



Reflecting on the Community Engagement and Involvement: Capacity Building for organic food production to improve environmental health while using the 9 x 9 backyard garden approach to increase crop and nutrition



The Global CFaH Project in Fiji

The project partnered with three provinces in Fiji's Central Division: Naitasiri, Tailevu, and Rewa. Communities in Tailevu and Naitasiri are inland, primarily relying on farming as their main activity and income source. Conversely, Rewa communities are closer to urban centers, with most residents employed in Nausori Town or Suva City. The team began by performing a traditional sevusevu protocol, introducing the Global CFaH project to the Commissioner Central and other government stakeholders. This protocol was also followed at the community level in all participating areas.

During these sessions, the project was presented, and Talanoa sessions were held with community members, chiefs, elders, and village headmen. These discussions helped us understand the communities' interests, issues, and challenges, which in turn informed the design of our implementation activities.

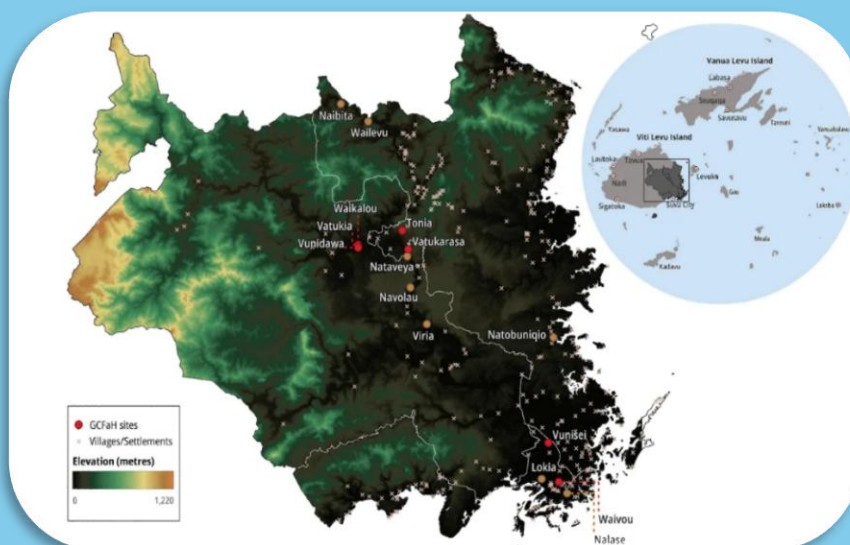


Figure 1: Map of the Global CFaH Intervention Sites

Getting Started

Throughout the implementation of the Global Communities for Health (CFaH) project, we learned that beginning with cultural awareness and respect for traditional protocols is crucial for building trust and ensuring active community participation.

Engaging the right stakeholders—including chiefs, elders, local health workers, and provincial council representatives—was fundamental in laying a strong foundation for the project. Their involvement not only legitimized the work but also ensured smoother communication and stronger local ownership of the interventions.

We also discovered the power of intergenerational knowledge transfer. Elders brought invaluable insights on organic farming and traditional food preservation practices, which greatly enriched the training sessions. This created a learning environment where traditional and modern knowledge systems could coexist, benefiting younger community members in particular.

Communities gained practical skills in organic farming, sustainable agriculture, and food preservation. More importantly, they saw the value of working together and utilizing local knowledge systems alongside introduced practices. There was a renewed sense of pride in traditional wisdom and a stronger recognition of the importance of community-led development.



Figure 2: Introducing the Global CFaH Project in the Central Division and developing meaningful collaboration with Government with Commissioner Central, Mr. Josefa Navuku, and Divisional Planning Officer, Mr. Mateo Naiveli; along with other local government stakeholders from Naitasiri, Rewa and Tailevu.

Compared to other typical engagements, this project stood out for the depth of early and consistent involvement of traditional leaders and elders. Often in previous projects, such stakeholders were brought in only after plans were already formed, which sometimes led to lower community buy-in. In contrast, this project emphasized participatory planning from the beginning, which led to higher levels of trust, participation, and sustainability.

Our previous extensive experience working in diverse communities helped us recognize the importance of cultural protocols and traditional governance structures. We applied these lessons from the start—approaching communities respectfully, taking the time to listen, and adjusting our strategies based on local input. This experience helped avoid common pitfalls and fostered strong partnerships with community members.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is not just a step we need to follow because we were told it should be done; it is necessary for the project to be accepted by the communities. It shows respect to the communities and is essential for a project's success.

When people are invited to co-design, shape, and lead initiatives, they are more likely to see the work as their own. This leads to stronger commitment, better uptake of interventions, and long-term sustainability—because the work is not imposed; it is grounded in lived realities.

Core Interventions: Capacity Building for Planetary Health. The engagement strategy included technical training designed to improve environmental health and human diet. This training equipped the eight communities with practical skills in sustainable practices and resource management.

Key Training Components

- **Basic Organic Backyard Garden Training:** This covered traditional farming practices, the use of organic manures, pest management, and soil health management (GAP). It also introduced participants to the organic certification process.
- **The 9 x 9 Model:** A key demonstration training where participants learned to plant 9 or more varieties of crops in small backyard spaces. This model incorporates a range of plants to ensure families have access to diverse produce for nutritious meals.
- **Food Processing and Preservation:** Hands-on training provided traditional methods for food preservation, healthy recipes, food safety, and packaging. These sessions helped beneficiaries manage resources while understanding the specific health benefits of their food.



Figure 3 & 4: 9 x 9 Model theory and practical training.



Figure 5: Participants taking part during hand on food processing training in Vatukarasa Village.

Farm to Fork Success: Monitoring and Outcomes

Following the implementation of the Global CFaH project, monitoring visits to five communities in Rewa, Tailevu, and Naitasiri have revealed significant positive shifts in local food security and health.

Key Observations and Achievements

- **Expansion of Backyard Gardening:** There is a noticeable shift in households establishing backyard gardens and cultivating a diverse variety of crops.



Picture showing a household's Integrated Backyard Gardens (Dalo, Pumpkin & Eggplant) in Naitasiri

- **Seed Saving and Sustainability:** Communities are now saving seeds from matured crops, ensuring a continuous supply of inputs for future planting cycles and long-term sustainability.



- **Improved Nutrition and NCD Prevention:** Families report consuming the majority of their harvest, leading to better household diets and improved nutrition, which serves as a critical defence against Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs).
- **Economic Supplementation:** While primary consumption is domestic, small surpluses are being sold to boost household income.
- **Local Sourcing:** Food prepared during community training sessions is now almost entirely sourced from fresh, local, and community-grown produce, demonstrating a shift away from processed alternatives.



Final Thoughts

Meaningful community engagement always starts by following traditional protocols and introducing the project to the appropriate community leaders during the planning stage. This helps capture the real issues and challenges the community faces, building trust from the beginning. Holding Talanoa sessions to actively listen to the community's voices and ensure they have a genuine role in decision-making. Involving the community in co-designing and leading initiatives encourages ownership, stronger commitment, and long-term success.