



# The University of Fiji

(An Entity of Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji)

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### **Sugar is still the backbone of the economy says Professor Shameem, Vice Chancellor of the University of Fiji.**

The University of Fiji Vice Chancellor Professor Shaista Shameem said that those who dismissed sugar as a ‘has been’ product of a bygone era should take another look at its proven resilience in the face of pandemics and other similar disasters facing Fiji and the world.

Professor Shameem said the University agreed with the Hon. Prime Minister who said at the International Sugar Organisation (ISO) Conference held over 2 days this week in Lautoka that collective strategies were needed to solve the pressing challenges the industry faces.

She said that despite the challenges faced by the industry, the experience of the University during the height of the pandemic showed that people who lost their jobs in tourism were able to pick up work on sugar cane farms and were thus able to look after their families.

“Tourism collapsed in just a few short weeks but the tenacity of the sugar industry allowed the parents of many of our students to earn enough so that their children could continue their education”, she said. Tourism failed the resilience test during the pandemic but sugar, though shaken, remained as steady as ever, thus reminding everyone that the reported demise of sugar as Fiji’s economic backbone had been exaggerated, Professor Shameem said. It is still the backbone as it achieves steady earnings for the nation and somehow is able to overcome the challenges posed by climate, pandemics, wars and political upheavals, she said.

However, at the same time, the ISO conference revealed that the sugar industry was challenged not only by global issues and natural disasters beyond our control but also by what appeared to be sheer neglect and an abysmal dereliction of duty towards the industry, she said. Scientists presenting the results of their research at the conference showed that everything in the sugar enterprise had been ignored – from caring for the soil and farmland, to modernizing transport and transport networks, maintaining the sugar mills, finding new and better markets after the preferential arrangement in the international market for sugar had ended more than 20 years ago, exploring innovations such as ethanol production that would reduce our carbon footprint, and by sheer wastage. There were plenty of excuses at the conference for why the sugar industry had not been performing up to standard, she said.

Professor Shameem said that as an educator whose role was to find decent employment opportunities for the University of Fiji graduates in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) respecting industries she was

shocked at how irresponsible the attitude of the main stakeholders had been towards the sugar industry. She said sugar had been the oldest and most reliable contributor to the national revenue for more than a century but there had been lack of will to somehow look after it in the way it should have been.

She said all stakeholders at the conference from the industry to the authorities were pointing fingers at everyone else and to nature's forces rather than taking a good, hard look at how they themselves had not stepped up to help the industry develop the nation's wealth better than any other industry to date.

The solutions offered at the ISO conference were not imaginative. Everyone seemed to vaguely fall back on the so-called need for research when best practices were already available in other countries such as Brazil, India and Guatemala, Professor Shameem said. Just doing research seems to be an easy way out as it puts off decisive action for another day she said. While other small producers of sugar had found innovative ways to use the sugar product to improve foreign earnings, and diversify their markets, the local industry stakeholders were seemingly oblivious to the possibilities, as the conference revealed.

Professor Shameem said that since sugar had already proven its resilience during the pandemic and other crises in Fiji, it should continue to be recognized as the backbone of the economy. Those involved in the industry should move as quickly as possible towards sugar's renaissance as a sustainable and more environmentally friendly enterprise which would then be able to attract graduates from the University of Fiji.