



The Pacific forum is an example of Australia's aid program working collaboratively with United Nations agencies to address the Millennium Development Goals and to build a safer and more resilient Pacific region.

ABOVE: Kiribati. Because women are often collecting shellfish in the shallow waters they notice environmental changes to the shoreline. Their knowledge and experience is invaluable. Photo: Lorrie Graham

Pacific workshop

FIJI: Thirty-eight representatives from government agencies, civil society organisations and universities gathered in Suva for a Pacific forum. Topics under discussion were disaster risk management and adaptation to climate change, with particular reference to understanding the gender implications.

Vulnerability in the Pacific

Small island states, such as those in the Pacific Ocean, are particularly susceptible to the effects of global climate change. Extreme weather events – rising sea levels, increased intensity of cyclones, droughts and flooding – will damage coastal conditions, reduce the reliability of certain staple food sources and hinder the resilience of Pacific communities dependent on subsistence lifestyles.

Ensuring that Pacific communities are able to adapt to the effects of climate change requires a new level of preparedness. In the past, strategies for dealing with disasters were implemented separately to considerations of climate change programming. Increasingly, however, the fields of disaster risk management and climate change adaptation are converging.

What's gender got to do with it?

Although it may seem everybody would be equally exposed to hazards, such as cyclones and floods, this is not so. In the Indian Ocean Tsunami, three women to every one man died because women could not escape the waves, either because they were encumbered by their long skirts, were trying to hold on to children, or simply didn't know how to swim or climb trees. Women have less access to resources, economic advantage, social rights and environmental justice, all of which makes them more vulnerable to climate and disaster risk.

In the Pacific gender roles and knowledge are strictly defined and segregated. Yet women's knowledge and social practices could be used to build community resilience. During a drought in the small islands of the Federated States of Micronesia, local women, knowledgeable about island hydrology, found potable water by

digging a new well that reached the freshwater lens.

Pacific island men know more about fishing in deep ocean waters whereas women, because they often collect shellfish close to the waters edge, know the shoreline. Women's observations could add significant value to programs designed to protect against coastal erosion. Divisions of labour between men and women denote different experiences and understanding and, consequently, can offer a good entry point for gender sensitive programming. Forum participants agreed that more women should be involved in activities concerned with disaster risk management and climate change adaptation.

Traditional knowledge

A number of Pacific communities have developed different ways of coping with the threats of natural disasters and extreme weather events. For example, some Pacific communities know about a type of yam that is not very tasty but can stay in the ground for years and, unlike other root crops, is not damaged by flooding. Planting this yam prior to cyclone season can make a real difference to warding off hunger during difficult times. It goes without saying such knowledge is vital and proves how important it is to consult with communities.

It's clear in order to access the full range of knowledge to cope better with climate change effects and disasters, programmers need to inform and consult with everyone – that's women, children, the elderly and the disabled, as well as men.

The Pacific forum workshop was coorganised by AusAID and the United Nations Development Programme Pacific Centre.

The 2008–09 aid budget includes \$150 million over three years to assist countries in the Asia-Pacific region to assess and adapt to the likely impacts of climate change.