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Webinar Series on the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (FRDP) and the Pacific Resilience Partnership (PRP).

Webinar 5: Stories of resilience, recovery, and solutions in contexts of internal displacement

Summary

Purpose

Pacific island countries and territories are on the frontline of the Climate Emergency. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 global pandemic, weather-related and other hazards displace over 50,000 people in the Pacific every year. It is in this context that Webinar 5 was organized by the Pacific Resilience Partnership Technical Working Group (TWG) on Human Mobility to share stories of internal displacement across the region. Individual and community perspectives were shared highlighting the specific characteristics, challenges and lessons emerging from internal displacement in the Pacific region. This webinar brought to the fore the reality and complexity of disaster and climate related displacement in Titiana (Solomon Islands), Vunidogoloa (Fiji), Ping Lap atoll (Federated States of Micronesia), and the Bikini atoll (Republic of the Marshall Islands).

Background

Ms. Alisi Vosalevu, Regional Advisor to the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD) in the Pacific and **Mr. Nacanieli Bolo Speigth Project Manager for the Pacific Response to Disaster Displacement (PRDD)** co-moderated this session. The moderators highlighted that the webinar was on 'stories of resilience, recovery and solutions in contexts of internal displacement' with individual and community perspectives being shared to enable a better understanding of the experiences and issues related to internal displacement in the Pacific. The importance of these human stories of resilience, recovery and solutions in the context of internal displacement cannot be stressed enough acknowledging the need to move beyond trends and statistics, and instead to understand how internal displacement really affects individuals and communities' lives and livelihoods and beyond. This webinar will also help inform a planned Pacific regional consultation with the High Level Panel on Internal Displacement, established by the UN Secretary General to increase global attention to internal displacement, while also developing concrete recommendations for Member States, the UN system and other relevant stakeholders on how to better prevent, respond, and achieve solutions to internal displacement.

Key Messages

Key messages that were emphasized by the panellists:

According to **Frances Namoumou** from the Pacific Council of Churches, relocation is about ensuring the affected people are well consulted and participate in the process as this about land, identity and belief systems and in this context it is important to build on the relationship that we already have through our traditional structures, clans and tribes in terms of ownership of land.

Lucille Apis-Overhoff from the Federated States of Micronesia emphasized that people's connection to their land and traditional knowledge and skills are integral part of their lives and need to be considered in any plans or processes to address internal displacement.

For **Mark Stege** from the Republic of Marshall Islands, learning from the experience with Bikini Atoll, and looking at climate change, choice really makes a difference and needs to be embedded in plans and arrangements for those communities that are impacted.

Dr. Tammy Tabe from the University of the South Pacific emphasized that Pacific islanders have always been culturally mobile and are resilient people. They thrive on social relations and networks. These characteristics and strengths should be used to build and strengthen existing migration capacities and pathways. She further highlighted that perhaps, it is important to define what makes a community thrive despite being affected by climate change or related disasters. Maybe by understanding these core elements and structures that enables the continuity of the community despite being affected or being relocated or displaced, then we can better understand and inform the types of interventions, solutions and policies that can be developed and implemented to protect and ensure the continuity and the resilience of the community in their new destination.

Summary of Discussions and Interventions from Panellists

Dr. Tammy Tabe, Assistant Lecturer at the University of the South Pacific, shared experiences and challenges faced by the Gilbertese people who were relocated to the Solomon Islands about sixty years ago as a form of humanitarian assistance including the impact of the 2007 Tsunami on this relocated community. Gilbertese have lived in the Solomon Islands for almost 60 years and have integrated into the larger Melanesian society, but they remain a minority community.

It was understood based on colonial records that the relocation was a humanitarian intervention by a British colonial administration for the good of the Gilbertese people and to provide them an opportunity to improve their standard of living but also to escape the long periods of drought in the Phoenix Islands. Yet, the move was not embraced by the people as humanitarian assistance with many feeling that they have been uprooted from their land. So, the process of being uprooted as they describe illustrates removal from their land which grounds/binds them as people and therefore leads to displacement.

Dr Tabe further highlighted, that displacement has been defined as situations where people are forced to leave their homes or place of residence, often in the form of flight or evacuation. While the framing of these movements has been conceptually defined, it raises key questions



such as what does internal displacement mean and who does it refer to in the context of the Pacific islands and its people? Is it defined based on geographical and spatial nature of movement between state territories or communities, land boundaries or is it based on the process involved in the movement? Are these types of movements understood by Pacific Islands as internal displacements or what does it mean for them? If the people are deeply rooted in their land and connected to the environment and ecosystems, doesn't degradation, depletion and absence of these elements already create a sense of displacement among the people? What does displacement mean for Pacific Islands people and communities affected by climate related disasters and forced to evacuate their homes? Or what does it mean for those who have been relocated or maybe subject to relocation as a result of climate change?

Dr Tabe shared that she often found that defining of these movements problematic especially in the context of Pacific islands because they limit the definition and categorization to the way people move without actually examining and understanding the strengths and dynamics of these movements that have been culturally embedded and observed by the Pacific people for many years. If internal displacement is the forced movement of people within the country they live, we are already categorizing and framing this movement based on place, boundaries and space. While this is relevant to inform decisions, interventions, development and implementation of migration and displacement policies, it shifts the focus from understanding that Pacific islanders have always been culturally mobile and are resilient people.

The 2007 Tsunami displaced most people residing on Titiana village and added to the sense of displacement to the Gilbertese communities living on Titiana. Studies following the Tsunami revealed that the most affected population were the Gilbertese communities because they lack the cultural understanding of the disaster, the environmental setting, preparation and evacuation measures to undertake during the warning. When we talk about the resilience of the Gilbertese people, first they have been displaced from their homeland in the Phoenix island to the Solomon and then internally as a result of the Tsunami. How is resilience defined and measured by the Gilbertese people or in this case, the Pacific islands, and its people? Are relocated and displaced communities considered resilient if they successfully re-establish themselves in their new homes? Perhaps, it is important to define what makes a community thrive despite being affected by climate change or related disasters. Maybe by understanding these core elements and structures that enables the continuity of the community despite being affected or being relocated or displaced, then we can better understand and inform the types of interventions, solutions and policies that can be developed and implemented to protect and ensure the continuity and the resilience of the community in their new destination.

Dr. Tabe concluded by emphasizing that displacement is never an easy topic to be discussed nor is resilience especially when one is being uprooted on the basis of what defines them as people, but sometimes the hardest things to talk about are the very things that inspire change, hope and resilience.

Mark Stege, Executive Councilman, Maloelap Atoll Local Government, Republic of Marshall Islands shared past experiences of internal displacement of the people of Bikini Atoll due to the Nuclear Testing and how lessons learned from this can be used for future displacement in the context of climate change. Nuclear testing was conducted in the northern atolls and



some of Mark's relatives, elders and specifically his grandfather came from one of those places. There is a history of displacement with regards to the nuclear testing with 67 tests in total that occurred during the 1940s and to the 1950s. People from Bikini Atoll and others have been relocated to Etege Island due to the nuclear testing and they are now facing the impacts of climate change mainly around sea level rise and coastal flooding.

The main question here is: what do we learn from the past when we talk about climate displacement? What did we learn from nuclear displacement that will be applicable as we now face climate change? Lessons learned from the past needs to be part of our toolkit for the future.

One of the lessons that Mark emphasized is that 'choice really makes a difference'. In past experiences, for the people of Bikini the question of where they were going to be relocated to, always seemed to be a discussion outside of their area of influence. They were consulted but they didn't participate in any meaningful way. Mark shared a conversation he had with his own father recalling his father's role in selecting a relocation site for people of Bikini with his father confirming that there were no Marshallese people involved in this selection process. When you really start looking at the historical records, choice was taken out of the equation frequently in the process of relocating the people of Bikini atoll.

Learning from the experience with Bikini Atoll and looking at climate change and where choices can be embedded in plans and arrangements, Mark emphasized that there is a need to choose relevant indicators very carefully, such as how frequent does flooding or drought need to be before island ecosystem services shut down. This also includes choosing and investing in the skills and tools for indicator monitoring and management. It is also about the choice of people to manage and monitor those indicators and the need to converse effectively with the relevant experts.

Sharing with the participants a Sea Level Rise (SLR) map on PowerPoint (can be accessed at <http://www.resilientpacific.org/media-and-events/>), Mark highlighted that these kinds of expert oriented measurements, tools, management and monitoring frameworks allows participation or enables people affected to make choices. On the map shared, Mark had highlighted where his home was situated and was among 341 homes or 2284 people (48% of Rita community) to be displaced through sea level rise by 2030.

Reflecting on the SLR Map, Mark underscored that this is his home and his community and as such he wants to be engaged in the plans and arrangements for his and his community's future. Mark emphasized a community first approach and the need to engage the community effectively as part of enabling those impacted to have a 'choice on what happens to them' as a means to address the issue of internal displacement effectively.

Frances Namoumou, Ecumenical Animator, Ecological Stewardship and Climate Justice Programme for the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) shared the challenges and complexity of internal displacement in the case of Vunidoqolooa, the first relocated community in Fiji. In setting the background for her intervention, Frances took the participants back to 11 years ago when the Pacific Conference of Churches agreed to the Moana Declaration which recognized worst case scenarios of people relocating or being displaced due to climate change and the role the church will play in responding to this. In 2011, Fiji Government invited PCC to be part of the relocation project Vunidoqolooa- the first relocated community in Fiji. In 2020,



years later at the new site, the church is still learning post relocation including the role of the church in responding to this very sensitive issue. Frances shared a story of a couple in Vunidogoloa and their insights from their experience of the relocation process through the symbolism of traditional mats. The title of the two stories were "My Mats! My Mats! Where Have They Taken My Mats?" (full version can be accessed at <http://www.resilientpacific.org/media-and-events/>). Note the names have been changed, but consent by the couple has been given to share their story and insights.

My Mats! My Mats! Where Have They Taken My Mats?

The Old Site

"My name is ...Tomasi..... I am 84 years of age and this is my wife,Sarah..... We spent most of our lifetime at the old village where now only our loved ones are resting and guarding the site. We did not agree to move here. However, we were never left out in the meetings and discussions of the relocation. It was indeed painful on the day we had to move. We had a church service, all the small items that we could carry were loaded in the truck. I made sure my wife boarded the truck with the other women and children. I choose to walk up. I want to feel for the last time the ground that I once ran around on; I have come to terms with what was happening and accepted that we were moving. I turned back every step of the way, hid my tears but continue to walk on for this choice is for my wife, children and the future of my grandchildren. They need to be safe and protected where they chose to live, and we are making that decision now."

The New Site

"We got to the new site; they have already assigned families to their new homes. It looked beautiful but I was not sure where we were going. Everyone had gone into their homes, excited and sad at the same time but I was left standing on the road near the truck wondering which house have they chosen for me and my husband. A daughter of mine came to my aid and showed me the house they have selected for us. Oh! It's on the hill. Did they ever consider that we are now old and might find it difficult to move around? I walked with my daughter up to the house and I noticed they have not brought in all my belongings. "Noqu Ibe? Noqu Ibe? E sa kau kivei noqu ibe?" translated My Mats! My Mats! Where have they taken my mats? I need those mats to spread in this house as this is our new home now."

The Strands of Our Mats

From an old village full of life, memories and loved ones laid to guard the last foundation that can withstand the rising seas to a new village of many dreams, opportunities and hope for the present and future. A culture and identity associated with the waitui, wasawasa will now adapt to farming on surrounding hills, and breed introduced fish species in ponds and grazing livestock as part of the relocation plan in Vunidogoloa.

The symbolism of mats:



1. Mat as a symbol of interconnectedness: Most of our mats have stood the test of times. This depicts the natural fabrication of our community. This interconnectedness to our Vanua, our ocean must be recognized and embedded in the relocation work, discussions and plans when responding to climate induced displacement or planned relocation. There were issues and projections of conflicts regarding land. Can this be mitigated through building on the relationships that we already have through our traditional structures, clans and tribes in terms of ownership of land? There will always be a space to welcome the different strands or contributions that elevates or promotes better life. On the same note, this also highlights the relationship between human beings and the environment.
2. The uniqueness of mat and its use in different parts of the Pacific. This portrays the vast ocean of learning in the Pacific region. Therefore, to assume the context in Fiji is similar to all other PICs, would be wrong. The different uses, shapes and designs of the mat symbolize that it is more than just directly responding to climate change impacts but it is taking into account cultural and traditional aspects, indigenous spirituality and the belief system that has shaped our identity.
3. The mat is spread to invite people for talanoa. When the mat is woven and spread in the homes, it is open for everyone, all are invited to sit together on the mat and dialogue or talanoa. This invitation to consultation allows engagement and participation of the different groups thus allows communities to drive the processes based on the needs of the community. These are elements of existing traditional peace building and conflict resolutions that could be embedded in the processes of relocation or climate displacement to avert possible conflicts such as those regarding land.
4. To conclude, our mat also projects resilience. The Pacific Theological Colleague, USP and the PCC started a project called “**Reweaving the Ecological Mat**” two years ago. The project recognizes or promotes indigenous knowledge, spirituality, culture and tradition but also recognizes our different communities of faith and how that can inform national and regional policies around development framework or relocation processes and displacement.

Lucille Apis-Overhoff of the Federated States of Micronesia shared her experience as an islander living on Ping Lap atoll. Being there, she was able to see, hear and feel firsthand what the people of Ping Lap atoll were being affected by and their response or adaptive measures to the impacts. Climate change is disrupting the daily routine of lives in the islands. It is getting harder to find ripe bananas as people are cooking green bananas before they are ripe. Planting more and alternative food crops doesn't solve the problem because plant growth is poor, and the yield is less. Fish are getting smaller with fish stocks in the lagoons dwindling and the need to go further beyond the lagoon for fish. Food preservation measures are also being adapted with Lucille sharing an example of a lifelong tradition of fermenting a type of breadfruit in pits with the preserve lasting for up to 50 years and contributes to the atoll inhabitant's food security. Unfortunately, due to saltwater intrusion, it affects the breadfruit by causing them to rot, though the islanders are now adapting through utilizing plastics to wrap the breadfruit. On top of these are increasing king tides and storm surges similar to



those experienced by many atoll people. In response to Lucille asking the people there why they did not just move or migrate to avoid all the problems, the answer was always similar:

“This is our home; how can we leave those who have gone ahead, already resting. Our culture and identity are tied to the island. While we are alive, the land nourishes us. When we die, our bodies nourish the land. If we move, how can we pass our traditional knowledge and skills to the next generation?”

Lucille emphasized that people’s response, shows the deep relationship between the island and the people and their dependence on one another. It also highlighted that life on low-lying islands, differs from those on the higher islands with the skills of the Ping Lap atolls tied to the oceans and the sea. Despite the challenges and impacts they faced due to climate change, these people do not want to move from their Islands. People do travel internally and overseas for employment, education or health reasons, but their connection to the land, traditional knowledge and skills are an integral part of their lives.

It was hard to measure or quantify people’s anxiety, their fears and their feelings, but Lucille composed a poem titled: Global Warming to reflect the feelings of the islanders as well as her own on her firsthand experience in Ping Lap atoll. Please go to: <http://www.resilientpacific.org/media-and-events/> to hear the poem.

Question & Answer:

Stories and narratives are an effective way of capturing intangible aspects of losses that may not be captured in many monetary-based climate and disaster assessments in the region. What would be the messages from the presenters for capturing non-economic aspects of relocation, migration and losses experienced in the region in formal DRR and climate assessments? Frances responded that for non-economic losses and damages in relation to climate change, relocation and migration, the **Reweaving the Ecological Mat** project has included a publication on ecological accounting which will enable member churches, PTC, USP and PCC to delve deeper into this kind of conversation, where impacts are without price tags and potentially how to respond to these type of situations. There are hopes that the publication can help communities to prepare through knowing the value of what they have particularly in their surrounding environment as well as help in valuing other aspects of a community’s livelihood.

Is there work that can be shared to help shape an understanding of mobility and resilience, which is grounded in the culture and experiences of the Pacific? This raises important questions about indicators and measurement processes? Also, please elaborate further on peoples’ choices being taken out of the relocation and planning process and what has been done to remedy this matter. Dr. Tabé responded by sharing that she has work in progress that focuses on the Gilbertese people mobility and resilience which could possibly be replicated to other communities and countries in terms of indicators and measurement processes. Mark shared that by making climate change vulnerability assessments expert driven, it winds up taking the people out of the process. The choices that they can make are part of the science, part of the indicators themselves and the designing of such indicators and identifying what matters. Do the ‘experts’ know and how could they know? People’s choices



being taken out of the process starts very early and continues through the process of planning, understanding the risks, measuring and managing those risks. People impacted, need to be part of all of this throughout that process.

Would those severely affected by COVID-19 and have returned to the outer islands also be considered to be internally displaced? Dr. Tabe responded that the question is important in highlighting the broader context of internal displacement and could be explored further through what makes people feel displaced? This does not necessarily have to be climate change and disaster related impacts, but what displaces them from their normal daily livelihoods and normal residential areas. Such relocation or movements might also be causing some form of displacement within the host communities that they have relocated to. Lucille added further by citing an example where residents of cyclone damaged Chuuk islands prior World War II were relocated to Pohnpei. Chuuk and Pohnpei have very distinct and different language, culture and skills. Not being aware of the traditions and skills, Chuuk islanders cut down the forests that in Pohnpei culture was taboo, to build their residences. Heavy rains resulted in landslides with whole families perishing. To this day, it has taken many generations of the Chuuk community in Pohnpei to acclimatize and understand the culture of the host communities. There is a need to understand this and that the time factor particularly of relocated communities living in one place can also provide a different perspective in terms of what displacement means.

Migration as an alternative to planned relocation. Would any of the speakers have comments about their own experiences/research where areas subject to relocation pressure experience increasing numbers of people migrating to 'informal' settlements in the city? And if that is the case what is this perspective on this type of migration as an adaptive response to climate change pressures? That is: what are the good and bad aspects of climate migration to 'informal' urban settlements? Mark shared that whether in a city or village, there still has to be the same type of mindset to manage and help people with resettlement efforts, forced or voluntary. There are finite amount of habitable spaces/land and these need to be measured and monitored in terms of habitability and suitability. However, there is lack of quality data to help make informed and effective decisions with reluctance to invest in such data perpetuating the lack of this data. City planning, good information, data driven decision making could reduce the pressures on urbanization especially if people are aware of better places in rural areas. At the very least such information allows people to make better choices that are more voluntary.

Can you explain the particular measures and tools that are used to speak with potential host communities to assist with a community that is relocated? Are there lessons and experiences that has refined approaches to assist internally displaced communities/individuals? Dr. Tabe acknowledged that the host communities are often forgotten in this process and in the context of the Solomon Islands, there are no established conversation or consultation with them as host communities creating a lot of problems in



integration. It is important to engage local communities and not just governments or leaders as eventually it is the host communities who will have to deal with the relocated communities. Without such consultation, it created an enclaved Gilbertese community and it was not until a few decades later when the local host community started opening up that integration is slowly happening. Lucille also agreed that the host communities should be considered since they will be living side by side with the relocated communities. Modes of consultations should utilize tradition methods or avenues as in the case of FSM, these are undertaken through social means and the consultation should not just be with governments but also the local leaders and communities. Mark shared that developing measures and tools in ways that enhance choice could be an option. He is currently exploring visual tools and maps that are better at replicating reality and allows communities to visualize the impacts and can also be archived (maps – before and after), might assist in reducing the grief associated with pain and loss. Frances added that in Fiji’s context, relocation within the communities has been within and in acknowledgement of land owned by clans or tribes with no case of conflict as yet between the host and relocated community. This is what she highlighted in her earlier presentation on the importance and use of traditional relationships before the process of the relocation takes place. Relocation should be centred around the communities and not just governments and leaders.

Wrap-up

The webinar brought to the fore the reality and complexity of disaster and climate related displacement in Titiana (Solomon Islands), Vunidogoloa (Fiji), Ping Lap atoll (Federated States of Micronesia), and the Bikini atoll (Republic of the Marshall Islands). It is part of a series of webinars that will inform the work of the PRP TWG on Human Mobility and also an upcoming Pacific regional consultation with the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement set up by the United Nations Secretary General.



Meet the Panelist

WEBINAR 5:

Stories of Resilience, Recovery and Solutions in
the context of Internal Displacement

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