

Development: WALKING OUT OF POVERTY

Providing people with employable skills

The Walking out of Poverty programme has been successfully running for three years, despite skeptics mentioning there is no poverty in Fiji.

Poverty, however, does exist in terms of lack of finances for families living in urban and peri urban areas. With Fiji's growing economy and the push for higher education—families are being pressured to meet this need—and with other factors such as displaced farmers and those seeking employment, this has created a huge urban drift over the years.

As a result, squatter settlements have mushroomed on vacant pieces of land in and around the towns and cities.

Such large groupings of people invariably create other social problems such as school dropouts and unemployment being the worst.

The Walking of Poverty programme, a joint partnership between the International Labour Organisation and the Ministry of Women Social Welfare and Housing, attempts to address this by providing short-term skills training and the supply of tools and equipment for trainees to either seek employment or start their own businesses.

The programme empowers and up-skills the poorer members of society, including disabled persons, to enable them to either seek employment, or start their own small business from the training provided by the programme, and to slowly walk out of their poverty situation.

The targetted groups are selected from squatter areas, Housing and Relief Trust Homes and rural settlements.

They include widows, prisoner dependents, disabled persons and single mothers who do not have any regular source of income, and those receiving social welfare benefits.

The immediate objective is to provide vocational skills training in commercially viable areas that can assist them to generate income immediately.

Training areas covered include a total of eleven skills ranging from food production, & tailoring to poultry farming, flower nursery and bee-keeping, and more recently technical skills such as welding, carpentry, electronics, plumbing, tile laying and joinery.

On completion of these training courses, participants are presented with certificates of attainment from ILO and the ministry.

A total of 511 men and women have been trained since 2003. The training courses were originally conducted by TPAF (Training and Productivity Authority of Fiji), however, due to the low level of education of most of the targeted groups, a more hands-on approach was considered.

As a result, tutors were recruited from established commercial companies specialising in the skills to be trained, such as plumbers, welders, carpenters and chefs from established restaurants and hotels.

This approach has proven to be successful, in the sense that on completion of the training participants are able to grasp the skills learnt more effectively, considering the short duration of the courses.

Equipment has been delivered to participants who have been grouped according to where they live. The idea is for these trainees to encourage others to start their own small businesses. To-date, a total of 10 sets of industrial and 27 singer brand sewing machines have been delivered, 33 gas stoves and two sets of 50-day old chicks have been delivered to the trainees.

Also basic tools have been issued individually to the technical trainees totaling as follows—

- 29 for plumbing;
- 36 for welding;
- 19 for carpentry;
- 18 for joinery; and
- 18 for electronics.

A policy structure group was formed in 2005 involving the Ministries of Land, Labour, Education and Women, with the view to formalizing a structure for the programme, and to see how best the targeted groups may benefit considering that these ministries utilize government poverty alleviation funding in their own respective projects, such as education assistance for poor families, family assistance allowances and land resettlement.

The selection process of trainees involves the completion of questionnaires which are circulated by these ministries to the target groups. Based on the types of trainings requested—programmes are drawn up and participants selected.

Many have started their small businesses and are able to support their families from the income earned. One such case is ex-prisoner Iliesa Naunuisinu, a tailoring course trainee in 2006, who said “ILO helped me with the training course, they also gave me a sewing machine, now I sew everyday and it helps me to send my children to school.”

The participants have embraced this programme and strived to learn as much as they can know that this opportunity does not come around often.

The ILO and Fiji government will continue with this partnership so that more and more of the poor or disadvantaged members of society may become self-reliant and walk out of poverty.

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