Fiji - Vanua ‘O Natewa: Sustainable Decentralization, Empowerment, Participation and Poverty Reduction Response [DRAFT]

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Abstract

Fiji is officially struggling towards the eradication of poverty. Universally the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are being addressed in numerous ways. Most governments find the target cumbersome and laborious as shown in the shifting of the goal from the year 2000 to 2015. Most governments that decided to target the reduction of poverty to 50% by 2015 seems oblivious of the knowledge base on which the goals were formed as indicated in the Human Development Report of 1997 explaining the Human Poverty Index for instance.

Discussions of Poverty Response Strategy Programmes (PRSP) rage as this paper is written. The definition of poverty has been argued to be insignificant in comparison to achieving higher national development growth rate (e.g. Duncan & Pollard) that will provide the opportunities to create jobs that will alleviate poverty as understood under the Washington Consensus. A softer World Bank and IMF policy has seen the exit of the proponents (Stiglitz, Kanbur and Wolfenson) in the institutions. We may now expect to see a stronger resolve for conditionalities that have landed countries into huge debts that are now written off ($800 billion) for eighteen countries mostly in Africa. This in simple terms means continued indebtedness, poverty in cities, corruption/abuse in landlocked desert countries and militarily dominated countries.

This paper attempts to explain the optimism on decentralised governing structures, participation and the nullification, alleviation or eradication of poverty in the case of a Fijian traditional district or vanua. Of course optimism is a major part of this attempt, it being the source of many useful inventions we enjoy today. Pessimism cannot be allowed to dominate for they cause regression. Optimism in our time honoured institutional realities in little countries like Fiji and most of the South Pacific have survived in an ecological balance for millennia. Even lately when there were coups; it was the time-honoured institution of traditional Chiefs that instilled calm and focus towards development and the pursuit of sustainability. This speaks volume of the realities of our indigenous knowledge and thought processes emanating from those realities of balance contrary to globalisation and its incumbent politics.

Geographically and culturally we are decentralised. Chiefs lead the vanua. The core of our existence is of an autonomous nature, structured, participatory and by and large rational in our own context. The question of empowerment is already tied into nucleus family and extended families with which we are bonded through participatory activities for sustainability. This does not stop individuals to move in or out of our districts. Culturally our traditional context contains poverty with our social capital. This should not mean that we wish to remain static in our traditional ways but to hybridise with the acceptable global trends sustaining the mana i.e. the spiritual essence of our Pacific rational world.

Some have called the above the Syndrome of Poverty Denial. Such a pessimistic view is relative to the ‘supposedly’ homogeneity of global capitalism. The Pacific people are special and they deserve specialised studies based on the decentralised, participatory, and structural realities of small vulnerable island countries. They cannot see themselves as denying poverty because the world today is driven much by the insensitivity of ‘wants’ ignoring the ‘needs’ of so many. It is not difficult (if we want to) to understand that limited basic needs causes vulnerability. Logically,
by reducing our ‘wants’ we will supply our needs, as Mahatma Gandhi articulated decades ago. Supplying the needs of all will reduce vulnerability. In essence this is what the late former President of Fiji Ratu Sir KKT Mara (1997) referred to as the Pacific Way.

**Introduction**

Fiji’s case like most countries is unique and its Pacific culture makes it special. The overwhelming view of globalisation has been applied generally to demand change of Fiji’s population, especially the indigenous people. As a result indigenous Pacific Islanders have reluctantly changed for one hundred and thirty years. After 17 years of independence there was a strong revival of ‘so-called’ culture and traditions with a very pronounced capitalistic flavour. This was repeated in 2000. Now the Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity (RTU) Bill to grant amnesty is being sort by the Government because stalwarts of its coalition partner were convicted and some are in prison. This so-called revival highlights that government and governance at national level is confused by local chiefdoms whose authority is more traditional or charismatic at local level. They erroneously blame Indo-Fijians for their backwardness. But that is another discussion.

Nationally a more legal-rational authority is in operation that similarly confuses the authority at villages or vanua level (in this view). Members of the Great Council of Chiefs in Fiji who advise on matters of culture and traditions on Fijians as the majority (54%) ethnic group display such confusion. This distinction has not been given the scrutiny it deserves. The result is that ethnic Fijians will ignore their homes or village traditions and join a political party or religion to voice dissent and make demands that are personally based on Indo-Fijian bashing, generalisations and hearsay. They use their vanua as a weapon to gain recognition. This is basically devoid of Fijian protocol and culture of respect. In fact it is distaste-full, offensive and mirrors mob rule.

Often former villagers in towns and cities join parties or individuals become self-appointed spokespersons without authority. Some have been accommodated by political parties to curry favours from their locality without proper procedures of tradition.
Needless to say that such breach of procedures by ethnic Fijians who purportedly treasure traditions contribute to the decline of their culture of respect. This process is deemed dangerous and has been festering for decades resulting in coups, violence, deaths, distress, alienation and so on. It needs to be addressed now. This paper asserts that through decentralisation, empowerment, participation and poverty reduction via training as well as education for income generation provides a wholesome short, medium and long term solution. It is certainly not new or spectacular; it is merely applied sociology, economics, public administration, incrementalism, some imagination and work.

The above proposition will be explained through the organisation envisioned of our geographically and socially decentralised traditional Fijian district called the vanua as a shift towards a local corporate body. The aim of the vanua ‘o Natewa\(^1\) is to utilise the resources of the district to address the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) through good governance locally. Embedded in that pursuit is the added aim to attain a comprehensive human development process to realise the short, medium and long-term visions of the people of the vanua or Tikina. In the process, the training of shifting the traditional and charismatic leadership and authority to a more democratic level with the traditional leaders still intact as it is in the British royal sense will be pursued. The plan, using what is already on the ground will evolve over time to a hybrid corporate culture steeped in the market economy with a view to satisfying the MDGs as well as evolving an already hybridised culture that is sustainable.

At this juncture it might be useful to register that this conceptualisation has benefited from the e-Discussion: The MDGs: Global Goals To Support Local Solutions (15 December 2004 Prepared by Flham Sevedsyamdost and Laurel Gascho on MDG Net on Queries and Answers). It might also be useful to mention that traditional districts such as vanua or tikina vary in size.

\(^1\) As a member of the vanua or Tikina/district of Natewa, permission was granted to the author at the Council Meeting held at one of the villages – Nadavaci on 9\(^{th}\) June 2005, 10.00 am to 3.00pm.
A vanua /tikina /district, for example, may consist only of two traditional villages (Nuku district or vanua in the Province of Tailevu), seven villages (Natewa district or vanua in the Province of Cakaudrove) or thirteen (Bau district or vanua in the Province of Tailevu) [see maps in Appendices 1 & 2]. Altogether there are fifteen provinces including the Polynesian Island of Rotuma. These provinces have varying numbers of districts. According to the Fijian Affairs Board (Fijian Affairs Act Cap 120) Provincial Statistics on Traditional and Administrative Groupings, there are 187 official district or administrative vanua altogether. This is 28 less than the known traditional vanua recorded by the Fijian Affairs Board (FAB). Altogether there were 1170 villages recognised by the FAB in 1992 (Qalo 1993 Appendix B.4).

To explain the present evolution from the traditional and charismatic hybrid of the vanua or tikina to a legal-rational basis of authority of a decentralised corporate entity the subject will be divided into sub-headings.

i. Brief on vanua, leaders, ownership, and autonomy;
ii. Glocal government, deconcentration, decentralisation
iii. MDGs engine of partnership: global and glocal participation;
iv. Accountability and peddling your own canoe;
v. Sensitising glocal capacities to the hybrid of traditions and globalisation for empowerment;
vi. Plan strategically for tax revenue and sustainability;
vii. Social capital and some practical implications.

The coverage of the above is basically a conceptual exercise based on the observations on the vanua /tikina ‘o Natewa in the Province of Cakaudrove in more than three decades of personal participation and action research. Some templates and mechanisms of corporate institutions will be experimented with the creation of mechanisms to facilitate hybridised global and glocal institutions in the creation of a corporatised vanua. Some mechanisms used by villagers in the late 1950s to the mid-70s were the co-operative movement, credit union, and the Fijian Development Fund Board (FDFB). Developing capacities of the
youth of that period benefited from those activities and efforts. It is now the turn of those developed youths to give back to their *vanua* as elders what they got out of it in a coherent and comprehensive manner suitable for their times and beyond for later Natewans to modify to suit them and their *vanua*. This added dimension of the legacy of the *vanua* to develop those of us who were youths in the fifties to the seventies is perhaps loosely referred to here as our *social capital*.

i. **Brief on vanua, leaders, ownership, and autonomy**

The *vanua*, *tikina* or district as mentioned earlier is a part of a Province that is a deconcentrated form of a centralised system of government. It is part of an orthodoxy that was created by colonial powers. An attempt to make head or tail of the Fijian way of life or culture by a dominant power. Overtime it became accepted by many indigenes as something authentically Fijian. It has become hybridized and claimed by a significant segment of ethnic Fijians as their very own indigenous institution. Many young chiefs without adequate training and formal education, today, assume that this is the case. Like-minded ethnic Fijians who are not academically, professionally or entrepreneurially engaged support them.

Such mindset forms the basis that was responsible and central to the coups. Basically it is a matter of the mind. Writing in 1917 the revered chief Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna (BA LLB Oxford) wrote of ethnic Fijians as having, by and large, docility and suspicion engendered and engraved in their character. “Fear and respect for constitutional authority, being the only things that matter under such conditions, are indelibly stamped on the minds of the people. On the negative side it is found that the faculty of independent thinking is suppressed and, as the centuries pass, the masses become more and more dependent on the will and guidance of the rulers. There is, to speak, inertia of the mind” (Scarr 1983: 52). That inertia of the mind persists today (Qalo 1993).
Ratu Sukuna provided the leadership that saw the review of the Fijian Administration to a Fijian Affairs Board (FAB), the creation of the Native Lands Trust Board (NLTB) and the Fijian Development Fund Board (FDFB). This corporate trilogy gave the ethnic Fijians a sense of autonomy. They were supervised by the FAB, their land was protected and leased for cash by the NLTB while the FDFB accumulated funds deducted from copra sold by landowners. These institutions exist to this day. Supporting the trilogy is the Native Lands and Fisheries Commission that registers all ethnic Fijians according to their tokatoka, mataqali, yavusa, and vanua (see Appendix 3). Allocation of lands and fishing grounds are based on this colonial designed structure and precedence on patriarchal line dominating matrilineal traditions\(^2\). Earlier this system was stated to have been deemed traditionally ethnic Fijian (sic).

ii. *Glocal government, deconcentration*, decentralisation

Glocal government is used here to highlight the historical British local government and its use throughout the Empire. While local governments are corporate bodies with similar structures and functions they are based on the culture of its users generally. Functions become affected because the people who drive the structures impute their own personalities into them contrary to ‘grand theorists’ from Weber to Parsons, Merton, etc (Adam & Sadie 2001). This is not only true at this level but nationally and globally.

The personalisation mentioned must be within legal provisions, needless to state i.e. governments locally, nationally, and globally must function within the law in practice and in theory. Autonomy in this sense must be within that parameter of law. In this sense much of what happens at local government may be dominated by the centre or by the law and personalities, as such, they fall into deconcentration. The provincial system of Fiji whilst communal, deemed to be decentralised and autonomous has developed as mode of

\(^2\) Illustrated in the tradition of *vasu* where the children of a woman may acquire properties of the woman’s clan or sub-clan etc. A similar tradition exists in the Kingdom of Tonga known as *fa’hu*.

\(^3\) For this purpose I assume Wolfers’ (in Larmour & Qalo 1985:03) definition of ‘administrative decentralisation’ as deconcentration and distinct from ‘political decentralisation’ with autonomy and independent revenue. These are mentioned here for conventional reasons and ease of association to more developed or sophisticated systems.
deconcentration i.e. with legal provisions tying the system to central government influence and control. Distinctly provinces are less autonomous than municipalities that generate revenue and managed by political dominance. The same is true of Tikina or vanua Council that are dominated by articulate local chiefs who are influenced and driven by government officials or extension officers.

Provincial Council members were experimentally elected since 1968. This was discontinued eighteen years later after the Great Council Of Chiefs (GCC) meeting at Somosomo Village, Taveuni Island in 1986. With local government politics, especially in municipalities, the election practices is first ‘past the post’ while nationally the ‘alternative vote’ is practised. Both election systems are plurality majority systems (Siwatibau 2005) i.e. one of the three large general groupings stated. The other two general groups are the semi-proportional representation and the proportional representation. Hundreds of electoral systems are used globally according to Siwatibau.

ii. MDGs engine of partnership: global and glocal participation

The electronic global discussions via IT on the MDGNet indicate the degree of participation and partnership from numerous countries around the globe. The MDGs: Global Goals To Support Local Solutions (e.g. 15 December 2004 Prepared by Elham Sevedsyamdost and Laurel Gascho on MDG Net on News Update #3 of 17 June 2005 etc) highlight the capacity available for participation intellectually. The volume of which is difficult to keep up with. Given this heavy traffic, we witness that the MDGs has become an engine of discussions through which lives are touched and changed hopefully for the better.

The pop festival in Edinburgh, Scotland Make Poverty History, Tony Blair’s pressure on the G8 on poverty in Africa and the debt write-off of $800 million for 18 least developed countries in June this year alone highlight an awakening. As the MDGs appeal to ‘human and social capital’ it inspires individuals to act in whatever way deemed by them to be
useful. Ted Turner announced his donation of US$1 billion to the United Nations in September 1997 to address issues like population control and epidemic disease. This was to be paid at $100 million for the next ten years. In 2001 Bill Gates donated $23 billion to various agencies and charitable organisations (Conniff 2004: 100-116). Of course with these gentlemen there are no shortage of alternative views with their own interpretations and particular sophistication.

Another interesting view, relate to the needless description of poverty in great detail for “It also appears irrelevant in such cases to be debating whether the focus of development should be on promoting economic growth or on reducing poverty” (Duncan & Pollard 2001:2-3). This view is supportive of the Washington Consensus of achieving higher national development growth rate that will provide the opportunities to create jobs that will alleviate poverty. Pincus & Winters (2002) report the softer World Bank and IMF policy that saw the exit of the proponents Stiglitz, Kanbur and later Wolfenson in 2004. We may now expect to see a stronger resolve for conditionalities that have landed countries into huge debts that are now being written off for eighteen countries mostly in Africa. Should what is being denied but fully understood by a substantive number of observers i.e. the change of personalities mentioned at the outset in simple term, means more of the same i.e. indebtedness, poverty, corruption, abuse of authority, military dominance and so on.

Contrary to the alternative views mentioned above, the MDGs in the micro case of the Tikina or Vanua ‘o Natewa have been touched by this international commitment to the eight targets. Their resolve is to corporatise their vanua as mentioned earlier. As such the process that will convert the vanua to eventually become a more rational-legally driven authority will be multi-pronged. First it will be a Poverty Response Strategy (PRS) with the conversion of the vanua to an evolving corporate institution. Secondly it will form a comprehensive glocal government with by-laws, tax/revenue base, financial reserve,

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4 In the USA official numbers of people living below the poverty line, and the percentage population of the total population that this represents, in selected years – 1990 = 33.5%; 1995 = 36.4%; 2000 = 31.5% and 2001 = 32.9%. Needless to say that many of the poorest people are undocumented immigrants (Seabrook 2003:13).
database, planning unit, issuance of business licenses, health unit, agriculture, fisheries etc. Finally it will manage its activities in their established Council that will oversee that policies of government dovetail with that of the vanua. In all of its activities villagers will be encouraged to pursue their private endeavours and collectively build on what they presently engage in e.g. fund raising, village maintenance, and various maintenance work needed. Further to the above the vanua would like to learn from other vanua at the same level (especially with entrepreneurial pursuits) what they are doing successfully for replication or modified versions in their vanua. Other vanua may send interns to learn from Natewa on other aspects.

iv. Peddling your own canoe: Accountability

The Vanua ’o Natewa and its people are looking forward to peddle their own canoe. This means building mechanisms earlier mentioned that they could understand. The mechanism, as mentioned is a Poverty Response Strategy (PRS) with the conversion of the vanua to an evolving corporate institution.

The peddling of one’s own canoe means forming a comprehensive glocal government institution from the Tikina Council. The Council will provide by-laws, tax/revenue base, financial reserve, database, planning unit, issuance of business licenses, proper health unit, extensive agricultural projects, fisheries etc. In addition it means looking for funds themselves from their own resources and from donors that are interested in this proposition and its replication around the South Pacific from the locals instead of others who work for a wage or salary only. We want those who will invest for their peoples’ future sustainability.

In our youth our elders planted a pine forest we can now harvest to build a reserve that we could invest for the future. Coupled with an annual taxation we will raise enough funds to develop our villages and respond to poverty, education, health, and infrastructure. We hope that we will be able to raise annually the 1/3 vanua – 2/3
government contributions for village projects. We are sure that our accounting will be much more accurate and transparent. In this sense it will be the new culture that will be evolved for the sustainability of development. We have buildings in the village of Natewa to house an Office that will administer the work needed.

v. Hybridising traditions, glocal capacities and globalisation for empowerment

Each village is still led traditionally by a village chief who has a particular title. In the case of Natewa Village, these are the Vunivalu, Sauvou, Maidreketi and Mataki. Maidawa is the head of Dawa Village and so is Tui Vusa in the village of Vusaratu. Tui Vusasivo is the head of the village of the same name and the nearby settlement and village of Qaranibali and Nadavaci respectively. Nadavaci has its own head in the Tui Nakaulau. Buca and Tukavesi villages are led by the Tui Kama and are located in Buca Bay. The Vanua ‘O Natewa is unique in that it has two bays i.e. Natewa and Buca.

All the leaders are members of the Council and are given leadership roles. At present the Tui Vusa has been the Chairperson for the last nine years. He is a retired forester who was instrumental in the development of the vanua. His service has been stabilising and he has been asked to serve till the end of the year. The priests of all the Christian denominations, the women’s group (Soqosogo Vakamarama) and the youth (Tabagone) are members. Head teachers from the three schools of the district attend when the Council meets in the village that they are in. The Chairperson of the school committees, the health doctor, and all the extension officers of government attend the Council.

vi. Plan strategically for tax revenue and sustainability

Presently the difficulties of raising funds for village projects have been wasteful with ‘hidden costs’ of festivals and bazaars. Besides the Provinces compete with the annual conferences of churches, rugby teams and so on. Fund raising has not been thought out carefully and what we get is just more of the same of some enthusiasts. Provincial tax is heavily criticised as inefficient and
increases contribution by some that are taxed on PAYE, VAT and again on Provincial subscription, which use to be a tax.

The Province of Cakaudrove tax 740 registered members of the Vanua ‘O Natewa over the age of 21 years. Some are still at school at tertiary level. The vanua raises $15,000 last year for the Province. To improve subscribing to the rural area and the vanua for development purposes it is proposed that any subscription to the Council will be tax deductible or tax-free. This will overcome the difficulties of tax collection and will encourage participation by every villager. The Council will be given this proposal regarding Vanua Tax. The mataqali or the village as a whole may raise the tax that the Council will determine in annual budgets. The other alternative that the subscription are collected in the office or sent to the office or bank account and receipts are made for tax returns. This taxation or subscription will allow the vanua to pay its Provincial subs as well as raising the 1/3 necessary for government funded projects with its 2/3 grant as mentioned earlier.

vii. Social capital and some practical implications

This proposition to the Vanua ‘O Natewa has been discussed and is now written up for further discussion and improvement. It is indeed a return to local-level planning by people of the area who have their resources to develop. Much of Fiji has been lying dormant and so is Natewa. Some of it could be developed in a thoughtful and sustainable way. Like many in the developed world we dislike what we cannot afford as well as those first world things our national government like but stretched to sustain like motorways, genetically modified food, industrialisation, huge concrete buildings and so on introduced by multi-national corporations.

We see our development as prioritised. First and foremost is our environment that our ancestors protected and guarded with their lives. They were tricked by some and lost some of it. This cannot and must not happen again. Sensitising our people to this legacy is vital and to begin at home, church, and at the primary schools.
Small businesses have started and some members of the *vanua* run their own businesses as lawyers, accountants, transportation (trucks & taxis), small village shops, handicrafts, eco-tourism and so on. There is a plan to purchase a double storey building in Savusavu Town to be a business centre for the *vanua*. Savusavu is a growth area in tourism and people of the *vanua* have already been gearing up to attract tourists for an experience in their villages and their coastline for snorkelling and scuba diving.

Education is well developed because our elders saw it as such. Today almost all households have a graduate from university or other tertiary organisations. The capacity of the past where mataqali will leave the coconut for the specific purpose of sending our first law student to New Zealand is still talked about today over fifty-five years ago. Using our traditions and decentralised autonomous authority for a sustainable development must revive the building of capacities and empowerment we enjoy today.

There are two Health Centres; one Police Station, two Post Offices and some households have telephones. Water is piped to homes or to a central tap. Village generators in all villages except for Vusasivo that invested on solar. Road provided by the government joins all the village of Natewa and Savusavu Town where they buy and sell their ware. The official count in the vanua is 1,717 in the villages as shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natewa</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vusaratu</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawa</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tukavesi</td>
<td>415</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buca</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vusasivo</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nadavaci</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,717</strong></td>
<td><strong>878</strong></td>
<td><strong>839</strong></td>
<td><strong>351</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Cakaudrove Provincial Council Office, Savusavu, 30.12.2004)*
This paper is merely an attempt to articulate it internationally for discussion and improvement. As it was mentioned this paper is a conceptual one a draft that will have to be improved.

References


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