

Social Inclusion and Resilience



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Abstract In interrogating the dynamics of social inclusion in small island communities and how that influences peoples' resilience to sociopolitical and environmental changes around them, this chapter examines two imaginaries about island societies, namely, the romanticising of island customs, traditions and ways of life and the homogenous framing of small island communities. We challenge the unnuanced and dichotomous narratives that often dominate discussions about social inclusion by adopting an intersectional approach. This approach seeks to explore the complex and dynamic power relations within and between communities. We aim to develop a deeper understanding of why there are often unbalanced levels of resilience among particular groups of people or households within a community and how social mechanisms enable inclusion and/or perpetuate the exclusion of different groups. We draw on three case studies to examine resilience differentials across several island geographies: (1) gendered aspects of livelihood dynamism in Timor-Leste, (2) challenges for youth engagement in Tonga, and (3) indigenous and

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migrant relations in coastal communities in Vanuatu. We further use the impacts of COVID-19 to understand in our case studies the multidimensional nature of social inclusion and how interactions between different groups under stress can materialise in intensified inclusion or exclusion of social groups.

Keywords Social inclusion · Intersectionality · Tonga · Timor-Leste · Vanuatu

In the context of small-island societies in lower-income countries, the ability of a community or group of people to overcome setbacks, disruptions and/or challenges depends for a large part on their capacity to act collectively and make decisions that are representative of most, if not all, voices (Jentoft et al. 2018). Resilience in these contexts then depends on how ‘well’ people live alongside one another in their everyday lives. Much has been written on social capital in the context of small-island, resource-dependent communities involved in, for example, tropical small-scale fisheries where dependence on common-pool resources requires collective management for sustainability outcomes. These analyses have usefully highlighted characteristics conducive to sustainability of the communities involved regarding leadership strength, social capital and community cohesion (Adger 2003; Bodin and Crona 2008), or of the resource base being drawn upon, such as clear boundaries of resource, connectivity of resource stocks and the presence of access rules (Ostrom 2000; Agrawal 2002). Given the limited capacity of human agency to influence the entire complex social-ecological systems that determine resource availability, community resource management is often preoccupied with managing social dynamics rather than resource stocks. In this context then, successful collective action that sees communities being able to organise themselves, integrate diverse and competing interests, mitigate marginalisation and resolve conflicts is fundamental to ensuring local resilience and local well-being (Folke et al. 2002). When crises occur, the structural inequities and systemic marginalisations which exist within and between communities can be exposed (McCarthy 2013; Sultana 2021), making the level of social inclusivity in decision-making and broader governance processes central to responding to disturbances equitably and sustainably.

While there is a dearth of literature that interrogates the definitions of ‘community’ and how these subsequently manifest into development and conservation practice, there is a basic consensus that communities are heterogenous (Agrawal and Gibson 2001; Stone and Nyaupane 2013). Accepting this admits that social inclusion is therefore multidimensional. Often, however, discussions around social inclusion are portrayed along binary societal divisions, e.g. between women and men, or between rich and poor. Social inclusion arguments, therefore, often relate to a power division between two groups and, in doing so, insufficiently recognise broader social relations and power dynamics. Intersectionality provides an alternative lens through which to examine social inclusion and resilience by exploring how ‘social identities such as race, class, gender, ability, geography, and age interact to form unique meanings and complex experiences within and between groups in society’ (Hankivsky and Cormier 2010, p. 217).

An intersectional approach reveals how the impact of crises cannot be understood in isolation or through the experience of single groups. Rather, they must be considered as overlapping disturbances which impact people across social groups, identities and locations (Sultana 2021). The ability of people to cope and adapt in the face of disturbances is limited, but this is more pronounced for marginalised groups, who may have less access to knowledge, resources or decision-making power. By applying political ecology perspectives to discussions on marginalisation and inclusion, we are able to unpack concepts of resilience with an understanding of power, agency, intersectionality and the different scales in which these relations play out, enabling us to ask, ‘resilience for whom and at what cost to which others?’ (Cote and Nightingale 2011, p. 485).

In this chapter, we present cases which illustrate the three dimensions of social resilience; coping capacities – the ability to cope with and overcome adversity, adaptive capacities – the capacity to learn and adapt to future challenges, and transformative capacities – the ‘ability to craft sets of institutions that foster individual welfare and sustainable societal robustness towards future crises’ (Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013, p. 5). We, therefore, understand the process of strengthening resilience to involve sociopolitical developments that are inextricably linked with power dynamics and social relations. Applying this view of resilience to various social groups requires an examination of the empowerment of those groups. Empowerment is ‘the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability’ (Kabeer 1999, p. 436). It can be experienced through various dimensions, including access to resources, increased agency and recognised rights and accomplishments. The links between empowerment and resilience are nuanced and poorly understood, but a key component is the role of agency (Coulthard 2012). Agency refers to the ability or capacity to ‘achieve’ (and/or deliberate towards) intended outcomes and is a form of power, albeit at times less visible (Cleverly 2009). Resilient people maintain their agency, allowing them to empower themselves, and as people become empowered, their increased level of agency will enable them to adapt and transform further. Here we explore how differences in peoples’ access to resources and level of agency can determine the extent to which their interests and claims are secured. In doing so, we reveal insights into the resilience of marginalised groups during disturbances.

In this chapter, we examine the dynamics between and within minority and majority groups in island communities to understand the social mechanisms that allow for inclusion and/or the barriers that perpetuate exclusion. We do this firstly to understand better why there are varying degrees of resilience among people and households and secondly to examine how people use their agency to empower themselves and increase their resilience. We use the impacts of COVID-19 and other recent disruptions to understand the multidimensional nature of social inclusion and the ability of marginalised groups to adapt and even transform the institutions around them. The three cases considered are: (1) coastal women’s livelihoods in Timor-Leste; (2) challenges for youth engagement in Tonga; and (3) indigenous and migrant relations in coastal communities in Vanuatu. It is important to note that these case studies present with a success bias, and in recognising that, we do not claim to

explore the full range of potential exclusions in society. Instead, we seek to demonstrate with these three cases how different marginalised groups leverage disturbances to increase their resilience despite the disproportionate challenges they face.

These case studies draw on existing research projects conducted in collaboration with local partners, supplemented with more targeted key informant interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather information on context and history, activities, governance arrangements and the effects of COVID-19. Where practical and appropriate, language translators and cultural facilitators were used to conduct interviews. Furthermore, in-country researchers provided expertise in all aspects of study development, from study design to data collection and analysis. The methods applied in these cases strongly advocate decolonised approaches to research where insider researchers and outsider researchers combine perspectives to explore multiple framings of truths. Insider researchers are those who are members of the research communities, while outsider researchers are not part of the study community (Fletcher 2019). As such, this chapter allows us to explore ongoing collaborations between academic and practice-oriented researchers, as well as community-embedded researchers. This enables insights and results from this chapter to be fed back to respondents and other participants in the research as part of an ongoing co-learning processes.

1 Women in Fisheries: A Case from Timor-Leste

The impact of COVID-19 on coastal livelihoods has been varied and significant, with gendered dimensions. In this case study, we explore the enabling conditions and motivating factors which allowed Tereza to cope and adapt during this disturbance. Tereza and her fishery group, MHOI TATA, from Watabou, Timor-Leste, lost much of their business when the COVID-19 pandemic led to extensive lockdown restrictions. However, they were able to leverage government support and the lockdown circumstances to change their business model and cultivate their own independent incomes, despite the challenges they faced.

People in coastal communities in Timor-Leste rely on a variety of livelihood activities. This diversity and dynamism are an important part of ensuring resilience in the face of shocks that can impact particular activities, e.g. farming, fishing and businesses (Mills et al. 2017). Women are responsible for the home and are also expected to take part in many livelihood activities. However, they face additional challenges due to social norms that often limit their earning potential, independence, agency or safety (Nabilan 2015).

Established in 2011, MHOI TATA (named after Tereza's grandchild) is a group of fishers and fish sellers who fish, buy and sell fresh fish, and operate a kiosk. Prior to COVID-19, being a member of this group provided Tereza with a good income of US\$ 30–50 per day, but the travel restrictions brought in by the pandemic limited people's movement, especially for domestic and international tourists, and led to a major loss of income for Tereza and others like her. The restrictions also impeded

fishing, gleaning, farming and other subsistence activities during the State of Emergency, preventing residents from using ‘traditional’ food sources to compensate for the loss of other income or food sources. It in turn resulted in fish price fluctuations due to limited supply and shrinking access to markets. Coastal communities across the country struggled due to a loss of income caused by the lack of public transport, which reduced visitors and access to markets and middlemen, thus impacting their ability to sell and purchase food. These disruptions forced coastal communities to adapt their fishing activities to the restrictions by changing fishing grounds or time at sea, modifying how they sold their fish and, in some cases, reopening locally managed marine areas to fishing (Blue Ventures, unpublished). These changes to marine management were attributed to the need to catch more fish for consumption, as well as to the decrease in tourists paying access fees to the community for snorkelling and diving in protected areas. The suspension of public transport forced MHOI TATA to take a new approach to selling their catches:

We put our fish in buckets on our heads and walked around the neighbourhood to sell our fresh fish. Thank God, people bought all of our fish, and we went home with empty buckets but money in our wallets... People were stuck at home, but they still needed to eat. So, we could sell the fresh fish they needed each day.

By making the most of the COVID-19 situation, MHOI TATA could build on their business and increase their quality of life. Tereza said:

A few years ago, my roof was in poor condition, and our house was very small, but now if you visit my home, you will see that it is nice already. The kiosk is bigger, and we have a fridge to store more fish. This all happened because I knew how to take advantage of the situation. When COVID-19 happened, everyone was afraid and stayed at home. Some of my fellow women and I carried our fish outside of the house, and we made good money.

COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on the informal employment sector (Mata Dalan Institute 2020) and also on women, who are likely to have informal jobs and take on the majority of unpaid household labour (CARE 2020). In Timor-Leste, the impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods has been widespread, which is particularly concerning in a country with 41.8% of the people living below the poverty line (World Bank 2016) and 22.6% experiencing undernutrition (FAOSTAT 2022). As a result, gendered dimensions of this impact can become an afterthought. Many women’s livelihood groups (Fig. 1) and other community initiatives stalled due to the lack of transport, reduced support from nonprofit organisations and the uncertainty and fear caused by the pandemic. Although the COVID-19 response from the government was not deliberately designed to target women, results from this study reveal that if support is provided at the right moment during a disturbance, it can enable women and others to empower themselves. As part of their COVID-19 support programme, the government provided the group with a boat that allowed MHOI TATA to increase their fishing efforts. Research shows that independent income and changes in social norms can enable women to increase their bargaining power at home and in society (Agarwal 2001). For example, for Tereza, her ability to make the most of the COVID-19 situation has brought material benefits and improved her well-being. She encourages women to pursue business opportunities where they can:



Fig. 1 Rara'a Traditional Atauro is one women's group in Timor-Leste that makes an income using seafood products. (Photo: Blue Ventures)

My advice to other women is not to sit at home and wait for men to work and earn money for you. As partners within the home, help each other to find ways to sustain your livelihoods. When women and men all have their own income, it reduces conflict in the home.

Looking to the future, Tereza has plans to continue to grow her business by breaking into new markets, such as purchasing a truck for transporting the fish to the mountains where high demand exists. Such an initiative would contribute to Tereza's family's resilience and well-being, but it would also increase inland communities' access to good quality and nutritious fish (Steenbergen et al. 2019). Tereza's dedication and entrepreneurship in the face of challenges caused by COVID-19 have the potential to improve the resilience of her family, her community and her future customers.

2 Youth Resilience: A Case from Tonga

In this case study, we explore the role of youth in society in Tongatapu, the largest and most densely populated island in the Kingdom of Tonga, where the capital city of Nuku'alofa is situated. The inhabitants of Tongatapu are a diverse group, including nobles, elders, government ministers, various religious groups, entrepreneurs, farmers, fisherfolk, teachers, students, mechanics and other tradespeople, Chinese immigrants and increasing numbers of young Tongans migrating to the growing capital city in search of social and economic opportunities.

This study investigates how youth (which in Tonga includes individuals of all gender aged 15–34) defines well-being and how they perceive their role in supporting the well-being of their community and natural environment. We examine how two major disruptive events may have impacted this perceived role: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha’apai volcanic eruption on 15 January 2022 (Zuo et al. 2022). We explore how interactions between different social groups under stress can intensify the inclusion or exclusion of youth seeking to support the wellbeing of their community. We derived three main findings from the insights and lived experiences of youth participants: (1) well-being is perceived as a state of inclusivity and collaboration; (2) to achieve well-being, youth participants believe that they must collectively participate in community projects and seek opportunities to engage in purposeful community developments that lead to empowerment; and (3) the disruptive events created various opportunities for youth to demonstrate their agency by taking control of their actions and increasing their decision-making skills. The main revelation that emerged from the findings is the link between agency, collective action, empowerment and resilience.

Tonga has been characterised as one of the most hierarchical and highly stratified societies in Polynesia (Fotu et al. 2011). Within a scheme of social stratification, rank becomes merely one form of social differentiation to be assessed in the same fashion as material resources, power or authority (James 2003). In Tonga’s traditional hierarchal social structure, youth sit relatively low (Gray et al. 2019), meaning that youth are not as engaged as they should be in community development opportunities or within the family. Due to the traditional social hierarchy, which continues to perpetuate exclusion, youth have become far too dependent on their parents, leaders and elders to make a change within the community. Yet parallel to this dependence, there exists a growing desire for inclusivity and demand for access to opportunities that empower youths to become leaders:

We are the future of the community, and I believe we should be given the space and opportunity to not just voice our opinions but also the opportunity to build our capacity as future caretakers of these communities. For me, wellbeing is a community where we are working together – youth, men, and women.

The need to be engaged in meaningful work and the longing for empowerment led to the creation of Tongatapu 5, Tonga’s first youth council established in Tongatapu’s western constituency. The youth council aims to engage youth by increasing their participation in various community development projects. Their goal is for youth to develop a sense of agency by participating, taking action and becoming less dependent. In addition to increasing active participation, the youth council has developed a series of capacity development programmes to increase awareness on a variety of different topics:

We had the ministry of land and national resources come talk to us about how to sustain water resources in Tonga; we invited preachers to talk about mental health and spiritual health; we invited people to talk about COVID-19 and what is happening around the world, and how to stay safe, how to be responsible citizens of Tonga – we had a justice week for our youth where we invited people from the ministry of justice and representatives of the police. So that is what my council is trying to do – we are trying to build the capacity of the youth.

It is always challenging to measure the success of capacity development programmes. However, the youth's collective and diverse responses to the series of cascading disruptive events that started in early 2020, and continue today, are a testament to the youth council's achievements in empowering young Tongans. In the following quote, a participant from a different constituency of Nuku'alofa, one which does not have a youth council, describes their commendation of the youth council's efforts:

What these disasters showed us is that youth empowerment programmes that are already running are actually really effective— because when disasters happen, young people who were in that space are already empowered to step up and take the initiative and be the leaders.

Participants of this study recounted countless examples that demonstrate youth's vital role in supporting their community, voluntarily and professionally. For example, after the major volcanic eruption on 15 January 2022, many young women and men volunteered with the Tonga Red Cross to distribute aid to isolated families (Fig. 2). Young teachers delivered lessons via radio and online platforms, while the schools were closed. Young women wrote inspiring blogs for mental health awareness. Early career nurses and trainee doctors worked 24-h shift. Older siblings took over parenting roles, while their parents, aunts or uncles were on seasonal work programmes abroad and unable to return. The disruptive events of COVID-19 and



Fig. 2 Tonga youth delivering aid to remote families after Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha’apai volcanic eruption. (Photo: Talitha Project Tonga Inc)

the Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha’apai volcanic eruption created many opportunities for youth to step up and serve the community. However, just as it is important not to romanticise island societies’ traditional customs, we must not idealise the notion that participation in times of crisis will lead to the sustained empowerment and inclusion of a marginalised group. Youth members that stepped up during these disruptive events represent a small percentage of youth in Tonga – the ones who were already engaged before the disasters and who had access to education and training opportunities. In the following quote, a participant sheds light on some of the complexities found within marginalised groups in Tongatapu’s heterogeneous island communities:

It’s not new young people that have stepped into volunteering roles and lead these spaces – it’s young people that were already in these spaces. The level of engagement is only as good as the level of awareness and access to these opportunities. But awareness comes with the willingness to learn and getting educated. We should better equip youth with the necessary skills and mindset to know how to stand up, how to take initiative, and how to be a leader and make decisions. So, what I would like to see from our government after noticing this increase in engagement, is to create more opportunities – not disasters – but opportunities for young people to be engaged and keep that ceiling of purpose sustained [sic].

The disasters temporarily increased the involvement of educated and previously empowered youth, but, more importantly, they served as a catalyst for youth empowerment by demonstrating the youth council’s success. As this case study demonstrates, there is a strong link between agency, access to opportunities for meaningful collective action, empowerment and resilience. In recent news, the government of Tonga has publicly recognised the youth council for their achievements, creating an example for other constituencies to follow in their footsteps.

3 Inclusion and Exclusion of Migrant Groups: A Case from Vanuatu

In Vanuatu, history shows how unpredictable natural disasters have disrupted island societies on many occasions, leading to resettlement of displaced people in or next to indigenous communities. Drawn through customary *kastom* links, kinship networks or simply by proximity, governance arrangements that emerge between such groups reveal both tensions and collaboration. This case study interrogates such intersections between a minority ‘migrant’ group (Meleamat village) and an indigenous group (Mele village), with distinctions defined around entitlement to land and resources. We examine how the historical absorption of migrants has materialised into interwoven, intergenerational power relations and sociopolitical dynamics that still largely impact village life across both groups and which, over time, have become legitimised through various agreements and policies.

The village of Meleamat adjoins Mele village on the island of Efate. It was established following the displacement of people from Mat village (or Maat) on Ambrym island in the 1950s. In 1951, a volcanic eruption forced the villagers of Mat to

evacuate to the nearby island of Epi, which was subsequently hit by a cyclone later that year, destroying their shelters and forcing their second displacement. After arriving on Efate, the evacuees were offered jobs to work on a coconut plantation. In agreement with the plantation owner and a prominent chief on Efate, the former Mat residents were granted access to land to build houses adjacent to the Mele community, establishing what is now known as Melemat. While formal historical records could not be traced, accounts from respondents indicate that in the years following their first settlement, the Melemat community became more permanent with the reported transfer of land (either by purchase or customary grant) in the mid-1950s and mid-1960s. This established Melemat's recognition in the 'marae' (residency system) of that area. The people of Melemat resided there under the auspices of chiefs from Mele, as their '*nawotalam*', a superior title-holding group that oversees subordinate social groups.

Respondents from both Mele and Melemat noted that during the tumultuous years running up to Vanuatu's 1980 independence, there was a passing of one specific '*nasaotonga*', a common (sometimes annual) customary ceremony that sees subordinate land title groups offering the first yam harvest (in addition to livestock offerings) to a superior title-holding group. While previous *nasaotonga* had been carried out as the conventional means to reinforce hierarchal title claims, the significance of this *nasaotonga* was the difference in its interpretation in relation to imminent independence. Melemat elders recalled how offerings exceeded any previous *nasaotonga* as an agreed means to enshrine a higher title status prior to the anticipated transition into an independent post-colonial administration. Mele elders, however, noted how their leaders recalled this *nasaotonga* as a definitive recognition of their relationship, thus functioning to secure the hierarchal title arrangement before any potential reshuffle that could result from the administrative transfer. These contradicting interpretations lie at the foundation of the much of ongoing tensions between these groups.

The declaration of independence in 1980 set off a myriad of land claims and disputes across Vanuatu, as boundaries were redrawn with the newly established national constitution stating that land be returned to rightful *kastom* landowners. The lands around Mele and Melemat were no different. Chiefs in Mele claimed their *kastom* land title as constitutional, including land that Melemat disputed as rightfully theirs, following the customary payments and agreements made prior to independence. At a meeting between prominent title-holding chiefs across Efate in the early 1990s, an agreement was reached on the boundaries between what is now known as the area councils of West Efate, including Ifira, Mele, Erakor, Eratap and Malorua. The proceedings of these meetings did not include title holders of Melemat, as they were seen as '*mankam*' (immigrants), a title some leaders in Melemat dispute given the past customary transactions. With the passing of elders (and their knowledge and experience) and the verbal nature of customary agreements, written law is increasingly taking precedence. As one respondent from Melemat noted: 'our elders knew exactly what was discussed and agreed [...] but with them passed away, we cannot recall the same information to make our voice heard [sic]'.



Fig. 3 A typical Vanuatu forest-fringing household garden with taro and cassava crops. (Photo: Dirk Steenberg)

Currently, most of Melema's housing and communal infrastructure (e.g. church) is built on land that has been formally recognised as Melema land. Residents can harvest natural resources within those boundaries according to their own by-laws; however, the land around Melema is disputed, including the more fertile flats. Mele's formal ownership over much of the cultivatable land means Melema residents either cultivate land along forest fringes (Fig. 3), infertile slopes or attain leases from Mele landowners to access fertile plots. Illustrative of this, one Melema youth leader noted that: 'under most lease agreements, landowners only allow us to cultivate short-term crops [...] no fruit trees are allowed in fear that we may claim the land if we have trees on it'. Others noted how Mele landowners often prefer to hire wage labourers from the outer islands to work their land over workers from neighbouring communities to avoid potential land claims. Access to fertile land, therefore, remains a prime challenge for most Melema households. One Melema women's group leader noted: 'Recently, a market house was built in the village centre; however, we have no land to cultivate crops, so our market house is empty. [...] The issue is limited access to land, not access to a marketplace'.

While Mele residents hold the constitutional land title based on customary entitlement, the grey nature of on-the-ground ownership claims has led to a governance vacuum over disputed lands in which intrusions are allowed. Both Mele and Melema residents complained of the residents from Ambrym island, who, despite not being from the original Mat community, recently established dwellings as 'self-determined rightful claimants' under the Mele-Melema *kastom* arrangement. Other

cases were noted where Mele owners had sold off disputed land to foreign investors in an attempt to eject themselves from further conflict while gaining financial benefits from its sale.

The disruptions caused by COVID-19 restrictions, including the closure of international borders in March 2020 and then the first domestic outbreak in early 2022, impacted the dynamics between Mele and Meleimat. While land disputes subsided markedly in early 2022, many respondents attributed this to the government lockdown policy, implying that people spent less time working the land. Some groups, like the youth in Meleimat, utilised the COVID-19 emergency to voice autonomy. The establishment of their own COVID-19 taskforce, for example, was initiated in response to the suggestion from the government that Meleimat fall under the Mele COVID-19 taskforce. However, there were examples where collaboration between the communities increased, such as the joint decision between leaders from both communities to establish a shared dispensary as a central COVID-19 testing and vaccination centre. So, while grievances persist between residents from each village, emergency conditions did make way for collaborative engagements. Similarly, respondents also referred to social connections that exist through marriage and kin, although these often materialise into more specific inter-household relations rather than at the community level.

Cases of migration and resettlement in Vanuatu show how new governance arrangements emerge as amalgamations of central state and customary governance structures. Especially in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, what materialises is the result of complex interactions shaped by power dynamics, socio-political institutional rules, new and old social relations and entrepreneurship of individuals or groups who effectively translate opportunities to serve interests. It sketches far more dynamic, pluralist and contested arenas than the common framing of island societies as spaces of customary harmony.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The three case studies demonstrate how three marginalised groups have dealt with unsettling events. Here we explore how the concepts of resilience and empowerment interact with each other to influence the inclusion or exclusion of marginalised groups during a major disruption. Rather than being marginalised groups who are unable to exercise their agency and improve their situation, these cases illustrate how people use tools and opportunities at their disposal to (re)claim power – sometimes despite disruptive events and, at other times, thanks to disruptions.

Marginalised groups are disproportionately impacted by disturbances, especially when interventions and support are not tailored to their needs (Sultana 2021). However, these cases demonstrate that when certain preconditions are met, marginalised groups can use their adaptive capacity to leverage disturbances to empower themselves and potentially transform the institutions which have excluded them. The preconditions explored in the cases demonstrate the diversity within groups and the value of an intersectional approach when examining peoples' adaptive capacity

(Erwin et al. 2021), e.g. empowered youth in Tongatapu 5 were the ones who were responsive and adaptable when COVID-19 happened, but others were left behind. Just as society is diverse and heterogeneous, so are specific social groups.

Peoples' ability to cope, adapt and transform in the face of disturbances is related to their ability to exercise agency. Although various constraints limit these abilities, our cases reveal strategies and mechanisms that people use to adapt, increase their bargaining power and begin to transform the institutions around them. There is a tendency in some policies and practices to romanticise the role of traditional structures, customary governance and local livelihoods in people's response to disruption, i.e. 'local, customary ways of life are the solution' (Cote and Nightingale 2011). Without suggesting otherwise, when grounded in hierarchical power structures, however, there can be a trade-off between the legitimacy and equity provided by the dichotomies between casual-official or modern-conventional mechanisms (Cote and Nightingale 2011). Our cases reveal that people draw on traditional and non-traditional tools in a way that best serves them and increases their bargaining position on various scales (household, community, state). Mobilising these according to interests increases peoples' empowerment, in addition to their adaptive and transformative capacity. The Vanuatu case highlights two dimensions of the way the agency of local actors materialises through the mobilisation of various 'instruments'. Mat evacuees, for example, used both expatriate (colonial) plantation networks and *kastom* connections to secure their well-being, as a means first to leave the island and later to access land and resources on Efate, thus establishing Melemat. Similarly, during Vanuatu's independence, Mele people used both the customary *nasaotonga* ceremony that had been carried out prior to independence and the political opportunity from land title reform under the new constitution. In doing so, they secured their claim to land over Melemat as they all transitioned from being citizens to a sovereign nation in a new political environment. Legal pluralism (Benda-Beckmann 2001), where *kastom* law functions legitimately in parallel to state law, maps a complex political landscape in countries like Vanuatu. This provides opportunities that can empower those who harness them but also impedes pathways out of marginalisation for those who do not.

Collective actions increase peoples' bargaining position and their ability to cope and adapt. People identified needs and transformed them into opportunities to 'step up' or collaborate. Although there is a risk that this increased participation could remain at an activity-specific level rather than progressing to interactive participation (Agarwal 2001), it is clear that the participants in each case intend to develop this into more meaningful change going forward through, for example, increased representation, reduced conflict or economic empowerment. In this way, collective action and establishing formal groups can enable access to resources, (re)negotiate power, navigate potential conflicts and create opportunities which could improve their adaptive and transformative capacity going forward. For example, the formal structure of MHOI TATA allowed women to access government support and develop independent incomes, which is an integral part of their economic empowerment.

Crises can compound the injustice and marginalisation against some groups (Sultana 2021). Our case studies prompt the question: why and how did some

people or groups transform disturbances into opportunities to thrive rather than struggling to survive? The impacts of COVID-19 caused considerable shifts in priorities as it directed attention away from pre-existing conflict within or between groups to solve the ongoing disruptions collaboratively. Despite the impacts of COVID-19, lessons can be learned from the nature of these collaborations and the social capital foundations that underlie them. These can positively influence the outcomes of future bargaining between minority and majority groups (Sen 1987). As new and unforeseen societal changes occur with COVID-19, we continue to see people learn to adapt to each new shock. Our cases reveal significant local adaptive capacity and agency to transform institutions, social norms and power relations. It remains to be seen whether these accomplishments will travel beyond COVID-19 or what the lasting impact of the pandemic may be for resilience and well-being overall.

People's ability to cope, adapt and transform in the face of disturbances is not equal. Considering how different groups have different access to resources, levels of agency and ability to produce outcomes reveals how social relations and power dynamics can continue to entrench inequality or can even be dismantled in the face of disturbances. The power dynamics and social relations which shape society also influence peoples' resilience, so marginalised groups may be worse affected by shocks. From this position, we acknowledge that many marginalised groups, despite being resourceful and adaptable, may not be given the opportunities and space to ameliorate their situation. However, the tendency to view marginalised groups as homogenous, vulnerable and oppressed obscures the reality of how people exercise their agency and power in many different ways and on various scales, e.g. family, community or the state. Island communities and marginalised groups are not passively experiencing disturbances. Instead, they use complex and dynamic mechanisms to improve their position, cope, adapt and transform. Societies can become more inclusive and collectively resilient by recognising the capacities, adaptive skills and resourcefulness of marginalised groups and individuals.

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