



RESEARCH IN THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR: Reflecting on our localised research model

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HUMANITARIAN
ADVISORY GROUP 

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INTRODUCTION

This reflection paper shares learning from the use of a localised research model supplemented with a regional knowledge broker role in an ongoing research initiative in the Pacific (see Box 1). The model was constructed to strengthen local research capacity in the region and ensure that skills and knowledge could be transferred among study team members and stay within the Pacific.

Box 1: Beyond Barriers research initiative

The Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP) commissioned this research to obtain a better understanding of how community resilience can be strengthened in Pacific island countries (PICs) through better integration of disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation (CCA) programming. The project aimed to determine persistent barriers and realistic opportunities for implementing agencies. It began by publishing a [foundational literature review](#) in July 2021, before collecting data from five case study countries to complete Phase 1 of the research. Phase 1 resulted in case study publications for [Fiji](#), [Vanuatu](#), [Solomon Islands](#), [PNG](#) and [Timor-Leste](#), the five countries where AHP Disaster READY programming occurs.¹ Phase 2 of this research included a stakeholder [Learning Workshop](#), a case study in Tonga (report forthcoming), and behaviour change analysis to provide guidance to agencies seeking to build community resilience (report forthcoming). This reflection paper is based on the model used to collect data for Phase 1.

This reflection draws on the views of several national researchers, the regional research lead and supporting Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) staff. It presents a snapshot of our learnings as a reflective piece rather than an evidence-based review. We believe it is important to share learnings from this model to highlight its value, and hope that other researchers and practitioners will replicate, build upon and scale up this way of working in the region.

¹ The Disaster READY initiative is part of the AHP, a five-year (2017–22), \$50 million partnership between the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Australian non-governmental organisations to improve humanitarian response. Disaster READY was designed to strengthen disaster preparedness and management across the Pacific and Timor-Leste.

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UNDERSTANDING THE MODEL

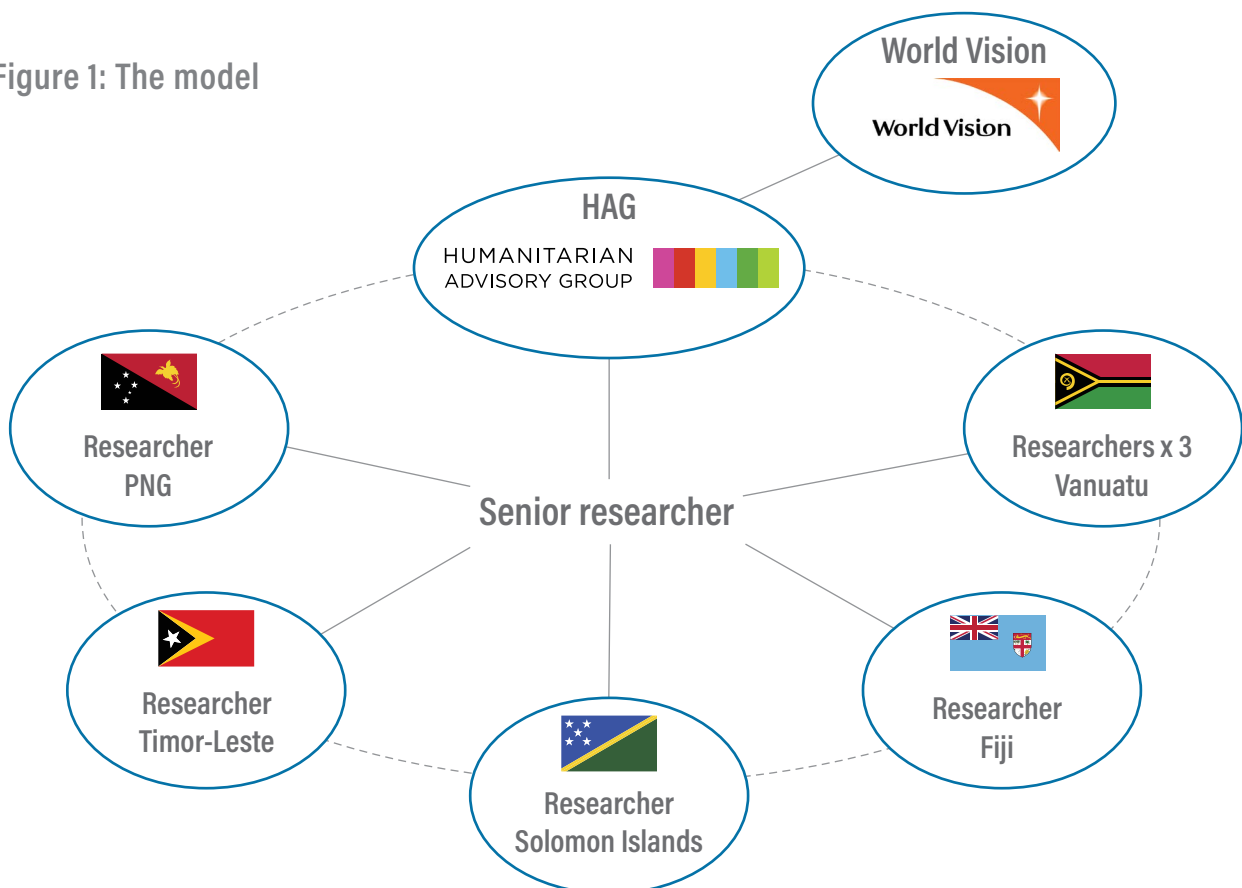
The goal of strengthening research capacity in the Pacific was explicitly included in the research commission and design. Recruitment of researchers in each of the five countries was based on existing networks, referrals and recommendations. In line with HAG and World Vision’s commitments to strengthening local research capability, the project team decided to recruit researchers who would work together and be led by a senior researcher based in the region to mentor and provide guidance to the group, as distinct from in-country consultants reporting directly to the contract holders (HAG). The intention behind this was to elevate our investment in strengthening the capacity of the national research in a way that created networking, mentorship and peer learning opportunities within the group, therefore sustaining capacity in the Pacific region.

The senior researcher, who had worked in the resilience and research space in the region for

more than 10 years, was identified through HAG’s existing networks. Based in Suva, Fiji, she helped to recruit the team, identifying candidates through her own network and connections. National researchers led data collection in each country, including desk review, key informant interviews and community focus group discussions (FGDs), and were able to receive guidance and support from both the senior researcher and HAG staff as needed (see Figure 1). The national researchers ranged from recent graduates to those with years of experience in the field, and each brought different skills and backgrounds to the role.

We also established an expert steering committee that provided strategic guidance and direction, and a reference group to provide technical advisory across our reports. These functions were vital to the success of the project on many levels but are not the focus of this reflection piece.

Figure 1: The model



The senior researcher was passionate about mentoring the less experienced researchers and working with a diverse team based across the region, which was critical to the success of this model.

"I provided the mentoring and guidance. Because I am from the region, we blend in a different way. Most of our discussions are the informal kind, [the national researchers] have to be comfortable to be able to do this work and ask for help, so I had to build that into my approach." (Senior researcher)

All five case studies were conducted simultaneously and overseen by the senior researcher. Project roles and responsibilities are outlined below.

World Vision

- ▶ Contract management
- ▶ Partnership and stakeholder management
- ▶ Technical advisory
- ▶ Communications and strategic support (for example, brokering conference and other socialisation opportunities)
- ▶ Methodological review
- ▶ Recruitment support (for the Senior role)

HAG

- ▶ Led project set-up and management
- ▶ Developed the research methodology and research team
- ▶ Recruited the senior researcher
- ▶ Led recruitment of the research team
- ▶ Supported the senior researcher in training the team
- ▶ Helped to connect the senior researcher and national researchers to relevant stakeholders
- ▶ Triangulated datasets and analysis from national researchers
- ▶ Led write-up of research reports
- ▶ Facilitated peer review of research reports
- ▶ Led communication and dissemination of research reports

National researchers

- ▶ Led country-specific literature reviews
- ▶ Worked with the senior researcher on contextualisation of research tools
- ▶ Led primary data collection (interviews and FGDs)
- ▶ Participated in team trainings and shared lessons and reflections
- ▶ Analysed data and presented reflections back to research team
- ▶ Led communication with focal points in-country

Senior researcher

- ▶ Helped to recruit the team
- ▶ Organised and co-led team meetings
- ▶ Provided training sessions for the team on research tools and technical knowledge
- ▶ Supported national researchers to contextualise tools for each country context
- ▶ Provided regular communication with each national researcher
- ▶ Supported national researchers to provide research briefings to key AHP stakeholders
- ▶ Supported national researchers in gathering relevant documents for desk review
- ▶ Reviewed and provided feedback on each literature review
- ▶ Helped connect national researchers with key stakeholders for interviews
- ▶ Helped to identify target communities for FGDs and arrange researchers' travel
- ▶ Supported national researchers to analyse data and identify key messages to present to the team
- ▶ Reviewed all reports

HAG staff maintained a very active role in the research process. A HAG team member was present for all team meetings and always available to provide guidance and support throughout each case study. HAG worked very closely with the senior researcher and kept open lines of communication with each national researcher, yet encouraged the team member to lead the process as she saw fit.

OUR KEY TAKEAWAYS

This model brought its own challenges, but its positive outcomes demonstrate the value in this way of working. We hope that our learnings guide others to enhance this model and enable it to be used more widely in the region and in research more broadly.



1. Invest in recruiting the right person as a senior researcher.

This model would not have been possible without an effective and passionate senior researcher. It is important to appoint someone who not only has the technical knowledge and skills but is committed to the capacity-building process. The senior researcher had years of research experience in the field, maintained strong connections with regional stakeholders, was able to manage and coordinate the team, and provided valuable technical oversight and review. Her experience and contextual knowledge of the region were critical to fulfilling the role.

“The senior researcher understood the context of the Pacific island countries. Whenever I was confused, I contacted her for clarification, and I could speak in Bislama. She would give options and ideas and allow me to make my own decisions.” (National researcher)

While the senior researcher's technical knowledge and connections were important, it was her commitment and ability to support and mentor young researchers that ultimately enabled the strengthening and transfer of skills.

“The mentoring bit was [most rewarding] for me, one of the greatest strengths of this research. It was not just one-off training where you come in and hold one session, the senior researcher is there to guide you, who will always be there to help, who you can email or WhatsApp or call anytime you have challenges.” (Senior researcher)

The senior researcher took on a large role in this project, larger than originally intended, because she wanted to provide the extra support. She went above and beyond her responsibilities to ensure that each national researcher felt supported and never overwhelmed. The time invested and her commitment also highlighted that this model, whilst effective, is resource intensive (see point 4 below). Finding the right person for the role was not easy, but the result was well worth the time and effort spent in recruiting her.



2. Seek consistency in the level of experience of the research team.

One of the strengths of this model was being able to work with a diverse team across the countries. The study team included recent university graduates, people with extensive consultancy experience but minimal technical knowledge in the field, and practitioners in the field with little research experience. This brought a diverse knowledge base to the team and allowed the researchers to learn from one another's strengths as well as from the senior researcher. For example, some researchers brought intimate knowledge of the AHP Disaster READY programming, whilst others brought extensive expertise in CCA approaches. However, the diversity also presented challenges for team trainings and mentoring, because everyone required a different level of support.

“We had to deal with very different levels of knowledge. I had to start if off at the same level for everyone, even though each went at a different pace. I had to do follow-up meetings with some.”
(Senior researcher)

When asked what we could have done differently to improve this model, the senior researcher suggested she would prefer working entirely with early career researchers. Some of the team had other commitments that prevented them from engaging consistently with the process, whereas the fresh graduates brought “a different energy to do the work”. Restricting participation to early career researchers would have allowed the senior researcher to tailor her guidance and provide more meaningful mentoring to people who were new to the role.



3. Setting clear expectations around roles, responsibilities and communications pathways is critical, but so is flexibility.

“I really liked the flexibility, HAG gave me a lot of that - ‘you do what you need to do but this is what we want’ - that gave me the ability to lead and oversee what was happening. It gets difficult when you have to work under strict conditions; HAG gave me the freedom and flexibility to tweak tools and methodologies and shape this research.” *(Senior researcher)*

In setting up the model and research process, HAG worked very closely with the senior researcher to ensure she had the support that she needed but also to allow her to guide us as to what was most appropriate in the region. The senior researcher was consulted throughout all stages of project decision-making and provided guidance on how best to proceed in each country.

In piloting this model, we were hesitant to be prescriptive, because we anticipated that the role of the senior researcher would evolve and change as the project progressed. In many ways this was helpful, allowing the senior researcher to make decisions and alter the process as needed and giving flexibility to the national researchers, who were all working in different contexts under different circumstances, including varying COVID-19 restrictions at the time of data collection.

However, it would have been helpful to establish and set expectations around roles and responsibilities more clearly. There was some confusion around the different roles of the senior researcher and HAG staff, creating some challenges in communication and reporting lines between national researchers and HAG. Flexibility was important in managing expectations and deadlines for national researchers through delays and difficulties surrounding COVID-19 restrictions; however, in some cases there was perhaps too much flexibility, and consequent unmitigated delays. In future, it will be important to distinguish more clearly between responsibilities with respect to mentoring and project management.

“The senior researcher was helpful in providing me with possible solutions when there are time and resource constraints. She gave options and ideas which I could use to make my decisions.” *(National researcher)*

Additionally, the minimal prescriptive structure resulted in some inconsistencies in the nature and quality of data collected in each country. In future, it will be important to strike the right balance between flexibility and standardisation.



4. Combining capacity development, project management and product delivery is resource intensive

Having research leads in each country who spoke the local language and understood the cultural context was critical for engaging with communities and identifying relevant stakeholders. However, working across five country contexts simultaneously with a team of various skill levels presented significant difficulties for coordination and timeliness.

A key aspect of this model was encouraging the national researchers to work together as a team and learn from one another. This required regular team meetings and coordination across contexts. Time zone differences and competing priorities complicated bringing everyone together for trainings, regular catch-ups and to share learnings. Various circumstances, relating to COVID-19 and other factors, changed timelines in some countries and made it hard to keep everyone coming together consistently.

These logistical issues inflated the project management role for both the senior researcher and HAG staff to an unexpected degree. Providing regular and effective communication and management of five consultants across five countries simultaneously requires a large allocation of time and resources. Administration and logistics became increasingly challenging, and the senior researcher and HAG staff had to pay constant attention to provide meaningful guidance across varying contexts. This was an important learning for the research team. The impact of this model proves its value; however, for others looking to work in this way, it will be important to plan for and allocate appropriate resources to manage and mentor a diverse team and maximise the building of skills and capacities.

"Additional support would have been helpful in trying to learn more analytical skills, research skills and ideas or opinions to provide critical information required for the work." (*National researcher*)



5. Investing in this way can have a significant impact on individual research capacity and future prospects

"I was able to understand what was required to become a great researcher from observing how you all conducted yourself in terms of this project. It really improved my work ethic and critical thinking skills by placing me in a position that allowed me to identify my strengths and weaknesses in terms of conducting research work." (*National researcher*)

Follow-up interviews with national researchers helped us to understand the impact of this experience on their career trajectories. The junior researchers reflected that this research improved their skills and confidence significantly.

"My fear of failure would have been greater without proper guidance from [the senior researcher]." (*National researcher*)

"[A national researcher] said to me, 'I've never done consultancy before but now I feel like I can.' In the region, a lot of consultancy work is done by people outside coming in to do the work, and having him say that shows that you can do it, and you can learn in every assignment you take on, and you can take more on now." (*Senior researcher*)

Additionally, working through this model helped the research team to make connections across the region that may not have occurred otherwise. The research team worked with a Steering Committee and Reference Group comprised of very reputable stakeholders from across the region. These experts generously donated their time, understanding that this research was seeking to give back to the region.

"I was able to connect with so many people from the region who are open to learning. When the questions keep coming, I don't take it as 'I don't think they can do it,' I always take it as capacity building, it shows that they are interested." (Senior researcher)

"When you go into a country and show that you want to build the capacity of their nationals, this provides you the entry point. You are not just going to take from people, they are more willing to donate their time, the buy-in is there." (Senior researcher)

For some national researchers, this research was their first consultancy, whereas others were more experienced. However, even the more experienced researchers noted that this project was an eye-opening experience. There is opportunity to further develop and refine this model to overcome challenges and continue to reap these benefits across the region.

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CONCLUSION

The push towards localisation, along with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, has caused a necessary shift towards engagement of national staff, yet this is often merely for data collection purposes rather than high-level input to research.

"I've done consultancies before, but it was the capacity-building part that was the heart of this for me. It is so important to build capacity of those in the region. If you're not helping to build capacity, don't expect people to have it whenever you need it." (Senior researcher)

Working in this way was challenging. It required considerable time and flexibility to manage communications, provide detailed, regular feedback, and oversee project management to a level that is rarely required when working with a small team of experienced consultants. However, we saw the benefit of this additional time and effort throughout all stages of the research. Engaging a regional knowledge broker and research lead allowed the research team to be more comfortable in asking questions and provided a level of technical and contextual oversight that HAG staff based in Australia could not provide. It allowed the knowledge gained to remain in the region and provided opportunities for researchers to leverage their new skills to find ongoing work.

The senior researcher role is the cornerstone of this model, and success depends on finding the right person for the

job. The senior researcher in this project continues to advocate for this model and hopes to take it forward in her own work.

"I've had other organisations approach me for work and I tell them this is the approach that I want to work in. Because of this experience, now I'm in a position where I can say this is how I want to work moving forward." (Senior researcher)

For others seeking to work in this way, it will be important to ensure that all recruits have the time and capacity to complete the work. In addition, recruiting people at a similar skill level will help streamline processes and manage expectations. Once the team is brought together, provide clarity around roles, responsibilities and expectations, while allowing flexibility for the model to evolve as necessary. Allow time for flexible deadlines and a continuous learning process, while providing enough structure and standardisation to ensure quality data. Most importantly, allocate a generous amount of time and resources to nurture the model and ensure its success.

This research has produced important findings and recommendations, and accelerated the careers of several young researchers. With the increasing need to advance localisation, including the localisation of research, we hope this model can be used to inform future approaches to strengthening Pacific research capacity.

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