



# **Resilience and Social Cohesion in Fiji's Climate-Affected Informal Settlements**

**An Environment-Fragility-Peace Nexus  
project case study**

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**CDA Collaborative Learning Projects with Conciliation  
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**CDA**



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Part of CDA's Environment-Fragility-Peace Nexus Collaborative Learning Project

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## About CDA

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects is an independent research organization passionate about the power of local capacities for positive systems change globally. Through our learning and advisory partnerships, we are dedicated to improving the effectiveness and accountability of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts wherever communities experience conflict. For over 25 years, CDA has been a trusted, independent learning partner of local and international organizations, policy and funding agencies, and companies, to create analysis, tools, and frameworks that make transformational policy and practice possible. Current flagship learning initiatives - the environment-fragility-peace nexus, shifting power through responsible INGO-to-local transitions, and understanding humanitarian risk - reflect our focus on meeting complex challenges with systems thinking. Today's issues set builds on CDA's impact pioneering Do No Harm, Reflecting on Peace Practice, the Listening Approach, Collective Impact, and other evidence-informed frameworks that have fundamentally shaped international development.

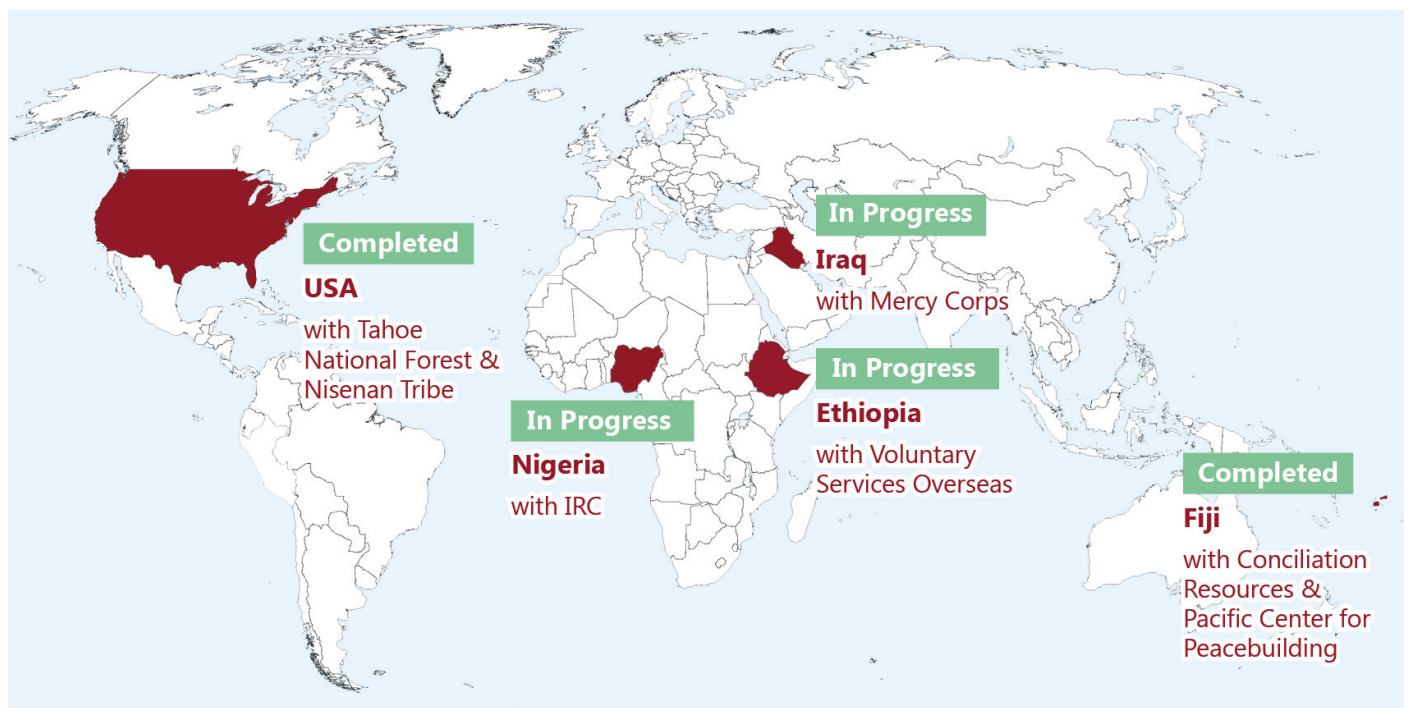
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## About the Environment-Fragility-Peace Nexus Collaborative Learning Project

The confluence of climate exposure, fragility, and potentially violent conflict demands a rethinking of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding practice (triple-nexus) in the 21st century. And while the science is established on climate and rapid environmental change, the radically new operating environment means practitioners, policy makers, and community leaders have questions. CDA is listening. To understand what matters most for effective and accountable practice and policy, where both environmental and conflict risks are key features of the context, CDA is leading a multi-year collaborative learning project that looks to communities for answers and insights. How can practitioners address environmental change and conflict together? What are the preconditions and circumstances under which climate change can lead to social cohesion, gender equity, and sustainable resource use? How can local knowledge of communities affected by climate change, especially Indigenous knowledge, support conflict management and climate resilience? In contributing to the growing knowledge base on these complex intersections, CDA is developing practitioner-centered, evidence-informed tools, and assessment frameworks through a rigorous and long-tested collaborative learning approach that has been adapted to purpose.

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Please send questions and comments related to this case study to Dr. Siad Darwish, [sdarwish@cdacollaborative.org](mailto:sdarwish@cdacollaborative.org)

To learn more about CDA's Environment-Fragility-Peace Nexus project or to get involved, please contact Diana Campos, [dcampos@cdacollaborative.org](mailto:dcampos@cdacollaborative.org)

# Resilience and Social Cohesion in Fiji's Climate-Affected Informal Settlements

This case study investigates climate-related environmental vulnerabilities and their interaction with conflict dynamics in three informal urban settlements,<sup>1</sup> Qauia, Maravu, and Nanuku, in Suva, Fiji. This study is part of a larger applied participatory research project that investigates the environment-fragility-peace nexus through at least fifteen comparative global case studies conducted by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA) in partnership with local, national, and international entities.

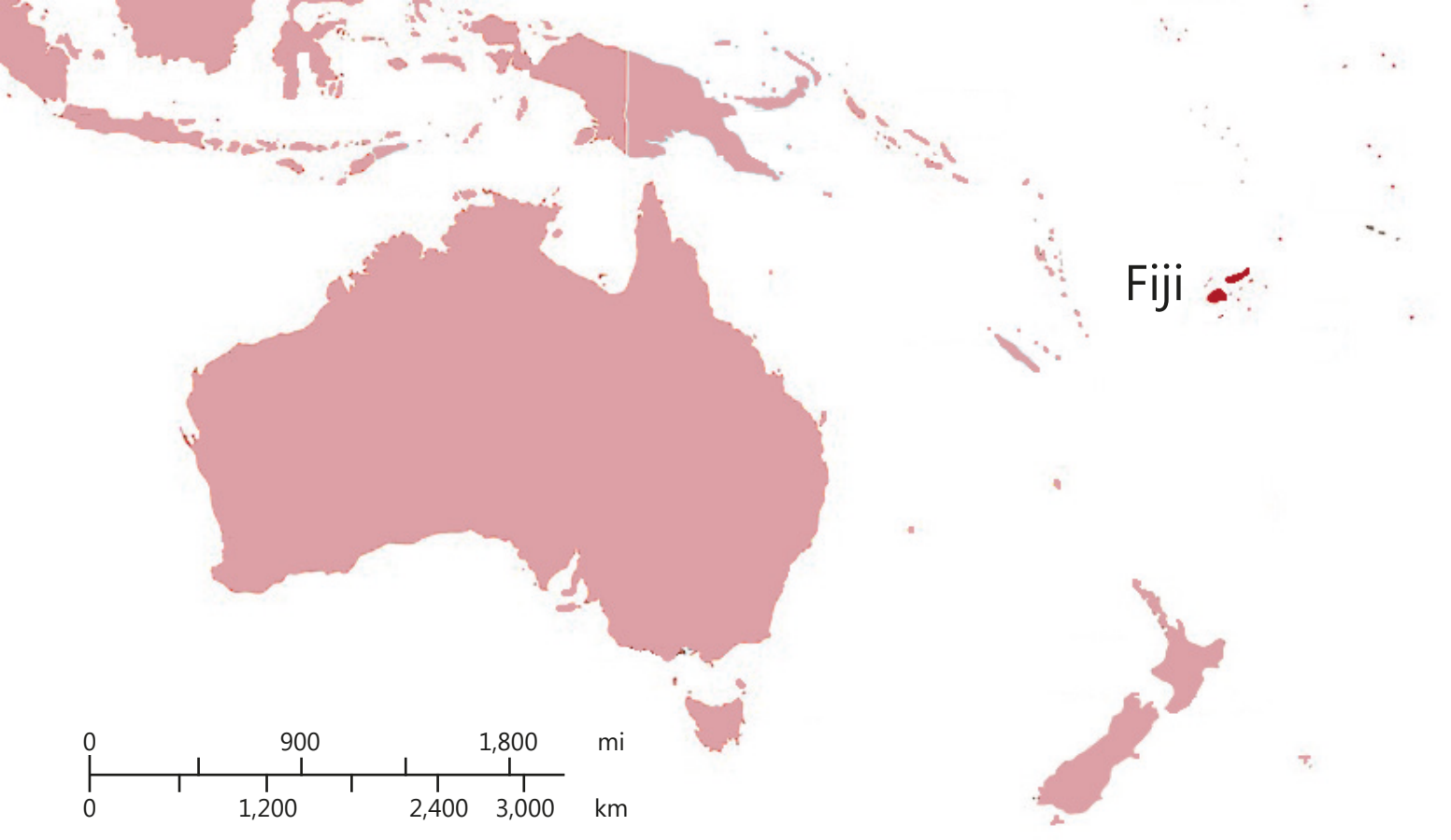
The Fiji case study was developed in collaboration with the Pacific Center for Peacebuilding (PCP), Conciliation Resources (CR), and the communities of the settlements in question. Findings are in part based on community research conducted by PCP with these communities and were substantiated by community visits by representatives of CDA and PCP during which the community discussed its concerns in an open community forum (*talanoa*). Findings were then analyzed in a day-long workshop with community members, researchers, and PCP staff to elaborate on the links between climate impacts, conflict, capacities for social cohesion, and climate resilience. In-country collaboration took place in July and August 2022.

Globally, the growth of informal settlements, which had declined in the past decade, is on the rise again. An estimated quarter of the nearly five billion people who live in cities today inhabit these cities informally without secure tenure or many basic services, and in poor housing conditions (UN Stats 2020). The sixth International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report concluded that people living in informal settlements suffer from social, economic,

infrastructural, and spatial exclusion that makes them disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (Dodman et al. 2022). Factors that heightened vulnerabilities in these settlements include poor quality or non-existent infrastructure, poor shelter, inaccessibility or unavailability of government services and formal governance structures, absence of basic services, and insecure land tenures.

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<sup>1</sup> UN Habitat defines informal settlements as: "residential areas where 1) inhabitants have no security of tenure vis-à-vis the land or dwellings they inhabit, with modalities ranging from squatting to informal rental housing, 2) the neighborhoods usually lack, or are cut off from, basic services and city infrastructure and 3) the housing may not comply with current planning and building regulations, and is often situated in geographically and environmentally hazardous areas. In addition, informal settlements can be a form of real estate speculation for all income levels of urban residents, affluent and poor. Slums are the most deprived and excluded form of informal settlements characterized by poverty and large agglomerations of dilapidated housing often located in the most hazardous urban land. In addition to tenure insecurity, slum dwellers lack a formal supply of basic infrastructure and services, public space and green areas, and are constantly exposed to eviction, disease and violence" (UN Habitat 2016: 1).



Through a migration pathway to conflict, informal urban settlements have also been identified to play an important role in climate-conflict linkages (Podesta 2019). Although climate change is rarely the only driver of rural to urban migration, typical pathways from climate impacts to conflict in informal settlements involve urban to rural migration after rural livelihoods have been negatively affected by climate events. Migrating populations typically seek to diversify their livelihood strategies in urban settings. Resultant population increases in the context of existing housing strain, low access to services, and often high competition for land, water, and other resources, can heighten community conflict (IRC 2022). Weak urban governance in particular plays into these dynamics and can cause feelings of marginalization and social exclusion on the sides of the residents and

thereby foment existing grievances against governments (IRC 2017).

Rural to urban migration in Fiji, and thereby the growth of informal settlements, has a complex history structured by various push and pull factors. Following the military coups of the 1980s, and in the context of a restructuring of the global economy, Fiji experienced severe economic uncertainty that especially impacted rural populations. The decline in the sugar and tourism industries was compounded by political insecurity and land tenure issues that resulted in unemployment and greater social inequality. In the 1990s, the non-renewal of agricultural leases under the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act (1967) and urban housing shortages led to the creation and rapid expansion of many informal settlements in Fiji's major cities (Naidu et. al.

2015: 29) (Figures I and II). Cyclones, floods, and droughts that affected rural communities have always played into these migration dynamics (Naidu et. al. 2015: 29). At the time of data collection, in July-August 2022, the settlements had also been severely affected by

job losses in agriculture and the tourism industry brought about by the COVID-19 lockdowns. Many of the families that had long lived in the settlements welcomed their extended families into the settlements under the financial strain brought about by the lockdowns.

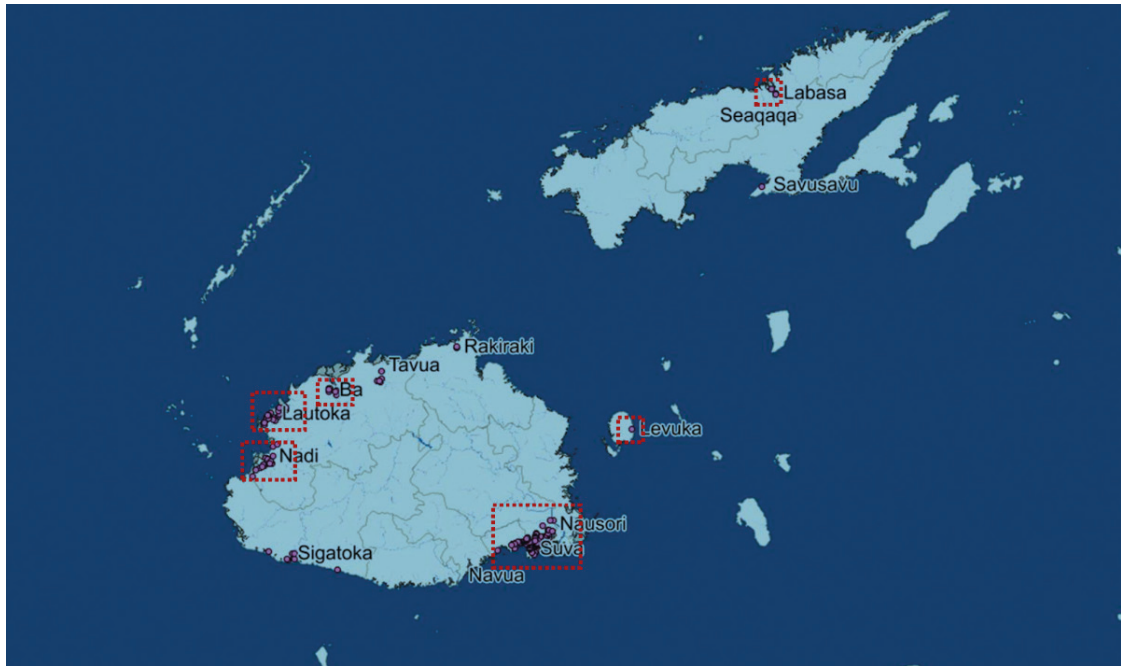


Figure I: Informal settlements in Fiji (UN Habitat 2019).

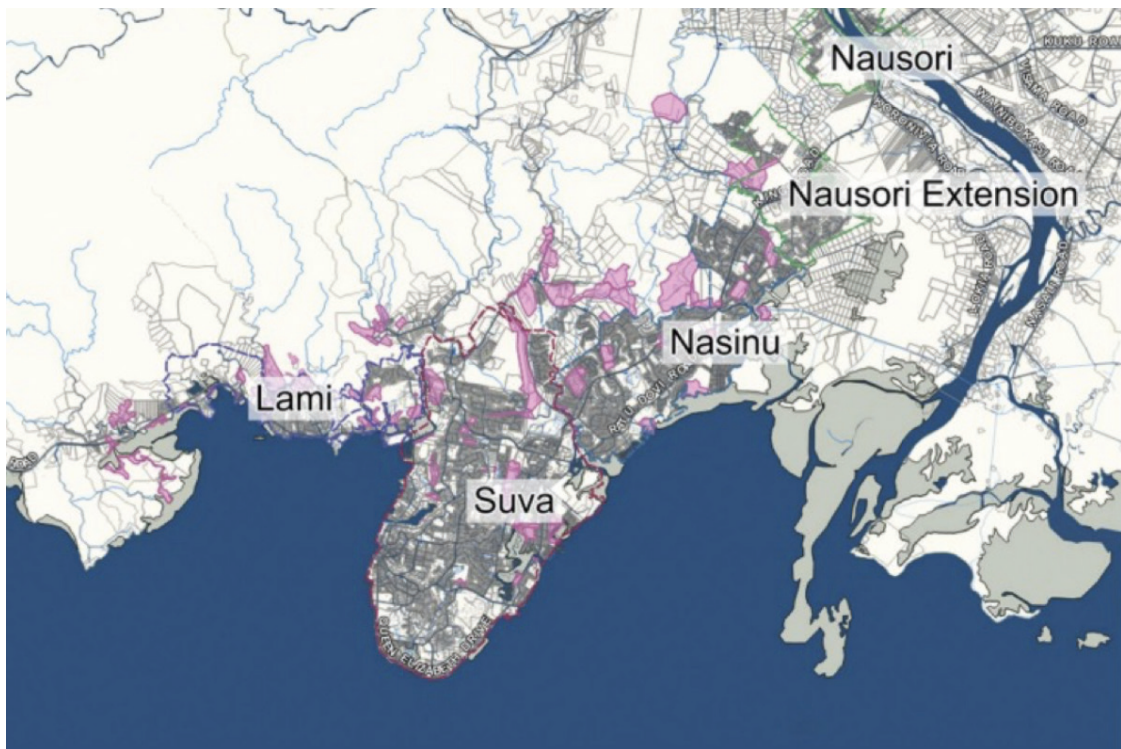


Figure II: Informal settlements in Suva (UN Habitat 2019).

The findings of this case study demonstrate that, in informal settlements, violence comes in many forms. Together with a sense of social and economic exclusion from the larger city, a strong sense of insecurity pervades the settlements. *Vanua*, the land, is an extension of the self and identity in indigenous Fijian society. Custom, tradition, spiritual practices, cultural beliefs and values, and social institutions that promote cohesion are all disrupted by rural-to-urban migration. Migration into the settlements because of climate change and other drivers is thus experienced as a loss through the uprooting of communities from the places and ecologies in which their cultural beliefs and practices are embedded. Insecurity - in land tenure, in economic situations, in environments to raise children in, in futures as the water rises and land disappears - adds up to the pervasive sense of fragility and exclusion. Non-existent or weak land rights add to feelings

of marginalization, hinder access to services, and prevent long-term investments in housing and infrastructure necessary to adapt to the changing climate. Poverty, joblessness, and a lack of economic opportunity are driving crime and leading to intergenerational tensions. Climate change, together with other push and pull factors, leads to gendered coping strategies for insecurity in the settlements that intersect<sup>2</sup> with other identity markers, such as economic status. Coping strategies are played out within existing patriarchal gender norms that prescribe violent criminal behavior, such as drug dealing, to men and boys, and condone the sexual exploitation of women and girls through prostitution.

Yet, inhabitants of the settlements also thrive in this insecure environment. Resilience<sup>3</sup> is a core cultural value of Fijians and other Pacific nations. The systems map (Figure III) explores the resilience and climate impacts in Fiji's informal

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<sup>2</sup> 'Intersectionality' refers to the way in which various identity markers can result in overlapping and therefore compounding forms of marginalization, exclusion, and oppression (Creshaw 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Resilience is a diverse concept, rooted in disciplines ranging from ecology, computer sciences, and psychology to disaster studies. Each seeks resilience at a different scale: individual, household, community and nation. In socio-ecological systems thinking, resilience is understood to represent "the ability of people, communities, societies, or cultures to live and develop with change and ever-changing environments. It is about cultivating the capacity to continue to develop in the face of change, incremental and abrupt, expected and surprising: (Folke 2016: 47). But resilience is also brimming with conceptual and operational sensitivities. First and foremost, resilience thinking runs the risk of obscuring, normalizing and naturalizing systemic precarity (Barrios 2016). Rather than shedding light on historically rooted injustices that give rise to social and natural threats, resilience thinking emphasizes the individuals' or groups' ability to endure and withstand this adversity. Focusing on structural factors of oppression - often the key driving factors in conflict systems - and balancing resilience thinking with vulnerability analyses, link hazards and precarity to historical injustice to counter this trend. Resilience thinking can also lead to isolationism in an increasingly precarious world, where internal systems, individuals, households or communities alone are tasked with bouncing back. And while the kind of peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity practice inherent in the approach promoted here focuses on local action and solutions, it also requires international solidarities. Cross scalar analysis, action, and solidarity across scales, will be essential to programming in this period.

settlements, by illustrating linkages among key driving factors (KDFs) of conflict and peace and manifestations experienced by community members. Resilience in this case is facilitated by high degrees of social and ecological connectedness, and mechanisms that promote social cohesion are expressed

in strong and highly adaptive community bonds. These bonds are in turn recreated within informal settlements. Social and political organization in the settlements, together with cultural values of reciprocity and humor, allow inhabitants to effectively respond to the many challenges their communities face.

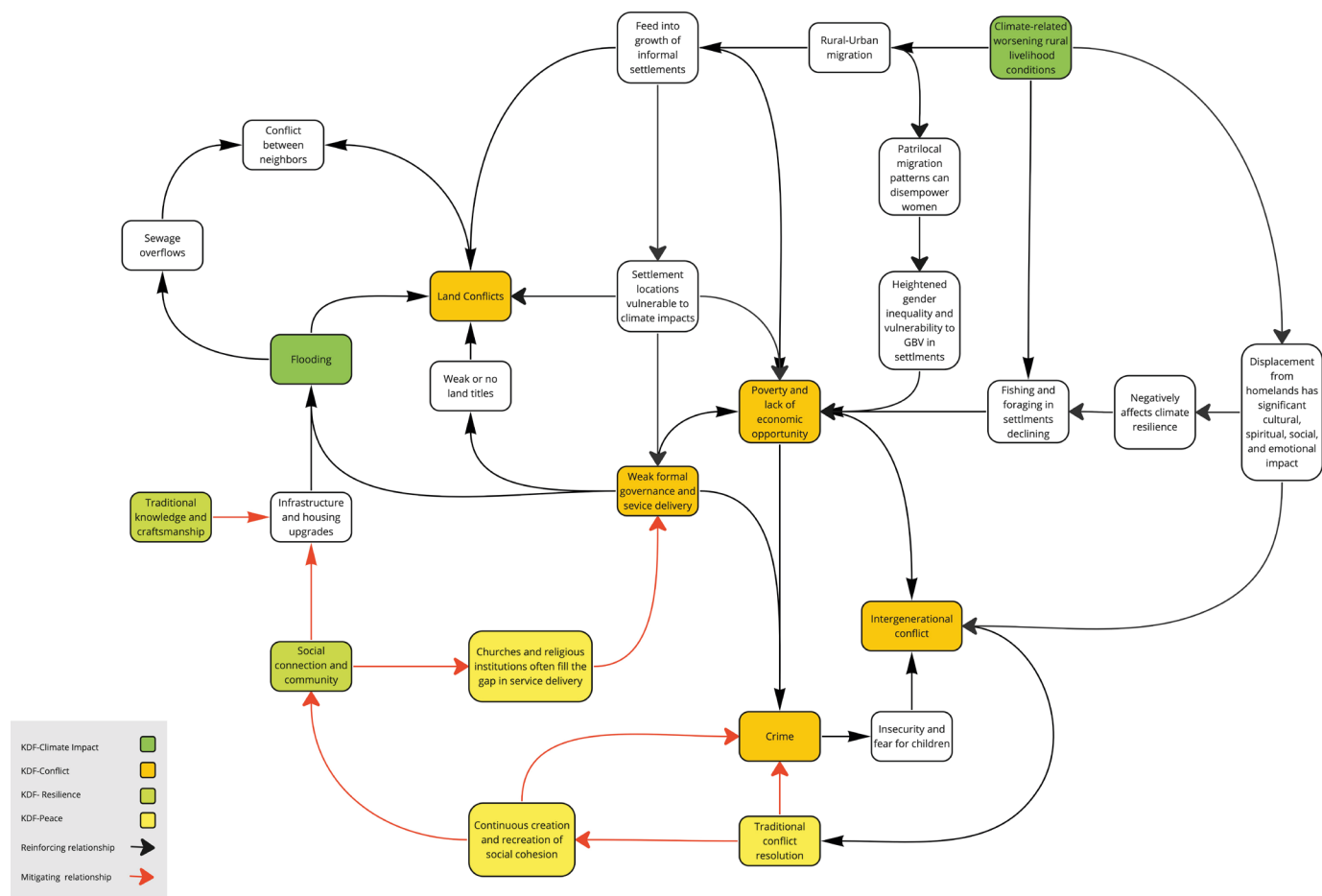


Figure III: Systems map exploring resilience and climate impacts in Fiji's informal settlements.



*The following impacts emerged from interviews and group discussions conducted by CDA, or summarize information observed in Fiji through the long-term collaboration between the Pacific Center for Peacebuilding, Conciliation Resources, and the communities of the settlements featured in this case study.*

## Climate Impacts and Specific Vulnerabilities

### Key Points:

- Changing weather patterns, slow and rapid onset disasters, and their negative impacts on rural livelihoods contribute to in-migration and the exponential growth of informal settlements.
- Gender also mediates the experience of rural-to-urban migration.
- The location of informal settlements themselves, and specifically their growth, render their inhabitants more vulnerable to climate impacts when assessed against the rest of the urban population.
- Excessive rain and increasing king tides have led to flooding, the diversion of waterways, landslides, and wastewater overflows.
- Climate change disrupts livelihood strategies within informal settlements.
- Displacement from homelands has significant cultural, spiritual, social, and emotional impacts on communities.

Fiji is one of the world's most vulnerable nations to climate change and climate-related disasters. Since 1993, Fiji has recorded a 6 millimeter (0.2 inch) rise in sea levels per year, higher than the global average of 3.4 millimeters per year (Earth.org 2020). The rapid rise in sea levels and the resulting saltwater intrusion that stems from the increase in coastal floods have made portions of the island nation uninhabitable. According to Fiji's National Climate Change Policy, global sea-level changes will more than double by the end of the century (ibid). Fiji is prone to natural hazards such as tropical cyclones, floods, droughts, and ocean warming, which severely impact the national economy, infrastructure, public health, environment,

and livelihoods (GIZ 2019). Consequently, Fiji has had significant economic and human losses due to the lack of sustainable climate adaptation and resilience strategies in urban and rural settlements. In 2016, Fiji was hit by Category 5 tropical cyclone (TC) Winston, considered the most severe to hit the South Pacific. The government of Fiji estimated that almost 350,000 people living in the cyclone's path were impacted and the cost of the damage reached up to USD 500 million (IFCR 2016). Most recently, TC Tasa made landfall in 2020 as a Category 5 cyclone, causing extensive damage across Vanua Levu, with estimates of 97,000 people affected (IFRC 2022).

**Changing weather patterns, slow and rapid onset disasters, and their negative impacts on rural livelihoods contribute to in-migration and the exponential growth of informal settlements.**

Climate change is never the only driver of migration. Individuals and communities are forced away from their homes for a variety of interlinked reasons, most recently and notably the disastrous impacts of COVID-19 on the tourism industry, and the immense job losses that accompanied it. However, saltwater intrusion, heat, changing rainfall patterns, and a series of tropical cyclones have had negative impacts on crop yields in many rural communities. As a result, agriculture has become a riskier livelihood strategy in Fiji with diminishing returns in many places. Communities seek to diversify livelihood strategies and economic opportunities by migrating to the city. Greater opportunities through jobs and education, particularly access to tertiary education, as a strategy for social mobility have always pulled rural communities to Suva. But this rural-to-urban pull is being intensified by climate-related pressures on rural livelihoods.

**Gender also mediates the experience of rural-to-urban migration.** Gender relations are shaped by traditional values in both *iTaukei* (Indigenous Fijian) and Indo-Fijian societies, particularly in rural areas, with the former emphasizing respect for the authority of chiefs and men, and the latter emphasizing male land ownership and decision-making power at home. While significant progress has been made in terms of education and labor force participation, gender norms have allowed

inequality to persist (Vuki and Vunisea 2016). Women, often responsible for the household, care of children, the infirm, and the elderly, suddenly have to manage these responsibilities alongside their extended family members in often cramped conditions. Finally, gender-based violence is widespread, with nearly two-thirds of women aged 18-64 reporting experiences of abuse by their husband or partner (Fiji Country Gender Assessment 2016). If migration involves members of the man's side of the clan / family, as is often the case, this might also skew gender relations in the household, with a woman suddenly being surrounded by her husband's family, not having access to family networks that might allow her to protect herself and her children from gender-based violence.

**The location of informal settlements themselves, and specifically their growth, render their inhabitants more vulnerable to climate impacts when assessed against the rest of the urban population.**

Because of the original informal nature of the settlements, many were built on marginal lands that were not fit for housing. The settlements are plagued by landslides (Qawia), floods (Qauia, Maravu, and Nanuku), and industrial pollution of waterways (Maravu). The poor economic status of settlement inhabitants, the relative absence of infrastructure (roads, drainage, sewage, etc.), and the often fragile nature of housing make informal settlements particularly vulnerable to floods and storms. As informal settlements provide some of the most inexpensive urban dwellings in Suva, it is often the most socio-economically disadvantaged rural communities

that migrate into them. In other words, rural economic marginalization is displaced into urban economically marginalized communities that are disadvantaged in their adaptation and resilience strategies to climate impacts.

**Excessive rain and increasing king tides have led to flooding, the diversion of waterways, landslides, and wastewater overflows.** The three coastal settlements have suffered from repeated flooding events that put pressure on already poor drainage and sanitation infrastructure. Unconnected from the urban sewage systems, sewage and wastewater are typically managed on a household basis and discharged into makeshift tanks or waterways. Where drainage does exist, it is poorly maintained by municipalities. During flooding events, overflowing sewage has led to skin diseases, respiratory issues, and conflict between neighbors. Accessible through a ford and footbridge, the settlement of Qauia and its 3,000 inhabitants are nearly completely shut off from the outside world during flooding events. This contributes to existing economic strain as inhabitants struggle to reach work outside of the settlement, and it disrupts the education of children and youth. It also presents a considerable risk to the infirm, disabled, and pregnant women who struggle to access health services. Women often bear the brunt of these climate-related pressures on households.

**Climate change also disrupts livelihood strategies within informal settlements.** Here, livelihood activities have always been substituted with subsistence agriculture,

foraging, and fishing. Many settlement inhabitants persisted primarily through these activities in the past and have in fact moved to the settlements for convenient access to fishing grounds. Established papaya, banana, and breadfruit trees, which amongst other crops are ubiquitous throughout the informal settlements and are known to easily recover after natural disasters, no longer bear as much fruit, and fruits on the whole are smaller and of lower quality. The planting of new fruit trees is often unsuccessful due to saline soils or other changing climatic conditions. Rivers and the ocean no longer offer much fish and seafood, and the size of catches has considerably diminished throughout the settlements. In the settlement of Nanuku, situated in coastal mangroves, salt water intrusion has reduced agriculture, which is now mostly limited to pot farming. And diminishing yields of shore fishing have pushed community members onto boats further out into the bay, allowing fishing only with greater economic investment and greater danger to fishermen.

**Displacement from homelands has significant cultural, spiritual, social, and emotional impacts on communities.** Indigenous Fijian cultures are highly place-based, deeply connected to the ecologies and land in which they are anchored. Fijian indigenous philosopher, Upolu Luma Vaai, calls this "eco-relationality," which "encompasses everything and gives direction to systems of values, principles, choices, and relationships; it holds the power to express the community's sense of identity and the concomitant orientation of

life and devotio; what is clear then is that ecology does not refer only to the natural environment as assumed by the Global North. Everything is relationally ecological" (Vaai 2019: 10). He goes on to explain that "...ecology is a whole, woven into all dimensions of life. The earth reminds us of our deep connection because we not only share the same ground, water, and air, but we are also made of the same materials. We don't 'have', rather 'we are' because of these" (Vaai 2019: 10). In other words, cultural values, spirituality and spiritual practice, identity, and community are all intertwined with a sense of place and the ecologies that construct them.

The loss experienced by displacement is then greater than the loss of a sense of home. Displacement is a disruption of the very sense of

identity a community is built upon. Displacement through rural-to-urban migration and relocation are not merely about the exchange of one home in the countryside for another in the city. It is an ontological loss that shatters a network of human- and non-human relationships and inserts them into another set of networks. With this loss, indigenous knowledge, closely bound to place and ecologies, is also lost, which hinders resilience and adaptation strategies. More importantly, it accelerates intergenerational change in the move from the country to the city. Yet many inhabitants of the settlements maintain strong links to their villages, where they are still bound into these eco-relationalities through traditional obligations within the social structure of village life.

## Key Driving Factors of Conflict and their Relationship to Climate Impacts

### Key Points:

- Non-existent or weak land rights add to feelings of marginalization, hinder access to services, and prevent long-term investments in housing and infrastructure necessary to adapt to the changing climate.
- Rural-to-urban migration adds to existing pressures on land, services, and infrastructure.
- Poverty, joblessness, and a lack of economic opportunity are driving crime in the settlements.
- Closely linked to criminal activity is a larger intergenerational conflict that feeds into tensions between new arrivals and established inhabitants, and adds to the general sense of insecurity.

Since its independence from Britain in the 1970s, Fiji has experienced four coups d'états, the last taking place in 2006. One of the key drivers of this political instability is an ethnic conflict between indigenous and Indo-Fijians, which is rooted in colonial Divide and Rule policies. In colonial times, while Indo-Fijians worked in the

sugar cane industry, indigenous Fijians were expected to maintain their traditional village lifestyles (Ryle 2005). The coup of 2000 led to divisions among indigenous Fijians, some of whom still supported the constitutional government, and chiefs, some of whom resisted plans to oust the president.

There were also divisions among senior officers in the army. This fragmentation ultimately led to the 2006 coup, in which the then head of Fiji's military challenged the indigenous order, seized power, and placed inter-ethnic collaboration at the center of his agenda. Until then, communal leaders had largely avoided addressing the issue of inter-group conflict, as doing so would have undermined their position within their own group (Ramesh 2008). Ethnic tensions are relatively low in the informal settlements, in part because of spatial separation of communities and solidarities around class and settlement membership that transcend these divisions. However their outcome, military rule, and especially the centralization of governance by the military regimes, is absolutely central to many of the conflicts in the settlements.

**Non-existent or weak land rights add to feelings of marginalization, hinder access to services, and prevent long-term investments in housing and infrastructure necessary to adapt to the changing climate.** Land is central to conflict dynamics across Fiji. Around 82 percent of land in Fiji is predicated on clan membership. This native or *iTaukei* land comprises much of the land the settlements are built upon, though some of it is now officially leased by the government (Tanner 2007). Of Fiji's remaining land, 8 percent is freehold and 10 percent is owned by the government (ibid.). Native land titling dates back to British rule. In 1879, the British established this model as the country's land tenure system, and they proceeded to register all native land through the establishment of the Native Land Commission (NLC) the

following year. Authority over land follows the *vanua-yavusa-mataqali-tokatoka* hierarchy, with plots of land allocated down by leadership at each level. Land has remained a contentious topic in Fiji. Only in August 2021, a land bill was passed that "removes the requirement of obtaining the consent of the *iTaukei* Land Trust Board for any mortgage, charge, pledge, or caveat on a lease under the act." Indigenous landowners complained it stripped them of powers for different purposes. A petition with over 30,000 signatures was presented by the opposition to parliament; two large fires were also reportedly started by landowners in protest of the bill (Anthony 2021).

Native land is the basis of wealth, social status, and cultural identity in Fiji (Tanner 2007). However, without land rights (Nanuku), partial and shifting land rights (Qauia), and long-term leases (Maravu), persistence on their current homelands is a relative uncertainty for inhabitants of the informal settlements. Informal settlements host a mix of different indigenous communities and individuals, which further complicates tenure as no single group can acquire land if that was to become a possibility. Further, Indo-Fijians can't buy *iTaukei* land and so do not have the same security that *iTaukei* have with their tribal land connection. Land use is therefore a potential conflict driver between Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians. Settlement dwellers see land rights as a prerequisite to gain access to services (water, electricity, and sewage). But land titles also offer a more general sense of security and belonging. In the context of settlement growth and

expansion, pressures on land have increased.

Conflicts erupt within households and between neighbors over lack of privacy as some of the households have doubled and tripled in occupancy, or as plots are subdivided to accommodate new housing for family members. While some land plots have always been more attractive than others, through access to services for example, increased flooding has decisively altered the hierarchy of desirable plots as some plots across all settlements are repeatedly inundated. Flooding also requires further investment to raise houses on stilts. Suitable soils to practice subsistence agriculture also raises the premium on plots while mosquitoes are more abundant in other plots. Climate change and population pressures change the value of plots and raise competition amongst inhabitants. Given the sometimes spatially divided nature of settlements - by kinship ties, geographical origin in the country, or ethnicity - these pressures could feed into inter-group conflict in the future.

**Rural-to-urban migration adds to existing pressures on land, services, and infrastructure.** In the informal settlements, access to services (electricity, water, and sanitation) is the main grievance of inhabitants. Some inhabitants in Maravu, the only settlement that has gained a 99-year lease and has land rights, have been waiting for six years to be connected to the electricity grid. These very common extended waiting periods and an inability to find redress add to the experience of marginalization amongst settlement

inhabitants in Maravu and elsewhere. The central problem in gaining access to services is the absence of local governance structures in Fiji. Because of the ad-hoc and sometimes illegal nature of informal settlements, the government often doesn't feel responsible to provide services. But without local government representation there is little social accountability to citizens in the settlements. The exposure to the heat, rain, and floods ferment feelings of exclusion and marginalization, and sometimes anger, especially amongst youth.

However, some households in the settlements, primarily older households that attained services in the past, do have access to services and split these with other households. This apportion of services can lead to a kind of monopoly over services by households with official access, which is sometimes abused for monetary gain. The communal payment of bills and occasional abuse of power by the monopoly holders often leads to conflicts between households. With the increased in-migration into the settlements, existing services are strained and conflicts are on the rise between earlier inhabitants and recent arrivals.

**Poverty, joblessness, and a lack of economic opportunity are driving crime in the settlements.** Informal settlements are by definition some of the most inexpensive places to live in reach of the city. Many people arrive from other provinces to escape rural poverty. They seek shelter with their extended families, save money, and initially pay little to no rent. The rationale is that these new arrivals eventually

find jobs, build their own houses within the settlements, or eventually move out of the settlements completely. However, the lack of economic opportunities with the collapse of the tourism industry under COVID-19 lockdowns and the economic knock-on effects have broken this rural-to-urban migration ladder. With little to no income, newly arrived families try everything to earn a living. Rather than attending school, children are often forced to seek employment, leading to a rise in school dropouts, further interrupting the economic-ladder that rural-to-urban migrants must climb.

In this weak economic climate, criminal activity, especially drug dealing, has become an extremely attractive livelihood strategy for individuals and families alike. Drug dealing is a more lucrative business than any other economic activity open to settlement inhabitants and it is particularly attractive to young men. Even some older community members see crime as a legitimate adaptation strategy that responds to the economic havoc wrought by COVID-19 and climate change. Drugs, primarily methamphetamines and cannabis, are being openly sold and consumed in the settlements. While police checkpoints are present in two of the three settlements, the police either condone or even encourage drug dealing to receive salary support, so-called "lunch money" from drug dealers, for turning a blind eye. Glue sniffing, theft, gambling, and prostitution are also increasingly pervasive in the settlements. In this way, the economic situation also feeds into the sexual exploitation of women and girls. While drug dealing is considered an exclusively male

activity, prostitution is seen as the primary female economic strategy within the shadow economy to respond to widespread poverty.

**Closely linked to criminal activity is a larger intergenerational conflict that feeds into tensions between new arrivals and established inhabitants, and adds to the general sense of insecurity.** Many residents are especially fearful for the safety of their children, who might be caught up in violence or succumb to criminal activity themselves. Drug use and drunkenness in public, loitering, disregard of elders, and fighting between youth are the most commonly cited transgressions. The so-called 'newcomers', especially the youth of newly arrived residents, are seen to not adhere to community rules and regulations. Lack of respect for traditional authority and custom by young people has frequently been decried. However, the same youth who are accused of disregarding community regulations and custom in the settlements will also follow customary regulations and even customary obligations in their villages. In the relative anonymity of the settlements and removed from familial networks, social sanctions are laxer or completely absent. While outright fighting between youth groups is rare, fist fights between youth, especially under the influence of drugs and alcohol, are commonplace.

### Key Points:

- Strong community bonds, social cohesion, socio-ecological connection, and ingenuity are central to survival in the informal settlements.
- Traditional knowledge and craftsmanship set some communities apart in their response to climate change.
- Cultural and emotional attitudes help individuals and communities cope with hardship and even thrive under the additional strain of climate change.

Like other inhabitants of the Pacific, Fijians have not only survived, but thrived within an environment wrought by natural disaster for centuries. Resilience is a core cultural value of Fijians and other Pacific nations, facilitated by high degrees of social and ecological connectedness and strong yet highly adaptive community bonds. Prior to European contact, Fijians had developed several methods for coping with natural disasters. First and foremost, they maintained a wide range of food crops and plants to reduce the risk of famine. Additionally, agricultural practices were developed to reduce the impact of storms (e.g., terracing to reduce runoff, erosion, and landslides, and planting in such a way that provided shelter from the wind). Fijians also used various food storage preservation techniques, such as fermentation. Finally, Fijians coped with disasters through community cooperation, both within and among the islands, from rationing food to helping with rehousing after storms (Campbell 1984).

Fijians always relied on mobility in response to environmental changes, migrating and returning to ancestral lands (Piggott-McKellar, McMichael,

and Powell 2021). Indigenous Fijians stored water, food, fuel, livestock, and household items before natural disasters to safeguard their well-being after the climate event. Indigenous housing structures were also an important coping mechanism for natural hazards. For example, Navala village built *bure*, characterized by low, breathable walls and high-pitched, hipped, thatch roofs with short eaves, built over an earthen plinth. The high dome ceiling combated humidity from heavy rainfall, and the open sides allowed wind to pass through. *Bure* houses were made with local resources depending on where the village was located. For an inland village such as Navala, the materials used were bamboo, reeds, and ferns.

More recently, the Fijian government has taken on several initiatives to ensure that climate change is mainstreamed into national development through the formulation of key policy frameworks, setting the basis for climate change adaptation and mitigation activities. This includes the formulation of the Green Growth Framework (2014), the 5-Year and 20-Year National Development Plan (2017), the



National Adaptation Framework (2017), Fiji's Climate Vulnerability Assessment (2017), Fiji's Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement (2017), the Planned Relocation Guidelines (2018), National Adaptation Plan (2018), National Climate Change Policy (2018), and Fiji National Disaster Risk Reduction Policy (2018).

While adaptation is a key priority, Fiji has also shown commitment to mainstreaming climate change mitigation by developing a sector-wide Low Emission Development Strategy (2018). The Government has established a network of bodies, committees, divisions, and other entities to focus on climate change and disaster risk management initiatives. At the center of the network are the Climate Change and International Cooperation Division under the Ministry of Economy, which is responsible for the implementation of the National Climate Change Policy (NCCP), and the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) under the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and National Disaster Management. Both entities are meant to play a key role in coordination and policy advice on climate change and disaster risk management. However, a lack of financial resources is a significant obstacle to providing technical and capacity needs for adaptation and mitigation activities and long-term investments in climate change research and development. Moreover, the lack of technical ability in relevant

ministries and agencies limits implementation of sustainable climate change plans and strategies. The weak institutional coordination across all relevant stakeholders inhibits the decision-making process to address climate change.

**Strong community bonds, social cohesion,<sup>4</sup> socio-ecological connection, and ingenuity are central to survival in the informal settlements.** In the relative absence of infrastructure or municipal service delivery, communities are self-reliant and relatively self-sustained. Reciprocity is a prized cultural value that underlies this sustainability and communities cooperate on the basis of kinship bonds, location of residence, and across ethnic lines in the settlements. Connection based on kinship bonds, often reinforced through ritual, allows social networks to respond to environmental impacts. Social cohesion is a central building block of climate resilience and disaster response more generally (Aldrich 2021). Resilience here is a tight network of communal bonding, social connection, and reciprocity that relies on ritual and tradition. However, this tradition, which forges and maintains community bonds, is inherently flexible, adaptable, and innovative. For example, while individuals and communities owe loyalty to a particular traditional chief through kinship ties, these loyalties aren't rigid. The community of Qauia, composed of rural migrants from across Fiji, owe loyalty to the chiefly family

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<sup>4</sup> The OECD (2011) defines social cohesion, as "a 'cohesive' society works towards the well-being of all its members, creates a sense of belonging and fights against the marginalization within and between different groups of societies."

on whose land the settlement is constructed. However, back in the villages, loyalty is owed to local chiefs. The structure of social relations that underlies cooperation is thereby transferable from one place to another, incorporating different individuals and communities.

Similarly, climate responses are flexible and innovative, using materials most closely at hand. In Nanuku, in response to increased flooding from the mangroves, walkways were lifted up with discarded car tires. The community collected small amounts of money from subsections of the settlement most closely reliant on those walkways to build and maintain infrastructure adjacent to their houses. Labor is provided cooperatively and freely, with those with greater skill-level expected to lead the endeavor. In this way, bags of cement are bought to secure paths against erosion or to build and replace lifted pathways. Embankments are reinforced to counter erosion on river banks. Land reclamation is common practice, especially from the mangroves in Nanuku. Small scale agriculture, fishing, and foraging are all strategies for collaborative subsistence and climate resilience.

All communal work is preceded or followed by *kava* rituals. *Kava* embodies the idea of eco-relationality, as it brings land, ecology, and the spirit world together to strengthen community bonds. *Kava*, also known as *yaqona* in Fijian, is both a shrub (*Piper methysticum*) and the drink prepared from it, commonly referred to as *grog*. Once the beverage is prepared through a ritualistic process, it becomes a living and

sacred entity that has the power to enhance a person's *mana*, or ability to effectively do a task at hand (Turner 1986:209). Because drinking *kava* also allows for easier communication with the ancestral spirit world, it is a highly spiritual practice (Ravuvu 1987:25). *Kava* drinking, which often happens in the evenings in the settlements, is intrinsically linked to the indigenous Fijian sense of identity, and as such is an assertion of communal bonds. When foreigners entered the settlement, including CDA researchers, they were welcomed into the community with a *kava* ritual. "*Kava* is therefore a symbol of social unity" (Tomlinson 2007: 1068).

### **Traditional knowledge and craftsmanship set some communities apart in their response to climate change.**

The largest social unit of traditional indigenous Fijian society is the *Yavusa*. Subsections of these descending kin groups are tasked with particular obligations and acquire specific skills and knowledge (Dau). *Mataqali* are also ranked by occupational status, and this hierarchical structure has led some anthropologists to refer to traditional Fijian society as a caste society (Tegunimataka and Palacio 2021). The presence of these particular skills and knowledge can greatly enhance resilience strategies. For example, building upgrades, reconstruction, and reinforcements are supported by traditional crafts and knowledge. The most common way in which houses are being upgraded in the settlements is by raising them onto stilts in areas prone to flooding. The quality of these houses varies greatly in relation to price and spending power of inhabitants. However, on the whole buildings and upgrades

in Maravu stand out for their solidity and level of craftsmanship. While the settlements have been spared by cyclones because of their relatively protected location, this kind of housing is more likely to withstand strong winds and rain. They were built and improved to extremely high standards due to the presence of a family of traditional carpenters (*Mataisau*) in the settlement. Here, carpentry, as a traditional type of knowledge, is transmitted from fathers to sons, and these skills and knowledge are embedded within the social relations described above.

**Cultural and emotional attitudes help individuals and communities cope with hardship and even thrive under the additional strain of climate change.** It is hard to overstate the positive attitude that inhabitants of the settlements bring to their often challenging lives. Humor precedes any other response in public life. Joking relationships even bond traditional enemies together. Members of Indigenous Fijian clans whose chiefs have been historically competitors or even enemies have a cultural

obligation to engage with each other through playful mocking, rather than aggression. While jokes might sometimes be hard to take, such jokes are transformed into a kind of kinship held together through humor. In other words, humor, in particular social relationships between competitors mediated by humor, is a conflict management mechanism.

It is not that there is not great solemnity and compassion with the suffering of others, but that humor is central to bringing opposites together and overcoming differences. But there is also a sense of ennui and fatalism, especially vis-à-vis the government, access to services, and political change. Even the hardest and most difficult challenges can be laughed about or met with mocking irony. Hedonistic pleasure seeking, not of the individual, but communal, also plays an important role, including the enjoyment of song, music, and *kava* drinking. It is these culturally prescribed emotional attitudes that come to the fore in the midst of hardship and which in themselves, seem to help the community bond together and press forward.

### Key Points:

- The continuous creation and recreation of social cohesion is the single most important building block for peace in the settlements.
- Traditional leaders and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms play a key role in mediating community and family conflict.
- Religious institutions play a key role in maintaining social order in the settlements.
- Churches and religious institutions often fill the gap in service delivery when government services fail or are absent in the settlements. They are central to social cohesion within the settlements and thereby also play a pivotal role in both conflict management and climate change mitigation and response.

### **The continuous creation and recreation of social cohesion is the single most important building block for peace in the settlements.**

Social cohesion is maintained through existing social relations defined by kinship and clan membership, but also through ritual, reciprocity, and other mechanisms, such as joking relationships involving ritualized banter.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous Fijians belong to various lineages of the *vanua-yavusa-mataqali-tokatoka* hierarchy. *Tokatoka* refers to one's extended family; many extended families comprise *mataqali* or subclans; many subclans comprise *yavusa*, which are clans formed within one or a few villages; and finally, many *yakuza* comprise *vanua*, which range over several villages. Each unit of the hierarchy has a leader or chief. This kinship structure plays a central role in village governance, ritual, and livelihoods. For example, most land is owned by indigenous Fijians through their *mataqali*;

similarly, fishing rights are dictated by *vanua* or *yavusa* (Takasaki 2011). This social structure is built and rebuilt through reciprocity, ritual, and the maintenance of customary kinship structures. Indo-Fijians are often organized into nuclear and extended families who live together or maintain frequent contact (Tegunimataka and Palacio 2021).

Most households in the settlements are inhabited by extended segmentary kinship groups. As these groups move out of a single household, they often build adjacent housing, forming kinship communities from a particular village. In Qauia, different Fijian provinces are roughly assembled in different parts of the settlement, producing a kind of microcosm of Fijian traditional kinship and clan relations. But these relations are by no means rigid, demonstrating great dynamism and

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<sup>5</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. (July 1940). "On Joking Relationships". *Journal of the International African Institute*. 13 (3): 195-210.

adaptability. When moving onto the land of another chief, as is also the case in Quaia, no matter what the alliances are in the villages, all inhabitants of the settlement then become subjects of the chief whose land they dwell on, and accept him, at least nominally, as their authority. In this way, the inhabitants of Quaia, though from different provinces and belonging to different clans, form a clan-like relationship within the hierarchical social structure of indigenous Fijian kinship systems. Potential internal friction between clans, that might be based in historical competition between clans, is managed through ritualized banter that brings traditionally opposing clans (*Tavu*) and provinces together under the banner of humor. While there is a spatial separation between Indigenous and Indo-Fijians in the settlements, reciprocity, the communal maintenance of infrastructure, and certain forms of ritual, like formal community gatherings, integrate the two communities to varying degrees.

**Traditional leaders and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms play a key role in mediating community and family conflict.**

The recreation of village social structure in the settlements also defers considerable power and responsibilities onto the local chief, effectively the key social and political authority in the settlements. Chiefs are almost always male and must come from a chiefly kinship line or caste. Individual chiefs are elected by the settlement community every two years, making their authority both traditional and representative. Conflict resolution in the settlements is predicated on the understanding

that the individual is bound up in communal relations. To resolve conflict, such communal relations need to be restored. Typically, this involves a kind of shuttle diplomacy by an elder or religious or community leader in which grievances on both sides are heard. Once the parties agree to meet formally, the setting of that meeting is highly ritualistic, and often involves *kava* ceremonies as well as the use of a whale's tooth (*tabua*), a rare item that traditionally was given as a symbol of atonement. *Kava* plays a central role as a symbol of social unity, peace, and tranquility, and can even be used in a ritual called *ibulubulu* (burial), in which large amounts of *kava* are given to the aggrieved party to "bury" the issue and restore social harmony. In all rituals of reconciliation, fault has to be admitted publicly and perpetrators have to humble themselves in front of the community and the aggrieved. These kinds of humble apologies have to be formally accepted. Depending on the grievance, reparations often in the form of money are negotiated, and, if both sides agree, parties are brought together in a reconciliatory ritual. When community dialogue fails however, village elders noted that police are often involved. It is unclear to what degree family disputes, and potentially family violence, are being hidden through these community-based justice mechanisms, as the importance of communal relations seems to be held over the interests of the individual.

**Religious institutions play a key role in maintaining social order in the settlements.**

Youth groups are often organized through churches to involve troubled youth in an array

of activities. Church leaders, together with other community leaders, form youth committees. These networks also function as conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms, as youth leaders are the first to respond to violence between youth.

**Churches and religious institutions often fill the gap in service delivery when government services fail or are absent in the settlements. They are central to social cohesion within the settlements and thereby also play a pivotal role in both conflict management and climate**

**change mitigation and response.** Churches collect money for the development and upkeep of local infrastructure and contribute a spiritual dimension to the climate response, forging communities together through common beliefs and rituals. Besides religious services, they organize sports events and activities, play a key role in uniting communities, and keep youth from crime and violence. Sports activities organized by churches and the Ministry of Youth keep unemployed youth, especially young men, off the streets. Sports camps often extend into teaching life and job skills.

## Conclusions

The inhabitants of informal settlements in Fiji teach us much about climate responses in fragile and conflict-affected environments. Their experiences highlight the role of social connection and cohesion in the response to climate change. On one hand, social connection is itself a form of resilience in the sense that social bonds can be relied upon to provide food, shelter, labor, and so on to families and individuals affected by climate change. Carefully designed interventions that consciously strengthen social connection and cohesion are likely to make communities more

prepared and resilient. On the other hand, slow and rapid onset disasters associated with climate change can offer a special opportunity to strengthen social cohesion across conflict lines. Peacebuilding interventions that incorporate disaster preparedness and response in their programs can use this opportunity for cooperation to strengthen social cohesion. While more research is needed to substantiate these findings, this study has showcased the myriad benefits from climate-sensitive peacebuilding or conflict-sensitive climate programs.

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