

How can aid be decolonized and localized in the Pacific? Yielding and wielding power

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Abstract

Motivation: The colonial legacies of aid and development in the Pacific continue to be at the centre of policy debate. The ideal is to decolonize and localize the practice of aid and development. However, decolonization and localization have become highly contested in their definition and proposed practical approaches. We call decolonization and localization “decolocalization.”

Purpose: This article aims to explore perspectives and proposals for decolocalization in the Pacific Islands.

Methods and approach: We talked to five key informants, all local to their islands, all with considerable development experience; we held a focus group; and we combined these insights and learnings with our own experience as Pacific Islanders engaged with development. Our analysis is reflexive.

Findings: Development practice in the Pacific Islands typically overvalues external Euro-centric knowledge and undervalues local knowledge. Most aid and development discourse has stressed financial figures, charts, and statistical assertions overwhelmingly from a donor perspective; Pacific non-statistical, human, and embodied contextual realities are overlooked or discounted. Hierarchies are created that privilege outsiders and discriminate against islanders.

A practical operationalization of decolocalization can begin with the recognition and practice of outsiders yielding and insiders wielding power.

Policy implications: We recommend decolocalization as a framework for studying and analysing colonial vestiges in Pacific aid and development. Decolocalization can be practised by outsiders yielding and insiders wielding power in aid and development.

Decolocalization is not an ultimate solution to a highly complex issue, but it offers a conceptual position; one that allows Pacific Islander scholars, thought leaders, and aid and development practitioners to further unpack the nuances and issues around aid and development from a Pacific Islander perspective.

KEYWORDS

Aid, decolonization, development, localization, power

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The Pacific region houses 10 of the world's most aid supported countries (Wood et al., 2022). Australia is responsible for 43% of all Pacific aid (Lowy Institute, 2023), but other significant multilateral organizations such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and other countries have a significant imprint in the region. Moreover, foreign aid, its effectiveness or otherwise (Wood et al., 2022), so contested and political, is an inevitable component of development in the Pacific. However, it is instructive to note that the ecosystem of international development is premised on historical and racialized structures of domination (Tawake et al., 2021).

The aid and development agenda has been viewed from within the Pacific, as a neocolonial phenomenon ruled by predominantly white, foreign, self-proclaimed experts. More often than not, local actors, leaders, and development practitioners are overlooked or dictated to by their foreign counterparts. This has reinforced the legacies and varied histories of colonization, resulting in unconscious or unintentional structures, systems, and instances of subjugation of local actors, leaders, and development practitioners. Similarly, local knowledge systems and context-specific insights are forgone, in favour of foreign expert assumptions or work-related correlations. This poses a challenge for Australia as the Pacific's largest aid broker. In the recent past, Australia has been infamously labelled a "Boomerang Aid" actor in the Pacific (Anderson, 2012; Shek, 2009; Werden, 2009). It has been accused of committing a substantive proportion of its aid to Australian firms, contractors, and subsequently nationals in the face of capable and at times overqualified local actors, leaders, and development practitioners. This inherent problem produces an unequal and neocolonial landscape that manifests itself in a variety of consequences. These consequences, as detailed later in the article, include: lacking contextual insight, unequal individual privilege checks, and unequal value afforded to local actors, leaders, and development practitioners. Given the loaded, neocolonial, and racialized structure of aid and development, the authors propose decolonization as a conceptual conduit to help address the problem. Decolonization is an amalgamation of the two terms of decolonization and localization, which are defined and clarified later in this article. Within this conceptual positioning, the practice of "yielding and wielding" power introduced by Tawake et al. (2021), foregrounds the need for locally led development and helps operationalize decolonization at an institutional and individual level. The authors argue that it is not an ultimate solution to a highly complex issue but that it does provide conceptual scope for Pacific Islander scholars to develop and operationalize overcoming the neocolonial legacies of aid and development. Going forward, critical policy considerations for aid and development in the Pacific may need to consider the decolonization agenda and process.

To help explore and unpack this discussion, this contribution uses the methods detailed in the next section with the participants engaged for this study.

2 | METHODS: PARTICIPANTS AND SELF-REFLEXIVITY

For this paper, the authors interviewed five Pacific Islanders (one male, four female) and conducted a focus group discussion with three people. The authors also reflected on their own experiences as both beneficiaries of Australian aid and from being involved in aid-funded projects both in Australia and in the region in various capacities. The five people interviewed are between the ages of 30 and 40. Three of them are married with children, while two are not married. Of the five, two are currently employed while three have taken study leave to pursue postgraduate studies. Between them, they have over 40 years of experience working in the aid and development space. In the last six months, the authors have been invited on numerous occasions to share their insights on the topic of doing development in the Pacific with Australian graduate diplomats and aid professionals. Through this exchange and experience, the authors have been dubbed as cultural translators. This is an appropriate term as the authors traverse the spaces of the development elite, while studying, working, and surviving in their discourses. Their positions as Pacific researchers who have received aid through scholarships, who have observed aid programmes operationalized in their local

context, and who have been employed in various aid-funded jobs equip them with deeper formal knowledge derived from these experiences. It is with this informed framework that the authors analyse, critique, and reflect on the discussion of aid in the region. This approach of systematically analysing our own collective experiences is also known as autoethnography. As a method, it is “both process and product” (Ellis et al., 2011). The overarching methodology that framed the methods discussed was centred on acknowledging the context and relationality of the Pacific, specifically through *Tok stori* and *Talanoa* (Aanae, 2019; Sanga et al., 2018). As such, participant size was enriched by the significant depth of reflexions and data provided, which were framed within the mentioned methodology.

3 | WHAT IS DECOLocalIZATION?

Decolocalization is an amalgamation of the terms “decolonization” and “localization.”

Colonialism and development as Western humanitarianism are both bound up in what Lester and Dussart (2014) described as a historical paradox. The paradox lies in the historical shift whereby colonial powers were intended to govern humanely and to protect, while simultaneously invading and stealing indigenous land and its people (Lester & Dussart, 2014). The history and legacy of development, as it is now known, is steeped in colonization and the hypocrisy of humane colonial governance. Development being steeped in colonialism requires decolonization. Decolonization is the process of unpacking colonial ideologies, ideals, and practices that privilege the legacy of colonization and Westernization, at the cost of local or indigenous peoples' values, principles, and approaches coupled with their knowledge systems (Cull et al., 2018, p. 7; Fellow et al., 2021, p. 13; Peace Direct, 2022, p. 3). Localization is the creation of meaningful engagement with the local leaders, national actors, and agents in elevating capacity and increasing funding (Peace Direct, 2022). Localization focused on humanitarian co-ordination in the backdrop of the 2016 “Grand Bargain,”¹ which subsequently evolved into three key areas. These include the support for efforts to increase funding access to local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), endorsing minimum standards to strengthen capacity sharing, and the participation of local actors in leadership of humanitarian co-ordination (Peace Direct, 2022). The introduction of localization in the humanitarian arena without a clearly positioned definition beyond that area has made it susceptible to wide-ranging critique. One was set out by Zadeh-Cummings (2022), arguing that localization mirrors coloniality, a direct claim that localization in itself is neocolonialist. Part of this critique lies in the fact that local structures are expected to mimic the international humanitarian systems, which have yet to be fully decolonized (Zadeh-Cummings, 2022). As such, the local mirroring of international humanitarian systems risks embracing the historical legacies of colonization and its consequences. This exposes localization to claims of superficial approaches in empowering local structures and interests. For instance, Peace Direct (2022, p. 3) has outlined that there is a risk of international NGOs relisting their country offices as “local” as an attempt to “localize” national office labels. In addition, this would see international NGOs position themselves to access greater funding at the cost of smaller, locally led organizations (Fellow et al., 2021, p. 14). Aside many other critiques of the concept of localization, it is evident that the broadly contested definition of localization has impeded a corresponding focus on systematic and structural matters of historical, racial, colonial, and neocolonial legacies in development.

Considering the broad and highly contested notions within localization as a concept, it is important to clarify what localization means and how it is positioned within this article. Here, localization is taken to be a form of grounded and locally led development. As Tawake et al. (2021) have argued, this follows not only the language, but also the practice of ‘yielding-wielding’ power within the aid and development sector at an organizational, systematic, and individual level. In this regard, the approach of “yielding/wielding” power acknowledges and unpacks the historical legacies of racial discrimination, colonial and neocolonial domination, and its subsequent power asymmetries. In essence, this form of grounded localization cannot prevail without the recognition and acceptance of the need for decolonization in

¹The “Grand Bargain” was an agreement launched in 2016 between large donors and humanitarian organisations, in an effort to provide more access to people in humanitarian action for improved effectiveness and efficiency.

the aid and development sector. This recognition and acceptance serve as a guiding framework for grounded localization. Hence, the authors view grounded localization or locally led development as a tool and means of operationalizing decolonization. Since localization as a term is highly contested and woven with significant threads of domination, it is essential that it is framed by the recognition and acceptance of decolonization. Therefore, an amalgamation of the two terms as decolonization provides a suitably consolidated reminder or anchor that localization is grounded in the need to recognize and accept decolonization at an organizational, systematic, and individual level.

The debates on neocolonialism in the aid and development sector have been ongoing and are likely to continue, given the varying complexity of layered interests and institutional constructs (Durokifa & Ijeoma, 2018; Langan, 2017). However, it is undeniable that aid and development come with veiled interests, creating circumstances of dominance and subjugation (Durokifa & Ijeoma, 2018; Langan, 2017; Sagoe, 2012). These can include global agendas that appear to unrealistically pressure and inappropriately expect national and local structures to measure up to internationalist metrics of development progress (Durokifa & Ijeoma, 2018). In these instances, global institutions and agendas, and global north country dominance, are visible and often accused of neocolonizing aid and development with loaded interests. In the Pacific region, it has become more specific in recent times, focusing on Australian aid and development interests. Tawake et al. (2021) have taken this further by highlighting the dynamic of these contentions between Pacific Islanders and Australians as being between “white” and “black and brown” actors, within the aid and development sector in the region. It is argued that these actors or agents and institutionally structured systems effectively embody generations of inherited legacies of colonial and neocolonial dominance at one end with those who are subjugated at the other.

4 | LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT AND CONSIDERATIONS

Craney (2020, p. 191) broadly defines locally led development or locally led projects as those “owned, negotiated, and delivered by locals.” Yet Craney (2020) acknowledges that the local is very much contextual. Using the Pacific-based Green Growth Leader's Coalition (GGLC) as a case study, Craney illustrates how locally led initiatives in the Pacific use the educated elite as enablers. This highlights a possible conflict of the “local” being understood in relation to how grassroots programmes should be targeted to address their livelihood struggles, which local elites may not experience or understand. In essence, the livelihood struggles at grassroots level differ markedly from those of local elites due to educational and professional access. However, it is instructive to note that local elites still have considerably more grounded grassroots access and connections than their expatriate counterparts. In addition, Pacific elites' (usually well educated, well connected citizens in governmental and non-governmental positions) engagement with development issues in their Island countries is cross-cutting and context-specific to Pacific societies and leadership. Another facet of locally led initiatives (projects and or programmes) is when the local (domestic) project has the agency to seek funding suited to their programme agenda and reject funding that conflicts with their approach. This is the case with Papua New Guinea's The Voice Inc (TVI), an organization created by UPNG law students in 2008 “as a way for students to look within themselves to discover their unique personalities and unleash the gifts and potential that lies dormant within them” (Kiomat, 2012). TVI is an example of a local NGO that “seeks greater financial sustainability without becoming dependent on any one donor” (Roche et al., 2020).

It is established that actors in the aid industry—the workers from the donor and recipient countries—operate in two “different worlds” (Spark, 2020). In addition to disparate salary and benefit packages, terminology used in this sector such as “expat,” “advisor,” and “consultant” further augment these hierarchical dimensions. Hence, decolonization in this space entails a concerted effort to minimize and cancel reproducing these hierarchies. It is about having cultural and racial awareness of power, agency, and influence in development organizations. Seasoned practitioners and academics in development articulate the need to reflect and self-position in the process of decolonization at various levels (Tawake et al., 2021).

5 | PACIFIC DEVELOPMENT: ENGAGEMENT AND ENTANGLEMENTS?

Pacific aid and development encompass a wide variety of sectors, including, but not limited to, humanitarian assistance, rehabilitation, gender, education, etc. These sectors have experienced various degrees of progress and aid effectiveness. Wood et al. (2022) have argued that there is potential in addressing Pacific aid effectiveness through “investment in contextual expertise” and the avoidance of “geo-strategic distractions.” These two notions of contextual expertise and geo-strategic distractions have been viewed as challenges in Pacific development engagement. The need to know the Pacific context and that of specific countries was expressed by all the informants in this article. These ranged from the recognition of individual Pacific-specific contexts to an understanding of local and national governance cycles. For instance, an interviewee described to one of the authors in February 2023 the reality of the contrasting individual contexts experienced by a Pacific Islander woman working in an Australian aid office, catching public transport and manoeuvring security risks, compared to white Australian counterparts who have security-aided transport. The privileges afforded to the white Australian worker were less of an issue than the pressure that locals felt to get to the office, working the same hours and unscheduled times as their Australian counterparts, without the awareness of unequal security risks, was highlighted as unfair and unrealistic. This example echoes the previously mentioned unequal and neocolonial landscape as experienced at the individual level in aid and development.

For governance or specifically local or district government cycles, another February 2023 interviewee told of the need to understand the intentional complacency of local governance approaches to scheduled aid assistance, which often neglects infrastructural maintenance and the upkeep of projects. As such, there was a strong recommendation for a “needs basis” for aid support rather than routine aid engagement. A needs-based focus would look to meet local needs rather than being externally designed development support, which often becomes incompatible with local priorities. The issue of geo-strategic distraction, is seemingly more and more inevitable in the current context of escalating geo-strategic insecurity, and which underpins Australia's defence discourses. This further undermines the effectiveness of aid and development in the Pacific, because interests tend to be weighted with “mixed motives,” as Wood et al. (2022, p. 21) aptly put it. An example would be Fiji's Black Rock military and defence facility, which was rebranded by the Australian government as a Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief Camp, after the Chinese had demonstrated keen interest in supporting the development of such a camp (Ivarature, 2023; Tarte, 2021). The facility has a dark past in Fiji, because at the height of the 2006 Bainimarama Coup people were allegedly detained and tortured at the location (Amnesty International, 2016). Now the location has been rebranded within the humanitarian framework of development, while conveniently consolidating a military and defence infrastructure relationship for Australia. The mixed and conflated motives have raised concerns among civil society actors, while questioning the extent to which the military facility can support genuine humanitarian and rehabilitation efforts. These instances of lacking contextual understanding and geo-strategic distractions are underpinned by the need to acknowledge and unpack the colonial positioning not only on an individual level but also within the focused framing of the Pacific region as a whole (Fry, 2019). The issue of contextual expertise speaks to the need for grounded localization. Furthermore, the practice of “yielding and wielding” power (Tawake et al., 2021) requires an organizational and individual initiative and repositioning.

The issue of unequal value afforded to local actors, leaders, and development practitioners has been expressed and observed within the aid and development space. As noted by Taylor and Middleby (2022) “the Western aid paradigm itself has become akin to a giant Ponzi scheme, in which a significant proportion of aid is pocketed by aid intermediaries...” Similar to the earlier claims of Australian aid and “Boomerang Aid,” these “aid intermediaries” are often seen as white, privileged and, as perceived from within the Pacific, underworked and underqualified but lavishly overpaid and overly lauded. The deep-rooted aid and development systemic and structural requirements privilege foreign aid professionals, despite the capable and often well qualified local actors, leaders, and development practitioners. Warne Peters (2020) similarly argues that the underestimation of what she describes as “in-country implementation agents” results in a form of self-sabotage of the development industry. Warne

Peters (2020) further argues that the development industry must “revisit and reassess its work and its workers.” In general, this results in an unequal valuing of locals and local knowledge systems that provide more contextually informed insight into aid and development approaches. As such, decolonization foregrounds the need to acknowledge this ongoing colonial legacy of devaluing locals, while emphasizing grounded localization. In the language and practice of “yielding and wielding” power (Tawake et al., 2021), redress is possible in enabling a more equal value oriented aid and development landscape.

6 | LOOKING AHEAD

Decolonization provides a guiding ideological framework that requires a continued recognition and understanding of the historical legacies of colonization: systematic, structural, and racial subjugation. This ideological sensitization of decolonization allows for the grounding of localization or locally led development, as well as the need for wielding and yielding power and roles. In effect, decolonization is grounded localisation that is anchored in decolonisation, through the language and practise of “yielding and wielding” power as outlined by Tawake et al. (2021).

In Papua New Guinea, TVI epitomizes a locally led initiative that seeks a more self-determined position beyond the aid–donor relationship. This operationalizes the idea of wielding locally led and positioned power at an organizational level. The context-specific insight is driven from within the community, in this instance by University of Papua New Guinea law students. As with context-specific driven approaches, an understanding of local government or district government cycles and the approach of local governance structures is also critical. As conveyed in the course of one of the interviews conducted in February 2023, local government or district structures can easily exploit routine aid and development engagements that are often anticipated by problematic local actors. Therefore a needs-based engagement that emphasizes the priorities of the communities beyond the local government actors and structures would be more appropriate.

The troubled history of the Black Rock facility in Nadi, Fiji, underlines the challenge posed by a lack of decolonization in aid and defence development in the Pacific. It is evident that heightened geopolitical tensions lend themselves to awkward forms of development, which may be conveniently labelled as humanitarian forms of infrastructure but are more like a defence outpost or a military co-operation base. In this sense, the human rights abuse histories in these locations and the siren call of what Wood et al. (2022) term as “mixed motives” in aid and development are inevitably mixed with the increased geopolitical insecurity of donor countries. The need to acknowledge context-specific insights and unpack “mixed motives” in aid, defence development, and diplomacy, are an additional requirement for decolonization in the Pacific.

Individual or self-positioned privilege checks resonate with the unequal security realities at work described above. This underpins the colonial legacies of privilege and unintentional biases that are often unexamined in aid and development work. Decolonization as a conceptual framing to enable the acknowledgement of these submerged realities necessitates the operationalization of “yielding and wielding” power (Tawake et al., 2021). Overall, this requires these aid and development spaces to be decolonized, localized, or locally led.

Finally, the issue of unequal value afforded to local actors, leaders, and development practitioners fits within the claims around “Boomerang Aid,” whereby donor country nationals are better rewarded and more highly valued. Certainly, arguments around donor country taxpayer entitlements have been informally used to justify the unequal value afforded to local actors, leaders, and development practitioners. However, this justification is flimsy in light of the extensive Pacific credentials, capacity, and contextual insight that are all too often overlooked. There is a long-standing need to make decolonization central to aid and development so that equal value is given to local actors, leaders, and development practitioners. The continued delay over the implementation of a decolonization agenda in policy consideration will breed a deeper cynicism toward aid and development, as expressed by Taylor and Middleby (2022) in their use of the phrase “giant Ponzi scheme.”

Decolonization is not a solution in itself to a highly complex issue but it does offer a conceptual position from which to work, one which offers solid ground for Pacific Islander scholars, thought leaders, and aid and development practitioners, to look further into the nuances and issues around aid and development from a Pacific Islander perspective. This is especially so since most of the aid and development discourses emphasize financial figures, charts, and statistical contributions that derive overwhelmingly from a donor perspective. Perhaps unwittingly, the Pacific non-statistical, human, and embodied contextual realities are overlooked or not well positioned enough to balance the ongoing discourses. Therefore, the conceptual positioning of decolonization offers much-needed scope in this area, while restating the need to acknowledge and accept decolonization, grounded localization in locally led development, and the language and practice of “yielding and wielding” power, as Tawake et al. (2021) so powerfully put it.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data not shared.

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