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Pacific Tourism Resilience in a Post-Pandemic Era | Vanuatu

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Vanuatu's GDP was almost halved for the two years in which it saw its international borders closed. Without tourism to supplement people's incomes, many Ni-Vanuatu had to adapt to survive. Three key factors of resilience were prominently showcased at this time in adapting to the deficit in the tourism economy. These were:

- Traditional Knowledge
- The Informal Economy – based on kinship and reciprocal exchange
- Plan B – collectively owned tribal land areas and the resources associated with them

The study found how Pacific people have utilised these Indigenous resilience systems to respond to both historical and recent shocks when bouncing back, and in particular examines how 'emergent leadership', defined in the literature as managing uncertainty and mitigating crisis factors (Hunt, 2019), can help to achieve resilience in the face of crises.

What is the development issue?

The development issue researched here was to further understand resilience and the role of emergent leadership in crisis situations. Specifically, in the area of tourism dependent economies in the Pacific, with a particular focus on Vanuatu. Given their two year border closure during the recent Covid-19 pandemic and an economy that relies on tourism related income which comprises almost half of the country's GDP, Vanuatu showcases an excellent approach in bouncing back.

This research explored how tourism stakeholders in Vanuatu adapt in the face of sudden shocks, in order to identify contributing factors to resilience, with the following objectives:

- 1) To investigate the concepts of resilience and understand the interrelated links to adaptability, sustainability and vulnerability.
- 2) To understand how specialists see adaptation and resilience as being best supported in Small Island States (SIS).
- 3) To investigate and identify emergent leadership in Vanuatu and its potential to support resilience building.

The research for this focus was conducted in Vanuatu during November and December 2023, and consisted of in-depth interviews with emergent leaders, as well as personal observations. Extensive literature review also took place.

Key findings

This research was undertaken to explore how tourism stakeholders in Vanuatu adapt in the face of sudden shocks, in order to identify contributing factors to resilience. In the process of understanding these factors, the role of emergent leadership has been highlighted in terms of how it takes this whole paradigm to the next level by drawing from resilient measures and adding to them specific leadership traits in a time of crisis, which magnify these aspects of resilience and lead the way through creative adaptation for others to follow.

The resilience of Indigenous systems

In addressing the aim and objectives of this research, it emerged that the most effective way that tourism stakeholders in Vanuatu can support resilience is to take stock of the Ni-Vanuatu Indigenous systems that have benefited the nation and its people for hundreds of years. As Campbell (2009) states, the Pacific is resilient because it has Indigenous processes and a keen connection to the environment. It was also noted that any sense of vulnerability is due to an erosion of these traditional processes. This resilient Indigenous system is tripartite in nature, consisting of investing in the informal economy (*kastom ekonomi*) by being part of the community (not just a bystander) and honouring the reciprocal exchange process which builds into the resilience network that Pacific people maintain and draw from; having a Plan B (*vanua*) as a stable and predictable resource base to fall back on in times of upheaval; and the role of Indigenous wisdom (*kastom nolej*) in both the individual and organisational settings which eventuate in greater wellbeing. *Kastom nolej* has proven to be sustainable, resilient and reliable, even in modern situations like that of the tropical cyclone Harold response. The promotion of traditional, locally sourced and sustainable construction techniques as a cyclone resilient (and safer) option by the Vanuatu government further populates the notion that government, people and nature are all stakeholders in informing resilience in the tourism sphere (Movono, Scheyvens & Ratuva, 2023).



Participating in a Tanna kastom ceremony in Ervan community, during the course of my fieldwork.

The benefits of emergent leadership

It has been made evident through the findings and literature that the behaviour of emergent leaders has benefited the nation and tourism sphere amidst recent crises including the pandemic and cyclones Judy and Kevin. Such is the role of emergent leadership inside the greater concept of resilience, that without it, a system lacks the full ability to create new adaptive pathways for others to follow in, in the process of bouncing forward into reorganising and exploiting new opportunities for resilient future livelihoods. As shown in Movono, Scheyvens & Ratuva's (2023) Tourism Resilience Framework (shown on page 6), emergent leadership's crucial function is made manifest at the point of crisis (the release phase) when things seem the most catastrophic and out of control. The four acknowledged emergent leadership traits from fieldwork research that are supported by literature are as follows:

- Being well informed, prepared and knowledgeable in key areas of both the vulnerabilities and strengths – an active resilience stance.
- Possessing an adaptive and flexible leadership competency. Adaptive intelligence allows for decision making, communication and networking amidst fluid crisis situations.
- Being committed, passionate and motivated about the cause to in turn motivate others forward.
- Utilising advocacy through storytelling to rewrite, retell and inform the change in active resilience and preparation for future events.



Enjoying the natural beauty of Vanuatu's ocean with my sons, Gabriel and Jesse, while navigating an extremely flexible schedule of interviews with emergent leaders.

The emergent leadership response

The decisive and expedient actions of research participants amidst differing crisis situations exhibited a robust framework of emergent traits that, when utilised in conjunction with the tripartite resilience system, provided a powerful and holistic response to complex and fluid scenarios with innovative, sustainable and successful outcomes. An interesting note is that the role of emergent leadership has not been to lead those in Vanuatu on a new path of crisis management or insight – it has simply been in the drawing from old knowledges and processes such as the vanua and the informal economy, to inspire resilience in the face of shocks and perturbations.

“We walk together as a group. When someone falls down, we are there to pick him up, that’s the way we work. Everyone carries him to reach the destination. It doesn’t matter how long the journey takes if we have each other to depend on – we rest, recover and continue on forward. In contrast, doing it alone, you end up dying alone – no one to call on for help. This promoting of individual societies draws away from the kastom practices of old. Some choose to be independent to become rich, but what is rich? I am rich in my relationships – I’m not poor when it comes to vanua [community]. I have other resources that are just as necessary. You can have thousands of Vatu but can you source a pig tusk for a wedding ceremony? Those are difficult to find and you need more than Vatu for things like this. The way we work together means we all help out, so after a cyclone you are helping me rebuild my house and tomorrow, everyone is helping rebuild yours – and we go on like this.”

Morris Kaloran, Secretary General of the Shefa Province, Vanuatu

The impact on Vanuatu's resilience structure

There is a concern that there are only so many shocks that a system can withstand in a short period of time due to the timeframe of being able to bounce back effectively (Uekusa & Matthewman, 2022) – or in some cases to bounce forward with new innovative processes. However, to date, Vanuatu has been an extremely resilient nation.

The Covid-19 pandemic pause was a perfect storm to test Vanuatu's resilience structures from multiple angles. Having recently graduated out of the list of Least Developed Countries (Brien, 2019) and showcasing a thorough (and, reportedly, more successful than previous INGO led responses) national-led emergency response to tropical cyclone Harold, Vanuatu has the resource base necessary in terms of resilience, adaptability and sustainable processes to stand amidst future shocks and perturbations and to address disasters like they have done in times past.

“Aneityum is the most interesting case study because it's got the highest visitation of tourists in the country through cruise tourism... and everyone thought that they'd suffer [during the pandemic] because that's all they are used to. The chief comes out a couple of months later after the borders were closed and he goes, 'our people are fine, we've gone back to Plan B, we're back to our gardens, we've developed, built a market house, we're sharing goods, bartering goods. We know how to be resilient'. And it was just mind-blowing that they implemented this strategy, even though they'd been away from it for over a decade.”

Cherise Addinsall, Project Lead for ACIAR, with research based in Vanuatu

An illustration of the interconnectedness of emergent leadership and Vanuatu's indigenous resilience structures are showcased in the context of a Pawpaw tree (shown on page 6).

Development implications and recommendations

In the context of managing future crises, Vanuatu's local processes and factors of resilience should not be negated, but rather be further explored and championed as a means to bouncing back more effectively and efficiently. This is not to say that foreign aid is unwelcome in the future, but given the recent Covid-19 pandemic and tropical cyclone Harold, foreign aid could have a more beneficial impact, feeding into and resourcing the existing indigenous resilience structures to build into further autonomy and capacity at greater levels of crisis preparedness.

In specifically 'further exploring and championing' Vanuatu's indigenous resilience structures, this research recommends what has seen to be effective in the past and replicating these successes in scale. When prominent emergent leaders reinspire the value of ancient resilience structures in modern crisis situations, the research shows multifaceted measures of success – from renewed cultural identity, to a greater sense of wellbeing, to efficient means of responding to crises without heavy reliance on external resourcing (Campbell, 2006; Vanuatu Sustainable Tourism Strategy, 2021-2025). Resourcing and strengthening the already prevalent strengths of the Ni-Vanuatu culture will undoubtedly benefit resilience in future challenges.

A further practical recommendation of the research is to champion and promote the indigenous knowledge systems (kastom nolej) that already exist yet have been undermined through modern technologies and trends (Campbell, 2009; Handmer & Iveson, 2017). An example is that of modern construction techniques that rely heavily on costly imported timber and fixings – whereas naturally occurring and environmentally friendly construction materials are being passed over or otherwise ignored as the knowledge of traditional cyclone resilient structures diminishes. Revitalising awareness and traditional knowledge of the safer, locally sourced and cyclone resilient housing structures

alongside the efforts of the Vanuatu Government's initial campaign efforts could go a long way towards realising less deaths during cyclones and encouraging capacity of local communities (Handmer & Iveson, 2017), rather than the current burden of having to purchase expensive, imported construction materials.

An additional consideration to those in prominent positions of New Zealand's development funding could be to support the Malavatumauri Council of Chiefs (in Vanuatu) in their promotion and facilitation of an entirely new kastom nakamal (a traditionally built meeting house) in which Indigenous knowledge is practiced and encouraged, and which will showcase and reinvigorate the effective and sustainable ancient construction techniques and knowledge.

With the degradation of indigenous resilience structures, especially in recent decades (Campbell, 1990; Pelling & Uitto 2001; Pierce & Hemstock, 2022), now is the time to act. Supporting our Pacific neighbours in equipping themselves to respond effectively and efficiently without a heavy reliance on foreign aid is key. With re-establishing the of importance of traditional resilience structures and their associated processes and benefits, particularly to the younger generations, we could all play a part in assisting the reinvigoration of traditional resilience structures in the future.

Equipping and amalgamating such a push together with emergent leadership adds fuelled propulsion towards positive outcomes. With tourism stakeholders in Vanuatu being at the forefront of facing and responding to shocks, further informing them as key agents of resilience will ensure that they continue to adapt and bounce back in the face of current and ongoing shocks – benefitting not only individual livelihoods, but the nation of Vanuatu as a whole.



Vanuatu is rich in culture, natural resources and beauty – a role model for furthering resilience knowledge, as well as a paradise for tourism.

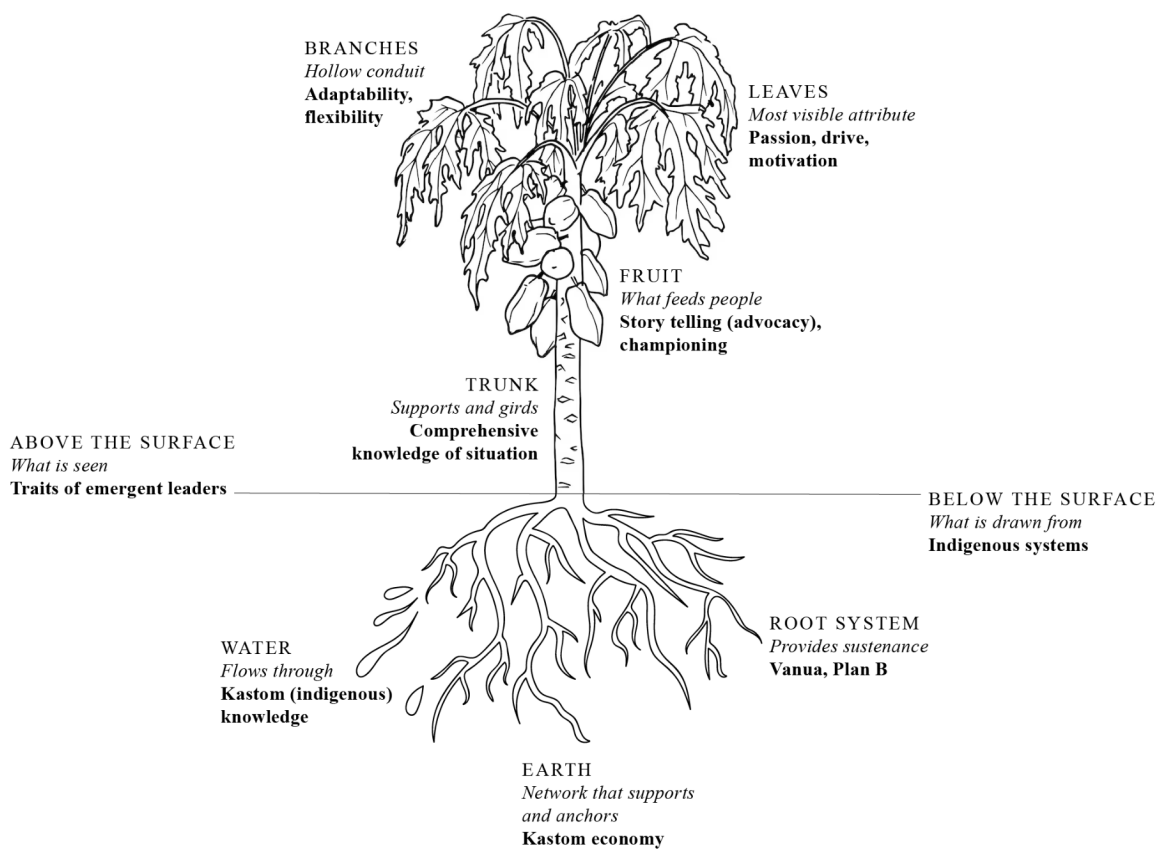
Tourism Resilience Framework

Movono, Scheyvens & Ratuva (2023).



Pawpaw Tree Context: A Metaphorical Analogy of Emergent Leadership in Vanuatu

Illustration by author (2024).



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