



The "Bula Bulletin"



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He said to them,
"Because of your
little faith. For truly I
tell you, if you have
faith the size of a
mustard seed, you
will say to this
mountain, 'Move
from here to there'
and it will move; and
nothing will be
impossible for you.
Matthew 17:20
(NRSV)

Rising seas... lowering mountains???

Sea levels are rising across the Pacific. As ocean water warms it expands causing the level of the sea to rise. The thermal expansion of warmer tropical waters is further compounded by glacial and ice sheet melt elsewhere; the result: higher sea levels across the Pacific.

Satellite data indicate that sea levels in Fiji have risen by about 12cm since 1993, twice the global average*. Coastal communities, who make up the majority of Pacific island populations, are particularly exposed to the effects of rising seas; they are experiencing increased coastal flooding, greater landward penetration of sea water and storm surges and the inundation and contamination of fresh water lenses. As a result, climate change is forcing many low-lying communities to consider relocation as their only viable, long-term option. Relocation by the whole community will always be complex, and often traumatic, but when land is available, the relative safety of higher ground can be an appealing prospect for those facing the relentless rise of the sea.

Previously, I used to think that to gain elevation few communities would consider the option of lowering a mountain, however, the more I learn about the relocation process, the more I realise that for communities disadvantaged by climate change, there are many ways to try to create a level playing field...

Relocation of Narikoso village, Ono Island, Fiji

Narikoso, a settlement of 27 houses in the southern island of Ono, is the second village in Fiji to approach the national government for assistance with its village relocation. As part of a courtesy visit to the District in June 2011, the Prime Minister, Frank Bainimarama saw first-hand the critical situation villagers living nearest to the sea face on a daily basis. At every high tide properties in proximity to the shore are surrounded by sea water. The Prime Minister instantly pledged financial support for the relocation project.

Narikoso village has long been experiencing the effects of rising seas. Village elder, Epineri Kuruvarua said: "Forty years ago trees grew on the foreshore, now the waves reach here and the trees are all gone."



A JCB, just visible against the bare, newly-excavated earth, is one of two diggers being used to lower a coastal mountain to create a flat, tiered site for the resettlement of Narikoso village

* In the worst-case scenario, by 2090 the sea level in Fiji is predicted to be 62-160cm higher, compared with the 1980-1990 base level.



For some time people living nearest the sea experienced regular flooding episodes. Then about a decade ago an open-water channel between the village and an adjacent off-shore island was blocked intentionally in an effort to divert the rising waters.

While this was a genuine and well-meaning attempt to limit the effects of the sea on Narikoso village, the intended mitigative action only worsened the situation for the villagers. Erosion increased.

Realising their misjudgement at closing the channel, the villagers took the decision to re-open the waterway but the resultant changes to the wave and ocean-current patterns from the closure had already caused increased damage and accelerated loss of land along the foreshore. The changed shoreline morphology made the low-lying parts of the village even more exposed.



The re-opened channel, and, coupled with the effects of sea-level rise, the enhanced impact of the channel closure on the nearby shore

Today, at every high tide the seawall is breached and waves further erode a foreshore littered with fallen coconut trees. The villagers realised that very soon parts of the village would become uninhabitable. Another more radical approach was needed.

When the Prime Minister visited last year, the villagers knew what they wanted... They wanted financial assistance to relocate the village.



The view from the District Officer for Ono Island, Kelepi Saukitoga's living room at high tide, and a proudly-displayed photo of Kelepi Saukitoga guiding the Prime Minister on the PM's visit in June 2011.

“So then, whenever we have the opportunity, let us work for the good of all...”

Galatians 6:10
(NRSV)

Decision to relocate

In Fiji ownership of communal land is vested in clans (*mataqali*), and most villages are comprised of several land-owning groups. Narikoso is no exception; the 109 villagers each belongs to one of four clans that make up the community.

The majority (80%) of the land immediately adjacent to Narikoso village is owned by the *Ravita* clan, with the remainder belonging to the *Tote* clan. The two clans, in a very far-sighted move, offered the plot of land to the entire village for relocation. In Fijian culture, where land and clanship are so integral, it was a remarkable and generous gesture, undertaken for the good of the community as a whole. The then-Senior Assistant Officer (*Roko*) of the Kadavu Provincial Council, Jesoni Kuruyawa said: “We realised that we had to do something exceptional, we (the *mataqali*) were all in agreement to give the land”. The head of the clan, 74-year old Vonivate Naqau Saukitoga added: “Giving up our piece of land is for the safety of our village and we are thinking about the future of our children”.

Initially the presentation of such steep and difficult terrain may not have appeared to be that generous an offer; it was not suitable as a resettlement site. However, it was adjoining the village, in an ideal location, and it had been given freely.

Level thinking

The proposal: Why not lower the elevation of the mountain and form a raised, flat platform on which to build a new village? The land would be suitable for settlement if it was level and low enough to allow access.

District Officer, Kelepi Saukitoga took the proposal to the Office of the Prime Minister in Suva. Council Officer Jesoni Kuruyawa explained: “While most villages were asking for assistance to build sea walls, Narikoso was the only village to request money for resettlement.” True to his pledge, the PM, Commodore Bainimarama agreed to provide government assistance.

Money was allocated on the basis of a scoping study undertaken by a government engineer late last year. Subsequently a team of 16 soldiers was employed to the village to undertake the extensive earth works. The target was to complete the work within 12 weeks, with the men working near-constant shifts to level the site within the time. The imported, orange, oil drums provided sufficient fuel for only a three-month operation, and after that the soldiers and their earth-moving equipment would be assigned duties elsewhere.

The work began in July. Gradually as the mountain top was lowered, with newly-exposed soil continually being pushed over its sides, the levelled area started to take shape. Now, at the end of the 12-weeks, the diggers and their operatives are staying on in Narikoso. Much work is still needed.

More money has been secured and drainage culverts purchased. The pipes are awaiting transportation to Ono Island in the government barge. Proper site drainage is critical to the success of any relocation; all stakeholders involved in the Narikoso relocation are only too aware that failure to provide adequate drainage could have disastrous consequences for the village in the future.



Prayer points:

- Pray for the people of Narikoso as they await the completion of the earth works adjacent to their village and eagerly plan the next stage in the relocation of their community.
- Give thanks for the skills and expertise of the site engineers, and pray that the engineering works will be finished on time and within budget.
- Give thanks for the unselfish donation of land for the project and for the ground-breaking communal idea to lower a mountain when no level site was available.
- Pray for those in authority who will receive increasing requests from communities who wish to move. Pray that each request will be handled with respect and the sincerity that it deserves.
- Pray that governments and individuals elsewhere realise that unlimited lifestyles are causing communities to suffer today and will result in financial hardships for developing nations in the future.
- Pray for 'Climate' generosity and responsibility at the international level.

A new timeframe of the end of March next year has been set for all earth works to be complete. When the diggers finally fall silent, the new relocation site will measure 200m x 100m; it will have proper drainage and reach a height of 1.5m above the current sea level. It is hoped that such an elevation will be sufficient to ensure that the villagers remain safe and secure against all future predicted sea-level rises.

Community support

The community is excited about the move. Each month at the village meeting (*bose vakoro*) they are updated on progress at the new site, and the newly-formed relocation committee reports on plans for the coming months.

Relocation is a long-term commitment. The relocation committee has plans for the immediate, the short-term (3-8 years) and the long-term (8 years +). Only once all the earth works are complete will the villagers set about the task of designing their new village.

"The relocation brings the opportunity to do new things, and it encourages us to think in new ways," said an enthusiastic Vonivate Naqau Saukitoga.

Never losing hope

At all times the villagers had remained steadfast in their faith. "This move is God's will," says 73-year old Mrs. Nanise Rorovanua, "all the changes happening in our village are a real challenge, but we never lose hope in God".

Saukitoga agrees: "We have seen so many changes, but God's love is always present in the changes happening to us".



Bringing the light

The visit by the Pacific Conference of Churches team to Ono Island fell during the first week of August. The first week of each month is special in the life of the church in the Kadavu Province. Promoted as 'Bringing the Light' by the Methodist Church in Fiji, it is a week of family time when prayers and special services are conducted, smoking and the drinking of kava banned and every church has a constant light burning brightly...

With the mountain gone, the community at Narikoso now has a brighter future, and incidentally, much to the delight of the villagers, a much better mobile phone signal!

Two lanterns burning in the Methodist Church in neighbouring Vuniseri village, Ono Island.

Christ, ever-present...



God bless
Julia