

Walking on the edge of a volcano

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Throughout the tropical Pacific thousands of people live on coral atolls, the last vestiges of long extinct volcanos. The reality of life for many in these islands is now a far cry from people's image of a tropical island paradise. Improving opportunities to walk and lead more active lifestyles could contribute one small part of a solution to the problems.

This presentation will comment on travel patterns in the main islands of south Tarawa (Kiribati), Majuro (Marshall Islands) and Funafuti (Tuvalu), highlighting factors associated with the decline in walking. It will outline some current initiatives, comment on some unique atoll challenges, and propose an alternative approach.

This presentation is based on the author's observations whilst visiting the islands.



Images from Butaritari, a remote Kiribati island. Traditional life, and transport, remains pretty much unchanged.

The main road

Often the fastest means of transport across the atoll



Active transport in decline

A few years ago people walked everywhere. A few years later and bicycles were the main transport. Nowadays, if you live in Majuro, you will most likely get around using shared taxis. If you're in south Tarawa, you'll get on a mini-bus. And if you're in Funafuti, it's likely you'll be on a moped (with several other people).



Funafuti

This reduction in active transport use, coupled with increasingly sedentary lifestyles and reliance on processed foods has contributed to a major increase in non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Diabetes has reached epidemic proportions. In Kiribati 51% of the population is obese, a key risk factor in diabetes; and in the Marshall Islands 90% of hospital inpatient visits are related to NCDs, principally diabetes.

South Tarawa main road



Uniquely linear issues

Geography is all determining when you live on a coral atoll. Life is linear. The atoll itself could stretch for tens of miles, but the habitable land is commonly only a few hundred meters wide. 'Ribbon'

development is the norm, with the majority of population living no more than a stone's throw from the main thoroughfare.



It is this unique geography which explains much about transport use in the atolls. With increasing centralisation of services, the distances to be travelled can be significant, certainly more than a reasonable walk. Mini bus or taxi transport is relatively cheap, services are frequent and it is essentially door-to-door. When everyone is travelling up and down the same road, and every vehicle is headed in your direction, why would you choose to walk?



Funafuti

Efforts to encourage walking?

To date, most efforts have been focussed on reducing the incidence of NCDs through dietary based health and well-being programmes.

One current infrastructure project which aims to encourage walking is the Kiribati Road Rehabilitation Project. The challenge will be managing the projected 4% p.a. increase in traffic volumes (and likely speed) whilst maintaining a road environment conducive to active travel.



*Causeway on main road, south
Tarawa, Kiribati*

Should the focus be on walking for recreation?

Tuvalu may provide some inspiration: Funafuti airport runway is by far the largest open space on the island. In late afternoon and into the evening it is taken over by people... playing football, chatting, riding bicycles, walking and running.

Perhaps every atoll should have at least one place like this?