



## Autumn Story

Waqa (left) and Elena are working with SEEP to make sure young people and women have a say in local affairs. CWS/Steve Hamlin

# LIVING ON A MINEFIELD

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**W**aqa has spent his life in Nadakuni village, a two hour drive on rough roads from Suva. It is the centre of his world and the place where everybody knows who he is and where he fits. He works the land, cares for his family and takes part in all the village events. It is a rich life but one that is in danger.

Deep in Fiji's rugged hills, villagers like Waqa are worried about the future. For centuries they have grown food on fertile slopes and gathered more from its creeks and rivers. They have maintained their traditional ways and adapted to the changes made necessary by modern life. They work hard to make a good life for their family and clan.

But they face more challenges. The need for money continues to increase and the land can no longer support everyone. Many of the young people head to Suva in the hope of jobs and enough money to help their family at home. Some take the longer route to New Zealand, leaving family back home to take care of their traditions and property.

The biggest challenges are becoming clearer. In 2014, Cyclone Winston signalled the beginning of more intense weather systems from climate change. Widespread devastation left many communities struggling to respond. Already coastal villages have moved to higher ground because of rising seas.

The rich mineral resources beneath their land and on the ocean floor are adding to their sense of danger. Alongside climate change, extractive industries are



There are rich mineral deposits under the land and in the ocean. SEEP wants to make sure that mining decisions are made fairly to protect the future of everyone.

threatening to cause the most harm. Confusion and disagreement around gold and other mining operations have strained relations in some villages. There are big questions about where profits will go, what will be the impact on community life and who will be left to cope with polluted waterways and mine tailings. Fijians are concerned that their government will not be able to negotiate a deal in their interest when faced with huge transnational corporations.

## MAI DEMOCRACY

Waqa is part of a team of people determined that the rural *i-taukei* or indigenous Fijians will have the skills and knowledge to participate in decisions that



***“We want to get past the small talk and increase the trust,” says Waqa.***

will shape their future. Part of SEEP (Social Empowerment Education Programme) he has learned new skills and is keen to strengthen democracy in Fiji.

SEEP has developed a uniquely Fijian way of working using what they call *Mai* democracy. Meaning “come” it is an invitation for all to be involved in decision making. Beginning in the village women’s and young people’s groups, SEEP has helped villages find new ways to include their views.

Growing up, Waqa learnt respect, keeping silent especially when being spoken to by an adult, and accepting the decisions made without question. With SEEP, he has found his voice. As a leader of the young people’s group he has pioneered ways to present their perspectives in village meetings. By working closely with Elena from the women’s group, they have broken the silence and won the trust of the male-dominated *Bose Vakaro* or village meeting.

Reflecting with people like Waqa and Elena, SEEP has developed a new model based on training key mobilisers in the village, something they are keen to share. Beginning with a kava ceremony, SEEP starts a process that is designed to keep everybody on board. They take time to get to know people, while watching for local leaders and listening for unmet needs and real concerns. “We want to get past the small talk and increase the trust,” says Waqa.

## **TAKING DEMOCRACY TO THE NEXT LEVEL**

SEEP has established good relationships in the village and trained people like Elena and Waqa who are keen to share their success. Very much a local organisation, they want to build democracy by giving people the skills and space to ask the right questions for their own development.

In a new programme called *Go Organic! Grow Organic!* they plan to expand their work into 20 rural villages, some of which they worked with after Cyclone Winston, trained in disaster preparedness, or sit on mineral deposits.



SEEP plans to give rural communities the skills and resources they need to protect their rights and improve their livelihoods.

Knowing the very real challenge Fiji faces, CWS recognises the importance of funding this next stage in SEEP’s programme. Locally driven, it will strengthen democracy in Fiji and make sure no one is left behind.

**With your support today, we can provide SEEP with the resources they need to run a successful programme in all 20 villages.** They will meet with the whole community and run workshops to teach new skills. The focus will be on addressing community concerns and when necessary backing it up with further research or outside expertise. Without that support, village councils and government may make decisions about mining that leave the people unprotected and the land destroyed.

**Please support the Autumn Appeal so our partner can prepare vulnerable rural communities for the challenges that lie ahead.**

**Thanking you so much for helping to build democracy in Fiji.**

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