Poverty and the Role of Media in Fiji

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Abstract

Poverty has significantly increased in Fiji since the first military coup in 1987. Political instability, resulting in downturn in economic performances is one of the most pressing issues facing Fiji now. Policies relating to economic growth, provision of targeted social services and development, and empowerment for the underprivileged in the society have been suggested to meet the complex challenges posed by the current state of social inequality and poverty. Media has an important role to play in increasing awareness as well as getting new impetus in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. This study explores the depth of poverty in Fiji and the important role that the media has in providing information on the wider picture of poverty and keeping all stakeholders informed.

Keywords: Media, Pacific Island Countries, Poverty

INTRODUCTION

Poverty has been a chronic global problem for several decades and Fiji is not isolated from the issue of growing poverty and inequality (Barr, 2008). Ours is a world out of balance. Out of the six billion people living in the world today, one billion receive 80 percent of the income, while more than one billion barely survive on less than a dollar a day (Wolfensohn, 2003). It is estimated that today half the world lives on $2 or less per day while “20 percent of the world’s population consumes 86 percent of the world’s resources” (Barr, 2008, p. 101). This is an indication of the great disparities that exist in our world and the gap between rich and poor nations is one of the biggest obstacles to development.

James Wolfensohn (2003), former President of the World Bank, defines poverty as "living below a minimum level of income such as a dollar a day per person and it is also a lack of adequate food, shelter, health, education and influence over decisions that affect one’s life" (page 1). In very simple terms, we can speak of the poor, the very poor and the struggling poor to capture those in absolute poverty, those who are destitute and those who are vulnerable to poverty. Today it is also very common to speak about poverty of access. This is where people’s hardship or poverty stems from the fact that they do not have proper access to health care, education, transport, infrastructure or markets for their produce.
Poverty in Fiji has been a pressing problem since pre-independence (before 1970). For thousands of poor people, life continues to be a struggle with very little assistance from the government. The social fabric of the society is severely fragmented along political and racial grounds (Khan and Khan, 2007). For many people, economic hardship is a daily reality. The World Bank’s prescription of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) for developing countries did not augur well in the case of Fiji, as poverty levels have generally increased with a depressed economy.

Out of 177 countries in 2005, Fiji was ranked 92nd on the UNDP Human Development Index and 49th out of 103 on poverty (Barr, 2008).

POVERTY IN PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

Amongst the major issues affecting Pacific Island countries in their development process is the increasing levels of poverty and income inequality. More and more people are moving to the towns and cities and the World Bank estimates that, by 2020, over 50 percent of Pacific Islanders will be urban dwellers (Barr, 2008). Storey (2006) discusses that “in the Pacific, cities are increasingly at the heart of economic change and income generation which is bringing about greater wealth and opportunity, but they are also sites of deep poverty, inequality and social tension” (p. 1). According to Storey (2006), “to allow cities of exclusion and elite interests to develop and endure will lead to unstable urban futures for the region with implications for national stability and development. Without action, the region’s cities will almost inevitably be characterised by slums, endemic poverty and environmental degradation” (p. 3).

A number of urban problems are foreseen or actually being experienced, such as population growth and lack of employment opportunities, the unavailability of land, the growth of crime, drugs, street kids and prostitution, and the increase in squatter or informal settlements. All these will place a strain on existing infrastructure. Environmental issues will increase in importance, especially, with the prospect of global warming.

The Pacific Human Development Report (UNDP, 1999) noted “poverty in the Pacific is rarely as visible or as extreme as it is in some of the harshest parts of the world but that is not the important point” (p. 17). There are people who are truly disadvantaged and deprived compared to other people in their community or nation (Reserve Bank of Fiji, 2004). Lal (2008) has found out that recent surveys have revealed large differences in income and well-being within several Pacific Island countries.

The recent studies done by the Asian Development Bank in a number of Pacific Island countries (Vanuatu, Kiribati, Fiji, Samoa, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Tuvalu, Tonga and Papua New Guinea) have reported undeniable levels of hardship and poverty. Extreme poverty was an issue in Papua New Guinea and Fiji. Poverty of access or poverty of opportunity is particularly relevant concepts in the Pacific (Abbott and Pollard, 2004). It would seem that at the root causes of growing poverty and inequality in various Pacific Island countries are the economic policies we are following. Our leaders are persuaded by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Asian Development Bank as well as our bilateral donors such as Australia, New Zealand, the European Union and the United States that we must follow their lead in supporting the policies of neo-liberalism and establish an export-oriented free market economy. They even tell us that this is a requirement for true democracy. Yet there is
overwhelming evidence that these policies have created greater poverty and inequality in so many developing countries. According to George (1976),

> the West has tried to apply its own conceptions of development in the Third World, working through local elites and pretending that the benefits showered on these elites would trickle down to the less fortunate. These methods have not produced a single independent and viable economy in the entire Third World - and in fact were not meant to (George, 1976). ‘Development’ has been the password for imposing a new dependency, for enriching the already rich world and for shaping other societies to meet its commercial and political needs (p. 17).

Currently there is a Pacific Plan which, together with the Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA) and Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) trade agreements, will tie us into a regional economic zone. While some are hopeful that this will bring greater sustainable development, others are warning that it will increase dependency and create more poverty and inequality as well as more unemployment (Barr, 2008).

**POVERTY IN FIJI**

Fiji has experienced increasing levels of hardship amongst all the communities since the first military coup in 1987. Fiji’s “position in the United Nations Development index (HDI) ranking has declined from 45 in 1994 to 90 in 2004” (Naidu, Barr and Seniloloi, 2007, p. 293). Two common types of poverty are prevalent amongst the poor in Fiji- relative and absolute poverty. Absolute poverty refers to a condition where people lack basics of life, such as food and shelter. Relative poverty refers to a condition where the lower strata of the population have a much smaller share of income than the upper strata (Khan and Khan, 2007). Both these types of poverty exist in Fiji. Relative poverty arising from income disparity is experienced on a larger scale while absolute poverty at a relatively smaller scale. According to the current trend, absolute poverty is increasing and the vulnerable communities are finding it harder to recover from their difficulties.

Relative poverty is defined as the proportion of household which earns less than a certain percent of median income, often set at 50 percent. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate that in 1990/91, about 33 percent of households were considered to be poor. By sector, this includes 29 percent of all urban households and 35 percent of all rural households, which by ethnicity includes 31 percent of Fijian households, 34 percent of Indo-Fijian households and 27 percent of other groups and the difference is even greater if per capita income is used Norindr, 1997). The 1990/91 HIES (Household Income and Employment Survey) data indicated that 10 percent of households were living in food poverty, 25 percent in basic needs poverty and 33 percent in relative poverty.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Based on household income</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural Village</th>
<th>Rural settlement</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on per capita household Income</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>39.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 2: Population in relative poverty by ethnicity, 1990 – 1991

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Fijian</th>
<th>Indo - Fijian</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Based on household income</td>
<td>32.66</td>
<td>31.28</td>
<td>34.46</td>
<td>26.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on per capita household income</td>
<td>37.61</td>
<td>36.59</td>
<td>36.61</td>
<td>36.05</td>
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</tbody>
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The national absolute poverty rate in 1977 was 15 percent source and the rate increased to 25.2 percent by 1991 (see Table 3). The figures in Table 3 clearly show that a substantial percentage of Fiji’s population fell below the poverty line over the last three decades. This was partly due to the effects of the military coup of 1987 which resulted in loss of jobs, reduced working hours, and decrease in investment. Part of the increase in poverty was due to weak economic performance during the early 1980s (Khan and Khan 2007). Poverty increased in Fiji during the late 1980s and early 1990s despite phenomenal performance in some exports sectors, which stood at $328.5 million compared to about $276 million in 1986. Chand (2007) points out that “one in eight in the population lived in poverty in 1977, [which rose] to one in four by 1990/91 and one in three by 2002/2003” (p. 57). Chand argues that on this trend it could reach a rate of one in two (50 percent) by 2020. This is attributed to economic decline but it may also be attributed to the lack of rural and urban development strategies and failure on the part of the government to provide adequate social safety nets for the poor.


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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>+9.2</td>
<td>+19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>-1.0</td>
<td>+20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>+15.0</td>
<td>+18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settlement</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The rate of poverty in Fiji has increased from 1997. Poverty figures, provided through the 1977, 1990/91, and 2002/2003 Household Income and Expenditure Surveys, and estimates and projections based on the HIES survey data, provide a clear pattern to the poverty trend in the country. This places an enormous responsibility on the government to tackle the problem. The root causes of the rising poverty rate and factors that contribute to the rising poverty rate are political instability, declining economic output, unemployment, low wages and underutilization of resources, particularly the use of land for agriculture. In large part, Fiji has neglected to rely on resources for generating livelihoods for people. This has occurred due to persistent disputes between stakeholders and the governments’ failure to resolve such disputes, have led to a persistent decline in the confidence of people in relying on land resources to generate incomes. Policy failures of past governments have also had a detrimental impact on welfare in the country. Racially divisive policies have also contributed to these social and economic ills (Khan and Khan, 2007).
Despite Fiji being comparatively more developed and affluent than most of its neighbouring Pacific Island countries, poverty and inequality in Fiji today has become extremely serious. From the statistics collected in various Household Income and Expenditure Surveys (HIES), it is established that:

- In 1977, nine percent of our population was living below the poverty line (Narsey, 2006b);
- In 1990/1991, 29 percent were living below the poverty line (Narsey, 2006b);
- In 2002/2003, about 34.4 percent were living below the poverty line (Narsey, 2006b);
- Most people in poverty live in rural areas, particularly those from the Indian community (Narsey, 2006a).

**Table 4: Percentage of population in poverty in Fiji**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fijians</td>
<td>Indians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>population in</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poverty</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It is also known that:

- The “national poverty line for 2002 was $8062.6 or about $155.00 a week;
- In 2002, 55 percent of those in full-time employment were earning wages below the poverty line” (Narsey, 2006b, p. 24);
- About 12.5 percent of our population is “living in squatter settlements” (Narsey, 2006b, p. 24);
- Almost two-thirds of children who drop out of school do so because of poverty (Save the Children Fund Fiji, 1998);
- “About 22,670 [people] were receiving Family Assistance Scheme [(FAS)] payments in 2005 (at a minimum of $60 a month and a maximum of $120 a month)” (Barr 2008, p. 102);
- Around 13,149 native land leases will expire between 1997 and 2028. “For every land lease that expires and is not renewed, at least five households (with an average of five members) are displaced. Those who [work] on the land as [cane-cutters] are some of the poorest people in Fiji” (Barr, 2008, p. 102);
The Household, Income and Expenditure Survey measures those in income poverty but many people also face poverty of access-income opportunities, clean water, affordable housing, roads and access to markets.

When we look at income distribution and the evidence of growing inequality in Fiji in terms of housing, wages, education, health care and access to opportunities, we must admit that we are in danger of creating (and accepting) two Fijis - the Fiji of the rich, which belongs to a small number of the elite; and the Fiji of the poor which belongs to the vast majority who are struggling to keep their heads above water. There is a lot of rhetoric about poverty from politicians, especially at election time. But there is very little serious action. Whether the recent very worrying statistics will really make politicians stand up against poverty remains to be seen (Barr, 2008).

“Many politicians and diplomats in Fiji are in denial about the poverty situation in the country or they play down its importance” (Barr, 2008, p. 4). Mistaking poverty and destitution, they say that compared to places in India and Africa, Fiji does not have a poverty problem. Or they say we do not yet have up-to-date information about poverty in Fiji. Again they say most people in squatter settlements do not need to be there. If really pushed, they may admit that there is possibly some ‘hardship’, ‘poverty of access’ or maybe some ‘pockets of poverty’. If our politicians and influential people deny or play down the existence of poverty and inequality, there is little reason to believe that anything will seriously be done to alleviate or eradicate poverty in our country. Poverty alleviation is not just the job of the Department of Social Welfare. Its job is to target destitution. Poverty alleviation should be the responsibility of every government ministry and there should be a co-coordinator or ‘watchdog’ to see that the money allocated to the various ministries for poverty alleviation is, indeed, spent for that purpose. The media should also be a watchdog in this regard (Barr, 2008).

Aid and Poverty

Fiji also depends on aid as it has been part of Fiji’s development strategy. Without this, the country’s economic situation would worsen, particularly for the poor and the disadvantaged. Many development projects, such as maintenance of schools, hospitals and the public and economic infrastructure, depend on international aid. The major donors have been New Zealand, Australia and the European Union (Khan and Khan, 2007). However, currently Fiji is “suspended from the commonwealth following the military coup in December 2006” (Khan and Khan, 2007, p. 321). Unless Fiji’s interim military regime establishes a clear road map towards democratic elections within an acceptable timeframe, these aid resources and normal bilateral and regional relations are not likely to realize. The Central Integrating Factor of Australia’s Aid Program (2001) mentions that the benefits of aid can be very effective when it is able to systematically integrate all concerned of stakeholders to establish well managed institutions, formulate and effectively implement sustainable policies and best practices that are able to improve development projects and create dynamic frameworks of poverty reduction.

Poverty Reduction Strategies for Fiji

There are a number of core policy areas that make up the strategic framework to eradicate poverty. They include economic growth, provision of targeted social services and social development, and empowerment for the underprivileged in the society. Economic growth is a central strategy for poverty reduction in Fiji. The Reserve Bank of
Fiji has often stated that the economy needs to grow at 5-10 percent annually to generate revenue, employment and livelihood that will address income inequality and poverty (Narube, 2006). Economic growth assists in poverty reduction more effectively when it occurs in numerous sectors of the economy generating job creation, income, better standard of living and stable prices. Economic growth must occur in labour intensive areas such as agriculture, tourism, small and micro business enterprises and hotels. Tourism and other related industries have, on average, paid below poverty line wages to workers with increasing proportion of casual workers who are unable to claim cost of living adjustments (COLA), pension schemes and other benefits (Ives and Naidu, 2006). Fair wages and improved terms and conditions of employment remain issues in the tourism and related sectors (Naidu, Barr and Seniloli, 2007). Agriculture and tourism have remained the largest foreign earners for Fiji for close to a decade.

Uncertain political and economic environment caused a decline in labour market with high unemployment. Between 1987 and 2001, skilled emigrants has been estimated to be 70,660 of which almost 90 percent were Indo-Fijians, the number of emigrants in 2000 was 5,275 and 6,316 in 2001 (Kumar and Prasad, 2002). Cumulative to May 2001, the number of professionals leaving the country increased by 32 percent; around 5,800 left in 2003 which represented a 5 percent increase from 2002 (Reserve Bank of Fiji, 2004). In the year 2008, 5,391 Fijians migrated, while in 2009, 5022 people migrated (Fiji Island Bureau of Statistics, 2010).

The sugar industry is the backbone of Fiji’s agricultural based economy. “Income and livelihoods of the bulk of the rural population depend primarily on agriculture, which employs 90 percent of the rural labour force and nearly 50 percent of the total labour force in Fiji” (Gounder, 2007, p, 251). Policies to increase productivity and competitiveness of agriculture are vital for improving the livelihood of majority of Fiji’s households. Duncan (2006) emphasised that agricultural inputs are fundamental to productivity gains for both subsistence and cash generating crops in the land-rich Pacific islands. However, the ailing sugar industry and the agricultural sector have declined over the past decade. There have been problems in the areas of diversification of commodities, improvements in infrastructure, access to markets, research, preservation techniques and storage, new technology, international standards, credit and land lease issues. Land tenure has been a fundamental problem that has not been formally resolved. Since 1987, thousands of Indo-Fijian farmers land leases under Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act have not been renewed mainly due to political ploys by indigenous Fijian leaders. Fiji has also lost economic growth potential of more than 5 percent since 1987 (Lal, 2008). Lack of consistent policies and sound development strategies has led to the downfall of the agricultural sector. The expiry of land leases and a lack of support from the government for evicted farmers have discouraged farmers leaving thousands of hectares of land unproductive and this has contributed to a significant decline in commercial agriculture. The government needs to resolve the matter urgently as there is a wide scope for commercial farming in Fiji.

Fiji does not have a national minimum wage rate and the majority of the poor are wage earners. Policy needs a wage guideline to increase the buying capacity of the poor (Narsey, 2006a). Women are clearly the victims of low wage phenomena in Fiji where 68 percent of women in employment are working poor, which is an evidence of feminization of poverty (Norindr, 1997). There is a need for Wage Councils to be more effective and accountable to establish a mechanism for better redistribution of income by the market system (Narsey, 2007). Fiji has a 12.5 percent value added tax, a tax on general goods
and services. Recently the income threshold has increased progressively from $6,500 in 2001 to $9,000 in 2008 and $15,000 in 2009 respectively which was a positive move (Seniloli, 2010).

Health, education and social welfare are also very important issues and have a wide implication in the subject of poverty. Policies in these areas have been heavily politicised and have severe ethnic dimensions to them. Social welfare institutions in Fiji are generally weak (Walker, Kewal, Vuki, Daunabuna and Barr, 2004). Many poor people in Fiji have not received any kind of assistance neither there is any mechanism in place to identify such people or to extend assistance that would be helpful in easing their problems. Women and the disabled are classic examples. The poor are very susceptible to malnutrition and sickness because of inadequate nutrition. Services such as housing, water, sanitation, waste disposal, telecommunications and rural development are crucial to development. Fiji’s population is aging and unemployment is also on the rise and the healthcare services are declining due to a lack of resources. Currently, there are some basic medical services offered through the Social Welfare Department’s family assistance scheme but it is not adequate. More poor people should be included in this scheme and there should be a dependants allowance introduced. Community healthcare programs should be more widely available with free medical treatment, drugs, spectacles and dentures to families earning less than $10,000 a year (estimated). Counselling services should also be increased on health issues such as HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, pregnancy, diabetes and general health care. Accessibility to basic services supported with subsidised costs and a collective and multi-dimensional approach will lead to poverty reduction and the enhancement of the capabilities of the underprivileged.

An educated society is the cornerstone of a country’s development and eradication of poverty. Many school aged children drop out of school early due to poverty, and in many cases to work in low-wage sectors to support their families. According to Save the Children Fund Fiji (1998), 65 percent of school dropouts are directly linked to poverty. The new government policy does not warrant children to pay tuition fees, however, they are many other charges still paid by the students such as, building fees, book fees, examination fees, sports fees and library fees. There are also additional costs to go to school such as uniforms, bags, transportation and compulsory fundraising. A larger portion of the budget should be allocated to assist the underprivileged including transportation and exemptions from all types of school fees and charges. All existing welfare and poverty programs need new strategies to make them sound and effective. Neglect and lack of proper monitoring systems of current welfare programmes have led to the failure of social and welfare policies. Thus, regular monitoring of such policies is also vital to ensure that the needs of the poor are effectively addressed.

There is also a growing and urgent need for affordable housing. It is estimated that around 20 percent of urban household live in informal housing associated with poverty, and over a third of all households live in substandard conditions and these settlements are known for unsafe water and inadequate sanitation (Walsh, 2006). Urbanization is a growing problem and has contributed to urban poverty. Costs of building materials must be lowered by decreasing tariffs. Long term land leases must also be secured from landowners. Government must act as a catalyst or facilitator between all parties to secure land leases for housing projects.
A sound and effective credit system is pivotal for development. Many people in Fiji do not have access to credit and financial institutions and are being left out from access to these services. “Efforts to assist development of small and micro-businesses” have not been adequate due to lack of skills and resources (Ministry of Finance and National Planning (Fiji), 2004, p. 11). As a result, people borrow from money lenders who are not registered and charge exorbitant interest which is seriously disadvantageous to the poor. However, there have been some efforts recently by the government to provide microfinance services and banks have also started to provide rural banking services. More support is to be provided by the government and they should also monitor charges and interest rates charged to rural dwellers.

Rural development will also minimize the rural-urban drift which is a contributing factor to poverty. It is putting pressure on the urban facilities and depleting young and able people from rural areas. The lack of rural development, opportunities, poor infrastructure and expiry of land leases have forced people to move to urban areas. Fiji is an agricultural economy and the government should improve the infrastructure, communication, education system and health care in rural areas and also establish markets for agricultural products. Tourism in Fiji has surpassed all other foreign earnings and resorts which are mostly located in the rural areas should make better use of the local agricultural produce which has not been the case. There is a considerable scope to inspire local rural industries for such tourist operations. The rural people need government and institutional support to undertake such a scheme to improve their livelihoods. “Half of Fiji’s total population still lives in rural areas and despite rapid urbanization it is estimated that 50 percent of the people will still be in rural areas by 2015” (Asian Development Bank, 2003, p. 26).

The voices of the poor and underprivileged should also be heard by those in power. Participation and empowerment is an essential part of any development process. There have been regular cases of persecution and harassment of the vulnerable by authorities. There must be an inclusive dialogue with these groups to ensure that poverty is understood from the perspective of the poor to enhance development and strategy implementation to eradicate poverty. There must be a change of attitude from the government to have an open dialogue to better understand the needs of poor and address them effectively and in a timely manner. The poor would require short and long term support based on individual circumstances. They need to be identified early and assisted accordingly. There has to be a coordinated and transparent effort by the government and social service organisations with adequate resources to assist the poor.

The government must also pursue investment and employment opportunities to cater for school leavers and tertiary students. The Fiji labour market is characterised by a lack of expansion and the economy has also been contracting since the last military coup in 2006. Each year, close to 18,000 school leavers compete for about 3,000 new formal sector jobs (Naidu, Barr and Seniloli, 2007). The government has to systematically forecast an organization’s future demand and supply of employees, and has to possess the ability to anticipate unexpected demands and fill in job openings proactively.

ROLE OF MEDIA

The media is “the most powerful tool of communication”. It gives a real exposure to the mass audience” about what is right or wrong. The media is a potentially powerful force for the elimination of poverty and it is journalists who hold that power and the
responsibility that comes with it in their pens.

Information is power; therefore, it is imperative for every true democracy to ensure that the media disseminates accurate information to keep the people informed of all the latest political, economic and social development without too much government interference (Centre for Democracy and Governances, 2009). This serves as a vital element for genuine participation, consultation, transparency, accountability and freedom of speech. However, many facets of this element of democracy is lacking in Fiji.

Restructuring and strengthening government institutions to improve economies requires good governance for all government institutions. The Poverty Reduction Strategy strongly insists on quality participation from citizens in policy forums in order to have an effective deliberation on issues pertaining to eliminating poverty (Hudock, 2009).

As Gounder (2007) mentions that, in most developing countries, and particularly in Fiji, the media sectors are not prepared for this role as they as a whole, face large obstacles to realizing their potential as government watchdogs and champions of public interest. However, many countries do not support an independent and a vigorous media industry despite its contribution to socio-economic development of the country (Hudock, 2009). In June 2010, the interim government promulgated a media decree that formalizes repressive government control of the media (Seniloli, 2010). Since the president of Fiji announced the abrogation of the constitution after the military coup in December 2006, censors have been stationed at the country’s newsrooms to stop the publication of any stories that were anti-government and journalists were detained when certain stories were published that the interim government deemed inappropriate. There have been widespread international condemnations of this decree. Therefore, it hinders effective contributions in the form of positive feedbacks and criticism from the people of Fiji.

As Lloyd (2005) highlights that “the media’s proudest boast, and indeed their main reason for being considered indispensable to a free society, is usually said to be to hold power to account” (p. 213). It is to assist the people of that society to understand all kinds of powers - state, corporate, associative, cultural, foreign – “so they, the people, can hold them to account through their actions, chief among which must be voting and other participation in civic life” (Lloyd, 2005, p. 213).

Heightened media involvement in the PRS process could help build a stronger independent media sector while preparing citizens to take an active role in dialogues that will have a huge impact on their lives (Seniloli, 2010).

The media sector can play a very crucial role in providing a platform for discussions pertaining to national interest, and keep the relevant parties well informed about the progress and outcomes of these consultations. A highly qualified media is important in creating awareness and disseminating accurate and timely information to the civil society of Fiji to enhance government’s policy efforts to eliminate poverty (Hudock, 2009). As Abbott and Pollard (2004) point out that, well-informed citizens are crucial to the success of the PRS development process and to ensuring lasting results of its implementation, and without the active participation of the media, civil society organizations (CSOs) and individual citizens are unlikely to fully understand the issues being debated, the trade-offs governments face in terms of policy options to promote poverty alleviation and economic development, and the implications this has for a society’s economic well-being.
Political forums to discuss and deliberate on national issues have not been in the agenda of the current government in Fiji. The discussions generated from political forums and disseminated by the media can be an important tool for nation building and finding the best practices for sustainable development.

As a socialising force and a source of information and entertainment, the media has the potential to be an agent for social change or a tool to maintain hegemonic power structures. (Stadler, 2003). The ideal of the role of the media in supporting positive social change is somewhat compromised by the trans-national, oligopolistic character of the media industry (Seniloli, 2010). The new media decree in Fiji requires 90 percent of local ownership of any media outlet. This forced the sale of foreign owned The Fiji Times, a 141 year-old company, to a local businessman (Seniloli, 2010). The local ownership of the oldest and the largest media company in Fiji is likely to compromise standards and publish news items which will be in line with the current government policies. Citizens of Fiji will be deprived of a true picture of the country's affairs, effective participation and representation.

Journalists in Fiji are restricted from publishing stories and assembling to discuss national issues about the reality of the poverty situation at hand as it is heavily censored and restricted by the Public Emergency Regulation Law. As a result, the media in Fiji is isolated from the consultation process with the relevant stakeholders.

Generally, it is imperative to empower the media in Fiji to freely engage in public forums and publish stories that would assist the government and all concerned parties to collectively eliminate poverty to a negligible level before the next election in 2014.

CONCLUSION

Poverty is a global phenomenon and its escalating implications have left many multi-ethnic communities in Fiji with widespread suffering and hardship. Fiji's poor economic performance, political instabilities and economic crises have pushed more people into poverty without recourse. The root causes of this alarming increase is characterized by increase in inflation, unemployment, low wages, unresolved land lease problems and failed government policies to execute Social Adjustment Policies (SAPs) across the wide spectrum of disadvantaged people suffering from relative and absolute poverty. Racially divisive policies to address the socio-economic ills of the society by previous governments have only benefited a few elites. The interim government together with concerned stakeholders need to put in place effective policies and processes that have been suggested in this paper to reach out to poverty stricken areas to alleviate hardship and enhance the socio-economic well-being of the community at large.

The media has an important role to play in increasing awareness as well as getting new impetus in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

There is a need for an independent and vigorous media sector in Fiji to provide quality and timely information to the citizens and policy makers. This will ensure that all relevant stakeholders are well informed about various pertinent issues and facilitate active participation to eliminate poverty.

The interim government's control of print and broadcast media in Fiji leaves little scope for dissenting opinions and, therefore, public debate. With the new media decree in
force, one of the major ethical issues that have confronted journalists is how do they report and practice the principles of journalism under a censored environment? Such are the obstacles to media freedom thus impeding social and economic progress in Fiji.

The people of Fiji and the government also need to be confronted with the important issues of the day. The media can help to expose people to these issues. One of them is poverty. In a country with over a third of its population living below the poverty line and another third just managing to survive, it is important for journalists to put pressure on politicians to be serious in addressing the issues that surround poverty.
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