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Pacific Community Relocations:
Comparing Relocation Efforts in Alaska and Pacific

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Abstract

Alaska and the Pacific Islands are worlds apart in terms of their location on the globe and their governance and economic systems. Still, they have similar colonial histories, culturally distinct indigenous and place-based communities that are often remote from urban centres, and cascading impacts from climate change. Communities in both geographies that may want to relocate have limited resources to do so without external assistance. Each country should have policies in place to provide assistance for community-led relocation based on the preferences, knowledge, and values of the affected communities. The private sector and churches could also play an important role. In many ways, relocation processes on Pacific Islands are more sophisticated than those in Alaska, and the United States could learn from the Pacific experience.

Introduction

Since the late 2000s, there has been increasing attention paid to the potential need to relocate Pacific Island communities and perhaps entire nations due to climate change

(Oakes 2019; Campbell 2014). Likewise, in Alaska, United States, particular villages have become "poster children" for climate change relocation, with many researchers writing about their plight (Martin 2012; Marino 2012; Bronen 2011; Shearer 2012). In terms of the geography and geology, Alaska and the Pacific Islands seem to be worlds apart. Yet both are experiencing climate change in ways that are often more extreme than temperate latitudes. And both are home to numerous Indigenous and place-based peoples who rely on their traditional lands, waters, and communities for their livelihood and cultural identity. This paper explores barriers and opportunities in both geographies for carrying out community relocation in response to climate change and related disasters. The paper is based on a literature review as well as the author's professional assistance to relocating communities in Alaska and previous research for the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat on relocation.

Climate Change Across the Geographies

While there are some commonalities among Pacific Islands and within Alaska, neither geography is homogenous. Alaska consists of 229 different tribes recognised by the United States with 20 major language groups, spanning 1.4 million square kilometres (First Alaskans n.d.). The Pacific Islands[1] consist of 22,213 square kilometres of land spread across millions of square kilometres of ocean. While often lumped into three major language/cultural groups, there is significant diversity, with some 700 different languages just on the island of New Guinea (Lynch 1998).

Despite the differences within and between these two geographies, there are commonalities, including the impacts of climate change. Climate change in Alaska and across the Arctic outpaces the changes occurring across the rest of the planet (Taylor et al. 2017). Changes witnessed in Alaska include rapid temperature rise, sea level rise, ocean acidification, melting permafrost, increased flooding, erosion, and forest fires, and the loss of the sea ice along shorelines that traditionally protected communities from severe storms (Makron et al. 2018). These changes have distorted infrastructure and roads, destroyed buildings along shorelines, and impeded the ability of Alaska Native residents to practice their traditional hunting and fishing (Ristroph 2021a, Ristroph 2019a).

Pacific Island communities are likewise experiencing rapid change in comparison to other parts of the Earth, including rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, sea level rise and the related saltwater contamination, increased risk of extreme drought and flooding (WMO 2021, 10; Keener et al. 2018). Infrastructure, much of which is located on the narrow bands near the coast, is highly vulnerable to sea level rise. As in Alaska, the changes are likely to catastrophically impact fishing, food security and traditional livelihoods (Keener et al. 2018; Boege 2022).

[1] The use of the term Pacific Islands here refers primarily to American Samoa, Northern Mariana Islands, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Wallis and Futuna.

Significance of Place Alongside Histories of Migration

Residents in both geographies are deeply tied to their traditional lands and waters, and have extensive knowledge based on their intergenerational relationships with their environments (Ristroph 2019b; Makondo and Thomas 2018; Janif et al. 2016). Yet they both experience a range of pressures that, with or without climate change, already contribute to mobility. Community residents move to access better health care, or for better job and educational opportunities, or due to a diminished ability to earn a living with traditional lifeways (e.g., small-scale fishing) (Ristroph 2019b; Campbell 2014).

Both geographies have long histories of voluntary mobility as a form of adaptation (Kirch 2017; Ristroph 2017). In Alaska, groups of families moved seasonally between camps, following their food sources (Tremayne 2018). In the Pacific Islands, oceanic voyaging in double-hulled canoes was part of everyday life. Both geographies have more recent histories of forced relocation related to external interference and colonisation. In the Pacific Islands, inland communities were moved to the coast for ease of administration, even where their historical locations protected them from disasters (Bower and Weerasinghe 2021, 22; Martin et al. 2022, 12; Campbell 2006, 24). Communities including Banaba, Kiribati, were relocated for the convenience of the mining industry, and in the case of the Bikini Islands, for the sake of testing nuclear weapons (Tabe 2019; Edwards 2013). In Alaska, communities consolidated into permanent settlements primarily because of the U.S. Bureau of Education's requirement that Alaska Native children attend school, and also because of the increased presence of missionaries (Lynch and Brunner 2007, 104; Berardi 1999, 329; ASCG 2001). Some were moved for the convenience of the U.S. military (Mikow 2010; NPS 2022).

It cannot be overstated how closely tied many Indigenous peoples are to their lands in the Pacific Islands (Yee et al. 2022; Singh et al. 2020; Charan et al. 2017). These ties exist alongside the phenomenon of individual/household migration to urban centres and other countries in search of better opportunities, especially among island nations that have a political relationship with more developed countries. In particular, younger generations may want to take advantage of opportunities elsewhere, while older generations tend to prioritise connections to ancestral lands and maintaining traditions. While Pacific Islanders are profoundly tied to their ancestral land—particularly to their ancestors' graves—they also have the agency and the ability to choose how to adapt (McLeod et al. 2018, 179; Oakes 2019; Perumal 2018, 58; McMichael, Katonivualiku, and Powell 2019). A number of scholars have emphasised the importance of 'voluntary immobility,' recognising that Pacific Island residents may choose to stay where they are (Yee et al. 2022; Farbotko 2018).

Alaska Natives also have strong ties to their homelands and to the species that meet their cultural and nutritional needs (Ristroph 2019b, Ristroph 2021b). Many Indigenous groups have a more equitable view of non-human species and important areas, seeing them as "relatives" rather than "resources" (Miller, Dewitt, and Dashvsky 2021). Beyond serving as a home for humans and other species, certain lands can be sacred or gateways to the spiritual world (James 2010, 42). But as with Pacific Islands, many families and individuals from traditional villages have been moving to urban settings for various social and economic reasons (Hamilton et al. 2016; Lowe 2010; Martin 2009; Jensen et al. 2022, 11).

Perhaps the biggest differences between Alaska and the Pacific Islands, aside from their latitudes, is their relative size: Alaska's land mass is nearly 67 times that of the Pacific Islands. Land scarcity is less of a problem in Alaska, and the range of a tribal community's traditional lands may be larger. Relocating communities can more easily remain in the same general area. In this way, ancestral lands need not be abandoned. This is not to suggest that all Pacific Island relocation must leave behind ancestral lands. Many communities can relocate on adjacent property, but this may be more difficult if sea level rise significantly affects low-lying atolls.

Nor does it mean that a village can relocate anywhere in Alaska. Unlike in the Pacific Islands, there is no recognition of customary title. Rather, the vast majority of Alaska lands are owned by the state and federal government, with around 10% owned by Alaska Native Corporations. These corporations are owned by Alaska Native shareholders who are tribal members, although the tribal governments charged with running Native Villages have virtually no say in corporate management, and corporations are under no obligation to provide land for relocation (Ristroph 2022). Still, there are more opportunities for relocation on adjacent lands in Alaska than in the Pacific. U.S. law allows for land trades between the federal government and Native Corporations and Tribes (43 U.S.C. §§ 1602(d), 1621(f); 16 U.S.C. § 3192). For the relocation of Newtok Village, Alaska, the tribal government negotiated an arrangement to move onto land that the Native corporation associated with the village received in a land swap with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Ristroph 2017).

By comparison, Pacific Islanders face greater challenges in securing land for relocation. Arable, available land is much more limited, and much of it is already occupied by people living there in accordance with long established customary rights of usage (Boege 2022; Boege and Rakova 2019, 11, Fitzpatrick 2022, 2; Vanuatu 2018, 34; Edwards 2013, 68, McDonnell 2021). In many Pacific Island nations, a large percentage of land (as high as 99% in Vanuatu) is customarily owned (Vanuatu 2018, 34; Edwards 2013, 68, McDonnell 2021).

Traditionally, relocations have taken place through customary norms that recognise the rights of the customary title holders and seek permission to move there (Bower and Weersinghe 2021, 23). Knowledge of customary title and methods for negotiating access to these lands through traditional leaders is important for planned relocations. Further, knowledge of informal settlers and potential tensions between settlers and newcomers is important (IFRC 2021, 33). Relocations are easier and have traditionally occurred where the relocating community already has customary title or are kin to those who hold it (Perumal 2018, 55). For example, Vunidogoloa, Fiji, was relocated to higher ground, nearly two kilometres inland from the original village site, but still within the customary boundaries of the community (Tronquet 2015, 129). In contrast, when there is a lack of customary rights to alternative sites and a relocating community feels that they are not welcome, or if a traditional leader would lose leadership and status in a relocated situation, then relocation can be more complex (Yee 2022, 46).

Despite the importance of custom, traditions can change during times of crises, such that receiving communities may welcome people who did not previously have rights to land. This was the case when rural community leaders in Tuvalu worked to accommodate urban residents who moved back to rural areas during the COVID-19 pandemic (Farbotko and Kitara 2021, 6). Customary solutions based on traditional values of caring for one's neighbour are under-researched and might serve as a means for sharing land with families and communities relocating due to climate change.

External Assistance for Recent Relocations

High costs

Unlike relocations in historic and precolonial times, relocations in Alaska and on Pacific Islands now take place in a globalized, colonized space where permanent, often Western-style architecture and design have become the norm. At least in Alaska, this means that relocations can cost orders of magnitude more than they did before. For example, in the relocation of Newtok, Alaska, 13 houses were constructed in 2019 at a cost of more than USD 700,000 each, even without running water in the home. At that rate, the cost of moving the village (approximately 44 households, some with multiple families) may exceed the 2006 U.S. Army Corps estimates of USD 80 million to USD 130 million (USACE 2006). Costs in the Pacific are a fraction of those in Alaska, but still well beyond the means of any local government. The relocation of Vunidogoloa, Fiji, with 26 households consisting of 32 families, cost USD 980,000 (Borsa 2020). The Fijian government paid approximately USD 740,000, and the community contributed approximately USD 240,000 in the value of the logs taken from the original houses and used to construct the new houses (Borsa 2020). Increased costs may be partly explained by rising standards of living, where indoor utilities and community facilities including health clinics have rightfully become the norm (Connell 2016). But they may also relate to the lack of autonomy among communities that are governed by, and must procure supplies from, external entities (Ristroph 2019b).

Need for assistance from national governments and international funders

In both geographies, much has been written about the need for external existence, from proposed frameworks for village relocation (Podesta 2019; Matthews and Potts 2018; Scott et al. 2020; Bronen 2011) to developing international treaties for 'climate refugees' (Katsoni and Graf 2021; Bergeron 2023). Communities in Alaska and the Pacific Islands have contributed relatively little to global greenhouse gas emissions, yet they are disproportionally facing the impacts of climate change. Principles of climate justice suggest that indigenous and place-based communities in Alaska and the Pacific Islands should receive assistance from those who have benefited from the development that contributed to the bulk of climate change (Ristroph 2017). Further, communities should play a lead role in how they choose to adapt or relocate (Ristroph 2017).

In spite of what justice may dictate, external assistance is limited and may not provide the time and resources needed to fully gain community consent and participation (Piggott 2018, 13; Ristroph 2018). Despite the numerous publications ranking Alaska Native Communities

on their vulnerability and need for relocation (GAO 2009; Gorokhovich et al. 2014; Himes-Cornell and Kasperski 2015; Denali Commission 2019), and despite numerous plans and pleas from communities for government assistance with relocation (see, e.g., Summit Consulting Services 2020; BIA 2020; Rosen 2022), there has not been a comprehensive effort by the state or federal government to actually move these communities. Most relocating Alaskan communities rely on piecemeal grants from various agencies to address one household at a time (Ristroph 2021a).

While there are numerous potential funding sources for new infrastructure and housing, there is not a specific agency, law, or programme to guide relocation (Ristroph 2021a). In one instance, the U.S. Congress appropriated USD 30 million for relocation of Alaska Native Villages, with half for Newtok Village (Public Law 115–141, 2018). In 2022, Congress's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provided the Bureau of Indian Affairs (the agency responsible for Indigenous peoples) with USD 216 million for climate resilience programmes, including USD 130 million for community relocation (Public Law 117-58, 135 Stat. 1391). In 2022, the Bureau awarded around USD 9 million to three villages to carry out relocation efforts, with additional funding to various villages for relocation coordinators and plans (BIA 2022). Also in 2022, the U.S. President's Office allocated Infrastructure Law funds to a Voluntary Community-Driven Relocation Program, through which Newtok and the Village of Napagiak each received USD 25 million for new infrastructure, and four other Alaska Villages received USD 5 million for planning purposes.

But the funding to date is a drop in the bucket compared to what is needed to move and sustain all the Alaska Native Villages in need. While there is not a clear number as to how many villages would like to relocate, the Denali Commission, a U.S. agency with jurisdiction in rural Alaska, estimated that 144 villages are severely threatened by flooding, erosion, and permafrost melt (University of Alaska 2019). The U.S. agency responsible for Indigenous peoples, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and other agencies have held consultations with villages regarding their desire for relocation (BIA 2020). But some villages are not in complete agreement regarding the desire to relocate, and some who want to relocate are reluctant to announce their desire lest it lead to disinvestment by the state and federal government in existing facilities. In a 2022 nationwide competition open to tribes for relocation assistance, eight awards were made for relocation and adaptation planning (nearly USD 2 million total); four for carrying out relocation and adaptation strategies (USD 8.5 million), and seven for relocation coordinators (nearly USD 900,000) (BIA 2022). But the costs needed to protect village infrastructure from damage due to flooding, erosion, or permafrost degradation over the next 50 years is estimated to total over USD 4 billion more than what is currently being spent (BIA 2020). Because these villages are located within a highly developed country (despite the fact that some have no running water in the homes), they are not eligible for international aid.

Just because Pacific Islands nations and communities may be eligible for international aid does not mean they will receive adequate funding. A number of publications and forums have attempted to comprehensively address the need for finance and policy regarding Pacific Island relocation (e.g., 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent; Campbell and Warwick 2014; IOM 2022). But international aid has been scattered, leaving each nation to handle relocation issues on its own.

Different nations are at different stages in planning for community relocation, and the considerations will differ depending on the availability of high ground within each nation. For example, Kiribati, Fiji, Tonga, and Vanuatu each have national plans that address relocation. Tonga's Joint National Action Plan on Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management simply calls for a study of scenarios of relocation due to climate change (Tonga 2018, 30). Vanuatu's 2018 National Plan on Climate Change and Disaster Displacement calls for the development of standard operating procedures for all aspects of planned relocation as well as disaster displacement in order to meet immediate needs for health and emergency services, as well as longer term housing, infrastructure, education, and land acquisition. Vanuatu gives particular attention to using and preserving community knowledge and coordinating with existing initiatives of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (Vanuatu 2018, 17, 26, 44).

Fiji has its own ministry dedicated specifically to climate change. Fiji's Climate Change Act, Act 43 of 2021, outlines principles to guarantee basic rights and enable all affected stakeholders to participate in decisions affecting communities. The Ministry has developed guidelines for both planned relocation and disaster displacement. At the end of 2022, the Ministry developed draft Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) designed to work with communities and seek their knowledge at all phases of relocation. There is a detailed process for relocations on customary land managed by the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, which works with a Task Force made up of various agencies concerned with relocation and displacement (SOPs, 1-9). Since the change in Presidential Administrations, it is not clear when and if these SOPs will be finalised.

Kiribati's Joint Implementation Plan for Climate Change and Disaster Management calls for the relocation of schools and critical infrastructure where required (Kiribati 2018, 137-138). But Kiribati is a low-lying atoll, and there has been much speculation as to whether people might leave the nation. Prior to this plan, Kiribati's former president Anote Tong called for "Migration with Dignity" whereby I-Kiribati would have power and choice over whether, when, and how they migrated. President Tong also arranged for the purchase of freehold land in Fiji belonging to the Anglican church (the Natoavatu Estate), ostensibly to advance food security. Some hailed the purchase as forward-thinking – creating a place where future I-Kiribati might live (Blue and Green Tomorrow 2014; Ives 2016).

But the Natoavatu Estate case is far more complicated than a simple purchase to provide for adaptation (Boege and Shibata 2020, 4-5). Bryant-Tokalau (2018, 51) cites sources suggesting that Kiribati paid too much for the land, which has limited value for agricultural use. The land is already inhabited by the descendants of enslaved Solomon Islanders invited by the Anglican Church in 1947. The Solomon Islanders now must pay for a limited lease for land that they intended to remain on indefinitely, free of charge. Their rights deserve more consideration. The rights of the original owners of the land, the iTaukei, who were there before the Anglican Church, should also be considered. To further complicate the issue, Kiribati has announced plans to work with China in developing this land (Faa 2021; Baleinakorodawa 2021). Transcend Oceania, a Fijian peace-building NGO, has worked to facilitate a dialogue between all stakeholders in this issue, including the Solomon Islanders and Kiribati people (Transcend Oceania 2020).

The role of churches

While this paper has focused on external assistance from international donors and national governments, the role of churches should also be considered. Christianity has been a transformative force in both Pacific Island societies and Alaska (Fountain and Throughton 2019; Roman 2013, 9; Brown n.d.). The Pacific Theological College has raised consciousness of eco-rationality – spirituality that aligns with Indigenous knowledges and holistic concepts of people in communion with their environment (Vaai 2019, 3). With churches playing a central role in the society of many Pacific communities, it should not come as a surprise that some churches have played a role in relocation. Aside from the role of the Anglican church in Natoavatu Estate purchase, churches have organised conversations about relocation in French Polynesia (Duvat et al. 2022, 16) and Fiji (Tronquet 2015, 136); offered land for relocation in Papua New Guinea (Campbell 2022-2, 27; Connell 2018, 82); and arranged for a burial site to be relocated in Fiji (Charan et al. 2017, 25). The Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) has made relocation issues a central part of its work (Edwards 2014, 123; Boege and Shibata 2020, 9; PCC n.d.). In 2007, PCC called upon the churches of the Pacific to welcome the people of Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands who wish to resettle in Pacific countries. The statement also called for a regional immigration policy which prioritises resettlement rights for those most impacted by climate change (Loughry and McAdam 2008).

Arguably, churches in Alaska have played just as profound as a role in establishing the culture of modern Alaska Native communities as they have in the Pacific Islands. It was U.S. policy in Alaska that indigenous peoples should "be brought under Christian influences by the missionaries" (Harris 1898, i). Sheldon Jackson, the federal government's General Agent of Education in Alaska, divided the territory into regions and invited various denominations to open and operate mission schools under the umbrella of his office (Brown n.d.). Early missionaries constructed churches in a number of villages, contributing to their sedentism (Summit 2020, Tanana Chiefs 2010). Many Alaska Natives have remained devout Christians, and most public meetings in Alaska Native Villages begin with a Christian prayer (see, e.g., meeting proceedings in Jensen et al. 2022, 12). To date, however, churches have not played a significant role in assisting with community relocation in Alaska. That said, some faith-based organisations have provided volunteers to assist with rebuilding and disaster response – namely Samaritan's Purse, which has organised volunteers to construct churches and other buildings across rural Alaska (Thompson 2019; Alaska 2011, 18).

Assistance with sustainability

Another major difference between relocations in Pacific Islands and Alaska relates to the sustainability of the relocated villages. Globalization and increasing dependence on imported goods hampers habitability in areas that are remote from urban centres of commerce. Nevertheless, some of the more recent Pacific Islands relocations have specifically planned for the residents' livelihoods and economic development at the site of resettlement (Bower and Weerasinghe 2021, 18). For example, the relocation of Vunidogoloa provided for fish ponds, pineapple plantations, and cattle at the new site (Piggott-McKellar et al. 2019, 13; Tronquet 2015, 129). This is not to suggest that resettled people from Vunidogoloa are entirely happy, since this new livelihood is not the same as

their traditional ocean fishing lifeway (Lyons 2022). Still, they are able to continue life together as a community.

In Alaska, very little has been done to address the sustainability of living in rural villages, aside from recent efforts to fund broadband and water/sewer infrastructure through the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act (Public Law 117-2, Sec. 602(c)(1) and 603(c)(1) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Alaska Native Villages are already dependent on outside sources for funding; unemployment is persistent; subsistence livelihoods are increasingly difficult; and the costs of energy and imported food are incredibly high (Fried 2020, 12; Ristroph 2019a; Ristroph 2021b; Ristroph 2022). Yet for the Newtok relocation, the Denali Commission opted to implement an energy system run by diesel generators, rather than using the reconstruction as an opportunity to implement a more sustainable renewable energy system. Aside from the temporary jobs that have been created through the reconstruction, there has been little effort to provide for livelihoods in the long term.

Transferable Lessons and Conclusions

Alaska and the Pacific Islands are worlds apart in terms of their location on the globe and the current governance and economic systems. Still, they have similar colonial histories, culturally distinct indigenous and place-based communities that are often remote from urban centres, and cascading impacts from climate change. Communities in both geographies that may want to relocate have limited resources to do so without external assistance.

There are policies that each country within these geographies could take to facilitate community relocation. Each country should provide for community-led relocation based on the preferences, knowledge, and values of those living in affected communities. Fiji's draft 2022 standard operating procedures may serve as a model for other Pacific Island nations. Aside from financial support, assistance could take the form of technical support (science data), mediators to build consensus about whether, where, and how a community may want to move, and guidance for navigating the available funding systems.

Of course, policies that may work in one geography may not be feasible in others. Coming to consensus on policies may be simpler in nations with smaller, more homogenous populations. The United States has the challenge of a divided government representing a diverse population that is thousands of times larger than that of any Pacific Island nation, with most of the population unaware of the challenges faced by Alaska Native Villages. While Alaska might come to some consensus on policies to guide the funding available to it, the United States as a whole is unlikely to ever adopt a comprehensive programme or agency to guide community relocation (Ristroph 2019c). Still, there is much that a U.S. presidential administration could do to aid communities in navigating the maze of piecemeal funding sources available, including fostering agreements between different agencies to harmonise their applications for funding and to coordinate complementary programmes, and funding "navigators" that could counsel and provide technical support to communities considering relocation.

It is interesting to consider whether international funders that have contributed to Pacific Island relocations would be willing to contribute to relocating Alaska Native Villages. There is no precedent for such assistance in the modern history of the United States. In the absence of significant funding provided by state and national governments in the United States, communities may need to rely on support and technical assistance from the private sector and non-governmental organisations (Ristroph 2022). Churches could play a much greater role in assisting Alaska Native Villages, building on what some faith-based organisations are already doing.

While the United States may be unlikely to restructure its governance to provide a better framework for relocation, there is much that it could learn from the policies that Pacific Island nations have put in place. Those from Vanuatu and Fiji are especially instructive, since they bring together existing institutions rather than creating new ones and rely heavily on community knowledge and input to make decisions about relocation.

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