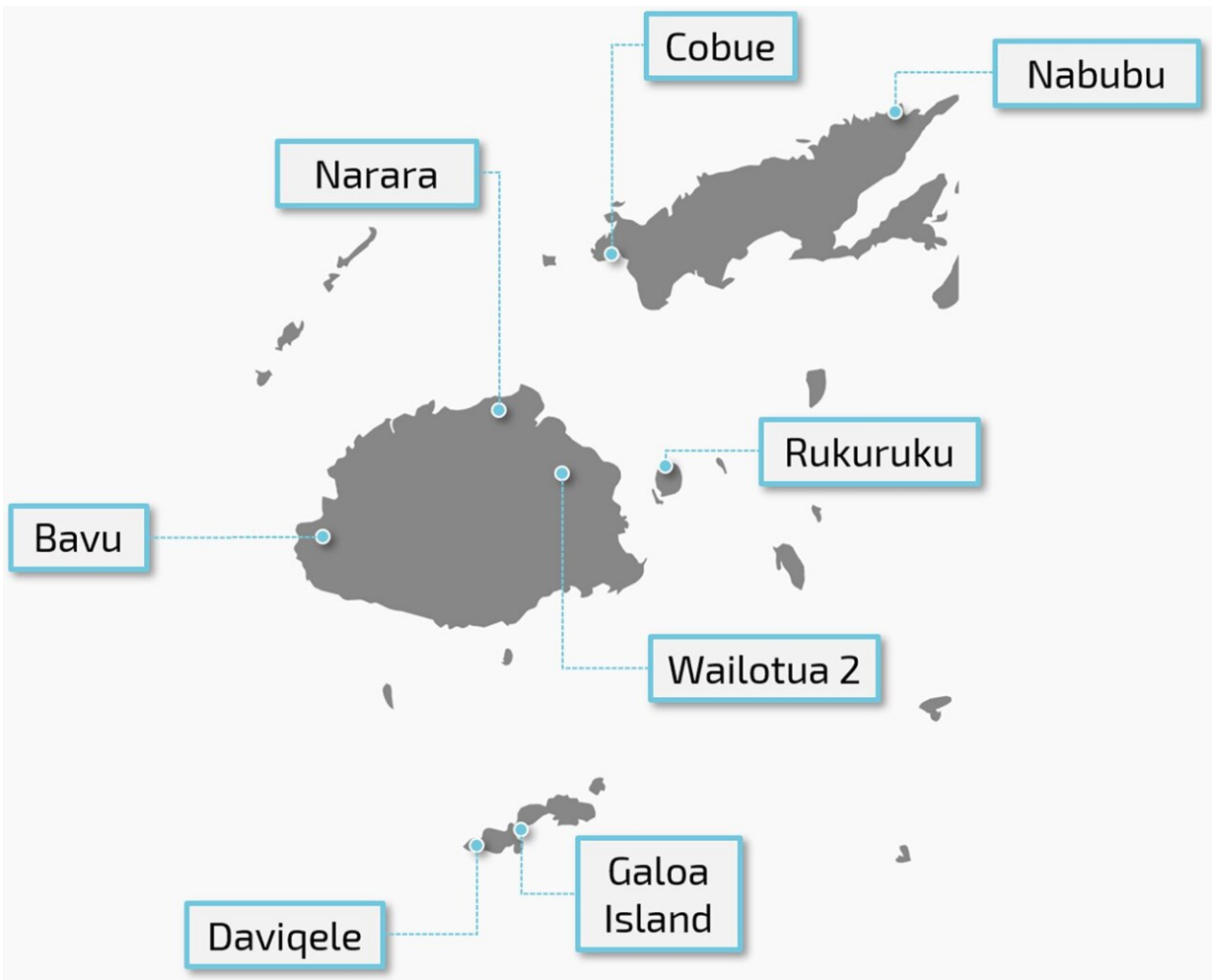


Social networks key to water management and sanitation in the Pacific, says study

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Eight rural communities (case sites) in Fiji. Source: Fiji – R. Sanderson with data from The Pacific Community (SPC) Statistics for Development Division & Open Street Map (2021). Credit: *Water Policy* (2022). DOI: 10.2166/wp.2022.202

A Griffith-led study has found that traditional and digital social networks are key to improving community water management and sanitation in the Pacific.

Published in *Water Policy*, this is the first study of its kind that investigates how social networks are being used to support improved rural water, [sanitation](#) and hygiene (WaSH) outcomes in rural Fiji.

"Pacific Island countries have among the lowest access to improved drinking [water sources](#) and sanitation services in the world," said co-author Dr. Regina Souter from the Australian Rivers Institute and the International WaterCentre.

"Due to geography, climate, the high frequency and severity of disasters, transportation difficulties and resource constraints, government and private sector support for rural populations in the Pacific Islands is often limited."

The ability of governments to offer '[water services](#)' to rural populations in these regions is limited, with it ultimately falling on non-state institutions, such as church, chiefs, and village organizations and committees to provide these services.

"The strong socio-cultural norms of reciprocity, self-help, and obligation that exist in the Pacific Islands allows support around water and sanitation to flow from urban to [rural areas](#)," said lead author Dr. Mark Love, a research fellow at the International WaterCentre and the Australian Rivers Institute.

"Our research shows that social networks built on kinship and place, supported by norms of obligation and reciprocity, constitute a central

part of the WaSH enabling environment in Fiji."

"When people and culture, rather than a government or its agents, enable agreement to ensure equitable access to safe, reliable, and adequate water, they must be appreciated as a critical component of the local WaSH environment."

The study demonstrates that family related urban–rural linkages, customs, relations and practices, and common interest associations like village development committees are an innovative response to social, economic, and [environmental change](#) and can be critical for enabling water, sanitation and hygiene in Fiji.

Migration for reasons of education, work, and [climate change](#) is resulting in 'hybrid' village development committees today being made-up of both rural residents and town-based urban emigrants.

"This provides important opportunities to engage with leaders in urban centers when dealing with rural development issues, such as WASH," Dr. Love noted. "Increasingly, engaging solely with [rural people](#) in the village is no longer acceptable as no longer represents an engagement with the 'whole community'."

With very high mobile connectivity, internet access, and [social media use](#) in Fiji (more than 70% of the population, primarily Facebook, but also TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, as well as messaging apps such as Viber and Messenger), social media has become an important post-disaster buffer, with urban and rural residents able to communicate and organize, providing an adaptive capacity to respond to emergency rural water and sanitation needs in the region.

"In Fiji, [social media](#) has been critical for improving water and sanitation services and to support disaster preparedness and response,"

Dr. Love said.

"For example, Facebook 'live' information discussions have been proactively used as a community development and advocacy tool, known as talanoa, to counter false narratives about COVID-19."

Given the unique character of the Pacific Islands region, using existing social networks to strengthen rural water and sanitation outcomes is a fruitful community water management 'plus' strategy for both governments and non-government organizations alike.

"We argue that in contexts like Fiji, where rural WaSH considerations are on people's radar and a functional degree of trust and accountability permeates social relations and urban–rural linkages, acknowledging and engaging with social networks simply makes sense," Dr. Love said.

"The insights gained from this study can be applied to similar contexts around the world where communities are situated remotely from centralized water, sanitation and hygiene services."

More information: Mark Love et al, Social networks and other forgotten components of the WaSH enabling environment in Fiji, *Water Policy* (2022). [DOI: 10.2166/wp.2022.202](https://doi.org/10.2166/wp.2022.202)

Provided by Griffith University

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