

Unsustainable village development: reflections on changes at Lepā

*Tu'u'u leti Taule'alo**

For wherever you go, I will go; And wherever you live, I will live. Your people shall be my people; And your God, my God. Where you die, I will die (Ruth 1: 16-17)

Introduction

The village of Lepā is located along the south eastern coast of Upolu in the Atua district (see Figure 1). It is not clear why it has always been called Lepa because the village has three sub-villages - Lealatele to the east, Lepā in the middle and Vaigalu to the west. In fact the whole electoral district comprising the adjoining villages of Saleapaga to the east and Aufaga to the west is also called Lepā. Perhaps it may be the significance of the historical *le pā*¹ (stone wall) that was built to separate the two parts of Aleipata and ended at where Lepā is today. Or may be it is due to the influence of the two paramount orators who reside in the Lepā sub-village that the whole area has been simply Lepā, no other names mattered. What ever the reason is, the sub-village, village and district are all Lepā.

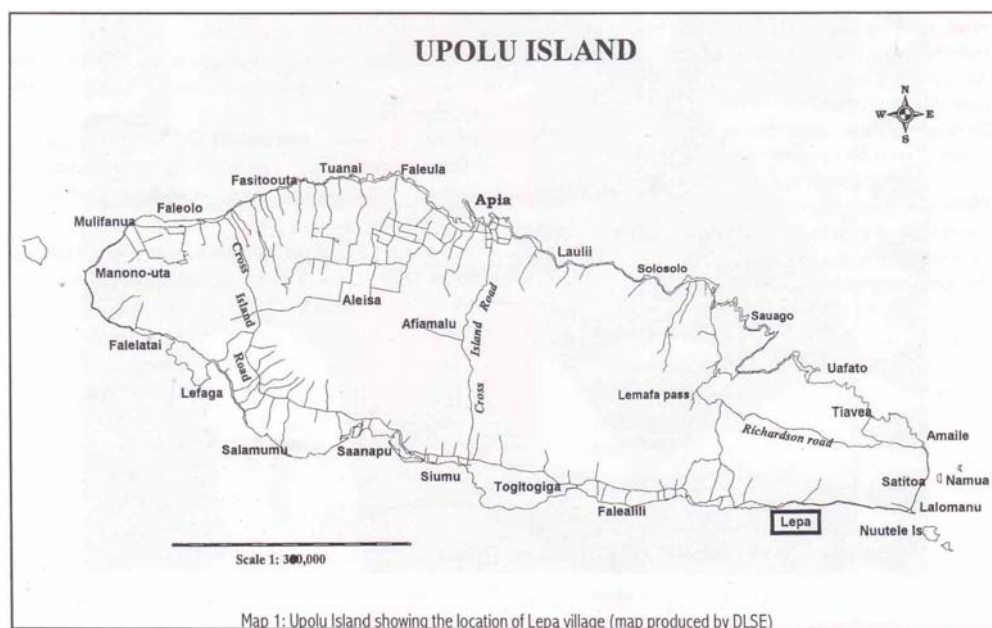


Figure 1: Location of Lepā village

I was born at Lepā village nearly fifty years ago, lived and grew up there until I was eighteen when I left to study in New Zealand. In fact my family has had a long connection with Lepa going back to my grandfather who worked there as a *faiife'au* (church minister). My father was also a *faiife'au* at Lepa; both my father and grandfather are buried there. As I go back now to visit, I am both curious and saddened by the changes that have taken place - curious at the stark contrasts between the old and new, and saddened by the extent of environmental decline

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that has occurred. And with so many people leaving the village I just wonder how much of the biblical ‘where you die I will die’ is still true.

This paper reflects on my journey back in time through progress in Lepā over the last 40 years. It explores the changes that have taken place and comments on the success or otherwise of past village development efforts. It also examines the impact of these practices on the environment and suggests possible options for sustainable community development.

40 years of change

At first glance there are some obvious signs of progress in the changes that have taken place. The most striking is the marked improvement in infrastructure. It was not until the late fifties that eastern Upolu was connected to Apia by road, no more than a dirt track then. Even by the mid-seventies, the road was still in fairly bad condition that it used to take three to four hours for the bus to travel the 60 kilometres from Apia to Lepa. With the new sealed road the trip now only takes about an hour. A rock wall is built all along the road supposedly to protect it from the sea. But I wonder if it is going to be of any real value when the cyclones come. Wouldn't it be wiser to shift the whole road further inland, away from the sea? This is a difficult decision as the village and houses are located along the coast. But then the main road has never been a historical part of the village and relocating it away from the village may guarantee its security as well as improve safety from faster traffic on the sealed pavement.

A permanent electricity supply is in place, connected to the national grid. In the old days, people used kerosene or spirit lanterns for lighting. And for a little while during the early 1970s the village operated electricity generator but supply was restricted to a few hours at night. Radio broadcast used to be the only way of sending messages nationally unless a trip was made specially for that purpose, and it often took days. Now there is increased mobility with better road transport. Telephone and television services are also now available although access is still limited through poor maintenance and lack of affordability. Improvement in communication, nevertheless, appears to be the most genuine progress made.

There is a health centre now. Compared to the open *fale* (traditional Samoan house) that used to serve as the women's committee (centre) health clinic, this one is a substantial European-styled structure with provisions for out patient and ward facilities. It is easily the main building in the whole of Vaigalu sub-village, However there are no medical staff or supplies and no patients. The doctor and nurses are still based in the district hospital at Lalomanu village, eight kilometres to the east. So health access is still difficult, particularly for emergencies.

The village appearance has also changed. It looks so much smaller than I can remember. Perhaps it is because most of the land on the seaside of the road has disappeared. The size of the cricket ground at Lepa sub-village, for instance, has shrunk so much that it would not be so difficult to hit six (or is it two) as the sea boundary is now very small indeed. There used to be quite a number of buildings along the beach with whole coconut groves. The effects of coastal erosion has been a nightmare to the people, seeing their lands and traditional sites of residence slowly being washed away. However it is by no means a new problem - I remember how the village tried to build their own sea walls to protect the main houses of the chiefs in the middle of the village. But with limited engineering or construction skills amongst the villagers it was all a waste of effort and money. At the same time, I am not sure if the present coastal protection, designed to arrest further damage and secure the expensive road facilities, will also work. The rocks are bedded on sand and are likely to be washed out

by the big waves, exposing the road. Some of the rocks are already scattered on the beach further jeopardising one of the key village assets, its waterfront.

While coastal erosion has been partly due to natural hazards, the main cause has been the impact of village settlement with poor coastal management and lack of understanding of wave-patterns and erosion control. These are complex technical issues requiring special skills to comprehend. However their appreciation is crucial to the development of sustainable management strategies and solutions. Other direct consequences of coastal erosion include the irrecoverable changes to the coastal dynamics and the modification of inshore marine systems. The sea used to be a natural source of food. I remember when the tide was really low at night, people were out on the reef with lights and just literally filled their sacks with green snails and stranded fishes. However the effects of coastal degradation and years of over-exploitation and destructive practices have virtually destroyed the lagoon and reef environment that was once the village's main source of protein.

Lepā used to be blessed with the abundance of water. The main river is at Vaigalu, which means 'wave of water', giving an idea of what this river used to be. It was big and multipurpose, used by everyone for bathing, washing and by the women for treating mulberry and pandanus. There were long pools where we used to compete underwater to see who could swim the furthest in one breath. It also had a series of waterfall, the closest to the village was the *Vai o le i'a* (pool of the big fish). I remember as a young boy being so scared to go near this pool for fear of the big fish that was supposed to live there. But it now appears that it was just another one of those adult stories to ensure that children kept away from the deep water for their own safety.

The river was also a source of food though not as popular as the sea. There were prawns, eels and whitebait in season. The latter used to be so plentiful that the river was covered with it. All we did to catch it was to place a sack in the riverbed and minutes later it would be full of whitebait. I did not know its value at the time until I got to New Zealand and found that I could not afford it anymore,

Today the Vaigalu River is quite small with considerably less water. The part near the road is polluted, shallow and does not seem to have enough flow to flush itself to the sea. This has been the culmination of years of neglect and unplanned forest clearance of the river catchment area. There is no control over village landuse generally or development within the water catchment areas in particular. Families use their lands in any way they choose with little regard for the public interest or the wider community welfare. So instead of the water being retained in the upland regions during the rains, it is washed out to sea causing severe floods and soil erosion.

The water falls at the western end of Vaigalu are also a sorry sight. There were a number of different falls, separate ones for drinking and washing clothes and the big one at the end for showers, This part of the village was known as the *sinasina* (waterfalls) and it was the ritual after a swim in the sea to rinse out under the big fall. It was the most beautiful part of the village, always full of children and adults in the evenings, playing and swimming. There was an old man living nearby who, with a stick, used to chase the kids away from 'his' beach. His name was Selu and we used to tease him back by singing:

Oi Selu e, poo fea o iai?

Su'e ile sinasina poo ta'ele ai

Su'e i le matāfaga poo 'ai tae ai

But like the river, there is reduced flow and some of the falls have dried up. Years of unsustainable agricultural development and uncontrolled felling of trees have taken their toll. And with the plantations all but abandoned, weeds have prospered making it extremely difficult for the forest to regenerate. Severe coastal erosion and environmental neglect has turned what was once a valuable community asset into a disaster area. Whatever happened to that long rock outcrop that used to stick out to the lagoon where the children used to jump off? Sadly it is mostly buried in the sand.

Overall the standard of housing is poor. There is a striking contrast between the few newly built homes near the church, for instance, and the run-down conditions of most buildings. Homes are badly constructed, poorly maintained and generally unkempt, accentuated by the fact that most houses now have iron roofs. Even temporary structures like the cookhouses and latrines are quite shabby and roughly made. The structural ruins of some buildings destroyed by cyclones in the early 1990s are still standing. An air of housing decay and neglect permeates through the whole village. Gone are the beautiful traditional guesthouses with the thatched roof that most families used to own.

The village gardens used to be a major feature of Lepā, with each family tendering their own flower and decorative plants around their homes. In fact, the whole village was an extended garden with the whites of the frangipani and the reds of the hibiscus blended against the greens of the breadfruits and all the other trees. It was one of the children's main daily chores to pick up the dead leaves falling off the trees. Somehow the homes and the gardens complemented one another and provided a 'sense of place'² throughout the whole community, where people seemed committed to their village and wanted to show how proud of it they were. Now there is little colour in the village. Weeds have taken over where there once were well kept grounds and family surroundings. It appears that the loss in harmony of home and garden is symbolic of a general breakdown in family spirit and community cohesiveness.

But perhaps the most significant change is the decline in population. From 1981 to 1998, there has been a drop of 30% in the total number of people, with just over 300 now actually living in Lepa. This is a lot of people leaving, no wonder my reaction each time I visit is - where is everyone? Many of them have gone overseas. While these people have supported their families through remittances they sent back home, experience of Samoan migrants in New Zealand had shown that family connections become less important after one generation. More and more, however, have settled in Apia, driven away by the lack of opportunities and in search of a better future. But a growing number have rebelled against the village's authority and central control as well as church obligations, preferring more individual freedom and choosing to support their families from a distance.

At the same time there are increasing pressures on people to conform to outdated rules, disguised as *faaSamoa* (Samoan way) or valued traditions. This is indeed a national trend, how often do we hear village proclamations banning long hair, mini skirts, drinking, dancing and absence from church on Sundays - all aimed at young people? Where are the young people's rights to free expression as guaranteed under our Constitution? It is a desperate move by those in authority who, instead of dealing with the special needs of young people, have resorted to even more strong-arm and authoritative tactics to deal with such sensitive social reality. With the country's population structure favouring the old and very young, how can we place such unnecessary restrictions over our most able and economically active?

Inter-family disputes and rivalries over titles and lands seem to have fuelled the breakdown in family relationships and social harmony. People feel aggrieved and alienated, aggravating the exodus from the village. Various factions, for instance, have for years been fighting for control of the two vacant paramount orator titles. Historically the holders of these titles commanded exceptional respect in the village district, and the subsequent vacancies have created a vacuum in community leadership. So when people leave, the traditional systems that have evolved over many generations start to disintegrate. And with the collapse of social institutions, the security of the *aiga* (extended family) is threatened, the foundation of family solidarity undermined and the promise of ‘wherever you live, I will live’ vanished.

Apart from scattered crops close to the village, there is no evidence of any progress in agriculture. Land that used to be planted with crops (coconuts, cocoa, bananas, taro) is now mostly overgrown and covered with weeds. Plantations were developed from behind the village homes, reaching deep inland. We used to walk long distances to get to our taro patches because the free-range domestic pigs had a special appetite for taro. However, the outbreak of blight in the early 1990s had wiped out the taro crops. There are now only a few banana plantations and considerably less breadfruit trees around the village. Consequently many families buy their basic foodstuffs from the Apia produce market or live on rice. This is what is referred to in the literature as ‘subsistence malaise’³ involving, as discussed above, environmental deterioration, increased vulnerability to biological and natural disasters and the breakdown in social institutions.

The Lepā people used to be self-sufficient in most agricultural products. In fact they exported bananas, copra, taro and to a lesser extent, cocoa. I remember the rather clever system for banana exports - your own cases were delivered to your home, stamped with your name and reference number; then trucks took them away when packed and the money was paid directly to you soon after. It was personalised service with no middlemen. And it was all developed by families themselves in the absence of any official agricultural credit. The prices were good and the local currency worth considerably more - one American dollar to seventy Samoan cents compared to one to three dollars today. But the globalisation of commodity markets spelled the end for small subsistence farmers as they are locked into a ‘poverty ratchet’⁴ - stuck in an international economy that they have no control over and with terms of trade continually moving against them.

In other development areas there is nothing that can represent economic progress. While there used to be three active shops including a trading cooperative, now there is one, opened only recently. There were a few locally owned vehicles including the village bus. Today there is none except for the pastor’s car. Most families used to own traditional fishing canoes compared to none today. The village primary school is decryped and run down, with outstanding repairs from the 1991 cyclone still to be completed. There are few if any educational resources, children have no desks or chairs but sit on floor mats. Students who can afford to attend school in town, reinforcing the urban population drift. It is ‘an infinite pause’⁵ environmental, social and economic constrains do not permit the achievement of a modern society.

Prospects for the future

People of Lepa face an uncertain future. ‘Too many constraints condition their strategies for processing information and making practical survival choices to satisfy their perceived needs’⁶. What can they do? How can they reverse the present trend in environmental decline? What are their options for sustainable development?

To engage in ‘sustainable development’⁷ the village confronts numerous obstacles, largely because they are dealing with new concepts that are, for the untrained, extremely difficult to understand. Sustainable development incorporates: the balance between environment and development; present and future needs; process of change; resource management; technological development and institutional change. Other factors covered by sustainable development include ‘quality of life, the health of the population, educational standards and general social well being’⁸. It also involves the integration of social, economic and environmental factors. To be effective, sustainable development must operate in a management planning framework with clearly defined objectives and strategies to achieve them.

Planning is an intensely ‘political process’⁹ that requires the support of the ultimate decision makers or it is ignored. It also demands the presence and efficient operation of ‘due process’¹⁰ or the means by which plans are executed. ‘Further, the articulation of problems in terms of planning needs is a sophisticated response demanding a high level of education and experience of other places’¹¹. At the same time ‘planning is not a traditional activity’¹² and any intervention say on land use, for instance, will bring it into direct conflict with village authority or family interest.

For the people of Lepā, the task of regaining environment control is daunting if not impossible. Everything is against them - social, economic and environmental. However they really have no choice but begin the rehabilitation process, to continue in the same path will lead to the total collapse of village systems and social processes. A new development strategy can be two-phased: first the village people must accept the need for change and respond accordingly; and second they must build their capacity aimed at the planning and implementation of appropriate programmes to meet their needs. But underlying all this is the need for strong leadership¹³, something that seems to be working well in the adjoining villages of Saleapaga and Aufaga. Key factors affecting village ‘management capabilities’¹⁴ include:

- Absence of village planning models that work
- Lack of community awareness of sustainable development practice;
- Poor understanding of the needs of the village population (e.g. attitudes, perceptions and opinions on key issues, demand and supply for services);
- Lack of baseline planning data (e.g. population characteristics, land-use, economic activities, resource utilisation);
- Lack of democracy in village consultation and decision making;
- Lack of transparency and accountability in village affairs;
- Lack of skilled people to make village plans and develop management strategies;
- Lack of resources to support village projects;
- Absence of village leadership and political commitment; and
- Lack of development policy direction from the national government.

Finally I ask myself what the chances are that my village can overcome its current problems. It is extremely difficult to predict what may happen because it is largely dependent on the villagers’ willingness to help themselves. There are numerous personal, social and institutional questions that must be resolved first. Issues such as: land security; leadership; community spirit, population decline; gender and the role of the church can only be determined by the relevant village groups - the chiefs and orators, women, untitled men, young people and the church. I am confident, however, that with quality leadership and

genuine commitment by the whole community, in partnership with national and international stakeholders, the people of Lepā can once again achieve sustainability despite the overwhelming odds against them.



Beach at Sinasina with erosion damage and scattered rocks



Main waterfall at the Sinasina, reduced flow with weed proliferation

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