

Le'apai Lau Asofou So'o and Rob Laking

# Samoaan Public Sector Reform: Views from Apia and the Villages<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction: stability and reform in public management

Some Pacific Island governments struggle to provide peace and social stability or deliver essential services to their citizens. This is clearly not the case in Samoa. By any standards, Samoa is a peaceful and orderly society and the Samoan government is competently delivering a wide range of basic services to Samoans throughout the country. It isn't perfect: there are service gaps and inefficiencies, rumours of corruption, and vigorous debates amongst Samoans themselves about the quality and probity of their government. But Samoa is frequently cited as an example of how the government of a small island state with limited resources can maintain harmony and good service for its citizens.

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Many Samoans would attribute this stability to the unique balance of custom and written law in their constitution, founded on *fa'asamoa*. In this system, villages are governed by *fono* (village councils of matai, or chiefs) under *fa'amatai*, the system of chiefly authority. Very much like any other democracy, the elected government in Apia, with a strong Westminster base, makes laws, enforces law and order nationally, collects taxes and provides public services. The two systems are connected politically by the electoral process and the written law. First, although (since 1990) Samoans have had universal adult suffrage, only matai can stand for election. Second, the written law allocates roles and power between government and *fono*.

In the mid-1990s, following a prolonged episode of economic and fiscal crisis, and concerns about accountability in the public sector, the government of Samoa embarked on a wide-ranging programme of public sector reform. The reforms included: economic and fiscal policy changes; financial market liberalisation; corporatisation and privatisation of government trading enterprises; and changes to management of the core public sector.

The core public sector reforms focused on reduction in the size of the public service; restructuring of ministries and departments; management decentralisation; development of government budgeting and accounting; and strengthening government-wide and departmental strategy and planning. A Public Service Commission paper in 2006 spoke of a 'shift in principal role of government from a service provider to a regulator, policy maker and service facilitator through involvement of the private sector and community in service delivery' (Public Service Commission (Samoa), 2006a). The core public service shrank from 5,621 in 1998 to 4,541 in 2004 (ibid). Government organisations have been reduced from 26 departments to 14 ministries and five constitutional offices. Heads of government departments were restyled chief executive officers and placed on term contracts.

Management structures were flattened. The government adopted output budgeting and a system of forward estimates. Departmental corporate plans and management plans were linked to high-level government policy objectives in the Strategy for the Development of Samoa (SDS) (Government of Samoa, 2005).

The design of the public management reforms was strongly influenced by the advice the government took from Australian and New Zealand consultants. But although the architecture of financial management and public administration imported managerialist ideas from Australia and New Zealand, the Samoan changes did not go as far on decentralisation. Important controls are still centrally held. The Ministry of Finance retains the power of pre-audit of expenditure and officials clearly have concerns about the capability of lower-level staff to manage budgets. Early delegation of some aspects of personnel management to chief executive officers was withdrawn, and a 'proper and effective check and balance system has been put in place to avoid misuse of powers and bribery in the public sector' (Public Service Commission (Samoa), 2006a, p.6).

#### **Reform evaluations: efficiency and effectiveness**

Early appraisals were approving. In 2000 an Asian Development Bank review team (Asian Development Bank, 2000) concluded, among other things, that benefits flowed from setting of outputs and performance measures, increased emphasis on strategic planning and community consultation and provision of increased autonomy and incentives for agencies, and the ex-ante agreement of outputs and measures with ministers. More recently there have been fiscal problems arising from big public service salary increases and the cost of the Pacific Games to be held in Apia in August 2008. Government operating expenses have been rising rapidly. The government has accordingly been unable to avoid crisis responses to budget blowouts, such as last year's 30% cut in operating budgets, although these reductions were largely reversed in the supplementary estimates. The fiscal deficit is also growing, mitigated by buoyant revenues.

While the language of planning and results seems to have taken root in the senior public service, there appears to be a gap between the formality and the reality. The corporate plans themselves are built strongly around results, and the estimates have been comprehensively restructured around outputs. Senior managers also talked of the advantages of integrating departmental tasks with national policy objectives through a corporate planning approach. But while devolution to ministries was supposed to lead to better management, results-based management is proving difficult. Some ministries and agencies deal better than others with the concept of outputs and performance measures. The estimates contain large numbers of output measures of marginal value in assessing the government's performance.

The Ministry of Finance itself admitted that in some aspects it was 'struggling' with the new approach: when budgets have to be reduced, ministry staff think in terms of cutting inputs, such as by blanket reductions in operating costs, rather than selective reduction in lower-priority outputs. Performance management by results was also difficult. Key performance indicators for chief executive officers have been in place only for the last three–four years; CEOs have difficulty getting their ministers interested in them.

The moot point in all this change is its effect on the quality of outcomes for Samoans. The Public Service Commission concludes, cautiously, that the 'real impact of delivery of services at the community and village level of these reforms is difficult to assess currently, given the challenges of implementing appropriate and robust monitoring and evaluating systems' (Public Service Commission (Samoa), 2006b). Several public servants we spoke to agreed that improved service delivery to communities and villages was a priority, but it would probably be difficult to demonstrate significant improvements in outcomes. There are concerns at Cabinet level about quality of service in some key areas.

Not surprisingly, the machinery and system changes in

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Apia have not made a huge impact on the consciousness of the average Samoan villager, who tends to judge what government does by changes in the services received at village level. An Asian Development Bank survey (Asian Development Bank, 2002) provides some evidence on what matters to Samoans about services. For children, lack of education and health support was 'the overwhelming concern among communities consulted'; for youth, it was lack of jobs and appropriate schooling; for women it was lack of education, jobs and cash (although 'the women consulted believe their overall situation has improved, mainly due to increased access to education and consequently, improved job opportunities'). Specifically, on problems with service delivery, people mentioned lack of accessible and clean water, poor or deteriorating access to transport, limited or distant health facilities, problems with market access, poor school facilities and expensive communications.

In mid-2007 we conducted a series of interviews in a sample of eight villages on perceptions of service changes in three main areas: primary education, health and agricultural extension. Villagers gave a mixed report on these services:

- In primary education, the majority of villages reported better performance from their schools in recent years, which they attributed to improvements in the quality of teachers and the leadership of school principals. Several

said that better facilities had made life easier for teachers, and one said that they had encouraged a return of children to the local school. The main concern, particularly for the remoter villages, was to maintain rolls and attract and retain teachers sufficient to ensure the viability of the school.

- Villagers had varying perceptions about whether health services were changing for better or worse. Some villages had no complaints, and the majority particularly mentioned the value to the village of education on family planning, healthy living and sanitation. On the other hand, several said that district nurses and other health workers visit less often, so that people have to travel to a district hospital to get medicines, see a doctor or get immunisation shots for their children.
- There was a higher level of criticism of the Ministry of Agriculture than of the other ministries. As far as many villagers are concerned, the ministry has not responded effectively to the many problems faced by Samoan farmers in the last two decades. Comments included poor communication, infrequent visits, failure to consult, inequity in provision of services and assistance, and suggestions of personal dishonesty.

Not all of these developments can be attributed to the public management reforms. In particular, since 1990 Samoan agriculture has had to contend with three hurricanes and some plant diseases and pests which have had serious effects on production, together with continued declining demand for traditional exports such as copra – problems which would have extended any government and its officials. Generally, smallholder farming seems like a sector in decline, and not an attractive option for young village men and women. In social services, the government also faces severe problems in recruiting and retaining education and health professionals in the face of the magnetic pull of emigration – economic forces that the government has little control over. Health also faces the worldwide problem of rising costs of medical technology and a local epidemic of diabetes. On the other hand, downsizing and restructuring appear to have had adverse effects on local services and the focus on corporate planning and output budgeting has yet to produce many tangible results in terms of improved service delivery.

The effects of restructuring have been uneven. The Ministry of Education seems to have come through more or less unscathed. On the other hand, the health sector is still regrouping after a major reorganisation which split the Ministry of Health into three parts: a ministry reduced to policy, regulatory and public health functions; a National Health Service (NHS), which has taken over most clinical services; and the Samoa Kidney Foundation, responsible for renal dialysis and kidney treatment. Senior staff of the new Ministry of Health have lost significant operational roles and obviously feel they have been relegated to the sidelines.

New planning and budgeting processes also seem so far to be focused on internal processes rather than improved service delivery. Ministry of Education officials said that in developing school plans, teachers preferred targets that

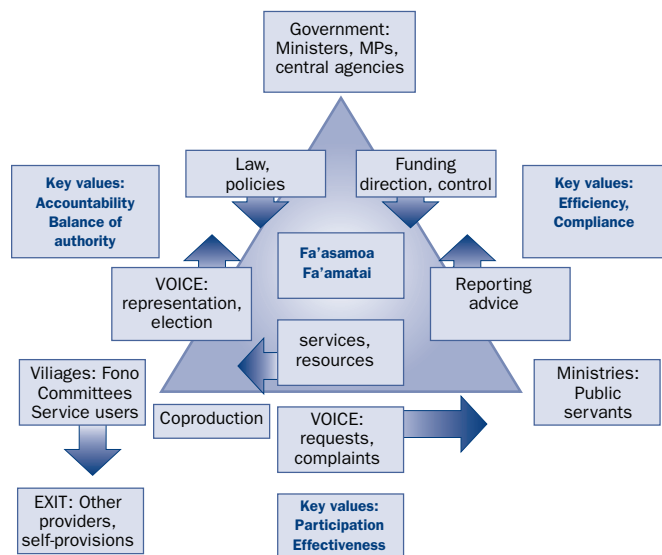
were easily assessable and depended solely on the school committee, like a new classroom or a school fence, rather than things that the committee is responsible for but reflect on teachers' performance: for example, children's reading or parents checking homework. A senior Ministry of Agriculture manager said that the management reforms had 'jolted us back into reality', the system had 'made us more accountable', but senior managers confirmed that reforms had so far focused more on internal efficiency than on improving service delivery.

**The service delivery triangle**

The interesting questions about Samoan public services centre around whether the way services are delivered are affected by the unique elements of Samoan governance, and particularly the relationship between the political authority of executive government, the administrative role of the public service and the autonomy of village governance under fa'amatai.

Along with the World Bank in its 2004 *World Development Report* (WorldBank, 2003), we postulate a triangular relationship in public service delivery between governments, their citizens and service providers. In this triangle, governments authorise and fund the provision of services; front-line organisations – public or otherwise – deliver services to citizens; and citizens give feedback on the services they receive.

**Figure 1: Samoa – service delivery triangle**



In the traditional bureaucratic model, the relationship goes clockwise around the triangle. The main job of governments is to decide what services are to be produced and then direct government ministries to provide them and monitor their performance; the main job of ministries is to deliver the services in compliance with government directives; and the main resource of citizens is to register their satisfaction or otherwise by talking to the government directly or through the ballot box. In this model, the citizen is recipient rather than producer, possibilities of exit are limited, and voice

is exercised through the political accountability of the government to its citizens.

The triangular relationship, however, implies that the provider doesn't have to be a bureaucrat; by separating the government's funding-authorising role from its provider role, it assumes that users might acquire services from the private sector or NGOs or from competing public providers, or could opt to provide services for themselves. In a participatory model, it can imply also that providers have a direct relationship with users in planning and delivering services. Finally, it leaves open the possibility that citizens have both 'voice' and 'exit' (in the famous definitions of Hirschman, 1970). That is, that they have several strategies for seeking improvement in services if there is a gap between their expectations and actual outcomes:

- voice: they may make suggestions or complain directly to service providers, as well as telling 'authorisers': their MPs or government officials;
- exit: they may be able to get services from NGOs, their church or private providers, or they might provide services for themselves through the village or their families.

#### Written law and customary authority

Samoan custom, culture and traditional authority introduce complexities into this service relationship. In the usual Western model of public policy, the unit of account is the individual as both service user and citizen, able to exercise choice and voice, the inheritor of a set of rights and duties arising from the social contract. But how much should this Western ideal of citizenship be modified by peculiarly Samoan institutions? In particular, how do we modify ideas of voice and exit if most citizen-government relationships are mediated through *fa'amatai*?

Samoan commentators clearly see the relationship between government and the villages as critical to an understanding of Samoan political economy. Colonial administrators sought to bypass, co-opt or eliminate chiefly authority, which led to rebellion and eventual bloodshed. The constitution of independent Samoa is founded on *fa'amatai*, and the nation's post-colonial history has been one of constant debate about the relationship between written legal authority and the authority of custom. Throughout this discourse are landmark clashes between the principles of the two worlds, and the boundary remains contested territory, particularly in the areas of customary land and human rights (Va'a, 2000). The PSC's public sector plan asserts that:

The relationship between these two levels of government is increasingly conflicting and impacting negatively on national development. Unless this interface is clarified and strengthened, development at the grass-roots level will not be realised. (Public Service Commission (Samoa), 2006b)  
Beyond the electoral provisions which provide the basic

drivers of the political relationship between the government and the villages, several key pieces of legislation govern the legal relationship: the most important are the Lands and Titles Act, the Village Fono Act and the Internal Affairs Act. The Village Fono Act provides the legal framework for village self-governance, including the appointment by the Fono of School and Women's Committees discussed below; the Internal Affairs Act 1995 defines the office of *pulenu'u*<sup>2</sup> (loosely and not very accurately translated as mayor)<sup>3</sup> and this official's powers and duties.

The office of *pulenu'u* was invented by the German colonial administrators as an arm of their authority in the villages, and has survived the New Zealand colonial period into the era of Samoan independence. Legally the *pulenu'u* are appointed by the government, but customarily on the recommendation or at least with the assent of the *fono*. Their duties (modest) and powers (very limited) are defined by the 1995 act<sup>4</sup> They are regarded in the villages as one channel for conveying requests or complaints to the government, and in turn the Mayors' Office calls them to Apia on a monthly basis to report on village affairs and to return with messages on government policy.

The government is trying to strengthen the role of the

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office. The Public Service Commission's public sector plan contains a number of measures designed to strengthen the accountability of the *pulenu'u* and their capacity to perform their administrative functions. But in the political balance between Apia and the villages, it seems clear that the *pulenu'u* remain middlemen of varying administrative ability, largely depending for their effectiveness on their status in the customary village hierarchy.

Two village committees are important for relations on service delivery: the women's committee and the school committee. Both are interesting fusions of law and custom. They have a legal identity but also carry customary authority, although in different ways. The women's committees began as a partnership in the 1930s between the Department of Health and the villages on public health, over time 'came to play a central role in every village development activity and were considered to be traditional groups' (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2000, p.104), and can therefore claim to have a customary status in their own right. The school committee is appointed by, and more clearly subordinate to, the *fono*.

In primary education, the Ministry of Education is responsible for teachers and their training; curriculum, textbooks and other educational materials; and electricity and telephone for government schools. Schools are built on land provided by the villages. Donor agencies play a large role in funding school buildings and other facilities and equipment, including computers. Villages provide, furnish and maintain the school buildings; provide housing for teachers; pay some operating expenses; contribute voluntary labour; and levy school fees on families with school-age children. They also enforce school attendance: *fono* may fine families money or food if their children do not attend school. The focus for this activity is the village school committee appointed by the *fono*. The only government requirement is that the school principal should be on the committee.

Life for school committees has traditionally been dominated by the relatively mundane problems of school upkeep. A school management project has revised existing procedures in an effort to broaden the relationship between government and communities. School committees are

facilities should be owned and operated by communities. Women's representatives needed to develop the roles of women in the health of children and care of the elderly.

Samoan villages have indeed played a large role in public health programmes since the 1930s. The village role in health services is generally the responsibility of women's committees, whose members are appointed by the *fono*. In villages where district hospitals are located the committees also carry responsibilities for the general cleanliness of the hospital and its environs and housing and feeding the medical staff. In return, they generally charge fees to patients and their families.

The villages we spoke to were generally confident in their ability to organise and maintain a variety of health programmes through their *fono* and women's committees. There was evidence of the strong social control function in Samoan villages being turned to the cause of public health. Several villages spoke proudly of the role of a strong village council and women's committee in maintaining standards. Several mentioned the role of the women's committee

in monitoring sanitary standards – rubbish disposal and cleanliness of cooking areas, for example. Villages run competitions to encourage high standards. Women's committee representatives can also impose fines on households that fail inspection.

Several villages said that if the government withdrew further from providing services they could and would organise provision themselves.

They took up now where the Ministry of Health left off, running their own health education and healthy living programmes. A couple mentioned that, with training from the ministry, they were distributing filiaris medication themselves. Two villages said that, with some training for local women, they could provide basic clinical services and dispense medicines from the village.

Any discussion of agricultural services to villages has to take into account the natural calamities visited on the sector, but it also appears that in looking for options to declining traditional exports the government's strategy has focused on development of commercial alternatives. Research and extension services to support traditional Samoan village farming – growing for the kitchen with some surplus to sell in local markets – may therefore have taken second place to commercial and semi-commercial farming and the development of forestry and fishing.

The current Strategy for the Development of Samoa, however, somewhat redresses the balance towards smallholders. Food security for local consumption – a slogan clearly directed at the villages - has become a 'priority area', aimed at introducing new activities such as fish farming and beekeeping as well as new crops, and revitalising traditional crops such as taro, coconut and cocoa.<sup>5</sup> The SDS and the ministry's Institutional Strengthening Programme (ISP) seek to strengthen the ministry's capabilities in market research, biosecurity and research and extension. But the ministry has

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supposed to sign a school agreement that commits the village to specific responsibilities. A baseline survey marked each school against a checklist as a basis for a school improvement plan. According to the ministry, however, sometimes it was a struggle to get the plan to focus on gaps related directly to children's learning, such as the variable performance of schools in establishing reading programmes.

How well equipped the school committees are to play the larger role envisaged by the ministry probably depends mostly on the qualities of the committee members. As a ministry official put it, 'if you get top guns it works: parents look up to them'. The school committees in the two Apia villages where we interviewed were well supplied with professional parents who took an active interest in the quality of learning at the school and knew who to contact in the ministry or in the government for assistance or funding. In other villages, in contrast, the members appointed by the *fono* carried little status. Membership could also change frequently, so that the ministry and teachers are dealing with inexperienced committees. Some principals keep school committees in the dark, or the committees deferred to the principals.

In health, the official view from the National Health Service is that villages can and should be playing a more active role in taking responsibility for their own health. Traditionally, one official said, 'we always thought we knew best'; the community should be given authority. Other

a lot of ground to make up with the villages where it has lost the position it held through the advisory officers. To restore this relationship, the language of the SDS is participative: improved performance 'will be achieved through strong cooperative efforts between the MOA, Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development (MWCSD), village councils and the farming community' (Government of Samoa, 2005, p.9).

Villages can support their own agricultural development through conservation projects; by encouraging the development of vegetable gardens; attending farming demonstrations and competing in produce shows; inspecting their plantations themselves; or organising working parties for pest and disease control and to maintain access roads. Villages also identified services provided by the ministry, such as extension services, maintenance and inspection of plantation access roads, provision of farming implements and insecticides and pesticides, and supply of cultivars such as coconut and taro seedlings.

### **Voice**

In each of our three target areas, the villages we spoke to were quite clear about their ability to complain or make representations to the government about services, and how they would go about it.

For education matters, most villages reported that the school committee would raise or discuss any issue first in the *fono* before taking it further. But then the committees appeared generally able to raise matters direct with the authorities. Most commonly, this was by making representations to the Ministry of Education, but several villages said that they would go direct to their member of Parliament with a request or complaint. The *pulenu'u* seem to play a relatively minor role in communications on education matters: the Mayors' Office reported that Ministry of Education officials commonly go direct to villages without checking in with the office.

For health services, all villages said they had had clear channels for giving feedback to the government, requesting services and making complaints if they needed to. As well as the *pulenu'u*, recently the government created a position of women's representative, a member of the women's committee nominated by the village to represent the village on health and other matters. In contrast with education, however, villagers said that the *pulenu'u* plays a role as well as the women's representative or the women's committee in general.

In agriculture, generally villages felt that they could have a say in the services they received, but the feedback was mostly delivered through the *pulenu'u* or sometimes their MP.

### **Conclusions**

On our triangle of service delivery, the Samoan public sector reforms seem to have had most impact on the relationship

between executive government and its public servants. But the picture is mixed. There was support amongst the senior managers we spoke to in the line ministries for the greater clarity of objectives and roles brought by the new system, particularly in its link to national strategies. On the other hand, in Health the reorganisation has left some confusion about the respective roles of the three new organisations. There is an impressive system of financial management, with a well-integrated set of accountability documents and a high standard of reporting, but there have been problems with operating deficits and budget blowouts and the objectives of decentralised management are not fully realised.

The impact of the reforms on service delivery as perceived from the villages is also at best mixed. The jury is still out on the effects of the reforms, partly because the reforms so far have been inward-looking rather than focusing on service improvement; and partly because there has been no systematic evaluation of their effects anyway. So our views are impressionistic. Of our three target ministries, Education seems to have made the most positive impression because

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of the direct relationship between ministry officials and the village school committees. The picture in Health is clouded by the general impression that services have been withdrawn from villages into district clinics and hospitals. Agriculture has generated more frustration than improvement, probably because ministry officials are not as visible in the villages as those of the ministries of Education and Health.

The current Samoan Development Strategy seems focused on redressing the balance between Apia and the villages by focusing more on services in the villages. A related issue is the apparent government intention to get villages to play a larger part in the governance, and possibly provision, of health and education services. Whether the villages have the capacity and governance strengths to do that is partly a question of scale. Can 'modern' schooling and clinical services be delivered at the scale of a village given the requirements for uniform standards of service, high-cost specialist services backing up primary care, training the workforce and equity in provision? In fact, for nearly all the important services in their lives (electricity, water, roads, communications, schooling, health, national security – to say nothing of dispute resolution), villages are mostly in the 'one-way triangle' described in our diagram. It is the government that decides at a national level what services will be provided to villages. Villagers do have a partnership role in local service delivery through school and women's committees, but they have a limited ability to

provide services for themselves. The main recourse of the villages, if they seek more or different services, is to make representations to the government.

The answer may turn on the effectiveness of that third side of our triangle, where villages can exercise their power of voice – through the pulenu'u, or to their local MP – to make their views known on the services they receive. And maybe that's quite effective. Why worry about greater local governance if this system seems to satisfy most Samoans?

Finally, though, there is the nagging question of how Samoans see their government. Is it part of them, there to take their orders (in both senses: obey instructions and serve up the meal from the services menu), or is it an institution over which they have only limited control and which in turn controls them: e.g. in land disputes or human rights issues, the two most contested areas of government–village relationships? Considering all the paraphernalia of outputs,

corporate plans and management speak (not to mention restructuring), have the reforms brought public servants closer to villages or are they pushing them further away? But there, maybe, we also have to remember *fa'asamoa* and *fa'amatai*, which (for good or for ill as in all families) bind Samoans, whether public servant, politician, matai or ordinary villager, into a web of obligations that is the real governance system.

- 1 The authors would like to acknowledge the support of a grant from the Pacific Cooperation Foundation towards the cost of the research for this paper. We also want to record, with great appreciation, the assistance provided by three staff of the National University of Samoa in interviewing in villages and writing up records of the interviews: Seiuli Vaifou Aloalii-Temese, Fiso Eve Faamoe and Naumati Vasa.
- 2 In the 'new non-traditional villages' known as the sui o le mālō (Va'a, 2000).
- 3 'Mayor' in English usually connotes a locally-elected official, although the equivalent term in some other languages may mean a local official appointed by central government.
- 4 According to Va'a, 'Pulenu'u are usually unassuming people who mostly keep records of village births, deaths and title investiture for the government. Otherwise, they have no other special place in the village fono and their status as pulenu'u does not affect their status in the village social hierarchy one iota' (Va'a, 2000, p.167).
- 5 The emphasis is not exclusively on crops. Other specifically village-focused elements of government policy include inshore fisheries management, village-based aquaculture and fish nurseries, village forestry initiatives and assistance to farmers with beef cattle production.

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# No State is an Island: Connected Governance in the South Pacific

By Andrew Ladley and Derek Gill *To be published in October 2008*

"Tradition" in the Pacific has always been part of the identity and cohesion of local communities. However, at national levels of government, many Pacific governments are struggling with isolation, size, and shortages of resources and capacities.

This monograph explores why and how Pacific peoples and their governments, including New Zealand,

might build on strengths in the Pacific in addressing the challenges. It offers suggestions for better, and increasingly 'shared', governance at local, national and regional levels. States can do some things by themselves, but not everything. 'Governing together', rather than alone, is the logical future – indeed, it is already starting.

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