

# INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR DISASTER RISK REDUCTION 2013

## LIVING WITH DISABILITY & DISASTER

### In Their Words

*Have you ever considered how disability is affected by disaster? Step into the shoes of people who have a hearing impairment, vision impairment, spinal injury or are a psychiatric survivor, as they talk about what it's like to experience a natural disaster and how Fiji can better support people with disabilities when disaster strikes.*



**Venasio Tamainai**  
Fiji Association for the Deaf (FAD)

I experienced natural disasters when I was about 9 years old in Taveuni where my family and I lived at the time. I have two sisters who are both deaf as well and we were in the village but had no idea a hurricane was about to strike. There was no TV back in the village but my Dad always listened to his small transistor radio and heard about a hurricane coming. My Dad looked for us but we were out playing with the other children so he came and got us and told us to come back home and help secure the house and then stay inside. I was wondering what was happening and when I looked outside I could see strong winds. The trees were swaying in the strong winds, an indication that a hurricane was coming and at night it struck. I couldn't hear but I could feel things banging and falling. The radio said the hurricane would last two days and warned against going outside. When we finally opened the doors after the hurricane had passed we saw fallen coconut trees and coconuts everywhere with lots of damage around.

It is very important that information is disseminated to everyone through things like text messages and through sign language interpreters on TV, as well as other visual signs that a natural disaster is coming. It is important that we have this kind of support from the government because as we all know disaster does not discriminate, it affects everybody. That includes persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities.

A final message I'd like to share is that it is important that awareness work is carried out all around the nation. It's a collaborative effort between government and Disabled People's Organizations. We need to work together to raise awareness. We need to work together not alone.



**Vetaia Seniualekaleka Fotu**  
United Blind Persons (UBP)

During cyclone Evan last year I was working at Treasure Island resort when the cyclone hit the western side of Fiji. We were told by our General Manager to stay inside and that all the guests were to fly back to the mainland immediately. It was really hard because it was the first time for me to work on an island that was affected by a cyclone. It was tough in many ways, especially because all the guests were evacuated and we were left behind for the night, but in other ways it was good because I got to know the people I was working with and we could support each other.

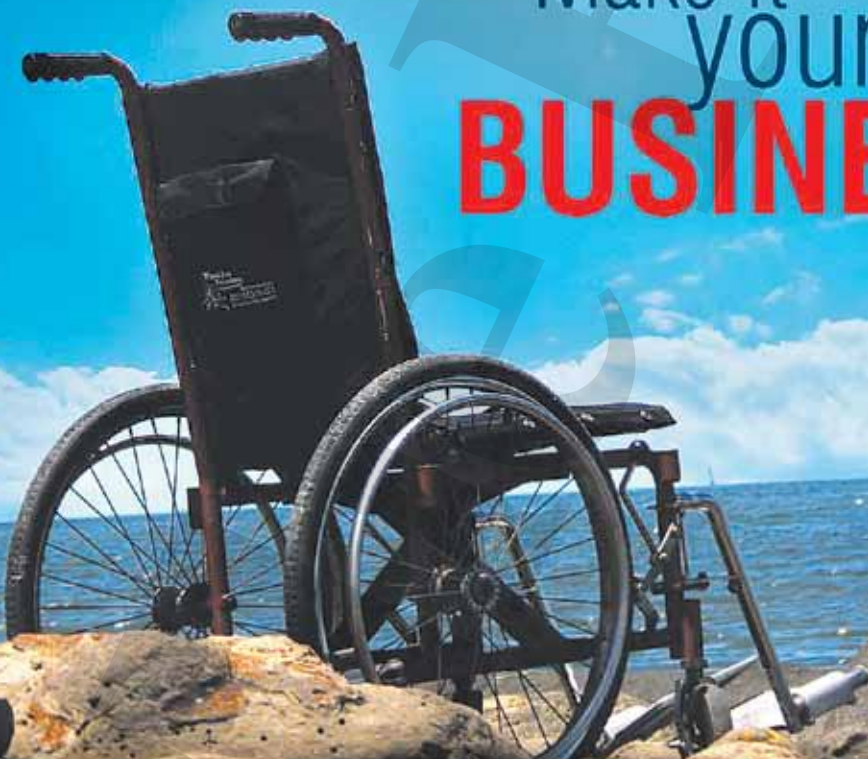
When I hear stories about people being turned away from evacuation centers during a natural disaster, for example because they communicated through sign language and the staff at the evacuation center did not understand them, it makes me feel badly. Accessibility of evacuation buildings and emergency services is a big issue when disaster strikes. For me with vision impairment it's very hard because people don't understand how to communicate with people with a disability or how to support them. My own person experiences have taught me that Fiji should support people with vision impairments, actually all people with disabilities, when a disaster strikes.

The awareness being raised through the International Day for Disaster Reduction is excellent because it let's all people with all abilities know that we need each other, at all times, not only during good times but during hard times as well.



INCLUDE DISABILITY IN DISASTERS....

Make it  
your  
**BUSINESS**



**Juitatia Senibiau**  
Spinal Injury Association (SIA)

I've attended workshops focusing on living with disability during disasters before. For me, it was very interesting attending these workshops and then visiting evacuation centers around town. I went to three evacuation centers and only one of them was accessible which is a big issue for people with disabilities.

Accessibility is a very important issue and needs to be taken seriously. I recommend that all evacuation centers become accessible so that persons with disabilities are not turned away during natural disasters and so that their needs can be better catered for.

People with disabilities should receive priority assistance from the government and the community. I was once rescued from a fire in a building and members of the community made sure I was assisted first. They knew I was in a wheelchair and they assisted me to safety. Having the support of your community is important and as a community we should make sure that all evacuation centers are made accessible, have appropriate provisions including medical supplies and real food not just junk food. You never know when disaster will strike and it pays to be prepared.



**Arishma Nandini**  
Psychiatric Survivors Association (PSA)

As you know when it comes to natural disasters everyone is affected, whether you're able bodied or a person with a disability. I think this year's International Day for Disaster Reduction is specifically including people with disabilities where as previously there was disaster awareness but it did not include people with disabilities. By moving on this the United Nations and more recently our government is acknowledging that we are part of a vulnerable group that need to be considered. I would think the government is making some positive changes within existing policies to include people with disabilities and better support them.

My message to the people of Fiji is we all need to be better prepared for natural disasters. In recent times Fiji has very much been affected by flooding. When we think about floods many people are farmers and heavily affected by flooding as it disrupts their only source of income and livelihood, which leaves people feeling vulnerable. If you hear a hurricane, cyclone or flash flood is coming, being prepared will make all the difference. Stock up your food and water, and make preparations for a safe house or to go to higher ground if you feel unsafe in your area. Most importantly, do not forget about persons with disabilities and make sure to include them in decision-making and preparations regarding natural disasters.