

Creating community-based systems of good governance at grassroots level: A case of organisational strengthening and capacity building among indigenous women in Tailevu Province, Fiji

Eci K Nabalarua¹

Te Pua Wānanga Ki Te Ao

The School of Maori and Pacific Development

Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

University of Waikato

Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand

[nabala2@waikato.ac.nz]

Abstract

Encouraging sustainable community development is a critical aspect of the work of agencies and communities and involves, in the case of contrasting indigenous and non-indigenous value frameworks, a range of challenges. This case study, involving the first twelve months of a Fijian provincial women's project, illustrates the nature of these challenges. From initial planning to implementation, the case demonstrates that the process of empowerment and skills building is possible in a context where the methodology is adapted to meet the needs of the target community. An important aspect of sustainability here is encouraging those accustomed to a culture of silence to articulate and record their aspirations, their needs and their objectives. Thus, traditional dependence upon an organizational history locked in human memory needed, in this case, to be supplemented by transparent, recorded systems of governance and the development of complementary functions in simple organisational frameworks. This case is an illustration of an indigenous experience which has much to offer in relation to ongoing indigenous development generally and much also to gain from the broader framework of indigenous development experiences elsewhere.

Introduction: Contextual background

A constitutional democracy recovering from the military coups of 1987, the Republic of Fiji is a sovereign island state located in the South Pacific and is made up of a little over 300 islands with a population of just over 750,000 people. A multicultural society, the two main ethnic groups are indigenous Fijians comprising almost 50 percent of the total population, Indo-Fijians who constitute 49 percent and other races who make up the remaining one percent. About 83 percent of the land is under native ownership, and in the sugar industry which is the main revenue earner for the country, the majority of Indian farmers whose livelihoods centre around sugar cane farming, are tenant farmers of indigenous Fijian land-owning units (*mataqali*). Disparities between the two main ethnic groups in all spheres of activity have been an ongoing concern with political parties, policy-makers and practitioners in the field. There is a dual system of administration in place. Apart from the main line ministries, the Fijian Administration under the Ministry of Fijian Affairs oversees and administers the provincial machinery of fourteen provinces around the country. The majority of Fijians still reside in the rural areas and many of those that are urban based still retain

ties with their villages. It is against this background that this indigenous women's project on capacity building in the province was initiated as a test case for sustainable community development. The occurrence of yet another coup in May 2000 presented this project with new challenges, challenges that are and is discussed here.

Looking back: reflections for action

The lives of women at grassroots village level often involves rural drudgery in the context of a social order which generally treats women as legal minors and wards of men. The status of these women has been a major driving force in efforts to put in place a model of organisational strengthening and capacity building for indigenous Fijian women at provincial level. This movement is one with a dual purpose. The first aims to develop a viable process of capacity building among rural-based women's Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), a process that uses a generic conceptual framework that can be replicated and customised elsewhere, one that contributes directly to the enhancement of the quality of life of rural women, their families and their communities. By implication, the second objective is to promote increased transparency of civil structures at provincial level.

This case focuses on an initiative that was realised within the collective framework of a rural women's NGO at provincial level. The aim is to share an example of best practice in building good governance and partnerships among key stakeholders in the development process, particularly women's groups. More importantly, it is an attempt to document an empowerment process for learning purposes. The decision to focus at provincial level was largely influenced by field experiences which showed that perceptions of good governance were 'seen' to be associated with top-down processes often determined from the centre. Awareness of good governance issues per se below national level and particularly in the villages is not apparent. Neither have these issues generated spontaneous discussions in decision-making forums such as the *bose va koro* (village council), the *bose ni tikina* (district council) or the *bose ni yasana* (provincial council). Given the current social standing of indigenous Fijian women in a predominantly patrilineal society and the need to enhance women's status in all spheres of activity through an empowerment process of upskilling and confidence-building, the notions of focusing on good governance by integrating it into an organisational strengthening and capacity building project at grassroots level was seen as a move that held potential for sustainable development intervention. This initial task of project formulation was the responsibility of a small working group of women led by a university lecturer with management teaching experience and assisted by the second eldest daughter of the paramount chief in the province and three elderly founding members of the organisation. All the women come from the province and apart from the academic who relocated overseas in 2001 for work purposes, all currently hold senior leadership positions in the Tailevu Soqosoqo Vakamarama (TSSV).

Organisational overview

The Soqosoqo Vakamarama (SSV) is a national indigenous women's NGO with a mandate to work with indigenous women in the villages. Its membership is

predominantly rural based. With its head office-cum-secretariat based in Suva, the SSV is managed by a national executive committee comprising elected officers and the provincial leaders of the 14 provincial branches. The latter form the membership base of the SSV. The SSV's credibility as an NGO capable of promoting the interests and meeting the needs of rural women depends on how well-organised the provincial branches are in terms of structures, processes and mechanisms for service delivery.

That credibility was threatened by a number of problems. Work programs endorsed at national level were not aligned with implementation strategies at provincial level. There was reduced transparency of decision-making processes which were being controlled by small cliques within the levels of the organisation. It was therefore concluded that the time had come to direct focus and energies to strengthening capacities at provincial level. In the organisational history of the SSV, the Tailevu initiative was to become the first of all such initiatives emerging from the fourteen provincial branches whose purpose was to introduce and undertake a provincial-based training programme for indigenous Fijian women. The choice of Tailevu province to initiate this capacity building project was influenced by the fact that this was the home province of the Deputy Provincial Leader of the TSSV, who for this provincial capacity building project also assumed the role of planner, resource mobiliser and head trainer.

The TSSV is an indigenous women's group largely rural focused in its activities and membership and operating out of Tailevu province. The organisation was plagued by a range of problems. These included: ineffective leadership, a weakly articulated membership base, a sluggish organisational momentum, ineffective delivery of services, inadequate capacities and skills base to undertake development-oriented work and negligible successful outcomes. As a consequence, there was an inability to respond effectively to the needs and aspirations of women in their roles as reproducers and producers primarily responsible for organising and managing the household in a rapidly changing rural subsistence context. Membership of the organisation was dwindling.

Given the potential role the TSSV had in enhancing the quality of life of rural women, their families and ultimately rural communities, some members felt there was an urgent need to resurrect TSSV. Through a series of activities aimed at overcoming the problems of organisational decline and poor outcomes, a momentum for change began to slowly build. Examples of these activities include: fortnightly meetings of the working group and other women leaders in the boardroom of the Tailevu Provincial Council since May 1999, alternate weekly visits to selected key villages in the province by 3-4 women to raise awareness of the new provincial women's capacity-building project and to obtain support from traditional leaders and the community, having TSSV traditional leaders and district coordinators attend village and district council meetings and informing these forums of the upcoming project, and on-going consultations with the Provincial Office for advice on logistics and training protocols. In June 1999, under the guidance of the Deputy Provincial Leader of the TSSV, a five-year project on *Organisational Strengthening and Capacity Building* for indigenous rural women in the province was devised. The project received endorsement from the TSSV Executive Committee, the traditional chiefs of the 22 *tikinas* (districts) which constitute the province and the Provincial Administration.

Guiding assumptions

The structure of this rural women's NGO was based on the administrative structure of the Fijian Administration at provincial level. As such, the 22 *tikinas* or districts which made up the province formed the basis of the 22 sub-branches which comprise the TSSV structure. All the 145 villages and settlements fell under these 22 *tikinas*.

Based on first-hand experience of the problems of running women's NGOs, certain assumptions were accepted as givens for the rural context in which capacity building was to be undertaken. These assumptions proved critical to the project's sustainability, its acceptability by the women themselves, its perceived legitimacy as a relevant form of intervention and its potential for transferability and replicability. Acknowledgement of these givens at the outset of the capacity building project made a substantial impact on women's participation, commitment and confidence in making better decisions. Such confidence was acquired from new skills and expanded knowledge bases directed at enhancing women's individual status and their standing in the different groups that they are members of. The latter range from the *vuvale* (nuclear family), the *i tokatoka* (extended family), the *mataqali* (land-owning unit made up of a number of *tokatoka*) and other non-kinship groupings such as the school mothers' club, church-based groups and so on.

The assumptions upon which this capacity building programme were based are:

- in view of the need to strengthen partnerships between civil society and the public and private sectors, NGOs as components of civil society would need to recognise the importance of having appropriate skills and capacities that would enable effective consultative partnerships for sustainable development;
- the pervading culture of silence in an authoritarian context could be tackled by a proactive and consultative approach to addressing women's issues and gender and development concerns;
- the organisation would need to be restructured to ensure greater visibility in the chain of command to grassroots level and better delivery of services;
- leading from behind through leadership by empowerment strategies would contribute to increased commitment to ownership and support by women for the project;
- the TSSV must be prepared to set up a financial base to fund minimum operational costs and to move away from the idea of 'forking from one's pocket' to meet organisational costs;
- in order to avoid 'reinventing the wheel', there would be a need to strengthen networking skills with stakeholders both within and outside of the community;

- in order for projects to be sustained at village and provincial level, all key stakeholders needed to be party to the entire process, from planning through to implementation and monitoring;
- the project must be sensitive to the particularities of the socio-cultural, economic and political context of the respective *tikinas* that constitute the province level;
- the TSSV and, indeed NGOs, must move away from the adhoc work culture stereotypes associated with voluntarism and must imbue a degree of professionalism into its planning, implementation of programs, delivery and quality of service, skills in personnel and time management, responsible leadership, learning to be accountable and financial prudence;
- there must be a core training component incorporated in all facets of the capacity building program ensuring that appropriate skills and knowledge were imparted at a functional level;
- a core team of women from within the province needed to be identified and provided with training skills to assist in delivery of training among their own people;
- in order to enhance effective dissemination and comprehension, the language of training must be in the vernacular or provincial dialect/language and take-home training kits needed to be provided for each workshop conducted;
- documentation and a filing system of records needed to be maintained to ensure continuity of the NGO and maintenance of the organisational momentum;
- NGO programs must be revised to reflect the changing needs and aspirations of the target group if it was to provide and facilitate timely and effective development intervention;
- in order to secure support from national, regional and international agencies: i) the TSSV initiative should serve as a potential model of capacity building for indigenous rural women in the other 13 provinces; and ii) if the process were to be transferable to other NGOs also keen on strengthening capacities, the TSSV must be able to produce visible outcomes in an accountable and transparent framework to enhance its credibility as a role model.

Methodology of the TSSV capacity-building project

Strategies employed for the process of organisational strengthening and capacity-building undertaken in this provincial project included the following:

- developing a knowledge of the customs of the land, traditional protocol and acknowledgement of the social pecking order in the various districts, speaking the language and the projection of an acceptable image of a capacity to deliver;
- the use of the 1996 Fiji National Census Report and the Ministry of Fijian Affairs' provincial data base to develop a provincial profile of rural Fijians in Tailevu province which in turn became the basis for identifying needs to be addressed in the TSSV five-year strategic plan;
- maintaining ongoing dialogue with traditional chiefs through the provincial council and obtaining crucial support for this provincial women's project from both the provincial leader and the deputy who were also sitting councillors themselves, the former representing her district and the latter as a women's representative;
- maintaining working relationships with the Tailevu Provincial Office in its role as a focal point for distribution and collection for TSSV information services;
- decentralising authority in the new TSSV structure, with increased responsibility and recognition being directed to the districts and the women leaders at this level which in turn generated new levels of commitment and ownership of the project among key women leaders in the community;
- working through chiefly families to get influential women to lend support while not demanding to run things;
- conducting small awareness sessions with members at fortnightly meetings in the first three months of the project, sessions dealing with basic organisational and management skills, the importance of, and rationale for, restructuring TSSV, the importance of complementary roles of traditional and organisational leadership in community development, changing functions of TSSV and expected duties of TSSV officers;
- getting the TSSV members from the 22 *tikinas* (districts) to choose and endorse their respective district leaders and coordinators;
- the documentation of all components of the project to be in the Fijian language and to be distributed to TSSV members for use in outreach and awareness raising;

- the use of the media (such as the Fijian programme on Radio Fiji and Fiji TV) for purposes of dissemination, education, raising awareness, and major women's fundraising major women's fundraising, with special advertising being paid for as part of the marketing strategy used by TSSV;
- the use of urban-based Tailevu men and women to support TSSV networks, such as, for example i) seeking the support of Tailevu men in the army in building sheds for the fundraising, and ii) utilising the time and expertise of Tailevu women in Suva as a resource for particular training sessions;
- the encouragement from the outset of developing and maintaining networks with individuals, NGOs, government departments, and development-oriented agencies both within and outside of the province;
- provision of financial support by TSSV to its members to attend other workshops organised by other agencies or NGOs which were seen to be relevant to the goals of the TSSV's strategic plan;
- confidence-building and a 'hands-on' approach among TSSV members such as the use of small working groups comprising 3-6 different women to plan and develop the logistics of all component activities in the project;
- maintaining a culture of interactive dialogue, consultation and transparency as the basis of the organisational culture of TSSV;
- the deliberate focus on a creating an empowerment process in which women would "stand, walk and talk together" which meant that the visible actions of forging ahead as a collective would be reflected in the kinds of results to be achieved twelve months later.

Outcomes of capacity building for the TSSV

In an attempt to enhance visibility and legitimacy of women's participation at village level the TSSV has, from June 1999 to June 2000, through the capacity building project, achieved the following results:

- The compilation of a **provincial demographic profile of rural Fijians in Tailevu province** extracted from the 1996 national census focusing on socio-economic indicators such as: educational attainment, housing structure, type of water supply, toilet facilities, means of waste disposal, type of lighting, infant mortality rates, economic activity, and a one-off comparison of the average weekly household income and degree of inequality with other provinces.
- The development of a conceptual framework known as **PROWESS** which stands for Provincial Women's Empowerment Support Systems and which forms the

basis of this organisational strengthening and capacity building project. Although it has been initiated for indigenous rural women, it has the potential to cater also for a multicultural and multiracial membership base.

- An organisational restructure in which **traditional leadership and organisational leadership have been separated**. The deliberate separation between traditional and organisational leadership roles in this capacity building program has assisted in power sharing, increased social bonding and networking between traditional women leaders and non-traditional women leaders. It has also provided a means whereby the notion of merit has been recognised and appreciated as crucial to effective organisational practices and complementary to traditional leadership without necessarily eroding existing power bases in the community.
- Alongside this restructuring, **a catalogue of duty statements for Tailevu SSV officials** has been compiled. The officials involved include the Provincial Leader, the Deputy, the traditional woman leader, the *tikina* coordinator, the village facilitator and the respective councils in the new structure. The purpose of this document is to inform line agencies and other NGOs of contact persons for women and development programs earmarked for the respective *tikinas* and villages. TSSV workers themselves need to know who are their counterparts in neighbouring villages and *tikinas* so as to reinforce networking and collaborative activities as and when required.
- The cataloguing of a **provincial profile of Tailevu SSV officials at village and *tikina* levels** records the names of 22 traditional women leaders, 22 *tikina* coordinators who are responsible for overseeing organisational activities and approximately 140 village facilitators. In total, there are a little under 200 TSSV workers providing voluntary services throughout the province to a membership of approximately 6-8,000 women in the 15-60years category.
- **A five-year strategic plan for the Tailevu SSV for the period 2000-2005**. This working document outlines nine key strategy areas which the TSSV will focus on in its empowerment programs among rural women, strategy areas that have emerged from the demographic profile of the province at the 1996 national census and from concerns raised by the women themselves. These key areas include:
 - addressing and maintenance of basic needs;
 - poverty alleviation;
 - healthy families and productive communities;
 - developing sustainable subsistence systems;
 - skills and human resources development;
 - women's participation and representation;
 - income-generating opportunities;
 - networking and establishing partnerships; and
 - change management and conflict resolution.

It should be noted that there has been a deliberate move away from the traditional SSV programmes of a “home economics” focus such as training in cooking, sewing and traditional handicraft making. Instead, this ‘home focus’ constitutes a component of strategies related to enhanced health status for women and income-generating opportunities. For purposes of marketing and resource mobilisation, this is the only document written in English, although the 9 key strategy areas have been translated into Fijian and used in the first provincial-wide workshop.

- **The opening of 22 *tikina* saving accounts managed and controlled by women themselves.** This initiative was made possible through a Tailevu Women’s Dollar Day programme held in November 1999. Seen as an alternative to the restrictions imposed by the women’s small credit schemes endorsed by NZODA and managed by the Department of Women, this financial outcome draws its practices from the grameen bank concept.
- The development of **simple financial guidelines for operating *tikina* accounts** in an attempt to promote financial accountability and transparent money handling practices. These accounts have provided optional credit sources to women in starting up small home-based retail services for common consumer items, credit for purchase of basic hardware material to improve kitchen facilities, buying seedlings for vegetable gardening, tailoring and purchase of ingredients for sale of cooked food. We are now seeing small but visible success stories of village women whose lives have changed given an opportunity.
- The first **provincial-wide workshop on organisational strengthening and capacity building** funded by the Australian government through the Direct Assistance Program (DAP) accessed from the Australian Embassy in Suva, was held in the five amalgamated districts (December 1999 - March 2000). Of the 300 mixed participants targeted, 289 attended. The participants included all TSSV officials. Because these workshops were conducted in the villages, other persons of important social status in the village were encouraged to sit in and become part of the small working groups. Such persons included: the district chief, the village headman, village nurse, young men and women, the local pastor and older men, some of whom were representatives of *tikina* councils.
- The drawing up of **22 *tikina* work plans for the year 2000** by the women themselves at the end of this provincial-wide training which formed the basis of TSSV work in the respective districts.
- A follow-up training on **upskilling in leadership, management and monitoring of women’s community projects** funded by the Ministry of Fijian Affairs in mid-May (a week after the coup) was specifically aimed at the 22 traditional women leaders and the 22 *tikina* coordinators. Of the 44 women required to attend, 30 women turned up for this two day workshop. This demonstrated the perseverance and commitment of these women leaders and managers to the efforts of capacity building. The remaining 14 women who did not attend were affected by transport restrictions in the week following the coup. They have, however, been given the appropriate documents by their counterparts who attended.

- From this leadership workshop, a **provincial checklist of indicators for monitoring effectiveness of rural women's participation in enhancing QOL and community development** was compiled by the women leaders. This checklist is now used as a guideline to monitor the quality of programmes initially listed in the respective annual work plans.

Insights on current challenges

The move to strengthen the TSSV and to put all the above into place has been a satisfying achievement at both a professional and personal level. From the perspective of professional Tailevu women who are urban-based, this experience has strengthened networks in both the waged and non-waged sectors. It has also revived and consolidated linkages between Tailevu women who are urban-based and those that are rural-based. The opportunity to be involved in development-oriented work, especially work related to women's issues, has the added bonus of offering first hand experience of such application in a non-governmental framework. This has been a fulfilling experience for all those involved. At a personal level, this capacity-building project has impacted greatly on the lives of rural-based women in Tailevu province in terms of increased awareness, skills building, enhanced articulation and making better choices.

The urgency with which the specifics of planning and implementation have taken place is somewhat prophetic given that Tailevu province now finds itself being proverbially placed at the eye of Fiji's political storm. The initial reaction among indigenous grassroots communities in the rural areas when the coup happened was the traditional silence and an emerging sense of resilience and steadfastness. The coup leader's Fijian blood ties to one of the districts in the northern end of the province became a point of jest as indigenous Fijians from other provinces made reference to the coup as a "Tailevu coup". This labelling implied, among other things, that the conspiracy to overthrow the government was initiated from within the province itself. In the context of these new developments, efforts to revive TSSV's role among rural women have not been in vain, something that is particularly important given the extreme vulnerability of both economic and political sectors. In many ways, the TSSV provincial structure now in place provides a timely illustration of an organised community-based organisation with the potential to be used as an effective conduit for meaningful participation in reconstruction and reconciliation at grassroots level.

The outputs of the TSSV as an NGO in the last 12 months have matched the initial aims of the organisational strengthening and capacity building project. These outcomes have been achieved largely as a result of: the transparency of the consultative processes undertaken, the maintenance of dialogue with key stakeholders in the province, good people skills, small but achievable and highly visible outcomes, use of the radio for timely dissemination of information and promotion of awareness and effective planning. The role of the Deputy Provincial Leader continues to be flexible. While the initial stand was focused on directing, there has been an increased emphasis on a more facilitating and resource-mobilising role as the capacities of

TSSV officials and members grow and as they acquire new confidence levels which are appropriate to the promotion of new development initiatives.

As in the case of all of the development activities in which NGOs are involved, the TSSV's capacity building activities have not been without their share of teething problems. These include:

- weak leadership in some of the *tikina* branches (which is reflected in power jostling between women in chiefly families or inaction or indecisiveness);
- poor membership support and commitment to some of the district leaders;
- strong resistance to change and a shying away from new ideas by some of the older members of the organisation;
- poor follow-up of decisions undertaken at some of the TSSV meetings; and
- ineffective support from the national SSV office.

In connection with the last of these, it needs to be pointed out that the relationship between the Ministry of Women and the current leadership of the SSV has not always been conducive to the rapid strides of TSSV. Government officers in the women's department have in most cases been overwhelmed (even intimidated) by the dynamics of change which have challenged the excessive exercise of caution in decision-making for potential women's projects coming through a provincial SSV branch. These initial challenges are minor in nature and to be expected. Nevertheless, they are being addressed in an ongoing, relatively interactive way by traditional women leaders, *tikina* coordinators, village facilitators and ordinary members

Given the voluntary nature of NGO activities, the TSSV has the added advantage of being able to tap the expertise of urban-based Tailevu women. These are teachers, health professionals, administrators, lecturers, accountants, social workers and legal specialists who provide a think tank and a resource-mobilising network for TSSV programs. Since the majority of urban Tailevu women choose to retain their rural links, their willingness to provide voluntary services and support to TSSV activities is perceived as a way of contributing to enhancing the quality of life in support of female kin in the villages who continue to fulfill community obligations on their behalf. For most women, the obligation to uphold the *vanua* and all that it represents is ingrained in the social psyche. So long as these linkages are maintained within a holistic framework that is functionally relevant to daily living and directed under leadership that is transparent and accountable, obtaining support and commitment is not a real problem.

Lessons for TSSV emerging from the current Fijian political crisis

Since the events following the civilian coup of May 19, 2000 fall within the TSSV's five-year plan in relation to this organisational strengthening and capacity-building project, lessons learnt from the broader national crisis have immediate relevance for TSSV work at provincial level. The repercussions of civil strife and pockets of civil disobedience have impacted on rural women's lives in a fundamental way. This has provided new insights on emerging aspects of social change and has also highlighted problems associated with complacency and a lack of sincere commitment to learning

from past experiences. The issues that have emerged reflect the national crisis in relation to governance and human and indigenous rights and have serious implications for this project. Recognition of these issues is part of the proactive approach taken by the TSSV which has undertaken to ensure that it responds appropriately and realigns its programmes in order that they should survive. Some of the issues surrounding the coup that have underscored important lessons of governance and development for TSSV at provincial level are listed below:

Inconsistency of consultative frameworks and processes

The use of arbitrary and often opaque processes of consultation with selected stakeholders at all levels and at all times have re-emerged as a real concern among grassroot communities in the provinces. Issues such as inadequate consultation, non consultation, insufficient information, transmission delays, and difficulties in accessing the 'right' information for making better quality decisions have, to some extent, become entrenched features of approaches to the realisation of development aspirations. For people at grassroots level, this information and communication problem can become a major demotivator. Under such circumstances, a development initiative can be doomed to fail even before it starts.

Inadequate customisation of development initiatives

The failure to adapt development initiatives to the particular socio-cultural context of the target group in order to ensure ownership of development and sustainability is a recurring cause of concern. The range of responses on the land issue from different landowning units (despite the general consensus that land is linked to the indigenous identity) suggest that even among ethnic Fijians, there are real differences that need to be considered in development intervention.

Maintaining uniqueness in diversity

Differences that exist within Fiji's multicultural society are real and cannot be ignored. Thus, policy makers will need to develop strategies that harness these multiple diversities into strengths conducive to unity, peace, tolerance and productivity.

Developing specificity in community development

There is a need to move away from generic labels and to become more specific and focused. For example, the label 'urban women' becomes more meaningful when it is broken down form-focused categories such as: sex workers, garment workers, women in low-cost housing, transient women, low-income women workers, domestic workers, small business women, disabled women. The more focused the target group, the more feasible is development intervention and the more time-specific the whole exercise becomes.

Growing discontent with leadership on the handling of indigenous interests

There is an emerging level of discontent among indigenous grassroots communities with the general manner in which the establishment has addressed aspects of indigenous development with a particular focus on issues relating to land. In other situations, concerns relating to weak chiefly leadership and the lack of vision and direction in village development have also been highlighted.

Weak provincial structures

The restrictive role of the provincial councils in their ability to respond effectively to the rapidly changing roles and aspirations of a largely indigenous rural constituent (currently being administered through a provincial administrative structure that is lacking in skills and knowledge deemed appropriate for initiating development at this level) is an issue of widespread concern.

Inadequate political education

There is a critical lack of political education relating to the role of the constitution and constitutional processes in a democracy and the role of traditional governance structures in a modern polity. There is also an absence of the heightened awareness of basic human rights and fundamental freedoms that is fundamental in societies that exhibit respect for life and property. Thus, pockets of civil disobedience are apparent.

Emerging culture of violence and aggression

A growing culture of violence and aggression has become one avenue for the expression of frustration, discontent and disapproval of those development initiatives which are seen as a threat to indigenous identity and control over resources such as land. This is indicative of the lethargy and centralised bureaucratic machinery that has represented a threat to development initiatives.

Inadequate and ineffective information flow

The things that need to be known are not filtering down quickly enough to village and community levels. There is, therefore, a very real disparity in skills and knowledge levels between the rich and the poor, among different categories within the same generic groups, between urban and rural, and between inland and coastal villages in the same province. When this issue of structured and timely information and communication flow is not effectively addressed, we see elements of provincialism, religious fundamentalism, emotional frenzy and racism being used to rationalise unlawful activities.

The issues emanating from Fiji's current political crisis have provided TSSV with an opportunity for its Executive Committee to go back to the drawing board and select focused training aimed at assisting immediate reconstruction and reconciliation processes in the community. The immediate focus for training among rural Tailevu communities in the years 2001 - 2002 (that would be spearheaded and facilitated by TSSV) include:

- stress and trauma counselling as part of conflict resolution and change management;
- reconciliation skills among rural communities;
- leadership enhancement skills for leaders in rural communities;
- joint training in good governance, involving provincial administrators and traditional leaders;
- political education on the fundamental role of constitutional law, electoral processes, and civic roles and responsibilities in rural communities;
- legal literacy training in rural communities on human rights, women's rights and the rights of the child;
- participatory needs analysis;
- project management and evaluation;
- adolescent reproductive health;
- family life and values; and
- primary health and basic needs upgrading.

These areas fall under the nine strategic areas highlighted earlier (see *Outcomes of capacity building for the TSSV* earlier) and would fall within the five-year framework of the TSSV's work mandate.

Capacity building in the province and implications for good governance

Generally speaking, good governance is a highly sensitive issue and is perceived differently in different quarters. Traditional leaders of both genders view it with scepticism and a guarded conservatism. They see such issues as having the potential to deconstruct and erode traditional leadership. Thus, for example, older men and women may still support traditional leadership despite its weaknesses. They may acknowledge the characteristics of good governance as important at the same time as being reluctant to initiate change from within. Younger and more highly educated adults may, on the other hand, openly support good governance, seeing it as a means of moving ahead on the basis of acquisition rather than ascription. The latter is generally regarded as the view of those who "have no roots" or are in the process of losing them. It is interesting to note, however, that there is a middle group of community people who recognise that there is room for the positive aspects of both the traditional and western systems of governance and that their integration may be the most viable route for the promotion of sustainable development. The fact that there are very different views, and the fact that some of these views may be based on lack of knowledge and understanding, highlights the need for advocacy and awareness-raising. These are important if good governance at community level is to be perceived as an empowering process that is non-threatening and user friendly.

The experience of NGO strengthening and capacity building in Tailevu province has important implications for how 'good governance' is defined, valued and achieved at the provincial grassroots level. The term 'good governance' has no direct translation equivalent in the Fijian language. Thus, it needs to be articulated in relation to the features and processes that are perceived as constituting good governance at a local level. This would conform to the version endorsed by the World Bank, ADB and the UNDP. Indigenous communities have traditional systems of governance that perform legislative, executive and judicial functions in the community. Thus, the TSSV project must be mindful of the need to ensure that good governance is customized in a way that identifies a common vision, a vision that integrates aspects of traditional and non-traditional systems in a way that promotes effective development.

Systems of governance need to be adequately contextualised if they are to be meaningful and relevant to people's lives. That contextualisation needs to emphasise participation, accountability, transparency, efficiency, equity and responsiveness. It also needs to emphasise the importance of the ideals of upholding the rule of law and promoting human rights. All of these have implications for methodology, particularly in the context of an indigenous community and a rural subsistence economy that is undergoing rapid change. All of them must be taken fully into account in TSSV capacity building programmes such as the one described here, one that is dedicated to making a contribution to the enhancement of women's status and quality of life.

Finding appropriate vernacular words that describe, or aptly reflect, the characteristics of good governance has continued to challenge TSSV capacity building programmes. Meeting this challenge is particularly important in the context of a type of change-management in which good governance needs to be put into practice at the community level and needs to take on concrete forms that are meaningful in relation to people's everyday lives. These concrete forms include:

- organisational re-structuring as a means of creating awareness of the importance of transparency in the chain of command and as a means of ensuring that that transparency is operationalised;
- developing and maintaining simple financial housekeeping rules directed at inculcating the importance of financial accountability, budgetary skills and savings habits,
- a deliberate and conscious attempt to ensure women's participation in decision-making forums such as village and *tikina* councils as a matter of right and not of birth;
- advocating equality of access to resources such as land, water and fishing rights;
- leadership training aimed at enhancing skills of accountability and responsibility;

- encouraging both gender participation and equity at TSSV training workshops; and
- being outcome-focused within the context of specific time frames.

The TSSV's role in promoting good governance at provincial level is indirect and not outwardly visible. Nevertheless, it has been well planned and integrated into the overall capacity building programme. In spite of the conservative provincial context of this NGO strengthening exercise, the underlying strength of TSSV has been exhibited in the documentation of a process that has the potential to retain and transmit new knowledge and values across all levels in the community over a long period of time.

Where to from here?

The experiences of the Tailevu Soqosoqo Vakamarama show that there is a pressing need for capacity building at grassroots level throughout the provinces. The particular case to which reference has been made here also demonstrates that these training processes, if well planned and organised, have the potential to contribute to the formation of a more informed, productive rural community and the strengthening of civil society at provincial level. There remains room for improvement in relation to initiation, commitment, sharing and demonstrating the courage to make a stand. The TSSV has initiated this five year capacity building project in the context of a meager resource base, hoping to attract greater institutional support in the later phases. That the initial objectives have been achieved is a testament to an exceptional level of collective commitment which has been underpinned and reinforced by a leadership style that facilitates rather than dictates, and the prioritization of empowerment techniques.

One challenge for the next four years is to maintain the momentum of the project in order that the quality of life of rural women will be enhanced in all respects. An even bigger challenge lies in ensuring that good governance practices are visibly incorporated into the framework of provincial and community institutions. Unless the national political will for good governance is filtered down to provincial level through a visibly structured participatory process, the ideals of good governance will continue to remain elusive and irrelevant to the majority of the people. The efforts of NGOs such as TSSV should be seen as complementary to the efforts of other agencies at provincial level. In order for partnerships to sustain the process of good governance effectively, all parties need to have ultimate confidence in their own capacity to participate effectively and to contribute meaningfully to this process.

Endnote

1. Dr Eci Nabalarua is a Senior Lecturer in Development Studies in the School of Maori and Pacific Development at the University of Waikato in New Zealand. Before coming to the University of Waikato, she taught Management and Public Administration in the School of Social and Economic Development at the University of the South Pacific for the last twenty years. Dr Nabalarua has extensive experience in developing capacity-building programmes for NGOs and women's groups and conducting professional upskilling courses for the Fiji Public Service. From 1998 to 2000 she held the position of Deputy Provincial Leader for the Tailevu Soqosoqo Vakamarama and put into place a provincial based capacity-building programme for indigenous women in Tailevu.

References

- Larmour, P. (ed.) (1998). *Governance and reform in the South Pacific*. Pacific Policy Paper 23, National Centre for Development Studies, The Australian National University.
- Nabalarua, E. (2000). Basic Education for Good Governance (unpublished). Paper Prepared for the Forum Secretariat for presentation to the regional Ministers of Education meeting, Niue, 2001.
- Nabalarua, E. Field notes and project documents 1999 – 2000 on “Organisational Strengthening and Capacity Building Project” for the Tailevu Soqosoqo Vakamarama