

Fiji's Current Poverty Situation

Kevin J. Barr

Defining Poverty

It is commonly accepted by sociologists that *absolute poverty* is defined in terms of a family's ability to meet its basic needs - food, clothing, housing, education and healthcare. *Destitution* describes the worst cases of absolute poverty. People are said to be at risk or *vulnerable* to poverty if they live close to the poverty line. People in *relative* poverty are those that are unable to live according to a standard of living which is considered to be normal for the society they live in at that particular time. Today, it is also very common to speak about *poverty of access*. This is where people's hardship or poverty stems from the fact that they do not have adequate access to healthcare, education, transport, infrastructure or markets for their produce.

Abbott and Pollard provide a good description of poverty in the Pacific (2004: 2). They state that, poverty is 'An inadequate level of sustainable human development manifested by: 1) lack of access to basic services such as primary healthcare, education, and potable water; 2) lack of opportunities to participate fully in the socio-economic life of the community; and 3) lack of adequate resources (including cash) to meet the basic needs of the household or the customary obligations to the extended family, village community and/or the church.'

The Situation in Fiji Today

The situation of poverty and inequality in Fiji today is becoming extremely serious. From the statistics collected in various Household Income and Expenditure Surveys, it is observed that:

- in 1977, 9% of the population was living below the poverty line;
- in 1990/91, 29% were living below the poverty line;
- in 2002-03, about 34.4% were living below the poverty line;

- most people in poverty in Fiji today live in rural areas, particularly those from the Indian community.

Table 1: Poverty Rates by Ethnicity

| | Rural | | | Urban | | | Total |
|---------------------------|----------------|--------------|--------|----------------|--------------|--------|-------|
| | Ethnic Fijians | Indo-Fijians | Others | Ethnic Fijians | Indo-Fijians | Others | |
| Population in poverty (%) | 38.0 | 43.1 | 41.3 | 27.2 | 29.1 | 17.3 | 34.4 |

Source: Narsey (2006b) - HIES 2002/03 Report

We also know the following facts about welfare and poverty in Fiji:

- The national poverty line for 2002 was \$8062.6 or about \$155.00 a week;
- In 2002, 55% of those in full-time employment were earning wages below the poverty line (Narsey 2006);
- About 12.5% of Fiji's population is living in more than 200 squatter settlements around the country and about 18% of Suva's population live in squatter settlements;
- In 2005, about 22,670 people received payments from Government's Family Assistance Scheme (at a minimum of \$60 per month and a maximum of \$120 per month);
- 13,000 land leases have expired to date and many more are due to expire within the next 10 years. For every land lease that expires and is not renewed, at least five households are displaced;
- Indo-Fijian cane-cutters and descendants of the Solomonian settlers are some of the poorest people in Fiji;
- The Housing Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) measures those in income poverty but many people in the interior or outer Islands also face poverty of access, that is, they lack income opportunities, do not have clean water, affordable housing, roads, access to markets good education and health care.
- A study done by Save the Children (Fiji) in 1998 found that 66% of those who drop out of school do so for reasons connected to poverty.

Looking at the evidence of growing inequality in Fiji in terms of

housing, wages, education, healthcare and access to opportunities, it must be admitted that there is a danger of creating two Fijis – a Fiji of the rich that belongs to a small number of the elite and a Fiji of the poor that belongs to the vast majority of people who are struggling to stay alive and preserve some degree of dignity.

Unfortunately, many people in Fiji deny the poverty situation in the country or are ignorant about it and consequently underrate its importance. Mistaking poverty and destitution, many compare Fiji with places such as India and South America and claim that Fiji does not have a serious poverty problem. If the country's leaders play down the existence of poverty and inequality, there is little reason to believe that any serious steps will be taken to reduce or alleviate poverty in the country.

The 1997 *Fiji Poverty Report* noted: 'Fiji is a society with deep inequalities'. While every Development Plan in Fiji since Independence had the objective of more equitable distribution of the benefits of development, this obviously did not happen. Inequality has increased steadily and the quality of life of the ordinary people has not improved. Economic growth has not been accompanied by social justice.

This leads one to ask whether poverty is the problem or is it wealth. The other question that one may ask is whether people are poor because of their own fault or because of the way society in Fiji is structured? If so, where does the failure lie, is it with individuals or is it with the system? As Robertson (1977: 254) states:

Poverty exists because our society is an unequal one, and there are overwhelming political pressures to keep it that way. Any attempt to redistribute wealth and income will inevitably be opposed by powerful middle and upper class interests. People can be relatively rich only if others are relatively poor; and since power is concentrated in the hands of the rich, public policies will continue to reflect their interests rather than those of the poor ...

Sociologists have come to accept that poverty is a structural or systemic problem. It is a direct result of political and economic policies – both at the national and international levels. It is about the unequal distribution of a society's resources and about political structures and economic policies which are making some people rich and others poor and marginalized. Fiji's political system seems to have been content with the current economic system which seeks to make bigger and bigger profits for those with the most wealth and consequently encourages scandalous greed while others fall into deeper and deeper deprivation.

Poverty is a multifaceted problem with a variety of causes and a variety of solutions. More employment accompanied by just wages is a key issue. Better access to services and market opportunities is so important for rural areas and those in outer Islands. Welfare assistance is necessary for those who are extremely poor. And people-centred economic policies which are aimed to improve the quality of life of everyone in the nation are essential.

References

- Abbott, D. and Pollard, S. (2004) *Hardship and Poverty in the Pacific—A Summary*, Asian Development Bank, Manila.
- Asian Human Rights Commission (1995) *Eradication of Poverty is a Basic Human Rights Issue*, AHRC, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
- Government of Fiji and UNDP (1997) *Fiji Poverty Report*, UNDP Office, Suva.
- Narsey, W. (2006a) *Just Wages for Fiji – Lifting Workers out of Poverty*, ECREA, Suva: Vanuavou Publications.
- Narsey, W. (2006b) *Report on the 2002-03 Household Income and Expenditure Survey*, Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics, Suva: Vanuavou Publications.
- Robertson, I. (1977) *Sociology*, New York: Wirth Publications.

Kevin Barr is the programme consultant for the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy (ECEA), 189 Rt. Sukuna Rd., Suva. He has written a number of books on poverty in Fiji and has served on various national committees in his capacity as an expert on poverty and as a social worker. Email contact: kjbarr@ecrea.org.fj