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Strategies for Effective and Just Conservation: The Austral Foundation's Review of Conservation in Fiji

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In the tropical, developing world conservation sector, big NGOs (BINGOs) dominate the prioritisation and implementation of conservation programmes (Rodriguez *et al.* 2007). Questions are asked about the impact and effectiveness of this dominance (Chapin 2004). Our research studied the impact and effectiveness of BINGO-dominance on the conservation sector in a small island developing nation in the Pacific – Fiji. In small island nations, trends and impacts can have a clarity and visibility that may not always be transparent in large countries, hence providing us the opportunity to investigate assumptions that underpin BINGO programme design in developing nations throughout the world.

The review took place during 2007. We interviewed 67 informants, who

were selected to be representative of stakeholders, collaborators, and other participants and funders of the conservation sector. Over 70 reports, articles and other literature from published and unpublished sources were reviewed, as were numerous conventions, strategies, policies and documents. The draft findings of the review were put to a meeting of 29 stakeholders and informants, and the ensuing discussion and conclusions were taken into account in the final analysis.

Fiji as an International Conservation Priority

The combination of Fiji's perceived international biodiversity values and the degree of threat facing its species and ecosystems has made the country a priority for a number of international conservation organisations.

For a total Fiji population of 900,000, we found 23 non-government agencies (including 18 BINGOs) and at least a half-dozen community-based groups working on conservation outcomes. A total of 148 individuals are employed full time in government and non-government conservation programmes and projects. Several Pacific regional secretariats with conservation mandates include Fiji in their oversight. By analysing the budgets of both government and non-government funding sources, we estimate that collectively over USD 8 million is spent on its biodiversity conservation annually.

A Biodiversity Crisis in Fiji

Most of the 18 BINGOs that have started conservation programmes in Fiji arrived a decade ago. While these arrivals resulted in a significant increase in the number of conservation projects

and programmes operating in Fiji, as well as increases in the total budget for conservation and the number of staff employed in the sector, the past decade has not seen an increase either in conservation success in this country, or in capacity development of Fijian institutions that is commensurate with the international resources that the BINGOs have brought to Fiji. Instead our review identified serious biodiversity conservation issues in Fiji including forest degradation and loss, invasive weeds and predators, endemic species threatened with extinction, and over-harvesting and pollution of marine habitats. While BINGOs may not be responsible for the current biodiversity crisis, given the resources they have brought to their work, they are accountable for having little impact on reducing the crisis.

Conservation History

Our analysis of the history of conservation programmes in Fiji revealed that over the past 30 years there have been nearly 50 significant conservation initiatives or programme start-ups. The changes and trends that have occurred during this time have been driven more by changes and trends in international understanding than by local needs and conservation priorities. This situation is exacerbated by interventions based on faulty assumptions about the underlying causes of Fiji's biodiversity crisis. These assumptions include: lack of local awareness about conservation and the environment, inadequate policies and legislation, shortage of information and science, the need for new ideas, and inadequate resources. Our review does not confirm that any of these assumptions of program design were leading causes of biodiversity loss in Fiji. Instead we conclude that solutions will be found in a reassessment of conservation approaches and strategies based on sound strategic thinking. Two cornerstones to this reassessment are discussed below: national ownership

of the crisis, and increased national capacity.

National Ownership of the Problem and the Solutions

Definition of conservation success provided to us by informants during the review includes the vision of Fiji nationals managing conservation effectively - from community level to government - and being accountable to the people of Fiji for that work. Interviewees made clear that Fiji nationals are central to resolving the biodiversity crisis. National and community leaders in Fiji need to own the conservation problems, set the priorities for action and design the solutions. There is a critical role for international organisations to provide technical support, experience and capacity development to support this agenda, but international organisations cannot be in the driver's seat of conservation programming if effective, sustainable solutions are to be found. This is a deeper concept of ownership than participatory methodologies that link community members in village-based projects. Much of the aid and development sector has already embraced the concept of partners owning and defining programme direction (Chambers 1995; Fowler 2002; see also the 1995 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness).

In contrast to this, Fijian nationals describe a situation where conservation is being done for them or to them by the 20 international agencies (including 18 BINGOs) that dominate the prioritisation, research, design, implementation, funding and evaluation of biodiversity conservation programmes and projects in Fiji. Sixty per cent of the total conservation budget in Fiji is managed by BINGOs. Yet BINGOs select their own programme priorities and are neither accountable within Fiji for this sizable portion of the national resource pool, nor are they required within Fiji to be

transparent about their operations. To attract donor funding, each BINGO seeks to attribute success and ideas to itself. As a result of which, projects, buildings, vehicles, and sometimes even communities are 'branded' with the name and symbol of the BINGO and/or donors. In both subtle and obvious ways this shifts the ownership of current conservation initiatives away from Fiji, from local people, and from local institutions that have the long-term responsibility for both the problem and solutions.

In their enthusiasm for ecosystem and species conservation, armed with science, supported by impressive budgets, and backed by a powerful global movement, BINGOs have swelled to fill the 'conservation' niche in Fiji to the point where the sector represents a problem with many foreign solution-finders but with few local leaders and owners.

'Lost in translation' has been a local concept of conservation that centres on resource management. International agencies bring an 'international' perspective of conservation, primarily one that concerns itself with species conservation (most particularly endemic and endangered species), habitat protection or the preservation of iconic, 'pristine', 'wild', or 'remote' landscapes. By contrast, the review confirmed Fijian-centred interest in biodiversity is primarily focused on its usefulness to people. As one informant told us 'Communities don't use the word 'conservation'. We can't even translate it into Fijian.' Locally-led conservation initiatives are almost always based on some practical reason, such as safeguarding food supply or because of ancestral, or cultural imperatives. Conservation is closely linked to development.

We found very little ownership of the 'international view' of conservation among Fijians after more than a

decade of diligent work by BINGOs in Fiji. An important start to building Fijian ownership and leadership of the biodiversity crisis would be to observe more carefully and thoughtfully the triggers for Fijian interest in conservation as it is linked to resource management, and make those the central components of international support to the sector. The question 'whose priorities are being met by this programme?' (a common question from Fijians we interviewed during the review) may be an effective early filter to programme design.

Fijian Capacity

The review found that there are two asymmetries in capacity within Fiji's conservation sector: between government and NGOs, and between BINGOs and Fijian organisations and agencies. On the first point, despite the fact that solutions to the most profound problems facing conservation in Fiji require government response to be effectively resolved, capacity rests disproportionately with the NGOs. Only one of the 22 NGOs told us that lack of capacity was a problem for them. By contrast, every government department with a role in biodiversity conservation that we interviewed said lack of capacity was their main, or one of their main, problems. There are about 45 government staff working on conservation outcomes for a total budget of USD 644,000. There are more than twice as many people (103) working for NGOs in Fiji with a total budget of just under USD 7.73 million – a budget more than 90 per cent higher than that of the Government.

Within the NGO sector, resourcing and capacity for biodiversity conservation rests primarily with the BINGOs. This situation is exacerbated by the practice of BINGOs opening offices in Fiji and employing local staff. Thirteen BINGOs have done just this. Today there are 24 people working for local NGOs on conservation (as

defined by Fijians) compared with nearly 80 working for BINGOs. Local NGOs and government cannot compete with the salaries and other benefits that BINGOs offer. From the viewpoint of an individual, there are obvious advantages in working for a BINGO including the higher salary, exposure to international experience, and increased resources to support conservation programmes. For national conservation outcomes, however, the negative impacts are serious. BINGO office-opening acts as a magnet, concentrating talented Fiji nationals into the service of international agencies and away from local NGOs and government. This in turn exacerbates the lack of capacity of the local agencies and government and further diminishes the likelihood of the growth and development of a Fiji-led conservation sector. Similar issues are reported in the conservation sector in other developing countries (Rodriguez *et al.* 2007).

The review found that after decades of sustained internationally-led conservation implementation in Fiji, there remains little capacity at both the NGO and governmental levels to design and lead effective conservation programmes. There are internationally-led capacity development projects in Fiji, but these tend to focus on developing technical skills (mapping, participatory methodologies, biological monitoring, information transfer), while the international agencies still control the skills required for programme prioritising, strategy, direction, and design. Yet it is the latter skills that are most critical for building long-term Fijian ownership and leadership and sustainability of conservation.

A fundamental reassessment of the role of international agencies and where capacity needs to be built, needs to be undertaken. Their most effective approach to conservation is

likely to be supporting the growth of local organisations, national and sub-national government capacity and local leaders. Talented local leaders and Fijian organisations are better able than international agencies to define biodiversity conservation in terms that are both credible and compelling to the people of Fiji. Importantly, only local NGOs will take on the role of mobilising civil society to hold government accountable. Even though this work is an essential contribution to biodiversity conservation in Fiji (government corruption or inaction are significant contributors to biodiversity loss), it is not work that the BINGOs will do (Edwards 2002; Chapin 2004).

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