

Mitchell Oration 2022

Enough is enough: audaciously decolonising the development and humanitarian nexus

‘Ofakilevuka Guttenbeil-Likiliki

Fakatapu ki he ‘Otua mafimafi ‘oku ‘i ho tau lotolotonga

‘Oku ou kole keu hufanga atu he ngaahi fktapu kuo ‘osi hono ‘aofaki ‘i he kamata’anga ‘o e koni-fele-nisi ni – kau hao hake he faingamalie ko eni ke fai ha talatalanoa-atu fekau’aki pea mo e kaveinga-lea ‘oku ou lele mai mo ia.

I’d like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we are gathering here today, the Ngu-nna-wal people. I pay my respects to their Elders, past, present, and emerging – and to the Indigenous Elders of other communities here today. I’d also like to acknowledge that Australia was founded on the genocide and dispossession of First Nations people and that sovereignty was never ceded.

The voices you heard – are the voices I represent today. These are the words of audacious women leaders from across the Oceanic Pacific who have simply had enough – and were willing to unapologetically share with me their stories. But before I get into the heart of what I want to say and share with you today, I pause to tell you about who I am as a story-teller and documenter of women’s lived realities across the Oceanic Moana Pacific.

My name is ‘Ofa-Ki-Levuka Louise Guttenbeil-Likiliki, and whilst my Pacific cultural identity is strongly rooted and anchored in the land and ocean Moana of Tonga. I also have ancestral roots and anchor in Samoa, and to the Global North or the Minority World of Prussia Germany and Ireland. I am also deeply connected to Aotearoa NZ and many spaces-in-between across the wider Oceanic Moana Pacific.

It’s important to set out my cultural roots and anchoring because it tells a story of who

I am today. About 140 years ago my Prussian-German great-great grandfather moved to Vava'u Tonga in search of trading and business opportunities – something that the locals couldn't do and needed help doing. He was STRONGLY advised against marrying a local Tongan Vava'u girl. Instead, an arranged marriage with the daughter of an Irish businessman who had set up in Samoa was the accepted practice. My great-grandfather, the son of the German and Irish marriage – broke that tradition and out of his 4 siblings, he was the first and only to marry a local girl – my Vava'u Tongan great grandmother. They had eleven children including my grandad Ingold. Grandad being half Tongan German Irish married a half-Samoa half Tongan girl and so we came full circle with the Tongan-Samoa connection but this time – a local connection – as opposed to the earlier European-settled-in-Tonga marrying a European-settled-in-Samoa connection. I like to call it my family's decolonisation of marriage expectations story ... that Europeans marrying locals was thought of as degrading one's standing in society – a story that is all too familiar with many of us in this room – in one way or another.

But I share this story because embedded in it, is a story of power-OVER and what was wrongly perceived as development. Power-over in the sense that my European ancestors had arrived to Tonga and used their western influenced knowledge and skills and access to resources to develop for themselves businesses in Tonga and all the while making sure that that they did not marry any locals because the locals were not good enough or not at their standards.

When intermarriages did happen, children of Pacific and European heritage or half-castes as we labelled them, immediately were elevated in Pacific societies, including Tonga. Their fairer skin tones, European features and foreign surnames gave them a head-start by default in many spaces: access to health, education, travel and employment to name a few. They fed into the notion that they were perhaps more superior than their local counterparts who had no 'white' blood running through their veins ... They were seen and received as being more developed in terms of the western concept of development. Being able to speak English was the only way a local or indigenous person with no European blood could elevate their own standing. So the more you spoke English and was good at it, the better chances you had in terms of accessing opportunities and resources.

140 years later there is not that much of a difference between my paternal colonial ancestor's approach to setting up business in Tonga and Samoa to that of development and humanitarian approaches in the Pacific in the last three decades. There is still that sense of we know better, we are better and we are here to make things better.

I have been working in the space of ending violence against women and girls for the last 18 years in Tonga. But I experienced something this year that I had never experienced before. I was actually on the brink of 'losing it'.

When Tonga underwent a humanitarian crisis in January of this year: the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai underwater Volcanic eruption followed by a Tsunami, the NGO I work for, WCCC, was one of the first responders on the ground within the first 72 hours carrying out rapid safety assessments with women and children in the most affected communities on Tongatapu. This was followed by on-going daily psychosocial support to high risk areas during the response phase. At the same time, Tonga had lost all forms of communication with the outside world – we couldn't telephone or communicate electronically with anyone for about 5 weeks.

Within three weeks of rolling out psychosocial support during the response phase – Tonga had its first positive COVID19 case which immediately sent the entire country into lockdown and borders closing.

In fact, upon reflection from the day of the volcano eruption in January up until about the end of April, Tonga was dealing with all these issues on their own. I was proud of my team at WCCC and the way we worked during the response phase, approaching our targeted women and children from high-risk areas with care, compassion and respect while ensuring that everything we did was based on the key guiding principle of DO NO HARM. We knew exactly what to do, how to do it and executed it like professionals albeit with the limited resources we had access to at the time. We would hold debriefs at the end of every day, although tired and worn out but we wanted to share the stories and identify high risk cases that needed immediate follow up.

On one of our visits to the most affected areas, the community were in the middle of a meeting about how to distribute donations that had been provided by the local government National Emergency Management Office, churches and NGOs. One of the male leaders had specifically addressed the women of that community and told them that they were causing too much trouble at the meeting by asking too many questions and making too many demands and so he told them to go home and wait for the donations to be delivered and to allow the men to discuss the distribution process of who got what. After witnessing this, we moved discretely into an area outside the hall and invited two women's development group leaders from this community to talk with us while the meeting continued inside the hall.

We made sure the space we created was safe and that it wouldn't bring too much attention to what we were doing. What turned out to be about a 45 min conversation with these female leaders was the beginning of a relationship that we knew we had to continue nurturing throughout the response phase. What the women had raised in the hall earlier that day was an urgent request for hygiene products or disinfectants to immediately kill a range of bacteria and viruses that their children, elderly and other members of the family could get diseases from.

WCCC immediately worked on this request and was able to work closely with the women in this community and community nurses to enable them to stop the spread of bacteria and viruses. For about 5-7 days during our initial psychosocial support this is what we focused on – helping the women with their most urgent needs.

We had gained their trust and respect and thereafter we commenced our psychosocial talatalanoa (conversations), support and advocacy and were provided with names and families who were at high risk and the most vulnerable to visit and carry out our AHA Strategy that we use in any humanitarian crisis – Are you safe? How are you doing right now? Are you being listened to?

So for example: Are you safe? WCCC assessed safe access of women and children to shelters and evacuation areas, safe access to bathrooms, adequate lighting, access to dignity and hygiene kits, access to food and safe drinking water and access to communication with loved ones and essential services. The majority of

women assessed were in a state of shock at how quickly things transpired and the lack of preparation or warning which had left many of them shaken. Unlike TC Gita and Harrod where women felt they had – had time to prepare, the January disaster had left them visibly distressed and worried.

How are you doing right now? 10 days after the eruption, 93% of those visited had stated that they had not had any psychosocial support provided prior to WCCC's psychosocial talatalanoa support & advocacy visit. WCCC understood that Psychosocial support needed to be differentiated from providing donations or undertaking surveys and moving on to the next household. WCCC defined its Psychosocial Talatalanoa Support & Advocacy as creating a safe space for talanoa between the counselor advocate and the woman and child (in all her diversities) based on its AHA questions.

As I mentioned earlier, WCCC's protocols is based on the key principle around women's safety: DO NO HARM. Is the space safe to ask women these questions? Or will asking these questions do more harm to her safety? WCCC Counsellor Advocates have been trained to carefully ask women about their safety from violence and abuse – only if they felt the space/environment that the talanoa was being held was safe for both the woman and the counsellor advocate would the questions be asked. The talatalanoa aimed at safely generating conversations around her mental, emotional, social, economic and spiritual needs.

Are you being listened to? Talanoa with women about their participation in decision making and meetings about post recovery and rebuilding their villages/ communities/ homes was a key component of WCCC's psychosocial support. More than 70% of the women who underwent psychosocial support expressed a desire to be part of the conversations and decisions being made about their wellbeing. Many of them felt left out and were not being listened to, properly.

But all of what I have just explained is not what made me almost lose it.

I purposefully explained a summary of what my NGO did immediately after the

humanitarian crisis in January because I wanted to highlight what we did based on our own working knowledge, skills and experience of addressing violence against women, girls and children and gender-based violence.

Because what happened shortly after that – painfully cuts back to the attitude of my colonial ancestors and how they viewed the locals 140 years ago – that, that same attitude is still very much alive today!

As soon as our communication lines to the outside world was back to normal, humanitarian experts on gender-based violence in emergencies started flooding our EAW and GBV spaces. Pre-designed approaches of how to roll-out psychosocial support to communities were being emailed to those of us in the EAW and GBV space in Tonga. A strong message of GENDER BASED VIOLENCE is different to GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN EMERGENCIES are two different things and require two different skill sets was being honed into our GBV/EAW space. We were being invited to attend online information sessions on what these experts in GBVie had to offer us. We were told that they had been in communication with government counterparts and had been given the go head to roll out the pre- designed activities on the ground. So basically, we didn't have a say – it was going ahead regardless.

You know it felt like WCCC and other local NGOs were very much like the locals with no white blood in their veins and the Tongans who had been employed by these larger expert interagency organisations as the in-country focal points were the half castes because they were closer to the white experts and obviously they had more knowledge, access to resources and expertise. So who were we to question them?

Armed with resources and the ability to get to all corners of the most remote areas of Tonga, WCCC reluctantly joined these interagency approaches – it was a situation where if we didn't go, we would not have access to all the areas they had access to because they could pay for chartered flights and boats and we couldn't – we just didn't have the budget for it. So to them, it may have seemed that we were validating their approach (which killed us internally) but to us, it was our way of reaching these areas and ensuring that we carried out our psychosocial support the best way we knew how

to and ensuring that women and children in high risk situations in these areas were referred to ongoing counselling, support and advocacy.

WCCC and I had never been made to feel so worthless and incompetent in the EAW space as I did this year with that experience, despite my 18 years of EAW and GBV working experience. I felt we had been bullied and disempowered. It felt exactly how I explained my great great grandfather's situation all those 140 years ago – do not marry a local girl they are not of your standard – do not use local expertise in EAW/GBV they are not of our standard.

In fact, on a personal note, I left Tonga for about two months over the July-August period because I felt if I didn't, I was going to absolutely lose it. My mental wellbeing was in question. I felt like I had failed as a leader for my NGO. I had tried with all the energy I had left in me to call these interagency approaches to account, I emailed and discussed this with them several times expressing my concerns – I wanted to them to understand their colonial approaches and break the pattern like how my great grandfather did when he went against the rules and married my Tongan great grandmother. I wanted them to just STOP and hand over the resources to the NGOs on the ground – I wanted them to acknowledge their power-over and to stop bullying. At one time, a comment was made to me:

“yes ‘Ofa we understand your concerns, but it was the Tonga Government who requested our help”

I responded to this person by saying: “yes, as government would do – because they assume you are the experts in this area. You have a responsibility and the ability to respond by saying “yes we have the resources and we would be happy to support your local experts on the ground to carry out the services you have requested – that is the difference between power-over and power-to that is how you can start contributing to decolonisation by acknowledging our expertise, skills and knowledge.”

BUT HERE'S THE THING, In the development aid context its NOT that much more different.

The excerpts you heard earlier is from a research I led with International Women's Development Agency IWDA in 2020. The research is titled **Creating Equitable South-North Partnerships: Nurturing the Va (or the spaces in-between relationships) and Voyaging the Audacious Ocean Together**

My primary role in this research was to navigate women's experiences and perspectives MAINLY in the development aid context – which meant that, at times, I had to dive in as far as I could, as far as the women would allow me, into the deepest ocean basin of the entire world: the Moana Pacific Ocean. My own experiences and perspectives did place me at the heart of this research, with one goal: to reimagine the way we move forward with Global North partners, to create a voyage that validates the voices in the research and one that enables the genuine creation of equitable partnerships and empowered relationships

The research report navigated through the knowledge and experience of 35 Pacific Island women who have been working in the women's rights movement space over the last three decades who agreed to talanoa with me (or hold conversations) sharing their perspectives on the role of Global North organisations and the interactions they have had with them over the last 30 years. There were three key guiding research questions:

Question One

What perspectives do Pacific women's rights movements and actors have – on the engagement of Global North organisations with their movements? Whilst there were positive perspectives – they were few and far between – I share with you here a summary of the 8 key perspectives of concern – as a way for us to learn from and move forward if we are serious about decolonisation of the development and humanitarian nexus:

1. GLOBAL NORTH AGENDA

Global North organisations bring their own agenda (western agenda) to the table with very little input from Pacific women's rights organisations as partners or there is a lack of consultation at the design stage through to implementation.

2. IMBALANCED POWER DYNAMICS

Global North organisations are perceived by almost all Pacific women's rights actors interviewed as having a position of power-over. An unequal partnership at the onset or one that does not value Pacific women's rights organisations as an equal partner.

3. COLONIAL PRACTICES IN POST-COLONIAL CONTEXT

Impact of colonization resulting in dependency of Pacific women's rights organisations on Global North organisations where the partnership continues colonial practices and is perceived as one of Donor and Beneficiary, Administrator versus Administered. The undermining of autonomy of Pacific women's rights organisations results in low confidence to negotiate.

4. CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Global North organisations lack contextual knowledge of the situation of women in Pacific countries, resulting in unrealistic expectations.

5. LACK OF SUPPORT FOR 'OTHER' WOMEN'S RIGHTS ISSUES

Issues not identified as Global North priorities are not included on the Global North agenda.

6. HIERARCHICAL CLUSTERING

Global North organisations perceived as having better relationships with well-established Pacific Feminist or women's rights organisations and are responsible for making feminism in the Pacific elite.

7. FRAGMENTING MOVEMENTS

Global North organisations have played a role in Pacific women's rights organisations working in silos and, as a result, the wider women's movement has seen weakened national and regional solidarity.

8. SUSTAINABILITY AND LONG TERM SUPPORT

Pacific women's rights organisations and women's rights actors constantly fear the 'unknown' in terms of sustainability of funds/support and accountability perceived as one way.

Question Two asked:

What role do Pacific women's rights movements and actors propose – for Global North organisations who want to engage with movements into the future?

1. GLOBAL NORTH ORGANISATIONS TO CO-CREATE AND CO-DESIGN, TO HAVE CO-RESPONSIBILITY AND COLLECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY WITH WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS
2. GLOBAL NORTH ORGANISATIONS TO DEVELOP ORGANISATIONAL FEMINIST POLICIES OR NATIONAL FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICIES
3. GLOBAL NORTH ORGANISATIONS TO SELF EDUCATE AND LEARN ABOUT LOCAL CONTEXT AND POLITICAL POSITIONING
4. GLOBAL NORTH ORGANISATIONS TO EMBRACE INDIGENOUS AND DECOLONIZED WAYS OF ACCESSING, SHARING, DOCUMENTING AND BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
5. GLOBAL NORTH ORGANISATIONS TO ADVOCATE FOR AND SUPPORT SUSTAINABILITY
6. GLOBAL NORTH ORGANISATIONS TO STRENGTHEN AND SUPPORT THE CAPACITY OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTORS
7. GLOBAL NORTH ORGANISATIONS TO INVEST IN INTEGRATIVE PARTNERSHIPS BUILT ON EQUALITY, DIVERSITY, INCLUSIVITY
8. GLOBAL NORTH ORGANISATIONS AND PACIFIC WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS TO AGREE ON SHARED VALUES AND STANDARDS

Question Three

What are the key elements of supportive, equitable and decolonized models of engagement between Global South women's rights movements and Global North

organisations?

1. DECOLONIZE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE AND SHARED POWER

2. ENABLE GLOBAL SOUTH POWER, AGENCY AND AUTONOMY

3. NURTURE THE SPACE IN-BETWEEN; THE VĀ – the relationship is critical for all pacific island countries

4. CONTEXTUAL SENSITIVITY

Participants in the research talanoa shared their perspectives that described the power dynamics that reflected unequal relations, and there was a kind of patten where it kept escalating every decade. In the last decade, moreso in the last 5-6 years, in my many conversations with women leaders across the Pacific, there is strong feeling that Global North organisations, in particular donors, have started to be more forceful in dictating ways of working rather than listening to their partners on the ground in spite of the Paris Declaration, BusanPartnership and Cairns Compact: dare I say:

The five principles of the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness: ownership, alignment, harmonisation, results and mutual accountability should be a key driver of approaching effective engagement between Global North and Global South. These principles were further reiterated in the Cairns Compact on on Strengthening Development Coordination in the Pacific (2009) and the 2012 Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation, emphasising the importance of transparency in funding decisions by donors and the engagement of civil society organisations as independent development actors.

There is a real urgency in what I am sharing today because the issues are very real and happening as I speak.

Australia's Minister for Foreign Afgairs (when visiting PICs earlier this year) said Australia would listen and would stand shoulder to shoulder with us. I want to see this turned into a reality.

Because The root of the problem is – is when those with power-over and access to resources control the entire discourse and distribution refuse to LISTEN. When you have a team of experts sitting in an air-conditioned office oceans and oceans away from your lived reality – who in my eyes – are development and humanitarian dictators – there is no room for real and meaningful shoulder-to-shoulder partnerships – nurturing the VA becomes a struggle and at times impossible. Locally led or localisation become the terms in fashion. Programs and activities become a tick-box – we revert back to my European ancestors view of Tonga 140 years ago – they need us – we bring money and resources to their country.

There ARE so many things I want to say and I could go on and on – but I believe in the power of conversations and being able to listen to other perspectives AND OTHER VOICES and so I will finish here.

But I leave you with this thought:

If we go back to how I was feeling in July–August of this year, Tonga almost lost a women’s right leader AT the expense of those with the power and resources NOT wanting to listen. Not seeing WCCC shoulder to shoulder.

Epeli Hau’ofa’s pre-eminent Oceanic philosophy in his essay ‘Our Sea of Islands’ (1993) speaks directly to the issue of reimagining Pacific identity from one that is often described as many tiny little islands spread across oceans of tranquil water, hence the name ‘Pacific,’ coined by Explorer Ferdinand Magellan in the 16th century. This has come at a price with the Pacific region often being labeled as small economies of scale dependent on its bigger brothers Australia and NZ (Kelsey, 2004), geographically scattered, with some being seen as completely ‘isolated’ from the ‘outside’ world. The most recent global referencing to this is the discourse of COVID-19 where comments have been made about most countries in the Pacific being spared because of its remoteness to the rest of the globe. Hau’ofa challenges this thinking and urges for a paradigm shift from viewing or understanding the Pacific as small pocketed islands with small land mass, spread across the vast Pacific ocean, to a more commanding and decolonized Oceanic presence – the biggest sea of islands in the world with a multitude of deeply

rooted histories, culture and people:

Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding,
Oceania is hospitable and generous,
Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still,
Oceania is us.

We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces which we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed place, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom

Oceanic Feminist and academic Yvonne Underhill-Sem suggests an additional paradigm shift. She argues that Hau'ofa's call for Oceanic people to rise up and be liberated from the 'tiny spaces' that they have resisted "accepting as [their] sole appointed place" fails to recognise the additional multilevel and intersecting struggles faced by women throughout the Pacific that still leaves women behind in those 'tiny spaces'. She elaborates on Hau'ofa's Oceania to a re-imagined positioning of women in the Oceanic space. When this happens, women can begin to confidently resist being "confined physically and psychologically" by demanding supportive, equitable and decolonized relationships. This was conceptual framework central to the research.

Finally, I would like to share two things; one from IWDA and a Hawaiian proverb that academic Teresia Teaiwa often quoted:

From IWDA – A CALL TO the development and humanitarian actors:

STEP UP and use our power to leverage resources and access for women's rights organisations, and make our own contribution to feminist movements. **STAND WITH** feminist movements in solidarity and amplify the work of global south actors.

STEP BACK when others are better placed to take the lead.

And the hawaiian proverb:

‘A ‘ohe o kahi nana o luna o ka pali;

iho mai a lalo nei;

‘ike I ke au nui ke au iki,

he alo a he alo.

The top of the cliff isn't the place to look at us;

come down here

learn of the

big and little currents, face to face

Malo ‘aupito!