Editor's Note: This is a brief summary of the opening address given by Mrs Emi Rabukawaqa, Deputy Secretary for Education, Fiji, at the fourth regional workshop for national coordinators of the Curriculum Innovation for Life Skills (CILS) Module of the Basic Education and Life Skills (BELS) Programme, held at the USP in September 1996.

The starting point for any examination of any investment must be in the people and in the nature of the society or nation. For all of us who live in the Pacific, the common factor that underlies our communities is the resilience of our people. This has been tested time and again through natural calamities such as cyclones, floods, economic downturns, political readjustments and the like. There have been so called experts who have predicted our doom. But we have not only bounced back, we have also charted our own road to recovery and well-being. Why? We may ask. I believe that our success is attributable to the built-in life survival skills inherited from our forefathers. Where these kinds of skills and will-power exist, there also exists the human context in which the vitality of any investment is assured. This vital Pacific essence must be captured and made part of our learning in agricultural education. As part of this progress, we may ask ourselves the following questions:

(a) Are we indeed stifling this vitality through our examination and testing modes?

(b) Are we becoming too bookish in an area which is practically based?

(c) Have we embraced too much the western mode of tilling the land and raising livestock at the expense of our well-tested simple traditional techniques?

(d) Will being able to answer a multiple-choice question enhance a child's understanding of a life skill?

These are some of the questions that we should not only continue to debate, but more importantly, do something about. I would like to suggest that an important ingredient in the incorporation of this vitality back into the agricultural education curriculum, is the involvement of the family group. The family in the Pacific is of course the single most important social unit for a young person. The strength, and the bond of unity in a family is crucial both to the family and the young person. In fact, life skill learning in the Pacific setting is something we acquire in a family and village situation, where living and learning is a seamless and a continuous process. It would follow then that a curriculum modelled on this pattern, might be assured of successfully instilling life-skill values in students. In this regard, the proposed extension of the CILS Module on a full-time basis, would be well advised to develop a community support component, not only to take advantage of the wealth of traditional values and methods in agriculture, but also to ensure the proper implanting of the agricultural life skill values and methods in our young people. Agricultural education in schools might then become a more coherent study, impacting on young people's lives in a vital and meaningful way. Indeed it would then be a sound investment for the future.

Any other examination of investment for the future must also focus on what exists in terms of resources. Our Pacific nations are indeed fortunate in being well endowed with rich and productive lands, and landscapes of great natural beauty. Indeed these are the resources that have provided the mainstay of our economies. However, like the rest of the world, we are experiencing the alarming spectre of unemployment in significant numbers. It is true that our young people face considerable odds today with the lack of employment. The situation is aggravated by the desire of young people to flock to the urban centres in search of jobs.

Education projects and organisations must cooperate to develop new life-skill subject areas and promote strategies that can combine economic growth with more employment opportunities. Our purpose in the CILS Module at least, should be clearly that of rebuiding life-skills learning back into the curriculum, in a way that will support young people to lead a more
productive life. We have an abundance of natural resources in the Pacific; we should therefore develop and reaffirm the position in our school curriculum of other life-skill subject areas such as marine studies, tourism and forestry. We are surrounded by the Pacific Ocean and a marine harvest of every kind ranging from seaweed, crabs, prawns, seashells to deep-sea fish is waiting to be tapped. Our young people need to be awakened to the notable potential existing in this sector.

Similarly, tourism is an increasingly important income earner, yet it is played down in our school curriculum at best, or not taught at all. I have already spoken about the great natural assets that we are endowed with. What we need to also ensure is, the retention of the local arts and crafts in our curriculum to provide a strong base of general life-skills for the investment in tourism. Tourism studies in schools should be closely linked to the target community. Investment in this life-skill area will also offer greater opportunities for local participation.

Our forests are also a significant resource even if it may only be coconut palms on coral atolls in some of our countries. Apart from the economic value of forests, life-skill learning in this area should also consider the study of the medical potential that our local plants offer.

These three areas, namely marine studies, tourism and forestry can very well be combined into one subject to be named "Environmental Studies" for want of a better term.

Keeping in mind our objective of promoting economic growth and the production of more employment opportunities, it is important to infuse all the life-skill subject areas with the knowledge and skill of entrepreneurship. Above all, we must resolve to do everything possible to enable our young people to live and develop their full potential, in an environment where parents and seniors are role models for responsible living in society, and respect for elders and fellow citizens, a valued attribute in the community. This means that life-skills learning for sound future investment is not complete unless there is a moral or a spiritual component undergirding the curriculum.