasad**, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.
- Summarised Hon. Prof. Prasad's credentials:
  - Origin: Dreketi, Vanua Levu
  - Tenure at The University of the South Pacific: 28 years. Held a number of high-profile positions such as the Dean of the Faculty of Business and Economics and Professor of Economics.
  - Consultancy: International Labour Organization & international bodies.
  - Political career: Member of Parliament (MP) and Leader of the National Federation Party (NFP) since 2014; former Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee (2014-2016).
- Invited Hon. Professor Biman Prasad to deliver the Keynote Address.

**4.4 Keynote Address**

**Speaker:** Hon. Prof. Biman Prasad (Deputy Prime Minister & Minister for Finance)

- Acknowledged the Executive Director of Dialogue Fiji, Mr. Nilesh Lal, and his team. Thanked Mr. Lal for organizing this forum.
- Recalled his transition from academia to politics a decade ago. Revealed that good policy can be good politics, and simultaneously, good economics can be good politics as well.
- Outlined the Four Pillars underpinning government approach:

1. Democracy
2. Media freedom
3. Human rights
4. Inclusivity—collaboration with private sector, civil society organizations and trade unions.

- **Examined the review of First Budget (2023-2024)**

  **1. Revenue Reforms**:
    - Value Added Tax (VAT) restructured: zero-rated on basic food items and prescribed medicines.
    - Closed tax loopholes in order to generate additional revenue.

  **2. Social Measures**:
  Social welfare allowances were increased by 15%; increased support to the agriculture sector with the dissemination of back-to-school grants.

  **3. Civil Service**:
  Salary increases ranged from 7-20%, the first since 2017.

  **4. Fiscal Outcomes**:
  Deficit decreased from 7% to 3.6%.
  Debt-to-GDP ratio were trimmed from 90% to 79%.

- **Review of Second Budget (2024-2025)**

1. Tax consistency: maintained the reforms of the first-budget (2023-2024) to ensure predictability.
2. Cost-of-Living:
    - Minimum wage hiked from FJD \$4 → \$4.50 → \$5.00.
    - Civil service raises.
3. Infrastructure focus: upgrades to health centres and divisional hospitals.
4. Results: revenue outperformed forecasts; while debt-to-GDP ratio were further trimmed to 76%.

- **Highlights of the Third Budget (2025-2026)**
- **Three Strategic Priorities**:
    1. **Address infrastructure deficit** – plans for a new national hospital, health centres, water projects (e.g. Viria Water Project and commissioning of boreholes in maritime zones).
    2. **Ease cost-of-living pressures** – VAT reduced to 12.5%, duty reductions on key food items and continuation of bus fare subsidies.
    3. **Prepare for global headwinds** – anticipatory spending amid tariff wars, including tensions in the Middle.
- **Fiscal Stance**:
    1. Expansionary deficit accounts for 6% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), with nominal GDP increasing from FJD \$11 billion → \$14.6 billion, hence, maintaining the debt-to-GDP ration below 80%.
    2. Growth projections range from 3.2%–3.4 %, with potential for increased growth if the investment climate prevails.
- **Social Justice**:
    1. Social welfare increased by 5%. There has been a total increase of 18% over the last three budgets.
    2. Civil service salary increased by 3%.

- Concluded by emphasising that moments like these are significant, as they focus public attention, engage policymakers, and create space for honest dialogue to shape policy.


*Deputy Prime Minister and Minister and Minister for Finance, Hon. Prof. Biman Prasad, delivers his Keynote Address during the National Budget Forum*

**4.5 Panel Discussion**

**Introduction by the Moderator**

Dr. Shailendra Singh, Associate Professor and Coordinator of the Journalism Programme at The University of the South Pacific, welcomed participants and Panellists. He also introduced the four Panellists in order of speaking duties.

**4.6 Panellist Presentations**

**4.6.1 Mr. Edward Bernard – Chief Executive Officer, Fiji Commerce & Employers Federation (FCEF)**

- Budget predictability: emphasized that there no surprises in the last three budgets. Therefore, the private sector can plan for 5–20 years ahead.
- Cost-of-Living & Doing Business:
  - Reductions in VAT & bus fare will lead to an increased disposable income and lower the transportation costs for workers.
  - Increase in social welfare will buffer the food price shocks.
- Reiterated that local manufacturers employ many Fijians who earn foreign reserves. Therefore, we need balanced protection and encouragement.
- Skills & Training: urged the utilisation of the 1% FNU levy (accounting for FJD $35–40 million per year) for workforce upskilling.
- Implementation & Review: called for a mid-term budget review each January to assess progress and adapt policies.


Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation CEO, Mr. Edward Bernard, shares his perspectives during the panel discussion

#### 4.6.2 Ms. Vani Catanasiga - Executive Director, Fiji Council of Social Services

- Asserted that the Civil Society Organizations should shape budget priorities, monitor spending, and hold the Government accountable.
- Highlighted the ongoing initiatives to ensure that communities are not only consulted, but empowered to influence how public resources are spent and monitored.
- Public Financial Management (PFM) Tools developed by FCOSS:
    1. Kadivaka Tool & Scorecard – tracks disaster recovery services in Northern Division (piloted in 2021; scaled nationwide in 2023). These tools have enabled communities to push for access to information on disaster recovery.
    2. Community Feedback Mechanism – mirrors national disaster coordination for civic input.
- Citizens' Budget Guide (2021): it has now become a key resource of the Ministry of Finance, therefore, demystifying the budget process and information in order to make it more accessible to the public. Since 2023, the Ministry of Finance has taken ownership of this budget guide. This is a strong example of collaborative social accountability – civil society laying the groundwork while the Government institutionalising this practice.
- Emphasized that if social accountability is to become a mainstay of public financial discourse in Fiji, then access to timely, reliable and desegregated information must be guaranteed. Called on Parliament to prioritise the enactment of the Access to Information Act.
- **Citizens' Analysis on the 2024–25 Budget**:

    - Safety & Protection: FJD $11.6 million was allocated to combatting the drug crisis. Systematic improvements require inter-agency coordination and broader funding.

- Access & Infrastructure: FJD $1.4 billion; disaster resilience & sustainability were noted as priorities by the communities.
- Service Delivery: a big concern noted by the communities. More than FJD $3.3 billion allocation – with education & health accounting for FJD $1.1 billion in combined funding; need stronger investment in rural/informal settlements.

- **Calls for Greater Advocacy**:
    1. Enact the Access to Information Act – it's a cornerstone for comprehensive transparency.
    2. Institutionalise social accountability – move beyond ad hoc consultations.
    3. Enhanced partnerships between Government, civil society organizations and the private sector.
    4. Close feedback loops – ensure budgeting intentions translate into community benefits.

*Executive Director of Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS), Ms. Vani Catanasiga, delivers her presentation during the panel discussion*

**4.6.3 Mr. Ram Bajekal - Group Chief Executive Officer, Golden Manufacturers Fiji**

- Conveyed appreciation to Dialogue Fiji for extending this invitation.
- Private sector is driven by the following three (3) scenarios:
    - Market environment and demand which enable the businesses
    - Operating environment
    - Enabling environment

- The 2025-2026 Budget is expansionary: hoping for the best, preparing for the worst. Voiced hope on the direction of this expansionary budget.

- Alluded to the nature of the growth we will get to see – nominal versus real growth. It will be watched keenly by observers.
- Emphasised that debt does not worry the private sector. Debt is acceptable when financing capital investment with future returns.
- Cautioned that if debt is for meeting obligations for operational expenditure or paying off previous debts, then it's a concern. The private sector looks at how serviceable is the debt, and how it can be better serviced.
- The visitor numbers remain high which means more money is coming into the economy.
- Confessed scepticism about dubious investments, including from yesteryears. However, this is changing as we observe more credible investments coming in. Noted the emergence of high-profile, credible and genuine investments, namely Sofitel, Vatu Talei project and Google.
- Asserted that local investors should not be overlooked or underestimated. In the past, Investment Fiji were guilty of pandering to foreign investors, most of whom were dubious. Encouraged support for local investors, and commended Investment Fiji for changing its approach.
- Stressed the need to build our supply chains in order to mitigate the migration crisis. The idea is to grow the base with renewed focus.
- The private sector appreciates the stability pertaining to the tax policy.
- **Energy & Education**:
    - Advocated accelerated renewable energy rollout; stressed urgency as Fiji approaches energy deficit.
    - The expansion of TVET scholarships, including opportunities for overseas placements, is a positive development.
- **Ease of Doing Business**:
    - Ease of doing business is often confused with ease of starting a business – its essentially about doing business.
    - Warned against administrative burdens and hinderances (e.g. VMS for Small and Medium Enterprises with turnover of FJD $50,000).
- Suggested a reasonable and targeted increase in water tax. The water rates in Fiji are very low. And it would be unsustainable for the Water Authority of Fiji. Hence, the Leadership needs to innovate by contemplating from an economically viable angle rather than a political angle. He also proposed a voluntary subsidy relinquishment, drawing parallels from India's case example.
- Outlined the grave threats posed to the private sector as a result of drugs. He cited an example of factories conducting drug tests.
- Advocated for greater focus on downstream agriculture - horticulture, namely essential oils and herbals, that would be conducive to Fiji. These are high value products, he added.
- Logistics & Infrastructure: Private sector faces severe hurdles on logistics, particularly in the shipping industry. Cited port congestion and shipping delays as critical hurdles for exporters and manufacturers.

*Golden Manufacturers Group CEO, Mr. Ram Bajekal, sharing his perspectives during the panel discussion*

**4.6.4 Mrs. Mereoni Taginadavui - Grassroots Leader, Soqosoqo Vakamarama, Bua**

- Highlighted the challenges pertaining to health access and cancer care. She cited that bed shortages at the Colonial War Memorial (CWM) Hospital delay critical cancer treatment while patients from rural communities' risk worsened outcomes.
- Road Safety & Maternal Health: recounted maternal emergency halted by poor rural roads, hence, urged prioritisation of road upgrades.
- Maritime Infrastructure: unsafe jetties in Nairai & Batiki endanger women and elders. Hence, it needs immediate attention.
- Job for Nature: supportive but criticised inadequate monitoring & evaluation. She urged for stricter contract adherence.
- Women's Economic Empowerment:
    - Outlined the vital link between economic opportunity, reduced drug abuse, and lower crime.
    - Call for rural women's involvement in district councils and political processes (e.g. re-introduce Building Resources In Democracy and General Elections [BRIDGE] program).
- Rights-Based Development: budgeting is stewardship whereby a diligent plan leads to profit.
- Concluded with a faith-based reflection on budgeting as a moral and communal responsibility.


*Grassroots Leader at Sososoqo Vakamarama (Bua), Mrs. Mereoni Taganadavui, emphasises her point during the panel discussion*

**4.7 Open Floor - Question and Answer Session**

**Moderator: Dr. Shailendra Singh**

**Format:** Brief self-introduction; concise question with responses from the Minister for Finance Hon. Prof. Prasad and the Panellists.

| Questioner | Affiliation | Question | Summary of Responses by Hon. Prof. Prasad (unless otherwise noted) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dr. Mosmi Bhim | Academia | Nurses' 20% salary rise:<br>- Does this apply to nurses?<br>- How do we plan to retain them amid growing migration? | - Yes, civil service salary raises (7–20% last year and 3% this year).<br>- Creation of nursing aide roles with continued health sector reforms. |
| Nirmal Singh Cheema | Activist/Consultant | VAT on local produce: Wholesale local meat, fish and vegetables should be VAT-free in order to boost local industry. | - Govt will review wholesalers' VAT obligations in order to balance local protection with fair revenue. |
| Felix Parker | Businessman | Ethnic/business equity; TVET quality: Ensure | - Universal eligibility for social support |

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| | | minority entrepreneurs can compete and upgrade TVET standards through partnerships with Australia and New Zealand. | - Targeted grants via Multi-Ethnic Affairs Ministry<br>- Scholarships are merit-based<br>- Education Commission to recommend quality enhancements. |
| Ray | Banaban Defenders Network | Banaban funding: Only 0.005% is allocated to Banaban Council.<br>- How does this ensure equitable accessibility to budgetary allocations for minorities? | - Universal schemes (welfare, transport, health) are non-discriminatory.<br>- In addition, there are specific grants to minority councils under the Multi-Ethnic Affairs Ministry. |
| Grassroots activist | Community leader | Agriculture inputs versus market access:<br>- Why focus on inputs, and not markets?<br>- - What is the role of Fiji Trade Commissions? | - Land-lease reforms;<br>- Non-sugar crop subsidies for fertiliser/weedicides<br>- Exploring community seedling nurseries;<br>- Highlighted the role of Trade Commissions' outreach via their engagement plans. |
| Sandeep Singh | Investment consultant | Sugar diversification:<br>- Global tour of sugar producing countries by the Sugar Minister but no implementation.<br>- Immigration: Spouses with skills should get open work visas. | - FAO-led sugar industry review underway.<br>- Legislation & institutions (Growers Council) being reconstituted.<br>- Immigration reforms in progress; streamlining skilled spouse entry. |

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| Adi Narayan | Former hospital manager | Health management: Beyond funding — there are issues pertaining to morale, procurement and management inefficiencies. | - Supply deployment for drug procurement<br>- New pharmaceutical agreements being crafted<br>- Aspen Medical PPP for hospital upgrades<br>- Indian Government funded 100-bed hospital underway<br>- Existing World Bank-led health review are guiding reforms. |
| Satish Kumar | Businessman | Municipal elections: - When to resume since 2005? -<br>- Deficit sustainability: Consumption versus capital split.<br>- Water tax: What is the rationale for 7-year water tax holiday to Fiji Water? | - Legal amendments to the Local Government Act are in progress, therefore, funding will follow post-amendment.<br>- Debt-to-GDP has been trimmed from 90% to below 80%.<br>- Capital investments are being prioritised.<br>- Fiji Water incentive designed to net-positive revenue; it cushions against the 32% tariffs imposed by the U.S. |
| Vereniki Sauturaga | Youth activist | Urban bias: The budget is heavy on operational (FJD \$3 billion) versus capital (FJD \$900 million); questioned the readiness of the ministries to implement the allocations. | - Rural allocations in water (boreholes/leak repairs); agriculture sector, youth; alignment with the National Development Plan; strengthened M&E via SPU; implementation frameworks active. |

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|---|---|---|---|
| Abel Caine | Tech enthusiast | AI readiness: No clear AI budget line; urgent need for AI capacity building across sectors. | - Minister for Finance acknowledged the oversight.<br>- He added that the Education Commission will propose AI strategy.<br>- He also alluded that funding exists in Education, Trade & Communications Ministries for digital upskilling. |

*Members of the public posing questions during the Q&A at the National Budget Forum*


*Panelist Edward Bernard makes a point during the Q&A session*

**4.8 Competition Winners Announcement**

MC: Ms. Archana Murti

- Announced the winners of the **Video & Art Competition** on women's political participation organised by Dialogue Fiji:
    1. **1st Prize (FJD 1 000)**: Nandini Kaushal
    2. **2nd Prize (FJD 500)**: Penaia Nawaqabuli
    3. **3rd Prize (FJD 250)**: Simran Kamal (absent)
- Judges: Ms. Kerry Mara (UN Women MCO) and Dr. Mosmi Bhim (Fiji National University).
- Commended all entrants for creative excellence and thematic relevance.


*Mrs. Nandini Kaushal (L) receiving her first prize from the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Hon. Prof. Prasad.*


*Mr. Penaia Nawaqabuli (L) receiving his second prize from the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Hon. Prof. Prasad.*

**4.9 Closing Remarks by Ms. Archana Murti (Programme Manager, Dialogue Fiji)**

- Sincerely thanked the following:
    - Hon. Prof. Biman Prasad for his Keynote Address and engagement with the audience.
    - Panellists and Moderator for their respective insightful contributions.
    - European Union (DASIG-Fiji) for their financial support.
    - Participants for their active involvement and robust Question & Answer session.
- Encouraged continued engagement with Dialogue Fiji on budget oversight and governance.

*The Moderator and Panellists with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance (M).*

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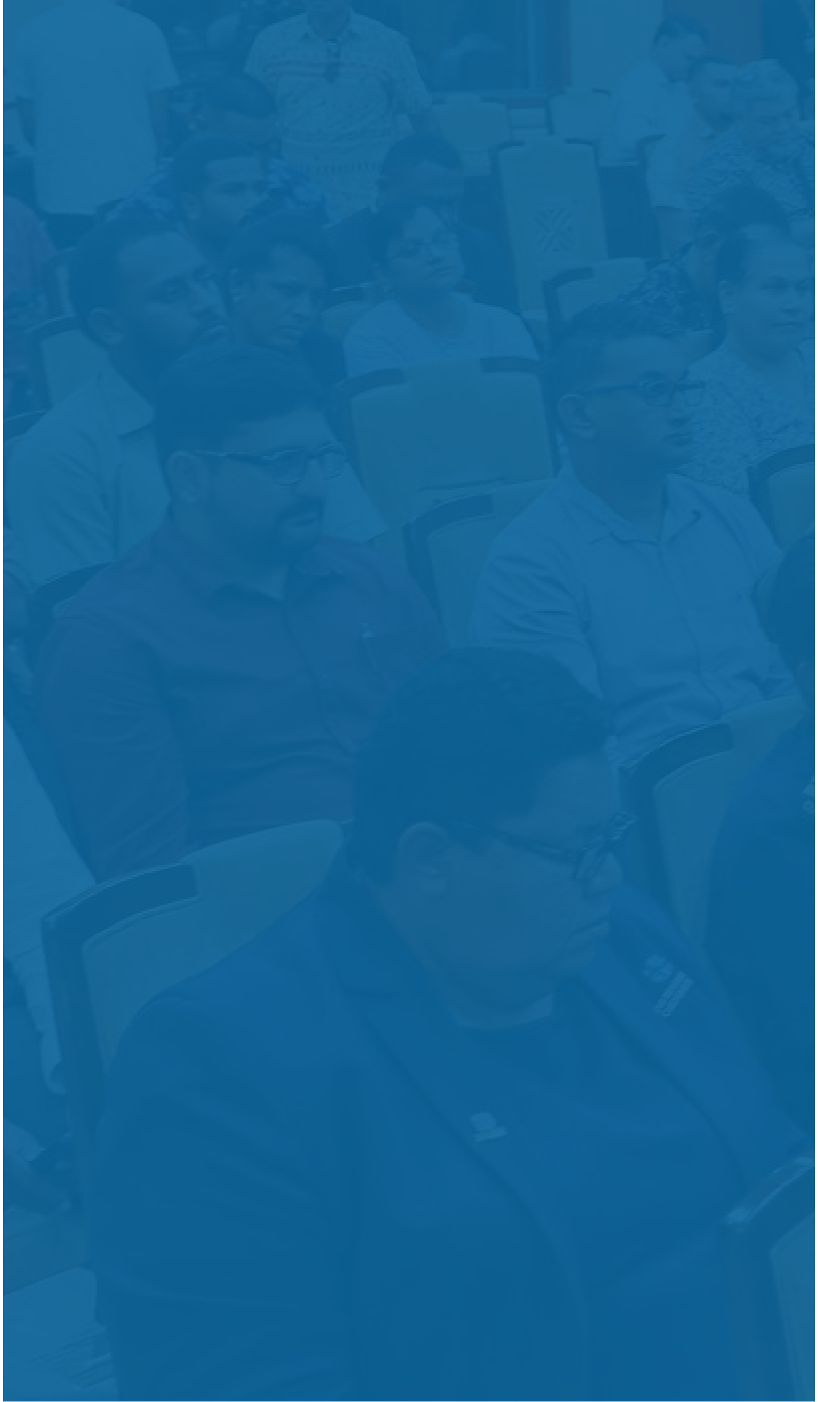

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