

## Non-government organisations, civil society, women's welfare and development in the Pacific Islands

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### Introduction

In this paper, the relationship between women's non-government organisations and their contributions towards the empowerment of women are examined with a special focus on economic empowerment.

Non-government organisations (NGOs) have continued to gain wide recognition in their capacity as agents of development. Some important aspects of development work that NGOs often spearhead include humanitarian relief, long-term development, policy formation and political advocacy. In most developing countries, some development assistance is channelled through NGOs, giving them an important role of serving as an alternative to government. "As development actors, NGOs have become the main service providers in countries where government is unable to fulfil its traditional role" (Ulleberg 2009).

Even in well-developed countries, NGO's contributions are recognised and acknowledged. Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in trying to promote its partnership with NGOs, conceded that they are always in tune with the needs of people at the grass-roots level, especially in catastrophic situations that governmental assistance may not be able to reach.

Streeten (1997), however, pointed out that some NGOs might be claiming credit for activities that they are not really performing to expectations, even though they have virtues that are frequently not proclaimed. He further commented that some NGOs rarely reach the poorest and in many ways are quite dependent on governmental support. He supported the notion though that NGOs are very adaptable and well-suited to promoting self-reliance, even if they are not usually participatory.

He further highlighted NGO functions and advantages, including the following:

- They are good at reaching and mobilising the poor and remote communities.
- They help empower poor people to gain control of their lives, and they work with and strengthen local institutions.

- They carry out projects at lower cost and more efficiently than government agencies.
- They promote sustainable development.

As stated by Ulleberg (2009), NGO activities are increasingly diverse and in many instances, may undermine government initiatives due mainly to the innovative and adaptive capacities they possess as compared to those of government. However, once NGOs start to scale up their various activities and techniques, so that they are in line with the government level, then a string of benefits can be expected to flow to the country as a whole. A scenario is emerging where NGOs are playing a proactive role in various development areas, particularly in relation to women's welfare, with one of the main objectives being the empowerment of women.

### Pacific Island NGOs

Pacific Island NGOs have always played strong advocacy roles when it comes to supporting women's rights, democracy, human rights, peace and development, media freedom, good governance and the rule of law. Assistance has been provided to Pacific Island countries to ensure they can meet their obligations to the international conventions they have signed through the United Nations.

Slatter (2006) declared that women's NGOs in Fiji and Samoa, in particular, played key roles in shadow reporting on their countries' performance in relation to their obligations to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The Fiji-based NGO, Coalition on Human Rights, has also produced a shadow report on Fiji's obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

### Women's empowerment in the Pacific Islands

The Women's Empowerment Principles are a set of principles for business, which offer guidance on how to empower women in the workplace, marketplace and community. They are the result of collaboration between the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the United Nations Global

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Compact and are adapted from the Calvert Women's Principles.

The development of the Women's Empowerment Principles included an international multi-stakeholder consultation process, which began in March 2009 and culminated in their launch on International Women's Day in March 2010. Pacific Island countries and territories adopted the principles at the 9th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women held in Fiji in 2005 as part of a regional charter for advancing gender equality and women's progress. The charter is reviewed every three years during the Triennial Conference of Pacific Women.

Women's economic empowerment was also highlighted as one of the critical areas of concern under the Revised Pacific Platform for Action on Advancement of Women and Gender Equality 2005–2015<sup>2</sup>. "It is about increasing women's participation and influence over economic decisions that affect their own lives and society. Women's economic empowerment can be achieved through equal access to and control over critical economic resources; gaining the skills to use economic resources; and equal access to economic opportunities" (Pacific Islands Forum briefing paper).

The 2011 Pacific Regional Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Tracking Report showed that "across the majority of countries, governments have done little to raise the economic participation of women, with civil society organisations (CSOs) and the private sector taking the lead".<sup>3</sup>

According to a Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat briefing paper, "Economic Empowerment of Women,"<sup>4</sup> women make critical contributions to the household and national economy with their involvement in multiple activities that support and sustain their livelihoods — subsistence farming, cash cropping, fishing, production of handicrafts and small-scale businesses. While the general business environment in Pacific Island countries is improving, secure property rights and access to financial services (including credit) remain issues for women.<sup>4</sup>

According to a World Bank report (2010), in some Pacific countries, 70% of male employees spent between 50 to 80% of their fortnightly wages on alcohol and kava. In contrast, women's income is mostly used for the purchase of food, school fees and other household needs. This is a reflection of entrenched behaviours that dictate decisions regarding the use of income.

## Women's NGOs in Fiji

A recent call by Fiji's Minister for Social Welfare, Women and Poverty Alleviation to NGOs working in the interests of children and women to strengthen their roles in times of disaster management and rehabilitation could signify a strengthening of their partnering relationship with the government. Alternatively, it could also suggest that NGOs are not really doing what they are supposed to do.

Similar calls have been made by the Permanent Secretary of Information, who was quoted as saying that women's NGOs were too focused on political issues and were not doing enough on the issue of sexual assault in Fiji. This statement was, however, refuted strongly by the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, the NGO that focuses on counselling and providing legal and medical assistance and practical support for woman and children who are victims of violence.

Such instances create uncertainty about the impact of NGO projects and raise questions about the effectiveness of development aid channelled through NGOs. With the increase in donor funding to women's NGOs in Fiji, public expectations for higher quality services are also expected to rise.

It is important to appraise, analyse and critique projects undertaken by women's NGOs to ascertain the extent of their impacts/influence on the empowerment of women in Fiji. Such a study may also raise critical issues concerning women's empowerment and the effectiveness of women's NGO projects and development in general.

Further studies will also assist in extending the existing space for literature and policy relating to the experience of women in development in Fiji, and help identify barriers and obstacles to mainstreaming women's participation in commerce and business. The new knowledge and information thus generated will be valuable to government, development planners, policy makers, donors, NGOs and other stakeholders.

## Impacts of development assistance

The real impacts of development assistance on programme beneficiaries remain largely unknown in many developing countries. NGOs in the Pacific have come a long way despite challenges that include government hostility, questioning of their legitimacy, funding constraints and over-dependence on donor support (Slatter 2006).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pacmas.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Revised-Pacific-Platform.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.forumsec.org/resources/uploads/attachments/documents/2011 Pacific Regional MDGs Tracking Report\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.forumsec.org/resources/uploads/attachments/documents/2011%20Pacific%20Regional%20MDGs%20Tracking%20Report_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.forumsec.org/resources/uploads/attachments/documents/FEMK.04.Rev%201%20-%20Economic%20Empowerment%20of%20Women.pdf>

However, now that they are better resourced than in the past and are taking on much wider social responsibilities, much is expected from Pacific NGOs. Delivery of high-quality, meaningful outputs are expected by stakeholders, the government, donors, service recipients, employees and society as a whole.

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