

# The concept of *empowerment* in a traditional Fijian context

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to begin to clarify the key terms used around the concepts of power and community empowerment in a traditional Fijian context. The approach that has been undertaken purposefully uses social inquiry techniques which can be easily replicated by others working in the field of community empowerment. This paper will be of interest to people who are most familiar with a westernised conceptualisation of community empowerment who work in development programmes and in particular to those in a Fijian or in a South Pacific cultural context. The paper discusses the relevance of the findings to those working in development programmes and suggests further areas of research.

## Introduction

Many of the definitions of empowerment have a positive and pervasive value and have been developed by psychologists in industrialised countries in the areas of neighbourhood empowerment and community mental health<sup>1,2</sup>. The definitions reflect the notion that empowerment must come from within a group and can not be given to a group or community. For example empowerment may be generally described as:

- *the connection between a sense of personal competence, a desire for and a willingness to take action in the public domain.*<sup>3</sup>

**Many of the definitions of empowerment have a positive and pervasive value ... The definitions reflect the notion that empowerment must come from within a group and can not be given to a group or community.**

- *the ability to act collectively to solve problems and influence important issues.*<sup>4</sup>

Erzinger (1994) identifies that empowerment may hold a very different connotation for people living in developing countries.<sup>5</sup> What might be perceived as empowering by a women in an industrialised country may be very different from that of a women in a rural community in a developing country. Contextual influences in developing countries such as poverty (economic), superstition (cultural) and political rule can create a strong sense of oppression or power over others.

Power is widely viewed in westernised countries as:

- power-over** or the ability to affect the actions and ideas of others despite resistance
- power-with** or our abilities to accomplish something, a sharing of power and
- power-from-within** an individual and psychological power promoting self-confidence and self-esteem.

Community empowerment is widely viewed in western literature as the control over decisions about the distribution of limited resources where this type of a power over situation leads to some people gaining at the expense of others. The role of development workers is to attempt to transform 'power-over' relations and to work towards a 'power-with' situation where the control of decisions about resources and needs are shared between stakeholders.<sup>6</sup> But how closely does this westernised view point relate to the concepts of power and empowerment in cultures in non-industrialised countries?

This paper begins to address this and other questions regarding the conceptualisation of empowerment in non-industrialised countries.

## Methodology

The initial part of the research used the themes of power and empowerment in a Fijian context to identify the main headings. Three unstructured interviews were held with staff at the Fiji National Centre for Health Promotion where the

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researcher was working. The use of subjects closely associated with the researcher was intentional given the complexity of the topic under discussion. It was necessary for the subjects to be able to articulate their explanations to the researcher, to have an understanding of the topic and experience of working in a rural community setting. Two further unstructured interviews were held with secondary school teachers to provide a perspective from an urban and institutional setting. The teachers were contacts of one of the Centre staff members. The interviews were held at the places of work of the respondents at a pre-determined time. The interviews were manually recorded and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes.

The next part of the research was to use the main headings taken from the unstructured interviews to develop semi-structured group interviews in regard to the Fijian terms of 'lewa' and 'kaukauwa'. The group interviews were intended to provide more insight into the meaning of the identified terms to determine who has power and how the different forms of power inter-relate and to provide anecdotal information to highlight the research findings. Three group interviews were held with 1) elders living in Mokani rural community, 2) with adults living in the Nauqu settlement and 3) with youth living in Wainivula section<sup>4</sup> a peri-urban community in and around Suva during June and July 1997. Each group interview had between 8 and 15 male and female participants and took between 60 and 120 minutes. Initial contact was made through staff at the National Centre for Health Promotion who had a wide range of community links and the researcher was accompanied on each visit by a translator from the Centre. Translation was not necessary in all communities, but it is customary for a visitor to be introduced by someone known to the community. The group interviews were manually recorded by the researcher and were held in a traditional meeting place.

## Findings and discussion

The term *lewa* was identified in the semi-structured interviews as having a close association with power and empowerment in a Fijian context. The dictionary definition of *lewa* is: command, authority, judgement, rule. As *lewa kaukauwa*, tyranny and as *lewa deivaki, matua* and *vuku*, prudent or enlightened rule. As a verb, to command, rule, judge, decide<sup>7</sup>. As a verb in a later translation, *vakatulewa* or *vakataulewa: tauca na lewa*, to make decisions, to decide.<sup>8</sup>

*Lewa* refers most closely to the concept of power-over. However, this can depend on how the word is used and on

the subject of the sentence. The verb 'to decide' would most closely relate to the different forms of power in either a singular or plural context.

**Chiefly 'power-over'.** The *lewa* provides a structural hierarchy which in the Fijian culture is traditionally headed by the village chief. Traditionally the *lewa* is kept within the family of the chief after it has been inherited as a result of birthright. The person with the chiefly *lewa* may delegate authority to another person such as the village herald, his brother, or other relatives.

*"A person or family has lewa by right of birth and is connected to the chieftain system".* Clan Ratu.

*"Lewa provides a framework of authority [in the community]".* Mokani male villager.

If a chief were to fall ill or die, his *lewa* would be passed to another Ratu (chief) according to accepted custom and in consultation with elders by a clan within the tribe with the designated right as 'king makers'.

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In settlements where a Ratu is not present an elder representative may be appointed by the community members and given the *lewa*. This person has the responsibility to consult all

members and, when necessary, to delegate authority to others in the community.

*"Here we have no chief. We have given this old man the lewa. He in turn can give this to the younger members of the settlement. He always consults the others [of the community]. In his absence his children will hold the lewa".* Nauqu male settlement member.

**'Power-over' at work and in the home.** The *lewa* may be bestowed upon someone as result of their status or position within society, within the family or within an institution. It may be a collective decision to appoint the person and with the position is the authority of decision making or power-over.

*"The person who has the lewa is the recognised leader. In our community this is the church leader."* Wainivula male community member.

*"The lewa provides a code of ethics and values in the family. In the family the father has the lewa."* Fijian female programme coordinator.

The *lewa* can refer to a structure of authority such as exists in an institution. The *lewa* can be delegated and this is

normally done within a framework following lines of authority or management.

*"It is the cohesive bond of an institutional structure such as a school, the rules and regulations that ensures that its members do not go off the rails."* Fijian male school teacher.

#### **The concepts of 'power-from-within' and 'power-with'.**

The term *kaukauwa* was identified in the semi-structured interviews as having a close association with the use of the term *lewa* in Fijian communities. The dictionary definition of *kaukauwa* is: Strong, hard. Also *va-kaukauwa*, violently, forcibly, strongly. As a verb *Vaka-kaukauwa-taka*, to harden, strengthen, reinforce; also to oppress<sup>7</sup>.

*Kaukauwa* refers most closely to the concepts of power-from-within (psychological, self esteem and self confidence)

*"It is the strength she has to look after her own family as a single mother."* Mokani female villager.

and power-with (our abilities to accomplish something, a sharing of power).

*"Other people can help someone achieve kaukauwa by example or through discussion and assistance."* Mokani male villager.

*Kaukauwa* appears to be an ideal and something which individuals, families and communities strive to achieve through hard work.

*"This can exist at the individual, family or community levels and may be achieved by hard work and financial or material possessions."* Clan Ratu.

**Community empowerment.** *Kaukauwa* appears to be the closest concept in a Fijian context to community empowerment. It refers to community strength and unity which can be developed and assisted by its members. It is a process, metaphorically described by one male member of Mokani village as *"bringing two blocks per week to slowly build a community centre"*.

*"Kaukauwa is unity. Without unity the village has less kaukauwa and the chief has less lewa."* Mokani male villager.

*"Kaukauwa bonds the community together through customs and rituals such as funerals and through clanship."*

*It gives a sense of community to its members."* Fijian female programme coordinator.

The term *kaukauwa* can be used to describe the right a person has to do something. The term *dodonu* has a similar meaning and a dictionary definition of this is: right, straight.<sup>7</sup> It was described in the semi-structured interviews as *'the right to do something'*.

**Power as strength.** The use of the term *kaukauwa* may be applied to various forms of strength, for example physical strength and strength gained from medicine.

*"Something hard like stone, strong, solid or stable."* Wainivula male community member.

*"It is the strength given when I use medicinal plants to heal others."* Nauqu female settlement member.

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**The relationship between 'power-over' and 'power-with'.** Chiefly *lewa* is a state, a status which is bestowed by birthright or by others in an accepted way and is interdependent on the strength or *kaukauwa* of the community. It is in the interests of the person with the chiefly *lewa* and the members of the community to maintain and increase the *kaukauwa*. The relationship is reciprocal and in this way the *lewa* and *kaukauwa* play an important role in the unity and strength of the community.

*"A strong lewa means a great deal of kaukauwa."* Mokani male community member.

The *kaukauwa* may be a mechanism by which the members of a community manage the authority delegated to them by the person with the *lewa*. It may also be a mechanism used when the community decides to resist and challenge this authority.

## **Conclusion**

A review of empowerment literature by the researcher on empowerment has shown that there is an absence of applied research in regard to community empowerment in developing countries. The literature mainly focuses on circumstances of 'power-over' and the control of oppressed and marginalised populations by others. Despite this, the term 'community empowerment' is increasingly used in relation to development programmes which place an emphasis on participation and community control.

The use of simple qualitative techniques in this study have been shown to be useful to identify the key terms in regard to 'power-over' [*lewa*], 'power-from-within' and 'power-with' [*kaukauwa*]. Although these terms provided a common understanding it is important to recognise that this can depend on how they are used. For example, the term *kaukauwa* in the form '*veivakakaukauwataki*' suggests action and a process rather than just a concept and would be a more useful term to use in a development context.

The group interviews generated a great deal of interest and the participants were clearly motivated by terms which they understood and felt to be relevant to their own lives and work and which they had identified as being important. The use of westernised concepts such as community empowerment in the setting of developing countries are unlikely to be as relevant, important or clearly understood by programme stakeholders.

It is suggested that further qualitative research is undertaken to provide clarity concerning the use of the terms power and empowerment in Fijian and in other cultural contexts in the South Pacific where similar societal structures exist. This could be achieved through simple social inquiry techniques such as those used in this study by the people working in development programmes. The findings of these inquiries should be shared to identify and compare terms which are relevant and important to the primary stakeholders as an alternative to the use of westernised language and concepts. This would provide all stakeholders with a more mutual understanding of the development programme in which they are involved and toward which they are expected to contribute.

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... *Vakaturanga* has become the most important element of the Fijian ethos and continues to be the ideal behavioural pattern ...

A. D. Ravuvu  
'The Fijian Ethos' (1987)