

Weaving Together and Development: Perspectives from a Melanesian Settlement in Fiji

Participatory development and contextual theology (1) have much in common because they both seek 'bottom-up' approaches to counter power imbalances against marginalised peoples. The concern for liberation from poverty and injustice is also at the heart of both. Development and contextual theory need not be a million miles apart and, in fact, may be mutually formed. This is partly why a number of academics have recently been challenging the "taboo" status of spirituality within development theory and practice. There is a concern that the relative absence of spiritual discussion, instead of reflecting the life experience of Majority World peoples, reflects the contemporary experience of the cultures that are most dominant in determining development perspectives and agendas.

Aware of this concern, I have worked with members of a Melanesian settlement and Anglican parish in Fiji through participatory research to express perspectives of development in a way that also enables the expression of people's spirituality. Doing so has brought insights into the connections between contextual theology and participatory development from our Pacific context.

As a way of drawing together our discussions, we created a series of posters. Each poster represented a Fijian mat to illustrate the diversity and coherency of community, with the different threads of opinions shown by the different woven strands. The first poster brought together descriptions of the settlement, the second shared the future visions of the settlement and the third (the one shown here) showed how those future visions might be realised.

Whilst a range of issues emerged, three overall threads were dominant. We classified these threads as: material needs, community and culture, and spirituality. The combination of these threads became the 'model of development' expressed by the community.

There is a very strong synergy between the content of these discussions and the contextual theology of the theologian Tuwereii. Tuwere's theology is written explicitly from his Fijian context, which he expresses as standing within the multicultural *vanua* of Fiji. *Vanua* is a complex term encompassing the land, as well as the people as the inner part of the land. Tuwere's *vanua* brings together contemporary Christian theology, Fijian mythology and the historical and cultural experience of Fiji. Tuwere believes that understanding contemporary Fiji requires an understanding of what he refers to as a "Trinitarian solemnity" (the sacred and implicit relationship) in Fiji between *vanua* (land and people), *lotu* (spirituality) and *matanitu* (government). There are clear parallels here with the Melanesian settlement's 'model of development'.

Initially, the settlement 'model' showed the three dominant threads as interlocking circles, demonstrating that 'best practice development' requires each of these aspects of their life experience to be addressed in equal significance. Through

discussing the way that these three threads relate to each other, the 'model' changed to the one showed here. Material needs and community and culture became pictured *inside* spirituality. This was explained by a theological understanding of material needs, community and culture being spiritual gifts from God. It was also explained in reference to an embodied theology of change, where the spirituality inside an individual informs changes in material provision and in community and cultural practices. Spirituality, when understood as the lived experience of personal change, is expressed here in a similar way to how 'capacity building' is understood in contemporary development language; hence its primacy in informing community changes.

Issues of spirituality have a contentious feel within development approaches. Traditional understanding within the Pacific, whilst continuing to raise questions, can also increase our appreciation of the inter-relationship between development and spirituality. Weaving, for example, is the metaphor used for the contextual theology of Pacific women, because weaving is inherently understood as a spiritual *and* community act. A parallel can be drawn between the 'mats' we wove in the Melanesian settlement; spirituality as expressed here was the *Aho Tapu* (sacred thread in Māori weaving terminology) from which the whole weaving (or development model) is created. Theological discussion then becomes an important part of informing this settlement's continued community development.

The motivations for Tuwere's contextual theology in Fiji is to acknowledge and positively influence the way that spirituality informs the contemporary Fijian context. As with all potentially contentious aspects of development, spirituality and religion often require more, rather than less, explicit and open discussion. Particularly, this is in order to listen with integrity to all of the life experiences and aspects of communities that are involved in working towards more life-enhancing ways of living together in this world.

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- i Ver Beek, K. A. (2000). "Spirituality: a development taboo." *Development in Practice* 10(1): 31-43.
 - ii Tuwere, I. (2002). *Vanua: Towards a Fijian Theology of Place*. Suva, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.
 - iii Johnson, L. and J. A. Filemoni-Tafaeono (2003). *Weavings: women doing theology in Oceania*. Suva, South Pacific Association of Theological Schools.
- 1 Contextual theology is a way of doing theology in which one takes into account the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the church; the culture in which one is theologising; and social change within that culture, whether brought about by western technological process or the grass-roots struggle for equality, justice and liberation. Definition from *Models of Contextual Theology* (1992) by Stephen B. Bevans. Orbis Books.

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