

Founder/Directors Message



This year laid the foundation for the growth of FRIEND to the next level as landmark developments were initiated and more dreams came to fruition. Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises N Development was set up to create opportunities for the people to step out of poverty in a country where poverty is not acknowledged. Regardless, recent statistics indicate that 40% of Fiji's population live below the poverty line and access to quality food, water, education and health is a challenge. FRIEND is working toward making a difference in peoples lives... encouraging and empowering the marginalized and underserved to take action and step out of their situation in order to improve their living standards.

At the completion of six years of existence FRIEND took stock of its achievements, spent time reviewing its role in the current economic environment, looked closely at how it could contribute to poverty alleviation at the national level and ultimately prepared its 5 year strategic plan for 2009-2013.

A key step into the future has been purchasing of land for FRIEND's new home. At the current location there are two rented spaces to house the office, food production centre and a card production centre. The food production center is too small to cater to the increasing demand. Five acres of freehold land at Tuvu Hill will become the new home for FRIEND in the coming years as the office, workshop, food production centre and model gardens are created as part of that dream. This increased space will accommodate more artisans who could benefit from the poverty alleviation projects.

After scoping work, FRIEND established an office in Labasa to serve the population of the Northern Division. Since the inception of the organization a key objective has been to open an office in Labasa. This April that dream came true. Three staff based at the Labasa office have been taking the various programs of social and economic empowerment into the communities. 2009 brought despair to the communities in low lying areas of Ba and Nadi where floods caused havoc to livelihoods.

We are thankful that our call for help was answered and families and corporate bodies donated with their heart. We were immediately able to provide food, water and clothes to the affected. Pacific Shipping Agencies not only mobilized resources but also their trucks to distribute the goods. Fiji Broadcasting Ltd in partnership with Vodafone Fiji Ltd through their flood appeal distributed much needed supplies in the affected areas. A grant from NZAID assisted with the purchasing of beddings for 1000 families who were in need. This money was also utilized to buy stoves and provide medical services through Fiji Aid International. The disaster exposed the need for better management of land and water resources and the need to be prepared for natural disasters closer to home. Over the years high dependence on imported items, malnutrition, ill health resulting in reduced income for the families have been contributing factors to increase in poverty. Recent poverty statistics indicate that 60% of all rural dwellers live below the poverty line raising the need to look into options to remediate this. After much analysis of resources and markets, agricultural production seems the obvious solution and will tie into the value addition program of FRIEND. To develop this area FRIEND has sought partnerships with BASIX in India and SPC to support with technical assistance. Secretariat of the Pacific Community helped train staff to implement the program in the communities. Volunteers from HELP International trained staff and communities start square foot gardening where land resources are limited. As a cross cutting theme in all its programs FRIEND started a program called GROW for Home, Health and Commerce. Through Governance, DESI and Youth programs GROW focused on sustainable gardening to grow a range of vegetables for nutritious meals at home to improve health. 82 % of all deaths in Fiji are attributed to non communicable diseases which is a cause for concern. Surplus from the gardens and farms could be used to earn much needed income in underserved and rural communities. Each community is being trained in the start up and maintenance of composts. The project has been trialed in 10 communities in Lautoka and has been introduced in Rakiraki, Tavua, Ba, Lautoka, Labasa and Nadi.

In the rural areas people with land are being encouraged to plant for commercial production and FRIEND has been guaranteeing the market to build confidence. The Governance program continued in communities where staff also took to creating awareness on global issues and preparing communities to deal with their impact. Awareness on participatory budgeting raised important issues on the balance of payments and the need to grow food locally, thus, encouraging most communities where the

program has been implemented to start up their gardens. The Youth Development Program developed its own theatre group with assistance from Women's Action for Change and took educational performances in communities and schools facilitating workshops on the issues raised. Youth Employment Network trained and sought work attachments for 30 young people. Partnerships with the corporate sector helped facilitate these work attachments for training and in some cases secure permanent jobs. Restorative Education for Alternative Livelihood (REAL) program came to a close as Yellow Ribbon Campaign of Prisons Department took shape. REAL has been working on reintegration of prisoners into communities since 2004 in Lautoka and the Yellow Ribbon campaign is doing that on a national scale.

The range of *Friend's Fiji Style*® products continued to grow as more community members have been taking advantage of sustainable livelihood program. Other than jams, chutneys, pickles, hand made cards, recycled paper products are now available in the market. To further develop handicraft products craft training programs have been initiated in the communities by skilled artisans. Fruit dryers have been installed in Tavua and Labasa by the SPC-FACT project and trials on dried fruits have already begun. I must thank media and in particular Mr William Parkinson and the Communication Fiji Ltd for providing free advertisements for our products greatly increasing awareness on the product range as well as giving free booth at every Showcase for the last 4 years. *Style Friend's Fiji*® shop has been instrumental in introducing new products trialed by community members and now also features dried fish and *kuta* products from the North.

To develop FRIEND Village, fundraising events were organized. NZAID increased its grant and joined AUSAID to core fund FRIEND. The Canada Fund supported the set up of recycle paper making project and SPC-FACT selected FRIEND as an organization they will support with technical assistance.

The Australia Community Justice Program fund for REAL program came to an end so did the European Union's Education Sector Fund for the Youth FACE program. Securing funds to maintain and further expand sustainable livelihood projects remain an ongoing challenge.

For the growth and sustainability of any organization, staff capacity building is extremely important. Five of the original volunteers who started work at the inception of FRIEND are now in senior management positions. Two senior managers continued their post graduation studies with UNITEC, one got accepted for the Leadership Fiji course and one for Diploma in School of Health and Community Welfare at APTC. All these course lengths are for one year or more. I went to India to visit BASIX for two weeks, (an extremely successful organization I must say!) to observe their small agricultural farm holding and microfinance schemes. SPC-FACT funded my air ticket. All other staff got the opportunity to attend short courses during regular-in-house training and courses organized by TPAF, USP, SPC. Many volunteers came to FRIEND for attachments and to support various programs. For example, every year Duke of Edinburgh youths from Natabua High School, Lautoka Muslim College and Central College came to volunteer on Saturdays. Sarah Taylor from Peace Corp joined the Youth Employment Network and worked in the communities on compost management. Jessica Stalenburg, an Australian Youth Ambassador is attached with the Youth Development Program and is supporting the mural and theatre projects. Johnny Dean from Australia volunteered with the art project for two weeks and Natasha De-Freitas from London offered her services for a month. Lyn Zelmer, the web trainer came back to further train staff on web maintenance skills and Dr Seetha from SRCM India trained staff on Values for Community Development.

I must thank the Board members and Trustees who have been voluntarily and tirelessly providing support and mentorship to the growth of the organization. The Board spent a significant proportion of their time this year on strategic development plan for the next five years and have been instrumental in the development of policies and accountability mechanisms for the organization. I would like to thank all our supporters, donors, volunteers, market, board, staff, media and everyone who have supported us in any way to come this far and we look forward to your continued support in our poverty alleviation initiatives as we step into the future.

Sashi Kiran
Founder / Director