

Family fishing on Funafala, Tuvalu (Credit: Carol Farbotko)



Youth resilience to COVID-19: indigenous knowledge in Tuvalu

By Taukiei Kitara and Carol Farbotko
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Beyond Tuvalu's closed borders, which are continuing to preserve its COVID-free status, Tuvalu's younger generations are facing new challenges and opportunities. Primary schools closed briefly, but students experienced low disruption as the school closure period was similar to those during extreme weather events. High school students, however, experienced school closures from March until June.

By June, there had been [significant migration](#) from the capital to the rural islets of Funafuti atoll and the outer islands. Some of these migrating families decided that their children would not return to school when it reopened. With only two high schools – Fetuvalu on Funafuti and Motofoua boarding school on Vaitupu island – some families on the outer islands preferred their children stay with them, while other students moved from Fetuvalu to Motofoua.

For students not in school, the Ministry of Education has implemented [alternative delivery of education](#). Education contingency planning is addressed in Tuvalu's [Talaaliki Plan](#), which lays out national emergency measures in the case of both COVID-19's arrival and reduced external imports of food, fuel and other goods. Although neither of these worst-case scenarios has unfolded, the Ministry of Education is acting in accordance with the plan's guiding principles, adapting the education system so that students can continue their education in a home-based environment.

Under the *Talaaliki Plan*, responsibility for education is broadened beyond the Ministry of Education, with educational oversight partially devolving to families and island communities. With many students and other young people moving to rural areas, [it is not surprising](#) that COVID-19 has ignited renewed interest in indigenous knowledge among Tuvalu's youth. This interest is particularly focused on local food production, which features strongly in the *Talaaliki's* food security plan.

Indigenous agriculture and fish preservation workshops are ongoing in the capital and in rural areas. Through the Tuvalu Food Futures Project, funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and administered by Live and Learn Environmental Education, [youth visited the pulaka pits](#) for a demonstration of how to plant and compost *pulaka*, a large taro-like plant traditionally grown in pits. Participants also engaged in a practical demonstration of collecting sweet sap (toddy) from coconut trees. This included identifying the right coconut tree, cleaning and preparing the tree, selecting the right flower (spathe), and ensuring they have the right tools and equipment – a sharp knife and strong *kolokolo* (local string made from coconut fibre).

Fish preservation training, funded by the World Bank, was conducted on Papaelise, an islet outside the capital whose tiny population has been growing with new arrivals heeding the [government's advice](#) to move away from the capital to rural islands if possible. Smokers for the fish were constructed, followed by demonstrations of the preservation process from preparing the fish to smoking them. The participants, mostly young adults, [were considering turning this into an income generation initiative](#): selling smoked fish to the people in the capital. They believed that such a business initiative would ensure that the skills and knowledge they were learning would be maintained and passed from one young person to another, and at the same time they would be able to earn money to support their families. Currently, there is very little in the way of paid employment on the small islet of Papaelise.

These workshops were [described in the Tuvalu national media](#) as a response to increased interest in self-sustaining food production during the pandemic, as well as an increase in resilience to climate change. For the youth in particular, COVID-19 has acted as a trigger for renewed interest in indigenous knowledge alongside the more formal, Western-style education. The workshop trainers are community elders who are keen to pass on their knowledge, and perhaps reduce [reliance on purchased food, which in the capital is at 92%](#). Young people interviewed in the media acknowledged that they did not have traditional skills such as growing *pulaka*, but that gaining these now seemed important, not only for themselves and their families but also to pass on to their children as survival skills when future global shocks occur.

These shifts in the activities of young people in Tuvalu can be considered in light of the current national conversation on Tuvaluan values, which emerged during the national consultation for the [rebuilding of the Tuvalu Foreign Policy](#). During the [consultations held with youth](#), they reflected on the importance of Tuvaluan values, not only in terms of foreign policy but also in behaviour and actions within Tuvalu itself – in communities, different organisations, and in households. Youth strongly felt that what is portrayed in the

international community should be the true reflection of what is practised back in the motherland. Given the changes in the lives of many youth in Tuvalu since the borders closed, it seems that COVID-19 has opened an opportunity for Tuvaluan young people to think differently about important issues such as indigenous knowledge and values.

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

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