



# NIUE

## Country Summary – Climate (Im)mobility in the Pacific

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**June 2024**

## Acknowledgements

### Communities

The authors sincerely thank the Vaiea and West Coast communities of Alofi South, Avatele, Makefu, and Tuapa, and their leaders, who hosted us and generously shared their insights into climate mobility, including not moving. We are also grateful to our in-country researchers in Niue who provided generous and insightful research support: Jamal Talagi-Veidreyaki, and Robin Hekau.

Special acknowledgement to the National Disaster Management division of the Niue Police Service.

Special thanks to our Auckland research support team: Grace Shaw, Lanea Tuiasosopo, Leah-Moana Damm, Rochelle Ellison-Lupena, Roi Burnett, and Sam Pilisi.

### Funding and support

This project was supported by Te Wānanga o Waipapa/School of Māori and Pacific Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Auckland.

We are grateful to New Zealand Foreign Affairs and Trade Manatū Aorere for the funding to undertake this research and its support for Pacific-led evidence-based policy research.

### Design

Special thanks to Luvly Limited, Raniera Ellison and Rodney Ng Shiu who contributed to the graphic design of the research products.

### Research organisations

University of Auckland Waipapa Taumata Rau  
Akairo Consulting  
Malatest International

**Suggested citation:** Newport, C., Underhill-Sem, Y., Ng Shiu, R., & Shaw, G. (2024). *Niue country summary – Climate (im)mobility in the Pacific*. Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland. <https://pacific-climate-research.blogs.auckland.ac.nz/niue-country-summary/>

**ISBN:** 978-1-0670223-7-2

**Disclaimer:** This research was commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, funded by New Zealand's climate finance. The views expressed here are the authors' alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the New Zealand government.

## Introduction

This paper presents climate (im)mobility research conducted in Niue by the University of Auckland.<sup>1</sup> It offers community case studies and policy analyses<sup>2</sup> on community resilience and climate change induced (im)mobility trends to support the Niue government and stakeholders in policymaking and resource mobilisation.

Five communities from Niue participated. Vaiea is an inland community that has voluntarily relocated from its coastline village of Fatiau. The West Coast communities of Alofi South, Avatele, Makefu, and Tuapa are coastal communities that were displaced by Cyclone Heta in 2004. The research engaged 50 community members, including 16 men, 34 women, and 12 young people. Seven people were originally from Tuvalu. Multigenerational dialogue in Vagahau Niue and English was facilitated using various methods such as community workshops, key informant interviews, and walk the land.<sup>3</sup> The study provides valuable insights into climate change adaptation strategies and decisions regarding remaining, relocating, or migrating.

## Population

The Niue population has seen shifting trends. Between 1950 and 1971, population growth took place before declining and almost halving by 1986 to 2,531 people.<sup>4</sup> Population decline has continued due to movement to New Zealand and low fertility rates. A stable population level of 1,600–1,700 was reached in 2001 with an increase to 1,719 recorded in 2017. Population projections for 2050 vary widely, with predictions of an increase to approximately 2,100 people or a decline to 1,370 people. Niue's sovereign arrangement of free association with New Zealand and free citizenship access to New Zealand have significantly impacted Niuean population trends. More Niueans were counted in the New Zealand census than in Niue itself by 1976. In 2018, nearly 31,000 people identified as Niuean in New Zealand. Nearly 6,250 people in Australia identified as Niuean in 2021.

At a community level, the combined West Coast communities make up nearly 70% of Niue's total population. Of the 81 people who live in Vaiea, about 65% have Tuvaluan ties. Despite the small population in Niue, the transnational communities in New Zealand and Australia are a potential source of support in addressing climate im/mobility associated threats to living conditions. Unpredictable and extreme weather presents a significant challenge for both the West Coast communities and Vaiea, affecting food security, infrastructure, and traditional knowledge. Hazards include cyclones, heavy rains, earthquakes, higher temperatures, droughts, storm surges, rising sea levels, landslides, coastal erosion, and altered rock formations. These challenges have social and economic implications, impacting food security, health, biodiversity, and traditional practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> See two community case studies for Vaiea and the West Coast communities <https://pacific-climate-research.blogs.auckland.ac.nz/product-catalogue/>

<sup>3</sup> Refers to physical tour and discussion of community sites with community leader.

<sup>4</sup> Niue national population study as part of Policy Paper 1 <https://pacific-climate-research.blogs.auckland.ac.nz/product-catalogue/>

## Climate-related hazards and vulnerability

Extreme weather events and climate change affect food security by destroying corals, which reduces fish stocks; hinders fruit production, and limits taro cultivation. The Vaiea community note there are less fish available. Traditional knowledge transmission is hindered by climate change, with elders finding it harder to move around to impart and use knowledge due to unpredictable weather patterns. High rainfall leads to mould growth on houses, disrupts power and internet access, and damages roads, posing health and safety risks. For the West Coast communities, the lack of infrastructure and financial constraints hinder movement from lower to upper terraces, prompting calls for government support to address these challenges and ensure community resilience and wellbeing.

These hazards and challenges threaten community wellbeing, prosperity, resilience, food security, and cohesion; however, neither community considers itself vulnerable.

## Climate (im)mobility patterns

Vaiea and the West Coast communities in Niue have distinct experiences with mobility. Vaiea's original relocation from the lower to upper terrace due to an eye disease outbreak in the 1950s led to a significant population decrease. A subsequent innovative arrangement from Niutao, Tuvalu in the 1990s, bolstered its numbers, with 67% being non-Niuean by 2011.

Conversely, the West Coast communities historically moved from inland upper terraces to lower terraces for convenience and Christian influences. However, climate change threats, notably Cyclone Heta in 2004, have prompted a desire to return to the upper terraces. Some families were compelled to relocate after Cyclone Heta due to significant damage.

Future relocation to upper terraces is recognised as necessary by many in the West Coast communities, although challenges like inadequate infrastructure and the desire to remain close to churches and the ocean persist. These communities envision a prosperous future in Niue, emphasising self-sufficiency and a connection to the land. Meanwhile, discussions in Vaiea are centred on future staying in place, with aspirations for improved education and economic opportunities to sustain the community's future. Despite these differing perspectives, developing policy measures for equitable internal relocation is being considered to address community cohesion and structural challenges associated with mobility.

## Community resilience

Communities demonstrate their agency and capacity to adapt to the impacts of climate change and their ability to remain in place by relocating within their ancestral lands. The resilience of West Coast communities in the aftermath of Cyclone Heta, is demonstrated by efforts to rebuild private, church, and community buildings. The government also made a strategic shift to relocate public infrastructure and buildings away from coastal areas toward more inland and upper terrace locations, reflecting a proactive approach to enhancing community resilience. Government policies and legislation have also been enacted to bolster the resilience of communities along the West Coast. In Vaiea, the movement of families from Niutao to Vaiea was an innovative measure of mutual benefit brokered by country and community leaders 30 years ago, also demonstrates community resilience through resettlement.

## **Resilience and land and marine use and tenure**

Land and marine use and tenure are central to community resilience in Niue. Land, passed down through generations, cannot be sold, with a caretaker overseeing land use and tenure decisions. However, uncertainties persist, particularly for Tuvaluan families in Vaiea who face challenges in securing land rights. Despite difficulties, families prioritise land stewardship, ensuring continuity for future generations. Cultural protocols dictate access to marine areas, crucial for sustenance and resource management. Conservation efforts are underway to protect dwindling resources, though conflicts sometimes arise. Land and the ocean hold significance for gardening, food security, and cultural practices. While the shift to upper terraces alters land use, many aspire to remain in Niue, valuing its agricultural potential and cultural heritage. Some consider overseas relocation for education and job opportunities, but few plan to leave permanently, highlighting the enduring attachment to Niuean land and identity.

## **Conflict**

Land use and tenure arrangements provoke tension in both Vaiea and the West Coast communities. In Vaiea, conflicts arise between residents and those abroad over land ownership and resource management. Concerns about returning landowners impact community dynamics, though leaders reassure Tuvaluan families of their place. In the West Coast communities, conflicts within families sometimes necessitate legal intervention. Differences in interpretation of laws and customs contribute to disputes, with Western influences complicating matters. While women have gained more say in land affairs, disparities persist. Additionally, tensions with the government over land leases and compensation further strain community relationships. Family meetings and discussions are prioritised to resolve conflict, emphasising traditional approaches over legal recourse.

## **Climate (im)mobility decision making**

In Vaiea and the West Coast communities, decision making occurs within a framework of traditional custom alongside Western legal structures and is not without tension. Land decisions involve consultation with the Leveki (Caretaker) and elders, though government involvement sometimes leads to community dissatisfaction.

Decision making regarding environmental displacement in the West Coast communities is undertaken at a family level. Following Cyclone Heta, communities decided to move to the upper terraces together, as a collective. However, deep ties to ancestral land, financial capacity, and lack of infrastructure (services and housing) meant a prolonged and fragmented approach. While some families moved, others stayed. Community members expressed frustration over slow progress with relocation and are critical of government inaction, seeing value in developing a national framework for equitable internal relocation.<sup>5,6</sup> In Vaiea, community decisions are overseen by the village member of parliament and Leveki. The Leveki facilitated negotiations with

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<sup>5</sup> Refer to Niue National Consultation on Climate Mobility Summary Report 25-26 May 2022 as part of Pacific Climate Change Migration and Human Security (PCCM-HS) programme.

<sup>6</sup> Climate change relocation in Niue event at CSW65: Exploring climate justice and feminist approaches to climate change-induced relocation in Niue. (2021).

overseas landowners to secure homes for Tuvaluan families in Vaiea, but as families grow, ongoing housing and land needs prevail.

Vaiea and the West Coast communities express a desire to remain on their lands, with minimal plans for international moves. Communities see the relationship with the government as key to future internal relocations as climate change impacts their ability to remain on their land.

### **Leadership**

Effective leadership and thorough consultation are essential for addressing the varied needs of the Vaiea and West Coast communities. Decision making takes place in a context of well-established customs operating simultaneously with Western laws and this has some tensions. It is important to be aware of this when looking at climate mobility decisions in the future.

### **Resilience and wellbeing**

Communities consider resilience and wellbeing are deeply intertwined with the environment in Niue, reflecting an Indigenous perspective that acknowledges the interconnectedness of land, water, community, and health. Despite facing challenges, the West Coast communities attribute their resilience to their strong connection to the land and sea, which is reflected in the absence of poverty and the communities' high employment rate.

This was evident in the West Coast communities' response to Cyclone Heta in 2004, when they rallied together to build and support each other. However, the trauma and grief resulting from the cyclone, and its lingering impact on mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing, underscores the importance of faith as a source of resilience, especially in the face of future extreme weather events.

Similarly, Vaiea has shown resilience through its growth despite past struggles such as the eye disease outbreak and subsequent population loss and relocation from Fatiau. Looking to the future, both Vaiea and West Coast communities are looking to build away from the coast to ensure younger generations can thrive.

Generational knowledge and community cohesiveness are vital aspects of resilience in both Vaiea and West Coast communities, with harvesting practices passed on to younger generations, such as where to fish, and what to take and not to take. This is future proofing, building community resilience in younger generations. There is concern this could be lost.

Internal and voluntary relocation entail significant loss and damage including severed connections to the ocean, ancestral lands, and cherished memories. Vaiea residents express a profound sense of longing for their ancestral homes in Fatiau and Tuvalu, highlighting a deep-rooted connection to their past. This connection remains strong. Losses extend to cultural heritage with the decline of Vagahau Niue, recognised as an endangered language by UNESCO, posing challenges for cultural preservation. Communities recognise the risks of cultural erosion associated with mobility, emphasising the importance of maintaining ties to ancestral lands and traditions for future generations.

## Conclusion

Niue's communities demonstrate resilience in the face of climate change challenges, with traditional knowledge and community cohesion contributing to their ability to adapt. However, (im)mobility policymaking must consider the interconnected aspects of land, culture, and wellbeing to ensure sustainable outcomes for those at home and overseas.