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Breaking Fiji's Coup Culture through Effective Rural Development

Joeli Veitayaki

Joeli Veitayaki: Personal Journey

I am currently an associate professor at the University of the South Pacific's (USP) School of Marine Studies. I am also Director for the International Ocean Institute Pacific Islands, based at the USP, as well as Co-Chair of the Korea-South Pacific Ocean Forum. I am a member of the High Level Panel of Experts for a Sustainable Ocean Economy that has been put together by the World Resource Institute in support of a high-level panel consisting of 13 heads of government. I am a trained teacher with a BA and MA from USP and a PhD in Environment Management and Development from the National Centre of Development Studies at The Australian National University (ANU).

At ANU, I was fortunate to work with some prominent Pacific Island scholars such as Elspeth Young, Padma Lal, Meg Keen, Gerry Ward, William Clarke, Brij Lal, Colin Filer, Stewart Firth, Ron Duncan and Greg Fry. Most of these scholars had worked at USP. ANU was also special in that many other young Pacific scholars congregated there to perfect their skills to allow them to best serve their people, countries and region. ANU is a great place to forge lasting friendships, contacts and networks.

I teach and conduct research in different parts of Fiji and the Pacific Island countries with partners from USP and abroad. I have worked with governments and development partners on the sustainable use and management of marine resources. I have written articles and books on the importance of subsistence and artisanal fisheries, indigenous knowledge and traditional resources management systems, culture, capacity building, climate change, disaster risk reduction, community-based resource management, sustainable development, the Law of the Sea, maritime transport and regional cooperation in the Pacific Islands. I have also worked as a trainer and researcher in most Pacific Island countries as well as in many other countries around the world.

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The transition of Fiji's independent subsistence communities to a modern, interdependent economy has not proceeded as well as expected. The change in the last 20 years has been dominated by four coups, which were largely supported by the indigenous Fijian-dominated rural populace. The political shocks, which caused incalculable economic, social and cultural hardships, were seen by them as a means to a better future while the poor conditions in rural areas were used by the different coup leaders to convince the people that the change in government was necessary and in their own best interests. The reality is different from the expectations. People now understand that coups, despite all their justifications, are disruptive and damaging.

The six successive governments since independence have failed to improve conditions in rural areas. The nation has been transformed from a model developing country in the early 1980s that the world might emulate, to a typical developing country that has a coup culture, stagnant economy, ineffective rural development, inadequate infrastructure, poor governance and lack of ability to implement set plans and strategies.

I argue here that the coups were related to ineffective rural development, which was used by the coup leaders to gain support of the rural populace. The lack of development in rural areas divides the country into the main centres and the periphery, while the inability of each government to address

the needs of the people and the lack of improvement to living conditions in rural areas made people dissatisfied with them. Consequently, the coup culture that has become established in Fiji can be broken only if rural development is more effective, so that the mass that live in rural areas support and trust their governments because they are provided living conditions similar to those enjoyed by their counterparts in the urban areas. Unfortunately, history made Fiji multiracial and tied the issue of backward rural areas to indigenous Fijians even though there are also poor Indians in rural areas. To end coups, rural development must improve the living conditions in rural areas and reduce the tension between the major races.

Fiji has gone through colonisation, political independence, military coups and a change of status from dominion to republic. In all of this time, the country has continued to search for a rural development strategy that provides people with the opportunities they require to improve their lot. The *Strategic Development Plan 2003–2005* (Government of Fiji 2002) listed the nation's priorities to be macroeconomic management, and economic, social and community development.

These priorities have been difficult to achieve given Fiji's highly scattered rural population. Six per cent of Fiji's population is scattered over 95 of its 97 inhabited outlying islands. Like their counterparts in the rural parts of the two main islands, these rural dwellers have to be provided with the opportunities for involvement in the economic affairs of the nation. Strategies such as decentralisation have not worked well up to now because the concentration of population and economic activities in the centres in Fiji's two main islands presents a dichotomy of an urban-centred and economically important sector and a rural-based poor periphery. For this reason, the provision of infrastructure and support services is an important part of rural development.

Native land constitutes approximately 82.4 per cent of all the land and is surveyed, registered and administered on behalf of the indigenous owners by the Native Land Trust Board. Reserved land comprises over a third of native land but most of this is too marginal for agriculture. State land (9.4 per cent) and freehold land (8.2 per cent), both unreserved, comprise the remaining. Although both the reserved and unreserved land can be leased, the reserved land leases are for indigenous Fijians only. Land leases under the existing Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act have been expiring since 1997 and have been a contentious issue, as the:

form of tenure under which land is owned and made available for use is a major determinant of how and by whom it is used, and the type of settlement people create on it (Ward 1998:92).

Involving people in rural development has been a continuous concern to policy-makers and governments alike. The majority of indigenous Fijians reside in their villages in the rural areas while Indians and other minority groups dominate the formal and business sectors and the urban population. In 1969, the then Chief Minister, Ratu K.K.T. Mara, in a memorandum on rural development, highlighted a concern that remains topical today:

The notable economic advance in recent years has not spread evenly across the countryside. Growth tends to concentrate in particular points, and those living away from them are cut off from its immediate benefits. Yet there are increasing stirrings in the rural area for a greater share in progress (Kick 1998: Appendix F/2).

Although the indigenous Fijian-dominated Alliance Party governed the country from independence in 1970 to the time of the general election of 1987, the plight of indigenous Fijians in rural areas remained a major concern. During this time, Fiji enjoyed political stability and prided itself on being ‘The Way the World Should Be’. However, the results of the general election that year saw a coalition of the two main Indian-dominated parties—the National Federation Party and the Fiji Labour Party (FLP)—come to power as the result of widespread dissatisfaction with the ruling Alliance party. The new government promised to better the record of the indigenous Fijian-dominated governments of the previous 17 years, but was vehemently opposed by indigenous Fijian nationalists who plotted its overthrow even though its policies aimed to improve the conditions of the rural masses. On 14 May 1987, Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka staged the first of his two military coups that year, ostensibly to protect indigenous Fijian interests. Race relations in the country were polarised and indigenous support for the coup was quickly secured.

In one of his first press conferences after the coup, Rabuka declared that indigenous Fijians had gained victory—implying that indigenous Fijian interests were under threat and would now be safeguarded. Given the protection of Fijian interests in the constitution, it is logical to argue that perhaps Rabuka was referring to the development aspirations of the indigenous Fijians who felt marginalised and disadvantaged. Consequently, Rabuka put in place policies to address indigenous Fijians’ concerns and aspirations.

The 1990 constitution, decreed into existence after the 1987 coups, reflected what indigenous Fijians believed to be the remedy for their political and development predicament (Lal 1997:75). Government policies emphasised affirmative action (positive discrimination) aimed at improving the position of indigenous Fijians and Rotumans and ultimately securing their control of government. Parliamentary elections were contested subsequently along totally racial lines while the prime ministership and the presidency, amongst other senior positions, were reserved for indigenous Fijians. In education and employment within the civil service, indigenous Fijians and Rotumans were allocated 50 per cent of all the available places, even with inferior qualifications. The principle of merit was often disregarded. Financial assistance was offered by government-owned financial institutions to allow indigenous people to invest, buy homes and set up commercial enterprises (Denoon et al. 1997).

It has been argued that indigenous Fijians gained more under the 1990 constitution than during the 17 years under the 1970 constitution (Fisk 1995:260). The affirmative action policy was to make development equitable and give people in the rural areas the opportunity to improve their living conditions, or at least provide for their basic needs. The policy benefited many people, particularly middle- and upper-class indigenous Fijians, who were in a position to take advantage of the schemes that were mounted for their group. There were some dismal failures, however, which reflected the way these initiatives were hurriedly planned and implemented. There was little improvement in the rural areas where the people remained poor, grappling with the problems of lack of opportunities, infrastructure, support services and employment.

The affirmative action policy was judged discriminatory by the international community, and Fiji was pressured to make amendments. Opponents of the policy argued that equity for one group in society should not be addressed by discriminating against another. The critics questioned why race determined which group of poor was more deserving of assistance, and argued that a merit-based system was important if the resources of the country were to be productively utilised. In addition, they argued that the affirmative action policy would lower standards, foster dependency and restrict peoples' contributions to the development of the country.

Fiji held its first election under a revised and internationally accepted 1997 constitution in May 1999. Subsequently, it had its first prime minister of Indian descent. Fiji was readmitted into the British Commonwealth.

For a time afterwards, it seemed that Fiji was moving ‘away from the cul-de-sac of communal politics and ethnic compartmentalisation’ (Lal 1997:76). However, the political rumblings in 2000 and the takeover of government in May of that year showed that racial problems were still important in national affairs, that racial feelings could still be manipulated for political ends. Many Fijians in rural areas supported the coup, which they were led to believe would provide them with another chance to improve their position.

George Speight’s reasons for overthrowing Mahendra Chaudhry’s Labour Party-led People’s Coalition government in 2000 were similar to those of Colonel Rabuka 13 years earlier. He promised to safeguard the interests of indigenous Fijians, which he claimed were being eroded. Many rural villagers and chiefs who saw the coup as a chance to get their concerns addressed supported George Speight. Indian farmers and settlers in rural Fiji were terrorised and robbed. Roadblocks were set up around the country, while the takeover of the military camp in Labasa, the police station in Korovou in Tailevu and the hydroelectric power station in Monasavu demonstrated the support of the rural communities for the coup. Indigenous Fijians were mistakenly convinced that the overthrow of government would improve their lot.

An interim administration, led by Laisenia Qarase, and made up of a new crop of national leaders, many from professional backgrounds, took the country to the general election in 2001, which they contested under the new Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) banner. The party broke away from the Great Council of Chiefs–sponsored Soqosoqo Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) party and promised a new road map for the protection of indigenous Fijian interests. However, indigenous Fijians were deeply divided and only the favourably weighted political set-up and not their dominant numbers assured them political leadership.

The SDL won the election and put in place strategies to appease indigenous Fijian aspirations, which they argued was the only way to achieve peace and prosperity in Fiji. Qarase reintroduced the affirmative action under the *Blueprint for the Protection of Fijian and Rotuman Rights and Interests and the Advancement of their Development* (Government of Fiji 2000; Denoon et al. 1997; Samisoni 2008). Indigenous Fijians and Rotumans were given government assistance, which included access to former Crown land (Schedule A and 8), ownership of customary fishing areas (*qoliqoli*), Great Council of Chiefs’ Development Trust Fund, and

royalty and tax exemptions. The blueprint determined the system of funding Fijian administration and its programs, payment of rent arrears, education fund, grants to Fijian Holdings Limited and other Fijian-owned companies, government shares, rents and contracts, licences, loan schemes, royalties, land buy-back, assistance for business and cane farming and the discontinuation of the Lands Commission.

While the intention of the above-mentioned assistance programs was noble (Samisoni 2008), their implementation was shrouded in mystery. In 2001, Fiji was rocked by disclosure of corrupt practices in an agriculture scheme that was formulated to assist people in rural areas by providing tools, implements and equipment for farming and fishing. The scheme was aimed at the disadvantaged communities in rural areas, but in fact it was only available to some. No clear system was in use and little information was available on the way the assistance was handled. In the end, assistance was given to only those people who knew about it. There were records of people in urban areas receiving assistance. The scam was unearthed amidst allegations of corruption, nepotism and political vote buying (Shameem 2006), which cost approximately FJ\$60 million. It was never known how much of the money was used for the people targeted in the project and how much went to the suppliers and the civil servants who were in charge. The scheme resulted in the suspension, sacking and imprisonment of some senior civil servants. There was little evidence that the national objectives for the development project were achieved. No monitoring was undertaken. This was why better rural development procedures are required as the costs of not doing it properly are just too great.

Fiji experienced its fourth coup on 5 December 2006. On this occasion, an indigenous Fijian-dominated multiparty government was forcibly replaced under what the military called a 'clean-up campaign'. Laisenia Qarase's SDL government that had just won its second term in office was overthrown by Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama after a long and widely publicised stand-off amid allegations of blatant pro-Fijian nationalist interests promoted by the government at the expense of the welfare of the country's multiracial population, good governance and equitable development. Commentators remarked on Qarase's manipulation of the democratic processes to serve the interests of indigenous Fijian extremists (Baleinakorodawa et al. 2007; Shameem 2007). Policies such as affirmative action, the Qoliqoli Bill, the Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill and the Indigenous Land Claims Bill furthered indigenous Fijian interests at

the expense of other groups. The 2006 coup redirected Fiji's development path to address the interests of all the people of Fiji, corruption and the mismanagement of the economy.

The interim administration of Commodore Bainimarama aims to provide better services to the people of Fiji. It revised the Budget, kept the value-added tax (VAT) level at 12.5 per cent and restructured the public service. Chief executive officers had their contracts and their posts reverted to permanent secretary positions with reduced salaries. Management and members of statutory organisations were overhauled, with many qualified indigenous Fijians on them implicated and replaced. The retirement age was reduced from 60 to 55 years to save over FJ\$70 million in salaries (*fijilive* 2007). Efforts are under way to assist the 33 per cent of the population that lived below the poverty line and arrest the deteriorating state of the economy that continues to push people from rural areas into the towns and cities. Some major investments such as the development at Natadola and Momi have been readjusted to protect local interests.

Unresolved Issues

The main objectives of rural development emphasise the:

- creation of the necessary economic and social environment, which will stimulate and strengthen rural community development efforts
- provision of an effective institutional framework for consultation, cooperation and involvement at the community level
- coordination of the effort with existing agencies in rural areas at the most appropriate decentralised level
- stimulation of rural communities to seek their own improvement, through the satisfaction of people's needs, through their own effort and resources
- provision of advisory, technical, financial and other material assistance, particularly where economic benefits would result (Fiji Central Planning Office 1980:302; Fiji Ministry of Rural Development and Rural Housing 1987a:1, 1987b:2, 1992a:3, 1992b:9–10, 1994:1, 1995:2–3; Fiji Department of Rural Development 1996:2).

These objectives demonstrate the need for an enabling environment in Fiji if rural development is to be effective. The fact that the objectives remain untenable indicates the amount of work that has to be undertaken in rural Fiji. Rural development since the 1987 coups has been 'reactionary' and ineffective. It has been implemented haphazardly in places with trying conditions and has been associated with quick-fix and short-term solutions. The poor performance in rural development has deprived people of the opportunities to improve their living conditions as well as the chance to be a part of the modern economic system. Consequently, people in rural areas remain oblivious to the requirements of economic development and the role they must play to improve their situation.

Rural development is complex and needs to be well planned to ensure that each of the targeted features is addressed. This is an area where rural development has faltered in the last decade or so. Faced with the reality in rural Fiji after the honeymoon during the immediate post-independence years, the people quickly grew sceptical of their leaders and yearned for political change as if political leadership alone would improve their position. This, of course, does not work and is the reason why the approach must be altered and public education undertaken.

A new approach to rural development is needed to address some of the hindrances that are faced. A system for addressing rural development issues must be adopted. Lack of capital forces people to rely on government assistance, which is available only when the budgeted amount is available. People have few means of improving their position. Although the bulk of the land is owned by indigenous groups, it often is not leased and cannot be used to secure finance from lending institutions. A lot of the reserved native land is unutilised as people have only small gardens because they do not have the means to maximise their production. In other instances, rural dwellers who have tried to improve their productivity face problems of irregular transport to markets and the lack of market outlets in rural areas. These peculiar conditions restrict the opportunities to operate commercially viable ventures in rural areas. It is unlikely that rural development initiatives involving people in these areas will work given the existing lack of infrastructure and support services.

Development institutions are not available in rural Fiji. This deprives the people of the advice and support services they require. Since the untimely demise of the National Bank of Fiji, banking facilities have disappeared from rural areas; institutions such as the Fiji Development

Bank, the Rural Banking Scheme of the Australian and New Zealand Banking Group and government representatives carry out only periodic rural visits. In many cases, development activities in rural areas are undertaken only in exceptional circumstances.

The need to streamline the work of rural institutions is sorely required. Public education on important national issues such as the constitution, the rights and responsibilities of the people, the significance of elections, governance and rural development planning have not been adequately provided, and people who are poorly informed on these issues rely heavily on their provincial councils, which, by necessity, have unduly influenced national affairs. Although the councils meet regularly, there are serious questions about representation of people in rural areas. In addition, there is little systematic follow-up action.

The Rural Development Administrative Structure (Figure 1) has been in place since the pre-coup days and outlines the communication channels between government and the people. This structure coordinates development work at the national level between urban and rural areas and amongst different racial groups in different areas (Lasaqa 1984:146). While the structure enhances good coordination and prioritisation of the development initiative proposals, the approvals and implementation are time-consuming and cumbersome and do not cater for communities that seek immediate attention to their needs. The process demands longer-term planning of three to five years, which is often not undertaken at the community level, where the immediate needs exist (Nayacakalou 1978:15). Often, the enthusiasm for development initiatives is lost because of the long time taken to arrive at a decision. The process is also influenced by government officials, local elites and politicians, whose actions affect the distribution of aid and development assistance and its timing.

The structure does not always provide resources to support rural development activities proposed by the people. This support depends on the availability of finance. Moreover, the structure does not specify the government ministry responsible for implementing particular rural development activities. Thus, rural development initiative in an indigenous Fijian village may be undertaken by any of the government ministries individually or in association with others.

14. BREAKING FIJI'S COUP CULTURE THROUGH EFFECTIVE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

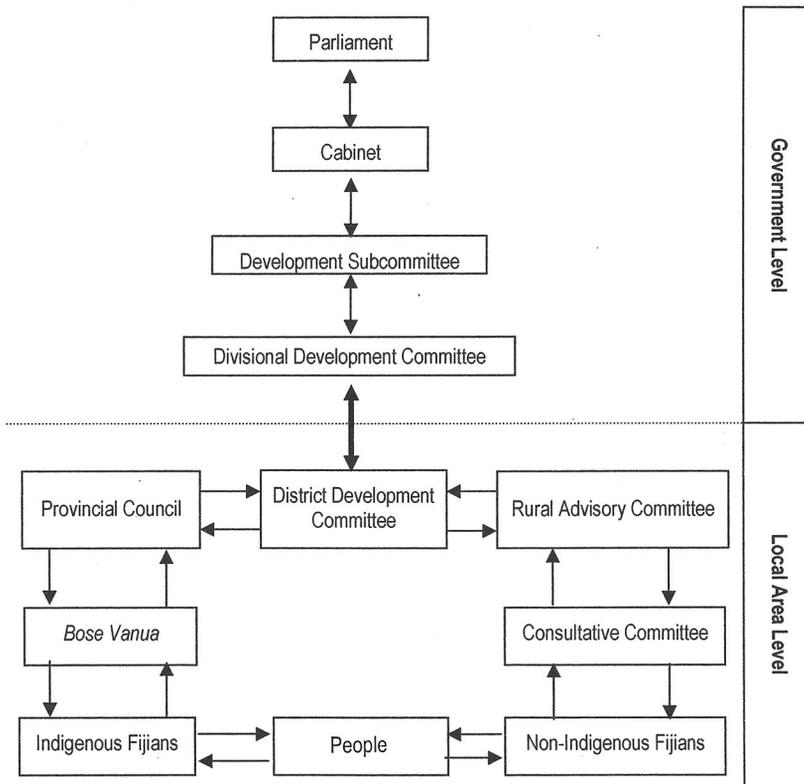


Figure 1. The Rural Development Administrative Structure.

Source: Lasaqa 1984:146-48.

Poorly planned rural development initiatives ultimately are damaging to the whole country. In a number of highly publicised cases, millions of dollars were spent on initiatives that were not effective in improving rural conditions. In many of these initiatives, there were short-term aims and gains accompanied by allegations of corruption, nepotism and of schemes benefiting people other than those who were targeted in the development activities. These costly initiatives have not only failed to improve living conditions in rural areas, they have also given rural dwellers false hopes. The recipe for trouble is set when people, who have least understanding of the economic development requirements and do not understand their own roles in the improvements of their conditions, mistakenly expect improvements in their lives when governments are usurped because they are dissatisfied with their present status.

Rural Development Issues

Pertinent rural development issues in Fiji include the types of activities introduced, the manner in which the rural development is undertaken and the effect on the people and their living conditions. Modernisation was promoted after independence in 1970 because indigenous Fijians' tradition, culture and social and cultural systems were regarded as hindrances to Fiji's economic progress (Spate 1959:1; Burns 1963; Belshaw 1964:282; Watters 1969:12; Fisk 1970:3). It was concluded that modernisation would stimulate the development of the country through a trickle-down process that would allow the rural hinterland to benefit from economic activities in the main centres.

Rural development initiatives, following the decentralisation approach, included the construction of townships, roads and airstrips and the establishment of junior secondary schools and commercial enterprises. These developments are meant to stimulate improvement in rural lives and reduce the movement of people to urban centres. However, people still leave their rural villages and settlements to seek education and employment in the main centres. In addition, the poor state of the markets and infrastructure, and people's customs and traditions hinder the operation of profit-making ventures in rural areas (Spate 1959:36; Fisk 1970:137; Nayacakalou 1978:40; Ravuvu 1988a:202, 1988b:8).

Rural development objectives in Fiji aim to improve the income of rural dwellers to reduce the economic gap between them and urban dwellers (Ravuvu 1988a:179, 1988b:70–71). This philosophy related to the thinking at the time that economic development would solve the problem of underdevelopment in rural areas. This position has been reviewed to acknowledge that economic development alone is not sufficient to solve underdevelopment in rural areas. In recent times, rural development programs have been designed to assist people to help themselves by encouraging those at the grassroots to define their development needs and to identify the resources available to meet them (Nayacakalou 1978:143; Lasaga 1984:141). Given the poor state of the infrastructure, institutions and support services in rural Fiji, nothing is expected to occur unless the root causes of underdevelopment in rural areas are properly addressed.

The situation is closely scrutinised because indigenous Fijians, who were encouraged since the colonial days to remain in their villages, are demanding involvement in the economic sectors of the country's life

(Tupouniua et al. 1975:33). However, in trying to support the commercial aspirations of indigenous Fijians, the affirmative policy must emphasise the attainment of goals and results and not cause strife amongst racial groups, as summarised in *The Fiji Times* editorial on 2 November 1994:

No one disputed the need to have more Fijians involved in commerce, but the practice of disadvantaging one group of traders to boost the stocks of another is like hobbling the fastest horse in a race so the rest can keep pace. The end result is that you go nowhere fast. Surely there is someone in the Government with the imagination and drive to come up with an effective, but fair, scheme to enhance the business prospects of indigenous Fijians without making half the country feel like lepers.

The argument that indigenous Fijian rights have been neglected has been used as a smokescreen in the political upheavals since 1987. The people who wanted to safeguard indigenous Fijian rights have not only extended these to include the right to govern and the improvement of living conditions in rural areas, but also to win public support. Ironically, these rights are more likely to be the outcome of effective rural development and not coups, which disrupt the economic activities that are crucial to the development of the country.

There has been little mention of the quality of the indigenous Fijian leadership over the years, nor of the fact that independent Fiji has always been under indigenous Fijian-led governments. These governments have not succeeded in meeting the expectations of development throughout the country and have not achieved much in providing for the rural populace in spite of all their affirmative policies. Ironically, political leaders have on most occasions easily convinced the populace that leadership must remain with Fijians (*fijilive* 2007). The experience in Fiji has demonstrated that rural development is more complicated than the provision of policies, strategies and project activities.

With the experience of the coups in the last 20 years, indigenous Fijians must accept that their disadvantaged position in rural areas is unlikely to improve with the illegal overthrow of governments. People's needs and aspirations can be satisfied only if they work hard and if their government supports their pursuit of development. Effective rural development needs good-quality government comprising leaders and people who understand the way the economy works and how it affects rural development. Indigenous Fijians must insist on having effective governance, regardless of its ethnic composition. People must demand results from their leaders and

must withdraw their support if the quality of government is unacceptable. However, these changes must be instigated through the accepted political processes and not through coups.

Making the correct development decisions is critical, given Fiji's widely differing social and economic conditions. Indigenous Fijians in many parts of the country require capital, infrastructure, experience and skills, managerial expertise, and hard work and dedication to be successful. It is wrong to assume that indigenous Fijians will succeed in commercial activities if financial assistance is provided. This assumption ignores the obvious fact that commercial ventures require skills, business acumen and a certain level of infrastructure (Watters 1969:204). This has been demonstrated time and again when racially biased initiatives, aimed at uplifting indigenous Fijians, were eventually acquired through the market process by other ethnic groups who were more prepared to handle them. Implementing rural development is more demanding than providing development initiatives.

The Army Auxiliary Unit's Operation Veivueti operated a collection scheme to stimulate commercial activities in the villages after the coup in 1987. The unit, which was allocated FJ\$20 million, reduced later to FJ\$12 million, operated at a loss but appeased the villagers who benefited. The failure of the project was attributed to both the villagers and the project officials who were unprepared for the undertaking. The villagers lost interest after a while because of the vessels' irregular schedules. In addition, there were restrictions on what the villagers produced and sold. Project officials, who were mostly army personnel, lacked the entrepreneurial skills to operate the venture. The products were at times sold below the purchasing price due to deterioration in their quality because of the time taken to bring the product to the main markets. Furthermore, there were a lot of empty trips to rural areas because the people who were not ready for the visits did not provide enough produce.

The Equity Investment Management Company Limited (EIMCOL) was established to induce indigenous Fijian and Rotuman participation in commercial activities. Eight married couples were trained for six months and allocated a supermarket each through a joint Fiji Government and Fiji Development Bank (FDB) operation. EIMCOL failed because the participants in the scheme were ill-prepared to operate these commercial ventures (Qalo 1997:96, 196). The shops were in places where larger and well-established supermarkets provided competition to which these

newly established businesses were unaccustomed. Moreover, there were allegations of careless buying and wastage by the people involved in the program.

The affirmative policy also was supported by special loans arranged with the FDB. In most of the cases, the people assisted were not always the most appropriate to undertake their chosen development activities but the ones in positions to benefit from these initiatives. This was illustrated in the sale of shares in the Fijian Holdings (Singh 2007) and the National Bank of Fiji saga (Grynberg et al. 2002), where the affirmative initiatives benefited the indigenous Fijian elites who could access these programs of assistance. The majority of the people—particularly those in rural areas—were not affected.

Experience in rural development also illustrated the inadequacy of government-led programs. The National Marketing Authority, the Fisheries Division and the Army's Auxiliary Unit all unsuccessfully tried the marketing concept that is now adopted successfully by some of the fish marketing companies buying fish in outer areas and islands and selling them in the main markets. Similarly, military involvements in commercial farming, rural development and commerce accumulated huge debts, which were all written off.

The Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Forests' Commodity Development Framework (CDF) was probably Fiji's largest rural development initiative. With a budget of FJ\$69 million, the CDF was to revamp the agricultural, forestry and fisheries sectors and, hence, living conditions in rural areas. The concept emphasised production, value-adding and marketing activities to boost agricultural activities in the country.

The CDF emphasised diversification and the transformation of subsistence into commercial farming. Although the aims of the CDF were laudable, its targets were ambitious and its delivery inefficient and wasteful (Ragogo et al. 1999:3). The projection to increase the annual income from commodities through the CDF by more than FJ\$745 million was excessive and questionable (*The Fiji Times* 1997; Ragogo et al. 1999:3).

The CDF promoted private-sector involvement but did not consult it. It was used to rescue ailing agriculture-based industries. The Pacific Fishing Company received FJ\$5 million, Wonder Gardens received FJ\$500,000, Yaqara Pastoral Company FJ\$749,376, and the copra mills in Vanua

Balavu and Lakeba each were given FJ\$200,000. There was no indication of how the CDF eased the financial problems of these companies, as there was no verification of whether the money was used for the required purposes and whether it made a difference to the status of the ventures. The handouts only prolonged the imminent failure of these operations; they made little difference to the lives of rural communities but provided welcome relief for the elite Fijian owners and stakeholders.

Crops such as yaqona, ginger, seaweed, taro, yam, pawpaw and cassava were allocated FJ\$9.73 million up to December 1998, but the amount that actually reached the people involved in the project activities is uncertain. In a particular department, out of a total allocation of FJ\$400,000 under the CDF, FJ\$234,690 was spent on the purchase of 13 vehicles (Ragogo et al. 1999:3). An additional FJ\$29,900 was earmarked for vehicle maintenance. A Squash Enterprises Limited was paid FJ\$95,000 on the strength of a proposal that did not progress to the next stage. In addition, there were overseas trips and other purchases that were not part of the program's plans.

It was not surprising that one of the first things that Chaudhry's government did when it came into power in May 1999 was to suspend the CDF. This costly episode exemplified the need to make development more realistic and appropriate. The CDF has shown that monetary inputs alone cannot solve rural development problems and that poorly formulated projects are likely to be too costly for the country. One thing is certain: there were some people who did benefit from the project, but few of these were from rural communities.

People in Fiji continue to live between subsistence and a modern economy. The subsistence and informal economy is based in indigenous Fijian villages where community decision-making, resource allocation and management are founded on subsistence, limited technology and a high level of local environmental knowledge (Hunnam et al. 1996:49). The modern economy, on the other hand, is based on the economic activities that are part of the formal sector, largely based in towns and on the main islands.

People in rural areas, who have limited sources of income, are paying the highest prices for goods and services. For most of the consumables, people in rural areas pay much more than do those who earn regular incomes in the main centres and are periodically the beneficiaries of sales wars mounted by competing supermarket chains. In Kadavu and Gau, people

pay more to move from one part of the island to another than to go there from Suva. Transportation is limited and linkages intermittent. The lack of services forces people to move from rural areas into the main centres where they contribute to the ever-growing poverty and squatter populations and where they are required to pay the same as their wage-earning colleagues and relations.

Alternative approaches have featured in rural development in recent times in attempts to improve it. Government policy to provide two-thirds of the total cost of any rural development activity if the community contributes the other third is a better arrangement than loan and repayment schemes, which have not been successful. The arrangement suits people who tend to slacken off after their initial enthusiasm wears off. Income-generating projects are encouraged in places where there are poor options, restricted markets and low buying power, and where the support services are limited.

Indigenous Fijians in villages own most of the land but produce subsistence outputs and cannot access financial resources. Consequently, people do manual work even with their commercial ventures. Life in villages seems relaxed and flexible but is in fact rigidly organised. Community work takes up a significant portion of time, which takes people away from their individual pursuits. The arrangement hinders individual initiatives and needs to be revised to suit contemporary considerations and aspirations.

The Way Forward

It is logical to deduce that the coup culture currently gripping Fiji will only be broken if the majority of the people deplore it as an unacceptable option to solve the nation's political problems. This position requires that people be educated that coups are wrong and must not be seen under any circumstance as justifiable. Unfortunately, all the successive coups to date protect themselves with immunity, providing lessons that coups and immunity are achievable.

The coup culture can be broken if rural development is effective so that people better understand the consequences of coups and why these are damaging to their interests. The people of Fiji must reject the propaganda that coups are mounted for them and must defend their democratically elected governments because they are relevant and effective. Moreover,

indigenous Fijians need to decide what is best for them and not rely on the collective decisions of the provincial councils, which wield great influence based on the interpretations that the advisers provided.

Rural development activities must be based on understanding the requirements of development activities and the significance of local social and cultural conditions. Stakeholders must understand the life in villages, their value systems and needs because these influence the success of the development activities. Moreover, the support must include a minimum level of infrastructure and institutions. That is why a new system for rural development must be formulated.

Rural development must be under an authority that designs and fomulates, then implements and monitors successful rural development initiatives. The authority must formulate and enforce policies that minimise wastage and losses, and in doing so increase the positive impacts of rural development projects.

Rural development projects must provide opportunities for rural development that are not bound by project cycles and timelines but are undertaken because people want them as they make sense economically, socially, culturally and ecologically. The authority can also seek and secure its own resources and lead the drive to sustainability in rural development.

Project proposals need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis by competent officials. The local situation should be properly understood because it will determine the types of rural development activities people in the area get involved in. This will minimise projects that are doomed from the start because of factors that cannot be changed easily.

Rural development activities must maximise production, income and sustainable development. Simultaneously, development activities should be rewarding to those involved. The pursuit of rural development policies requires an integrated approach that uses quality databases and information for good decision-making. Government must improve its capacity for data collection and analysis to convince people of what it is doing.

Moreover, government departments must work closely with each other, local groups, NGOs and international development agencies to identify, formulate, implement, monitor and evaluate rural development initiatives. Government must provide the social and economic environment in

which the private sector can participate (Nichols and Moore 1985:i). Government has to provide advice, the funds and the management guidelines. This cannot be realistically done by a particular line ministry and must be the responsibility of a body to facilitate the success of rural development within the country.

Conclusion

Waste of rural development resources and effort because of incompetence and corruption has badly affected the country and must be minimised. Hurriedly planned and implemented initiatives have robbed the country and the people not just of the money but more importantly of the opportunity to make a difference to their lives. Corruption has been a common reason behind each of the country's four coups. Operation Yavato (wood grub) was instituted by Rabuka in 1987 but was never completed because it involved many of the country's leaders and was judged too damaging to reveal. Given the events in the last 20 years, this was a costly mistake from which the country has not recovered.

George Speight accused Chaudhry's government of eroding indigenous Fijian rights through corrupt practices and controversial policies. In 2006, Commodore Bainimarama made the same justification for his 'clean-up campaign'. Indeed, corruption is the only consistent rationale behind the coups that have brought about the political, economic, social and cultural shocks in the country over the last 20 years. It must be quickly addressed because it cannot be allowed to continue. Under the new authority this has to be a major responsibility.

Improving rural development performance is one way of breaking the coup culture. Rural development must be made more effective to be relevant to people who have little understanding of economic principles. The performance of the economy will influence rural development, which must be suited to the conditions in different parts of the country and incorporate people's interests. These prerequisites are necessary because rural development is a commitment that requires hard work and perseverance. Furthermore, it is not an entitlement and it must be offered in a calculated manner.

The institutional structure to coordinate the requests from the people is in place but it must be strengthened and provided matching resources. There is a need to improve coordination within the different government ministries to ensure that appropriate assessments are undertaken for all development initiatives proposed. A review process is required to ensure that project plans are properly evaluated and thought through.

The resources committed to rural development must produce better results. People need to be committed to their chosen development activities because they have a good chance to succeed while government must provide a conducive environment that supports those people and groups that prove they are prepared and suited to undertake the development activities. This approach will enhance the design of appropriate rural development projects that reflect people's drive and commitment and the opportunities available in different areas. The results will improve conditions in rural areas, which will make the rural people realise the value of their governments and the high prices that are paid every time one is overthrown.

The coup culture in the country will be broken only if the people no longer see coups as viable options. The experience of the last 20 years has made people less gullible. They are aware that the coups will not enhance rural development and will not improve living conditions in the country. In addition, people are more critical of the propaganda that they used to accept in the past. The people of Fiji now know that to realistically address their needs and aspirations, they must focus on breaking the coup cycle they are a part of at present.

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