

HOW A COMMUNITY IN FIJI RELOCATED TO ADAPT TO CLIMATE CHANGE

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In recent decades, unusually extreme storm surges and erosion along global coastlines – primarily in low-lying atolls of the Pacific, Bangladesh, Louisiana, and Alaska – have altered the natural environment to the detriment of coastal communities. As sea levels continue to rise, scientists expect coastal degradation to worsen causing salt contamination of fresh water resources, soil erosion, salinity-inhibiting plant growth and infrastructure damage. Poor communities often lack proper infrastructure to mitigate the impact of rising sea levels, forcing them to resettle away from the coast.

Popular media accounts have sensationalized this situation, with headlines warning of “sinking islands” and a mass exodus of “climate refugees” from developing nations. This alarmist portrayal suggests that advanced nations could be swamped by masses of people displaced from environmentally threatened poor countries. But this is not an unmanageable crisis because coastal communities can prepare for relocation as a response to environmental degradation.

Relocation as an adaptation to the impacts of climate change is already occurring. In 2014, the Fiji government relocated the community of Vunidogoloa in Vanua Levu, Fiji’s second largest island. The community was moved to higher ground because seawalls were no longer able to prevent flooding and coastal erosion – a move that followed nearly ten years of planning. Village leaders and government officials first met in 2006 to discuss the relocation and the Fijian government approved plans that same year, but further preparations were postponed until 2012. That year, the government created an ad hoc committee to support the relocation of Vunidogoloa and the national government assisted the village with financial and political aid. Two years later, the selection site was identified and the community relocated a mile and a half inland. Since then, the Fiji government has identified numerous villages as candidates for relocation.

Lessons Learned from the Relocation Process

I have studied the social dynamics of relocation politics. From my interviews with the villagers of Vunidogoloa, I learned about various complexities that can arise:

- **New limits for women.** Fiji is a patriarchal society with a clear gender division of household labor. Women are in charge of fishing and household chores including cooking, tending to the children, and cleaning, while men are the primary caretakers of the household farm, in charge of planting and harvesting crops for the family. At the original village site next to the sea, women fished every day, but the new village site is situated a mile and a half away from the sea and closer to the farms. As a result, women are no longer able to fish, either because age keeps them from making the daily walk or because their husbands will not allow them to leave

the household for an extended period. Consequently, women have become more dependent on their husbands to feed the family.

- **Some new efficiencies for women.** Relocation alleviated some burdens for household chores. It was decided by the villagers and the government that every new house in Vunidogoloa would be built with an individual tap for washing, so women started to spend less time waiting at the community tap and more time on other daily activities, such as mat weaving, baking, and socializing. In this respect, relocation lessened the burden of female work within the existing patriarchal structure.
- **Village elders became less mobile.** Communities along the coast tend to be on flat ground. Relocation can involve moving inland, often to higher ground. For the elderly, moving to a new area with more difficult terrain limited mobility; daily activities such as walking to church on Sunday, visiting other households, and going to the village store became arduous. Some elders actually became housebound because they could not walk back up the hill to their homes.

Overcoming Obstacles to Further Positive Outcomes

From a stakeholder perspective, funding is the primary obstacle to community relocation in a less-developed country such as Fiji that does little to worsen climate change yet relies on international funds to assist in-country adaptations. Funding is not all that matters. In a close-knit society, social dislocations like these can have adverse impacts on human health or serve to disrupt long-established cultural and familial practices.

As relocations are planned, communities not only need to fund the new settlements but must also try to anticipate and mitigate traumas that can arise from moving people away from accustomed arrangements and resources they rely upon. To date, little scientific research has been done on how best to approach the human and social challenges of relocation – but the need for policymaking informed by research is only growing.

Governments and international organizations are currently pursuing relocation efforts in the developed as well as the developing world. For instance, U.S. communities in Louisiana and Alaska have been identified as needing to relocate. However, too often, climate change adaptation efforts use a top-down approach and standardized models, in which the people who face environmental degradation have little say in the decision-making process. Research on community-led relocation efforts can clarify the many ways in which national-level policies can be informed and fine-tuned by local input.

As my research makes clear, relocation in poorer rural areas can be an opportunity to increase the standard of living for inhabitants – for instance, by installing indoor plumbing and showers that were not present in the originally located settlements. In addition, my research suggests that special attention should be given to how relocations will affect marginalized groups including women and the elderly. Case studies like the relocation of Vunidogoloa highlight some of the social effects that policymakers need to consider as they plan to protect at-risk regions while at the same time ensuring that the most vulnerable community members will not face new burdens.

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