



PACIFIC LOSING GROUND ON CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

A young man of Navitilevu Village, Ra using a tippy tap. Photo: Habitat for Humanity Fiji

By Samantha Magick

In the Pacific region, access to clean water and sanitation has gone backwards since 2015 according to the latest Sustainable Development Goals 2002 progress report.

The title of that report, *Widening disparities amidst COVID-19*, gives some idea of why ground has been lost. It states that while the Pacific subregion is not on track to achieve any of the 17 goals by 2030, regression on clean water and sanitation (SDG 6) is an area of particular concern.

“Despite a substantial increase in aid to LDCs [Least Developed Nations] for water supply and sanitation, the region must take action to reverse negative trends on water use efficiency and the protection and restoration of water-related ecosystems. A large population still lacks access to safely-managed drinking water services and basic handwashing facilities, especially in rural areas. Progress towards those targets is too slow to achieve Goal 6 by 2030,” the report states.

It says there are ‘conflicting trends’. For example, “while access to basic drinking water and sanitation are gradually improving in the Pacific, high fluctuations in permanent water areas is causing a regression in clean water and sanitation.”

In the Pacific, 43-45% of the population does not have access to basic water supplies, and even more, 65% (or eight million people), do not have access to basic sanitation. Climate and other natural disasters will exacerbate this problem.

Non government organisation ChildFund describe what that looks like in Kiribati. In Betio, it says, piped water is only available for a few hours every two-three days. Groundwater supplies are threatened by “rising sea levels, high tides, storm surges and contamination from rubbish.” A recent ChildFund survey showed 73% of the 1,875 households participating in its water quality testing programme had unsafe or likely-unsafe drinking water, due to bacterial contamination.

Poor quality data or the absence of data relating to SDG progress entirely, is a continued challenge, although there are moves towards more targeted and locally-relevant surveys says Alison Culpin, the Social Statistics Adviser with the Pacific Community (SPC). She says more focus is needed on improving the availability of disaggregated data to understand and support groups that are being left behind, while addressing national planning needs.

The desegregation of data, particularly along ethnic lines, is a sensitive matter in Fiji. The Senior Development Finance Analyst International in Fiji’s Ministry of Economy, Kris Singh, says while COVID has hindered Fiji’s SDG ambitions, it remains committed to progress, and improving reporting mechanisms ahead of the country’s 2023 Voluntary National Review.

The SDG 6 (water and sanitation for all by 2030) targets relate to:

- Safe drinking water
- Trans-boundary water cooperation
- Access to sanitation and hygiene
- Water-related ecosystems
- Water quality
- Water-use efficiency

- International cooperation on water and sanitation
- Participatory sanitation management

“The need to reach those who are furthest behind has never been greater,” Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), has written.

“Understanding the intersection of key development challenges with population characteristics such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, health, location, migratory status and income, is critical to achieving a more equitable recovery. We must work together as a region to ensure that no one or no country falls behind.”

Chlorination and the Cook Islands

Measures to improve the quality of the water supply in Cook Islands (and related reforms around pricing and governance) prompted public marches and opposition in mid-2020. Landowners were concerned over its impact on their ownership rights and the cost of water services. The use of chlorine to purify water in the new system was so controversial that it has now been banned.

The Cook Islands water authority, To Tatou Vai (TTV) says its Te Mato Vai project to replace Rarotonga’s aging water infrastructure was “specially designed for Rarotonga, taking into consideration the unique environment, and building on decades of scientific knowledge in best practice water treatment from around the world and particularly the Pacific region.” It was funded by the New Zealand and Chinese governments, at a cost of NZ\$89.7 million (US\$62.5 million).

The water authority conducted a six-month trial of polyaluminium chloride (PACl) use in the water supply, saying: “following more than 10,000 tests taken, the data collected tells us that there has been a huge improvement in water quality.

“Turbidity (dirty water) and E. Coli (bacteria) levels have greatly reduced, meaning there are less harmful contaminants in the water that put the community at risk of illnesses including gastro (upset stomachs), ear infections and skin diseases.

A recent Asian Development Bank (ADB) webinar heard from an (unnamed) representative from TTV, who said following the PACl trial, “we’re waiting on permission from the landowners to continue dosing. And the use of chlorine has been outright banned for the foreseeable future.

“So, I guess the challenge that we’re having is that there’s not really a lot of reporting data at the moment from health and how many people do get sick from water. It’s really hard to convince people that they need something that they don’t know they need, the general data ...is there...but there’s no sort of record of how that affects Rarotonga,” she said.

“Unfortunately we’ve got the infrastructure there, we just can’t use it really,” she concluded.

While data quantifying the economic cost of illness due to using contaminated water— for example in school or work hours lost—is difficult to find, the human cost is heavy. Five people have died from typhoid in Fiji this year, with 67 lab-confirmed cases of typhoid fever at the time of writing. While



A Fiji LTDD (Leptospirosis, Typhoid, Dengue and Diarrhea) team conducts outreach consultations in rural Fiji this month. **Photo:** Ministry of Health



Upgrading work underway at the Tupapa area, Cook Islands, where a corroded galvanised pipeline was replaced with a new PE (plastic) pipeline that will last up to 100 years. **Photo:** TTV

the Ministry says the cases recorded are within usual ranges, repeated flooding in some parts of the country has seen some communities more at risk.

As such, Fiji's health ministry is encouraging people, "especially those in rural areas, informal urban areas, and any other areas where access to clean drinking water is limited, to boil all drinking water," and take other precautions.

Taking matters into their own hands

Despite the difficulties posed by COVID, and the slippage in SDG targets, many communities are demonstrating a DIY spirit.

Authors from the Vanuatu Skills Partnership, a "nationwide initiative that aims to improve human resource development for service delivery reform in Vanuatu" recently wrote on the DevPolicy blog about a rural community project that saw the training of local plumbers and community members in maintaining water supplies, and installing an ecological purification water system.

The authors quote Philemon Ling, Torba Provincial Government Training Board Chairman, as saying the training was really important: "Similar training has been delivered in the past but without the implementation of a water system, trainees have not had the opportunity to apply their new knowledge and skills."

In Fiji, Habitat for Humanity's five-year Water for Women program has a similar focus, with decisions and actions on water management happening at the community level. *[Editor's note: The author is a Habitat for Humanity Board member.]*


Water for Women works with 18 communities around Fiji and has resulted in tangible outcomes such as water and sanitation upgrades in schools, handwashing stations outside homes and kindergartens, and in a significant development, the creation of Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) blocks.

These blocks in schools are fitted with a shower and change

space that female students can use if they have their first periods in schools or if their menses arrives unexpectedly. While data is scarce, research has shown that "many girls do not have the facilities to manage menstruation effectively and with dignity" and that this can lead to poorer education outcomes.

For Water for Women Project Manager Alisi Evans, it is an intangible outcome that has been most rewarding. "The most fulfilling part of rolling out this program is witnessing the slow but steady shift in gender norms concerning community water management decision-making and practices in rural communities in Fiji," she says. "In the last 4 years we've supported 20 women to take on WASH leadership roles in water committees across 18 communities. This is no small feat when working with indigenous and traditional structures."

An enterprising community in Somosomo in the Yasawa group in Fiji, is setting an example to other villages. During the training offered by Habitat for Humanity, a village water committee was established and continued to maintain the village water supply and solar and mechanical power to the village borehole with no external funding. They harnessed the power of social media to tell their story, eventually attracting funds for repairs as a result. The Fiji government is now in discussion with the community as to how its learnings can be shared with other village committees.

The COVID-19 pandemic and internal movement restrictions deeply affected the program in the last year, Evans says, "curtailing all engagements and construction works in schools and communities. Despite this we were able to use mobile technology to stay in contact with our beneficiaries. We provided a small stipend to purchase credit so they could highlight challenges and progress in maintaining good WASH practices via phone calls and social media platforms." 

editor@islandsbusiness.com

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