

## OPINION

## Lessons for adaptation pathways in the Pacific Islands

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Despite contributing only 0.03% of global carbon emissions, the Pacific Islands region is at the vanguard of climate change impacts and adaptation conversations [1]. Varied aspects of Pacific Islander livelihoods are threatened by climate change, including food security due to predominately subsistence lifestyles (as highlighted in the photograph taken at Marobe market in Vanuatu as Fig 1), and these crises must be addressed through adaptation and resilience building. Local communities across the Pacific Islands region, however, have long prepared for and survived extreme environmental changes [2], managed and protected natural resources [3], and known what kinds of solutions would best support them in their specific local vulnerability context and everyday realities [4]. In this Opinion piece, we lay out the persistent challenges for adaptation in the Pacific Islands before proposing four mutually reinforcing adaptation pathways that could lead to more equitable, sustainable, and impactful adaptation futures.

The first challenge is the persistent ‘deficit framing’ that is often cast over the Pacific Islands region. The dominant narrative is one of negativity, problems, and weakness. Our concern with this framing is that donors, governments, practitioners, and academics uncritically focus on deficiencies, thereby creating ‘problems’ to be ‘solved’ [5]. This can lead to local efficacy and agency being undermined, Pacific Islanders’ autonomous capacity to solve issues being undercut and local creativity and capabilities being stymied. This deficit framing is often perpetuated by outsiders, external parties and donors who tend to fly-in-fly-out and play the consultative role that imparts ‘expertise’ with little regard for local agency.

The second challenge is the way community-based adaptation (CBA) has been used as the panacea for interventions in the Pacific Islands. Funding has been increasingly channelled to the local level to move away from top-down approaches but achieving effective and sustainable adaptation that ensures genuine community engagement has not been straightforward, with many issues emerging [6]. Our recent study, which evaluated 32 CBA initiatives in 20 rural communities across four countries in the Pacific, found that initiative appropriateness was a strength, but that sustainability was a consistent challenge [7].

The third challenge is that ‘adaptation knowledge’ is often tightly held. In the adaptation field, due to significant pressures to be successful and fears around ramifications on funding prospects, success stories are readily shared while the wisdoms and lessons around poor performance are largely obscured. This lack of reflexivity means that mistakes are often repeated by others, wasting precious resources in the process. The fear of sharing poor performance is also stifling reflections on, and the willingness to share, any heterogeneity in adaptation outcomes that can emerge from local-level power disparities. Standardised adaptation outcomes inevitably favour some views over others, thereby reinforcing the vulnerability of marginalised groups (see [8]).

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**Fig 1. While the availability of, and access to, food throughout the Pacific Islands region has been relatively secure—due to subsistence farming, fishing, hunting, and trading and buying products—climate change poses significant threats to food security which needs to be addressed through adaptation and resilience building.** Photographer: Karen E McNamara.

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We put forward a few ways that can contribute to overcoming these challenges and creating adaptation pathways that are more equitable, sustainable, and impactful. First, we emphasise avoiding victimisation and enabling local agency. Vulnerable and marginalised people have the agency and right to develop their own resilience and such recognition is critical [9]. ‘Place-based’ analyses on the active roles of locals and vulnerable groups can help us recognise local agency, as well as understand how diversity in knowledge, institutions and everyday practices matter in producing options but also barriers for achieving resilience [10]. Our research on the experiences of ni-Vanuatu women market vendors in responding to Cyclone Pam and a subsequent drought has showcased how women market vendors play active roles as social capital mobilisers, collectivising and leading forces, adaptation innovators and entrepreneurs, which all contribute to building their own resilience in the face of risk, but also that of their households and communities [11]. We found that we need to better acknowledge and integrate women’s knowledge, capacities and skills in disaster response and recovery policy and programming, but also support women to further develop their capabilities and address underlying vulnerabilities and barriers to avoid feminising responsibility and exacerbating existing or

creating new burdens [11]. In this way, it is critical to move beyond fixed either/or conceptualisations of power and inequalities (i.e., people as either oppressed or the oppressor). We must enable people to express and experience their own capacities as this creates a pathway of analysis that enables agency across and beyond social categories [9].

Second, we recommend that locally led adaptation (LLA) be the driving agenda in the Pacific Islands to overcome many adaptation challenges to date. LLA puts the onus on people in-situ to create their adaptation futures. This could include locals identifying the need for funding and other forms of resourcing as part of their adaptation responses, thereby requiring external actors to become facilitators or enablers [12]. In this way, funding, expertise, and resourcing should be made available to, and be controlled by, locals where required, as well as disentangled from the values and expectations of funders. This approach is a shift away from community-based approaches that largely sees external agencies ‘partner’ with communities, which can have the unintended consequences of eroding capabilities. Instead, adaptation that is ‘led’ by communities is an important shift towards increased agency and ensuring that local knowledge, local resources, and local realities are central [5]. Such a bottom-up approach is important in the Pacific Islands as it can support and use traditional governance systems and better integrate local knowledge for lasting sustainability [13]. Additionally, LLA does not presume that ‘local’ infers ‘community’, thereby overcoming the fallacy of homogeneity in communities and allowing for more creative adaptation entry points.

Building on the above, our third recommendation focuses on the need for locally appropriate alternative entry points for adaptation that go beyond the problematic notion and scale of ‘community’. Given the inherent issues with the normative and restrictive ‘community’ notion, we put forward alternatives that target networks and groups that span different units, thereby allowing for fluid and dynamic boundaries and the use of traditional forms of governance, while also supporting local livelihoods. Examples for the Pacific Islands include: 1) rural technical colleges, with strong and stable governance structures, as sites for adaptation demonstrations and innovation that support extensive adaptation knowledge and skill transfers from these sites to home villages; 2) marketplaces and their ‘collective of vendors’ which have embedded extensive social networks and well-established governance systems that help create diverse and multiple positive outcomes for adaptive capacities; and 3) whole-of-island approaches to ecosystem management and adaptation which enables the creation of co-benefits across multiple ‘communities’ and groups of people [14].

Fourth, and finally, we make an urgent call to the adaptation community to share adaptation performance more readily, even when characterised by limited or poor performance, so that all stakeholders can learn from such experiences. We appreciate that this is difficult, especially when funding prospects can be affected, but we also know that there are no silver-bullets for adaptation, so we must challenge business-as-usual and encourage multi-scalar transformations in the culture of the adaptation sector. We need to shift our mentalities (i.e., towards poor performance as important learning opportunities), encourage and reward proactive sharing and learning, and transform donor culture from short-term funding contracts to longer-term approaches centred on learning and building on poor performance. At the same time, it is also crucial that we expand our thinking on what success means. It could be that adaptation projects reveal unexpected or novel outcomes that might not be captured in constrained and initially intended metrics of success, or it could be that local metrics of success are not included in formal evaluations, thereby calling into question whose interests are being represented [12]. Seeing the value in poor performance may help us shift away from standardised outcomes and create the needed space for more authentic dialogue about whose interests are being favoured in adaptation outcomes [8]. Commitments from existing journals, portals and universities to

publish and report findings of poor performance could also reduce stigma, as could ‘fail forums’ that encourage reflective discussions and learning [8].

Given that funding to the Pacific Islands for adaptation is finite and is expected to diminish and eventually cease [15], efficiencies in terms of impact for money are critical. Through these pathways we propose, we believe that local agency and capabilities can thrive, subaltern knowledge can be embodied, more appropriate and efficient entry points can be capitalised, and poor performance can lead to critical advancements in practice and policy. More equitable, sustainable, and impactful adaptation futures may then be more within our reach.

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