
"YOU MADE US THINK": THE PATH-BREAKERS BATTLING LAND DEGRADATION IN SAMOA'S RURAL COMMUNITIES

Aloema Leaupepe



A training programme covering the basics of permaculture and of a healthy lifestyle is promoting sustainable development and enabling communities across Samoa to combat the adverse effects of climate change. Drawing upon Samoan heritage, the *Taiala* programme placed an emphasis upon community-led education and communal learning in farmer's cooperative societies. Through the guidance of Matuaileoo Environment Trust Inc.'s *Taiala* programme, 10 villages have now adopted a more ecologically attuned world-view.

Located in the south-west Pacific, Samoa is a small island developing state, and is widely recognised as one of the most vulnerable areas to the impacts of climate change. In many of these nations it is believed that they have contributed very little to the causes of climate change and yet they stand to suffer the most. A lack of local climate knowledge has left Samoa unable to effectively adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change, leading to soil erosion and rising sea levels which are affecting the livelihoods of island communities.

In order to reverse this trend, Matuaileoo Environment Trust Inc. (METI) embarked upon an innovative programme named *Taiala* – meaning path-breakers. The project started in January 2010 and ended in January 2011. In partnership with the Government of Samoa, the 10 communities of Lealalii, Maninoa, Nofolii, Sapulu and Sapunaoa in small Upolu, and Malae, Patamea, Satufia, Sagone and Vaipu'a on the island of Savaii, received agricultural training from METI.

Issues concerning food production, such as poor soil quality, were identified by METI as major obstacles to sustainable development across Samoa. METI therefore implemented an approach to help find solutions to the different issues that individual farmers were facing. For example, training in food security, sustainability and climate change adaptation was provided, as well as offering education in problem-solving and organic

farming. From previous experience, however, METI understood how a lack of communication between NGOs and communities can be a barrier to progress, and so was this programme put into place.

Who are *Taiala* and what were their objectives?

Traditionally, *Taiala* are leaders who guide the way for the rest of the community. In this instance, they acted as middlemen between the community and METI, and those who were selected came from a number of different backgrounds. Some were chiefs and orators, others were housewives or retired public servants. What they all had in common was that they were raised in the villages they were selected to lead.

Before the path-breakers began their work in the villages, they underwent 2 weeks of training in agriculture and permaculture. Afterwards, they were embedded into village activities and made key participants in local decision-making processes. This enabled METI to ensure that informed decision-making remained at a local level. The main objectives for the *Taiala* were

- to appropriately train communities to protect Samoa's productive landscapes and to mitigate land degradation;

Cover Putting their training into practice, farmers use recycled plastic bottles to grow seedlings



Above Training at the community level in Samoa

- to promote biodiversity conservation; and
- to increase soil carbon sequestration in order to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

A training process

The project began with consultations between METI and community members, where the objectives were laid out. The overall aim was to improve the capacity of the 10 communities to live sustainably, which was achieved by enacting the following activities over a 4-week timeframe in collaboration with the *Taiala*:

- **Problem-solving training:** A programme based on the premise that sustainable development can only succeed in a peaceful environment. METI offered this training to communities in order to teach peaceful problem-solving and promote non-violence in the community.
- **Permaculture training:** An agricultural programme which taught participants that permaculture is a design system used to provide for human needs in a sustainable way. Permaculture uses natural patterns as a model for design. It provides a way of thinking which helps us to design highly productive systems, where people can live abundantly while caring for the earth in harmony with the animals, plants, oceans, rivers and people around us. The methods taught in this training

session could then be used to resolve land degradation, improve biodiversity conservation and increase soil carbon sequestration.

- **Healthy living training:** Considered the most direct and effective measure to prevent and reverse the near-epidemic levels of obesity and non-communicable diseases currently plaguing Samoa. This campaign focussed on raising awareness about the causes and consequences of unhealthy food habits. The training was also important in educating the sufferers of non-communicable diseases, empowering them to change their lifestyles and to consume locally produced fruits and vegetables.
- **The establishment of farmers' cooperative societies:** A way for beneficiaries of METI's training programmes to come together and to put into practice what they had learned. Within the cooperatives, community members had the ability to produce organically grown crops for their own consumption or for sale in local and overseas markets. These cooperative societies also had the potential to transform into informal learning hubs in the communities.

As a result of the 4-week training, about 80% of farmers in each village set up their own vegetable gardens from the seeds and tools distributed by the project organisers. METI visited the farmers every 2 weeks but the *Taiala* were there to help them every day,

as well as to record their progress. Overtime, METI developed strong relationships with the villages. This enabled open discussion about some of the challenges that the communities were facing throughout the project, which helped the project to run more smoothly and improve as it went along.

After a relatively short time, METI was able to see many results. A detailed assessment showed that community members

- can produce seeds from their own plants;
- can utilise tools in their gardens;
- are more resourceful, utilising old plastics and bamboo for their seedlings;
- can apply seed saving methods, rather than buying seeds; and they also
- understand how to use natural pests, such as neem leaves and pawpaw leaves, rather than buying pesticides.

But despite the positive results, the programme still faced some challenges that hindered the training process. For example, some community members were still relying upon chemical pesticides whilst they were learning about organic farming. Even with the help of the *Taiala*, there was difficulty in trying to change the habits of some community members. As a solution to the issue, during permaculture training, the importance of using natural pesticides was reiterated and the communities soon began to implement what they had learned. As one of the farmers explained, “You made us think”.

Another issue that arose was resentment between those who were involved in the programme from the beginning and those who wanted to join the programme later on. It was felt that those who had invested time in implementing the project should see the benefits of it first and as such, no new members should be allowed to join the programme. The issue was discussed in the cooperative and it was resolved by simply giving the rest of the village the chance to participate by joining the farmer’s cooperative society.

What next?

It is anticipated that a more environmentally-aware village leadership will emerge following the sustained efforts of METI and the *Taiala*. It is hoped that this leadership will promote a new mind set which reflects a more peaceful, inquisitive and ecologically attuned world view. It is expected that this new world view will lead to an increase in appreciation for nature and its unique processes by village leaders. It is further expected that in the aftermath of this programme, more vibrant communities, capable of carrying out self-reliant initiatives, will develop. Community leaders can then also become effective stakeholders in negotiations with the Government of Samoa, pushing for change to environmental policy across the country.

The cooperative societies remain in place and continue to promote sustainability in the 10 *Taiala* programme communities and METI maintains a strong connection with these communities. Due to its success in the initial 10 communities, METI intends to expand the *Taiala* project to the rest of Samoa.

METI’s motto for community work is inspired by the philosopher Lao Tzu, who said: “Go to the people, talk to them, live with them and love them. Start with what they know, build with what they have and with the best of leaders. When the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say, we have done this ourselves.”



Aloema Leaupepe works as Senior Training Officer & Programme Coordinator, Matuaileoo Environment Trust Inc. (METI).
E-mail: aloema@meti.ws