

# The Significance of the Pacific Commons for Community Resilience: From Disaster Recovery to Climate Mobilities

**Andreas Neef & Anita Latai Niusulu**

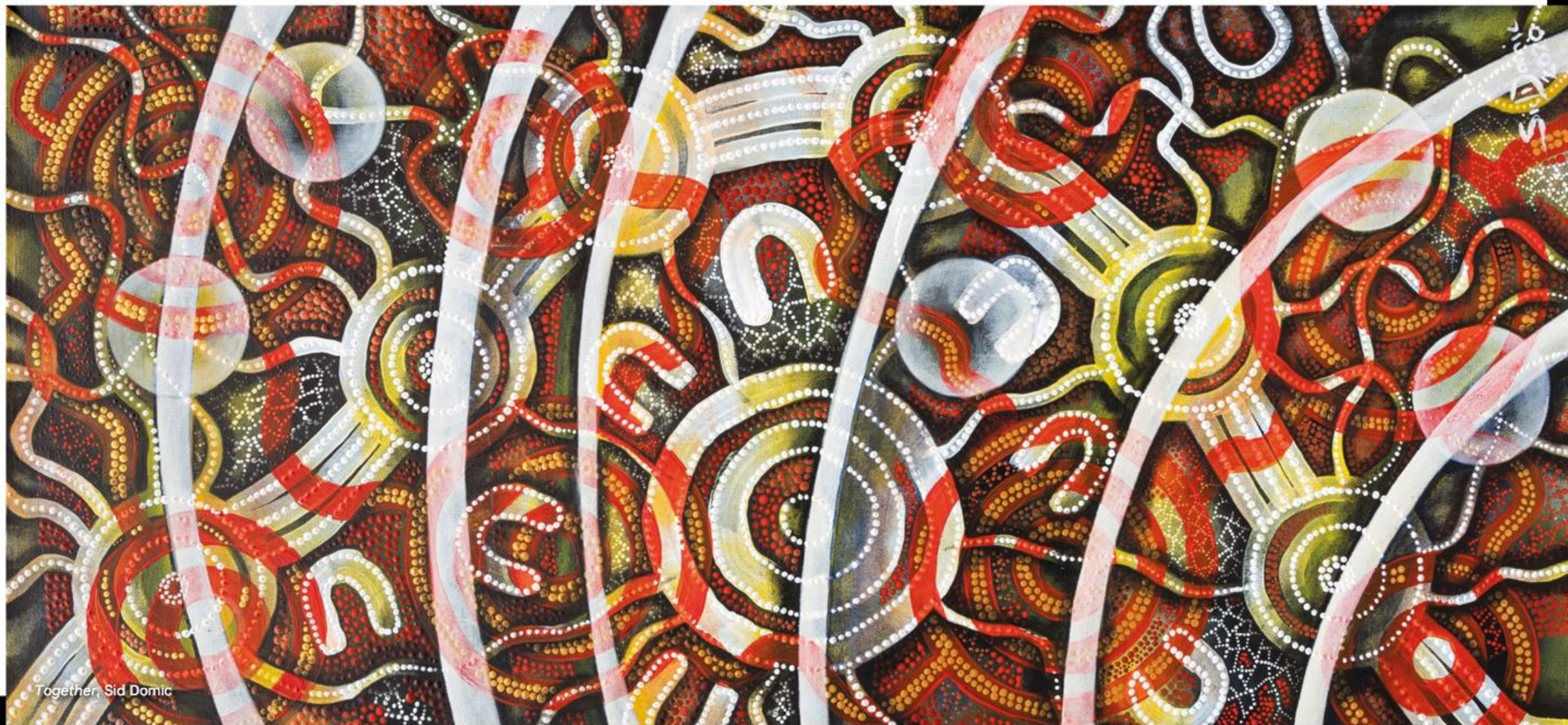
**Griffith University & National University of Samoa**

World Commons Week 2024  
IASC Oceania Regional Chapter  
2 December

  
Kirat Karo – Honest living  
Naam Japo – Meditation on God's Name  
Vand Chakko – Share Your Earning

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Griffith University acknowledges the people who are the Traditional Custodians of the land. We pay respect to the Elders, past and present, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



Together, Sid Domic

- ❑ **Introduction: Community Resilience in the Pacific**
- ❑ **The Tourism-Disaster-Conflict Nexus: Disaster Recovery and Land Access in Vanuatu**
- ❑ **Terraqueous Territoriality and Legal Pluralism: Mining and the Commons in Fiji**
- ❑ **Customary Land Access and Climate Mobility in Samoa**
- ❑ **Concluding Remarks**



# Community Resilience in the Pacific



Flood in Votua (Fiji) 2012

Courtesy of Votua villagers



**Cyclone Winston  
in Navala 2016**



**Cyclone Winston  
in Votua 2016**

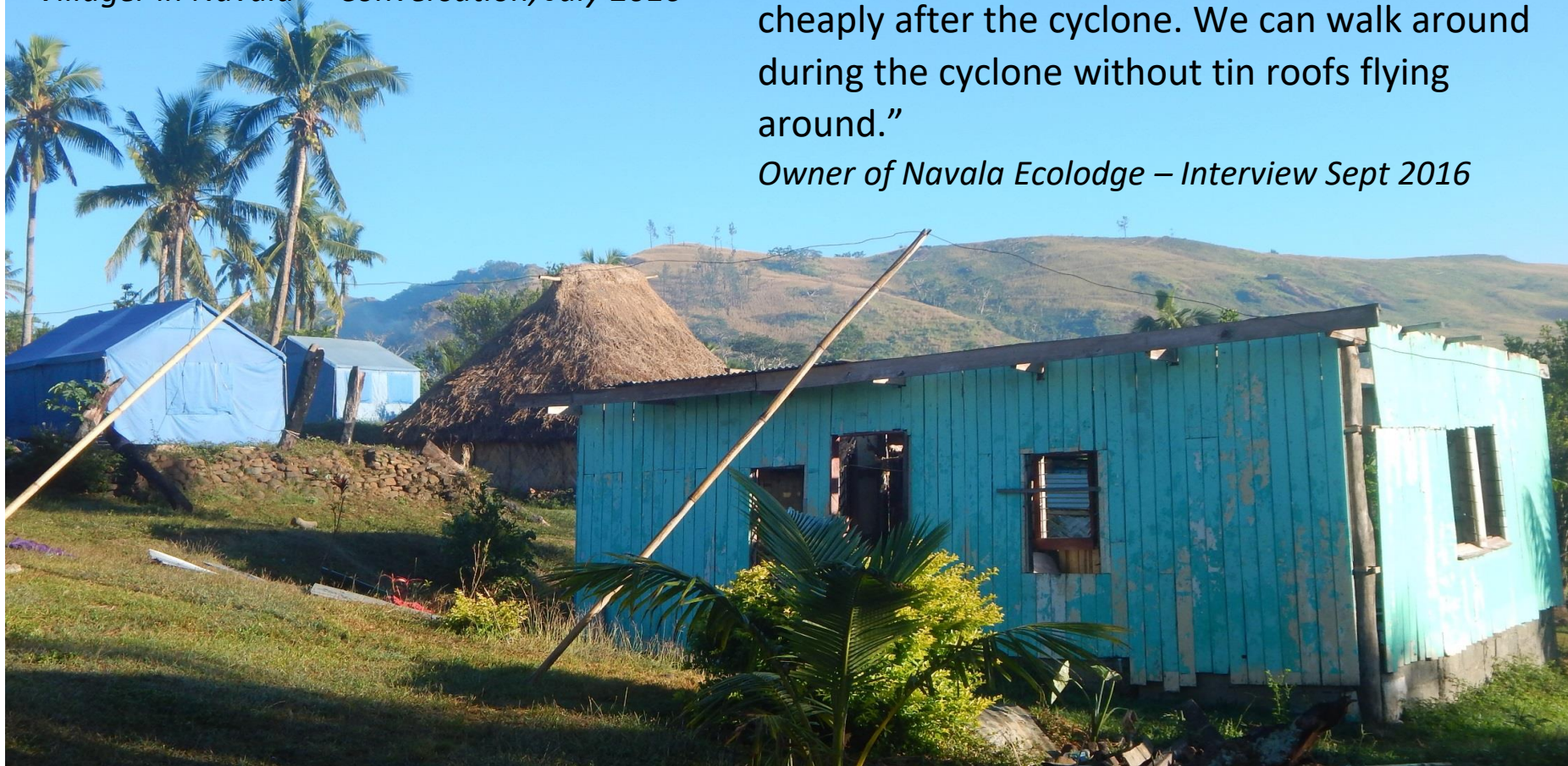


“I have a modern house and a traditional *bure*. During the cyclone we stayed in the *bure* because it was much safer.”

*Villager in Navala – Conversation, July 2016*

“In the community we are still discussing about changing to modern houses. We get money [from the gov’t] for keeping them traditionally, but we can also repair them more easily and cheaply after the cyclone. We can walk around during the cyclone without tin roofs flying around.”

*Owner of Navala Ecolodge – Interview Sept 2016*



## Vanuatu holidays

### Your holiday can help: Vanuatu and Nepal appeal for tourists to return

Two countries blessed by natural beauty but hard-hit by natural disasters are keen to change the narrative and lure back travellers



No filter required ... a blue hole on Vanuatu's largest island, Espiritu Santo, which was undamaged by cyclone Pam. Photograph: Nikki Marshall for the Guardian



722 16

Nikki Marshall

@MarshallNikki

Thursday 13 August 2015 21.07 BST

“Disaster tourism” is an ugly phrase, conjuring up images of rubberneckers gawping at others’ misfortune.

In the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster even the most well-intentioned visitors can get in the way if they lack coordination and expertise. They can end up slowing aid efforts.

Yet for developing countries whose economies rely on tourism, luring visitors back at the right moment is a vital step to recovery. Timing is everything.

## Reality

Floods in Fiji (2012): Tourists switched to Vanuatu

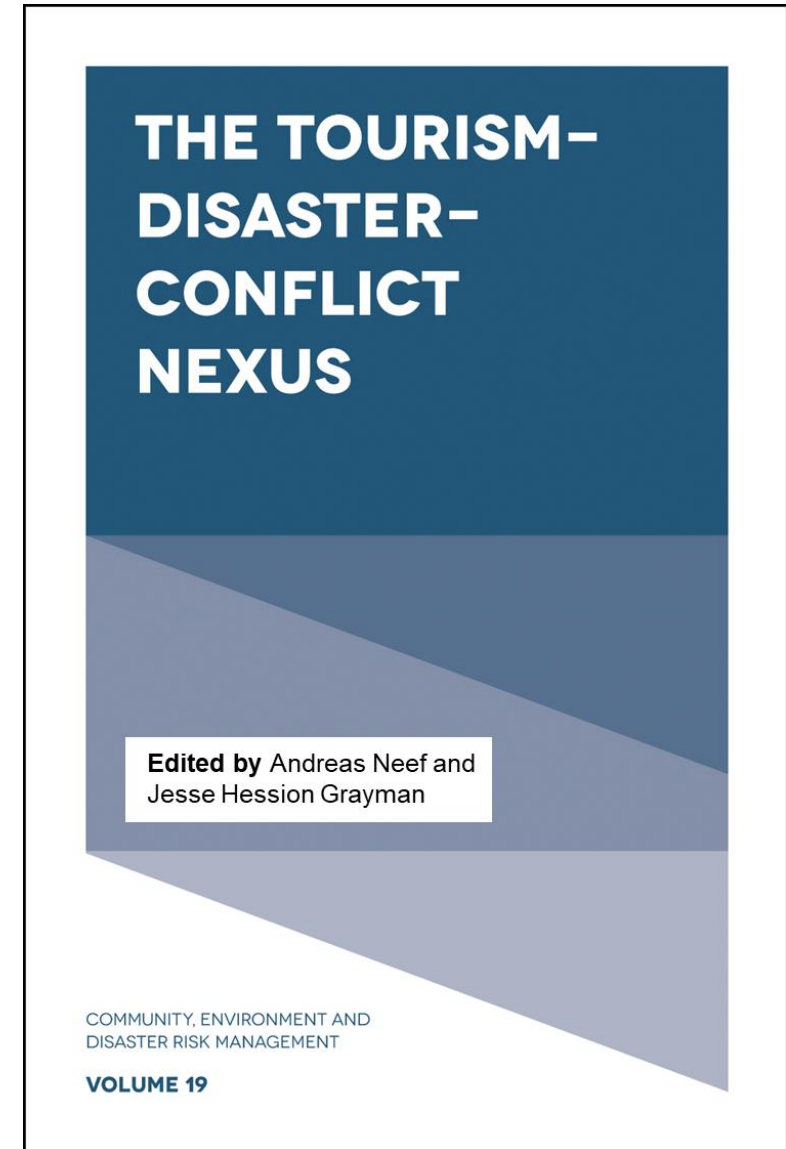
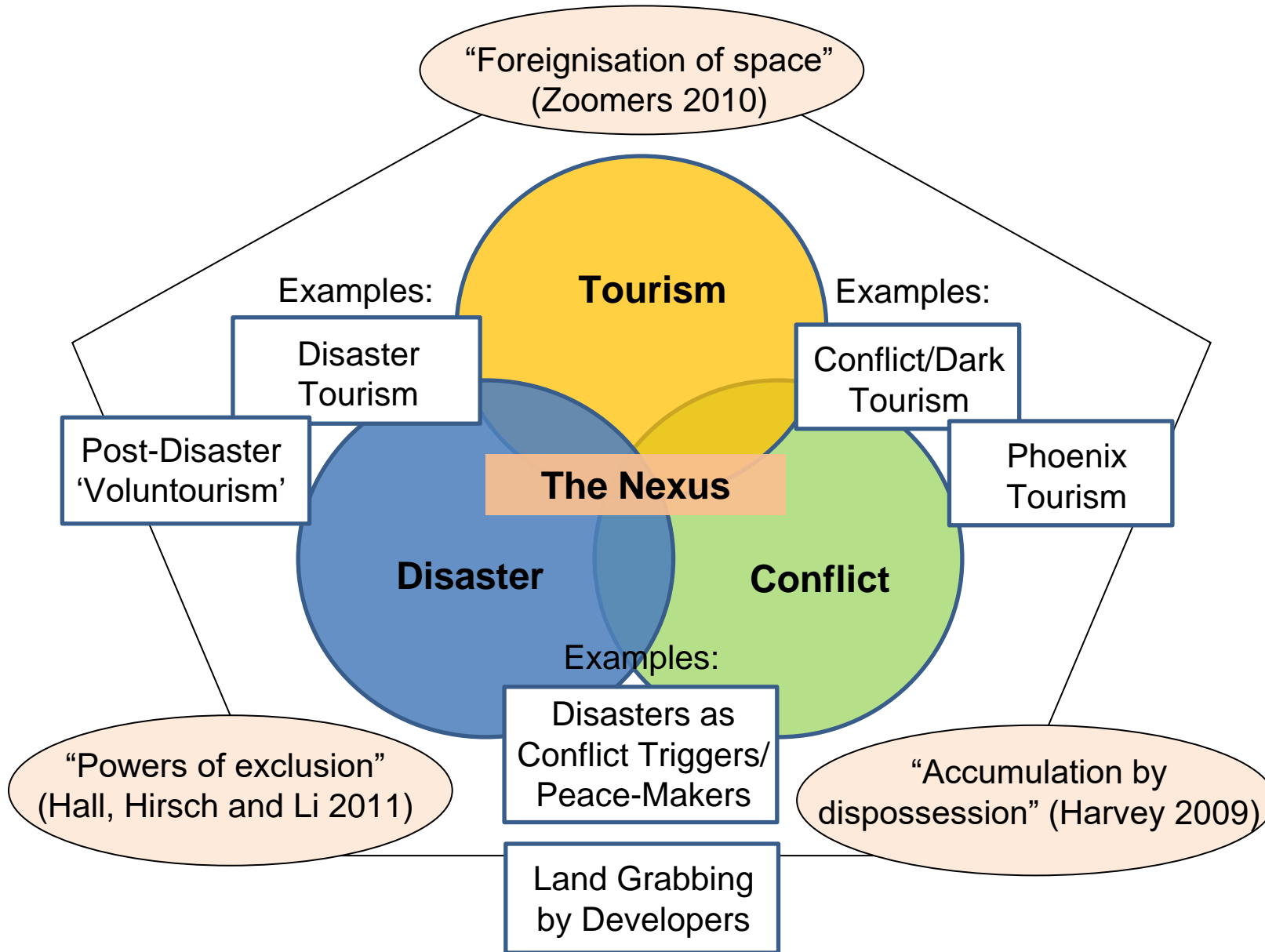
Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu (2015): Tourists booked their holidays in Fiji

## Questions

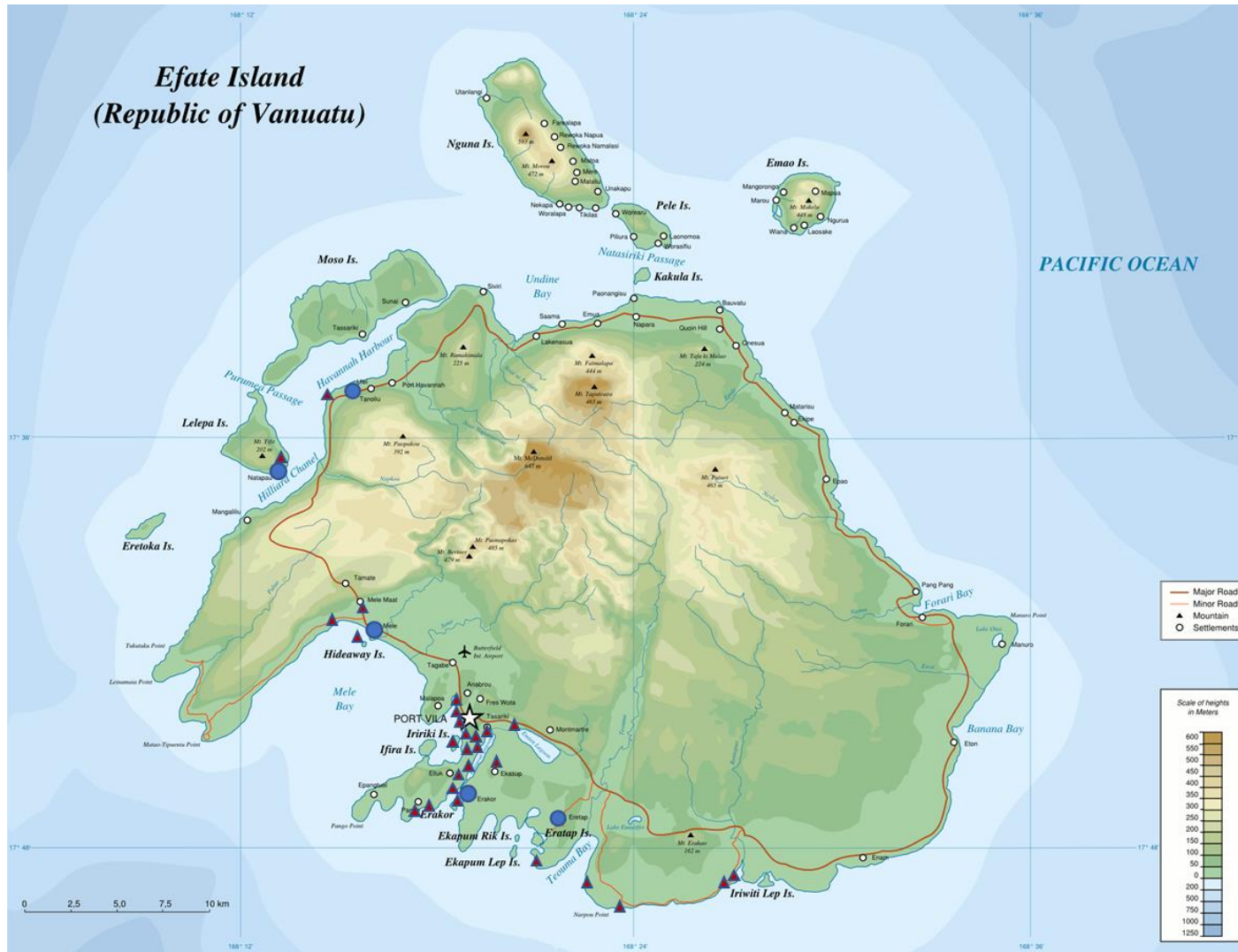
Is tourism a positive force in post-disaster recovery processes?

Or does it cause more harm than good?

And what roles do communally managed resources and collective action play?

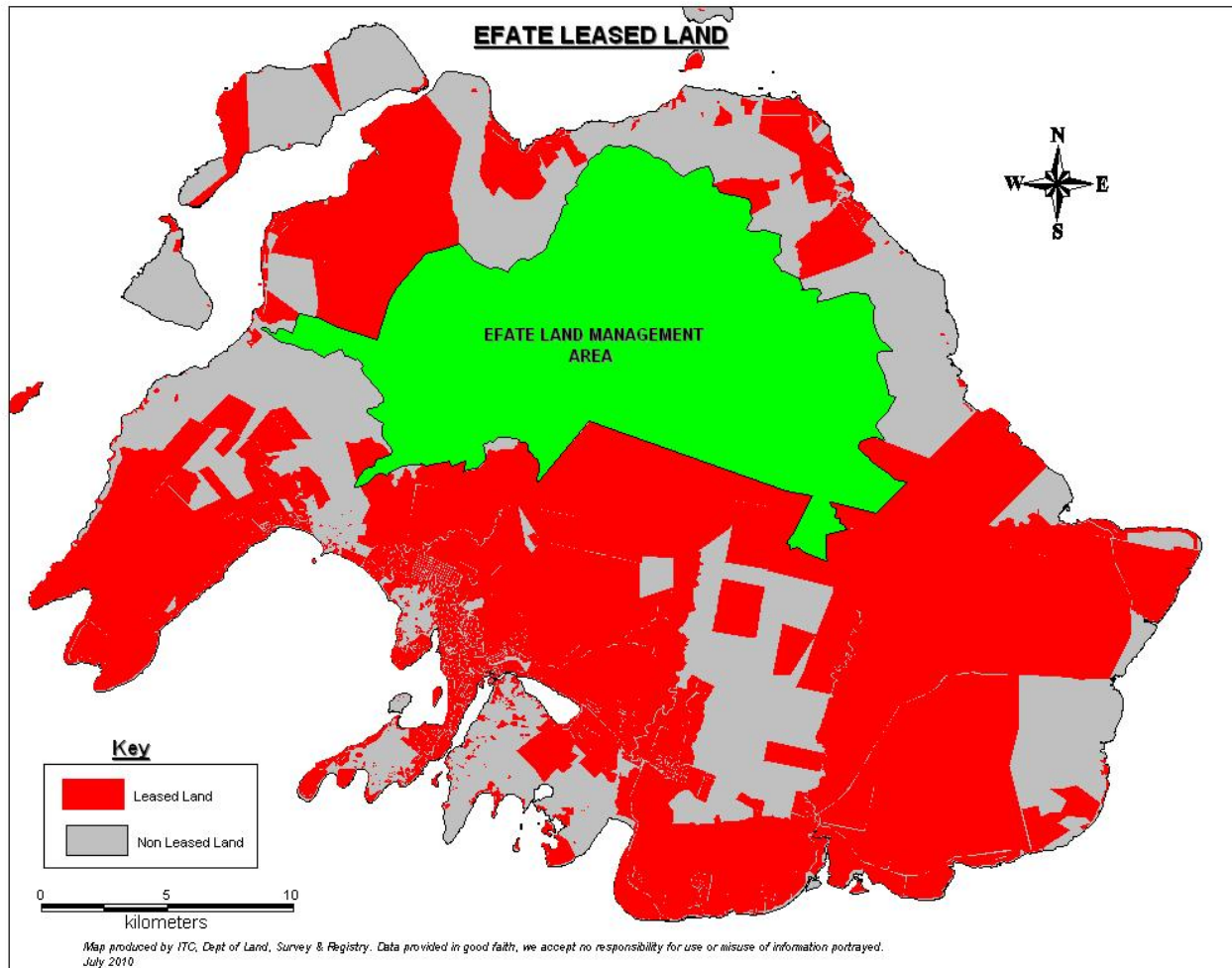


# Case Study Vanuatu – Cyclone Pam



**Figure 1.** Map of Efate Island with location of hotels and tour operations (purple triangles) and communities (blue circles) selected for the study





- ❑ 80% of the coastal land on Efate Island has been leased by foreigners (mainly Australians and New Zealanders) from customary owners – usually for a period of 75 years

**“Land sales are such a huge business, I know it from my own experience. My Australian step-father bought a plot of land for 3 million Vatu, and we just cleared the land and then he resold it for 23 million Vatu.”**  
*Caretaker of a 4-star apartment hotel in southern Efate*



**Beneficiaries:** Local chiefs, lawyers, land speculators, foreign tourism investors

**Victims:** Local communities (and women in particular) are denied access to near-shore fishing grounds & food gardens

**“The leases here are pretty cheap, for a 4,000 m<sup>2</sup> plot you pay around AUD1,000 per year.”**  
*General Manager of luxury boutique resort in southern Efate*



Land exclusions  
‘Spaces of exception’

“Many local people have sold [leased out] their land without thinking of the long-term consequences. **The landowner is usually the main chief in the village** and the benefit is meant to be spread evenly, but often that is not the case.”

*Manager of luxury resort in northern Efate*

“The **land ownership rights** over the area where the resorts are located have been **transferred to two families**. They get most of the benefits from the resorts, **the Council of Chiefs also receives some money**, but the **real customary owners do not receive anything.**”

*Participant in focus group discussion in rural community in southern Efate*



## Support provided by the hotel industry after Cyclone Pam

“I set up an emergency fund for the villages and collected about AUD70,000. I used AUD12,000 to provide food for 1,600 people in the four villages over a period of 12 days. Another part of the fund was used for installing a water reticulation system in one of the villages. [...] With the rest of the money, we built a second classroom for the school.”

*Manager of luxury boutique resort in northern Efate*

“[The resort] did not give us any help, but maybe it assisted its own staff. It will be difficult to get help from the resort because we have to go through the chief and there is a lot of paperwork to do and we usually give up before we even try. None of the other two resorts provided help.”

*Chairman of men’s group during community focus group in southern Efate*



“Now the communities face another challenge and that is the developers that are coming in, mainly for residential development. Many developers have bought land way back, but they are now coming to claim their land rights.”

*General Manager of luxury resort in northern Efate*

## Disaster Capitalism & Foreignisation of Space

“I recently went to a Tourism Forum which was organised by the Department of Tourism [...] and they were talking about challenges and benefits, but **there were only expats, no indigenous people**. How can we talk about challenges and benefits without involving the indigenous people?”

*Caretaker of 4-star apartment hotel in southern Efate*

## Foreignisation of Decision-making & Control



## TOURISM, LAND GRABS AND DISPLACEMENT

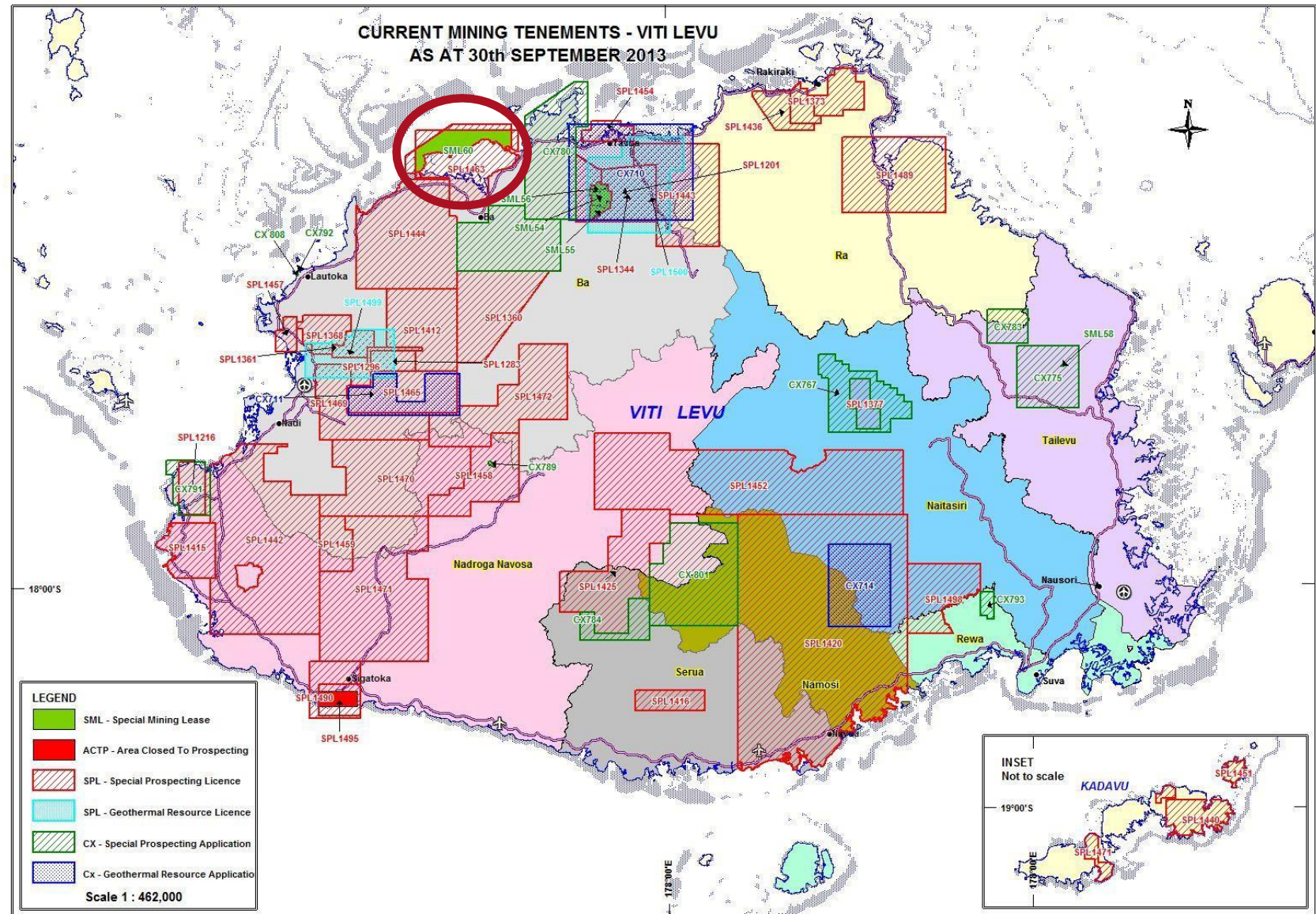
THE DARKER SIDE OF THE FEEL-GOOD INDUSTRY

Andreas Neef

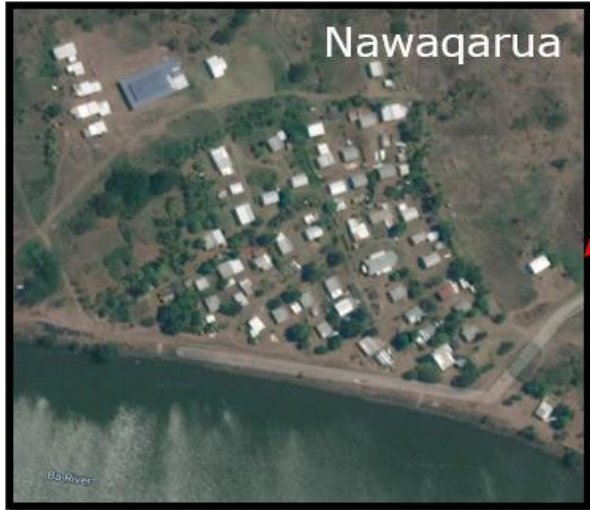


Fijian government promotes mining due to its potential to promote wealth and to diversify the country's economy

Growing concerns over the mining sector's adverse social and environmental impacts



# Case Study – Ba River, Viti Levu



220 million tonnes of iron sand



**Terraqueous Territoriality:** “the distinctly capitalist articulation of sovereignty, territory and appropriation in the capture and coding of maritime space”

(Campling & Colás 2018, p. 777)

**Theory of Access:** defines property as “socially acknowledged and supported claims or rights”, while access is defined as “all possible means by which a person [or entity] is able to benefit from [a resource]” (Ribot & Peluso 2003; p. 156)

**Legal Pluralism:** a situation in which two or more legal systems coexist in the same social field (Merry, 1988)

## Methodology

- Longitudinal case study approach (fieldwork conducted from 2012-2020)
- Research conversations (*talanoa*), semi-structured interviews, focus groups, direct observation, feedback workshops, analysis of media & documentaries

Ownership of iTaukei land is vested in landowning clans (*mataqali*)

*“The land is us. It is our identity, our vanua and our culture. The land provides for us, so we should nurture it. If we do not nurture our land, it will not nurture us.”* (Votua Landowner, *talanoa*, 17 October 2018)

*Mataqali* can neither sell the land nor grant private access to outsiders

*Mataqali* land is held in trust by the iTaukei Land Trust Board (TLTB);  
TLTB controls and administers leasing arrangements

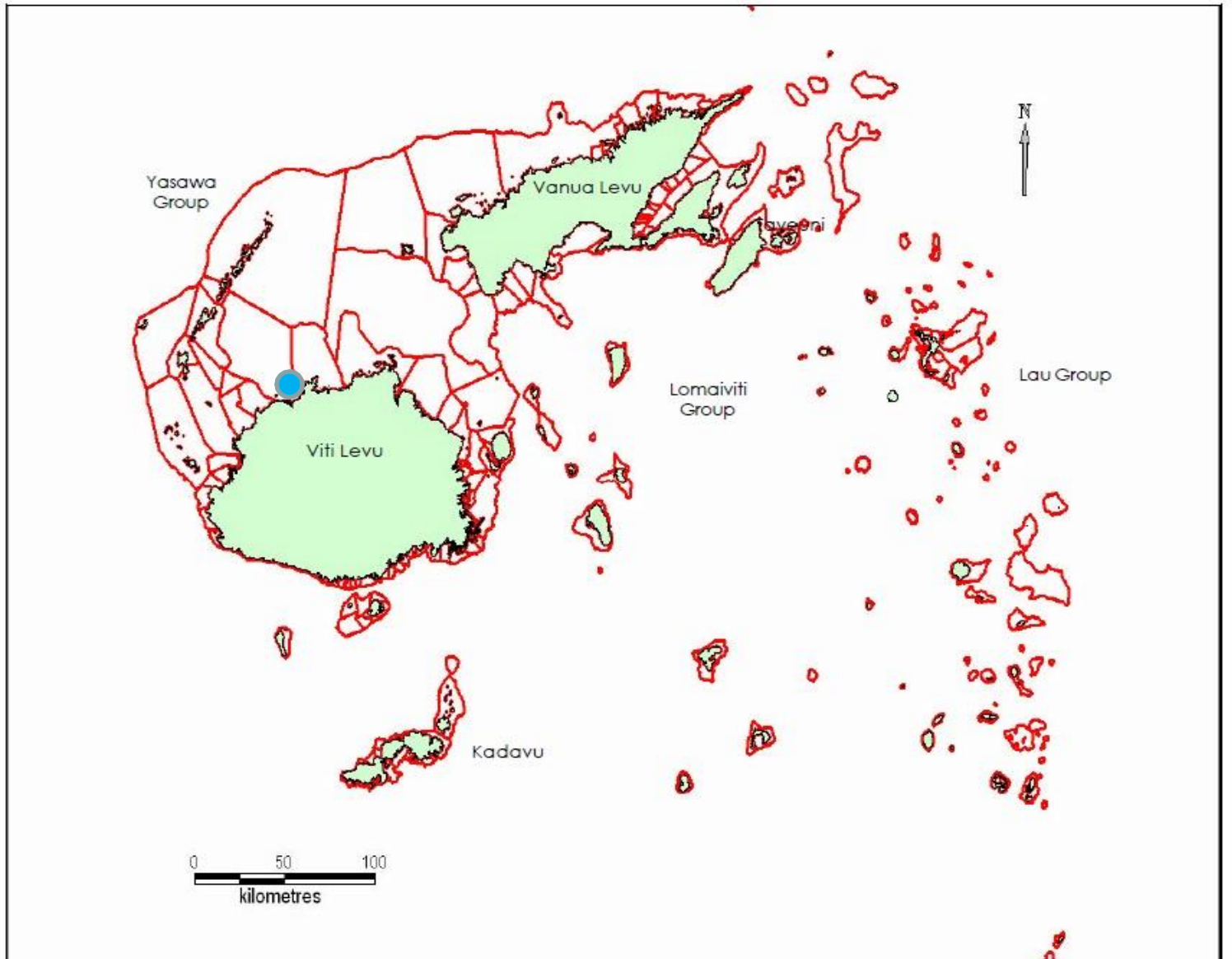
*“All minerals in or under any land or water, are owned by the State, provided however, that the owners of any particular land (whether customary or freehold), or of any particular registered customary fishing rights shall be entitled to receive a fair share of royalties ...”* (Constitution of the Republic of Fiji)

# Who owns the fisheries?

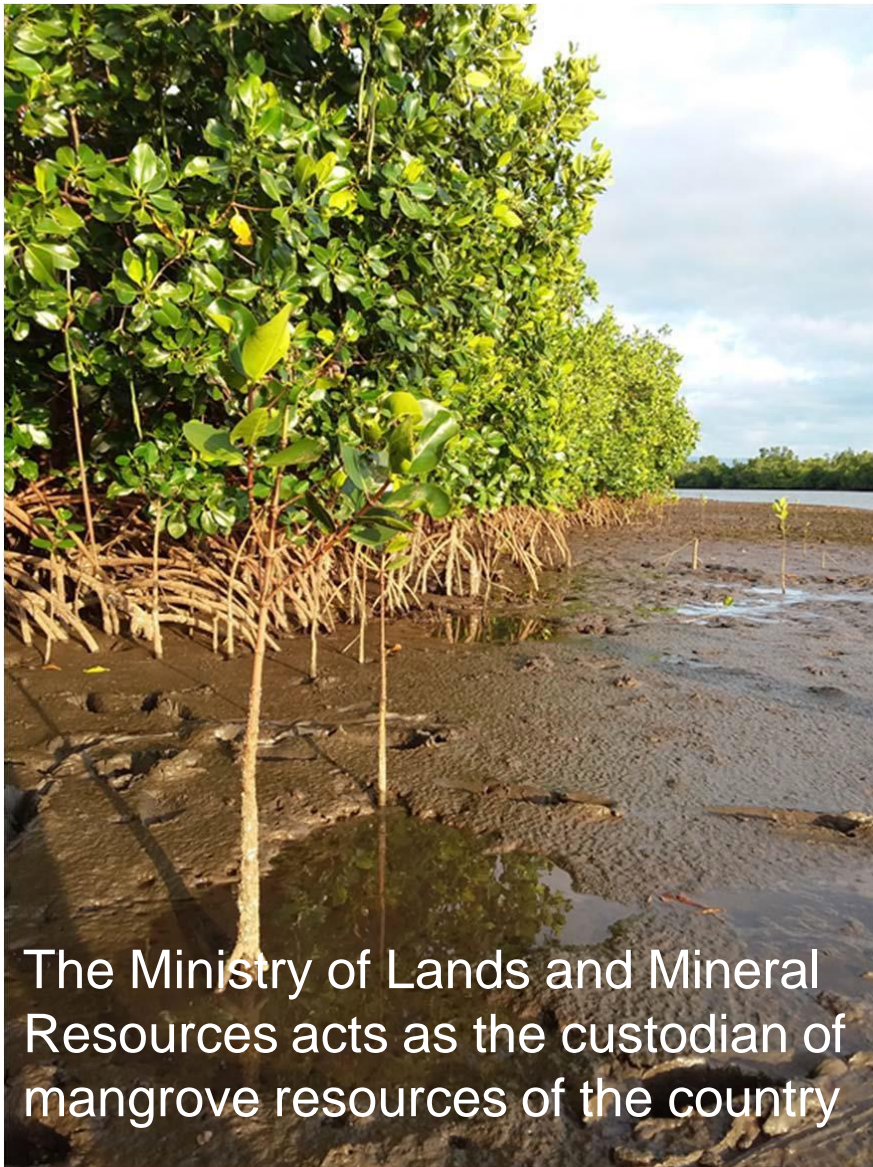
Fiji's *qoliqoli*: inshore waters extending from the foreshore to outer reef boundaries, with fishing rights held by *iTaukei* (indigenous) communities

411 *qoliqoli* registered by the Native Land and Fisheries Commission, covering a total of about 30,000 km<sup>2</sup>

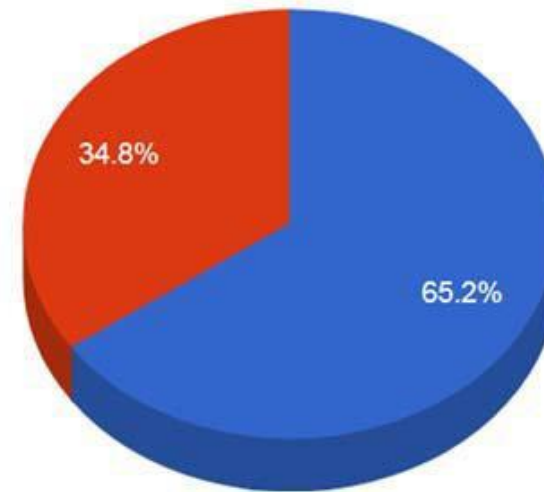
Fiji's *qoliqoli*: most systemically recorded and demarcated customary-held marine tenure areas in the Pacific → yet the State maintains ultimate control over the *qoliqoli* area



# Who owns the mangroves?



Actual management by *iTaukei* communities



**Figure 1.** Proportion of local households in the Ba River delta that derive their livelihood from mangroves



“Those who signed the document do not even know what it contained.”

*(Paula Tabace, Nawaqarua, July 2019, in ‘Heartless Mining’)*

“The company does not seem to understand the way to follow in order to consult us the resource owners.” *(Simione Navara, Turaga ni koro, Votua, July 2019, in ‘Heartless Mining’)*

“Unfortunately, the greed of this company is destroying us by destroying our land.”  
*(Landowner from Votua, research conversation, October 2018)*

“There will be no crabs, no fish, how can we survive?”  
*(Atonina Loata, Nawaqarua village, July 2019, in ‘Heartless Mining’)*

“The mining company is not offering us any jobs.”  
*(Woman from Votua, feedback workshop, September 2019)*



“The majority of the villagers of Votua support the operations of Amex and those who oppose [them] are just a minority.”

“The largest of the 3 yavusa’s [sic] ... have given their written support and consent recently.”

“A number of resource owners from Votua are now happily employed by Amex and are proud to be part of the company.”

Source: Paid Advertisement in “Fiji Sun”, 12 September 2019

## **Amex Resources Limited Lays Off 107 Employees One Year After Operations**

*The \$335 million company set up to process iron sand in Lautoka laid off the workers on Monday afternoon and this has been confirmed by the company’s general manager Alivereti Tuidravuni.*

Source: “Fiji Sun”, 26 February 2020



“Mining is one of the areas that will take Fiji forward.”

*(Former PM Frank Bainimarama, during the official handover ceremony for the Tuvatu Gold Mining Lease 2016)*

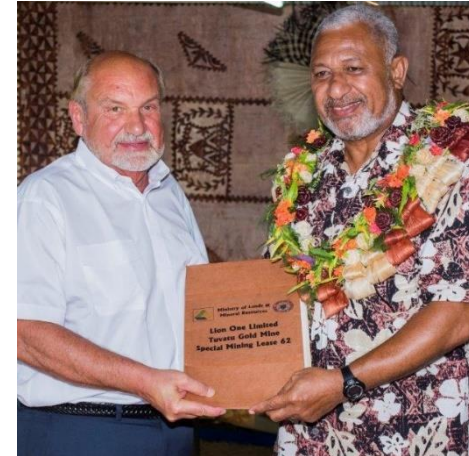
“To any developer from anywhere in the world, let me say this: if you intend to destroy or forever degrade our environment, you are not welcome in Fiji.”

*(PM Frank Bainimarama, during the Fiji Tourism Awards 2019)*

“I believe this government does not really care about us the resource owners, for it was only concerned about what it wanted.”

*(Simione Navara, Turaga ni koro, Votua, July 2019, in ‘Heartless Mining’)*

Since 2020, villagers have reported an increased presence of police vessels monitoring the boundaries of the mining operations and warning locals not to infringe upon them.



The Fijian government has instrumentalised the country's hybrid legal system to instigate a process of 'terraqueous territorialisation' at the terrestrial-maritime interface.

This process produces new configurations of capitalist spaces in which the government redistributes wealth and resource sovereignty from communities to corporations and the state through means of appropriation and deception.

Civil society, communities and academics need to work together to counter the false narrative of 'minimal social and environmental impacts' constructed by foreign mining companies and the Fijian government.

NATIONALNEWS

www.fijitimes.com



## Research team disseminates findings with local communities

By LUKE RAWALAI

UPSTREAM deforestation and iron-sand mining in the Ba River delta has aggravated the effects of climate change within communities in the area. This was established by research teams from the University of Auckland, University of Western Australia, University of Sydney and the University of the South Pacific, which recently organised a dissemination workshop for three communities in the lower Ba catchment, Yotua, Nawaqarua and Natutu recently. The research teams also identified the need for more community-led climate adaptation research in Fiji. Project leader, Professor Andreas Neef from the University of Auckland said these communities did not only face climate-related hazards such as cyclones, floods and droughts, but also other risks stemming from upstream deforestation and iron-sand mining in the Ba River delta. "The combination of these risks puts increasing pressure on the local mangrove ecosystem and the livelihoods and ecological services that are derived from it,"

said Prof Neef. "The researchers combined scientific methods with local knowledge to identify the most viable adaptation strategies. "In *talanoa* sessions, community members and researchers discussed how the research could be used to convince government officials and mining corporations about the immense value that the Ba delta's vast mangrove area had for biodiversity, carbon sequestration, disaster risk management and the local economy." Community leaders expressed their gratitude to the research team for the trustful and productive work over several years and for making an effort to disseminate findings that are useful for improving local resilience and adaptive capacity. Meanwhile, the research teams will continue its study in the Ba River delta under a project on climate-smart landscapes and livelihoods funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research. The workshop was attended by 57 participants – concluding four years of research into local climate adaptation strategies funded by the Asia-Pacific Network for Global Change Research.



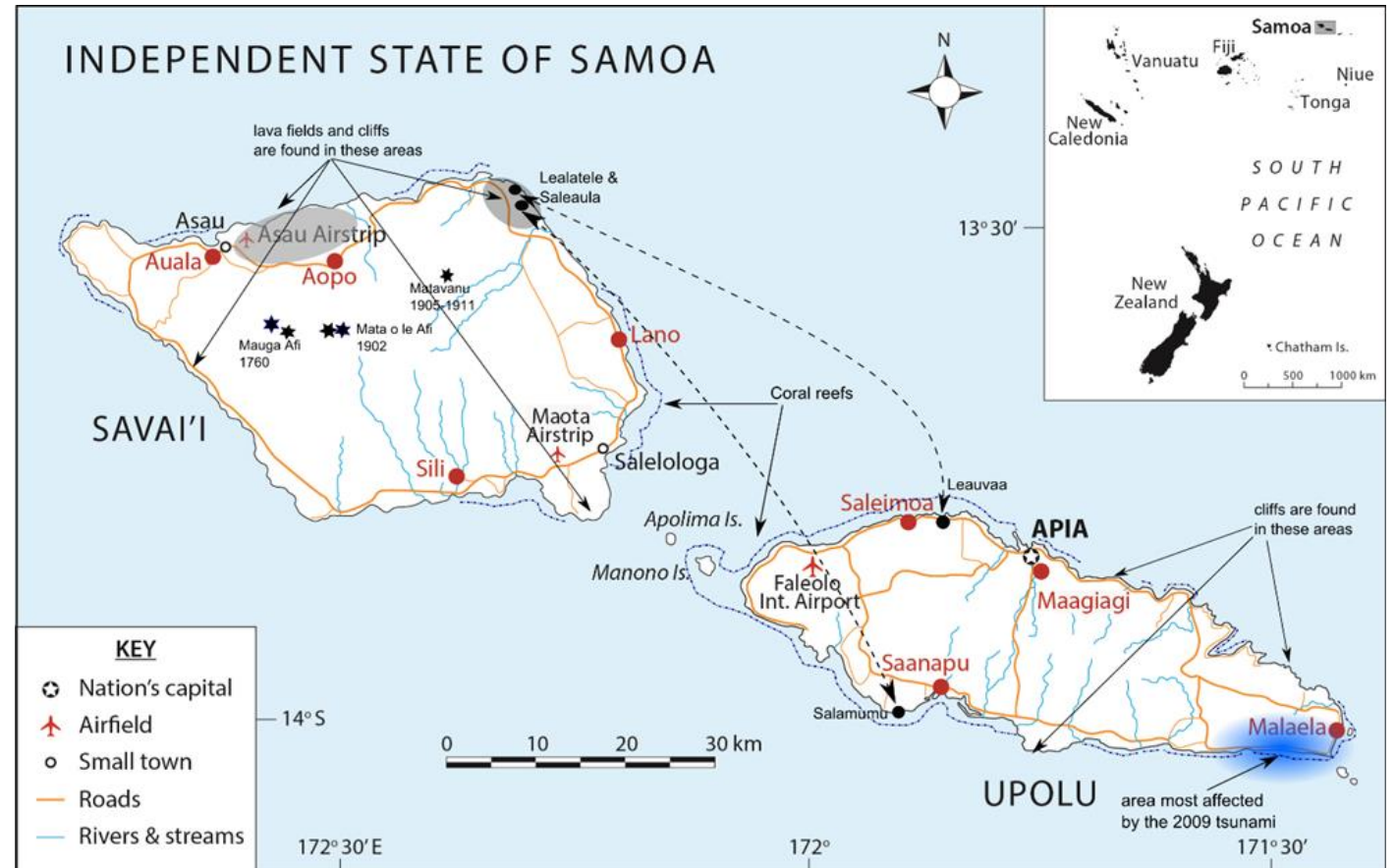
Participants of the recent dissemination workshop held in Ba which discussed on climate change research issues. Picture: SUPPLIED

## Customary land access and climate mobility in Samoa

Mobility of Samoans is influenced by many factors **which include climate change**

Why do people move?

- i) Urbanization
- ii) Building of new roads
- iii) 1990s cyclones
- iv) 2009 tsunami
- v) Institutional push



Source: Latai Niusulu, 2017

- ❑ Major settlement shifts/ patterns (since the 1950s) have been mainly towards Northwestern Upolu **AND inland** in both Savaii and Upolu.
- ❑ All Samoans can access customary lands and large sections of most villages remain under customary land tenure.
- ❑ Samoan 'bi-lineal' access to customary lands has enabled 'flexibility of movement' of many Samoans within Samoa. Many Samoans have built residences, cultivate crops and farm in more than one place, either within the same village or in different villages.
- ❑ Some villages, in partnership with the government and other agencies, have become 'active agents' in the management and protection of their mangroves and lagoons.

## Lano, Savaii

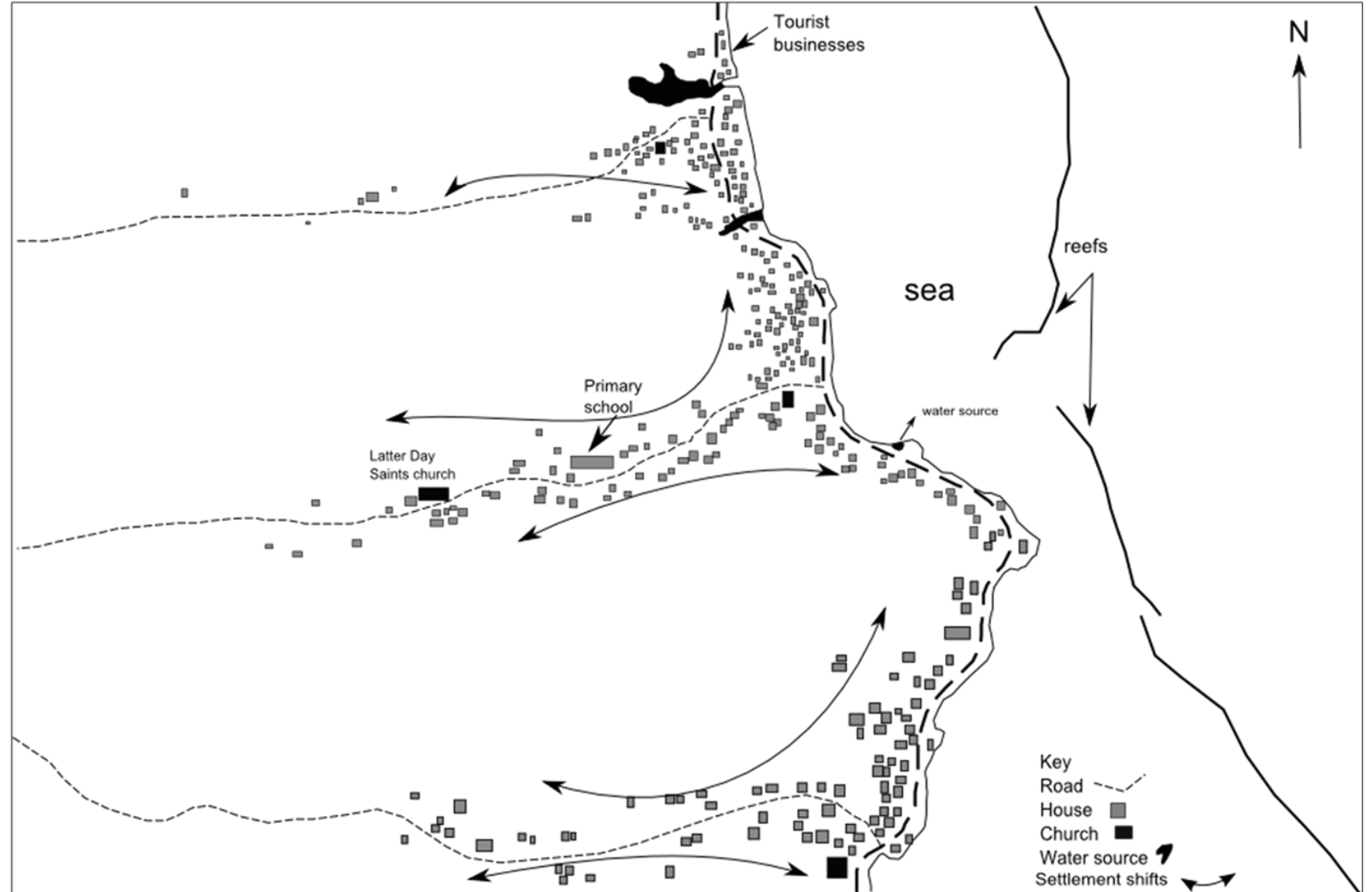
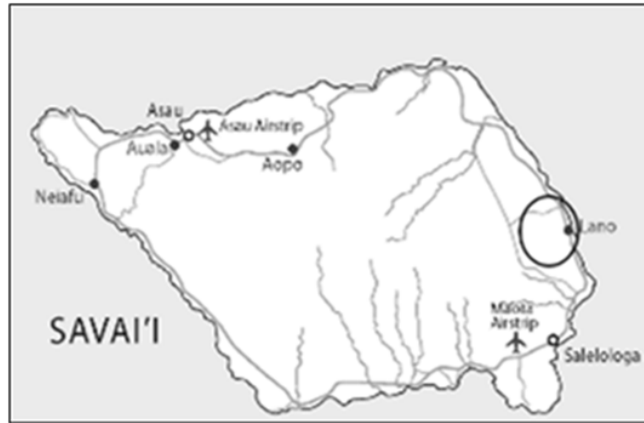


Figure 5.12: Village settlement at Lano (Source: after Google Earth, 2016).

**An elderly resident who once lived on the coast before the 1990s recounted the destruction of their home by Cyclone Val.**

**She said:**

“We lived with my parents in small open houses like this one. The houses did not fall but the posts slanted because the sea flowed into our houses and covered the whole area inland. The whole coast was covered by the sea. When we walked the sea came up to our knees. My uncle came to help us out. I gathered my parents and brought them to my uncle’s house on the first day.

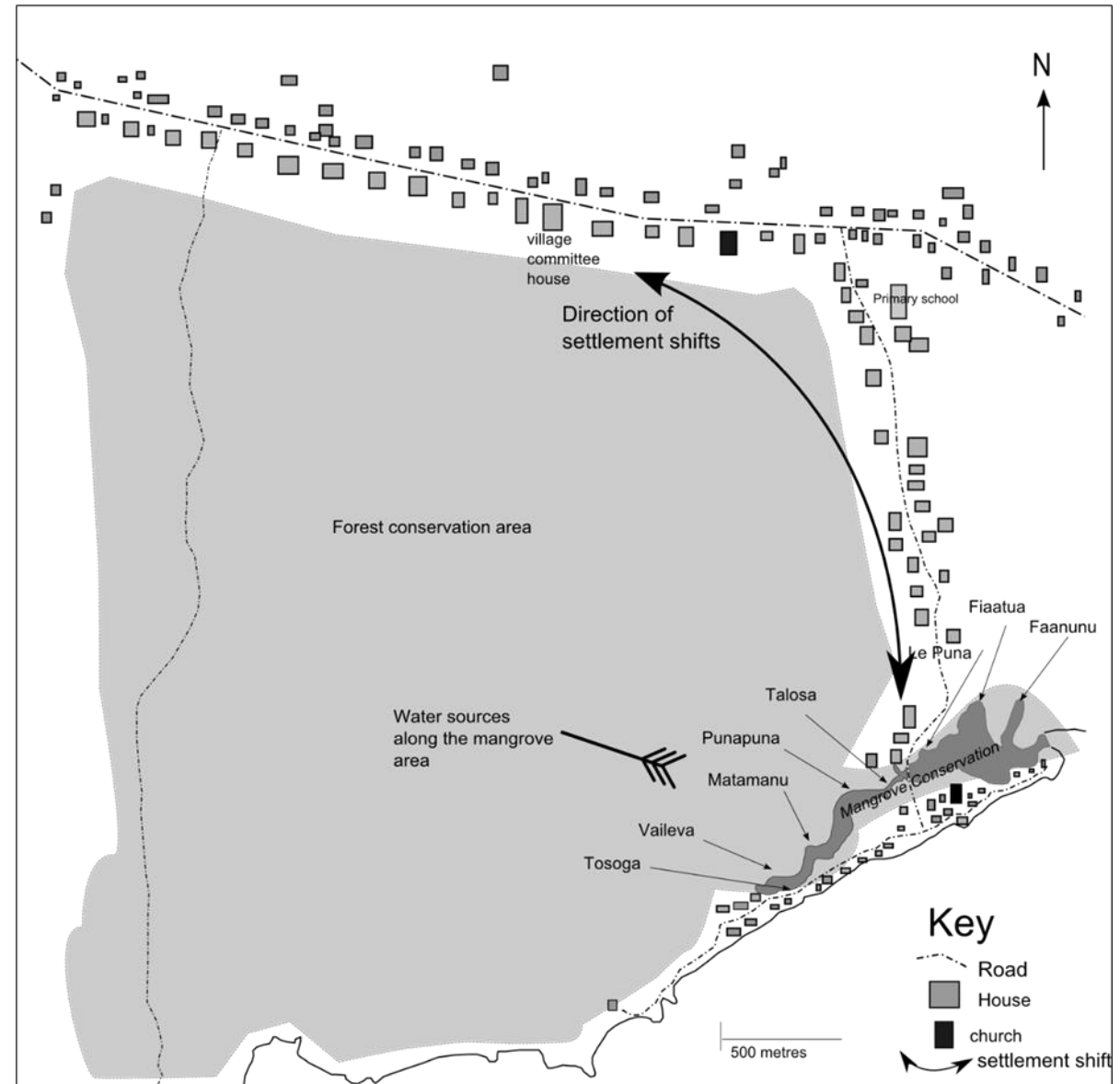
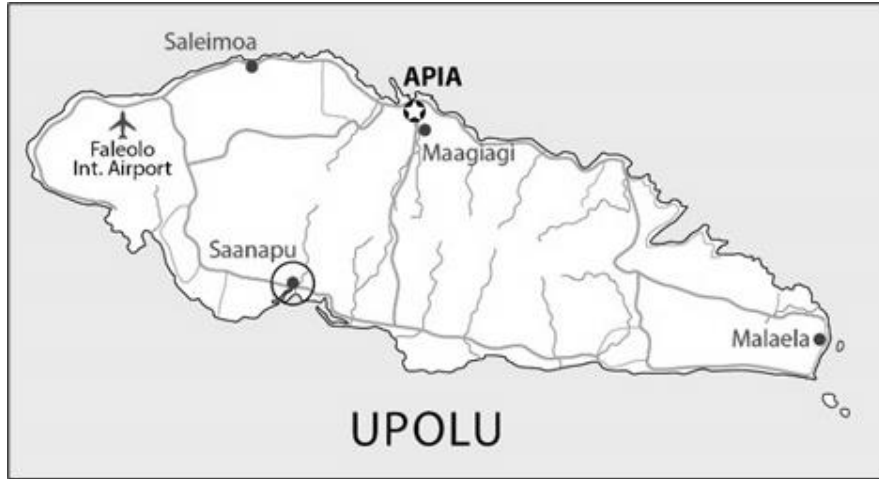
Because my father is blind. We lived at my uncle’s house until our house was rebuilt ...



## Lano's mangrove area



## Sa'anapu



## Coastal part of Saanapu



- ❑ There are villages whose lands have been alienated and privatized (either to Churches, government or private landowners)?
- ❑ There are a few families living on 'insecure' government-owned land

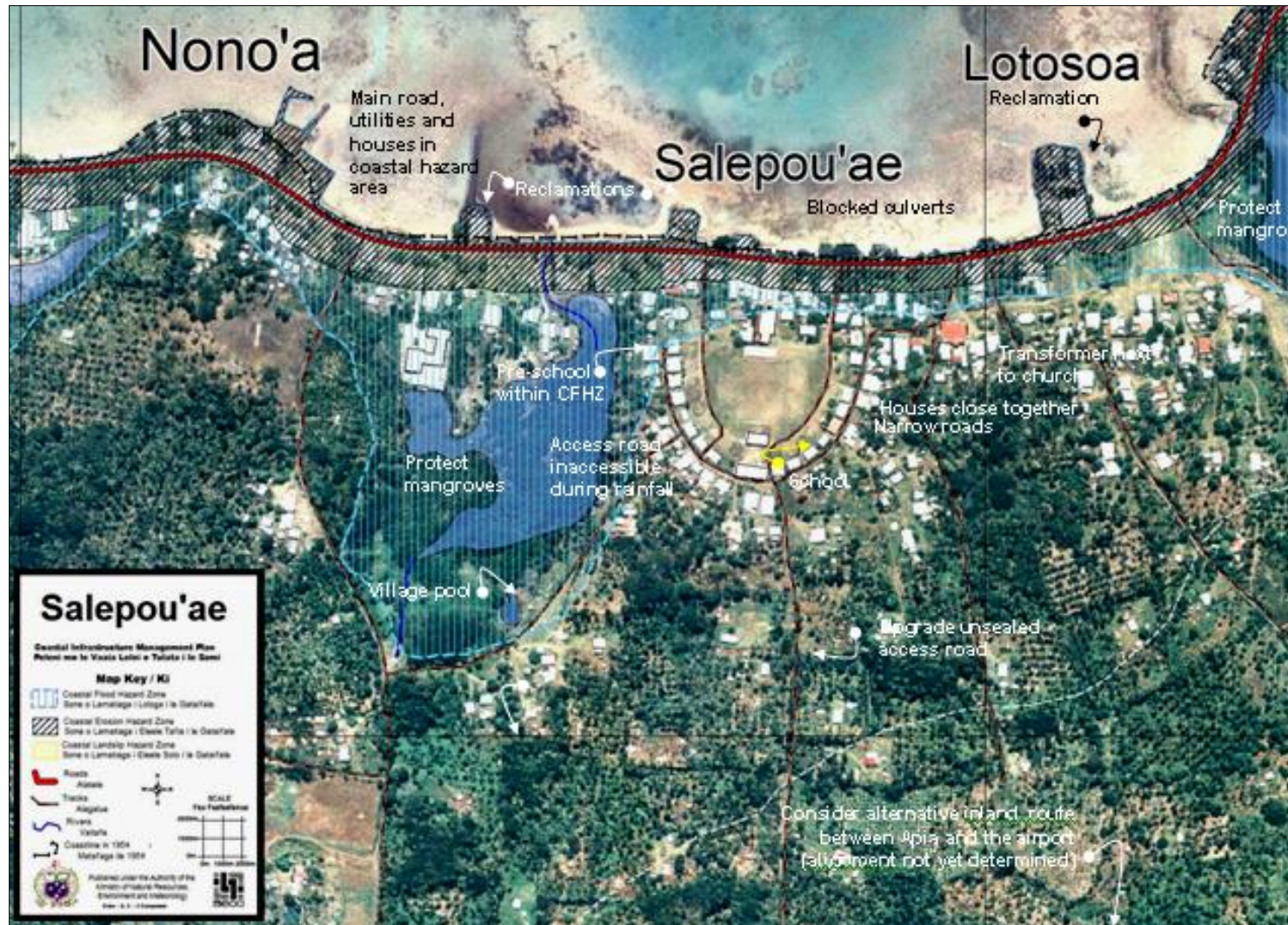
1990s- evidence of Churches returning sections of land back

Some people have accessed customary lands in other villages

Some people have bought private lands in areas close to Apia

'Lease to own' arrangements by the government





**Figure 5.3: Parts of Saleimoa susceptible to flooding (Source: Government of Samoa and CIM Plan Committee for Sagala le Falefa District, 2007).**

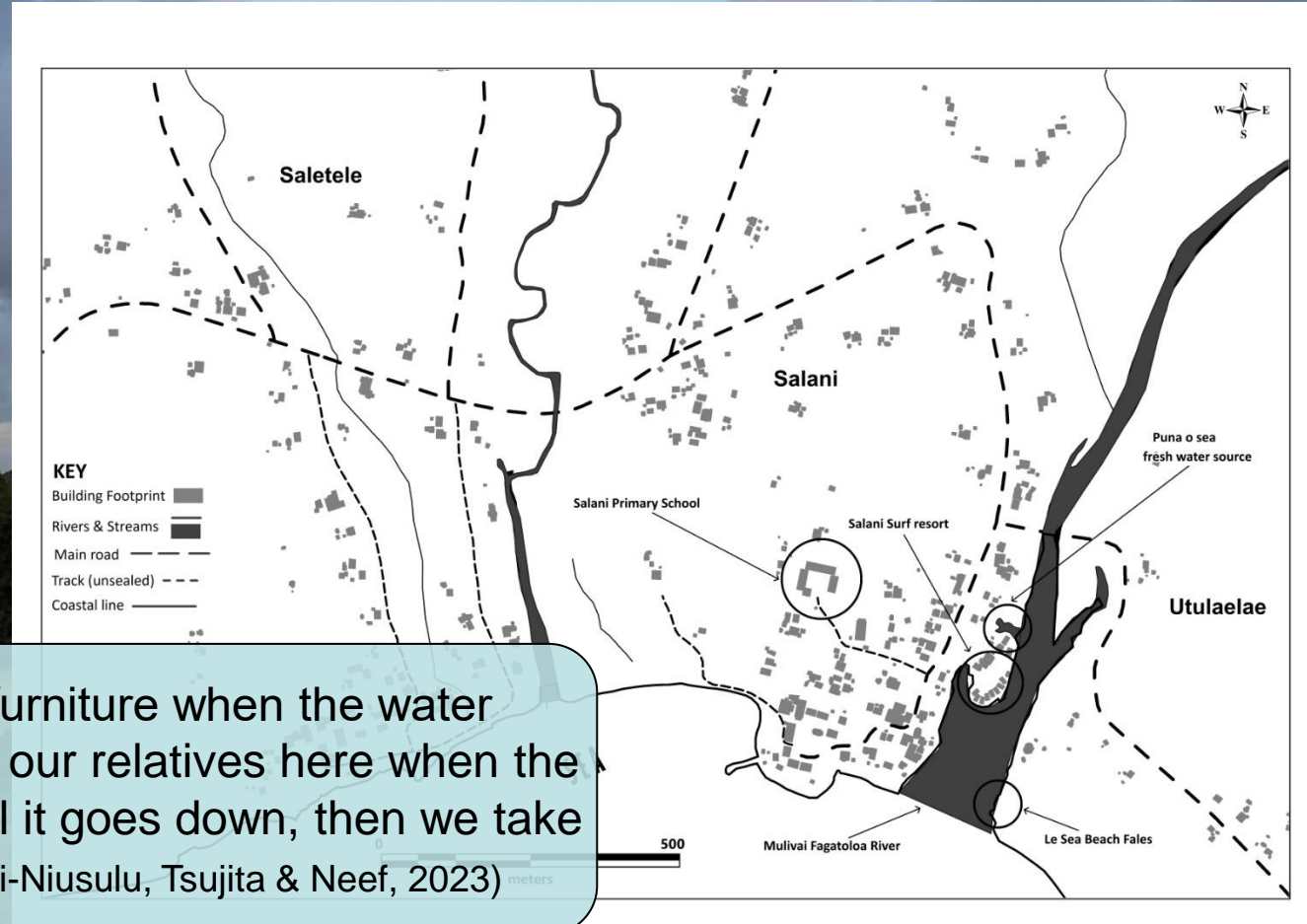


**Figure 5.2: Development at a plantation site at Saleimoa. This family who also reside on the coast first built an open house on their plantation back in the 1970s. They replaced it with another one in the mid-1990s (pictured left). They started building the closed European house in 2011 where one of the daughters and her family has moved.**

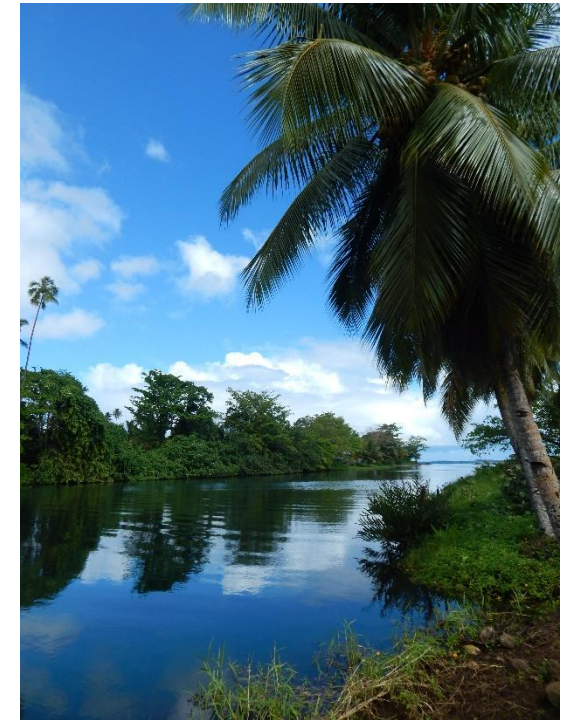
## Cultural Practice of *Fa'a-āigalua* (living with two families)

## Salani

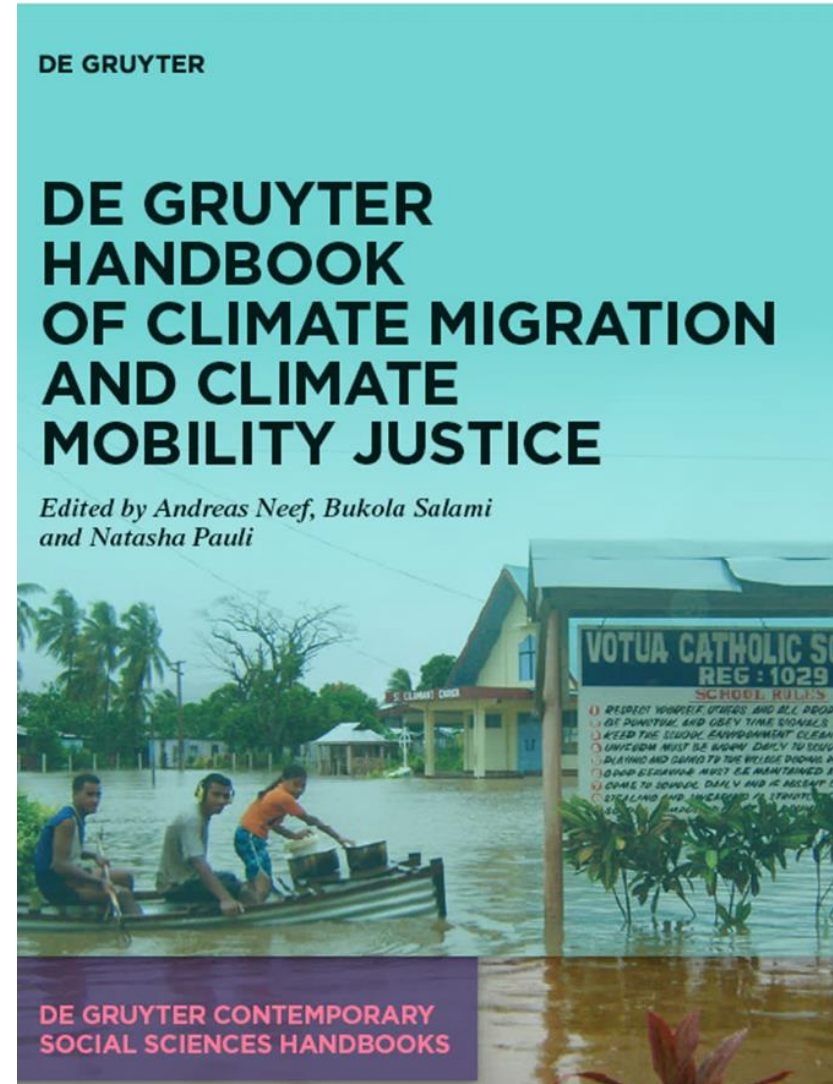
“My older brother still lives at the coast but when it is close to the rainy season they come here, then afterwards they move back.”  
(Latai-Niusulu, Tsujita & Neef, 2023)



“Children lift up furniture when the water floods. We bring our relatives here when the water floods until it goes down, then we take them back.” (Latai-Niusulu, Tsujita & Neef, 2023)



- ❖ The significance of the commons for community resilience in the Pacific Islands cannot be overstated
- ❖ Inland, coastal and marine commons are crucial for adaptive capacity, recovery from disasters, sustainability of rural livelihoods, and climate mobilities
- ❖ Communal resource tenure provides an important safety net for communities and households in the multi-risk socio-environmental context of Oceania
- ❖ Attempts to disestablish customary land tenure and shared control of communal resources may have adverse consequences for community resilience



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# Questions and Feedback

