

Foreign aid, human agency, and self-reliance in the Pacific: Lessons from the pandemic

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Abstract

Motivation: Amid the highly polarized discourse on development aid in Pacific Islands, few studies explore the perspectives of local people. Missing from the literature is how the subjective experiences of Pacific Islands people responding and adapting to a sudden global disruption influence their perceptions of foreign aid. Faced by the sudden shutdown of export markets, tourism, and labour migration, the COVID-19 pandemic offered an opportunity to investigate how disruptions from international events affect Pacific Island peoples' perception of foreign aid.

Purpose: We investigated how the lived experiences of people in the Cook Islands and Tonga during COVID-19 may have influenced their perceptions of foreign aid.

Methods and approach: Semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions were conducted with 25 individuals in the Cook Islands and 24 in Tonga. Interviewees were purposively selected from staff in government ministries and environmental non-governmental organizations; from people working in tourism and private enterprise; from members of youth empowerment groups; and from among traditional leaders, faith leaders, high school teachers, fisherfolk, and farmers. The interviews explored their subjective experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and the meanings they attributed to them.

Findings: The pandemic closed down tourism and interrupted labour emigration in both countries. In response, people switched to farming and fishing and found ways to redeploy their skills. The pandemic saw increased local innovation, strengthened traditional practices, increased local agricultural output, and enhanced collaboration between foreign donor partners and recipient countries in the development of local human capacity.

Policy implications: Rather than repeating history by integrating Pacific Island societies into the globalized economy, or providing bail-outs through economic restructuring, donors should strive to support the agency and self-determination of Pacific Islands people. They should start by recognizing the resourcefulness and capacity to adapt shown by participants during the pandemic.

KEYWORDS

foreign aid, global disruptions, human agency, Pacific Islands, self-reliance

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article investigates how the lived experiences of Pacific Islands people in the Cook Islands and the Kingdom of Tonga during the global disruption of COVID-19 may have influenced their perceptions on the role of foreign aid. Foreign aid, commonly referred to as official development assistance (ODA), has been one of the most prominent policy tools used by international donor agencies and regional donor partners seeking to increase economic development, improve the wellbeing of local populations, facilitate institutional development in low-income countries, and as a geopolitical tool to gain a presence in respective regions of interest (Connell, 2010; Qian, 2015). In the context of the Pacific region, small island nations have been recognized as the most aid-dependent countries in terms of aid inflows as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) (Dayant, 2019).

The importance and role of ODA in Pacific Islands countries (PICs) is perhaps best illustrated in the MIRAB and TOURAB economic theories, both of which focus on the economic stimulus initiatives of foreign aid (Dornan & Pryke, 2017). MIRAB is an acronym for migration (M), remittances (R), foreign aid (A), and public bureaucracy (B), which posits a central role of migration and overseas remittances for the functioning of Pacific Islands micro-economies, such as Tonga (Bertram & Watters, 1986). In the newer TOURAB—tourism (TOU), remittance (R), foreign aid (A), and public bureaucracy (B) model—which has been used to describe the Cook Islands' economy, the typical revenue streams from MIRAB sources are supplemented by an extensive tourism industry (Umamura, 2020). The significance of tourism in the Cook Islands and workers' remittances in Tonga can be seen in their contributions to the GDP of each country. For example, recent studies demonstrate that personal remittances received in Tonga from labour migration account for approximately 44% of Tonga's GDP (Edwards, 2022). In the Cook Islands, before the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism accounted for nearly 70% of the country's GDP and approximately 34% of the total local workforce (Cook Islands Statistics Office, 2021).

In investigating the influence of tourism and labour migration, however, it is important to recognize the role of two leading regional donor partners: Australia and New Zealand (Dayant, 2019). In the Cook Islands, the role of New Zealand in supporting the development of the tourism industry has been widely recognized (Bertram, 2016, 2018; Mannakkara et al., 2018; Mawdsley et al., 2018). According to an evaluation report on New Zealand's country programme in the Cook Islands, New Zealand Aid has been fundamental in achieving the successful growth of the tourism sector (Cook Islands Government, 2021). Similar studies from the Lowy Institute (2023) and Adam Smith International (2015) demonstrate how New Zealand's support for tourism has led to significant economic development outcomes in the Cook Islands. For example, tourist arrivals in the Cook Islands grew by 26,682 or 28% between 2008 and 2014 (Adam Smith International, 2015). As illustrated in Figure 1, the GDP of the Cook Islands increased significantly during the same period (IMF, 2020). Furthermore, studies have noted that the growth of tourism between 2010 and 2012 coincided with a period of increased investments in tourism by both the New Zealand and Cook Islands governments (Lowy Institute, 2023). By comparing New Zealand's support for tourism, in addition to the growth in tourism arrivals, with the Cook Islands' strong economic growth over the last decade, scholars argue that continued external support will be required to sustain those achievements (Bertram, 2016; Cooke et al., 2021).

In Tonga, both Australia and New Zealand aim to stimulate the local economy by encouraging labour migration through the development of seasonal worker schemes (Connell, 2015). New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) and Australia's Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) have provided temporary work visas for about 70,000 Pacific workers over the last decade (Hugo, 2015), with Tongans representing the highest number of Pacific workers in Australia and the second highest in New Zealand (Bedford et al., 2017). According to recent studies by the World Bank (2021), the demand for Pacific seasonal workers in both donor countries continues to grow, as evidenced by the increasing contribution of remittances to Tonga's GDP (Figure 2). However, in comparing the increasing flows of remittances in the last decade to Tonga's fluctuating GDP, scholars argue that the link between remittances and development is still unclear (Brown et al., 2014; Jayaraman et al., 2018; Kumar & Stauvermann, 2021).

Although there is empirical evidence that demonstrates the positive economic contributions of foreign aid in supporting the development of tourism and labour migration in the Cook Islands and Tonga (Gelb et al., 2021;

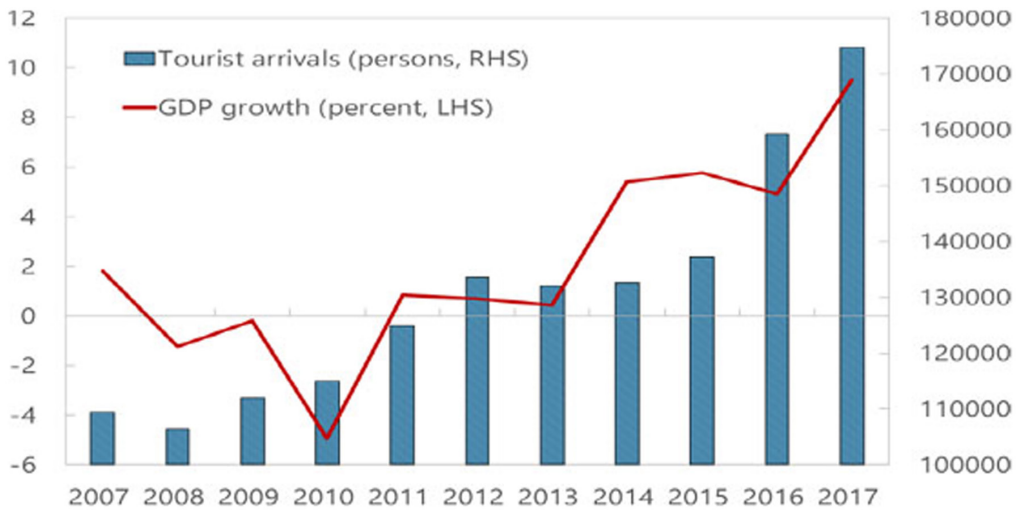


FIGURE 1 Cook Islands GDP growth and tourist arrivals from 2007 to 2017.
Source: IMF, 2020.

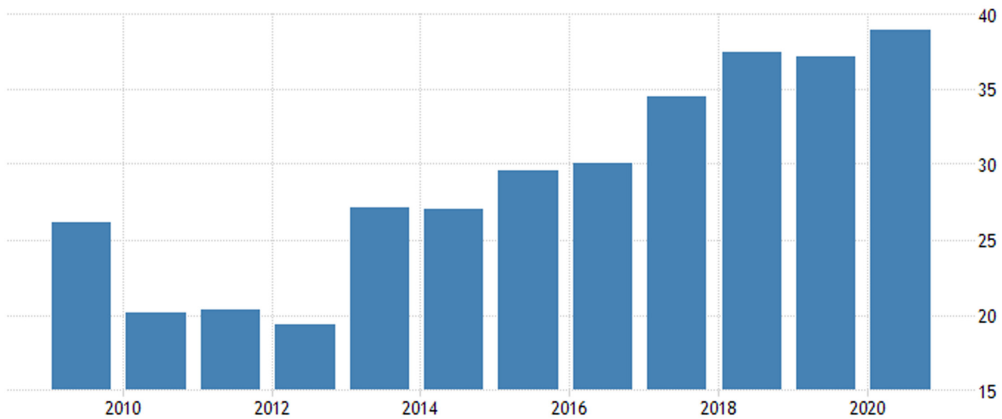


FIGURE 2 Remittance inflows to GDP in Tonga from 2010 to 2020.
Source: Trading Economics, 2023a, 2023b.

Gössling & Scott, 2018; Hughes & Scheyvens, 2018), there is also an extensive literature that demonstrates the socioeconomic and environmental challenges linked to overdependence on tourism receipts and remittance inflows (Connell, 2018; Tolkach & Pratt, 2021). However, in the highly polarized and controversial discourse on the role of ODA in strengthening the MIRAB and TOURAB economies of PICs, there are limited studies that explore the perspectives of Pacific Islands people (Haak & Nakamura, 2021). Furthermore, missing from the literature is how the subjective experiences of Pacific Islands people responding and adapting to a sudden global disruption could influence their perceptions on the role of foreign aid.

The global disruption of COVID-19 presented an opportunity for Pacific Islands people to reflect on the ways that key global processes influence their small island societies. For TOURAB economies, the sudden crash of tourism and the absence of visitors presented an opportunity for host destinations to reflect on the risks associated with an increasing dependence on tourism as an economic growth strategy (Gössling et al., 2020). In MIRAB economies, local communities may have reconsidered the dependence on labour mobility, migration, and remittances to support their island economies (Foley & Piper, 2021). Therefore, in framing the COVID-19 disruption as an

opportunity to reflect on global norms, this article addresses the gap in the literature by exploring how the lived experiences of Pacific Islands people may have influenced their perceptions of the role of foreign aid.

2 | RESEARCH DESIGN

This study used a comparative qualitative research design guided by a constructivist grounded theory methodology to provide an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of study participants (Charmaz, 2006). Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit participants who have certain knowledge or affiliation with regard to the research question (Bernard, 2013). The participants represented a wide range of sectors from Nuku'alofa, Tonga, and Rarotonga, Cook Islands, including various government ministries, environmental NGOs, the tourism sector, traditional leaders, the religious sector, high school teachers, youth empowerment groups, fisherfolk, farmers, and the private sector. A total of 25 participants from Rarotonga, Cook Islands, and 24 participants from Nuku'alofa, Tonga were recruited.

In-country researchers (Teaurere and Latu) provided expertise in all aspects of study development, from study design to data collection and analysis. In-country researchers, also referred to as insider researchers, are members of the research communities (Fletcher, 2019), whereas outsider researchers (de Waegh, Orams, Lück) are not part of the study community. By including both inside and outside researchers, this study combined perspectives to explore multiple framings of truths and ensured the legitimacy of the findings through local voices, experiences, and insights.

Semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions were conducted with participants to explore their subjective experiences during the global disruption of COVID-19 and the meanings they attributed to these experiences. A constant comparison method was applied to analyse the qualitative data in an iterative process (Charmaz, 2006). Data from six interviews were used in this article.

3 | RESULTS

The findings in this section represent data relating to how participants' lived experiences during the global disruption of COVID-19 may have influenced their perceptions of the role and impacts of foreign aid in their respective Pacific Islands nation. Although the following excerpts may appear to be single quotes, they represent articulate patterns that were identified during the transcription and iterative data analysis process.

3.1 | The Kingdom of Tonga

In Tonga, the role of regional donor partners in supporting labour migration programmes was perceived in a negative light:

Australia and New Zealand think it's the best thing that they have ever done to the Pacific ... But, man, they are killing our country by taking away the labour force that we have ... When you go out to the smaller communities where there are only less than 50 households, you take all the youth to go to New Zealand for fruit picking, or to Australia, then that whole village will lose during planting season, and then you start seeing them buying rice and, I mean—we are unhealthy already! We are recognized as the fattest country in the world! NCDs [non-communicable diseases] is killing everybody here. But again, because this is a working scheme, they [donor partners] just measure by the amount of money that comes back to the country and so they think it's a success.

(Participant 1)

The findings indicated that the disruption in global trade and limited access to seasonal working schemes in New Zealand and Australia catalysed the revitalization of the local agriculture sector and the production of healthy local produce:

Before COVID-19 happened, import substitution wasn't even prioritized. We were still importing so much unhealthy food ... The only reason why we are looking at more projects about product diversification and import substitution is because COVID-19 disrupted the global trade ... It has increased cost on imported goods that then force our locals to look at local goods ... Although it's a challenge, it has provided an opportunity to shift reliance on what is available here. It's like now people are turning to nature for comfort and for economic stability. So, the production is up and I would say the self-sufficiency is really top at the moment. And it means that the people are enjoying this, and that the community is ensured to have enough food.

(Participant 2)

The data further revealed that, in the absence of foreign consultants, participants benefitted from an increase in training and human capacity development through virtual spaces:

I think COVID-19 has provided the means to transfer capacity to be strengthened at national and local level—because now the external experts have to explain themselves through virtual spaces. So now the Tongans are proposing an innovative way of approaching it, which is to rely on us. So now there are a lot more virtual online courses, online trainings, online conferences and workshops happening to build national capacity and local capacities to respond to the needs right now.

(Participant 3)

3.2 | The Cook Islands

In the Cook Islands, the findings shed light on the double-edged sword of tourism and the risks associated with having a tourism-dependent economy:

Over the last 30 years I would say there has been rapid development in tourism. However, alongside that development, there has been the slow degradation of our environment ... It is a catch-22 because the economy and the government rely on tourism taxation. So, you cut that off like we did in the last 16 months with COVID-19 and we struggle, and the only way that the government can sustain is two ways: one you get your development partners, Australia and New Zealand, to bail you out, which they did before with the Asian Development Bank. Or, two, you borrow. And once you borrow you increase the debt ... Now we are in a situation where Cook Islanders can't pay that debt from their mortgages and survive, so they had to look at other opportunities. That's why they went to New Zealand ... There was an exodus of Cook Islanders leaving to New Zealand as soon as the borders closed.

(Participant 4)

On the other hand, the findings also revealed that, in the absence of tourism, participants observed an increase in local innovation and entrepreneurship:

We actually received a lot of great ideas for the economic response plan to address the economic impacts of COVID-19 and the crash of tourism. We just supported a local entrepreneur who is making use of the new fibre optic cable with Esports [online gaming which you can make money from] ... Another great idea is from the University of the South Pacific. They are looking at opening a Pacific indigenous studies school in the Cook Islands ... in the hope that they have international students coming ... There was also a

group of young women that before COVID-19 were working in the tourism industry...And then when they had no jobs, they developed an online platform to assist small businesses do their accounts.

(Participant 5)

Furthermore, the data indicated that through the revitalization of traditional livelihoods, participants were resilient to the impacts that followed the COVID-19 disruption:

The actual situation is that within the last 12 to 16 months people have been resilient. They have planted more in their home gardens ... the mamas have done their crafts ... Those informal sectors have made use of the opportunity during COVID-19 to go back to the land and the sea—back to what was their livelihoods prior to tourism.

(Participant 6)

In the next section, relevant literature is used to support the interpretations and findings from participants' lived experiences during the disruption of COVID-19.

4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The isolation and geographic remoteness of PICs enabled governments to swiftly close their borders in early March 2020 and shield their communities from the transmission of the virus (Connell, 2022). While the Cook Islands reopened their borders 15 months later, in the hope of kick-starting the tourism industry by opening a two-way travel bubble with New Zealand (Radio New Zealand, 2021), Tonga remained closed for nearly two and a half years, only fully reopening on 27 September, 2022 (Government of the Kingdom of Tonga, 2022). In the Cook Islands, the closure caused the tourism sector to collapse, which in 2021 led to a 26% decrease in the nation's GDP (Webb, 2022). In Tonga, the disruption in labour migration caused the suspension of seasonal employment, with reports indicating a drop of 60% in new recruitment intentions in March 2020 (World Bank, 2021). The loss of potential income by cancelled seasonal workers is directly related to the financial challenges experienced by Pacific Islands people who depend on seasonal workers schemes in Australia and New Zealand. According to the World Bank (2021), Tonga had the highest estimated financial losses in total remittances due to cancellations of seasonal worker schemes, nearly doubling the average losses of other Pacific Island nations.

The findings revealed that the global disruption of COVID-19 increased participants' awareness of pre-existing issues linked to tourism and labour migration. For example, respondents in the Cook Islands voiced their concerns of accumulating debt from overinvesting in a volatile tourism sector, which in turn may increase outward migration as Cook Islanders seek greater economic opportunities in New Zealand. This fear was realized in recent history during the Economic Restructuring Programme (ERP) of 1996 which resulted in widespread unemployment and massive outward migration (Alexeyeff, 2011; Bertram, 2018). The increasing financial pressures, mortgage debts, and the "exodus" of Cook Islanders to New Zealand led participants to believe that history might repeat itself. In Tonga, respondents described their concerns about the detrimental impacts associated with the increasing reliance on labour migration, particularly regarding the adverse effects on their local labour force and nutritional health. Within the existing literature, studies support the former by demonstrating how remittances provoke consumerist and non-productive attitudes in migrant-sending communities, which in turn increases the demand for non-nutritious imported goods and discourages the youth from finding jobs in their home countries (Boland & Dollery, 2019; Portes, 2010).

However, the increasing financial pressures and rising unemployment rates forced Pacific Islands people to find alternative income-earning options. The data showed that participants adapted to adverse impacts by revitalizing their traditional socioeconomies which, prior to tourism and labour migration, used to be predominantly dependent on agriculture, fisheries, and informal sectors (Overton et al., 2018; Pomfret, 2016). For example,

respondents in Tonga discussed how the disruption in global trade and limited access to seasonal workers schemes catalysed the revival of the local agriculture sector, strengthened the local labour force, and decreased their dependence on imported goods by increasing the production of import substitutes.

In addition to reviving their agrarian and fisheries socioeconomies through the resurgence of traditional practices, the findings further revealed how participants exercised their agency and social capital in innovative ways that enabled them to use both traditional and non-traditional tools according to their needs and interests. For example, respondents in the Cook Islands explained how employees from the tourism sector were able to transfer their accounting skills to develop an online consulting business to support small businesses in the absence of international tourists. The ability to repurpose resources from the tourism sector, including particular skillsets, has also been supported in recent studies that explored the recovery responses of host destinations in the Asia-Pacific region during the pandemic (Becken & Loehr, 2022; Sigala, 2020). On a similar note, in the absence of foreign consultants to implement ODA projects, participants in Tonga explained how they were able to collaborate with overseas experts through virtual spaces to transfer technical skills and build their local capacity. In recognizing the benefits of virtual training programmes, the World Food Programme (WFP) recently launched a free online Teachers of Trainers course for disaster management (WFP, 2022).

In summary, the findings presented in this article demonstrate how disruption in key global processes increased local innovation, strengthened traditional practices, stimulated local agricultural production, and enhanced collaboration between foreign donor partners and recipient countries to develop the local human capacity of recipient communities. Recognizing the resourcefulness and adaptive strategies of Pacific Islands people in the face of disruption, in addition to listening to their desires to become more self-reliant, the global aid regime can collaborate with PICs to create societies that are more resilient to external disruptions. Rather than repeating history by introducing new ways of integrating Pacific Islands societies into the fold of the globalized economy or providing bail-outs through economic restructuring plans, donor partners should strive to support the agency and self-determination of Pacific Islands people.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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