



Evgeniya Kleshcheva, UN Volunteer with the UNDP Pacific Office in Fiji, at a career fair.

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Carving a path to sustainable livelihoods in Fiji

Evgeniya Kleshcheva, a UN Volunteer fully funded by the Russian Federation, serves with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) Pacific Office in Fiji. She shares her inspiring experience supporting the response to COVID-19 and recovery from economic losses in Fiji.

For almost two years, I have been working with the UNDP Pacific Office in Fiji. I am part of the inclusive growth team, supporting entrepreneurship, small and micro businesses, livelihoods and innovation in Pacific Island countries and territories.

Our unit is relatively small and dynamic, so although my assignment title is in communications and partnerships, I have been engaged in diverse initiatives, together with other team members. For example, I have coordinated entrepreneurship and innovation

initiatives, which I implemented with a national UN Volunteer.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, it affected the Pacific economically, due to loss of tourism income and supply chains, as well as rising unemployment.

“ We came up with an exciting concept, the COVID-19 Pacific Response: Sustainable Livelihoods Challenge, which is now showing successful results. This challenge aims to identify locally-led solutions to socio-economic issues and support their implementation. This has great potential to contribute to recovery from the repercussions of the pandemic.

We reviewed data on the economic impact on tourism income and employment losses, coupled with our capacity to implement in various countries. On this basis, we selected Fiji and Vanuatu for the first challenge, as they are countries with a significant tourism share of employment and income affected by the pandemic.

In collaboration with UNDP Accelerator Lab Pacific, the solevaka.org platform, government and private sector in Fiji and Vanuatu, we launched the call for applications. Our offer was financial and technical assistance to support the implementation of projects. In just over two weeks, we received almost 100 proposals.

After screening and shortlisting proposals, we organized virtual pitching events. At first, it was quite challenging to organize online events, as we were more accustomed to hosting face-to-face events. Also, like other small island countries, we don't have the most reliable internet connection.

However, the events turned out great. Eight teams in Fiji and seven teams in Vanuatu pitched their projects to a panel of judges and a small audience. The final list of initiatives was then identified to receive assistance: three from Fiji (Green Thumb, Rise Beyond the Reef and the Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises & Development) and three from Vanuatu (Alternative Communities Trade in Vanuatu Association, Next Limited and Village de Santo.)

As the challenge was focused on livelihoods, most of the selected proposals deal with economic empowerment, specifically small and micro enterprises, income generation for vulnerable groups, or agriculture. For instance, the Rise Beyond the Reef programme is the largest economic and leadership development initiative in Fiji for remote rural women, supporting income-generation through traditional contemporary arts and crafts. Another proposal, the Alternative Communities Trade in Vanuatu, was created due to the pandemic to assist local producers and farmers in serving the local community and sustaining the

local economy.

“ There were many innovative and promising applications that were not selected for the final grant due to the limited assistance available. However, we hope that the applicants will continue working on their initiatives while UNDP and partners can offer advisory support.

In October 2020, we launched an additional programme to support several applicants – through crowdfunding capacity building and supporting fundraising campaign development. Additionally, through a partnership with ANZ Bank, we will be providing financial literacy and business basics training for beneficiaries of the projects and vulnerable communities in general. Now, there are plans to continue and extend the initiative across the Pacific.



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