

Research Summary

Exploring the resilience of Pasifika peoples to a global disruption by developing meaningful relationships with local research partners in the Kingdom of Tonga and the Cook Islands: the heart of my doctoral research journey.

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The prevailing view in international development discourse is that Pacific Islands Countries (PICs) are highly vulnerable to exogenous disruptions, including socio-economic shocks and extreme weather events linked to the adverse impacts of climate change (Birkmann et al., 2022; Lee and Zhang, 2023). This disempowering framing of PICs is largely shaped by western perceptions of vulnerability, success, and wellbeing, which often do not translate to local cultural constructs (Movono et al., 2023). Furthermore, the discourse on vulnerability reinforces the dominant narrative of PICs as externally dependent and passive in the face of global disruptions, stripping Pasifika peoples of their agency and self-determination efforts to engage in the global economy on their own terms. It also negatively impacts their ability to adapt to exogenous disruptions according to approaches they themselves have developed. This study aimed to challenge the reductionist framings of PICs by exploring the adaptive responses of Pasifika peoples in the Kingdom of Tonga and the Cook Islands, through their perceived ability to support the wellbeing of their communities and natural environments during the global disruption of COVID-19.

The theoretical concept from social-ecological systems was applied to explore resilience as a term that is free from norms, transferrable across disciplines, and independent from scale, yet that recognises that people and nature are intricately connected (Cheer et al., 2023; Cinner and Barnes, 2019). In doing so, the methodological approach avoided starting the research from a predefined state of vulnerability by measuring resilience with indices of wellbeing that are externally designed and conceptualised. This study used an interpretive research paradigm underpinned by a constructivist grounded theory methodology and comparative

case study approach to explore the adaptive responses of Pasifika peoples in the Cook Islands and Tonga. Due to the COVID-19 travel restrictions, semi-structured interviews with 25 participants in the Cook Islands and 24 participants in Tonga were conducted by using online video-conferencing technologies such as Zoom. All interviews were facilitated by the development of local research partnerships.

It was found that communities in Rarotonga, Cook Islands and Nuku'alofa, Tonga used various coping strategies, across many social domains of resilience when responding to the compounding shocks that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. The social dimensions of resilience that emerged from participants' lived experiences implied that Pasifika peoples' resilience depended on their access to various forms of social capital, at a community, regional, and international levels. Furthermore, the social domains of resilience observed in this study suggested that the adaptive capacity of the Pasifika peoples depended on their ability, willingness, and agency to influence change, as well as their capacity to organise themselves collectively. These capabilities were required in order to mobilise responses according to their needs and a future desired state of wellbeing. Importantly, the resurgence of traditional livelihoods and a reawakening of cultural identity, community spirit, and sense of "pride of place" were found to be key resilience-building features of Pacific Island societies.

The *Kia Rangatira and Ala 'i Sia, Ala 'i Kolonga Model* illustrated in *Figure 1* offers a graphic depiction of resilience that embodies the lived experiences of Pasifika peoples during a global disruption. The model seeks to answer the questions "resilience for who" and "resilience to what" by acknowledging how global change, power dynamics, and social differentiations at local, regional, and international scales influenced the resilience and self-determination efforts of Pasifika peoples adapting to exogenous disruptions. The four prevailing winds in the top left corner, and the dark waves in the bottom left, illustrate how multiple interacting and compounding global systemic risks interact with each other to produce disruptive external forces that affect the local island communities. On the right side of the Model, the bending, swaying coconut palm tree represents the responses and resilience of Pasifika peoples, which adapt to the powerful influences of global trade, labour migration, international tourism, foreign aid, climate change and extreme physical disasters.



Figure 1. Kia Rangatira and Ala 'i Sia, Ala 'i Kolonga Model

The Model further illustrates how participants' visions of wellbeing are inherently linked to how they perceive resilience (represented by the four coconuts), and how these social dimensions of resilience shape the adaptive responses of Pasifika peoples. As the global disruption of COVID-19 unfolded in various ways across different sectors in the Cook Islands and Tonga, participants responded to the impacts they perceived were the greatest threat to their wellbeing, according to their needs, and in ways that allowed them to reach a desired state of wellbeing that they determined. This hopeful, autonomous and empowered future is represented as the glowing sun in the right-hand side of the model.

The name of the model "*Kia Rangatira and Ala 'i Sia, Ala 'i Kolonga*" was entitled in both Cook Islands Māori and Tongan by participants and friends of participants to respectfully represent the concept of resilience in a culturally responsive manner. In Cook Islands Māori, the model is entitled "*Kia Rangatira*" and in Tongan, the model is entitled "*Ala 'i Sia, Ala 'i Kolonga*". The title *Ala 'i Sia, Ala 'i Kolonga* was collectively gifted by participants in Tonga during my visit to Nuku'alofa at the end of August 2023. After spending a night together sharing food, dancing, laughing, and getting to know each other on a personal level, I asked a few participants what they thought we should name the model. They proposed to entitle their social resilience after a Tongan proverb, *Ala 'i Sia, Ala 'i Kolonga*. This proverb honours the skills of the trapper who was not only skilful in snaring the *heu lupe* (pigeons) but also skilful at cooking the pigeons. In a modern context, *Ala 'i Sia, Ala 'i Kolonga* is a metaphor for those who have the talent and wisdom to overcome any obstacle that comes their way, and who are adaptable in various environments, new places or situations.

The title *Kia Rangatira* was gifted by Tauraki Rongo. I was introduced to Tauraki by the founders of a local environmental NGO in Rarotonga, Kōrero O Te `Ōrau, who participated in this research. After spending an afternoon together in Auckland, Tauraki Rongo generously offered the title *Kia Rangatira* to represent the resilience of Pasifika peoples in the Cook Islands. As Tauraki explained, *Rangatira* means conqueror - someone who is able to conquer any situation by applying the knowledge and experiences gained from their ancestors. This generational knowledge comes mainly from understanding the nature of one's environment, which enabled Pasifika peoples to survive and overcome obstacles and changes for hundreds of years. As such, *Kia Rangatira* means the ability to conquer the changes through one's understanding and ability to pay attention to their surrounding environment.

Similar to how the title of The Model evolved through participatory dialogues with participants and friends of participants, the graphic design of the *Kia Rangatira and Ala 'i Sia, Ala 'i Kolonga*

Model was also designed in collaboration with a local artist in the Cook Islands. Over a three-week period, I engaged in an iterative process of conversations, concept drawings, feedback and refinements with a local artist to create the final model illustrated in *Figure 1*. The imagery of a coconut palm was chosen because of the symbolism and significance of this tree for Pasifika peoples. The coconut palm is not only common across Pacific islands, but it also represents an important source of products (e.g. coconuts, copra, leaves). More importantly, in the context of resilience, the coconut palm tree is well adapted to responding to external forces and disruptions (such as cyclones and tsunamis) and is able to survive such disruptions and continue to flourish. Thus, the coconut tree is used as an analogy in the graphic depiction of the *Kia Rangatira and Ala 'i Sia, Ala 'i Kolonga Model*. In addition, the use of culturally important Polynesian symbols, motifs, and designs that are common in both Tonga and the Cook Islands seeks to honour the local culture and offer a model which is drawn from the local artistic approaches to depicting knowledge, understanding and experiences.

The collaborative and culturally responsive process of developing the *Kia Rangatira and Ala 'i Sia, Ala 'i Kolonga Model* is an accurate representation of the entire research process and embodies the heart of my doctoral research journey. While the disruption of COVID-19 created many challenges for this research, it also presented an opportunity to meaningfully engage with participants and local research partners by developing relationships that are based on reciprocity and respect. It was of critical importance for this research to be guided with the cultural knowledge of my research partners, Dr Rerekura Teaurere and Tokilupe Latu, who both kindly showed me how to place reciprocity at the center of the research journey. They invited me to learn about their cultures, allowed me access to their communities, and helped me develop relationships with participants only after we had established a mutual sense of respect and trust for one another. Furthermore, prior to conducting the research, we ensured that the cultural value of reciprocity would be maintained throughout the study by learning about each other's research interests, exploring local challenges in Rarotonga and Nuku'alofa, and collectively aligning the research aims and objectives according to the realities and needs of the local communities. From the very beginning of this study, Dr Rerekura Teaurere and Tokilupe Latu provided instrumental guidance that increased the value of the research by ensuring that the questions asked were of importance to their people and their natural environment and that the study was conducted in a culturally responsive and respectful manner. This in turn enhanced the quality, credibility and significance of the research findings not only for the participants, communities, local governments, and the greater research on the resilience of small islands states, but also for me as the researcher. On a personal level, the most powerful outcome that resulted from engaging in meaningful relationships that are based

on reciprocity and respect was the emergence of two invaluable friendships with Dr Rerekura Teaurere and Tokilupe Latu.

The gift of reciprocity that Tokilupe Latu and Dr Rerekura Teaurere shared with me spread to all the participants, and even friends and family of participants, across both small island nations. To return the gift of giving, I also extended gestures of reciprocity, including: (1) the involvement of four indigenous Cook Islands youth in photovoice interviews to shed light on the excellent work done by the local NGO Korero O Te Ōrau and empower the voices of local indigenous youth; (2) co-presenting the findings from the photovoice project with the four indigenous youth participants at their first international conference – the Pacific Islands Universities Research Network (PIURN); (3) the contribution of a young artist in Rarotonga who designed the photovoice book and the *Kia Rangatira and Ala 'I Sia Ala 'I Kolonga Model*; (4) the gifting of 40 copies of the photovoice book to various members of the local community in Rarotonga; (5) the co-authorship for two youth participants in Tonga who shared their perceptions on the role of social inclusion for resilience during disaster times in their first ever published book titled “Islands and Resilience: Experiences from the Pandemic Era”; and (6) co-presenting at an international research conference with Dr Rerekura Teaurere and Tokilupe Latu, in addition to publishing two articles together in top-tier journals, *Development Policy Review* and *Frontiers of Sustainable Tourism*. Lastly, when the international travel restrictions of COVID-19 finally lifted, I had the opportunity to travel to both Rarotonga and Nuku'alofa between July and September 2023. During this time, I was able to meet nearly half of all the participants in both small island nations and personally thank them for their invaluable contribution as we shared food, stories, and laughter together.

In summary, the key lesson that I learned throughout this doctoral research journey is that there is a need for an increased understanding of, and respect for, the inherent resilience of Pasifika peoples and their ability to shape a future that works for them, as opposed to an outsider's view of success, happiness, and wellbeing. Pasifika peoples both wish and possess the ability to shape their destinies towards a desired future state that is rooted in their ancestral wisdom and cultural values. By striving to build relationships that are based on reciprocity, trust, and respect, foreigners can learn to engage with Pasifika peoples in a culturally responsive manner where the aim is to support each other, learn from one another, and collectively guide the connectivity of our global society towards a prosperous, inclusive, and meaningful future.

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