



Let the Children Live



People-centred Development in Fiji

Methodist and Presbyterian Women's Special Project 2018 – 19

with the Social Empowerment Education Programme and Christian World Service

The work of SEEP in a community begins in conversation. Staff take time to get to know the people. They work with the women and young people to make sure they are part of discussions. *Mai* Democracy as they call it starts from the grassroots and grows up.

Working this way, trust is developed and harmonious relations maintained in a way that enables everyone to participate. Together the community identifies its own priority needs.

In this new phase, SEEP wants to draw on the traditional understanding of land as the centre of family and village life. In their Go Organic! Grow Organic! Programme they will build on this knowledge to encourage more effective agriculture and better protection from natural disaster for communities.

SEEP began life as a programme of the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy but went on its own in 2009.



In a Nutshell:

The Social Empowerment Education Programme (SEEP) is taking a big step forward. The Special Project will help support Go Organic! Grow Organic! in villages where it works and in new villages specifically targeting *i-Taukei* (indigenous Fijians) Landowning units where major developments are planned or underway. The programme will:

- Help these communities to prepare in case of disaster
- Improve agricultural livelihoods using organic and 'slow food' methods
- Strengthen local participation especially for women and young people, growing 'organic' democracy from the grassroots up.

The plan is to work with 20 villages and three settlements in Nawaidina, Nagone-ni-Colo, Mua I Ra, Yadua, Saivou and Ba Districts.

Preparing for the next Disaster



In February 2018, Tropical Cyclone Gita caused damage on two of Fiji's southern islands but fortunately missed the rest of the country. In 2016,

Cyclone Winston with windspeeds of up to 280 km/hour claimed the lives of 44 people, affected 40% of the population, and caused an estimated US\$ 1.4 billion in damages. Donations to the CWS Appeal enabled SEEP to deliver emergency supplies to some affected communities and provide psycho-social care.

The United Nations Risk Report measuring from 2012 - 2016 [puts](#) Fiji as the 15th most vulnerable country. The index measures the probability of natural hazards like cyclones and sea level rise, their likely impact on people, the ability of the people to cope with extreme disasters and the extent to which the country is preparing for possible disaster.

Climate change is already having a significant effect on some communities. Already some villages threatened by rising seas have moved further inland. Others say they will not give up the land their ancestors have lived on for centuries. As well as increasing the risk of disaster, agriculture and food security, climate change is likely to threaten the tourist industry. SEEP will help rural communities become more resilient using a combination of traditional and new disaster preparedness strategies.

Local women demonstrate Tavu ena Bitu—Roast in Bamboo as part of a slow food display.



Improving Agricultural Livelihoods

Using its 'Mai' approach from the grassroots up, SEEP is working with rural marginalised communities, including those in areas threatened by gold and other mining. Particular attention will be paid to the participation of women and young people at all stages. Their focus is on farmers who are interested in or already committed to using organic methods developed from traditional practices or improved techniques based on agro-ecological methods like permaculture.

The programme will include training on organic and semi-organic farming methods, the training of local leaders in each village, and exploring the possibility of setting up a model farm.

Depending on the requirements of each village, they will supply the materials, animals or seeds the people need to grow new plants and animals. Where necessary, farmers will learn new growing methods to deal with changing weather patterns and improve local resilience. SEEP focuses on women and young people, giving them training and support to improve



Lutu Librarian Nai with SEEP director Chantelle.

their confidence and enable them to take a greater role in local decision making. Under SEEP's guidance, village women and young people have set up local groups in some villages. In the groups, members decide what they want to do together with SEEP's support and make their own action plan.

For young people and women who are not used to being part of the village decision making process, this is a big step. In some villages, these groups have already discovered the power to make life better for their families (see *A Story from Lutu*).

Once increased food sources are established, SEEP will encourage villages to explore new markets or develop cottage industries using the produce they grow. The families will have more food choices, better food security if disaster strikes, and the benefit of improved income. Young people and women will have a greater say in their community's affairs and be able to shape its future. Most importantly, they will have more resilient communities who can help each other no matter what happens.

A second part of the programme is to train locals in new marketing skills and promote improved opportunities for selling organic produce—this will be funded by other international partners.

How SEEP works: A Story from Lutu

Every day when school is over the children of Lutu race to their Community Library. Only a year old, the library housed in an abandoned home has inspired the children of this inland village. They are doing better at school and most won academic prizes last year.

At the library the school age children do their homework and practise reading. Preschool children take part in activities and listen to stories. Nai a mother and the community librarian encourages the mothers to join their children for the reading time, giving extra parental support.

Every day Nai records their attendance. If they miss too many sessions, she talks to their teacher or raises it at the Bose Vakoro (village meeting). Each child is given a book to take home to read for the week.

Lutu is a community of around 50 homes, though some houses are empty because families have moved to the city three hours away. The majority of its 400-500 residents are preschoolers or school age children. It takes 20 minutes to walk to the primary school in the next village. There is no preschool.

The members of the Lutu Women's Group were worried about the struggle their children were having with schoolwork and came up with the idea of a library. They worked together to get village support and, earlier this year, with the local men met the Provincial Administrator. Nai took the opportunity to tell him about the success of the library. He was so impressed that he has now included it in the local government plans. The Administrator's office is currently processing the quotes to repair the building to make it safe and colourful for community use.

Programmes like the library and disaster training workshops have given members the confidence to take on bigger challenges. Achievements like the school library show how the women are shaping village life and achieving grassroots democracy.



Map: Australia National University College of Asia and the Pacific

About Fiji

Fiji is made up of more than 330 islands of which about a third are inhabited. Fiji's total land area is 18,333 square kilometres. The 2 major islands are Viti Levu and Vanua Levu.

According to the last census, the population [was](#) 884,887 with an average growth rate of 0.6%. Half the population is under 27.5 years old. 44.1% live in rural areas, down from 49.3% at the 2007 census.

- Indigenous Fijians 56.8%
- Indo-Fijians 37.4%
- Other ethnic groups 5.8%

Fiji is a religious nation with diverse practices and beliefs including Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. The largest religious group is Christianity with approximately 64.43%. This is followed by Hindus with approximately 27.87%. The largest Christian denomination is the Methodist Church (53.73), followed by the Catholic Church



(14.1%). Indigenous Fijians make up the highest percentage of Christians (87%).

Fiji retains a strong natural resource base including minerals and sea resources. Indigenous Fijians own 87.9% of the land while 3.9% is held by the State. 7 % is freehold and Rotuma owns 0.3% of the land. Sugar [is declining](#), now contributing 2% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Fijians are developing new crops but subsistence farming remains crucial to food security.

Fiji gained independence from Britain in 1970, retaining a mixture of traditional and colonial structures. The country has experienced four political coups in the last 20 years, with each coup highlighting underlying issues like the lack of democratic processes, lack of participation by women and young people, use of resources, growing poverty, and health issues. Elections are due to be held on November 14, 2018.

CWS has produced a PowerPoint about the work of SEEP. It comes with a talk that you can adapt. Contact us for a copy.

Message from SEEP

"When Trish relayed to us that the Methodist and Presbyterian Women had decided to support us in their Special Project, we were humbled and grateful for the love and generosity shown.

It is exciting to know and be able to share with our people that there are former Fiji citizens among the group, making this more special!

We acknowledge with gratitude, the kindness and warmth coming from your land to ours. We look forward to hearing from you and are grateful of this blessing...

Vinaka vakalevu na loloma (Thank you for the love).

*May God Bless and Guide you always!
Chantelle and the team*