

CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION IN POST-DISASTER RECOVERY - POLICY BRIEF 9

Religion: A Bane or a Boon in Post-Disaster Fiji?

As climate change continues to produce storms with increasingly devastating force, communities and policy makers must look widely at how disaster preparedness is achieved in vulnerable communities and how those affected communities recover in the wake of tropical storms. In Fiji, religion has been used as both a tool for preparedness and a therapeutic means during recovery. This policy brief explains how Fijians affected by Cyclone Winston in 2016 interacted with the idea of God and religion following a major disaster. Researchers used interviews and excerpts from journals to understand how the people of Ba District in Viti Levu, an area significantly damaged by Cyclone Winston, responded to the storm in conjunction with their faith. Many religious iTaukei (indigenous) Fijians view the cyclone through biblical terms and express a mixture of repentance, awe, fear of God's power, and gratitude for being spared. Many expressed the view that disaster preparedness includes spiritual preparedness, a theme which is not generally found in secular disaster policy. This brief finds that while secular aid organisations and state agencies often claim supremacy in the disaster space, faith-based organisations such as those who responded in Fiji contribute greatly to disaster recovery and provide significant local knowledge.

CONTEXT

Cyclone Winston was a Category Five Cyclone that hit Fiji on the 20th of February 2016. It was one of the strongest cyclones ever recorded in the Southern Hemisphere and the first ever to be labelled a Category Five. Forty-four people died and 120,000 people were displaced from their homes. Significant damage was done to homes and crops, with 60% of Fijians affected in some way by the storm. The scale of the cyclone was unprecedented and has led to some discussion around how Fijians prepared for the storm. Many in the Ba District, located in the northwestern part of Fiji's Viti Levu island, stated they did not understand the significance of the 'Category Five' label given and admitted they grossly underestimated or were simply not aware of the scale of the storm and the impending destruction.

PATH OF CYCLONE WINSTON



The trail of devastation in Fiji. Source: The Australian

AT A GLANCE...

-  Highest Category 5 (350km/h wind speed)
-  44 died & 120,000 displaced
-  30,000 private houses damaged
-  FJD 2 billion (20% of GDP)

KEY MESSAGES

1 ACT OF GOD

Cyclone Winston was viewed as an 'Act of God' by many iTaukei Fijian Christians.

2 PREPAREDNESS

Religious iTaukei Fijians include spiritual preparedness as a key aspect of disaster preparedness planning.

3 RESILIENCE

Abeyance of agency in favour of God's will is not to be seen as fatalism or passivity but as an active engagement with disasters that positions the believer as moral actor who heeds warnings and as humbled subject who displays the correct disposition towards the Creator.

4 HEALING

Religion is deemed a powerful healing tool in post-disaster situations.

5 RELIEF AID

Faith-based organisations provide significant relief utilising previously garnered community connections to deliver emergency aid in disaster-affected communities.

HISTORY OF RELIGION IN FIJI

Religion plays a significant role in the lives of most Fijian people. Christianity is the most commonly held religion among indigenous Fijians, with several strands of Christianity present. Most Fijians identify as Methodist Christians, with others identifying as Catholic

or as part of Evangelical denominations. Despite being introduced by Methodist missionaries in the early 1800s, religion in Fiji has since been decolonised and is now deeply entwined with local traditions and practices as per local culture.

CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM OF CYCLONE WINSTON

For Fijian Christians, natural hazards bear symbolism of God's characteristics and the occurrence of them elicits the fear of God. More than a natural phenomenon, the destructiveness of Cyclone Winston is a reminder to the Fijian Christians that God is all-powerful and he is Creator. As Creator, he sits above all created things and is to be revered. This understanding conjures up an image of God being the ruler over the iTaukei (indigenous Fijians) and the vanua (land) and assumes that the iTaukei people are held accountable to God for the use of the land. An encounter with the deadly force of the cyclone is akin to meeting God face to

face. In an instant, one is rendered powerless and made insignificant. From having fearful awe to bursting into praise, survivors of the cyclone responded in gratitude for being spared from death.

Placing God at the centre of Fijian's narrative in relation to natural hazards has implications on the practice of disaster preparedness for the Fijian community as the values that they hold and the meaning that they attach to them prompt responses that either align with or ignore the need for risk mitigation strategies.



Figure 1. A church in eastern Viti Levu destroyed by Tropical Cyclone Winston in 2016

IS DISASTER PREPAREDNESS THE SAME AS SPIRITUAL PREPAREDNESS?

Disaster preparedness entails an active engagement to protect lives and assets in practical ways prior to a disaster. However, some villagers in the Ba Catchment started preparing only upon receiving warnings of an impending disaster. The idea of being too easy-going (*vamaluva tu ga* in Fijian) is observed by the media, government and external agencies as culturally endemic to Fiji and a barrier to disaster preparedness.



Figure 2. Church in Navala, upper Ba Catchment

However, for individuals, the lack of urgency is due to poor spiritual preparedness. Fijian Christians are more familiar with spiritual preparedness than disaster preparedness as watchfulness and heeding warnings are proverbial messages in the Bible for leading a righteous life. For some, it is about being ready for the return of Christ.

In the aftermath of Cyclone Winston, many sought to explain the disaster with narratives pointing towards the poor stewardship of the

land and as a form of punishment for their sins. As borrowers of the land, the iTaukei people believe that they bear responsibility to care for the land that the Creator has entrusted to them. This is a testament to their involvement in the climate change discourse and their awareness of the impact human actions can have on the environment.

Hence, the disaster was widely interpreted as punishment by God for the mismanagement of the environment. General sins such as moral failings and specific sins like the love for money were other reasons given for God's chastisement. From this perspective, averting another disaster requires repentance and humbling of oneself before God. In contrast to being labelled as passive, Fijian Christians have a high regard for preparedness albeit in the form of religious piousness and watchful anticipation.



Figure 3. A student's drawing after TC Winston

CAN ABEYANCE OF AGENCY BE PRACTICAL?

Tropical Cyclone Winston is easily accepted as God's will because the might of the cyclone is evidence of God's power as Creator. This understanding led the Fijians to adopt faith-based methods as solutions to major disasters, thereby ignoring the need for practical measures in disaster preparedness. Although the abeyance of agency refers to the suspension of one's action, iTaukei Fijian Christians view it as a proactiveness to seek God for an answer in humble waiting. The practice of abeyance of agency is a process that culminates into a recommitment to uphold moral disciplines of submission and obedience towards the

Creator in hopes of preventing future disasters.

Despite having their own methods to deal with the disaster, there was a huge reliance on the government and aid agencies to support their recovery from the aftermath of Cyclone Winston. People expected to receive funds quickly so that they could begin to rebuild their homes. The expectation and frustration with the delay in assistance belied their display of gratitude, somewhat acknowledging their failure to be independent.

DOES HAVING SPIRITUAL BELIEFS INCREASE DISASTER RESILIENCE?

Religious beliefs of individuals affected by disasters are important in overcoming grief and trauma in post-disaster recovery. For instance, villagers in Votua in the lower Ba Catchment revealed that their faith in God provided them with comfort and strength to resist the fear of the cyclone. Others asserted that their faith gave them the strength to recover and move forward while others revealed that though they firmly believe in God's omnipotence, they are responsible to adapt and overcome the adversity of

disaster. All these different spiritual interpretations of traumatic events demonstrate that spiritual beliefs are themselves a form of resilient behaviour, aiding individuals in difficult situations. It also demonstrates that faith can be a vital source of comfort and resilience during times of trauma and disaster. Evidently, local people's beliefs are important in post-disaster recovery as they help them to become resilient to disasters and enable them to overcome grief and trauma associated with disasters.

“Spiritual beliefs are themselves a form of resilient behavior, aiding individuals in difficult situations.”

IS THERE A PLACE FOR FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS IN POST-DISASTER RECOVERY?

The role of religion in post-disaster recovery cannot be underestimated. In Fiji, religion plays an important role in the everyday lives of the indigenous population. The influence of the church in Fiji is evident at every level of life, from the state, to the community and to the household. In view of this, responses to climate-related hazards must take into consideration the socio-cultural context of local communities which requires understanding of and respect for the beliefs, norms and embedded knowledge of communities. Humanitarian interventions must be sensitive to local needs and practices to ensure effective responses to disasters.

For many Fijians their spiritual relationship with God provided comfort and meaning, both during the storm and in the process of recovery.

Evidence suggests that in Fiji, Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) are an integral part of local communities due to their spiritual roles in the everyday lives of people. Therefore, FBOs should be included in post-disaster recovery efforts as they can better utilise their religious networks at both the local and international level to facilitate immediate disaster recovery. Given that religious beliefs and faith are an integral part of people's lives, FBOs are considered more trustworthy as they have more local knowledge and religious links with local communities than secular or international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Thereby, it is important to foster strong relationships and dialogues between the government, NGOs and FBOs because a lack of understanding from both sides can

lead to unanticipated consequences, such as uncoordinated delivery of disaster relief.

FBOs such as the Methodist and Catholic churches in Fiji played an important role both during and after Cyclone Winston. For instance, the local community of Votua in Fiji reported that during Cyclone Winston, both the Methodist and Catholic churches made their church buildings available as evacuation centres for the local communities. Restricted access to Votua in the aftermath of Cyclone Winston did not significantly hinder humanitarian response because local churches were prompt in their response to avail their church buildings as evacuation centres.



Figure 4. Church service in Votua

Local churches played an important role in ensuring the safety of the local people of Votua village and acted as a source of comfort during Cyclone Winston when local people experienced fear and confusion. These local churches can also help in disaster response because they can provide

religion-based counselling to individuals as they are more in tune with their religious belief.

Religious institutions, both local and overseas, provided a significant source of support for the recovery of Votua village from the devastating impact of Cyclone Winston. Assistance for recovery came from various faith groups such as Christian denominations, Muslims, Hindus and Hare Krishna groups. The involvement of religious institutions in the humanitarian response during and after Cyclone Winston demonstrated that religious institutions can

be trustworthy in providing relief to the most affected and disadvantaged people regardless of their personal beliefs or faith.

With climate change becoming a global challenge to sustainable development, engagement of development institutions with religious organisations is essential as it encourages the inclusiveness of religious communities whose voices are often being disregarded. This is very important because responses to disasters and climate change must be collaborative and reflect a diversity of viewpoints.

SUMMARY

The majority of iTaukei Fijians are Christians whose culture is strongly intertwined with their faith. This faith-based culture opens up an interpretation of tropical cyclones as a form of punishment from God for the wrongs they had done. Their faith was tested but they are thankful that not many had lost their lives and saw this as a lesson to learn from. Some of the communities have admitted that there were flaws in the relaying of weather information and what to expect but nearly all of Votua in Ba District were hopeful for the future. Their faith also served as a healing tool for their outlook for the future, as they tried to understand what was happening. It was their faith that brought them peace in a time when they were losing loved ones, their homes and possessions.

It was God that they turned to for comfort in their time of need and when they could not comprehend what had just happened. It was the churches who came to their rescue

through aid and relief work; the churches knowing and having a more personal interaction with them. Faith-based organisations are often in a better position to support the rural and isolated communities as they possess existing networks in the communities. It is essential for the Fijian government to recognise the benefits of collaborating with churches and faith-based organisations that are already on the ground.

Preparedness for more intense natural hazards has not been effectively translated from Science to lay terms. Scientific findings obtained from the meteorological service and the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) should be effectively relayed to the communities through tailored programmes with traditional knowledge-based input. These can be carried out in simple community drills and formulated emergency plans or standards of procedures.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- ❑ There is a need for considering the role of religion in grief and trauma counselling both pre- and post-disaster.
- ❑ Faith-based organisations (FBOs) can support a contextualised process of disaster preparedness and recovery.
- ❑ Working with leaders of faith-based organisations may strengthen the effectiveness of early warning systems - through continuous community awareness, trainings and drills.
- ❑ More research needed on the role of non-Christian faith-based organisations in providing both material and spiritual relief in post-disaster situations.

This policy brief has been prepared by Ana Ake-Patolo, Laura Cairns, Saamu Tui and Sabrina Seetoh, The University of Auckland, New Zealand. It is based on the following material:

Bronnimann, K. (2016). *Losing Faith in Development? The role of religion in a post-disaster environment* (Unpublished BA Honours Dissertation, Development Studies, The University of Auckland).

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