

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Perceptions of local community members towards foreign aid: A case study of Vava'u, Tonga

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Abstract

Foreign aid has arguably played a significant role in the economic development of the Pacific Island countries. Tonga is deemed to have succeeded in implementing the principles of the Paris Declaration of 2005, especially Ownership, Alignment and Harmonisation, by aid funding channelled through state institutions. Nevertheless, it is still unknown if the aid effect has reached civil society, and how community members perceive aid. This article examines the perceptions of community members towards foreign aid, using the case study of the archipelago of Vava'u, Tonga.

KEYWORDS

aid, community, ownership, Pacific Island countries, perception, Tonga

1 | INTRODUCTION

Foreign aid has played important roles in developing countries since the mid-20th century. Among the Pacific Island countries (PICs), Tonga has been known as an aid-dependent nation where as much as 59% of its 2014–2015 annual revenue relied on foreign aid (Bertram, 2015). Tonga is a MiRAB state, where the economy depends on migration, remittance, foreign aid and the public bureaucracy. Arguably, in the PICs, aid inflows have increased economic growth while reducing poverty (Dornan & Pryke, 2017). Nevertheless, whether or not countries like Tonga should rely on foreign aid for economic growth and development is debatable. Presumably, the nation's budget is not sustainable for the long-term if the nation substantially relies on foreign aid. A question is whether or not aid promotes the growth of recipients as it is meant to be. Indeed, Hughes (2003) once stated that aid to the Pacific had failed because it merely increased dependency without any sign of efficiency and effectiveness. Furthermore, foreign aid has so often been used as a political tool by donor countries and institutions to maintain their political/economic powers over developing nations, most of which are former

colonies (Overton, Murray, Prinsen, Ulu, & Wrighton, 2019). For aid donors, the interest of local community members was not necessarily of their concern (Otter, 2003; Wood, 2019). On some occasions, the lengthy and inefficient bureaucracy of recipient countries made aid dysfunctional. Dornan and Pryke (2017) thus conclude that the PICs are still quite distant from the effective use of aid.

The global community has attempted to fix such problems. An example is the Millennium Development Goals adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2000, which increased the total amount of aid and began focusing on improving the welfare of the world's poorest (Overton et al., 2019). The Paris Declaration of 2005 targeted recipient countries to control aid and required donors to align with recipient countries. Since then, some studies have examined to what extent the principles of the Paris Declaration have been implemented and whether or not ownership of aid has been transferred to recipient countries (e.g., Booth, 2012). Such case studies also include a few PICs (e.g., Mountfort, 2013; Pirnia, 2016; Talagi, 2017; Wrighton, 2010). Nevertheless, there is very little research on citizens' perceptions towards aid in recipient

countries (Milner & Tingley, 2013). How do the local community members of a recipient country perceive aid and have they benefited from foreign aid projects in any way? Do they believe that foreign aid is necessary?

It is not easily determined if a country should rely on foreign aid and to what extent, without listening to the voices of local community members, because they are the ones who may substantially be affected by the development of foreign aid projects. The analysis of the perception of local community members is also vital for the government to determine the country's policy and the performance of aid projects (Milner, Nielson, & Findley, 2016). Thus the article examines the perceptions of community members towards foreign aid, using the case studies of two communities on the archipelago of Vava'u, Tonga. This article is part of a larger project examining the effectiveness of aid projects in Vava'u (Haak, 2019). In this article, we only look at the perception of local community members towards the concept of aid.

2 | AID IN THE PACIFIC AND THE PERCEPTION OF CITIZENS TOWARDS AID

Among developing countries, the PICs have received a comparatively high amount of aid despite its small scale of economy and population size (Dornan & Pryke, 2017; Feeny & McGillivray, 2010). The evidence for this is shown in the high proportion of aid value in the PICs' Gross Domestic Product (GDP). For instance, in the early 1980s, foreign aid was accounted for 10% of the GDP of PICs and by 1988 it increased by 20% (Feeny, 2007). Currently, "10 Pacific island countries are among the 25 countries where ODA [official development assistance] is highest as a proportion of national income" (Dornan & Pryke, 2017, p. 386). Aid donors include developed countries and such organisation as the World Health Organization, which offers financial support under the Millennium Development Goals to combat poverty (Feeny & Clarke, 2009). One of the characteristics of aid modality in the PICs is that donors fund projects through the government, as opposed to bypass aid (donors fund projects through non-governmental organisations) (Baldwin & Winters, 2020). The latter usually involves high donor visibility and often higher-levels of the donor (as opposed to government) management and aid is delivered through discrete local projects with a fixed duration and often with smaller budgets. By contrast, the former, often seen in the Pacific, is delivered through forms that have a higher level of government involvement, aiming for support to the primary

education sector or budget support, for instance. In this form, donors are less visible in the community and aid is often part of a strategy to boost government capability and legitimacy (Overton et al., 2019). Under such modality, some PICs have used aid to enhance health and education status while others have attempted to improve governance or infrastructure. Investment in infrastructure from aid has been large, which arguably enhanced economic productivity and increased the flow of goods and services in the PICs (Gibson, Anderson, Ostrom, & Shivakumar, 2005).

Currently, government officials of the PICs are under substantial pressure to deal with foreign aid (Mountfort, 2013; Wrighton, 2010). This is not necessarily because of the scale of aid the countries receive, but due to the active implementation of principles of the Paris Declaration of 2005 and the Accra Declaration of 2008, both of them attempted to increase aid effectiveness. The five principles of the Paris Declaration—Ownership, Alignment, Harmonisation, Mutual Accountability and Managing for Results—are deemed to be critical measures to enhance aid effectiveness. For instance, the ownership principle grants aid recipient countries the power to control over the funds provided, as well as to design, implement and monitor development projects (Mountfort, 2013; OECD, 2008). The alignment principle requires donors to align recipient countries with policies and systems, while the harmonisation principle seeks joint missions and analytical works by donors and recipient countries (Mountfort, 2013, p. 31). Mountfort's study (2013, p. 77) with the government officials of Tonga confirms that the transferring of ownership over foreign aid projects has been successful to some extent, and the government of Tonga is "working more closely with other donors in the region and making aid more effective for Tonga" in exchange of the significant increase of burden on government officials.

However, most existing studies of foreign aid in PICs have focused on issues such as how foreign donors partner with recipient governments (e.g., Mountfort, 2013; Wrighton, 2010). Hence some questions have not been much addressed: whether or not there has been an attempt to transfer ownership to civil society; and the effectiveness of aid has been observed in the community. How do the citizens of the PICs benefit from the aid and how do they perceive it? Given that the government handles a substantial amount of work to make aid more effective under the principles of the Paris Declaration, public support appears to be critical; however, it is still unknown how the citizens of the PICs have perceived aid, and whether or not the citizens believe that they need aid (Overton, Murray, & McGregor, 2013).

Milner and Tingley (2013) argue that the public knows virtually nothing about foreign aid and what they know is inaccurate and in most cases, their opinion about foreign aid does not matter for both donors and recipients. This is partly due to the complexity of the concept itself (Blowfield & Dolan, 2014; Lemke, 2018), or it is because foreign aid and aid policies are beyond their reach (Otter, 2003). However, Milner et al. (2016, pp. 220–221) list three reasons why citizens' attitudes towards aid matter: (a) "attitudes and beliefs may have a strong correlation with how aid projects are actually performing"; (b) "even if these perceptions do not correlate with objective outcomes, they may be important for politics, policy, and development"; and (c) "perceptions about aid and government projects can inform our theories [about the impact of aid] and provide evidence for (or against) them." Blair and Winters (2020) outline two distinct mechanisms on aid and citizens' interactions with the state. First, citizens are willing to cooperate with the government for the public good if they learn that aid improves government performance. Second, aid functions rather negatively, as citizens start questioning the legitimacy of the government, which eventually reduces state capacity. Based on the case study of Uganda, Milner et al. (2016) find that citizens significantly support foreign aid projects and trust aid donors over the government, because foreign aid projects are believed to be more effective, and the government is perceived as corrupt. Milner et al. (2016, p. 221) conclude that aid is often seen as the most relevant alternative to government spending. This is also confirmed by Montinola, Taylor, and Largoza (2020) and Baldwin and Winters (2020), based on the case studies of the Philippines and Uganda. According to Montinola et al. (2020, p. 4), citizens often view foreign aid as "a substitute for government spending in the financing of public goods" and eventually lose insensitivity to contribute to taxes for public goods.

In the Pacific, as stated, donors often align with recipient government priorities, strategies and systems, in accordance with the principles of the Paris Declaration, and aid funding is channelled through state institutions and spending programmes (Overton et al., 2019). Hence at the community level, donors are relatively invisible and it is difficult to differentiate projects funded by the government from the ones funded by foreign aid. As such, foreign aid is not necessarily a substitute for government-funded projects. Also, the scale of foreign aid does not necessarily mean that the government is not trusted. Rather, it is important to gain public support towards the government in order to enhance the performance of aid projects. This is why studying citizens' perceptions of aid is important in the context of the PICs.

3 | THE KINGDOM OF TONGA AND FOREIGN AID

The Kingdom of Tonga is a PIC situated in the southwest Pacific Ocean, consisting of 176 islands, 40 of which are inhabited. Tonga is divided into four major archipelagos: Tongatapu, where the capital Nuku'alofa is located; Ha'apai; Vava'u and Niuas. According to the 2016 census, the population of Tonga was 100,651. It also showed a population decline by 2.5% (2,601) from 2011. The main reason for this is migration to overseas. About 85% of the people in Tonga are engaged in agriculture, mainly subsistence, and in recent years commercial (Malm, 1999). Resources from the land and sea have long supported Tongans' livelihood. Our two case study sites are located on the second most populated archipelago Vava'u, with a total population of 13,738 (2016 Census) (Figure 1). Unlike the other archipelagos, Vava'u is hilly with rugged valleys and terraces. Also located 270 km (167 mi) north of Tongatapu, the climate of Vava'u is much warmer than the rest of Tonga, except Niuas. The warm temperature, high rainfall and fertile soil have developed a thick vegetation in Vava'u (Campbell, 1992). The major economic activities in Vava'u are agriculture, fishing and tourism, with sailing and whale watching being well known. From July to October, Vava'u hosts hundreds of visitors who wish to swim with humpback whales (Fiori, Martinez, Orams, & Bollard, 2019). Of note is that the culture, land tenure system and language of Vava'u is somewhat different from Tongatapu (Poltorak, 2007). Together with the remoteness of the archipelago, these differences sometimes negatively influence the quality of services delivered from the central government, especially in terms of consultation and decision-making, as will be seen in our case studies.

Tonga is an example of a PIC where foreign aid is believed to have achieved economic growth (Dornan & Pryke, 2017). Table 1 illustrates Tonga's major grant aid inflows between 1970 and 2009. Tonga has established partnerships with a number of bilateral and multilateral aid donors, including the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID), the Australian Agency for International Development, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Aid from these organisations has been the major portion of development assistance in Tonga over the past three decades (Tonga Visitor Bureau, 2010). Aid targets span human resources development, public sector, health and sanitation, technical and vocational skills, policy makings, energy, environmental conservation, agroforestry development, tourism, civil aviation and infrastructure development (Government of Australia, 2009; JICA Annual



FIGURE 1 Tonga, Vava'u group and the two case study sites. *Source:* Google Map & Earth 2018 [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Development partner		Aid value (USD\$M)	Aid value (%)
Bilateral	Australia	391.7	30.6
	New Zealand	227.1	17.8
	Japan	232.9	18.2
	UK	53.8	4.2
Multilateral	ADB, WB and EC	280.7	22
Others		92.4	7.2
Total		USD\$1279M	100

TABLE 1 Tonga grant aid inflow 1970–2009

Source: OECD (2011).

Report, 2017; UNDP, 2013). In addition, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has funded cultural awareness, environmental sustainability, disaster risk management, climate change adaptation and the Special Management Area (SMA) projects in small coastal communities in response to the impact of climate change on marine resources (ADB, 2011; TFSP, 2016). Recently China became a significant development partner of Tonga. In 2008, Tonga received a USD\$50m concessional loan from China to reconstruct the buildings in the capital Nuku'alofa that were destroyed in the 2006 riot. In 2010, another USD\$45m concessional loan was granted from China for road and infrastructure upgrades in the capital (World Bank, 2016). In 2017, the two projects were completed and the Chinese government is requesting the loan to be paid back. Of note is that Tonga signed the Joint Declaration on Aid Effectiveness with Australia, New Zealand (NZ) and the ADB in October 2007. This declaration was a regional version of the Paris Declaration, aiming for effective development coordination in Tonga (Mountfort, 2013).

The Vava'u group has also observed a number of foreign aid projects funded by bilateral and multilateral

donor agencies. Such projects include infrastructure establishment, human skills development, health services, disaster relief, technical support and energy use. The two aid projects investigated in our research were both funded by the JICA. The first project is the J-PRISM Solid Waste Management project, which aimed to improve rubbish disposal on the entire Vava'u. Kalaka, right next to Okoa Village, was designated as the official landfill site where all waste shall be brought and dumped, instead of rubbish burnt at each household or littered. The second project is a marine resource management project called the Taunga Island SMA, which established the SMA and the Fish Habitat Reserve in the island community of Taunga (TFSP, 2016). In addition to JICA, this project was supported by ADB, Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, NZAID and UNDP. The two projects were selected as our case studies because they were considered community-based projects, meaning that the projects developed on the site—not necessarily the involvement of community members or consultation taking place in the process, however. As such, we assumed that community members were aware of how the community benefitted from the

TABLE 2 Participants by gender and age

	Women	Men	15–25	26–35	36–45	46–55	56+	Total
Okoa	18 (57.1%)	7 (42.9%)	2	4	5	5	9	25
Taunga	9 (45%)	11 (55%)	2	5	6	3	6	20
Total	27	18	4	9	11	8	15	45

Source: Authors.

aid projects and the community members would be able to express their views on foreign aid. In addition, Vava'u as a remote island group makes an interesting case study to determine how aid effectiveness and ownership extend to civil society.

4 | RESEARCH METHODS

For this research, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted in June–July 2018, in two communities of Vava'u: Okoa and Taunga. To recruit interview participants, we first sought the assistance of town officers, who informed the communities of our project. In each community, respectively 25 and 20 participants were conveniently selected (Table 2). Although remote community members are not always open to outsiders, in our project, community members were supportive and eager to share their thoughts. We presume this is because one of the authors is from Vava'u, community members saw us as a family member and were not hesitant to share information. Interviews were also conducted in Tongatapu with three government officials of the Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Fishery (MoF) and Ministry of Health (MoH). Respectively 11 and 9 questions were posed to community members and government officials (Tables 3 and 4). All interviews were conducted in the Tongan language and later translated into English by one of the authors. As interviews were open-ended, interviewees' answer to a question often covered elements to be asked in other questions. Hence below the results are presented comprehensively.

5 | COMMUNITY MEMBERS' PERCEPTIONS OF FOREIGN AID

Our interviews with the members of the two communities confirm that both aid projects have overall been successful. For instance, the entire island has recently observed less littering, thanks to the J-PRISM project. In Taunga, the community members now have a stronger sense of ownership of marine resources and sustainable resource management.

TABLE 3 Interview questions asked Okoa and Taunga community members

1. What is your understanding of the concept of foreign aid? What comes into mind when you hear the concept?
2. Can you explain what aid projects have done in your community?
3. Did you know that the waste disposal/marine resource conservation project is one of the foreign aid projects? What do you know about the project? How did you come to know it and when?
4. Can you describe the background history of the aid project in your community? What is the aid project about? Where and who came up with the idea of the aid project? When did it start? What is the purpose of it and why was it established in your community? How was the aid project implemented and who monitors it?
5. How do you describe the effectiveness of the aid project? How do you think the project has been beneficial for your community and community members? Have there been any positive/negative outcomes and what are they?
6. Do you or any other local community members participate in the aid project? If yes what are your responsibilities? How have you benefited from the participation?
7. While involved in the project what were the challenges the project faced? How did you deal with it?
8. If an aid project like this stops, would it affect your daily livelihoods?
9. How do you think the community would have looked like if the project had not been initiated?
10. What sort of project would you like to see, if there is another possibility of a foreign aid project? Does it have to be a foreign aid project? Do you think the community can initiate such a project by itself? Do you think you want to participate? In what way?
11. What would be an alternative for foreign aid in the future in regards to the social and economic development of your community?

As discussed, the public is assumed to know very little about foreign aid (Milner & Tingley, 2013); however, the interviewees were able to identify at least one aspect of foreign aid. The interviewees list: a gift from the donor to

TABLE 4 Interview questions for government officials

1.	Describe the nature of your involvement with aid donors.
2.	What is your position and how long have you been in it? What are your key roles within the government of Tonga?
3.	What thoughts come into your mind when thinking about the concept of foreign aid?
4.	Who are the main aid donors you work with and what are the major roles you have with them?
5.	Do you think the aid donors usually listen to your requests and reflect them in the projects? Or do you always prioritise their interest? Can you explain why you think so with examples?
6.	Describe the relationship between aid donors and the government of Tonga.
7.	How important is foreign aid to the government of Tonga at present and in the future?
8.	Do aid donors work cooperatively with the Tongan government system? If yes, in what ways/if no why?
9.	What are the most challenging issues concerning with aid donors as they implement aid development projects in Tonga?

recipient nations; poverty reduction in poor nations; all types and form of assistance from rich to poor countries; a loan from donor nations; help a country gives to another country to solve a particular problem; hazard relief from rich to poor nations and tax money of people in developed countries given. Merely one person from Taunga stated that s/he cannot clearly explain what foreign aid is. Overall, the locals perceived foreign aid as any form of help or assistance provided by overseas countries to Tonga; however, their answers varied regarding whether foreign aid is a donation or loan.

The interviewees were also aware of a few aid projects that took place in their communities. For instance, in both communities, the set-up of water tanks was widely known as the result of foreign aid (72 and 85% in Okoa and Taunga, respectively), partly because of an American national flag label attached on the tank. Likewise, the establishment of solar lights funded by China was well known, although a few of them were unsure whether the project was a foreign aid or national government funded. In Okoa, a few interviewees identified the fruit picking programme in NZ/Australia and the construction of cyclone houses as foreign aid projects, while the community wharf was widely recognised in Taunga. However, no interviewees referred to government budget support or human skills development in the public sector as aid projects, which are key features of aid in the country.

Interestingly, in Okoa, 92% (23 out of 25) interviewees indeed did not know that the J-PRISM Solid Waste

TABLE 5 what sort of aid project do locals prefer in the future (Okoa)?

Type of aid project	#	%
• A new dumpsite project for Vava'u to relocate the Kalaka dumpsite	23	92
• Bridge project to let sea water flow to recover fishing grounds	21	84
• Community hall for women to use for crafting and weaving	20	80
• Agricultural project where donor agency donates plough, fertilisers and seeds for local farmers to grow crops for food and cash	19	76
• Road project to allow a safe accessibility of women to fishing grounds	13	52
• Livestock project where each household members are given live chicks, piglets or sheep to be domesticated as source of livelihood	10	40
• Reliable market for women's handicrafts and fine mats	9	36
• Improving sanitation facilities (proper flush toilets) for villagers	8	32
• Youth project to help avoid drug abuse	7	28

Source: Authors.

Management was a foreign aid project. Instead, they believed it to be an environmental awareness campaign initiated by the government of Tonga, either Ministries of Health or Environment. Two individuals who were aware of it being a foreign aid project recognised so from the label on the dump trucks: "Kindly donated by the People of Japan," or presumed so since a vehicle driven by "an Asian person" always accompanied dump trucks. The rest of the interviewees were informed about the project itself on the radio but did not know how, by whom, and when the project was initiated. On the contrary, in Taunga, 11 out of 20 interviewees were aware that the SMA project was a foreign aid project. They were informed so by the Ministry of Fishery's officials who regularly visit the community. Others presumed it to be a project by the Ministry of Fishery.

An important aspect to note is that the interviewees believed foreign aid projects to be significantly important for community development and listed potential projects they wish to see (Table 5). The result shows that 92% of the interviewees in Okoa preferred to see a project to relocate the current dumpsite from Kalaka (Okoa) to a new site where people and environment are less affected. In Taunga, 16 participants (80%) wished to see a project

to establish a flush toilet for every household on the island, as all households were using pit toilets outside of their house. The establishment of a stable water supply system was also identified by four participants (20%).

In any case, in both communities, the interviewees insisted that community members be consulted or be intensively involved in any future projects (100 and 90% in Okoa and Taunga, respectively). This is because community members are aware of the needs of the community and people than anyone else (Okoa woman, personal communication, June 2018). Some of them expressed this idea aggressively: "Government and donors have no right to ignore local members' views, opinions, and potentials", and 52% of the interviewees questioned why project designers often try to control the entire process, including decision-making based on the limited inspection of the project site:

I totally agree that it is important for community members to participate in any future aid project. Just like what we had on the SMA project...I would like to be involved in decision making, planning, implementation, and management. We may know nothing about development but I am sure we know our community's needs better than anyone else; therefore we have the right to partaking in any development issues that are related to us...this way we feel we own the project. (Taunga woman, personal communication, July 2018).

Community members' wish to be involved in any future project was particularly strong in Okoa (100% while 90% in Taunga). This is partly because they were not consulted when the Kalaka pit was selected to be the official dumpsite under the Vava'u J-PRISM solid waste management project. The people of Okoa had long requested to close down or to relocate the Kalaka dump pit (Okoa man, personal communication, June 2018). They assumed the reason for no consultation was because the project organisers knew Okoa's standpoint against Kalaka continuing operating. This is also presumably the reason why 92% of interviewees in Okoa listed the relocation of the dumpsite as a future foreign aid project. While all participants strongly agreed that the waste management project is an important aspect of development and they all appreciated the initiative of the donor and government, they claimed that the waste management project would be considered successful only if the official dumpsite is located far from where people live. Two interviewees in Taunga did not wish to be involved in aid projects because they focused on farming and fishing and

felt they did not have appropriate knowledge about development, thus wanted to leave responsibility with the government and/or aid donors.

The interviewees were also asked to provide a provision about any alternatives to foreign aid projects. Indeed in both communities, the interviewees were confident with their future without foreign aid. In Okoa, nearly 90% of interviewees (22 out of 25) believed that individual and community livelihood rested upon the hands of the people themselves, despite the country's substantial reliance on foreign aid. They saw foreign aid as a mere portion of community development, or an extra benefit the community enjoys:

If aid stops I think we are still able to make a life by ourselves. It is important not to rely too much on foreign aid but to see it as only an addition to whatever we produce from our land and sea. (Okoa woman, personal communication, June 2018).

Interviewees claimed that some people like to rely on aid because they do not work hard and do not fully utilise the resources they have:

I strongly believe that if foreign aid stops I can still manage to survive with my family. Prior to all the foreign aid projects delivered to our island most families had their own ways of making a life...mostly from the resources in the sea and on our land. We used to grow crops and do fishing for our food and sold the excess in local markets for income. As foreign aid projects started to come in I think most people started thinking that this is how life is going to be like, as the government is going to provide everything for us...however I see most of the aid projects have nothing to do with our individual daily lives...most aid projects do not give us a way to make our own life. ...For this reason, I think aid projects are good but we still have to find our own ways to make a living... (Taunga man, personal communication, June 2018).

I don't think we should heavily rely on foreign aid but should work harder for our own families and communities. ...In the agricultural sector, we can grow more food and cash crops like kava and vanilla...women can weave more mats and tapa...they can also make use of the fishery resources and so

forth. Foreign aid itself is a good thing but we should never rely on it as our source of life. I think we should see foreign aid projects as just an addition. (Okoa woman, personal communication, June 2018).

Importantly, the interviewees have a clear idea of how their community could sustain their livelihood without foreign aid. They identify the primary industry as alternatives to foreign aid and they argue that the country can live without substantial reliance on aid. In addition in Okoa, 17 (68%) interviewees, mostly women, pointed out women's handicrafts (mat weaving and tapa making) to be a key alternative to aid. Some of them even argued that merely the change of their mindset would enable them to survive, as they used to be:

My wife and I run a small business. First, I went overseas and worked for six months. The money I earned enabled us to run this shop. I also do farming and fishing. With the money I saved, I bought a car to provide a taxi service. The daily income is just enough for my family to have a decent life. There are many different ways we can do to make a good living but sometimes people are too satisfied with what they get from aid. (Okoa man, personal communication, June 2018).

6 | GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS' PERSPECTIVES

Finally, we interviewed three government officials (MoE, MoF and MoH). While the Ministry of Finance and National Planning is currently responsible for the overall management of aid in Tonga, there are numbers of bilateral and multilateral aid channelled through these three ministries. The individuals interviewed are in a position to oversee all the aid programmes coming into respective ministry. In our interviews, all of them shared the view that foreign aid is an essential component of the ministry's annual budget and it is a reliable source. Aid dependency is inevitable for a country like Tonga because of its smallness, remoteness and vulnerability to natural hazards:

Foreign aid plays a significant role in the annual budget. It fulfils most of the MoH financial gaps. Currently, the Australian government agrees to support a four-year budget plan with the MoH to fight chronic diseases in Tonga. The WHO also agreed to assist a

two-year budget that caters for scholarships for staff, medical supplies that cover the ministry's health care activities and also conducts training within the ministry. (MoH official, personal communication, June 2018).

When they were asked if the country should keep relying on foreign aid in the future, they stated that the country needs to move forward:

In the future, foreign aid will still be crucial to the MoF because the ministry's future development plans will heavily depend on it. However, the government of Tonga and the MoF should see foreign aid as an extra addition to the national budget rather than having it as one of the main sources of income for development. (MoF official, personal communication, July 2018).

Foreign aid is a tool that strengthens and allows people to take care of them... I also think foreign aid acts as a stimulus that allows people to start a project or activity on their own; ...however, it never means to make people lazy and dependant on it entirely. (MoH official, personal communication, June 2018).

7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the Pacific, the existing literature on foreign aid has predominantly looked at issues such as how foreign donors partner with recipient governments, or how they channel money through the private sector or NGOs. Tonga has been no exception to this. Although some empirical studies have positively evaluated the implementation of the Paris Declaration principles into the country (Mountfort, 2013; Overton et al., 2019; Pirnia, 2016), their focus has been limited within government sections and its performance with aid. The existence studies also did not look at the perceptions of community members in a relatively remote part of Tonga about aid and its place in their development. Hence as one of the very first studies on foreign aid effectiveness in PIC communities, this article attempted to fill this gap, in the interests of bottom-up accountability and a sense of local ownership of foreign aid. Our findings are summarised as follows.

First, in both case study sites, community members were overall positive about the outcomes of the projects. However, they are not necessarily happy with the degree of their involvement and influence on the projects. For instance, in Okoa, many interview participants were unhappy with the location of the dumpsite and their voices were not heard in the decision-making process, which suggests minimal community ownership of the project and the limited reach of effectiveness of aid to civil society. Our research did not fully investigate the reasons for this minimal ownership and limited reach. Hence, there still needs further research on whether this is because of the remoteness of the case study sites, or because active community involvement in projects has been overlooked while donors have focused more on collaborating with governments, in accordance with the Paris Declaration principles—alignment and harmonisation.

Second, as the interviews with government officials show, for the moment, the country's budget cannot sustain without aid, which suggests that the citizens are indirectly benefiting from aid through government services. Unlike some countries, in Tonga, the fact that the country substantially relies on aid does not mean the corruption of the government or the citizens significantly support aid over their government (cf. Milner et al., 2016). Rather, our interviewees appear unaware of aid funding channelled through state institutions and spending programmes. Even in the case of the solid waste management project in Okoa, 92% of them were unaware that it was funded by JICA and some gave credit to the government instead, although this project took place in the community—arguably more visible to the public and higher possibility of the community benefiting from the project. Our findings run counter to the argument that the public knows virtually nothing about foreign aid (cf. Milner & Tingley, 2013); however, there still needs research on how to enhance public awareness on aid in Tonga.

Third, with regard to the perception towards aid, while the interviewees list some potential aid projects they would like to see in their community (see Table 5) and argue that their voice should be reflected, the majority of them argue that the country should sustain without aid, and they believe that the country can. These interviewees' self-reliant attitudes can be seen as positive because it means aid independence of the country. However, it is uncertain if the interviewees will retain the same view after having learnt about the substantial portion of aid in the country's budget, and how greater community awareness and community ownership of aid projects may change their perspectives towards aid. Furthermore, our interviews with government officials were

limited to the role of aid in the country and its relationship to donors. Hence it is necessary to investigate how the government attempts to listen to community voices and extend ownership to the community.

How are then such perceptions of citizens on aid important for politics, policy, and development of the country (cf. Milner et al., 2016), and do citizens need to be enlightened more on aid? It has been clarified that the demands of administrative tasks on aid among have been placing a heavy burden on the government officials of Tonga (Overton et al., 2019). Also, as Mountfort (2013) states, capacity constraints are still a major barrier for recipient countries. Given that the interviewees wish to be actively involved in aid projects, Tonga may have a high possibility to develop government and civilian collaboration over aid project administrations. If the government attempts to closely communicate with citizens including those on remote island groups and enhance the awareness of the structure of aid projects, citizens can support and share some tasks (cf. Blair & Winters, 2020). In this way, the involvement of community members in the planning and implementation of community-based aid projects may become possible. As such, the ownership of aid and aid effectiveness will extend to the community and civil society.

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