

Relocation: rising seas and raising awareness in Solomon Islands

The issue

“Rising seas are impacting on our atoll communities; people’s livelihoods are already affected, and the Anglican Church of Melanesia (ACoM) has taken the decision to accompany communities experiencing climate-related hardships”, said general secretary of ACoM, Dr. Abraham Hauriasi, during his opening welcome to participants at the start of a three-day relocation workshop in Honiara. “Ultimately, communities may face the challenge of relocation, and, therefore, we must be prepared in every way that we can”.

The geography



Solomon Islands, a Pacific sovereign state to the east of Papua New Guinea, is aptly named. The nation comprises of nearly one thousand islands and is home to more than half a million people, most of whom live around the coasts of the main islands of Choiseul, Guadalcanal, Malaita, New Georgia, San Cristobal and Santa Isabel.

Some communities, however, are very remote as they are located on low-lying atolls, known as the ‘Polynesian Outliers’, hundreds of miles (or days by boat) away from the larger islands; while others, geographically closer, live on artificial islands, built many centuries ago by their ancestors from blocks of the surrounding reef. All are vulnerable to the effects of rising seas.

The workshop context

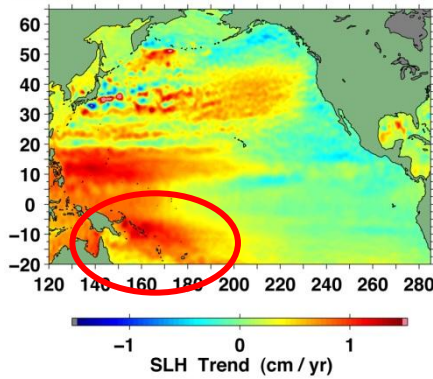
The Pacific Conference of Churches was approached by ACoM to conduct awareness training on the issue of relocation. Over the course of three days in March 2016, more than thirty people attended the meeting, drawn from affected, low-lying island communities, government ministries and ACoM head office staff. The participants gained understanding about the science of climate change, shared their personal experiences and learned about relocations elsewhere in the Pacific, before offering their own approach to the issue.



The science to date

It’s getting hotter in Honiara - 0.15°C per decade hotter to be precise - in line with global trends; but changes to rainfall patterns, both annual and seasonal, are unclear – the data indicate no particular trend. The same cannot be said for sea-level rise, however.

AVISO Satellite Altimetry: SLH Trend 1992 – 2009



news.agu.org

Satellite data record that sea levels have risen near Solomon Islands by 8mm per year since 1993, more than twice the global average of 2.8mm to 3.6mm.

The higher annual rate locally may in part be due to natural fluctuations, such as the El Niño Southern Oscillation; nevertheless, an on-going rise of nearly a centimetre a year will have devastating consequences for coastal communities, who are already noticing the impacts.

The personal stories

The representatives of low-lying Luanguia village and Pelau village in Ontong Java; Sikaiana, an outer island of Malaita; and Walande and Fanalei communities in southern Malaita, explored, within their respective peer groups, their experiences of climate change and how it was affecting their lives. Unsurprisingly, their stories were very similar.



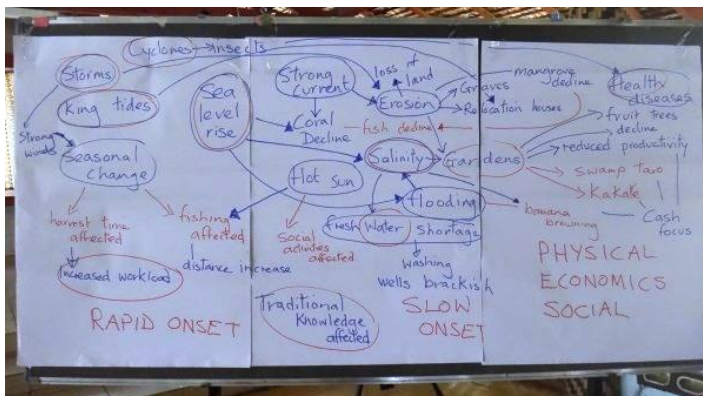
Representatives of Pelau community discuss climate-change impact



Representatives of ACoM present findings

Rosalyn Sapivaka, from Sikaiana reported that the people of Sikaiana no longer rely on root crops, such as swampy taro (*kakake*), because salt water was coming up from a hole in the centre of the island, contaminating the soil. She added: “We are also experiencing new kinds of disease that we think are connected to our changed diet, such as body numbness and aching bones, linked to a lack of certain nutrients”. And she was keen to emphasize that life was getting harder.

Patrick Amai, a community leader of Luanguia village, Ontong Java said that: “the changing conditions mean we are forced to live on store food, which is expensive and in limited supply”. James Taluasi of Walande agreed, noting the shift to a more money-orientated society, at the expense of indigenous, traditional knowledge.



Representatives from Pelau village, in the north east of Ontong Java, focused on the extensive erosion around the atoll. Ancestral graves had already been washed away, and homes forced to relocation inland because of the invading sea.

The main discussion points were captured in a summary ‘changes and impact’ chart.

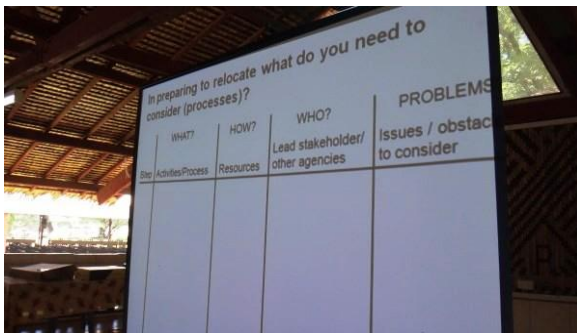
Conditions on the main islands were also deteriorating - representatives of ACoM reported that fruit-tree seasons were less predictable, especially for breadfruit, and the increased incidences of insects and diseases had resulted in smaller fruits and reduced yields.

The 'ideal' relocation – what to keep...

The presentation of historic relocations in the Pacific: Banabans to Rabi; Vaitupuans to Kioa, Gilbertese to Western Province, and Salia clan to Buca, Fiji, generated much debate on how to retain culture and identity when relocation becomes a reality. However, participants acknowledged that some form of integration with host communities would be necessary for a successful outcome – a delicate balance at best. Here's what they wanted to keep: language (including family name); cultural practices (including songs, dances, stories, clothing, arts and crafts, food and drink, and, traditional currency); farming and fishing practices; leadership and governance; community history; and, religion. A rich list!

The 'ideal' relocation – what to do...

The groups were then tasked to come up with the 'ideal' relocation process, highlighting the activity/process; what resources would be required at each stage; who the stakeholders involved in that activity/process would be; and, any limitations/obstacles to take into account.



Group task – In preparing to relocate, what do you need to consider (processes)?



Representatives of the Luanguia Community in discussions



Representatives of ACoM finalise steps

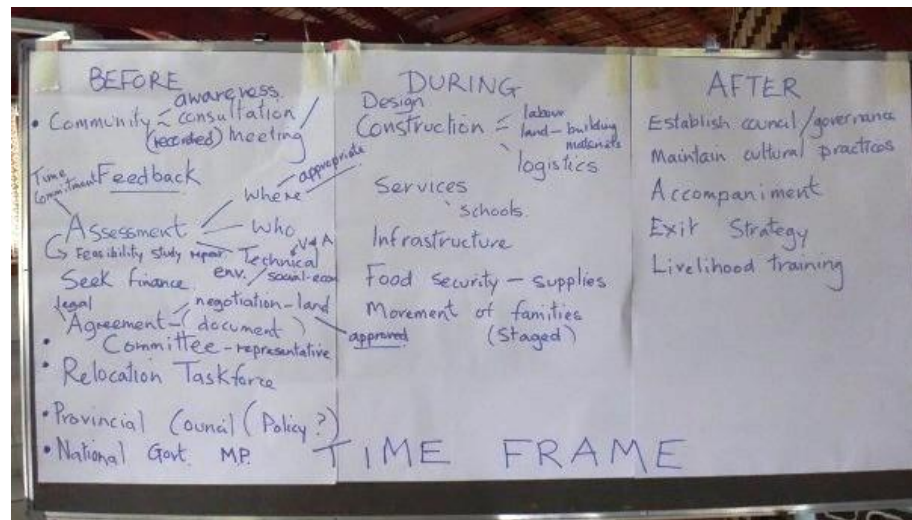


Representatives of the Sikaiana community presenting their 'ideal' steps

- All groups stated that community consultation must come first – some indicated that this awareness raising could be undertaken exclusively by the community, others indicated that it might be helpful to involve the provincial government in the process;
- There was also the suggestion that a community-based committee ('climate-change committee', 'climate change relocation taskforce') be established, with membership drawn from the affected communities;
- Several groups indicated the need for a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)/legal agreement between the community, government and landowners, to ensure each is clear on the relationship going forward and their roles and responsibilities;
- Land identification, suitability and acquisition were also viewed as very important;
- Finally, securing funding would be essential.

Prayer Points:

- Pray for low-lying communities in Solomon Islands, and elsewhere, where lives are impacted by the daily realities of climate change, especially bringing to mind those who may face relocation away from their island homes.
- Give thanks for the work of the Anglican Church of Melanesia as they seek to raise awareness of the relocation issue and accompany affected communities.
- Pray for the Solomon Islands government as it searches for appropriate and dignified approaches to the relocation challenge.
- Pray for the future openness, understanding and acceptance of displaced peoples in Solomon Islands by receiving communities.
- Pray for world leaders and humanitarian actors as they engage in humanitarian issues at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, May 2016.
- Pray for all forcibly displaced peoples, that they may receive a warm, loving welcome in a new 'home', where they can start to rebuild their lives.



Summary of steps to be taken in the 'ideal' relocation process

The commitment – what we will do...

No workshop would be complete without a “What we’ll do next” session... Participants were asked to highlight short-term actions (those to be undertaken this year), and more medium-term commitments. Raising awareness of the relocation issue in their own contexts, and the coordinated engagement of all involved in the relocation task, appeared strongly among this year’s ‘to-do’ lists.

“This workshop is an opportunity for establishing new networks amongst government and NGOs, communities and also churches”, said one government representative.

And it’s not often that the relocation issue makes the front page of a national newspaper - but that week, relocation featured twice!



The Island Sun,
Wednesday, 16th March 2016



The Island Sun,
Friday, 18th March 2016

The hope

The general secretary of the Anglican Church of Melanesia, Dr. Abraham Hauriasi concluded: “[The workshop] provided an avenue for the Church to begin the conversations with those affected by climate change together with other important stakeholders[...] we are so thankful for the partnership we have on this important issue - Climate Change and Relocation and Resettlement.”