

Consumer Council of Fiji



Strategic Plan 2011 - 2014

CONSUMER COUNCIL OF FIJI
STRATEGIC PLAN – 2011 to 2014

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FOREWORD

It gives me pleasure to present the Council's Strategic Plan 2011 to 2014. The Strategic Plan is an evolving document that is reviewed annually to take account of changing situations, government policies and emerging issues affecting consumers. The plan is expected to play a positive role in achieving a market place where consumers are well informed, confident and protected from unlawful, deceptive, misleading or otherwise objectionable practices. It is critical that consumers understand their rights and responsibilities and have the skills and confidence necessary to ensure they receive the best quality services and value for money.

A clear direction to design Council's Strategic Plan was provided by two key documents namely - the Government's Roadmap for Democracy and Sustainable Socio Economic Development Plan for 2009-2014 and the Fiji Institute of Applied Studies (FIAS) Report. FIAS Report provided key findings and recommendations after a comprehensive review of the Council's consumer awareness and service delivery programs which was funded by the AusAID. I wish to thank the Government of Australia for assisting the Council financially to conduct an independent comprehensive evaluation of its activities.

The Plan provides the framework against which the Council will prioritise its activities for action for the next 3 years. The staff of the Council will turn these strategies into Work Programme each year so that it delivers the activities effectively for the benefit of the consumers. The revised Strategic Plan outlines the Council's roles and functions and highlights its mandate, mission statement, values and aspirations. The objectives and strategies in this document are designed to spell out a sense of purpose and source of direction.

The Plan further highlights the strategic objectives which the Council will endeavor to achieve in the next three years keeping in view the resources available to it. Developing the Plan has been a real challenge particularly with the level of awareness that the Council has created in the last three years which has led to greater expectations of the consumers from the Council. This is a very positive impact and will be further build upon for the future

It is our hope that we will continue to engage with all our partners as we take this Plan forward in a spirit of openness and partnership for change for the benefit of consumers. We firmly believe that our Strategic Plan provides a focused approach to address issues confronting all our consumers.

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Chair, Consumer Council of Fiji

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Purpose of the Strategic Plan

This Plan sets out what the Council will be doing over the three year period from January 2011, and how the Council intends to get there. The Plan outlines our vision, mission, values, operating principles, objectives and implementation strategies for 2011-2014. It provides the direction for a more detailed annual work programme, which will clearly identify how we will measure our performance against key result areas. It gives the direction for management decisions and priorities for all levels of the Council's work, and provides a basis for measuring and reviewing the individual staff and overall performance of the Council.

Given the Council's mandate stated in the Consumer Council of Fiji Act-1976, the Council's strategies, activities and performance indicators have been reviewed to accommodate consumer complaints, research conducted by the Council, the recommendation mentioned in the FIAS Report and the emerging issues identified by the Consumers International.

VISION

The Government endorsed the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection that represents an internationally recognized set of minimum objectives to protect and promote consumer interests. In that context the Council has the Vision:

To build an assertive consumer movement in Fiji

MISSION STATEMENT

The Council will advocate and safeguard consumers' interests through vigorous campaigns on key consumer issues, conducting evidenced based research for policy reform and empowering consumers through education and information on their rights and responsibilities to ensure a fair and safe marketplace.

Making consumer voice count

1.0 Our Values

The Council is committed to achieving positive change for consumers. As a small organization with limited resources, the Council will play an active role as a catalyst and facilitator for positive change in the marketplace.

To do this, we will adhere to the following values:

1.1 Consumer Satisfaction

- Effective and quality services to our consumers at all times; and
- Respond to consumer complaints and queries with utmost respect and human dignity.

1.2 Professional Excellence

- Inculcate teamwork, cooperation and self-discipline;
- Foster open and honest communication;
- Value new ideas and seek ways of doing things better;
- Exercise enthusiasm and compassion towards our work;
- Maintain high standards of ethical conduct;
- Being accountable, transparent and responsible; and
- Value and enhance the cooperation and goodwill of counterpart organizations in Government, Civil Societies, and external partners.

1.3 Employee satisfaction

- Provide reliable, rewarding and challenging environment for Council employees; and
- Offer equal opportunity for employees to utilize their full potential for quality performance and excellence.

2.0 Our Principles

- Campaign fearlessly to change the policies and practices that adversely affect consumer interests;
- Maintain a highly disciplined result-oriented focus that maximises impact for consumers;
- Maintain neutrality in resolving consumer complaints; and
- Build a strong financial management and sound operating procedures.

3.0 About the Consumer Council

3.1 The Consumer Council of Fiji (CCF) is an independent statutory body established under the Consumer Council of Fiji Act -1976 (Cap 235). The Council, as a watchdog protects the rights and interests of consumers by promoting a fair and just delivery of goods and services. First and foremost the Consumer Council is an advocacy organisation, conducting rigorous research and policy analysis on key consumer issues. CCF's insight into consumer need is a powerful tool for influencing decision-makers to bring about change. The Council protects the vulnerable groups such as rural poor, physically and mentally challenged, children and women by identifying and articulating the policy issues that are of importance to the consumers.

3.2 Members of the Council are appointed by the Minister for Industry and Trade for a term or terms as the Minister may determine. The Chairperson of the Council reports to the Minister. The Board of Directors appoint the Chief Executive Officer/Executive Secretary to lead and manage the Council affairs within the legal framework and by maintaining high ethical standards. From corporate governance perspective, a Board Charter is in place that sets the rules and procedures within which the Board functions.

4.0 Functions of the Council

Section 6 of the Consumer Council Act stipulates the functions of the Council. The Council is required to **do such acts and things it considers necessary** or expedient to ensure that the interests of the consumers of goods and services are promoted and protected.

These functions include:

- Advising the Minister on such matters affecting the interests of the consumers;
- Making representations to the Government or to any other person/organizations on any issues affecting the interests of consumers;
- Collecting, collating and disseminating information in respect of matters affecting the interests of consumers;
- Supporting or maintaining legal proceedings initiated by a consumer, where such support is deemed necessary;

- Conducting research and investigations into matters affecting consumers;
- Advising and assisting consumers on matters affecting their interests;
- Co-operating with any person, association or organization outside Fiji having similar functions and becoming a member of or affiliate to any international organization concerned with consumer matters; and
- Soliciting and accepting for the purposes of the Council any money, land, or other property from the Government, any local authority, public body, organization, or person by way of grant, subsidy, donation, gift, or otherwise.

The Consumer Council Act 1976 was amended in 1992 by Decree No 23. The amendment deleted a few key functions of the Council to promulgate the "Trade Standards and Quality Control Decree 1991". Whether the amendment decree reduced the specifically listed functions to prevent the CCF from actually carrying out these functions is a matter of legal interpretation. As long as the amendment does not prohibit the carrying out of the three functions, the general power of the Council can be invoked to continue to carry out research, and/or examination or testing of goods and services, and receiving and acting on consumer complaints. The overriding function is to ***'do all such acts and things that it may consider necessary or expedient to ensure that the interests of consumers of goods and services are promoted and protected'*** [s6 (1)]. The 1992 amendment to the Consumer Council Act seems to be redundant as consequential amendments were not made to the Act.

5.0 General Principles

Underlying the legislative requirements of the Act, the Council is guided by the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection, briefly given as follows:

Governments should develop, strengthen or maintain a strong consumer policy, taking into account the guidelines set out below. In so doing, each Government must set its own priorities for the protection of consumers in accordance with the economic and social circumstances of the country, and the needs of its population, and bearing in mind the costs and benefits of proposed measures.

The legitimate needs that the guidelines are intended to meet are translated into the nine basic *rights* and *responsibilities* of consumers. These are the essential starting point for the Council's policies.

5.1 Consumer Rights

- **The right to satisfaction of basic needs** – This is the right to have access to basic essential products and services, adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care, education, water and sanitation;
- **The right to safety**- This is the right to be protected against production processes, products and services that are hazardous to health or life;
- **The right to be informed**- This is the right to be given facts needed to make an informed choice, and to be protected against dishonest or misleading advertising or labelling;
- **The right to choose**- This is the right to be able to select from a range of products and services, offered at competitive prices with an assurance of satisfactory quality;
- **The right to be heard**- This is the right to have consumer interests represented in the making and execution of government policy, and in the development of products and services;
- **The right to redress**- This is the right to receive a fair settlement of just claims, including compensation for misrepresentation, badly made products or unsatisfactory services;
- **The right to consumer education**- This is the right to acquire knowledge and skills needed to make informed, confident choices about products and services while being aware of basic consumer rights and responsibilities and how to act on them;
- **The right to a healthy environment**- This is the right to live and work in an environment that is non-threatening to the well-being of present and future generations; and
- **The right to service** – the right to receive the highest possible standard of service from public and private sector service providers regardless of consumers income and irrespective of whether they live in an urban or rural areas.

5.2 Consumer Responsibilities

- **Critical Awareness** - to be more alert and question the price and quality of goods and services we use.
- **Action** – to be assertive and take action to ensure that we get a fair deal and avoid being exploited by traders and service providers.

- **Social Concern** – to be aware of the impact of our consumption on other citizens, especially disadvantaged or powerless groups whether in the local, national or international community.
- **Environmental Awareness** – to understand the environmental and other consequences of our consumption. We should recognize our individual and social responsibility to conserve natural resources and protect the earth for future generations.
- **Solidarity** – to come together as consumers to strengthen and protect our interest.

6.0 General Framework

6.1 Consumer Policy

Consumer policy can contribute to poverty alleviation, efficient markets, good governance and the promotion of consumer and human rights. The Council will actively pursue the three pillars of consumer policy:

1. Consumer Protection Legislations and Regulations,
2. Consumer Representation, and
3. Empowerment of individual consumers through dissemination of information.

Within this general framework, the Council will:

- Advocate for a single Consumer Protection Legislation to effectively address consumer concerns;
- Advocate for a simple, speedy, efficacious, inexpensive consumer redress system;
- Actively advocate for stringent enforcement of existing consumer protection legislations ;
- Advocate for consumer representation at national policy making level and at appropriate bodies dealing with key consumer issues; and
- Empower consumers on their rights, responsibilities and redress system as outlined in the Consumer Protection Laws.

6.2 Campaigns

The Council will use campaign as a medium to raise consumer awareness, engagement and mobilization on key consumer issues. Through campaigns consumers will become conscious, proactive, critical, responsible and supportive to demand better quality of products and services. Campaigns empower consumers to voice against unethical practices in a marketplace. The Council will:

- Campaign effectively on key issues that matter to consumers in Fiji; and
- Gather evidences to advocate for reform in the market place against a product or service.

6.3 Consumer Education & Awareness

Consumer education addresses not only problems of consumers individually, but also targets sustainable consumption, social justice, human rights, ethical values and poverty alleviation. Consumer education contributes towards the formation of a participative, critical and competent citizenry. The Council will:

- undertake consumer awareness in schools; tertiary institutions, Government Departments, civil society groups, rural and, outer islands, urban communities through mobile unit, lectures, community visits, workshops, campaigns, media programmes etc;
- Promote active participation and consumer awareness amongst traders and service providers; and
- Develop multilingual consumer education and awareness materials for consumers in Fiji.

6.4 Trade and Economics

The daily lives of consumers across the world are directly affected by the actions of governments and international institutions in regulating and liberalizing trade, investment and the practices of international business. Speculative financial flows, regional and multilateral trade liberalization, and corporate mergers and acquisitions are of particular concern.

The Council, in concert with any organization in the region and internationally, would seek to ensure that the interests and rights of consumers are recognized and protected in international and regional trade and economic agreements. The Council will:

- Advocate for the formation of trade and economic policies that take into account the interest of consumers;
- Research the impact of trade liberalization on the daily lives of consumers;
- Promote the use of competition policy which enhances consumer welfare nationally;
- Encourage local business organizations to adopt and observe UN Guidelines on Consumer Protection;
- Encourage businesses to adopt international standard on Social Responsibility developed by ISO; and

- Encourage local businesses to improve the transparency of their business operations and better understanding of local consumer needs.

6.5 International Rules and Standards

International rules and standards have major impact on safe design, performance and fit for purpose of products and services, and hence provide vital safeguards and protection for consumers. Standards should take into account consumer concerns and grievances of the product and services which consumers use in their daily lives. The Council will:

- Lobby with the Department of Trade Measurement and Standards to develop and implement Standards;
- Pressure Trade Standard and Advisory Council to prevent the entry of inferior quality and ill packaged goods into Fiji;
- Increase public awareness on the importance of the Codex and standards in improving the quality of goods and services.

6.6 Sustainable Consumption

The consumption pattern in this era cannot be sustained without the risk of exhausting existing natural resources and irreversible damages to the environment.

Ways must be found to improve the quality of life for consumers while preserving the natural environment and ensuring equitable distribution of the country's resources. The Council will encourage Government and industries to adopt policies and methods that will promote sustainable consumption. It will advocate for the following actions:

- Promote public transport systems, car pooling and other ways to prevent traffic congestion and pollution of the environment;
- Ensure that consumers have sound information on the environmental impacts of their buying decisions and lifestyle choices; and
- Raise consumer awareness of production and marketing practices that are consistent with sound environmental policies.

7.0 Core Focus Areas

7.1 Food Security and Food Safety

The Council recognizes that food security is the availability, accessibility and affordability of safe food for all our citizens. All consumers have the right to sufficient and safe food. In protecting that right the Council will:

- promote food security and improved food access;
- promote information strategies that support informed choices;
- ensure that food is safe and correctly represented in accordance to food safety laws;
- test food items to ensure the labels reflect the ingredients used in the food and that the food is not adulterated or contaminated; and
- require clear and explicit labelling of irradiated food, genetically modified food and other food of concern to consumers.

7.2 Health

The Council believes that every consumer should have accessible, affordable and reliable health services. In this respect it supports the objectives and targets set by the WHO in its document "Health for All". The Council will strive to pursue the following:

- Promotion of patients rights and redress;
- Raise awareness on misleading advertisements and door to door sale of alternative medicines such as herbal medicines, therapeutic treatments etc;
- Lobby for implementation of the National Drug Policy;
- Access to safe and affordable pharmaceutical products;
- Monitor anti-competitive market practice in the pharmaceutical sector and auxiliary health services; and
- Ensure necessary reforms take place in public and private medical and dental practices for efficient, accessible, affordable and safe delivery of health services.

7.3 Public Utilities

Public utilities including water, electricity, telecommunications and postal services are the fundamental rights of consumers. The price, quality and reliability of these services and access to them are the most important issues for consumers. The consumer interest should be the basis for planning and decision making. The Council will:

- Ensure equal access to public utilities for all;
- Ensure cost effective, reliable, timely and efficient delivery of service;
- Lobby for consumer friendly billing system that is accurate and easy to understand,
- Promote water and energy conservation; and
- Advocate for fair procedures for consumer complaints and redress.

7.4 Information Technology and Media

Information technology and media are fundamental in creating conscious and assertive consumerism in Fiji. The Council would seek to ensure that an appropriate regulations or standards are in place, whereby consumer interests and voice are effectively represented. The Council will advocate for information technology and media policies on the following:

- Issues of privacy, access, security, and dispute resolution through appropriate mechanisms;
- Regulation on marketing, advertising, and broadcasting; and
- Developing Broadcasting standards in Fiji.

7.5 The Child Consumer

In the contemporary marketplace, businesses are increasingly targeting children to sell their products. The advertising and marketing strategies of businesses and corporations have now become more child-focused. This is because young population of today are known to have greater influence on their parents' decision-making and income. To protect child-consumers in Fiji, the Council will ensure the following:

- Special protection of the use of children in advertising and marketing of products;
- Special protection from marketing and promotion of junk foods to children in school canteens, sporting events and via media;
- Lobby government to adopt WHO - International Code on Marketing of Food to Children; and
- Lobby for advertising standards in Fiji.

7.6 Financial Literacy

Consumers are facing difficulties with the rapid pace of financial innovation, the growing complexity of financial products, and the increasing financial risks and responsibilities transferred to households. The need to teach people how

to spend, save, invest, borrow and manage debt wisely has become more important than ever, in both developed and developing countries.

As governments implement policies to promote economic recovery, financial education programmes should be targeted at all levels of society – the most vulnerable and the financially excluded, as well as the general public – to help sustain consumer confidence and create economies that can better withstand market fluctuations. In this regard the Council will:

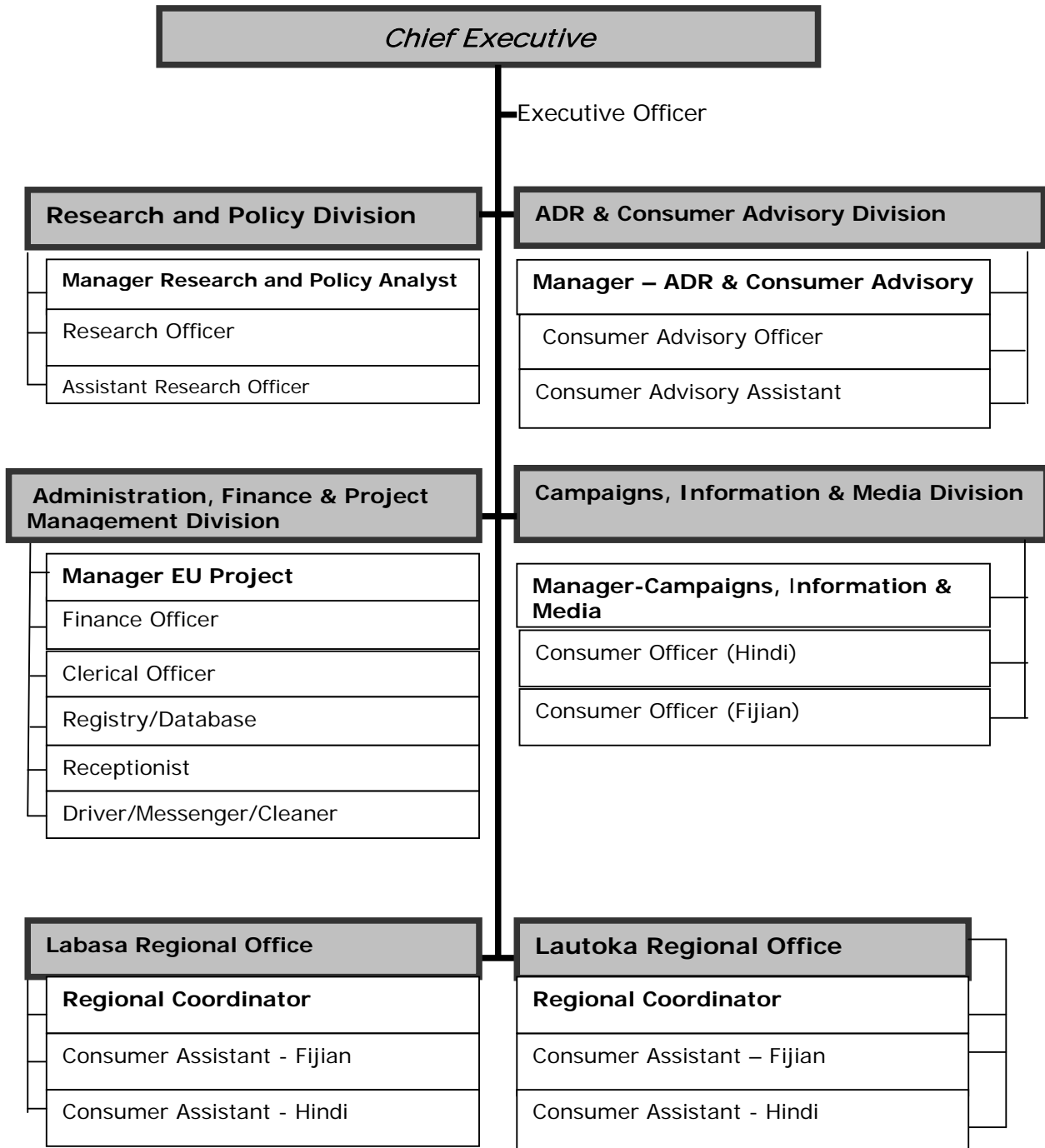
- Protect consumers to understand credit and other complex financial products;
- Lobby to set up an independent system that deals with consumer protection in financial system;
- Resolve consumer complaints on financial services;
- Raise awareness on Consumer Credit Act; and
- Highlight unethical practices that exist in the financial services sector.

8.0 Organizational Structure

To achieve the Strategic Plan, there are four divisions with specific objectives, which are given below:

Division	Objectives
Research and Policy Analysis Division	Undertakes complaints-driven and evidence-based research including market surveillance and submissions for policy change to the government or any other persons/organizations.
Campaign, Information & Media Division	Undertakes campaigns, advocate and disseminate information on key consumer issues to achieve real change in policy and practice.
Alternative Dispute Resolution & Consumer Advisory Division (ADR)	Assists consumers in resolving complaints through alternative dispute resolution, advisory services and legal representation.
Administration, Finance and Project Management Division	Provides support services to the Council based on good governance practices.

This management structure will enable the Council to implement its objectives and strategies efficiently and effectively.



9.0 Strategic Objectives for 2011-2014

1. To empower consumers with knowledge and information to bring about reform in policy and practice that adversely affect consumer interests;
2. To assist consumers in resolving complaints through alternative dispute resolution, advisory services and legal representation;
3. To identify and undertake broad-based and complaints driven research on key consumer issues and consumer protection legislations through necessary policy change; and
4. To manage the Council's resources prudently and efficiently in accordance with good governance practices; and developing and maintaining a healthy work environment with a work culture that promotes organizational pride.

10.0 Campaigns, Information & Media Division

This Division will campaign on key consumer issues to raise awareness and educate consumers to become participative, critical and competent in the delivery of goods and services. The Council will mount campaigns on key issues in an attempt to change policies, improve services and address unscrupulous practices that compromise the rights and interests of consumers.

10.1 Strategic Objectives

- a) To empower consumers with knowledge and information to bring about reform in policy and practice that adversely affect consumer interests;
- b) Mount campaign on key consumer issues to raise awareness and educate consumers to become participative, critical and competent in the delivery of goods and services; and
- c) To encourage traders and service providers to uphold and respect consumer rights and responsibilities.

10.2 Implementation Strategies

- a) Campaign effectively on key consumer issues using the following mediums:
 - TV Ads
 - Cinema Ads
 - Radio Ads
 - Print Media
 - Fact sheet
 - Brochures
 - Community networks
 - Resource kits
 - Mobile units
 - Networking
 - Newsletters
 - Website based Consultation
 - Complaints- based investigative research

- b) Mobilise consumer network members and other stakeholders to campaign on one consumer issue annually;
- c) Develop and disseminate information and resource materials on consumer issues;
- d) Produce and publish Council's newsletter "**The Consumer Watch**";
- e) Conduct consumer outreach programs through mobile units;
- f) Regularly update Council's website;
- g) Conduct regular radio-broadcasts on consumer issues in English, Fijian and Hindi languages;
- h) Issue regular press releases on consumer issues and respond to any media queries; and
- i) Organise activities of World Consumer Rights Day Celebrations.

11.0 Alternative Dispute Resolution & Consumer Advisory Division

This Division will use Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms to assist aggrieved parties to arrive at a mutually beneficial resolution. Consumers will be able to get redress if they become the victims of unfair trade practices or breaches of consumer laws. The Council's conciliation role will allow consumers, including poor and disadvantaged, to receive some form of remedy or relief.

11.1 Strategic Objectives

To assist consumers in resolving complaints through alternative dispute resolution, advisory services and legal representation.

11.2 Implementation Strategies

- a) Assist consumers in resolving complaints through ADR process with traders and service providers;
- b) Refer cases that come under the jurisdiction of other consumer protection agencies for redress;
- c) Assist consumers in dispute resolution by referring cases with a monetary value of up to \$5,000 to the Small Claims Tribunal;

- d) Provide advisory services to consumers on any enquiries on products and services;
- e) Record and document complaints on a centralised database; and
- g) Collate and provide statistics on request.

12.0 Research & Policy Analysis Division

This Division of the Council will engage in conducting evidence-based research on broader consumer issues or on issues that are complaint driven to thoroughly understand the root cause of the problem. Issues paper will be developed to demand policy change which adversely effect consumer interests. On a regular basis, market surveillance will be conducted to protect consumers from unscrupulous traders and service providers. This Division will also prepare submissions if new legislation is being drafted or amended, or when price determinations are made on products and services by the Commerce Commission.

12.1 Strategic Objectives

To identify and undertake evidence-based research on key consumer issues and consumer protection legislations that promotes and protect consumer interests through necessary policy change

12.2 Implementation Strategies

- a) Conduct research and prepare submissions on new or amended legislations or proposed price increases of goods and services;
- c) Conduct research and prepare Issues Papers on key consumer concerns;
- d) Propose necessary change to the respective laws, policies, practices, and standards, to ensure consumer issues are taken into consideration;
- e) Conduct market surveillance to establish products prices, labelling, safety, etc;
- f) Develop database on price changes of products and services.
- g) Conduct research in partnership with Regional and International organizations; and
- h) Develop research proposals on selected consumer issues.

13.0 Administration, Finance & Project Management Division

This Division is tasked with the responsibility of managing financial and human resources for effective and efficient delivery of our services. It creates a result-oriented organizational culture, with related policies and performance indicators. The division also manages all donor funded projects.

13.1 Strategic Objective

To manage the Council's resources prudently and efficiently in accordance with good governance practices; and develop and maintain a healthy work environment with a work culture that promotes organizational pride.

13.2 Implementation Strategies

- a) To facilitate the review of Council's strategic plan, work programme, business plan, the organizational structure, provisional yearly budgets and individual job descriptions;
- b) Prepare yearly financial budget in consultation with the Council/Ministry in accordance with government's budget guidelines in a timely manner;
- c) Manage and control financial resources based on good governance practices;
- d) Manage and implement donor funded projects;
- e) Prepare annual Service Agreement and Council's annual performance assessment report with the Ministry;
- f) Organize Council Meetings and prepare board papers;
- g) Develop personnel resources through training and practical attachment internally and externally to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our workforce;
- h) Advocate and establish consumer representation and networking in key sections of the economy;
- i) Develop and maintain network with consumer and civil society organizations regionally and globally; and
- j) Maintain and develop Council's IT, Registry & Database Services.

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