



Reflections on poverty assessments in Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Vanuatu

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Poverty, vulnerability and corruption are not new or unique to the South Pacific, but the lack of capacity of governments to govern has seriously affected households and communities already on the edge of poverty. In Papua New Guinea, the general deterioration in government services and in transport and communication infrastructure, has increased the economic and social marginalisation of many isolated communities. The recent poverty assessments in Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Vanuatu outline a number of strategies to assist those living in, or on the edge of poverty, but these will only be successful if accompanied by strategies to achieve more effective and equitable governance.

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Poverty is much more than low income levels. It also reflects poor health and education, deprivation in knowledge and communication, inability to exercise human and political rights and the absence of dignity, confidence and self-respect. Behind these faces of poverty lies the grim reality of desperate lives without choices and, often, governments that lack the capacity to govern (UNDP 1997:iii).

Poverty assessments and poverty alleviation programs require a multi-dimensional approach in which access to cash income or equivalent economic benefits is only part of the solution. Political and social factors may also

negatively impact on individuals, households or whole communities and limit their access to productive resources and services.

Interlocking and interdependent aspects of disadvantage create a 'deprivation trap', which serves to create and maintain poverty. International definitions of poverty have tended to emphasise cash income levels and poverty lines. As Bryant pointed out

Obviously there are problems with these definitions, particularly in establishing poverty levels in societies, which may still be partially or wholly subsistence (Bryant 1993:13).



This difficulty in measuring the extent and seriousness of poverty does not mean that it is not a reality for many individuals, families and communities. During the 1980s and early 1990s, many observers noted the increasing problem of pockets of poverty in otherwise non-poor communities, and a marked increase in the number of households living in absolute poverty (see Barr 1990, Morauta 1984, Cox 1994). They shared Bryant's conclusion that poverty was becoming a significant feature of life in many villages and towns.

Both absolute and relative poverty exist in the Pacific. There are households which are absolutely poor and which do not have enough food or clean water, or access to a decent house or basic education. There are others who live in relative poverty in that they do not have access to the basic needs, which a society may consider to be 'normal'.

In the smaller countries of the South Pacific, increased poverty has often accompanied the shift to a Western-style cash economy. Rural-urban migration has resulted in unplanned settlements where those with little or no cash income have joined the ranks of the urban poor. The situation does not equal the scale or depth of absolute destitution, which exists in many countries in Africa and Asia. Nonetheless, an increasing proportion of urban and rural households, and individuals within households, have very limited access to basic needs and services.

One explanation for the continuing reluctance to address poverty as a serious and pervasive problem, is the strongly held belief that families and communities are willing and able to look after their own. Yet traditions of ceremonial gift-giving and reciprocal exchange imply the existence of a similar resource base. Where some members of the group have moved further into dependence on the cash economy than others, or where the cultural safety net has broken, this situation may no longer exist.

In addition to the 'at risk' groups, there are other disadvantaged communities who have been persistently bypassed and are, in a very real sense, out of sight. For some, their geographic remoteness and minimal scattered populations make the delivery of services or economic development programs difficult and unsustainable. For other communities, or households, the problem may be that of political or social isolation. Patterns of clan loyalties and reciprocal obligations now operate most effectively for those who have greater access to the wider economy, and/or to political and administrative patronage. And, for urban employed relatives, the burden of providing a safety net for impoverished kin may itself be a factor which places them 'at risk' (Morauta 1984, Monsell-Davis 1993, UNICEF and Papua New Guinea 1996, UNICEF and Vanuatu 1991, UNDP and Fiji 1996).

It is clear that earlier conclusions as to the adequacy of safety nets are now out of date. Over the past two years Papua New Guinea has experienced an economic downturn, exacerbated by political instability, natural disasters, and a general deterioration in administrative capacity. These problems have seriously affected marginal households and communities already on the edge of poverty. The emergence of poverty in hitherto self-sufficient communities is related to the general deterioration of government services and national transport and communication infrastructure, and the inequitable distribution of development benefits. The lack of capacity of governments to govern means that assistance is not available to enable households and communities to improve their participation in the cash economy. The trap closes even more tightly as health and education services deteriorate. Law and order problems, particularly (but not exclusively) a problem with unemployed urban youth, may also threaten national and community stability.



The Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs has pointed to the links between effective governance, social order and poverty alleviation (Downer 1998:6). The need to strengthen institutional capacity has become an important focus of Australian assistance to Papua New Guinea.

Good governance underpins poverty reduction and economic growth. Good governance means the effective management of a country's resources in ways that are open, transparent, accountable, equitable and responsive to people's needs.

The inescapable conclusion is that, unless and until the capacity of governments to govern is improved, any positive development obtained through government, bilateral, non-government organisation or United Nations poverty alleviation programs will be unsustainable.

The United Nations and poverty assessment

Reflecting a growing concern about the increase and persistence of poverty in developing countries, the World Bank's 1990 *World Development Report* ushered in what has been termed the Decade of Poverty Assessment. By the mid-1990s, more than 60 national poverty assessments had been conducted in developing countries.

At the same time, other UN agencies were concerned with the identification of vulnerable groups at risk of becoming poor. Particular emphasis was placed on the problems experienced by women and children, as they were often the most disadvantaged members of low-income households (UNICEF and Vanuatu 1991 and UNICEF and Papua New Guinea 1996). In addition to the poverty line/cash income approach, it was clear that a broader poverty assessment index was needed to identify vulnerable groups and individuals within households and communities.

Noting that 'the quality of people's lives can be poor even in the midst of plenty' (Human Development Report 1996:43), UNDP broadened its development focus to include gender and participation measures, with emphasis on sustainability and assistance to vulnerable groups.

One might well question why the World Bank, UNICEF and UNDP studies and surveys of poverty and sustainable development proceeded in isolation. Examples of converging, but still divergent, attitudes are reflected in the different approaches to non-government organisations by the World Bank, UNICEF and UNDP.

A source of continuing tensions has been the debate on the relative merits of quantitative economic measurements of poverty levels versus more qualitative and anecdotal indicators. At the heart of all these debates are differences in the way in which poverty is defined and in the appropriate unit of analysis. There are also problems in reconciling and integrating 'hard' data such as cash income and access to productive resources, and 'soft' data such as access to the psychological support of kin and community and the value of a sense of personal security.

Problems inherent in relying on quantitative data obtained in earlier surveys are highlighted here. In some cases, sampling inadequacies or logistic problems faced by interviewers tended to exclude remote marginal communities. In other situations household surveys were unable to identify poor individuals in non-poor households.

It has taken some time for the elements of the 'deprivation trap' to become mainstream issues in the poverty assessment debate. This delay may have benefited smaller South Pacific nations, as it is now more acceptable to assess poverty by taking into account the different realities facing individuals or groups. And, while some analysts may still consider it necessary to



warn that isolation and vulnerability should not be equated with poverty, few would deny that they are closely interrelated.

Another major question, which has been of concern to United Nations agencies from the beginning of the poverty debate, is the relationship between poverty and government capabilities. The focus of the 1997 *World Development Report* was the lack of government capabilities, ineffective service delivery, corruption, and government mismanagement (World Bank 1997). Pointing to the negative consequences on human lives and social and economic development, it stressed the need to reinvigorate state institutions. An implicit assumption was that the institutions of nation states had been vigorous and effective at some stage in the past. Yet, the very fragility and lack of vigour of many of these institutions may be related to the inappropriate and unwieldy nature of their colonial beginnings. While few would argue with the call for regulatory simplification and public enterprise reform, there must be some concern regarding the current emphases on privatisation and liberalisation, and the contraction of the role of the state. For countries such as Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, where economies of scale and private enterprise are inadequate responses to the needs of small, scattered and remote communities, these may be premature and defeatist responses.

Despite statements in other World Bank publications calling for a more sensitive and integrated economic and social approach to development, there are hardline rational undertones in the assertion that strategic options must focus on what is workable (World Bank 1997).

While the need to focus on the workable is understandable, some serious questions remain as to whether the apparent persistence of poverty will lead, not to alleviation programs, but to an acceptance

of increasing poverty as an intractable, if unfortunate, reality.

Poverty assessment: politics, process and preliminary findings

It is important to stress the preliminary nature of even the most definitive of poverty assessments—they are part of the overall process of situating the poor within a particular society during a particular time period. Not surprisingly, the poverty and related human development assessments carried out in Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Vanuatu reflect their different political circumstances, and the relationships between national governments and particular international funding agencies.

Papua New Guinea

The World Bank-sponsored Papua New Guinea Poverty Assessment Project was initiated in partnership with the Government of Papua New Guinea in 1996. There were six areas of enquiry with a national household survey as the major component. Both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained from a number of additional surveys and analyses of secondary material. The interrelationships between poverty, health, education and geographic remoteness, and the role of non-government organisations in the identification and alleviation of poverty, complemented the major surveys.

The following outline of the poverty assessment process is from World Bank (1997c).

- **Household Survey.** This included analyses of data collected in six urban areas of Papua New Guinea for the 1985-89 Urban Household Expenditure Survey as well as data from the 1996 Household Survey, which surveyed 1,400 rural and urban households (Gibson 1996c, Gibson and



- Rozelle 1997). Additional working papers on 'boy-girl discrimination' and 'women's education and child growth' were based on data available from the Urban Household Expenditure Survey (Gibson 1996a, 1996b).
- Poverty, nutrition and health care. A rapid assessment of four types of poor communities included urban settlements, rural cash-cropping settlers and rural subsistence communities (Jenkins et al. 1996).
 - Poverty and education. A rapid assessment was undertaken of five different types of poor communities (Guy et al. 1996).
 - Poverty and agriculture. This study was based on a long-term study of six of the poorest agricultural systems in the country (Allen and Bourke 1997a).
 - Non-government organisation involvement in rural service delivery. The report on non-government organisation activities was collaboratively produced by twenty-five non-government organisations, and interagency groups. It included findings from two forums, and case studies which illustrated the most promising non-government organisation strategies (Education Development Center 1996).
 - Social safety net. This report involved case studies and a literature review of formal and informal support systems (Guy 1997, Gustafsson 1997).
- The World Bank's 1997 status report noted that five seminars had been held in Papua New Guinea involving government officials, particularly from the Department of Finance and the National Planning Office, other departmental and provincial administrators and non-government organisations. Seminars were also held in Washington and Canberra. A National Seminar was held in Port Moresby (27–28 February 1997). The final World Bank report was scheduled for completion later in 1997.

During 1997, the Government of Papua New Guinea and the World Bank were involved in continuing negotiations over the basis for further loans, and the conditions to be met if loan moneys were to be released. At a distance, it is not clear how far these problems had a spin-off consequence for the poverty assessment program. At the time of writing, the final report had still not been released, although many of the papers and reports are now public documents.

Nonetheless, preliminary findings indicate that the distribution of consumption is more unequal than in neighbouring countries—the richest 10 per cent of the population accounts for 36 per cent of consumption; the poorest 50 per cent for only 19 per cent of the total (World Bank 1997d).

Approximately 20 per cent of the population have a consumption level less than the threshold cost of achieving a basic standard of living. In addition, consumption levels have fallen in most cases; '... the poor in Port Moresby have become worse off than they were 10 years ago' (World Bank 1997d:9). A study of the relationship between poverty and agriculture found that many households in rural areas had very low cash incomes, some less than 50 kina a year.

Despite the uncertain status and incompleteness of the Papua New Guinea Poverty Assessment Program, many of the findings contained in its different components are now accessible to government and non-government planners. What is lacking is the political will to continue the process, as well as to ensure that any proposed poverty alleviation programs are appropriately targeted and sustainable.

Fiji

In 1991, the Government of Fiji established a National Poverty Task-Force. The 1996 Fiji Poverty Study (UNDP and Fiji 1997) also reflects the collaborative action of international and national agencies and



institutions, and a number of individuals working in the field of poverty alleviation.

The study was commissioned by the Government of Fiji, with financial and technical assistance from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) through its Pacific Regional Equitable and Sustainable Development Program. This was part of UNDP's Poverty Strategies Initiative, launched in conjunction with the 1996 International Year of Poverty Eradication. In addition to material obtained from existing secondary sources, the poverty assessment process included the following components.

- Household and expenditure survey. A comparative analysis of the 1990/91 Bureau of Statistics Household and Expenditure Survey (Ahlburg 1996).
- Expert research papers and case studies. These were prepared by a number of consultants with long-term experience in Fiji.
- Case studies of people in poverty. These were obtained from welfare officers from the Department of Social Welfare and some of the 68 non-government organisations, listed as involved with poor and disadvantaged groups (UNDP and Fiji 1997, Annex 3:130-47). Other input was provided by members of the Government/non-government organisation Fiji Poverty Study Technical Working Group.
- Participatory needs assessment and subjective poverty line survey. These surveys and interviews by teams of research workers aimed at enhancing the participation of the poor and ensuring that their perspectives were included in the report.
- Poverty eradication strategies. The analysis of different strategies to alleviate poverty involved a survey of 68 non-government organisations involved with poor and disadvantaged groups (UNDP and Fiji 1997, Annex 3:130-47) and output from a workshop

'Brainstorming on Poverty Eradication Strategies' organised by the Central Planning Office and UNDP/ESHDP in July 1996.

Between 23-25 per cent of the population reported income which was below the poverty line (UNDP and Fiji 1997:38-39, Ahlburg 1996:14-15). At the lower income level, between 10-12 per cent of households reported that their income in 1990-91 was insufficient to cover even basic food costs. Ahlburg points out that

[t]his was a significant increase over estimates for poverty in the late 1970s. However, a sizeable part of the increase in poverty was due to an upgrading of the minimum nutritionally adequate diet. Slow economic growth and rising food prices also contributed to a rise in poverty (Ahlburg 1996).

The composition of minimum nutritious diets took into account cultural differences between Fijian and Indo-Fijian households (UNDP and Fiji 1997, Annex 2:127-129). An important part of the assessment was to identify ethnic patterns of poverty, which might otherwise be masked when using national or urban/rural averages. National averages suggest that Indo-Fijians have a higher average household income than ethnic Fijians. However, when income distribution is broken down into ten percentile categories (UNDP and Fiji 1997:26) a different result is obtained.

It shows that, relative to Indo-Fijians, there are fewer very poor or very rich Fijian households, and that Fijians predominate in the middle income groups. Thus the higher average incomes for Indo-Fijian households reflect the high income of the highest income groups. Among the poor, Indo-Fijian households predominate.

However, other findings also point to the widening gap between urban and rural areas, noting that 'these geographic differences outscale ethnic differences and contribute to them' (UNDP and Fiji 1997:27).



The survey was undertaken at a time of relative peace and harmony in Fiji. The acceptance of a new Constitution and strategies to develop greater cooperation in national economic development also made it easier for material to be presented which reflected the major ethnic divisions in Fiji society. It draws attention to the vulnerable in society and the process of impoverishment. In doing so, it also attempts to link qualitative profiles of poverty with quantitative material from the national Household Income and Expenditure Surveys.

The strength of this report is in this integrated focus, which provides data to support the conclusion that poverty is indeed a problem, and profiles of vulnerable 'at risk' individuals and households.

Vanuatu

Sustainable Human Development in Vanuatu (UN and Vanuatu 1996) was prepared as a joint undertaking between a number of United Nations agencies, the National Planning Office and other government and non-government agencies. It was financed and technically supported by the UNDP/UNOPS Pacific and Regional Equitable and Sustainable Human Development Program. It relied heavily on existing source material, secondary analysis, and some case studies undertaken by researchers and non-government organisations.

Quantitative and qualitative data, which formed the basis of the report, included the following components.

- Analysis of existing data. This included the 1988 National Population Census, the 1993 Demographic and Migration Analysis, the 1994 National Agriculture Census, preliminary data from the 1995 National Employment Survey, and National Planning Office, Ministry of Education and Health Department surveys.
- Literature survey. This included information in research reports, surveys, and policy documents prepared by government departments, UN agencies, other aid donors, non-government organisations and researchers (for example, the 1991 UNICEF and Vanuatu Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Vanuatu, low-income urban settlement data in the 1994 ADB/Ministry of Transport Report on Urban Infrastructure, and Fallon 1994).
- Case studies. These included a report on small-scale development programs run by the Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific, and other examples provided by the National Council of Women, and members of non-government organisations.
- Meetings and workshops. Insights were provided by the members of the national core team, described as representative of government, non-government organisation and donor interests.

The report notes that the national core team met regularly over a 12-month period, and team members were involved in the collection and consideration of data. The final report was the most qualitative of the three national assessments, with only a partial focus on poverty and inequality. This approach may reflect a need to tread softly due to the reluctance of some ni-Vanuatu decision-makers to accept that poverty is a growing problem. However, agreement was reached (UN and Vanuatu 1996:99) that there were two types of poverty: those who are poor for structural reasons, and those who are at risk of becoming poor in times of crisis. In Vanuatu, as in Papua New Guinea, geographic remoteness and isolation also means that smaller communities are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain any form of economic and social access to the wider society.



The threat of increased poverty in Vanuatu seems to echo the situation in Papua New Guinea and Fiji a decade or so ago and this may explain the ambivalent reaction to poverty and vulnerability. Yet, while preferring to focus on the more acceptable (and perhaps more manageable) questions of 'sustainable development', there was a recognition (UN and Vanuatu 1996:19) that many households were experiencing hardship.

Isolation

In their study of poor rural communities in Papua New Guinea, Allen and Bourke (1997a) found that many development projects initiated in these areas had left almost no trace.

[R]elative isolation from places where cash can be earned, primarily large and intermediate urban centres and mining enclaves, is associated with low incomes, and hence with low growth rates in children (Allen and Bourke 1997a:11).

Isolation and lack of access to services and markets may be related to physical remoteness in inland areas or to climatic conditions which hamper transport to and from smaller islands. The costs, and in some cases the security risks, involved in travel to and from main centres, mean that already infrequent government services may cease altogether and the marketing of local produce is no longer commercially viable. For isolated communities, the presence, or absence, of regular radio communication is another important factor in the level of their connectedness with the wider community.

In some areas, the deterioration of existing infrastructure (roads, bridges, wharves and so on) leads to a general impoverishment of whole communities. Lack of reliable access to markets mean that it is a waste of energy to prepare produce,

in the hope that transportation will become available. The problem is compounded when the occasional ship does call and commercial shipowners complain that there is not enough produce to make regular scheduling of visits worthwhile.⁵

The Vanuatu study pointed out that 'provinces furthest from the capital of Port Vila record lower education, health and income levels than the more urban areas' (UN and Vanuatu 1996:100). The problems associated with maintaining adequate services in remote communities were reflected in an analysis of the Radio Vanuatu Message Service (Asian Development Bank 1992: Annex C3-1). Problems of isolation and transport difficulties help to explain why many health, education and other government workers are unwilling to conduct regular patrols or to be posted to remote areas (see Ward 1998 for a discussion of problems relating to air transport in Tonga).

On the other hand, regular and reliable communication can be a positive factor, which mitigates against the tyranny of distance. The economic and social benefits to marginal families and communities provide the impetus for self-help and family or community economic independence.

The content of messages broadcast over Radio Vanuatu in 1991/92 reflected a wide variety of individual, family, community and national concerns and activities. Information regarding illness, death, and family and community conflicts were followed by items regarding business activities, church celebrations, or visits from government field officers. Health supplies, schoolbooks, water tanks and livestock were to be delivered to particular health centres or schools. Passengers were to travel to Vila or be collected at their destinations. Tardy employees were threatened with 'strong action' if they did not return from their holidays. Teachers and other government workers were informed of their new postings (see Dobell, this issue).



Similar message services have been provided in Papua New Guinea. As part of a system which can reach out to isolated communities and improve their general standard of living, this service depends for its success on the availability of road, sea, or air transport for people, goods and services. The system also depends on the maintenance of radio communications, the quality of reception and the availability of radio receivers in remote communities. In Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea communication and transport services to remote communities have deteriorated, while at the same time the costs of any remaining services have increased. This means that poorer communities are increasingly disadvantaged and that formal and informal support systems are less effective.

In addition to spatial isolation, poor individuals, households and communities may be marginalised and isolated from the developments occurring within the wider community (UNDP and Fiji 1997). For example, the Solomon Islands settlement in Suva contains some of the poorest households in Fiji but is subsumed under 'other' in most statistical summaries. In these situations, small ethnic minorities may find that they are overlooked or are included with other more financially and socially advantaged groups.

In some circumstances, isolation may be a conscious decision of individuals or groups who are seeking to avoid negative official attention. Small unplanned settlements are established in out-of-sight locations so that government officials will be less likely to order their removal. However, this also means that in these generally very low-income households, services such as clean water or sanitation will not be available and that the group will be less likely to have access to adequate health and education services.

Social isolation may also be related to the fear or reality of domestic violence,

abuse and neglect. Low-income migrant families may experience high levels of stress and may not have access to supportive kin and community networks. In these situations, women, children, the elderly and the handicapped may be most at risk of violence or neglect. The fear of violent reactions may also deter women from participating in community activities.

Personal security fears also limit the participation of women in activities outside the home. In some areas of Papua New Guinea, there has been a marked increase in reports of sexual attacks, including gang rapes. Newspaper reports of these crimes are often accompanied by police advice to women to be more circumspect, and not to move around the community unless accompanied by male escorts. These situations seriously constrain women's economic and social participation and are further evidence that isolation and vulnerability are linked to the persistence and creation of poverty.

Vulnerability

Just as there are debates and divisions over how best to conceptualise 'poverty' the notion of 'vulnerability' means many different things, depending on the focus of the discussion. One definition of vulnerability is

...those who are poor in a sense of not having enough to fall back on in times of crisis, during a period of crop failure for example. Although poverty or poorness may be part of vulnerability, income is not the only factor (UN and Vanuatu 1996:99).

Poor individuals, households and communities are often more vulnerable to changes within their economic, social or physical environment. Their savings may be limited or non-existent, and their network of kin and community equally economically disadvantaged. Their low health, nutritional



and educational status make it difficult for them to cope with economic, social or natural disasters. Poor urban households may be particularly vulnerable, as they often have less access to food gardens, or other subsistence sector resources.

In addition to those who are living in absolute poverty, many individuals and households are at risk of becoming poor and lack the social and financial safety nets which might provide assistance in times of sudden need (UNDP and Fiji 1997:99).

The safety nets available to many low-income people in Fiji do not fully bridge the gap between an adequate lifestyle and destitution. In Fiji there is a strong sense of community and kinship. Yet the poorest households tend to be small and isolated; family systems do not encompass everyone, nor does their support necessarily last as long as the need for it does. Financial support systems exist but they often do not protect the most vulnerable. Government provides many forms of assistance to low-income earners but direct welfare is available only to the poorest of the poor and provides little relief from severe hardship. Non-government organisations run many programs to assist the poor, yet acknowledge that poor coordination and their often limited outreach prevent them from fully meeting the needs of the poor in Fiji.

Vulnerability may also be related to government regulations, which constrain or actively prevent marginal people from entering the informal sector.

The 1990 *World Development Report* noted that the burden of poverty is spread unevenly and that some individuals or groups are often more vulnerable and disadvantaged than others, pointing out that 'women in general are disadvantaged. In poor households they often shoulder more of the workload than men, are less educated, and have less access to remunerative activities' (World Bank 1990:2).

In these circumstances, the informal sector often represents the only opportunity

for poor women to obtain cash income, often in order to provide for their children's basic needs. Yet, it is when women move out from the home to seek economic benefits, that they may be vulnerable, not only from attacks from those labelled as 'criminals', but from the forces of formal authority, who may themselves be marginalised and vulnerable individuals.

Natural disasters

Pacific island countries have always been subject to natural climatic hazards such as cyclones, tidal waves, volcanic eruptions and landslips. Traditional safety precautions have been developed to minimise the devastating impact of these events.

If local food gardens are destroyed, families, and even entire communities, may be taken in by other less affected communities. This is part of the normal cultural cycle of reciprocal assistance and mutual help. At some time in the future, they will be called on to return the favour, and provide assistance to others within their safety network. In recent years, family members working in towns, or in rural areas away from the home community, may respond to disasters by sending food supplies, building materials or additional cash.

This customary disaster relief may, however, be unable to accommodate a major catastrophic event (or a succession of less serious events) which exhausts locally available resources, or for which emergency medical and other assistance is urgently needed. Those affected by these events are then dependent on government or international aid. In countries with areas prone to natural disasters, or facing severe economic downturns, families or whole communities may experience poverty for the first time. For many, this is only a transitional experience, but for others, particularly where they were living at the



edge of poverty, external and sustained support may be required to enable them to once again become self-reliant and independent. This is where the links between vulnerability and governance become important elements in the process of immediate support and longer-term economic and social rehabilitation.

Over the past few years Papua New Guinea has suffered several major natural disasters. In 1994, a volcanic eruption devastated Rabaul in East New Britain, and had serious economic consequences, not only for the local communities, but at a national level. In 1997, a severe frost, which affected highland areas, was accompanied by one of the most widespread and severe droughts in living memory. And, in July 1998, a catastrophic tidal wave devastated several villages in the Sissano Lagoon in the West Sepik, with an estimated loss of 3,000 lives. All of these events required short-term government and international emergency assistance, and longer-term economic support and the provision of health, education and other social services.

The ability of the worst-affected communities to cope with the drought of 1997 in Papua New Guinea was severely restricted because they had already been marginalised, and had very limited communication facilities, transport and other infrastructure. As far as many of these communities were concerned, government benefits and development had little or no meaning. In the short term, aid from within and outside Papua New Guinea provided immediate support. But, once the crisis was over, the capacity of the government to deliver ongoing services usually had not improved (Yala and Levantis 1998).

For these vulnerable and isolated communities, the concept of 'sustainable human development' is a distant dream. They remain, in a very real sense, among the poorest of the poor in Papua New Guinea.

Poverty and governance

How far have the poverty assessments and discussions in Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Vanuatu taken into account governance?

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) has sponsored research into the effectiveness and adequacy of poverty alleviation approaches. The study of projects initiated in Papua New Guinea found that, while they were clearly worthwhile programs, the results were transitory and locally based, and

...desperately need to be complemented by macro-level, centrally-funded and nationally-planned development strategies (Cox 1996a:60).

Current political processes have increased social fragmentation and have undermined administrative planning capacities. In part, this is a reaction against the centralised control which existed at the time of Papua New Guinea's independence in 1975. To be effective, national (or even provincial) poverty alleviation strategies will have to be able to accommodate the many sociopolitical systems which make up the nation state of Papua New Guinea. In varying degrees, Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Vanuatu, have all found that the inherited, centralised patterns of government service provisions are cumbersome and unworkable. Regional divisions in Papua New Guinea, racial divisions in Fiji, and the condominium divisions between Anglophone and Francophone in Vanuatu, remain recognisable features on the development landscape.

In Papua New Guinea, the conflict in Bougainville also had its genesis in colonial times, and the severe social, economic and political consequences have negatively affected the overall capacity of the government to govern. While progress has been made in resolving this problem, scarce resources, which could be directed towards



economic and social development, have been dissipated. In Fiji, progress has been made towards equity and political accord between ethnic Fijians and Indo-Fijians. But problems still remain, and the determination of the extent and causes of poverty, and the allocation of resources to alleviate poverty, will continue to be a sensitive political issue. In Vanuatu, problems inherent in the condominium legacy of different legal and administrative systems are still being resolved. Many of the dual services provided under the condominium were clearly unsustainable on economic grounds and solutions must now be found to assist remote areas.

The interlocking nature of poverty and governance issues is clear. It is not that there is a simple cause and effect relationship but that corruption 'may be embedded in a wider, but non-corrupt, framework of inept governance' (Larmour 1997:10). Political instability, and the preferential allocation of resource, also make it inevitable that some areas or groups receive unequal development assistance. Politicians seek to reward those who have voted for them and to balance central coordination and financial control against regional or local demands.

Problems of poverty, marginalisation, vulnerability, and corrupt and ineffective governance are not new or unique to the South Pacific. For some observers, these have been seen as inevitable consequences of political and social change, and economic development. Often the response has been to develop grand plans and national programs of poverty alleviation, with the hope that these will be funded by international aid donors. But national planning must also take into account local needs and be appropriate to particular cultural contexts.

Considerations of distributive and restorative justice provide another perspective on ways to lessen the increasing alienation of marginalised and unemployed

youth. These young people pose a threat to civil order, and are among the most familiar (if often unrecognisable) faces of poverty encountered by the non-poor. In considering reforms to the justice system, Dinnen (1998:265) points to the need to take contextual factors into account when considering strategies to lessen problems of raskolism.

Where, for example, lack of economic or development opportunities are accepted as underlying particular kinds of crime, then an appropriate restorative outcome should seek to improve such opportunities by linking rehabilitation strategies with educational opportunities, vocational training, micro-credit facilities or project assistance.

The proportion of those living below or just above the poverty line may be debated for different countries or groups within countries. It may be even easier to argue over whether specific 'baskets' of food or other items represent basic or generous survival needs. But, the inescapable conclusion is that in Papua New Guinea and Fiji and, although to a lesser degree, in Vanuatu, there are many different examples of poverty and marginalisation.

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