



Rainbow Resilience

**Leaving no Fijian behind –
giving *sofi* for more inclusive
climate and disaster
resilience**

External Report

By Lana Woolf



About Edge Effect

Edge Effect (www.edgeeffect.org) is a specialist diverse SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics) humanitarian and development organisation that supports people with diverse SOGIESC (also known as LGBTQIA+ people) to access their economic, social and cultural rights and do so with safety and dignity. Edge Effect does this by building a broader, deeper and more accessible evidence base. Edge Effect wishes to thank the many people who contributed to this report, including the 136 Fijians who agreed to take part in the Rainbow Resilience project. We are especially grateful to the participants with diverse SOGIE who agreed to take part in the research, given the stigma that many negotiate daily.

Lana Woolf is the author of this report. While all errors and omissions remain hers, the report would not have been possible without the work of other Edge Effect staff and contractors who made up the project team: Lavetanalagi Seru, Sepesa Rasili, Sarita Dutt, Agu Tuinesau, Eroni Rogoivalu, Petueli Veremalumu, Anna Arifin, Amra Lee, Heather Grace Jones and Jenny Crocker.

Finally, it is important to note the content of this report does not include definitive representations or interpretations of the Bible, as this was not the focus. Instead, we sought to explore and reframe religious disaster narratives within the context of their misuse in driving harmful discrimination and exclusion against persons of diverse SOGIE in Fiji.

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Preliminaries

Terminology

Terminology can be confusing and everchanging. This report adopts the phrasing of ‘people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions’ (SOGIE) in preference to ‘LGBTQIA+ people.’ The LGBTQIA+ abbreviation is rooted in certain understandings and assumptions of SOGIE that do not always have the same meaning or value for specific cultural groups in the Pacific, such as the *vakaselewalewa* in Fiji, *leitis* and *fakatangata* in Tonga, or *fa’afafine* and *fa’atama* in Samoa. Although the ‘+’ is used to acknowledge ‘others’, it reinforces within the acronym that identities stemming from the global north are more important and that specific cultural identities in the global south are indistinguishable from or less important than the LGBTQIA identities. In other words, it ‘others’ specific people with identities from the global south. For many, this is another form of colonisation – of the irreparable destruction of specific cultural identities and practices. We do, however, use it in specific quotes within this report, when it has been used by others, such as below.

‘Sometimes it is hard to understand ourselves in our villages because we feel different and are treated differently, so we look outside our community. We look to Rainbow Pride Foundation or Haus of Khameleon to show us we can be ourselves. We look to the trans in the Adi Senikau Pageant and see that they are beautiful and proud. We also act as mentors to the youth in our villages when they come to us because they are also LGBT. We support them and show them we are not un-natural, that people like us have always been here.’

Community Participant, Lautoka (diverse SOGIE)

SOGIE refers to the characteristics that every person has. Everyone has a sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. The use of ‘diverse’ before the acronym SOGIE refers to those who are non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual (also known as the LGBTQIA+ community). In relation to specific identities, we also follow the preferences of the local communities and individuals that we work with and use the specific terminology they prefer.

Glossary and frequently used abbreviations and acronyms

<i>Bula vakavanua</i>	Fijian term for the Fijian traditional way of life.
Cisgender	A person whose gender matches with their sex assigned at birth.
Climate change	A change in the state of the climate that can be identified by using statistical tests (e.g., by changes in the mean and/or the variability of its properties) and that persists for an extended period, typically decades or longer (IPCC, 2022).
Climate justice	A concept that addresses the ethical dimensions of climate change and understands climate change to be an ethical, legal and political issue, rather than a solely environmental or physical one. In Fiji, it is commonly understood that climate justice is deeply embedded in women's equality as well as climate change issues (Porter et al., 2020).
Diverse SOGIE	An umbrella term for the variations of sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions that may differ from the (subjective) hegemonic and mainstream cultural understandings and categories (Dwyer & Woolf, 2020).
Disaster-resilient community	Defined by Australia's <i>National Strategy for Disaster Resilience</i> (2011) as one that 'works together to understand and manage the risks that it confronts.'
Disaster risk management (DRM)	'The systematic process of using policies, plans, organisations, and operational skills, capacities and actions to lessen the adverse impacts of hazards, as well as the possibility of a disaster' (Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific 2017–2030, adapted from UNISDR, 2009).
Disaster risk reduction (DRR)	Disaster risk reduction is aimed at preventing new and reducing existing disaster risk and managing residual risk, all of which contribute to strengthening resilience and, therefore, to the achievement of sustainable development (UNDRR, 2022).
Duavata	Fijian term that means 'one' or 'unity'.
Ituvatuva	Fijian term meaning 'a set of guidelines or arrangements'.

LGBTQIA+	Individuals or communities that identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual or other. This term is popular in Fiji and used to describe Fijian NGOs. However, it does not specifically acknowledge cultural terms like <i>vakaselewalewa</i> .
Liutaka	Fijian term that means ‘in charge of’. <i>Liutaka</i> is derived from the word <i>liu</i> , meaning ‘to lead’.
Lotu	Fijian term for church.
Narratives	The knowledge used and stories told by groups to promote an ideology or share an experience (e.g., narratives of faith, of blame, of climate change or of queerness).
Meta-narrative	An overarching account or interpretation of events and circumstances that provides a pattern or structure for people’s beliefs and gives meaning to their experiences.
Matavuvale	Fijian term meaning ‘family’.
Matanitu	Fijian term used to describe the government and other formal institutions.
MWCPA	Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation [Fiji].
NDMO	National Disaster Management Organisation.
Participatory research	An approach to research that prioritises and emphasises participation by members of the community affected by the area being researched.
Rawaka	Fijian term meaning ‘ability’. Used to describe the ability of a person or organisation to do something. The term can be extended to <i>vakatagendegede ni rawaka</i> , meaning ‘the extent of an organisation being able to carry out something’.
Resilience	The ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions through risk management (UNDRR, 2022).
SOGIE	Sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions.
Solesolevaki	A Fijian traditional framework for working together to achieve a common goal or for the benefit of the community. Often shortened to <i>solu</i> .

<i>Turaga ni Koro</i>	A Fijian term for the person who leads the village, <i>i.e.</i> , the village head.
<i>Vakailavotaki</i>	Fijian term for funding. Derived from the word <i>lavo</i> , which means ‘money’.
<i>Vakaitavi</i>	Fijian term for participation.
<i>Vakaitavitaki</i>	Fijian term meaning ‘having a share or duty’.
<i>Vakasalewalewa</i>	Fijian term to describe a traditional third gender, culturally specific to the country of Fiji and usually applied to people assigned male at birth who express a feminine form of gender.
<i>Vanua</i>	A Fijian term loosely defined as ‘community’. The term embraces all people, their relationships with others and the land they live on, and their spirituality, resources and environment.
<i>Veiliuaki / vakatuelewataki</i>	Fijian terms that mean ‘working together’.
<i>Veitokani</i>	Fijian term for partnership. This word is derived from the word <i>tokani</i> , which means ‘partner’. The prefix <i>vei</i> refers to partnerships between people and organisations.
<i>Yavutu</i>	Fijian term meaning ‘a set of laws, principles or guidelines’.

Executive summary

Between January 2021 and 2022, the Rainbow Resilience project brought together 136 Fijians through *talanoa*-style workshops to discuss the inclusion of people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions (SOGIE) in climate action and to build climate and disaster resilience. The participants came from diverse SOGIE, climate activism, and village and faith leadership backgrounds belonging to three communities across two islands. These community participants often wore several ‘hats’, recognising that people have many intersecting identities. Despite apparent differences, it was clear throughout the research that all participants saw their various identities through the lens of their shared cultural identity, being Fijian.

This innovative research builds upon the findings from the *Down by the River* report that identified the problematic role religious disaster narratives play – when they attribute the increased frequency and intensity of climate shocks in Fiji to the existence of persons from diverse SOGIE – and the subsequent discrimination, exclusion and harm this causes.

The Rainbow Resilience project adopted a participatory approach that placed Fijian community members at the centre of the study’s design, implementation and interpretation. This approach situated the power within the research process with those who are most affected and was deliberate in aiming to redress the power imbalance between researchers and participants.

Key learning

One way to make climate change and disaster knowledge, governance and response more effective is for them to be grounded in local experience, knowledge and practices. Local narratives of change can provide insight into localised environmental histories and the effects of climate change and disasters. Local experience, knowledge and practices can further account for the ways communities (and people within these) experience climate change, how they make sense of this and how they cope with the resulting impacts. There is a growing amount of research internationally that shows how communities appropriate risk governance discourse to their local places and re-make it around their diverse concerns towards their own equally diverse ends (Bremer et al., 2019; Ryghaug, 2011). In these places, there is a change in the climate narrative (Vanderlinden, 2020). In this way, Indigenous knowledge

within Fiji can give meaning to abstract scientific information that is key to many Fijians' understandings and ability to make sense of what it means to live in and with climate change.

The community participants advocated for adopting *solesolevaki* as a form of culturally embedded agency that can be used to support the inclusion of people with diverse SOGIE in climate justice and climate and disaster resilience. Giving *solu* is connected to the community world view integral to Fijian culture. The community participants shared that Fijian collective culture posits that personal achievements come from shared knowledge, common values and mutual support. Community connectedness and giving *solu* are responsible for the success of all. Related to giving *solu*, there is a need for broader recognition of the important role that Indigenous knowledge and diverse SOGIE strengths can contribute to community resilience.

Ways forward

The main recommendation from the community participants is the development of dedicated *solesolevaki* groups at the local village and district levels to build climate justice and climate and disaster resilience. Vunibola and Schyvens (2019) refer to a *solesolevaki* group as an organisation where people of different backgrounds work together to achieve a goal. In this model, people from the *lotu* (church), *matanitu* (government) and civil society organisations including diverse SOGIE can work together to support more inclusive measures to address climate change and disasters and ensure no Fijian is left behind.

We strongly encourage you to read beyond this summary, to dive deeper into the background and discussions, to hear the voices of those most affected and to think about opportunities to contribute to more inclusive climate and disaster resilience for people with diverse SOGIE.

Introduction

Discrimination and stigma towards people with diverse SOGIE is prevalent in Fiji and has unique connections to locally-based narratives and people's experiences of climate change and disasters. This research builds upon the findings from the *Down by the River* report, which identified the role that religious disaster narratives can play in reinforcing discrimination, exclusion and harm against people with diverse SOGIE. Recognising that harmful narratives are constructed over time, then it is also true that new narratives can be explored and offered. This is the starting point for this innovative research project that brought together 136 people from diverse SOGIE, faith, youth and climate activist backgrounds across three provinces of Fiji, to take that next step from sharing stories of discrimination, and creating new social realities, by interpreting, contesting and creating new stories of inclusion. The participatory research, which we have named Rainbow Resilience, contributes to a growing body of work that focuses on improving the inclusion of people with diverse SOGIE throughout the disaster risk management (DRM) cycle, including disaster mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery, as well as actions for climate change adaptation. Rainbow Resilience centres on crisis-affected communities and their experiences, skills and knowledge, drawing on Indigenous methods and their recommendations for *vakatuelewataki* (working together).

'All around us the old stories are failing, crumbling in the face of lived experience and scientific reality. But what stories will replace them?'

Naomi Klein

This research found that the discrimination experienced by many people with diverse SOGIE in Fiji consistently shares several features in the socially-constructed power struggle between faith and diverse gender and sexuality. The first feature relates to the belief that stigma is a natural consequence for people who don't abide by dominant socio-cultural norms. The impact of colonialism in Fiji has been and remains far reaching and resulted in the imposition of a foreign legal system and its religious moral values. Homosexual activity was criminalised in 1874 and remained so until 2005. In 2010, Fiji became the first Pacific island nation to give people with diverse SOGIE protection from discrimination under Article 26 of the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji (2013).

Despite these legal protections, discrimination remains prevalent in practice. Those who openly discriminate defend their behaviour towards people with diverse SOGIE as upholding traditional culture and maintain that LGBTQIA+ is a Western concept, despite culturally-specific traditions of diverse SOGIE pre-dating colonisation.

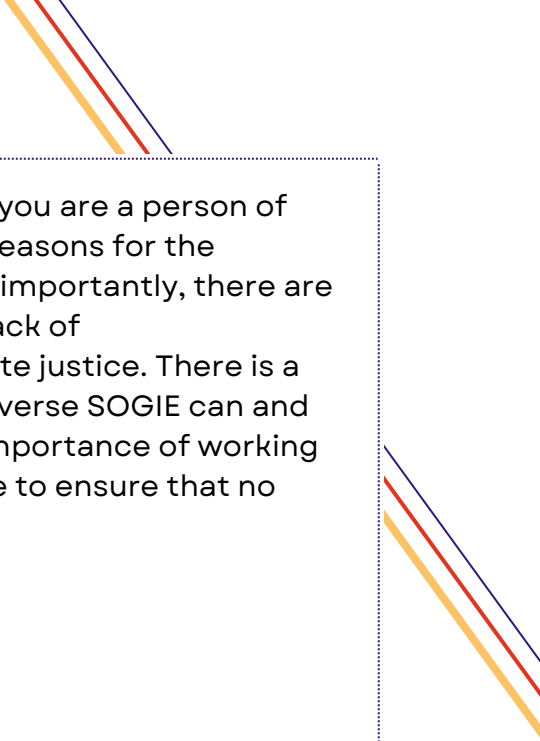
The second feature is the perceived divide between the Christian faith and diverse SOGIE. This narrative maintains that people with diverse SOGIE are anti-Christian, that they are sinners and commit sinful acts. However, as research participants discussed, what this narrative doesn't account for is that many diverse SOGIE people are people of faith themselves. Faith and diverse SOGIE are not oppositional binaries. Furthermore, there are many Christians and people of other faiths in Fiji who accept people with diverse SOGIE. For participants, this narrative creates broken connections between people, families, and their communities, and drives harmful exclusion through pitting faith on one side and people with diverse SOGIE on the other.

The third feature is the narrative that people with diverse SOGIE are to blame for disasters, which participants identified as deeply problematic and harmful. The *Down by the River* report revealed the additional discrimination, exclusion and harm that diverse SOGIE people face in disasters. The research further identified the role of harmful religious disaster narratives, specifically that LGBTQIA+ people are to blame for the increase in these types of disasters in Fiji. Diverse SOGIE participants recognise that they are not to blame for the disasters; rather, climate change is increasing risks from weather-related disasters and driving sea level rise. These narratives set up a binary struggle between faith and diverse SOGIE people in Fiji, without space for insights from climate and disaster science.

'It is forbidden to be a lesbian in my church and the pastor preaches against it. After the TC Winston, the church pastor said that Winston was caused by our sin, and I felt bad. It is not us who they should blame ... Straight after TC Winston, whenever we came past these people, they would call out that it is "us people" that caused TC Winston. I asked them "what people?" and they said LGBTQ people. I told them it is climate change, not LGBTQ people.'

Interviewee in the *Down by the River* report

The Rainbow Resilience community research participants acknowledged these perceptions of religious disaster narratives negatively impact people with diverse SOGIE. This research project set out to bring faith leaders and people with diverse SOGIE into a space alongside climate activists, to break the binary narratives that suggest either you are a person with diverse SOGIE, or you are a



Christian; either you are a sinner and cause disasters, or you are a person of faith. That there are more stories to uncover, and other reasons for the devastating consequences of these disasters, and more importantly, there are ways forward. In this binary described above, there is a lack of acknowledgement of the role of climate change or climate justice. There is a further lack of recognition of the role that people with diverse SOGIE can and need to play in climate and disaster resilience, and the importance of working with local communities to practice traditional knowledge to ensure that no Fijian is left behind.

Background

Climate change and disasters

Fiji is home to one million people, inhabiting approximately one third of the 300 islands and atolls that make up its land mass. Fiji ranks 14th on the World Risk Index due to high exposure and vulnerability to disaster risk from extreme natural events and negative climate change impacts (Aleksandrova et al., 2021). Fiji is vulnerable to hazards such as earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanos, landslides, tropical cyclones, flooding, wildfire, and drought (APCP, 2021). This prevalence of destructive weather patterns is evidenced by Tropical Cyclones Ana (2021), Yasa (2020), Harold (2020), Josie and Keni (2018), and Winston (2016).

Climate change intensifies extreme weather (e.g., increases in the intensity of tropical cyclones, rainfall and extreme rainfall events, leading to flooding), and drives increases in temperatures, including extremely hot days and nights, sea level rises and ocean acidification (RCCAP, n.d.). According to the *Republic of Fiji National Climate Change Policy 2018–2030* (Ministry of Economy, 2018), sea level rises will double by the end of the century.

The impacts of climate change are already affecting all aspects of life for Fijians – the environment, economy, and social development, as well as cultural practices and Fiji’s traditional ways of life (Fijian Government, 2020). Fiji’s updated Nationally Determined Contribution (Fijian Government, 2020) identifies that ‘Fiji is facing loss and degradation of vital ecosystems and natural resources, including its coral reefs, coasts and catchments, on which key sectors of its economy such as agriculture and fisheries are dependent. Further, its critical infrastructure- including electricity and water stations, schools and hospitals – are frequently damaged by the increasing extreme weather events, which are impacting the social well-being, employment and livelihoods of the Fijian people’ (Fijian Government, 2020).

‘This is a climate emergency. The number of weather and climate-related disasters has more than doubled over the past forty years.’

Mami Mizutori, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction in the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction

Overwhelming evidence now suggests that climate change exacerbates existing development challenges and will disproportionately impact vulnerable people already living on the margins, who are ‘likely to have less access to resources, information and decision-making processes’ (Islam & Winkel, 2017).

The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its Sixth Assessment (2022) identifies that ‘despite widespread international evidence that the impacts of climate change and disaster events often negatively affect women more than men, attention to gender equality as a concept is still only ‘embryonic in climate change adaptation in the Pacific’ (IPCC, 2022). To the extent that these social issues are starting to be addressed, the researcher has observed that adaptation efforts have tended to focus on gender equality for cisgender heterosexual women, rather than people with diverse SOGIE.

All-of-society approach

There are a range of international and national strategies, frameworks and documents that refer to inclusive approaches as an essential component of climate and disaster resilience efforts. The UNFCCC Gender Action Plan (2019) sets out ‘objectives and activities under five priority areas that aim to advance knowledge and understanding of gender-responsive climate action’. A guiding principle of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (UNISDR, 2015) states that ‘[m]anaging the risk of disasters is aimed at protecting persons and their property... while promoting and protecting all human rights.’ It goes on to explain that ‘[d]isaster risk reduction requires an all-of-society engagement and partnership. It also requires empowerment and inclusive, accessible, and non-discriminatory participation, paying special attention to people disproportionately affected by disasters.’

The Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNDESA 2015) has a principle to ‘leave no-one behind’. Under the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2020), Pacific Island countries and territories are to follow the guiding principle ‘to ensure that every person has equitable access to humanitarian and development assistance, according to his or her specific needs.’ As directed by international and regional policy, actions for climate and disaster resilience are to be inclusive. This includes people of diverse SOGIE who are at high risk of discrimination, exclusion and harm in relation to the impacts of disasters and climate change.

Religious disaster narratives related to people with diverse SOGIE

For the more than 60% of Fijians who identify as Christian (Office of

International Religious Freedom, 2020), faith plays an important role in understanding and recovering from the impacts of disasters (Uniting World, 2019). Christianity is positioned as ‘traditional’ within Fiji, which has had an impact on the way that traditional knowledge has evolved since colonisation (Close-Barry, 2015). One Christian teaching that has been reproduced is the Genesis Flood Narrative from the Old Testament (The Holy Bible Genesis 1-3, 1979). This narrative has been replicated through the use of the Bible story of Noah, in which God sees sin, destruction and violence and orders Noah to build an ark and fill it with pairs of each animal, along with Noah and his family, divinely chosen by God. Once the ark and its passengers are prepared, God causes the flooding of the world and most life is destroyed. Only Noah and those with him survive by obeying God’s command. After the rains stop, the rainbow is sent as a sign reminding people of the promise from God not to flood the world again. Rainbow Resilience participants and Uniting World (2019) highlight that some people of faith in Fiji and other Pacific Islands now interpret the Genesis Flood Narrative in contemporary contexts to explain the devastation caused by climate change, including slow onset impacts, such as rising sea levels (the world flooding), and rapid onset impacts, such as increased intensity of cyclones and flooding (Uniting World, 2019). At the core of these religious disaster narratives is the belief that those who sin, including people with diverse SOGIE, are the cause of this environmental devastation by God (Uniting World, 2019; Cox et al., 2018); that sinners have stolen the rainbow, globally used to symbolise LGBTQIA+ pride, as a symbol to celebrate their sin.¹ This experience in Fiji is consistent with many other post-disaster situations, including Sulawesi in Indonesia, Haiti and New Zealand and in Australia where people with diverse SOGIE have also been blamed.²

Uniting World (2019) recently addressed the prevalence of disaster narratives, noting that ‘[t]he idea that a disaster is caused because of a particular person or group’s sin or wrongdoing is not new and neither is it particular to the context of the Pacific.’ *A Theology of Disaster Resilience in a Changing Climate* and its baseline studies in Pacific countries identify a range of sins said to be the cause of disasters, including some references to the biblical Noah’s Flood and Sodom and Gomorrah narratives (Uniting World, 2019).

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah appears in Genesis 19:1–29 (The Holy Bible, 1979). In the previous chapter of Genesis, God tells Abraham that there have been bad reports about Sodom and Gomorrah. Two angels are sent to see whether what they have done is as bad as the outcry that reached God, promising that if it proves to be the case the city will be destroyed. The angels find a warm welcome in Sodom and Lot greets them at the gateway of the city and invites them back to his house to eat dinner and spend the night. While

¹ This story came up several times in discussions. For an example from America, see: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/rex-huppke/ct-rainbow-flag-god-fischer-huppke-20170403-story.html>.

² See for example: <https://www.pantograph-punch.com/post/why-israel-folau-is-no-hero>.

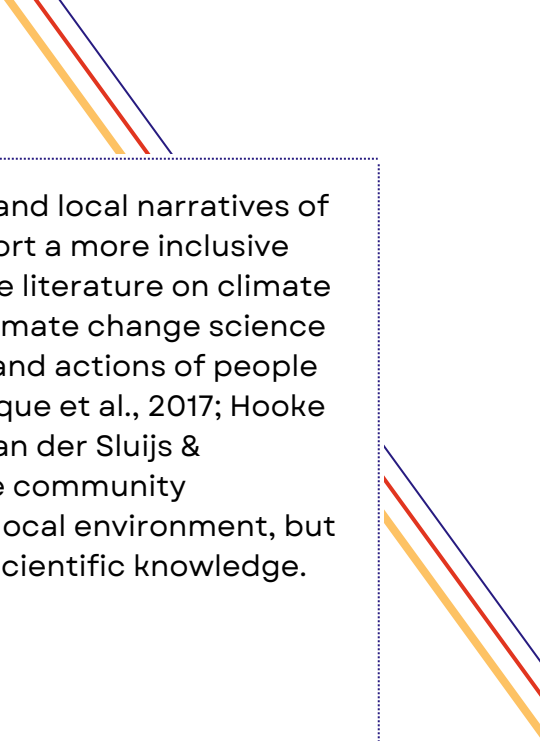
they are there, the men of Sodom gather outside Lot's house and demand that he sends out his guests 'so that we can know them.' Lot refuses, offering his two virgin daughters as an alternative. Next, the men of Sodom threaten Lot. To protect Lot, the angels strike the men of Sodom with blindness. The angels then urge Lot to get out of town as quickly as he can, because the city is going to be destroyed. After Lot has escaped with his family, God rains down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah, destroying all those living in the cities and the vegetation in the land. While the story of Sodom and Gomorrah has become implicated in discussions of sexuality and the Bible (Uniting World, 2019; Cox et al., 2018), its relationship to prohibitions of same-gender sexual relations is far from clear. The notion – now commonplace – is that the people of Sodom promoted sexual contact between men and were destroyed through blasts of lightning and sulphur raining down for this reason. This biblical narrative is not only prevalent in Fiji according to the community researchers, but also acknowledged in the Pacific-focused disaster narrative research, *A Theology of Disaster Resilience in a Changing Climate* (Uniting World, 2019), and the Fiji-specific disaster narrative research, *Disaster, Divine Judgment, and Original Sin* (Cox et al., 2018).

While sexual orientation and gender identity are protected characteristics in the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji (2013), this research demonstrated that significant socio-cultural stigma exists that prevents discussion of diverse SOGIE issues and addressing diverse SOGIE issues within religious contexts. On one side of this contentious issue, some community participants with diverse SOGIE suggest that the type of inclusion they seek 'will not change anything', that they are not interested in legal reforms such as marriage equality, and they will conform to traditional values and extended family structures. On the other, community participants admit that some people of faith in Fiji predict that 'hell is breaking loose', both literally and figuratively, and that with equality for people with diverse SOGIE society will be destroyed, family shattered, and God will rain down his wrath on our communities.

The Rainbow Resilience project explores a third option: that the acceptance of people with diverse SOGIE, and more importantly the differences they bring, have the potential to help address climate and disaster risks and build more inclusive resilient communities. The Rainbow Resilience research aims to highlight the benefits of including diverse SOGIE voices, their knowledge, experiences, and ways of knowing and understanding the world. We offer suggestions for how diverse SOGIE people in Fiji can work alongside faith leaders, climate activists and experts, to support more inclusive climate and disaster resilience to ensure no-one is left behind.

Localisation and Indigenous knowledge

Climate change is happening in different ways in different places. This research



explores the experiences of people with diverse SOGIE, and local narratives of change, alongside climate and disaster science, to support a more inclusive and localised approach to disasters. There is an extensive literature on climate risk governance that highlights a disconnect between climate change science knowledge by global experts, and the lived experiences and actions of people in local communities and villages (Bremer et al., 2019; Haque et al., 2017; Hooke & Pielke, 2000; Kirchhoff et al., 2013; Lorenz et al., 2016; van der Sluijs & Wardekker, 2015). The mismatch means that many of the community participants showed a very good understanding of their local environment, but significantly less of formal climate change and disaster scientific knowledge.

Methodology

Research design and approach

The Rainbow Resilience project brought together over 136 Fijians from diverse backgrounds for 26 days of workshops across Suva, Lautoka, and Savusavu. This included community members from diverse SOGIE, climate activism, and village and faith leadership backgrounds. Community participants often wore several ‘hats’, recognising that people have many intersecting identities connected to their social position, age, education, family connections, spirituality, gender, sexuality, and village relationships, among others. Despite these apparent differences, what became clear was that all identities were seen through the lens of their shared cultural identity, being Fijian.

This project adopted participatory research as its primary research method and approach. Participatory research can be described as ‘a philosophical approach to research that recognises the need for persons being studied to participate in the design and conduct all phases (e.g. design, execution, and dissemination) of any research that affects them’ (Vollman et al., 2004). The participatory research activities included individual story sharing, *talanoa*, community mapping, stakeholder mapping, and developing a theory of change using problem and solution trees. Understanding the importance of Fijian cultural identity, all participants agreed on the importance of using *talanoa*³ in the participatory processes, which guided each workshop.

Through the Fijian framework of *talanoa*, the community researchers inserted themselves into the intangible realms of stories, ideas, and assumptions that frame actions to address climate change and disasters. This process included an analysis of narrative power that places *talanoa* at the centre of the Rainbow Resilience research. *Talanoa* is an iterative process, where one person shares informally, their stories, thoughts, and feelings. As others present in the *talanoa* process, others share their stories, thoughts, and feelings, and they connect their stories to the others told. In this way, it starts to build community stories, by creating interlinkages between the stories. Using the oral tradition of *talanoa* provided invaluable culturally-sensitive insights into understanding the experiences and values of the different groups that constitute the Rainbow

³ In Tongan, the word *talanoa* is taken from *tala* (meaning ‘to tell stories’ or ‘talk’) and *noa* (meaning ‘what comes from the heart’). In Fiji, the word *talanoa* is not found in the dictionary, but ask many Fijians and *talanoa* guides a process that will lead to a shared understanding and new shared knowledge.

Resilience project.

Trauma-informed

The Rainbow Resilience project brought together Fijian community members from different backgrounds, and many of these had opposing ideas and views about Christian faith, people with diverse SOGIE, and information about the cause of disasters and climate change. All have experienced the social, emotional, and physical impacts related to living through disasters, and many face regular discrimination and exclusion related to their SOGIE.

Due to the inability to identify diverse SOGIE-safe counselling services and referrals, Edge Effect was unable to recommend psycho-social support referrals. Instead, we implemented a strengths-based approach⁴ to supporting the participants. This involved each group collaboratively creating their own safer space agreements, which were reviewed at the end of each day. Participants were asked to create their own support plan, which included activities they had undertaken in the past to support their emotional and psychological health, and to create a contact list of support persons they could call if experiencing emotional or psychological stress. Further, in each location, there were several locally-based co-facilitators in each workshop who would regularly check in to see if anyone needed a break from the discussions.

Limitations and adaptations

There were no known persons with diverse sex characteristics (also known as intersex) participating in this research. Edge Effect does not require participants to identify or categorise their diverse SOGIE unless they wish to do so, and Edge Effect's diverse SOGIE networks have no connections to individuals or communities of intersex people in Fiji.

This project was designed and began implementation prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, travel restrictions impacted the initial planning, including the ability of the lead researcher to travel to Fiji. Adaptations included using a flexible approach to community participation, with all workshops having an online option, and the facilitation of regular coaching by Edge Effect staff for locally-hired project staff. These adaptations enabled the successful delivery of this project.

⁴ A strengths-based approach, also termed strengths-based practice, recognises strengths and inspires positive and participatory actions of communities, rather than focusing on needs and problems. (Juliet Willetts et al., 2014).

Discussion

Unpacking, challenging and reframing harmful narratives

Before, during and after disasters, efforts by people with diverse SOGIE in Fiji to access their rights and basic needs are often met with backlash and resistance. This occurs at both the individual and collective levels, formal and informal. The research revealed that backlash and resistance are a response to the actual or perceived challenge to existing hierarchies of power within villages, local districts, and national structures that lies in accepting and supporting people with diverse SOGIE. Backlash and resistance were identified as a reaction against people with diverse SOGIE, and their access to civil society spaces. By unpacking and understanding the dominant meta-narratives that propagate discrimination, the participants were then able to start to understand the context of these narratives and consider new or different narratives to replace them. Some of the dominant meta-narratives identified in the research when exploring backlash and resistance against diverse SOGIE people in Fiji are unpacked, challenged and reframed on the following pages through a summary of the participants statements.

‘Before LGBT people started to talk about human rights, it didn’t come up in our dialogues. Human rights are something ‘out there’. In our villages, we focus on *duavata* (unity). We have our *bula vakavanua* (culture and tradition) and we have what we call the three-legged stool – *Matavuvale* (family), *Lotu* (church) and *Matanitu* (our governance). In our traditional way, this is what we look to – to our community ways, not putting the individual above others. That is what human rights does, and that is what LGBT people are doing. Putting themselves before others.’

Community participant, Savusavu (diverse SOGIE)

‘We feel the discrimination in our village. We are not welcome in our *Bose ni Koro* (village meetings) and so we advocate for ourselves. Because it is us against the *Turaga ni Vanua* we strategise with what we have. We have human rights language that says we should be included, and we try to use that for our benefit. If we worked through *veitokai* (partnership) it would bring *duavata* (unity). Those ways are closed to us.’

Community participant, Lautoka (diverse SOGIE)

Meta-narrative

Diverse SOGIE people want individual rights above and beyond the rights the rest of us understand as *vakatuelewataki* (working together). Human rights are a Western framework that does not align with our traditional culture.

Meta-narrative unpacked

Custom and collective practices are an integral part of Fijian culture. People with diverse SOGIE want to bring Western frameworks that focus on the individual; we are a community focused culture, and this doesn't align with our traditional ways. Human rights are disruptive to our *duavata* (unity).

Potential new narrative identified by community participants in Lautoka

The term 'human rights' is new to us, but the concept of our *bula vakavanua* is something we know and understand. What we all hold is common values of love and community connection. For people with diverse SOGIE, being acknowledged as having rights helps them feel accepted in our communities. Human rights and Fijian traditional ways of working don't need to be in conflict, and how we can do that is to focus on our shared values.

'After the cyclone, I went to the [NGO] as a volunteer. Many of the LGBT community are volunteers there and some of us had to go house to house with the forms to identify people's needs. We looked at the questions and saw that it would not capture the needs of the LGBT community. We asked about it, but we were told that we just had to ask the questions on the forms. While we did that, we were able to know which houses were occupied by the LGBT community, and we kept note. Once we finished our work, my LGBT friends and I went back to check on them, to ask them questions that needed to be asked about their needs, and to help address them between our own LGBT community.'

Community participant, Lautoka (diverse SOGIE)⁵

Meta-narrative

That people with diverse SOGIE are taboo and don't align with the way things are done traditionally here.

Meta-narrative unpacked

There is a need to return to aspects of an idealised 'traditional' past in which discrimination was normalised.

⁵ This participant was also a part of the 2019 Down by the River research.

Potential new narrative identified by community participants in Lautoka

That our traditional framework of *bula vakavanua* (culture, tradition, and ways of being) doesn't discriminate; it is people who discriminate and people who are excluded. People with diverse SOGIE were not seen to follow our ways, but they do in their own ways because they feel excluded from our processes.

'After this project started, I was speaking to our local Pastor about LGBT people, and *solesolevaki*. He told me a story. In February when the men from our village give *solesolevaki* by dedicating some of their farming efforts to the village, a trans woman in our community collected flowers and decorated the church. She didn't have much, but she could give *solu* by doing this. At the end of the month, the Pastor gave a sermon about how some of the men didn't give *solesolevaki* even though they were respected men in the village. And how the trans woman was not always respected within our village, but she gave *solesolevaki*. The Pastor gave a sermon on this. This changed a lot of misconceptions in our community.'

Community participant, Lautoka (*this occurred during the project)

Meta-narrative

People with diverse SOGIE don't participate in the village, they don't give to our community through *solesolevaki* and, therefore, they don't deserve to have the benefits of our community.

Meta-narrative unpacked

When we don't see people with diverse SOGIE working alongside us in our villages, then we assume they don't value our ways, carry on our customs, or deserve our resources.

Potential new narrative identified by community participants in Lautoka

As a result of people with diverse SOGIE feeling excluded and alienated from the village and *Turaga ni Vanua*, they more often practise these customs between themselves, and by feeling included in our community they would practise it with us.

Indigenous knowledge and diverse SOGIE strengths for greater resilience

Through the process of *talanoa*-focused participatory research, participants highlighted the importance of cultural values, which was used interchangeably with the concept of traditional knowledge. All of the participants felt that for all Fijians – including people with diverse SOGIE – to live to Fijian cultural values, this needs connection to Fijian traditional knowledge. The research revealed a number of findings in relation to participants finding strength and connection in recollecting their Indigenous knowledge. One area of uncertainty is whether the participant’s desire to connect with traditional knowledge has an analogue in the past: whether some or all people with diverse SOGIE had access to discussions about that knowledge and its formation. Diversity of gender and sexuality has long been part of Fijian society, as it has been elsewhere in the Pacific. However, as colonialism contributed to the writing-out of people with diverse SOGIE from these histories, it is difficult to make definitive statements about the history of people with diverse SOGIE in traditional knowledge practices. The focus of the *talanoa* discussions was very much on the future: respecting and drawing upon those knowledge practices in ways that will create a Fiji for all. Through the unpacking of Fijian cultural values and Indigenous knowledge, the participants also recognised that Fijian communities have systems and structures that can be interwoven with international and national approaches to understanding climate and disaster resilience.

At the same time many community participants felt alienated by the language of the climate science community and there were no climate change deniers. Discussions among the groups highlighted that other countries played a large role in the effects of climate change they were experiencing. Many participants spoke about Fiji leading the Conference of the Parties (COP)23 and Fiji’s leadership in COP26 (held at the end of the project). However, the focus by the community researchers was on the natural warning signs that are understood locally by people. They explored how traditional knowledge can be used in managing disasters and how to embed the *solesolevaki* framework with this. *Yadrava na nomu itavi* (being aware of your role and duty in disaster preparedness) is something that people with diverse SOGIE were keen to be involved in, but also felt excluded from, as the *turaga ni koro* (village head) communicated different roles people played in the preparedness activities.

‘[A]nother story is that our actions and the actions of climate change have a place here. We know that the reclamation of land in one area can lead to flooding in another. The Namoli village reclamation led to Viwa village facing flooding. Yes, the land has eyes. It can see and feel what we do to it. We pollute, we will pay. The years of

mismanagement of our *vanua* and our resources has led to the challenges we are experiencing today, not because of the *vakaselewalewa*, who have been a part of our traditional culture.’

Community participant, Lautoka (Climate activist and church youth leader)

During participatory research discussions across Suva, Lautoka and Savusavu, community participants shared the following Indigenous knowledges in cyclone and storm preparedness⁶, including early warnings and the traditional practice of *cokonaki* (food banks). Some of these warning signs are also documented in the ‘*Traditional and Local Knowledge about Climate Change and Natural Disaster Management in the Pacific Islands*’ report (Nunn, P., Kumar, R., 2022) which elaborates further on the role of future looking traditional knowledge: ‘This [Traditional Local Knowledge] is generally used to predict particular types of weather, especially extreme events like tropical cyclones, and plausibly evolved – just like synoptic weather forecasting – from regular observations of the skies and island (terrestrial and marine) environments over perhaps thousands of years. These observations allowed weather prediction which in turn allowed people to prepare in anticipation of particular conditions evolving.’

In response to these traditional knowledge narratives, the unique capabilities, strengths and spirit among members of the diverse SOGIE community during response and recovery stages in humanitarian crisis came to the fore.

Traditional resilience measures

Community researchers identified resilience measures that use traditional knowledge and ways of culture including *cokonaki* (food banks); for example:

‘We bury our foodstuffs like breadfruits, the casava is trimmed, and *lololo* house is filled.’

(Savusavu)

‘Some *valevakaviti* (Fijian houses) are more strong than others. Especially [when] some houses are built with not strong materials. The *bure* is stronger than some of the new houses. This is why some houses don’t stand up to cyclones. It is not sinners who are being punished by god, but (those) who can (not) afford stronger houses.’

(Savusavu)

⁶ This Indigenous knowledge is passed down through oral history and therefore not well-documented. The importance of this knowledge, particularly for remote outer lying islands and communities that lack of access to ICT for early warning technology, is captured in Johnson (2015).

Early warnings

Traditional knowledge around early warnings was identified through the research, including the following examples:

‘If they [honeybees] are making their home under a tree, there will be a cyclone this season, if they are up in the trees, there will be no cyclone.’

(Lautoka)

‘My elders grandfather told me that a cyclone comes when they see the *metueli* bird flying high.’

(Lautoka)

‘We see *manu ni cagi* birds on the ground and that’s a warning that a cyclone or bad weather is coming. If it is flying high up, then it is all ok.’

(Savusavu)

‘The elders say, where there are bunches of breadfruit together there will be a cyclone next year.’

(Lautoka)

‘The vidi plant, the top shoots, they usually point up, and show us that nothing bad will happen, but when it is a few months before a cyclone, they point down and tell us to prepare.’

(Savusavu)

‘When the weather is getting bad, and there might be a cyclone, you can hear the coral reefs roaring; the sound that is different to the other times.’

(Savusavu)

‘When it is the sound of the sea is booming, then my father stays awake. He knows that he needs to be alert if we have to get to safety.’

(Lautoka)

Response and recovery

In local contexts, before interventions from the international or national disaster response system, the activities that need to be carried out for rebuilding and recovery efforts start:

‘As soon as the wind ceased, we started to work, we did not wait for assistance. *Vakavinakataki ni vale starts* (referring to the fixing and the maintenance of houses by the men), while the women would cook the food for all of those involved in the clean-up phase.’

(Community participant, Lautoka community leader)

This coordination is carried out by the *turaga ni koro* (village head) and the community plays an active role in clearing of debris. It in this area that gender norms started to play a role in reinforcing discrimination against people with diverse SOGIE. Again, in discussions, the concept of *solesolevaki* came up, with some participants suggesting that people with diverse SOGIE do not participate, or they had nothing to offer.

‘Because our needs are not met, and we are disadvantaged in our village, we give *solu* in our own way. When our houses were destroyed, we shared our things between us. Without the LGBT community, I wouldn’t have anything, but I was able to get clothes from my best friend that were not men’s clothes, but clothes that made me feel like myself, and made me feel like I can get through this disaster. The LGBT community checked in with each other, made sure we had food and fresh water. That we had somewhere safe to stay where we wouldn’t get bullied.’

Community participant, Lautoka (diverse SOGIE)

Community participants with diverse SOGIE shared how, in the aftermath of a disaster, they lean into their differences, through being flexible to assist in *solesolevaki* wherever they are needed. Several diverse SOGIE participant responses below highlight how their differences can be a source of strength and contribute to disaster recovery at the community level:

‘My strength is that in the recovery stage, I can do men’s work and I can do women’s work. I am valuable because I can do whatever the village needs of me.’

(Community participant, Suva, diverse SOGIE)

‘Yes, I am a woman, but I am also a lesbi [lesbian], so when the men were busy replanting food crops, I could be fixing the roofs of the community, helping in the recovery efforts that benefit the community.’

(Community participant, Lautoka, diverse SOGIE)

'The women were off doing the women's work, but as a trans woman, I am not accepted in those spaces. I went and looked after the elders, and the children so that the women could just focus on their work cooking and cleaning in the response efforts. At first, when they look at me with disgust, but now, they come to accept that being trans has benefits for this community.'

(Community participant, Savusavu, diverse SOGIE)

Recognising Indigenous knowledge

It is well documented that Indigenous peoples who have a close relationship with the land and sea observe and interact with the natural environment, due to a reliance on it for their economic, cultural, and social ways of life (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2020). These observations over time become Indigenous knowledge that is passed on through generations, typically through oral history, and evolves with continued connection and observation to the lands and seas. This knowledge is now broadly recognised as legitimate, accurate and useful within scientific contexts. (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2020). The disappearance of traditional knowledge, in the context of a rapidly changing environment due to the climate crisis, directly impacts traditional communities. Many of the traditional ways of life, traditional activities and traditional knowledge are threatened. (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2020).

Key learning

The key learning from this project is outlined below. It is in line with participatory research principles and starts with what the community participants identified as the critical role of *solesolevaki* in the inclusion of people with diverse SOGIE in climate and disaster resilience. Building on this is the importance of recognising and drawing on Indigenous knowledge and diverse SOGIE strengths at the community level for greater climate and disaster resilience.

Using participatory research methodologies

Using participatory research provided a number of insights that contributed to the key learning of the project. It was not typical participatory approaches that made the project interventions more relevant or sustainable; it was that the design of the interventions was based on a thorough understanding of the local realities of people with diverse SOGIE and the cultural context of Fijian communities. This in turn enhanced a sense of ownership among the Rainbow Resilience participants. Rather than a uniform application to participation, being guided by the local practitioners and the participatory research participants ensured that the complex challenges and local issues were enveloped in local solutions.

The project highlighted participation is not the goal in itself, but a means to achieve acceptance and inclusion of people with diverse SOGIE in climate and disaster planning and response. The form of participation may vary according to the specific purpose of the research and the local conditions in a particular village or region. Depending on those specific local conditions, alternative forms and activities of participation may be explored, such as those focusing on the establishment and strengthening of direct relationships between the local communities and government departments involved in climate and/or disasters.

Solesolevaki (giving *solu*)

The Rainbow Resilience community participants advocated for adopting *solesolevaki* or giving *solu* as a form of culturally-embedded agency to support the inclusion of people with diverse SOGIE. *Solesolevaki* brings together

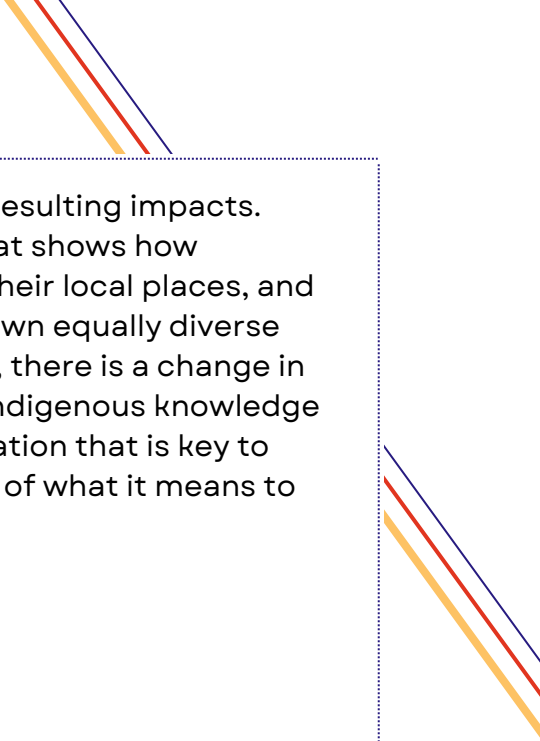
community-level stakeholders to collectively use their knowledge, skills, and resources for inclusive approaches to build climate and disaster resilience. *Solesolevaki* in this way can be thought of as a form of social protection, where formal systems of state, aid agencies, and civil society, are merged with informal systems – community, family, cultural systems, social networks – ensuring a social safety net for a significant change towards inclusion. The underlying importance of *solesolevaki* is that it is a traditional Fijian value that enables everyone who is participating to be afforded their rights, access their needs, and contribute their skills, knowledge, and strengths. This process requires immersion in underlying traditional values that are deeply interwoven in *bula vakavanua* (traditional way of life). The four crucial institutions that promote these cultural values are the *matavuvale* (family), *vanua* (culture, tradition), *lotu* (church), and *matanitu* (government/formal institutions, including agencies that work on climate change, DRM, and humanitarian response).

A central part of *vanua* (faith, culture, and community), in which *solesolevaki* is embedded, is about reflecting love and compassion: values cohesive with faith-based values and values identified by diverse SOGIE communities. As evidenced in the above report, across Fiji it is common that there is disconnection between faith and community leaders and people with diverse SOGIE. At the same time, most community participants, including people with diverse SOGIE expressed that one of their coping mechanisms is faith in *yadrayadravaki* (keeping vigil) during disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. Some also suggested, that if able to find faith leaders who did imbue the values of love and acceptance, they could bring people together in the *solesolevaki* with the biblical proverb, ‘*Vakarau ni se siga toka*’, which means that you need to prepare while there is still time.

Resilience through Indigenous knowledge and diverse SOGIE strengths

Building on the shared cultural identity of being Fijian and the importance of *solesolevaki*, there is a need for broader recognition of the important role of Indigenous knowledge and diverse SOGIE strengths in community climate and disaster resilience. This starts with adopting Fijian approaches such as *solesolevaki* and requires greater attention to and respect for oral histories and the knowledge they share in observing early warning signs from their environments, and resilience measures such as *coronaki* (food banks).

One way to make climate change and disaster knowledge, governance, and response more effective, is for it to be grounded in local experience, knowledge, and practices. Local narratives of change can provide insight into localised environmental histories, and the documentation of climate change and disasters. Local experience, knowledge and practices can further account for the ways communities (and people within these) experience climate



change, how they make sense of this and cope with the resulting impacts. There is a growing amount of research internationally that shows how communities appropriate risk governance discourse to their local places, and re-make it around their diverse concerns towards their own equally diverse ends (Bremer et al., 2019; Ryghaug, 2011). In these places, there is a change in the climate narrative (Vanderlinden, 2020). In this way, Indigenous knowledge within Fiji can give meaning to abstract scientific information that is key to many Fijians' understanding of and ability to make sense of what it means to live in and with climate change.

Ways forward

The community participants recommended the development of dedicated *solesolevaki* groups at the local village and district levels to build climate and disaster resilience. This is where people from the *lotu*, *mataitu* and civil society organisations, including diverse SOGIE, can work together to support more inclusive climate and disaster resilience measures to ensure no Fijian is left behind. Additional recommendations are outlined below, related to the need for ongoing *talanoa* linked to climate and disaster resilience, structural issues driving discrimination against persons with diverse SOGIE, and urgent need for more inclusive climate and disaster resilience actions and DRR.

Solesolevaki groups to build climate and disaster resilience

While Disaster Management Committees (DMCs) are present at the village and district levels, there is a need for more inclusive *solesolevaki* groups to be created to build climate and disaster resilience and complement the work of these existing structures. Through the experience and values embedded in the *bula vakavanua* (culture, tradition, and ways of being), the climate *solesolevaki* groups can contribute to strengthening community resilience through inclusion of people with diverse SOGIE in climate and disaster resilience activities.

Resilience through Indigenous knowledge and diverse SOGIE strengths

In terms of climate and disaster resilience investments, participant discussions emphasised the need to build on existing structures, as well as passing down of traditional knowledge in building community resilience to people with diverse SOGIE and other younger community members. The Rainbow Resilience participants did not elaborate on the ‘how’ of building on existing structures and passing down of traditional knowledge as acts of inclusion. This is an opportunity for future participatory action research that could employ community education and arts practices that engage people with diverse SOGIESC and other Fijians in dialogue about traditional knowledge practices. While recognising their strengths, it is also necessary to ensure that people with diverse SOGIE can safely participate in policies or programs related to building climate and disaster resilience at the village level.

Build and expand on this research through ongoing *talanoa* at and between the village, district, provincial and central levels

This innovative research project brought together a diverse range of community stakeholders through *talanoa* workshops to discuss, unpack and reframe harmful stereotypes and narratives that perpetuate discrimination, exclusion, and harm against people with diverse SOGIE in relation to climate change and disasters. While significant progress was made, in recognition of the increasingly problematic and unregulated nature of social media platforms and their ability to spread misinformation, it will be important to support ongoing *talanoa* between faith representatives, and climate and diverse SOGIE activists, as achieved by this project. It will also be important to identify opportunities for the learning from community-level dialogues to reach and influence government and donors for their actions in building climate and disaster resilience at the central, provincial, and district levels.

Information, education and communication (IEC) campaign for inclusion and community resilience

Recognising the deep structural roots of discrimination against persons with diverse SOGIE in Fiji, there is a need for a broader national IEC campaign to challenge harmful stereotypes and narratives. At the same time, Fiji is in a constant state of responding and recovering from disasters in which persons with diverse SOGIE face unacceptably higher levels of exclusion and harm. This necessitates a more immediate and tailored IEC campaign on community resilience and inclusion in actions to address climate change and disasters, involving a partnership between government, high profile Fijians, and diverse SOGIE civil society. This could take a whole-of-society approach to increase awareness on discrimination against people from diverse SOGIE, persons with disabilities, and other groups at high risk of exclusion.

Stakeholders committed to SOGIE-inclusion

Stakeholders committed to SOGIE-inclusion are encouraged to adopt a twin-track approach to inclusion of people with diverse SOGIE in actions to address climate change and disasters in Fiji. This involves supporting broader inclusion efforts that mainstream inclusion throughout all assistance for climate change and disasters, paying particular attention to partnerships and distribution networks at the community level. At the same time, diverse SOGIE civil society in Fiji require access to dedicated resources to strengthen their own voice and agency in influencing discourse, and assistance in relation to climate change and disasters.⁷

⁷ See, for example, dedicated efforts by the Fiji Cash Working Group to have dedicated SOGIE partnerships and referral pathways to support access to cash assistance for persons with diverse SOGIE affected by tropical cyclones and COVID-19.

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