

# Localising Pacific consulting

by Mere Nailatikau and Nicollette Goulding

8 November 2021



Local consultants bring deep contextual knowledge

Photo Credit: [Global Environment Facility/Flickr](#)

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been rumblings of its potential to rebalance existing inequalities. Development commentators noted border closures were accelerating localisation efforts, creating new opportunities for local leadership in humanitarian spaces. “The physical absence of foreign aid workers,” **they say**, “has created space and opportunities for local leaders to use their creativity and innovation. It has encouraged changes in established ways of working, enabling shifts in institutional cultures.”

Fijian coral reef ecologist Sangeeta Mangubhai **confirmed** that with international scientists barred from travelling, local scientists in the Pacific are stepping forward into the void.

This reflects the experience of Pacific development consultants. “Though COVID is a challenge, it has offered opportunities for more locals to move into consulting”, observed Lydia Nenai, a Port Moresby-based climate change consultant. “Looking around, I know there are nationals who know the context of the work that we do, but we constantly hire international experts that come in to do the roles locals are able to do. That realisation gave me the push to move into that space”, she said.

As a result of the increase in demand, and expanding use of partnership models, the pandemic has opened opportunities for Pacific experts to think about consultancy as a viable long-term career option, which may have seemed too risky pre-COVID.

For Gaylyn Puairana from Solomon Islands, consulting offered the opportunity to apply her newfound skills after returning from studying abroad. “After completing my Masters in Applied Anthropology and Development Practices and returning to a full-time job in project management, I found my work to be fairly routine and wanted to use my new skills. So when I was contacted by the World Bank, I took the opportunity”, Puairana said.

Few locals see consulting as a viable career. For some, it takes a fortuitous approach from a recruiting agency to apply, and for others, forays into consulting are only possible alongside full-time work. But there are signs that this is changing, with expanding Pacific-based consultancy firms, collaborations and networks.

A common thread seems catalytic to taking the first step – valuing one’s capabilities. Samoan marine and fisheries consultant Maria Sapatu-Kennar began consulting after years in government, regional organisations and NGOs. “I wanted to do more, to pursue new ideas and to move up the ladder in my career. So I closed my eyes and made the bold move to try out for a consultancy as a project coordinator for government work”, she recalled.

The same realisation dawned on Peni Tawake, a Fijian consultant and accredited partnership broker whose first consulting experience involved undertaking political economy analysis in Papua New Guinea. “It gave me a sense of validation of my expertise, that I have a degree of specialist knowledge to contribute, and the confirmation for me personally that Pacific Islanders can do consulting work”, Tawake said.

“Saying yes to things I am scared of has so far been a plus, as well as valuing my work and managing my imposter syndrome by acknowledging that I bring knowledge, networks and contacts to this role”, said Suva-based gender and technology consultant Shaunalee Katafono of TraSeable Solutions.

The points of difference locals bring to consulting have long been lauded: deep contextual knowledge; understanding what is likely to make lasting impacts; and locally relevant technical expertise. However, in some cases, international agencies and local elites can dominate consultancy spaces, so that they remain inaccessible to newcomers. Mindsets also need to change about ‘what a consultant looks like’. “At times in meetings when I am introduced as a consultant, I can see the look of surprise on people’s faces, as I seem ‘quite young’ for what they expect a consultant to look like”, Sapatu-Kennar said.

“As Pacific Islanders, we often carry copious amounts of self-doubt due to colonisation of the mind. To realise that we are just as good as, if not better than, non-Pacific consultants – particularly regarding our innate knowledge of the Pacific, and how to contextualise programs – there is a degree of decolonisation of the mind that needs to happen”, Tawake added.

Puairana affirms that perceptions need to change across the board. While she has successfully consulted with international agencies, she is yet to convince organisations led by fellow nationals to take her on. It is also clear that systemic

change requires recruiting agencies to rethink their procurement processes, and how they may [exclude](#) local, country-based consultants.

Opportunities for personal and professional growth are what draw locals to consulting. “As a Pacific feminist, consulting opens up a world of exploration and learning. I can contribute skills and expertise and extend myself into an area I am deeply interested in – the Blue Economy and Oceans space”, said Fijian consultant Mereoni Chung.

Pacific consulting or contractor firms often focus on engineering, construction and project management. Increasing demand shows room for growth in climate change, disaster risk reduction, gender and social inclusion, and environmental consulting.

As their numbers grow, local consultants are reaching out to collaborate, share opportunities and exchange skills – like Kenneth Katafono, ICT and blockchain consultant, whose blog on [consulting in the Pacific](#) attracted such an enthusiastic response that he wrote a [sequel](#).

“There is no formal setup in the Solomon Islands, but a group has gathered out of interest. Our first training was on taxes and record-keeping, and more than ten female local consultants attended”, Puairana shared. Samoa-based Sapatu-Kennar draws strength from a Facebook Messenger group, ‘Blue Connect’, of colleagues and friends who share information, opportunities and moral support.

As with any career change, there are learning curves to consulting, including understanding taxes and regulatory requirements, cash flow planning, marketing one’s skillset, clarifying terms of references, negotiating rates and contractual obligations.

According to Chung, a more equitable and localised consultancy sector in the region would lead to more impactful, locally led, owned and driven interventions:

“A successful, thriving consultancy landscape would see local consultants having a powerful role in informing many spaces. Our community of practice would be reflected positively in the society we live in, the way we think, the rules we have, and our internal capacity.”

*The Australia Pacific Climate Alumni Network is hosting a series of hybrid events in November on localising Pacific climate consulting. Visit [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#) for updates.*

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