



30 KEREKERE, HIERARCHY AND PLANNING IN FIJI: WHY CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING SHOULD BE A PREREQUISITE TO INTERNATIONAL PLANNING

Marc Schlossberg

Economic, social, and infrastructure planning for many developing countries is initiated, funded and supervised by international aid organizations such as the United Nations. One such planning attempt is the Pacific Human Development Report, a 1994 summary document putting forth development recommendations for the South Pacific region. Although seemingly comprehensive (especially to the eyes of planners born and schooled in the West), it overlooks key cultural characteristics of the region which are impediments toward its recommendations. This paper compares the recommendations of the Pacific Human Development Report with the cultural realities of Fiji and highlights why cultural characteristics should be the first data gathered when embarking on an international planning process.

The Pacific Human Development Report (referred to as "The UN Report") is a summary document putting forth development recommendations for the South Pacific region. Written in 1994, it concentrates on human development, rather than physical construction of infrastructure. The UN Report is comprehensive, including topics such as resource allocation, investment and growth, community participation, and decentralization. The purpose of The UN Report is to present a summary of the current problems in the South Pacific and to offer development guidelines to address those obstacles. Specifically, it seeks "to define appropriate development paths for individual countries, development paths that protect and promote strengths of traditional cultures and support systems, while at the same time fostering the improvement of living standards" (United Nations 1994, 3). Once these areas are identified, then the specific countries are to take the recommendations into consideration and to develop plans to address the major issues.

Even though The UN Report attempts to create a regional framework under which specific countries can effectively plan their future, it overlooks key cultural characteristics that may be impediments toward implementation. The report's terminology, focus, and base assumptions are rooted in Western thought, but "to plan realistically you have to either have had experience of, or to possess a sound knowledge of, the kind of life the majority of people lead" (Rokotuivuna 1980, 7). While this approach should not be surprising, since the bulk of the funding for such planning reports come from the more wealthy Western countries (as well as the educational backgrounds of the authors), it does raise the concern of whether the report is actually a useful planning document.

When attempting to look specifically at how the report applies to the Fiji Islands, several potential problems arise. The UN Report was written to apply generically to all South Pacific countries, but the individual cultural characteristics of Fiji differ from other island nations and therefore are not consistent

Marc Schlossberg is a Ph.D. student in the Urban and Regional Planning Program at the University of Michigan. He has degrees in marketing from the University of Texas-Austin and urban and regional planning from San Jose State University. His research interests include uses of geographic information systems (GIS) for social and environmental good, and community-based and environmental planning.

with many of the recommendations of the report. The UN Report emphasizes economic growth as the key focus of planning and development although market economics is antithetical to the Fijian way of life. The report also stresses community participation as the key planning methodology to ensure sustained success. By focusing on economic growth and citizen participation, the Pacific Human Development Report will lead to an ineffectual use of resources because this Western bias toward planning fails to consider Fiji's indigenous economic system, hierarchical structure, communal culture and short term focus.

This disparity between the international community's approach toward planning and Fiji's approach is significant because localized development plans often follow the recommendations of international planning reports such as the Pacific Human Development Report. These eventual country distinct plans become the guiding document of all government action (Puri 1989). Thus if the original plan is full of inadequacies and flaws, then the Fiji plans will mirror these same mistakes.

This scenario of indirect imposition of inappropriate international development schemes became very clear during my two years as a Management and Planning Advisor to the Ministry for Regional Development in Fiji. International consultants continuously prepared reports and recommendations for planning and development in Fiji without considering some of the cultural barriers to those plan's successful implementation. The Fijian government often followed the recommendations of such international plans however, because doing so is a prerequisite to obtaining international aid. I was fortunate in that I was given almost three months of cultural introduction, including language training. I then took an additional year to learn about the cultural intricacies and to build relationships with my planning colleagues. And even then, I knew that my Western bias would still come through in my suggestions.

The observations below will in large part be based on personal observation and experience in living in Fiji for two years. Additional support is grounded in international development theory and literature, ethnographic texts of Fijian culture, and essays on predominant Western planning approaches. This critique focuses on the indigenous Fijian community, rather than all of Fiji's citizens, because most foreign planning focuses on indigenous cultures, nearly all decision makers in planning related ministries are indigenous Fijian, and it is the community with which I am most familiar.

The Pacific Human Development Report

The Pacific Human Development Report summarizes the emerging challenges facing the people of the South Pacific and offers many broad solutions. The report does not make country-specific recommendations, but its human development focus draws on examples taken from individual nations. The following are the main topics of the report:

- The Concept and Relevance of Human Development
- Human Development Situation and Challenges
- Investing in Human Development
- Participation for Human Development
- Human Development Strategies

Within these broad subject headings, the report goes on to delineate more specific opportunities for change. Examples of these sub-topics include the role of non-governmental organizations, decentralizing government to better meet the needs of the people, women's participation in development, community participation in the planning process, health, environmental and education issues, and the role of economic growth in development.

The Pacific Human Development Report is a broad-based planning document because it not only talks about the ends of development, but it also discusses the means. Those means are the various planning processes which must be undertaken to successfully implement the report's recommendations. The report draws on many different planning approaches including the incremental, rational, equity, justice, and corporate planning models (United Nations 1994).

Fiji Background

Fiji is divided into about 300 islands with the total land mass equaling the size of Massachusetts. Most of the islands were formed volcanically and thus contain high, steep mountains, lush vegetation, and rich soil. Some islands are mere atolls, rising only meters above sea level. About 70% of the people live in rural areas, some in the interior of the bigger islands, and some in coastal locations. The other 30% (and a growing percentage) live in urban and semi-urban areas with Suva, the capital, being the largest urban center. Suva stands in contrast to the tropical image with its tall buildings, smog-belching vehicles, and general urban feel.

Fiji was a British colony, but achieved independence from Britain in 1970. The population of Fiji is split almost equally between indigenous Fijians and Fijian-Indians (or Indo-Fijians), descendants from Indians attracted to Fiji by the British over a century ago to work in the sugar cane fields. The Indians today continue to farm sugar cane (sugar is Fiji's number one industry and export), but most do not own the land they work because most of the land in Fiji is natively owned and is passed down through blood relationships. (There is a small portion of land which is government owned, and a smaller amount which is free-hold land—anyone can purchase the title to it.) The Indians therefore lease the land and pay rent to the Fijian landholders. A significant disparity between the two races has emerged over the issue. On the one hand, Indians want to own land so that they have some security about the permanence of their farms. On the other hand, the Fijians are envious of the economic resources the Indians have gathered through their farming endeavors.

In 1987, the Indians won a parliamentary majority for the first time. Even though a Fijian was chosen as Prime Minister,

a racially driven, bloodless military coup arose which installed an Indigenous Fijian government that continues to govern to this day.

Besides the political significance, the coup also has had a direct impact on planning in Fiji. The current government, still led by the coup's leader, runs under a new racially biased constitution which favors the indigenous population. As such, the government has developed special programs to assist the indigenous people in many ways, including development, the ability to secure financial resources, and access to education. It is no surprise then, that there is a growing resentment within the Indo-Fijian population because government policies overtly discriminate against them. Combine all of the racial issues with a growing rural-urban migration problem, increasing crime problem, increasing urbanization, an increase in cash dependency by one-time self-sufficient communities, and an economic shift toward an export economy with its associated debt and dependence on foreign aid, and you have a very interesting climate under which to submit an unspecific, broad, culturally neutral planning document such as the Pacific Human Development Report.

There are three primary planning agencies in Fiji: the Central Planning Office (CPO), the Town and Country Planning Department, and the Ministry for Regional Development (MRD). The CPO is a centralized, government wide planning agency which acts as the gatekeeper between foreign aid and domestic development. The CPO of Fiji mirrors other developing countries which have developed similar agencies to take on the relatively new concept of planning (Puri 1989). In most developing countries, then, the CPO becomes the crucial thread between "the legislature, the executive, the ministries, the public enterprises and other specialised government agencies, and...all lower governmental formulations down to the local level" (Puri 1989, 118). When foreign aid is given, the CPO then directs the funds down to the other two planning agencies which are responsible for implementation of programs.

The Ministry for Regional Development is the primary development agency in Fiji. Whereas the Town and Country Department oversees the development in the limited urban and suburban areas, the MRD seeks to provide assistance to 70% of the total population—those living in rural areas.

Critique

Understanding cultural differences are necessary before attempting to create a plan on a particular culture's behalf. These unique cultural characteristics are not only differences, they can be barriers to a Western approach to planning. Each community has its own culture, and if the planning process proceeds without understanding and respecting that culture, then there is a high likelihood that new projects will fail. Such is the case with the Pacific Human Development Report. The critique below divides the issue into two primary categories: 1) the error of emphasizing a Western-based economic system

and 2) why Western-styled citizen participation practices are inappropriate.

Economic Growth

The underlying assumption among the many recommendations, suggestions, and philosophies put forth in the Pacific Human Development Report is that sustained economic growth is at the core of what the South Pacific countries should strive for (United Nations 1994). The authors believe that "greater economic growth is a prerequisite for a sustained improvement in human development" (United Nations 1994, 1). Moreover, they see economic growth as the way to share benefits among the people (United Nations 1994). This economic approach toward planning and development is consistent with current domestic approaches toward planning in Western countries where it is seen that the private sector is the unit of solution in communities (Klosterman 1997). In the West, economic growth and development occurred simultaneously, thus it is natural for planners from those countries to view lesser economically advanced countries as also lesser developed (Augustine 1989; Stockwell and Laidlaw 1981). To be successful in Fiji however, planning should "not confine itself to alleged economic development along capitalistic lines" (Ali 1980, 13).

The report's emphasis on economic growth clearly demonstrates an inappropriate Western bias and lack of understanding of Fijian life because the Fijian culture is the antithesis of such an economic system. It has not been uncommon for other planners working in the South Pacific to have similar inappropriate solutions. One scholar on South Pacific development described the typical international planner working in the South Pacific as "overwhelmingly trained not only in one discipline, economics, but predominantly in one sect within it—that of Euro-American liberal capitalist economics" (Croccombe 1980, 1). The structure and beliefs of Fijian culture is much different than Western societies which believe in an economic system based on growth, private ownership, and individual exchange.

This key economic difference between Fijian and Western culture can be explained by looking at the *kerekere* system in Fiji. *Kerekere* (keh-reh-keh-reh) is a system of shared goods based on need rather than ability to pay. It developed as a way for people to equally distribute the abundant food sources to one another based on need. Asesela Ravuvu, a Fijian scholar and ethnographer describes the importance of such an arrangement: "In an economy which is still very much subsistence based, the idea of caring for and sharing with others is an important aspect of the value systems of the Fijian people" (Ravuvu 1983, 81).

The *kerekere* system has its origins in traditional Fijian culture, but it still exists alongside modern Fijian society even with its growing cash economy. If a family is hosting a wedding for a child, they would ask "to borrow" extra food from another family in their same clan in order to provide for all the guests. No IOU is exchanged, it is just understood that at

some point in the future when the situation is reversed, the original giver family will ask the other family for some of its surplus food.

There are larger world implications for not acknowledging the *kerekere* system. One of the main emphases of previous development, as well as the Pacific Human Development Report, is that of rural-based small business. Many rural areas of Fiji lack access to large commercial centers and markets, therefore most villages have some type of small store which sells a range of items from cigarettes to tinned mutton to kerosene. In the 1970s there was even a push for these villages to run the stores cooperatively instead of privately in the hopes that the cooperative structure would better mirror Fijian collective society. Regardless of the ownership method, the result has been the same—the businesses have failed. The main reason for failure is that if someone wants an item from the store all she has to do is ask for it and if she does not have any money, the store owner cannot refuse to give her the item. After a while, the store owner does not have enough money to cover his debts and to buy more stock, so it fails. The eventual result is that an Indian-run store will emerge and succeed (Indians have no obligations under the *kerekere* system), which further fuels the economic disparity and racial tension.

One of the major failings of the Pacific Human Development Report is that being a Western-driven development plan, it fails to recognize the existence of the *kerekere* system alongside the cash-based economic order. In fact, the report's main recommendation to increase sustained economic growth is a clear indicator that the plan may result in failure and a poor allocation of resources. The UN Report even acknowledges the likelihood of failure when it says that "individualistic patterns of development produce conflicts wherever...traditional lifestyles are highly valued" (United Nations 1994, 7). The *kerekere* system is based on the close relationships of the Fijian people and "in a capitalistic economy where great value is placed on accumulation and economising, kinship is a very costly affair...[but] kinship only appears costly when measured with a capitalist yardstick" (Rika 1980, 28-29)—a crucial fact which is summarily overlooked at the Pacific Human Development Report's call for a capitalistic economic growth solution to Fiji's problems. This lack of cultural acknowledgement in the Pacific Human Development Report's recommendations sets up future planning based on the report for failure.

Citizen Participation

One of the recurrent themes within the Pacific Human Development Report is that the report's success should be measured on the eventual impact of programs on human development. One of the report's keys in realizing these goals is to include the Fijian people in the decision-making process. The following are some examples of the citizen participation focus of the Pacific Human Development Report:

- "A dominant theme of this report is the need for a participatory approach toward development" (United

Nations 1994, 1);

- "Community development is an indispensable component of a human development strategy" (United Nations 1994, 6);
- "...community participation directly promotes the objectives of a human development strategy. It increases people's choices and vests greater control and responsibility for development in communities" (United Nations 1994, 7);
- "People's participation is essential so that development is generated from within...and that people can determine their own destiny" (United Nations 1994, 9);
- "Participation is the basis...for people to move away from dependency to self-reliance, from being passive recipients of decisions to active role-players in decision-making" (United Nations 1994, 53);
- "Genuine popular participation has to lead to greater control by the people themselves over development activities...participation also implies the empowerment of people to undertake the transformation of institutional structures so as to increase community cohesiveness..." (United Nations 1994, 54); and
- "Unless there is full community involvement...development projects aimed at improving community well-being will fail to be sustained. There is a need to promote greater participation in the development process and to foster greater community involvement in all aspects of development" (United Nations 1994, 69).

While it is essential to include the recipients of development into the planning process (based on my observations, most projects which fail in Fiji do so because there is no local involvement), foreign planning approaches fail to consider the cultural landscape within which this participation must take place and the results are just as ineffective as if there were no participation at all.

These barriers can be overcome and utilized within the planning process, but aid agencies such as the UN rarely spend the necessary time understanding cultural intricacies and altering their planning approaches to work with these differences—it is a bit like the modernistic or positivistic approach toward planning (Beauregard 1997) where it is perceived that there is a single universal approach toward a process and that it is a matter of fitting the situation to the methodology rather than adjusting the methodology to the situation. Planners in Fiji need to spend time with the communities they are trying to serve (Ratuvi 1980) so that they can learn how to customize their ideas to the needs of the Fijians.

The hierarchical structure of the culture, the parallel communal culture, and the short-term focus of the society are the three main cultural obstacles in why Western approaches toward citizen participation are inappropriate in Fiji.

Hierarchical Structure

Citizen participation requires a social structure under which people feel equally free to participate alongside decision makers. In Fiji however, this is not the case. A major impediment toward including the recipients of planning in Fiji is the pervasive top-down social hierarchy (Toren 1990). From birth, Fijians learn to respect authority and withhold action unless sanctioned by that authority. The chiefly system, the church, and the educational system create and reinforce this top-down mentality.

The chiefly system is very strong in Fiji. Most Fijians are still brought up in the village, but even those who live in urban or semi-urban areas still closely identify with the village of their father and the chiefly decisions made there. Most people cannot speak to the chief unless they are spoken to first. It is not even allowed for people to physically rise above the chief's head because it is taboo to think that you are better (or above) the chief in any way. The chief has his advisors, mainly the village elders, but the chief's decisions are final. Other non-chiefly villagers have little voice in the ultimate decisions which effect their village, but this lack of input is culturally ingrained and thus villagers do not feel that they are somehow left out of a decision-making process (Sovaki 1980). This hierarchy is clearly established and reinforced throughout village life and is easy to see when entering a village, yet is unacknowledged by international advocates of bottom-up planning methodologies.

The church is the second arena where the top-down social hierarchy is established. Most Fijians are Christian Methodists while a minority are Catholic. (The missionaries were able to influence such a great number of people by converting the chiefs first. Once the chiefs converted they told their villagers to convert as well, which in general they did.) The village minister is seen as an authority figure and often wields as much power as the chief.

The final main reinforcer of a strict social hierarchy is the educational system. In the schools, principals have complete authority and can act in similar ways as the minister or chief.

One result of all these hierarchical institutions is that people do not usually make decisions without the sanction of an authority figure. When villagers (or planning and development employees) are asked for their input, they wait for their chief (or boss) to tell them what to do. Even in modern office settings, Fijians tend to defer to their superiors and are reluctant to think or act independently. The Pacific Human Development Report fails to acknowledge that barriers exist which would warrant a different approach toward citizen-based planning.

Communal Culture

The collective nature of Fijian society is another cultural barrier toward citizen participation. At first there seems to be an inconsistency between a strictly hierarchical society and one which is very communal, but the two co-exist because

day to day life is communal while decision making is hierarchical. Having a communal component may sound like a plus for planning since collaboration and coordination are critical for effective plans, it is not advantageous for planning in Fiji. In the Fijian village, everything is owned by everybody, even if an individual purchased an item with his own money from his own private job. Private ownership of materials (or ideas) does not exist (or at least are not expressed). Similarly, people do not like to stand out in any way. To be viewed as an individual is to be an outcast and this includes expressing individual opinions.

While communal-based societies are conducive to easily identifying development needs because everyone's needs are shared and thus essentially the same, the communal way of thought means that people working in the planning or development fields usually do no take individual initiative. The result is that people who should be involved in planning are really only a group of followers leaving decisions to the boss, a chief, or an outside consultant. Obviously then, ideas are limited to a single individual, and if that person has neither the skills nor the interest in planning (which is often the case for planning employees who are usually politically installed) then the whole planning process breaks down.

Short-Term Focus

"Development planning is the management of resources to expedite progress towards a better social state" (Rokotuivuna 1980, 7) and is therefore longitudinal in nature. Fijian culture however is oriented toward living for the day (Ravuvu 1983). In fact, the whole professional field of planning is impeded in Fiji because in some communities planning is essentially taboo. The main thrust of this taboo is that to plan is to spoil things; rewards come to those who live for the day. There are obviously implications of this type of belief when an agency like the UN develops a planning document with a long-term time frame. In terms of citizen participation, how can people who live for the day be actively involved in a long term planning process? Again, there are ways to work with the culture to address some of these barriers, but the key is to acknowledge their existence which the Pacific Human Development Report fails to do in any meaningful way.

Conclusion

The Pacific Human Development Report is a broad planning document for the South Pacific which identifies primary areas for change. Although the UN Report uses new terminology like "sustained human development" (United Nations 1994, 1) to reflect a supposedly new wisdom in international planning which recognizes the need for self-sufficiency, the report continues in a long traditional of imposed planning which fails to consider the key cultural characteristics of the recipient country. Its approaches toward development merely continue the same types of practices of the past which have led to the continual failure of development projects.

Specifically, the key missing element of the Pacific Human Development Report is its failure to recognize and understand the cultural characteristics of Fiji which are inconsistent with a Western approach toward planning. First, the report neglects to realize that the basic structure of Fijian life is antithetical toward a Western economic system. This omission undermines all other report recommendations because economic growth (a Western bias) is seen by the UN as the means to reach all other ends. Second, failure to see how Fiji's hierarchical structure, communal culture, and short-term focus impacts bottom-up planning undermines the report's main methodology for creating sustainable change. The result of these oversights is that this plan will probably continue in the historical tradition of working against native cultural practices rather than working with them and thus ultimately fall short in its endeavors.

This pattern of international recommendations leading to local failures has led to a great waste of monetary and human resources. Yet the international aid continues to funnel in to Fiji despite the failures. With international planning agencies such as the UN, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund (primarily being led by Western countries) exerting increased international influence, there is however, little prospect for change.

Author's Note

Speculation as to appropriate solutions to the problems mentioned above are difficult. Successful planning can only be achieved if planning efforts fully understand the culture in which the planning takes place. One new method of achieving these goals is the Participatory Rural Assessment (PRA) method. PRA is a community-based planning methodology which involves villagers in their own development process. Designed to take advantage of local knowledge about needs, problems, capacities, and solutions, PRA takes place in the village setting and asks a cross-section of the community to participate in various activities designed to extract information and ideas in a culturally sensitive way. Tactics include soliciting stories from village elders, walking a transect across the village with a small group and asking for a descriptive tour, and developing historical timelines which highlight past developments and identify the impetus for change. This information exchange usually takes place over many days with the planners staying in the village the entire time. By living with the villagers, the planner builds trust with the people and allows them to set the pace—two key elements of building effective working relationships in Fiji.

PRA is a relatively new method, but has been used with some success in Africa and Latin America. On the surface, it seems to be an appropriate approach toward rural planning in Fiji, but I would hesitate to hold it up as a solution. Many methodologies and schemes have been tried in Fiji, each with the assurance from the foreign planners that they were "the answer", and each has either failed outright or led to other

significant problems. PRA sounds like the perfect approach, but I am unable to discern whether the methodology appeals to my planning sense or my Western biases. Which is the point of this paper—cultural characteristics do matter for successful planning.

References

- Ali, Ahmed. 1980. Has Planning Progressed? The Past for the Future. In *The Pacific Way: Social Issues in National Development*, ed. Sione Tuponiua, Ron Crocombe, and Claire Slatter. Suva: South Pacific Social Sciences Association.
- Augustine, John S., ed. 1989. *Strategies for Third World Development*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
- Beauregard, Robert A. 1997. Between Modernity and Postmodernity: The Ambiguous Position of U.S. Planning. In *Planning Theory*, ed. Scott Campbell and Susan Fainstein. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc.
- Crocombe, Ron. 1980. Seeking a Pacific Way. In *The Pacific Way: Social Issues in National Development*, ed. Sione Tuponiua, Ron Crocombe, and Claire Slatter. Suva: South Pacific Social Sciences Association.
- Klosterman, Richard E. 1997. Arguments for and Against Planning. In *Planning Theory*, ed. Scott Campbell and Susan Fainstein. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc.
- Puri, M.M. 1989. Political Perspectives in Development. In *Strategies for Third World Development*, ed. John S. Augustine. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
- Ratuveli, Sitiveni. 1980. The Ethics of Economic Planning. In *The Pacific Way: Social Issues in National Development*, ed. Sione Tuponiua, Ron Crocombe, and Claire Slatter. Suva: South Pacific Social Sciences Association.
- Ravuvu, Asesela. 1983. *The Fijian Way of Life*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies at the University of the South Pacific.
- Rika, Nacanieli. 1980. Is Kinship Costly? In *The Pacific Way: Social Issues in National Development*, ed. Sione Tuponiua, Ron Crocombe, and Claire Slatter. Suva: South Pacific Social Sciences Association.
- Rokotuivuna, Amelia. 1980. Are Planners Human? In *The Pacific Way: Social Issues in National Development*, ed. Sione Tuponiua, Ron Crocombe, and Claire Slatter. Suva: South Pacific Social Sciences Association.
- Sovaki, Marama. 1980. Alter the Dose to Suit the Need. In *The Pacific Way: Social Issues in National Development*, ed. Sione Tuponiua, Ron Crocombe, and Claire Slatter. Suva: South Pacific Social Sciences Association.
- Stockwell, Edward G. and Karen A. Laidlaw. 1981. *Third*

World Development: Problems and Prospects. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.

Toren, Christina. 1990. *Making Sense of Hierarchy: Cognition as Social Process in Fiji.* London: The Athlone Press Ltd.

United Nations, United Nations Development Program. 1994. *Pacific Human Development Report.* Suva: United Nations Development Program.

