

POLICY BRIEF 2

Moving to Remain in Place

Climate Micro-Mobilities as Adaptation Practice in Samoa



Pacific Island Countries and Territories have been exposed to many disturbances associated with climate change-related environmental transformations. Pacific Island people's adaptability, extended kin-based networks, and family-oriented social structures that provide access to land, natural resources and remittances have been significant strategies for survival in a multi-risk environment. Being able to move from one place to another, in particular, has been a crucial livelihood strategy in the face of various internal and external pressures, including climate change. Therefore, understanding Pacific Island people's mobility patterns is imperative to develop policies that help enhance their climate resilience. This policy brief summarizes the findings from Samoan villages that demonstrate how micro-mobility strategies, such as small-scale and temporary movements, can enable communities to remain in place despite increased risks from accelerating climatic changes and associated impacts.

KEY MESSAGES

- ❖ Micro-mobilities have been a crucial livelihood strategy of Pacific Islanders for decades, even before climate change became a global and local concern.
- ❖ Samoan mobility practices are deeply rooted in Samoan culture, norms and worldviews.
- ❖ The Samoan practice of living with more than one family – expressed by the term *fa'a-āigalua* – can enhance coastal residents' adaptability to a changing climate and challenging situations, such as weather-related disasters.
- ❖ *Fa'a-āigalua* is enabled by the system of customary land rights and extended family connections, which allow Samoans to hold two or more parcels of land and diversify their places of residence and livelihood generation.
- ❖ Micro-mobilities and circular migration are an expression of the adaptability of Samoans to changing socio-ecological and climatic circumstances.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Samoa Mobilities and the Socio-Cultural Significance of Land

Mobility and migration have been commonplace across the Pacific for centuries. Family connections between Tonga, Samoa and Fiji and the existence of various diasporic communities in Samoa are evidence of these historic movements. Prior to colonization, Pacific mobility and movement between a 'sea of islands' connected nations and created networks that transcended the colonial western construct that viewed the Pacific islands as miniscule dots in a vast ocean.

In contemporary Samoa, circular movements that occur at multiple scales are often intertwined deeply with multilayered kinship connections that transcend physical boundaries and international borders. Seasonal work schemes also provide opportunities to travel overseas for short periods of time, accelerating transnational movements.

Malaga is the word commonly used as an equivalent to the English term migration. It implies the notion of circularity—both visiting and returning locally and internationally. The key role malaga plays is to pay respect and maintain social relationships between 'āiga [family or extended family], matai [chiefly titleholders], and family land. 'Āiga means family, both nuclear and extended. The extended and semi-subsistent nature of Samoan households allows for diversified ways of earning income and accessing resources.

'Āiga is the foundation of the fa'amatai, the Samoa's chiefly system which is based on Samoan traditions and customary laws. Every 'āiga is headed by a matai who governs the use, distribution and protection of the customary land which belongs to 'āiga. About 80% of the land in Samoa is customary land while 12% is freehold land, and about 7% is government land. All Samoans can claim traditional rights to occupy or use customary land for

Public transport in Samoa



various purposes through both maternal and paternal lineages. The customary organization of land provides flexibility for a family to shift around their house location according to shifting needs, which helps build their resilience.

To maintain their ties to 'āiga, matai, and land, Samoans move back and forth to strengthen family connections and cultivate social relationships between kin members irrespective of their geographical locations and for the collective welfare of their family. However, the practice of malaga does not fully encapsulate the role of social and natural disturbances in prompting people to shift between residences, within their home villages or across islands. To further understand their micro-mobilities and how these practices enhance the climate change adaptability of Samoans, this policy brief illuminates the Samoan cultural practice of fa'a-'āigalua.

Fa'a-'āigalua literally means 'to be with two families' or 'having two or more residences or families'. It is a cultural practice that enables Samoans to shift back and forth between two houses, families, or residential locations, flexibly and spontaneously, not only within the village but also across villages. Some families may temporarily leave their residences for whichever reason and move to other places or move in with relatives living in other villages. This practice is enabled by the system of customary land rights and extended family connections, which allow Samoans to hold two or more parcels of land and diversify their places of residence and plantations. For example, many families living on the coastal parts of villages cultivate crops on other parcels of land located inland or even in another village. In this light, fa'a-'āigalua can enhance people's adaptability to changing climate and challenging situations.

Cattle farm and coconut plantation on Upolu Island



RESEARCH METHODS

Study Villages

The study was conducted in two villages on Upolu Island, the rural community of Salani and the urban settlement of Vaitele (see Boxes 1 and 2).

Box 1. Characteristics of Salani village, southeast coast of Upolu Island

Salani is a traditional coastal village where nearly all families live on customary land and the principles of the traditional and village authority are well maintained. Salani is a middle size village in terms of its population of approximately 550 residents.

fishing is a major source of income for the families that own fishing boats.

Flood-prone mouth of the Mulivai Fagatoloa River



Buildings on higher ground in Salani



More than 90% of the village's 88 households live on customary land, with only a few households living on freehold land. Almost all families in the district own plantations producing crops like taro, ta'amū (giant taro), banana, coconut, and cocoa. The district also has a good marine environment, comprising a wide windward barrier reef, an extensive lagoon with deep blue holes and reef slopes. Most villages in the district have fishery reserves, and

On 29 September 2009, a massive tsunami destroyed nearly all villages on the southern coast of Upolu including Salani and took the lives of 149 people. The tsunami also affected considerably the natural landscape of the district. It built up the sand along the mouth of estuaries and blocked the natural flow of the river, which created expanded wetlands and flooding of inland streams. In the aftermath of the tsunami, most families in the district shifted their homes inland from the coast. At the same time, forests continued to be stripped as families moved further inland to cultivate fertile soils for plantations.

Box 2. Characteristics of Vaitele, northern coast of Upolu Island

Vaitele is an urban settlement located on the outskirts of the Samoan capital Apia, outside the purview of structured village authority. Vaitele is a fast-growing suburban settlement with a population of over 8,000. Vaitele has about 1,300 households, 80% of which live on freehold land, while only about 7% live on customary land.

Many families living in Vaitele today are descendants of Melanesian labourers who worked on the copra plantations as indentured labourers in Vaitele as well as in Mulifanua on the northwestern end

of Upolu. When Samoa's largest copra plantation in Mulifanua was closed in the mid-1980s, 95% of the Melanesian labour community were relocated to Vaitele and given a 50-acre tract of land by the government. Some families of the original Vaitele villagers still live in Vaitele, but many are now living elsewhere in Samoa. Modern day Vaitele is a government-planned residential and industrial zone that is home to people moving in from rural areas as well as local and international businesses.

Church building in Vaitele



Talanoa Methodology

This study employed a comparative qualitative case study approach using talanoa style conversational interviews. Talanoa literally means ‘talk freely’ and is a term used across the Pacific Islands. It has been developed into a research methodology suitable to conduct interviews in Pacific Island communities as it replicates a space of everyday life on islands in which people share stories and experiences. This method helps remove psychological distance and reduces the power differential between interviewer and interviewee and allows the participants to share their stories in a relaxed atmosphere.

Mobility mapping in Luatuanu'u village, northern coast of Upolu Island



The research team also used various visual methods, such as mobility maps and causal loop diagrams, in a follow-up study in Vaitele settlement.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Climate-related Mobility Drivers

While climate change cannot be isolated as the sole factor driving movements, the majority of study participants cited climate-related reasons, alongside other environmental, social, and economic factors, as influences on their decision to move. Participants highlighted rising sea levels, changes in river behavior, increased flooding, and the 2009 tsunami as primary drivers. Some moved after their homes were destroyed by cyclones, while others relocated due to the increasing frequency and severity of flooding. A few participants acknowledged the possibility of relocating in the next 20 years due to anticipated sea-level rise and coastal erosion.

2. Role of 'Āiga in Mobility

Samoan mobility is deeply rooted in the concept of 'āiga (extended family), with movements often beginning and ending within the family network. Family support plays a crucial role in facilitating mobility, and several participants mentioned the assistance provided by relatives in making relocation decisions. While this can cause tensions, the extended family structure provides diversified livelihood strategies that include formal sector employment, casual work, agricultural production, and remittances. These diversified income sources support family development and facilitate movement.

3. Land Access and Micro-Mobilities

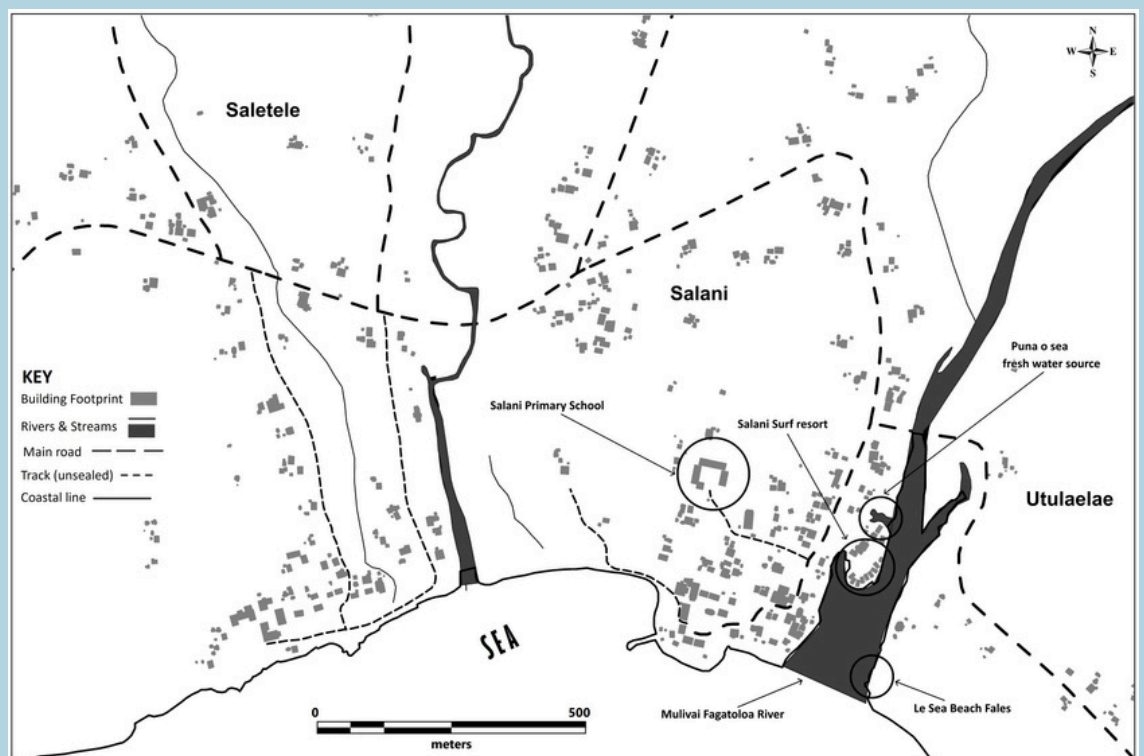
The pattern of movement among Samoans reflects a micro-mobility model, where households close to the coast or rivers have shifted inland. These movements are typically short-distance, often from coastal to inland areas within the same village. This shift is facilitated by the customary nature of land ownership, which allows easy access to inland areas, with minimal costs or permission required from matai (chiefs). This type of micro-mobility contributes to the resilience and adaptive capacity of particularly coastal communities.

4. Fa'a-'āigalua and Multilocalities

The Samoan cultural practice of fa'a-'āigalua also enhances the ability of families to shift their residential locations according to their needs. This practice allows families to move back and forth between their previous and new residences, easing the burden of shifting locations. The temporary shelters provided by fa'a-'āigalua help reduce physical and financial pressures on families, particularly those affected by environmental changes. This cultural adaptation strategy enables better mobility, resilience, and adaptation to climate impacts, underscoring the importance of family networks and customary land access in responding to climate change.

Figure 1. Map of Salani village (Source: Latai-Niusulu et al., 2023)

Figure 1 shows the expansive building footprint of Salani village, with houses concentrated at the river mouth and along major roads and unpaved tracks further inland. This pattern reflects the multilocality of households and potential for micro-mobility strategies.



Recommendations

1. Retaining customary land ownership and the practice of fa'a-'āigalua is important as it ensures the continuation of 'āiga micro-mobility in response to environmental challenges.
2. Local governments and international organizations should refrain from policies and legislation that threaten 'āiga customary land rights and subsequently their ability to be mobile.
3. Private landowners in Samoa, namely the government and mainstream churches, should continue to develop supportive mechanisms, whereby even the most vulnerable members of 'āiga are able to access parcels of land where they can shift their residence and develop multi-local livelihood strategies when future challenges arise.
4. The Samoan government must continue to review the socio-economic impacts and implications of temporary and permanent migration schemes, such as New Zealand's Recognized Seasonal Employer program and Pacific Access Category and Samoan Quota Scheme as well as the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme to ensure these schemes prioritize vulnerable families and their needs.
5. Further research is needed to probe and further understand the experiences of villages and families who have lost inland sections of their customary lands.

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