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The reason place matters: Climate change and community relocation in Fiji and Papua New Guinea

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Retreating from coastal areas in response to changing environmental conditions has long been a part of Pacific Island communities' traditional adaptive strategies, culture and practices. One can point to a number of cases of significant out-migration, as well as environmentally-induced partial and staggered community relocations, which are outside of "normal" migratory patterns. Furthermore, many traditional risk management and response strategies have been lost in the post-colonial era, due in part to today's pre-eminence of "modern" strategies. This loss also applies to strategies of risk-sharing with traditional trading and kinship partners, who are now found across artificial international borders. It leaves exposed communities and specific vulnerable groups with fewer capacities to respond to extreme weather events and the (gradual but permanent and assured) loss of habitable land (as in the case of low-lying atolls and volcanic eruptions). The result may be the loss of shared social and cultural identities, spaces and meanings; the creation of a bifurcated, altered or hybrid identities. Those who migrate are often in tension with those who return to or remain anchored in the physical source of a shared heritage.

These concerns are of particular importance for community members who are attached to customarily owned land. The adverse effects of climate

change are likely to increasingly incite islanders to migrate to cope with threats to their livelihoods.

This summary is an overview of the extent to which customary land issues are key to the sustainability of population movements in the Pacific region. This is done through a multi-layered analysis of scholarly debates around planned relocation and land rights, exploring divergent cases of environmentally-induced community relocations in Fiji and Papua New Guinea.

The paramount and contrasting role of the colonial authorities and post-colonial state are highlighted, in relation to the "success" of land reallocations and their failed attempts to alienate land from customary owners. Two primary, and conflicting, impetuses for relocation strategies are revealed: one based on the primacy of community cohesion, social development, and the preservation of heritage. The other plays to a neoliberal narrative of economic growth and development, based on individual rights and logistical aspects of the relocation process. The strategies and outcomes for both have heretofore been expressed as existing in opposition. We argue for a middle-of-the-road strategy that enables communities take an intermediate path towards a sustainable future. A deep exploration of both ancestral and recent community relocations and customary

land tenure is necessary to ensure relocations are sustainable and maintain the link between people and their land, which has been the crux of their identity for millennia.

Policy Recommendations

1) Develop legal and political framework including clear government policies on climate change adaptation and relocation planning combining both modern and traditional approaches to address insecurity of land tenure:

- Policies should include land tenure boundaries as the main borders to be considered when planning for relocation of communities in the region to avoid loss of cultural heritage and conflicts associated to land ownership.
- Policies should place emphasis on community cohesion and the preservation of Pacific people's identity, culture, social and belief systems linked to their land tenure systems. In the context of climate change adaptation in the Pacific; traditions and culture should be at the center of any recommendation directed towards regional level of governance and more particularly on adaptation to climate change implying at the first line conflicts related to land that holds a strong cultural component.
- Policies should be based on exploration of ancestral and recent relocations taking lessons from the past while observing contemporary challenges related to land tenure.

- The role of human mobility should be clearly identified in national adaptation plans (NAPs and plans of action, NAPAs). NAPs and NAPAs should also recognize the positive impact of migration and mobility on increasing community resilience and set ambitions to build on existing agreements to enable mobility in safety and dignity. Relocation must be a last resort measure, and enhancing existing migration channels can help in securing the right to stay for those who so choose.

2) Support greater consultations and participation of local communities early and often in the relocation process, in particular integrating - with the participation of community and traditional leadership structures, in order to maximize buy-in of the community.

- Consultation process should include all interests at stake into the relocation process including hosting and relocated communities and customary chiefs at both origin and destination sites.

3) Promote a participative approach (including all stakeholders) to relocation with a particular focus on ensuring that affected and hosting communities have an access to reliable information at all stages of relocation process.

- Efforts should particularly aim at awareness rising amongst key community decision makers; empowering traditional leaders to make informed decisions about

environment and mobility is key to sustainable relocation.

4) Assess potential inter-generational tensions around land and consider those tensions in relocation planning.

- Tensions between pro individual land rights and pro collective land rights should be considered when planning for relocation to avoid post-relocation conflicts associated with claims from younger generations from the community that provided the land threatening litigation, based on the lack of a formal deed, to obtain the land back.

5) Support, facilitate and coordinate at the regional level of governance national initiatives such as the Currently developed national relocation guidelines in Fiji based on lessons from relocation that have already taken place (ex: Narikoso relocation)

6) Promote the combination of both traditional and modern approaches to deal with future challenges associated with climate change and migration in the region.

- *Traditional knowledge* on Community relocation as adaptive response to extreme environmental events in the region is crucial. Perceptions of the environment and of environmental change have social and cultural elements. The great challenge of translating local knowledge into policy should be urgently addressed. Regional institutions in the Pacific are best placed to address this gap and find ways to merge traditional

knowledge and scientific best practices in environmental governance.

- *Locally-based expertise* should be valued, and supported. A shift must be made towards recognition of locally-based experts. Efforts should be put together by governments and regional entities to expand current initiatives aiming at coordinating, publicizing and expanding local expertise to give a sense of ownership key to long term sustainability of relocation.

7) Focus on strengthening research on climate change, conflicts and relocation by providing support in addressing gap of research on:

- The effects of relocations from before the relocation occurs to many years afterwards:

More longitudinal data on the effects of relocations is needed from before the relocation occurs to many years afterwards. These must include questions relating to intention to migrate and intention to return. In the case of the Carterets and Manam (PNG), for example, uncaptured return of populations creates difficulties in assessing indicators of well-being (because baseline data on some even basic things like population are absent) and administering resources. Coordination of research projects and capitalizing on previously collected data is important to minimize the undesirable effects of

survey fatigue on surveyed populations as well as on data quality.

- The implications of land reform and land-based related conflicts in planning for migration as adaptation strategies in the Pacific region:

The evolution of the land reform and the future survival of customary land rights as prevailing form of tenure in the Pacific will have significant incidence on future policies related to land management and environmental migration in the region.

- Understanding traditional Knowledge related to environment, conflicts and mobility in the Pacific and developing models helping translate traditional knowledge into policy-making:

There should be a comprehensive study of the interface between state-based (“formal”) and community-based (“indigenous”) land security mechanisms to develop coherent regional security frameworks around land in the context of Climate Change adaptation.

8) Promote the establishment of a long-term financial commitment from regional and international partners that is institutionalized and administered in the spirit of cooperation.

Navigating the nefarious impacts of climate change will be difficult but will be more efficient and effective if done in the spirit of international collaboration and solidarity, with the benefit of more sustainable global development. Significant trust funds will have to be established to purchase land and prepare it for settlements, as well as for future eventualities. A long-term financial commitment from regional and international partners that is institutionalized and administered in the spirit of cooperation – such as the “Climate Change Displacement Facility¹” proposed by the G77 and LDCs in the UNFCCC discussions - will help achieve this aim. Such an institution would require a significant monitoring and evaluation component

¹Since the writing of this text, under the Paris Agreement concluded at the 21st session of the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC (COP21), a task force was established under the Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage tasked with developing recommendations for integrated approaches to avert, minimize and address displacement related to the adverse impacts of climate change. At the time of publication, the composition, funding and work plan of the task force was under development.

