It was after the 1969 Education Commission Report that non-formal education (NFE) came to prominence in Fiji. It had, of course, been practised prior to this in community health care and farming programmes. However, after 1969 both government and NGOs showed its potential in improving the quality of lives of people, particularly the young. The report felt that there was great potential in running adult non-formal education classes for parents, and for school leavers especially, in developing the economy of the nation.

In addition, many people felt that the formal school system, by itself, was not adequate in developing our human resources. It was true that more children and youths were attending schools, yet still a large number dropped out or were pushed out when they failed external exams. Something had to be done about them.

Non-formal education, it was felt, would give a second opportunity to school dropouts and adults to learn new skills, knowledge and attitudes to encourage them to be gainfully employed in the informal sector. This would mean learning such skills/knowledge as screen-printing, sewing, light engineering, improved farming skills of cash crops, simple bookkeeping, literacy and cultural matters. Attitudes would be taught to the learners in the form of positive mental attitudes or a strong work ethics. This would be integrated with other training they did.

NFE refers to all learning skills, knowledge and attitudes done in a systematic way outside of the formal education system. (Of course NFE classes may make use of the facilities of schools in the evenings but the training is independent of the school system.) The NFE training is supposed to be more flexible in its delivery. The teaching methodology differs from the school in a number of ways. Most skill training is practical with less emphasis on academic theory and external exams. The relaxed and flexible learning atmosphere is necessary to cater for school leavers and adults who may not like the rigid classroom atmosphere and techniques.

NFE and Poverty Alleviation

NFE also aims to provide the skills for people to satisfy their basic human needs. The training is tailored to the environment where learners come from. That is why most training is conducted in the evenings, on weekends or during holidays to accommodate those who are working. In most cases, the people themselves decide what they want to learn, based on their needs.

In many Pacific countries, non-formal education is used to mobilise people to participate in the informal economic sector. As part of the training, people are often given loans through micro-credit schemes and they are also assisted in dealing with government bureaucracies. This is particularly in relation to establishing small businesses.

NFE also has a social role in facilitating primary health care. People, particularly in rural areas or urban squatter settlements, are encouraged to build water tanks, water-sealed toilets, smokeless stoves as ways of improving the quality of their lives.

Perceptions of NFE in Fiji

NFE has not been widely accepted in Fiji. Its effectiveness in alleviating poverty is tentative at best. There are a number of reasons for this.

People often see NFE as second rate education, firstly because those who
attend courses have failed in the formal school system. Secondly, they also do not receive certificates like in schools and tertiary institutions. In other words training in NFE will not give participants the white collar jobs they want.

NFE’s entry into Fiji was through primary and secondary school teachers. The idea here was that teachers would use the classrooms after school to run courses for parents and school leavers in leadership and cultural, spiritual and skill-training programmes. Activities were aimed at complementing formal education, not providing viable alternatives.

This has generally not been successful because teachers tended to use the same rigid inflexible teaching/learning methods they used in their classrooms. Many were not qualified to teach the skills they were assigned to. Most schools, unfortunately, offered NFE programmes mainly because the Ministry of Education and later the Ministry of Youth gave funds for them. Teachers also tended to be conservative and had set ideas on NFE routine. I recall a number of workshops on innovative farming practices I attended in the early 1990s where participants came dressed in their Sunday best, ie long-sleeved shirts, *sulu vakataga* and neck ties. As they sat politely in classrooms (sweating in the noon-day heat) and looking wistfully out of the windows to their gardens, the teacher droned on about farming techniques on the blackboard.

**My Experiences in NFE**

My experience with NFE has initially been through an organisation, which is now defunct, called the *Fiji Association of Non formal Educators* and later the *Fiji Community Education Association*. In 1996 and 1997 I was also involved in preparing a training curriculum for the *National Youth Services*, a programme of the Ministry of Youth.

Apart from my University work, I currently oversee a number of youth programmes.

One is a *dalo* and vegetable farm at Nepani run by school leavers. The other is a group in Cunningham doing small construction jobs. The third is a youth fishing project operating out of Laqere. All of these projects have deliberately avoided receiving any aid from Government or other sources. The basic tools or planting materials have been bought by the youths themselves through their savings or fund-raising activities like *kati, gunu sede, soli*, bottle collection and social evenings. Prior to beginning the projects, the youths were trained in leadership skills, basic farming, fishing or carpentry. The training was done through the Fiji National Training Council in Narere, the Ministry of Youth or the Fiji Community Education Association.

Each project provides its own unique set of problems. That is why weekly or fortnightly meetings are called to discuss the problems and come up with practical solutions. I try as much as possible to get the youths to manage their own projects but find that, because they are new to these activities, they constantly seek my advice and moral support.

From 1995 to 1997 I ran free weekend computer classes at home. This was with two computers I own. I had to stop this mainly because I had to take work home from USP after our BEd student numbers increased dramatically.

**Strengthening NFE**

There is a need for more co-ordination between local NGOs, government ministries, and overseas agencies dealing with community education and development. The rivalries and the duplication of programmes are wasteful of the limited resources available to NFE.

There is a need to re-examine some of the conceptual framework upon which some NFE income-generating projects are based. Most such projects are run like co-operative schemes with little or no profit. Even if profits are gained, they are
channelled into the administration of the organisation.

We should encourage individual or family projects, and even those of small groups made up of friends. I know of two youths in Kinoya who attended a two-week light engineering workshop in 1998 run by the Ministry of Youth. They are now making about $300 to $400 a week repairing home appliances. They walk from house to house doing their work. Naturally they keep all the profits themselves.

There is a need for more commitment and professionalism in running such income-generating projects based upon strict business practices. The vakavanua style, kerekere mentality or the idea of receiving capital from government to run projects has not worked.

Conclusion

NFE has great potential in empowering the poor to take action to improve their lot. But NFE by itself cannot achieve the goals of poverty alleviation without a political climate conducive to the encouragement of activities in the informal economic sector.

References
