

National Information and Library Policy Development in Support of the UN Sustainable Development Goals: the Case of Fiji in a Pacific context

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Abstract:

The Fiji Government's 5-Year and 20-Year Development Plans are aligned to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) thus reflecting their importance to Fiji's sustainable development. In the context of the Plan, this paper discusses the status of national information and library policy development in the country using a critical analysis approach against the backdrop of the Statement of Intent of the Pacific Libraries Summit held in 2018 and its strategies and work plan. The outcomes of this paper will provide an indication of the status of national information and library policy development; the obstacles to their development and recommendations that might also be stimulus for other Pacific Islands. Reference is made to the University of the South Pacific Library's role in 'student success' through inclusive and education and the acquisition of life-long information skills.

Keywords: Fiji Islands, national information policy, national library policy, Pacific Libraries Summit; The University of the South Pacific;

Introduction

The information explosion and technological developments reaffirmed for the world that information for national development is more readily available and accessible. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) has reminded many nations of the importance of qualitative and quantitative information in the development process of achieving the SDGs. For the requisite information to be available, organised and accessed for the intended impact and output requires guidance at the national level in the form of legislation and policy. Closely linked to this is the role served by national, public, special, school/academic libraries as the conduits for free and easy access to information produced within the country in order for citizenry to be informed and to be able to participate in national developments and to use it for whatever personal and community development it may be needed for.

With particular reference to the Fiji Islands, this paper looks at how Fiji supports the UN SDGs through its 5-Year and 20-Year National Development Plans (NDP). Using a critical analysis approach, the author attempts to determine the role of a national information policy in the process of its construction against the backdrop of the goals of the 2018 Pacific Libraries Summit *Statement of Intent*.

From the analysis, the author will determine the status of national information and library policies in Fiji; identify any obstacles to their development and make recommendations for Fiji that might also act as stimulus for Fiji's Pacific neighbours.

Located in the Pacific Region, the Republic of the Fiji Islands has a population of 884,887¹. Comprising indigenous Fijians known as *itaukei* making up over half the population; Fijians of Indian descent and others of European, Chinese and Pacific descent make up Fiji's multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural background. Adding to this mix are peoples from all over the world who are employed in the offices of regional and international organizations located in Fiji.

Libraries and archives in Fiji are a colonial and missionary legacy² established in an oral tradition environment of the *'itaukei'* culture. Independence from the British in 1970 resulted in the transfer of governance to the Fijian people and with it came the responsibility for the establishment, management and development of all matters pertaining to information –its organisation, access, dissemination and preservation.

Fiji, like many of the Pacific islands colonised by the British and French, in particular, inherited legal systems that provided the bases for developing their own legislation.

In the Fiji context of information and libraries, this gave rise to two pieces of legislation namely:

- *An Act to Provide for the Better Preservation of the Public Records of Fiji* also cited as *The Public Records of Fiji Act No. 29 of 1971*
- *Libraries (Deposit of Books) Act Cap 109 1978*
http://www.archives.gov.fj/images/Cap_109.pdf

Until recently these were the only two pieces of legislation that made any specific reference to information and libraries. It should be noted that Cap 109 is not an Act covering libraries but provides for the deposit and preservation of copies of books printed in Fiji with the Fiji National Archives.

Prompted by the information explosion, ICT developments and Fiji's role in the information arena, this has resulted in the promulgation of new legislation on information and related areas:

- *Fiji Information Act (2018) Act No. 9 of 2018* legislates Right to Information; Right To Correction And Deletion Of Incorrect Personal Information; Promoting Access To Information; Accountability And Transparency Commission.
- [Fiji] *National Research Council Bill. Bill No. 5 2016*
- *Online Safety Act 2018 (Act No. 8 of 2018)*

A Freedom of Information Law remains as a work in progress.

Legislation manifested through strong policy based is an enabler for effective and efficient development. Policy guides action and the law gives it legitimacy. The development of legislation is generally followed by policy development, but it is recognised that policy development may lead to the recommendation of new laws.

Based on the existing legislation, Fiji demonstrates that it has the legislative environment for the development of national information and library policy but whether it is in place, in process of being developed or not in the pipeline of national development is considered in this paper.

The Fiji Government is committed to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as reflected in the Republic of Fiji 20-Year Development Plan (2017-2036): Transforming Fiji which is inclusive of a comprehensive 5-Year Development Plan (2017-2021).

The Foreword of the NDP states:

‘The NDP is aligned with global commitments including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change...The integrated nature of development and the need for multi-sectoral solutions are recognised and addressed. Critical cross-cutting issues such as climate change, green growth, the environment, gender equality, disability and governance are mainstreamed in the NDP.’³

It is 137 pages in length and contains the following sections: Foreword; Twenty Year Development Plan 2017-2036; Strengths and Enabling Environment; Five Year Development Plan 2017-2021; Monitoring and Evaluation Systems and Glossary.

The 5-Year Development Plan is divided into two parts (i) inclusive socio-economic development and (ii) Transformational strategic thrusts.

The inclusive socio-economic areas are: water and sanitation [SDG6], energy [SDG7], housing development, food and nutrition security [SDG2], education [SDG4], health and medical services [SDG3], social inclusion and empowerment [SDG10] youth and sports development[SDG3], women in development [SDG5], culture and heritage, national security [SDG16] and the rule of law [SDG 16].

The transformational strategic thrusts comprise modernising land transport, inter-island network, domestic air services, international connectivity (airports and sea ports), modernising the business regulatory environment [SDG8], micro, small and medium enterprises development [SDG 1&8], manufacturing and commerce [SDG9] financial services, sustainable cities and towns [SDG11], expanding the rural economy [SDG8], sugar, non-sugar agriculture [SDG12], fisheries [SDG14], forestry, mining, tourism, enhancing international trade and foreign relations, information and communication technology.

Fiji’s leadership of COP23 in 2018 that had the support of Small Island Developing States was well reported locally and internationally providing greater awareness of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) in an environment where climate change [SDG13] impacts directly or indirectly on all 17 SDGs.

In any discussion at national fora in Fiji and the Region sustainable development, climate change, SDGs, high level forum partnerships, collaboration, the 'need for information' for sustainable decision making is acknowledged. The Fiji Government shares much information through local media on its activities to reinforce its commitment to the UN SDGs for an improved quality of life for its people.

A search located 53 local and international NGOs in Fiji whose work is either guided by or in full support of the UN SDGs. Judging from the coverage of the SDGs by NGOs it is clear that the awareness of the UN SDGs is demonstrably higher than it was two years ago.

The following questions never-the-less arise – how is the information in support the UN SDGs being managed for access and for dissemination? Who is it accessible by? Is it public or private? Who owns it? How is it accessed? What information standards are being used; what information software is used for access?

For the analysis of the NDP for references to a national information and/or library policy in the construct of the NDP or in the outcomes and outputs of the NDP, the following were undertaken (i) keyword search on 'information', 'policy', 'library' and 'archives' (ii) linkage of SDGs to strategic priorities (iii) search for existing policies; policies for review and policies for development linking it to an existing national information and library policy or its development.

The author also uses the eight goals of the *Statement of Intent* that was the outcome of Pacific Libraries Summit held in Fiji in 2018 to ascertain how the NDP is responding to the information and library needs in the context of Fiji in the Pacific. The Summit brought together key stakeholders, Pacific library practitioners and INELI Oceania innovators from the Pacific to discuss a range of issues relating to information and libraries and included training of library practitioners on the UN SDGs.

The analysis revealed the following:

- (i) The linkage between SDGs and strategic priorities in the Plan is exhaustive in the sense that each of the seventeen goals is linked to an activity of the Plan. The degree to which they are given attention varies within the context of the priorities of national development
- (ii) In the NDP references to 'information' occur fifty-three times; 'policy' one hundred and thirty-six times; 'library' four times and 'archives' five times
- (iii) With reference to existing 'policies for review' and 'policies for development' focusing on any reference to an existing national information and library policy or its development, there is no reference made. There is reference to many policies; the need for review of some and the development of others but there is no specific reference to confirm the existence of a national information or library policy.
- (iv) Assessed against the goals of the *Statement of Intent*, the general picture obtained is that:
 - a. **Develop legislative and Policy Frameworks.** Fiji has a developed legislative framework that is an enabler for the development of an information and library policy framework. It requires political will.

- b. **Advocate for the role of libraries.** There is recognition that libraries play a role in development of the country but this is limited to roles in education and preservation of national heritage. Advocacy is not from a holistic perspective nor linked to information for governance purposes. This is reinforced by the reference made to digital and financial literacy and again is in the context of primary and secondary education.
- c. **Improve literacy rates:** with no recognition of the role that libraries play in information literacy for life-long learning.
- d. **Preserve and promote cultural heritage:** The NDP recognizes the preservation and promotion of heritage from both a cultural and economic perspective.
- e. **Promote and strengthen collaboration.** The importance of collaboration is acknowledged with stakeholders in the SDGs, donors and NGOs and it can only be assumed that somewhere in the list of stakeholders there is reference to information experts and libraries.
- f. **Build skills, capacity and recognition of the value of librarians.** There is no recognition of capacity and skills building or recognition of the value of librarians per se but again it may be assumed that the few in Government are consulted.
- g. **Ensure equitable access to information to all.** The Freedom of Information law is important in the access to information for all SDGs
- h. **Develop inclusive programs and services that support awareness and delivery of SDGs.** Reference is made to the e-library or virtual library but little else about how this will be accomplished.

The designers of the Plan clearly recognize the value of information, the need for it for decision-making and development purposes and that high proportion of the type of information needed for the achievement of the Plan relates to policy. References are made to the quality and quantity, verification, strengthening, systems for collecting and disseminating information; information systems (products, education, health), public access to information, information technology. It is therefore difficult to ascertain how this is all to be achieved without the guidance of a national information policy.

The four statements mentioning libraries refer to the development of school libraries and the National Library that are both very important, however they are not the only types of libraries serving the nation. The National Library is part of the Fiji National Archives and the focus is on the preservation of culture and heritage for preservation and the economic benefit derived from tourism. There is no explicit link to the National Library or any of the public libraries that exist as sources of information for the populace to access information for decision making purposes relating to issues of the SDGs.

‘The upgrade of Fiji Museum and the National Library housed within the National Archives will greatly contribute to the preservation of Fiji’s heritage. The positive steps already undertaken to produce authentic heritage merchandise will be scaled up to provide genuine, culturally appropriate and iconic goods to tourists in an effort to boost the economic spin-off from Fiji’s cultural and documentary heritage’.⁴

There is a strong focus in the plan on the education sector [SDG4]. To expand school libraries with relevant resources’ is one of the strategies employed ‘to improve education at all levels’. This is excellent, however without a national policy on libraries on how this is to be done, it is less achievable.

The Plan commits to 'the maintenance and upgrade of school library resources under the SDG 'Quality Education for All'. However, whilst the Plan states on an annual basis the number out of the 731 schools in the country that will receive water tanks and boats spread across 2017-2022, there is no similar indication of the number of schools to receive library resources in three of the five years. Furthermore, there is no library resource activity between 2021-2022. However, the Total Output Column reads 'School libraries upgraded'. [DP: 38]. The MoHEA is responsible and in such cases a national information and library policy would be of great benefit in guiding those in the Ministry.

The plan also advocates for the development of an e-library or virtual library for all citizens and this is in tune with the times. However, it emanates from the policy to 'Ensure every Fijian Student has equal access to education at all levels.' [DP: 36]. All citizens are not students but it is understood that all students are citizens. A national policy on libraries would provide clarity for the management and establishment and location of a virtual library and will provide direction on access by the different categories of the population to information sources such as a public or special library.

The USP Main Library at Laucala and the Fiji National University Library in Suva are examples of libraries of international standards that have taken a lead role in the growth of digital collections in a virtual environment and skills of use for student success. The USP Library teaches information research skills through all years of its undergraduates and post-graduate programmes for student success, to meet the literacy requirements of the graduate attributes and with emphasis on lifelong learning. It puts information skills in the context of governance and the ability to locate and identify the best information for decision making. Its online research skills programme is led by professional librarians in a reconfigured space of the learning commons that incorporates interactive learning. The skills of trained personnel at both institutions under a collaborative arrangement would contribute to a stakeholder consultation on a national information and library policy.

In the highly digital environment of today, libraries and librarians exist in a learning environment. They help individuals and communities by not only giving them access to information but by teaching them to become information literate using digital technology which opens up the world of information and opportunity for them to improve their lives. The world has witnessed the close correlation between information and digital literacy and economic prosperity.

In the NDP information and libraries is equated to education and whilst it is an important component of education, information has greater implications for governance in the realm of national development and the SDGs. Information is about governance! It underpins every component of development. The quality of information created and freedom of access to all information pertaining to development is core to democracy. The NDP states that good governance will be mainstreamed:

'The management of public records will be enhanced to ensure open and transparent government. This will include support for informed decision-making by improving statistical data-collection and analysis, including the national census, and the preservation of national archives.' ⁵

This is well stated, but without guidance through a policy on exactly how the management of public records is enhanced to ensure open and transparent government, which is provided by legislation and policy, this remains a concern.

Personal consultations on a national information and library policy did not indicate the existence of an NILP. Unconfirmed reports intimate that a draft information policy was approved at Department level and submitted through the internal machineries, but the outcome took the form of an official 'Circular'.

It is obvious that planners understand the need for policies given the range of policies referred to in the document. Some of these include Fiscal Policy, National Gender Policy, Trade Policy, National Water Resource and Sanitation Policy, Social Housing Policy, Free Education Policy, Fijian Trade Policy, Natural Culture Policy, National Sports Policy. In the NDP there are policies listed for review and others for development, but no mention is made of an information policy guiding the access and dissemination of the outcomes of all these policies to the citizens of the country who are entitled to these.

Based on the Development Plan there is no evidence that a national information and library policy has been developed nor are there plans in the national document for this.

Without an NILP, the impact on Fiji's support of the SDGs are likely to be: that information acquired in the effort to achieve an SDG remains in the sector and the multi-sectoral impact lost; that there is duplication of research efforts for information acquisition due to the lack of a central facility or robust policy guiding access and dissemination of information; NGOs and the Government working in silos on the SDGs; information is retained for purposes of power retention/access to selective information only; achievement of SDGs is slower due to lack of access to appropriate information; information is not professionally organised to enable access for the benefit of all persons.

In the course of this analysis, what appears to be the main obstacle to NILP development, and its support of the SDGs is that government officials, planners and decision makers do not understand the role of libraries and their link to information access and dissemination for economic empowerment and development⁶.

In conclusion, it is clear that every effort has been made to ensure national development is aligned to the UN SDGs and awareness strengthened through the media. However, there remains an element of concern with regard to the management, organisation, dissemination and access to all information acquired and used in the development of the NDP; its implementation and outcomes in the absence of a national information and library policy. What information standards are being applied and what tools are being used to ensure access to all is another question asked in the absence of an information and library policy.

The experience of Fiji is similar to those of other regional countries such as Tonga and Vanuatu. This indicates that there is a gap in national development process that needs to be urgently addressed.

The following recommendations are made to strengthen the processes of information management, access and dissemination in Fiji to address the concerns in this area.

1. That the Fiji Government repeals the Fiji Libraries (Deposit of Books) Act and replaces it with a Libraries Act that includes the deposit of all formats of materials produced in the country; recognition of all types of libraries and their roles in national development; inclusion of trained library personnel in all libraries in the country in consultation with library and information experts and all stakeholders on all aspects of library contributions to national development.
2. Develop a Fiji National Information and Library Policy in consultation with local and regional professional librarians and information specialists and all relevant stakeholders.
3. Develop standards for Fiji libraries. Work with the Fiji Library Association to update the 'Standards for Libraries in Fiji' document with reference to standards designed by institutions such as the International Federation of Library Associations in consultation with relevant stakeholders and organizations such the Pacific Libraries Network and PARBICA.
4. That regional and international organizations and agencies located in Fiji lead by example in the way they manage information inclusive of the training and employment of qualified librarians in their information roles that will convey to all stakeholders an understanding of the benefits of professionally trained personnel.

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- ⁴ 5-Year and 20-Year National Development Plan: Transforming Fiji:58
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- ⁶ A National Information Policy, p344.

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