

ADB

Priorities of the People

HARDSHIP IN TUVALU

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Asian Development Bank

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Introduction

Especially difficult development challenges confront the small, widely dispersed Tuvalu population of about 9,500. Nearly half of the population now lives on the main capital island of Funafuti. Although Tuvalu recently experienced a sharp boost in prosperity due to revenues generated by the marketing of the “.tv” domain name, fishing licenses, and high investment earnings from the Tuvalu Trust Fund, times are now getting hard for many people. The bursting of the Internet bubble and declines in world capital markets have resulted in economic difficulties and the likelihood of lower incomes for many Tuvaluans.

Analysis of the 1994 Household Income and Expenditure Survey showed that at that time about 23 percent of households were below the basic needs poverty line. This means they did not have enough income to obtain a basic diet and other non-food essentials and therefore had to make difficult choices between buying food, paying school fees, meeting social and community obligations, and paying electricity or fuel bills.

Tuvalu’s traditional social system and culture, in which all those in need are cared for, is beginning to break down as the demand for cash incomes and modern ways influence the country. Migration of people from the outer islands to Funafuti and overseas leading to declining populations on the outer islands and

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rising dependency of those who remain. This is weakening the traditional social and economic subsistence lifestyles that have sustained Tuvalu in the past.

In light of these changes, the issue of hardship can no longer be ignored. The situation is more complicated than merely improving income levels; for many people, particularly those living in the outer islands, hardship is due to poor access to basic services and economic opportunities, or of being unable to realize their own potential and aspirations.

To better understand the nature of hardship in Tuvalu, the government undertook a Participatory Assessment of Hardship in mid-2003 with assistance from the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The assessment identified the needs and priorities of people living in communities throughout the country with different levels of access to services such as education, health, markets, transportation, water, and sanitation.

Six communities were selected for the surveys and interviews, including three on Funafuti (Lofeagai, Nanumea, Mulimalae) and three on central, southern, and northern outer islands (Vaitupu, Nukulaelae, Nanumaga). The assessment team consulted village heads and council members, elders, church leaders, women and youth, as well as community members who were perceived to be suffering most from hardship. A national workshop was held to present the findings of the assessment and discuss strategies and recommendations for addressing the perceived needs of the people.

Is Hardship Really a Problem in Tuvalu?

Most of the people in the communities consulted said they believe poverty does not exist in Tuvalu since people have access to land and food, and they do not see beggars on the street; however, they believe hardship does exist in the country. These hardships include the poor quality, limited reach, and high cost of basic services, particularly power, water, education, transport, and telecommunications.

Overall, the assessment showed that people throughout the country see the need for more jobs and ways to earn income as a

critical issue, and are quite concerned about the poor quality of basic services such as safe water supply. Water is very critical for an atoll country like Tuvalu that has very limited freshwater resources.

These conditions of hardship are leading to social tensions, including the breakdown of families, conflict over different religions, rising crime, and an overall reduction in the quality of life for rich and poor alike.

What is Hardship?

To learn about the people's perceptions of poverty and hardship, the assessment team talked with about 250 people throughout the country. When asked to define poverty, people used the Tuvaluan term *mativa* (meaning having nothing, such as land, money, and other resources). *Olaga Faigata* was the term used for hardship (meaning living in a very difficult situation;

Young Woman, 18 Years Old

I was born in Nukulaelae and lived with my parents, two sisters and two brothers. Our eldest sister got married and moved with her husband to another island. My two younger sisters are in primary school. I went to our secondary school here, however I failed my Form 4 exams, so I did not continue my schooling. My parents, two brothers, and me are not working. One of my brothers was a seafarer, however, he only went overseas once.

The only source of income we have is from my mother selling bread. Her profit is only \$50 a week, which is not enough to meet our basic needs considering the high cost of goods, e.g., rice is A\$1.00, sugar \$1.30 and flour \$1.05. To supplement our income, we also harvest local food from some of our lands. There are some land disputes between my family and our extended family so we

only have limited use of our lands. I have a cousin sister in the Marshall Islands, who is trying to get me to the Marshall Islands so I can find a job. However, she still hasn't confirmed that plan yet and in the meantime I stay home and do the laundry, clean the house, and help my mum.

In the future, I want my family to have a proper modern house so we can live happily. I also want to get a job so I can help my family financially, especially for my sisters to have a good education, so they can assist our family too.

It is very important to establish a vocational school not only for our community, but also for the whole of Tuvalu. In this way, jobless youth like me can be trained and expand our skills and help improve the well-being of families and the community.

**Most said their
situation is
now becoming
worse again**

living in a thatched roofed house; earning money and gathering food through hard labor; being dependent on relatives for food, money, and shelter; and supporting too many dependents in the household).

When asked if things had become better or worse over the past 5 years, most communities surveyed said 3–5 years ago their situation improved due to better access to some basic services, but that it was becoming worse again due to the deterioration of these services. The improvement was due to many homes becoming connected to power and telephone services, construction of water cisterns and distribution of water tanks, and construction of a health clinic and primary school on each of the outer islands. In the urban areas, having the road tar-sealed and extended throughout the island capital was seen as an important improvement.

Who is Facing Hardship?

The people consulted, particularly those from the outer islands, said “We are all experiencing hardship here and no one is experiencing more hardship than the rest.” This sense of shared disadvantage, seen as different from being poor, was common in most of the communities surveyed. However, during the discussions there were indications of emerging differences in Tuvaluan society based on income, where people occupying high-level government positions, people who own businesses, and families with relatives working overseas were perceived as doing well. Those not belonging to these categories were considered to be facing considerable hardship.

Those surveyed identified disadvantaged Tuvaluans based on their access to income, land, and basic services and not on access to food. Thus, hardship in Tuvalu is more closely linked to poverty of opportunity rather than hunger or destitution.

The following groups were said to be suffering more hardship than the rest of the community:

- People without a regular source of income,
- Those without access to land (settlers),
- People with large families (supporting many children and

- relatives),
- Abandoned elders (whose children moved to the capital or overseas),
- Mentally challenged and physically handicapped people,
- Orphans,
- Women with alcoholic spouses,
- Widows and single mothers without regular income,
- Elderly childless couples, and
- Families living in squatter areas.

Families living on squatter lands were perceived to be in extreme hardship due to their poor living conditions—lack of or poor toilet facilities and absence of household water tanks. Community water tanks are available, but collecting the water and the irregular supply were cited as hardships.

The majority of those surveyed said that disadvantaged people were present in both urban and rural/outer island areas. Interestingly, people in the urban areas believed that those on the outer islands experience more hardship, while those on the outer islands believe hardship is worse in urban areas.

Elderly Man, 65 Years Old

I have four grown-up children and am currently staying with my son, his wife, and their daughter who is studying at Motufoua Secondary School. In 1972, I went to work for the Phosphate Scheme in the Ocean Islands. It ended in 1979 so I came back to Nukulaelae. I didn't find any job when I returned. I then resumed with our traditional chores like going to the *pulaka* pits and so forth.

Both my son and his wife are not working. However, our family manages to earn A\$80-\$100 weekly from selling fish. During bad weather my son cannot go out fishing, so our family needs to manage our funds properly in order for us to survive and for my granddaughter to attend school. Our expenses include payments for my granddaughter's school fees and other necessities, food items at the store, and contributions to the community and church. The money we get from my son's fishing is not

enough to support us financially. But we manage to harvest bananas, breadfruits, *pulaka*, and *pavpaws* from our lands for food.

In the future, I want my son to have an adequate concrete house and my granddaughter to have a good education so they may live happily and peacefully. I also want to have a concrete foundation for my pigsty and a proper fence so I can sell pork to the Tuvalu Cooperative Society and earn some money.

For our community, improvement of our harbor is a priority to assist our young men, who are the backbone of our community, in handling and delivering cargo. Improvement of our education system is another significant issue for our grandchildren to help improve the well-being of their families, the community, and Tuvalu as a whole.

What Causes Hardship?

Although the causes of hardship are complex and interrelated, six major categories of perceived causes emerged during the assessment. The people perceived that hardship is caused by (i) limited access to quality basic services; (ii) limited opportunities to earn money, particularly for women and youth; (iii) overcrowding and overpopulation of households and communities; (iv) the deteriorating social support system; (v) too many familial, church, community, and island contributions; and (vi) idleness and a “dependency attitude.”

Poor Service Delivery

The poor quality, limited availability, and high cost of basic services were cited as the most critical cause of hardship by the people consulted. All six communities consulted had a primary school, health clinic, water, power, telephone, road, and transportation. However, the quality of many of these services was poor mainly due to inadequate maintenance, high costs, few qualified staff, and lack of supplies.

Water supply was perceived as poor in most outer islands due to poor rainwater collection and storage. Since most households depend on rainwater, efficient collection (mostly through the roof gutters) and storage were major concerns among the communities surveyed. Due to limited or absence of maintenance work, a number of community water cisterns and tanks were reportedly leaking, thus further limiting water storage capacity.

For Funafuti communities, the regular power outages were deemed a major inconvenience and cause of hardship. During the 2 weeks the assessment was conducted, power outages occurred almost every day and lasted for about 2–4 hours or more. These resulted in food spoilage, premature consumption of a family’s food budget, and damage to expensive household appliances such as refrigerators. Power outages had reportedly become more frequent since the new hospital opened, and people expressed concern about increased demand for power when the new government building opens in early 2004. Other than power, communities on Funafuti had relatively good access to services such as telecommunications, transport, and markets.

**The quality of
many services is
poor**



Water collection and storage is a concern

For the outer islands, the most common causes of hardship were limited and expensive telephone services, poor education and health services, inadequate water supply, bad road conditions, and poor market access.

Telephone connections suffered from regular service disruptions that at times lasted for months, due to limited available lines (usually two on each outer island surveyed), poor power supply, bad weather, and absence of skilled technicians to fix the lines. In the case of Nukulaelae Island, people reported that no one could call in or out for about 3 months. These disruptions effectively isolated the outer islands from Funafuti, the administrative center, and relatives overseas.

All outer island communities had a primary school, but most reportedly did not have enough qualified teachers, appropriate textbooks, or facilities. On Vaitupu Island, the location of the only secondary school in the country, people reported having similar problems, including no running water in the children's dormitories and toilets (which resulted in a typhoid outbreak in early 2000).

There were generally one or two nurses stationed in the clinics on each of the outer islands surveyed. Doctors were only assigned to the hospital in the capital; during emergencies, patients from the

outer islands had to travel by boat to Funafuti or fly to Fiji for treatment.

Access to markets to buy and sell fish on the outer islands was reported to be good due to effective Community Fisheries Centers established by the government under the Fisheries Department. However, limited access to markets for handicrafts, one of the most common activities for women, restricted their ability to earn income locally. Handicrafts were sent to the capital through the women's island handicraft centers and sold in the handicraft center on Funafuti or in front of the Funafuti airport during flight arrivals and departures.

Need for Education and Livelihood Opportunities

The people consulted during the assessment said those who finish only Form 4 in school cannot get good jobs; they believed completing Form 6 or 7 as well as having a degree or higher qualifications are required. Some, particularly the youth, were said to be poorly educated because their families could not afford to pay their school fees, they lacked personal motivation, or they did not have the intellectual capacity to continue their studies.

For those who could not get a job placement, there were very few alternative options; a place in the highly competitive Tuvalu Maritime Training Institute was the most sought after. For female youth, the options were seen to be even more limited, comprising only two privately-owned computing schools and the University of the South Pacific (USP) extension campus on Funafuti, both of which could accommodate very few new students and had very limited facilities. There was demand for a vocational school for young men and women who cannot get into the Maritime Training Institute or the USP extension center.

The need for more livelihood opportunities was mentioned by women, the elderly, and youth. Women highlighted their need for tools, especially for softening the *pandanus* leaves to make mats—this reportedly caused painful muscle injuries on their backs, shoulders, and arms. Women also cited the limited market to sell their mats to earn cash for food and school fees. For the elderly, some were left on the outer islands by children who went overseas or to the capital to work, leaving them without a regular source of income but often responsible for young dependents. Young people, especially those on the outer islands, cited very few opportunities after finishing Form 4. They are limited to construction work,

**A vocational
school is
needed**



small businesses such as canteens, cargo handling, and low-level or menial government jobs.

Overcrowding

During the assessment, many people said hardship was caused by large numbers of extended family members living in one house. Some claimed to have 13–15 people living in a 10 x 6 meter house, which put pressure on the family’s food supply (now mostly bought from stores), and stress on water supply, sanitation, and children’s health. Also, the youth group said overcrowding leads to “having arguments all the time at home” and that “very few people are working and earning.” Mothers stated that overcrowding has a noticeable impact on their children; skin diseases occur when there is poor sanitation and not enough water for washing. Aside from lack of land and limited funds, overcrowding was said to be due to the common practice in Tuvalu where married children, particularly sons with their wives, live with their extended family so they can take care of their elders. However, this practice was seen to be declining as young couples with jobs prefer to live on their own and support their extended families when they can.

**Only 60 students
are admitted each
year to the Tuvalu
Maritime Training
Institute**

About 14

people lived in

a 10 x 6 meter

house

Communities also perceived that available land was decreasing due to overpopulation. This was cited as a major hardship particularly for people on the outer islands like Vaitupu and Nukulaelae, where a family of 12–15 or more were said to share a piece of land much smaller than a hectare to build their house and grow food. Although census data shows that outer island populations are dropping, this view can be explained by young families wanting to build their own nuclear family house and not having enough room within the ancestral land holding. Those living in the urban areas on Funafuti said the rapid population growth and overcrowding was leading to decreasing land available for shelter and food. This was resulting in housing congestion, health and sanitation problems, and serious waste management issues. Borrow pits that used to be used for garbage disposal were being reclaimed by landowners for housing due to the high demand for land.

Cultural and Social Change

Increasing social problems such as alcoholism, drug abuse, gambling, lack of respect for elders, and school absenteeism were cited as causes of hardship during the assessment. People in the urban areas highlighted the increasing consumption of alcohol by youths and men, particularly construction workers and paid laborers. This reportedly caused quarrels between husband and wife when much of the husband's income was used to buy alcohol rather than food. Marijuana smoking among the youth, especially those who have worked overseas, was also an increasing concern. The elders mentioned loss of respect by young people, such as young people talking back when being given a lecture by their parents, or drunken people harassing elders on the roads at night. Frequent school absenteeism and dropping out due to peer influence, access to alcohol and nightclubs in the capital and on Vaitupu, and low personal motivation to finish school were other causes mentioned.

Although the traditional support system in the communities was perceived to still be strong, there were a few elderly people who had no one to support them financially or help them cultivate the land. This was explained by changing attitudes or Westernization of the younger generation, particularly those who had been overseas. Their preference is to only support their immediate rather than their extended families. This concern was expressed by most of the communities surveyed. Most elderly people said they wanted to be financially independent, rather than having to rely on

relatives as was customary, for example, by leasing their lands to have a regular source of income.

Cultural Obligations

Too many familial, church, community, and island contributions were said to be a major cause of hardship in Tuvalu. Men and women, particularly those from the capital, said these contributions are draining their household income. Some communities required households to provide about A\$1,000 each, often payable over 1–5 years. People without work were also expected to contribute. Some said that people still give contributions even though they are a burden because of the Tuvaluan custom that inhibits people from admitting that they are having difficulty and cannot afford to contribute.

**Many rely only
on relatives for
financial
support**

Widow, 75 Years Old

I am 75 years old. My father worked as a salesperson in the Niutao Fusi. I lived on Niutao ever since I was born. I got married at the age of 17 and joined my husband at Ocean Island where he was employed as a phosphate worker for 12 years.

We have 13 children. Three are living on Funafuti and the rest are overseas. My husband died at the age of 36 while our children were still very young. They all attended school and I had difficulties paying their school fees. My brothers were very supportive and understanding; they paid for my children's school fees.

In 1990, I came to live in the capital as three of my children got jobs here. Life here is very different to that of the outer islands. Everything costs money, nothing is free. There are 13 of us, six adults and seven children, all living in a 12 x 6 meter thatch-roofed house with a raised floor made of timber. We have a water tank, fridge, and kerosene stove. Two of my sons work with combined earnings of just over A\$200 a week. My daughter-in-law receives remittances from one of my sons overseas and she

gets \$100 a month. Life is basically expensive for us, as we have to buy all our food from the shops except fish. My sons fish for our family. We are not able to plant any crops or put up a farm around our house because there is no space—it is too crowded around our house.

Ever since I came to the capital we have often experienced water problems. We collect very little water because we have a thatched roof. We do not have any toilet in the house and therefore we use the lagoon or the sea. Since it is a public place, we can only go to the toilet in the evenings. At my age it is very difficult to use toilet and bath in the sea especially at night. When we run out of water we get help from our neighbor.

There is no water project in our village like the other villages. A government water truck can be hired but it will cost us \$15 for 500 gallons. This is quite expensive and we cannot afford it. I hope the government or someone in our village can take the initiative to get a water project for our village to address the problem.

The people surveyed also said that due to extended family ties, there are many people who rely only on relatives for financial support. They said this has led to idleness and a “dependency attitude,” and hardship for the people providing the support. Since it is difficult to refuse requests for assistance, they end up spending most of their income on these extended family obligations and community contributions, leaving little for family needs and virtually nothing for savings.

Especially Affected Groups

The people surveyed during the assessment mentioned specific causes of hardship for three especially affected groups: children, youth, and women.



Children

Hardship among children was said to be caused by parental neglect due to the breakdown of marriages; parents spending too much time on community activities, gambling and drinking; and parents being unaware of the importance of spending quality time with their children. People also mentioned the low quality of education, poor nutrition, large families, and limited water supply and transport as causes of hardship for children.

Youth

Joblessness was said to be the major cause of hardship among the youth and was said to be due to their lack of interest in school, dropping out of school, being unskilled, and having too few jobs available. Many young people said they find it difficult to get the sort of jobs they would like—a subsistence farming life is

no longer very attractive to them. Youth were also said to face burdensome contributions for community youth activities and family needs. Alcohol and drug abuse, lack of discipline, and early marriage were cited as other causes of hardship for young people.

Women

Women said the major causes of hardship for them are having too many roles to play (traditional household and community roles with the addition of income earning responsibilities), domestic violence compounded by men's alcoholism and gambling, breakdown of marriages, supporting large extended families, and "too many community contributions." All six communities surveyed said that men and women decide jointly on how money is spent, and the number of children they will have. There were, however, observations that couples do not consciously decide on the number of children they will have. Overall, women felt their situation is improving due to better educational opportunities, particularly at the tertiary level, increasing community recognition of their contributions, and impact on community decision-making. Although they are not represented in the community or island councils, women's needs were seen to be increasingly recognized by the all-male councils of elders. Lastly, women's appointment to high-level government positions (e.g., permanent/assistant secretaries, heads of departments) has contributed to women's increasing participation in governance at the national level.

What Can Be Done?

After listening to the views of the poor and understanding the nature of hardship, what can be done to address it? Working together with those facing hardship to plan, prioritize, and implement solutions has a good chance of leading to successful, lasting initiatives. Before planning such initiatives, it is important to understand the communities' view of current assistance programs, how they currently cope with hardship, and most importantly, their priorities and suggestions for future action.

Current Initiatives to Address Hardship

Community fund raising and church fund raising were the two main community initiatives to address hardship identified during

**Community
and church
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the main
activities**

the assessment. Community fund raising activities were organized by local communities in the capital and outer islands to raise funds to pay for school fees, funerals, and community gatherings, as well as to fund community projects such as water storage tanks and sea wall construction. Church fund raising involved families contributing money for the pastor, church building, or mission support.

Some community members were aware of government initiatives to address hardship, most notably infrastructure projects and trust funds. Among these initiatives, the Tuvalu Trust Fund and the Falekaupule Trust Fund were the most commonly known among the communities. These were followed by water supply, education, livelihood, and harbor improvement projects in all six communities surveyed. The communities were aware of projects funded by ADB and the Canadian and Japanese governments. There was also a high level of awareness of the Government's role in the facilitation of these projects.

When designing future development projects it would be useful to consider the community initiatives listed above and how the communities perceive government and donor-funded projects.

Woman, 30 Years Old

I was born in Kiribati and have been living here in the capital for 29 years. I have 3 sisters and no brother. All my sisters were married and then divorced by their husbands. My education level was only up to Class 6 as I was not able to pass the entrance examination to Motufoua Secondary School.

I have 3 children with different fathers, 2 girls aged 11 years old and 7 months old. My only boy is 6 years old. I have never worked since I left school because there are no jobs available and to make it worse I did not complete the minimum requirement of Form 6. I am a singer locally (not professionally). I never thought or was told that my talent could be developed into an opportunity.

All along I have wanted to work, but caring and looking after my children is a real problem because my mum is 73 years old and sickly so she can't look

after them. I look after my mum, my children, and my sister's children. I clean the house, cook, and wash for the family. The father of my youngest daughter is supporting her by sending money every month. My father and my two sisters, with their two children, are all working. Their total income a week is about A\$370.

There are 17 of us all living in one house that is about 11 x 4 meters wide. We do not have a water tank, so we fetch our water from the community tank. We do not have a fridge or washing machine. We only have a kerosene stove and stereo. We live mainly on food bought from the shops for we cannot grow any crops outside our house because the soil is poor and the land does not belong to us. Our father is too old to go fishing so we buy our fish from the market too.

Most communities expressed their willingness to contribute land, labor, some construction materials, partial funding, and food for future projects. Project achievements can be sustained by more actively seeking community participation not only in construction but also in maintenance, a concern repeatedly raised by the communities during the assessment.

Coping Strategies

Communities have evolved their own strategies to cope with hardship, such as working as a community and utilizing family networks. Supporting the strengthening of these strategies and community capacity building will help communities be stronger partners in development to reduce hardship.

To help them cope during crises, most communities surveyed during the assessment ranked their immediate families, extended family, and their church as the most responsive and dependable during crises. They ranked their clan, community organizations, village/island councils, and government departments as secondary in importance. Members of Parliament were ranked third.

People said their immediate families are the first to provide food, money, or shelter, while churches provide spiritual support. The clan provides additional assistance similar to that of the extended family, although on a smaller scale. Community organizations such as women's and youth groups, including nongovernment organizations like the Red Cross, provide assistance in kind and moral support. Village/island councils are seen to provide support in the form of organizing community activities, such as to support families that need extra assistance in tending their garden or *pulaka* (root crop) pits or fixing the water supply. Government departments, according to the communities, are the first ones to respond during natural disasters.

People's Priorities

During the assessment, the communities suggested several priority actions to address hardship and poverty.

Economic Opportunities

- Expand income generation opportunities, particularly for women and youth, by improving the quality and appropriateness of education, access to skills training, improved

production tools, and identifying additional markets for local products; and

- Improve cargo handling and lower freight charges, especially in the outer islands.

Access to and Quality of Basic Services

- Improve the quality of basic services in the urban areas and outer islands, particularly power, water supply, health, education, and communications through regular maintenance, assignment of qualified health and teaching staff, and reduction of service charges;
- Construct a vocational school for the youth;
- Provide access to housing loans to address the problem of overcrowding of households, particularly in the capital; and
- Provide sports facilities and equipment

Improve

service quality

and income

opportunities

Other Priorities and Capacity Building Needs

Other community priorities identified during the assessment were assisting local businesses, building a youth center, improving water cisterns and sanitation facilities, rehabilitating sea walls, tar sealing roads, providing welfare benefits for the elderly, and providing credit schemes.

There were five major categories of skills, according to importance, identified by the communities to allow them to actively participate in future development initiatives. These were:

- Gardening skills for food security;
- Home economics skills such as proper nutrition, sewing, cooking, baking, household budgeting, and making water safe for drinking;
- Income generation skills such as establishing and operating businesses, carpentry, piggery operation, and computer skills; and
- Management skills to strengthen community based organizations, including planning, communications, and leadership techniques.



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