

Policy Brief

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Research Context and Background

The Marshall Islands are located in the northern Pacific, approximately halfway between Hawai'i and the Philippines. The United States (US) secured and assumed control of the Marshall Islands during World War Two. Following the end of this conflict, the US selected Bikini Atoll as a site to test their nuclear weapons. In 1946, the Bikinians were coerced into leaving their atoll home to allow the US to conduct these tests. The Bikinians were eventually relocated to the small single island of Kili. A second resettlement site was founded on the island of Ejit in Majuro Atoll following an attempt to resettle Bikini Atoll in the 1970s which failed because of exposure to dangerously high levels of radiation. The Bikinians believed their relocation would be temporary, however they are still unable to return to Bikini Atoll because of the radioactive contamination.

The forced relocation of the Bikinians disconnected them from their atoll home which had formed the basis of their culture, society, their well-defined livelihood systems and source of self-sufficiency (Mason, 1950; Kiste, 1977; Niedenthal, 1997 and 2013; Sutoris, 2011; Report of the Special Rapporteur, 2012; Tabucanon, 2014). The effects of this displacement have been devastating for the Bikini community and the consequences of displacement continue to be felt to this day. Most significantly, these impacts include a loss of culture, social disarticulation, food insecurity, marginalisation, perceptions of injustice and a deepened sense of vulnerability. While the Bikini community is still centred on Kili and Ejit, the Bikini population is today scattered throughout the Marshall Islands and the US.

Now on Kili and Ejit Islands, the Bikinians are facing the growing threat of sea level rise. This effect of climate change contributes to flooding and inundation which destroys crops, causes salination of groundwater and soils, damages houses and infrastructure and disrupts the import of food and supplies. While the Bikinians have been able to develop strategies to respond to the vulnerabilities they face from displacement and climate change, the risks to survival on Kili and Ejit from climate change can be seen as considerable as the impacts of climate change are projected to increase significantly throughout this century (Forbes et al., 2013; Weir, 2017; IPCC, 2019).

In this research, to understand how displacement influences the Bikinians vulnerability to climate change and their ability to adapt and build resilience, it has been necessary to understand the considerable effects displacement has had on this community. The reason for this is the impacts of climate change are greater for communities already socially and economically disadvantaged (Barnett, 2010; IPCC, 2014; Kelman, 2014; Oliver-Smith, 2014; Ensor et al., 2015; Christoplos and McGinn, 2016; Suliman et al., 2019; Bordner et al., 2020; Eriksen, 2021).

Additionally, climate change can be considered as a 'multiplier of vulnerabilities' amplifying existing inequalities (Lewis, 2018, p. 193).

To allow the Bikinians to tell their story as much as possible in the research, to understand the vulnerabilities they face, both from displacement and climate change, qualitative methods were selected. A document analysis was undertaken on key documents prepared by the Bikinians, or based on their testimony, that established their experience of displacement and climate change. Bwebwenato, a Marshallese term for 'talking story' and analogous to the Samoan term Talanoa, was used to guide semi-structured interviews. Bwebwenato were held with members of the Bikinian leadership to hear and record their personal narratives and the experiences of their friends, family and the wider community. Plans to undertake a larger number of community interviews in person was not possible because of COVID-19 travel restrictions. Instead, a small number of interviews with members of the Bikini leadership were undertaken remotely. These interviews have provided a rich source of data.

Findings

1. Displacement has intensified Bikinian vulnerabilities associated with climate change

This research found that the vulnerabilities faced by the Bikinians due to displacement are intensifying the Bikinians' exposure and sensitivity to climate change. The vulnerabilities of displacement not only contribute to vulnerabilities associated with climate change but are also further exacerbated by climate change (Bordner et al., 2020). Additionally, the loss of the Bikinians' land and atoll and the impacts of displacement have had a significant impact on their social and economic capital. It is this social and cultural capital that Oceania communities, like the Bikinians, have relied on in the past to adapt to changing environmental conditions (Donner, 2015; Connell, 2015; Kelman, 2018; Corendea and Mani, 2018; and Clement et al., 2021). The loss of this capital affects their ability to build resilience and increases their vulnerability.

2. Climate change contributes to perceptions of injustice

For the Bikinians, the feelings of injustice first generated by their displacement continue and deepen with the effects of climate change. The Bikinians perceived their continued displacement at the hands of the US as being unjust and unfair (Kiste, 1977 and 1985; Sutoris, 2011; Report of the Special Rapporteur, 2012; Bordner et al., 2016; Tabucanon, 2014; Marcoux, 2021). Climate change is making life more difficult on Kili and Ejit and many Bikinians contemplate the need for further relocation which influence and deepened their perceptions of injustice. The Bikini leadership considered any climate change induced migration would amount to another devastating forced relocation. The Bikinians spoke of continuing injustice when contemplating climate change migration when they are still suffering from the impacts of their original displacement (Official Website, 2022).

3. Self-determination is important in adapting and building resilience

The Bikinians have shown high levels of resilience. The strategies they first developed in response to their displacement must now consider climate change. Conversely, adaptation to climate change must address the impacts of displacement as the underlying cause of Bikinian vulnerability. For these adaptation strategies to be successful, Bikinian self-determination is important as the community must have the ability to make choices on how they adapt (Bordner, 2019; Bordner et al., 2020). While some Bikinians may choose to migrate to escape the difficult conditions on Kili and Ejit and to access social and economic opportunities elsewhere, the Bikinians acknowledged that not everyone will want to migrate. Kane and Fletcher (2020) and Bordner et al. (2020) also suggest that migration as a response to climate change may not

always be inevitable as long as communities can fulfil their right to self-determination and have ownership of their adaptation strategies.

For the Bikinians gaining unrestricted access to financial trust funds set up by the US has been an important step in being able to address their vulnerabilities (Official Website, 2022). Having access to financial resources is important in adaptation and Cinner et al. (2018) state that adaptive capacity increases for people and communities when they have access to resources and assets to draw on when needed. Access to their trust funds has allowed the Bikinians to implement adaptation that reflects their priorities. While the Bikinians have been able to fund some adaptation, the financial limitations of these funds has been highlighted by the Bikinians. Hau'ofa (1993), Weir et al. (2017), Bordner (2019) and Bordner et al. (2020) also noted that post-colonial systems in the Marshall Islands have left communities like the Bikinians dependent on external financial and technical support for their adaptation. The risk for the Bikinians is that that relying on outside support can perpetuate subordination and entrench dependency that can generate additional vulnerability through the implementation of adaptation measures that do not always address the needs of the community (Rudiak-Gould, 2013; Bordner et al., 2020).

4. Migration can be successful as a response to displacement and climate change

The threats of climate change for the community on Kili and Ejit are considerable. Despite having developed strategies to respond to the vulnerabilities they face, there may be limits to the Bikinians' ability to adapt. As a result of the deterioration in living conditions many Bikinians may consider migration, especially to the US (KBE, 2015a). However, there is tension on the need to migrate with the Bikinians warning that being forced to relocate because of climate change could be another disaster for the community. The literature shared these concerns with Naser (2013), Gromilova (2014), and McDermott and Gibbon (2017) explaining that forced relocation is a clear violation of human rights. However, these authors acknowledged that forced relocation may be needed in exceptional circumstances, such as a response to climate change in order to protect the right to life.

The literature proposes that gradual migration can reduce the social and cultural impacts of migration and can form a successful adaptation strategy especially when established diaspora assists migrants to establish social and cultural connections and help find economic opportunities (van der Geest et al., 2020; The World Bank, 2021). It is likely that the Bikinians are already connecting to their diaspora centred in Majuro, Hilo in Hawai'i and Arkansas through their gradual migration to the US. The connection to their diaspora could provide positive networks for the Bikinians, similar to the concept of the "sea of islands" discussed in the literature developed by Hau'ofa (1993, p. 152) and Farbotko et al. (2018, p. 396) that were traditionally established in Oceania to build and improve resilience to change by utilising social connections. By connecting with existing diaspora in the Marshall Islands and US or undertaking carefully planned relocation to Hilo facilitated by the KBE, migration could be used as an adaptation strategy that avoids many of the cultural and social impacts of forced migration.

Implications

When determining climate change vulnerability and resilience, it is necessary to understand and address the underlying social, economic and cultural conditions that shape community vulnerability. The impacts of climate change cannot be addressed in isolation from a community's pre-existing conditions (Barnett, 2010; Kelman, 2014; Oliver-Smith, 2014; Ensor et al., 2015; Christoplos and McGinn, 2016; Suliman et al., 2019; Bordner et al., 2020; Eriksen, 2021). These pre-existing vulnerabilities shape the extent to which climate change affects communities as

outlined in the research by Kumari Rigaud et al. (2018), Bordner (2019), and Scott and Salamanca, (2021).

The right to self-determination is important in adaptation, as people need the ability to choose whether they adapt in place or use migration as an adaptation response. While communities will need financial and technical support to adapt, they must be able to decide on how adaptation action is undertaken. Communities themselves are best placed to understand their needs and where support should be directed. As discussed by Kane and Fletcher (2020), Bordner (2019) and Bordner et al. (2020) migration as a response to climate change may not always be inevitable as long as the community can fulfil their right to self-determination and have ownership of their adaptation strategies and can make choices about their status and future.

Migration can be used as an successful adaption strategy when it is chosen by individuals or the community. Climate change forced migration has the potential to cause significant disruption to communities in Oceania through the collective loss of their way of life, culture, identity, sovereignty, livelihoods, and social networks (World Bank, 2021; Bordner, 2019; Clement et al., 2021). Despite this disruption, more people in Oceania may choose to migrate as life becomes difficult with the impacts of climate change (Rudiak-Gould, 2013; Bordner et al., 2020). That migration is often rejected by Oceanic people or considered a last resort reflects the tension between not wanting to leave their homes and the need to escape the effects of climate change (Suliman et al., 2019; World Bank, 2021). However, many communities in Oceania have large proportions of their population living and working abroad because migration can be a positive adaptation strategy for many (Kumari Rigaud et al., 2018; Bordner, 2019; Clement et al., 2021). Gradual migration can reduce the social and cultural impacts of migration, especially when migrants connect with centres of diaspora, which can help migrants find cultural connections and economic opportunities (van der Geest et al., 2020; The World Bank, 2021).

Limitations and further research

The primary limitation of this study was being unable to travel to the Marshall Islands to bwebwenato with the Bikini community due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Had travel been possible larger numbers of interviews and with a more diverse sample of the community could have been conducted. The data collected was instead restricted to the Bikini leadership that were of a very similar demographic. Additionally, recruit of participants was difficult to achieve remotely, even with the support of a research assistant in Majuro. Had I been in the Marshall Islands I am likely to have had the opportunity to recruit more participants and increase my sample size. However, as community leaders, the participants interviewed were very knowledgeable of the impacts of displacement and climate change on their community and the response of the community to the vulnerabilities they faced. Despite this limitation, I feel I have collected a sufficient quality and quantity of research material.

There is room for further research on this topic. It would be useful to discuss the impacts of migration with the Bikini diaspora and the influence climate change had on their decision to migrate or return to the Marshall Islands. It would also be interesting to better understand cultural impacts suffered by the diaspora through migration of an already displaced community. There are also a number of other communities that have been displaced in the Marshall Islands because of US nuclear testing and military operations and comparing their experiences would be fascinating as these communities also contemplate the impacts of climate change and options for adaptation.

Appendices

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