

RICE, GRAIN AND DISASTER RELIEF

Dawn Tuiloma-Palesoo Sua
Regional Programme Manager – Disaster
Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific International (FSPI)

I recently wrote this for the Fiji Island Business Magazine. The intent of the article is to promote self-reliant communities.

I once listened to a prominent Indian Professor who candidly told us that, in India there are three main crops, namely “*rice, grain and disaster relief*”. With a region wrought with all kinds of natural disasters, is it no wonder they rely heavily on outside assistance.

Unfortunately this is the case for most developing countries, including our own Pacific Island nations. When a disaster strikes, many communities in our island countries tend to sit back and wait for handouts. This may sound harsh, but it is becoming, if not already in some countries, a harsh reality. However, the mentality we Pacific Islanders have adopted is not entirely of our own doing. Through international aid, we have developed the expectation that we are not alone and assistance will arrive from all corners of the world, I suppose this is what is meant by “globalization”. While intentions are good, is it really producing “good”?

I could waffle on at this point and cite the financial costs of disasters and the cost of relief supplies and aid to our Pacific countries, but what is the point, instead I would rather look at the social and cultural costs, which in my opinion, is of more value.

I had mentioned earlier that we Pacific Islanders have adopted this “hand-out mentality”, with the emphasis on “adopted” mainly because we were not always this way. If we were to examine how our ancestors dealt with disasters we would be surprised at how resilient they really were. I suppose a key element in their success, was the fact that in their days, there was very little or no assistance of any kind, so in the end, they really only had themselves to rely on. So, how can we go back? The answer is we cannot, but there are lessons we can learn or rather relearn in order to better cope with the devastation of disasters today.

One of the ingredients that made our forefathers more resilient to disasters was the fact that they were prepared. If you look at traditional houses today, which by the way is almost non-existent in many communities, you will notice that they are built with local materials and were in some instances not built to withstand disasters. Why? Because the houses could easily be rebuilt after the disaster. Also, still with housing, some communities collapsed the poles of traditional houses before a cyclone, and reinstalled them after the cyclone had passed. In relation to food, some cultures, when planting food crops, there was always a patch reserved for emergencies. Also we still hear the words “hurricane food” which are foods cooked and prepared in a certain way which makes them last longer. These foods were to sustain a family or community after a disaster. Are any of these still being practiced? There are many, many examples of how our ancestors traditionally prepared themselves for cyclones, floods and other natural disasters, but each culture knows its own traditional methods best.

In essence, there needs to be a general revival of these traditional practices. But is this enough? I would say no, we need to go further and change our mentalities. We need to be able to determine for ourselves what is best for our own communities; we need to determine for ourselves our own methods in dealing with disasters.

On the other hand, we cannot close the door on what the 'outside' has to offer. There are always new methods and tools available to us. The onus then is on those 'outside' to ensure that the tools provided to countries are both relevant and useable. Too often we see new equipment, tools and methodologies provided to countries and literally left to gather dust - why? Because we do not have the capacity to use them **and** maintain them.

But more importantly, let us go back to what the social and cultural costs are? The answer simply is **us**. Every time we allow outside influences to determine how we live, we begin to lose a little of who we are each time. This to many, may sound like nostalgic BS, but think about it, how much of our societies have changed already, and why? I am sure you can figure that out yourselves.

So what is it people? Rice, Grain or Disaster Relief? The choice and its consequences are entirely yours.