

Vunilagi Book Club: Lessons learnt from a grassroots initiative in an informal settlement in Fiji

Nicholas Halter
School of Social Sciences
The University of the South Pacific
Fiji Islands
nicholas.halter@usp.ac.fj

and

Anawaite Matadradra
School of Social Sciences
The University of the South Pacific
Fiji Islands
anawaite.matadradra@usp.ac.fj

Abstract: Vunilagi Book Club is a recent example of innovative female leadership to promote literacy and education in an informal settlement in Fiji. Informal or “squatter” settlements in the capital of Fiji have existed for over 50 years and received significant (albeit intermittent) attention from foreign donors and the national government; yet, the underlying causes of poverty and disadvantage remain. This paper examines the case of a small-scale literacy community initiative with a qualitative approach based on close observation and participation in the group’s activities since its inception. These lessons learnt suggest that women are key agents of change in the community and that informal grassroots reading classes have the potential for improving the education of children in informal settlements. Closer study of the social relations and constraints within informal settlements suggests that solutions to the challenges of inequality and access to education must originate from within informal settlement communities.

Keywords: Suva, informal settlement, literacy, urbanisation, urban poverty

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Introduction

The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go (Dr Seuss, 1978, p. 27).

In 2018, an ambitious grassroots community project emerged in the Nanuku informal settlement to encourage reading amongst children. With the above words of Dr Seuss as inspiration, a core group of three indigenous Fijian women established the Vunilagi Book Club (henceforth referred to as Vunilagi) in response to community concerns about declining literacy rates amongst the children of the settlement in the capital of the Fiji Islands. (The Fijian word ‘vunilagi’ means ‘horizon’.)

One of many informal settlements formed as a result of rural-urban migration since the 1950s, Nanuku has been subject to a variety of government and donor initiatives designed to tackle the challenges caused by urbanisation and to encourage sustainable development. Yet, these development projects have historically struggled to have lasting impacts in Nanuku, often because they have been imposed and implemented by foreign actors, or because they have been unsustainable in the long term. In contrast, Vunilagi's success in growing a committed group of volunteer readers and students can be attributed to its indigenous female leaders, two of whom are residents of Nanuku and who are deeply invested in, and connected to, the people and issues of the settlement. This paper explores how reading, and education more broadly, is viewed as a domain of women, and so mothers and sisters have emerged naturally as leaders in this space. Living in a multicultural community beyond the constraints of village and cultural protocols has also given women the opportunity to play a more vocal role in community affairs.

Informal settlements in Fiji are a symptom of the nation's rapidly urbanising environment. With a total population of 884,887 and a GDP per capita of FJ\$12,187 (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2018), Fiji is considered a small state according to conventional studies (Raadschelders, 1992). Conventional thinking about small states have reinforced a deficit narrative, focusing on their presumed political and economic weaknesses, including their limited natural, human, financial and material resources (Thorhallsson, 2018, p. 20).

With 56% of Fiji's population living in urban areas, the growth of informal settlements is a visible reminder of the limitations of successive governments to address persistent social issues. One of the paradoxes of public governance in small states is that a small population does not necessarily result in a small and efficient government (Randma-Liiv and Sarapuu, 2019, p. 166). Governing is not necessarily easier because limited resources, a shortage of expertise, and the absence of economies of scale create challenges for governments to offer adequate public services. Another paradox of small states is that the reduced scale favours personalism and close social relationships that lead to informal networks and governance; and, in some cases, corruption, clientelism and despotism. Fiji's case, having experienced four coups in the last thirty years, is evidence of the ways in which democracy functions differently in several Pacific Islands (Corbett 2015). As a result, marginalised groups like the people living in informal settlements have little say in their own affairs.

A shift in focus away from this deficit narrative is needed to highlight the many successes of small states like Fiji (Baldacchino, 2006; 2008). Grassroots initiatives like Vunilagi are examples of the ways in which members of a community capitalise on their strengths to find a potential solution to the issues they face. A constructivist approach is useful here because it acknowledges the specific cultural and social conditions which shape a group's identities and ideas (Wendt, 1992). This article offers a narrow and nuanced perspective that focuses on the lives and experiences of individuals, their relationships with others, and the historical and cultural factors which shape their community. This information has been gathered from personal observations and qualitative interviews made as a participant in the group since its beginnings in 2018. The case of Vunilagi is illustrative of other small island states where social relationships and expectations (including gender roles) are significant in shaping communities.

This paper will briefly explore urbanisation and urban poverty in Fiji and the Pacific, and document the efforts by donors and governments to improve social outcomes in Nanuku. Next, it will explain how reading and education is a gendered space in which men have little interest or involvement. Then it will posit reasons for Vunilagi's success with a particular focus on the leadership roles played by three indigenous women who are deeply embedded and invested in the community.

Urbanisation and urban poverty in the Pacific

The growth of informal settlements in Fiji is similar to broader trends in the Pacific where a connection between rapid urbanisation and urban poverty is identified. According to Connell (2013, p. 137),

Informality occurs where incomes are low and irregular, public housing policies fail to meet demand for low-cost housing, and urban planning and management remain weak.

Studies of the urbanisation phenomenon have tended to focus on much larger communities, historically found in Africa and South America. However, small island states in the Pacific have featured more recently in the urbanisation literature. Bryant-Tokelau (2012) argues that the Pacific was neglected by studies of development and cities, and when it was discussed in the 1980s and 1990s, the small island states and territories were generally represented as isolated, vulnerable, resource poor and aid dependent.

The Pacific is becoming increasingly urbanised. According to Connell (2011, p. 122), “If Papua New Guinea is excluded, more than half of all Pacific Islanders now live in urban areas” as a result of rapid urban expansion post-independence. Informal residential areas have grown, especially on marginal land such as steep hillsides, and land in close proximity to swamps and coastal areas characterized by poor quality soils with limited opportunities to cultivate crops. In some cases, Pacific economies exclude their peri-urban areas, which means that urban growth trends may be underestimated. Statistics by the Asian Development Bank (2016, p. 11) estimate 2.5 million people, or nearly one in every four Pacific Islanders, lives in formally defined Pacific urban areas. In some of the atoll states, urban growth has produced exceptionally high population densities, but the towns and cities of Melanesia are larger. Melanesia contains 89% of the total Pacific population and the largest proportion of urban residents (24%) who live in the towns and cities of Honiara, Port Vila, Port Moresby and Suva (ADB, 2016, p. 11). The same report noted that, “Melanesia has the highest urban growth rate, averaging just under 3.0% per annum, compared with the low rates seen in Micronesia (1.4%) and Polynesia (0.9%).” In Melanesia, urban growth continues to be driven by migration, but increasingly is generated by population growth amongst second- and third-generation urban residents (Connell, 2011, p.122). Urban infrastructure cannot cope with this rate of expansion and serious issues of sustainable urban policy development have emerged. Numerous issues such as housing, roads, water and electricity supply, waste disposal and sewerage, employment and access to services such as education and health arise in the context of equity, social justice and environmental sustainability.

Connell and Lea’s *Planning the future: Melanesian cities in 2010* (1993) advocated the need for urban management and planning at the local government level. Since the *Pacific Urban Agenda* was launched in 2003, five countries (Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga and Solomon Islands) now have an urbanisation policy (UN Habitat, 2015). Fiji recognised the unaffordability of housing prices in Suva city which is driving many residents to Nasinu or Nausori towns on the outskirts of the city, and formulated a National Housing Policy in 2011. These policies are aided by a number of reports which document urban growth in the Pacific, such as the Asian Development Bank’s *The state of Pacific towns and cities* (2012) and the Pacific Institute of Public Policy Discussion Paper *Urban hymns: Managing urban growth* (2011). More concerning is the increase in urban poverty in many Pacific countries despite efforts to improve government management and planning (Bryant-Tokelau, 2012). Nanuku is typical of many informal settlements in Fiji that are characterised by extreme poverty. In a survey of 290 households in Fijian informal settlements, Mohanty (2003) found that, on average, 40% had no assets and lived in absolute poverty (the figure was as high as 70% in

some areas). Residents of Nanuku continue to suffer social stigma and discrimination because of their status as squatters and most live below the poverty line. One of Bryant-Tokelau's criticisms is that global studies of urbanisation in the Pacific have failed to acknowledge internal land issues, and the importance of land to Pacific identity. She argues (2012, p. 201),

Irrespective of planning regimes, land is increasingly coming under pressure in much of the urban Pacific as people move in search of new opportunities.

Naidu and Matadradra also emphasise the importance of land in contemporary debates about informal settlements in the Fiji context. British colonial policies in Fiji to stem the migration of indigenous populations to urban areas before the 1960s have resulted in restrictive requirements for establishing formal settlements in major urban areas today (Naidu & Matadradra, 2014, p. 8; Matadradra, 2013). Other historical events have compounded the growth of informal settlements in Fiji, including post-coup economic downturns, natural disasters and the non-renewal of agricultural leases under the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act (1977) since the mid-1990s (Naidu, Matadradra, Osborne & Sahib, 2015). Unlike other economic and statistical reports on Fiji's informal settlements (Lingam, 2005; Mohanty, 2006, Narsey, 2008; Narsey, 2012), the social constructivist approach by Naidu and Matadradra (2014, p. 1) explores the social contexts which encourage people to live in informal settlements. They identify social inequality, landlessness, poverty and social exclusion as the primary social forces. In their in-depth study of a settlement in the northern province of Fiji, they identified some common characteristics of informal settlements such as insecure land tenure, poverty, substandard housing, inadequate sanitary conditions, susceptibility to natural disasters and health issues, all of which can be found in Nanuku. Naidu and Matadradra also stress the importance of understanding specific differences between each informal settlement in Fiji, and the variety of living standards and circumstances that may occur within each community.

Civil society organisations and religious groups have also played a leading role in documenting and improving the lives of people living in informal settlements like Nanuku, especially following the disruptions of the military coup d'état in 2006. These include publications funded by the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy (Chung, 2007; Narsey, 2007a, 2007b), and the work of the late Fr Kevin Barr and the Citizens Constitutional Forum to document the stories of residents and argue for the need for 'bottom-up participatory planning models' (2007a, 2007b). A notable example is the Peoples Community Network (PCN), a community-based organisation that operated for more than 20 years to empower people in informal settlements (Kiddle, 2010, p.92). With an inclusive network of elected community leaders from informal settlements, it created a number of pioneering experiments, including a micro-saving scheme and the Lagilagi Housing project at the Jitu Estate in Suva. The latter, in partnership with the Ministry of Local Government, constructed 70, two-three bedroom subsidised flats with strata titles to those who had saved through the micro-saving scheme. Unfortunately, the partnership has since broken down and PCN is currently in litigation with the Fijian government, hampering what could have been a model for housing the poor in Fiji (Walsh, 2019). Another civil society organisation called Women's Action for Change made promising efforts from the late 1980s to empower less privileged women through direct action research and advocacy. It promoted shared family responsibility in order to advance the status of women through community theatre groups and child care for workers' children, but was forced to close due to financial difficulties (George, 2012, pp. 145, 168).

Nanuku informal settlement

Nanuku is located in the suburb of Vatuwaqa, 3 km from Suva city centre (see [Figure 1](#)). The land upon which it sits is privately owned by Bhindi Brothers Limited who acquired the site during a land exchange with the Suva City Council and Lands Department in 1982. Nanuku Street is a dirt road that provides access to the settlement from the main thoroughfare Fletcher Road (both marked on [Figure 1](#)). Buses take 20 minutes to reach the city centre from Vatuwaqa. The settlement is estimated to contain more than 300 families or roughly 2000 people (Waq, 2017, p. 13; Vakasukawaqa, 2015). Originally mangrove swampland, people began settling there in the early 1970s because of its proximity to the city centre (UNDP, 2018). The settlement backs onto the open sea near Suva point which provides a source of food for many of the residents, but also makes the community vulnerable to high tides and storm surges. Most of the houses are constructed out of corrugated iron and wood. The dwellings are small and in close proximity to one another, connected by makeshift footpaths of tyres or cement blocks. Few homes have toilets, running water and electricity, and access is limited to those who are able to afford the high cost of utilities (Waq, 2017, p. 12).

Figure 1: Google Map View of Nanuku Squatter Settlement, September 2020.



Nanuku is one of the older and well-established informal settlements in Suva but it has only received scholarly attention in the last 20 years. The population is a combination of long-term residents and temporary visitors, which means that there is limited demographic information available as the transient nature of residents in informal settlements makes it difficult to establish statistical information. We estimate 55% of Nanuku residents are iTaukei (indigenous Fijians) and 45% are Fijians of Indian descent (also known as Indo-Fijians), as well as smaller groups of migrants from other Pacific Islands.¹

¹ In 2010, the Fiji government announced that all Fiji citizens would be called “Fijian”, a term once reserved for the indigenous people. Now indigenous Fijians are officially identified as “iTaukei” (owners of the land) and descendants of Indian immigrant labourers as “Fijians of Indian descent”. Other terms to denote ethnicity such as Indo-Fijians and Fiji Indians continue to be used in public and scholarly discourse.

The last national census to record ethnicity statistics in 2007 reported Fiji's population as 837,271 of which 57% were iTaukei and 37% were Fijians of Indian descent. The census also reported for the first time more than 50% of Fiji's population resided in urban areas, and an estimated 57% of this population lived in the Greater Suva Urban Area (UN Habitat, 2012b, p. 10). In 2017, the proportion of residents in urban areas was 55.9% (Fiji Bureau of Statistics 2018). Estimates of informal settlements in Fiji vary. A 2006 study reported that Fiji had 182 informal settlements. By 2016, the number had grown to 220 informal settlements, most of them in Suva (Penjueli, 2016). A more conservative estimate by UN Habitat (2012a, p. 26) identified over 100 settlements in the Greater Suva Urban Area. These were home to 90,000 residents who made up 30% of the area's population.

Studies of Nanuku have typically been qualitative, interviewing a small number of residents to highlight particular stories or experiences. Some of these families are well established, with more formal housing and better access to infrastructure than the newer arrivals. A study by Veramu (2005) highlighted some typical stories of Nanuku residents who reported unaffordable housing, job opportunities, health care facilities and access to schools as reasons for living in the informal settlement. Riare and Ratulevu interviewed one unemployed resident from Macuata Province who had settled in Nanuku in 1972. His home cost FJ\$1,500 to build, and housed 11 people. He relied on the sea and a small home garden as sources of food, and his children worked as factory workers, a house-maid and a market vendor to support their school-age children (Veramu, 2005, p. 26). In another case, a young couple moved to Nanuku because they could not afford the rent in Nadawa Housing Estate. They ignored eviction notices from Suva City Council to abandon their small shack which they built at a cost of FJ\$350 (Veramu, 2005, p. 27). The most recent survey of Nanuku was conducted by Adi Mariana Waqa for Uniting World in March 2017. Surveying 115 women in Nanuku to identify young women to be part of a skill-building project, it reported similar living conditions and experiences as Veramu.

The Nanuku community lives in constant fear of being relocated. The Uniting World survey noted,

The Nanuku community continues to have a history of instability in terms of its future because of the ongoing negotiations between the Fijian Government and land owners of the settlement (Waqa, 2017, p. 2).

The 64-acre area of freehold land is privately owned and has become increasingly valuable as the city of Suva expands. The family which owns the land (and currently lives overseas) wishes to subdivide it into industrial estates; but the pace of negotiations has been glacial, as the government is cautious of the potential negative political and social impacts (Phillips & Keen, 2016, p. 12). Talks of resettlement have been publicly announced periodically since 2015 but failed to materialise. A plan to relocate the residents to Makoi across town was announced again in June 2020 (Chand, 2020).

The residents of Nanuku have become used to the periodical visits of civil society organisations. The Uniting World survey reported,

In terms of economic empowerment, Nanuku's history has shown that workshops and donations of items have not had any kind of sustainable outcomes. In most cases the women will unite for a short time under the guidance of an NGO, but once the time for an agency or agency worker is finished, projects tend to also meet their demise through internal tensions which exist in the community (Waqa, 2017, p. 3).

This resonates with Naidu and Matadradra (2014, p. 1) who reported that informal settlements in Viti Levu generally have been regularly researched and residents are experiencing research fatigue. Recent announcements to relocate the settlement has made Nanuku residents in particular suspicious of outside enquiries into the status of households. This presents challenges for gathering up-to-date quantitative data and, for this reason, qualitative evidence is presented in the following section which explores the attempts of a new community-based group to enter this space to address a specific issue faced by the children of Nanuku: literacy.

Literacy and the challenges of establishing a book club

Within informal settlements, children are some of the most vulnerable and at risk. According to *Children in Fiji: An atlas of social indicators*,

... ongoing research and analysis confirms that impoverished child populations suffer from the highest concentrations of disease, ill health, illiteracy and abuse and face a much higher risk of dying before the age of five (United Nations Children's Fund, 2011, p. 3).

Veramu (2005) noted the prevalence of teenage pregnancies and drug and alcohol abuse in informal settlements which prompted churches and government ministries to hold non-formal education initiatives and drug awareness programmes. The harsh living conditions of Nanuku of high crime, limited electricity and poor sanitation places many children at risk of disease and discontinued education, leading to diminished opportunities in life. Children in poor households are vulnerable to many forms of deprivation and often must go without necessities such as proper meals, school stationery, medical care and adequate accommodation. Matadradra's research on informal settlements in Fiji highlights that many students drop out of school because they have had very little success, poor literacy and numeracy or because of the socio-economic circumstances they are trapped in. Less advantaged children are more likely to feel a lack of control over their learning, and to become reluctant recipients of the taught curriculum. This influences the development of different attitudes to education at primary school (Matadradra, 2014, pp. 22, 71).

The experience in informal settlements is different from what official statistics suggest: that, at a national level, Fiji is performing well in its literacy and educational goals. Estimates of literacy among Fijians varies between 91% and 99% (Akram-Lodhi, 2016, p. xii; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017). Literacy levels have increased slowly over the years with improved education policies and reforms that attempted to address historical inequalities in education (Mangubhai, 1997). The primary school system consists of eight years of schooling and is attended by children from the ages of six to fourteen years. Fiji has three official languages, English, Bauan Fijian and Hindi, and the spoken form of the vernacular languages is taught in all schools. In 2017, the Fiji government introduced a National School Library policy to address the lack of primary school libraries in Fiji (Rainey, 1998). Government policies of free education, bus transport, textbooks and lunches has been an important factor, and these policies have relieved some of the financial burdens in informal settlements (Naidu and Matadradra, 2014, p. 36). There are few statistics available on literacy in informal settlements in Fiji, although a recent study of English language and literacy proficiency in an urban Fiji primary school found that most urban Year 1 students require intensive English language support upon entering school, and Year 4 students have gaps in their knowledge of English (Hopf, McDonagh, Wang et al., 2019).

The educational reality faced by children in the Nanuku informal settlement is one of the reasons why a children's book club was set up there in 2018. Observational evidence suggests the children in Nanuku settlement do not have the same levels of literacy as other Fijian children. In some cases, children above the age of six were struggling to recognise phonics, and children as old as fourteen were unable to read independently. The reasons for this are complex. For example, Nanuku children who participate in Vunilagi attend an estimated three kindergartens, six primary schools and three high schools. In some cases, classrooms are overcrowded (an example was given of one seven year old boy in a class of 42 students) and school libraries are inadequate (examples were given of limited numbers of books, poor quality of books, limitations on borrowing, poor maintenance, and in one case, no library at all). Blame cannot rest solely with the education system, which is overstretched and under-resourced. Some schools attempt to play an active role in the Nanuku community by holding meetings with parents and occasionally visiting the settlement if a student does not attend class for a period of time. The living conditions of Nanuku settlement also present challenges for the supervision and support of children. Returning from school, children can roam the settlement unattended for hours waiting for parents to return from work or other engagements. There are no support services such as childcare, and simple tasks such as completing homework is challenging for students who live in overcrowded homes or have limited access to electricity. Financial difficulties are also common: for example, some children who attended Vunilagi reported they did not have access to basic items such as paper and stationery, and do not eat regular meals. Many have visible sores on their arms and legs from poor sanitation, and may miss school due to illnesses such as water-borne diseases. The settlement can also be dangerous, with regular instances of substance abuse, violence and criminal activity. In some cases, families can leave the settlement suddenly, forced by financial difficulties or domestic crises to move.

When the Vunilagi Book Club was set up in Nanuku in 2018, there were few examples to guide the founders. There is limited documentation of small-scale literacy initiatives in Fiji, which have sporadically emerged in some small communities across the country. Women's Action for Change made significant inroads into informal settlements, establishing early childhood education resources, a mobile kindergarten and classes in the 1980s and 1990s (George, 2012, p. 116; Rae, 2013). More recently in the 2000s, some organisations have created specific programmes directed at youth leadership. For example, Kids Link Fiji was established in Suva by the global civil society organisation Save the Children to offer a leadership and participation programme for young people between the ages of 12 and 18 (Vakaoti, 2012, p. 10). Ola Fou Fiji is a Pacific-based youth organisation with a goal to support Pacific-based youth workers in vulnerable and informal communities to develop their leadership skills and gain a qualification around working with young people in their community (Pitaoe, Korocowiri, Martin, & Davidson, 2018). Other smaller churches or community centres run informal literacy sessions, such as Rotary in Lautoka and the Church of God in Tuitaleva settlement in Suva (Kiddle, 2010, p. 92).

The first reading session of Vunilagi began with five volunteers and fifteen children, meeting in a 30m² corrugated iron shack that is used as the local Methodist Church (Indian Division). A handful of donated books were shared with the children, who were encouraged to look at them and listen to a story being read aloud by one of the volunteers on a Saturday morning for an hour. Today a similar process is followed with some slight improvements: children assemble in the church space on a Saturday morning every two weeks and are arranged into smaller groups, usually by school level. Individual volunteers spend 15 to 20 minutes reading which each group: older children read aloud independently, while younger children are

guided with the aid of translators. Afterwards, children explain to the whole room what they read, before fruit and water are served to the children and they are then escorted home.

Nanuku's proximity to the urban centre is one reason why few residents wish to leave. This prime location close to the city centre means that many of its residents are more easily able to access employment and educational opportunities, as well as health care and essential goods and services, compared to many rural Fijian communities that are isolated. For Vunilagi, this means that supplies such as books and stationery are easy to access: in fact, there is no shortage of donated books for Vunilagi from local groups such as Value City, as well as books shipped from donors around the world. Despite volunteers being scattered around the Suva area, they can communicate and meet regularly with ease. Notably, Vunilagi has responded to some calls to expand and support sister libraries and book clubs in regional areas, but this has required substantial organisation, planning and extra funding to accommodate transportation costs, which is likely to make this effort unsustainable, compared to activities in Nanuku.

Nanuku's location in the capital also means that there are more human resources available. This means that there is a larger pool of available volunteers who can read to the children, and there are also numerous community groups, civil society organisations and donor groups nearby who are willing to contribute people, books or financial support to the Vunilagi cause. Vunilagi also has a strong base of children participants, which on average number 30, but have increased to almost 60 at times. Most are from Nanuku, but other children have also visited from nearby informal settlements like Wailea. These large numbers mean that children can support and encourage one another in the reading process. In fact, youth are one of Fiji's greatest strengths. Young people represent the majority of the population in Fiji – the median age is 27.5 years (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2018) – and, like much of the Pacific, this youth 'bulge' is a significant factor in local politics and development (Clarke & Azzopardi, 2017). In Nanuku, youth are important actors both as volunteers and as role models for the children, and bring enthusiasm and innovation to Vunilagi.

Generally speaking, ethnic communities within Nanuku have good relations today. Overall, iTaukei, Fijians of Indian descent, and other smaller Pacific ethnic groups are well integrated in Nanuku. This is evident in Vunilagi, where most children understand both Fijian and Fiji-Hindi languages, and live in close proximity with one another. Ethnic relations in Nanuku are mediated by community and religious leaders. The majority of iTaukei residents in Nanuku are Christian, while the Fijians of Indian descent are comprised of Hindus and Muslims. People are understanding of one another's religious and cultural differences, perhaps explained by the transient and migratory nature of the settlement. As a result, members of Nanuku are not bound by rigid cultural protocols of the traditional village, and this allows for more interaction, innovation and experimentation. Its proximity to the urban centre of Suva means that Nanuku residents are familiar with different ethnic groups, as well as government actors and foreign donor groups. It could be argued that the economic conditions of the Nanuku informal settlement and its proximity to the urban setting means that the community is adaptable and innovative.

The other asset that the Nanuku community possesses is its women and the case of Vunilagi demonstrates how women can successfully operate within traditional gender roles and spaces. In the Nanuku settlement, many of the community change-makers, including the community and church leaders, are male, and women in Nanuku are disproportionately disadvantaged compared to men. Women are also vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse in Nanuku, reflective of a broader trend in Fiji (Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, 2019). Despite this, women play vital roles in their families and the wider community. Given the economic hardships of the settlement, many women are employed, and in some cases are the main

breadwinners in the family, as well as being responsible for domestic duties and childrearing. Since Vunilagi focuses on children's literacy, two iTaukei women from the Nanuku settlement have taken ownership of the project and this is permitted under existing power structures within the settlement. By operating outside of formal school or village committees, Vunilagi is able to develop and experiment without outside interference, and yet the cultural awareness of the iTaukei women leaders and their position within the community ensures that Vunilagi is sanctioned and social harmony in the settlement is maintained.

Lessons from Vunilagi Book Club

Vunilagi's experience has two implications for small states literature. First, it suggests that grassroots approaches which favour personal and particularistic relationships and informal networks are important factors in addressing complex social issues like urban poverty and literacy in small states. Foreign imposed solutions from the top down have often struggled to make discernible differences in the lives of ordinary Fijians in informal settlements, so innovative grassroots solutions may be better adept at navigating the relationships and expectations within communities. Second, diasporic communities are active and engaged actors who may increasingly play a role in addressing the social challenges faced by small states. In the case of Fiji, permanent emigration since independence in 1970 has resulted in a steady outflow of skilled human resources (Mohanty, 2006a). As the case of Vunilagi shows, these migrants and their descendants remain connected to Fiji and are deeply invested in the future prosperity and wellbeing of the communities. This relationship is a two-way exchange in which the diaspora can contribute knowledge and resources through informal means, while also maintaining and strengthening connections (emotional, familial, economic, religious and otherwise) with their place of origin.

The success of Vunilagi can be partly attributed to the involvement of two local women from the Nanuku community who negotiate the informal networks on behalf of the group. Mele and Losalini (both pseudonyms) are two women who reside in Nanuku. Mele is in her thirties, and lives with her five young children. She has family ties to Rewa Province but she chooses to live in Nanuku so she can send her children to school and work as a sales representative in town. Losalini is in her twenties and lives with her mother. She works as an administrator in a Methodist primary school. Both women attended schooling up to secondary level, and their initial interest in Vunilagi was prompted by Mele's concern for the education of her own children. Mele participates actively in local school meetings and is an outspoken advocate for educational reform. Vunilagi's development has relied on Mele and Losalini's in depth knowledge of the families in the informal settlement, as well as the local community leaders, teachers and parents. They are both crucial intermediaries between the Vunilagi volunteers and the children. Their detailed knowledge of the languages and cultural norms and customs of both the iTaukei and Fijians of Indian descent families is valuable. Mele and Losalini are skilled communicators, able to move within the settlement and visit people's homes and their intimate lives. As women, they are able to use this to their advantage: Losalini's age makes her an approachable and non-threatening role model to the children, and Mele's experience as a mother gives her authority with both children and parents. Their combined ability to liaise with parents, teachers and community leaders enables them to understand personal and intimate details that impact student literacy, such as family problems at home, or poor performance at school, or lack of school attendance due to registration or lack of materials. Considering that the list of children who attend each session is always changing, Mele and Losalini provide a consistent support base for the group with their knowledge of everyone's names and personal

backgrounds. Overall, their presence legitimises and endorses Vunilagi's activities for both the children and the wider community.

Vunilagi's development can also be credited to the Fijian diaspora who have supported it and the leadership of one particular Fijian-Australian woman. Adi Mariana Waqa, an iTaukei woman in her thirties with ties to Tavenui, was born and raised in Melbourne². Graduating with a Bachelor of Theology from Australia, Waqa was enrolled in an Honours program in Theology when she returned to Fiji in 2017 and began volunteering for the Methodist Church of Fiji. One of her tasks was a seven-week survey of Nanuku for Uniting World Australia and the Methodist Church of Fiji, led by the late Dr Richard Wah (Waqa, 2017). During this survey, she met Mele and some months later discussed the idea of a book club with members of the community and the Methodist Church. A product of the diaspora herself, Waqa's education and communication skills are important resources that she has used to garner wider support for the project, manage the group and mentor the other women. Vunilagi was founded in Melbourne in December 2017 when she first created a Facebook page to generate interest, network and receive donations from communities in Melbourne and Sydney (Vunilagi Book Club, 2020). With the permission and support of Wah and church leaders in the area, reading sessions began in February 2018. Capitalising on social media, Waqa publishes reports online using Facebook and Instagram, and promotional articles with the *Fiji Times* to promote their cause and call for support. Much of the support comes from the diaspora, with book donations and cash donations from Australia and the United States. To date, monetary donations have funded the purchasing of food for the children, student supplies and transportation. Waqa's familiarity with both Fijian cultural traditions, and diasporic networks in Australia and the USA, allows her to act as an intermediary successfully communicating between two different value systems.

Reflecting on the path ahead

Though it has only been running for two years, Vunilagi has made a lasting impression on the Nanuku informal settlement. This was clear during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, for example. When schools were closed for months, Vunilagi continued to run reading sessions during this time while practising social distancing. It also organised homework sessions and private tutoring on a weekly basis that has improved the reading outcomes of several children who were struggling to read. When the Fiji government stopped the free school lunch program after the outbreak of COVID-19, Vunilagi mobilised a team of mothers from the settlement to provide daily lunches to the children. It has received donations from members of the public and churches to continue providing lunches because there is no other alternative option.

Inspired by the words of Dr Seuss, Vunilagi has continued to focus on delivering a consistent message to the children that literacy can lead to empowerment. Mele and Losalini recently completed the first course of a skills training programme at the University of the South Pacific's Technical and Further Education offerings. Funded by a local civil society organisation called the Graduate Women Fiji (GWF), and the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, the pilot project has selected seven women from the Nanuku settlement and, if successful, could be rolled out nationally. This was partially in response to the Uniting World Survey which recommended promoting education and upskilling for women in Nanuku (Waqa, 2017). Furthermore, four of the older children have taken up leading roles

² Adi Mariana Waqa is interviewed in an 8-minute video-clip available on the Vunilagi Fiji Facebook page: - <https://www.facebook.com/vunilagibookclub/videos/171208303552016/>

in the group by assisting as translators during reading sessions, reading to younger children, and managing a system of borrowing books within the settlement.

Vunilagi's activities are carefully reviewed in monthly meetings by the organising team of women to consider feedback and monitor progress. The group is cautious to ensure meaningful engagement with the community that supports and empowers both parents and children who reside there. The *Uniting World* report noted,

Many of the people in Nanuku are very clever and have dealt with enough churches, NGOs, and other agencies to perpetuate the one-dimensional narrative of a helpless, sickly, and poverty-stricken community in order to maintain the patron/donor relationship. This is not to say that such issues do not exist, but they are manipulated as such to obtain financial or material resources from agencies who in turn make very little sustainable impact upon the community once their time is up (Waqa, 2017, p. 15).

For this reason, participation of local community members in the leadership of Vunilagi is crucial to its success. Though initiated by Waqa, the club now shares the leadership role each Saturday between the regular volunteers in the group in an effort to empower each person and encourage local ownership of the entire endeavour. The participation of Mele and Losalini has been crucial in legitimising the efforts of Vunilagi to the children and parents in the settlement. Local leadership allows for more flexible and responsive engagement with the residents of Nanuku through informal networks, and the participation of Nanuku residents Mele and Losalini reinforces that Vunilagi is deeply rooted and invested in the settlement.

Though Vunilagi recognises that their small-scale book club model could be replicated in other informal settlements, the leadership has taken a cautious approach to repeated requests to expand or formalise its operations. As news of Vunilagi's progress spread in Fiji, individuals suggested a variety of strategies to expand the club, including registering it as a formal organisation, replicating the club in other settlements or rural villages, seeking trained education professionals to train the volunteers, and seeking working with children certifications for the volunteers. However, these measures are costly, and they require a higher level of organisation and management that exceeds the current capacities of the club members. Apart from a core group of Fijian women, volunteers are transient, inconsistent and unpredictable, and efforts to professionalise or certify them may discourage participation. It is for these reasons that the Vunilagi leadership has made a conscious decision to remain small scale and focus on a simple goal of encouraging literacy among children and empowering the volunteers and children over expansion.

Conclusion

Urban poverty is a persistent challenge within informal settlements in Fiji, and residents of Nanuku face a number of difficulties in their daily lives, ranging from insecure control and access to land, unaffordable housing, and limited access to state utility services and clean water. These tenuous living conditions make the lives of children and the pursuit of education (and literacy) difficult as well. However, the efforts by Vunilagi show the potential for improving the education of children in informal settlements through grassroots initiatives which encourage the participation and leadership of local women. Vunilagi also illustrates the possibilities of grassroots approaches to make small but significant progress in addressing complex social issues by capitalising on social relationships and informal networks, and mobilising a diasporic community that wants to connect and contribute to its country of origin. To what extent this initiative can outlast its founders is unclear; but documenting the successes

and difficulties of this initiative in the coming years may provide some indication of how best to empower grassroots action in disadvantaged urban communities. Whatever the future may hold, Vunilagi volunteers are proud to be a part of a “good news” story out of Nanuku which attempts to counter the overwhelmingly negative narrative that influences popular misperceptions of informal settlements. To use the words of Fijian historian Brij V. Lal (2019, p. 148), “I see despair but also much determination and pride...The squatter settlement is their temporary destination, not their destiny.” With each reading session, Vunilagi takes one more step forward to helping the children look out to the horizon and see the places they will go.

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