

UUSC Partner Story: Ursula Rakova

"We feel that climate change violates our rights to continue to live on the island that we were born on and that we are connected to."



The Carteret Islands of Papua New Guinea are among the first communities on earth having to relocate because of climate change. Back in 2006, Carteret Island Elders began noticing sharp increases in sea surges, tides, and coastal erosion. Sea levels were rising, food sources were dwindling, and there was no formal relocation process or support system in place.

Tired of waiting for the government of Papua New Guinea to turn their talk about relocation into action, the Elders decided to create a support system of their own. They asked Ursula Rakova, the daughter of the matrilineal clan community, and an environmental activist, to lead their community's migration to higher ground.

Born on the tiny island of Han in the Carterets, Ursula is well acquainted with her community's deep connections to their land. She explains, "The islanders are connected to the islands. They were born there, they grew up on the island, and having to move means detaching themselves from the islands that they're connected to. The islands are basically their identity. It's their way of life." This deep connection is why Ursula puts migration with dignity, and keeping Carteret Island culture alive, at the forefront of her climate forced displacement programs.

Responding to the Elder's call to lead, Ursula founded the non-governmental organization Tulele Peisa, one of UUSC's seven climate forced displacement partners in the South Pacific. Tulele Peisa, which means "Sailing in the wind on our own" in the local Halia language, supports Carteret Islanders through all stages of relocation, from the first stages of the move to finding a new home and new employment in Bougainville, the resettlement destination in the Solomon Islands.

One way Tulele Peisa works to keep Carteret Island culture alive is local advocacy, for which UUSC is providing funding. This emerging project supports youth and community members, as they advocate for their rights and forge connections and relationships in Bougainville in advance of moving, which makes the move smoother and more comfortable. With UUSC's support, Tulele Peisa is organizing youth and Elder speaking tours, and engaging Papua New Guineans and Bougainvilleans in lobbying to protect the rights of climate displaced peoples and ensure that Carteret Islanders' culture can thrive wherever they are.

Together with Ursula's leadership and Tulele Peisa, UUSC is supporting migration with dignity for the Carteret Islanders facing severe climate change impacts they did nothing to create. Ursula's migration strategy recognizes the importance not just of supporting Carteret Islanders as they leave their homes behind – but also of creating a new home that fits, as best it can, with their identity and way of life.

UUSC's Environmental Justice and Climate Action Program focuses on assisting indigenous populations of the Pacific and Alaska, regions that rely on coastal habitats and are facing severe climate change impacts with limited resources.

This story is part of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee's 2017-2018 "Guest at Your Table" program. You can find other stories from the program in the *Stories of Hope* booklet at uusc.org/guest.

