

# It's not “too late”: Learning from Pacific Small Island Developing States in a warming world

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## Abstract

The scale and speed of action required to limit global warming is unprecedented. However, claims that it is “too late” to act or that societal collapse is “inevitable,” must be challenged, particularly in the context of Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS). Here, the serious impacts of sea-level rise may already be unavoidable, but ongoing global mitigation efforts are essential to avoid further catastrophic impacts. First, narratives of despair reinforce social distancing in ways that make it harder to assert claims of shared responsibility for past climate injustices and mutual obligations in the future. Second, claims that it too late to avoid societal collapse overlook significant adaptation efforts already initiated by PSIDS, particularly those led by women and youth, which are informed by distinctive community values of *Vai Nui or Fonofale* (interconnected well-living). These values have sustained PSIDS societies through traumatic histories of colonization, racism, and violence, and are still positioned to support communities suffering now, and when facing future risks.

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## KEYWORDS

adaptation, agency, climate-change, Pacific, Pacific Small Developing Island States, transformation, wellbeing, well-living, youth

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The need for far-reaching action to cut greenhouse gas emissions is urgent (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2018), particularly for Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) for whom the climate crisis has been described as an “existential threat”—where sea level rise for some islands is already four times greater than the global average (Guterres, 2019). However, claims that it is “too late” to act on climate change or that societal collapse is “inevitable” must be challenged (Bendell, 2018; Wallace-Wells, 2019). If even more catastrophic impacts are to be avoided, ongoing global mitigation efforts are vital. Claims that societal collapse is inevitable also overlooks vital adaptation work led by PSIDS communities, informed by traditional values that have guided communities for generations (Barnett & Waters, 2016). While the limits of adaptive capacity are significant (Dow et al., 2013; Roy et al., 2018), assertions of impending collapse risk colonizing

climate debate with narratives of despair, and “othering” the experiences of local communities. In doing so, these narratives neglect the importance of local values of mutual solidarity that have inspired collective adaptation efforts of PSIDS (Nakashima, Krupnik, & Rubis, 2018). The power of this sense of collective agency and solidarity is reflected in the Samoan proverb: *E so'o le fau ile fau*—Each thread derives its strength from being interwoven with others to create a strong fine mat (Faleafa, 2009).

## 2 | TOO LATE FOR WHAT?

The 2018 IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C (IPCC, 2018), highlighted a range of climate impacts in the present and near term, and focused attention on the immediacy of risks and the loss and damage that could be avoided by limiting global warming to 1.5°C above preindustrial levels. This focus disrupted popular impressions that climate change is something that will happen “in the future” to “distant others” (Ballew et al., 2019; Spence, Poorting, & Pidgeon, 2012). Yet subsequent recognition that climate change is already happening, and growing understanding of the scale of efforts required to avert more catastrophic effects, has added to a sense of despair and hopelessness (Nairn, 2019). Strong emotions, including fear, guilt, grief, and shame surround climate change debate (Launer, 2019; Whitmore-Williams, Manning, & Krygsman, 2017). Some argue that society has been unwilling to face up to the extreme risks involved (Wallace-Wells, 2019), while others have called for an Extinction Rebellion (House, 2019). Troublingly, amid claims that societal collapse is “inevitable” and the best response is “deep adaptation,” or learning to grieve and live more simple, individual, meaningful lives (Bendell, 2018), climate debates have also begun to “skew” toward “disaster and death narratives” (Vogelaar, Hale, & Peat, 2018; Wolfe & Tubi, 2018).

While confronting our ecological crisis, and the serious losses and suffering already faced by communities effected by climate change is critical, there are concerning implications in the insistence that it is now too late to act (Fritsche, Cohrs, Kessler, & Bauer, 2012). This assertion can make it harder to assert our shared responsibility for past injustices and mutual obligations to support on-going global mitigation efforts. Effective mitigation requires responsible citizenship and de-centered political deliberation, where citizens in one place and time address the suffering and hardship of distant others and nonhuman nature (Hayward, 2008; Young, 2006). “Too late” narratives risk reinforcing a time-bound concept of political engagement that limits our perception of responsibility. If it is too late, why bother doing anything? Those who have benefitted from fossil fuel use in the past are also responsible for on-going climate loss and damage (Hoad, 2016). In this sense it is not too late for example, for former colonial powers to acknowledge their obligation to act for a fairer future for PSIDS. Nor is it too late to take effective, far-reaching mitigation action to prevent further catastrophic loss (Prasad, 2019).

An overwhelming sense of fear and despair can also trigger social disengagement, and nihilism (O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). A stark example of the consequence of this kind of reaction is expressed in the book, *Deep Green Resistance*:

Those who come after...(are) not going to care how you or I lived our lives. They are not going to care when future generations cannot breathe the air, drink the water, and face ecological collapse; They are not going to care whether we were nice people. They are not going to care whether we were violent or non-violent... (McBay, Keith, & Jensen, 2011, p. 13).

We strongly disagree that how we respond to the climate crisis no longer matters. It should be recognized that invoking an emergency is a tactic often used by powerful actors to force compliance (Klein, 2007). Doomsday rhetoric takes us further, it demands citizens forgo the time it takes to listen to others, to reason collectively, effectively stripping citizens of their rights to a democratic future, as well as the a more sustainable one (Hayward, 2012; Honig, 2009). For example, there is real risk that insistence that we have run out of time could justify a rush to geo-engineering options to address our climate emergency in ways that may simply further exacerbate suffering amongst already vulnerable communities (Preston & Carr, 2018).

## 3 | FACING FEAR AND GRIEF AND ACTING ANYWAY

Many communities, particularly low-lying PSIDS, are already experiencing the devastating reality of climate change. Even if warming is kept to 1.5°C above preindustrial times, it would likely result in a sea level rise of 20 cm by 2,060 and 50 cm by 2,100 (Church et al., 2013). Recent research (Golledge et al., 2015; Rintoul et al., 2018), has identified an ocean heat threshold for the marine-based Antarctic ice sheet sectors and Greenland (Pattyn et al., 2018), at 1.5–2°C, above which the Antarctic ice

shelves are committed to irreversible and widespread collapse, risking 1.5 m global sea-level rise by 2,100 and multimeter global sea-level rise in following centuries. Responding to the threat of sea level rise and the IPCC 1.5°C report, the former President of Kiribati, Anote Tong said:

Our whole nation is only two metres above sea level, and the report shows that the difference between 1.5°C and 2°C of warming is several centimetres of sea level rise. Given that we are already feeling the impacts of rising water, every millimetre counts. ...We are being told that we may have to abandon our islands, the places where our ancestors have been buried, where our children have a home and an identity (Tonge, 2018).

In response to the risks, PSIDS are drawing on traditional values of interconnection and mutual solidarity to inform adaption strategies, mitigation efforts and disaster responses. Local values of “holistic and relational concepts of wellness” are particularly significant in supporting adaptive action (Cammock et al., 2014). Collective values of mutual solidarity are articulated across the Pacific in particular ways locally. For example, in Samoan, well-living is expressed as, *Fonofale*, a world view of interconnection and belonging expressed through the “*fausiga o le Fale Tele*” or metaphor of building a house with core *poutu* (sustaining values) of *alofa*—love and commitment, *tautua*—service and responsibility, and *fa'aaloalo*—respect and dignity (Luafutu-Simpson, 2011). Many Pacific communities share this inextricable sense of being linked to their families, communities and environment, which is also expressed as *Vai Nui*, a sense of mutual interdependence which travels with Pacific peoples wherever they are. *Vai Nui* reflects a world view that, “I am not an individual; I am an integral part of the cosmos. I share a divinity with my ancestors, the land, the seas and the skies. I am not an individual, because I share a *tofi* (an inheritance) with my family, my village and my nation...this is the essence of my sense of belonging” (Paterson et al., 2018). *Vai Nui* challenges the vision of strong societies based on individual well-being, and instead places emphasis on values of mutual support and a respect for human and nonhuman interrelationships in ways that resonate with other indigenous conceptions of collective solidarity (Beling et al., 2018; Hayward & Roy, 2019; Lent, 2019).

These values influence the work of faith organizations, local governments, and community-led engagement in ways that advance transformative thinking particularly for adaptation action (Fletcher et al., 2013). For example Vanuatu is highly exposed to natural disasters (Roy et al., 2018), and yet Vanuatu is now leading the way in establishing an integrated adaption plan to address climate change and disaster risk reduction at national, regional and community levels (Nalau, Handmer, & Dalesa, 2017; Roy et al., 2018). Many Ni-Vanatu, like other PSIDS communities, resist imposed narratives that try to determine the future (McGregor & Yerbury, 2019). The values of mutual solidarity, have informed an array of diverse adaption actions in Vanuatu, including efforts by women to help lead climate action despite dire climate projections of natural disasters, and cascade effects that would have severe impact on livelihoods and economic stability (Roy et al., 2018). To varying extents, other PSIDS governments are also drawing on local values to strengthen their institutional structures to support climate change mitigation and adaptation initiatives in ways that support holistic community development and ensure that resources are distributed to the most vulnerable (SPC, 2016; see Box 1).

There are hard limits to effective adaptation at greater magnitudes and rates of climate change (IPCC, 2018). However far reaching actions by PSIDS suggest that societal collapse is far from inevitable. For example, there is a “wave” of community

### BOX 1 PSIDS: TWO EXAMPLES OF LOCAL ACTION FOR TRANSFORMATIVE ADAPTATION

In Vanuatu, women and youth in the provinces of Sanma and Tafea were supported by Non Governmental Organizations of *Care & Save the Children* to implement food preservation and agricultural projects, that also combined local knowledge and values with curriculum initiatives and gender empowerment (Schoch, Damon, & Holt, 2017). Supporting women and youth by integrating indigenous knowledge and values with science education, and human rights advocacy, can significantly extend the impact of climate adaptation initiatives (Granderson, 2017).

In 2017, a youth-led initiative in the Anglican Diocese of Polynesia (Nuku'alofa) trained 16 young volunteers in Quantum Geographic Information Systems (QGIS) to map areas prone to risks from natural disasters and climate change. The youths then utilized the information and worked collectively to advance community recovery; they identified 22 homes most at risk before Tonga was hit by cyclone Gita, then delivered aid and follow up care (Anglican Tonga, 2018; Jione, 2018).

and governmental action sweeping the Pacific. From villages and local communities to national, regional and international levels, these actions draw on community traditions, collective well-living, and spiritual strengths of interconnection within and across regional and national borders, with the aim of increasing adaptive capacity and community resilience (SPC, 2016; Trundle, Barth, & Mcevoy, 2019). A notable example of adaptive action under extreme circumstances, is Kiribati, which responded to climate change and rising sea levels by purchasing land in Fiji. Subsequent exploration of policies to assist migration with dignity and options to defend local areas, demonstrates how communities can assert agency, even within severe constraints (McNamara, 2015). Similarly, communities like Vunidogoloa in Fiji have already relocated within their own customary area (McMichael, Farbotko, & McNamara, 2019).

Climate change is a daily reality for PSIDS and a point of on-going discussion in media and public discourse (Voyer, 2014). The images and the statistics may be overwhelming and disheartening. But extreme hardship has often been the reality, not the exception, in many Pacific communities (Vogelaar et al., 2018). During British colonial rule, a historic genocide that accompanied the Peruvian slave trade saw many die from epidemics spread in the wake of the ships (Scott, 1991). Drastically, only 15 of 747 Cook Islanders taken in this period, ever returned home (Scott, 1991). Despite such histories of genocide, slavery, illness and land confiscation, Pacific communities have found multiple ways to prevent societal collapse by drawing on values of mutual support (Ataera-Minster & Trowland, 2018). While we heed the caution to not endlessly politicize “hope” to communities that have experienced the horrors of systemic violence (Warren, 2015), it is also important to recognize and respect that communities of the Pacific, like many other indigenous minorities, draw strength from values of “belonging” and collective action (Schlosberg & Carruthers, 2010).

#### 4 | RETHINKING AGENCY FOR COLLECTIVE ADAPTATION AND MITIGATION

The way risks are framed can exacerbate despair or determination. In the case of the Pacific, “smallness is a state of mind” (Hau’ofa, 2008). The ability of individuals to realize strength in unity demonstrates how communities often framed as “vulnerable,” can retain a sense of agency and strong motivation to engage in mitigation or adaptation action (Steiner, 2015). For many in the Pacific, hopelessness is an indulgence we cannot afford to perpetuate. Despite “eco-colonial” attempts to portray Pacific communities as victims, PSIDS communities have long histories as agents of change (McNamara, 2015). Many Pacific scholars are already resisting the narrative of despair portrayed in reports of sinking atolls. Tongan philosopher Malakai Koloamatangi has argued, “We are not people of small atolls, we are explorers of vast oceans” (Hayward, 2017).

When local values are respected alongside the introduction of new advances in science, these values can be a powerful source of support, helping to sustain far-reaching adaptation and mitigation efforts (Fletcher et al., 2013; O’Brien et al., 2018).

##### BOX 2 PSIDS INTERNATIONAL YOUTH ACTION FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CLIMATE ADVOCACY

A youthful Pacific diaspora are drawing on a Pacific world view of *Vai Nui* and *Fonofale* (interconnection and belonging between the human and nonhuman worlds, individual and community), to support their efforts to transform regional and international decision-making processes. The Pacific Youth Leadership and Transformation Trust (PYLAT) was founded in New Zealand in 2010 by young people, some as young as 14, who were concerned about the limited opportunities for Pacific youth to be heard in decision-making. They designed iSPEAK, an ongoing discussion series where Pacific young people are supported to learn and participate in decision-making about political issues they are interested in. Discussion and training is underpinned by values of collective well-living, to support new, grass roots leaders in their capacity to create change. PYLAT also hosted a Pacific Youth Parliament in 2017. The 98 participants who took part from New Zealand and Oceania admonished New Zealand’s efforts on climate change, and called for a range of initiatives to support mental health, education, justice and employment alongside climate action (PYLAT, 2017). Some Pacific youth resolutions (regarding use of Pacific languages and dress), were adopted by New Zealand’s parliament, but PYLAT’s most transformative work is in encouraging Pacific youth across PSIDS to share their voice in all decision making spaces, and to run their own Pacific youth parliaments. A community of practice is growing in this space and we are seeing strengthened PSIDS youth voices on key international decision-making bodies (Radio New Zealand, 2018).

For example some researchers have called for “transformative adaptation” or a “fundamental shift” in values away from “high consumption lifestyles” toward low carbon living (Wolfe & Tubi, 2018). But for many young members of Pacific communities, these transformations are already occurring, and are sustained by traditional values. For example, some young leaders are using new communication technologies to challenge traditional decision-making institutions led by elders, including large “mainstream” churches, while continuing to maintain values of *Fonofale*, or interconnection (Thomsen, Tavita, & Levi-Teu, 2018). “Small voices Samoa” is a popular youth-led project based on principles of traditional oral story-telling, shared via YouTube and Facebook to support young people to undertake mitigation and adaptation efforts (Harris, Papoutsaki, & Kailahi, 2016; and see Box 2).

In many PSIDS communities, respect for traditional values and knowledge has helped build adaptive capacity (Barnett & Waters, 2016; Nalau et al., 2017). As a result, adaptation efforts are shifting from single “conventional” adaptation practices to cross-sectoral and interlinked society-wide responses (Ensor, 2016). From this perspective, societal collapse is far from inevitable (Roy et al., 2018). While there are crucial limits to adaptation, and multi-national action is also essential, research in the Cook Islands, Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu for example has identified how community responses are more effective when there is recognition and respect for local knowledge; faith and religious beliefs; local leadership; and family and community involvement (Fletcher et al., 2013).

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Values of collective action and inter-connected well-living, embedded in the world view of *Vai Nui* and *Fonofale*, have inspired generations of PSIDS communities, and now inspire climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. The social and economic struggles involved in addressing climate change are daunting, but it is not “too late” to act and societal collapse is far from inevitable. Too often Pacific communities are written about by others, or cast as victims by donors, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or international media (McGregor & Yerbury, 2019). There are also still too few opportunities to hear directly from Pacific communities, particularly young leaders. Yet with support, and respect for the nuances of local values, the efforts of Pacific communities can inform far-reaching transformative responses to climate change. More research is needed to understand how climate change will test communities. But new generations, strengthened by local values, and new advances in scientific knowledge, also bring new possibilities for effective climate action. Traditional PSIDS values of *Vai Nui* remind all countries that we share collective responsibilities and obligations and when we act on those responsibilities with resolve, we can avoid yet more catastrophic effects. We close with our opening proverb: *E so'o le fau ile fau*—each thread derives its strength from being interwoven with others to create a strong fine mat (Faleafa, 2009).

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have declared no conflicts of interest for this article.

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