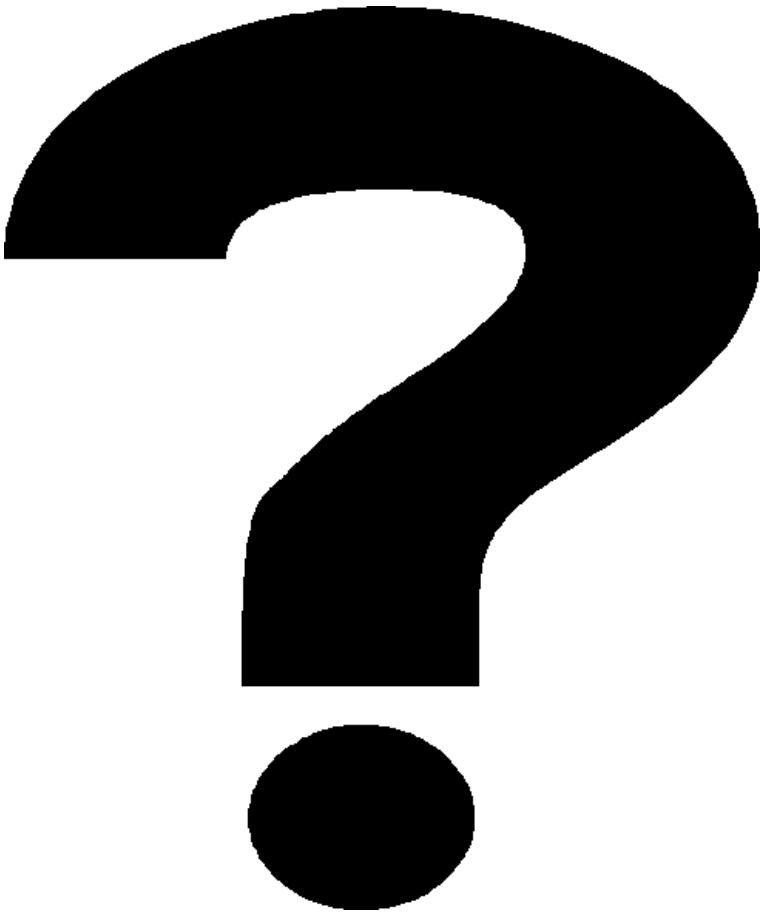
MICRONESIAN SEMINAR
P.O. Box 160
Pohnpei, FM 96941

www.micsem.org

Micronesian Counselor
December 1, 2008 **Issue 74**

WHAT ARE OUR PRIORITIES



Francis X. Hezel, SJ

The recent election in the US has given rise to a flood of articles addressed to the president-elect on what his national priorities should be. But elections shouldn't be the only occasion for reviewing the national agenda. A review of our key priorities is a worthwhile exercise anytime, especially as we prepare for the New Year and its challenges. Here I offer my own priorities, for what they're worth. Although principally intended for FSM, they may be of some relevance to other parts of Micronesia as well. My hope, as always, is not so much for complete endorsement of this list as that it might stimulate discussion on matters of some urgency for us all.

Health

Diabetes and hypertension (heart disease) are the two greatest health threats to the island populations today. There are a host of other health problems, of course, but none of them is responsible for nearly as much loss of life and decline in the quality of life as each of these.

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In a US Navy health survey of the islands conducted in the late 1940s, neither of these diseases rated so much as a mention. Yaws, TB, intestinal parasites, and infectious diseases of all sorts were found everywhere, but diabetes and hypertension were not regarded as serious threats. But times change–and so do diets and lifestyle. Today these diseases

the Pacific. Hotlines, school counseling services, and safe houses for abused women may have their value in the US, but they have not proven very helpful here in Micronesia.

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If so many of the social problems we face today appear to have their roots in cultural change, especially change occurring in the family and the community, perhaps it would make sense to examine them in their cultural context. When we ask ourselves what a traditional community would have done to prevent these problems, we may be on the way to discovering solutions that truly work. A consolidated approach toward social problems that is rooted in a cultural understanding of what is happening might produce richer results for everyone.

Survey of Top Students

Help! Do you remember who was the valedictorian and the salutatorian when you graduated from high school? Names? Contact information?

MicSem is doing a survey of the three top graduates from each of the FSM high schools, public and private, between 1976 and 2004. This is to determine what they're doing now, how much further education they received, and where they are now living.

If you remember your top three classmates, please help us out. We'd like to know their name, high school, graduation year and contact information (if you have it.)The Micsem staff person on this project is Eugenia Samuel. You can email her at *euke@micsem.org*.

Integrated Approach to Social Problems

Like all countries undergoing rapid modernization, Micronesia has been beset by a host of social problems. For the most part, these problems began to emerge during the late 1960s, worsened in the following decade, and have become a staple of life in the islands today. Some of these problems are especially linked to young males: juvenile delinquency, vandalism, violent behavior associated with teen gangs, and drunkenness. Another set of problems is tied more to the family: wife beating, child abuse, growing rates of incest, and suicide. Still other problems arise from what appears to be increased sexual promiscuity: high rates of teenage pregnancy, especially among very young girls; the spread of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV; and sexual violence.

Problems such as these might have occurred in earlier times, but they were not nearly as common as they seem to be these days. We can presume, therefore, that the explosion of these social problems was brought on by some of the cultural changes occurring in the course of modernization. It may be safe to say that the protective web that the traditional family and community had constructed to safeguard against just such problems as these has been pulled apart.

At present we have separate desks, sometimes separate organizations, to deal with each problem area individually. Each is funded separately, often with US Federal program assistance, and interaction between offices tends to be minimal. We are treating these social problems as utterly distinct from one another, and solutions for each are being sought from US-designed models that are often ineffective in

are doing incalculable damage to our people. They should be at the very top of our list when we are working out our health agenda.

This should be in the forefront of our minds as our health workers engage in the other campaigns that have to be conducted simultaneously. Our medical workers and public health staff are expected to fight lesser battles as well, but let's not forget where the biggest problems lie. There is a limit to the number of activities we can conduct effectively. When offered resources to do dozens of other things to satisfy Federal grant requirements, we would do well to remember that our priorities ought to guide our use of funds, not the other way around.

Preventive medicine is more effective than anything in combating these two diseases. "An ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure," we used to hear from our parents when we were young. Doctors and other medical personnel in the islands would agree wholeheartedly with this. If we could only put our resources into educating people to take necessary steps before they become seriously ill, we would save money and our people would be spared needless suffering.

Both of these diseases can be controlled by lifestyle changes, especially diet and exercise. If we ate properly,

avoiding the kinds of fatty and salty foods that clog our arteries and add to our weight, we wouldn't need expensive medication later. If we got a reasonable amount of exercise throughout our life, we could avoid the danger of all the nasty effects of diabetes and minimize the risk of a heart attack at an early age.

Young people usually have all kinds of opportunities to engage in sports and other physical activity. The problem lies not with them, but with adults. We could begin the campaign for exercise by offering all, adults as well as kids, a place to exercise, a place to walk, and a place to swim. Sometimes something as simple as cutting the grass around the field can be a first step in encouraging adults to take a daily walk.

In the end, we have the responsibility of educating a generation or two of people who have become used to living a much softer life than their ancestors did how to avoid the problems that diabetes and hypertension bring. Public education–through TV, radio, booklets and word of mouth–is going to make the difference.

Education

With a work force on the move and thousands emigrating to the US every year, a good basic education is an imperative for Micronesia. The world has changed since the Compact has gone into

services that the government offers its people improving?

If the nation hopes to chart its progress and do responsible planning for the future, it will need to collect reliable data related to its economy, the health of its population, and the quality of its education. The other obvious use of such data is to ensure its donors, especially the US, that the nation is using its aid productively.

The islands have made a start in this direction a few years ago when they adopted basic measures in education and health. The Performance Monitoring Project, run by the USDA Graduate School, offered a considerably expanded list of measures of its own, but this left FSM with two overlapping sets of measures. Matters were already complicated by the fact that different software programs were used to record the data in different states, and sometimes in different offices within a single state. It may be impossible to standardize the software in all places. Even so, we should be working toward adopting a single list of performance measures throughout the nation.

To make this system more effective, two steps should be taken. First, the measures that are being used should be reassessed to make sure they are capturing the most essential signs of progress. A single basic set of measures should result from this, with the understanding that local offices may add to this list other data that they might need. Second, the channels of information flow (eg, between the village schools and central education office, and between state and national government) need to be improved so that there is a regular flow of data, not one that operates by fits and starts.

gauge possible expansion of remittances in the years to come. Not only should remittances be factored into economic planning, but serious thought ought to be given on how to maintain and enlarge these inflows in the future. This discussion might touch on migrants' rights to landownership and the vote, not to mention encouraging dual citizenship. It could also consider ways of encouraging emigrants to return for regular visits to the islands. For FSM, if not for the Marshalls and Palau, the remittance flow could be an increasing source of income in the future.

Third, work to increase the nation's proceeds from its ocean resources. As tuna becomes ever more scarce and competition heats up for right to fish in the world's richest tuna waters, the islands might find a way to obtain a larger share in the value of the total catch. The government might consider the possibility of forming a cartel with seven other members of the Pacific who control the richest fishing grounds in the Central Pacific.

Charting Our Progress

Any modern nation needs to be able to measure where it is at any point in time in comparison with what it hopes to achieve. How far has it come in meeting the Millennium Development Goals that international organizations use in marking progress? Do standardized test scores show improvement for our public school students? Have the infant mortality rates dropped in the last five years? Are the

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effect. Micronesians who leave home now have to compete with the rest of the world for good jobs and decent housing. Those youngsters who don't like the confinement of a classroom still have the option of fleeing to the village and living off the land. But those who hope to land good jobs will have to move elsewhere to find them, as we must all know by now after watching the local economy shrink and then shrink some more. They are the ones for whom education matters, the ones who stand to lose if they have to spend half their college years learning what they should have picked up in their first dozen years of education. The rest of us lose as well, of course, since these emigrants are sending a healthy slice of their paycheck back home to support family and friends.

Our best elementary schools and high schools are the ones that have the best principals, as we have seen time and again everywhere in the region.

Some people persist in their belief that good schooling somehow results in a loss of cultural roots. They see a fundamental conflict between culture and formal education, forcing us to choice among the two. The first step we can take in improving public education is to put an end to such silly thinking. There is no reason why education, even one that aims to teach English and math, can't reinforce cultural identity at the end of the day. We would do well to recognize the cultural argument for what it is: a lame excuse for our inability to reform a mediocre education system.

Other people put great stress on the importance of vocational education on the grounds that it is more oriented to the needs of these islands. I would never deny that

vocational education may be useful for some young people, but I'd quickly add a caution to be realistic. There are few jobs available in the islands at present (If there were, people wouldn't be leaving in such great numbers), and for the jobs that are open to our people abroad basic academic skills will prove much more useful than welding and carpentry.

In my view, there are few more urgent priorities today than the improvement of the public elementary and secondary schools. But what should be done to improve public education?

First, public education will have to redirect its attention, away from getting everyone into the next grade and toward ensuring that students have the basic skills and information required at every step along the way. In other words, norms and standards will have to be moved from the administration's file folders into the classroom. Standards for each grade level will have to be made operational. Failure to do this creates an illusion of successful education, while in fact imposing a huge burden on the local colleges to engage in remedial work.

There should be no free rides in the college system any more than in the public school system. If a student does not meet a set of predetermined goals for improvement after his initial year in college, that student should not be permitted to continue for a second year.

Second, the norms for appointing and retaining school principals should be re-examined. It's more important that the principal be an effective manager than a degree holder. The drive over the past ten years to get all our teachers

even if this has been under-utilized in the past. At present FSM is receiving only about $13 million yearly from the sale of fishing licenses to foreign countries.

In the face of the failure of former economic plans, the government will have to rethink its priorities. Economic planners always caution against trying to pick winners when envisioning future development, for they maintain that in fertile ground for investment surprising plants may sprout. Still, the government might consider an action plan along these lines.

First, work with Asian Development Bank, the major financial institution in our region, to help it reassess its expectations of Pacific Island economies and its strategies for dealing with development. Its present high expectations have rarely been met anywhere in the Pacific, suggesting that there is something wrong with its formula for development. Factors that need to be considered include the effect that island "subsistence affluence" has on productivity, the relatively high costs of funding small nation states and maintaining their dispersed public services, and the dearth of resources available. The US should be a party to this conversation so it can adjust its own expectations of what is attainable at the end of the present Compact period.

Second, measure the extent of the remittances today and

island nations, with their limited resources, distance from markets, and tiny populations, to develop a solid economic base. Once upon a time, some dreamed of high-end agricultural exports, others saw the potential of turning the islands into a major tourist destination, while still others thought that fishing was going to be the answer. For many reasons, these dreams remain unrealized. Agriculture was never much of a starter and has fallen off after the demise of the pepper industry in Pohnpei. The visitor figures for FSM, at 18,000 a year, have remained nearly unchanged for the past 20 years despite the efforts of the state Visitors Bureaus. Local efforts at establishing a fishing industry have been less than successful over the years, so FSM continues to depend almost entirely on foreign fishing license fees. Isn't it time to reassess our priorities in economic development?

The two greatest assets of FSM today are: its strategic value to the US now and in the future, and its exported labor abroad. To these two income sources we might be able to add as a third asset the fishing grounds contained within the nation's EEZ.

What's needed now is a realistic appraisal of what the islands have to work with in building their economy. The two greatest assets of FSM today are: its strategic value to the US now and in the future, and its exported labor abroad. The first has given rise to the Compact of Free Association, which yields more than $100 million a year for FSM. The exported labor–that is to say, those among our 35,000 emigrants who hold regular jobs in the US and its territories–is responsible for an estimated $25-$30 million in remittances each year. To these two income sources we might be able to add as a third asset the fishing grounds contained within the nation's EEZ,

proper credentials is a noble cause, but let's not harbor the illusion that this alone is going to transform our education system. Our best elementary schools and high schools are the ones that have the best principals, as we have seen time and again everywhere in the region. When it comes to good schools, management makes the difference–not the degree that the principal has. It's even more important than the quality of the teachers in the school. If you don't believe this, just look at the rise and fall of the top elementary schools around the area and see whether these ups and downs don't correspond to who was in charge at a given time.

Third, some of the pressure has to be taken off local colleges, swamped as they are with students who have not been able to master what should have been required in the public school system. The capacity of colleges to provide remedial assistance to underachieving students seems taxed to the limits. Nearly anyone who walks in the door with a high school diploma in hand can be accepted into one of the state campuses. There they remain until they have finished two years of "college" work. College is not a retirement home; it is meant to be a systematic program for advanced learning. There should be no free rides in the college system any more than in the public school system. If a student does not meet a set of predetermined goals for improvement after his initial year in college, that student should not be permitted to continue for a second year. That change alone would reduce the drag effect on those who may lag behind but who truly want to learn. It might lessen the Pell grant income for the colleges, but it would do wonders for the motivation of the students.

Care of the Outer Islands

A large percentage of the population continues to reside in the outlying atolls: 18% in FSM, and about 33% in RMI. They are in danger of becoming the forgotten people, a remote and dispersed population that is left to take care of itself. The usual problems associated with their remoteness have been compounded by damage to their local food resources, especially taro, due to saltwater incursion that is sometimes attributed to climate change.

Many of us assume that the outer island populations are gradually decreasing, perhaps to the point where they will disappear entirely before too long. In actual fact, however, a surprising number of outlying islands have gained population between 1994 and 2000, dates of the last two official censuses. Kuttu in the Mortlocks rose from 633 to 873 and Puluwat jumped from 684 to 1015 in those six years. The population of Lukunoch, Satawan, Nama, Pulap, and Onoun all increased by at least 100 during that short period, and seven other outliers in Chuuk showed smaller gains. In Pohnpei, while other atolls did show declines in population, Sapwuafik jumped from 629 to 857. In Yap, Woleai also showed a gain from 844 to 975. Overall, the outer island population in FSM has grown slightly during those six years by about 1,130, or from 17% to 18% of the entire population.

With the enormous rise in fuel prices over the last year, ship service to the outlying islands has fallen off and air service to those with landing strips is more uncertain than ever. When we factor in the higher cost of imported food and the damage to local food supplies that some of these islands have suffered, the future does not look very promising for these people.

Government should be prepared to subsidize transportation and communication to allow the people living there to access public services and economic opportunities.

The government will have to make some hard decisions here. Unless the government is prepared to have these people move into the population centers, it should be prepared to subsidize transportation and communication to allow the people living there to access public services and economic opportunities. Ship service, some limited air service and a decent communications system are minimal needs.

Economic Development

The Federated States of Micronesia and the Marshall Islands are nations that still have a long way to go in developing viable economies. If Palau appears better off, with a per capita GDP that is three times higher than its neighbors, that's due to the thriving tourist industry that has developed there. Viable economies are usually built upon strong industries.

We all know from experience how difficult it is for small