

20 YEARS OF INVESTING IN PACIFIC WOMEN

20 years ago, serial social entrepreneur Greg Casagrande made his first foray into the Pacific Islands, setting up the South Pacific Business Development (SPBD) Samoa operations with the aim of helping women in need to help themselves out of poverty.

The network of microfinance institutions now spans five Pacific nations and continues to lead and innovate in the microfinance space. SPBD works to eradicate poverty by empowering women in rural villages with the opportunity to start, grow and maintain sustainable, income-generating micro-enterprises, build assets, and finance home improvements and childhood education.

SPBD provides its clients with training and financial services and ongoing motivation so that they can climb permanently out of poverty. It serves women in both rural and peri-urban areas who are vulnerable to the consequences of poverty, including single mothers, the unemployed, minorities, the poor in health, the disabled, and the unbanked.

Since 2000, SPBD has impacted more than 80,000 women and disbursed more than 246,000 micro loans worth US\$177 million to hardworking, low-income entrepreneurs.



As the initial and flagship microfinance institution of the SPBD Network, SPBD Microfinance Samoa is often used to launch new products and pilot schemes. With coverage on all four islands and nearly every village in Samoa, SPBD Samoa has been financially sustainable since 2007. SPBD is currently impacting more than 20,000 families (an estimated 120,000 individuals), almost 60% of the population.

“I was once a woman with dreams and ambitions,” says SPBD Samoa General Manager Luapene Lefau. “Therefore I would like to remind every woman out there that hard work and determination will lead us to success and achieving what may seem impossible at first.”



Following the success of SPBD Samoa, SPBD launched in the Kingdom of Tonga in 2009. SPBD Tonga reached financial sustainability within 18 months of inception and has since disbursed US\$48.6 million. SPBD Tonga will continue to expand its outreach on existing island groups (Tongatapu, Vava'u, Ha'apai, Eua') and will expand to additional islands over the next few years. SPBD Tonga currently impacts half of Tonga's population.

“SPBD knows the power of women first-hand. For 20 years, we have seen what they can accomplish. Our members want to improve their lives and their families' lives. They want healthier housing, better nutrition, and better education for their children. They want the next generation to have a better life. So, how can they make that happen when there

are so few jobs? Where can they turn when they have to rely on their own resourcefulness and their own skill set? They can turn to SPBD. We are so proud to provide the financing, support and training so they can get the tools they need to succeed,” says SPBD Tonga General Manager Fine Tu'ipulotu.



Launching in December 2010, SPBD Fiji makes available the benefits of microfinance to the low-income and disadvantaged women of the Fiji Islands who constitute 35% of the population. SPBD Fiji has disbursed more than 55,600 loans since inception, totalling more than US\$32.7 million. Today with more than 9,000 members -- of which 5,600 are active loan clients -- and loan portfolio of US\$3.5 million and savings portfolio of US\$1.9 million, SPBD is the largest and most successful microfinance institution in Fiji.

“The consistent use of financial education by SPBD has changed the mindsets of the women of Fiji. Not only have they become entrepreneurial but also responsible financial managers. SPBD will continue to expand its outreach to the rural areas and assist these ladies formalise their businesses as well,” says SPBD Fiji General Manager Rico Munoz.



SPBD Solomon Islands started operations in November 2012 and disbursed its first loans in January 2013. Since then, SPBD has disbursed US\$15.5 million and more than 25,200 loans. It currently services 8,400 savings accounts and more than US\$320,000 of savings. Of the future, General Manager Ajay Verma says: “We will further increase the geographical footprint and the suite of financial products offered by SPBD to make more meaningful impact in the lives of rural families. My Solomon Islands local team and I will strive to make SPBD Solomon Islands one of the largest SPBD businesses in the South Pacific region.”



SPBD Microfinance (Vanuatu) commenced operations in April 2017. The newest of the 5 MFIs in the SPBD network, SPBD Vanuatu has shown impressive progress disbursing more than 13,000 loans worth US\$6.8 million since inception. SPBD services 6,900 savings accounts totalling US\$290,000 in Vanuatu.

Florin Covaciu, General Manager of SPBD Vanuatu, shares, “I am proud and happy to be a member of this exceptional institution, SPBD. We will increase our efforts to extend our service on other islands of Vanuatu, because our mamas work very hard, and they deserve to have a source of training and of loans as close as possible to their businesses. It is very nice to see them improving and developing, and we are doing our best to be here for them. When they succeed, we succeed.”



“IT’S ALL ABOUT HONESTY” SAYS SUSANA

“[For] us women, there are always ways to earn money,” says Susana Silikiwai, a SPBD member from Kalokolevu village on Viti Levu.

Susana was one of the members who came to Suva to celebrate SPBD Fiji’s 10th anniversary recently. “I shed tears” Susana said while thinking about her SPBD journey. “I was looking at where I am now, the number of educated women that could [have] come here, and that God chose me to come here. I thank God.”

Susana runs a canteen and makes lovo packs. Since COVID-19 hit, she has also begun selling produce in Lami each Sunday, after 26 years selling from Suva municipal market. Lami is well known for its small Sunday market populated by Seventh Day Adventists like Susana (who mark their sabbath on Saturdays), and Susana says she can earn more on that one day than if she were to come into Suva market four days a week.

Susana is also training family to help in the business. “I’m teaching one of my children, my daughter. I told her not to go anywhere, or work elsewhere. I told her to stay in the market, for me to teach her how to buy and sell, for her to stay in Lami market while I run the one in Suva.”

Her membership with SPBD has enabled the grandmother of 25 children to care for her family, grow her income and extend her home, adding two extra bedrooms, a kitchen and sitting room.

“I take care of my children, my grandchildren, and even one of my nephews; his parents passed away. I am supporting his education. That’s SPBD. These banks here, they can’t help us like SPBD does. Our house is a small house, I used to say. One small house with 2 bedrooms, no kitchen. We cook in-

side; if the weather is good, we cook outside. I thank SPBD for giving me the wisdom and the knowledge, I am really happy with SPBD; [and have] extended my house.”

Susana continues to think about how she can increase her income and diversify her business. Kalokolevu is situated on the busy road between Suva and Nadi and she wants to take advantage of this convenient location.

“I want to expand my business and do one [stall] on the highway where we live” to sell vegetables, cooked food, juice and handicrafts.

“In two years’ time, I plan to purchase a van to assist with my farm produce and lovo pack deliveries,” she says.

Susana is also keen to buy a pool table to entertain the many children that come to her home and to further improve her kitchen.

As a participant in the Fiji Bloom small and medium business formalisation program, Susana says her coach has advised her to grow vegetables to sell, rather than buying them from other suppliers.

Like other Fiji Bloom participants, she also invested F\$1000 of her own money in the training program. “This motivates me to explore other potential businesses out there,” Susana says.

She is also grateful for the assistance SPBD has given her to navigate loans and hire purchase agreements without the complications of detailed paperwork.

She encourages other women in her community to follow her lead.

“It’s all about honesty. If you don’t have honesty, you can’t do it. We’re poor...but I thank SPBD for raising our family’s living standard.”



Greg Casagrande in Tonga

INDEPTH WITH GREG CASAGRANDE



South Pacific Business Development founder, Greg Casagrande is a “serial social entrepreneur”, founding not only the SPBD microfinance network 20 years ago, but also Micro Dreams, a microfinance acceleration fund, and Transformative Ventures LLC, a microfinance advisory company. Casagrande’s storied career has also seen him promote hi-tech entrepreneurship, and act as founding director of the Ice Angels, Australasia’s largest angel investor group. Here he reflects on SPBD’s 20 years, and the challenges and opportunities 2020 brought the network.

Islands Business: The SPBD network has just celebrated its 20th anniversary. How has your vision evolved over that time?

Greg Casagrande: SPBD began simply in the year 2000 with the vision of providing under-privileged Samoan women with the opportunity to obtain small unsecured loans to help them start and grow tiny income generating businesses so that they could work their way up and out of poverty. Since then, we have learned that there are several other important needs that we can also address. Today we provide a full range of financial and business development services including: affordable savings accounts, a variety of death benefits, significant financial literacy education, heaps of micro, small and medium business training including our much lauded BLOOM programme, childhood education and higher education financing, basic housing improvement financing, several different asset purchase financing programmes, solar powered equipment financing and distribution, regional seasonal employee financing, remittance facilitation, mobile money transfers and more. Over the past twenty years we have also dramatically expanded our vision beyond the shores of Upolu

in Samoa. Today we work throughout Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

IB: As founder, what has given you most satisfaction over this period?

GC: I always find tremendous joy meeting in the villages with our many successful women micro-entrepreneurs. I love hearing their stories about how they have taken charge of their lives and are working hard and making the living and educational environment better for their families and especially their children. So many of our members have become fantastic leaders in their communities. They are especially inspiring.

IB: What is the biggest lesson you have learned?

GC: I read a good quote many years ago that said, “if you want to go fast, travel alone, if you want to go far, go together.” My vision is for SPBD to be a permanent impact organisation that is spread across the region. To achieve that has required building excellent local teams in each one of our markets. Building a great team is critical to achieving sustained significant success. I am enormously proud of our excellent team throughout the region.

IB: Has anything surprised you about the way the network has developed?

GC: Building a financially self-sufficient, sustainable and highly impactful organisation that serves the grass roots communities in nearly 2,000 villages across dozens of islands in five different Pacific Island nations has not been easy. There were many times, especially early on, that we could have failed. I understand clearly why so many well-intentioned similar, well-funded efforts have in fact failed. I think SPBD has great tenacity in its DNA. When I started, I would never have imagined how difficult it would be. But the effort has clearly been worth it.

IB: 2020 has been a difficult year for Pacific island economies, and many families have turned to micro and small enterprises for their economic survival. How has the

pandemic and resulting economic impacts impacted SPBD? What adjustments have you made?

GC: 2020 has indeed been an extraordinary and difficult year. SPBD has made many adjustments to better serve our clients in this significantly changed environment. SPBD adopted new procedures and policies to fully comply with all new government regulations in each of our markets. Among other things, this included adopting significant use of personal protective equipment in all aspects of our operations, suspending weekly meetings as needed and then using micro-meetings (with just 3 people, in lieu of larger groups) when appropriate. We also helped our clients with their loans by providing them with significant repayment grace periods and opportunities to reschedule existing loans. Additionally we are providing all of our clients with the ability to take out new rehabilitation financing to either relaunch a business or, for those who were working in the tourism industry, to launch an entirely new and different business.

IB: You describe yourself as a ‘serial social entrepreneur’. What new ventures are you working on now?

GC: In addition to SPBD, I am also the Chairman and CEO of WaterHealth International (WHI). WHI is a major provider and operator of distributed, affordable clean drinking water facilities located in hundreds of rural communities across India, Nigeria, and Ghana. Millions of poor rural families rely on us each day for their purified drinking water.

IB: What is the one piece of advice you would give someone who is thinking of going into business?

GC: My advice, to any person considering going into business, is to have a very clear vision of the specific customer needs that you are going to address and satisfy. Figure out exactly how you are going to delight your customers by fully meeting their specific needs. With that knowledge in hand, you can then design a financially sustainable and scalable business model that will consistently deliver terrific solutions that please your customers. You will then be on your pathway towards a successful business.

IB: Who inspires you, and why?

GC: My father has always been my main inspiration in business. He is a tremendously accomplished entrepreneur. He instilled in me most of my core values, a strong work ethic, and a disposition to tenaciously and smartly build quality organisations around terrific, tightly knit teams.

IB: Sadly, you haven’t been able to travel to SPBD countries this year. But when borders reopen, where are you looking forward to visiting again?

GC: In 2021 I will most definitely be back in all five SPBD countries (Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Solomon Islands & Vanuatu). I look forward to meeting face-to-face once again with all of our teams and many of our wonderful, inspired members. **IB**



SPBD’S 20 YEARS OF EXPANSION

- 2000: SPBD Samoa established
- 2004: Savings program begins
- 2009: SPBD Tonga established
US\$10m in loans disbursed
- 2010: SPBD Fiji established
Launch of Death Benefit Product
- 2011: SPBD Holdings launched
- 2012: SPBD Solomon Islands established
Financial Education Program launched
Mobile Banking in Fiji begins
- 2013: SME Loans launched
Overseas Workers Loans first available
- 2014: Higher Education Loans
100,000 loans disbursed since inception
Value of clients’ savings exceeds US\$1.5million
- 2015: Solar loans first available
US\$10 million in assets
40,000 active savings accounts
US\$60 million in loans disbursed since inception
- 2017: SPBD Vanuatu begins operations
US\$100 million in loans disbursed since inception
SPBD launches new offices, bringing total number of offices to 17
- 2018: 200,000 loans disbursed since inception
US\$130 million in loans disbursed since inception
Number of savings accounts serviced surpasses 50,000
- 2019: First local national GMs take the helm in Samoa and Tonga
Value of clients’ savings exceeds US\$3 million
US\$20 million in assets
- 2020: SPBD celebrates its 20th Anniversary
SPBD launches network-wide effort to support member businesses impacted by COVID restrictions
SPBD Fiji’s BLOOM business accelerator programme graduates its first group of participants

MEET THE MEMBER: MARICA SUTE

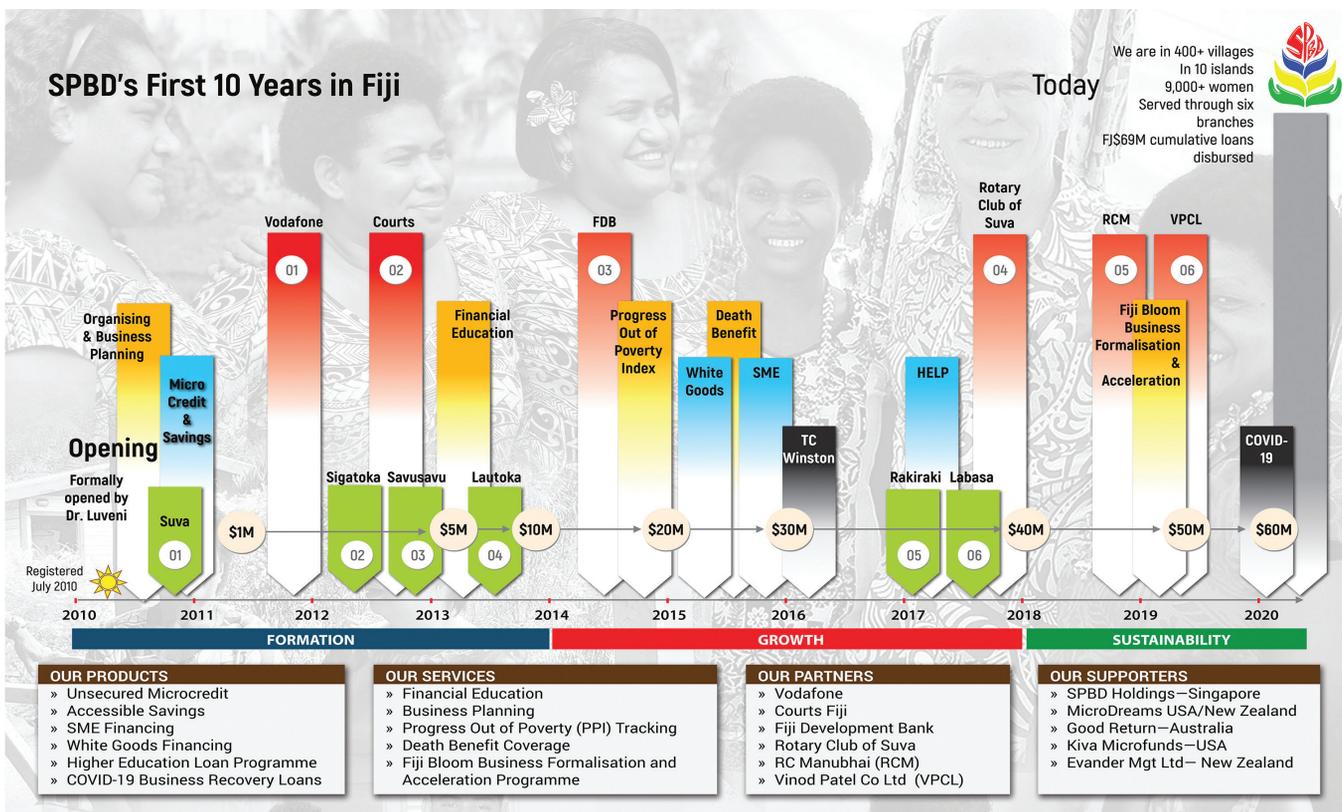


Marica Sute’s granddaughter graduated with a Bachelor of Science from the Fiji School of Medicine four years ago; something that brings the SPBD Matanakilagi Centre leader great pride, particularly as she was able to help pay for her granddaughter’s education.

Marica has been able to help her grandchildren with their education expenses through her hard work as a micro-entrepreneur. Well-known for her baking and cooked meals, she runs a small canteen from her home, and with other Matanakilagi members, has a café at Suva’s iconic World Harvest Centre. Her clients include her friends, neighbours, office workers and church members.

While COVID-19 has posed challenges, she has managed to keep going. “I had a hair salon which I established two years ago but when COVID-19 hit, and business was going down, I sold my share. So, I got my share of money back and that’s it. I’m still carrying on with my café, Café 1 at the food court,” Marica says.

28 women belong to the SPBD Matanakilagi centre. In 2017, Marica was recognised as SPBD’s ‘Individual Saver of the Year’. “The funds I got from SPBD helped me establish and run my canteen. I do some savings too and yes, all the businesses we have were funded by SPBD,” she says. Marica hopes to remain a member of SPBD for a long time to come.



MEET THE MEMBER: ATASA VAKASOKO



“My name is Atasa and I’m from Nasilai, Rewa. We started with SPBD as it was established and I’ve been running my business for almost ten years now. In my first year, I owned a canteen and sold fish. But I realised that fish was getting expensive, so I tried with sasa (fibres from coconut fronds). I bought loose sasa for \$3 and sold it as taufale (brooms) for \$8. My husband really helps me a lot in selling sasa. Since then, I’ve been selling sasa.

I see many changes in our living standard. Before, our house was seated on the ground, the ground was the floor with an iron roof and dried coconut leaves as walls. Today, our house is elevated, has a proper floor, an extended kitchen including our toilet and bathroom.

I took the loan too because my child was studying to become a teacher at that time. My first loan was \$900 and on the week I took it, my daughter called to say she flopped one of her units, so I took another loan; I’ve paid off both.

My daughter is now teaching in Bua Secondary School and this is her second year. We have benefitted a lot from SPBD as we are able to meet our expenses; everything church-related, village-related, education-related, relative-related. SPBD is a good organisation. I’m always telling members of our centre how sad I get, as this opportunity only presented itself when I’m this old. If only I could turn back time - but whatever God has set for us, that’s it.”

THE SPBD ANNIVERSARY LOGO



The masi design of SPBD Fiji’s 10th anniversary logo encompasses key achievements of the past decade.

- The ten islands where women entrepreneurs hail from
- The six branches that serve more than 400 villages across the country
- Diamond designs dramatising the five key commitments of SPBD members and staff, which guide the company to realise its vision:
 - △ I shall own and run a revenue-generating business
 - △ I shall attend weekly Centre meetings
 - △ I shall repay my loan on time
 - △ I shall honour my Group and Centre guarantees
 - △ I shall invest in my family through savings, childhood education and housing improvement.

SPBD PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

- Small unsecured loans of approximately US\$400 for micro-businesses, housing improvement and children’s education
- SME (Small and Medium Enterprise) loans between US\$3,000 - US\$12,500
- Overseas Worker Loans for seasonal workers who travel to New Zealand and Australia to earn income
- Simple and small-balance savings services to build-up funds for future needs
- Training (financial and business) and on-going guidance and motivation
- Loan security coverage which covers clients’ outstanding loans with SPBD in case of death
- Death benefits to clients and their spouses designed to decrease the financial burden on the family of the deceased
- Mobile money services in Fiji in partnership with Vodafone.