



IFAD/R. Hartman

## Wheelbarrows, a road and a future: South Pacific islanders rediscover their power to change their lives

**Remote Pacific Island communities face increasing socio-economic and environmental uncertainty. The breakdown of traditional community structures has removed an important social safety net. But islanders are reasserting control of their economic and social well-being and achieving spectacular results with the help of an IFAD-supported programme.**

Life in the isolated rural areas of the South Pacific islands of Fiji, Kiribati and Tonga can be challenging. These nations are groupings of scattered islands, where the outlying islands may be hundreds of kilometres from the main island. In Tonga, for example, there are 45 inhabited islands, some as far as 562 kilometres from the main island of Tongatapu.

Food is often scarce and, even on these remote islands, the global economic crisis has had an impact, and reliance on imported food has left these countries vulnerable. Locals are paying more for food as a result of higher fuel and transportation costs. Because of their isolation,

remote island communities receive little support for their social and economic needs. And the breakdown of traditional community structures in recent years has removed yet another social safety net.

“There was a need to empower communities to take charge of their own development,” says Ron Hartman, IFAD’s country programme manager for the Pacific Islands. Today, islanders are rediscovering the power they have to change their lives thanks to Mainstreaming of Rural Development Innovations (MORDI), an IFAD-supported programme implemented by the Foundation for South Pacific International (FSPI), a regional NGO network. The programme has provided essential support for dozens of island communities, working in small, but highly efficient ways.

### **Spectacular fund-raising by a small community helps build a new road**

The village of Hunga in Tonga sits high on a hill above the harbour. For thirty years, the people of Hunga struggled to get their goods to the wharf in order to bring them to market. The wharf is

only one kilometre from the village, but the walk to and from the wharf, on steep, unpaved paths, was difficult.

Local community facilitators realized that a paved road was essential to the community's economic and social well-being. With assistance from MORDI, they worked out a creative way of fund-raising, using information and communication technologies.

In a community where the average income is about US\$58 per month, community members raised US\$100,000 from their own funds and from relatives living abroad. A young person in Hunga set up a social networking website for the Hunga community to help keep overseas families and friends up to date on developments. The road project was posted on the site, along with a barometer of the money collected. Then they looked for outside help and managed to convince the Government of India to fund the completion of the road.

The village now has a new road leading to the wharf. Life is not only easier for the villagers, but they are also able to explore more livelihood opportunities.

"Sustainability is our main focus," says Soane Patolo, National Programme Coordinator of MORDI in Tonga. "In this case, it really was a community organizing themselves."

Through the MORDI training, communities such as Hunga are realizing how much they can achieve when they work hard and together. In Hunga, the success of the road project inspired the community to tackle another long-term

problem – access to drinking water. They are now working collectively to raise funds to fix their community water tanks.

### **Community-led organizations**

The key to MORDI's success is its focus on strengthening the institutional capacity of the communities it works with and enhancing the ability of community-based groups, such as women's and youth groups, to drive the development process.

Community facilitators are central to MORDI's work. They are trained in four important areas: learning, sharing, community strengthening, and economic empowerment. They use a 'bottom up' approach to community development – living, working alongside and understanding the people and their issues.

MORDI also works to increase employment and sustainable livelihood opportunities, especially for women and young people. Once groups are ready, they can apply for community support funds. In addition, the programme helps remote rural communities improve their links with national policy and planning processes, giving these communities a voice at the national level in decisions that affect their lives.

### **A teacher turned community facilitator**

Alamoti Tautakitaki, from Hunga in Tonga, had spent a lifetime inspiring and motivating his students to learn in the Tongan capital of Nuku'alofa. As a retired teacher, he knew he could tap into those same skills to reach out and help others. And he knew that the cycle of inspiration and knowledge would continue, from generation to generation. So Alamoti decided to leave the comfort of town life to go back and help his community in Hunga.

With MORDI's help, Alamoti became a community facilitator. Facilitators are trained to deal with a wide range of issues. They help determine what, realistically, can or cannot be done and guide the community in developing and adjusting their development plans to achieve their goals. They also organize subcommittees within the communities to work alongside traditional village leaders and decision-makers in areas needing the most attention, such as fishing, young people and women's issues, and agriculture.

Alamoti realized that the key to motivating his community was to get more people involved. After he completed his own training, he branched out in the village, training eight willing school dropouts to improve their own facilitation skills. The training had a secondary effect. Other

The Hunga community raised US\$100,000 from their own people and relatives living abroad to build a road to bring goods to market. They also convinced the Government of India to help fund their project





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Young people attend financial literacy training

members of the community were inspired by seeing their friends and neighbours becoming involved. The entire community became very motivated, more willing to help each other and less reliant on outside assistance. And by involving more of the village people in their own economic future, Alamoti found that people felt more powerful. They finally started believing and having confidence that they themselves could be the best agents of their development.

### **Wheelbarrows change lives**

Similar changes occurred in Tonga's remote Lape – a community of only 30 inhabitants three hours from the main island of Vav'ua, another island group in the region – whose members realized that in order to change their lives they needed to think small.

In Lape, people were used to back-breaking work: transporting sweet potatoes, *pandanas* (a material used by the women to make woven goods), animals and even other injured villagers on their backs.

A group of villagers applied for funds from MORDI to buy four wheelbarrows as their community project. Programme staff were initially sceptical, but the wheelbarrows turned out to be an innovative solution to a transportation problem: wheelbarrows bought the villagers freedom and time, improving their earnings by helping them transport goods to the harbour more quickly. Sick people, too, can reach the harbour faster and more comfortably when they need to leave the island to get to a hospital.

As with Hunga, the villagers first raised money in their own community before being able to apply



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MORDI helps communities prioritize their development activities

for a grant from MORDI. The success of the wheelbarrows has inspired the Lape Women's Group to apply for a grant from MORDI to buy a lawnmower. This will help the women reduce several days of work with a hoe or a machete to one day, allowing them to focus on other income-generating opportunities or spend more time with their children.

### Into the future

Thomas Elhaut, Director of IFAD's Asia and the Pacific Division, recently visited Tonga, which is among the three poorest countries in the region. Elhaut believes that agricultural development can not only boost the country's economic growth, but can give more vulnerable groups – especially young people and women – a sense of security.

MORDI-Tonga has received additional funding from other development partners, including the Government of New Zealand, which will enable the programme to expand its support to these remote island communities.

"MORDI is demonstrating a sustainable community development model," says Hartman. "The programme has benefited over 9,000 people in 63 communities in the remote outer islands of Fiji, Kiribati and Tonga. In small but essential ways, lives are changing for the better."

### KEY FACTS

**Mainstreaming of Rural Development Innovations Programme**

**MORDI Phase I**

**Total cost:** approximately US\$2.2 million

**IFAD grant:** US\$2.0 million

**Cofinancing:** NGOs (US\$104,700); Australia and New Zealand Banking Group Limited (US\$90,000); project participants (US\$14,400)

**Duration:** 2005-2008

**Status:** Closed

**MORDI Phase II**

**Total cost:** US\$1.5 million

**IFAD grant:** US\$1.5 million

**Duration:** 2009-2011

**Status:** Ongoing

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### LINKS

**Rural poverty in Asia and the Pacific**

[www.ifad.org/operations/projects/regions/pi/index.htm](http://www.ifad.org/operations/projects/regions/pi/index.htm)

**Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific International (FSPI)**

[www.fspi.org.fj](http://www.fspi.org.fj)

**Stories from the field**

[www.ifad.org/story/index.htm](http://www.ifad.org/story/index.htm)

## Building a poverty-free world

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) works with poor rural people to enable them to grow and sell more food, increase their incomes and determine the direction of their own lives. Since 1978, IFAD has invested over US\$12 billion in grants and low-interest loans to developing countries, empowering more than 350 million people to break out of poverty. IFAD is an international financial institution and a specialized UN agency based in Rome – the UN's food and agricultural hub. It is a unique partnership of 165 members from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), other developing countries and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).



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