POLICY BRIEF 1

Moving to Remain in Place

Rethinking Climate Strategies: Micro-Mobility and Planned Relocation in Fiji

Climate adaptation strategies in response to environmental change range from subtle, short-distance movement—termed *climate micro-mobility*—to more structured approaches like planned relocation. Climate micro-mobility includes adaptive actions such as shifting housing within a village, moving livestock to higher ground, or adjusting daily activities to cope with seasonal or environmental changes. In contrast, planned relocation in response to climate change involves systematically moving entire communities to ostensibly safer locations to reduce exposure to hazards, as seen in Fiji's adoption of policies under its Planned Relocation Guidelines (PRG). Many coastal communities in Fiji engage in climate micro-mobility as a means of adaptation, however, this activity lacks support and recognition from the government at a policy level. This policy brief will showcase examples of Fijian communities that engage in climate micro-mobility and highlight the need to ensure that National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and policies capture such community-based strategies and recognize and support all avenues of mobility-based adaptation before the inception of planned relocation in communities.

KEY MESSAGES

- **Adaptation and Agency:** Micro-mobility is a localized, often voluntary strategy that allows communities to adapt incrementally while maintaining cultural and ancestral ties. Conversely, planned relocation, though often preemptive, requires significant external intervention, potentially disrupting social and cultural bonds.
- **Sensitivity to Climate Impacts:** Micro-mobility is often more agile and responsive to immediate climate impacts, whereas planned relocation addresses long-term risks but may overlook short-term mobility needs and dynamics.
- **Community-Led Micro-Mobility in Fiji:** Communities in Fiji, such as Etatoko, Galoa, and Yadua, often engage in micro-mobility by relocating uphill or shifting agricultural activities to adapt to flooding and sea-level rise while maintaining ties to their traditional/mataqali lands.
- **Policy and Data Gaps:** While Fiji's PRG provides a robust framework for climate-induced planned relocation, similar policies for increasing visibility and supporting climate micro-mobility as an adaptation strategy are lacking. Micro-mobility remains underrepresented in migration datasets and adaptation frameworks, limiting its integration into policy planning.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Climate-induced planned relocation has gained prominence in Fiji, guided by frameworks like the Planned Relocation Guidelines and broader global commitments under the UNFCCC Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage. Notable examples, such as the relocation of Vunidogoloa village on Vanua Levu, Fiji's second largest island, demonstrate how structured relocations can reduce vulnerability to hazards like sea-level rise. However, many communities also rely on micro-mobility, such as temporary movements to urban centers for work after a disaster or shifting agricultural plots or seasonal livestock movements, as an adaptation strategy that allows them to maintain a connection to their traditional lands while adapting to the environmental impacts of climate change. We have highlighted examples of local communities, such as Etatoka in the northwestern Ba province on Viti Levu Island, that engage in micro-mobility activities after being permanently relocated after a major flooding event in 2012 that destroyed several homes along the Ba River bank in Fiji.

Research highlights how coastal communities in Fiji engage in micro-mobility and circular migration as a means of adaptation. While the Fiji government notes that climate-induced planned relocation is the last resort in the absence of adequate and affordable mitigation and adaptation strategies, current policies need to be expanded to include the increased visibility and support for climate micro-mobility as a legitimate and adaptive response to climate change.

Abandoned homes in Galoa village on the southern coast of Viti Levu

The settlement of Etatoko, one of the first relocated communities in Fiji

KEY FINDINGS

This policy brief highlights the interplay between climate micro-mobility and planned relocation as adaptive responses to environmental change in communities in Fiji. The following key findings outline the opportunities and challenges associated with these strategies:

1. Localized Adaptation through Micro-Mobility

- Micro-mobility enables communities to respond flexibly to immediate climate impacts while maintaining cultural and ancestral ties.
- Fijian communities engage in micro-mobility by relocating houses within villages, shifting agricultural activities, or temporarily moving livestock to higher ground during floods.
- These actions are often household-driven and reflect a deep connection to place and support through extended family networks, demonstrating agency and resilience.

Feeding a newborn calf in Galoa village

Collapsing seawall in Yadua village

2. Challenges in Capturing Micro-Mobility

- Short-distance movements are often invisible in migration datasets and adaptation frameworks, making them harder to integrate into policy planning.
- Data collection methodologies tend to focus on long-distance or international migration, overlooking subtle climate-driven changes such as seasonal adjustments or transhumant patterns.
- While there are recognized pathways for micro-mobility in formal frameworks in Fiji the limited visibility reduces its potential to be recognized and supported as a climate change adaptation strategy.

3. Distinctions and Synergies with Planned Relocation

- Planned relocation is a structured, often externally supported approach designed to mitigate long-term risks, such as sea-level rise or coastal erosion. In Fiji, this is the last option considered in climate change action.

- Micro-mobility, by contrast, offers incremental and immediate adaptations, which can complement planned relocation efforts by addressing short-term needs.

- While planned relocation can disrupt cultural and social ties, micro-mobility allows communities to adapt while preserving connections to their ancestral lands and vital livelihood sources, such as waterways and marine areas.

4. Policy Gaps and Opportunities for the Future

- Fiji's Planned Relocation Guidelines (PRG) provide a robust framework for addressing long-term displacement, however, they do not explicitly integrate micro-mobility as a complementary strategy.

- Expanding existing policies to include micro-mobility can strengthen resilience by increasing visibility and supporting local, community-based solutions.

- Improved data collection on short-distance movements is necessary in order to understand their role in climate adaptation and integrate them into broader national frameworks.

Kindergarten at risk from rising sea levels in Galoa village

5. Supporting Evidence from Pacific Communities

- Surveyed households in Fiji's coastal regions reported making seasonal adjustments, such as moving livestock or altering fishing patterns, to adapt to climate risks.

- Communities in coastal Fiji have relocated inland or shifted living arrangements incrementally, maintaining ties to their traditional lands while avoiding immediate hazards such as flooding and tropical cyclones.

6. Implications for Policy and Building Resilience

- Recognizing micro-mobility as a legitimate and complementary adaptation strategy alongside planned relocation is essential for designing holistic policies.

- Approaches that account for micro-mobility as an adaptation strategy can address Pacific communities' diverse and context-specific needs, enhancing their resilience to the multifaceted impacts of climate change.

Several families in this coastal community on Vanua Levu Island have moved their houses further away from the coast following recent cyclones and storm surges

LIMITATIONS

While this policy brief aims to provide actionable insights into climate adaptation strategies, several limitations should be considered:

1. Context-Specific Focus

The case studies and recommendations are derived primarily from Fiji's experience, particularly coastal communities in Viti Levu. While informative, these findings may not fully capture the diverse challenges and contexts of maritime islands, hinterland communities, and ethnic minority communities within the Pacific Islands.

2. Limited Long-Term Data

The analysis draws on community observations and studies conducted over the past five years. However, the long-term impacts of planned relocation and climate micro-mobility require further long-term research to assess socio-economic, cultural, and environmental outcomes comprehensively.

3. Community Representation

This brief relies on qualitative data from focus group discussions, mobility mapping and observations. While these provide rich insights, the perspectives presented may not fully represent the diversity of experiences and opinions within the studied communities.

4. Broader Policy Implications

The findings focus on localized adaptation strategies. The scalability of these approaches to national or regional levels may face significant political, financial, and logistical barriers.

5. Dynamic Climate Risks

Climate change impacts are evolving, with increasing uncertainty around the frequency and severity of hazards. Recommendations based on current experiences may need continual adjustment to address emerging risks and changing local contexts.

6. Institutional Constraints

The analysis acknowledges institutional barriers, such as land tenure and governance challenges, but does not deeply explore potential reforms needed.

These limitations highlight the importance of ongoing research, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and adaptive policy frameworks to support the effective implementation of climate adaptation strategies.

Recommendations

Recognizing and integrating micro-mobility alongside planned relocation can provide a comprehensive approach to climate adaptation, leveraging both community agency and structured planning to address diverse vulnerabilities in climate-vulnerable countries like Fiji.

1. Integrate the terminology of Micro-Mobility into Frameworks

Integrate the terminology of Micro-Mobility into Frameworks: Expand current policies, such as Fiji's PRG, to include recognition and support for micro-mobility as a legitimate and adaptive response to climate change.

2. Develop Cross-Scale Approaches

Design programs that address the interplay between short-distance micro-mobility and planned relocation, ensuring they complement rather than compete.

3. Strengthen Data Collection

Establish metrics to capture micro-mobility within national climate adaptation and migration datasets.

4. Promote Community-Based Solutions

Balance planned relocation efforts with strategies that empower communities to manage micro-mobility while preserving cultural and ancestral connections.

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