

## Poverty and Deprivation amongst Ethnic Minorities in Fiji: The Case of Ni Solomoni and Rabi Islanders

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### *Abstract*

*Poverty issues in the Pacific are now coming into the open as governments come under domestic and international pressures to attend to the Millennium Development Goals and address local developmental needs. Unfortunately the problems of the minorities have not found much space on the national agenda on poverty in Fiji. Fiji's Melanesian and Rabi Island minorities are two such minority communities that have faced increasing poverty for a long time. This paper shows that the welfare positions of these two specific groups are distinctively different from the rest of Fiji. They have significantly higher poverty rates, while their leaders are after distinctive solutions.*

### INTRODUCTION

Economic and social disparities between the rich and the poor have risen dramatically in all societies in the past few decades. This has happened while global wealth increased significantly in this period (IBRD, 2002; 2001). The economic conditions of many developing countries continue to worsen as they fail to grow due to various problems. These problems vary widely amongst developing countries.

From amongst the Pacific Island nations, Fiji is unique. Apart from spatial variations in poverty levels and economic disparity, there are many ethnic minorities that have distinct economic and social problems of their own. Poverty issues in Fiji are often analyzed in the context of in-

ter and intra ethnic variations (UNDP, 1997). The smaller minorities such as the Rabi Islanders and Ni Solomoni groups are often left out from the broader welfare debate (see for instance UNDP, 1997; Government of Fiji, 2003; 2005). Media attention on poverty amongst these communities is also negligible, thereby keeping the problems of these communities away from public gaze.

There are three specific reasons for such a state of affairs. Smaller minorities lack political voice and leverage. They also do not have adequate representation within the media fraternity to raise awareness. These are compounded by the lack of expertise within these communities to address or voice their problems.

The Ni Solomoni settlers are descendants of Solomon Islanders brought to Fiji during the pre-colonial labour trade in the Pacific; their origin here is pre-indenture (early to mid-1800s). Today an estimated 10,000 descendants of these foreign workers reside in 40 different settlements in the country of which 15 are in the greater Suva area. The Ni Solomoni community is one of the poorest communities in Fiji. They are the worst affected people in terms of ownership of land. As a result of this most of them lack the ability to sustain their livelihood in the long-run (NACCSC, 2003; Halapua, 2001). The community has faced frequent displacements over a long period of time (Halapua 2001).<sup>1</sup> As a result of this and lack of access to land, a high rate of poverty is observed among the community members.

The Rabi Islanders, on the other hand, are relatively more established spatially. Most of them live on the Island of Rabi. They are descendants of Banaban people who came to settle on the Island after being displaced from Banaba (Ocean Island) by the British in 1945. Ocean Island was nearing an environmental disaster due to uncontrolled phosphate mining. The pioneer group of 1,003 Banaban settlers arrived on Rabi Island on 15 December 1945 (Kituai, 1981). While many Rabi Islanders have moved to other parts of Fiji, most continue to live on the island.

The incidences of poverty among these two communities, however, have different causes as they live under different circumstances. Rabi Island is geographically isolated, thus separated from the major economic centres and economic activities. The Ni Solomoni community, on the other hand, is closely embedded in the mainstream economy of Fiji. Yet they are distinctively poorer than the other communities they live with. In the case of Rabi Island, most of the educated classes have left the Island

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<sup>1</sup> The community's history of displacement from one place to another has been described by Halapua (2001).

for better opportunities elsewhere. The small population size also makes it impossible for the market to function adequately on the island. This paper examines the extent and nature of poverty in these two communities.

### Methodology

Two different datasets are used in this paper. While both the datasets emerged from sample surveys, data for the Ni Solomoni community was collected in May 2004, while that for Rabi Islanders, was done in April 2005. The research for the Rabi Islanders involved surveys of 30 households in four villages - Uma, Tabwewa, Buakonikai and Tabiang - of the Island. This includes a settlement of approximately 5,000 people. The survey involved personal visits to the households by the enumerator.<sup>2</sup> Respondents were interviewed face-to-face using a structured questionnaire. The questions captured selected indicators such as education level, employment type, household income, wage level, food and clothing consumption, land ownership, health care and other expenditures. The research was endorsed by the governing authority of the Island, the Rabi Island Council. Respondents were cooperative and enthusiastic.

Similar methodology was used previously for the Ni Solomoni community.<sup>3</sup> This survey included 42 households. The interviewees were cooperative, confident and enthusiastic in their responses. The survey was well received and endorsed by the community leaders, who requested cooperation with the hope that the research could bring them some benefits. The survey areas were: Kalekana in Lami, and Marata, Vataleka, Wai, Tobaita and Koio in Wailoku. These are the major Melanesian settlement areas around Suva.

### Definition of Poverty

Poverty may be defined on the basis of intensity and level of deprivation. The two main concepts that are often used to describe poverty are 'absolute' and 'relative' poverty. *Absolute poverty* represents a minimal living standard specified in terms of nutritional level, clothing, and the like that can be measured on a money scale (Anand, 1983). *Relative poverty* is a comparative indicator.

The poverty levels of the Rabi Islanders and the Ni Solomoni community could not be measured using any specific yardstick as there is no

<sup>2</sup> The enumerator was the second author of this paper. He is fluent in Banaba.

<sup>3</sup> The enumerators for the Ni Solomoni community survey were the third and fourth authors of this paper.

previous data available for these communities. Instead, levels of deprivation are measured in terms of consumption. There are scientific methods of calculating minimum nutrition levels necessary to be out of poverty. There, however, is no 'set' or 'acceptable' minimum for clothing, education, or health needs. Poverty is, ultimately, a socially constructed phenomenon. A level of consumption of food, clothing, education and health may be regarded as socially satisfactory in one country, or society, while the same level may be regarded as socially unacceptable in another. But this borders on the notion of relative poverty. Anand (1983) states that *relative poverty* defines poverty in terms of prevailing living standard of the society, recognizing explicitly the interdependence between the poverty line and the entire income distribution (Anand, 1983; see also Watts, 1968, and Sen 1999).

Traditionally, absolute poverty is defined in terms of shortfalls in consumption and income so as to diminish a household's chances of survival to a level that is socially unacceptable. Currently, some attempts are being made to redefine poverty that is expressive of conditions afflicting the people. It includes various dimensions of human society and the desire of individuals to have access to good education, medical facilities, and one's ability to lead a long and creative life, acquire knowledge, have freedom, dignity, self-respect and respect for others and to have access to the resources necessary for a decent standard of life (UNDP, 1997; IBRD, 2001; Sen, 1999; and Anand and Sen, 1996). There is, thus, no prescribed standard and authentic definition of poverty in that sense. It remains an issue of perception and varies between societies. For instance, in one society poverty may be said to exist because of a lack of access to land and adequate shelter. Another society may have land and decent shelter, but may lack adequate education facilities or medical care facilities, thus perceive itself to be in poverty. Such differences in the meaning of deprivation has been comprehended and accepted by analysts (Ravallion, 1996). These variations in perceptions do not weaken the analysis here.

### Poverty and Politics in Fiji

Recent report on the incidence of absolute poverty state that poverty levels could be as high as 30% in urban areas and 36% in rural areas (Government of Fiji, 2003, 2005).<sup>1</sup> Barr and Naidu (2002) placed the poverty line in Fiji at a household income of \$94.20 per week for 1996, and at \$99.27 per week for 1998. They estimated that 25-30% of the

<sup>1</sup> See also the National Advisory Council Cabinet Sub-Committee report, referenced as Government of Fiji (2003: 10).

population was in poverty and an additional 25% was vulnerable to it in 2002. They attributed urban poverty to the declining wages in the formal sector, expanding informal sectors, and systemic exploitation of workers, a view that is supported by Kumar and Prasad (2002).

For the early 1980's, Stavenuiter (1983) found that there were more poor households in villages than in settlements but also that most poor people living in squatter settlements in urban areas faced relatively high cost of living as they had fewer opportunities to supplement their income. He also found that in urban areas, unemployment was higher amongst ethnic Fijians than amongst Indo-Fijians. He also argued that poverty in Fiji was linked to declining real wage rates and employment, and the absence of a credible social security system for the poor and unemployed.

According to the 2002 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), approximately 28% of households were in poverty (Government of Fiji, 2005). This compares with the rate of 25% on the basis of the 1991 HIES. The poverty level for the rural sector was estimated to be much higher - at 36% for all groups. Analysts argue that the level of destitution has also worsened since 1991 as a result of a number of events that affected the Fijian economy (Kumar and Prasad, 2004; Government of Fiji, 2003; Walsh, 2002; and Barr 2003).<sup>4</sup>

Poverty data, as given above, is often cited by politicians and analysts, though more often in the context of ethnic appeal (Barr 1990; Sriskandarajah 2003). The issue is often raised in national budget debates. The following statements, for example, were made by the Minister of Finance and National Planning in his 2006 National Budget speech:

... In terms of national population, the incidence of basic needs poverty is estimated to have affected 28.2 percent of the population as a whole (up from 25.5 percent in 1990/91). Amongst Fijians, the rate of basic needs poverty incidence is estimated to have been 29.5 percent in 2002/03 compared with 27.7 percent in 1990/91, and to have been 28.5 percent amongst the Indian popu-

<sup>4</sup> The following are cited as the adverse development that contributed to the loss of earnings for the people in Fiji and eroded the general confidence of people: Cyclone Kina (1993); National Bank of Fiji scam (1994); commencement of the expiry of land leases (1997); drought (1997/98); financial scam involving the Commodity Development Fund allocation of over \$60m (1998); 20% devaluation of Fiji dollar (1998); floods (1999); and terrorist uprising and political instability (2000-01). A large-scale agricultural scam in 2001 has caused lots of negative publicity for Fiji's political system and the civil service generally. A cyclone in 2003 caused significant damage and loss of property in the northern district. The gradual withdrawal of preferential sugar prices from 2008 will have a severe effect on people's income in the following years.

lation, down slightly from the 31.0 percent recorded in 1990/91. ... There has been a notable increase in poverty in the rural areas where the average ... incidence amongst the rural population appears to have increased from 24.3 percent to 36.4 percent. Rural poverty appears to be more widespread amongst Indian households (37.2 percent) than amongst Fijian households (24.5 percent). In the urban areas, the highest levels of urban poverty were recorded, where about 32 percent of households, living in settlements, Housing Authority housing, and urban village areas, were living below the poverty line (Government of Fiji 2005: 32).

There is often a constant reference to the two major ethnic groups in discussions about poverty in Fiji; minority groups have often been left out of the analysis. More generally, the smaller minorities do not even get due mention in official statistics; an example of this is the 2002 HIES Urban household analysis (Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics, 2002; 2003).

Ethno-political analysis of poverty intensifies around national elections and political crises (Sriskandarajah, 2003; Premdas, 1993; and Prasad et. al. 2001). The post-2000, military backed government for instance, highlighted economic grievances of indigenous Fijians and indigenous Fijian poverty, to provide subtle justifications for their right to power and decision-making. The ethnic issues featured prominently in parliamentary debates during 2001-6. Political posturing is nothing new in Fiji, with ethnic nationalism having a firm root in Fiji's recent history (Robertson and Sutherland, 2001; Sutherland, 2000; Cameron, 2000, 1987; Baba, 1997; Sutherland, 1992; and Kumar and Prasad, 2004). What the posturing does, however, is to lift the public profile of the issues.

The persistent focus on poverty amongst ethnic Fijians and ethnic Indians, has been considerably detrimental to the minorities in regards to resource allocation and addressing their problems. While for political purposes, there have been some token responses to the economic plight of the minorities (see, for example, Government of Fiji, 2003 for a discussion of the prevalence of poverty amongst them) overall, there has not been any sustained focus on poverty amongst the minority communities, nor has the public been provided with concrete figures on poverty rates. The case of Ni Solomoni and the Banaba communities is a glaring example. The lack of any serious literature on poverty amongst these communities is a major handicap.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Horowitz (1985), Cramer (2003), and Lichbach (1989) for discussions of conflict resolution dynamics, and Horscroft (2002) for a discussion of inequality and conflict in Fiji.

## Poverty amongst the Ni Solomoni

### *Employment and Earnings*

All heads of households in the Ni Solomoni community surveyed had an employment. About 80%, however, were in low paid jobs. About 12% of the household heads were either farmers or involved in selling farm produce for an income. 24% of the household heads were construction workers, 8% had other blue-collar job, 5% were in shoeshine business, and 35% were in other low paying engagements, like artisanal fishing, gardening and other manual work. 17% were in white-collar jobs, mostly in the education sector. Most household incomes were supplemented by traditional or subsistence farming. A majority of those living in Wailoku settlement earned additional incomes from selling surplus crops at the roadside or the local municipal markets. People in Kalekana settlement, which is on the shore, depended more on fishing for their supplementary income.

Table 1 provides the household income data; incomes include those from informal activities. However, these do not include the value of production directly consumed by the households. The data shows that 90% of the households had weekly household incomes less than \$105.

**Table 1: Household Incomes, Ni Solomoni Community**

Average Income (\$/week)	No. of HH	Percent
38	8	19
60	9	21
81	11	26
105	10	24
140	1	2
145	1	2
187	1	2
196	1	2

In Fiji, an income level of \$132 per week for a family of 5 is taken to be the poverty line (Barr 2003). On this basis, 93% of the Ni Solomoni households fell below the poverty line. On the other hand if the new Government of Fiji (2005) poverty line is used, which is about \$147 per week, about 95% of the households would fall below the poverty line.

Most of the households had a single male income earner. The over-

whelming majority of Ni Solomoni people fell within three broad income-earning groups. The first category includes those relying entirely on subsistence agriculture; their monthly earnings ranged from \$100-\$300. This category represented over 30% of the households. One of the main problems expressed by this group was their lack of access to fertile land, which explains their limited earnings. The second category comprises those who were engaged in manual work on a casual basis, either in the formal sector or the informal sector. Their income levels ranged from \$300-500 per month. The major grievance of this category was a lack of access to better education, which placed them in disadvantaged positions. The third category comprises those with formal jobs in the state sector (like, public works, military, police), or private sector (like fishing, construction or security industries). Their earnings were normally above \$500 per month.

### *Spending Behavior*

Major expenditure categories included food, clothing, education, health, energy, and transportation. Table 2 provides the profile of expenditure on food. It shows that the majority of the households spent less than \$500 per month on food.

Only two households spent greater than \$500 per month on food. 90% of the households' monthly expenditures on food were in the range \$101-450. Cash expenditures on food in most households were kept low on account of subsistence farming or fishing activities.

**Table 2: Food Expenditure Profile**

Food Expenditure (\$ per month)	Number of households	Percent
0-50	0	0
50-100	2	5
101-150	9	21
151-200	10	24
201-250	3	7
251-300	7	17
301-350	3	7
351-400	4	10
401-450	2	5
>500	2	5
Total	42	100

Expenditure on clothing, excluding expenditure on school uniforms, which formed the next largest category of expenditure, was concentrated in the range \$10-\$30 per month, with 60% in the range \$11-\$20 per month. Approximately 90% of the householders spent less than \$30 per month on clothing. While some families received clothing gifts from relatives abroad, most households relied on used clothing outlets for their clothing needs.

Other major consumption categories of the households were health, entertainment, electricity, cooking gas and/or kerosene, telephone, travelling cost and charity. Most of the households spent less than \$20.00 per month on these items, in total. This expenditure level is considered low, and an indicator of serious economic distress. It was found that some households opted not to use services such as electricity and telephone even when these were available, while most households applied stringent controls on the use of electricity, with restrictions placed on the number of light bulbs or electrical equipment in the house.

Health and hygiene issues are some of the most pressing concerns of the Ni Solomoni households. Reliance on private medical service was non-existent, while accessing public hospitals was also difficult on account of transportation costs. The latter could often result in delayed medical attention and thus prolongation of curable illnesses. Health infrastructure and primary healthcare services were often not adequate in terms of quantity and quality. In many instances lack of basic health care led to serious handicap or even death in the poorest of the households. Hygiene was a serious problem in the settlements. Common issues raised included the condition and availability of drainage systems, and toilet facilities. Most of the toilets were dugout-pits in the settlement areas, some of which were badly rundown and had leaking roofs or flooded pits. Some of them posed major health risks.

Public buses were the most accessible means of transportation to these villages. Most of the households, however, spent less than \$20.00 on transport.

### **Educational Attainment**

Lack of education is always a major problem for depressed communities. The case of Ni Solomoni community is well known for this deficiency. First, there were very few opportunities for post-secondary studies, and second, most households did not have enough income to meet the cost of education. 64% of the households had someone who attended secondary school during the survey period. However, of those who were eli-

gible to proceed to tertiary institutions, most did not on account of a lack of resources.

26% of the household heads had less than class 5 education (less than 5 years of education), while another 24% had classes 6-8 education, making it 50% of the entire household heads who had only primary school education. Another 43% had education upto the Fiji Junior level (year 11 level).

Most households found providing basic education quite costly. Even though primary and secondary education is officially free in Fiji, poorer households find it difficult to meet the expenditure of sending children to schools, which entail expenditure on bus fares, uniforms, books, stationery and lunch. The cost of education to the Ni Solomoni families is provided in Table 3. The table shows that over 15% of the households incurred education costs in excess of \$1000 per annum. It also shows a strong possibility of denial of education to school age children. Approximately 36% of the households did not have school going children. Interestingly, more than 95% of the households did not have any expenditure on tertiary education. This is quite unusual for any community in Fiji where entry into tertiary education is relatively easy. It seems the cost of education is the main deterrent.

**Table 3: Annual Expenditure on Education**

Expenditure (\$)	Primary		Secondary		Tertiary		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
0	23	54.8	30	71.4	40	95.2	15	35.7
< \$300	7	16.7	1	2.4	0	0	6	14.3
\$300-\$500	7	16.7	3	7.1	0	0	7	16.7
\$500-\$1000	3	7.1	5	11.9	2	4.8	8	19.1
\$1000-\$2000	2	4.8	3	7.1	0	0	4	9.5
>\$2000	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	4.8

As a result of income deprivation of the households many school age children dropped out of school and entered the lower paid job market. The Ni Solomoni community did not enjoy preferential treatment under the *Social Justice Act*, that the indigenous Fijian and Rotuman communities enjoy. The community, therefore, is trapped in an intense poverty cycle that is difficult to break. The condition of poverty, inequality and the abysmal living standards of the Ni Solomoni people seem, in the absence of any special intervention, perpetual. In addition, the lack of opportunity for further education reduces community pride and collective actions to

get the due attention and support from the government. Most community leaders expressed a lost sense of belonging as citizens of Fiji.

### **Land**

The Kalekana settlement near Lami town is situated on 9.5 acres of land. The Wailoku area, where Koio, Tobaita, Fataleka, Wai and Marata ('Are'are) settlements are, 254 acres of land is available. Both these land are leaseholds. The Kalekana land lease is an annual lease renewable at a fee of \$110 per year, which is met by the community collectively. In essence this lease is a tenancy-at-will lease. The Wailoku lease is for a 20 year term and is owned by the Anglican Church of Fiji. The current lease, which was renewed in 1988, would expire in 2007. The fee of \$10,000 for the last renewal was paid by the government; there is no certainty on who will pay for the renewal this time around.

Of interest is the fact that the leases are collective leases for the community rather than individual leases for households. As such, improvements on an area allocated to a specific household can not be cashed, or utilized as collateral to borrow money for investments.

### **Housing and Asset Ownership**

While the housing leases were collective leases, the houses on these leases were privately constructed. Most Ni Solomon people live in wood and iron houses. The size, age and quality of the houses in these settlements varied significantly. Almost all the houses are low-cost houses by normal description and are far below the average standard of houses in urban areas. The values of the houses ranged between \$500 and \$5,000. The value of 17% of all the houses was below \$1,000; 70% of the houses had values less than \$3000. The average value of the houses in 2004 was estimated at \$2,500. A majority of the houses were old and meagrely maintained. Some houses were built recently, but were built mostly of second-hand materials that were collected over a period of time. In some cases, materials were donated by family members and friends. A few houses had newly changed roofs, but these belonged to the highest echelons of the community.

Lease insecurity and lack of private leases were matters of concern for the community. This led to the belief that building larger or more permanent structures could be risky as there was no guarantee of extension to the leases. It was, therefore, quite common for some extended families to share a single house, despite the small size and relatively unhygienic conditions.

A majority of the houses were between one to three bedrooms and were connected to electricity. Some households opted to use fuel lighting and depended upon neighbours for power supply. A few of them shared electricity with power line connections from a single power meter. Some houses had in-built kitchens, toilets and showers, but most did not have these facilities. While some households had television sets and a few had multi-system stereo sets, over 90% of the households only had necessities such as radio, refrigerator and electric irons.

### **Poverty among Rabi Islanders**

#### **Employment and Earnings**

Current employment opportunities in Rabi were limited. The only formal employer on the island was the Rabi Island Council, which is a local authority that manages the Rabi Island Trust Fund. Other employment opportunities were limited to farming and self-employment (small business). Some people worked for church groups as volunteers. Most households on Rabi Island survived on subsistence farming and fishing. 53% of the household heads were farmers, while 30% were engaged in work for Rabi Island Council and the government (nurse, policeman, teacher); 7% were involved in small businesses.

A majority of the households (54%) were headed by females. This unique feature was a result of male migration out of Rabi to other parts of Fiji in search of work. 83% of the household heads were married while 17% were widowers. The average family size on Rabi Island was slightly less than 7, which was about 40% higher than the national average.

Cash earnings on the Island varied from no income at all to \$500 per month. Table 4 provides household cash earnings distribution.

**Table 4: Household Incomes, Rabi Island**

Income per month*	No. of Households	Percent
No Income	2	7
Between \$1 and \$50	6	20
Between \$51 and \$100	18	60
Between \$101 and \$500	4	13
Total	30	100

\* The value of direct consumption from own production has not been imputed. Not being commercial farmers or fishers, only cash incomes households received from informal production is included here.  
(Source: USP Economics Dept (2004), Rabi Island Poverty Survey)

The Table shows that 7% of the household heads did not have any cash income. These families were headed by widowers and aged people; their survival was based on charity and occasional subsistence cultivation/fishing.

The price adjusted poverty line for rural settlements was \$115 per week in 2002 (Barr and Naidu, 2002); this is equivalent to \$498 per month. On the basis of this, over 90% of the Rabi Island households fell below the poverty line.

Most of the islanders expressed serious concerns on their future on the island, arguing that the only way out of the grim situation was to attract investments and creation of new jobs on the island.

### ***Expenditure Behavior***

84% of the households spent less than \$100 a month on food. For clothing, 60% of the households spent less than \$10 per month and another 37% spent between \$6 and \$10 per month; none spent more than \$20 per month on clothing. 91% of the households spent less than \$10 per month on electricity. The island's energy supply was through community diesel generators operated by 4 communities. Islanders contributed on a monthly basis for the provision of electricity for between 3 to 4 hours per day. Contributions varied by the community operating the plants, but ranged between \$5 and \$14.80 per month. Energy needs were supplemented by kerosene, with 90 percent of the households spending between \$5 and \$10 per month on this.

Other major expenditure items were communications and transport. Even though Rabi Island is serviced by Fiji's main Telecom services, the services are costly. But given that Rabi Islanders are spread throughout the Fiji group, phone services are necessary. 97% of the households spent between \$5 and \$20 per month on telephone charges. The Rabi Island Council operates the main land transport service on Rabi Island. However, another privately owned operator provides bus services on the island. On occasions when these services are out of order, people use small boats with outboard motor to travel from one village to another. 73% of the households spent up to \$5 per month on transport services. Only 17% spent more than \$11 per month on transport.

Entertainment, which comprised kava sessions and bingo games, consumed up to \$5 per month for about 90% of the households.

### ***Education***

A majority of the household heads had primary school education; 27% had education below the fifth class and 33% had education between classes 6 and 8. 27% had obtained 2 years of secondary education, and 13% received higher secondary education (forms 5 and 6 levels).

The main educational expenditure items were uniforms, transport, books, stationery and building fee. Expenditure on school uniforms varied from \$20 to \$30; building fee was at \$30 per annum for primary schools and \$20 for the high school. Both these elements were periodic costs, as also were expenditure on books.

There were 6 kindergartens, 3 primary schools and one secondary school on the island. The highest level of education provided in the secondary school was sixth form level. For education beyond form 6 students had to find places in schools outside Rabi, which became expensive for the islanders. Scholarship provision for the Islanders was limited because of stringent grade requirements for entry into tertiary institutions, the limited number of places, and limited budget allocation for multi-ethnic student scholarship that catered for the islanders. In total, at the time of the survey (2005) about 45 students were studying under the multi-ethnic scholarship scheme. However, the living allowances under this scheme, at \$500 per semester, were insufficient to cater for living expenses for a student, thereby requiring parents/guardians on the Island to make up the balance. The Rabi Island Council makes a nominal provision for scholarships; in 2003, for example, this budget was F\$13,102.

### ***Access to Land and Housing***

Rabi Islanders have legal provisions on access to land. The *Banaban Lands Act* provides: 'Rabi Island shall vest in freehold in the Council (Rabi-Council) to be held as a trust for the benefit of all members of the Banaban community'. The Rabi Island Council, therefore, is the custodian of the land. Under the law, the Council may divide any area or areas of land on Rabi Island into portions and may allocate these to and vest them in members of the Banaban community (s4(1)). The Council may grant, or permit the transfer or assignment of leases of any land, other than Banaban land, on Rabi Island and may grant licenses over such land on payment of a fee or otherwise. Under law, Banaban land is not to be disposed off whether by way of sale, lease, transfer, or otherwise to any person other than a member of the Banaban community (s4(3)). All titles are communal lease holdings issued to individuals. There is no free hold-

ing scheme for any individual. In this regard the land right of Rabi Islanders is secure, but like the case for the Ni Solomoni community, this asset can not be used as collateral for raising commercial loans.

Most houses on the island were old. Some were as old as 60 years, being originally constructed in 1945 when the first settlement took place. Most of these houses were in dilapidated conditions as they had not been maintained for decades. Some had been left idle after sustaining damages in a cyclone in 2003. Building maintenance is costly on the island, which is at a significant distance from the main hardware and construction centres. Very few households are able to repair their houses due to resource constraints. For many, the additional problem is the lack of repair and maintenance skills and high cost of hiring skilled labour on the island.

### **Affirmative Action**

Under the 1970 Constitution and the earlier colonial administrations, Rabi Islanders and the Ni Solomoni (as well as other Melanesians) were classified as 'Fijians', a label reserved for indigenous Fijians. They also voted with the 'Fijians' under the indigenous Fijian communal rolls. Other small groups, such as the Tuvaluan community (a Micronesian community staying on Kioa Island) were registered as 'General' voters. Under the 1990 and 1997 Constitutions, these small communities came under the 'General voters' classification. 'General' voters include all those who have roots that are ethnically neither indigenous nor Indian. The transfer meant that the Ni Solomoni and Rabi people lost access to the special benefit schemes for indigenous Fijians, enjoyed under the government's affirmative action for indigenous Fijian and Rotuman programs. During the period leading to the 1997 Constitution, Rabi Islanders protested at the reclassification, to no avail.

Citizenship of the Banabans is also an unresolved issue. Only Fiji citizens are empowered to vote in national elections in the country. But while Rabi Islanders have been voting in elections, they have not been granted formal citizenship rights. While this is an ineffectual anomaly – as Rabi Islanders qualify for Fijian passports – the process of formal naturalization began in 2005 when the government provided a three month period for the Banabans to apply for citizenship by naturalization.

A vast majority of the Ni Solomoni and Banabans believe that the government is responsible for their plight but the Banabans do not freely criticize the government of the Rabi Island Council for the continuing neglect of their welfare. The Banabans look up to the Council as the only institution that can look after their interests. That this has not happened constitutes a breach of the provisions of the *Banaban Settlement Act*.

### **Conclusion**

Over 90% of the Ni Solomoni and the Rabi island residents fall below the poverty line in the country. This rate of poverty is significantly higher than the rates for other communities in the country, as well as the national average rates. Both these communities have been relatively voiceless in the country. While the Banaba have the Rabi Island Council as an institutional support mechanism, there is no similar institution for the Ni Solomoni community. But even the Rabi Island Council has remained, in effect, defunct in terms of meeting its obligations under the *Banaban Settlement Act*.

For both the groups, the only option is to demand immediate attention from the government. On its part, the state itself needs to recognize that these two communities suffer disproportionately from poverty and deprivation. The Ni Solomoni people have been in desperate situation for long although they are part of the greater Fijian economy. The degree of economic deprivation faced by the members of the community is reflected in the extent of their poverty. The people are a 'wounded' and humiliated ethnic group that has been alienated for generations. Their ancestors were the first of the foreign workers who helped in the building of the country's economy. In like manner, the Banaba, whose own land was ripped barren by British phosphate interests, have been an alienated community.

Fitting neither as indigenous people in Fiji, nor in the image of the General voters, both these communities need to come at the centre of state policies. An effective voice needs to be given to these communities. It is the responsibility of the state to alleviate the deprivation of the two communities through affirmative action policies. It is also the responsibility of NGOs to include these, and other voiceless communities, in their plans of actions.

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