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Forging Futures After Displacement: Banaban Youth Aspirations and Resilience on Rabi Island

Summary: The Banaban people of Banaba (Ocean Island), now primarily residing on Rabi Island in Fiji, have experienced more than a century of displacement, dispossession, and environmental destruction resulting from colonial phosphate mining. Although large-scale mining ceased in 1979, its legacies, and persistent attempts at extraction, continue to shape social, economic, political, and psychological conditions for Banaban communities. These legacies are particularly evident among Banaban youth, who now constitute over half of the Rabi Island population.

This policy brief draws on participatory action research conducted in 2023–2024 to examine Banaban youth aspirations, life pathways, and resilience in a prolonged post-relocation context. It highlights how young people pursue education, livelihoods, cultural continuity, and political participation within conditions of structural exclusion, constrained opportunities, and renewed extractive threats. While Banaban youth demonstrate strong resilience through cultural practice, collective action, and community solidarity, their aspirations are frequently curtailed by governance limitations, economic precarity, and lack of meaningful inclusion in decision-making.

The brief identifies youth-centred development, inclusive governance, mental well-being, and historical accountability as critical policy entry points. These findings have direct relevance for MFAT's Pacific priorities, particularly in relation to youth, resilience, and rights-based development partnerships.

Key Messages

- Banabans' forced relocation to Rabi Island constitutes a case of colonial climate injustice, implicating Aotearoa New Zealand, with long-term impacts on mental health, identity, and development.
- Intergenerational trauma is sustained by political exclusion, economic neglect, and renewed extractive threats.
- Youth resilience is actively cultivated through cultural revival, artistic activism, and collective resistance, yet remains constrained by structural barriers.
- Meaningful policy responses must prioritise Banaban self-determination, mental well-being, and historical accountability, not short-term extractive development.

What is the development issue?

The development issue facing Banaban communities is the long-term entanglement of colonial extractivism, forced displacement, and constrained post-relocation development pathways, which continue to shape social well-being, youth aspirations, and resilience decades after phosphate mining ceased on Banaba (Ocean Island). Banaba represents one of the most extreme historical cases of environmental destruction and Indigenous displacement in the Pacific, with impacts that remain unresolved and are now intersecting with contemporary development, governance, and climate challenges.

From the early twentieth century until 1979, Banaba was intensively mined for phosphate by the British

Phosphate Commission to support agricultural production in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (Teaiwa, 2014; Morris, 2022). Mining removed an estimated 22 million tonnes of phosphate and rendered approximately 90% of Banaba environmentally degraded, transforming the island into a landscape of limestone pinnacles unsuitable for sustained human settlement (Teaiwa, 2015). In 1945, Banabans were forcibly relocated by colonial authorities to Rabi Island in Fiji, losing not only their land but also political control over their future and development trajectory (Sigrah & King, 2001).

While compensation arrangements were negotiated in the late twentieth century, these settlements did not restore self-determination, viable land, or long-term economic security (UK Parliament, 1979). As a result,

Banabans remain a displaced Indigenous population, living with the developmental consequences of decisions made without their consent. These consequences include limited access to education, employment, infrastructure, and representative governance, particularly on Rabi Island, where political authority has been administered through appointed structures rather than elected local councils since 2013 (Kumar, 2023).

For Banaban youth—who now constitute over half of the Rabi Island population—this history translates into constrained life pathways. Young people articulate strong aspirations for education, skilled employment, mobility, and leadership, yet face structural barriers that limit their ability to realise these goals. These barriers include geographic isolation, narrow local labour markets, the cessation of targeted scholarship opportunities, and limited institutional support for youth transitions into adulthood. Aspirations are therefore not absent; rather, they are systematically misaligned with available opportunities, producing frustration, uncertainty, and stalled futures.

The development issue is further compounded by the intergenerational impacts of displacement and environmental loss. Banaban youth inherit histories of mining-driven dispossession through family narratives, cultural memory, and ongoing political struggle over Banaba. This inherited loss manifests not only as grief tied to land and identity but also as diminished trust in institutions and development processes that have historically excluded Banaban voices. Mental well-being challenges reported by youth are thus closely linked to structural conditions—including marginalisation, lack of voice, and limited prospects—rather than individual pathology.

Contemporary development pressures have re-activated these historical dynamics. In 2023, renewed interest in phosphate exploration on Banaba by an Australian company was framed in economic and development terms, yet it triggered widespread anxiety and opposition among Banabans, particularly youth, who interpreted the proposal as a repetition of colonial extractive logics (RNZ, 2023a; RNZ, 2023b). Initial exclusions of youth from consultation processes reinforced perceptions that development decisions affecting Banaban futures continue to be made without meaningful consent or participation.

At the same time, Banaban youth demonstrate significant resilience and agency, challenging narratives that frame displaced communities solely in terms of

vulnerability. Through cultural revitalisation, collective organising, and artistic activism, youth cultivate identity, belonging, and political voice in contexts where formal pathways are limited (Teaiwa, 2012). These practices represent adaptive responses to long-term structural constraints, and they also highlight a critical development gap: resilience is being upheld primarily through community labour from constrained resources rather than supported by enabling institutions or policies.

In sum, the development issue is not only the historical harm caused by mining and displacement, but the ongoing failure to translate recognition of that harm into sustainable, youth-centred development pathways. Without effective mechanisms to support Banaban self-determination, inclusive governance, education and employment opportunities, and culturally grounded well-being, young Banabans are left to navigate inherited injustice with limited institutional support. Addressing this issue requires shifting from short-term, extractive, or technocratic development responses toward long-term, relational approaches that centre Banaban aspirations, rights, and futures.

Research aims

This research was designed to address a critical gap in development, climate, and displacement literature by centring the perspectives, aspirations, and lived experiences of Banaban youth in a long-term post-relocation context. While Banaban displacement from Banaba to Rabi Island has been well documented historically, the everyday impacts of this displacement on younger generations—particularly in relation to life pathways, resilience, and participation in development processes—remain under-examined (Teaiwa, 2015).

Rather than conceptualising Banaban youth solely as victims of historical injustice or as beneficiaries of development intervention, the research sought to understand youth as agents navigating constrained structural conditions, with aspirations shaped by education, mobility, cultural identity, and political awareness. The research was also motivated by extractive interests courting Banaban leaders and the increasing visibility of youth-led resistance, raising important questions about whose voices are recognised in development decision-making (RNZ, 2023a; RNZ, 2023b).

Specifically, the study aimed to:

1. Examine Banaban youth aspirations and life pathways
2. Understand how displacement and colonial legacies shape wellbeing
3. Explore youth resilience and community-based coping practices
4. Analyse youth participation in development and resource governance
5. Generate policy-relevant insights for youth-centred development

Community Profile

Banabans are an Indigenous community forcibly relocated from Banaba (Ocean Island, Kiribati) to Rabi Island, Fiji, in 1945 to enable colonial phosphate mining. Today's Banaban population on Rabi largely consists of second- to fourth-generation descendants of those displaced. While Rabi is the primary place of residence, Banaba remains central to Banaban identity, political claims, and collective memory.

Demographics

- Over 50% of the population is under the age of 35.
- Youth are navigating transitions into education, work and leadership within a context of limited local opportunities.

Governance and participation

- Rabi Island is governed under a special administrative arrangement.
- By law local governance should function via an elected council. However, since 2013, local governance has been overseen by an interim appointed administrator, rather than a democratically elected council.
- Decision making is further shaped by gerontocratic norms, limiting youth—and particularly young women's—participation in formal leadership and consultation processes.

Livelihoods and economic context

- Livelihoods are constrained and primarily based on:
- Subsistence farming and fishing
- Informal and short-term labour - Youth face high unemployment and underemployment, with few pathways into skilled or professional work.

Education and youth pathways

Primary and secondary education is available, but:

- Access to tertiary education is limited by cost and distance.

- Former Banaban specific scholarship schemes have been discontinued.
- Youth report a persistent gap between educational aspirations and realistic opportunities.

State investment

- Banaban communities receive a small annual budget allocation from the Government of Fiji.
- On a per capita basis, this funding is very limited and insufficient to support infrastructure development, youth programming, or livelihood diversification.
- As a result, communities rely heavily on self-help and external advocacy.

Culture, identity, and well being

- Banaban culture remains strong, maintained through dance, storytelling, and oral histories.

Youth mental wellbeing is shaped by:

- Long term displacement
- Limited opportunity structures
- Inherited trauma related to land loss and political exclusion
- Resilience is largely collective and community based, rather than institutionally supported.

Contemporary pressures

- The 2023 proposal by an Australian mining company to resume phosphate mining on Banaba resurfaced historical grievances and heightened anxiety among Banaban youth.
- Youth viewed the proposal as a continuation of extractive injustice, particularly given limited consultation.



Figure 1. Revitalisation of traditional dance by Banaban Youth on Rabi Island, 2023

Methodology

This policy brief is informed by qualitative Participatory Action Research (PAR) conducted between 2023 and 2024, and was designed to centre Banaban youth

perspectives while generating findings relevant to development policy and practice.

The study combined PAR with Pacific research methodologies, particularly talanoa, to prioritise relational ethics, dialogue, and accountability, while situating youth experiences within the historical and political context of Banaban displacement. Fieldwork was carried out in two phases (August–September 2023 and January 2024) and involved semi-structured interviews with Banaban youth, talanoa with elders and community leaders, participant observation, and engagement in youth-led cultural and advocacy activities. Arts-based approaches—including dance, exhibitions, and visual art—were incorporated as tools for expression, reflection and collective meaning-making, allowing youth to articulate aspirations, wellbeing, and political concerns beyond conventional interview formats.

Data were analysed thematically through an iterative process that engaged participant narratives, field observations, and questions of power and exclusion, with ethical practice grounded in informed consent, relational responsibility, and care in a research setting shaped by intergenerational trauma and historical injustice.



Figure 2. Mural making by Banaban Youth on Rabi, 2023

Key Findings

This research documents how Banaban youth on Rabi Island experience and respond to development challenges shaped by long-term displacement, limited governance inclusion, and constrained opportunity structures. Drawing on in-depth interviews with youth and elders, participant observation, and arts-based engagement, the findings show that youth aspirations and agency are strong, but are consistently shaped—and often limited—by structural, historical, and political factors beyond individual control.

1. Banaban Youth Aspire to Education, Stability, and Leadership, but Face Systemic Barriers

Banaban youth articulated strong aspirations for higher education, professional employment, and leadership roles within their community. Several participants expressed a desire to “give back” to their people through law, teaching, engineering, or community advocacy. However, these aspirations are constrained by high education costs, discontinued Banaban-specific scholarships, and limited employment pathways on Rabi.

One youth described the gap between ambition and feasibility as follows:

“I still want to be a pilot... but I knew that my family cannot support me for this... sometimes I have to go to school with no pen, no calculator, no books.” (Jeke, youth interview, 2024)

Others described returning to Rabi after tertiary study due to financial pressure, family obligations, or lack of employment opportunities aligned with their qualifications. This results in stalled social mobility despite educational achievement.

2. Displacement and Intergenerational Trauma Continue to Shape Youth Wellbeing

Although Banaban youth did not directly experience relocation from Banaba in 1945, the impacts of displacement remain deeply embedded through family narratives, cultural memory, and ongoing experiences of marginalisation. Youth described feelings of sadness, anger, and fear in response to renewed mining proposals, reflecting inherited trauma rather than isolated political disagreement.

A young woman recalled learning about mining through her grandmother’s stories:

“Whenever she shared those stories... she began to cry with tears in her eyes. Now I can feel what they felt and what they experienced, all of the hurt and pain.” (Tekanaiti, talanoa, 2024)

These narratives highlight that displacement functions as an ongoing development condition, affecting identity, trust in institutions, and perceptions of the future.

3. Youth Are Marginally Included in Governance and Decision-Making

Youth consistently reported exclusion from community decision-making due to gerontocratic norms and Rabi Island's appointed governance structure. Public meetings are dominated by elders, with young people expected to listen rather than speak.

As one young man explained:

"That's where we, the youths, are not accepted. It's where only the elders speak... it's a waste of time to go." (Matteo, youth interview, 2024)

This exclusion became particularly visible during the 2023 phosphate mining exploration agreement, where youth learned about the decision after it had already been made. Youth expressed frustration at not being consulted on issues affecting "the fifth generation," reinforcing perceptions of political marginalisation.

4. Community Resilience is Strong but Largely Unsupported by Formal Systems

Banaban youth and elders demonstrate considerable resilience through collective practices, cultural continuity, and mutual support. Dance, storytelling, communal labour, and youth-led initiatives help sustain identity and well-being. However, this resilience is largely community-driven, with minimal institutional backing.

An elder noted the contrast with previous generations:

"At our time we were well supported by our community elders... today you don't see that anymore." (Elder Takaniko, talanoa, 2024)

Limited per-capita public funding, deteriorating infrastructure, and an absence of sustained youth programming place the burden of resilience on families and volunteers rather than the state.

5. Arts-Based and Cultural Engagement Create Pathways for Youth Voice and Agency

Arts-based initiatives—such as dance, murals, exhibitions, and speech contests—emerged as critical platforms for youth expression, leadership, and healing. These spaces enabled youth to articulate histories of injustice, assert identity, and engage in advocacy locally and internationally.

Reflecting on performing Banaban dance in Auckland, one youth stated:

"I wanted to show them who the Banabans are... and remind them of the history of the mining and how they tricked us out of our land." (Jeke, youth interview, 2024)

Such initiatives contributed to increased confidence, political awareness, and youth participation, demonstrating the development value of culturally grounded engagement mechanisms.

6. Youth Mobilisation Increases When Development Decisions Are High-Stakes

Youth engagement intensified during the 2023 proposal to resume phosphate mining on Banaba. Although initially excluded from consultation, youth demonstrated strong political consciousness once the implications became clear.

As one participant explained:

"It won't benefit us... not only this generation, but the fifth generation. That's why I was really upset." (Eta, youth interview, 2024)

Youth-supported advocacy—alongside elders and civil society allies—contributed to the suspension of exploration plans, illustrating that youth leadership capacity exists when meaningful participation is enabled.



Figure 3. Rabi Youth on World Indigenous Day celebrated in 2023

Implications

Across all themes, Banaban youth display aspiration, cultural strength, and leadership potential. However, historical displacement, governance exclusion, and limited development investment continue to constrain youth pathways. These findings reinforce the need for

youth-centred, inclusive, and trauma-aware development approaches in displaced Pacific communities.

1. Match Youth Aspirations with Enabling Structures

Aspirations require structural support—education financing, mobility pathways, vocational training, and labour market access. Without these, aspirations remain symbolic.

2. Treat Displacement as an Ongoing Development Reality

Intergenerational trauma, land loss, and political exclusion continue to shape youth lives. Development responses must integrate historical accountability and psychosocial support. This also means ensuring that exchange and educational programming includes access for those with citizenship barriers.

3. Strengthen Inclusive Governance

Youth participation must be embedded in governance structures. Transparent consultation, youth representation, and intergenerational dialogue are essential for legitimacy — as are democratic structures with accountability mechanisms.

4. Do Not Substitute Community Resilience for Institutional Responsibility

Resilience must be supported by investment in public services, infrastructure, and youth programming—not used to justify under investment.

5. Recognise Arts Based Approaches as Legitimate Development Tools

Culturally grounded, creative methods enhance youth agency and should be integrated into programming.

6. Engage Youth Early in High Stakes Decisions

Youth engagement increases when decisions affect intergenerational futures. Development actors should create sustained, accessible entry points for youth participation, especially in the context of state-mediated foreign extractive activity.

Limitations of the Study

The study's qualitative design prioritised depth over breadth. While interviews captured diverse youth experiences, they may not represent all perspectives,

particularly those of the most marginalised youth who are disengaged from community activities.

The political context—especially the 2023 mining proposal—heightened youth awareness and may have influenced responses. Youth in the diaspora were not included, and their experiences may differ significantly.

Despite these limitations, the study provides rich, grounded insights into youth aspirations, resilience, and governance participation in a long-term displacement context.

Conclusion

Banaban youth are navigating the complex legacies of displacement, environmental destruction, and political marginalisation. Their aspirations are strong and their cultural identity remains vibrant. Yet structural barriers continue to constrain their futures.

Banaban youth are not passive recipients of development—they are active agents forging futures in the shadow of extractive injustice. Supporting their aspirations is not only a moral imperative but a strategic investment in Pacific resilience, leadership, and self-determination.



Figure 4. Banaban Human Rights Defenders, 2023

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Figure 5. Justice for Rabi: The Story of Banaba Exhibition in Auckland, New Zealand 2023

Key Recommendations

1. Establish a Banaban Youth Development Fund

A dedicated fund could support tertiary scholarships, vocational training, mobility grants and youth led enterprises

2. Support Governance Reform Toward Elected Representation

MFAT and partners can encourage a return to elected local governance, support youth advisory councils and facilitate inter-generational dialogue platforms

3. Strengthen Infrastructure and Public Services on Rabi

Priorities include education facilities, digital connectivity, transport links and youth centres

4. Support Cultural Revitalisation and Arts Based Programming

Investments should be in dance groups, mural making and exhibitions, youth storytelling initiatives and cultural exchange programmes

5. Ensure Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) in all Development Decisions

Particularly for resource extraction, land use and environmental management, youth must be included from the outset

6. Promote Long-Term, Relational Development Partnerships

Shift from short term, extractive and technocratic approaches toward partnerships grounded in historical accountability, rights-based frameworks and youth leadership

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