

## EXPERIENCE AT THE GRASSROOTS

The CCF has now held four workshops for landowners and tenants on land and the future of the sugar industry. The first was in Sorokoba Village, Ba, the second in Sigatoka, the third in Bureniu Village, Ra, and the fourth in Labasa.

Many of the participants at these workshops told us they had never before attended a forum where landowners and tenants could talk to each other and share their experiences.

Important facts that were shared at these workshops included:

- In 2004, there were about 20,000 cane farmers, 3,000 mill workers, 2,000 truck drivers and 17,000-20,000 seasonal cane cutters in Fiji (these numbers are likely to have fallen since then).
- About 200,000 people in Fiji (nearly one quarter of the total population) depend directly on the sugar industry for their livelihoods.

Points of agreement that emerged from the workshops included:

- that the ownership of native land should remain with indigenous Fijians
- that landowners and tenants need to work together to ensure the survival of the sugar industry
- that expert research and analysis is needed to identify the best strategies for saving the sugar industry
- that everyone suffers when tenants are forced off the land and it reverts to bush

- that new indigenous Fijian farmers are generally inexperienced and most have not done as well as the Indo-Fijians whose farms they look over
- that the formula for fixing rent for agricultural leases on native land should be determined on the basis of expert research and analysis, not emotions and politics
- that politicians should stop using the ALTA/NLTA debate for their own ends



See also Part 1: Things you need to know to understand the debate over agricultural leases on native land.

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## THE ALTA/NLTA DEBATE

Part 2: Recent developments,  
deciding on a process and  
grassroots experience

March 2007

## WHAT HAS THE SOGOSOGO DUAVATA NI LEWENIVANUA (SDL) PROPOSED?

In 2004, the Coalition Government of the Sogosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) and Conservative Alliance Matanitu Vanua (CAMV) parties introduced two Bills into Parliament to amend the *Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act* (ALTA) and the *Native Land Trust Act* (NLTA).

If passed into law, these Bills would have excluded all native land from the operation of ALTA, and provided for agricultural leases on native land to be granted solely under NLTA.

The Bills provided that agricultural leases under NLTA would have:

- a minimum term of 20 years and a maximum term of 50 years
- a fixed annual rent of 10% of the unimproved capital value (UCV) of the land.

Because ALTA is an entrenched law, the Bill to amend ALTA could not be passed without the support of the opposition Fiji Labour Party (FLP).

However, when the two Bills were debated in 2005, the FLP opposed them. As a result, neither Bill was passed.



## WHAT HAS THE FIJI LABOR PARTY PROPOSED?

The FLP did not put forward specific reform proposals in the 2005 parliamentary debate. Instead, it advocated a process of dialogue between political leaders, designed to rebuild trust and confidence. The FLP proposed that this dialogue should then lead to negotiations aimed at achieving reforms agreeable to both the landowning and tenant communities.

## WHAT IS THE BEST PROCESS FOR RESOLVING THE DEBATE?

The facts underlying the ALTA/NLTA debate are complex, and it is often hindered by inadequate information and misperceptions.

For example, many indigenous landowners feel that Indo-Fijian tenant farmers have grown rich off their land, while they themselves have stayed poor.

However, the truth is that very few farmers in Fiji are rich. Most of them have to struggle to get by. The latest statistics from the Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics show that, among the rural population, 41.5% of Indo-Fijians are living in poverty, along with 30.8% of indigenous Fijians.

The Fiji Constitution Review Commission recommended in its 1996 report that the Constitution should continue to entrench ALTA, and that "the procedure for amending entrenched legislation ... should make it as

clear as possible that it will never be changed without the agreement of the communities and groups it protects."

The report went on to say that policy directions about the use of land in Fiji "have to be worked out behind closed doors by the political leaders, with the help of knowledgeable experts and perhaps someone who can act as a facilitator or conciliator in helping the political leaders to reach agreement."

This is exactly the approach that was adopted in the *Talanoa* sessions between the SDL/CAMV and the FLP. The Citizens' Constitutional Forum (CCF) believes those sessions provide a good model for future dialogue.

However, the CCF also believes that the wider, public debate over ALTA and NLTA is just as important as negotiations between our political leaders. Everyone in Fiji should be able to understand this debate and contribute their point of view.

