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Revitalising rural development in the Pacific: An *itaukei* (indigenous Fijian) approach

Suliasi Vunibola and Regina Scheyvens, Massey University

'Na coke vou mai na dulumu ni bula'
(The new growth from the buried stump that gives life)

Indigenous groups who live on and work with customary land and resources occupy many rural settings in the Pacific. In Fiji, as life has become dominated by economic demands, many *itaukei* (indigenous Fijian) communities have struggled to see how *bula vakavanua* (tradition, culture and the way of being)—such as *solesolevaki*, or unpaid communal work for collective good—can aid in sustainable development of their resources for their people's benefit. This struggle, along with a lack of opportunities in rural settings, has given rise to rural-urban migration and increased related social problems.

This paper aims to demonstrate that indigenous-driven, effective rural development is possible in the Pacific despite these challenges. Case studies of successful *itaukei* businesses based on customary land in Fiji—and how *solesolevaki* has been revived to support *itaukei* entrepreneurial success and community wellbeing—were conducted and analysed.

Social embeddedness and businesses development

The notion of embeddedness of economies was initiated in the nineteenth century by Karl Polanyi, who focused on how the self-regulating market economy affected society and the environment. Polanyi detailed the transition into the industrial revolution and the 'double movement' which refers to the need for social welfare and protection within a market society (Polanyi 1944). Mark Granovetter used the same concept, stating that as one starts to look at economic life in terms of relationships, one will get a different picture of how the economy operates (Granovetter 1985, 2005). Polanyi and Granovetter's concept of 'social embeddedness of economies' was further used by Lin, who strongly argued that social networks provide the necessary environment conducive to facilitating and promoting economic activities (Lin 2017).

Social embeddedness shifts the viewpoint from the economy as somewhat separate to society, to the inclusion of social actors, social networks and relationships as enabling economic activities. In the context of this study, relationships established through kinship, blood-ties and customary land are integral to indigenous businesses. An embedded conceptualisation of economic development leads to more inclusive development that is centred on an ethical concern for people, not just economic growth. Inclusive development thinking is also associated with the recognition of diverse economic activities such as

bartering, subsistence farming and communal work, not just formal activities of the wage economy. These other activities are usually not recognised as economic activities in their own right in capitalist discourses, yet they remain strongholds of many communities (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy 2013).

Similarly, the notion of a place-based economy recognises that customary practices like indigenous exchange and reciprocity can support local businesses (Curry and Koczberski 2013). Appreciating culture, place and people supports less eurocentric development paths, allowing space to recognise indigenous alternatives (Curry 1999). A place-based approach also involves the process of viewing development through the lens of a market economy which can incorporate cultural and social practices, which could include place-based practices like gift exchange or the Solomon concept of *kaon* (credit), where relationships are strengthened through credit and reciprocity benefitting the business network (Leokana 2014), and the Fijian case of business *vakavanua* (Farrelly 2009). A place-specific activity supports the premise of this study that entrepreneurs can, in an effective manner, work collectively using culturally specific systems like *solesolevaki* to create and control their economic development and contribute to community wellbeing.

Development, wellbeing and *solesolevaki*

In many instances, supposedly well-intentioned development does not enhance the wellbeing of Pacific communities. This raises questions about actions carried out in the name of 'development' (White 2010), as well as disparities between those doing the development and what is being developed (Copestake 2008). The connections between development and wellbeing were examined by Richardson, Hughes, McLennan, and Meo-Sewabu (2019) in mining communities in PNG and tourism communities in Fiji. Their study documented views of communities on what constitutes meaningful development which, in most cases, was not associated with externally driven development practices. Wellbeing was associated with indigenous development values embedded in their way of life, for example, *gutpela sindaun* (sitting down well/a good situation) in New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea, and *bula taucoko or sautu* (sense of completeness) in Fiji. This study therefore recommended that development bodies find a point of connection with established structures and social norms in order to contribute to the collective good (Richardson et al. 2019).

Pacific communities have systems and structures that can be interwoven with various approaches to development. Development is more sustainable and meaningful when people collectively make decisions with respect to their development pathways (Richardson et al. 2019). One such structure that can contribute to the collective good, community wellbeing, and quality of life for *itaukei* (indigenous Fijians) is *solesolevaki*—whereby people can work together for the common good without expectation of individual payment. *Solesolevaki* draws upon social capital, entails indigenous values and ethos (Movono and Becken 2018), and is linked to communal cohesiveness and collective wellbeing (Meo-Sewabu 2016). Researchers have noted that *solesolevaki* is utilised as a vehicle for development (Movono and Becken 2018) and for community-based natural resource management in Fiji (Clark 1999). We see *solesolevaki* as a form of culturally embedded agency executed to enhance social change (Meo-Sewabu and Walsh-Tapiata 2012). Specifically, *solesolevaki* involves clan members who collectively gather and use their resources, labour and land for agriculture-related development, then share the benefits (Kingi 2006).

Practicing *solesolevaki* enables accomplishment of important tasks as responsibilities are shared. These tasks can be for a communal need—such as building footpaths through a village—or for comradeship, where people work together on an individual’s farm or tasks. This work system is a form of burden-sharing activity that usually involves much laughter—‘the hands of many eases the workload’ (Meo-Sewabu 2016). Ratuva stated that *solesolevaki* is also a form of social protection for *itaukei* communities, where formal systems of state, aid agencies, and civil society are merged with informal systems—community, family, cultural systems, social networks, social safety net—for a significant chance of sustainability (Ratuva 2010).

Methodology

Vanua Research Framework

The Vanua Research Framework (VRF) (Nabobo-Baba, 2008) is a widely accepted cultural research framework used in the Pacific. The VRF acknowledges the concept of vanua (tribe) and the integrated nature of land, people and culture) as central to the identity of being an *itaukei* (indigenous Fijian). The framework—similar to Kaupapa Maori research (Smith 2013)—is strongly driven to include indigenous worldviews by developing and encouraging relevant approaches in research that value cultural ways of being (Nabobo-Baba 2008). Adhering to the VRF principles helps to build a web of trust, respect, and lifelong relationships with research participants.

Case Study: The enabling environment of *solesolevaki*

The Nayarabale Youth Farm was established in 2008 through discussion after a church service—recognising the challenges faced by villagers to contribute to multiple sociocultural obligations. The farm is located at Nayarabale

village, Vaturova district, Cakaudrove province, on the island of Vanua Levu, Fiji. The farm is positioned 60 km off gravelled and rough terrain from Labasa, the nearest town, and is only accessible by a river without a bridge. During periods of flooding, the village is isolated from communication and electric grids.

Villagers looked at their resources (land, culture and people) and agreed to do *solesolevaki* on land given by the *mataqali* (clan-based land owning unit), to run a farm managed by youths using a specific work structure (Table 1, see next page). They focused on kava and taro as main commodities and progressed over the years in scale and scope. From an initial target of 300 kava plants per year in 2008, the target was raised in 2019 to 25,000 kava plants, 10,000 taro plants, 12,000 yam plants, and 10,000 cassava plants per year. The farm also diversified to include pineapple and sandalwood farms. Every year the farm put aside fifteen thousand dollars (FJ\$15,000) in three separate accounts for the church, cultural ceremonies and education—which catered for all of the sociocultural obligations previously shouldered by families living in the area. *Solesolevaki* is practised at the *vanua* level in Narayabale, and has been working successfully for eight years.

Work structure

Solesolevaki functions well in the Narayabale case because there is a clear working structure. The Nayarabale youth group monthly work structure divides a month into four different periods of activities: week one is *solesolevaki* for the Nayarabale Youth Farm which earns money that pays for sociocultural obligations; week two entails *solesolevaki* for individual farms where smaller youth groups work together depending on the location of their individual farms; week three is designated for *solesolevaki* on the clan’s food security; and week four, the last week, is for the *vanua*, church and the government to organise any activity that requires local people’s involvement. The latter means that, for example, if the Ministry of Agriculture wants to send officials to the village to run a workshop for farmers, they are instructed to only come in the fourth week of each month, as this will not disrupt the village routine. Table 1 (next page) depicts this work structure. While there are now payments made to youth members who work on the youth farm—this was not possible at the start of the farm’s operation—so youth members worked in an unpaid fashion as part of *solesolevaki* until the farm was economically viable.

Leadership

A *solesolevaki* group is like an organisation where people of different backgrounds work together to achieve a goal—thus good leadership is vital. The leaders in the case study do not have formal leadership qualifications but through experience and values embedded in the *bula vakavanua* (culture, tradition and way of being *itaukei*), they contribute to the success of *solesolevaki* initiatives. *Vanua* leadership entails valuing and respecting other people, and reflecting love and compassion. This is important as people are more likely to be loyal to a common cause when

Table 1: Nayarabale Youth Farm work structure

Week	Solesolevaki Activities	Group involved	Venue	Earnings/benefits for individuals and community
1	Youth farm	All youth members	Youth farm camp	FJ\$120-250 per person for a week's work. The additional revenue from farm produce is used to pay for sociocultural obligations (see week 4, below).
2	Individual farms	Small youth groups who farm at the same location engage in small <i>solesolevaki</i> , helping out on other individuals' farms.	Individual farm camps	FJ\$200-400 from selling own crops at the market on Saturday in weeks when produce is harvested.
3	Tribal food security	All tribe members	Village	Staple crops are planted for each family within the tribe, and for those serving the tribe e.g. teachers at the district school and the pastor of the church.
4	Activities and sociocultural obligations (prescribed by the <i>vanua</i> , church, government or any visitors from outside the area)	All tribe members are involved, but the necessities for hospitality and cultural protocols (such as money, food, artefacts and transport) are provided by the youth farm. Members do activities like cooking and attending meetings, trainings and ceremonies.	Village	Creates balance between the business and the key formal institutions (family, <i>vanua</i> , church, government) and provides quality of life and community wellbeing.

they know they are appreciated, setting the stage for *solesolevaki* leaders to operate.

To capture the energy and skills of youth requires leaders who inspire and lead *solesolevaki* with understanding and patience, as shown in the following example of a leader dealing with four youths who were still playing with their phones 15 minutes after their lunch hour was over:

It was after the lunch hour then four boys appeared when 60 youths were already clearing the bush for a new plantation. The youth leader asked them why they were late and when he found out they had been on their phones, he simply instructed them to go and lift a log and carry it about ten steps to make room for planting. The other work continued, and the four boys tried with all their might to carry the large log—which it seemed was so big that only a machine could move it. After about 20 minutes, the leader called out to everybody and asked them politely to carry the log together. The large log was easily carried by the 60-plus youths and dumped ten steps away. The leader then with a smile told the four boys, '*ni da caacaavata a levu e' da na rawata*' (in unity we achieve great things) (Iliesa Seru, November 2018, personal communication).

One of the boys reflected on this: '*mai na gauna ma ca 'a ina arai eitou maka va'adua ni kai dau bera*' (after that incident we were never late during our *solesolevaki* activities) (ibid.).

Effective leadership around *solesolevaki* activities also involves transparency and clear communication. The members of the group need to know every detail of the activity they are executing and the reason for engagement.

In the Narayabale case study, transparency means everything—from the work done, tools used, money earned and spent, and vehicle usage. If kinship and relationships were used by leaders to hide aspects of the business or *solesolevaki* activities, there would be suspicion of favouritism and inequities which could undermine people's loyalty.

Solesolevaki enhancing wellbeing

From the case study, *solesolevaki* was successful when people witnessed the actual product created—that is, the farm produce from 25,000 kava plants, 12,000 yam plants, 10,000 cassava plants, 3,000 pineapples, and 100 sandalwood trees—and members benefited economically, socially and culturally. The Nayarabale Youth Farm attracted more people when the farm increased in size, and was able to start paying people. The success of Narayabale and its *solesolevaki* initiatives meant that even people who lived away from the village and who had previously not been keen to move home started moving back to the village. As the activities and economic output became more visible, and Narayabale received media attention as the 'rural millionaires farm' (Ralago 2016), more people were encouraged to be part of the *solesolevaki* initiative.

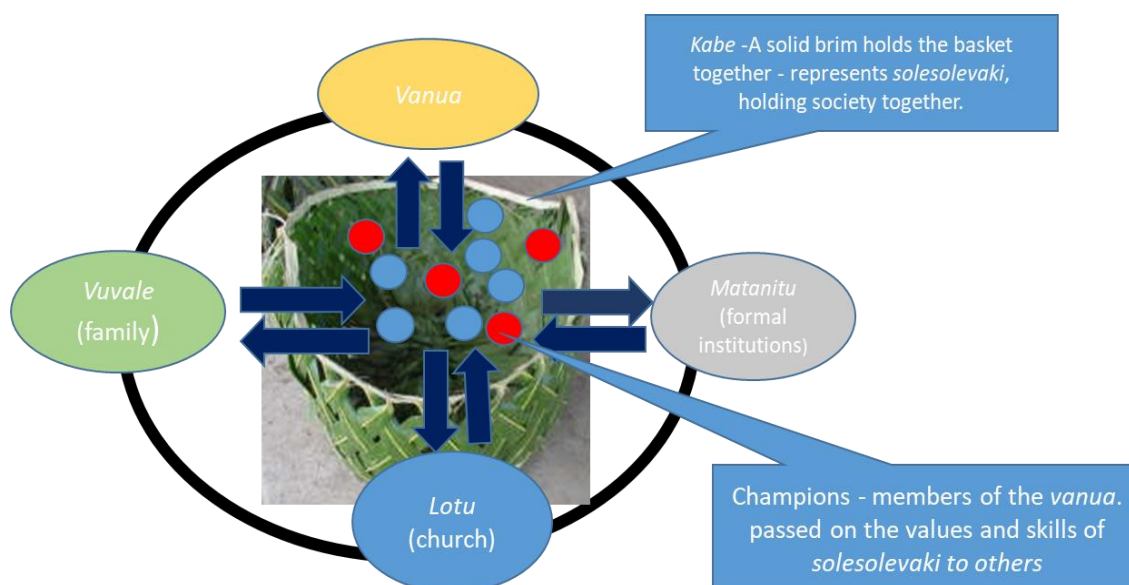
People often ask about the establishment capital for the Nayarabale farm and—learning that it was started from *solesolevaki* without any financial assistance—recognise that it can also be replicated in their villages. This is one reason why the Narayabale model has spread elsewhere.

How can *solesolevaki* be revitalised in other communities? A *solesolevaki* model.

Solesolevaki is represented in Figure 1 as a food basket made from coconut leaves known as 'voco sova', or 'ketekete' (men's basket) for carrying food from a *lovo* (earth oven) and for presentations during a traditional ceremony.

A coconut leaf is split in half and made into an oval shape making the *kabe* (hard skeleton) which centres around the solid brim. The *kabe* represents *solesolevaki* as the essential element of the basket that determines its shape and durability, which holds the basket together. Coconut fronds are plaited to make the body of the basket, representing the community. The layers of plaited leaves represent the idea that as time goes on, people unite and become stronger by practising *solesolevaki* together. Inside the basket are the members who take part in the *solesolevaki* process. These become the champions who possess the passion and vision to drive the economic development associated with *solesolevaki*.

Figure 1: The *solesolevaki* model



Solesolevaki is rooted in traditional values and institutions that can help people reconnect with their culture, their land and their people. The reconnection process requires immersion into underlying values that are deeply interwoven in the culture and *bula vakavanua* (way of life and being of *itaukei*). The four crucial institutions in *itaukei* settings that promote cultural values are the *matavuvale* (family), *vanua* (culture, tradition), *lotu* (church) and *matanitu* (government/formal institutions).

The *matavuvale* (family) is the first school that prepares family members with wisdom, skills, culture, and appropriate behaviours. The *vanua* is a broad term including the people, culture, social strata, clans, environment, traditional practices, kinship and ceremonies of a particular area. The *lotu* (church) plays a crucial role in the *vanua*, as most *itaukei* people embrace Christianity. Individuals are governed by the *matanitu*—government and other formal

institutions. These foundations become the active fuel that propels the revitalisation of *solesolevaki*.

Action research

The *solesolevaki* model (Figure 1) was also implemented in Saroni village in Dogotuki district, Macuata province, Vanua Levu, Fiji—which was struggling with implementing *solesolevaki* initiatives. The first author is connected to the people there through his father's family, meaning he is also a landowner and part of the community. Some community members asked whether he had any ideas for revitalising customs and helping them to earn an income from their land, as earlier efforts to revitalise *solesolevaki* had failed. Practical knowledge and skills from research conducted at the Nayarabale Youth Farm—in particular, the four week work structure—were replicated and executed by people in Saroni village to enhance the wellbeing of individuals and the general community.

The author followed the VRF in order to gain approval and trust of the members. Proper channels were followed by formally informing the elders of the plan of action and seeking their approval and support. Youths were identified

to pilot the program, and included in discussions along with the elders. The work structure was planned out and—despite taking some time for people to adopt *solesolevaki* within the work structure—the program is now showing significant signs of success. After eight months of operation, 1,000 kava plants have been planted in the field, 1,000 kava plants are in germination nurseries, village food is provided from a community vegetable garden, and 2,000 cassava plants have been planted. The *solesolevaki* group also initiated a commercial vegetable farm where village women gained income from vegetable sales, which they used to help women build a community oven to make bread to sell to other villages. The women's group also started a small handicraft business from the vegetable sales.

Saroni village has also influenced two other small villages—Wainiura and Sarifaci villages—which belong to the same sub-clan *tokatoka Nubunilagi*. Both these villages

have 500 kava plants breeding in their nurseries, have planted 1,000 cassava plants, and started vegetable gardens. These villages are also following the four week work structure, with villagers witnessing increased community status and unity as a result (personal communication, August 2019).

Conclusion and recommendations

Solesolevaki was a dying tradition in *itaukei* society due to many factors—including pressure on people to earn cash. The case study shows that revitalising this practice can be a pillar for supporting *itaukei* communities in providing opportunities for personal and family development, communal development, satisfying sociocultural obligations, economic development, and reducing rural-urban migration. Through *solesolevaki*, the hands of many can help rebuild communities in rural areas.

The routine set up by the Narayabale four weekly work structure created a means for villagers to produce a wide variety of crops, from which a social and economic safety net was created for the community by involving both formal and informal systems to support the tribe. *Solesolevaki* activities also attracted more village members to return from town to be with their people. As a form of social capital (Movono and Becken 2018), *solesolevaki* can therefore foster meaningful development and quality of life in the modern era. This finding is inspiring not only for Fiji, where other communities such as the group at Saroni are seeking to copy the success of the Narayabale Youth Farm, but for the wider South Pacific.

Wherever land is under customary ownership in the Pacific, there are traditional systems in place to ensure that the land can be the basis of the people's livelihoods. In order for rural development efforts in the Pacific to be more effective and sustainable, both international and local development agencies need to capture the passion and interest of locals and channel that energy through established structures around cooperative development—rooted in the culture, values, and ethos of the communities.

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