

Making a Difference Where it Counts: A Case of Activism, Advocacy and Action-Research with Two Women's Groups in Fiji

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Abstract

This paper examines innovative and viable options of addressing the role of civil society as challenges of indigenous and local development are pursued against a backdrop of rapid globalization. If organized in a semi-structured framework, civil society has the capacity to respond to unanticipated national events like civil and political upheavals thereby playing a critically significant role in efforts directed at national reconstruction and reconciliation. Interrelationship between ideas and concept application through action research lays the basis for more effective intervention. This in turn has a greater success rate at directing better-informed policy towards effective governance and sustainable community development in Pacific societies. Drawing on the experiences of PROWESS a women's empowerment initiative and fem'LINKpacific, an urban-based multicultural women's collective, the paper illustrates the relationship between concept formulation and application.

Introduction

The so called arc of instability incorporating Pacific countries like Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Bougainville, East Timor and Fiji has ushered in new dimensions of weak-strong state groupings in the Pacific. However, does this portray realities on the ground? What it does indicate is that there is a gap between changing aspirations and needs of the

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general populace and governments' abilities to respond to and deliver development in an effective and timely fashion. We have all seen in some form or other, the best and poor examples of development in terms of planning, processes, policy management, project governance and leadership, popular participation and representation, processes of accountability and transparency and the quality of the outcomes. As the cycle continues, the challenge to come up with remedies that are sustainable and feasible make us realise that optimal solutions are those that are locally bred, locally owned and locally driven. Having said that, this paper argues that enhancing community governance through community groups is one of the key prerequisites to Pacific stability and sustainability. Drawing on a Fijian experience of two community based organizations, the discussion shows how these groups perform a crucial role towards building up the foundations of good governance in the community with great potential to sustain an ongoing impact in society at large.

This Fijian case study is based on the work of two women's groups; the first being a predominantly rural based indigenous provincial group namely the Tailevu Soqosoqo Vakamarama (TSSV) and the second, an urban-based multicultural women's collective in the form of fem'LINKpacific.¹ TSSV has operated for several years and underwent a major restructuring and strategic revamp twelve months before Fiji's 2000 coup, while the second group emerged out of the Blue Ribbon Peace Vigils in the early post-coup aftermath. The very nature of their status as non-state actors untouched by red tape and petty bureaucracy with a degree of freedom and autonomy, smallness, flexibility and an ability to blend in at grassroots, placed these groups in a strategic position to perform key roles in national reconciliation and rebuilding lives and communities. These roles would in the later stages of organizational growth stand to reshape the form and content of possible and potential community-based contribution to strategic grassroots intervention directed at addressing contemporary issues of conflict and dispute resolution, stress and trauma management, cross-cultural dynamics, peace and reconciliation, advocacy and awareness raising.

This discussion reaffirms that the ongoing support for innovative ideas relating to sustainable community development that are home grown and home owned needs to be vigorously continued. For proponents and advocates of policy promoting good governance, this Fijian experi-

¹ Much of the documentation for this paper is based on Trustee diary notes on fem'LINKpacific and TSSV field notes on gender and development intervention in Tailevu Province, Fiji. These unpublished documents are with the author.

ence serves as a reminder that there are no short cuts to a transparent consultative framework that is truly participatory and representative. In order to make informed policy on development, non-state actors, NGOs or community-based groups must continue to be included in equally transparent processes of dialogue and strategic visioning at all levels. To action-researchers, development practitioners, mediators, negotiators and interventionists, this case study reminds us of our ethical and moral obligations in development-type work. Our inputs need to be guided by a real commitment to making a difference by way of contributing to local and global discourse on concept formulation and application in the field. This study illustrates how community groups in civil society continue to impact on national efforts towards good governance, nation building and upholding of the common good. Indeed it is also about developing processes of intervention and protocols of engagement in development that are both sustainable and founded on a commitment to and a belief in, the power of critical mass for enlightenment, empowerment and enhanced quality of life. Here I offer my analysis, as *my* story and *talanoa* as perceived and portrayed in the ongoing attempts directed at intellectualising discourse surrounding governance and sustainable development at community level.

The discussion is in two parts. The first examines the process of addressing community governance through community groups within the context of gender, governance and development. The second section looks at the implications that this field experience has for growing a culture of sustainable community development in Fiji and elsewhere in the Pacific. It concludes by revisiting these initial reflections and reaffirming the position that enhancing community governance through community groups is one of a key requisite for long term sustainability in the Pacific.

Addressing Community Governance Through Community Groups

The four key areas to be covered in this section are, first, the emergence of an idea for women's empowerment, second the formulation of a conceptual framework, third the development of an organizational climate and structure through which the notions of empowerment would take form and, fourth, the direct impact of PROWESS. The experiences of the two women's groups will be examined using a comparative approach throughout this discussion.

Emergence of Notions of Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment initiatives are not new to Fiji and the Pacific (for example, de Ishtar 1998; Douglas 2002; Emberson-Bain 1994;

Leckie 2002; Scheyvens 2003). I consider the difference here centres on the location of control within the empowerment process. It was always so easy and much more convenient to be a willing recipient and even a gullible (and often naïve!) advocate of ready-mix packs and often foreign made templates of empowerment. The decision to develop and grow local women's processes in both rural and urban settings set the basis for a potentially powerful and sustainable instrument for strengthening individuals, groups, families and communities. A lesson learnt very quickly is that one never knows the potential of the power within and what it can unleash until one takes full control of the processes leading to fulfilment and self-determination.

I chose to be involved in the work of a rural based indigenous women's group in Tailevu Province and in an urban-based multicultural women's collective in Suva. With a clear reading of the current socio-political undercurrents within the Fijian context, an opportunity presented itself for piloting interventionist measures for rural women's empowerment. This began twelve months before the coup of 19 May 2000, and then extended into fem'LINK during the post-coup period. My response was to the circumstances of mayhem and my sense of disjuncture during this period. In many respects while the rural women's group took a strong proactive approach to gender and development and later adopted a reactive position after the coup, the urban group emerged as a result of and in response to the 2000 political crisis; it subsequently proceeded to be more proactive as it settled into a routine of advocacy and awareness raising centred around reconciliation, peace-building and a reconstruction of national semblances of community, citizenry and constitutional democracy.

Given the particularities of Fiji's indigenous social context, the challenge that lay before me as the architect of this rural empowerment initiative, now commonly referred to as the 'Tailevu Model', was to develop a framework that would address issues of gender and governance by using the vehicle of women's groups and women themselves as the conveyance, custodian and champions of this interventionist process. There was a mindset that had to be challenged; old habits, stereotypes and perceptions that had to be unpacked; comfort zones to be dismantled, and the growing apathy and idleness needed to be converted into a commitment to productive frameworks. Morale and self esteem were waning fast; pride of being a *taukei* or indigenous person was put to the test, followed by a pervading feeling of distrust of the State and what it represented. A visible gap in the continuity of strong strategic Fijian leadership and a sense of hopelessness and frustration was emerging all around. For those who have never had the experience of operating in two worlds, it is difficult to

imagine the dilemmas faced in an extraordinary situation. I recall that perceptory senses attained heightened levels of reception towards a clime of fear, frustration, confusion, anger and self-pity, all welled up in one huge mass of highly volatile and potentially destructive force of energy. There was the choice of either taking a reactive stance or responding passively as issues emerged or assuming a proactive approach. The choice to be proactive was made and PROWESS was born.

The Formulation of PROWESS: A Conceptual Framework for Women's Empowerment

Developing a sound conceptual framework in which women's empowerment initiatives are located and a board to spring off from has many advantages. It provides a sound basis for focused and clear direction, sets the parameters for scope and content and puts in place an overarching framework that is credible, reputable and universal in appeal and application. The vision, conceptual framework, design and implementation of this project was initiated and coordinated by the author drawing largely from different roles as a management teacher and trainer, a women's representative on the Tailevu Provincial Council and as a Deputy Provincial Leader of the Tailevu Soqosoqo Vakamarama. The challenge of bringing the stories of women and their communities to the forefront and to share these stories with the rest of society is the main reason for fem'LINK's existence. Empowering women by raising awareness through media and the use of multi-lingual programmes has meant that its multicultural focus is being addressed and maintained. It was clear that PROWESS might also gain in strength from this involvement as it began to build a reputation of viable and sustainable intervention.

PROWESS is a multi-pronged instrument. It is multidisciplinary in nature, multi-skilled in focus, multi-phased in operations with a multiplier effect in outcomes and impact. Designed with the six 'Ps' of being people-centred, participatory, proactive, progressive, professional and positive, PROWESS strived to be the vehicle for developing empowerment support systems for both provincial and professional women. Depending on the context, PROWESS in a rural setting stands for PROVincial Women's Empowerment Support Systems and when applied in a more urban context could be altered to become PROfessional Women's Empowerment Support Systems. PROWESS' strength lay in its ability to have a generic set of guiding values, which could be easily particularised to any context. The PROW can be altered to specifically refer to 'provincial women, professional women, professional workers, productive work-

ers, progressive women or progressive workers' and once the profile of the target group is identified, developing appropriate empowerment support systems (ESS) becomes more manageable and sustainable.

The term PROWESS was chosen because of the metaphorical links to 'woman power', reflected in the notions of an inherent power that had the potential to unleash great potential when properly motivated and managed. Through an empowerment process of dialogue, interactive forums and consultation, this inherent power was to be identified and released by the women themselves, once they began to buy-in and claim ownership of the process. As word spread among Tailevu women throughout Fiji of this new form of empowerment initiative, support began flowing in from all corners of the province for all the planned activities. The provincial council and the district chiefs gave their blessings, the men rallied behind the women and most important of all, was the support and commitment of the women themselves and the traditional leaders within TSSV who took a leading role in steering and maintaining the momentum of this process.

The formulation of PROWESS and its success was further influenced by a range of factors. They included things like fluency and mastery of Fijian and English languages, skills and knowledge in customary protocols, and ability to operate in bilingual and bicultural contexts. Traditional status of the concept's architect meant access to seats of influence and leadership in the province, and a ready and willing audience drawn from credibility through prior experience with women and youth training in the communities.

Using a multidisciplinary approach this empowerment project fulfilled a range of learning objectives at different levels. At the level of applied research, it attempts to provide viable options of addressing women's drudgery, poverty and increased access by looking at development applications that integrate indigenous knowledge systems with conventional organizational practices adapted to suit the particularities of a changing subsistence economy. At the level of the community and among the women themselves, learning by doing and using empowerment approaches that facilitate and expand upon knowledge capacities within, meant that there was greater buy-in to the aims of the project. From the position of policymakers, development specialists, researchers, trainers and adult learners involved in community development, the documentation process would in turn form the basis of a case study rich in ethnographic data that provide significant insights for policy implication and development intervention on the ground. In short PROWESS is about 'excellence in being local, sustainable and global'.

Developing an Organizational Climate and Structure for Concept Application

The five-year TSSV provincial women's project, which began in mid-1999 and was placed within the framework of PROWESS, was undertaken with three broad aims. The first was to develop a methodology of capacity building at grassroots level incorporating issues of gender and governance aimed at empowering rural women, rejuvenating quality parenting and families, and building strong communities. Second, the ensuing documentation of such a process would lead to the emergence of a rural women's empowerment model that would lay the basis for possible replication in the other provinces in the country. Third, this Fijian experience would have the potential for transferability and adaptability among other countries in the Pacific region. After the first eighteen months of this project, a methodology has emerged; the details of this are found in Nabalarua (2001a). The move into the second phase of capacity building for stronger communities and community governance on a nation-wide basis using the Tailevu model was delayed, pending further consultations among interested groups. Transfer and replication to other island states is an option that is available should other national NGOs and development agencies strive to pursue this line of development intervention.

With regards to fem'LINKpacific: Media Initiatives for Women, this is a Suva based women's NGO committed to 'linking women with the media', bringing the stories of women and their communities to the forefront and to sharing these stories with the rest of society. This initiative was born out of the post-coup Blue Ribbon Peace Vigils and has since committed itself to increasing awareness of critical social, political and economic issues, in addition to serving as a means of promoting peace and reconciliation. I was one of three initial trustees of this collective registered as a charitable trust. It is currently run by a core group of five young professional women. It has continued to grow in terms of outcomes and outreach. Much of the group's work is funded from aid agencies; with the exception of project funded staff, all five professionals that make up the collective, including the trustees, provide voluntary service. The timing for the emergence of this organization was right and their ability to operate unrestricted by bureaucracy has been to their advantage.

The vigils played an important role for many individuals of both genders and from different walks of life. In the fifty-six days that the hostages were kept in Parliament House, the vigils assumed greater meaning and mobilised people as the local and international press splashed our faces across the newspapers and television screens. The Anglican Church,

which hosted the peace vigils, became the focal refuge point, the safety house, a place for peace and a haven of hope.

Involvement in the TSSV project and fem'LINKpacific was made possible because of an ability to apply PROWESS principles. While I was directly involved with both governance and operational management in the rural women's group, I assumed a more governance-type function with the urban lot. In so doing, it was easier to draw on prior experience and adapt accordingly to this urban interventionist process.

PROWESS and Grassroots' Support

Social impact

In terms of its social impact, PROWESS has certainly made a dent in the thinking and behaviour of women in Tailevu province towards the options that empowerment can provide. Awareness of rights and the rule of law have reached new levels, there is an increase in female members on the twenty-two *tikina* (sub-district) councils in Tailevu, increased confidence of women in negotiating, lobbying and mediating for space, resources and a right to be heard and a more visible presence in strategic provincial initiatives like the Education Day organized in collaboration with the Tailevu Provincial Council. Men's overwhelming support of this empowerment process is a significant and crucial response. It sets the basis for the emergence of a solid partnership between genders in development. This partnership is based on mutual respect, trust, sharing, goodwill, caring and tolerance; values which underpin notions of sustainability. These set the tenor for new expectations of community governance.

In comparison, the strengths of fem'LINK were reflected in its multicultural focus and outreach to the wider community. From the ashes of despair emerged a vibrant and fresh social consciousness that had a wide appeal because the group quickly recognised the potential of face-to-face dynamics and personalised and real life experiences in delivering messages of hope and perseverance, as the nation struggled to rebuild. Raising awareness through appropriate media was designed to provide positive public rapport. The level of creativity and innovativeness lies in fem'LINK's professional expertise. Since fem'LINK's inception it has produced a woman-centred video for peace and nation-building (Bhagwan Rolls, 2001a), been involved in advocacy and awareness raising on peace-related themes with other NGOs, worked with other women's groups on compiling the NGO Status Report of Women in Fiji, and has maintained a regular electronic link with global partners (see Bhagwan Rolls 2000, 2001b).

Target impact

For the rural women's project PROWESS addressed reducing drudgery and poverty through capacity building and organizational strengthening. The first component of capacity building was directed at enhancing individual capacities by identifying multiple roles of rural women and developing a range of skills and a knowledge base to enable increased performance and quality outcomes in those roles. The second component of organizational strengthening was aimed at enhancing the capacities of women's groups as collectives. Since both components are mutually reinforcing, they form the basis for sustaining the much needed momentum to effect change among women in both the short and long term.

In terms of reaching target groups, PROWESS has been implemented within the framework of the largest indigenous women's group in the province, the Tailevu Soqosoqo Vakamarama (TSSV). All Fijian women may either deliberately choose to be members or by being registered Fijians become automatic members and may either assume an active or a latently active membership status. In terms of numbers, since the TSSV directs its services to women within the standard economically active category of 15-59 years of age there are approximately 7,000 women whose lives would be influenced by the project. Apart from on-going monitoring activities throughout the project cycle, the year 2005 has been put aside for project evaluation purposes. The impact of this project on the women of Tailevu province and their families will be measured by new opportunities for income generation, poverty reduction, expanded income bases, and increased participation and representation of women at all levels of decision-making at provincial level.

Because fem'LINK is media focused, its work has tended to be screened in the large theatres in Suva with smaller groups and communities having access to videotapes for group viewing, discussion and feedback. The themes touch on daily common struggles of women to meet basic needs, to achieve common goals of good education for their children, decent housing, good health care, to have a quality family life and to strive towards peaceful coexistence and harmony. fem'LINK also participated in a national children's art and literary workshop for peace in conjunction with Fiji TV and primary schools.

Innovative and creative impact

In terms of creativity and innovation, the ability to devise a provincial model for rural women's empowerment drew its strength from identifying the existing capacity gaps at provincial level, utilising bicultural and

bilingual abilities and being guided by a strong belief in the power of small beginnings, simplicity and being focused. Financial restraints were never seen as the determining factor in the evolution of the project because the guiding principle was to initially develop a creditable strategy, which in turn would be used as proof to funding agencies that such a project warranted future funding support. With minor restructuring in the first six months of inception, the TSSV has to date a little fewer than 200 TSSV officials on the ground servicing around 145 villages and settlements spread over the twenty-two districts, which comprise Tailevu province. The project has therefore put in place an organized network of women who have been up-skilled in different roles and who perform strategic functions of data collection, data processing and information dissemination within communities.

For this project, creativity involved developing something constructive and useful from the ground up for rural women and the design and implementation with its associated outcomes in the first twelve months of the project cycle has reflected this well.

The PROWESS project is distinctive in many ways:

? It has local, national and regional applications within the same project life cycle with each phase feeding off the other. This is seldom seen in similar local project.

? It is the first comprehensive provincial project on rural women's empowerment in Fiji.

? The potential for replication in the other thirteen provinces in the country offers potential in terms of skills and knowledge transfer.

? This is an indigenous women's project that has been managed and controlled by provincial women themselves with a particular focus on a documented process. This contributes to consolidating this empowerment initiative.

? The project design incorporates new ways of doing things such as separating traditional leadership from organizational leadership.

? A strategic plan specifically compiled for the project is a key document for the women in the province because it locates the current provincial demographic profile in a national context in areas such as health, education, housing and economic activity. It provides significant pointers to priority areas that women need to be aware of and address.

? The use of the Fijian language as a medium of communication and dissemination of information in all documents, with the exception of the strategic plan, is the important factor in obtaining buy-in, local ownership and commitment to this project.

The mission to empower indigenous Fijian rural women to be in effective control of their lives and to make a difference in their own communities has been delivered through PROWESS. Training styles incorporated facilitating skills, widespread consultation, group dynamics and teamwork and were reflected in processes of goal setting and problem solving. It should be noted that while the original vision was initiated, conceptualised and instigated into the project by the author, it later became the collective vision of the TSSV, once TSSV leaders and its members endorsed the project.

Long term impact

As the Tailevu PROWESS project enters its fourth year, it is ready to be replicated in the thirteen other provinces in Fiji and hopefully, to selected countries around the Pacific region. The strength of this process lies in its multidisciplinary focus which is proactive, participatory and progressively aligned with issues of governance, reducing poverty, enhancing equity of access through knowledge and up-skilling and renewed confidence in economic productivity at community level.

The long-term vision of fem'LINK^{pacific} is also that it may be replicated and adapted in the island countries in the region. An expansion of its current activities and developing new growth areas are options that will need to be duly considered given implications on resources and cost sharing with other groups involved in similar projects. The use of some of its programmes in parts of the Pacific on national radio and television has been endorsed.

For both TSSV and fem'LINK, capacity building is the pivotal core of this empowerment process because empowering women, especially Fijian women requires capacity building as the springboard for raising awareness and exercising timely and informed choices. Newly acquired skills, self-esteem and confidence levels have been reflected in effective articulation and increased participation and representation at village and district meetings. They indicate an increasing recognition of and the importance of exercising basic rights among women. High attendance of the forty-four TSSV women leaders at most of the meetings and the workshops in the province since it all began, indicate a willingness to take new options accruing from learning opportunities and a commitment to the vision. Raising capacities through the use of the media means that pace of learning is quickened. Focus on human rights, communication for peace and making informed choices allow fem'LINK to go through different communities at different levels because they respond to common gaps of knowledge that need to be consistently filled.

While PROWESS was locally designed, it was structured in such a way that the actual ownership of the project has always been the women themselves. This has proved valuable in a way because while I, as the project architect since 2001 relocated to New Zealand for work purposes, the project is being maintained and monitored by the women leaders and the TSSV officials with ongoing support from the Tailevu Provincial Council and the chiefs. In terms of ownership of intellectual property associated with the project, it has been the express wish of the author, that while this project has been a TSSV project, the women of Tailevu should take pride in sharing knowledge and information and establishing networks with women in the other provinces through the use of PROWESS.

Ethical impact

In terms of development ethics, PROWESS ensured that ethical concerns were to be upheld and acknowledged along the way. TSSV project leaders were constantly reminded by village elders that development with dignity and integrity needed to be acknowledged and respected throughout the intervention process. This was built in to the methodologies and processes used. Given the largely male-oriented and male-dominated emphasis in Tailevu's social genre, providing a 'space and place' for women to 'stand and belong' was a pivotal turning point towards the success of this empowerment initiative. The TSSV project continues and has managed to keep a high and visible profile in the province. The project's establishment in the province prior to the coup in 2000 was an important stabilising factor in and around rural pockets of civil unrest and social instability that many of these villages and communities in the province were unwittingly drawn into during the immediate period of social upheaval and trauma (see, for example, Lal 2001).

With fem'LINK, the collective takes ownership of all the planning, implementation and evaluation of project activities. Decisions are collectively based and there is a sense of equality and collegiality in the work ethos of this group. The professional calibre of the collective and the trustees demand high accountability and transparency in all activities. Since fem'LINKpacific works largely with women in the communities, there is an expectation and more of a requirement to be gender-sensitive and to show and earn respect while in the field collecting women's stories. Transparency and providing feedback of the final product to the women and the communities from which stories were collected prior to public viewing is considered high priority among the collective.

Implications for the Pacific in Growing a Culture of Sustainable Community Governance through Women's Empowerment

The TSSV project for rural women's empowerment was possible because it was based on a conceptual framework of PROWESS providing it with the latitude and the flexibility to try new options. The same kind of planning strategy will also be applied to the replication phase if the opportunity does arise in the near future. The project's impact on development is reflected in the high visibility and profile that this empowerment initiative has generated among indigenous Fijian institutions, other women's groups outside the province and among indigenous women themselves. The women of Tailevu province are mindful of their potential to be involved in skills and knowledge transfer and their ability to be facilitators in the possible replication of this Tailevu model. The biggest impact to development that this project has provided is in reaffirming that development is about people, for people, with people and by people.

The central arguments for expansion of this project are based on the following insights obtained from the current project activities. Current social and political instability in Fiji have shown that there is a glaring capacity gap between national and community levels in terms of fundamental skills and knowledge in areas such as basic human rights, indigenous rights, women's rights, exercise of choice, level of political literacy with regards to electoral systems, understanding and relating to the functions of a constitutional democracy, aspects of governance and its application at provincial level, gender concerns, and leadership for social change. The increasing pressure of all of these have impacted greatly on rural women because of the key roles they play in managing and maintaining household economies at community level.

Given the situation that Fiji currently is in, and the ability of the Tailevu project to come up with a model that is able to deliver, it is seen as a matter of urgency that the move to replicate the project in other provinces be embarked upon as soon as possible. Media portrayal of rural unrest and ethnic tensions in terms of looting and burning of some Indian farms by surrounding villages and landowners, forced takeover of government offices in some of the districts and in some cases, a disrespect for life and property, are manifestations of mounting disillusionment and frustrations with a socio-economic and political system that is perceived to be disengaged from the realities, aspirations and struggles of grassroots existence.

If the capacity gaps between national and sub-national levels have become quite pronounced in the coup aftermath, then there is logic in en-

couraging increased dissemination of information and communication and consolidating skills and knowledge base through a well integrated capacity building project at grassroots level. Having said that it is evident that replication would be a timely intervention for filling in the gaps to some extent in that the process would better equip rural women and communities with skills and knowledge that assist in effectively coping with social, economic and political change.

Common issues associated with gender and governance which were incorporated in both projects and its emergence reflect generic concerns country wide. While this lends consistency and credibility to the Tailevu model, the project is designed in such a way to enable each of the thirteen provinces to contextualise specific aspects of these common concerns in the replication process itself. In short, the rural women's project in Tailevu province show that in terms of enhancing sound community governance on the ground, this multidisciplinary emphasis has paved the way for the emergence of pools of more informed and increasingly articulate individuals spread throughout the 145 villages in the province.

Turning to the urban women's group, their visible role in advocacy and as a conduit for peace initiatives in an organizational framework where members are self managed, show that at times when there are unanticipated events occurring in the organizational calendar, stepping out of the box becomes inevitable and at times the best option. Both PROWESS and fem'LINKPacific women's groups have a strong grounding in universal religious values and while they served different target groups, common issues of service, survival, solidarity and stability soon became the common ground for all women in the post-coup period. The experiences discussed here show that the pathways for effective and sustainable development can take directions that diverge considerably and yet are complementary in their vision and goals. The distinct separation between a largely conservative and traditional based indigenous women's group and a modern, progressive multicultural urban women's collective reflect important gaps in capacities that they each have come to fill. Both groups have achieved considerable outcomes given their size and mandate and complement each other. Equally important is the potential to continue to contribute towards peace, stability and reconciliation at community level, which in turn will offer important prerequisites for enhanced community governance and national re-building efforts in Fiji.

While the ideals of an empowerment initiative are encouraged, the greater challenge lies in developing processes of development intervention that make a difference and are sustainable. This study has shown that small beginnings can have wide-reaching impacts and that in terms of

promoting sustainable community governance, there is an urgent need to take the discourse to community level and to engage in spontaneous debate. Both of these groups are not without their shortcomings, but they have both learnt to manage these as they continue to grow. The experience of PROWESS confirms that the days of development rhetoric are a thing of the past. The call to intervene is now aimed at development that is self-directing, self-sustaining and full of self-esteem. There is no place for an empowerment process that is self-serving, self-perpetuating and results in self-degradation. Changing aspirations and expectations on the ground mean that empowerment initiatives like PROWESS show that community groups everywhere do play a significant role in enhancing community governance and greater sustainability and that without question, their continued input is a vital prerequisite for ensuring stable and stronger Pacific communities in both the short and long term.

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