

A CIVIL INFLUENCE

(Opening remarks to Pacific Regional CSO Forum 2006, Mocambo Hotel, Friday 20 October, 2006, 9.30am)

Creating just and peaceful societies in the Pacific is our collective responsibility. It requires the co-operation of the Government, the private sector, the churches, the *vanua* and civil society. Because our societies comprise interconnecting interests, we all have a role to play in achieving that outcome. Justice and peace are co-extensive terms. They are meaningless without each other. Peace without justice is empty rhetoric because it merely camouflages the tensions inherent where there is inequality. Justice without peace is equally hollow. It is not an end in itself, but strengthens the cohesiveness of our societies in reinforcing notions of fairness.

The emphasis in this gathering is necessarily the place of civil society in this great challenge. The task is made difficult by the attitudes of Governments throughout the region. They are often suspicious of community organisations, querying everything from their motives, their mandates, their funding as well as their legitimacy. It is unfortunate as well as unhelpful. Unfortunate because it diverts energies from the real priorities. Unhelpful, because many of these groups represent particular interests advocating for improvement in the lives of the people or causes they are working for. Such betterment is beneficial to the community as a whole.

Part of the problem is one of perception. Many of us tend to see Parliament as the sole repository of the will of the electorate. Politicians themselves confine that mandate to themselves, and bureaucrats take their cue from that vantage point. Civil society develops largely in response to the particular needs of a group or issues of great moment. They are in their own way representative of the community. They complement rather than supplant Parliament and the Government. We need to recognise that the machinery of the State is far too structured and limited to cater for particular and varied interests in our societies. They should not be considered a threat, but a boon to the process of development for reasons already explained.

Throughout the Pacific, we continue to be largely agrarian societies, although urbanization is changing this in a profound way. One of the serious obstacles to development is the lack of empowerment many rural people feel. It is largely dependent on the quality of leadership they have, and this is often uneven. Where leaders are bereft of ideas and defensive about input from elsewhere, the problem is compounded. The advent of community-based groups seeking to work with people in partnership provides mutual benefits to those concerned. Where development takes place in this manner, it helps to relieve the pressure to emigrate to the urban areas. In the larger countries such as Papua New Guinea, the Solomons, Fiji and Vanuatu we have yet to take full advantage of the agricultural resources

available to us. This is a field where a few community-based initiatives are making a meaningful contribution.

As regards the role civil society plays in contributing to just and peaceful communities, that I believe is necessarily implied. Whether your organisations are rights specific or development-oriented is immaterial. The important common features you share are the improvement of the lives of the people or the causes you serve. Emerging from this base is the empowerment of those for whom you are involved. In those ways, those who have neither the means nor the confidence to assert themselves are able to be heard. Moreover, they are able to make their presence felt and thus facilitate the initiation of remedial measures. As relatively small societies, our Governments must balance the accumulation of great individual wealth with a concern to redress the inequities of the market. Civil society is well-placed to remind Governments of this obligation.

Regionalism is a ready catchphrase but it often founders on national interests. This is an area where I believe civil society can play a seminal influence. This is because the nature of your concerns are broadly similar, and you often attract defensiveness if not hostility from your respective Governments. You represent the power of ordinary people at their level, which is the grassroots level in common parlance. The major issues like HIV/AIDS, climate change, indiscriminate logging, overfishing, squatter settlements, poverty,

gender inequality to name a few are not specific to one country. They are challenges we all face. The common thread is broadening participation and empowerment in order that communities and groups can determine their destinies for themselves. We are scattered over a vast expanse of ocean. It is costly and time consuming to meet. That is a price we must be willing to pay. Information technology and telecommunications are partly overcoming the obstacle of distance. But they will never fully replace the need to meet in person and affirm each other from time to time.

It is in renewing and reinforcing these networks and connections that civil society can more actively engage in dialogue about the Pacific Plan. It sets out a path for the future of the region, attempting to integrate national and regional development. The term is self-explanatory. As a plan it sets out guidelines and objectives. It is not written in stone. It is open to change. That is why it is so critical for you as community-based organisations to engage the politicians, the economists, the bureaucrats and the varied consultants who have contributed to it. You deal with ordinary people every day. Those whose lives will be directly affected by this Plan have their best opportunity of being recognised through you. It is a grave responsibility. It will be your task to infuse this noble conception with the salt and sweat of the people throughout the Pacific. Only when it is translated to that level, will it begin to be more meaningful for our own people.

Economic growth and sustainability are concepts with which civil society is familiar. Because of your practical experience, no one better understands the dynamic between the two. If we as Pacific societies are to survive and prosper, then the answer must lie in a reassessment of the relationship between growth and sustainability. To ensure that our proud heritage as Pacific peoples, of which the land, ocean and resources therein are an indispensable part, is enjoyed by future generations, an appropriate balance must be struck. Better husbandry of our resources and our surroundings is crucial in this regard. That requires us to think more laterally about the issues. Put simply, unrestricted access and uncontrolled use of our natural heritage will leave our islands as desolate and lacklustre places filled with sad, demoralized populations.

The strength of civil society in the Pacific lies in its ability to respond effectively and expeditiously to people's needs. Not in the sense of fulfillment of what they seek, rather as a channel for their hopes and concerns. Development in all its complexity is multidimensional. Earning a living is the primary goal but it is not the only one. Where are we headed? The economic trends are not promising. At a time when the generation of economic wealth is fuelled by lightning advances in technology, particularly in information and telecommunications, the number of people in abject poverty has never been greater. So too the accumulation of wealth and power in fewer hands. As Governments are held captive to the power of

multinational corporations, powerful vested interests and the middle classes, the growth of community-based groups to articulate particular concerns provides much-needed balance. It is about allowing those without voice or influence to be heard and play some part in decision-making.

The rise of civil society in the Pacific has been overwhelmingly positive in that it has given recognition to women and children, the most vulnerable members of our society. It has correspondingly allowed women to play increasingly valuable roles beyond the hearth and home. In places such as the Solomons, Bougainville and Fiji, civil society has been at the forefront of the rebuilding of bonds within the community. Whatever their concern, their close ties with people is perhaps their defining character. It is this intimacy that is relevant to nation building and regionalism, of which peace and justice form an integral part. Where people are engaged in processes that contribute to the improvement of their lives and that of their families and communities, they are less likely to be discontented. This is because they are made to feel part of the process of development. Is that not what justice and peace are about?

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