

Samoa's development paradox: diversification away from the agriculture-based economy

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Introduction

This paper highlights several key issues that are fundamental to any review of the sustainable development of Samoa's natural resources. In this context, the following distinctions need to be made.

Natural Resources and National Resources are synonymous. Both refer to actual and potential forms of wealth supplied by nature to Samoa, such as land, plants, forests, animals, sea and marine life, water, people, and energy. (Websters New World Dictionary, 1998:903). These are the materials or conditions occurring in nature (in Samoa) capable of being exploited. (Oxford Dictionary, 1998).

Collectively, these Natural/ National Resources give rise to the country's National Wealth, the value, the possession, and the ownership of which constitutes Samoa's national assets. The focus of this Forum is "the sustainable development of these same natural resources," making it necessary to pose a couple of important questions.

- (1) What does the sustainable development of Samoa's natural resources mean in action based terms?
- (2) How has Samoa fared in the development of its natural resources to date?

The agriculture-based economy

Samoa's agriculture-based economy was first described in the early seventies by development experts as the "coconut-based economy", because coconuts, cocoa and bananas, made up over 90% of all exports, provided the largest source of employment, and the principal foreign exchange earner for the country. However, throughout the seventies, the state of this coconut-based economy was on the decline, reaching a critical state in the early eighties. This forced the Government of the day (1983), to institute stringent measures in a stabilization programme.

By 1986, the results of this programme was evident in the curtailment of inflation (to some 2.7%); the national budget was in surplus; the arrears of government debt was paid off and debt servicing was substantially reduced; international reserves rose by more than 69%, and a growth rate of some 2.0% was achieved. But the key question still remained to be answered, **thus the Paradox:**

"Why has national development faltered so far below the desired expectations? Despite the country's favorable endowment of natural resources, its people and its lands, the generous amounts of aid monies as well as the huge remittances it received from Samoans living abroad, why has it been so difficult to achieve national development targets?"

Experts and policy engineers concluded that it was due to the limited potential and the inherent instability of the "agriculture/ coconut-based" economy. It was limited because

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production and productivity, or wealth creation, cannot be assumed to increase continually in money earning terms. But contrary to this view, it must be reiterated that this coconut-based economy was none other than the country's agriculture- village based subsistence economy, which at the time possessed very clearly defined characteristics, most of which are still very relevant today:

- (a) It controls up to 80% of all the country's natural resources
- (b) It accounts for over 50% of the country's GDP.
- (c) It receives and controls 80% and more of all the money remittances that come into the country. This amounts to upwards of SAT\$100 million tala annually. It is the number one revenue earner for the government budget.
- (d) Because it controls over 70% of all agricultural production, inclusive of crops, forestry, Livestock, fisheries, in the country, it therefore controls food production for all internal and home needs for over two thirds of all Samoans. This is the sector that provides the basic food requirements of this country. In effect, this coconut-based economy controls and guarantees the nation's food security, and its very survival.
- (e) Since it constitutes 70% and more of the country's population, this same sector has the greatest political influence.

The choice of development alternatives

It is against this background, with the overwhelming dominance of this so-called coconut based economy, that makes the search for sustained economic growth and stability so great a challenge. The policy engineers have opted for "Diversification and increased private sector participation, and corporatization with greater foreign investment." Diversification is clearly interpreted here as "moving away from agriculture into such things as tourism, light industry and manufacturing, to environment resource management and regulatory control of the use of the country's natural resources."

In some quarters, diversification is interpreted as crop diversification – shifting away from the traditional crops of coconut, cocoa, taro and bananas, to new crops (Misa 1995:2) or that diversification is simply to change traditional village producers from low production units to high productivity, profit – oriented commercial producers (Leonard & Fong 1995: 6-10)

But whatever the interpretation, diversification is still confronted with the same constraints, whose root cause emanates from the same islandness of Samoa – its small size, small population, isolation and long travel distance from available markets, both for manufacturing products and the source of the tourists.

By the early nineties, the Samoan government instituted a reform programme as the logical follow up to the stabilization programmes of the mid eighties. As summed up by Kolone Vaai: "Samoa became the exception among the Pacific island states: Positive growth has been posted when others have experienced negative results."

Driving the optimistic outlook, rare in the South Pacific, has been a reform policy that has embraced getting the private sector underway by removing constraints to its development. Reforms have been wide ranging, covering the financial sector, privatization and corporatisation, trade reform, broadening the tax base, government budgetary process and public sector institutional reform (Vaai 2000:1).

Samoa moved from the nineties into the new millennium, with the choice and selection of development alternatives continuing to be challenged by the question. "How do you convert

this economic stability into sustained economic growth with continued stability?“ Kolone Vaai duly records this concern, noting that from the peak of 9.0% growth during 1995, there has been continuing decline to 1.1% during 1998; while in external trade and BOP, total exports amounted to a mere SAT\$ 50.9 million tala for 1998, compared to total imports of SAT\$ 285.7 million tala for the same year. This worsening in the trade deficit is attributed largely to the continuing poor production levels from the agriculture sector (Vaai 2000:3).

In spite of the significant improvement in the national economy, it is obvious that reforms alone cannot guarantee continued growth and stability. While it is necessary to continue the forward progress of the reform programme, this progress must be accompanied with significant improvements in agricultural production. Sandy Cuthbertson of the Australian National Center for Development Studies (2000: 13) warns that “ having come this far, Samoa must now tackle the difficult problems that remain outstanding on the home front – the most significant being agriculture.”

The logical conclusion is clear, diversification alone is not the solution. The mere change away from agriculture to other potential growth areas does not negate the fact that all that Samoa has to effect its development are its natural resources. Therefore, in the context of this perception, the more correct challenge facing the reform policies is thus phrased: **You cannot achieve sustained economic growth and continued stability without acknowledging that the coconut – based economy is the priority national resource, the national asset in which the nations food security and survival rests.** As one wise Samoan matai said: “ **Aua e te u ina le aao e tausia le fofoga taumafa ole atunu’u . Don’t bite the hand that feeds the mouth of the nation.**”

National wealth creation

This writer puts forth the thesis the “ the sustainable development of Samoa’s natural resources must first and foremost, be predicted on the principles of **productivity increase and the creation of national wealth (tamaoiga ole atunu’u)**. That sustainability, whether fiat or ethic, is not just the sustainable maintenance and or management of the country’s natural resources by regulation; nor the perceived improved environmental controls, some of which will impose limits on growth and productivity (Jones 2000:169). This perception of development as wealth creation from productive work is the prevailing view of traditional Samoan society, as one village elder expressed below: E iai le toeaina faifeau o lo matou nu’u. O so’o se taimi lava ma te o ai i lotu a le Ekalesia, fai mai le toeaina, "Fui aisea le mea e le faatele ai a tatou tupe?" Ou fai atu "o le a le uiga o lau tala?" Fai mai a ia, "Se aumai sa tatou masini tupe fa’atele ; aumai ni mea e fai ai tupe" Ona ou fai atu lea iai. "E sa’o a oe. Ae ete iloa o au na ou aoga i mea tau tupe. Sa ou aoga i sina taimi puupuu lava. O le talaaga ole tupe, o se tagata e tele lona galue, e tele foi ana tupe. O so’o se tagata e galue le eleele ma fai ana mea, e tele ana tupe."

Ua ou fai atua leni faamatalaga aua ua tele lava tupe a tatou, a ua le mafia ona faatino. A ou vaai nei ile popo ua fau faapea, ua matua tele lava, ua le iloa se mea e ave iai, e mafia ona ou aumai e tuu ile faletupe, aua o le la ua laulau ai lava, ma uma ai lava lena vaega a tupe. E faapena i koko ma isi vaega. E faapena i ava o la e iai, o au tupe ua le mafia.

O le fesili, o ai na te fa’aliliuina tupe nei i ni tupe? Aua e le mafai ona aumai popo, ona fau lea i talaane o fale o tagata ma tuu ai, e le mafai. A la’u la’u le tumu leni mea, ona ola ai lea o popo, ae na ala ona fai e le papalagi le tupe e faaitiiti ai, ma faaoga ai le poto o tama fanau

ale atunuu, ma le poto o e faia le Malo ina ia mafia ona fa'aitiitia ai le mea a ave i ai lau tupe e teu i le faletupe.

According to this Samoan matai, the goal of developing the land is to obtain increase in the enterprise being undertaken. Then to exchange the product of that enterprise for money which you then put into the bank. Therefore, contrary to established economic belief that the need is to change Samoan society from the traditional into the more dynamic monetary economic, it is argued that Samoans have always viewed development and progress as the acquisition of material goods. That the ultimate goal in the development of his villages' natural resources is exactly the conclusion reached by professor Crocombe when he stated, ' Development (for Pacific countries) is to achieve the greater good, which is access to material goods, welfare, and the amenities of modern life, without the sacrifice of traditional values and institutions that provide material security' (Crocombe, 2000: 38).

Surely this is the proven method for the sustainable development of the country's natural resources.

There is every indication that the Samoa of today is a money – based traditional society, with money, cash income, wages, savings, remittances (take – home pay), investment, credit, and profit are now all very much an integral part of the Samoan ethos. Maybe the coconut – based economy was always money based, and material possessions were the items of exchange, the mode of buying, selling, paying, and rewarding relationships. In this assessment of money, markets, moralities and mentalities in traditional societies, Marshall Sahlins concluded that in certain conditions, money could increase kinship bonds, thereby “develop “ the so – called traditional societies in the sense of obtaining more and better of what they consider to be the good things (Sahlins, 2000:52).

Clearly, Samoan society is well versed and integrated into the money economy, ready to develop their natural resources, but provided their work will be fairly rewarded. Samoans will invest their own moneys (including remittances) when they are certain there is a good return on their investment. When the village matai therefore says, “Afai e 200,000 a'u popo, ona ave lea na o sina tamai tupe laititi, po ua maua sina 10,000 tala e teu ile fale tupe”, he knows very clearly what the returns on that i.e. 200,000 coconuts makes 40 tonnes of copra, which at \$800 tala per tonne, returns \$32,000 tala. But he calculates to get \$10,000, which is a price of \$250 tala per tonne of copra. Even at that much lower price, \$10,000 tala is still a very large amount of money to put into the bank.” This is the essence of production and wealth creation from our natural resources. But to attain this goal, the political will to develop must accept that the sustainable development of our natural resources is a national necessity, approached and actioned with the same determination and commitment as today manifested in the economic reforms now in operation.

To that end, it is accepted that diversification into other economic activities should be a part of overall policy, but it must not be at the neglect of agriculture, since some policies are difficult to achieve in practical terms. For instance: (1) Economic growth through diversification and greater foreign investment is not compatible with the goal of increased local food production; (2) with the reduction in tariffs imported foods are much cheaper and now available in greater abundance, thereby giving a clear message – the import business is more profitable, while local production is not; and (3) the proposition that traditional producers (i.e. primarily subsistence production) must be changed to commercial producers (i.e. production mainly for exports) in order to effect greater production levels, is not correct.

Production levels are increased markedly when the rewards to the producer are available – in other words, guaranteed market outlets and fair commodity prices. And this condition does not, nor have any need to differentiate between traditional and commercial producers, an argument now widely mooted to justify more alienation of Samoan customary owned lands.

One of the stated intentions of the diversification policy is to create more employment opportunities within Samoa, so that there are more jobs for the unemployed and the underemployed, as well, as deterring the large migration of Samoans abroad. Unfortunately, the issue is not just one of the job creation. After more than a century of western influence, all Samoans today, whether rural, urban, subsistent or commercial, see their horizons for living as including the wider environments of New Zealand, and the United States. Migration has its roots very much in the Samoans perception of the good life and is money/ wealth motivated – it is money oriented. In their desire to maximize real cash incomes, especially when the earnings from the family lands are pitiful, Samoans are simply behaving rationally and sensibly in seeking more profitable occupations elsewhere, in Apia and overseas.

The earned incomes are take home pay, just as wages earners anywhere in the world take their wages home. So when sons, daughters, families, send their wages to Samoa, it is fallacy to call these remittances and classify them as a ‘constraint to production,’ as so believed by development economists. What is necessary is to acknowledge that Samoan society, with the failure of the agriculture sector to provide decent monetary prices and earnings, that that same society did take the initiative themselves and seek for and make better incomes elsewhere. The natural resources held by these very Samoans could never then, now and tomorrow, ever return them the one hundred million tala they annually produce in the form of remittances for this country. The challenge then becomes very obvious, 'Is there a way whereby Samoans can be attracted to apply that same ingenuity and entrepreneurship to the development of their own natural resources here at home?'

Effective Development, the National Asset Model.

In 1996, Government released the new policy direction titled "A new Partnership" which designated the private sector to be the principal partner and the engine for the country's economic growth. (Government of Samoa: 1996). This was followed in 1998 with the second directive “ Strengthening the Partnership”, again reinforcing the principle that sustained growth was dependent on a healthy and competitive private sector. The other strategic areas identified are agriculture, education, health, and public sector reform. (Government of Samoa: 1998).

But it is extremely important to reiterate that the agriculture sector is by far the biggest private sector of all. Its dominance is confirmed by its control of some 80% of the country's natural resources: over 50% of GDP; contributes some \$100 million tala annually by way of remittances; engages some 80% of the population; and produces over 70% of all agricultural food production. There is no doubt this is Samoa's biggest and most important private business, ranking even ahead of our national airline business. **It is our principal national asset.** It assures national food security. Rightfully, by whatever measure so determined, it is entitled to national development priority. No doubt, this is the very basis for the latest policy initiative “Partnerships for Prosperous Society,” the SES for 2000 to 2002, to restate emphatically that ‘Agriculture and Fisheries’ are backbone of the village (national) economy. (Government of Samoa: 2000).

Samoans own and control the greatest portion (some 80%) of all natural/national resources in the country. As owners of these resources, Samoans want to develop them to obtain productivity increases for food and commercial reasons- for cash income and for socio-cultural needs. The extent and variations to which these natural resources can be exploited are already known collectively as the agricultural sector, inclusive of crops, livestock, forestry, and fisheries. The technologies and methods for cultivation, rising, management, the harvest, processing and the marketing of the products of these resources, are known to, available to, accessible to all Samoans who own them.

But what remains as the critical factor that will make Samoans make effective use of these resources? The answer - "It is increased productivity, with assured market outlets wherein to sell/give/exchange their products for real value, real money, fair prices, and more wealth. And this is the exact area where planners, the policy engineers, the experts, the decision makers, the politicians, and all, of opinion, and us who have a view or want to express come through with differing perceptions, theories, assumptions, and conclusions. Thus we have the range-cash crop development and diversification; traditional food production; more intensified fishing; encourage greater production in agriculture; enhancing of farmers incomes, etc. But after three decades of development activity, the one area of agreement is to acknowledge the failure and stagnation of the agriculture sector. This admission of our own inadequate perceptions and confusions is well described by Philip Muller:

I was closely associated with efforts to improve the general well – being of our villages, by a variety of projects and programmes in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. There were ever present efforts to rehabilitate the copra, cocoa, and banana industries, which, for whatever reason, were directed towards harnessing the efforts of village smallholders. Very soon, a mentality of providing incentives arose, where support was provided in bush clearing, planting, weeding, fertilizing, spraying, and whatever else was needed. Access roads, transport and centralized produce marketing soon followed. In fact, it almost seemed that the incentives were all set in place to prevent any sort of entrepreneurship from developing. Our planning had forgotten why villagers expended effort and if it was for money, what that money was going to be used for?

Another early lesson I have learnt was that we, the educated privileged were almost systematically desensitized to the needs of our people. Planners often neglected the needs of stakeholders and at their own peril.

We often enunciated noble goals such as job creation, foreign exchange earnings, improved balance of payments, and even more equitable distribution or redistribution of wealth and involvement in development. We should have been attempting to understand motivating factors such as family dignity, the pressure of politics, the community, the church, Education, and events such as Children's Sunday, and other matters of relevance to the individual and extended family. Everything was coming from a faceless government that was progressively becoming distressed by its lack of success, and being carried out by officials who were hard pressed and under – resourced. Yet all that people wanted to know was, what to produce, how to produce more, and how to get the best from the markets. (Muller, 2000).

In not as many words, our traditional matai producer/commercial farmer, Mimio, presented the very same message in the national Parliament when he stated: "The story of money is the picture of power. Every person with lots of knowledge has lots of money. Every person who

works hard has lots of money. Every person who cultivates the land and develops many things will make lots of money. I am telling you this because we have lots of money. But we are not generating it, when I see coconuts piled up everywhere, and we have nowhere to take them to turn them into money to put in the bank. Then they go to waste and we lose all that money. It is the same with cocoa, likewise the kava in the fields. It is your money you are not able to receive. The question is - Who will change this money to be into real money? Because the people cannot bring the coconuts and pile them by their houses, and keep them there. That's not done. Because if you fill up the space, the coconuts will start to grow And the reason why the palagi made the money is to make things smaller, so the sons of the country will use their brains, together with the knowledge of these persons running the government. To make the coconuts into money you save in the bank."

The current policy directive, the national Statement for Economic Strategy (SES), 2000-2001 titled "Partnerships for a Prosperous society, " has confirmed that the country's natural resources are its principal assets. It has accepted that the sustainable development of these national assets, in particular those collectively termed the agricultural sector, is a national necessity. Agriculture is a national asset the biggest private sector economic activity, a critical component in the engine of economic growth, desperate for intensive investment from its local owners and stakeholders. **A national asset has Government as its ultimate stakeholder because of the prime national interest of national survival.**

It is just inconceivable to think that Samoa will survive solely on food importation, no matter how economically viable such a policy might become. At the same time, the prime requisite for continued economic growth and stability is for increased exports – and this can only come the agriculture sector. In fact it is true to state that for Samoa to survive and benefit from joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO) there needs to be significant increase in agricultural production for export.

It is the contention here in this presentation that the current existing "stagnant" state of the agriculture sector is rapidly going from a national dilemma to becoming a national disaster. Its continuing downward decline will soon reach a point of no return, when its owners * – and that's 70% of the population who hold 80% of all natural resources – will have evolved into mere landlords with rights to vast areas, wherein the only sustainable development is the return to bush and natural growth. Over the past two decades some 40,000 plus acres of the most productive lands, producing well over one third of all copra, two thirds of all cocoa and coffee exports, have been taken out of production, because its owners (WSTEC and SLC) decided agriculture was not financially viable. It was more profitable to go into the land trade business. Their behavior thus, is no – more – no – less rational and money sensible than the village producer. In this same vein, we will be hard pressed to find one acre of Government land today, from amongst the total 18% of all the country's land resources held by Government that is producing for exports.

Conclusion

The sustainable development of Samoa's natural resources is a fine ideal. But first and foremost for national survival, production for food security and export must take precedence. Therefore the goal of productivity increase must become the determinant principle in all development strategy for the country's agricultural resources. In the national interest, the time is at hand when the ultimate responsibility and take the required actions. The situation with agriculture is not very different from the recent state of the national airline, wherein Government, as the ultimate stakeholder, intervened to ensure the continued viability,

survival and sustainability of Polynesian Airline, in the nations interest. The price tag this year alone is over 30million tala, just to keep the airline flying until international economic conditions improve to where it will pay its own way. In this instance Samoa is not alone – many other countries are doing likewise with their national airlines.

The coconut industry like the airline industry (Polynesian) is a national asset. In the policy statement detailed in ‘ Partnership for a Prosperous Society 2000-2001,’ the pronounced aim is to enhance farmers’ incomes and sustain coconut production through cash crop development, traditional food production, improved research, extension and market information. This is all very nice on paper. But clearly, more convincing action should be taken, to confirm to producers that government duly recognizes the industry to be a national asset, and is committed to it by guaranteeing a permanent market outlet with fair and just prices. To reflect again on the economic growth and stability impact of this industry, the following is to be noted:

The policy confirms there are about 80,000 hectares (197,000 acres) of coconuts in Samoa, (Aveau & Pouono, 1999). This equates to some 49,500 tonnes of copra annually. Using the conservative figure of 30,000 tonnes, this will produce 18,000 tonnes of coconut oil with a potential value of US\$9.0 million dollars (US \$500 per tonne of oil), or some SAT\$ 29.0 million tala annually. A purchase price for copra to the farmer of SAT \$600 per ton (SAT\$26 for a 100lb bag), requires SAT\$18 million tala fro the year, which is SAT\$1.5 million tala per month. In effect, a revolving fund of \$1.5 million tala is all that is needed each month to guarantee the price of \$26 tala for one bag of copra.

The sale of the copra and/ or the oil each month will ensure that the fund payments for copra will be recovered. Without going into the costing ramifications of the industry at this discussion, the principle being put forward here is that “Samoan owners of the resources will themselves invest their time, their effort, and their money, in the continued development of their coconuts and coconut plantations, when they are assured of a permanent market with fair and just prices for the coconuts and copra.” It is important also to reiterate the following key features of the industry in Samoa. The industry is run primarily by women and children. One bag of 100 pounds of copra requires 216 coconuts, which are readily collected during the week and made into copra by sun – drying. So the price of \$26 tala for the one bag represents what may be the only source of cash income each week for the thousands of families who make up the 80% of the country’s population associated with agriculture.

For its investment as the ultimate stakeholder, Government gets guaranteed production from 36% of its land resources (some 197,600 acres) now under coconuts. This production potential ranges anywhere from 30,000 tonnes to 49,000 tonnes of copra annually, for which only an export market exists. During the past five years, production has ranged from a few tonnes to barely 12,000 tonnes in 1996. Clearly, the existing situation raises questions as to the interpretation of the ‘concept of the sustainable development of Samoa’s natural resources?’ What acreage constitutes sustainable development? What production levels constitute sustainable development? If the measures are not specific levels, then what other measures are to be used – declining, stagnation, increasing, non- productive, individual and private rights for people not to use their lands or to use them as they feel inclined?

Naturally, if productivity is the determining factor, then sustainable development strategy must state how these are to be achieved, maintained, sustained, and for how long? If guaranteed markets and fair prices are the requisite factors to ensure use their resources –

their lands, their labour, and their money – to attain sustainable development, then the government is the only stakeholder so able and must do that. It is a matter of national interest, national survival. Every other country does the same thing, whenever they determine the situation is undermining the national well-being. Recently, the United States House of Representative passed a multi- billion dollar farm prices bill, stating it was necessary to keep American farmers afloat in a global economy where commodity prices have plunged. In essence, the US Government is guaranteeing the markets and fair prices to farmers for those crop commodities considered critical to the country’s economic growth and stability. This of course is part and parcel of the overall national strategy to sustain and maintain agricultural productivity at clearly identified set levels (targets) predetermined as necessary to the overall nation’s economic strength. In like manner, countries like Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the European Union Members continue to put priority support schemes into their agricultural sector. **There is every valid reason on hand for Samoa to do likewise with its own agriculture/ coconut – based industry.**

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