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STRENGTHENING THE INTEGRATION OF BIODIVERSITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ASPECTS INTO THE ENVIRONMENT IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA) PROCESSES AND GUIDELINES:

PERSPECTIVES FROM BIODIVERSITY EXPERTS

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ABSTRACT

The conservation of biodiversity and sustainable development of a country can be guaranteed through effective Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) processes in place. The effectiveness of an EIA can be attributed to the guidelines that govern it and the mechanisms in place to support the EIA process. This study draws on the perceptions and lived experience of local biodiversity experts in Fiji to identify lessons for strengthening the EIA guidelines and processes for Fiji.
Using qualitative research approach, we analyzed data and information from in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion. These methods captured the experts' perceptions and facilitated the co-creation of practical solutions for better integrating biodiversity and sustainable development aspects into the EIA processes. Based on this outcome, this paper presents recommendations reforming Fiji's current EIA Guidelines for consideration the Department of Environment in Fiji.

KEY WORDS: environment impact assessments**,** biodiversity, guidelines

Introduction

Biodiversity is foundational to human wellbeing, food systems and livelihoods, ecosystem services upon which we all depend on (OgOgwu, Ojo, & Alaka, 2025). The term 'Biodiversity' is defined by the global Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD) as "the variability among living organisms from all sources including, *inter alia*, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part of; this includes diversity within species, between species, and of ecosystems." Biodiversity faces major threats from habitat loss and degradation, invasive species, climate change, over-exploitation and pollution (Environment, 2020b). The consideration of conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity should therefore be part of all human development processes. The CBD defines biodiversity mainstreaming as ensuring that biodiversity and the services it provides are appropriately and adequately factored into policies and practices that rely and have an impact on it. Article 14 of the CBD requires parties to "introduce appropriate procedures requiring environmental impact assessment of its proposed projects that are likely to have significant adverse effects on biological diversity with a view to avoiding or minimizing such effects and, where appropriate, allow for public participation in such procedures" (Victor, 2005).

Infrastructural development can be detrimental to the environment and more importantly to the biodiversity of an area, if an Environmental Impact Assessment is not conducted the observed risks considered already in the planning phase. Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) are an important step in the planning and development of any infrastructural projects to identify the potential environmental effects of a proposed project before its implementation (Glasson and Therivel, 2013). This is because infrastructural development can cause habitat loss and degradation. It can cause pollution or allow the introduction of invasive species (Cares, Franco, & Bond, 2023). It can contribute to greenhouse gases and aggravate the impacts of climate change (Joseph et al., 2018). It can alter the natural flow of water or create human wildlife conflicts (Karjalainen & Järvikoski, 2010). It can also lead to socio-economic inequalities, which can in turn exacerbate the utilization of natural resources and threaten the biodiversity as a result (Wang, Ulibarri, Scott, & Davis, 2023).

Although Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) are commonly used to assess the impacts of development projects on the environment, EIAs have been criticized for not fully addressing the impacts of development projects on biodiversity loss (Bigard, Pioch, & John D. Thompson, 2017) due to a combination of methodological limitations, a lack of prioritization of ecological factors or inconsistencies in the expertise applied. The Fiji islands host unique ecosystems with numerous endemic species whose survival depends on local conservation efforts. Protecting this biodiversity is essential for maintaining ecosystem resilience, sustaining livelihoods, and safeguarding critical functions such as coastal protection and carbon sequestration (Environment, 2020b). According to Fiji's country profile on the CBD webpage, the main driver of threats to Fiji's biodiversity is economic development and is mostly human-induced (Environment, 2014). Several non-native species of fish, shellfish, and crustaceans have been introduced into Fiji, primarily for purposes such as aquaculture, ornamental use, sports fishing, and biological control. Unplanned and uncoordinated tourism activities also pose a significant threat to Fiji's biodiversity. Specifically, habitat destruction in coastal areas for tourism development endangers the biodiversity of mangroves, estuaries, reefs, and

foreshore ecosystems. Biodiversity loss due to unsustainable development is a major concern in Fiji and the country's profile for their CBD reporting (Environment, 2020a) states that Fiji's rich biodiversity, and the ecosystems supporting it, are at risk.

Building on these premises, the objectives of the present study are to (1) identify the barriers to mainstreaming biodiversity into EIAs in Fiji, and (2) to co-design solutions with local biodiversity and EIA experts. Based on the results, a list of recommendations for reforming the EIA system and practices will be suggested.

Methodologically this research applies semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion approach (Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, & Mukherjee, 2018) as a participatory knowledge co-creation method, to draw from the experience of the biodiversity experts and understand the current EIA practices from their perspective. Focus group discussions are found to be effective for gaining an in-depth understanding of social issues from a purposely selected group of individuals rather than a statistically representative sample of a broader population (Nyumba et al., 2018). The focus group discussions carried out in this study stem from the Qualitative Research Methodology, particularly the Constructivism Theory, where knowledge is co-created through the interviews and focus group discussions from the subjective meanings and lived experiences of the biodiversity experts (Tümen Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021). The focus groups were formed of local Biodiversity experts representing different organizations, such as NGOs and Civil Society groups, universities and research institutes, and the EIA consultancy group engaged by government to carry out and review EIAs in Fiji. The participants have differing perspectives on the local EIA processes, which was needed to give meaning to the circumstances around the biodiversity conservation and EIAs in Fiji. The focus group discussion allowed the experts to speak freely, share their lived experiences of the EIA processes and verify amongst themselves what things are working well and what are the common barriers faced in the current EIA Guidelines, in terms of the biodiversity conservation.

Overview of Fiji's Environmental Management Act 2005, Environment Management (EIA Process) Regulations 2007 and Fiji's Environmental Impact Assessment Guidelines

Fiji's primary environmental legislation is the Environment Management Act (EMA) of 2005, last amended in 2020. The Act's purpose is "the protection of the Fiji's natural resources, for the control and management of developments, for waste management and pollution control and for the establishment of a national environmental council (NEC) for related matters" (Act, 2008). Part 4 of EMA outlines the EIA process and the duties of the approving authorities, the EIA procedures, report content, and review process. The Act includes a Subsidiary Legislation on Environment Management (EIA Process) Regulations 2007 (Environment, 2007) which details the steps and procedural requirements of the proponent. These regulations, last reviewed in 2016, are divided into five main parts, i.e. Screening, Scoping, Processing, Conducting the EIA study and Reporting it?. While the EMA and its Regulations have been amended over time, Fiji's EIA Guidelines that was intended to operationalize these laws were developed in 2008 and have not been reviewed since. The use of

outdated guidelines is a recognized challenge in global EIA practice (Macaulay & Richie, 2013). A recent review of legal documents is imperative to align with advancement in science and technology. The 2008 Guidelines were designed to guide the Approving Authority and the Environmental Units within the line ministries, explaining the procedural steps for processing development applications at the Department of Environment (DOE).

In the EIA-process of Fiji, relevant authorities to determine whether an EIA is required screen development applications. If so, a scoping process defines the TOR, often involving consultations and site assessments. Registered consultants conduct the EIA study, following national guidelines. The DOE reviews the report, facilitates public consultation, and considers feedback from stakeholders before issuing a decision. Approval may include conditions such as environmental bonds and mandatory management or monitoring plans.

Methods

Separate preliminary interviews were conducted with four key stakeholders in Fiji's EIA community including a leading EIA consultant, a government representative, an academic and a resource owner. The consultation included discussions of the objectives of the research project, its validity, and relevance. Brief discussions with these participants revealed barriers to strengthening biodiversity in EIAs in Fiji and the need for more in-depth discussions with biodiversity experts particularly those with experience with EIA consultancies and EIA reviews to identify the main reasons behind the barriers to mainstreaming biodiversity into the EIA process in Fiji. Consequently a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was convened with biodiversity experts to explore these barriers, co-create solutions and recommend policy reforms (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

Participant Selection

We purposely selected 27 individuals based on their expertise and experience inviting them to participate in the FGD. The selection criteria were both substantive and practical, similar to that used by Hagerman, Dowlatabadi, Satterfield, and McDaniels (2010) in an examination of expert view on biodiversity conservation. Substantive criteria included demonstrated expertise in biodiversity as indicated through publications in academia, involvement in biodiversity work with NGOs as well as registrations with the Department of Environment's EIA consultants. Practical criteria was necessary due to Fiji's limited pool of such experts; participation was also contingent on availability for a full day face-to-face meeting. Of the 27 invited actors, 20 attended the FGD. To facilitate more focused discussions, participants were divided into two sub-groups: an aquatic group (marine and freshwater) and a terrestrial group. This approach leveraged shared experiences to encourage more open dialogue (Wong, 2008).

Table 1 *Biodiversity expertise and EIA experience represented at the focus group discussion*

Biodiversity Areas within Sub-group	Expert Academic	Non-governmental Organizations	Private consultancy businesses	# of years of EIA experience (+ is 10 years)
1. Aquatic (Marine/Freshwater)				
Marine & Coastal Processes	☒		☒	+++
Ecosystems	☒		☒	+++
Coastal Fisheries			☒	+++
Marine Biology	☒	☒	☒	+++
Riverine Fishes		☒	☒	++
Ecology	☒		☒	++
Invertebrates	☒		☒	++
2. Terrestrial				
Mangrove Ecosystem Services	☒		☒	++
Vegetation Ecology		☒	☒	+++
Botany		☒	☒	+++
Ecology	☒			++
Herpetofauna and Invasive Species		☒		++

To validate that the focus group participants all had a similar definition of the core term '*Biodiversity*', participants were asked to define biodiversity in their registration forms. All the participants in the focus group discussion were considered to have a similar definition and understanding of the concept (Table 2).

Table 2 *Definitions for biodiversity by focal group participants. T = terrestrial sub-group, A = aquatic sub-group.*

Sub group	Definition of biodiversity
T	The various types of biological organisms living in a specific place at a specific time
T	The diversity of life on the planet
T	All living things
A	Proliferation of life in the physical environment.
A	Spread and number of species with a specific habitat in comparison to entire country ecology.
A	Variability or differences in living organisms/plants.
A	Any living thing on our planet Earth (plant, animals etc.).
A	The diversity of plant and animal species their ecology, conservation status and geographic distribution.
A	All living organisms that re intricately responsible for keeping in balance the web of life.
A	Diversity of flora and fauna.
T	Organisms both plant/animal (marine/terrestrial) that make up a particularly place.
A	Variability of living organisms from all sources including ecosystems and ecological complexes of which they are part.
A	Everything around us, what we access every day. The sustainability of a community livelihood and environment depends highly on the ultimate biodiversity roles in different contexts
A	Different types of flora and fauna, habitat etc.
T	Biological/living chaos (diversity)
T	Variety of living things in the natural ecosystem (species diversity)
A	The occurrence of living organisms at all levels genes, species, habitat and ecosystems. The level of diversity (species richness combined with abundance in an area)

The one-day FGD was facilitated by a main facilitator and two co-facilitators who aimed to create a relaxed environment for open and honest interactions (Wong, 2008). The discussions were divided into morning and afternoon sessions, with both sub-groups addressing the same set of research questions. The duration of the session depended on the number of participants and the depth of their responses. A note taker on flip charts and audio-recorded documented sub-group discussions.

The research questions were:

Session 1: Barriers and Root Causes

1. In your experience, what are some of the main challenges that you have faced in ensuring that biodiversity is included in EIAs in Fiji? Give examples or case studies from your experience and identify what are the root causes of your barriers.
2. List your barriers in order of importance and urgency.

Session 2: Solutions/Strategies

1. From the list made in Session 1, choose three of the most important barriers that need to be addressed urgently.
2. Discuss the solutions and strategies to these barriers. How can the solutions (e.g., suitable tools, best practices and standards) be mainstreamed into the EIA Guidelines - specifically the current screening and scoping checklists? Provide as much details as possible, of how the solution can be integrated. For example, list sources of biodiversity data for Fiji that can be accessed easily and used in the EIA process.

Following the sub-group discussions, a plenary session was held where each sub-group presented its findings. The plenary session was also audio recorded. To identify key themes, the audio recording was transcribed from the plenary session and analyzed, using thematic analysis, a flexible method for qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings is elaborated in the Results and Discussion Section.

Results & discussions

Thematic analysis of the transcribed plenary discussion revealed three primary barriers to mainstreaming biodiversity into Fiji's EIA process (Table 3). Participants as requiring urgent attention further prioritized the barriers. The three main themes were for barriers were (1) Inaccessibility to EIA information such as EIA reports, baseline information collected from previous EIAs (in terms of population size, range or distribution of species), monitoring data and relevant government ministry related data; (2) Lack of technical capacity to reviewing TORs and EIA Reports, as well as in biodiversity valuation, taxonomy, and restoration guideline development; and (3) Lack of clarity and quality of the scoping process and TOR development. In response participants co-created three corresponding solutions: (1) Establish formal networks of EIA consultants and experts to facilitate information sharing; (2) Revive and empower the Technical Advisory Groups (TAG) to ensure scientific input and build technical capacity; and (3) Build biodiversity knowledge capacity within the approving authorities to improve the scoping process and TOR specificity.

Table 3 *Summary of perceptions on barriers faced by biodiversity experts during their experience of contributing to EIAs in Fiji*

Barriers Listed by Participants		
1) Inaccessibility to EIA Information		
• EIA Reports	☐	
• Baseline information collected from previous EIAs (in terms of population size, range or distribution of indigenous species)	☐	☐
• Monitoring Data		
• *Relevant Ministry Data*		
2) Lack of Technical Capacity		
• *Reviewers of Terms of Reference and EIA reports*	☐	☐
• *Value of Biodiversity*	☐	☐
• *Expertise in taxonomy (succession planning/capacity development)*	☐	
• *Guidelines on restoration*		☐
• *EIA Consultants for Department of Environment*		☐
• *Access to NBSAP Experts*		☐
3) Lack of clarity and quality of Scoping Process & development of TOR		
• *To be specific to development project*	☐	☐
• *To include areas adjacent to project development site*	☐	☐
• *Definitions of terms used in Terms of References*		☐
•		

It is interesting to note that barriers faced by both sub-groups were remarkably similar. All the participants acknowledged that EMA (Act, 2008) provides a strong framework for biodiversity protection. However, they stressed that without enforcement, the environment remains at risk:

"If you do not follow that document [EMA] you will muck up the environment".

The terrestrial sub-group perceived that while the Act's guidelines are suitable, enforcement of procedures is insufficient to mitigate environmental impacts. This aligns with findings from Turnbull (2003) who argued that a comprehensive EIA system is ineffective without serious government commitment and Wood (2003) who identified weaknesses in implementing broader environmental controls as a barrier to sustainable development. All the participants agreed that one of the underlying issue is that Fiji's Guidelines (Environment, 2008), which operationalizes EMA, have not been update since 2008, raising uncertainties about the effectiveness in implementing current regulations.

Inaccessibility of EIA Information

Both sub-groups agreed that accessing previous EIA reports, baseline data, and monitoring information is a challenge. One of participants highlighted the unreasonable costs of accessing reports:

"…you cannot get it, because you will have to get it by photocopy, and that's in the Act, it is $4.60 to photocopy one sheet in an EIA report."

This practice contradicts Part 2, Section 17 of EMA that stated that a person is entitled to have access to any record or document recorded in the Environmental Register. Furthermore, the financiers of the EIA studies consider much of the baseline data confidential and reports are only made public after seven years. While participants agreed that information should be shared for subsequent studies, one noted:

…"I've always felt at liberty to give out the data, as long as I am not giving out the development plans"…

A key strategy proposed was the creation of formal networks between EIA consultants, academia, government, consultancy businesses and NGOs to improve accessibility to EIA information. For example, the MESCAL report on mangrove ecosystems in (Mackenzie, 2013) was not widely disseminated, leading to the continued use of outdated assessment methods. AS one participant explained:

…"it's sad to say that a lot of Blue Carbon work that is currently being run today still use the old system of assessment, especially the classification systems for the types of forests and habitat types that we have in mangrove systems that talked of zonation, we no longer work on zonation, we work on forest and habitat types that are there in mangrove systems and that has a lot of effect when it comes to calculating the biomass"…

Similarly, experts recommended integrating 'Best Practice Mangrove Planting For Fiji' (Watling, 2021) into the EIA Guidelines as a restoration standard, as EMA currently mandates mitigation plans but provides no practical guidelines. One participant discussed how the lack of information could lead to ineffective restorative actions in the following quote:

…"because a lot of people are planting mangroves but they are not looking at the diversity of the species, they are not looking at whether it's an appropriate place to do it, but they think they have to plant things, but the important thing is what you are planting"…

The National Biodiversity Strategic Action Plan (NBSAP) (Environment, 2020b) was also

considered in the Aquatic focus sub-group discussion as an important source of information for developing the criteria for the screening stage in the EIA process as it provides detailed information on conservation priorities and on ecosystem types and conservation status. Furthermore, the national plans describe trends and threats at ecosystem and species level and provide an overview of planned conservation activities (Slootweg, 2006). Effective monitoring through follow-ups on EIA is important to collect monitoring data once development has started and Environmental Monitoring Plans (EMP) are carried out. Members of the both sub-groups perceived that the monitoring data is important to be used in other EIAs, especially to begin establishing Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA) for Fiji, to document accumulative impacts over wider geographic scales. One participant described this as follows:

> *"Monitoring data can then be used for an EIA for another [development] project*
>
> *…because Strategic Environmental Assessments, relies on all your previous projects, understanding the actual impacts vs the predicted impacts "*

Macaulay and Richie (2013) in their analysis of the variation and challenges in global practice of EIAs concluded that 'monitoring' should be carried out by the regulatory body (in this DOE) with mechanisms to check the activities of the proponent especially in countries where proponents carry out the EIAs such as Fiji.

Most participants considered that an "e-database" of all the different types of EIA information would be a highly useful product, linking a network of EIA consultants, academics, NGOs and government agencies with similar objectives, to reduce the impact of development projects on the environment. The quote below described this:

> *"If administrators don't want to make information publicly accessible, at least they could make it accessible to registered consultants or something like that, there could be a qualifying factor to actually access the database"*

This has been supported already by (Goundar, 2013) who proposes a cloud-based EIA system to overcome the many barriers faced by practitioners in Fiji. Based on the input into the EIA system, the suggested system would use an inference engine to check the knowledge base and report on possible impacts and mitigation actions. The knowledge base would be based on the database of information that the EIA regulators have obtained and the EIA system would use GIS and simulation models to process potential environmental impacts and produce environment impact statements.

In total, six recommendations on the online sources of data that are relevant to Fiji were mentioned in the discussion and presented in Table 4.

Table 4 *Six online sources of biodiversity information that could be used in the EIA process as generated by both sub-group participants*

Online Sources of biodiversity	**Information for Fiji**
1. World Database on Protected Areas	
2. IBAT is an alliance of Birdlife, Conservation International, IUCN and UNWCMC Environment Programmes an online tool where biodiversity information on threatened species and critical habitat can be found to prevent and minimize impacts of project development on biodiversity.	
3. GISD is an online source of information about alien and invasive species that negatively influence biodiversity.	
4. FLMMA is a local country network that promotes and encourages the preservation, protection and sustainable use of marine resources by resource owners.	
5. IUCN Red List – provided information about the geographic range, population size, habitat and ecology use and trade, threats and conservation actions for different species.	
6. EPS Act – to regulate and control the international trade, domestic trade, possession and transportation of species protected under the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and for related Matters.	

Technical Capacity

Both sub-groups provided a consistent picture of the challenge of limited 'Technical Capacity' in strengthening biodiversity adequately into EIA processes and guidelines in Fiji. One sub-group perceived that because there was limited technical capacity, there was a data deficiency as per the following quote:

> *"We still don't have up-to-date confirmed estimates on population sizes, distributions, or population range of difference species"*

Similarly Swanepoel et al. (2019) discusses how the best performing areas of development in South Africa were areas where EIAs had increasingly enriched biodiversity databases, albeit at a more strategic level that supported the quality of baseline descriptions, hence strengthening biodiversity impact reports.

Both the sub-groups attributed this data deficiency to the lack of technical capacity in the area of biodiversity knowledge and the lack of succession planning currently in place for technical capacity that already existed.

> *"In terms of succession planning for biodiversity experts, we feel like we are entering into a phase where everyone is going to be dying off or retiring, who is going to be there in 10-15 year time to actually do all this work"*

The need to build the capacity of upcoming biodiversity researchers is important to make sure there is enough biodiversity expertise available in Fiji to continue the work that most of the biodiversity experts in the room had started. Collaboration between the experts and academics would be useful to understand and address the knowledge gaps needed for future students intending to become EIA professionals.

The Terrestrial sub-group also made recommendation to revive the Technical Advisory Groups (TAG) established previously under the National Environmental Council (NEC). The core aim of the TAG was to provide technical advice to NEC so that the functions of NEC were strengthened. Functions of NEC include "(a) to approve the National Report; (b) To improve the National Environmental Strategy; (c)to monitor and oversee the implementation of the National Environmental Strategy; (d) to facilitate a forum for discussion of environmental issues; (f) to make resolutions on public and private sector efforts on environmental issues; (g) to advise the government on international and regional treaties; (h) to perform any other functions conferred under EMA or any other written law" as stated in EMA Part 2 Section 7 (1).

Both sub-groups perceived that the TAGs established in the past such as the National Protected Areas Committee and the National Wetlands Steering Committee had specific roles within EMA to advise government on development. There were strong perceptions that rather than reinvent the wheel, opportunities to take advantage or strengthen existing TAG groups should be prioritized as per quote below,

> *"The strategy is to amend the EMA to empower the TAG".*

It was also perceived that if remunerated, the TAG would ensure more collaboration and scientific input into the current EIA matters, including the EIA Guidelines. Funds from the Environment and Climate Adaptation Levy (ECAL) and EMA Trust, which is "money appropriated from parliament, any environmental bond, any contribution or donation, fines of fixed penalties and any other money required under EMA or any other written law to be paid into the Fund" in EMA Part 7 Section 55, can be made available to engage the right kind of expertise to help the DOE revive and

remunerate TAGs.

Another technical capacity building recommendation was to establish a research unit within the DOE, similar to other Fiji government ministries such as the ministry of agriculture and the ministry of forestry who have research units within their ministries. A research unit would be the body that will be doing the biodiversity assessment of the proposals that come in. The DOE could establish technical positions with good salaries, so that DOE and Fiji would not lose the expertise that has been built.

Scoping Processes/Terms of Reference

The Aquatic sub-group perceived that everything they had discussed could be put together under Scoping/Terms of Reference as follows:

> *"it was all really about how and who is doing the TOR and planning the EIA, a lot of problems that we can see of which we talked about earlier was really the capacity of the people who are involved with EIA the process"*

The immediate result of the concluded scoping process is the preparation or modification of the Terms of Reference (TOR) for the conduct of the EIA (Environment, 2008). The quote below showed strong concurrent perceptions that sometimes the TORs is not specific enough to the development proposal:

> *"TORs often are not fit for purpose; they tend to rely on a generic template which does not get customized to the actual projects themselves"*

Similarly the perception that sometimes the TOR lacked the specificity and wider perspective to produce a comprehensive and useful assessment of the biodiversity,

> *"when we are given our TORs, it often really limits the area we are looking at, it usually looks at only one area of coastal area, one area right in front of the project site and maybe a few meters on either side, but you are not encouraged to look at the larger area and so if you are talking about biodiversity, then it is important to know whether that area is representative of the larger area"*

Substantial capacity building was seen to be needed in the outer remote islands where the person that is doing the screening or the scoping might be the Rural Health Authority, who understands more about health issues and very little about biodiversity issues. Capacity building is therefore needed at different levels and requires collaboration between government ministries and approving authorities, to set out who will be responsible for screening and scoping development proposals. For example, as per the following quote:

> *"Conservation officers out in the Provincial Offices could be involved in training people and helping people ask the right questions. Because normally the resource owner communities is asking, what the compensation will be instead of what the environmental impacts of a development might be on their natural resources. Conservation officers are very much an integral part of the Bose Vakoro, Bose ni Tikina and Provincial Meetings, not only in the villages but in the informal settlements as well, so their scope of impact can be great"*

Capacity-building on the potential impacts on biodiversity from development projects is important for local communities and resource owners to ensure that the right questions are asked when there are development proposals or scoping exercises in their areas. Conservation Officers based at the Provincial Offices are normally part of the "*Bose Vakoro*" or village meetings, the "*Bose ni Tikina*" or district meetings and the Provincial meeting. They can make a crucial impact and build

the capacity at these forums to strengthen biodiversity considerations in the decision-making. The Conservation Officers can be upskilled in taxonomical, economical and conservational assessments so they can also assist the various scoping exercises that are carried out in their jurisdictions, as they would have a more in-depth knowledge of the biodiversity issues to be considered in their various provinces.

Other perceptions to strengthen the scoping process and the development of the TORs was to build capacity in the utilization of acceptable biodiversity tools and toolkits or standards or methods that assisting the assessment of biodiversity or taxa or ecosystem services. Lessons learned from Civil Society Organizations whose programs are funded by EU and World Bank can be adapted to develop standard tools and Environmental Safe Guards for a minimum requirement within the screening or scoping processes.

Policy recommendations

In this paper, the qualitative analysis of a focus group discussion exercise was used to determine the priority solutions to strengthening the integration of biodiversity aspects in the EIA Guidelines for Fiji. As a conclusion, it seems Fiji's EIA Guidelines (Environment, 2008) are outdated and do not accurately reflect the EMA and the subsidiary legislation on EIA Regulations which were generally perceived by the entire focus group to adequately address biodiversity issues in development in Fiji. However, in analyzing the discussions and articulating the perceptions of EIA consultants and biodiversity experts, we learned that there are three practical strategies that can be adopted to strengthen the biodiversity considerations in Fiji's Environmental Impact Assessment Guidelines. These are to:

1. Formulate formal networks between EIA consultants across, academia, government ministries, consultancy businesses and NGOs to facilitate easy access to existing, and future, EIA biodiversity information and integrate this access into the current EIA Guidelines.
2. Revive and empower the Technical Advisory Groups (TAG) that were previously established under the National Environmental Council (NEC), to (a) ensure more collaboration and scientific input into the current EIA processes, and the EIA Guidelines, and (b) to build the technical capacity of experts, particularly in taxonomy and biodiversity knowledge, to be integrated into the EIA Guidelines.
3. Improve the quality of the EIA Scoping Process/Terms of Reference steps by building capacity at different levels within the approving authorities to strengthen clarity and biodiversity knowledge of how the scoping processes are undertaken to ensure that the Terms of Reference is developed specific to the project proposal.

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