

Samoa: local knowledge, climate change and population movements

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The voices of scientists, academics, politicians and development practitioners dominate the climate change debate, yet local knowledge, values and beliefs are essential elements of navigating the way forward for affected communities.

Samoa, located in the southern Pacific Ocean and with a population of around 190,000 people concentrated on two main islands (Savaii and Upolu), is very vulnerable to climate change with at least 70% of the population and infrastructure located in low-lying coastal areas. The village of Lotofaga on the south coast of Upolu Island has a population of just over a thousand which is decreasing due to significant levels of out-migration.

Life in Lotofaga is largely guided by *fa'a Samoa*, the Samoan way of life, an umbrella term that encompasses the social structure of the village. *Fa'a Samoa* has remained strong, despite long exposure to Western influences. Land is held in accordance with Samoan custom and usage, and it represents identity, culture and community. Traditional coping mechanisms in times of hardship include customary safety nets, where remittances undoubtedly play a key role, and migration to diversify family income.

It is clear that climate change is affecting people in different ways. Those who suffer the most are the most vulnerable, such as families who do not have access to remittances or enough support from family members, and people – in particular women and elders – who have to rely on themselves to

sustain their livelihoods. There are also differentiated gender impacts as a result of women's limited access to information and resources. In addition, in a situation of environmental stress women have reduced mobility because they are the ones who care for children and the elderly.

“Some family members have gone away to America, New Zealand and Australia. They have gone away in search of fortune ... and because of the change of weather and to look for work to help and support family, but no one cares, no one loves me and my small children. I would leave this place only if and when it is God's will. But I can't go away.” (40-year-old widow)

Although the majority of people in Lotofaga are familiar with the term 'climate change', it is not clear for them how the 'scientific information' can be applied to their daily lives. In contrast, they are absolutely aware of the changes in their own environment and the effects that climate change has been having on their lives and livelihoods. Some people rely on their traditional knowledge to interpret the changes occurring in their environment and believe that climate change is part of a cycle, while others associate climate change with God's will. In general, people in Lotofaga do not describe themselves as victims of climate change. They said they have been

dealing with a changing environment for centuries and they have learnt to adapt to these changes for generations.

Village residents need better access to information about climate change and its implications. An interviewed male village chief stated:

"... we hear all this very technological terminology from government and others, and on the radio, but we really need to make sure that we understand what climate change is ... because many of these concepts are in terms of global processes when it's very important for rural people to better align what they are doing at the village level ... and what we can do in our own villages."

Young people and migrants have better access to information through mass and social media and also through education campaigns about climate change and disaster risk reduction. Migrants living abroad are aware of the impacts of climate change in Samoa and they support family members when natural disasters occur. However, increasing needs increase the burden on migrants.

Village residents and migrants have political concerns related to climate change. One male village chief who lives in the capital, Apia, in referring to climate justice said:

"It's quite unfair to start talking about climate change, how you adapt to climate change or how much contribution you have to make towards a global responsibility when we have contributed a negligible amount or even nothing to the problem."

Population movements

In the case of Lotofaga, population movements have been influenced by a combination of economic, social and environmental factors, although it is difficult to disentangle climate change from other drivers of migration. Decisions to move are made by individuals or families, inland from coastal areas, to Apia temporarily or permanently, or abroad.

Mobility is a strategy to diversify family income, to seek better access to education

and employment, to expand social networks, as well as to respond to environmental and climate changes. It is possible to define four types of population movements linked to climate change in the village.

Mobility within the village: Over recent decades, a significant number of families have moved inland. Lotofaga was once located directly on the coast but now there are only a few houses left there. One explanation is that some people moved inland as better access roads were built. Another reason is that a combination of slow-onset environmental events (e.g. coastal erosion) and sudden-onset events (such as the 2009 tsunami and Cyclone Evan in 2012) has forced people to relocate inland. Very few families are still living on the coast, although they are aware of the risks associated with their decision to stay.

Circular mobility: In Lotofaga there is evidence of circulation between the village and Apia or the countries of the Pacific Rim to diversify income.

Rural-urban migration: Although village residents mentioned economic and social factors as the main drivers of migration, subsistence agriculture is greatly affected by climate variability and it does not provide enough income.

Migration abroad: In the case of migration to New Zealand and Australia, work opportunities, education and family reunion are the main reasons indicated by people for leaving the country. The opportunities offered by foreign countries attract mainly young people, who have the perception that life in the village is getting harder.

Internal population movements, although within the village, have modified traditional cultural structures. Every piece of land has a history, a significance which embodies cultural heritage. In some cases, these movements involve a rupture of the connection between the family and the community land which is difficult to recover afterwards.

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Migrants – although they have a strong connection with their village because it provides them with a sense of identity and belonging – now have to navigate two worlds. Migrants living in Apia can participate in the life of the community more frequently, while for migrants living abroad returning to the village is a difficult endeavour. Migrants are committed to ceremonial, family and village obligations, and also are expected to provide help to family members affected by environmental problems and natural disasters.

Far from being fatalistic about climate change, people have developed adaptation strategies using their own knowledge. They have not been seeking solutions aimed only at adapting to climate change but rather holistic solutions to increase their resilience to a wide range of challenges. However, climate change is now threatening the very roots of the traditional knowledge by which their livelihoods are supported.

Although population movements are not a new phenomenon in Lotofaga, climate change now appears as a real contributory factor. Based on the village study findings, at the national level:

- there is a need to combine different knowledge systems to understand the impacts of climate change



- migration is an adaptation strategy to climate change and has to be addressed at the policy level
- traditional knowledge has to be integrated into climate change adaptation policies
- policy responses to environmental migration and climate change have to start at the village level.

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