



*School students in Honiara welcoming an Australian delegation. (DFAT/Qoriniasi Jr. Bale)*

# COVID-19: an opportunity to empower

**By Thomas Hehir and Leone Tupua**

Globally, we are witnessing a movement making it clear that Black voices demand to be heard, and for too long our institutions have not been listening. For those of us working in the development space, we should take a moment to reflect and ask

ourselves if we are truly listening to this global movement; are we doing all we can to ensure that the Black Lives Matter message is reflected in our work and the programs we implement?

This means more than community consultations. It means empowering local people in the design and delivery of aid programs, creating the space for national experts to unleash their imagination and innovation and to bring their expertise and experience to leadership roles.

With many of us unable to leave our own country, state, city, or perhaps living room due to the pandemic, we as an industry have been pushed to use every tool available to us to deliver programs thousands of kilometres away. We have come to see the roles that need an expat or consultant on the ground, and those that do not (of which there are more than we thought). We could be far less dependent on Australian citizens in-country to deliver development.

The COVID-19 lockdown has provided some space for nationals of our partner countries to take more leadership, but we have also actively limited that space. A rapid adoption of technology across the sector has meant that we have been able to rely on Australians back at home to continue program leadership and decision-making. Our capacity to work remotely has meant that generally, we have not relied upon national experts to take the lead and continue our programs. If a disruption the size of COVID-19 does not force us to change our approach, then it is clear the status-quo will be maintained indefinitely unless we choose otherwise.

The humanitarian space has been implementing a localisation agenda that has not, despite renewed interest, been replicated across the development sector. For the last two years, the Disaster READY program has worked closely with civil society throughout the Pacific and Timor-Leste to assist in disaster preparedness. Its leadership has been driven at the country level by local civil society groups with support from Australian counterparts. When Tropical Cyclone Harold hit the region during the COVID-19 pandemic, expats could not fly in to help. This forced

local communities, governments, and civil society groups to lead the response – accelerating the transition to localisation in a way traditional development programs have not been required to.

The response to Cyclone Harold itself faced many issues that could have been addressed through increased international presence. To have effective locally-led development, we must also recognise the important, and often crucial, role that international experts can provide in providing resources and knowledge that would otherwise be missing. The shift towards localisation means empowering local leaders, be they individuals or organisations, to be supported by international experts where they are needed.

Many development programs engage national consultants in senior roles. At Whitelum Group, in Southeast Asia we already leverage national technical consultants and leadership within our investments. Our work in Indonesia and Vietnam in particular showcases successful programs that value local expertise at high levels; however, this stands in sharp contrast to development programming across the Pacific.

The primary barrier to engaging Pacific nationals is a shortage of the skills we need for our programs. This has been due to a number of reasons, including Pacific Islanders immigrating to developed countries in the region in search of better work opportunities. The experience of the Pacific stands in stark contrast to the current and emerging middle-income countries of Southeast Asia. There, we draw more on national expertise, as better access to education has increased the availability of skills in technical advisory, monitoring and evaluation, and management.

After decades of aid work in the Pacific delivered by the Australian Government, we must reflect that if there is a shortage of the skills we need in the Pacific, then we have failed to support and empower Pacific Islanders to develop those skills, or indeed to change our ideas of what is actually needed. If our objective is for

Pacific Islanders to empower themselves to lead their own development, we must create the space for this to happen.

The other contributing factor is that the skills managing contractors and consultants alike value in senior positions are not only technical, but frequently cultural. We seek senior specialists who can 'speak DFAT', write reports not only in native-speaker level English but tailored to an Australian Government audience, and who manage staff and present themselves in meetings and consultations as Australians do.

This inherently disadvantages Pacific experts who seek senior roles in our programs, even when these skills are not always a necessary part of the role. Consultants and advisers based in Australia can support reporting and 'translate' information for DFAT needs; but managing Pacific staff may be more effective when done by someone who is also from the local culture. Meetings and consultations within the Pacific islands are with Pacific Islanders, and will be conducted differently by a Pacific expert. The skills we value in these roles speak more to our cultural norms than they do any deficiencies in skills throughout the Pacific.

For too long the onus of responsibility has been on our neighbours to move into line with donors' values and the things that are important to us. We (inadvertently) create the expectation that people from 'other' cultures will become like 'us', normalising our own culture and 'othering' the cultures of the countries we are working in. To navigate this, we must shift into Pacific cultural spaces and weave together elements of cultures to establish new ways of working<sup>[1]</sup>. A clear example is the sense of community, face-to-face interaction and verbal conversations inherently valued by Pacific Islanders. By integrating these elements of Pacific cultures, we increase our capacity for knowledge sharing and efficacy in development.

During the long days since lockdowns began, most of us have been considering

what our work will look like in the post-COVID world. This future should include a transition to more remote support for programs, a reduced presence of Australians in senior program roles throughout the Pacific, and more appetite for diversity and difference. We should take our lead for how we can achieve development objectives in the Pacific from Pacific nationals. This could also be a first step towards having more local organisations and companies directly take on aid contracts.

Australia stands to gain as much from these changes as our Pacific neighbours. Australia has the chance to distinguish itself as the ‘partner of choice’ in the region if we recognise and champion Pacific people, approaches and ideas in our development programs. We will significantly reduce our environmental footprint (hands up how many practitioners have spent more time in transit than in-country?) and achieve massive cost savings from travel and allowances.

Black voices everywhere are screaming that institutional racism is embedded in every part of life. It would be tone deaf of us to not reflect upon our own sector and what we can do to create change. COVID-19 presents the opportunity for us to take a leap in engaging with local expertise to develop strategic initiatives that build local human capital, so that a new generation and cadre of national experts can drive change throughout the Pacific. The risk is that if no action is taken to now, the opportunity to catalyse change could well pass us by.

*[1] Whitelum Group staff recently completed a cultural safety training day run by “Beyond... Kathleen Stacey and Associates” who walked us through the concepts of weaving cultures and exploring dominant culture. This workshop had an impact on many of our staff, who experienced the difference a professional training in cultural safety can make to our own perceptions of ourselves, our work, and the world around us.*

*This post is part of the [#COVID-19 and the Pacific](#) series.*

## About the author/s

### **Thomas Hehir**

Thomas Hehir is the Chief Operations Officer of Whitelum Group. Thomas has a Bachelors of Commerce and a Masters of Social Policy, both from the University of Melbourne.

### **Leone Tupua**

Leone Tupua is a MEL specialist with over 10 years experience in managing development programs in Fiji. Leone has a Postgraduate Diploma in Governance from the University of the South Pacific.