

129. Pacific climate micro-mobilities

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Long-distance mobility has historically been a key survival and adaptation strategy for Pacific Island people and has received much scholarly attention. Yet the dynamics of short-distance and short-duration mobility patterns among Pacific Islanders as a means of enhancing climate resilience and adaptive capacity remain understudied. These micro-mobility strategies – identified by the authors through Pacific research methodologies, including the Pan-Pacific talanoa method and the Fijian vanua research framework – challenge the prevailing narrative that portrays Pacific Islanders as vulnerable victims of climate change and future climate refugees.

In Fiji, the government has earmarked more than 40 coastal communities as being in immediate need of planned relocation, with many more classified as needing some form of mobility assistance in the future. Meanwhile, some at-risk communities have spontaneously relocated parts of their settlements without government support. In both spontaneous and planned relocation, the preference is to move within their own social landholding unit (*mataqali*) due to strong ancestral ties to the land and in order to avoid tensions with other communities.

The relocation of the Etatoko settlement on Viti Levu, Fiji's largest island, highlights both the benefits and challenges of planned resettlement due to climate-related hazards. The community, formerly located on the banks of the Ba River, was destroyed by severe floods, prompting its relocation to a safer, higher-elevation area within the community's customary territory. While the relocation provided safety from immediate climate risks, it introduced new challenges, particularly in terms of altered mobility and livelihood practices. The residents retained their original farmlands, which were fertile due to riverine sediments. However, the relocation increased the distance between their homes and these farmlands, forcing villagers to walk several kilometres daily to tend their crops. The relocation also disrupted fishing practices, a primary source of income for many villagers. The long commute to farms and

fishing grounds has led to physical exhaustion and reduced interest in traditional livelihood practices, with many youths seeking precarious employment in nearby towns instead. The relocation also affected the community's social structure. Designated as a 'zoned settlement' rather than a village, Etatoko lacks the formal traditional governance structures of an Indigenous (*iTaukei*) village. This has resulted in a disconnect from traditional cultural practices and a lack of formal recognition by the *iTaukei* Lands Trust Board, affecting the community's autonomy and resilience.

The Etatoko case underscores that while planned relocation can mitigate immediate climate threats, it often introduces long-term mobility challenges that may not be fully anticipated during the planning stages. Sharing experiences from such resettlements can help improve future planning and ensure that relocated communities maintain resilience and cultural continuity.

Traditional Samoan micro-mobility practices may hold the key for alternatives to planned relocation in the Pacific. Like in Fiji, Samoan mobility is deeply rooted in cultural norms and worldviews, particularly the concept of *malaga*, which denotes the circular movement of people between places. This mobility pattern is not linear but fluid, reflecting the interconnectedness of Samoan society, where the extended family (*'āiga*) and local community are central to social life. *Malaga* involves journeying back and forth between locations, often for such reasons as maintaining social relationships, accessing resources, and fulfilling cultural obligations. This cultural mobility system has been vital for adaptation and survival, especially in the face of climatic changes. Traditional migration theories, which typically view migration as a one-way movement from origin to destination, do not adequately capture the complexity of Samoan mobility. Instead, Samoan mobility involves continuous oscillation between multiple locations, thereby allowing individuals and families to maintain ties with their *'āiga* and community in Samoa and abroad while adapting to changing circumstances.

A particular form of Samoan micro-mobility is *fa'a-'āigalua*, a cultural practice in Samoa that involves maintaining two or more residences, allowing people to shift between them as needed. This practice is enabled by the system of customary land rights, where

customary land can be allocated for different uses, such as residential areas, plantations, and forests. Fa'a-'āigalua allows Samoans to diversify their living arrangements, often moving between coastal and inland areas or between different villages. This flexibility enhances their ability to adapt to climate change and other challenges. Unlike *malaga*, which captures broader patterns of circular movement, fa'a-'āigalua refers to localised, temporary movements that are often prompted by environmental disruptions, such as hydro-meteorological disasters. Families may temporarily leave their homes to avoid climate-related risks, such as storms or flooding, but they do not permanently abandon their residences. Instead, they maintain a continuous process of transition between places, often identifying multiple locations as 'home'.

By recognising culturally embedded micro-mobility practices, such as fa'a-'āigalua, policymakers can develop more effective strategies to support the resilience of Pacific Island communities. Rather than viewing climate-affected communities as passive victims of climate change, they need to be seen as active agents who employ a variety of strategies, including mobility, to adapt to changing environmental conditions.

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