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This is a work in progress – please contact the author if you wish to cite any of the contents. The text varies slightly from the copy of the paper distributed at the DEVNET conference.

Deprivation, desires and decision-making – some reflections

The starting point for this paper is my interest in the gaps where discussions by international bodies of particular issues in the South Pacific intersect. Major areas of interest include poverty indices (UNDP) and “quality of life”. While some Pacific nations may rank well in relation to measures of poverty, it will be argued that many people experience forms of deprivation that are not included in standard indices. In situations of deprivation people perforce limit their desires and choice making to what they see as achievable. Governments can then claim, in the absence of agitation, that there is little desire on the part of the poor to change or improve their standard of living.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the University of Waikato for support during study leave, Feb. to June 2000, and to the Research Committee, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), The University of Waikato, for part of the financial support for the research project on which this paper is based. Also to the staff of Unilink and administrative staff of FASS for their assistance while I was in the field. Thanks too to helpers in Tonga: Edward, Fiona, Inu and Aleki, and to the people who let me interrupt their lives and be interviewed. In Samoa, thanks to the executive of the National Council of Women, and to Peggy and Jim Dunlop.

Deprivation, desires and decision-making – some reflections

My discussion and partial conclusions are simple ones. I have written this paper as someone whose life has been closely linked for the past fifteen years with the lives of people living in a South Pacific nation and in migrant communities in Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S.A.. For a considerable portion of the time I have spent doing fieldwork research in Tonga I have lived in households in towns and in villages most of which were located on atolls. I have lived for shorter periods in Samoa. My views tend to be partisan in relation to the way people try to make their way in the world, and the barriers they have encountered in trying to have a better quality of life.

I have been influenced by the writings of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. I have come late to their work and cannot pretend to understand the depth of Nussbaum's or Sen's philosophical discussions. However, their ideas seem to me to be essential reading for anyone engaged in analysing why poverty imposes limitations on people's opportunities to live in a modicum of comfort.

In February-March this year I went back to Tonga specifically to look at the way housing styles were changing. I have outlined the results of this research in another paper (Cowling, 2000). In that paper I discuss the environmental impact of mangrove destruction, caused by the unchecked reclamation of land edging the two lagoons of the island of Tongatapu. I also report on the marked contrast in housing stock between the homes of the wealthy elite and those built by prosperous emigrants living away from Tonga, and those of the poor and less well-off. I occasionally compare the situation in Tonga with that of Samoa.

Capabilities

In the the UNDP's 1999 Human Poverty Index the Kingdom of Tonga rates among the best-off Pacific countries. The low value for Tonga of 5.9 is second after Niue's 4.8, with the Cook Islands and Tuvalu at 6.1. The highest is Papua New Guinea – 52.2 and Vanuatu 46.6.¹

As is probably well-known:

The Human Poverty Index is derived from a combination of the percentage of people not expected to survive to age 40; the percentage of adults who are not literate; the percentage of people without access to safe water or health services, and the percentage of children under 5 years of age who are underweight.

It is pleasing that Tonga rated so well, but obviously these poverty indices are the minimum measures. As Nussbaum (1995:81ff) says such indices represent a threshold over which we would hope all human beings had passed. Moving on to achieving a better or *good* quality of life is more problematic. The achievement of this is affected both by the aspirations of those governing a nation for their citizens and by what choices individuals feel they are able to make.

Nussbaum and Sen (1993:3) in the Introduction to their edited volume *The Quality of Life* summarise their view of what they call functionings and capabilities.

The life that a person leads can be seen as a combination of various doings and beings, which can be generically called functionings. These functionings vary from such elementary matters as being well nourished and disease-free to more complex doings or beings, such as having self-respect, preserving human dignity, taking part in the life of the community, and so on. The capability of a person refers to the various alternative combinations of functionings, any one of which (any combination, that is) the person can choose to have. In this sense the capability of a person corresponds to the freedom that a person has to lead one kind of life or another.

In his paper, "Capability and Well-Being" Amartya Sen notes (1993:33) that

The freedom to lead different types of life is reflected in the person's capability set. The capability of a person depends on a variety of factors, including personal characteristics and social arrangements.

Nussbaum (1995:83-85) has eleven measures of capability which she terms "Basic Human Functional Capabilities". These include freedom to be oneself, freedom from unnecessary pain, freedom to creatively use one's imagination, to have attachments, to enjoy life, and significantly, for my purposes, to have the freedom to make a variety of life-choices and "to have adequate shelter". She links the latter with health (1995:83, Notes 50 & 51), noting that "health interacts in complex ways with housing". Nussbaum (1995:87), following Sen, asserts that one of the questions we have to ask when "assessing the quality of life in a country" is have people been enabled "to live well"?

A reasonably benign climate means people in Tonga do not starve or suffer from the cold, although some in poorer quality housing may experience discomfort during the rainy season and winter months. If “quality of life” is measured by the existence and quality of shelter; of adequacy of food; of life experiences that are largely pleasurable rather than oppressive; of rates of serious illness and of mortality, then Tonga can be ranked moderately well.

It is possible for the very poorest person to survive in Tonga– that is, not starve or suffer from the conditions caused by severe deprivation. There are four beggars regularly sitting on the pavement of the main shopping area in Nuku’alofa - many more would be seen in Sydney, London, New York or San Francisco. A disturbing trend is the number of young children who are not attending school but spend their days trying to sell items such as matches and peanuts to workers and passersby. In Apia in Samoa a number of young children also spend the day selling items such as brooms, batteries and fruit to workers and passersby. You also see women who are unable to afford the fees for a market stall sitting on the pavement with one or two pineapples or a few bottles of coconut oil to sell.

I discussed the idea of ranking the quality of life for the poorer Tongan family on a scale from ten down to one with a number of people; most suggested you might locate them at 5 with more prosperous Tongans ranked higher in qualified gradations (see Figure I below).

Figure I: Ranking quality of life in Tonga

10	N/A
9	Very prosperous traders & others who have invested in large new homes and business ventures needing large amounts of capital.
8	N/A
7	“Middle class” - people who have well-paid positions and have had tertiary education (cf. James 1998). Returned migrants with new home and repatriated pension.
6	Church ministers (<i>stipend may be low but has house - increasingly new ones are being built for the ministers of the Free Wesleyan Church. They are also kept supplied with foodstuffs and gifts of crafts.</i>)
5.5	Tongan lower paid civil servants; Church of Tonga ministers
5	Tongan poorer peasant and poorer working class
4	<i>Favela</i> residents in Rio de Janeiro; Poorest people in Tonga – inadequate shelter, few possessions
3	Residents of slums in Jakarta and in Bangkok
2	People “sleeping rough” in cities such as London and New York
1	Homeless in Calcutta, Mumbai (Bombay).

In fact I described the situation of people in 1 and 2 to the 30 people I approached for their views. One woman had seen a television programme on Jakarta.

Helping one another

A recent trend in the Pacific, and particularly in Tonga and in Samoa, is for elite members of society to claim there is no poverty. They commonly state that “The people have their culture” – *anga fakaTonga* or *fa’a Samoa*. Linked with this is the claim that “If people are poor it is because they are lazy”.

I can understand why elite individuals in Tonga and in Samoa would wish to deny that there is real poverty and deprivation in their countries. If you take the woman’s statement at face value it could be interpreted as a claim that poverty is outweighed by the fact that people have some knowledge of what they believe to be their cultural heritage, their “tradition”, including customary behaviour.

That is, they have a knowledge of what it means to be a Tongan or Samoan or and how one should think and behave. By implication they have a sense of self-worth even if they do not have economic prosperity. Additional evidence is

offered in Samoa by indicating the existence of many traditional-style houses. In both nations those claiming there is a strong commitment to tradition point to the farming of traditional food crops, women making traditional crafts and many people happily participating in traditional dance and song presentations.

Epeli Hau'ofa (1985) has asserted that there are very few activities in the Pacific islands today that could be labelled truly 'traditional', apart from languages. He notes that many practices and values have been imposed from outside or "deliberately created by island leaders" (p.153). He juxtaposes "traditional" with "indigenous values" which he sees as pre-dating European influences but operating, in a modified form, contiguously with the new concepts.

Some customary values and practices offer the poorest people some means of surviving. One practice derives from what the Samoan economist Te'o Ian Fairbairn termed "economic sharing arrangements" (Fairbairn with Tisdall 1985:138) and which fifteen years later is locally glossed in Samoa and in Tonga as "helping", as "gifts", as fictional "loans". They are fictive in that the money is unlikely to be repaid.

In Tonga this year there have been discussions by members of Parliament about what they term "the Tongan economy", something different from any European economy. Apparently they mean that there is an indigenous way of managing economic relations and are alluding to what is often termed a Pacific value, that of "caring and sharing". Fairbairn noted (1985:139) that the "institutionalised sharing" which had been present in pre-contact Pacific societies "has been significantly modified over time". Hau'ofa (1985:162) points out that sharing was essential in the past because many items of foodstuffs were perishable.

However, four important aspects of economic sharing for rural village residents which are still in place are access to common land for grazing animals, access to wells and ponds, fishing and gathering rights on reefs and in lagoons, and access to trees such as hibiscus and pandanus for craft materials. In recent discussions customary or communal land tenure in the Pacific has been termed "an informal system of social security" (Firth 1999:191) and "an insurance floor ... providing for basic needs" (Bertram 1999:107).²

In those Samoan villages where the *aiga* is still an important production group working land owned in common, sharing of commodities between members of an extended family is also common. Farming work groups, both of extended kin and of villagers, which had been common in the past, are now much less common in Tonga. When they exist it is usually to perform farming duties for the King or the church.

However, numerous authors (e.g. Hau'ofa 1985:160; Howlett 1985; Ward 1997) have pointed out that Pacific Island land tenure systems have been altering in favour of individual land ownership for some time. It is not valid, either, to see the majority of the populations of Tonga or Samoa as dependent on subsistence farming. Remittances, in cash or kind, are a more important social welfare contributor.³

In the main towns of Samoa and of Tonga, Apia and Nuku'alofa, the spirit or tradition which motivates the practice of sharing is also present in some kin networks. It is demonstrated in the loaning or gifting of substantial amounts of cash to family members or close friends coping with a life-crisis, or the occasional gifting of agricultural produce and other foodstuffs.

In Tonga such sharing is termed *fetokoni'aki*, translated as "helping one another" and is seen as a fundamental cultural value. In Tonga there is a noticeable absence in villages and towns of co-residence or close residence of members of extended families because of internal and external migration. However, members of some families will send excess amounts of cooked food to close relatives or gifts of fish which has unexpectedly come their way and will share food left over from the preparation of a feast table.

Gifting is also present on a much larger scale in Tonga in a modern version of what Eric Wolf (1982) termed "The tribute mode of production" when hundreds of pigs, and scores of baskets of yams, plus craft goods are ceremonially presented to the King and to nobles on particular occasions. Tonga has a much weaker village organisation and oversight than does Samoa. However, when tribute is required chiefly representatives (*matapule*) and town officers canvass households to commission craft goods and to request contributions of agricultural products.

The contemporary tribute-giving has been styled as being done from choice, motivated by feelings of "love" and concepts of duty. For example, in the context of a discussion of aristocratic (noble) and commoner relations, a senior Tongan noble declared that these tributes were and are made from choice.

What was considered slavery in ancient Tonga was really a traditional obligation that had to be fulfilled by all Tongans to the Tu'i Tonga ["Sacred high chief"]. Then in 1862 Sioasi Tupou I [the first king] emancipated all Tongans from their obligations to the chiefs, but if somebody wanted to continue it was their free choice (Fonua 2000b:34).

The Tongan economist Sitiveni Halapua (1994:5) has pointed out that the sharing process in all Pacific nations “is a very important cultural resource that assures a basic and sustainable material livelihood while providing social and physical satisfaction”. He argues that states, when devising development plans, need to take more account of this and other cultural factors. I have no doubt that many planners in states in the South Pacific do so. The existence of the sharing system, including the sending of remittances, means that politicians and planners do not have to direct their attention to people’s personal well-being, but can concentrate on improving infrastructure and developing projects which may provide work and income for the nation’s population as a whole.

Mo’ui lelei (the “desirable life”, the “good life”)

In discussions with a number of individuals on low incomes in Tonga this year all said that their income allocation had four priorities. The first was to “put food on the table”, the second, “pay the children’s school fees”, the third, “buy the children’s school uniforms”, and the fourth, “Give money to the church”. If they were homeowners or farmers paying off a bank loan somehow the money for repayments had to be siphoned off from the amounts allocated for these four priorities. In one village close to Nuku’alofa I found families who could not afford to pay the modest fee for receiving piped water. Most of these families did not have a rainwater storage tank, so they went to neighbours with tanks to beg for drinking and washing water.

When moving around the villages it is obvious that many of the houses built with New Zealand aid following the massive destruction caused by Cyclone Isaac in 1982 have deteriorated considerably. House maintenance and repairs are not high on the list of many poorer people’s priorities. Nor do people have the funds to install drains to deal with heavy rain so in many cases water lies around village houses on Tongatapu in lake-like proportions for long periods of time.

In contrast large, sometimes opulent churches have been built in many villages. These have been funded by collections from local members as well as by money obtained from migrants living abroad. The devices used to obtain the money from migrants include commissioning a senior man or small group of men to spend some months away in Australia, the U.S.A. and New Zealand visiting church kava circles. Another fund-raising device is presentations by touring concert parties, again targeting church groups. Most commonly family members in Tonga request large sums from relatives living overseas. A considerable proportion of this money is donated to the annual church collections.

Many migrant Tongans feel somewhat guilty that they are enjoying the higher wages and other benefits of living overseas. However, in many cases they too are poor and face double demands, for membership of a Tongan church in their new home also requires a big financial commitment.

In choosing to respond to the ideal of a “mo’ui lelei” or “good life”, the idea of obtaining a higher level of comfort, by improving personal and household amenities, is subordinated to the *moral* aspect of this concept. A good life is demonstrated in an individual’s obvious devotion to God and country.

The church buildings give people a pleasant environment in which to spend many hours during the working week and on Sundays. The church buildings are a source of pride but also, most importantly, represent the members’ palpable commitment to their faith. Many Tongans have developed an equation-like explanation for giving so much to the church. “If we give to God, he will bless us and our children”. The blessings are not so much material as spiritual and social. Spiritual, in that gifting earns a place in heaven when one is dead. Social, in that children will achieve educationally and so obtain jobs which will raise them and their families in the local social scale.

Feeling entitled

The ability to function capably, and in a way which satisfies both the physical and psychological needs of individuals, is obviously affected by people’s freedom to make particular choices. Agency and choice making can be strongly affected by the ideological framing of a society, or what Pierre Bourdieu (1978/1972) defined as an important element in the *habitus* ⁴

If it is clear that a large proportion of a population are sacrificing the possibility of achieving a better standard of living for their household in favour of gaining a future reward the situation needs to be examined. This sacrifice involves contributing to the achievement of a family’s or a village’s corporate prestige by giving goods for a large-scale tribute presentation, or by building a larger, grandiose church.

While psychological and spiritual well-being can be achieved through a person’s self-sacrifice in the service of others or of the whole community, the individual’s physical well-being, including comfort, can be seriously affected. Ironically,

such self-sacrifice is to the detriment of the national good, when the state is busy promoting tourism. Viewing poor housing stock and badly maintained villages in Tonga has had a negative effect on many tourists. I realise that it can be argued that knowing that slums exist in Manila or in Jakarta does not seem to put people off taking holidays in the Philippines or in Indonesia. Most tourists are not particularly sensitive souls. But somehow tourists in Pacific countries expect an attractive totality, not just in the environment, but in the residences of the locals. Samoa has responded to this – Tonga has not.

It took two world wars and a leap forward in manufacturing for working class people in Australia and New Zealand to aspire to a better quality of life. This included living in a well-built house (but not necessarily owning it),⁵ owning a car and a range of whitegoods. High levels of comfort and the ownership of many possessions were not the priorities prior to the 1950s, except for the wealthy. The achievement of a better quality of life was also contingent on a long history of agitation for worker's rights, including better working conditions and appropriate wage levels.

There has been an increase in the ownership of goods such as cars, trucks, television sets, refrigerators, video players, and radios since 1986 in Tonga (Kingdom of Tonga 1999:12) and in Samoa. Until recently not many of these goods would have been purchased locally but would have been bought by relatives living overseas and many of these items were second-hand. Ownership of a television set is not a useful indicator of prosperity. Non-government organisations funded from Australia and Canada have been involved in the provision of household water tanks and better kitchens. Australian government aid has helped fund water tank construction and infrastructural improvements.

The provision of better housing and better local environments is not seen as necessarily being a Government responsibility. The Governments of Tonga and of Samoa have ministries and boards which oversee waste disposal, the provision of health services, road construction, and town water supplies, and which have responsibility for the care of the general environment. Concerns about quality of life and comfort are seen as individual matters. In Tonga reasonable levels of comfort and a reasonable standard of housing are not seen as a good which poorer people can yet aspire to have.

In Tonga any perception of "rights" to a better quality of life is generally low among many commoners. In many cases it is clear from discussions with poorer people in Tonga that they feel achieving an improved quality of life, evidenced in a better and more comfortable standard of living, is beyond their reach or *entitlement*.

They have benefited from the self-sacrifice of many thousands of Tongans living overseas. The migrants have not only regularly given money to family members for the annual church collections, school fees and other needs, they have also contributed to villages for electrification schemes programmes, as well as contributing money for new churches.⁶

A negative view of entitlement means that people will not agitate for change. It may well be that elite individuals in Tonga, as in Samoa, would wish to deny that there is poverty and deprivation. Chambers (1997:45) has an apposite comment on this issue:

Deprivation as poor people perceive it has many dimensions including not only lack of income and wealth, but also social inferiority, physical weakness, disability and sickness, vulnerability, physical and social isolation, powerlessness, and humiliation.

Differences in housing quality and in local environments are demonstrations of "lack of income and wealth" and "social inferiority". Further research would enable a greater understanding of people's life choices and their aspirations in the present economic environment

In the meantime it would seem that many Tongans have sacrificed their personal quality of life and comfort for ephemeral feelings of pride and for an investment in the hereafter. Informants (both well-off and poor) told me of the pride they felt when a church for which they had given and collected money had been built.

Of course this is a very human emotion, but mixed in with pride is the belief that not only have they demonstrated to their neighbours their commitment to church life but also God has noted the church members' generosity. They believe there will be a concomitant reward for the family in this life as well as in the next. They have also demonstrated a commitment to the collective good rather than to individual gratification.

Full circle – tradition and values

I am not condemning people, particularly the poor, for putting their energy and money into the building of churches. As Epeli Hau'ofa (1987) has pointed out the poor have been targeted too often by elite individuals in Pacific nations as unprogressive and not committed to development, because of their apparent commitment to other values. However, I am concerned about the way that poorer people in Tonga, in spite of royal and noble⁷ rhetoric, are housed and are

somewhat uncared for in material terms. I am aware that the people do not experience the levels of deprivation found in parts of Asia and Africa, but this is due in part to the contribution of money to the Tongan economy by migrants.

The scale of the remittances is not yet diminishing. However, I am told there are now tee-shirts being worn by young people of Pacific island descent in Porirua, a suburb of Wellington, which read in English and Samoan “No more falavelave” [“No more gifting”]. The young of the Tongan community are repeating this sentiment. Nevertheless, it is impossible to predict when the sending of remittances will decline.

Hau’ofa, like Fairbairn and Halapua sees “sharing of goods and services” (p.156) as a vital aspect of indigenous values. In his analyses he has emphasised the deference to group interests which motivated this sharing in the past. However, he also notes the mobility of elite members of island societies. He links this fact to the “alienation” (p.163) of elites from a true sense of place and connectedness with the historic past. Nevertheless Hau’ofa (p.165) is optimistic that the indigenous social security system – “in which the elderly and the disabled are taken care of by their families” will remain strong.

It is the elites of island populations who decide the future directions of their economies. If the free market ideology, which is influential in Tonga, is seen by politicians and planners as the main economic guide, and if contemporary aid programmes support projects which are meant to enable a mythical trickle-down effect, then many individuals will not experience an improvement in the quality of their lives.

Link this to the lack of a political framework which would permit vigorous criticism of the status quo and a general acceptance of a religious and social philosophy which views humility and sacrifice as prime values, then it is difficult to see how things will change. Tongans have many of the Nussbaum and Sen capabilities and functionings. Some aspirations and capabilities are limited by the situation which I have outlined.

Notes

1. Cited in report of Meeting of Pacific Women GO/NGO Beijing +5, Expert Working Group Meeting, Suva, Fiji, Aug 27-31, 1999. Published by the Pacific Regional Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) Annex 3.
2. Firth (1999:191) notes:
Most Pacific island societies have characteristics that will counterbalance globalization. The first is communal land tenure, much derided by aid donors as a barrier to development. For all its faults, communal land tenure continues to act in many countries as an informal system of social security...

See also Bertram (1999:107)
Actual and potential subsistence production from land, most of which remains unalienated under customary tenure, puts an insurance floor under living standards by providing for basic needs, and possibly also for some modest cash sales of produce to urban or export markets.
3. Remittances from Tongans working overseas increased from TP\$70 million in 1999 to TP\$90 million in 2000. 80 percent of the daily consumption of foodstuffs is imported. (Finau 2000a:14).
4. Bourdieu (1977:85) uses the term *habitus* to encapsulate the end-product of the life-long process during which an individual is imprinted with the requisite information to enable her (or him) to function within a society. He describes the individual's acquisition of his or her habitus thus:

The habitus is the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history, the objective structures (e.g. of language, economy, etc.) to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions, in the ... individuals lastingly subjected to the same conditionings, and hence placed in the same material conditions of existence.
5. The State became involved in providing homes for people on lower incomes to rent in Australia from the late 1940s and in New Zealand from the 1930s.
6. Brown 1995:19 notes:
It is well known that a significant part of remittances in the South Pacific are sent directly to churches and other institutions, such as community organisations, sports clubs, cyclone relief funds, and so on.
7. The monarchy in Tonga was established by conquest in the mid-19th century with the encouragement of Wesleyan missionaries. It was consolidated in subsequent generations by the marriages of descendants of traditional high chiefly titleholders. Prior to this Tongan society was dominated by a sacred high chief, two other high chiefs, lesser chiefly/aristocratic families (known today as *nopele* (nobles)) and *matapule* (representatives of the chiefs and originally labour organisers). The term for non-aristocrats was and is *tu'a* (commoners). There are now 33 noble families and the titleholders are entitled to a seat in the Tongan parliament. A number are elected by the nobles and some selected by the King on a triennial basis.

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