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Improving the Quality of Life on Remote Outer Islands: Actor-Centred Insights from Southern Lau, Fiji

- ▶ The relationships between actors contributing to local development on remote outer islands are not well understood.
- ▶ This research identifies the role of key actors and their mutual relationships in Vulaga, a highly remote outer island district in Southern Lau, Fiji.
- ▶ The positive contributions of yachties to local development need to be valued more by the Fiji Government and its development partners, yet carefully managed and coordinated to do no harm.

What is the issue?

Fiji's remote outer island populations typically receive limited, irregular, and unreliable external development support from government and international aid agencies to improve their quality of life. The aid initiatives and socio-economic development interventions that do reach these remote islands have often been of limited effectiveness and are not sustainable.

Furthermore, Fiji has been rapidly urbanising over the past decades. Over 55% of Fijians now live in urban areas (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2018). There is a growing need for the Fiji Government to redirect resources away from remote islands to cities and towns.

Due to this demographic shift, development support for the relatively few people who remain on remote outer islands has become even more costly per capita while competing with the needs of growing urban areas.

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ **External support focuses on resilience and conservation rather than the daily needs and development aspirations of local people.**
- ▶ **The local population on Vulaga looks toward yachties to receive development support from them.**
- ▶ **The development impacts of yachties on Vulaga are mixed.**

Given these trends, it is imperative that the initiatives which do reach remote outer island populations are maximised, meaning they are as effective and sustainable as possible, cause no harm, and work in synergy with the

endogenous development potential of outer island populations (rather than undermining it).

The purpose of this policy brief is to provide evidence-based guidance on how key actors can maximise their development support for remote islands in Southern Lau, Fiji.

Research questions and study site

To establish an evidence base which can guide remote outer island development policies, this research has mapped the key external actors in the Vulaga district in Southern Lau, Fiji, to understand (a) their roles, (b) their relationships, and (c) how they can improve their development support.

The Vulaga district is inhabited by about 400 people who live across three villages on Vulaga island (18.5 km²) and one village on Ogea island (13.3 km²). Located 340 km aerial distance from Fiji's capital, Suva, Vulaga is among Fiji's outermost island districts.

The research findings provide much-needed insights into how external actors can improve their support to remote outer island populations to achieve their needs and aspirations.

Research findings

Field research was conducted in the Vulaga district in 2021. This included 14 semi-structured *talanoa*-interviews and 1 focus group discussion with locals, 7 in-depth interviews with visiting sailors of yachts (yachties), several informal conversations with key informants, and extensive participatory observation among the Vulaga island population and the yachties.

Preliminary research findings identify five types of key external development actors in the Vulaga district (see Figure 1). These include the Fiji Government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), urban diaspora, researchers, and yachties. Their intentions and influence on Vulaga vary.

External livelihood support to the Vulaga district is largely driven by a disaster response, climate change, and conservation agenda. Government and NGO initiatives aiming to enhance the quality of life beyond disaster resilience and biodiversity conservation are relatively rare. The urban diaspora contributes to the livelihoods on Vulaga through barter and reciprocal systems, but become particularly active after disasters (e.g., Tropical Cyclone Yasa in 2020 and Tonga volcanic eruption in 2022). Research in the district is very limited and, apart from this study, focuses on marine conservation and natural science.

In sum, external support to the Vulaga district largely focuses on resilience and biodiversity conservation rather than the daily needs and development aspirations of local people.

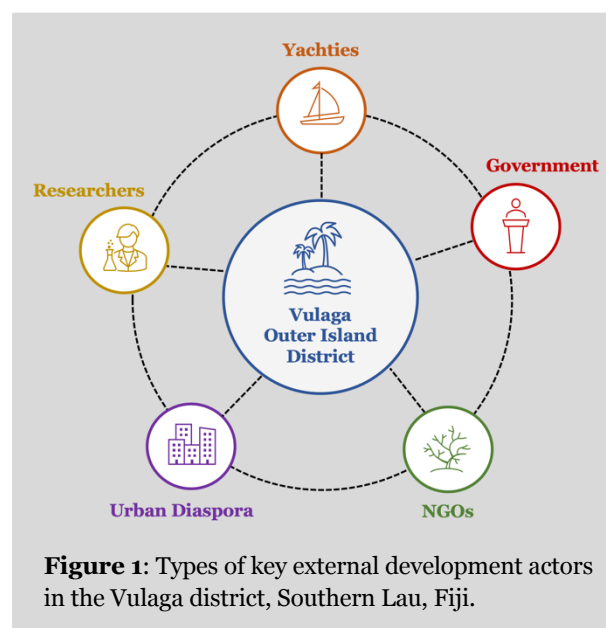


Figure 1: Types of key external development actors in the Vulaga district, Southern Lau, Fiji.

Given the limited development support from the Fiji Government and NGOs, the local population in the Vulaga district looks toward yachties in their quest to improve their quality of life. It is estimated that, in the recent years before COVID-19, over 100 yachts have visited the Vulaga district during the sailing season (April to November). These super yachts (with large crews) and private cruisers (typically sailed by couples or families) provide a means

of informal development assistance for local people living in the remote Vulaga district.

What are the development impacts of yachties? Preliminary research findings are mixed, showing that yachties bring positive and negative changes.



As maritime travellers, yachties bring a range of **benefits** to people living in the Vulaga outer island district:

- technical know-how and practical skills for maintenance and repair of local infrastructure (e.g., engines, boats, solar systems)
- tools, materials, and services useful for islanders' daily activities (e.g., to print photos, repair boats, and laminate documents, such as vaccination cards)
- finance by paying an anchorage fee (between FJD50 and FJD300), participating in local fundraising, buying wood carvings and food, and giving large donations (e.g., FJD30,000 donated by a super yacht to the chiefly village)
- sharing of excess fish with locals, especially when a large catch does not fit freezer space on yachts
- collecting and burning of rubbish
- transport for islanders between Vulaga and Ogea and to Suva in emergency situations and for travel purposes
- enlargement of the social field, sharing of experiences, introduction of new ideas and information, which can further support local livelihoods

In sum, yachties contribute a range of human, physical, financial, natural, and social capitals to the Vulaga district.



On the negative side, a range of **risks** accompany the presence of yachties in the Vulaga district:

- Yachties contribute to uneven intra-village development as their interactions and transactions tend to occur with those most capable (i.e., locals fluent in English who are physically able to visit yachts) rather than those most in need (e.g., elderly people).
- They contribute to uneven local development as most interactions and transactions occur in the chiefly village.
- Yachties cause jealousy within and between villages because of uneven support, resulting in social friction and reduced community cohesion.
- Yachties can be a burden on locals as they disrupt daily activities.
- Unregulated movements of dinghies in the lagoon disrupt the fishing activities of locals.
- Free handouts to locals (e.g., lollies for kids, fuel for adults) contribute to a dependency mentality which can undermine the endogenous development potential.
- Locals report marine pollution caused by yachties.
- Culturally inappropriate behaviour of yachties can lead to social tensions and conflicts.

Overall, yachties have a high potential to positively contribute to local development in the Vulaga district, given their frequent (although seasonal) presence, technical skills, and hospitality needs.

However, to mitigate negative impacts such as social friction, inequality, and external dependency, the involvement of yachties in local development needs to be better coordinated, regulated, and professionalised to do no harm and ensure more equitable and sustainable contributions to local development in the Vulaga district.

What is the relationship between key actors? Recently, a strong partnership between the Fiji Government and financially powerful conservation NGOs has been driving a biodiversity agenda in the Lau group. In turn, partnerships and investments in the daily needs and development aspirations of local people living in remote Vulaga have been rather weak.

The Fiji Government depicts yachties predominantly as income-generating tourists, who cause environmental pollution and pose human security risks. Yachties, in turn, articulate a sense of frustration, as they feel they could contribute more to local development in the Vulaga district, yet their efforts are limited—sometimes hindered—by the Fiji Government. For example, yachties on a cruising permit are not legally permitted to provide transport for locals from Vulaga to Suva, even in emergency situations, and are liable to be prosecuted.

There is considerable scope to enhance cooperation between yachties, the Fiji Government, and its development partners. This is important, given that development NGOs rarely reach Southern Lau and the presence of yachties is predicted to increase.

What should policymakers do?

Community leaders of the Vulaga district, together with the Fiji Government and its development partners, should **explore smart avenues to leverage yachties' potential for remote island development** in the Vulaga district. This can be achieved along the following six steps:

1. Create awareness among government entities and development partners about the key role of yachties for local development in the Vulaga district.
2. Consider yachties in maritime development policies and planning.
3. Develop strategies and policies that harness the benefits of yachties for local development in the Vulaga district.
4. Develop strategies and policies that minimise the negative social and environmental impacts of yachties in the Vulaga district.
5. Strengthen the capacity among the yachting community in Fiji to do no harm and provide equitable and sustainable development support.
6. Integrate efforts by the government, development partners, and yachties in enhancing the quality of life in the Vulaga district.

These recommendations for the Vulaga district may be useful for other outer island districts frequented by yachts, whereby contextual differences must be considered.

To enhance remote outer island development in Fiji, the Fiji Government and its development partners should furthermore (i) **strengthen social science research and expertise** in the Vulaga district and Southern Lau generally; and (ii) **invest resources in Fiji's rural development data and knowledge hub**, as envisaged by the Fiji Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, **with a focus on remote outer islands and a broad 'quality of life' lens** (beyond resilience and conservation).

Investing in remote outer island populations, such as people living in Southern Lau, is not an isolated provincial exercise but of national significance and in line with the United

Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). Implementing these recommendations can help to mitigate urban pressures (as rural areas become more liveable), reduce uneven development on a local and national scale, and contribute to the overarching 'leave no one behind' goal of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Limitations and further research

This research provides a rare example of field-based research in one of Fiji's most remote outer island districts. It was mainly carried out in November/December 2021.

More research is needed throughout the annual cycle marked by the cyclone season to reduce seasonal biases and understand the development impacts of yachties post-COVID-19 travel restrictions.

In addition to yachties, the Vulaga diaspora residing in Suva and abroad is an under-recognised development actor contributing to livelihoods on Vulaga. More research is needed to understand their role and their relationships with other key actors.

Some of these research gaps are addressed in other components of this research and will be published in due course.

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Further reading

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