

IWRM in Fiji : an achievement story

By Vinesh Kumar



Empowering Women through Community Disaster Management Committees



Above: Wailoaloa community discussing high risk areas during floods

Prior to the implementation of the GEF Pacific IWRM Project in Nadi Basin there was a fragmented approach to disaster management in the catchment. The Nadi IWRM Project helped 27 communities establish Community Disaster Management Committees (CDMC's) and Plans. The process involved women from the villages, many of whom became the chairpersons of the CDMC's. This has helped to empower the women of the communities and to formally recognise their important and often overlooked role in disaster response and recovery.

The previous fragmented approach to disaster management was typified by a lack of coordination among the communities, and between the communities and response agencies. This led to lives lost during flooding events, delayed response times and the recurrence of slow and costly recovery. Normally in the villages of Nadi Basin, women are the ones who bear the brunt of a disaster and are at the centre of recovery, working to handle the situation and take care of families.

In many of the villages where the committee has been established, women have been chosen as the chairperson. Mrs Rafik, chairperson of the Wailoaloa CDMC, says "This is significant in a male dominated area and has given us an active role in the decision making of the community". Through active inclusion of women in the development of the CDMC and Plan, the project has been able to provide recognition of the important role that women play in disaster response and recovery. It has been a source of great pride for many women and as Mrs Rafik says "This is the first time I have had any recognition of my hard work and we had a great feast to celebrate!"

Mrs Rafik was running the Wailoaloa Women's Group which the IWRM project approached to be the foundation for the CDMC. This came about because Mr. Vinesh Kumar, the IWRM Project Manager, had previously run separate consultations

with the Wailoaloa Women's Group, discussing the issues in the area, in particular the major problems that flooding causes. Because of Mr Kumar's attention to the needs of the women in the community they became confident in their understanding of disasters in the area and asked for the CDMC training in Wailoaloa village.

"I now have the confidence to facilitate the community in a disaster and am much more confident to talk in front of a group about our disaster situations".

Through involvement in the establishment of the CDMC and the subsequent management plan Mrs Rafik says of the experience "I now have the confidence to facilitate the community in a disaster and am much more confident to talk in front of a group about our disaster situations". Mrs Rafik went on to discuss the powerful ripple effect the CDMC has had on people, particularly women, that now people are starting to see disaster response and recovery as everybody's business and that they need to be part of the solution. "We discuss with other women in other communities the benefits of using this system to respond to disaster and we are proud of our role in looking after the community".

Since the establishment of the CDMC's there have been no lives lost in the villages during flooding events. The Nadi IWRM Project continues to provide support to these communities and was instrumental in the establishment of the Nadi early warning flood system. ect continues to provide support to these communities and was instrumental in the establishment of the Nadi early warning flood system.

As the project manager I have learned throughout the process of engaging communities, listening to their concerns, facilitating workshops and assisting with plan development how important it is to have active community participation. With community buy-in everyone acknowledges the importance of what is being done and works together to maintain systems and processes. This is critical for the longevity of any project goal.



Above: Community members being trained in disaster response