

Pacific response to disaster displacement

Urban case study: Ba Town, Fiji



Acknowledgements:

With funding from the European Union, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) is collaborating with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD) to generate new evidence to help governments better understand, plan for, prevent and respond to disaster displacement in the Pacific region. The Pacific Response to Disaster Displacement (PRDD) project will contribute to better policy responses, planning and operational tools.



Introduction

Since the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) started collecting data on disaster displacement in 2008, disasters have triggered about 153,000 displacements in Fiji.¹ In 2020, the combined impacts of hazards such as Cyclones Harold and Yasa, which hit the country in April and December respectively, resulted in around 37,000 new displacements.²

Rapid urbanisation, and in particular the growth of informal settlements, is increasing exposure and vulnerability to hazards.³ Ba Town, situated on the banks of the Ba River on the island of Viti Levu, has experienced recurrent flooding, in particular in the wake of tropical cyclones; the town also faces additional climate risks associated with riverbank erosion and landslides.⁴

In the face of these challenges, the government of Fiji is working to reduce the risk of displacement and support the relocation of communities affected by climate change and disasters.⁵ To support these efforts to better

prevent and respond to disaster displacement, this paper draws upon recent research in Ba Town to examine the drivers, patterns, and impacts of internal displacement linked with disasters.

Methodology

Data collection was carried out by IPSOS in October-November 2021. A total of 300 survey interviews were conducted in Ba Town with households who had been displaced by floods and other natural hazards in the past year. The findings do not claim to be representative of the town's displaced population. A random walk technique was used to select households, complemented by a modified respondent-driven approach. A majority of interviews were conducted in Mataniqara, Yalalevu, and Elevuka neighbourhoods, with 34 interviews taking place in other areas of Ba Town. The survey was supplemented by five key informant interviews. All names in the report have been changed.⁶

Key findings

Displacement drivers

Poor urban planning contributes to disaster risk

Climate change is contributing to a growing intensity of tropical cyclones in Fiji, with devastating consequences for the small island nation.⁷ Despite efforts at disaster risk reduction, this results in repeated displacement for the island's population. "The strength of the cyclones has continued to increase and even cyclone-proof houses have been uprooted," reports Thomas, who works for a local non-governmental organisation (NGO). As a result, 94 per cent of survey respondents have been displaced more than once.

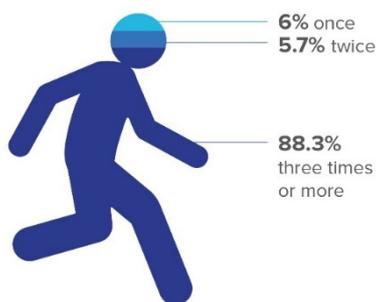


Figure 1. Number of displacements

Natural hazards alone are not solely to blame for the extent of displacement: poor urban planning and harmful development projects have exacerbated the problem.⁸ "The main cause of these floods is development," says Isaac, a leader of the displaced community in Ba Town's Yalalevu neighbourhood. "Before there was nothing, it was just a sugar cane field. [...] All the water used to just go through the sugar cane field and spread." According to Isaac, despite expert advice and funding, effective steps have yet to be taken to reduce flood risk in the neighbourhood.

Displacement patterns

Lack of housing rehabilitation support prolongs displacement

Displacement in Ba Town is a local affair, predominantly involving movement to higher ground. Just 19.3 per cent of survey respondents reported going to an evacuation shelter; many others seek refuge with families and friends. According to key informants, it is mostly vulnerable groups such as the sick and elderly who are taken to evacuation shelters, along with women and children without relatives to accommodate them.

Conversely, it is common for men to either remain in their homes or return as soon as it is safe to do so: "we usually return home quickly when the water begins to drop, because we need to clean and move the water in the house so that the dirt does not settle inside," explains Venasio, a representative of the indigenous community.

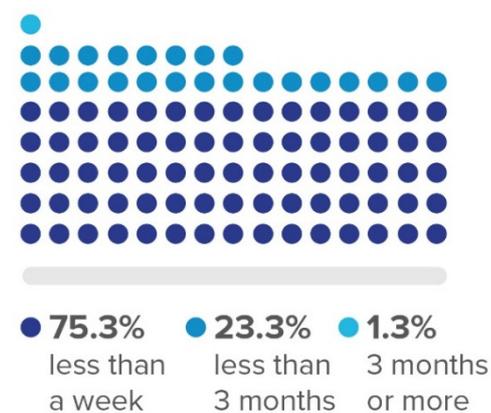


Figure 2. Duration of displacement

Despite efforts to evacuate the mud along with the floodwater, cleaning the house and its content is a lengthy and arduous process that can delay their return. Although three quarters of survey respondents were displaced less than a week during their most recent displacement, 23.3 per cent were displaced for up to three months, and the remaining four respondents were displaced for longer periods.

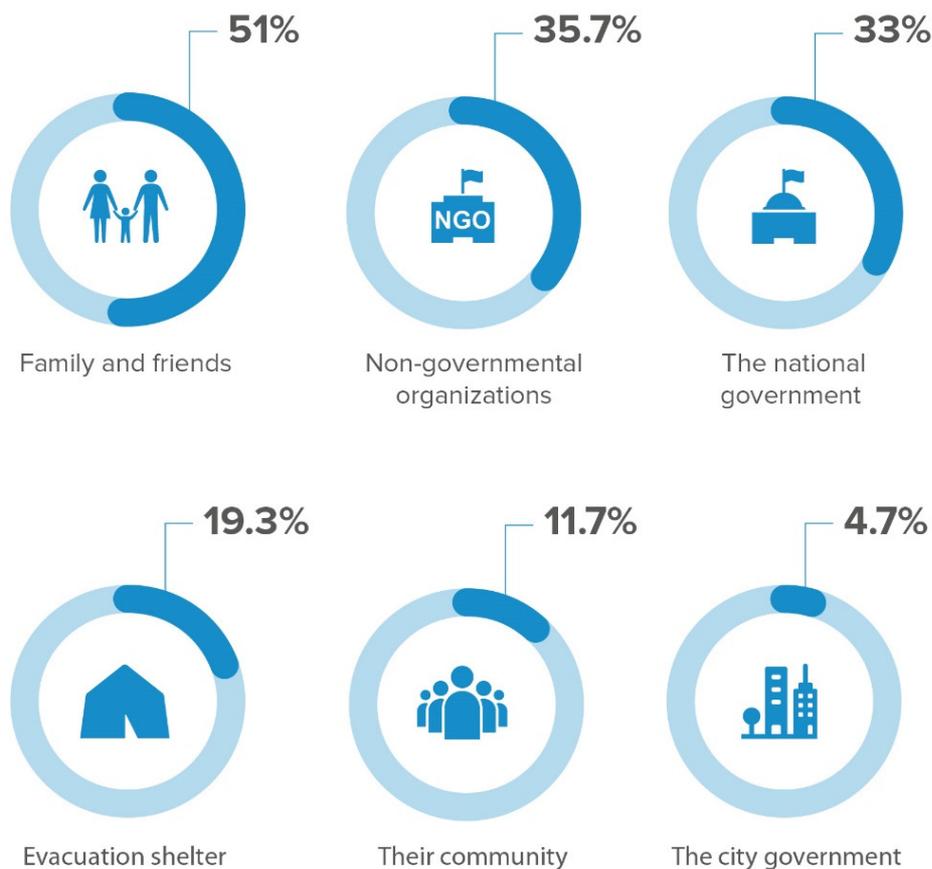


Figure 3. Sources of support

Family and friends are the first line of support

Given the frequency of natural hazards in Fiji, responding to disasters is an important part of NGOs’ work. “We have an emergency stance that is activated when the impact or the devastation caused by the hazard reaches a certain threshold,” explains Thomas. “When the amount of people affected reaches the threshold, we have to leave all activities aside and respond to the cyclone.” Despite this preparedness and donors’ reported flexibility, resources are sometimes insufficient: in Ba Town, Thomas feels that NGOs have “a 50-cent solution to a 2-dollar problem.”

The government also supports those affected, notably through the provision of food rations and cash distributions. “The assistance given in 2016 was the best so far,” recalls Venasio, “We

were given cards and people could decide if they would want to buy food or materials.”

However, family and friends remain the greatest source of support: while 33 and 35.7 per cent of respondents received support from the government and NGOs respectively during their most recent displacement, 51 per cent received help from family and friends. “If we are affected by a cyclone, the first line of support we expect is the community itself,” says Thomas.

Displacement impacts

Housing should be a priority for prevention and response

With the bulk of the response focusing on food security and hygiene, shelter needs are sometimes unmet. “I don’t think a lot of NGOs are into shelter support,” says Thomas. According to Isaac, affected neighbourhoods often lack water and power for over a week in

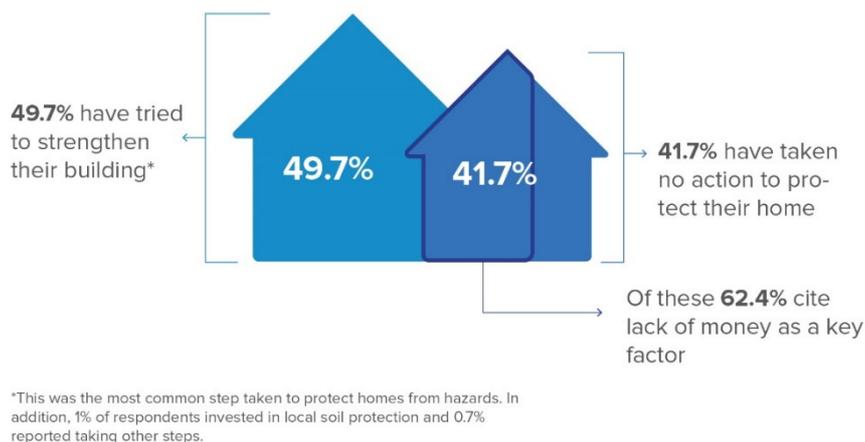


Figure 4. Actions taken to protect homes from natural hazards

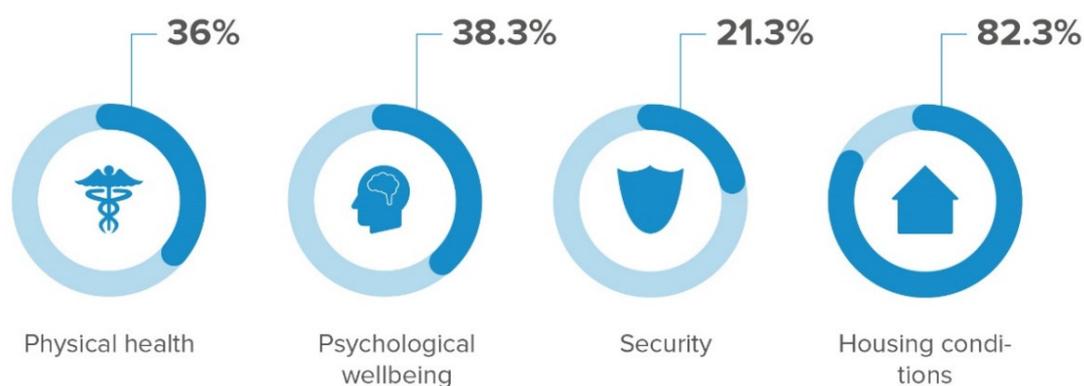


Figure 4. Negative impacts of displacement

the aftermath of floods, making it more difficult for people to clean and repossess their homes.

This is an important gap in response: 82 per cent of respondents say that their housing conditions were negatively impacted during their latest displacement. Households who have experienced three or more displacements are particularly affected, highlighting a progressive erosion of resilience in the face of repeated displacement.

Nearly half of respondents have tried to strengthen their building against future hazards, and a handful have invested in local water management or soil protection, for example by digging drainage systems. Among those who haven't attempted to protect their homes from hazards, 62.4 per cent blame lack of resources, and 49.6 per cent lack of support. Overall, only 12 per cent of all respondents have received any financial support to protect their homes; fewer still have received material or

technical support, information, or training. Households who have experienced multiple displacements have greater difficulty meeting their basic needs and may therefore face greater barriers to protecting their homes from future hazards, further exacerbating their vulnerability.

Livelihood support is needed to avoid negative coping strategies

Alongside the impact on housing, natural hazards and associated displacement also have a negative impact on livelihoods. Only 28.3 per cent of respondents reported no change in income as a result of their latest displacement. While 38 per cent were able to recover their income following a temporary loss, 27.3 per cent say their income has decreased, and 6.3 per cent have lost their income entirely.

Households who rely on farming often find their crops destroyed by the floods, in particular root

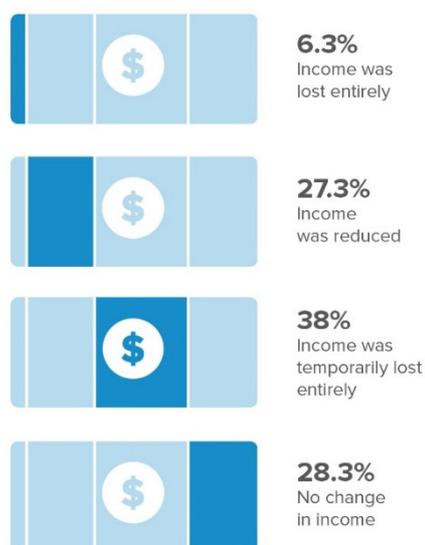


Figure 5. Impact on personal income

crops such as cassava. “It usually takes months for them to recover”, says Isaac. “After the floods there are thick mud deposits on soil tops, which covers all root crops and farmland. Some farmers would have their vegetable gardens covered in thick mud. They have to replant all this again as whatever has been covered by the mud is dead.” Beyond the impact on farmland, floods can also destroy other assets. Isaac himself lost 295,000 Fijian Dollars’ worth of goods when his business was flooded.

Loss of income can have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups, including female-headed households. “As a last resort they will try to get easier means of generating money, like prostitution, and some of them are begging for money,” notes Ariadna, a displaced women’s representative.

Continued school enrolment should be incentivised

In the aftermath of disasters, children often suffer disruptions to education. According to Isaac, many children miss three to four weeks of school. Some children may lose their school

materials in the flood, including books, stationaries, and uniforms.

Among respondents with children of school-age (N=201), 90 per cent say their children’s education was temporarily interrupted, and a further 4.5 per cent report that their children have not gone back to school since. “The parents just say it’s very difficult to get an income [...] so it’s better that they stay home and start working somewhere,” explains Ariadna. “This results in underaged workers.”

Efforts should be made to promote the wellbeing of those affected

Displacement had a negative impact on the physical health of 36 per cent of respondents. Flooding is a cause of diseases in the community. “If a house gets flooded, it takes months to get the smell out of the house,” says Ariadna. “If you live in a filthy situation like that, automatically you will get sick.” According to Thomas, in Ba Town, more people may have died of leptospirosis, typhoid, and dengue than of Covid-19.

The impact of displacement on physical health is greater for the elderly: among respondents over the age of sixty, 54 per cent report a negative impact on their physical health. Displacement also has a toll on mental health: 38.3 per cent of respondents say displacement had a negative impact on their psychological wellbeing

Alongside the health implications, 21 per cent of respondents note that displacement had a negative impact on their security. This may be particularly true for women and girls. In evacuation centres, accordingly to Ariadna, lack of privacy increases the risk of sexual or gender-based violence.

Ways forward

The frequency and intensity of natural hazards are growing. Among respondents in Ba Town, 61 per cent expect to experience a new hazard within the year.



Figure 6. Expected future displacement

Displacement, however, need not be inevitable. Steps can be taken to reduce the risk of displacement and minimise its negative impacts. Appropriate interventions to address the causes and effects of displacement should be identified in partnership with affected communities, non-governmental organisations, and the private sector, and positioned within Ba Town's local government structures to build upon existing processes and priorities.

Pending inclusive consultations, this paper has highlighted the following ways forward to prevent and respond to internal displacement in Ba Town:

1. Reduce negative impacts of natural hazards in urban and peri-urban areas by improving urban planning and drainage systems.
2. Provide support for households to protect their homes from hazards and prioritise inclusive shelter in response, with special attention to the protection of women and girls.
3. Provide livelihood support for displaced households and strengthen their resilience to future shocks through targeted insurance schemes, livelihood diversification or other relevant

measures, with a particular focus on female-headed households.

4. Encourage and facilitate continued school enrolment, including through the provision of new school material.
5. Identify and address differentiated threats to health and safety during and after displacement.

Beyond these measures, when repeated displacement erodes the resilience of affected communities, consultative, community-led relocations can offer alternative opportunities for durable solutions, as outlined in Fiji's Planned Relocation Guidelines.⁹ Nick, a leader of the host community in Vadravadra, explains that half the villagers were relocated from the village's flood-affected outskirts. "We used to live down there where these displaced people are, then we were relocated to this place which is on higher ground and is not usually affected by the floods," he says. According to Thomas, efforts are already underway to relocate the village of Nasolo: "The whole village of Nasolo goes underwater whenever there is flooding, so they are working on relocating that village to a new area, but the relocation must be from the villagers themselves." Relocations are more successful, he finds, when they take place at the initiative of those affected. "If they are willing to move, they will find a way to survive in the next place. If they are not ready to move then they will struggle."

Endnotes

¹ IDMC, [Pacific displacement: Fiji, sudden onset disasters and displacement risk](#), October 2020.

² IDMC, [Country profile: Fiji](#).

³ IDMC, [Risk profile: sudden onset hazards and the risk of future displacement in Fiji](#), October 2020.

⁴ Ba Town Council, [Ba Town Flooding](#), 2022; Yeo, S., Blong, R. J., and McAneney, J. [Flooding in Fiji: Findings from a 100-year historical series](#), October 2007; The Fijian Government, Hon. Minister for waterways, Dr. Mahendra Reddy at the [commissioning of the construction of river bank protection works](#), June 2018; The Fijian Times, [Landslide threatens homes](#), January 2022.

⁵ The Fijian Government, [Planned relocation guidelines](#), 2018.

⁶ Names attributed to key informants:

Thomas: local NGO staff

Isaac: leader of displaced community in Yalalevu, Ba Town

Venasio: representative of the indigenous community

Ariadna: displaced women's representative

Nick: leader of the host community in Vadravadra

⁷ COP23, [How Fiji is affected by climate change](#).

⁸ Urban Floods Community of Practice, [Urban flood risk management in the Pacific: tracking progress and setting priorities](#), December 2017; Kingdom of the Netherlands, [Disaster risk reduction team mission report: Fiji - Western Division, Ba and Rakiraki](#), August 2019.

⁹ The Fijian Government, [Planned relocation guidelines](#), 2018.