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## **We don't have time to wait for the government to help us**

**A conversation with climate activist Lavenia Naivalu, from Fiji, about climate **change** adaptation, traditional knowledge, and the fight to preserve marine protected areas**

*Lavenia Naivalu was an important representative of civil society who had travelled to Lisbon for the UN Ocean Conference in late June 2022 to raise the profile of small-scale fisheries and their coastal communities. In Fiji, she is one of the prominent activists in the fight against climate and being the first woman to head a district there, and she is also organized in the LMMA Network (Locally Managed Marine Areas Network, <https://lmmanetwork.org/>). They prepared their activities in Lisbon in cooperation with representatives of artisanal fisheries from Africa and Latin America. One outcome of this collaboration was a Call for Action to protect the livelihoods of small-scale fisheries and coastal communities in the Global South.*

*We met them for a conversation on the last day of the conference.*

*Cornelia Wilss: You are the first female community leader in Fiji's history. Could you please describe your responsibilities?*

**Lavenia Naivalu:** I come from a group of small islands in western Fiji; we have large coral reefs in the sea where we can fish to feed our families and sell the surpluses to earn some money. Actually, what I do is to manage seven traditional villages and two informal settlements, and I take responsibility for 2,000 people. My primary job is to coordinate

administrative tasks. I am employed by the government of Fiji and am the representative of my district to the government and other private or non-government work.

*In several statements, you and to other representatives of fishing communities refer to Sustainable Development Goal 14.b (SDG 14.b). How can small-scale artisanal fishers' access to marine resources and markets be improved?*

Talking about the access to resources, means also to talk about the women's part in the fisheries sector and the empowerment of women among themselves. And now the government has given recognition to the important work of women in our traditional system and appointed me to this position. Believe me, it is not for self-promotion! I have been directly elected by the people as their representative, which basically means I am representing people's voice.

Above all, we try to empower women in our communities. For example, I brought in the *Fiji Women's Crisis Centre*, a very influential non-governmental organization. I got them to come to the villages and empower the women! The local people need to be trained. We can talk about all these goals at the national and UN level. But there is a big gap at grassroots implementation.



Foto: LMMA Network

**“Women’s roles in fisheries and fishing communities must be recognised, documented and heard to address food security, eradicate hunger and poverty, support economic growth, and build resilient nations”** (Lavenia Naivalu, Fiji’s LMMA Network International representative at the UN Ocean Conference.)

*What are you specifically doing on the ground?*

We have developed a sustainable development plan in our district, a 20-year plan to be precise. And now it's about the various steps of implementation. My tasks and responsibilities include all areas of development in the region, from the village to the smallest hut. I take care of educational tasks, health, environmental and climate issues, and food security. With the activities we have undertaken so far, we have already achieved at least 20 to 30% of the goals we set. So, we are doing quite a lot. Not to forget protecting the oceans and trying to get our climate change adaptation projects up and running.

*Could you give us an example?*

We have implemented a new concept to ensure water supply to households. The Fiji Island chain has been known since the days of our ancestors for the need to tap underground water. We have water sources, one of which is the God-given rain, we have spring water, we have borehole water, and we have wells. So, we have water, but there is no plumbing system that provides us with water day and night. So, in my region, we have worked out a water management plan and started training several villages and in the informal settlements. We really need to network better in the future. Do you know how the big NGOs work? They are not coordinating their projects among themselves, and they are not coordinating their projects with the local demands. For *WWF Pacific*, I've seen that they focus more on training and management. The *Habitat for Humanity* guys, for example, have developed concrete sanitation projects. However, they lack the resources to do management training. I tried to bring *WWF* and *Habitat for Humanity* together for better coordination of projects, instead of each organization doing its own work.

### *How does the climate catastrophe affect your commitment?*

The effects of climate change are the greatest problem we face. After the big cyclone Winston, all the houses along the coastline in my village were destroyed. Most of the houses are located just one meter from the sea. When the water comes, half of the village will be flooded. No one can imagine what we are going through. You see, we can't wait for the government and NGOs to help us. My own people are doing something to adapt to climate change. And I tell them what to do (she laughs). Time is running out.

### *One example please ...*

Once I get informed that there is strong erosion on a particular stretch of coast, I get on the phone on Sunday evening and call the village leaders. They must plant grass there on Monday. The chiefs then make sure that everyone in the village knows about it, so that the people really all come together. "This is our activity for the day. You all must come and bring one with you. Right. You have to do that, and you have to come with your five brothers and sisters or whatever." That's how they round up people, or something like that. This is exactly what we're trying to do to save ourselves. In other words, we want to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 14b without the government and NGOs coming in and telling us what to do. We are doing our own science based on traditional knowledge.

### *How powerful is traditional knowledge?*

You know, what I try to tell people at home is that our ancestors, with their traditional knowledge, predicted that climate change would be our enemy. They knew that this time that we are experiencing now would come. In our generation, people have become comfortable and built their homes on the beaches because they were then close to their food sources. Unlike our forefathers. They settled on the hills because they knew they would be better protected there. That is traditional knowledge. They also grew more crops, not just cassava, which grows quickly in the hills. They planted sweet potatoes and yams or kawai. Cyclones are less likely to affect these crops because they sprout close to the ground. For example, I have used the two years of the COVID 19 pandemic to bring traditional practices back to our villages. Before the pandemic, there were only three older women in the village, including me, who would know how to make clay. Now we are more, and other women

have taken up weaving again or weave items from pandanus leaves. We depend on our traditional knowledge if we want to survive.

*You have been invited by civil society to travel to the UN Oceans Conference to address fisheries management plans and strategies that involve indigenous and local communities and women fishers.*

*What were your experiences at the conference?*

Yes, I had the opportunity to speak every day here. Do you know what I would like to see? The voices of small-scale fisheries must be heard on all platforms, especially in political decision-making processes. Back home, I will pass on our demands. I am not anti-government, but I want to share something that we experienced just last year. At our home, we have marine protected areas because we are trying to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 14 and take an inclusive local approach to protect our marine life. We have created traditional marine protected areas in front of all the villages and resorts that we have, which have been established by the local people, but also recognized by the government.

*And what happened?*

Fishing licenses in Fiji have been issued by the government for some time. And now we are at crossroads. I mean, every Saturday I send my two boys fishing. They walk for miles because we're not allowed to fish in our marine protected areas. And then the big boats come—they have a license from the government, and they fish undisturbed in the marine protected areas.

*In the marine protected areas that you have implemented...?.*

Yes. They get a lot of licenses. Normally, people are not allowed to fish there. Because the waters are sacred. Our community has its own community-based fisheries management plan that helps us manage our fishing grounds sustainably. And we have marine protected areas and mangrove management plans to protect our mangroves, and we also plant corals. But the government doesn't care about all that; they continue to issue the licenses and ignore our demands. The government and the people who make the decisions for these policies don't want to listen to us. What is the point of coming here to the EU and shouting it out loud if you can't do it at home? As community leader, I can't sit around and let people screw me over. And the tireless efforts that my people are making to protect the

oceans, where are they going?

*What are your demands?*

Traditionally, we have the right to use the ocean. But as I said, our voices are not being heard. We need more accountable and transparent fisheries management plans and policies that involve our local communities and artisanal fisheries. We need to know how many fishing licenses are being issued, whether they are consistent with management plans, how much revenue is being generated, and whether some of it can be reinvested in resources management. We have a right to get this information, it should be published according to the minimum standards of the Fisheries Transparency Initiative. The government has a responsibility to act in a way that matches the needs of communities - not the other way around. (<https://www.cffacape.org/ssf-call-to-action>)

Thank you for sharing your time!

*The Interview was conducted by Cornelia Wilss (Fair Oceans)*