

Urban–Rural Re-Relocation as a Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Tuvalu

Carol Farbotko and Taukiei Kitara

Introduction

Around the globe, rural-urban migration is a taken-for-granted phenomenon. In the Pacific Islands region, migration into already crowded urban areas has long been considered a challenge for employment and urban planning (ADB 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, migration patterns changed in the Pacific Islands. As paid employment in cities decreased, migration to some rural areas increased, often with encouragement from national governments (Davila and Wilkes 2020; Eriksson et al. 2020). Much of this migration is poorly understood. A year into the pandemic, furthermore, some migrants have returned to urban areas following an initial rural relocation, particularly in those countries with low or zero COVID-19 infection rates. However, even as a temporary phenomenon, urban-rural migration that occurred during the pandemic is instructive for understanding how cultural and family connections to rural places help in maintaining resilience among Pacific Island populations, particularly in the face of external shocks.

This paper explores urban-rural migration in the Pacific Island nation of Tuvalu. The COVID-19 pandemic witnessed, at least initially, significant internal migration from the capital to rural islands in Tuvalu. Tuvalu, with a national population of just under 12,000, is one of the smallest countries in the world by population and land area, which is 26 square kilometres. It has nine inhabited islands including the capital, Funafuti, and all are low-lying with an elevation of around 5m. The closest island to the capital, Nukufetau, is 96km away, while the furthest, Nanumea, is 461km. There are also several small rural islets that are close to the capital island, around 15km away. All these islands and islets experienced population increases in 2020 (Kitara et al. 2020). The risks associated with COVID-19 prompted many

Tuvaluans to move from the capital to a rural island to which they could trace their family ties and claims to land ownership and use. Those who were Indigenous to Funafuti could move to rural islets just off the capital, some of which were either very sparsely inhabited or previously uninhabited. For the first time, Indigenous Funafuti people also made land on rural islets accessible to non-Indigenous people with no prior land claims. Tuvalu's outer islands and rural islets were perceived and experienced as safe and secure –places where customary practices of resource sharing, and locally sourced food, would sustain people as they moved away from the capital, the site of any likely entry of COVID-19 into the country. Examining the urban-rural migration in Tuvalu in terms of its cultural context, it is possible to draw out some lessons on the role of voluntary relocation to culturally important land in nurturing resilience among island communities.

COVID-19 and Rural Relocation in Tuvalu

A year after the pandemic was declared, Tuvalu remained, along with a handful of other Pacific Island countries, one of the few globally to have successfully maintained a COVID-19-free status. This was achieved by swift and sustained action by the Tuvalu national government. A Declared State of Emergency included the hard closure of its borders from 20th March 2020, after which there were no passenger flight or boat arrivals for several months. Even members of parliament and senior bureaucrats who happened to be travelling abroad at the time of the pandemic being declared were obliged to remain where they were, mainly in Fiji and New Zealand. Meanwhile, health security measures were implemented in Tuvalu, including the acquisition of medical equipment such as ventilators, and the establishment of quarantine facilities (Kitara et al. 2020). When flights resumed in the second half of 2020, it was for repatriation purposes only. Cargo ships were permitted to enter the port in Funafuti, once strict health security measures were introduced. At the time of writing in early April 2021, Tuvalu had recorded its first positive tests among six returned citizens in quarantine, although subsequent testing suggested these were false. Tuvalu remains free of community transmission at this stage.

A key feature of the Tuvalu Government's COVID health security plan involved encouraging members of the population who lived in the capital to voluntarily move to the outer islands. Under the *Management and Minimisation of the Coronavirus Regulation*, the government could also mandate relocation should COVID-19 arrive in the country. The national *Talaaliki Plan* included migration to the outer islands as a central measure in the event of Tuvalu's identified worst case scenario, defined as an outbreak of COVID-19 in the country and/or when food, fuel and other essential imported goods became unavailable (Government of Tuvalu 2020). The policy to physically separate as much of the population as possible from any outbreak in the capital (the only site of international transport into Tuvalu) was accompanied by stringent measures to quarantine all arrivals for two weeks, both pre-departure (in Fiji) and on arrival in Tuvalu, as well as testing once in Fiji and twice in Tuvalu, before they were released into the capital. Under this policy, Tuvalu's outer islands were designed to be well-protected from an outbreak, and indeed the rural islands did grow in population, even in the absence of an outbreak. Tuvaluan people responded to the voluntary relocation advice and quickly moved in large numbers away from Funafuti, both to rural islets off the capital, and to the more distant outer islands (Kitara et al. 2020). This led to a

sudden reversal of rural-urban migration trends. In 1979, just after independence, Funafuti's population was 2120, with the outer islands at 5229. By 2012, Funafuti had grown to 5436 with the outer islands having a total of 5204. In 2017, Funafuti was home to sixty per cent of Tuvalu's population, at around 6,500 people. The remainder of the national population was distributed throughout Tuvalu's outer islands: Nanumea, Nanumaga, Niutao, Nui, Vaitupu, Nukulaelae, Nukufetau and Niulakita. During the pandemic, the outer islands experienced an average population increase of about thirty-five per cent in March and April 2020, while Funafuti experienced a twenty-five per cent decrease (Kitara et al. 2020).

Pandemic Population Mobility in Customary Context

Why did a quarter of Tuvalu's capital population heed governmental advice and move to rural islands in the early months of the pandemic, where they were made welcome by host communities? The answer lies in the way land, culture and historic mobility processes intertwine in Tuvalu. Land is held communally rather than through individual private ownership. Much of Funafuti's population prior to the pandemic comprised internal migrants, or children or grandchildren of migrants, who had migrated to the capital from the outer islands, largely for employment reasons as the capital grew. Internal migrants to the capital do not have customary access to urban land, and therefore must rent their housing, unlike the Indigenous people of Funafuti, who are the customary owners of land on the capital (McCubbin, Smit, and Pearce 2015). The strength of the customary ties to land means it is not uncommon for some Tuvaluans who have migrated away to return to their *fenua* (home island) even if they have been away for many generations. For others, the dream of going back to the home island remains, among those who have moved to the capital or perhaps abroad. This is partly about an enduring sense of home, as well as a customary responsibility to one's island and its community. But it is also about security. Tuvaluans often perceive their own *fenua* as the safe place they would prefer to be, for instance, in case of war or cyclones (Farbotko 2021). For many Tuvaluans in the capital who chose to leave during the pandemic State of Emergency, the obvious choice of destination was the island with which they or their spouse had *fenua* (home island) ties. The *fenua* is "the source of life" in Tuvalu (Falefou 2017, p. 217) and kinship links back to the home islands are typically strong (Marino and Lazrus 2015; Stratford, Farbotko, and Lazrus 2013). This means that few if any migrants returning from the capital to the home islands, during the pandemic or at other times, would be landless or lacking in some family support (Kitara et al. 2020).

Within a *fenua*, people trace their ancestry and are entitled to collect food from *kaitasi* (family lands, literally 'eat as one'). This entitlement extends to very extended family – anyone who is a blood relative, no matter how distant. Thus, despite many years or even generations of absence, family members can and do return to the home island and claim a share in access to clan land and support, such as being accommodated in existing housing and collecting food within the *kaitasi*. Furthermore, a returning migrant family is likely to be offered more permanent accommodation by an existing household in their extended family. Often, multiple offers of accommodation will be made, and occasionally this can lead to small disputes and gossip if a migrating family chooses to stay with the wife's relatives

rather than the husband's. Alternatively, the new migrants might build a new house on lands on which they have an entitlement to do so, under customary land ownership arrangements. A return to one's home island might be prompted by retirement, marriage, a period of unemployment, or other household circumstances. The pandemic was an exceptional circumstance, with large numbers of simultaneous migrants, but the customary arrangements described provided the same basic support system as for anyone returning home. It will not be surprising to learn that in Tuvalu the *fenua*, which embodies the deep connection of the people to the land and the land to the people, is the same word used to describe the placenta:

The function of the land is equivalent to that of the placenta, hence the use of the same word. The placenta is an organ that plays a crucial role during pregnancy in keeping the baby alive and well. Its main function is to supply the unborn baby in the mother's womb with adequate nutritional substances and oxygen.... The placenta is the ultimate source of life for the unborn baby. In the same vein, land is the source of life for the ... people (Falefou 2017, 144).

For the Funafuti *fenua*, the Indigenous residents of the capital, very little of their customary land is available for agriculture, since much is leased for the capital's housing, government buildings, roads, sports grounds, waste disposal facilities, and the international airstrip and port. It is the sparsely inhabited islets off the capital that offer the possibility of customary access to land for growing food for the Indigenous people of Funafuti, and it was to these islands that Funafuti Indigenous people could move in difficult times, including the 2020 pandemic (Farbotko 2021).

According to anecdotal accounts from some who were planning to leave the capital in May 2020, health security was the key reason to move, but the prospect of spending time on one's *fenua* (home island), eating local food there, and leaving the noise and the pollution of the capital made the impending relocation welcome (Kitara et al. 2020). The migration during the pandemic was triggered by governmental advice, but was largely appropriate and acceptable to the people due to their long-standing customary ties to their home islands. The national government provided financial support and overall planning advice to the outer islands to manage the population increases (Kitara et al. 2020), but existing local and customary governance was relied on to ensure relocating people were settled and supported; longstanding rights to live on family lands and access local food on this land were crucial to the success of the government's advice to move away from the capital (Farbotko 2021). The government allocated AUD 500,000 to each outer island to assist efforts to prepare for the influx of people arriving from Funafuti. This included improvements to health clinics and provision of water tanks, tents or tarpaulins to assist with housing shortages. A financial support package included cash payments to all individuals, including children, of AUD 40 per month, although this payment was discontinued in mid-2020. Employees affected by downturns in the tourism and hospitality sector and the wharf and aviation sector could access pension accounts up to a limit of AUD 500. Banks were requested to ease requirements for loan repayments and freeze interest incurred on personal, house and business loans. Agriculture and food security businesses could access grants (Kitara et al. 2020). Only in very unusual cases might individuals experience a refusal of their wish to return to their home island, although there was at least

one occurrence of this during COVID-19. One family was turned away by their island leaders for political reasons (Kitara et al. 2020). Such politicisation of the *fenua*, however, is extremely rare.

The National Government's *Talaaliki Plan* recognised the importance of customary practices around food security to support the relocation to rural areas. It promoted an intensification of customary food production, preservation, and distribution activities, all intended to limit the need for reliance on external cargo supplies or humanitarian aid from the COVID-19 infected outside world. Indeed, it is planned that the outer islands become self-sufficient, non-cash economies as a final step to achieving food and health security if the virus arrives in the capital (Farbotko 2021). In this event, island communities would be supported by Island council-based organisation of food security practices. This governance arrangement includes directing all families to tend their *pulaka* (swamp taro) pits, to engage in household food gardening activities, to go fishing using methods not requiring fuel, and to ensure equipment for food production is available for relocated families. Even without the virus arriving in Tuvalu, the Department of Agriculture is providing resources such as training in subsistence food production.

The *Talaaliki Plan* also draws on customary knowledge practices as part of its overall resilience planning. In it, responsibility for education was broadened beyond the Ministry of Education, with educational responsibilities partially devolving to families and island communities. This policy is intended to harness existing customary practices and local, Indigenous knowledge to address pandemic-related education needs. With many students and other young people moving to rural areas, for example, many of Tuvalu's urban youth were no longer able to attend high school or other training centres, as most of the outer islands only have primary schools. At least one of the islands, Nanumea, refused to let its students return to Vaitupu when the Motufoua Secondary School on that island opened up around July. Nanumea's young people thus all stayed out of school until November. As a result of pandemic disruptions to formal education, many Tuvaluan youth were newly exposed to and began participating in customary food practices, both with their relatives and in training workshops in rural areas, which targeted skill development in areas such as preserving fish, planting and composting *pulaka*, and harvesting coconut toddy. Although there were likely to be at least some instances of youth being disgruntled with their lack of access to formal schooling or being bored on the outer islands, other Tuvaluan young people

acknowledged that they did not have traditional skills such as growing *pulaka*, but that gaining these now seemed important to them, not only for themselves and their families but also to pass on to their children as survival skills when future global shocks occur (Kitara and Farbotko 2020).

On the outer islands they might come to a better understanding of the importance of the customary practice of planting trees when building new houses. Each time a house is built, staple food-producing trees such as coconut, pandanus, pawpaw and breadfruit are customarily planted around it, a customary safeguard against long-term future uncertainty. The trees themselves then become a marker of genealogical knowledge, as histories capture the story of each tree that is planted; extended family remembers who nurtured the young trees. This tree-planting practice is similar to that of burying the umbilical cord of newborn

babies on the *fenua* (home island) and planting a new tree in the spot. Even after periods of absence, return to *fenua* always involves further nurturing of all the trees connected to a family. In short, the pandemic prompted some young people to reflect on their customary heritage and how they could become agents of resilience using local resources and local knowledge.

Customary governance by the *falekaupule* (council of Indigenous chiefs) on each island became mobilised to attempt to ensure communities worked together harmoniously during the State of Emergency. Challenges do exist when settling the urbanised new arrivals, who may be more accustomed to *ola tu tokotasi* or *kalo vao* (individualised lifestyles). This potentially causes disagreements in, for example, the sharing of food, between rural and urban branches of single families (Kitara et al. 2020). Prior to the pandemic, families in Tuvalu had existing, well-established systems of exchange, whereby food and other locally produced items from the outer islands were sent to family members in the capital, who in turn supplied cash to family members on the outer islands for expenses such as building materials, mobile phones and so on. These systems are likely to have been disrupted during the pandemic by decreased opportunities for cash income, more crowded living conditions on the outer islands, and increased demand for local food (Kitara et al. 2020). Customary food production, storage and distribution practices in the rural islands are also at times challenging for newly arrived migrants, since *Tuu mo Iloga Faka-Tuvalu* (customary knowledge) of these has been dwindling among those living in the capital (Kitara et al. 2020). Pressure on natural resources in the outer islands would have increased with the new arrivals, although food security issues were not reported, suggesting that customary arrangements worked well.

Early evidence, however, suggests that many of these challenges have been addressed through practical measures such as training youth in customary agricultural practices, discussed above, and innovative solutions that directly address tensions across urban-rural family networks and ethnic groups. One example of innovative land sharing occurred on some of the uninhabited islets of Funafuti. With the *fale pili* customary practice becoming triggered across Tuvalu society during the State of Emergency (Kitara 2020), the Funafuti *falakaupule* (the council of Indigenous chiefs for the capital and its rural islets) gave permission to non-Indigenous residents to relocate to Funafuti's rural islets. Previously, permission to live on these islets has been granted only to families recognised as possessing Indigenous land claims. Most of these islets are uninhabited or sparsely inhabited and all are accessible only by private boat. Only one, Funafala, had a small village, comprised of around ten households, a chapel, a community hall, a small agricultural initiative and a guest house, but no school or shops (Figure 1).

Fale pili means treating a neighbour's problem as your own, and hence treating neighbours as family. Through *fale pili*, the customary responsibility to share land with kin became extended to others who were not kin, but wanted to move off the island capital for health security. This was a particularly important initiative helping those who had strong ties to the capital, for example through employment, or who had weak or broken family links to the outer islands, that made moving to the islands of their own *fenua* impractical or disruptive. Specifically, the Funafuti Indigenous people agreed to allow others who were not Indigenous to Funafuti to relocate to some of the rural islets off the capital that were in

their customary ownership, and to build a house on land there. Those who decided to relocate to the islets in Funafuti would thus be free to grow and harvest food on that piece of land and use resources available on the islet, for as long as they needed. Those who relocated to these rural islets through this arrangement are building traditional-style houses and installing water tanks (Kitara et al. 2020). From Funafuti's islets, it is possible to return across the lagoon to the capital for supplies, services and employment, at least while the country remains COVID-19 free. Frequent return trips to the capital may not be feasible for many, however, including school students, given the high cost of private boat transport (Kitara et al. 2020).

Such arrangements may not be permanent. Similar, albeit not land-based, forms of resource sharing are not uncommon in Tuvalu in the times of disaster, such as cyclone or drought. For instance, during and after a cyclone, those whose homes are not affected by the cyclone commonly invite as many people as they can to stay with them, providing shelter, food, bedding, and water as long as it is needed (for example, while people rebuild their own damaged houses). This type of resource sharing is also common-place during other forms of family hardship. For example, a Tuvaluan family living in Australia might welcome family members to live in their house if they migrate from New Zealand to Australia but do not yet have jobs. COVID-19 witnessed Funafuti landholders making the significant step to make Funafuti's islets outside the capital available to non-indigenous Funafuti people to use for the first time, innovating across the boundaries of Indigenous groupings and customary land tenure.



Figure 1: Cleared land for new development on Funafala rural islet off the capital with customary ownership among the Indigenous Funafuti, during 2020. Existing village on the left. https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=134490725149791&ref=notif¬if_id=1614582155936507¬if_t=live_video_explicit

Conclusion

If COVID-19 breaks the bounds of quarantine in Tuvalu, Tuvalu's outer islands would likely decide through their *falekaupule* governance processes to self-isolate, as they did in the first months of the State of Emergency, possibly even banning cargo ships. Under such a scenario, the resilience of the rural islands would be put to the ultimate test. This paper has discussed how the customary arrangements in place, that provide extensive and innovative ways in which Tuvaluan people can move to safer rural areas, both in the past and during the pandemic, are capable of peacefully and effectively rising to this challenge. Peaceful urban-rural mobility is also relevant for adaptation to climate change impacts among Tuvaluan people. Locally and internationally, practices such as *fale pili* and *kaitasi* mean that there are likely to be few social challenges when people might need to move away from coastal hazards, gaining access or being granted access to land and other resources in ways that strengthen ties and, overall, nurture resilience.

Tuvalu is not the only Pacific Island country where rural migration increased during the pandemic, and while the specificities of culture and geography clearly vary, customary practices could be prioritised in nurturing resilience across the region, even—perhaps especially—in countries where customary links to rural areas are less strong than they are in Tuvalu (e.g. Petrou 2020). This could be achieved, for example, through religious leadership that encourages community discussion, mediation and problem-solving. When people move to rural areas, some customary practices which are in decline or dormant may be reinvigorated, particularly when supported by national policy. Other customary practices might be modified to suit the new context, as occurred on Funafuti's islets with the opening up of rural indigenous land to urban non-indigenous people for the first time. Customary practices can also be harnessed for particular purposes, such as food security, through targeted training programmes. Overall, urban-rural migration that occurred during the pandemic can be important for understanding how cultural and family connections to rural places can help in maintaining resilience among Pacific Island populations.

References

- Asian Development Bank (2016) The emergence of Pacific urban villages: urbanization trends in the Pacific islands. Pacific Studies Series, Asian Development Bank <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/201291/pacific-urban-villages.pdf>
- Davila, F. and Wilkes, B. (2020) 'COVID-19 and food systems in Pacific Island Countries' in Robins, L. Steven Crimp, Monica Van Wensveen, Robyn G. Alders, R. Michael Bourke, James Butler, Michaela Cosijn et al. "COVID-19 and Food Systems in the Indo-Pacific: An Assessment of Vulnerabilities, Impacts and Opportunities for Action." (2020).
- Eriksson, H., Ride, A. Boso, D., Steenbergen, D. and Neihapi, P. (2020) Coastal fisheries in a pandemic: Solomon Islands and Vanuatu experiences <https://devpolicy.org/coastal-fisheries-in-a-pandemic-solomon-island-and-vanuatu-experiences-20200729/>
- Government of Tuvalu (2020) Talaaliki Plan. National COVID-19 Taskforce, Government of Tuvalu, Funafuti.
- Falefou, T. (2017) Toku Tia: Tuvalu and the impacts of climate change (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Waikato)
- Farbotko, C. (2021) Making place in virus-free space. Geographical Research. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12463>
- Kitara, T. (2020) Tuvalu's foreign policy and values. <https://devpolicy.org/tuvalu-foreign-policy-and-values-20200609-2/>
- Kitara, T. and Farbotko, C. (2020) Youth resilience to COVID-19: indigenous knowledge in Tuvalu <https://devpolicy.org/youth-resilience-to-covid-19-indigenous-knowledge-in-tuvalu-20200708/>
- Kitara, T., Farbotko, C., Talia, M., Suliman, S. and Evans, C. (2020) Reducing COVID-19 risk through population relocation and closed borders: effects of pandemic emergency measures in a small island state. The COVID-19 Pandemic, Migration and the Environment Series, International Organization for Migration. <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/blogs/reducing-covid-19-risk-through-population-relocation-and-closed-borders-effects-pandemic>.
- Marino, E., and Lazrus, H. (2015). Migration or forced displacement?: the complex choices of climate change and disaster migrants in Shishmaref, Alaska and Nanumea, Tuvalu. Human Organization, 74(4), 341-350.
- McCubbin, S., Smit, B., and Pearce, T. (2015). Where does climate fit? Vulnerability to climate change in the context of multiple stressors in Funafuti, Tuvalu. Global Environmental Change, 30, 43-55.
- Petrou, K. (2020) If everyone returned the island would sink. Berghahn, New York and Oxford.
- Stratford, E., Farbotko, C., and Lazrus, H. (2013). Tuvalu, Sovereignty and Climate Change: Considering Fenua, the Archipelago and Emigration. Island Studies Journal, 8(1), 67-83.

The Authors

Carol Farbotko is a cultural geographer. Dr Farbotko received her PhD from University of Tasmania, Australia. Her research explores the nexus of culture and the politics of climate change risk, with a particular focus on the Pacific Islands. She is currently working on a collaborative project called Transformative Mobilities in a Changing Climate, funded by the Australian Research Council. She is a Research Scientist at CSIRO and a University Associate at the University of Tasmania.

Taukiei Kitara: I am from Tuvalu, currently living in Brisbane, Australia. I worked for a not-for-profit organisation called the Tuvalu Association of Non-Governmental Organisation (TANGO) as a Community Development Officer, was a founding member of Tuvalu Climate Action Network and have represented Tuvalu civil society at several United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conferences of Parties. I am the President of the Brisbane Tuvalu Community and also council member for the Pacific Island Council for Queensland (PICQ). I am studying for my Masters in Global Development at Griffith University.

Toda Peace Institute

The **Toda Peace Institute** is an independent, nonpartisan institute committed to advancing a more just and peaceful world through policy-oriented peace research and practice. The Institute commissions evidence-based research, convenes multi-track and multi-disciplinary problem-solving workshops and seminars, and promotes dialogue across ethnic, cultural, religious and political divides. It catalyses practical, policy-oriented conversations between theoretical experts, practitioners, policymakers and civil society leaders in order to discern innovative and creative solutions to the major problems confronting the world in the twenty-first century (see www.toda.org for more information).

Contact Us

Toda Peace Institute
Samon Eleven Bldg. 5th Floor
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160-0017, Japan
Email: contact@toda.org

Sign up for the Toda Peace Institute mailing list:
<https://toda.org/policy-briefs-and-resources/email-newsletter.html>

Connect with us on the following media.
YouTube: @todapeaceinstitute3917
Twitter: <https://twitter.com/TodaInstitute>
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/TodaInstitute/>