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INTERNATIONAL RELOCATION FROM PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES: ADAPTATION FAILURE?

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ABSTRACT: Increasing attention has been given to the issue of adaptation as a response to climate change, especially for Pacific Island countries (PICs) which have been identified as among those most likely to be effected. One set of adaptive responses that has received a considerable amount of media and political attention is relocation of communities from sites that might be rendered uninhabitable. There has been much postulation about the likely need for, or problems associated with, relocation. However, there has been very little research into the types of relocation that might be required, and the social, cultural, political, economic and environmental implications of such an adaptive option. Relocation, although a last resort, may become more common with many communities residing close to the high water mark on the coast, on atolls, in wetland areas and on river flood plains. While most attention has been focused on international relocation (particularly of atoll populations) other forms of relocation are likely to be at least as significant including moves within countries (island to island) and within single islands including "proximate" relocation such as moving inland from a coastal village site. All forms of relocation have happened and/or continue to occur in Pacific Island countries for a variety of reasons including phosphate mining, nuclear testing and tropical cyclone events, particularly following storm surge devastation. The movements have often been associated with social, cultural, political, economic and environmental issues such as tensions over land, community dislocation, inadequate resources and unsuitable sites. The paper reports on field research in Fiji and analysis of literature sources to establish a comprehensive list of relocated communities in the region, procedures under which relocation occurred and implications of relocation for the communities concerned.

Key Words: community relocation; Pacific Islands; adaptation.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Pacific Island communities have been identified as being among the most likely to be affected by climate change (Mimura et al., 2007). Accordingly, there has been a good deal of postulation about the likely need for, or problems associated with, relocation as an adaptive response, by these communities, to climate change and variability. However, there has been very little research into the types of relocation that might be required, and the social, cultural, political, economic and environmental implications of such an adaptive option. Relocation by Pacific Island communities, although a last resort, may become more common with many residing on atolls, close to the high water mark on the coast, in wetland areas and on river flood plains likely to be affected by global warming. The logistics of relocation need to be investigated more thoroughly than has been the case to date. This paper reports on a project that examined relocation in Pacific Island countries. This work included participatory research in a relocated community and documentary research for information on other cases of relocation.

2.   A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY.

There are a number of terms used in the context of environmental variability and change and the movement of people (Bierman and Boas, 2007; International Organisation for Migration, 2008; Kniveton et al., 2008). Quite often the term relocation is used in relation to a variety of these concepts. For this study it is important to distinguish community relocation from other concepts such as evacuation, displacement, migration and environmental refugee, although there is often some overlap in the meanings of these notions. Lieber (1977: 343) uses the general term resettlement to refer to 'a process by which a number of homogenous people from one locale come to live together in a different locale.' In this study, the term relocation is used to refer to the permanent (or long-term) movement of a community (or a significant part of it) from one location to another and in which the important characteristics of the original community including its social structures, legal and political systems, and worldviews are retained: the community stays together at the destination in a social form that is similar to the community of origin.

The term adaptation has been defined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as 'adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities' (Parry et al. 2007: 869).   The IPCC acknowledges that adaptation may have costs which include the 'costs of planning, preparing for, facilitating, and implementing *adaptation* measures, including transition costs' (Parry et al. 2007: 869). In the rural context of the Pacific Islands region, which is the basis for this study, the relevant 'human systems' will be village communities which may be seen as groups of people connected by kinship and linked by birthright and/or kinship to local land and sea resources (after Hunnam, 2002). This paper seeks to identify some of the social costs of community relocation as an adaptive option. If a community is not able to re-establish itself in a new location, it may be considered to have failed to adapt successfully to change and variability.

3.   RELOCATION IN PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES.

A literature search was conducted to identify relocated communities in the Pacific region. Ninety-six, of the more than 500 items entered into a bibliographic database, were initially identified as cases that involved population movement that had been described as relocation. These 96 cases were categorised according to the reasons why relocation took place. On closer examination, many of these were, by the definition adopted for this study, cases of evacuation in which the communities concerned returned to their home site, or migration of individuals or families. Eventually we reduced the number of relevant case studies to 33. As Figure 1 shows these relocations took place at a variety of dates, mostly in the twentieth century and over a range of distances. Two thirds of the community relocations were forced by environmental change, mostly in the form of natural hazards, although there were also cases of human induced environmental degradation such as mining and nuclear weapons testing. A number of themes emerged from the various studies and these are discussed below.

The literature search included ten case studies from a seminal 1977 publication, *Exiles and Migrants in Oceania*, edited by Michael Lieber. The book reports on ten case studies of communities that 'relocated' in the colonial era (a point that will be returned to later in this paper). As Lieber pointed out in his introduction, there were a range of movements ranging from what has been defined as relocation in this study through gradual development of 'satellites' on new islands through to community dispersal upon relocation. Using the information gathered from these cases and also from fieldwork in Biausevu, a relocated village in Fiji, it was possible to identify four categories of relocation based not only on the distance moved by the relocatees, but also the nature of the 'boundaries' crossed in the process of relocation. These categories included proximate relocation within customary land boundaries, proximate relocation but beyond the communities' customary lands, long distance relocation within national boundaries but outside internal boundaries such as beyond one's island or province and finally, international relocation.
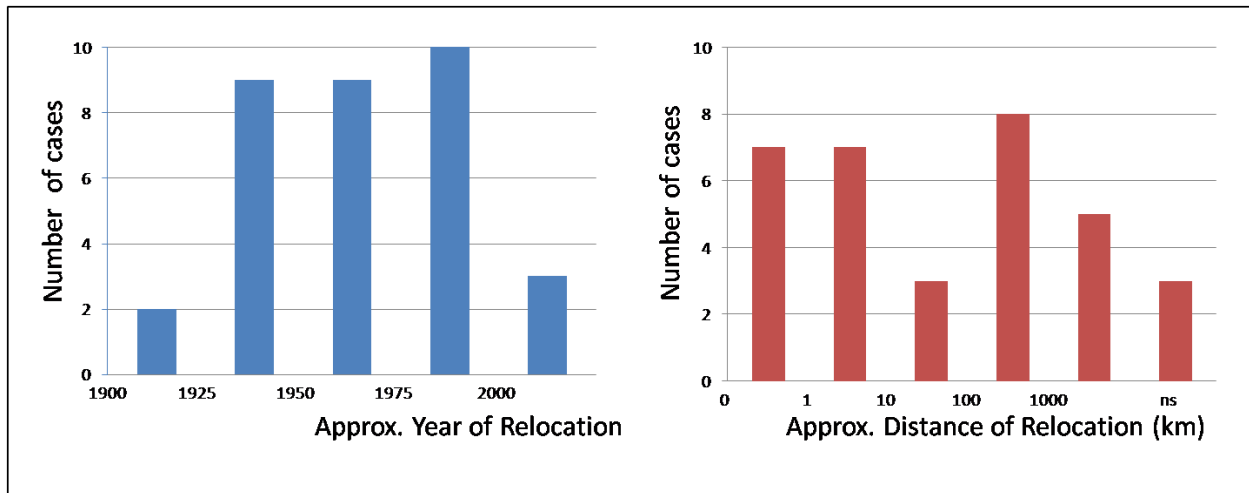
Figure 1: Summary of 33 case studies of community relocation in Pacific Island Countries showing the range of dates (1905 – 2004) in which relocation took place and the range of distances covered (1 – 3,600 km.). The case studies are from 11 of the 22 political entities in the region (based on current jurisdictions)

3.1 Proximate relocation within customary lands: the village of Biausevu

The Biausevu people and their forebears have relocated their village no less than four times in the past 135 years (see Figure 2). Originally the Biausevu people lived at Tilivaira, a fortified settlement on a high ridge inland from the present site. Around 1875 the community moved to Teagane, a site on lower land, closer to the coast, following the 'pacification' of the local area when missionaries encouraged communities to move from their inland settlements. This move was to land that belonged to the original inhabitants of Tilivaira and where crops were probably grown in the fertile flood plain. Following a flood in 1881 in which Teagane village was destroyed the community moved further upstream to a site known as Biausevu (No. 1). The village site still has clearly visible *yavu* (house mounds) and several graves are still in good repair. The community remained at this site for almost sixty years until they were again subjected to flood devastation in 1940. As a result of the damage the villagers moved to a new site known as Busadule which was then inundated in 1972 during cyclone Bebe, one of the most destructive cyclones in Fiji's history. The village was rebuilt in the same location but plans were put in place to seek a less hazardous site led by the village chief. He identified a small hill, named Koroinalagi, as a suitable site. He engaged a logging company which was extracting timber further inland from Biausevu to use a bulldozer to flatten the top of the hill and place the removed material on its flanks, thereby widening the surface area. The flat surface lies about 20-30 metres above the flood plain. When Cyclone Oscar caused very heavy flooding in 1983, the site was already prepared and for the community to move yet again.

It took over a hundred years from the initial settlement of Teagane to the final move to Koroinalagi. Several of the relocations were unsuccessful with the community moving from one flood prone area to another. One might ask why did they not simply move uphill rather than upstream in the first place? One possible explanation is that the community needed to have access to fresh water and also needed a flat site upon which to rebuild. Cheaper PVC piping, which enabled the community to bring in water from a head some distance away, and heavy earthmoving equipment, did not become available until the latter part of the 20th Century. Today, the village is spilling onto lower land as its population grows. It is likely that, while for some of the population the relocation has finally succeeded, it is not a solution for the full community.
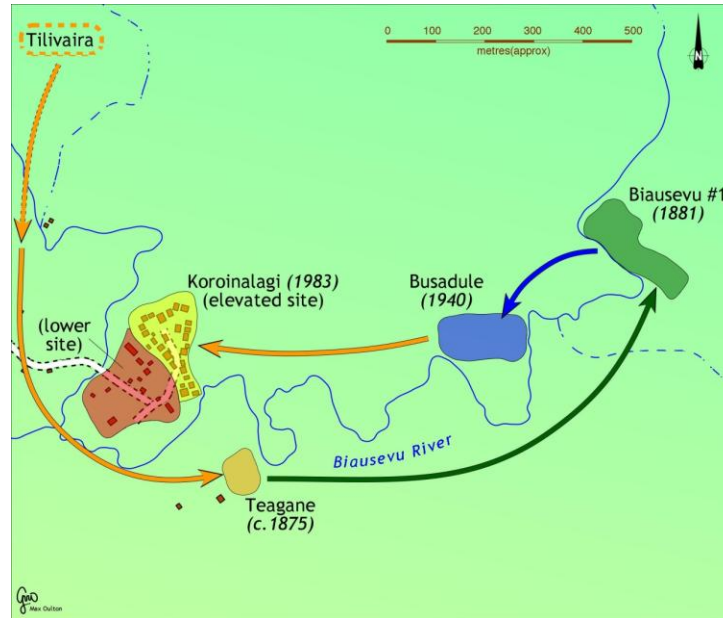
Figure 2: Map showing the four village sites occupied over the past 130 years in the Biausevu area. Note the original movement was from Tilivaira, the actual location of which is beyond the borders of this map.

3.2   Proximate relocation beyond customary lands

A number of the case studies reported on communities that had moved relatively short distances, but to sites that were under the tenure of other communities. Many Pacific societies have procedures by which such relocations can take place but they are subject to considerable negotiation and application of traditional protocols. Despite this there is often resentment in the community whose land has been resettled upon. Cagilaba (2005) reports on conflict between relocatees belonging to Solodamu village on the island of Kadavu and members of the *matagali* (clan) that had conferred land to them. Some younger members of communities do not accept the traditional arrangements arguing that there needs to be a legally binding written contract for such moves to be accepted.   Cagilaba also noted that not all community members wish to relocate to other lands.   Their ties to their own lands are too strong. Accordingly communities can become divided between the relocatees and those who stay.

3.3   Relocation within national boundaries but at some distance from traditional lands.

There are a number of case studies where communities have relocated and established new communities on other islands, often near the capital or main urban centre, within their own country. Examples include the community of Polynesians from Kapingamairangi on the Micronesian island of Pohnpei, and the Tikopia (Polynesian community) on Russell Island in Solomon Islands and Sikaiana and Anuta communities in Honiara are examples. Such relocations often establish minority communities and interethnic tensions may result. The issue of land (to be discussed later) remains, with 'host' communities loath to give up their birthright.   Where communities have related in urban areas in Pacific Island countries other social processes emerge. Modell (2002: 5) edited a special issue of *Pacific Studies* on Pacific Island migrant communities in urban settings.   She captures some of the issues confronting migrants from rural areas into such settings:

> In the following essays, community creation goes on in settings of complexity, heterogeneity, and diversity characteristic of the "city." These are settings in which class replaces kinship and distance replaces closeness as the basis for interaction, where clues to personal behaviours are puzzling and anonymity the mode of self preservation.

Modell was referring to communities of migrants, not relocatees or people who were subject to enforced displacement. Nevertheless, she provides insights into the likely problems facing communities relocated within countries but well away from their original lands.

3.4 "International" relocation

The term environmental refugee is evocative of people forced not just from their lands but from their country. Much of the media discourse about climate refugees infers that millions of people from developing countries will find their way to the developed countries. None of this discourse seems to consider the possibility of entire communities relocating, let alone maintaining their social, political, legal and cultural structures. Indeed we have very few examples to draw from of such international relocation. There are only three cases of relocation beyond what we might call national boundaries in the Pacific region (see Figure 3). The first of these is a Micronesian community from Banaba (now part of Kiribati), which was devastated by phosphate mining which now lives on Rabi island in northern Fiji. The first group arrived on December 15, 1945 (Silverman, 1977b). Fraenkel (2003: 12) reports that the 'Banabans remain one of Fiji's most disadvantaged and politically marginalised communities. Affirmative action programmes for indigenous Fijian and Rotuman communities in the aftermath of the 1987 and 2000 coups have not been targeted at Banaban peoples.' Moreover, the original inhabitants of Rabi, who were displaced to the nearby island of Fiji, are seeking to reclaim their island (Pacific Island Report, 2007).
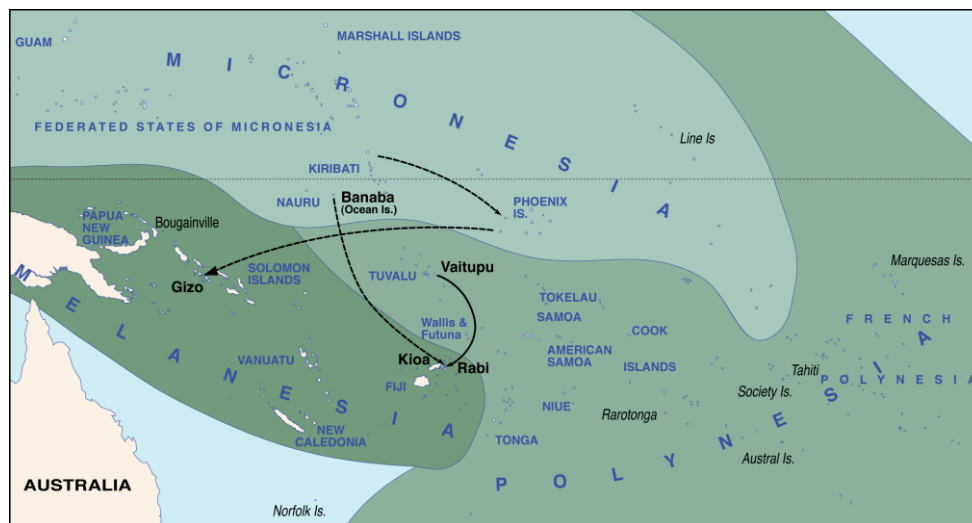

Figure 3. The "international" type relocations that took place during the colonial period under the colonial governance of the United Kingdom. The map shows the broad 'cultural regions' of Oceania and indicates that the three communities were relocated to quite distinct cultural milieux from their own.

The second example is a Polynesian community from Vaitupu (now part of Tuvalu) on Kioa island in northern Fiji. The island was purchased in 1946 and settlement began 26 October, 1947 (Koch, 1978). The final example is the Gilbertese (I-Kiribati) community in Wagani and Gizo, Western Province, Solomon Islands (Knudson, 1977). This relocation, encouraged by the colonial administration of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands which considered some of the atolls in the Gilberts group of islands to be overpopulated initially began with relocation to islands in the Phoenix group in the central Pacific. But these islands lacked sufficient fresh water and people were then relocated to Solomon Islands beginning in 1955 and continuing through to 1971. The relocatees were placed in areas where land quality was poor and in many cases they did not have security of land tenure (Fraenkel, 2003). Despite these disadvantages the relocation has been a source of tension, and 'while saying they were not hostile to the Gilbertese as such, Western [Province] leaders resented the fact that their province took all the burden of Gilbertese resettlement' (Premdas et al., 1984: 45).

4.   DISCUSSION: IS RELOCATION ADAPTIVE FAILURE?

In nearly every case community relocation incurs costs. Even proximate relocation within one's own lands raises issues. Climate change relocation often involves moving to a higher elevation and getting water, food and people to such sites on a daily basis is an additional cost that the community must bear. Longer distance moves have even greater costs especially elating to land, loss of community identity and structure and the problem of international boundaries.

4.1   The importance of land.

Communities that are forced to relocate (either as a result of government edict or environmental degradation) often find themselves in a state of discontent wishing to return to their homeland. Given that climate change is an external "force" it is likely that such discontent would be an outcome for communities that are relocated as a result of climate change effects. The root of this discontent is the very strong relationship or bond that exists between most Pacific Island Communities and their land – in most cases they are inseparable. This is certainly the case in Fiji as Ravuvu (1988) notes in relation to villages located in central Viti Levu:

> The people of Nakorosule wherever they are and in whatever work they are involved are often reminded by their elders not to forget the *Vanua*, meaning the land and the social system and the *dela ni yavu*, one's house site back in the village. … The *Vanua* in terms of the *dela ni yavu* is the physical embodiment of one's identity and belonging. (Ravuvu, 1988: 6)

> The people of Nakorosule cannot live without their physical embodiment in terms of their land, upon which survival of individuals and groups depends. It provides nourishment, shelter and protection, as well as a source of security and the material basis for identity and belonging. Land in this sense is thus an extension of the self; and conversely the people are an extension of the land. (Ravuvu, 1988: 7)

Given this inseparable nature of the society-land relationship it is clear that for many Pacific Island communities either abandoning land (particularly ancestral home sites), or giving land to relocatees, is likely to be extremely problematic. As Ravuvu implies migrants are secure knowing that their *vanua* remains. Climatically forced relocatees, however, may no longer have such security. Ravuvu also refers to the importance of the house site and Cagilaba (2005: 76) makes a similar observation when discussing the village of Solodamu, Kadavu, Fiji.

> A traditional Fijian house or *bure* is always built on a *yavu*, which is the foundation of a house … These *yavu* remain in [the] family always for them and their offspring's use. … These *yavu* become almost sacred over time, having become imbued with Fijian metaphysical qualities and there are usually repercussions for those who choose to build on a *yavu* that is not of their family. Over time these *yavu* come to hold *mana*.

As these descriptions of *vanua* and *yavu* indicate, there are extremely strong relationships between people and their place. The act of relocation may be seen as a measure that can create a fissure in this set of relations. This may be particularly so for those who leave their *vanua* and *yavu*, but also may apply to those who may give up some of their *vanua* for relocatees. This disruption of the land-person bond is not so significant for emigrants who may always have the option of returning, but where land is physically lost or made uninhabitable the disruption is much greater. O'Collins (1990: 259) describes the poignant situation of people relocated from the Carteret islands. These atoll communities are faced with a growing population and subsidence of their land and are being resettled on the large, high island of Bougainville, in Papua New Guinea, some 200 km. to the south.

> The problems of adapting to a new environment for which most members of the family had little or no preparation meant that the timetable for building a new Carteret Village,

establishing food gardens and moving from the transit houses had to be considerably extended. Many women sat for long periods of time thinking about their island homes. On Sundays they would often risk the 20 minute walk through terrifying tall trees and bush to reach the seashore and gaze for hours out to sea towards the atolls.

4.2   International relocation in the post-colonial era

As noted, Lieber's collection was of relocation that took place in the colonial era under a number of regimes. Silverman (1977a) noted that there were a number of reasons why this is significant. Colonial administrations could make decisions about land and community locations with fewer constraints than is currently possible where land is enshrined in laws that were established to protect customary land rights in the newly independent nations. Second, colonial administrations could easily move people across what are now international boundaries, as long as the territories were colonised by the same metropolitan power. This was the case for the three existing cases of 'international relocation'. They all took place under British Colonial Rule where the Western Pacific High Commission oversaw the Gilbert and Ellice islands as well as Solomon Islands, among others, and was headquartered in Suva, Fiji.

Tonkinson (1977: 275) also points out another element of colonial relocation activities. Often they encouraged or enforced relocation based on their colonial perceptions of particular sets of circumstances:

> The 1951 relocation [of Ambrymese after the volcanic eruptions] differed from previous ones in several important ways. First, the prolonged ash-falls that precipitated the decision to evacuate the area were viewed as a crisis by the condominium government, not by the Ambrymese, who were accustomed to such phenomena and regarded them as inconveniences. Second, the decision to relocate was made by the administration, not the Ambrymese. Third, the places selected for refuge were chosen because of their convenience for the administration, not the preferences and needs of the Ambrymese. The Ambrymese were reluctant to leave their homes, especially if this meant relocating on the allegedly sorcery-ridden island of Epi. The misgivings of the Ambrymese were confirmed when a hurricane struck Epi six weeks after the resettlement, killing forty-eight people and levelling the shelters of the refugees.

While the majority of Pacific Island people are no longer administered by colonial governments, it is important that Tonkinson's observations are observed by contemporary civil servants and others involved in climate change adaptation work. Local environmental knowledge must be taken into account along with local understanding of such events as extreme events.

Equally important are the implications for long-distance, international relocation. It is highly unlikely that it would be possible to transplant a community from one cultural and environmental setting to another in the contemporary Pacific. Where suitable land might become available (as in a freehold coconut plantation being sold) the descendants of the original inhabitants would most likely have priority in most countries in the region, if indeed the land was to be returned to customary ownership. Relocation outside the region would most likely be to countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the United States where land is held in fee simple and where the current political economy is capitalist and lifestyles are individualistic. In this sense any form of population movement would be more likely to occur as migration with the community characteristics of the origin being considerably transformed if not completely destroyed.

4.3   The costs of relocation as an adaptation to climate change and variability

Even moving a settlement to a new site within its own customary lands has costs. Most such moves are to higher lands which require the costs of installing and maintaining water supply systems, carrying food, firewood and other goods up hill. Relocating to proximate sites but beyond the traditional confines of a community's own land often results in long term friction between the origin and 'host' communities. Rokocoko outlines some of these in her research on the relocated community of Solodamu in Kadavu,

Fiji. On the other hand the community retains access to its land and can carry on with its agricultural and other activities (although the costs of distance would need to be accounted for). Moving away from an island (or perhaps from one province to another in large countries such as Papua New Guinea) may result in a disconnection between the community and their land. Some communities may return to harvest copra, for example, but the regular use of land resources will decline. Lieber (1977) discusses the social, cultural and economic divergence that has occurred between the Kapingamarangi community on the atoll and that which has become established at Porakiet in Pohnpei.

The most problematic form of relocation is likely to be that involving international travel. It is possible that, should the atoll environments of Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Tokelau and Tuvalu (countries existing entirely of atolls) become uninhabitable, such relocation may be rendered necessary. Given the difficulties of making customary land available the options which were available under colonial rule are likely to be more limited. There may be possibilities to buy freehold alienated land in other Pacific Island Countries (such as plantations – as was the case in Kioa and Rabi) but it is equally likely that descendants of the original land owners would be given preference in such instances. Relocation beyond the Pacific region to countries such as Australia and New Zealand are likely to pose other types of problems. While freehold land could be purchased there would be problems recreating community life in these places. It would be much more likely that relocatees would be placed in urban areas and establishing themselves in existing Pacific Island diaspora communities. Figure 4 represents schematically the nonlinear characteristics of relocation, not simply associated with distance in a quantitative sense, but also, and perhaps more importantly, with the qualitative nature of 'boundaries' that must be crossed.
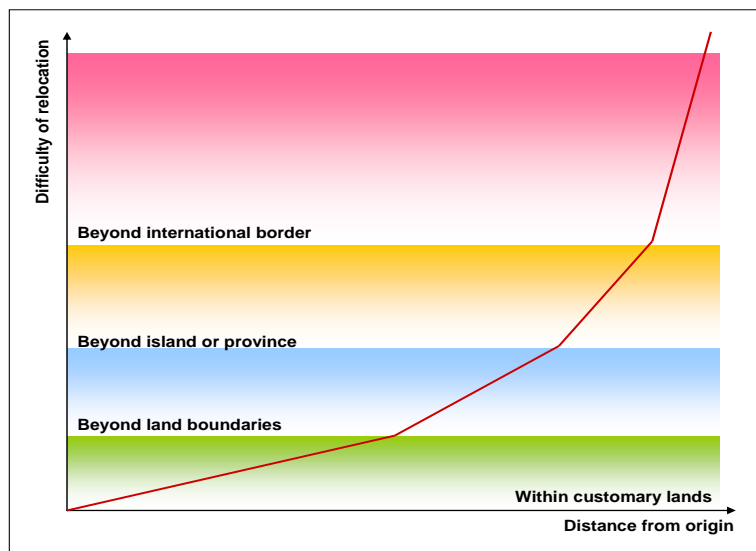

Figure 4. The costs of relocation. The social, cultural and economic costs of relocation increase with distance. They also increase when certain thresholds are exceeded such as crossing land tenure boundaries, island boundaries or national boundaries.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Community relocation is not new to Pacific island communities. But it does not come without cost even for the most proximate forms. At the extreme of international relocation the costs would appear to be exceptional. Communities would most likely fall apart, the person-land attachment would be destroyed and community members would be subject to, and dominated by economic, nutritional, legal, political, social and political systems that are vastly different from what currently exists in their home settings. Such relocation may accordingly be considered to be adaptive failure.

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