

Relocation revisited: Vunidogoloa village, Vanua Levu, Fiji

Today, the villagers of Vunidogoloa are settling into their smart, new, identical homes on a hillside in Fiji's second largest island, Vanua Levu. And every day, they give thanks to God for their many blessings. And every day, the stream of curious visitors to the village is a reminder to them of their God-given, good fortune.



Vunidogoloa village: the first climate-related relocation in Fiji.

“Every day we share our story, over and over again to people who are keen to learn about our relocation”, says village elder, Manoa Rokotovitovi. “It can be stressful to be interviewed all the time, even secondary school children come to observe the village for their school projects. But we always welcome people and want to be generous. Just as we have been blessed and give thanks to God, in turn we wish to share our blessings with others”. At this point, Manoa's earnest expression breaks into a broad smile and he jokes that perhaps the village will soon be listed as the newest tourist attraction in Fiji.

Visitors come for a good reason; Vunidogoloa is an example of a successful relocation. Back in 2012 the community made environmental headlines when they were promoted as the first village in Fiji to undergo relocation because of climate change. At the time, the original village, on the foreshore of Natewa Bay, regularly experienced salt-water inundation, and after many decades of increasingly adverse conditions, the villagers had approached government for relocation assistance.

The selection of a new site, a couple of kilometres inland, and, crucially, uphill from the original coastal location, has enabled the now-relocated, 130-strong community to sleep soundly at night for the first time in many years, free from the worries of flooding, storm surges and tsunamis. “Weather was a constant pre-occupation; it was always on our minds,” said village chief, Simone Botu. “Living by the sea was always a risk. Now away from that danger, we sleep well”.



Village chief, Simone Botu

The enhanced well-being of the villagers, post-relocation, is not merely based on a good night's sleep, however. Children are now able to attend school daily, travelling on the local bus, rather than having to walk unaccompanied along the foreshore, negotiating a tidal river (especially dangerous in bad weather), and then boarding weekdays at the nearest school - an unimaginable ordeal for the youngest community members and anxious parents alike.

Improved access to the Natewa-Bay main road also means that the sick no longer have to be carried on bamboo rafts (*bilibili*), and paddled down the coast to the local hospital; road vehicles now transport them swiftly to medical services, easing both transfer times and patient hardship.

Life is easier.

But the move was not without its concerns. As with all planned relocations, the biggest challenge for the villagers was leaving the village where they had lived all their lives, and also coming to terms with the potentially traumatic decision to exhume the remains of their ancestors and move them to a new burial location.

“We didn’t want to leave the cemetery where it was, to be washed away, so the church arranged for the burial site to be moved. The new cemetery is now more convenient, and we save time going to visit there compared with accessing the old site,” said village elder, Rokotovitovi.

Sadly, the first new burial at the site was that of a still-born child.

The relocation process

Prior to the relocation, the villagers always maintained that they would relocate together, and true to their word, over the course of three days in January the entire community - possessions, luggage and all - moved into their new homes.



Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama officially opened the new village on 16th January this year.

Source: Fiji Sun

Each house has running, gradient-fed fresh water, an inside toilet and shower and a detached, external kitchen. Notably, all the properties are the same size - the villagers wanted a uniform look to the settlement - and everyone was treated alike in the housing allocation. And amicably, old neighbours remain new neighbours at the new site.

One change, however; since the relocation, each married couple has a home of their own, where previously, up to three families shared one house in the original settlement.



Solar panel on a roof top, Vunidogoloa

And thanks to rural women-empowerment training, the new village has solar lighting. Vunidogoloa grandmother, Titilia Somica, completed a UN Women-funded programme on solar engineering at Barefoot College, India in 2012, and returned home upskilled and armed with an inverter and a carton of light bulbs.

For the cost of the wiring fee, villagers can now have up to three solar lights in their homes, bright enough to last all night when fully charged, and Mrs. Somica manages the on-going maintenance of the system.

Recently, she told the Fiji Times: “I initially carried out the wiring in the surrounding villages [as well] until I taught my husband to do the wiring himself, so that I can carry out my household chores”.

Capacity building and additional resources

Outside agencies are also keen to offer long-term assistance to the community. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) provided both qualified volunteers to help construct homes and funding for the purchase of pineapple seedlings, post-relocation. Presently, pineapples line the banks of the hillside overlooking the village. “The villagers have been very shrewd; the variety of pineapple they have selected means that it will be ready to be harvested when other varieties in the surrounding area have ceased, ensuring a higher price at market”, says the ILO consultant to the community. The women of the village have a new venture, too, courtesy of the Ministry of Fisheries - four newly-dug fish ponds.



Pineapples in the foreground, fish ponds in the background, and the Natewa-Bay main road heading off into the distance; and Vunidogoloa village sandwiched in between.

“Only one pond has been stocked so far, with 2,000 Maleya fish. They reach maturity in about three months, and once fully-stocked each pond can hold 5,000 fish, with three harvests a year possible,” explains village elder, Manoa Rokotovitovi. “The Ministry of Fisheries supplies special feed and has advised the women on feeding times.

The fish can tell the time; if the women are late, the fish are waiting!”

Relocation costs

The government provided about \$500,000 Fijian dollars (£170,000) towards the cost of site preparation and other building and resource materials; though the villagers are quick to point out that the villagers provided the timber for the 30 new homes - about \$250,000 Fijian dollars (£85,000) worth of wood. A local logging company offered their services to fell the village-owned trees.



Vunidogoloa home under construction, April 2013.

Future relocations

Communities seeking to relocate in the future will also have to find a similar financial contribution – a Fiji government condition to partnership – and such a monetary prerequisite may deter many villagers who have little in the way of resources or finances, even when, like Vunidogoloa, they will have land to move to.

“Vunidogoloa is different from other communities – they have the resources. Who knows what’s in store for most communities?” said the commissioner of Cakaudrove Provincial Council, Sara Bulutanti Matai.

Records show that the mean sea level at the Lautoka tide gauge in western Fiji has increased at an average of 4.6mm per year since 1993, and with similar future projections likely, a further 45 coastal and delta-dwelling communities in Fiji have been identified as under imminent threat of relocation.

As a result, the Fiji government, having noted a relocation policy and protection gap at the national level, is busy drafting planned-relocation guidelines. “The government recognises it has a primary duty and responsibility to provide protection and assistance to people at risk of climate change”, said the director of the Climate Change Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Mahendra Kumar. “Fiji will be one of the first nations to have guidelines to address the issue”.

Future funding will be key; no Pacific-island government will be able to bear the burgeoning costs of climate-induced relocations alone. In November 2013, at the UN climate talks in Poland (COP19), the international community approved the establishment of a loss-and-damage mechanism, in part, to provide funds to compensate for the consequences of climate change; however, heavyweight pledges, and the finer details of the agreement, have yet to be finalised. Low-lying developing countries are now looking to COP20 in Lima, Peru next month for concrete commitments from the governments of the north, and greater appreciation of the economic *and* non-economic (cultural-loss) aspects of climate change.

Without additional financial assistance from international agencies, and substantial reductions in carbon emissions by industrialised nations, in the future, few coastal and other low-lying communities in Fiji, or elsewhere in the Pacific, will be able to sleep soundly at night. Sleep tight...