




RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Culture, Community, and Development: Unpacking the ‘Socio-Cultural Milieu Dynamics’ of Solomon Islands and Their Influence on Australia’s Aid Localisation

Mark Opoku Amankwa^{1,2}  | Gladys Nangira Murraka² | Kwadwo Adusei-Asante¹ | Vicki Frances Banham¹  | Clement Amponsah³  | Emmanuel Enyiful⁴

¹School of Humanities, Arts and Social Science, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Australia | ²Indo-Pacific Research Centre, Murdoch University, Murdoch, Australia | ³Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK | ⁴Stirling Management School, Frederick Kibon Changwony, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

Correspondence: Mark Opoku Amankwa (m.amankwa@ecu.edu.au) | Clement Amponsah (clement.amponsah@sant.ox.ac.uk)

Received: 21 April 2025 | **Revised:** 6 November 2025 | **Accepted:** 11 November 2025

Keywords: Australia’s aid | culture | localisation | post-development theory | socio-cultural dynamics | socio-cultural milieu | Solomon Islands

ABSTRACT

Using public ethnography anchored in the post-development theory and interpretivist epistemological paradigm, this study examines what we term the ‘socio-cultural milieu dynamics’ (SCMD) of the Solomon Islands (SI) and how these shape meaning, discourse, and practice in ways that influence Australia’s aid localisation efforts and aid outcomes. The findings indicate that local communities are deeply entrenched in complex SCMD with heterogeneous networks of decision-makers within the ecosystem. These SCMD, we argue, are evident in the structural and contested roles associated with the gendered composition of local committees, the power asymmetries between dominant local elites and subalternised groups, and the relationalities between donors and local communities. We suggest that while the current orientation of Australian aid programs or projects leans towards advancing locally-led projects, they should be more responsive to the community or local culture that accommodates different SCMD and more attuned to the cultural preferences of local communities. Our study contributes to ongoing development praxis and discourses by highlighting how aid projects cannot be separated from the cultural, ontological, and epistemological contexts that shape local experiences of aid localisation.

1 | Introduction

Australia has recently taken significant steps to rebuild aid programs in the Pacific, culminating in the launch of Australia’s International Development Policy (AIDP): *For a Peaceful, Stable and Prosperous Indo-Pacific* in 2023. A quick search for the catchphrase ‘local’ in the policy document returned 44 words, emphasising locally-led approaches to the programme’s delivery. While the policy’s intentions are well-meaning, marked differences in socio-cultural values and belief systems between donor and recipient countries can result in divergent preferences, potentially undermining the policy’s goals. Such misalignment often leads to a disconnect between aid programs

and the actual needs of local communities (Dreher et al. 2024). Literature thus shows that differences in the ideological underpinnings of both donor and recipient can reduce the impact of aid on beneficiaries (Dreher et al. 2009; Dreher et al. 2024; Minasyan 2016).

Like any other Australian foreign policy, the AIDP, which tends to foreground aid localisation in the Pacific, should be subject to rigorous ideological and discursive analysis given its philosophical and political assumptions and implications. While the stance of the Australia’s International Development Policy signals a partial shift away from top-down approaches by acknowledging the value of local knowledge and cultural

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2025 The Author(s). *Public Administration and Development* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

context (Gordon et al. 2024), our contention here is that it may still be shrouded in serious traps or undertones of imposing a Western agenda on Pacific Island Countries (PICS). In this sense, localisation risks functioning less as a genuine co-production of knowledge and power and more as a neo-colonial project that reproduces donor dependency, external control, and Western epistemic dominance under the guise of bottom-up participation (Amponsah 2025a, 2025b). For instance, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), through the Australian High Commission (AHC) in the SI, doled out 40 grants in 2024 for community development projects but required them to submit proposals in the donor's preferred language. This tends to favour applicants who are proficient in donor's language, thereby marginalising other local people who could have offered valuable contributions but are hindered by the language barrier (Amankwa, Amponsah, et al. 2025b). Frings-Hessami and Oliver (2022) argue that this approach reflects the values, the culture and language of those who developed them. Nevertheless, although a detailed critique of these ideological traps and undertones lies beyond the scope of this study, our focus is to understand how socio-cultural milieu dynamics within local communities function to shape meaning, discourse, and practice in ways that influence Australia's aid localisation efforts and aid outcomes in the Solomon Islands.

The post-development framework proffers a critique of modernist reductionist forms of development, arguing instead that development cannot be meaningfully separated from local cultures and epistemologies (Nourani Rinaldi 2022). They contend that attempts to impose universal models of progress often overlook or undermine Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and relating to the world (Demaria et al. 2023; Escobar 2015). Through such dialogical praxis, donors have increasingly sought to incorporate local culture into development discourse, which has been the agenda of the World Humanitarian Summit and Grand Bargain since 2016 (Roepstorff 2022). Since Australia's International Development Policy advances locally-led development as part of Australia's aid localisation efforts, it is imperative to examine the ways in which the socio-cultural milieu dynamics of the SI may shape or influence its efforts. In this study, we examine how socio-cultural milieu dynamics within local communities function to shape meaning, discourse and practice in ways that influence Australia's aid localisation efforts to localise development aid, drawing from a set of 46 interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Our key findings show a complex cultural terrain within which Australia's aid localisation efforts in the SI are unfolding.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. The next section discusses the concept of aid localisation in development literature. Third, we examine socio-cultural milieu and dynamics (SCMD) and their relevance to aid location and development. The fourth section presents the post-development theory as an enlightening heuristic guiding this study. We then outline the research methods employed. The sixth section presents the results and analysis. Finally, the paper concludes with key findings, implications, and recommendations.

2 | Aid Localisation

Aid localisation has gained prominence in development discourses as a strategy to enhance the effectiveness, accountability, and sustainability of aid interventions over the last 2 decades. By shifting decision-making power, resources, and responsibility closer to local actors, it seeks to address longstanding critiques of top-down high-modernist development approaches (Scott 1998) and mitigate power asymmetries inherent in international aid programming. According to (Amankwa et al. 2025a, 4), aid localisation is understood broadly in terms of '(1) enhancing local agency, decision-making power, and ownership to reduce power asymmetries; (2) increasing direct funding to local non-governmental organisations for cost-effectiveness; (3) investing in local capacities to bolster project sustainability; and (4) valuing local knowledge and access for effective project design and delivery'. These principles gained global recognition with the Grand Bargain Agreement in 2016, a landmark commitment forged at the World Humanitarian Summit to institutionalise localisation by prioritising direct funding to local actors and redefining aid delivery (Barakat and Milton 2020; Koch and Rooden 2024).

While the agreement reached under the Grand Bargain represents foundational work in institutionalising localisation within humanitarian frameworks (Koch and Rooden 2024), its underlying premise warrants critical scrutiny. Indeed, the very concept of localisation remains contested and has often been used interchangeable with locally-led development (Robillard et al. 2021; Roepstorff 2020, 2022). In this context, this paper frames localisation 'as locals being the nucleus of envisioning and enacting development, whereas locally led development can be argued as putting a local face on top of existing development paradigms' (Amankwa et al. 2025a, 4). The prevailing assumption is that localisation of aid necessarily produces more efficient and effective development outcomes. Yet, this framing risks obscuring persistent issues of power, exclusion, and inequity at the local level. Much of the debate on localisation also focuses on how internationally led systems could be modified to allow for increased local participation rather than challenging the historical and structural dominance of such systems. Doing so extends the risk of marginalising the perspective and initiatives of the indigenous that have already been systematically displaced by external interventions. This encapsulates a broader paradox: while localisation frameworks call for increased inclusion, they continue to maintain internationally driven models as the normative core of development praxis.

Since 2022, Australia has made considerable efforts towards aid localisation in Solomon Islands pursuant to its commitment to the localisation initiative. Indeed, the Solomon Islands Australia Community Partnership Project aims to empower local communities by improving infrastructure and enhancing livelihoods. Additionally, Australia has provided AUD276m to fund the Solomon Islands Infrastructure Project, which is a 10-year developmental initiative to create local job opportunities as a way of supporting the Solomon Islands recover from the problems created by COVID-19 (Solomon Islands Infrastructure Program 2023). While these initiatives seek to advance the

interests and well-being of the local communities in SI, it is expedient to ensure that the projects are aligned with the socio-cultural milieu dynamics of SI, thereby avoiding the broader paradox of reinforcing international modernist paradigms of development that can marginalise local perspectives and epistemologies.

3 | Social Cultural Milieu Dynamics (SCMD) and Development

In Solomon Islands, aid localisation unfolds within complex cultural systems in which community decision-making is shaped by *Kastoms* (customary practices), *Wantok* (kinship networks) and gendered power dynamics (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2002; Kabutaulaka 2005). These systems we term ‘socio-cultural milieu dynamics (SCMD),’ are not monolithic; rather, they reflect contested hierarchies among different groups, including chiefs, church leaders, women’s group, men’s group, youth, inter alia (Allen 2013). For instance, Moore (2018) documents how Guadalcanal’s post-World War II urbanisation heightened the tensions between *kastom* and state institutions, especially around issues of governance and land rights in Honiara. Similarly, Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (2002) demonstrate how epistemological collisions, stemming from the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems, can impede development efforts. They illustrate this with the case of the Kwara’ae community of Malaita, where the substitution of externally driven models for indigenous epistemologies undermined the Oka Village Project and led to its collapse. The project had operated successfully for a decade based on indigenous knowledge, but collapsed when a new leader took over and replaced these methods with Western models and culture. Given these socio-cultural complexities, international donors like Australia also face significant challenges in designing aid programs that genuinely align with local realities. These realities are shaped by what we frame as the ‘socio-cultural milieu dynamics’, a concept that captures latent groups with shared values, positions and behaviours (Groh-Samberg et al. 2023). In SI, these milieus unfold in contested hierarchies (Allen 2013), tensions between *Kastom* and state institutions in urban governance (Moore 2018) and epistemic clashes (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2002), underscoring Morgan et al. (2017) argument that socio-cultural milieu dynamics influence development at all scales.

Anchored in the post-development theory and drawing the links between socio-cultural milieu dynamics and Houghton’s classification of culture, evidence that cultural bias, social relations, and the way of life of a community can collectively shape and differentiate socio-cultural milieu dynamics within the wider socio-cultural environment. For instance, failing to understand the complexity of the socio-cultural environment of beneficiaries may undermine how people interpret, participate and legitimise aid projects that benefit them (Houghton 2019; Salvatore et al. 2018). However, engaging with these complexities as a form of ‘cultural capital’, particularly through possessing knowledge of the local culture, can prove indispensable for the success of development projects (Bourdieu 1991; Frings-Hessami and Oliver 2022; Frings-Hessami and Oliver 2022).

According to Salvatore et al. (2018), the socio-cultural milieu dynamics consist of a plurality of development paths, each of which emerges as a particular interpretation of the local context. This plurality highlights the importance of culturally relevant development projects, as donors may be required to negotiate across different social settings.

4 | Theoretical Perspective—Post-Development Theory

This study is grounded in post-development theory, which gained traction in the 1990s as a critique of the Western-centric orientation of development discourse advanced by modernisation theorists, and as an attempt to revalorise non-Western ways of life (S. Matthews and Castellsagué 2025). It challenges the limits of development theory, which focuses on changing the traditional into a ubiquitous universality where ‘all world cultures and societies are reduced to being a manifestation of European culture’ (Escobar 2013, 213). Other scholars argued that the approach echoed the paternalistic and colonial frameworks of the past, reminiscent of the League of Nations mandate system, where external oversight of Western ontologies decided on the readiness of local institutions to govern themselves, delaying true local autonomy (Jerónimo 2020). Its key proponents, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and Arturo Escobar, sought to defend the local against the global (S. J. Matthews 2018). They argued that development interventions should be comprehensive enough to capture all facets, especially for those who are looking for alternatives to the top-down, Western-dominant ideologies of development (Sesay 2025).

Previously, using culture to explain the conditions of development was seen as orientalist because of the colonialist and patriarchal posture of Western epistemes (Al-Zo’by 2019). This was incongruous with the modernisation theorists who believed that Global South countries were inundated with ‘unwarranted’ endogenous characteristics, inter alia, traditions and culture (Horner 2020; Willis 2011). (Litonjua 2010, 46) contends that ‘poverty and injustices that Global South countries suffer are not only personal but cultural and structural, rooted in the very structures of the societies and supported by the values and attitudes of their culture’. Given that these societies are rooted in complex socio-cultural environments with heterogeneous networks of decision-makers within the aid ecosystem, it is imperative to understand the ways in which the socio-cultural milieu dynamics of SI influence Australia’s aid localisation efforts in their context. Thus, the post-development theory offers a framework to examine how the socio-cultural milieu dynamics within local communities function to shape meaning, discourse and practice in ways that influence Australia’s aid localisation efforts to localise development aid.

In this article, we illustrate how development interventions are never merely technical, but deeply embedded in discourses and meaning-making. Discourses of post-development stress how dominant paradigms of development, modernisation and aid localisation construct particular ‘truths’ about what development ought to be, while subalternising bottom-up local epistemologies and ontologies of being. In this context, we frame the

socio-cultural milieu dynamics of the SI not as mere cultural observations but deeply entrenched in discursive formations that shape what is considered legitimate, worthy, or possible in aid localisation. Considering that Australia's International Development Policy professes to be 'locally oriented,' the post-development theory allows us to look beyond the purported intention to investigate the validity of the political and philosophical assumptions that underpin Australia's aid development policy.

5 | Methods

5.1 | Settings

The study was conducted on the island of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. Four out of 21 provincial assemblies located on Guadalcanal Island were selected to collect data for the study. Honiara, which is the capital of the Solomon Islands, was also visited because it has been the centre of nation-building efforts since World War II (Bennett 1987; McDougall 2022). According to Australian High Commission Honiara (2016), Guadalcanal, Makira, and Malaita are the top three islands in the Solomon Islands with high poverty levels. While Australia's aid is used to improve the standards of living in all islands in the country, including the top three listed, it aims to do so where poverty is endemic (Australian High Commission Honiara 2016), hence justifying the selection of the research area. The Island is the biggest of the nine provinces of the SI, with a total land area of 5336 square miles. As of the 2019 census conducted, the total population of the province stood at 154,150, 79,093 (representing 51.3%) males and 75,057 females (representing 48.7%). The study's area is made up of 21 provincial assemblies or wards including Tandai, Saghalu, Savulei, Tangarare, Wanderer Bay, Duidui, Vatukulau, Talise, Avuavu, Moli, Tetekanji, Birao, Valasi, Kolokarako, Longgu, Aola, Paripao, Tasimboko, Vulolo, Malango, and Ghaobata. Contrariwise, the lead author visited four out of the 21 provincial assemblies to collect data for the study.

5.2 | Research Philosophy and Design

Using public ethnography anchored in the interpretivist epistemological paradigm, the study examined how socio-cultural milieu dynamics within local communities function to shape meaning, discourse and practice in ways that influence Australia's aid localisation efforts to localise development aid. According to Creswell and Creswell (2022) ethnography affords the researcher to study the shared patterns of behaviours, language and actions of a cultural group in their natural environment over a long period of time. However, this study goes beyond studying participants' shared patterns of behaviours, language and actions to presenting culturally grounded insights that shape policy debates on Australia's aid localisation efforts (Burawoy 2005). Public ethnography not only studies people's culture but also contributes to public debates, which are critical and timely for social issues (Graizbord and McPike 2020). The study adopts public ethnography to intervene in the public debate and also cause a political change in Australia's aid

localisation efforts. As Fassin argues, public ethnography is often *politicised* ethnography, concerned with introducing certain questions or perspectives into the public debate or with an eye on impacting policy (Fassin 2017; Scheper-Hughes 2009; Vaughan 2005). Narrative and interpretive inquiry were employed to construct and analyse the lived experiences of interlocutors, drawing on recollected observations, detailed field notes, and reflexive accounts (Creswell and Creswell 2022). While interpreting data, the study also navigated issues of trust, positionality, and the researcher-participant relationship, recognising their role in co-constructing knowledge. Reflexive practice further helped to evaluate the degree of interaction and the researcher-participant relationship, which reaffirmed the importance of ethnography in contexts where development is deeply entangled with local and global power structures (Amankwa, Amponsah, et al. 2025b).

5.3 | Methodology and Approach

The ethnographic study was conducted between early February and early June 2024, which constituted a limitation of the research. Although a 6-month period was initially requested to carry out the fieldwork, only a 4-month visa was granted, with no possible extension, thereby constraining the duration of data collection. During the fieldwork, 3 focus group discussions (FGDs) (consisting of 8 respondents each) and 22 semi-structured interviews with key informants were conducted. Out of these interviews, 47.83% were women and 52.17% were men. Although interviews were conducted on the Guadalcanal Island, who are predominantly Guales, responses from other participants from other provinces were also captured during the field work, offering diverse perspectives on their social-cultural environment (Bennett 1987).

As the chief investigator, semi-structured interview questions for the formal interview structure were tailored to the study's objective without donor influence. This autonomy was to ensure that questions framed encouraged genuine responses while avoiding biases that could occur as a result of pre-set donor priorities. During our discussions, questions were based on observations or previous documents on Australia's aid programs in the Solomon Islands and recorded after obtaining participants' consent. Interlocutors were also briefed on the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation and measures taken to protect their confidentiality (Amankwa, Amponsah, et al. 2025b).

Further, informal sessions through *Tok Stori* were organised. The Solomon Islands Relational Indigenous Epistemological Framework (SIRIEF) localises research methods, recognises indigenous knowledge and decolonises research (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2001). This framework, inspired by Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo (2001) uses *Tok Stori* to ground the realities of indigenous ways of knowing and being in lived experiences (Amankwa, Amponsah, et al. 2025b). *Tok Stori*, which simply means telling stories, is a Solomon Islands language used by Indigenous peoples to tell what they do always, through telling stories, sharing their experiences, making sense of life, and creating a joint narrative. According to Roche et al. (2019) *Tok Stori* is a cultural practice where participants are allowed to

share their own stories during informal conversations. It emerged in response to the normative answers that emerged as recurrent challenges in formal interviews. This approach is purposefully ‘ground-up’ and dialogical, intended to hear the lived experiences of the local communities and agen (ts)/or (cies) often excluded in the theorising of post-colonial development discourse (Adamowicz 2023; Amankwa et al. 2025b; Amankwa et al. Forthcoming; Roche et al. 2019). By centring on the voices and lived experiences of beneficiary communities, the framework ensures that their perspectives are informed by local ways of being and knowing, leading to a more effective localisation of Australia’s aid efforts in the Solomon Islands. For locations for *Tok Stori* (telling stories) outside the structured or formal interview framework, it was guided by respondents and held in appropriate and comfortable circumstances (e.g., during meals, drinks, dinners, cooking, laundry, inter alia). The use of this approach was to ensure inclusivity of the participants’ ways of being and knowing, but also to critique the dominance of donor language in the data collection process (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2002).

These sections lasted 45–90 min on average and were taken in English or native languages. With the consent of the participants, the interviews were recorded and transcribed while the research assistant (native) provided real-time translations into English during sessions held in their dominant local language (Solomon Islands Pidgin). Participant observations were also made during the fieldwork while living with the local people. Measures were taken to protect the confidentiality of participants. As such, participants were assured that their responses

were going to remain anonymous and used solely for academic purposes.

At the local community level, the lead author was embedded in seven cases, including a women’s group, young people, a men’s group, premier and provincial assembly members, traditional chiefs, ‘Bigmen’ of Kastom Wantok groups, and heads of traditional Wantok groups (Yin 2012). Additionally, the chief investigator was embedded in four cases of civil society groups¹, including local non-government organisations (NGOs), think tanks and research institutes, faith-based groups, and community-based groups (See Figure 1: Methodological Framework). Members, agents and contractors of DFAT were also included as an embedded case. The qualitative research design of the study meant that purposively sampling of interlocutors was not based on equal representation of various groups but on how resourceful they were on the subject matter. These cases were treated as individual cases, and a cross-case analysis was conducted to triangulate or compare their views, which allowed for data confirmability and saturation (Creswell and Poth 2016; Hennink and Kaiser 2022; Maher et al. 2018).

5.4 | Data Collection

We collected data from several sources, including primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources included documentary analysis of reports, media publications, peer-reviewed publications, proceedings, and conference papers, among others, whereas the primary sources included key informant sources

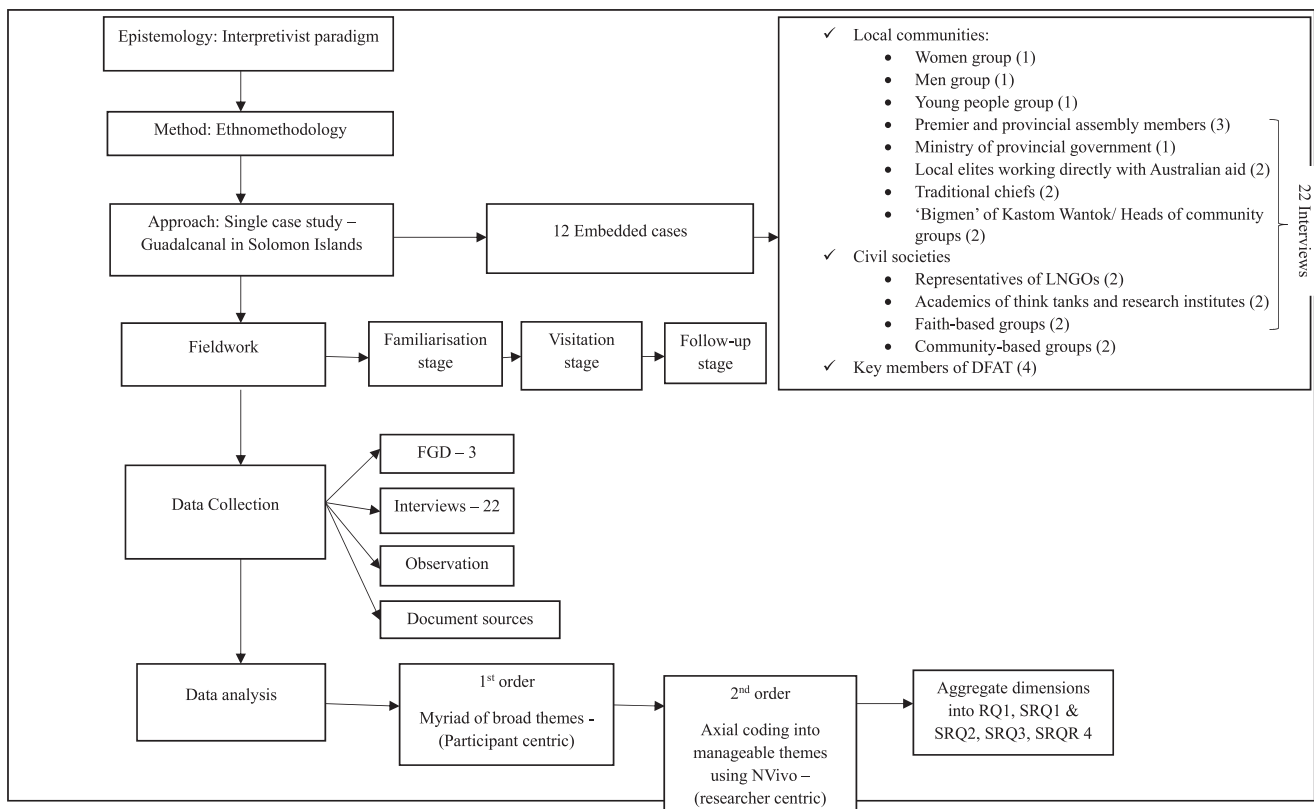


FIGURE 1 | Methodological framework. *Source:* Authors’ conceptualisation.

with community members, civil societies and representatives of the donor, field notes, and observations. The lead author utilised gatekeepers in the community who both informed the participants about the study and also facilitated their recruitment in the collection of primary data. Alternatively, where data collection processes were difficult, the primary author contacted a staff member of a university in the Solomon Islands who assisted with the collection of primary data from the interlocutors. The lead author continued to maintain contact with the research assistant and the relevant community stakeholders through phone calls, emails, and WhatsApp messenger calls. This was to avoid reinforcing the perception of research being a modern form of (neo) colonial extraction.

Before the fieldwork, the lead author sought ethical clearance from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of Edith Cowan University (ECU) (Approval Number: 04569). The lead author also sought permission and consent from the Ministry of Education and Human Resource and Development (MEHRD), the provincial government of Guadalcanal (GPG), traditional chiefs, and interlocutors of the study.

5.5 | Data Analysis

The NVIVO 12.0 version was used to organise the interviews after transcribing and coding, while we attempted to make meaning of the data through the analysis of statements and themes. From the general objective of the study emerged the specific research question, *‘How socio-cultural milieu dynamics within local communities function to shape meaning, discourse and practice in ways that influence Australia’s aid localisation efforts to localise development aid?’* From the specific research question emerged the theme of SCMD. Based on the theme, we derived 6 sub-themes, which were cultural dynamism, local apathy towards aid projects, gender differences, *Wantokism*, land ownership and tenure system, and cultural acculturation. We conducted a thematic analysis, organising and interpreting the data according to emergent sub-themes to capture key patterns and insights. The statements or findings were embedded in quotations with ‘thick descriptions’ for contextualising and commenting on the findings of the study. We also incorporated field notes and observations into the discussion of the study. After, we triangulated the findings of the study with existing literature and interpreted them as obtained during the study (Aktinson and Hammersley 1998). Additionally, we applied reflexivity, which is an important aspect of public ethnographic studies and consistent with the interpretivist research paradigm (Coffey 2018), during the collection and interpretation of data. This was to prevent over-familiarisation and overtly immersing ‘self’ in the process of collecting and interpreting the data of the study.

5.6 | Data Credibility and Integrity

While recording interviews was initially planned to ensure the accuracy of data, in other instances where it was not feasible, we adjusted this approach when some participants expressed discomfort due to the sensitive geopolitical developments

involving donors and the upcoming elections, which were only a few months away. During this period, participants were particularly eager for change and often provided answers they believed were expected or aligned with prevailing narratives. To respect preferences and mitigate these dynamics, we opted to take detailed and contemporaneous notes and transcribed them immediately afterwards, maintaining data integrity (Rutakumwa et al. 2020). To further ensure the credibility and integrity of the data, transcribed data was sent to a professional transcriber in Australia to validate the responses of the interlocutors. After that, the data was sent to participants for confirmability and authentication.

6 | Results

6.1 | Socio-Cultural Milieus and Dynamics

Having situated aid localisation within a post-development lens and discussed our methodological approach, we now analyse the role of local socio-cultural milieu dynamics in shaping how external aid interventions are received, adapted, or resisted. In the Solomon Islands, culture is not simply a framework on which aid is situated, but a constitutive force that defines decision-making, relationships, authority, and legitimacy in development and localisation practice. We argue that these dynamics both open possibilities for co-production and address the limitations of modernist paradigms when donor priorities meet local worldviews and social institutions. In examining how the socio-cultural milieu dynamics of the Solomon Islands shape and influence Australia’s aid localisation efforts, we identify several key themes: cultural dynamism, local apathy towards aid projects, gender differences, *Wantokism*, land ownership and tenure systems, and cultural acculturation—all of which significantly structure engagement with Australian aid programs.

6.2 | Cultural Dynamism—Matrilineal and Patrilineal Systems

While the localisation agenda has been regarded as the driving force behind community development projects, failing to account for the underlying community forces behind development may have a domino effect on its effectiveness. Among these, cultural dynamism manifesting as matrilineal and patrilineal systems emerged as a common theme of the community forces embedded in the socio-cultural milieu of SI during interview sessions with interlocutors. The common notion is that the effectiveness of aid programming is not solely the awareness of beneficiaries’ cultural context but is instead shaped by the matrilineal and patrilineal systems of inheritance and power dynamics that underpin aid localisation. While the latter holds merit in its ideal sense, overlooking this socio-cultural milieu can also impact aid outcomes. In the SI, which encompasses both patrilineal and matrilineal systems, women in matrilineal systems are markedly not inferior to men as compared to entrenched patterns in patrilineal systems. Consequently, donors are expected to be attuned to subtle cultural differences across various local communities. These framings are context-specific, and like SI, where communities are not homogeneous

groups, similar considerations may apply. In an interview session where we attempted to understand the cultural system of the community, a respondent was asked to describe the cultural system of the community. The respondent (Guale) claimed that:

Within the SI, we have different cultural systems. Some provinces follow a paternal system, while others follow a maternal system of leadership and inheritance. For instance, this island [Guadalcanal] follows the maternal system for leadership and all related matters.

When respondents were asked whether these cultural systems have an impact on the way community aid projects are delivered, there were several contestations. At the community level, where donors and CSOs frequently engage in addressing social issues and development priorities, there was widespread concern regarding the limited or absent representation of women on development committees, regardless of whether the community adhered to a matrilineal or patrilineal system. In some matrilineal communities, the lead investigator visited, such as Turarana, women stressed the need to have equal representation in committees, but in practice, their participation was minimal. A respondent explained,

Yes, in matrilineal systems, inheritance and lineage come through the mother's side. However, when it comes to leadership or decision-making, it's often the men who take charge, even if women have a say. Women might raise issues or make suggestions, but the final decision usually rests with the men.

In such matrilineal societies where males still dominate leadership positions and committees, one could assume that this might have a significant impact on community aid programs that concern women. However, when asked whether this dynamic affected aid programs, a participant accorded, 'Yes, because of our matrilineal system, most Australian aid programs directed towards women won't have any negative impact on our traditional culture.'

During fieldwork, the lead researcher observed that most Australian aid programming or projects at the community level often prioritised women or girls over men or boys. In one community where the lead author visited, DFAT, through the AHC in the SI, funded the construction of a girls' dormitory and ablution block. When the primary author inquired about the rationale behind this project, teachers, community chiefs and committee members—who were predominantly men—consistently expressed the belief that the initiative would promote gender parity in education. Paradoxically, while women in matrilineal societies voiced concerns about underrepresentation on development committees, male leaders tended to champion development projects that predominantly benefited women. This paradox, where aid projects intended to benefit women are promoted by male leaders despite women's underrepresentation, highlights not only the complexities of gendered participation but also points to broader attitudinal challenges, such as local apathy towards aid projects, that influence engagement with aid initiatives.

6.3 | Local Apathy Towards Aid Projects

A sub-theme that emerged during the interview sessions with interlocutors as a socio-cultural dynamics was apathy. Although this sub-theme was not predominant in most of the responses of the participants, it foregrounds an attitudinal problem in the development ecosystem of the SI. In specific instances, respondents were asked about the ways in which apathy influences or shapes Australia's aid localisation efforts in the SI. A key informant mentioned that;

Apathy is an interesting concept. In my last job in the Marshall Islands, there was a saying: 'Never challenge the whale'. This reflects a cultural element in many Micronesian and Melanesian societies—there's a reluctance to challenge authority or the 'Big man.' This mindset can definitely be problematic, as it discourages questioning or pushing back against those in power, even when necessary for progress.

The involvement of some Big men and educated elites in writing project proposals on their behalf may make it difficult to challenge them on the true needs of the local communities. Further, with the current power dynamics that exist in the aid architecture, apathetic behaviours of local communities will prove difficult to challenge the prevailing status quo either at the local, national or even global level. Another respondent accentuated that:

Cultural dynamics play a big role. For instance, there's a tendency for apathy among some farmers and women. They don't always believe in what we're trying to do, thinking the funding should come directly to them. It's a mindset that takes time to address.

The apparent lack of trust between community members and local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) who have directly benefited from Australian aid may result in the local apathetic behaviour of beneficiaries. During observations in various local communities, the lead researcher noted a prevalent lack of maintenance culture in relation to aid projects, raising crucial concerns about the long-term sustainability of these community aid projects. The general maintenance and sustainability challenges associated with aid projects portray the local apathetic behaviour of aid beneficiaries in local communities in the SI. In many cases, respondents expressed a sense of exclusion from decision-making processes, which may translate into the laissez-faire attitude of communities maintaining aid projects. Additionally, some believed that direct financial disbursement to beneficiary communities should have preceded their involvement in aid projects. This sense of local apathy is further complicated by gender dynamics, as male-dominated structures and household hierarchies often influence who participates in, and benefits from, aid projects, shaping both engagement and outcomes of aid in the Solomon Islands.

6.4 | Gender Differences

The hierarchical relationship between men and women and how society tends to favour men predominantly plays an integral role in the way community development projects may be implemented. In the context of the SI, the results were mixed, with male-dominated social structures and household power dynamics appearing most as gender differences that shape aid development programs and projects. While some respondents maintained that gender differences do not necessarily hinder the implementation of aid projects, they emphasised the importance of acknowledging and integrating gender considerations into decision-making processes. Conversely, others argued that gender dynamics significantly influence how aid projects are implemented at the community level. For instance, in an interview with a respondent working with Australia aid donor agency, he indicated that:

Gender differences don't necessarily impact the implementation directly, but they must be acknowledged and incorporated into the process. We have a dedicated gender team, and as part of every scoping study, they conduct a gender analysis. Similarly, they assess disability and social inclusion considerations. For example, if we're building a market, we ensure there are appropriate toilets for women and ramps for people needing wheelchair access. Gender considerations are factored in before, during, and after activities.

In stark contrast, an academic working with a University in the SI was of the view that:

Gender differences have a significant impact on how aid programs are implemented. For example, women's responsibilities at home, like taking care of the household and children, often limit their ability to participate in community meetings or project activities. In some cases, cultural and social norms restrict women's mobility and their ability to contribute to decision-making processes. Programs might also overlook women's specific needs, such as access to maternal healthcare or skills training that could help them generate income. Moreover, in male-dominated societies, men usually hold more power, which can lead to women's roles being undervalued or ignored when projects are designed or implemented.

The findings reveal a discernible disconnect between institutional perspectives on aid implementation and the lived experiences of local communities. Further, respondents consistently indicated male dominance as a deeply entrenched cultural norm that significantly shapes the design and implementation of aid programs. Notably, several participants observed that despite being intended to benefit women, many development initiatives remain under the control of male actors, thereby reinforcing existing gender hierarchies. A participant averred that:

Male domination makes it hard for women to be involved in decision-making. For example, if a project is supposed to benefit women, the men might still be the ones who decide how resources are distributed. Women's voices are often ignored, even when the aid is meant for them.

Another respondent also intimated that:

Male dominance creates a lack of gender balance. Most educated individuals in leadership are men. When aid is given, men often dominate the implementation process, sidelining women even if they have valuable ideas. The male-centric approach in decision-making continues to stifle the contributions of women in community projects.

Aside from the educational background of men being most talked about, some respondents felt that because of the gendered roles in society, men had more authority in decision-making than women, and thus translated to decision-making on community aid projects. For instance, a female participant asserted,

Here, it's the men who do most of the heavy labour and provide for the family. In villages, it's hard work—using knives, cutting logs, carrying heavy loads—all of this is seen as the man's role. Because they are the ones who physically work to bring bread and butter to the table, their authority is more respected. Unlike in urban areas or other countries like Australia, where women also work and contribute financially, in rural areas here, it's primarily the men who earn and provide.

It was observed during the workshop and focus group discussions that women were notably not forthcoming with their responses in mixed-gender settings as compared to when they participated in their homogeneous, female-only groups. When the chief investigator questioned them during individual interviews, they explained that although their society is matrilineal, they often felt intimidated or constrained when expressing their opinions alongside their male counterparts. In a telling vignette illustrating such gendered constraints, a 'Big Man' acknowledged that although their society was matrilineal and women may hold land ownership rights, the ultimate authority over land use decisions typically rested with their husbands or male relatives. From a feminist standpoint, if such power dynamics—rooted in cultural norms—are not dismantled, it becomes very difficult for them to be heard on community development committees. It is noteworthy that these entrenched gendered hierarchies in aid interventionism often intersect with social networks and kinship ties, such as *wantokism*, further shaping the actors in terms of who possesses influence and voice in community development and aid decision-making.

6.5 | Wantokism

Wantokism,² which literally means ‘from one language’, emerged as a sub-theme of ways in which the SCMD of SI may shape and influence Australia’s aid localisation efforts in the SI. When participants were asked, they perceived that *Wantokism* continued to dominate aid efforts in the various communities visited. The Big Man culture and local elites privileged to win community aid projects on behalf of their communities may be expected to recruit the people they have relationships to implement aid projects. A respondent lamented that:

The “wantok system,” which fosters favouritism and nepotism, can create challenges. People tend to prioritise helping their relatives or close acquaintances over others. This dynamic is deeply rooted and affects all levels of work, influencing how aid is distributed or managed.

Another respondent highlighted that:

Yes, the “wantok” system can be a big problem. When aid comes into the community, instead of it being shared fairly, it is often given to someone who knows the person distributing it—a close relative, brother, or sister. This creates tension because the rest of the community doesn’t benefit as they should.

Jealousy, which arises out of wantokism, was also expressed in some of the responses of respondents. For instance, a participant was of the view that:

For the negatives, jealousy often arises due to power dynamics. For instance, if Australia channels a community project through a commoner in the village, the chief or the leading family or tribe might say, “We are the ones who are supposed to lead this. How come that tribe is in control of this project?” This situation often leads to self-interest issues.

While some of these participant responses framed wantokism as promoting insular, self-interested groupings that operate in isolation within community development projects, others offered contrasting views. They viewed these culturally embedded homogeneous groups as interconnected, functioning within a broader relational system that enables mutual and social accountability. An interlocutor informed that: ‘The one-talk system plays a big role here. It’s a system of trust and relationships within communities’. Another participant suggested that,

On the positive side, if these issues are managed correctly and the right people are involved, then the project can succeed. The right alignment of stakeholders is crucial for the project’s success.

From these perspectives, wantok networks may serve as informal mechanisms of checks and balances, ensuring that

development initiatives remain responsive to the interests and concerns of distinct social units within the community. During a visit to a local church that had benefited from a community development project, the first author observed contrasting sentiments among community members. While some expressed dissatisfaction with the siting of the project on the church-owned land, others perceived it as an opportunity to work synergistically in implementing the project. This scenario underscores the nuanced and often contested nature of the wantok system in community development. Despite its complexities, the wantok system places a greater value on social support and mutual bonding. Contextually, cross-cutting relational ties serve to bolster community development, thereby promoting Australia’s aid localisation efforts.

6.6 | Land Ownership and Tenure

An emerging theme that significantly shapes and influences Australia’s aid localisation efforts is the land ownership and tenure system. In the SI, most lands are classified as customary lands held according to customary tenure. Owing to the fact that the commonly accepted norms of customary lands are owned by a group of people related by kinship, whether by family system or descent, securing lands for aid projects can sometimes be problematic. A key informant noted that:

Land disputes are another major issue. For example, if a project requires land to build something, like a school or clinic, disputes over who owns the land can delay or even stop the project. Sometimes, the landowners refuse to allow the project to proceed unless they are compensated, and that compensation can create further tension within the community.

In a vignette recounted by one of the local elites apropos of a water project under the WASH (Water, Sanitation and Health) project that had led to division in the community, he asserted that:

Yes, there was a water project meant to help the entire community, but the two families couldn’t agree on who owned the land where the water tank would be placed. The project was delayed for months, and when it was finally implemented, many people had already lost interest because of the long wait.

This results in the delay of community projects, as cited by an agent working with DFAT, who pointed out during an interview session with the key informant. He asserted that:

Yes, land tenure is a persistent issue and often a source of delays for Australian projects. It’s a complex challenge that requires careful navigation to avoid conflicts and ensure the smooth implementation of development initiatives. Land disputes, often between tribes, are a significant challenge for infrastructure projects.

They can cause lengthy delays in implementation and drive-up costs. A notable example is the Tina Hydro project, which has faced these issues. Land tenure and disputes remain a field of ongoing concern, especially for large-scale developments.

Another key informant of DFAT also iterated that:

One of the biggest impediments to implementation is land tenure. Land tenure is massive. There's so much uncertainty around land ownership. Even when land is designated as government-owned and gazetted, disputes arise, with people claiming ownership. This uncertainty is a huge barrier, not only for development but also for private sector investment. The private sector won't invest in areas where land ownership is unclear. For development to take off, private sector involvement is crucial, and this lack of land tenure certainty is a major obstacle.

Much more significantly, land tenure problems continue to stymie these community aid projects, having strong reverberations on how aid programs may be delayed. One of the development challenges the lead researcher observed was the Islands' complex land tenure system and traditional land accessibility: with only a small fraction of land owned by the state and the rest controlled by the indigenous people, this continues to remain a controversial issue in SI's development discourse. It is also a strong theme that occupied the minds of development partners in the country. A classic case study of this is the siting of a Community High School and clinic, which highlights the contradictions in development discourse. On one hand, local communities need development projects, while on the other hand, the intricate land tenure system affects where these projects can be located.

During my fieldwork, it was noted that the clinic, funded by Australian aid and a Community High School, funded by development partners like the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and DFAT, were situated far from the town, forcing locals and students to walk long distances to access these essential services. Upon questioning the reasons for these inconvenient locations, the chief investigator was informed that landowners had rejected the initial plans to site these projects closer to the village. Consequently, development partners had to find alternative lands to build the facilities. Further, the Tina Hydropower project, partly funded by the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP), has also faced challenges due to land tenure issues in the country. A respondent noted that the delay in starting the project was caused by disputes over land acquisition from some tribal groups, even though the Solomon Islands Government (SIG) had secured land for the project. This situation underscored the broader issue of land accessibility and the significant impact it has on the implementation of development projects.

During fieldwork, it became apparent that another issue linked to land tenure considerations is cultural acculturation. In this context, understanding local customs and adapting to cultural sensitivities is essential not only for land tenure systems but also

to ensure projects are designed and delivered based on meaningful community ownership and ontological appropriation. As we shall see below, navigating these temporal pressures while respecting customary practices is critical to ensuring that interventions are both effective and culturally appropriate.

6.7 | Cultural Acculturation

A sub-theme that emerged during the fieldwork is cultural acculturation, which manifested in cultural sensitivity. Donor's aid projects are mostly implemented in a timely manner, requiring milestones and deliverables. On the other hand, community development projects require community consultation for the community to engage in development processes that concern them fully. Interestingly, some of these consultation processes are bypassed due to the long process of community consultation. This was confirmed by a local respondent working with an International CSO who remarked that:

The limited timeframe really restricts us from conducting comprehensive consultations with all stakeholders. For instance, we don't always have sufficient time to go down to the communities to gather views directly from children, women, and girls about what they think and how their input could shape the project design. Given these constraints, we often rely on existing materials and resources, such as previous or recent reports and evaluations from current projects that align with our scope. Additionally, we sometimes piggyback on ongoing activities by asking our field staff to incorporate a few key questions during their interactions with communities. They then gather feedback and bring it back to us for consideration in the proposal design. While this approach is not ideal, it allows us to make the most of the limited time we have while ensuring that the proposals reflect some level of community input.

This approach, where meeting timelines of donors conflict with communal consultation during aid decision-making, may be insensitive to meeting the social and community needs of the people. Furthermore, most Solomon Islanders live in rural areas and thus have strong ancestral connections with the land and *kastom* (customary beliefs). Western notions employing developmental or universalist approaches to development, including building schools with modern facilities, may oppose traditional beliefs that tend to favour Indigenous building materials made of palm leaves. Rightly so, respondents believed that Australia's aid localisation efforts in terms of building small community development infrastructure have not entirely replaced the traditional building styles of the local people. A Traditional Chief informed that:

They assisted us with funding to build proper houses for education and clinics, but they made sure not to replace our traditional houses entirely. They respected

our preference for maintaining our cultural houses alongside these new buildings.

In another interview, the participants asserted that:

Yes, when they helped with the school, they ensured the design included spaces where we could hold cultural gatherings and ceremonies. They also included our input on where to place the buildings, respecting sacred areas and ensuring the layout fit our way of life.

From the participants' perspective, Australia's localisation efforts in the Solomon Islands corroborate, partly, with the core tenets of the localisation concept, where aid programs or projects are sensitive to the cultural and community needs of the people. While in the Solomon Islands, the lead author observed that small community infrastructure projects were made from aluminium and offcut timber that sought to depict, albeit selectively, elements of building practices of local people. However, a closer examination shows a more nuanced tension: even in remote rural areas where traditional building architecture, such as houses made from palm leaves, remains the norm, project infrastructure continued to replicate the material aesthetics more commonly associated with urban or peri-urban areas in the country.

7 | Discussion: Social Cultural Milieu Dynamics and Aid Localisation

The study sought the perspectives of key informants, local people and CSOs on how socio-cultural milieu dynamics within local communities function to shape meaning, discourse and practice in ways that influence Australia's aid localisation efforts and aid outcomes in the Solomon Islands. Rather than treating development as a neutral or universally applicable process, post-development theory (Demaria et al. 2023; Escobar 2015) provides a critical lens to interrogate how local norms, power relations, and epistemologies—embedded in matrilineal and patrilineal systems, gender roles, wantok networks, and land tenure practices—actively shape the implementation and outcomes of aid projects in the SI. This approach highlights that material outcomes of aid are not merely technical achievements but emerge through discursive processes that mediate whose knowledge, priorities, and values are recognised and acted upon, revealing the limits of donor-centric approaches in achieving meaningful localisation (Escobar 2015).

According to decolonial scholars, localisation has been widely criticised for failing to redress (neo) colonial systems and subjectivities of power and domination in the aid ecosystem. Also, Roepstorff (2020), argues that 'local' is being conceptualised as a binary categorisation of actors to the global, characterising neo-colonial subjectivities of domination and power. While the study acknowledges that donor-driven systems, approaches and practices themselves can undermine locally-driven aid and reproduce systems and logics of coloniality, we argue that this theorisation also misses the nuanced dynamics of cultural interconnectedness and interactions in these local settings that continue to reinforce the neo-colonial subjectivities of power

and domination already being problematised at the global level or inextricably linked to the systems and practices of international donors and aid agencies. In this study, we argued that these dynamics also function to shape meaning, discourse and practice in ways that influence aid outcomes. The findings illustrate that cultural dynamism also consolidates the neo-colonial subjectivities of power and domination already being problematised in the international aid ecosystem. Some post-development theorists rooted in post-patriarchy have challenged the primacy of masculinist approaches to political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property (Demaria et al. 2023).

Cultural dynamism was associated with the power dynamics evident in the matrilineal and patrilineal systems or practices in local communities. The participants' responses highlighted the complex cultural terrain in which Australia's aid localisation efforts in the SI unfolded. The research participants argued that even though their communities followed a matrilineal line, there were patrilineal undertones in the constitution of committees that oversee community projects. Nonetheless, these patrilineal undertones experienced on local committees continue to pursue gendered programs that tend to favour women in these local communities. According to Bennett (1987), although a woman's economic worth was recognised in the marriage transaction, her social status relative to a man's was low. The Polynesian concepts of *noa* (common, secular, ritually unclean—the negative female element) and *tapu* ('special, sacred, ritually holy—the positive male element) also prevailed in varying degrees in the thinking of Solomon Islanders. To men and women alike, the social order, constantly reinforced and reinforcing, seemed normal, inevitable and unchanging. Further, while development actors often assume that recognising cultural context is sufficient for effective aid programming, the field data suggests that power dynamics within inheritance and leadership systems play a decisive role in mediating aid delivery. Indeed, the SI case highlights that matrilineal systems do not extend to all aspects of decision-making: although women inherit land and lineage through the maternal bloodline, authority in leadership committees and community governance often remains dominated by men and traditional patriarchal systems. This disjuncture emphasises the significance of a nuanced socio-cultural understanding in localisation efforts in the Pacific region, since treating cultural dynamics as a mere enlightening lens to aid praxis ('matrilineal' vs. 'patrilineal') risks obscuring the gendered hierarchies that persist in programme design and implementation (Baker and Palmieri 2021).

On the contrary, these endorsements do not depict structural change in fostering gender equality in these societies. The fieldwork experience further cemented the interlocutors' view of patrilineal and matrilineal systems. Most local committees the lead researcher interacted with had low to no representation of women on committees. Committees that recorded some women's participation were either financial or general secretaries, relegating them to better managers. Several studies (Batliwala 2019; Diprose 2023; MacArthur et al. 2022; Niner et al. 2022) found that structural changes in power relations could foster greater control of resources by women. For instance, Niner et al. (2022) found that focussing on the qualitative transformation of deeply

entrenched inequitable social structures is required to bridge gender gaps in political representation in development interventions. MacArthur et al. (2022) also established that challenging the distribution of resources and allocation of duties between men and women requires gender-transformational approaches, including dismantling power structures.

Similarly, local apathy towards aid projects foregrounded an attitudinal problem in the development ecosystem of the SI. The study accentuates tensions that exist between the local powerful elites and the subalternised, with the latter finding it difficult to challenge the former when aid projects do not reflect the true needs of the local people. More so, the interlocutors suggested that the lack of trust between CSOs and the local people creates apathetic behaviours. This was also evident in the laissez-faire attitude of local people towards maintaining aid projects in the communities. This confirmed Atinga et al. (2019) and Wong et al. (2025) findings that growing apathetic behaviours, low trust, and growing individualism undermined the capacity of mutual support for community-based projects. Aid projects that overlook the historical and socio-political realities of the community risk disrupting existing forms of social participation and inclusivity, which may contribute to patterns of apathetic behaviours among local people (Brouwers 2018).

Gender differences, revealed gender norms and power or hierarchical relationships existing between men and women in local communities. We contend that entrenched patriarchal structures continue to shape participation in community and aid development projects. Both local residents and representatives from civil society organisations highlighted that male-dominated power relations often determine who is allowed to engage in decision-making processes. This indicates that, despite formal mechanisms for inclusion, gendered hierarchies remain a critical factor influencing both access and influence within development initiatives. This was evident during community meetings, where male participants predominantly controlled the discourse, often muzzling women's voices in decision-making processes. On the other hand, key informants—primarily donor representatives—acknowledged the existence of gender differences but generally perceived these dynamics as having minimal impact on aid projects' successes. In effect, the study shows a clear divorce between institutional approaches to aid implementation and the lived realities of local communities.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the findings highlight a tension between the broader literature and local realities. Scholarship on aid effectiveness often argues that gender considerations are central to equitable and sustainable outcomes (Baker 2017, 2018; Baker and Palmieri 2021; Davies 2018). Yet, in the SI, this emphasis appears unevenly translated into practice: while donor agencies and the Australian government often prioritise gender mainstreaming through inclusion checklists, community-level implementation reflects a rather weak women's participation, shaped by entrenched patriarchal norms and male-dominated decision-making structures. This disconnect may also reflect distinct accountability mechanisms of international actors compared to local communities. Here, while donors are required to report against gender equity indicators as part of project requirements, local socio-cultural milieus and dynamics

are more influenced by customary authority and male-dominated realities. According to Coulter et al. (2019) and Acosta et al. (2020) male-dominated societies perceive women who are 'voiceless'—not standing up against a man or cannot speak up—as desirable, feminine and good. The authors argue that in relational discourses, women are expected to remain silent while their male counterparts speak. This was confirmed in the study of Coulter et al. (2019), who underscored historical injustices that have constrained women from participating in decision-making processes, stemming from related lack of voice, leadership, empowerment, and the practical limitations imposed on them by their gendered roles, often impacting their abilities to participate in civic processes. Even in the development sector, Spark (2020) found that women were not seen to have the moral and technical capabilities to run development projects in Papua New Guinea (PNG). While these essentialist perspectives may dominate development discourses, they often overlook the experiences of other marginalised groups, like the youth, who also suffer from this syndrome (Caputo 2022).

In this article, we have demonstrated how Wantokism manifested in a nepotistic attitude in development aid projects in the SI. This pervasiveness caused some participants to be jealous of other heterogeneous groups, even though projects were supposed to benefit communities. This was in line with Trundle et al. (2019), who indicated that wantokism disrupted imposed Western norms of institutional governance and contributed to nepotistic tendencies, thereby fragmenting resources. Contrariwise, other participants believed that wantokism presented a cultural embeddedness of homogeneous groups in societies undergirded by mutual and social accountability. Ha'apio et al. (2019) confirmed that the wantok system embedded in the local culture of local people was significant in engendering social cooperation and cohesion in community development. We argue that social cohesion provides autonomy to act collaboratively when the government fails to fulfil its responsibilities.

In the Solomon Islands, the land ownership and tenure system presents persistent challenges that often constrain the implementation of aid development projects. A recurring concern among participants was the uncertainty surrounding land allocation for community projects, compounded by enduring cultural governance norms and unresolved disputes over land ownership. These factors often complicate project planning and implementation, highlighting the need for context-sensitive approaches to land management in development initiatives. The analysis is therefore congruous with the studies of Allen (2013) and McEvoy et al. (2020), who asserted that many land tenure issues in rural areas remain unresolved by successive governments in the Solomon Islands, although governments have expressed concerns about resolving these issues through land reforms. Monson (2025) and Murray and Overton (2011) also affirmed that because 85% of the land in the Solomon Islands is held under customary tenure, land disputes are common, thereby obstructing rural development initiatives.

Finally, cultural acculturation, which manifested in cultural sensitivity, revealed tensions between the donor's timelines, milestones and deliverables and the communal consultation processes. This, at times, led to the circumventing of consultation processes, which may be insensitive to the social needs of

the communities. Further, the study showed that development projects cannot be divorced from the cultural beliefs and practices underpinning local communities. This was depicted in the way aid projects were implemented, where small community development infrastructure did not entirely replace the traditional building styles of the local people. This suggests that while some degree of cultural sensitivity is present, the localisation process remains, at best, a partial effort, often privileging standardised design templates over deeply contextualised, community-led construction methods. Such dynamics often than not raise critical questions about cultural acculturation in the localisation discourse and praxis.

8 | Conclusion

The study examines how socio-cultural milieu dynamics within local communities function to shape meaning, discourse and practice in ways that influence Australia's aid localisation efforts and aid outcomes in the Solomon Islands. Working within the post-development critique, our findings show that these local communities are rooted in complex socio-cultural milieu dynamics with heterogeneous networks of decision-makers within the ecosystem. Rather than treating development as a neutral or universally applicable process, the post-development theory provided a critical lens to investigate how local norms, power relations, and epistemologies, which are embedded in matrilineal and patrilineal systems, gendered roles, Wantok networks, and land tenure practices, continue to shape the implementation and outcomes of Australian aid projects in the Solomon Islands. In this study, while we recognise that donor-driven approaches and praxis can negatively impact locally-led aid, thereby reproducing logics of (neo) coloniality, we argue that the theorisation also misses the complex cultural interconnectedness in these local settings, which may continue to reinforce the neo-colonial subjectivities of power and domination, discursively being problematised in development discourse and practice. Interestingly, this study's approach highlights that the material outcome emerges through discursively framing and processes that mediate whose knowledge counts, whose knowledge is valorised and acted upon and not merely technical fixes that limit donor-centric approaches to achieving meaningful localisation. These socio-cultural milieu dynamics were evident in the structural and contested roles associated with the gendered composition of local committees, the power asymmetries between dominant local elites and subalternised, and the relationalities between donors and local communities. Therefore, the analysis of the SCMD of SI illustrates the important influence that socio-cultural context has on the way development aid projects are implemented in local communities.

These findings have clear implications for implementing locally led aid projects in the SI and the Pacific. While the current orientation of Australian aid programs or projects leans towards advancing locally-led projects, they should be friendlier to the community or local culture that accommodates different SCMD and more attuned to the cultural preferences of local communities. If these details and nuances are lost in practice, it may prove difficult for the success of localising aid projects in local

communities. Moreover, they will not demonstrate that they are sensitive to the socio-cultural environment of SI. Future research is needed to examine how DFAT incorporates cultural needs into the framing and implementation of locally led development projects.

Author Contributions

Mark Opoku Amankwa, Kwadwo Adusei-Asante, and Vicki Frances Banham contributed equally to the conceptualisation of this article. Mark Opoku Amankwa did the collection of data, transcribing, and writing of the article, while Kwadwo Adusei-Asante and Vicki Frances Banham contributed to the revision of the original draft. Gladys Nangira Murraka was involved in refining, reviewing and fine-tuning the manuscript to situate the work in the development discourse better. Clement Amponsah and Emmanuel Enyiful were involved in revising the manuscript in line with the reviewers' comments, resulting in its current form. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript with no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements

The manuscript is part of a doctoral study at Edith Cowan University. The authors would like to thank Edith Cowan University, University of Oxford, University of Stirling, and Murdoch University for their support and for using their available resource facilities, and also acknowledge the Human Resource Ethics Committee of Edith Cowan University Higher Degree by Research Scholarships (HDRS) for ethical clearance.

Funding

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Practice Impact Statement

This paper examines what we term the 'socio-cultural milieu dynamics' of the Solomon Islands and how these shape meaning, discourse, and practice in ways that influence Australia's aid localisation efforts and aid outcomes. Although the current orientation of Australian aid programs or projects leans towards advancing locally-led projects, it risks functioning less as a genuine co-production of knowledge and power and more as a neo-colonial project that reproduces donor dependency, external control, and Western epistemic dominance under the guise of bottom-up participation. This undermines the Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and relating to the world. As such, they should be more responsive to the community or local culture that accommodates different socio-cultural milieu dynamics and more attuned to the cultural preferences of local communities.

Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Endnotes

¹ World Bank (2022). *Civil Society*. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/partners/civil-society/overview> define civil society as faith-based groups, charitable organisations, professional associations, labour unions, non-profit organisations and foundations, coalitions, community-based groups and NGOs involved in advocacy, information-sharing, and policy dialogs. See World Bank (2022).

²Wantokism' is a social kinship, mutual obligation and welfare system and, by extension, belonging to a religious group, which a person belongs to in a society.

References

- Acosta, M., M. van Wessel, S. Van Bommel, et al. 2020. "What Does It Mean to Make a 'Joint' Decision? Unpacking Intra-Household Decision Making in Agriculture: Implications for Policy and Practice." *Journal of Development Studies* 56, no. 6: 1210–1229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2019.1650169>.
- Adamowicz, M. 2023. Local Development Model as an Element of Regional Sustainable Strategy. <https://www.intechopen.com/chapters/85593>.
- Atkinson, P., and M. Hammersley. 1998. "Ethnography and Participant Observation." In *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, 248–261. Sage.
- Allen, M. G. 2013. "Melanesia's Violent Environments: Towards a Political Ecology of Conflict in the Western Pacific." *Geoforum* 44: 152–161. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.09.015>.
- Al-Zo'by, M. 2019. "Culture and the Politics of Sustainable Development in the GCC: Identity Between Heritage and Globalisation." *Development in Practice* 29, no. 5: 559–569. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2019.1602110>.
- Amankwa, M. O., K. Adusei-Asante, and V. F. Banham. 2025a. "Personal Reflection on My Fieldwork Experience in a Small Island Developing State." *Development in Practice* 35, no. 5: 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2025.2452406>.
- Amankwa, M. O., K. Adusei-Asante, P. N. A. Brempong, J. O. Acheampong, and A. Muntaru. Forthcoming. *A Bibliometric Analysis of the Realities of Australian International Development Aid Efforts in the Pacific Region*. Australian Journal of Political Science.
- Amankwa, M. O., C. Amponsah, K. Adusei-Asante, V. F. Banham, and P. N. A. Brempong. 2025b. "'Rhetorics or Business as Usual?' A Systematic Review of the Realities of Australian Aid Localisation Efforts in the Pacific Region." *International Politics*: 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-025-00712-x>.
- Amponsah, C. 2025a. "Resilience Praxis as a Function of Coloniality: Rethinking Modernity, Resistance, and Participation in Adaptation Governance." *Antipode* 57, no. 5: 1792–1824. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.70035>.
- Amponsah, C. 2025b. "Resisting Resilience: Re-Conceptualising 'Counter-Conduct' to Environmental (In) Justices in Northern Ghana." *Development in Practice*: 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2025.2492664>.
- Atinga, R. A., I. A. Agyepong, and R. K. Esena. 2019. "Willing But Unable? Extending Theory to Investigate Community Capacity to Participate in Ghana's Community-based Health Planning and Service Implementation." *Evaluation and Program Planning* 72: 170–178. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2018.10.001>.
- Australian High Commission Honiara. 2016. Australian Aid: Fighting Poverty in Solomon Islands. <https://solomonislands.embassy.gov.au/honi/220416.html>.
- Baker, K. 2017. "Great Expectations: Gender and Political Representation in the Pacific Islands." *Government and Opposition* 53, no. 3: 542–568. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.54>.
- Baker, K. 2018. "Women's Representation and Electoral System Reform in Papua New Guinea: The Limitations of Limited Preferential Voting." *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 5, no. 2: 208–219. <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.235>.
- Baker, K., and S. Palmieri. 2021. "Can Women Dynasty Politicians Disrupt Social Norms of Political Leadership? A Proposed Typology of Normative Change." *International Political Science Review* 44, no. 1: 122–136. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121211048298>.
- Barakat, S., and S. Milton. 2020. "Localisation Across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus." *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 15, no. 2: 147–163. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1542316620922805>.
- Batliwala, S. 2019. "All About Power: Understanding Social Power and Power Structures." *CREA*. <https://reconference.creaworld.org/all-about-power/>.
- Bennett, J. A. 1987. *Wealth of the Solomons: A History of a Pacific Archipelago, 1800–1978*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Harvard University Press.
- Brouwers, S. A. 2018. "The Positive Role of Culture: What Cross-Cultural Psychology Has to Offer to Developmental Aid Effectiveness Research." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 49, no. 4: 519–534. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022117723530>.
- Burawoy, M. 2005. "For Public Sociology." *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 1: 4–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240507000102>.
- Caputo, V. 2022. "Anthropology's Silent 'Others': A Consideration of Some Conceptual and Methodological Issues for the Study of Youth and Children's Cultures." In *Youth Cultures*, 19–42. Routledge.
- Coffey, A. 2018. *Doing Ethnography*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Coulter, J. E., R. A. Witinok-Huber, B. L. Bruyere, and W. Dorothy Nyngi. 2019. "Giving Women a Voice on Decision-Making About Water: Barriers and Opportunities in Laikipia, Kenya." *Gender, Place & Culture* 26, no. 4: 489–509. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369x.2018.1502163>.
- Creswell, J. W., and J. D. Creswell. 2022. *Research design-international Student Edition: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. SAGE Publications Limited.
- Creswell, J. W., and C. N. Poth. 2016. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Sage publications.
- Davies, S. E. 2018. "Gender Empowerment in the Health Aid Sector: Locating Best Practice in the Australian Context." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 6: 520–534. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2018.1534938>.
- Demaria, F., A. Kothari, A. Salleh, A. Escobar, and A. Acosta. 2023. "Post-Development: From the Critique of Development to a Pluriverse of Alternatives." In *The Barcelona School of Ecological Economics and Political Ecology: A Companion in Honour of Joan Martinez-Alier*, 59–69. Springer.
- Diprose, R. 2023. "Brokerage, Power and Gender Equity: How Empowerment-Focused Civil Society Organisations Bolster Women's Influence in Rural Indonesia." *Journal of International Development* 35, no. 3: 401–425. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3770>.
- Dreher, A., M. J. Lamla, S. M. Lein, and F. Somogyi. 2009. "The Impact of Political Leaders' Profession and Education on Reforms." *Journal of Comparative Economics* 37, no. 1: 169–193. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2008.08.005>.
- Dreher, A., V. Lang, and B. Reinsberg. 2024. "Aid Effectiveness and Donor Motives." *World Development* 176: 106501. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106501>.
- Escobar, A. 2013. "Beyond the Third World: Imperial Globality, Global Coloniality and Anti-Globalisation Social Movements." In *After the Third World?* 194–217. Routledge.
- Escobar, A. 2015. "Degrowth, Postdevelopment, and Transitions: A Preliminary Conversation." *Sustainability Science* 10, no. 3: 451–462. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-015-0297-5>.
- Fassin, D. 2017. *If Truth Be Told: The Politics of Public Ethnography*. Duke University Press.
- Frings-Hessami, V., and G. Oliver. 2022. "Clashes of Cultures in an International Aid Organisation: Information Cultures, Languages and

- the Use of Information Systems.” *Journal of International Development* 34, no. 7: 1414–1429. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3644>.
- Gegeo, D. W., and K. A. Watson-Gegeo. 2001. “How We Know: Kwar’a’e Rural Villagers Doing Indigenous Epistemology.” *Contemporary Pacific* 13, no. 1: 55–88. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2001.0004>.
- Gegeo, D. W., and K. A. Watson-Gegeo. 2002. “Whose Knowledge? Epistemological Collisions in Solomon Islands Community Development.” *Contemporary Pacific* 14, no. 2: 377–409. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2002.0046>.
- Gordon, E., S. J. Gunawardana, and L. Lowe. 2024. “Exogenous Crises and Australia’s Development Policy.” In *Australian Politics at a Crossroads*, 162–176. Routledge.
- Graizbord, D., and J. McPike. 2020. “Features and Form: Appropriating Digital Storytelling for Public Ethnography.” *Ethnography* 26, no. 1: 1466138120924428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138120924428>.
- Groh-Samberg, O., T. Schröder, and A. Speer. 2023. “Social Milieus and Social Integration. From Theoretical Considerations to an Empirical Model.” Supplement, *KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 75, no. s1: 305–329. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11577-023-00892-5>.
- Ha’apio, M. O., R. Gonzalez, and M. Wairiu. 2019. “Is There Any Chance for the Poor to Cope With Extreme Environmental Events? Two Case Studies in the Solomon Islands.” *World Development* 122: 514–524. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.06.023>.
- Hennink, M., and B. N. Kaiser. 2022. “Sample Sizes for Saturation in Qualitative Research: A Systematic Review of Empirical Tests.” *Social Science & Medicine* 292: 114523. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523>.
- Horner, R. 2020. “Towards a New Paradigm of Global Development? Beyond the Limits of International Development.” *Progress in Human Geography* 44, no. 3: 415–436. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519836158>.
- Houghton, J. W. 2019. *Culture and Currency: Cultural Bias in Monetary Theory and Policy*. Routledge.
- Jerónimo, M. B. 2020. “Imperial Internationalisms’ in the 1920s: The Shaping of Colonial Affairs at the League of Nations.” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48, no. 5: 866–891. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2020.1816620>.
- Kabutaulaka, T. T. 2005. “Australian Foreign Policy and the RAMSI Intervention in Solomon Islands.” *Contemporary Pacific* 17, no. 2: 283–308. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2005.0058>.
- Koch, D.-J., and A. Rooden. 2024. “Understanding and Addressing the Unintended Effects of Aid Localisation.” *Development in Practice* 34, no. 3: 351–363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2024.2303666>.
- Litonjua, M. 2010. “Third World/Global South: From Development to Globalization to Imperial Project.” *Journal of Third World Studies* 27, no. 1: 107–132. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45194611>.
- MacArthur, J., N. Carrard, F. Davila, et al. 2022. “Gender-Transformative Approaches in International Development: A Brief History and Five Uniting Principles.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 95: 102635. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2022.102635>.
- Maher, C., M. Hadfield, M. Hutchings, and A. De Eyto. 2018. “Ensuring Rigor in Qualitative Data Analysis: A Design Research Approach to Coding Combining NVivo With Traditional Material Methods.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 17, no. 1: 1609406918786362. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918786362>.
- Matthews, S., and A. Castellsagué. 2025. *Post-Development from the Global South: Radical Alternatives or Ambivalent Engagements?* 1st ed. Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003477921>.
- Matthews, S. J. 2018. “Postdevelopment Theory.” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.39>.
- McDougall, D. 2022. “China Ups the Ante: The New Chinese Security Agreement With Solomon Islands.” *Round Table* 111, no. 3: 453–454. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2022.2083780>.
- McEvoy, D., D. Mitchell, and A. Trundle. 2020. “Land Tenure and Urban Climate Resilience in the South Pacific.” *Climate & Development* 12, no. 1: 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2019.1594666>.
- Minasyan, A. 2016. “Your Development or Mine? Effects of Donor–Recipient Cultural Differences on the Aid-Growth Nexus.” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 44, no. 2: 309–325. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2015.07.002>.
- Monson, R. 2025. “Land Tenure, Climate Adaptation and Legal Pluralism in a Pacific Town: This Is the Real Story.” *Cities* 159: 105732. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2025.105732>.
- Moore, C. 2018. “The End of Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (2003–17).” *Journal of Pacific History* 53, no. 2: 164–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2018.1472521>.
- Morgan, M., G. Terry, S. Rajaratnam, and J. Pant. 2017. “Socio-Cultural Dynamics Shaping the Potential of Aquaculture to Deliver Development Outcomes.” *Reviews in Aquaculture* 9, no. 4: 317–325. <https://doi.org/10.1111/raq.12137>.
- Murray, W. E., and J. Overton. 2011. “The Inverse Sovereignty Effect: Aid, Scale and Neostructuralism in Oceania.” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 52, no. 3: 272–284. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8373.2011.01468.x>.
- Niner, S., D. Cummins, S. B. Sahin, S. Mulder, and E. Morrison. 2022. “Women’s Political Participation in Post-conflict Settings: The Case of Timor-Leste.” *Asian Studies Review* 46, no. 2: 293–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2021.1973365>.
- Nourani Rinaldi, P. 2022. “The Age of Transition: Post Development and North-South Synergies.” *Latin American Perspectives* 49, no. 1: 237–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582x211060381>.
- Robillard, S., T. Atim, and D. Maxwell. 2021. *Localization: A ‘Landscape’ Report*. Final Report to USAID, Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance, Issue. F. I. Center.
- Roche, C., N. Walim, and H. Sindana. 2019. “Human Flourishing and Extractive-Led Development: ‘The Mine Will Give Me Whatever I Like’.” *Extractive Industries and Society* 6, no. 2: 573–583. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2019.02.002>.
- Roepstorff, K. 2020. “A Call for Critical Reflection on the Localisation Agenda in Humanitarian Action.” *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 2: 284–301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1644160>.
- Roepstorff, K. 2022. “Localisation Requires Trust: An Interface Perspective on the Rohingya Response in Bangladesh.” *Disasters* 46, no. 3: 610–632. <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12483>.
- Rutakumwa, R., J. O. Mugisha, S. Bernays, et al. 2020. “Conducting in-depth Interviews With and Without Voice Recorders: A Comparative Analysis.” *Qualitative Research* 20, no. 5: 565–581. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794119884806>.
- Salvatore, S., V. Fini, T. Mannarini, et al. 2018. “Symbolic Universes Between Present and Future of Europe. First Results of the Map of European Societies’ Cultural Milieu.” *PLoS One* 13, no. 1: e0189885. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0189885>.
- Scheper-Hughes, N. 2009. “Making Anthropology Public.” *Anthropology Today* 25, no. 4: 1–3. Wiley Online Library. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8322.2009.00674.x>.
- Scott, J. C. 1998. *Seeing like a State*. Yale University Press.
- Sesay, M. 2025. “Localization From a Postcolonial Perspective: African States’ Experiences With the International Criminal Justice Norm.” *Global Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 1: ksafo14. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf014>.

- Solomon Islands Infrastructure Program 2023. Introduction to Solomon Islands Infrastructure Program. <https://siip.com.sb/publications/page-elements/publications/portfolio-items/introduction-to-siip/>.
- Spark, C. 2020. "Two Different Worlds': Papua New Guinean Women Working in Development in Port Moresby." *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 61, no. 2: 353–365. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12271>.
- Trundle, A., B. Barth, and D. McEvoy. 2019. "Leveraging Endogenous Climate Resilience: Urban Adaptation in Pacific Small Island Developing States." *Environment and Urbanization* 31, no. 1: 53–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247818816654>.
- Vaughan, D. 2005. "On the Relevance of Ethnography for the Production of Public Sociology and Policy." *British Journal of Sociology* 56, no. 3: 411–416. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2005.00074.x>.
- Willis, K. 2011. *Theories and Practices of Development*. Routledge.
- Wong, L.-T., K.-W. Mui, and D. Zhang. 2025. "International Service-Learning Projects on Water Sustainable Management in Higher Education: A Case Study on Improving Water Quality in a Needy Community." *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSHE-03-2024-0186>.
- World Bank, W. 2022. *Civil Society*. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/partners/civil-society/overview>.
- Yin, R. K. 2012. "Case Study Methods." In *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology*, edited by P. M. C. H. Cooper, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, and K. J. Sher, 141–155. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-009>.