

Multiple mobilities in Pacific Islands communities

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Types of mobility in the Pacific Islands are numerous and diverse. Case-studies from the region offer insights into the actions and agency of people, households and communities in the face of accelerating climate vulnerability.

The Pacific Islands feature prominently in global debates around climate-related mobility in light of the region's vulnerability to climate change impacts. Some estimates suggest that up to 1.7 million people in the region will migrate or be displaced by 2050 because of climate impacts.¹ Such movement manifests itself in various ways, including planned relocation of communities, migration from rural to urban areas (or towards main islands), and cross-border migration.²

Relocating – Fiji

In Fiji, at least 42 villages have been identified by the Fijian government for planned relocation as a potential adaptive response to climate change risks. The communities concerned are low-lying coastal sites that variously experience inundation of homes and ancestral burial grounds, shoreline erosion, storm surges, and saltwater intrusion into arable farmland and potable water sources. Several villages – some with the support of government ministries, donors and NGOs – have undertaken the process of relocating their homes, livelihoods and communities away from sites of environmental risk

The coastal village of Vunidogoloa in Vanua Levu, for example, relocated to higher ground in 2014 to reduce exposure to coastal erosion and inundation. The new location is about 2km inland – situated on customary clan land – and offers improved housing and infrastructure, access to farmland and livelihoods activities, and improved access to health and educational services, main roads and markets. The move was community-initiated with community members and leaders playing key roles in planning and decision making, and facilitated through partnerships and collaboration between community leaders and members,

church networks, donor agencies and the Provincial Council and government ministries. Challenges of relocation have included changes in diet and lifestyle (not least due to easier access to urban centres), disrupted attachment to place, lack of a place of worship (which is being addressed through community-funded construction of a church) and incomplete infrastructure. Other Fijian villages are also retreating from encroaching shorelines, both with and without government and donor support, although some are not relocating their entire community. In the coastal settlement Vunisavisavi in Vanua Levu, for example, in 2015 just four new houses were built (with donor support), beyond the inundation zone, while other houses were upgraded for cyclone proofing. Short-distance retreat of a few households has limited disruption to daily lives, livelihoods and place attachment.

These planned relocations offer lessons, including the need for: inclusive decision-making processes prior to, during and following relocation; continuation of spiritual and cultural lives of communities; maintained or improved standards of living, including access to services (health, education, markets) and infrastructure at household and community levels; and livelihood planning so that all community members can pursue sustainable livelihoods activities.

Drawn to the city – Fiji

Rural to urban migration can be a positive strategy for livelihood diversification and resilience building, including among communities facing climate risk in the Pacific Islands region where urban centres and main islands already attract large numbers of people. Some urban migrants channel part of their income towards efforts to build

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resilience and adaptive capacity in rural and remote areas. Some residents of the rural Fijian village of Lobau, for example, have moved from agriculture and subsistence farming to working in the cash economy in urban centres but part of their income is directed to community projects and facilities – such as building and repairing Lobau’s community hall which is used as an evacuation centre in times of disaster. Urban migrants also send cash to those who remain in the village, while villagers send local produce to those who have migrated to urban environments. Rural to urban migration in Fiji, and elsewhere in the region, not only can help people achieve sustainable livelihoods but also is increasingly used as a way of building resilience to environmental change and disaster (even though, as is true with most types of mobility, it can also involve risks). In rural areas, people’s survival depends on a precarious mix of agricultural and non-agricultural sources of income. Greater engagement by, and support from, public authorities in ensuring that these sectors connect and complement one another are needed if livelihood strategies such as internal migration are to help improve livelihood outcomes for rural households.

Going abroad for work – to Australia

Australia’s Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP), in operation since 2012, permits citizens from nine Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste to work temporarily in the Australian agriculture and accommodation sectors. The purpose is to fill Australian labour gaps while contributing to economic development in the countries from which workers originate. Of 12 Solomon Island SWP migrants interviewed, all planned to use money they were earning in Australia to construct or upgrade housing in Solomon Islands. For example, one worker explained how upgrading his house from a thatched leaf construction to one of iron, concrete and timber would provide greater protection for his family during inclement weather. Another worker was considering exactly where to build his new house, given that his current house was situated very close to the coast and he had witnessed the encroachment of the shoreline over recent

years. Finally, one worker was contributing to the construction of a village guesthouse, on the premise that this might help attract NGOs to establish environmental projects in the village.

In short, climate resilience building is a key part of Pacific Island migrants’ pursuit of work opportunities offshore. Given this, integrating training in building climate-ready housing – which is at the same time culturally, contextually and geographically relevant – into the SWP is one example of how addressing climate risk could be better mainstreamed into international labour mobility.

Renewing cultural attachment to place – Tuvalu

Funafala village in Tuvalu is only accessible by sea. Infrastructure there is limited, with no schools, shops or roads and with no public ferry service to the nation’s capital, an hour away by small motorboat. Funafala, as with all of Tuvalu, is on a low-lying atoll and experiences coastal erosion. This remote island community, which has no cash economy, might reasonably be expected to be experiencing out-migration but in fact the opposite is true. The 10 households that comprise Funafala are well aware of climate change risk, particularly that stemming from sea-level rise, yet nobody plans to leave. On the contrary, the number of households is increasing. Why is this the case?

Funafala land is traditionally owned by the indigenous people of Funafuti, part of the same indigenous group who are also landholders in Tuvalu’s capital. The village site has historically been an area of settlement for Funafuti people, but changes such as increasing urbanisation in the capital have meant population numbers have varied over time. The present community members all value the opportunity to live a more traditional life compared with life in the capital itself, and this is driving in-migration to the village. Fishing and household food cultivation provide at least partial subsistence livelihoods, and handicraft materials are easier to source here. Most households supplement their subsistence livelihoods with some paid employment in the capital. Water tanks and solar panels supply water

and power to all houses. Locally sourced and constructed sea walls are recent additions, and mangroves have been planted as protection against coastal erosion. The community has built a new chapel and a community hall. The community has lobbied for a school, which has been promised by the national government; when it is built, the population of Funafala is likely to increase further. Currently, families with children split their time between the capital and Funafala so that their children can attend school and indeed, the population of Funafala is currently lacking a younger cohort. The residents agree that more young families are likely to move to Funafala once a school is established.

Community members speak about the importance they attach to preserving their culture and health – priorities which they carefully balance against the longer-term risks of climate change. Currently, nobody feels physically unsafe, and the simple houses are relatively easily reparable from damage associated with flooding, storms and erosion. Funafala people are well aware of the prominent wider debates about Tuvalu becoming uninhabitable at some point in the future but meanwhile are renewing their indigenous connections to land while there is still time, building cultural and social as well as livelihoods resilience. The Funafala example aligns with the national policy priority in Tuvalu to adapt to climate change in situ. Physical fortification of low-lying islands, which is probably necessary to enable communities to remain on indigenous land in the long term, is an issue that needs to be more highly prioritised by Tuvalu's international partners. While the technical and financial challenges to achieving physical fortification are many, local cultural, social and environmental impacts will also need to be carefully considered should large-scale projects such as land reclamation become feasible.

Policy context

Affected island communities are pursuing a range of mobility strategies to lower their

risk and to increase resilience and adaptive capacity; these strategies are undertaken at the individual, family and community level, and are distinctive in their variety of motivation, direction and outcome. Although much migration policymaking in the region is, for the time being, only broadly taking account of mobility pressures and processes in the climate change context, there are some dedicated policy instruments. For example, the Fijian government has developed national Planned Relocation Guidelines, launched at COP24 in 2018,³ to guide stakeholders in all stages of the process of relocation in response to climate change. The Fijian government has also set up a Climate Relocation and Displaced People's Trust Fund (launched at the UN General Assembly in 2019): the world's first relocation fund for people who are displaced or who relocate due to climate change impacts. Meanwhile, Vanuatu has established a National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster Displacement, an instrument guiding public authorities and non-governmental actors in implementing sectoral and systems-oriented approaches where displacement occurs. However, moving from broad policy goals and guiding principles to clear directives and implementation arrangements for the Pacific Islands continues to prove challenging. In the meantime, any policy development needs to be based on a sound understanding of the reality of people's mobility strategies and the factors at play in their decision making. Importantly, policy development should recognise that people address climate risk (directly and indirectly) across the multiple places where they live and through the act of being mobile, and should incorporate innovative, flexible mechanisms of support.

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3. www.refworld.org/docid/5c3c92204.html

