

## TALANOA PROCESS: THE CASE OF FIJI

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Shortly after Fiji experienced a coup on 19 May 2000, the author, Director of the East-West Centre's Pacific Islands Development Program, entered into discussions with a diverse group of individuals regarding the desirability of facilitating a *talanoa* process to address the challenges facing the nation. These preliminary discussions evolved into five, two-day *talanoa* sessions and several smaller one-day working sessions over the period between November 2000 and July 2002. The East-West Center acted as host for the various *talanoa* sessions and provided support staff to summarize the evolving dialogues, while the author served as the main "listener" throughout the sessions. This paper provides an overview of the *talanoa* process as a philosophy for building relationships and understanding, and presents the outcomes, to date, for the continuing process in Fiji.

### **Introduction: *Talanoa* as a Philosophy**

The process of *talanoa* involves frank expression without concealment in face-to-face dialogue. It embodies our understanding of the inner feeling and experience of who we are, what we want, and what we do as members of a shared community termed the nation. I use the words "frank expression without concealment" precisely because the meaning of *talanoa* is derived from two different yet related meanings in the languages of Austronesian-speaking people: *tala* meaning talking or telling stories and *noa* meaning "zero or without concealment." Our reconstruction of the meaning of *talanoa* tells us that it can mean engaging in dialogue with or telling stories to each other absent concealment of the inner feelings and experiences that resonate in our hearts and minds. *Talanoa* embraces our worldviews of *how* we can and ought to live and work together collectively, and relate to one another as members of society.

Pacific island societies have throughout their histories relied upon the *talanoa* process. It helps build better understanding and cooperation within and across our human relationships. It advances knowledge about our social identities, extended families, our villages, our ethnic and tribal communities, our religious beliefs and our moral, economic, and political interests. The process of *talanoa* is fundamentally concerned with strengthening relationships that not only connect us, but also enable us to respect

and learn from each other. The knowledge and understanding advanced by *talanoa* serves to reduce tension and conflict and thereby fosters stability and complementarity in our relationships with one another over time and space. This simply implies that the sense of security and well being that we have with respect to each other as members of society are directly related to enhanced understanding, respect and trust among those in the community with whom we share our lives.

The process of *talanoa* can help us build a new and better foundation for stable and complementary relationships. Such stable human relationships are essential for the development of our collective sense of unity and achieving greater complementarity in the diverse ways we live. For *talanoa*, the fundamental question to be asked is always *how*, i.e., understanding the stable, complementary “way” we can and ought to come together to talk, openly and without concealment, and always with respect for one another. The *talanoa* process of building, re-building, and travelling toward a more stable and secure community is of necessity a gradual, step-by-step endeavour. Thus the process of *talanoa* becomes the mediator between our own worldview and the other’s worldview. It provides the opportunity to hear and learn, and consider anew our own perspective of the stable, complementary “way” that enables us to live and work together and relate to one another while building a better society for all.

This mediating process can be achieved only in conjunction with the principle of “open-agendas.” Here, the idea of “open-agendas” is based on the premise that the participants in the process of *talanoa* can and ought to shape and re-shape their own “agendas” during, and not prior to, their actual dialogic interaction with each other. The open-agenda character of *talanoa* embraces a dynamic and productive process in which those engaged in dialogue participate in an open, face-to-face interaction. Thus the open-agenda approach of *talanoa* presupposes a vital role of the *neutral* “organizing-mediator” who facilitates the process. In practice, the *talanoa* process shapes and reshapes the participants’ pre-understandings and opens up new perspectives, altering participants views of the subject matter.

**Fiji's Talanoa:**

Following the coup of 19 May 2000 the East-West Center began listening to and talking with various political and religious leaders concerning the changing and unstable situation in Fiji. Beginning in July 2000, I broached the idea of *talanoa* with a number of political and religious leaders including the Rt. Hon. Ratu Sir Kamesese Mara, Leader Hon. Mahendra P. Chaudhry and some senior members of the Fiji Labour Party, Prime Minister Hon. L. Qarase, Ministry of National Reconciliation and Unity, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Information and Communication, Leaders of the National Federation Party, Soqosoqo Ni Vakavulewa Ni Taukei, Fijian Association Party, VLV Party, Fiji Nationalist Party, United General Party, Party of National Unity, General Voters Party, Rotuma Island Council Chairman, Chairman of the Fiji Council of Churches and President of the Fiji Methodist Church, Secretary General of the Fiji Methodist Church, Leaders from the Then India Sanmarga Ikya Sangam, Shri Santan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji, Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji, some members of the Fiji Muslim League, Vicar General of the Catholic Church in Suva, military officials, academics from USP, diplomats, and many more.

Given the unstable political and social circumstances faced by Fiji at the time, probably the only thing that could realistically be asked or expected of potential *talanoa* participants was to sit down and talk with no request for commitments, preconditions or pre-determined agendas. Over time, a diverse group of leaders were approached and consulted. While still believing a *talanoa* process with an “open-agenda” would be a difficult thing to do in Fiji given the volatile situation, they saw nothing wrong with trying it. This is a point that needs to be emphasized. No one believed that *talanoa* process with an “open-agenda” was *not* a good idea. Based on this direct, open consultation, the East-West Centre was able to see the need for a neutral, open dialogic process through which various political leaders with their respective political beliefs could sit together and talk, and share their different personal understandings, feelings, and experiences so as to nurture and shape a stable and peaceful “way” forward for Fiji. Through this dialogic process of *talanoa*, the leaders were able to express and share their

different personal pre-understandings. At the same time they reflected on and considered the possibility of altering some of their pre-understandings of the issues.

### **First Talanoa Statement on National Unity:**

The first *talanoa* session engaged twenty-four participants who represented themselves as individuals on the theme of “Fiji Unity Building.” The group, which came from different political, religious, ethnic groups and institutions, convened from 29 November through 1 December, 2000. They articulated their collective understanding that: “Our *talanoa* is based on the principles of reconciliation, inclusion, sincerity, honesty, respect for each other as individuals, respect for the rich indigenous and other cultural traditions domiciled in Fiji, and respect for our national assets and institutions including spirituality, human values, aspirations for economic and social justice, and basic constitutional principles.” In addition they expressed a collective understanding: “National unity requires both dialogue and actions to increase understanding among the peoples of Fiji and dialogue and actions to address basic problems that underlie disunity. National unity also requires the highest standards of leadership and good governance.” They pointed out that “Prejudicial stereotyping, cultural insensitivities, and a failure to work concertedly to build bridges across cultures are serious national problems.”

In this first stage of *talanoa*, they emphasized how “Understanding and respect cannot be a basis for unity without addressing the real problems of our country.” They identified issues in four key arenas for priority attention and action, namely, economics, natural resources, politics, and education. On economics, they felt “the growing economic gap between ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ needs priority attention.”

Accordingly, “the existence of disadvantaged communities disadvantages the nation as a whole.” Understanding the close relationship between the education gaps and the economic gaps, they saw “A good educational system is an investment in the future of our children and the nation of Fiji.” Politically, “institutions of good governance need deeper rooting, providing protection for the legal right to disagree and respect for the law,

order, and the sanctity of contracts.” In addition they collectively saw a need for “the integrity of traditional and democratic institutions relative to globalisation and the relationships between them need contextual examination.”

With respect to the shared relation of land to political and economic stability, our first *talanoa* group concluded that “land is a key and critical issue in unity building. We recognize there can be no change in the ownership of native land. But the fears and tension associated with land can be reduced by fair tenancy agreements that provide access to land, and fair returns and real security for owners and tenants. Real security means that owners should not fear their land being taken from them, while tenants would be assured of their sustained livelihood.”

The first *talanoa* group also focused on the role of leadership. “Leadership, committed to the vision of the nation based on inter-ethnic harmony, cultural respect, and the rule of law, is of utmost importance to carrying out the actions we have described.” The group went on to say, “We are pledged to continue the ‘Talanoa Process’ of free and open discussion of national issues to promote the well being and national unity of our country.” On the basis of their expressed commitment, the President of the East-West Center agreed to continue to support the *talanoa* process on the theme of building national unity in Fiji.

### **Second *Talanoa* Statement on National Unity:**

The dialogue participants in the second *talanoa* session, representing broad segments of Fiji’s society, but expressing themselves as individuals, came together on 9-10 March 2000. They expressed the view that their “*talanoa* process has acquired all the greater urgency in light of recent political and legal developments in Fiji.”

The participants began by orientating the subject matter of their open *talanoa* process toward the rule of law. They reflected and shared their different views on the rule of law and good governance questions. At the end of their open, dynamic, and productive

conversation, they “agreed on the importance for national unity and economic and social well-being of having a constitutional, legal, and political framework that enjoys legitimacy among the leaders and grassroots people of Fiji.” Thus the second *talanoa* session introduced and emphasized the need for a *framework* through which the various aspects of national development could be viewed and understood. “This framework needs to take cognizance of international standards of good governance and human rights, but must also be acceptable to and reflect the aspirations of the people of Fiji. It needs to incorporate effective protection for the rights and customs of indigenous Fijians, including the protection of their land rights, as well as protecting the rights and interests of all communities.”

In addition they “agreed that many Fijians may not be familiar with the current provisions in our basic legal documents, including the Constitution, for protecting the rights and traditions of indigenous Fijian communities. Special educational efforts are required to increase such knowledge. Since there is a strong feeling, however, that customary law is not adequately reflected or protected in the Constitution and laws and that the Constitution may be adequate with respect to the protection of indigenous rights, this issue merits further consideration.”

The second *talanoa* session then articulated what they saw as the relation between the issue of income and wealth disparities, identified by the first *talanoa* group, and that of the rule of law. “The legitimacy of a political and legal regime that appears discriminatory is always in doubt. Promoting a better life for the disadvantaged is an essential element of good governance. Globalization is believed to provide greater overall economic opportunities, but it also accentuates disparities, adding to the urgency of addressing this issue.” Further, the group saw a link between the question of disparities and that of the land. “The efficient use of land and a fair return to owners and tenants of the product of that land is also critical to economic growth and reducing the disparities between haves and have-nots.”

New insights were shared by the second *talanoa* group with respect to a need for reviewing and restructuring their pre-understanding of the existing worldviews of the Fijian administration system. “We believe that by empowering provinces and districts, a determined process of administrative decentralization is crucial to the enhanced efficiency of the human and natural resources of Fiji as well as to building a sense of national community.” Virtually all political groups in Fiji have agreed that an excessively top down process of distributing resources and exercising administrative power has inhibited local initiative. Central government has an important role to play in redistributing resources, providing expertise often unavailable at the local level, and in ensuring appropriate accountability. But local village, district, and provincial governments need to have greater resources and political and administrative empowerment in order to more efficiently and equitably deploy those resources at the grassroots level. Moreover, the greater exercise of local authority will encourage Fijians from different ethnic groups to work together in their local areas on the problems that face them as local communities. As indicated in the Talanoa I *Statement of National Unity*, the well-being of each group in our society depends upon mutually beneficial relations with the others.

With respect to the question of political power-sharing in the context of recent political developments in Fiji, “we recognized the need for continued dialogue and desirable constitutional and political changes to encourage unity building as opposed to political fragmentation and tension. In this regard, it was suggested at our *talanoa* that more thought be given to the proposal that the Prime Minister should be directly elected by majority universal vote, with provision for run-off elections in case there is no majority winner, rather than indirectly elected through the traditional Westminster system. It was also suggested that democratic processes could be deepened at various levels through the election of the Senate, provincial and district councils, and mayors of municipalities. Such changes should be explored carefully to determine their efficacy, compatibility with grassroots desires and traditional forms of governance, and, if adopted, how they should be phased in to avoid misunderstanding or social and political instability.”

On the role of leadership, as emphasized in Talanoa I, it was noted how “leaders play a critical role in building national unity. Our Talanoa II occurs at the time of great political uncertainty in Fiji. We are encouraged, and strongly urge the political leaders to hold their own *talanoa* and to develop a consensus among themselves on land issues and power-sharing. It was agreed that these two areas need further exploration. In this regard, the leadership has an urgent and special responsibility in taking the country forward. We believe such a ‘Leadership Talanoa’ should be held at the earliest date possible to assist in the reconstruction of our inter- and intra-ethnic relationships in the days ahead.”

**Third *Talanoa* Statement on National Unity and Stability:**

The third talanoa group met on 18-19 May 2001 and added the issue of stability as a key dimension of national unity. “In this respect, Talanoa III has sustained continuity with, consolidated gains from, and productively built upon Talanoa I (held 30 November-1 December 2000). In doing so, we have strengthened our momentum toward establishing a shared vision for achieving national unity and stability in Fiji’s multicultural society. Talanoa III upholds the previous Talanoa Statements I and II and further builds upon them.” Specifically, Talanoa III discussions clarified, elaborated upon and found areas of agreement on the principles and understandings necessary for creating a common structure for national unity-building and stability in Fiji.

Talanoa III participants said, “We see an urgent need for dialogue among the leaders of all political parties before and after the general election. We suggest political parties, religious organizations, NGOs, indigenous Fijian institutions, police and military forces, business enterprises and associations publicly reaffirm their commitment to accept the results of the general election and to adhere to the rule of law. We recommend that before the general election, political parties agree to a review of the constitution, and a post-election mechanism be established by Parliament for the review. The constitution review needs to be completed and the outcome finalized during the lifetime of that Parliament. We recommend that before the general election, political parties agree to

establish a mechanism, through Parliament, to urgently resolve land-lease arrangements. We recommend the leaders should work together to ensure the resource owners gain an equitable share of the benefits derived from the use of their resources. We call for an in-depth, broad-based assessment to enable Indigenous Fijians to realize fully opportunities arising from the utilization of their resources.”

In conclusion, Talanoa III recommended that “within one year of the commencement of Parliament, a commission be established to foster good governance, good inter-ethnic relations, and respect and understanding among all cultures in Fiji. We recommend the leaders of political parties agree before the election that the Prime Minister consider forming an all-inclusive multi-party government of national unity that reflects the multicultural makeup of Fiji society. We recommend that leaders make it a priority to reduce the economic gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ in all communities. We recommend the formation of an independent and neutral Commission for Truth and Reconciliation to advance justice, healing, and forgiveness. We recommend that during the preparation for the next election, the political parties make special efforts to educate and familiarize the voters about the content of the constitution. We recommend that the leaders of political parties, in their preparation before the election and their conduct afterwards, act with honesty, flexibility, trustworthiness, tolerance, broadmindedness, and with a commitment to constitutional processes. We recommend the principles and understandings set forth in Talanoa I and II, be included as basic principles and understandings of a common structure for building national unity and stability before and after the forthcoming general election. We urge the leaders of all political parties to develop a national vision that reflects the basic principles and understandings stated above.”

As with Talanoa I and II, participants encouraged public discussion and comment on the third *talanoa*. “On this first anniversary of the events of May 19, 2000, we feel that the ‘Talanoa Process’ of free and open discussion on promoting national unity and stability has contributed to moving our country toward reconciliation and healing. We therefore strongly urge that this effort continue.”

Overall the *framework*, introduced by Talanoa II and refined during Talanoa III, incorporated the basic understandings for the purpose of building national unity and stability. This paved a way for the continuity of the *talanoa* process after the polarized outcome of the general election of August 2001.

**Fourth Talanoa: Leaders Statement on Harmony and Stability in the Rebuilding of Fiji:**

At the first *talanoa* convened after the general election, Prime Minister Hon. Laisenia Qarase, and Leader Hon. Mahendra P. Chaudhry came together on 3-4 November, 2001 to lead a Fourth Talanoa for the purpose of “promoting national unity, harmony, and stability, and improving the livelihood of our people through a process of conciliatory dialogue and action.”

**Summarizing Talanoa IV, the leaders issued a historic joint statement:**

“Over two days of *talanoa*, the basic issues that concern us were brought up and discussed openly and candidly. It was an achievement of our *talanoa* that we found many areas of commonality and even where we did not agree, we gained a deeper appreciation of each other’s perspectives and positions. We strongly believe in the continued need for a sustained, informal process of *talanoa* dialogue to move the national reconciliation process forward. The *talanoa* process should involve everyone where decisions of national importance are being made. Unity cannot be artificially forced. It must evolve naturally through enhanced dialogue among leaders, and greater understanding among the people. It is a long-term process, but as leaders of Fiji we bear a special and urgent responsibility to maintain and promote understanding and national unity.

“We agree on many basic principles even where differences remain on strategies and methodologies. With the shared aspiration of achieving greater harmony, stability, peace,

and unity, our basic points of agreement include the following areas in the rebuilding of Fiji.

*1. Building trust and reducing suspicion and fear among leaders and communities:*

“In order to gain a better understanding and genuine respect for the values of different communities, there should be more *Talanoa* among leaders in all political parties and communities on the issues facing the country. Too often we are talking ‘at’ each other rather than ‘to’ each other. We recognize that this has sown seeds of mistrust, suspicion and fear in our communities, and we are resolved to reduce these through continued commitment to inter-party and multiethnic dialogue.

*2. Fostering wide acceptance of the rule of law:*

“We agree that harmony and stability depends upon good governance and adherence to the rule of law. As pointed out in previous *Talanoa*, stability and good governance depends on having constitutional, legal and political processes that enjoy legitimacy among leaders and society as a whole. This framework needs to take cognizance of international standards, but must also be acceptable to, and reflect the aspirations, conditions and cultural values of, the people of Fiji. It needs to be sensitive and incorporate effective protection for the rights and customs of indigenous Fijians, including the protection of their land rights, as well as protecting the rights and interests of all communities. We need to foster a culture of respect for the law across the broad spectrum of our society.

*3. Ensuring all communities feel secure in Fiji as their home:*

“We agree that there should be ‘affirmative action’ to help disadvantaged communities and the needy in our society. Affirmative action should be available to help the indigenous Fijians to develop their resources. Such programs should be effectively implemented, transparent, and their performance periodically reassessed as detailed in the Constitution.

4. *Examining the Constitution:*

“We agree that the Constitution is a living document created by people. Where provisions may need change, we agree this should occur through a Constitutional process of change and an inclusive consultative process with the people. We agree to continue our dialogue to identify specific area of potential Constitutional change and to reach a general understanding on these matters. In the meanwhile, there are some differences of opinion with respect to some provisions of the Constitution and these are being resolved in the courts. We agree that there needs to be greater public education on the Constitution and Constitutional issues.

“We pledge to continue the process of *Talanoa* looking more intensively at issues we have identified as being of priority concern: building understanding, constitutional change, affirmative action, acceptance of the rule of law, and ultimately uplifting the material welfare of the people of Fiji.”

**Fifth *Talanoa*: Leaders Statement on the Pathway Forward For Fiji**

On June 8-9, 2002 the second *talanoa* after the general election convened. *Talanoa V* on “Fiji Unity Building: The Pathway Forward,” was based on an agenda developed by Prime Minister Hon. L. Qarase and Leader Hon. M. Chaudhry. Specifically, the gathering addressed priority issues associated with land, constitutional revision, and multi-party cabinet. “We agreed that these urgent issues needed to be tackled in order to continue to deepen trust and confidence in each other and establish stronger political and policy frameworks for economic growth and social stability. Our discussions reflected the spirit of all of our *Talanoa* sessions—dialogue is based upon principles of reconciliation, inclusion, sincerity, honesty, frankness, and respect for each other as individuals and as representatives of the rich and diverse cultural traditions of the people living in Fiji.”

As noted in previous *Talanoa* statements, the participants underscored that “unity cannot be forced, but must evolve naturally through enhanced dialogue among leaders and greater understanding among the people. At the same time, we felt an urgent need to deepen and strengthen the *talanoa* to transform it into a more sustained, continuous and action oriented process. Therefore, we agreed to establish joint *talanoa* committees under the overall guidance of the Prime Minister Hon. L. Qarase and the Leader Hon. M. Chaudhry to continue to explore priority issues between meetings of the leaders. It was also agreed that where the *talanoa* has resulted in agreement on basic parameters and approaches, such agreements should be brought into the formal political and parliamentary processes without delay.”

**The Talanoa V communiqué reflected the growing cooperative spirit fostered by the process in addressing highly sensitive topics:**

*1. Land*

“Our discussion of land issues reflected converging perspectives on what is needed to address this very urgent and critical issue. We agree that there needs to be a sense of security on the part of native landowners over the use of their land and security of tenure for the tenants over such leased land. All welcomed significant changes in the position of the NLTB on terms and conditions, disclosed by the Prime Minister—that it will support longer lease terms and a percentage basis for lease rentals with a higher rate to be assessed on the basis of unimproved capital value (UCV). The NLTB has also asked the government to consider premium payments on lease renewals, and the government will explore this.

“We discussed the legislative vehicle for moving ahead, particularly as regards the relationship between ALTA and the NLTA. The *Talanoa* session noted that there is need for more dialogue on the NLTB and GCC position to bring all agricultural land under NLTA and the position of tenants to retain agricultural land under ALTA. It was agreed that the framework needs to be comprehensive, addressing different types of ownership and use, and should provide confidence to both landowners and tenants. We felt that we

can reach agreement on the basic parameters through further discussion. In this connection, we have agreed to form a joint *talanoa* committee to continue discussions on an accelerated basis with a view to putting together an agreement on basic principles to be brought into the formal political process. We also agreed that there if politics and emotions are put aside, a mutually satisfactory solution to the land problem can be reached.

2. *The Constitution*

“On constitutional issues, we began by reiterating our agreement in Talanoa IV, that the Constitution is a living document created by people and subject to change through those processes outlined in the Constitution itself and involving inclusive consultations with the people. It was agreed that there are specific, non-controversial provisions of the 1997 Constitution that require change. We agreed to establish an informal bipartisan *talanoa* committee to discuss these possible changes and bring them to the parliamentary processes on reaching consensus. On other constitutional issues, continued discussion and consensus-building is required.

3. *Multi-Party Cabinets*

“The question of multi-party Cabinet, as provided for in Section 99(5) of the Constitution, is one such issue. We had an extensive and constructive discussion of multi-party Cabinet, exploring the history and original intentions of this section, the pros and cons of this unique feature of the 1997 Constitution, and the practicality of multi-party Cabinet in the current political and social context of Fiji. In addition, we explored a number of alternatives including the appropriate size and composition of a multi-party Cabinet, a government opposition option, a constitutional amendment, and a multi-ethnic, as distinct from multi-party, option.

“It was agreed that in light of the current case before the Supreme Court involving the interpretation of Section 99(5), it would be premature to try to anticipate any particular outcome of that case. We agreed that the discussion was useful and that we had a fuller understanding of each other’s perspectives, even through we had no consensus on future options. We agreed on basic principles—that government should be representative of the broad segments of our society and that our political system should reflect both rule of law

and political stability. We also agreed that we need urgently to put specific programs into place to promote understanding among the ethnic communities represented in Fiji.

“We thank the East-West Center and its Pacific Islands Development Program, for its continued support of the *talanoa*. We pledge to continue our Talanoa process with the ultimate objective of building our society based upon social stability and harmony, rule of law, affirmative action to uplift and promote the welfare of the people of Fiji.”

### **Talanoa Committees on Land and the Constitution**

The Prime Minister Hon. L. Qarase and Leader Hon. M. Chaudhry, had appointed the members for the Talanoa Committees on Land and the Constitutions, who participated in their first brief *talanoa* sessions on July 8<sup>th</sup> and July 9<sup>th</sup> 2002, respectively. They began to identify some of the issues and the associated documents that needed to be addressed by these *talanoa* committees. Once again, the convenors stressed that frankness and honesty ought to be the basis of their *talanoa*, and emphasized the importance of discussing the sensitive issues at the *talanoa* before they were placed before the parliament. The East-West Center has committed to provide support and serve as the secretariat to the plenary *talanoa* process as well as to these *talanoa* committees on land and constitutions.

### **Conclusion**

By its very nature, the process of *talanoa* offers neither a solution nor an answer per se. Indeed, cynics might even interpret the process as little more than social ceremony. In reality, the recent *talanoa* in Fiji have attempted to facilitate an alternative process. Drawing on Pacific cultures and traditions, these gatherings seek to strengthen interpersonal bonds, enhance respect for differences, and forge a broad consensus for the purpose of reducing tensions and fostering stability. As the *talanoa* continue to address sensitive, deeply rooted issues, the challenges may well increase. Yet to the extent that Fiji's collective welfare and security depend on a nation that is unified, the ongoing

*talanoa* process presents a practical opportunity for achieving an enduring vision and a way forward that can benefit all of Fiji.