

Land: a fault line for Pacific peace and security?

Recognising land as a pillar of regional security

Author: Dr Anna Naupa



In conversation with:
Karen Mapusua
George Hoa'au
Vehia Wheeler
Dr Akka Rimon

About the author



Dr Anna Naupa
Senior Research and Engagement Fellow
Pacific Security College

Anna Naupa joined the Pacific Security College in 2026 as a Senior Research and Engagement Fellow (Pacific Security). She serves as an Advisory Member to the Centre for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University (Melbourne) and sits on the Advisory Committee for the Toda Peace Institute (Japan).

For the past 20 years, Anna has worked in her home country of Vanuatu and at the regional level in the Pacific, holding senior advisory and management roles at the Pacific Fusion Centre, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, and United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

She has produced expert strategic security assessments for Pacific Island countries in response to the *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* and is a thought leader on Pacific human and cultural security and geopolitics.

Anna holds a Master of Arts in Geography from the University of Hawai'i, Manoa, a Master of Public Administration from Harvard University, and a PhD from the Australian National University. Her research interests include Pacific politics, statecraft, cultural security, decolonisation and Melanesian diplomacy.

About the Pacific Security College

The Pacific Security College serves members of the Pacific Islands Forum through learning and training, policy engagement and regional collaboration.

We have a holistic approach to Pacific security, encompassing traditional and non-traditional security issues, taking our lead from the Forum's *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*, the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* and the *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration*.

We work in a spirit of service and collaboration with our Pacific stakeholders in national governments, universities, civil society organisations and regional institutions.

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- In our sea of islands, sustainable access to and management of land are fundamental for the environmental, human and livelihood security of Pacific peoples.
- Land governance systems – inclusive of pluralistic, indigenous customary and state structures – are at the heart of peacemaking, social cohesion and maintaining a connection to place.
- Climate security threats highlight the need for renewed regional attention to the intersection of national land policies, societal responses and prospects for peace and security.





Executive summary

Land is entwined with daily life in the Pacific

Eroding coastlines. Submerged homes and graveyards. Rising saline levels in soil and freshwater systems. Changed harvest periods and diets. Relocated communities. Sea wall construction. Reclaimed land.

Each of these scenarios is linked to climate-induced impacts affecting Pacific Island communities. Each also has land as a common denominator.

Missing the land for the sea

Land management policy was a key element of a former Pacific Islands Forum-led initiative aimed at minimising regional conflict by connecting state and customary land governance with peacemaking and security. But this focus faded in the early 2010s alongside waning regional attention to human security.

Currently, spaces for regional knowledge sharing and exchange about land governance are limited. While resource-based attention to land has continued in some sectors, the non-commercial aspects of land governance systems that underpin community cohesion, sustain life and livelihoods, and mediate conflict are often overlooked. Land tenure is not among the selected regional Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) priorities. Despite the muted regional policy attention to land governance, national affairs suggest otherwise.



In recent years, ocean governance has become more of a critical regional priority, propelled in part by multilateral processes and increased geopolitical competition in the Blue Pacific.

Without external pressure or multilateral processes directly forcing attention on what Pacific peoples also hold dear, land, is regional security policy in danger of missing the land for the sea?

What can be done?

Well-supported, pluralistic land tenure systems are implicit to several security themes within the *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* and the *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration*. However, these declarations would benefit from a more targeted recognition of the links between land governance, peacemaking and security. Possible policy approaches can be found within the *Pacific Regional Framework for Climate Mobility* and the *Pacific Guidance on Internal Planned Relocation*, which recognise land loss and mobility as entwined with the protection of cultural heritage, identity and dignity.

The region is encouraged to:

- Refocus on land and its centrality to Pacific peoples' identity and belonging. For the Blue Pacific, land is as important as the sea. The recognition of culture in regional declarations provides an important foundation for this.
- Reintroduce land governance as a critical component of regional peace and security discussions. The issues will only get sharper as climate change intensifies and socio-political pressures mount.
- Use the development of the Regional Peace and Security Action Plan to formally recognise the role of plural land governance systems and their contribution to social cohesion and everyday peacemaking, and advance this through collective regional action.
 - This could be through dedicating space for regular regional dialogue about the land-peace-security nexus within the Pacific's regional security architecture, and exchanging knowledge through existing platforms such as the Pacific Peace and Security Dialogue and the Pacific Peace Conference.
- Use the annual *Pacific Security Outlook Report* to spotlight pressing land policy issues – including sustainable access, plural governance systems, 'new' land, and transboundary mobility – and target strategic regional security assessments accordingly, such as via the Pacific Fusion Centre and the Forum Subcommittee on Regional Security (FSRS).





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Director's introduction

I am delighted to launch the latest policy paper from the Pacific Security College. This series aims to contribute to regional discussions on how we can collectively realise the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*.

This paper supports Forum Leaders' vision for a resilient, peaceful and secure Pacific by drawing attention to an issue that is both fundamental and often underexamined in regional security discussions: land.

Land is central to the social, cultural and economic security of Pacific Island communities. It is a source of identity and strength, and serves as a vital safety net for livelihoods and wellbeing. At the same time, it can be a source of conflict, tension and misunderstanding.

The impacts of climate change – the region's greatest security threat – are already testing previous understandings and arrangements for land tenure. Population movements within and between countries will continue to reshape relationships to land, and raise complex policy and security considerations.

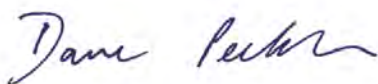
This timely paper, authored by Dr Anna Naupa, initiates an important conversation about the evolving challenges surrounding land management and governance, and the pathways available to strengthen their prominence within regional peace and security efforts.

Dr Naupa identifies opportunities to refocus attention on people-centred land policy and governance, and to elevate the role of land in peace and security discussions. And she shares the history, existing processes and regional architecture that provide a strong foundation to support this next phase of work.

These papers are intended to encourage conversation and bring forward a range of perspectives. I thank Karen Mapusua, George Hoa'au, Vehia Wheeler and Dr Akka Rimon for their very meaningful reflections, which encompass the diverse ways people relate to land in the Pacific and its importance to peace and security in the region.

The Pacific Security College policy paper series seeks to support regional dialogue and policy development. The views expressed are those of the author and respondents, and do not represent the official positions of the College, our university, or our funder.

Our policy papers *do* reflect our strong belief that effective policy emerges from engaging with a diversity of perspectives, and from exploring how we can work together to realise the shared vision set out by Forum Leaders in the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*.



Professor Dave Peebles
Director
Pacific Security College



Linking Pacific land to regional peace and security policy

Crucial, but inconsistent, attention

The launch of the *Pacific Guidance on Internal Planned Relocation* ([Pac-GIPR](#)) in March 2026 put the spotlight back on land governance and its deep connection to peace and security in the region.

Spearheaded by the governments of Fiji and Tuvalu, who served as co-Chairs on a regional Joint Working Group on Climate Mobility, the Pac-GIPR is a unique tool for implementing the *Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility*. Fiji's foreign secretary Dr Rajjeli Taga highlights its Pacific-centred approach in the Pac-GIPR foreword:

“This guidance is grounded in a culturally informed and decolonised approach that honours the wisdom of our peoples and the sanctity of our connection to place.”

Since 2024, [climate mobility](#) and displacement have been at the forefront of Pacific policymaking. Until recently, the matter of land access for relocation has been less prominent.

A brief regional policy history

Between 2008 and 2010, [land management](#) was treated as a regional security issue.

Land was understood to be central to peace-positive policymaking across the region. Conflict minimisation, the Pacific Urban Agenda, and the bilaterally delivered Australian-funded [Pacific Land Program](#) were all examples of the importance placed on land policy as a regional issue during this period. It was seen as a priority under the Pacific Plan until it dropped off the regional agenda.



The Pacific Plan itself lost relevance, seen as an impractically apolitical, project-heavy approach to policy – as the 2013 Morauta Review noted of the Plan, Pacific regionalism needed a recalibration. While regional land work has a permanent home in the Pacific Community’s (SPC) Land Resources Division, elements of land policy related to conflict minimisation and customary rights – those that treat land as a peace-positive regional issue – have been considered national matters.

Land has traditionally been seen as best managed at a domestic or national level, rather than as a regional public good. On average, Pacific Island countries have between 50 to 80% or more of land held in customary tenure. While a national focus is pragmatic, spaces for regional knowledge sharing and exchange are limited. This contributes to a current regional policy vacuum regarding the land-peace-security nexus.

More than 50% of Pacific land is held in some form of customary tenure^{1*}

Country	State, Crown or Public land	Freehold (includes native title)	Customary
Cook Islands	Some	Little	95%
Federated States of Micronesia	35%	<1%	65%
Fiji	4%	8%	88%
French Polynesia	–	–	–
Kiribati	50%	<5%	>45%
Marshall Islands	<1%	–	>99%
Nauru	<10%	–	>90%
New Caledonia	56%	16%	27%
Niue	1.5%	–	98.5 %
Palau	Most	Some	Some
Papua New Guinea	2.5%	0.5%	97%
Samoa	4%	17%	79 %
Solomon Islands	8%	5%	87%
Tonga	100% (all land is Crown land – there is no dual system of customary and registered ownership, although there are multiple tenure types such as allotments, leases and permits)		
Tuvalu	5%	<0.1%	95%
Vanuatu	3%	0%	97%

*Customary tenure is distinct from native freehold title in that it operates under its own traditional governance system and often may not be ‘registered’, whereas a formal registration or titling system is based on Western legal systems.

1 Compiled from the following sources: AusAID (2007), Paterson (n.d.), Samoa Bureau of Statistics (2019), Cassouret & Salenson (2024), Dubertret (2024).



A widening regional policy vacuum

When the Pacific region jointly identified priorities for land under the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 15 (Life on Land), only six of the 24 indicators were selected. These were primarily environmentally focused, with an emphasis on resource management, including the commercialisation of genetic resources. The matter of land tenure or management – which is what underpins Pacific communities' safeguards for peace, as shown in the table – is not among these priorities.² This is despite most Pacific Island countries actively contributing to the 2010 consultations on global voluntary guidelines on the governance of tenure of land for food security (FAO 2022).

In contrast, SDG 14 (Life Below Water) includes an emphasis on ocean governance and integrated ocean management, and is supported by a sophisticated Pacific regional architecture.³ While the Pacific has prioritised women's equal rights to land ownership within SDG 5 (Gender Equality), there is no broader attention to land systems and their delivery of peaceful, sustained communities and livelihoods. The full set of indicators relevant to land tenure systems across all SDGs do not sufficiently capture ways to track Pacific land systems and the significance they have for sustaining societies (see Appendix on page 28).

The *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* places the deep cultural and spiritual attachment that Pacific peoples have to the land within the context of people-centred development. Yet its planned regional collective actions do not yet recognise the role played by land governance systems, despite the attention to themes of social protection, cultural heritage and traditional knowledge. Neither land nor cultural systems are included in regional tracking for this pillar of the 2050 Strategy. The call for sustainable management of ocean and land-based ecosystems provides the most proximate attention to land governance, but regional tracking stops at agricultural use of land. The *Boe Declaration Action Plan* similarly only considers land in relation to environmental and resource security, not from a peaceful governance angle.

These examples illustrate a treatment of land governance and the cultural systems that underpin it as separate, or even marginal, to issues of peace and security. This is despite land access and management being foundational to agriculture, ecosystems-based sustainable management, and housing and shelter.

Developing regional collective actions within a Regional Peace and Security Action Plan presents an opportunity to focus on how land governance systems could contribute to regional goals for peace, prosperity and security, including through conflict sensitive policy approaches.

2 As a region, indicators similar to this theme were not selected for collective reporting. See for example: SDG indicator 1.4.2 – *Proportion of total adult population with secure tenure rights to land, with legally recognised documentation and who perceive their rights to land as secure, by sex and by type of tenure*. It is possible that the Western-legal framing of this indicator, including the implications for land registration systems modelled on Western rather than customary practice, may have been a reason for this non-selection.

3 This includes several Pacific regional ocean policies such as the *Pacific Islands Regional Ocean Policy* (2005) and the *Pacific Oceanscape Framework* (2010). There is also a dedicated regional Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner.



Learning from national policies

Though the region has turned its peace and security gaze elsewhere, several domestic policies show that land governance remains central to matters of security. Below are four facets of land that have wide-reaching consequences for safeguarding a peaceful and prosperous Blue Pacific region.

Land access underpins internal mobility

Engaging with land is at the heart of regional conversations about mobility. As the PAC-GIPR has noted, internal relocation requires access to land. For many countries, including atoll nations, adaptation entails both mobility and immobility (Rimon and Tong 2021; Boege 2022; Fitzpatrick 2022; Farbotko 2023; Moore and McNeill 2025; Westbury 2025). Whether communities relocate to towns for employment or choose to relocate to avoid climate impacts – e.g. coastal flooding, slow-onset food and water supply issues – or stay to face them down, their decision ties back to the land. Its tenure, its health, its resilience, its relationship with people is at the centre of this conversation. Sustained access to land underpins social cohesion and everyday peace between and within communities. Land is needed for relocation, it is needed for livelihoods, and it represents a sense of belonging. These factors will only get sharper as climate change intensifies and socio-political pressures mount.

The spiritual connection between people and place is a major factor in voluntary immobility (Sevudredre 2023: 9; Naupa et al. 2026). Tina Stege, the Marshall Islands' Special Envoy on Climate Change, has said, "The question in climate change adaptation is often not how to leave but how can we stay?"



As land comes under increasing pressure from climate change, the decision-making burden on customary tenure systems also grows, as documented in Malaita province in Solomon Islands, for example (Darwish 2026). When pressure outpaces management for social cohesion, the risk for conflict increases (Darwish 2026). Pacific towns become places of new opportunity and refuge; the social pressures often transferring in tandem. Existing policy challenges to manage rapid urbanisation play out alongside new, emerging policy challenges – many of which countries are already addressing. Examples include Kiribati's focus on water security and SPC's work with countries on climate-resilient crops to support food security.

A diverse terrain: state-held, customary and other land categories

The power that a central state or government has over land varies across the Pacific. Most Pacific Island countries operate with high levels of non-state, customary tenure. This produces varied legal arrangements between governments and communities. In several cases, government land is located in urban centres, while outside these areas, there may be provisions for government-held leases or land acquisition for public infrastructure. Across the region, there are distinct approaches combining government need and indigenous land systems to meet legal and local needs (see, for example, Monson and Foukona 2014). This reminds us that governments are often not the sole authority over land in a country. Any internal relocation management requires widely consulted and negotiated terms for accessing land for mobility (McDonnell 2021; PAC-GIPR 2026).

This scenario plays differently for New Caledonia and French Polynesia, the still-colonised members of the Pacific Islands Forum. Their administrations face additional considerations in how land is categorised and indigenous rights to land are recognised in relation to their colonial systems. This constrains the scope for local communities to plan for climate adaptation where mobility and traditional food systems may be impacted. In New Caledonia only 27% of its considerable land mass is currently held by its indigenous Kanak communities in native reserves, while 16% is private and 56% is the French state's (PANG 2025). In French Polynesia, the legacy of nuclear tests in parts of the islands has displaced communities and undermined ecosystem health.

The terms of land rights, tenure and the relationship with states is a key part of the potential for local-level peace and security, which in turn has a bearing on the wider scope for a peaceful region. The role of the Pacific's growing diaspora in relation to customary land decisions is also important to consider.

Sustainable peace is not assured for the Pacific without policy sensitivity to the multiplicity of land tenure systems. Formally recognising that plural land governance systems are part of a more holistic picture of Pacific regional governance can enable more mature and nuanced collective regional actions under the 2050 Strategy's Peace and Security pillar, as well as under the Boe and Ocean of Peace declarations.



‘New’ land drives new policy needs

New land that has never existed under customary or state tenure, but is ‘reclaimed’ or created, is an emergent policy frontier. While there has been much discourse about ‘shrinking islands’ and relocation to higher ground, more attention can be given to reclaimed or ‘new land’ and how tenure is structured. Opportunities to exchange lessons between countries and co-develop strategies can be found via regional platforms such as the Pacific Islands Law Officers’ Network (PILON). In Tuvalu, the Tuvalu Coastal Adaptation Program (TCAP) reclaimed eight hectares of land, protecting 800 metres of coastline, described as “space for housing, livelihoods and public facilities” (UN 2025). Tenure arrangements for the reclaimed land will need to bridge ancestral and state/public claims.

This has been a source of tension in another atoll nation, the Republic of Marshall Islands. In 2025, a reef landfill exercise for a government-owned power utility sparked a Supreme Court case between the Nitijela (parliament) and private landowners over ownership of reclaimed land. Although a 2008 Nitijela provision states that “newly created landfill [automatically] becomes the property of the adjoining landowners”, government and donor investment in these sites for public use has raised questions about what counts as public land (Johnson 2025). This is a particularly significant case to be resolved by the high courts as Marshall Islands’ National Adaptation Plan includes considerable investment in land reclamation, which needs “money that donors will not provide if newly created land becomes private property” (Johnson 2025).

Land policy is a growing part of transboundary climate security

The transboundary nature of climate change and its impact on human mobility also prompts a considered approach to land access. This is important for maintaining social cohesion and safeguarding sustainable peace for communities, especially when international borders are involved. When the Kiribati government purchased freehold land in Fiji in 2014, then-President Anote Tong noted that the land would be both an investment and source of food production, and potentially an alternative home for ‘climate refugees’. This was the Kiribati government’s acknowledgment that eroding land availability in the atoll nation required alternative, proactive and international policy measures (see also Rimon and Tong 2021).





Final thoughts

In the Pacific Islands region, it is often climate-induced hardship rather than climate-induced conflict that many are concerned about (Ide et al. 2026). Secure access to land can alleviate this hardship and provide a sense of identity and belonging to people. However, if land governance policy does not sensitively and holistically address the socio-economic pressures arising from land scarcity, the risks to peace, social cohesion and the potential for localised conflict can intensify (Darwish 2026). For the Blue Pacific, land is as important as the sea.

Pacific land governance sits on a potential regional peace and security fault line. Returning land to Pacific regional peace and security discourse is a demonstration of how the Ocean of Peace and Boe declarations and the 2050 Strategy intersect to self-determine the Pacific ways of managing movement and migration. Sustainable access to and management of land are fundamental for the environmental, human and livelihood security of Pacific peoples. In the words of Fiji's Dr Taga, the Pac-GIPR ensures that:

“Our pathways are guided by our own wisdom, not by externally imposed frameworks or rigid timelines. Relocation in our context is not simply about moving structures: it is about honouring the *Vanua*, the *Moana* and the *Lomalagi* – the land, the sea and the sky – which hold our identities and our ancestral spirits.”



However, as focus returns to land policies within Pacific peace and security, more attention is needed to resolve tensions between state and customary land governance systems. This will require strategies that embrace pluralistic land models. New models need to be explored that enable governments to invest in public infrastructure and public goods, whilst also safeguarding customary rights and heritage. The emphasis needs to be on people-centred, peaceful land governance. The risk is that alienation of customary land may once again be deployed as a panacea for climate-induced displacement solutions and exacerbate, not mitigate, conflict, if government policy is implemented without consulting customary groups (Wilson 2024).

The development of the Regional Peace and Security Action Plan presents a key opportunity to formally recognise the role of plural land governance systems and their contribution to social cohesion and everyday peace. This should be underpinned by regular regional dialogue about the land-peace nexus within the Pacific's regional security architecture and exchanging knowledge through existing platforms such as the Pacific Peace and Security Dialogue.







In conversation with...



Karen Mapusua
Director, Land Resources Division,
The Pacific Community

This paper highlights a critical gap in the discourse on security and resilience in our Blue Pacific Continent, and points toward a persistent mismatch at the core of Pacific land governance. Given that up to 80% of Pacific peoples practise some form of subsistence agriculture, and that traditional land tenure and relational/governance systems – so central to social cohesion – are inseparable, this needs to be addressed.

Donor institutions, development banks and regional policy frameworks routinely approach land as a *resource*. Something to be mobilised, leased, titled, and made productive – an extractive view. Pacific peoples, however, have long understood land as something far more elemental: not as an asset to be exploited, but the very ground of identity and belonging. But when the policy conversation is framed entirely around ‘mobilising land’ and ‘enabling investment’, and where customary tenure is discussed as a constraint to be managed rather than a framework to be built upon, it creates no space for the proposition that land relationships are also sacred responsibilities. The result is a policy blind spot with real security consequences.

Food insecurity and hunger are drivers of social unrest. When people cannot feed themselves, and cannot afford healthy imported alternatives, the crisis is real. As climate-related relocation, urbanisation, non-agricultural developments such as tourism, and population growth put pressure on arable land, these issues will grow. For example, across the region, farmers anecdotally report increasing theft of crops and livestock. Such disputes framed in legal terms as theft may reflect something more structural: the breakdown of customary mechanisms that once governed access to land across clan boundaries, for example, or issues of food insecurity and impoverishment. Treating these disputes as criminal matters alone, without addressing underlying issues, is security management without addressing the drivers.

One of the more unhelpful framings in Pacific agricultural and environmental policy has been ‘food production vs environmental protection’ as competing land use objectives. The *Growing the Pacific 2050 Strategy*, endorsed by Pacific Ministers of Agriculture and Forestry, represents a meaningful step away from this by anchoring its approach in five interwoven pathways – healthy, regenerative, secure, integrated and enabled – and explicitly promoting regenerative practices alongside afforestation and climate-resilient systems. The strategy recognises that agriculture and the environment do not have to be in competition and calls for the development of land use policy ensuring availability of land for agricultural production while contributing positively to ecosystem restoration. This reframing, so aligned with traditional food production and land management systems, provides a platform for more integrated, pluralistic land policy development.



The land-security nexus in the Pacific is not a theoretical construct. It is the daily reality of communities navigating between customary obligations and formal legal systems, between the sharing economy and cash economy, between subsistence gardens and imported processed food, between ancestral belonging and climate-forced displacement. Pacific peoples have never needed to be told that land matters, nor that oceans matter. The land-ocean nexus is the beating heart of Pacific food systems and communities. Addressing one and not the other contributes to a false dichotomy. What is needed is integrated policy architecture that takes seriously why both matter and in ways that cannot be reduced to resource economics. To quote my colleague Florence Rahiria: *“When I think of my own village communities – we are richer when we have access to both land and sea. If we don’t have access to sea, we would have to build traditional relationships with coastal people through sharing of ‘names’ or marriage, so when we need fish to diversify our diets we go to our coastal family to trade with our vegetables. That harmony and co-existence is a way of life.”*



George Hoa'au
Permanent Secretary,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and
External Trade, Solomon Islands

For my people, the 'Are'are in the southern part of Malaita Island in Solomon Islands, we refer to the land as *mako*. In our language, *hanua* means home, or place, and the canoe is *l'ora*. The connection between the three, *mako* (land), *hanua* (home) and *l'ora* (canoe), is coded, accessed and secured through our names. This is 'Are'are epistemology of being– we cannot talk about land, place or your genealogical canoe without talking about names and connection. Land is secured through your name and that connects you to your place. For example, Hoa'au means 'Sacred Bamboo Flute,' which connects me to my 'Are'are land and my Papa'apu tribe. As Dr Naupa's article points out, when up to 80% of land in the Pacific is under customary tenure, this is important foundational knowledge that underpins identity, belonging and land security.

However, the declining use of traditional names for our young people, particularly in urban areas, means they're also losing the connection to their place, and therefore potentially also the access to their land and home, which they will need in the future, if not now. This is a risk that arises through modernisation and urbanisation – it may not be something written into capital city-drafted policies, but it is the security of our traditional names that binds our connection to our land and island homes.

With respect to land and security, we need to recognise that events now cast their shadows before, and shadows now beckon to events ahead. This means that even a hint of troubling shadow – landlessness of some of our urban communities, for example – forecasts the need to prepare well now, or else shadows can grow into conflict events. Solomon Islands has unfortunately experienced this many times and we learn from this. Honiara's informal settlements have been codified and registered as an example of our government seeking to ensure secure land access, and societal peace. This policy brief provides some of the foreshadowing our regional security officials must pay attention to.

Events today also cast long shadows. Conflict is an ever-present concern, but we only need to look to our island histories to be reminded how peace has been secured through, or despite of, conflict. It is rightly said that peace is not the absence of conflict, rather the ability to mediate through conflict. This is why I am confident that our region can face the events today – whether to access land for climate relocation or restoring land health from nuclear testing or World War II legacies – provided that we continue to invest deeply in working with our indigenous land systems and conflict mediation processes to ensure sustainable peace.



Looking regionally, secure land access is often at the heart of internal conflicts within our region, which sometimes spill into requiring regional responses. The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) from 2003 to 2017 was about the question of land. New Caledonia's decolonisation efforts are about the question of land. If we look to Fiji's past, conflicts have arisen around land. In Bougainville, it has been a question of land. When the land sneezes, regional cooperation catches the flu!

As Dr Naupa's article shares, there is much to be learned from national policies regarding land, whether from Solomon Islands, Marshall Islands or elsewhere. We need more regional knowledge exchange so we can learn from each other – our people have moved islands, been adopted, looked after and journeyed around the Pacific for generations. The lessons for land security are already here, amongst our countries. They are not abstract practices; they are already happening. But our regional security efforts must catch up. We need to look to these national lessons, codify them and incorporate them into regional policies and planning.



Vehia Wheeler

Environmental and Cultural Consultant, Sustainable Oceania Solutions

Pacific peoples' spiritual, cultural and practical relationships with land is an undeniable fact. As highlighted in the policy brief, although our relationship with land is an essential part of identity and livelihood, it is minimised in relationship to romantic and economic ideas of the ocean. The ocean seen as a blue economic endeavour, or the ocean seen experiencing environmental threats such as pollution, overfishing or global warming. In actuality, in the Pacific, land is a mirror to ocean in many ways, and land is a continued relationship of the ocean. In several Polynesian cultures across Oceania, land societies are represented by the symbol of the canoe; the canoe on the ocean is the canoe on land, both mirroring each other and both emphasising a holistic continual relationship between the two spaces. Land and ocean are inextricably linked, and what happens on land impacts the ocean and vice versa. The separate management of land versus ocean management that we see today is actually a colonial imposition that does not appropriately encompass the indigenous ways of indigenous holistic management between the two spaces.

For our context in Ma'ohi Nui/French Polynesia (MNFP), because of the ways that land and ocean have been divided over time, Indigenous people have much more authority over land space than ocean space. For example, most Indigenous communities have access to their ancestral lands, or live on their ancestral lands across the 118 islands in MNFP. But starting in 1850 continuing to 1884, ocean space was transferred to territorial and French state control and management. Therefore, customary clans that previously managed ridge-to-reef or land-to-lagoon territories experienced an aggressive cut between land and ocean management, and furthermore, a cut between the local people and cultural understandings.

This has also impacted Indigenous livelihood as access to fishing rights became more complicated, fishing areas became off limits, and access to beaches became privatised. As a result, knowledges of fishing, canoe sailings and practices started to change or diminish. Additionally, while climate change impacts maintain a present and ongoing existential threat, the nuclear history in MNFP poses ongoing unresolved land and ocean health issues that we are already trying to address. The nuclear legacy, where our ocean experienced 193 nuclear explosions over a 30-year period, poses multiple issues for our society, but also insights. If there is anything to learn from this history to a current climate change context, it is that through issues of displacement, access to healthy seafood and agriculture, and health have been extremely compromised in Tahiti already.



As adaptation strategies, Indigenous knowledges were and continue to be the anchor of people adapting to a rapidly changing environment. Otherwise, expensive canned imports or frozen food imports become an increasing norm as a form of healthy food, which creates an extremely dependent and vulnerable society, one that is reliant upon imports in order to feed itself. Without secure, healthy land and ocean space for people to practise traditional management, agriculture and fishing, we create vulnerable societies.

Furthermore, the Pacific can look to the history of several communities that have experienced similar issues of displacement due to factors out of their control. Our past can, and should, inform our future. These communities such as the Banaba population on Rabi Island, the Gilbertese population in Solomon Islands, the Bikini islanders that now live on Majuro atoll, or the numerous displacements of Papua New Guinea communities due to land mining, inform ongoing challenges or insights. We can look to these many communities for guidance on how to adapt, options in relocation or not, options in maintaining land ties and culture while in relocation or not, or other various important questions and issues that are involved in the climate change situation across the Pacific.



Dr Akka Rimon Research and Engagement Fellow, Pacific Security College

Pacific security has always been narrated through the vastness of the ocean, its geostrategic corridors, its climate-exposed vulnerabilities, and its blue economy potential. This ocean-centred framing is neither accidental nor apolitical. It emerged during the post-independence period shaped by the region's growing momentum for Pacific-led regionalism and Blue Pacific identity. Yet beneath this dominant maritime gaze lies a quieter, more volatile terrain: land. Across the region, land is an integral part of life, a place of belonging, identity, and history.

This place-based dimension of security is what Naupa recentres in this policy brief. She reminds us that while oceans connect, it is land, its genealogies, custodial obligations, and governing frameworks, that determine the stability or fragility of Pacific societies. Her intervention shifts attention back to the grounded realities of land-based security, underscoring that peace and security in the Pacific are anchored as much in land-centred narratives, as in maritime ones. Naupa cautions that as regional initiatives on climate change and mobility continue to grow in scope and political significance, a persistent disconnect emerges between ocean narratives, emphasising fluidity and connection, and land-rooted realities of communities facing displacement, loss of territory and jurisdictional uncertainty. She contends this divergence represents a consequential blind spot within regional security frameworks, where symbolic framings of regionalism often outpace the material, legal and social challenges experienced on the ground.

Reframing Pacific security from ocean to land

Naupa develops this position through three interrelated arguments. First, she posits that sustainable access to, and management of, our 'sea of islands' is inseparable from the environmental, human and livelihood security of Pacific peoples. Ocean governance cannot be meaningfully discussed without equal attention to land-based foundations on which identities, economies and Pacific ways of life hinge. Second, she highlights a persistent absence of coherent land policy and governance structures at both national and regional levels. These institutional gaps, she argues, constitute a critical vulnerability requiring urgent action if regional peace and security is to be fully achieved. Addressing this requires sustained political commitment and the deliberate strengthening of pluralistic legal arrangements that recognise the interplay between customary authority and state institutions. Such an approach, she contends, would better equip Pacific Island countries to navigate emerging land disputes, jurisdictional tensions, and questions of territorial integrity.

This observation is particularly salient given the region's history of land-motivated tensions, which Naupa has highlighted. Fiji's coups have long reflected contestations over land ownership, chiefly authority and political representation. In Solomon Islands, protracted land disputes have fuelled social unrest and violence. Vanuatu provides an equally instructive case and here, Naupa's own work is especially illuminating – drawing on her analyses of ni-Vanuatu customary tenure and the modern socio-economic pressures reshaping land relations. Naupa builds on a wider body of scholarship on kastom, land governance, and climate displacement to demonstrate the central role of land in determining identity, power and security. Extending this analysis beyond Vanuatu, she offers nuanced insights from Small Island States; specifically from Kiribati, Republic of Marshall Islands and Tuvalu, where the implications of 'lost land versus newly acquired land', whether through domestic reclamation or offshore purchase as in Kiribati's 2014 acquisition of Fiji land, remain deeply contested. These debates underscore the acute pressures surrounding land in Pacific communities today.

Her third argument foregrounds the escalating threats posed by climate security and underscores the imperative for renewed regional attention to human-centred and context-specific national and regional land policies embedded within Pacific peace and security frameworks. She contends that climate-driven pressures, such as displacement, loss of territory, resource scarcity, and the destabilisation of customary governing systems, intensify existing land vulnerabilities and create new fault lines that Pacific states are not yet institutionally equipped to manage. This analysis is not only relevant to contemporary Pacific security debates, but is also timely, resonating with a growing regional recognition of land as the foundation for security. This shift is reflected in the *Pacific Guidance on Internal Planned Relocation*, which stresses that relocation must safeguard identity and belonging, cultural continuity, customary land governance, and relationships to place.

With more than 80 to 90% of land held under customary tenure in the Pacific, Naupa asserts that land must be restored to the heart of Pacific security thinking. She argues that land remains the spiritual, relational and cultural foundation of society – constituting a whole-of-life system that binds peoples, communities, cultures and ecosystems. The ability of Pacific peoples to protect, manage and share in the land's bounty – living symbiotically with nature – is not simply stewardship; it constitutes the very practice of security, as understood across generations. This worldview underscores why land insecurity, whether driven by climate change, economic shocks or poorly informed policies, could potentially undermine Pacific peace and security. Global experience reinforces this point as evident in unresolved land grievances fuelling protracted conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere. These parallels offer a sobering warning for the Pacific. As climate impacts intensify and mobility pressures rise, the region faces mounting challenges of land scarcity, contested tenure and undermined sovereignty. Naupa's call to foreground land-rooted security is therefore both timely and urgent.





Contributor profiles



Karen Mapusua
Director, Land Resources Division,
The Pacific Community

Ms Mapusua is Director of the Land Resources Division of the Pacific Community, which provides technical and scientific support to the Pacific Island countries and territories on all aspects of agriculture and forestry.

She has worked in rural development in the Pacific region for close to 26 years including co-founding the Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community (POETCom), leading in implementing the Pacific Organic Standard and Guarantee Scheme, building tools to support organic policy development, and establishing alternative forms of certification that empower farmers.

Ms Mapusua has driven the development of the Pacific Community Flagship on Food Systems for improved health, nutrition and resilience outcomes and has actively promoted economic empowerment of women through agricultural value chains.

Ms Mapusua is President of IFOAM-Organics International, the global umbrella body for the organic agriculture movement, and previously served on the Board of Directors of Fairtrade Australia and New Zealand. She is a national of Samoa and Australia.



George Hoa'au
Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and External Trade, Solomon Islands

Mr Hoa'au was appointed Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, Solomon Islands, in June 2026. He previously served as the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs. His career spans both national and sub-regional arenas, including his tenure as Deputy Director-General of the Melanesian Spearhead Group Secretariat (2020-2023) and earlier service as Assistant Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, Solomon Islands (2005-2013).

Mr Hoa'au holds a Bachelor of Arts in History and Politics, and a Postgraduate Diploma in Pacific Philosophy and Governance from the University of the South Pacific, Fiji.

His further professional training includes an Executive Diploma in Comprehensive Security from the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawai'i, a Diploma in Trade Policy and Negotiations from the WTO Graduate Institute in Geneva, Switzerland, and a Master of International Law from the Australian National University, Canberra. He is a member of the Pacific Security College Advisory Board.



Vehia Wheeler

Environmental and Cultural Consultant,
Sustainable Oceania Solutions

Ms Wheeler is a Mā'ohi researcher with more than 10 years' experience in environmental and cultural consulting with projects in Mā'ohi Nui/French Polynesia.

She recently completed a doctoral degree at the School of History, Language and Culture at the Australian National University on ancestral land management in Tahiti as a form of climate adaptation.



Dr Akka Rimon

Research and Engagement Fellow,
Pacific Security College

Dr Rimon was one of the Pacific Security College's inaugural PhD scholarship recipients, completing her doctoral research at the Australian National University's School of Regulation and Global Governance.

Her research examined labour migration as a climate adaptation strategy in Kiribati and in doing so developed a Kiribati-grounded framework called *Te Waa* (the canoe) of Mobility. This cultural-centric lens highlighted community perspectives, shedding light on the intricate dynamics driving climate-related mobility, and deepening understanding on the dual impacts of labour migration.

Before entering academia, Dr Rimon served in the Government of Kiribati, including as Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Immigration and as Country Representative for both the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank.

Dr Rimon is I-Kiribati-Banaban, with family roots on Nikunau Island in southern Kiribati, and on Rabi Island in Fiji.



Appendix

Land governance receives minimal attention within the contextualised Pacific regional SDG indicators

Pacific SDG Indicator	Target	Sub-indicators
SDG 5: Gender Equality		
5.A	Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws	5.A.2 Proportion of countries where the legal framework (including customary law) guarantees women's equal rights to land ownership and/or control
SDG 10: Reduce Inequalities		
10.7	Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies	10.7.2 Number of countries with migration policies that facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people



SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

11.4	Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage	11.4.1 Proportion of the national budget allocated to culture, including for protection, preservation (heritage) and promotion (*This is a Pacific Proxy Indicator)
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SDG 13: Climate Action

13.1	Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries	13.1.2 Number of countries that adopt and implement national disaster risk reduction strategies
13.2	Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning	13.2.1 Number of countries with nationally determined contributions (NDCs), long-term strategies, national adaptation plans, strategies as reported in adaptation communications and national communications

SDG 14: Life Below Water

14.2	By 2020, sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems to avoid significant adverse impacts, including by strengthening their resilience, and take action for their restoration in order to achieve healthy and productive oceans	14.2.1 Number of countries using ecosystem-based approaches to managing marine areas
14.5	By 2020, conserve at least 10% of coastal and marine areas, consistent with national and international law and based on best available scientific information	14.5.1 Coverage of protected areas in relation to marine areas



SDG 15: Life on Land

15.1	By 2020, ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains and drylands, are in line with obligations under international agreements	15.1.1 Land area covered by forest 15.1.2 Average proportion of Terrestrial Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) covered by protected areas
15.5	Take urgent and significant action to reduce degradation of natural habitats, halt the loss of biodiversity and, by 2020, protect and prevent extinction of threatened species	15.5.1 Red List Index
15.6	Promote fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilisation of genetic resources and promote appropriate access to such resources, as internationally agreed	15.6.1 Have adopted legislative, administrative and policy frameworks to ensure fair and equitable sharing of benefits
15.7	Take urgent action to end poaching and trafficking of protected species of flora and fauna and address both the demand and supply of illegal wildlife products	15.7.1 Proportion of traded wildlife that was poached or illicitly trafficked
15.8	By 2020, introduce measures to prevent the introduction and significantly reduce the impact of invasive alien species on land and water ecosystems and control or eradicate the priority species	15.8.1 Proportion of countries adopting relevant national legislation and adequately resourcing the prevention or control of invasive alien species

Source: Pacific Data Hub/The Pacific Community





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Pacific Security College
JG Crawford Building 132A
1 Lennox Crossing
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 2600

Email: psc@anu.edu.au

Website: pacificsecurity.net

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