Centre for Democracy & Dialogue

CDD POLICY PAPER

FIJI'S DEVELOPING EL NIÑO DROUGHT

From Emergency Response to National Water and Food Security

POLICY POSITION: An adequately financed, nationally coordinated drought response must prioritise essential water supply, productive livelihoods and household food security, while investing in water resilience ahead of future climate shocks.

EVIDENCE CUT-OFF: 4 November 2026. Figures and forecasts are dated and should be updated as new official information becomes available.

Executive summary

Fiji is entering a potentially severe drought period with mounting pressure on public water supplies, farms and household budgets. As at 1 November 2026, 19 of the Water Authority of Fiji's 44 monitored operational sources were classified as critical, seven were approaching critical levels and approximately 24,600 people were experiencing intermittent supply or relying on water carting. In the Northern Region, production was 19.9 million litres per day against demand of 29.4 million litres. WAF projects that, if dry conditions persist, as many as 82% of its monitored sources could be critical by January 2027. These are conditional projections, not guaranteed outcomes. [1][2]

The agricultural risk is already tangible. Farmers in Nabaka report vegetable losses and shortages of irrigation water, while livestock farmers in Tabia have reported deteriorating pasture and animal deaths. Fiji's October 2026 consumer prices were 9.0% higher than in October 2025, although this increase cannot be attributed to drought alone; the separate 12-month average inflation measure was 2.9%. [3][4][5]

CDD proposes an urgent, time-bound package that goes beyond water carting: protect safe household water, support livestock and viable vegetable production, monitor food supply and prices, establish targeted household assistance, and provide public accountability for funding and delivery. Alongside these immediate measures, Fiji should build distributed agricultural water-storage capacity, manage groundwater sustainably and accelerate the reduction of losses in existing networks. The policy response should be risk-based, fiscally disciplined and transparent.

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Water sources at critical level
Of 44 monitored sources as at 1 November 2026

1. Problem definition and policy objective

The immediate problem is not only dry taps. Drought disrupts a linked system: rainfall and streamflows decline; drinking-water reserves tighten; crops and pasture deteriorate; farmers face rising input costs and lost income; local food supply may contract; and the poorest households face higher risks of food insecurity. Some impacts endure after rainfall returns, particularly lost breeding animals, damaged soil and depleted farmer savings.

The policy objective for November 2026–April 2027 should be to prevent avoidable mortality and severe hardship, preserve productive farm assets and restore water security while producing a credible foundation for future drought resilience. Government should distinguish emergency actions achievable within days or weeks from capital projects requiring months or years.

2. Evidence and outlook

2.1 Advance warning

The Fiji Meteorological Service's outlook issued 31 March 2026 identified an elevated possibility of El Niño emerging during June–August and noted the potential for normal-to-below-normal rainfall in July–September. This was a probability-based early warning, not certainty about the severity or timing of the current drought. Worsening conditions and subsequent official forecasts provided further reason for preparedness. [6]

2.2 Public water supply

The deterioration has been rapid: ministerial reporting indicated seven critical sources on 15 September and 19 on 1 November. The Western and Northern Regions were designated for Crisis Response, with particularly high risks around Vaturu Dam and Northern Division systems. The Minister outlined 67 water-carting trucks already deployed and a proposed additional package including 43 trucks, temporary treatment systems and two reverse osmosis units. Its reported FJ$10.46 million cost was indicative and subject to funding consideration; it is not evidence that all expenditures were approved or incurred. [1][2][7]

2.3 Agriculture and household welfare

The Ministry of Agriculture acknowledged risks to crops and livestock in September. A farmer in Nabaka reported losses of at least FJ$1,300 per harvest and described 36 affected vegetable farming blocks; this is a reported local account, not a national estimate. Livestock deaths in Tabia have likewise been reported by local farmers. National crop-loss, livestock-mortality and household food-insecurity estimates are not yet available in the evidence reviewed for this paper. [3][4][8]

Higher agricultural costs and lower production can raise fresh-food prices, but the size and timing of price effects depend on imports, substitute foods and transport conditions. Fiji Bureau of Statistics reports a 9.0% October 2026 year-on-year increase in the all-items CPI; food and non-alcoholic beverages increased 3.2% from September to October. The Bureau notes a technical CPI aggregation issue and possible revisions. It would be inappropriate to attribute the headline inflation rate wholly to El Niño. [5]

2.4 Fiscal constraints

The IMF's May 2026 Article IV assessment projected central government debt of 82.5% of GDP in 2026, with limited fiscal buffers and vulnerability to disasters. This is a projection, not an observed November debt stock. Response design must prioritise grants, budget reprioritisation and targeted intervention over untargeted commitments. [9]

3. Response principles

- Protect life, health and essential services first. Hospitals, schools, water-dependent healthcare and high-risk settlements must receive priority safe water.
- Act on forecast risk, not only observed losses. Predetermined thresholds should trigger pre-approved resources before systems fail.
- Protect productive assets. Timely support for breeding livestock, viable crops and farmers' working capital can avoid long-lived losses.
- Target by vulnerability and verified need. Prioritise affected communities, smallholders, low-income households, disability and other access barriers.
- Use low-regret, environmentally sound investments. Not every borehole, pump or farm dam is suitable; site selection must follow technical screening.
- Publish decisions and results. Allocation, delivery, procurement and outcomes should be routinely disclosed.

4. Immediate policy package: first 30 days

4.1 Activate one national drought operations framework

Cabinet should approve a funded, cross-government drought operations plan led through the existing national disaster-management arrangements and linked to WAF, Fiji Met, Agriculture, Finance, Health, Trade and divisional authorities. Establish a single operational dashboard and weekly public situation report. It should record water-source thresholds, water deliveries, priority villages, livestock-feed gaps, crop-loss reports, market prices and funds released. The plan must specify who decides, who purchases and who delivers.

4.2 Maintain safe household water supply

Prioritise vulnerable communities, health facilities, schools and dense settlements. Audit truck delivery schedules and water quality; publicise distribution points and complaint channels. Accelerate repairs to major bursts and leaks that yield quick recoveries. Evaluate emergency treatment and borehole rehabilitation using site-level water-quality testing. Groundwater drilling should be conditional on hydrogeological evidence of sustainable yield; poorly planned pumping can deplete aquifers or draw saline water into coastal wells.

4.3 Prevent avoidable livestock deaths

Within two weeks, agriculture and veterinary teams should establish an area-specific feed and water needs register for livestock. Procure appropriate feed for high-risk locations and establish temporary troughs and bulk-water logistics. Prioritise breeding stock and smallholders facing irreversible losses. Veterinary outreach should cover hydration, nutrition, disease and humane husbandry; where viable, voluntary planned sale or destocking should be supported with transparent markets. Public agencies should not encourage indiscriminate culling.

4.4 Preserve viable crop production

Rapidly identify farm areas with dependable sources suitable for limited irrigation. Provide time-limited assistance for efficient drip systems, pumps, hoses, storage and mulch, with training. Where water is unavailable, support income stabilisation and restart planning rather than supplying ineffective equipment. Explore supplementary production in better-watered areas without withdrawing water from households or sensitive ecosystems.

4.5 Secure food access and affordability

Introduce weekly monitoring of wholesale and retail prices, crop volumes, staple food inventories and transport disruptions. Prepare a contingent import plan for verified shortages, after consultation with growers and distributors. Examine temporary duty changes only when the fiscal cost is clear and consumer pass-through can be monitored. Where markets function but households cannot afford essentials, prefer targeted cash support; where food is physically unavailable, arrange direct food assistance.

5. Stabilisation: days 31–90

Expand targeted farmer support based on verified field assessments. Establish district-level water and agricultural recovery plans covering soil moisture protection, livestock feed supply, access to affordable seeds and veterinary services. Build a temporary farmer recovery facility through existing administrative channels, with eligibility rules, ceilings, safeguards against duplication and published disbursements. Review crop and livestock losses monthly and adjust the size of interventions rather than maintaining open-ended universal subsidies.

Provide consistent public forecasts linking Fiji Met rainfall outlooks with agricultural extension messages and WAF supply restrictions. Coordinate with local authorities, market associations and farmer organisations so households can make decisions on planting, feed purchases and water conservation.

6. Long-term resilience: six months to five years

6.1 Distributed farm water storage

Launch a screened programme of small farm ponds, off-stream reservoirs, rooftop harvesting and, where feasible, professionally engineered earth dams. Capture an environmentally sustainable fraction of wet-season runoff for dry-season agriculture and livestock; freshwater reaching estuaries is not inherently “wasted”, because downstream flows support habitats, fisheries and coastal salinity balance. Provide standard design guidance, catchment assessments, spillways, erosion protection, maintenance training and technical supervision. New storage constructed during a dry spell may not fill until rainfall returns. FAO identifies water harvesting and small-scale storage as established agricultural resilience measures. [10]

6.2 Sustainable groundwater

Create a public groundwater inventory of working boreholes, yields, quality, ownership, pumping patterns and seasonal reliability. First rehabilitate existing viable infrastructure; new drilling should use geophysical screening, pumping tests, water-quality testing and monitoring. Coastal aquifers require particular protection from saltwater intrusion.

6.3 Reduce avoidable water losses

Scale pressure management, district metering, active leak detection and repair of priority mains. Fiji's 2025 experimental environmental water account reports that 49.3% of WAF-extracted surface water was lost during distribution and 5.3% during purification. These are different accounting categories from the approximately 47% non-revenue-water estimate; they should not be added together or conflated. Establish zone-specific targets and report actual water volumes recovered. [11]

6.4 Institutionalise anticipatory finance

Adopt pre-approved funding triggers based on drought indices, reservoir levels, agricultural vulnerability and expected impacts. A small flexible contingency facility could finance early feed purchase, tank delivery, field teams and cash assistance when pre-agreed thresholds are met. The June 2026 FAO–WFP joint appeal illustrates the principle of financing anticipatory action before climate impacts become humanitarian emergencies; it was not, by itself, a Fiji funding commitment. [12]

7. Financing and implementation

CDD does not recommend publishing an uncosted headline allocation. Government should publish a rapid, bottom-up budget within 14 days: unit costs for water delivery, feed, veterinary visits, irrigation kits, temporary household assistance, transport and administration; anticipated beneficiaries; and the likely duration. Each expense should be tied to a trigger, beneficiary group and reporting obligation.

Financing channel	Appropriate use	Safeguard
Existing appropriations and reprioritisation	Immediate operational response	Disclose vote transfers and opportunity costs
Drought contingency or emergency funds	Time-critical procurement and logistics	Predefined triggers and ex-post audit
Bilateral and multilateral grants	Livelihood protection, storage and technical assistance	Avoid duplicate projects and establish measurable outcomes
Concessional finance, where justified	Durable, appraised resilience infrastructure	Lifecycle cost-benefit, debt and maintenance assessment

A credible package should be financed through a mix of reallocations, contingency funds and requested grant assistance, rather than assuming further borrowing is free of consequences. Any future capital programme should undergo appraisal against alternatives such as leakage reduction, storage rehabilitation and demand management.

8. Institutional responsibilities and accountability

Lead	Responsibilities
National Disaster Risk Management Office / Cabinet coordination	Activate response thresholds, publish weekly consolidated situation reports, resolve cross-agency bottlenecks
Water Authority of Fiji / Public Works	Supply continuity, water quality, water carting, major leaks, reservoirs and treatment
Ministry of Agriculture	Farmer assessment, livestock feed, veterinary support, irrigation targeting and recovery
Fiji Meteorological Service	Forecast risk, rainfall indicators and regular seasonal outlooks
Ministry of Finance	Emergency budget, financing requests, disbursement disclosures and expenditure control
Trade / consumer authorities	Essential food availability, retail price monitoring and competition enforcement
Health and social welfare agencies	Waterborne disease prevention, household vulnerability and targeted social assistance

A drought response without published performance results risks substituting activity for impact. The Government should disclose the programme budget, actual spending, procurement contracts, litres delivered, water quality tests, farmers assisted, feed distributed, livestock outcomes and household assistance coverage. Independent review should follow the emergency phase.

9. Implementation matrix and indicators

Deadline	Deliverable / proposed indicator
Within 7 days	National operational lead named; consolidated baseline published; priority communities and farms mapped
Within 14 days	Costed emergency budget and funding gap disclosed; livestock feed and water needs assessment completed in priority districts
Within 30 days	Public water delivery schedules and water-quality reporting; targeted animal feed and viable-crop support operational

Deadline	Deliverable / proposed indicator
Monthly to April 2027	Updates on water-source levels, affected households, market prices, crop losses, livestock deaths and support delivered
Within 90 days	Independent evaluation of response gaps; published recovery and resilient-water investment pipeline
Within 12 months	Pilot farm water-harvesting sites and borehole registry established; leakage-reduction progress reported by supply zone

Indicators should have baselines and targets set by technical agencies within the first 14 days. Without verified starting values, this paper does not invent beneficiary counts, programme costs or expected water volumes.

10. Conclusions and CDD recommendations

Fiji received advance warning of El Niño risk and now faces measurable water shortages and reported agricultural losses. Some government preparedness actions occurred, including water contingency planning and inter-agency coordination, but the adequacy, reach and financing of earlier agricultural and social protection measures require public accounting. Drought preparedness should be evaluated on whether damage was prevented, not merely on whether meetings or warnings occurred.

CDD recommends immediate adoption of one costed national drought response; emergency protection of safe water and productive agriculture; a market-informed food security and household assistance plan; transparent weekly reporting; and investment in farm storage, sustainable groundwater and reduced distribution losses. Action is needed before the peak risks projected for December and January, while the longer-term investments must be assessed on safety, environmental sustainability and whole-of-life cost.

References and evidentiary notes

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