Pacific Community Water Management Plus

The benefits of strong Gender and Social Inclusion in the management of village water systems in Melanesia

LEARNING BRIEF **June 2021**

Bavu village, Viti Levu
(Photo credit M. Love)

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The Pacific Community Water Management Plus (PaCWaM+) research objective is to investigate how Civil Society Organisations (CSO) and governments can better enable rural community water management to improve SDG6 outcomes, including the resilience, inclusiveness and sustainability of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) outcomes. ***This Learning Brief focuses on the role of gender and social inclusion (GESI) in relation to strengthening community water management in two Melanesian states – Solomon Islands and Fiji.***

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Women are part of almost all water use activities in a village and have influence and authority in how water is managed at a household level. Further consideration is needed as to how this water knowledge can be harnessed to improve their overall involvement in community water management. Women in active water committee (WC) roles, such as managing demand, assisting with maintenance, can improve the overall management of village water systems.

2. Young people are often the 'heavy lifters' when it comes to maintaining water systems, yet they are generally excluded from formal WC membership and rarely have a voice in management decisions. Greater youth representation is needed on WCs to improve youth buy-in to looking after the water systems. More youth on WCs would also strengthen the longevity and resilience of WCs as they are typically made up of aging male members.

3. Zones or areas within a village are often used as spatial administrative groupings by villages, with households in the same area working together on set tasks. Working at smaller levels than the whole village – such as zones/areas or tribes – may provide a more effective mechanism for triggering and sustaining water management activities. Importantly, working with small levels of existing social cohesion is more likely to overcome multiple forms of exclusion.

4. Many WC executives hold other significant roles in the village. In line with recommendation 2 above, sharing executive roles more widely amongst community members would make space for greater diversity in age and gender in WCs. This will reduce the pressure on aging, busy members, allow for greater inter-generational transfer of skills and knowledge, and encourage engagement from diverse community members.

1. Background

The active and meaningful participation of all members of society, especially groups at risk of marginalisation, is widely seen as critical to improving water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) outcomes, and this is stressed under SDG6, which aims to "ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all" (UN, 2016), and with SDG6.1 and 6.2 focusing on achieving global access to equitable and safe drinking water and sanitation by 2030.

In rural developing country contexts, community-based water management (CBWM) is currently the only feasible approach to providing water services. Social inclusion and effective community-based water management are interlinked: 'good' water management is required to improve water, sanitation and hygiene service levels, whilst water management effectiveness is improved when the management group itself is diverse and inclusive. In self-managing water resources, social inclusion is deemed necessary to secure more equitable and sustainable water management and supply outcomes for all. Nevertheless, there is a lack of empirical data on how contextual factors influence water management in the Pacific islands region.

Drawing on case studies of 8 Solomon Island and 8 Fiji villages, this brief summarises key findings on challenges and benefits of increased gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) in the daily management of water systems in rural settings.

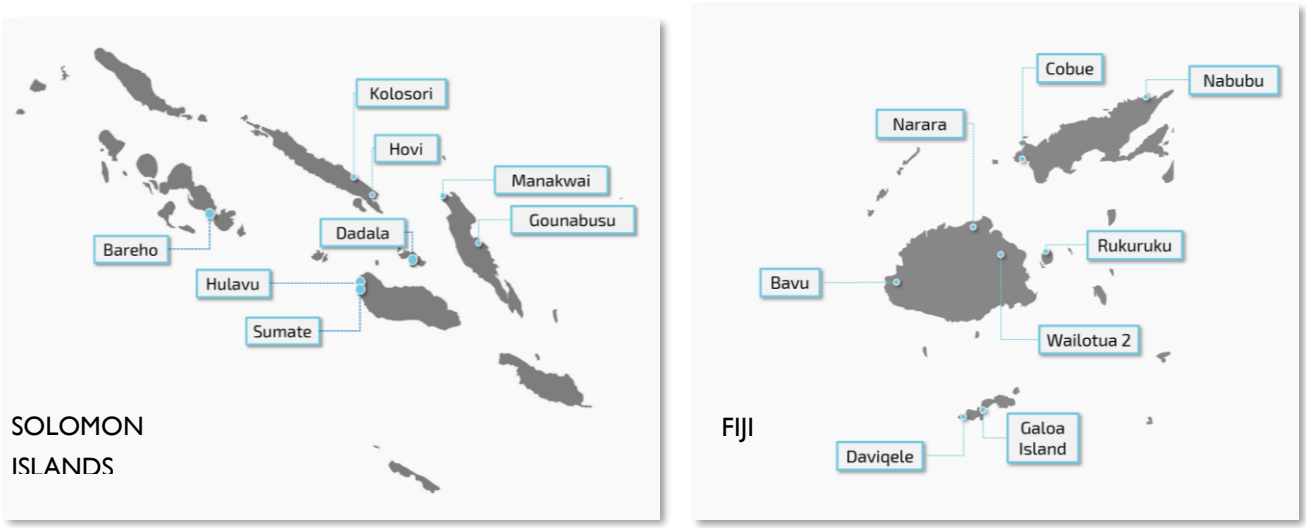

Fig. 1 Maps of Fiji and Solomon Island Study Sites

Methods

The data for this research was collected from 16 villages across the Solomon Islands and Fiji (Fig 1.) as part of the formative research component of the wider PaCWaM+ project. The research methodology comprised a mixed-methods approach, drawing on a range of quantitative and qualitative techniques. This brief draws primarily on the qualitative data, which consisted of key informant interviews (KIIs) and group interviews (GIs) and household surveys (HHS) (Fig 2). Participants were identified based on a mix of targeted and snowball sampling strategies and typically included: youth group representatives, religious leaders, customary leaders, life histories, women's group members, project actors, water committee members, people with disabilities, health workers, and teachers.

In addition, a number of KIIs were conducted with town-based stakeholders in Suva, Fiji to obtain and government and CSO perspective of the role of women in managing water within *iTaukei* community and culture (See Spotlight Study 1). The influence of women and girls in community water planning in Solomon Islands is explored in Spotlight Study 2

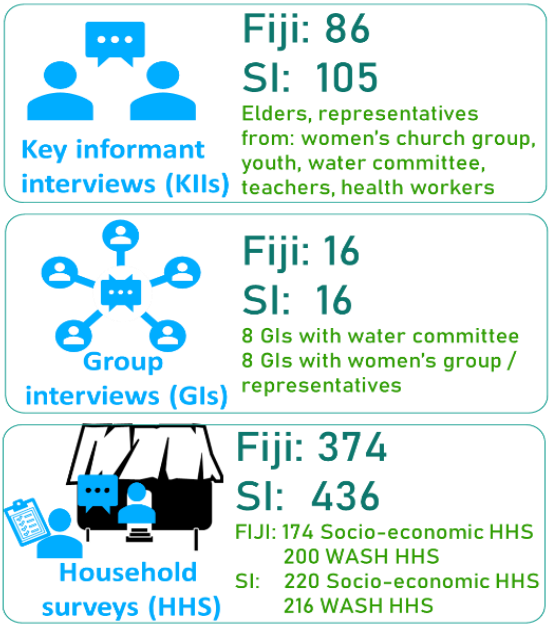

Fig 2. Qualitative data sample sizes

KEY FINDING 1: GENDER

Whilst there were signs of improved inclusivity with regards to government mandates to include women on water committees, they remain under-represented in key committee roles and decision making. The Solomon Islands Government (SIG) have recognized that moving from policy to practice in regards to gender equity will take time, but there is evidence that the *Rural Water, Sanitation, Hygiene* (RWASH) 'mandate' to have at least one woman in the water committee (WC) has resulted in some attitudinal changes amongst male members and community leaders. In Hovi – where there are three women on the WC (including one in the Treasurer position) – a male WC representative stated that having women on the WC was a "*bara [very] good idea as ladies are the ones who mostly use the water so they have a concern; men use water to swim [wash] only and nothing else…".* When the SIG went to Manakwai, they insisted that the WC have some women members. One of the current WC members stated: "*Many women were asked, but they were afraid [to join]*" (Female WC member, Manakwai). The current WC chairman noted that he, like many other men at the time, were reluctant to have women on the committee as it is "*no kastom blo mifela"* [not our custom]. However, he now acknowledges that it was a "*wise move*" as "*women listen to women*" and use more water than men.

Clearly, the quota rule has gained some traction in both Fiji and the Solomon Islands. However, there is evidence that the quota does not necessarily allow for the nuance needed to navigate the full suite of complexities around gender, e.g. inclusion is not just about having females on the water committee but also from which tribes/clans they come from, what their kin relationships are to key WC members/village leaders and, ultimately, a question of whether they have the agency to raise concerns and advance women's WASH issues through membership in the committee. For example in Fiji, *iTaukei* women are rarely empowered and able to have rich engagement and quality participation in decision-making around water resources within their communities, with responses indicating either implicit, nominal, consultative or passive participation and only some examples of active and interactive (empowered) participation. As a Fijian female KII stated: *"It's because they don't have the knowledge, especially on technical work so they can't [sic] be part of the decision-making…. So they don't have a voice because they don't know what's happening...".* WC's in Bavu and Daviqele were the only committees that had no female members, although Nabubu also appears to have no *active* female membership in practice; the community nurse in Nabubu was reported to be a member by some respondents, but the nurse herself rejected this stating "*I was a member a couple of years back*" but since becoming a nurse she has "*never attended or been invited to a Water Committee meeting*" (village nurse).

The women we spoke to in Solomon Islands generally saw themselves as having a voice; however, their degree of power and inclusion remains limited in terms of day to day water management. Numerous women noted that they have rarely, if at all, been actively engaged in CBWM decisions or actions, other than cooking for workers during the water system installation phase. In Hulavu, the women's group representative stated that they had "*never taken part in water supply, sanitation, or hygiene programs because they were not informed, aware, or trained*". Similarly, a female participant complained that "*the water committee has never involved women in their meetings to discuss the water situation in the village […] and this should change*". Therefore, it is important to recognise that while the quota system is showing some benefits to women's participation on WC, the actual roles that they are being considered for may not be improving actual influence or a strong voice as a WC member. Thus, further exploration of how women's engagement in water management can be strengthened is required (see Recommendation 1).

Woman washing clothes, Bareho (Photo C. Beal)

KEY FINDING 2: YOUTH

Young people are essential to the ongoing operation and maintenance of village water systems but are marginalised from active participation in decision making. In terms of social inclusion, the Solomon Islands RWASH policy dictates that women must be involved and represented "equally with men in WASH committees and as caretakers", and encourages persons with a disability to participate (RWASH CE guidelines, 2019:11); however, it does not specifically mention the involvement of younger community members.

Youth are often relegated to low status work as labourers for the family, community projects and businesses. As one female SI youth stated "*A lot of time as a youth leader I want to say something to the community but they do not want to listen ...*". Another male SI youth had similar misgivings "...*the leaders in the community do not give any opportunity for the young people to voice our ideas and concerns*".

Youth are represented in the village governance through representatives of the formal 'youth group' or 'committee' (typically a church coordinated group). However, in these settings youths don't always feel they are truly included. In Fiji, eleven "youth" representatives were interviewed (5 female-F / 6 male-M), with four stating that they felt that they were "*not often*" heard (F), paid little "*attention*" (M), "*not listened to at all*" (F) or were "*not given time during meetings*" and thus "*don't really have a voice*" (F). A few were ambivalent, saying that while they had space at the community meeting to present their views, young people's perspectives were low "*priorities*" compared to everyone else's (F).

Being a 'youth' representative does not mean however, that the elected 'youth rep' is a young person (e.g. by the SI national definition of 34yo or under). For example, in Bareho the youth secretary is 48yo, in Dadala (SI) the youth group leader is 46yo, and in Hovi the youth representative on the WC is 43yo. This is another form of youth marginalisation; having youth voices represented by people who are not actually youth, and thus do not actually represent youth interests, is a form of "structural minimisation".

The observed low youth representation in WC membership does not reflect the average village or country age distribution of youth in the Solomon Islands (Fig 3). Solomon Islands has the second youngest population in the Pacific region and its rapid population growth rate means that this trend will only increase further.

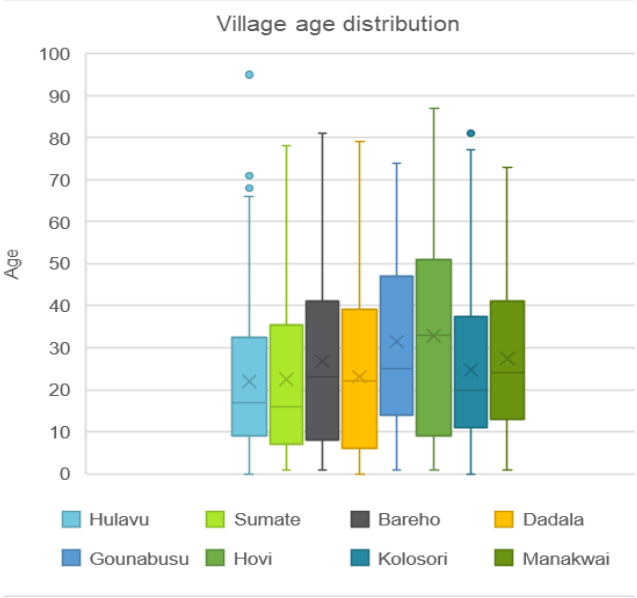

Fig 3. Village age distribution for 8 Sol. Is. sites (n=1067)

Across all research sites young people were critical to both assisting with the construction of the water system and also, typically, the most active in terms of ongoing system operation and maintenance. In Dadala, for instance, the youth group "*support the water committee with fundraisings [by collecting fish to sell]*" (male WC Representative). In Kolosori, it was reported that the youth group and Sunday school children "…*are the main people who help the water supply committee look after the system. When there is something wrong […] the water committee use the young children to help*" (female Youth Representative). Similarly, in Gounabusu, "…*if there is a problem with the water supply due to a blockage at the dam or broken pipes […] the young people in the village will fix the problem* (male Religious Leader). In Bareho, it is primarily two young males who are not members of the WC that, in practice, undertake the bulk of system repairs and maintenance.

Although there are many examples that demonstrate how young people are key to water system maintenance, they are generally excluded from formal WC membership and having a more pro-active engagement in management decisions. Further to this, six of the case study villages have had previously failed WC with many WC members dying or becoming less active due to aging or ill-health. This is a strong argument then, for greater youth representation on WC, not just because they are often the "hand of work" when it comes to water system maintenance, but this would strengthen the longevity and resilience of WC by having a diversity of age representation in the group.

Key Finding 3: Other forms of Inclusion

It is clear that understandings of social inclusion in Melanesia need to be contextualised to include not only women and youth but wider sociocultural factors, such as minority faith groups, tribes, class, and micro-spatial locality within the village.

Other than age and gender, most villages attempted to have relatively inclusive membership in terms of socio-cultural (tribal) and spatial representation. Zones or areas were often used as spatial administrative groupings within a village (Fig 4), with proximal households working together on a set task, such as church fundraising or community work (e.g. Solesolevaki in Fiji).

Like zones, in both Fiji and Solomon Islands tribal/familial groupings are often operationalised in collective action terms in regard to specific issues, such as household building, fundraising for marriage, assisting with school fees, etc. For example, in Fiji much solesolevaki (community work) is organised by Mataqali. For example, in Galoa (Fiji) people work together (generally grouped by *mataqali*) to undertake tasks, such as cutting grass around the central community drain and tap stands. The same is sometimes true in Solomon Islands (e.g. north-west Guadalcanal where zones also often correspond to tribe). These smaller socio-cultural groupings can be quite effective.

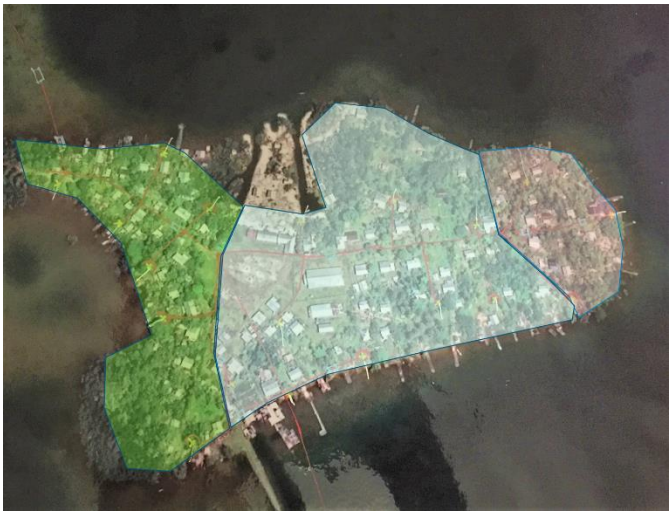

Fig 4. Approximate demarcation of 3 zones in this SI village which supports 13 tribes (Source: Google Maps)

Indeed, in Sumate (SI) it was suggested that it was best to form a WC that included members from each of the four tribes in the village, partially so that any materials or information could be directed to the proximal WC representatives in a given zone rather than the village-wide chiefs or elders. This was echoed more pointedly in Hulavu, where one male respondent stated that "*each zone should have a water committee to look after the water, so people use it wisely*".

SPOTLIGHT ON GESI: PACWAM+ PROJECT CASE STUDIES

WOMEN AND GIRLS IN WATER SAFETY PLANNING IN SI

Community-based Water Security Improvement Planning (CWSIP) is a new approach being piloted in West Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands. CWSIP is designed to improve the sustainability, inclusivity and resilience of rural water systems by working with communities to develop their own *Gud Wata Plan Blong Iumi* ("Our good water plan").

The CWSIP approach does this by supporting communities to identify and manage existing and future risks to their water supplies. A recent study conducted a thematic analysis of interviews with community members in three villages in West Guadalcanal where the CWSIP process is being piloted. The research identified ways CWSIP can be improved to achieve more gender equitable outcomes, particularly relating to meeting the WASH needs and aspirations, and reducing the burden of inadequate WASH, for women and girls.

Women need to have greater influence in water management in order to improve their WASH situation; specific strategies to achieve this include:

- Overcoming barriers to women's participation
- Improving female leadership and empowerment
- Promoting male advocates
- Encouraging women's collective voice.

Recommendations to strengthen and streamline CWSIP to improve gender equitable WASH outcomes include:

- Assess households/zones within communities against JMP water service levels to tailor activities to their specific needs and aspirations (during preparation)
- A minimum number of female CWSIP community representatives (e.g. 50%) to encourage female representation during implementation phase
- Establish a framework for follow-up research to be able to determine whether strategic gender outcomes have been met through the implementation of CWSIP.

Source: Bukauskas (2020)

WOMEN, WATER AND THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN FIJI

Water committees across Fiji have been the main mode for rural water services for some time, however, little is known to what extent women are included in water management decisions and what the influence of *iTaukei* culture on women's involvement in CBWM is. A study based on government and stakeholder interviews and the PaCWaM+ data (Love et al 2020b) was thematically analysed to identify key themes and trends to address this gap. In sum, there was evidence of women's indirect participation in water management decisions (e.g. at household or group levels):

"So the women talk and then the women go back home and share to their husbands. So that's where the husbands come to an agreement during the village meeting.." (Female KII)

"..they're not only talking to their husbands to push their issues, but they're now finding the women's committees to bring out those messages" (Female KII)

However, results also showed that Fijian rural water committee structure, in its current form, is not always promoting gender equality and empowering women's decision-making over water resources, despite the mandated quota system within water committee by-laws:

"..women are not heard, not given a voice to express themselves. In a Fijian community, it's hardly at meetings, village meetings and provincial meetings, unless you have status." (Male KII)

"Now for any community, specifically in Fiji's context, women are not always part of decision-making … It's mostly men who are decision makers." (Female KII)

Recommendations from this study included:

- Create/strengthen a monitoring and evaluation system within Government (e.g. WAF or Ministry of Health) to monitor the inclusion of women (number, role and meaningful participation) in water committees
- • Provide guidelines to accompany the quota mandate
- Future rural water and GESI projects should include behaviour change components that aim to tackle socio-cultural norms that prevent gender equality across *iTaukei* villages.

Source: Pankhurst (2019)

Working at smaller and/or different aligned levels – tribe or zone/area – may have other social inclusivity advantages. At the village-wide level, senior men dominate decision-making processes (e.g. Dyer 2018). Women can and do have some influence on community decision-making processes through 'indirect' or 'passive' means, via their husbands, brothers, and sons, but women also have different degrees of agency at different levels (e.g. village-wide, zone/area, and household levels). At a tribal or zone level, women are more likely to be surrounded by extended family members and thus have more 'rights' than at the village-wide level. It is not a coincidence that it was a formidable (older) retired female teacher from zone 3 in Sumate who instigated, managed and led the successful construction and operation of the school, without any senior male, CSO, or government support. As already noted, this was a tribal and zone, rather than village-wide, collective action.

The potential benefits of considering zone and/or tribal representation in CBWM are numerous. There is already existing social cohesion and collective action at this level; there is greater potential for agency of marginalised individuals; and we observed that water system service levels differ within a village, typically in alignment with zones/areas and their proximity to water sources. It is important to clearly recognise these differences in village dynamics and suggest that zone and/or tribal representation in CBWM could be a mechanism that addresses multiple forms of exclusion.

Key Finding 4: Strong WASH Committees

There needs to be greater diversity in age and gender in WCs to reduce the pressure on aging, busy members, allow for generational transfer of skills and knowledge and increase communal engagement from the various tribes and diverse community members.

In both Solomon Islands and Fiji, there was considerable evidence of water committees waxing and waning over time. There were a variety of factors informing this trend, including the challenge of load sharing (many executive committee members having multiple leadership obligations), the high mean age of water committee members, and a lack of institutional redundancy. Most WC executives were also members or executives of other village committees, meaning that they have dual or multiple responsibilities. Committees are a universal part of village governance across most rural villages in the region. The obligation to be materially invested in 'community' is essential to Melanesian culture. Nevertheless, across all study sites many, especially older, respondents complained that committee effectiveness and participation had decreased substantially over the last decade or two. The reasons for this where typically expressed in terms of general 'moral' and 'social' decline (e.g. "selfishness", land/chiefly title "disputes", growing "individualism").

Six of the villages in Solomon Islands have had water committees in the past that have collapsed, with aging or ill-health partially the cause of the collapse. This suggests a need for greater institutional redundancy (knowledge transfer across generations and genders) to ensure WC sustainability. Similarly in Fiji, (Daviqele), a youth representative complained about the lack of formal youth engagement in the Water Committee, stating that "*youths must be involved as members, as the current water committee are getting old*."

There is a critical need to strengthen Water Committee linkages and communication with other committees or groups in communities (particularly with community health worker/nurse, Health Committees, Sanitation Committee, and possibly Church groups). The absence of linkages between the Water Committee, Health Committee and/or nurse in Fiji is a missed opportunity, especially given that community

Water committee members, Solomon Islands (Photo D. Gonzalez-Botero)

nurses and Health Committees are considered formalised elements of all iTaukei communities across the country. An interesting factor informing the involvement of the community nurse in WCs in Fiji is culture; women with maternal links to a community are customarily more legitimately positioned to give input – that is, have agency – than those married-in to a *koro* (village) who have no kin linkages. Hence, in Rukuruku, the nurse has maternal linkages and thus is "*not afraid to speak out*", whilst in Galoa and Wailotua they do not. Directly engaging with this challenge during the community engagement phase of water system implementation is worthy of attention by Government agencies and CSOs.

In the Solomons, all but two WC executives were members of other committees and this extends, albeit less so, to general WC members: 12 (32%) of the total 38 non-executive members were also members of other committees. The challenge of multiple responsibilities amongst WC members reflects the power dynamics of village life; older men are seen as natural leaders in Solomon Islands and are keen to be associated with executive positions on village committees as such positions both attract and reinforce prestige, regardless of actual individual or committee performance. The desire to be engaged in executive positions on village committees delimits the scope for widening social inclusion, bracketing the diversity of the make-up of WC's. This is especially evident with regards to youth. Having diversity in age and gender in WCs will reduce the pressure on aging, busy members, allow for inter-generational skills and knowledge transfer and increase buy-in from the various tribes and diverse community member, thus strengthening water system sustainability.

Further Reading

Full project reports that synthesise the baseline findings from Phase 1 formative research for the PaCWaM+ project can be found though the links below or from the Pacific Community Water Management Project website - https://www.watercentre.org/research/research-impacts/pcwm/.

- Social inclusion and CBWM in Solomon Islands – Development Policy Review journal article
- Solomon Islands Country Synthesis Report 2020
- Fiji Country Synthesis Report 2020

Suggested Citation

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Kadavu Province, Fiji (Photo credit: D Gonzalez Botero)