

Commonwealth Regional Workshop and Pacific Island Association of Non Government Organisations meeting

JOHN LA ROCHE*

With funding support from the Commonwealth Foundation, 66 people from all over the Pacific met at Papakura Marae in Auckland from 24 to 28 February 1997. The theme was "Navigating the Pacific - Exploring NGO operation in a Changing World".

The Western Samoa NGOs were working hard to gain Government recognition but saw politics as sometimes a threat to NGO progress. In Tonga, the Government recognises the importance of effective partnership which NGOs can provide to the Government for improving the socio economic well being of the people. NGO representatives have been included on a number of Government committees. The Government of Nauru also recognises the importance of NGOs through the Local Island Council and various Government departments. NGOs have been involved in policy making through workshops and public seminars. The Government encourages its departments to use NGOs in the formulation of policy.

Auckland from 24 to 28 February 1997. The theme was "Navigating the Pacific - Exploring NGO operation in a Changing World".

The Cook Islands delegation described Government-NGO relations as "satisfactory and improving". NGO matters can be taken up directly with the minister concerned who usually respond in writing to avoid misunderstanding. The umbrella organisation Cook Islands Association of NGOs, is hoping to arrange an official relationship with the Government.

Countries represented at the workshop included Nauru, Tonga, and Western Samoa. Countries represented at the workshop included Australia, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Cook Islands, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati, Fiji, Tahiti, Tonga, and Western Samoa.

NGOs were working hard to gain Government recognition but saw politics as sometimes a threat to NGO progress."

The umbrella organisation Cook Islands Association of NGOs, is hoping to arrange an official relationship with the Government.

The February 1997 Auckland workshop was the fourth in a series to promote better NGO Government relations. Other workshops have been held in Johannesburg, Port of Spain, and New Delhi. A further workshop is to be held in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

While the Vanuatu Government has no official guide for interaction with NGOs, there have been numerous meetings between the umbrella organisation Vanuatu Association of NGOs, about creating a formal communication link. However individual NGOs have established links with their appropriate Government departments and ministries.

Most country delegations comprising government - non-government organisations and non-governmental organisations presented a Country Paper outlining the state of organisation relations in their countries.

Tuvalu representatives felt that not enough attention had been paid to NGOs who could assist the Government process. The subsistence economy and difficulty of transport among the nine islands mean NGOs have had to rely on their own resources. Provision of help in times of need such as in the aftermath of cyclones is difficult. The Tuvalu Family Health Association has been allowed to implement a basic health programme with Government approval and donor support.

The Solomon Islands described how they have seen as being at loggerheads with one another, but have seen a great deal of cooperation that was often overlooked. Examples of cooperation in establishing a marine conservation area, assisting a cash strapped Ministry of Forestry to check logging company operations and community based rehabilitation for people with disabilities.

The Kiribati Ministry of Environment and Social Development acts as a home for all NGOs. Secretarial support is provided for women's affairs, youth and sports organisations. Overseas NGOs such as Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific, Red Cross, Peace Corps, VSO, VSA and OSB have agreements with the Government and direct links to

*Director, Water for Survival, PO Box 6, Auckland, New Zealand. Phone: (09) 528 9752, email: John@wfs.ak.planet.gen.nz

government departments. There are some difficulties in assignment of responsibilities and an inappropriate divisional structure. It was felt qualified public servants should join as members of the NGOs but this has not happened.

Papua New Guinea NGOs wish to establish more formal and institutionalised linkages within the NGO movement and Government. The Department of Home Affairs formulated an NGO policy in 1991 and this is being reviewed to ensure there is goodwill and remove any unnecessary barriers to NGO - Government cooperation. NGO initiatives such as the Peoples Alternative Social Action Programme and the Capacity Building Programme are viewed favourably by Government. Active involvements of NGOs in forums, workshops, seminars, conferences and statutory boards are ways in which the Government is cooperating with NGOs.

Hana Tukukino, Chairperson of the Workshop Planning Committee, described the need to integrate a vast wealth of

old technology from the Pacific into the technology of today. We need to integrate the timeless society with today. We need courage to deal with complex issues and different ideologies. In New Zealand we are being asked to take responsibility for our own affairs. The people know what is best for them. NGOs have the skills to serve, to be accountable and transparent.

Don Clarke, Deputy Director of the Commonwealth Foundation, said the outcomes of this workshop would be discussed at an NGO Seminar and the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Edinburgh this year. He referred to the many changes taking place in the way governments operate. Services are being contracted out and there is a general recognition by governments that NGOs can work directly with people at the community level. There are many issues and challenges for NGOs, for example maintaining integrity in a commercial environment. □

**Let us not despair but work with new inspiration,
for like our ancestors before us we in our time have
the chance to create for us and our descendants a society,
a nation, and a region to be proud of ... our children
will in turn create their future ...**

Langi Kavaliku

In Pacific Perspective 1980; 9(2):62-76