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Recycling Policy and Hazardous Waste Management in Samoa: Pathways Toward a Circular Economy in Small Island Developing States

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Abstract: Samoa, as one of the Small Island Developing States (SIDS), faces a challenge for solid waste management. Despite legislative efforts such as the Waste Management Act 2010 and the 2019 ban on single-use plastics, Samoa struggles with low recycling rates, landfill saturation, and logistical isolation. This research aims to examine the current recycling landscape in Samoa by identifying the geographic, economic, and behavioral barriers to effective waste management. By analyzing successful cases from other SIDS and developed island nations, including Palau's Container Deposit Scheme and Taiwan's community-based recycling model, a multi-tiered framework for Samoa is proposed. Recommendations made in this study include the implementation of a national Container Deposit Scheme, the strengthening of public-private partnerships, and the localization of circular economy principles through village-level governance. While government policy provides a foundation, the integration of civilian-level engagement and regional shipping partnerships is essential for a sustainable future.

Keywords: Samoa, Waste management, Waste recycling, Small island developing states, E-waste, Community-based recycling

1. Introduction

Waste recycling has become vital for sustainable development to address the scarcity of resources and the increasing environmental impacts of waste. By reintegrating wasted materials into productive cycles, recycling helps reduce landfill dependency, saves energy, and mitigates greenhouse gas emissions [1]. Globally, recycling approaches vary considerably. Developed countries, such as Germany, Japan, and South Korea, have implemented an organized system of waste recycling, extended producer responsibility, and waste-to-energy technologies, with recycling rates above 60% [2]. In contrast, many developing nations rely on informal recycling sectors or community-based initiatives with modest outcomes [3]. The environmental effects of such different approaches are obvious: countries with robust infrastructures have reduced landfill use, lowered emissions, and improved public health, while those with less developed systems face mounting wastes and crises from them and marine pollution [4]. Therefore, through comparative studies of the different studies, policy design, technological investment, and public participation are ensured for success in recycling practices.

For small island nations, where landmass is limited and ecosystems are fragile, recycling is an ecological necessity rather than a policy preference. The Pacific Islands, including Samoa, have faced unique vulnerabilities from marine debris, landfill exhaustion, and biodiversity loss, which threaten both livelihoods and cultural heritage [5]. The Independent State of Samoa exemplifies the beauty and vulnerability of island ecosystems. Located in the South Pacific, Samoa comprises two main islands, Upolu and Savai'i, and several smaller islets, covering 2,842 km². According to the 2026 projection, Samoa's population was around 220,528, with increasing urbanization and consumerism reshaping waste streams [6]. Traditionally, a significant amount of waste in the islands was biodegradable, but the transition to imported plastics, metals, and other non-biodegradable goods has overwhelmed the islands' natural capacity [5]. This change has intensified pressures on Samoa's volcanic terrain, coastal ecosystems, and limited landfill sites.

Samoa has enacted several policies to address these challenges, including the Waste Management Act 2010 [7], the National Waste Management Strategy 2019–2023 [8], and the Tafaigata Landfill Management Plan [9]. These frameworks aim to regulate waste disposal, promote recycling, and raise public awareness. However, their outcomes have been limited: landfill sites are approaching the maximum capacity, recycling infrastructure is underdeveloped, and public recognition of the urgency of waste

management is uneven [10]. Marine litter, particularly plastics, has become a pressing concern, threatening fisheries, tourism, and public health. International observers, including the UN Special Rapporteur on Toxics, have warned that Samoa faces a surging plastic tide that requires urgent intervention [11].

Therefore, it is necessary to examine why existing policies have not yielded optimal outcomes and to propose actionable solutions tailored to Samoa's socio-cultural and geographic circumstances. By situating Samoa's recycling challenges within a global framework and drawing lessons from comparable island nations such as Palau [12] and Fiji [13], this research aims to contribute to the discourse on sustainable development and environmental protection of Samoa. Strategies at the civilian and government levels are also proposed to ensure that Samoa can strengthen its waste management systems, safeguard its ecosystems, and align with broader sustainable development goals.

2. Methodology

2.1. Geography and Demography of Samoa

Samoa consists of two main islands, Upolu and Savai'i, and eight small islets (Figure 1). Samoa occupies a total land area of approximately 2,842 km² [5]. According to current 2026 mid-year projections, the nation's population is estimated to have reached 220,528, representing a steady increase from the 205,557 inhabitants recorded in the 2021 census [6]. 78% of the population resides on the island of Upolu, reflecting a demographic concentration compared to the larger but less populated island of Savai'i [14]. This distribution is further impacted by a trend of rapid urbanization toward the capital, Apia, which has concentrated waste generation in specific areas that possess limited room for infrastructure expansion [9]. Ultimately, the primary challenge for the archipelago remains its extreme geographic isolation; being situated roughly 2,800 km from New Zealand and 4,000 km from Australia, the "cost of distance" renders the exportation of recyclable materials—the only viable end-of-life path for metals, plastics, and paper—prohibitively expensive [15].

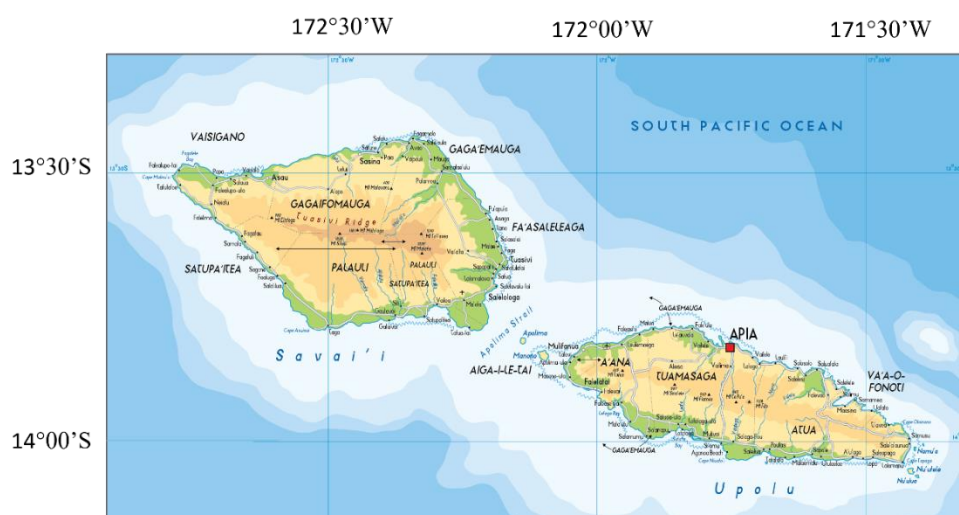


Fig. 1. Map of Samoa (<https://www.worldometers.info/maps/samoa-map/>).

2.2. Methods

A mixed-methods comparative case study was used in this study to evaluate the efficacy of recycling policies in Samoa. An analysis was conducted on Samoa's primary legislative frameworks, including the Waste Management Act 2010 [7] and the National Waste Management Strategy 2019–2023 [8]. This was supplemented by international monitoring reports from the UN Special Rapporteur on Toxics and Human Rights [16] and SPREP audit data [5]. Primary waste data was sourced from the 2020–2021 Samoa National Waste Audit. This data was cross-referenced with World Bank metrics on municipal solid waste (MSW) in SIDS to identify gaps between policy intent and localized outcomes [17]. Using the best practice framework, the Palau Container Deposit Scheme and the Taiwanese Community-Based Model was analyzed [18]. The case studies were selected based on their geographic and demographic similarities to Samoa (limited landmass and high import dependency) to determine their transferability to the Samoan socio-political context.

3. Recycling Policy, Practice, and Problems in Samoa

Recycling in Samoa is mainly conducted by private sector actors and non-governmental organizations. The Samoa Recycling and Waste Management Association serves as the central hub, coordinating the collection of scrap metal, lead-acid batteries, and selected plastics for export [10]. Disposal infrastructure is centered on Tafaigata Landfill (Upolu) and Vaiaata Landfill (Savai'i) [9]. Neither landfill is equipped with advanced material recovery facilities, limiting the capability to separate and process recyclables locally. As a result, Samoa has been heavily dependent on export markets for recycling, which introduces logistical and financial challenges.

The Government of Samoa has demonstrated high-level political measures to address waste management through the following initiatives.

- Waste Management Act 2010: This is the primary legislative tool regulating waste collection, disposal, and management practices across the islands [7].
- National Waste Management Strategy (2019–2023): This strategy emphasizes waste minimization and the Reduce, Reuse, Recycle (3Rs) to enhance institutional capacity and community awareness [8].
- Plastic Ban (2019): Samoa became a regional leader in banning single-use plastic bags and straws, a measure designed to protect marine biodiversity and reduce plastic leakage into coastal ecosystems [19].

These initiatives highlight Samoa's commitment to environmental protection, but their implementation has faced challenges due to limited infrastructure and financial constraints. Despite its policies and practices, the outcomes of recycling in Samoa have shown the following structural issues, termed the recycling leak.

- Logistical costs: The market value of recyclables (especially plastics and glass) does not cover the cost of shipping them to overseas processors [15].
- Lack of waste separation: While municipal collection exists, there is no mandatory nationwide requirement for households to separate recyclables from organic waste, leading to contamination and reduced recovery rates [1].
- Infrastructure deficit: Samoa lacks localized upcycling or pre-processing equipment, which increases the volume and cost of waste exports [10].
- Importers' lack of responsibility: There is no legislative mechanism requiring importers of electronic waste (e-waste) or vehicles to contribute to the eventual disposal of these products [7].

As highlighted in the 2024 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Toxics (A/HRC/60/34/Add.2), Samoa faces a critical import leakage of hazardous substances [16]. While Samoa has ratified major conventions (Basel, Rotterdam, Stockholm, and Minamata), it significantly lacks local management [7]. In addition, Samoa's agricultural dependence has led to widespread use of hazardous pesticides, specifically paraquat and glyphosate [16]. Despite bans in many producer nations, these chemicals are still exported to Samoa, resulting in soil contamination and human health risks, including neurological and reproductive issues [11].

Recently, the Tafaigata landfill in Samoa is overwhelmed by legacy waste, including end-of-life vehicles, lead-acid batteries, and e-waste [9,16]. Samoa imports large volumes of second-hand vehicles without a take-back mechanism, leading to accumulations of scrap metal, waste oil, and tires that create mosquito breeding grounds [16]. With the increase of electric vehicles, Samoa lacks infrastructure to manage spent lithium-ion batteries, which pose fire risks and toxic leaching hazards in tropical landfill environments [20]. Samoa has no dedicated high-security disposal cell, although post-disaster debris and renovations of older buildings release asbestos. Surges in medical waste during the COVID-19 pandemic and measles outbreaks have challenged the limits of Samoa's two incineration facilities [16].

4. Comparative Case Studies: Global Solutions to Island Waste

To contextualize Samoa's performance, it is necessary to compare its recycling outcomes with those of neighboring Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Table 1 outlines the technical disparities in recovery rates and the policies, highlighting Samoa's relatively low recovery rate (8%), underscoring the need for stronger policy mechanisms and infrastructure investment.

Table 1. Comparison of waste recovery outcomes in selected Pacific regions.

Country	Estimated recovery rate	Major policy	Challenge
Palau	87% (beverage containers)	Container Deposit Scheme [4]	Financial sustainability of exports [5]
Samoa	8% (total MSW)	2019 Single-Use Plastic Ban [11]	Low household separation rates [13]
Fiji	15% (urban centers)	Public-private partnerships (naboro) [24]	High ghg emissions from landfills [24]
Cook Islands	25% (plastic/glass)	Advanced recovery fee [1]	High logistical costs of distance [8]
Taiwan	55% (nationwide)	4-in-1 community model [14]	Scarcity of land for new landfills [15]

Palau implemented a successful Container Deposit Scheme under the Palau Recycling Act, whereby a 10-cent deposit is added to imported beverage containers [12]. Jurisdictions with CDS achieve recovery rates nearly ten times higher than those relying primarily on bans or voluntary recycling, such as Samoa. Palau has achieved a recovery rate of more than 80% for beverage containers, providing a self-sustaining financial model for waste export [21]. This demonstrates the effectiveness of economic incentives in driving recycling participation and ensuring financial sustainability. Taiwan's 4-in-1 model connects residents, collectors, recyclers, and a government fund [18]. Mandatory waste separation and the pay-as-you-throw systems shifted the burden of waste costs from taxpayers to waste producers [22]. Its model has achieved nationwide recovery rates of over 55%, despite Taiwan's limited land availability for new landfills. Taiwan's system illustrates how strong regulatory frameworks, combined with community participation and financial responsibility, can transform waste management into a circular economy model.

Mauritius implemented a strategy emphasizing decentralized composting and waste-to-energy initiatives, particularly by partnering with the tourism sector [18]. By requiring the largest waste producers (hotels and resorts) to fund infrastructure, Mauritius ensured that local communities benefited from improved waste management capacity. The Mauritius model demonstrates how SIDS leverage their dominant industries to finance sustainable waste solutions, reducing reliance on government budgets.

Samoa's reliance on bans and voluntary recycling has yielded modest results compared with those of the structured, incentive-based systems of Palau and Taiwan, or the public-private partnerships of Mauritius and Fiji. The evidence suggests that economic incentives (Container Deposit Scheme or advanced recovery fee), mandatory source separation, and industry partnerships are critical levers for improving recycling performance in small island contexts.

5. Proposed Solutions for Samoa

5.1. Technical Recommendations

Samoa's hazardous waste challenges require immediate and targeted interventions. Following the United Nations' recommendations, the government must ban paraquat and glyphosate, transitioning toward regenerative agricultural subsidies that encourage organic farming and reduce chemical dependency [11,16]. A mandatory environmental bond on all vehicle imports would generate funds to support the Moana Taka Partnership, enabling the export of scrap metal and lead-acid batteries to specialized offshore processors [23]. Investment in battery-stripping and e-waste dismantling stations is required to enable Samoa to export only high-value components (e.g., circuit boards, cobalt), reducing the bulk and cost of hazardous exports [20]. These technical measures need to be introduced to reduce Samoa's reliance on landfills, mitigate toxic leakage, and align with international conventions on hazardous waste management.

5.2. Government-Level Policies

At the policy level, Samoa must adapt the following proven models from other island nations.

A Container Deposit Scheme similar to Palau's is necessary to encourage recycling imported aluminum cans and polyethylene terephthalate bottles at the point of entry [12]. This creates a revolving fund to subsidize shipping costs and incentivizes household participation in recycling [21]. Importers of difficult waste for recycling, such as vehicles and tires, must be required to pay an environmental bond [22] to ensure that when products reach end-of-life, funds are available to export scrap metal and hazardous components [7]. It is necessary to expand its participation in the Moana Taka Partnership, which allows non-commercial waste to be transported on shipping lines at low cost [23]. This regional collaboration reduces logistical barriers and strengthens collective resilience among Pacific SIDS.

5.3. Civilian-Level Campaigns and Cultural Integration

Community engagement and cultural integration are essential for sustainable waste management in Samoa. While government policies provide the framework, civilian-level initiatives ensure that recycling becomes embedded in daily life and cultural practice. Successful cases from across the Pacific and other island nations demonstrate that grassroots action can transform waste management outcomes.

1. Village Green Initiative in Samoa

Waste management in Samoa must be decentralized to the Ali'i ma Faipule (Village Councils). By empowering village leaders to enforce zero-litter bylaws, the government needs to leverage the traditional Fa'a Samoa (Samoan Way) to embed environmental stewardship in cultural governance [24]. Similar community-led bylaws in American Samoa and Guam have proven effective in reducing litter and strengthening civic responsibility [25].

2. Upcycling Curricula in Education

School programs must be provided to emphasize waste as a resource. Encouraging industries to use crushed glass for construction aggregate, local jobs can be created, and reliance on imports can be reduced [10]. Dominica's Zero Waste Schools

Program integrates recycling into curricula and fosters student-led initiatives [26]. Fiji's Circular Pacific Plastics initiative has piloted community recycling hubs that teach children and families to separate soft plastics for reuse [27]. Such programs must be provided in Samoa to educate people to be more aware of waste recycling and the economic benefits of it.

3. Grassroots Recycling Campaigns

Grassroots initiatives across SIDS have demonstrated the socio-economic benefits of recycling. In Fiji, community cooperatives have organized neighborhood collection points, reducing marine litter while generating income for local households [28]. In the Comoros and Mauritius, women-led cooperatives have pioneered composting and plastic upcycling, showing how waste management can empower marginalized groups [29].

Traditional governance structures can be powerful allies in waste management. In Samoa, village councils already regulate social behavior; extending their authority to enforce recycling norms would align modern environmental goals with cultural traditions [24]. The United Nations Environment Programme reports that more than 30 island nations are integrating cultural practices into environmental campaigns, ensuring that ecological resilience is inseparable from community identity [30].

6. Expected Outcomes

Community recycling hubs in Fiji and Dominica have created local employment opportunities and reduced municipal waste management costs [26]. For Samoa, similar initiatives can generate green jobs in collection, sorting, and upcycling, while reducing dependence on costly landfill expansion. Women-led cooperatives in Mauritius demonstrate how recycling can diversify household income streams [29]. Grassroots campaigns in Guam and American Samoa have significantly reduced plastic leakage into coastal ecosystems [28]. If Samoa adopts similar models, 40–60% of plastic leakage into the Pacific Ocean can be reduced [19]. Localized composting and glass upcycling further reduce landfill volumes and greenhouse gas emissions.

Integration of traditional governance in Samoa and other SIDS has strengthened civic pride and reinforced cultural values of stewardship [30]. In Dominica, student-led recycling programs have considerably changed community attitudes, showing that youth engagement catalyzed broader societal change [26]. For Samoa, embedding recycling into everyday life can normalize sustainable practices, making them part of everyday life rather than external obligations.

7. Conclusion

The recycling problem in Samoa is a systemic challenge that requires a systemic solution. By shifting the financial burden to importers and consumers and by utilizing the strength of the village social structure, Samoa can transform a linear waste model into a circular economy model. Samoa's recycling deficit is not a product of legislative absence, but rather a result of financial and logistical linear-lock. While current bans on single-use plastics have reduced visible litter, the underlying problem of hazardous leakage from e-waste to toxic agricultural chemicals continues to threaten the nation's water lens and marine biodiversity. The transition to a circular economy in Samoa requires initiating waste recycling in a mandatory, incentivized system. The implementation of a national Container Deposit Scheme and Extended Producer Responsibility frameworks is mandatory for green policies, which are essential to internalize the environmental cost of imports. By integrating policies and measures with the traditional Samoan way of village-led governance, Samoa needs to create a waste management model that is both technically robust and culturally grounded.

The waste crisis is not limited to Samoa but is a common regional emergency. Therefore, the Pacific Islands Forum and regional policy leaders must call for the following action. Leaders must move toward a unified Pacific-wide Container Deposit Standard. A harmonized deposit fee across the region would prevent waste leakage into nature and allow for collective bargaining with international shipping lines to lower the cost of waste export. It is also required to operationalize the 2050 Strategy. Waste management must be considered from an environmental issue to a security and economic pillar under the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. This includes regional funding for network hubs where SIDS can aggregate recyclables for high-volume, low-cost shipping. Regional leaders must collectively require toxic transparency from exporting nations to adhere to the Basel and Stockholm Conventions. Pacific nations no longer serve as the final destination for end-of-life vehicles and banned pesticides that are illegal in their countries of origin. To empower the Moana Taka Partnership, the Samoan government must incentivize private shipping to expand the Moana Taka Partnership, ensuring that no island is left with stockpiles of hazardous waste due to a lack of commercial profitability. Samoa has the opportunity to lead this regional transition. By turning waste into wealth through innovative technology and regional solidarity, the Blue Pacific can secure its environment and sustainable development.

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