Momentum
VOLUME 1, ISSUE 8
www.dialoguefiji.com
JULY 2012

DIALOGUE: Looking Beyond Ethnic Tags
A Dialogue Reflection by George Nacewa

I took the bus home the other day. I don’t do this often but had to as my parents had to use the family car in the afternoon.

It had been an exhausting day—fresh out of the Western and Central Eastern dialogue events and preparing for the Northern Dialogue amidst other family events, including a first cousin’s impending wedding.

The only thing on my mind that day was a hot meal and my warm bed. It wasn’t going to be a pleasant ride home as the bus was cramped with workers returning home and I knew the prospect of keeping my seat till I reached home was getting dimmer with every new passenger that boarded the bus. Sooner or later, I was going to have to give my seat to a female passenger.

Sure enough—an elderly indigenous Fijian woman boarded the bus as if reading my mind.

She walked down the aisle but before she reached where I sat, a young man of Indian descent had already vacated his seat to offer his place to her with a smile.

That small act of kindness for me and many others like it are signs of hope that despite decades of unstable race and ethnic relations that so plagued my parents’ generation (and that of their parents’ generation before them), Fiji’s new generation are looking beyond skin colour and ethnic backgrounds to the human being that is in all of us to move forward.

I remember vaguely growing up in a Fiji that on one side strived to become the modern hub of the South Pacific and on the other holding onto cultures that had defined and demarcated various ethnic groups fiercely in the face of globalisation.

I remember the ethnic labels we had for each other, although we sat next to each other in school and shared lunches, the disdain for each other’s culture had become so entrenched even our daily conversations that it became “normal” to refer to someone according to his ethnicity rather than his name.

Facilitating at the dialogues has helped me to reflect on how people have been impacted and more so, how our generation can turn the table and play an active role in creating a new ideology for the country. An ideology based on our common need for a peaceful, stable and harmonious Fiji, that draws its strength from its diversity and with humanity, builds its communities.

How can we start? We can begin by looking beyond the race tag and skin colour and seeing people for the human beings that they are.
Youth and related issues like unemployment were recurring themes for World Café sessions for the Western and Central Eastern dialogue events held in July.

The World Café sessions took place on the third day of both dialogue events and centred around thematic areas indicated by participants in the first two days and later clustered together by facilitators.

“Youth, their development and their needs featured in both the West and Central dialogues,” said DF coordinator, Fanny Fiteli.

“We did expect that the youth agenda would come up strongly in the Western dialogue given the results of our scoping survey in May,” Mrs Fiteli said.

“For the Central Dialogue event, youth was tagged together with unemployment as a world café theme on the last day of dialogue.”

She said these indicated that youth participants at both events were highly engaged in the dialogues.

“They could mean that youth participants felt the space provided at the dialogues were enabling enough to voice their concerns and needs.”

She said it was interesting to note that while the youth café session in the West looked mainly at the need for better youth representation at decision-making levels, the Central dialogue youth Café session focussed on various government policies and initiatives that attempted to solve high rates of youth unemployment.

“There were two very distinct topics that generally indicate differences in needs for youth based in two divisions.”

Other topics clustered for World Café Sessions in the west include traditional leadership, health and disability and faith based organisations.
SPREADING THE DIALOGUE INFLUENCE

The recent Western and Central Eastern dialogues in July provided an opportunity for community based participants to share how dialogue is being implemented in their communities and for others, how awareness and practice of dialogue is expected to improve service delivery and effectiveness.

Story 1
A participant shared how the use of dialogue helped a friend of his avoid an expensive court case and resolved what could have been a complicated land squatting issue in Deuba. He stressed that dialogue is built on creating and maintaining healthy relations with those one could potentially be at loggerheads with.

Story 2
A participant shared how dialogue brought together a village that had been divided over different ideologies of the Christian faith. Personally he felt that a lot of those who broke away from the main practice did so because they did not want to undertake their own traditional responsibilities and duties. It came to a point where there were eight denominations in one village and affected the smooth running of the village. It was only when another NGO came in to do some work in the village that all factions came together, dialogued and agreed to work together for the benefit of the village. They now set aside a Sunday each month where they carry out an interdenominational church service for all village members.

Story 3
Another participant said he appreciated the awareness session on dialogue (its meanings and principles) which for him was eye opening and reinforced the fact that as a lawkeeper he must go a step further. He referred to those who constantly offended – a seasoned burglar—and how police officers must not only strive to ensure the law is not broken but understand the root causes of deviant behaviour.

CONSTITUTION COMMISSIONERS ADDRESS DIALOGUE PARTICIPANTS

Dialogue participants were given the rare opportunity to quiz and discuss the Constitution drafting process with its expert commissioners during the Central and Western dialogue events.

Constitution Commissioner, Taufa Vakatale was guest speaker at the Western Divisional Dialogue in Novotel Nadi on July 13th while commissioners, Dr Yash Ghai, Dr Christine Murray and Dr Satendra Nandan were panellists at the Central Eastern Dialogue in Novotel Lami on July 20th.

Participants at the Western dialogue quizzed Ms Vakatale on the various phases of the Constitution drafting process including the Constituent Assembly, the draft Constitution, civic education, submissions and general questions on issues like proportional representation.

While participants in the Central division raised similar questions, comments and clarifications were sought on the commissioners’ motivation for agreeing to facilitate the process in the first place.

A participant asked the commissioners to explain what motivated each of them to take up the offer to lead the process.

Other participants asked the commissioners to clarify

A) If there is to be a challenge against the new constitution, would the commissioners play any part in the response?

B) The Constitution Commission Decree outlines a clause on principles tagged non negotiables. What and how will the commission respond if more than 70 per cent of submission oppose any of these principles?

C) In their experience as Constitution drafters, have overseas commissioners, Dr Ghai and Dr Murray experienced a time where the constitution they helped draft was thrown out after elections?

A participant took the opportunity to give the commissioners a preview of issues that he hoped to later make submissions on saying,

“I would like to see a Constitution that gives all Fiji citizens equal rights but not at the sacrifice of iTaukei rights to their culture and traditions as well as their resources. Would also like the Commission to please go to the Lau group even as far as Ono-i-Lau to hear their views and collect their submission. The Constitution will be our life – something that our children will inherit.”
Clockwise from above:

1. Representing Ba and Rakiraki to the West Dialogue 2012; Mrs Tilak Chand and Ms Viksh Mala (above)

2. Lead facilitator, Ms Koila Costello Olson clarifies a point while Mr Kelevi Dinamata and Mr Timoci Rokeva look on. (Below)

3. The lone private sector representative at the Western Divisional Dialogue 2012, Mr Isei Tudreu during the organisational mapping session. (Left)