



“Where my heart belongs”: Disaster-induced displacement in Nabavatu village, Fiji

This short paper draws attention to the plight of a community in Fiji displaced following Tropical Cyclones Yasa and Ana in late 2020 and early 2021. Highlighting applicable international human rights frameworks, the paper calls on the Fijian Government and state duty-bearers everywhere to fulfil their fundamental human rights obligations to people displaced in the context of climate change. The paper also recommends specific actions the Fijian government, humanitarian actors and other stakeholders should take in Nabavatu village and similar contexts, including the support for livelihood development and diversification, inclusive rights-based decision-making, and community-led relocation planning.

Published on 27 March 2025

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Overview of the displacement

The world is increasingly experiencing environmental disasters, including the adverse impacts of climate change. The Pacific Islands region is on the frontline of these challenges, with Fiji particularly vulnerable. As the adverse impacts of climate change escalate, increases in displacement in Fiji become inevitable.

Climate change impacts can amplify existing risks by worsening social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities. Community members from Nabavatu village on Vanua Levu, Fiji, were displaced by a geohazard event that triggered land slumps, tension cracks, and ground displacements in late 2020. The situation worsened due to heavy rainfall following Tropical Cyclones Yasa (December 2020) and Ana (January 2021), leading to

landslides. For their safety, the residents of Nabavatu evacuated to a nearby school.

A geo-technical assessment and aerial mapping conducted by the Fiji Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources in February 2021 revealed that most dwellings in Nabavatu were at high risk. The Ministry's report confirmed that all buildings and houses within the medium to high-risk zones had to be relocated to ensure the safety of residents and the community. The village, in its current state, has been deemed unsafe for future habitation due to the ongoing risk of geohazard events. As the Fiji Permanent Secretary for Rural Development stated on December 11, 2024, "Based on that scientific report, we cannot advise them to go back to the old site" (FBC News, 2024). Since January 2021, local community members have been living in tents in an Assemblies of God (AOG) church compound, less than two kilometres from the original village site.



Plate 1: Nabavatu village was critically affected by a geohazard event followed by a series of landslides and flooding in 2021 (Mosese Nayabo, 2021)

Initially, the 37 households (approximately 169 people, including more than 60 children) were told their stay at the AOG church compound would

be temporary, lasting only three months. However, the community has been in tents for over three and a half years. The reality in 2025 is that community members face their fourth consecutive year living in tents.

Two of the authors of this paper visited Nabavatu in April 2024 to listen to and document their experiences and insights into how future displacements and relocation should be managed. We spoke with 30 members of the displaced Nabavatu community, and we share their stories below.



Plate 2: Displaced Nabavatu villagers in the AOG church compound (Mosese Nayabo, 2024)

Living conditions

The community continues to face significant challenges, including unstable ground, inadequate shelter, and privacy issues. As one resident noted, “We feel the earth shift beneath our feet, and it makes us anxious every day”. The temporary housing situation remains dire, with families living in tents provided by the Fiji Government, which were originally intended for short-term use but have now been in place for over three years. One mother expressed her frustration, stating, “Heavy rain for the past months and our tent was flooded and we had to dig drainage in the tents to let the water drain out from the tent and the village”. Overcrowding, discomfort and lack of privacy exacerbate the situation, with multiple families often sharing tents. A young father commented,

“It’s hard to find a moment alone. We are always on top of each other”. Some women also expressed safety concerns with the tents. “We feel unsafe because it’s not locked, especially when the men leave for the day”.

Access to basic necessities

Access to basic necessities is severely limited, with families relying on shared facilities for water, sanitation, and electricity. “We wait in long lines for water, and when it runs out, we feel helpless”, shared a local elder. Although schools are nearby, the community depends on solar lights and shared electricity sources for their needs. “We can’t study at night. We have to rely on what little light we can get from using my mother’s phone”, a student lamented. The stress of these living conditions weighs heavily on everyone. “Every day feels like a struggle, and we carry that burden in our hearts”, said one community member. Health and safety concerns are prevalent as the tents deteriorate, leading to leaks and other issues. The community healthcare worker warned, “We are seeing more skin diseases and stress-related issues; this environment is not safe for anyone”. According to Habitat for Humanity Fiji (2023), more than 61 individuals have been affected by chronic fungal infections due to overcrowding, and sanitation and hygiene issues.

Delays in relocation

At the beginning of 2024, the Fiji Government approved the relocation of Nabavatu village to a site in Nadoiviri, belonging to the Mataqali Uluitoga and Mataqali Nalutu. This relocation initiative, the first to be funded by Fiji’s Climate Relocation of Communities Trust Fund, will be financed through public contributions from the Environment Climate Adaptation Levy – a tax on luxury services and utilities – along with direct bilateral grants from development partners. The Nabavatu relocation project will be in four phases, with an estimated total cost of FJD5.9 million.

However, there have been extensive delays in permanently relocating this community to the new site. Initially, the Fiji Government assured the community that they would be temporarily displaced in tents for only three months. Promises of new housing have been delayed. While there has been a groundbreaking ceremony, no new homes have been built.

The community was told that ten new houses would be constructed by April 2024, but this has not happened. On December 11, 2024, the Fiji Government announced that the construction of 37 houses will now commence in early 2025. Given that the original village is classified as a high-risk zone and the government has restricted return to these areas, this leaves families with no choice but to wait. In March 2025, the residents of Nabavatu finally received some encouraging news as the foundation-laying commenced at the new, future Nabavatu site (Fiji Government, 2025).

Community cohesion

Despite these many hardships and challenges, the displaced community remains close-knit and supportive, with strong social bonds. As the village nurse at the displaced site expressed, “We are very close in here. We are small in numbers, and that assisted us to work closely together”. This sentiment was echoed in a women’s *Talanoa* discussion, where one woman said, “This new site, we have experienced that the bond between the families has really grown, and we’ve become a very close-knitted community”. However, tensions exist with those remaining at the original site. Cohesion with the original site is weakening, leading to social tensions between those who stayed and those who were displaced. As the women’s *Talanoa* explained, “When we go back to the old site, we are like visitors, ‘*Vulagi*’, in our own land. That bond is weakening between us and those in the old site”.

Obligations and responsibilities under international frameworks

The [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030](#) (UNDRR, 2015) aims to substantially reduce disaster risks and losses in lives, livelihoods, and health while strengthening resilience. It emphasises understanding disaster risks, enhancing preparedness, and adopting a ‘build back better’ approach in recovery efforts. Similarly, the [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#) (OCHA, 2004), adopted in 1998, provide a rights-based framework to protect and assist internally displaced persons at all phases of displacement. The [Guiding Principles for Children on the Move in the Context of Climate Change](#) (UNICEF, 2022) puts forth nine principles derived from the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* to safeguard the rights and well-being of children moving in the

context of climate change. Together, these principles and guidelines prioritise safe, dignified, and durable solutions while safeguarding the right to housing, health, education and security.

All frameworks underscore the shared responsibility of governments, international agencies, and stakeholders to address displacement and migration in a coordinated and inclusive manner. Their relevance to the Nabavatu relocation process is clear, offering a foundation for practical, rights-based, and sustainable solutions. Drawing from these principles, the following recommendations aim to enhance the living conditions, dignity, and resilience of the displaced Nabavatu community.

Recommendations

We make five key recommendations relating to disaster-induced displacement and relocation, with a focus on access to critical assets, economic empowerment, inclusive decision-making, finance and support, and community-led processes.

1. Improve living conditions and assets pending physical relocation

- While the new tents and toilets provided in October 2024 were welcomed, the current infrastructure requires ongoing monitoring and upgrades to ensure privacy, security, and protection from heat and rain. There is currently a need for more cooling solutions, such as fans, and alternatives to sleeping on the ground.
- All community members should have access to the key assets and resources they need to sustain their lives in a temporary site, such as solar lighting and resources for kitchen gardens, as current distribution is inequitable and inadequate. Access to other essential assets, such as clean drinking water, need ongoing monitoring and maintenance.
- In line with the *Guiding Principles for Children on the Move in the Context of Climate Change* (UNICEF, 2022), the State, with support from development partners, must recognise climate-induced mobility as a critical trigger of responsibility. The best interests of children should be a primary concern, ensuring they have

uninterrupted access to education, healthcare, and essential social services throughout all stages of their displacement and relocation.

2. Bolster and diversify livelihoods and economic opportunities

- Displaced communities are currently in a state of limbo, unable to restart their livelihoods. The community seeks more employment opportunities and economic growth initiatives.
- It is important to support livelihood diversification with a focus on market demand, such as providing workshops for youth to develop their livelihood interests, activities and skills (e.g. crops and agriculture, textiles and weaving).

3. Ensure inclusive and rights-based decision-making

- The community must be more effectively included and involved in the planning and decision-making processes for the new relocation site. More direct communication and consultation between the government and community members is needed. As echoed by one of the women, “They made decisions about our future without even asking us what we wanted. We were only informed after everything was already decided”. This must change.
- Timely community feedback allows community members to make decisions about their future. The decision-making process must ensure that displaced communities are fully informed and engaged in a participatory manner.
- It is essential that the government and development partners uphold a rights-based approach that recognises the fundamental human rights of displaced persons under international frameworks such as the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* and the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030*. This includes protecting displaced individuals from further harm, ensuring access to adequate housing, and enhancing disaster resilience to prevent future displacement.
- The Fiji Government and its partners should establish mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability for relocation timelines.

Delays undermine trust and exacerbate emotional and physical harm and suffering.

4. Acknowledge capacity challenges and mobilise support

- Growing climate-related challenges may outstrip the resources and capacity of the Fiji Government. More targeted appeals for international support and partnerships will be required to address funding and resource gaps. For example, Fiji's Climate Relocation of Communities Trust Fund will require additional financing from multilateral organisations and development partners.
- Ensure that funds are directed effectively to priority areas.
- In accordance with the Sendai Framework, leverage international cooperation to enhance disaster preparedness and resilience for relocated communities.

5. Foster a community-led planned relocation process

- Conduct regular *Talanoa* sessions to ensure the voices that need to be heard in setting the priorities for planned relocation, including women, girls, older persons, persons with disabilities and youths, are heard and incorporated into relocation strategies.
- Invest in local capabilities by enhancing communities understanding of climate risks, generating solutions, and managing planned relocation with reduced external influence.
- State and non-state actors should recognise the value of local knowledge and expertise in adapting to climate risks.
- Allow communities to adjust planned relocation plans based on evolving climate risks, local priorities, and lived experiences.
- Support provisions to restore people's previous livelihoods, or where that is not possible, develop strategies with them to replace livelihoods applicable in the new site.

These recommendations, which would enhance the living conditions, economic opportunities, and overall well-being of the displaced community members of Nabavatu village, are also relevant to other displaced communities in Fiji and beyond. The pervasive failure to uphold

fundamental human rights obligations to communities displaced in the context of climate change must be addressed through a coordinated, rights-based approach that emphasises transparency, community engagement, and sustainability.

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