Situating Island Resilience

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Abstract Resilience as a complex concept has been recognised and employed to strategise mitigation policies and processes during disruptive events. Island resilience in particular is used to frame islanders and their societies as vulnerable entities combating uncertainties with limited resources and capacities. On the one hand, public discourse on island nations tends to centre around victimhood amid disasters; on the other hand, islands are portrayed as peaceful and idyllic paradise during regular times. This opening chapter uses the term 'imaginary' to signify such discourses that construct one's understanding of island societies. We first outline the conceptual framing around the evolution of *resilience*. Then we elaborate on four prominent 'imaginaries' of Small Island Developing States and island societies in general. By unpacking the term 'imaginary', we aim to expose the dominant discursive framing of island societies to elucidate constructive avenues for locally owned progress and development in an increasingly variable and *glocalised* world.

Keywords Resilience · Island imaginary · Neoliberalism · Island paradise · Small Island Developing States

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Islands and island cultures have long captured the imagination of people and researchers, often framed as 'frontiers', 'vulnerable', 'unlike the mainland' and 'isolated and insulated' (Lockhart et al. 1993). Island environments are also romanticised as pristine and idyllic paradises. Islands across the globe, however, differ significantly in size, climate, ecology, political economy and sociocultural realities. Sociopolitical histories of islands have undergone unique transformations from peripheral tribal indigenous societies to participants and activists in global governance and trade. The United Nations (UN) recognises the administrative status of 58 Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the Caribbean, the Pacific, Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea. In addition to their colonial pasts still having prevailing impacts on their modern socio-economic structures (McLennan and Ulijaszek 2015), SIDS today are also positioned to be part of solving major challenges that humanity faces, particularly in maritime affairs. Their critical and leading roles in protecting biodiversity and marine resources (Chan 2018) are further emphasised in their active participation and contribution in international collaborations for the Blue Economy and maritime security issues (Voyer et al. 2018).

The concepts of vulnerability and resilience have long been used to represent island societies and geographies. Despite their limited capacity to cope with climate change, for example, islands are disproportionately affected by shifts in weather patterns and rising sea levels (UN 2021). Latin America and the Caribbean are most impacted by life-threatening climate events (World Meteorological Organization 2021); the 2017 Hurricane Maria caused losses of around US$ 68.6 billion across Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique and the US Virgin Islands (Alves 2021; Phipps 2017). The category five Hurricane Dorian in 2019 was the worst cyclone and natural disaster ever encountered in the Bahamas (World Meteorological Organisation 2019). Similarly, Cyclone Winston, the worst storm ever documented in the Southern Hemisphere, hit Fiji in 2016 and impacted 62% of the country's population, displacing more than 130,000 people (The World Bank 2017). More recently, the volcanic eruption of Tonga's Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha'apai in early 2022 directly affected more than 100,000 people, cut off communication channels with and within Tonga for weeks and led to a thick blanket of ash that compromised access to clean drinking water and damaged crops worth US$ 17 million (Witze 2022). In need of aid from other countries, Tonga also encountered its first COVID-19 wave following relief ships arriving in the country (AFP 2022).

Although the geographical remoteness of islands has in many cases helped island societies keep the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic at bay in 2020, their connectedness and interdependencies to the global community have meant that COVID-19 outbreaks were inevitable. Island nations commonly have inadequate healthcare systems, particularly in the Pacific (Carreon and Jackson 2022), and this has justified rapid responses in closing their borders to international travel. With limited external visitors, many island societies have been able to maintain their daily ways of life during the pandemic with curfews in place to prevent virus spread (Carreon and Doherty 2021). However, prolonged border closures have impacted

the local island economies, especially for those dependent on inbound tourism (Browne 2022), such as Cook Islands and Fiji, where tourism accounts for nearly 70% of their GDPs. Generally perceived as dependent on external capital due to their limited natural resources, many island states were forced to open their borders in 2022 or earlier and ease restrictions to allow international tourism back (Fox and Major 2022; Panapasa 2021; McCulloch 2022) after almost 2 years of battling against the COVID-19 pandemic with closed borders.

While the capacity for adaptation has been shown to be integral to the culture and lifestyles of island societies, the disruption from COVID-19 and increasing climate change impacts have meant individuals, families and/or communities are experiencing multidimensional impacts on livelihoods, including food security, financial security and social-ecological well-being. Understanding how these extra burdens have been dealt with, or not, reveals aspects of resilience in small island societies that challenge common contemporary framings of island-based rural development, disaster relief and natural resource management sectors.

The collection of chapters in this book seeks to expose and challenge assumptions and simplistic generalisations on island societies and their resilience to external disruptions. By unpacking the term 'imaginaries', a concept used to represent Other places and cultures in ways that reflect and enable relations of power, this book exposes the dominant discursive framing of island societies to elucidate constructive avenues for locally owned progress and development in an increasingly variable and *glocalised* world. In this opening chapter, we first outline our conceptual framing around the evolution of *resilience* and examine this in the context of governance in small island societies. We then identify four prominent 'imaginaries' of island societies that are applied and perpetuated in both the development literature and in practice. These include framings of SIDS and their societies as (1) against ahistorical terms that ignore the severe impacts of colonial legacies, (2) passive and dependent on external assistance, (3) vulnerable to environmental and non-natural exogenous shocks, and (4) isolated, homogenous and 'romantically' traditional. The rest of the book is divided into four chapters that delve deeper into each of these imaginaries and explore how such reductionist representations have affected the various dimensions of island resilience.

1 Resilience

Resilience as a complex governance framework (Chandler 2014) has come to underpin various interdisciplinary mitigation strategies addressing climate change, disasters, political fragility and urban inequity. The conceptual roots of resilience, however, can be traced back to ecological research and early equilibrium perspectives on ecosystem function, which emphasised the ability of a system to absorb shocks so as to maintain overall function, i.e. maintaining a stable state. Folke (2006: 253) outlines this evolution of resilience within the context of systems

thinking and shows how the concept evolved through multidisciplinary involvement to encompass aspects that concern 'the capacity for renewal, reorganisation and development'. While equilibrium perspectives sought to control change, resilience perspectives take change for granted and shift emphasis to a social-ecological system's ability to cope with and/or adapt to change, allowing for renewal and reorganisation, for example, adaptive capacity. The recognition of connectedness to and potential interference by influences external to a system is critical here as it adds layers of complexity to the function of systems. Parallels exist with current globalised sustainable development discourses when one considering the complexity embedded within the dynamics between human agency and environmental processes. Peoples' coping capacity in the face of natural hazards, for example, determines the success of disaster response. As such, resilience has increasingly gained traction and is frequently used as a concept to steer policy and action in the sustainable development and disaster relief domain.

To continue Folke's (2006) argument, resilience is not simply about reducing the physical vulnerability of infrastructure in the built environment. This argument has advanced by recognising that resilience is not simply about reaching equilibrium and stability in order to avoid the impacts of hazards; but it is also the ability to live with hazard and to adjust to drastic changes. From this position, resilience goes beyond reconditioning the built environment and restoring income and health levels. As Campanella argues, it is often the 'thick concatenations of social and cultural matter that endows a place with its defining essence and identity'. Political ecology and global environmental change research also incorporate adaptive capacity in the discussion of resilience. Being able to adjust to changing circumstances amid sociopolitical change requires developing new plans, taking new actions and modifying existing behaviours. Ultimately, to withstand and recover from disruptions is particularly necessary when it is not possible or wise to return to the way things were.

In the resilience literature, 'external problems or threats' are commonly viewed as exogenous disruptions. Events like earthquakes and typhoons, for example, are framed as apolitical and ahistorical threats that determine how vulnerabilities are produced. This perspective, however, does not fully comprehend how social, political and economic processes shape disaster risk over time. Apolitical conceptions of such threats drive apolitical solutions rooted in technology and markets, cementing rather than challenging the status quo that may have caused the perceived vulnerabilities in the first place. It wrongfully obscures power relations and implies that islanders must accept their fate as vulnerable subjects, and further that maintaining resilience is the community and personal responsibility. In turn, one loses focus on the general governance structure that has been poorly institutionalised. This then may result in perpetual systematic inadequacy and deficient political leadership on the state level.

2 Island Resilience

Islands are conventionally and conveniently understood as 'a reserve of non-modern modes of interdependence, relation and feedback' (Chandler and Pugh 2021: 397) and hence are considered in need of resources such as self-organisation and survival in times of adversity and crisis (Humbert and Joseph 2019). This sets islands in direct contrast to the powerful mainlands that offer aid and guidance during and after crises and disaster. In the 2021 Glasgow COP26 climate summit, the foreign minister of Tuvalu filmed his speech standing in knee-deep ocean water to starkly demonstrate that the island nation is vulnerable to, if not at the forefront of, climate change (Handley 2021). Robinson (2020) argues that small island states that produce climate refugees migrating to the mainland have a heightening role in the global dialogue on cooperation to seek climate justice. Furthermore, the advocacy for small island resilience should not only position itself within the global context but also call for island-centered theories as a new framework. Specifically, small island states should reject complete dependency on information know-how produced in the developed world and become proactive knowledge producers in research and public discourse (Robinson 2020, see chapter "Resilience and Resistance").

Indigenous island cultures generally embody multifaceted connections between local, regional and global practicalities in building resilience capacity (see chapter "Wayfinding Resilience"). Because small islands must combat the influences of climate change, endogenous and proactive actions form the primary frontline of resilience (Trundle et al. 2019). In this process, it is believed that local community efforts should be highlighted and cherished. Trundle et al. (2019) promote community-oriented knowledge as a base to strengthen the sustainability of Pacific islands. Also, kinship networks, subsistence farming and community solidarity are suggested to be key components in resilience mechanisms for small islands in the Pacific (Ratuva 2021).

While internal capacities continue to be called upon in resilience literature, not all studies agree that endogenous systems, in silos, are effective in combating the compound threats of exogenous disruptions. Weaver (2016) suggests that small islands are, sometimes mistakenly, understood as ambiguously marginalised states surrounded by geopolitical tensions and monolithic economic structures. Due to their heavy reliance on the tourism economy, small island resilience in the Caribbean is challenged by management deficiencies, lack of creativity of the private sector, dependency on grants and limited local access to tourism benefits. These lingering impacts prevent small islands from leveraging resources from within. In recent years, it has been observed that certain island states have emerged to be regional powers in international politics, such as Fiji and Papua New Guinea protecting their own strategic interests amid the intensified influences of Australia, New Zealand and China in the South Pacific (Wallis 2017). However, questions still remain regarding whether islands are indeed metamorphic and able to form long-term resilience.

3 Governing Resilience

Throughout this book, we understand resilience as a complex concept rather than a simple step of going back to old established systems or aspiring a 'stable state'. However, within contemporary development and conservation practices, there is a tendency to frame resilience as the ability to return to a previous form of equilibrium and stability. This tendency is entrenched in dominant neoliberal forms of governance that focus on limiting government expenditures, maximising individual responsibility and the privatisation of industries and promoting the value of free-market competition for economic prosperity.

In recognising that disruptions are part of the human condition, it is necessary that people have the capacity to learn, adapt to and make change during ongoing disruptive events. Much of the existing development literature primarily frames resilience as a state agenda (Krüger 2019), omitting the participatory and leadership capacities of local communities and individuals. This result is a state-centric and top-down approach that does not reflect how populations on the ground intuitively define, process and actualise resilience (Humbert and Joseph 2019). There appears to be a dominant 'universalised' conception of resilience accepted by governments at different levels. However, such an idea is largely driven by Euro-centric values and agendas and is not necessarily translatable to all contexts (Bourbeau and Ryan 2018; Wandji 2019). Risk can be managed by embracing new information, new experiences and progress made in science and technology. This willingness to change and adapt as individuals and as social groups is fundamental to progress. In considering this, resilience-thinking frames policy failure not as a *lost* opportunity but as a *learning* one that drives systemic progress in a complex world. Failure enables policymakers to learn from the revelation of these concrete and emergent interconnections. In spaces where top-down directives are absent, for example, collective solutions are often jointly determined by members of the community (see chapters "Social Inclusion and Resilience" and "Well-being and Resilience").

Ironically, in contrast to interpretations of neoliberalism theory, neoliberal policy has evolved into highly regulatory and interventionist regimes. Neoliberal approaches have sought to govern through the instrumental use of social engineering with regulatory market techniques. In that, resilience has come to heavily emphasise individual preparedness, making informed decisions, understanding our roles and responsibility and showing adaptability to our situation and being able to get backup when things go wrong. New forms of power and governmentality emerge as a result that works from a distance through a liberal rationality of governance. Liberal, in this context, refers to the principle of respecting the individual, and neoliberalism pushes the focus on the individual to the limit. The liberal logic is then not about constant supervision and surveillance, instead the rationality of liberal government stresses the need to respect the freedom of economic processes through the deliberate self-limiting of government. Liberal rule relies on the private sphere

and civil society as a way to disguise the imposition of market discipline as an exercise in freedom. In other words, neoliberalism works through the social production of freedom and the management and organisation of the conditions in which one can be free.

Neoliberal ideas remain attractive in the mainstream as they seemingly bestow the individual with personal freedom and personal responsibility. Bureaucracy and the social structures of modern society are seen as hindrance to personal development and actualisation. Besides that, systems become cumbersome and obstructionist to efficient and effective social outcomes in society, as we experience the failures of health care, social housing and the like (see chapter "Social Inclusion and Resilience"). So instead, solutions to social and personal problems must come from the ground-up. Persons and groups at the ground level are in a better position to know their problems and also to find relevant and appropriate solutions. Resilience is part of this ground-up idea. This has been translated to the global level by countries being treated as individual entities that must solve their own challenges and grab new opportunities (see chapter "Resilience and Resistance").

Set in this context, resilience seems to be used as a conceptual frame in which individuals and/or communities, as part of the neoliberal regime, determine their own future after disruptive challenges. Such framing deflects responsibility for failed policies to the inevitable imperfections of established market mechanisms. In the case of SIDS, tourism is often considered a powerful tool for poverty reduction, but neoliberal tourism policies primarily aim at market expansion and tourism revenue growth without comprehensively understanding the core socio-economic needs of island communities (Scheyvens and Momsen 2006). For example, Scher (2010) has demonstrated that the traditional Carnival of Trinidad and Tobago is marketed as a commercial product to tourists, and the success of the local tourism is mainly measured based on monetary gains from the festivity. When its purpose is to maintain the economic flow and political governance, the authenticity of this cultural event and its relevance to the local heritage become questionable. Unfortunately, similar situations have been observed in other tourism-dependent island communities, where commercial success and market growth are key developmental indicators and a reductionist approach is favourably adopted to achieve community prosperity.

4 Island Imaginaries

Islands and their societies are often framed and understood through discursive constructs that reproduce essentialist and reductive narratives. These constructs directly inform our understanding of the way disasters impact people and their way of life. As such, they directly inform resilience policies and programmes across small islands. In this book, we use the term 'imaginary' to signify the discursive constructs which shape the public and policymakers' consciousness of island societies. Edward Said refers to the *geographic imaginary* as 'how meaning is ascribed to

physical spaces, how knowledge about these places is produced, and how these representations enable particular activities and interventions to take place within them' (in: Kothari and Arnall 2017: 985). Imaginaries about islands often represent the Western, and/or colonial, ideas about islands. It has been argued that islands are Orientalised as exotic and pristine paradise getaways that are uninhabited and homogenous (Yee 2015). This has, for example, enabled and justified: (1) the rapid development of tourism we see across small islands today (Kothari and Wilkinson 2010); (2) the extraction of islands' natural resources (Edwards 2014); (3) the eviction of entire island populations to install American satellite systems; and (4) the utilisation of islands as experimental spaces to test nuclear weapons (Gugganig 2021), medicines (López 2008) and technologies and policies for energy systems (Laurent et al. 2021). On the other hand, by overly emphasising island resilience in terms of community interests, one runs the risk of magnifying the imagination by the West of islands merely being communal, collectivist and homogenous entities. It perpetuates false notions that individual islanders may be less independent or innovative, and their personalities uncompetitive and docile. It also overlooks that islands are often adaptive and agile to sudden external disruptions with local and native knowledge and capacities.

Policies and bodies of scholarship around disaster management commonly frame islands as being on the 'front lines' of climate change impacts (Kelman and West 2009), whereby islands have become the proverbial 'canaries in the coal mine'. This instrumentalises islands and islanders as indicators of disaster impacts and as subjects through which new insights about adaptation can be observed and investigated (Chandler and Pugh 2021). These are just a few illustrations of how simplifications are not just metaphoric or imaginary but have material impacts on islands and island life. We examine several prominent imaginaries that shape our understanding of resilience in islands and of the implications of these constructs for disaster policies and programmes.

The first imaginary to address is the conventional view of islands against ahistorical terms. One of the most consistent ideas about islands circulating in scholarship and policy literature is that disaster risk is a product of recent processes. Discourses (e.g. Shultz et al. 2016; Price et al. 2014) that seek to provide some form of measure of disaster risk often focus on the source of a disastrous event. Hereby disaster risk is framed around, for example, the magnitude of an earthquake, the ferocity of a hurricane, the infectiousness of a disease or the rise of the sea level. Alternatively, focus is put on the societal system that is being affected as the primary measure of disaster risk, recognising how the complex social, political, economic and other factors shape the vulnerability of small islands and the capacity of populations to adapt and recover. Literature on vulnerability across small islands reveals how factors such as income, health and education levels of the population, the built environment, governance frameworks, food and material reserves and the quality of emergency services dictate to what extent a hazard impacts small islands. However, both these perspectives that seek to measure disaster risk are based on conservative and ahistorical imaginaries of how and why small islands are seen to be so 'disaster-prone'.

For one, they neglect or poorly understand how disasters in small islands have historical roots in colonialism (Lewis 2012; see chapter "Resilience and Resistance"). Disasters are framed as 'singularities' that are disconnected from long-term colonial processes. Yet, when we broaden our temporal analysis of disasters, it may be observed how colonialism is deeply related to the vulnerability of many SIDS. For example, small islands are some of the most indebted countries in the world – a debt which limits their ability to build resilience – yet this debt is a symptom of colonialism and imperialism (Bishop and Payne 2012). The economic structuring of many small islands towards sectors like tourism, agriculture and fishing is not a simple consequence of physical geography. Rather, many small island economies are structured towards these sectors in line with neoliberal development and state-building models that involved establishing central government rule and globalised market connections. Such state-building processes premised a 'debt crisis that was itself somewhat precipitated by countries' insertion into a vastly unequal global system of relations post-independence' (Sealey-Huggins 2017: 2445). The push for industrialisation from the West, which fuelled the resource extraction of many small island states, is also the driving force behind climate change (Williams 2005).

Neglecting how colonisation shapes disaster risk tacitly creates imaginations of small islands as historically insular. At the same time, it ignores the indigenous and traditional methods in disaster reduction overshadowed by Euro-centric disaster management frameworks that emphasise external aid (Gaillard 2007). As a result, island communities are disempowered, their inner sociocultural fabrics neglected in combating uncertainties and a vulnerable fate accepted by many. Such a temporal interpretation of vulnerability negates the highly place-based sociocultural and political dynamics of island resilience (Kelman and West 2009). This analytical approach shifts attention away from the roles former colonial powers played in shaping island vulnerability. With this in mind, scholars such as Leon Sealey Huggins (2017) have called for climate reparations to be paid to former Caribbean colonies that are now bearing the brunt of climate change in large part because of the resource extraction that has undermined the capacity of Caribbean nations to adapt to climate change.

The second imaginary we need to highlight is the assumption that small islands are externally dependent. They are imagined as economically and politically 'small' (Weiss 2015). This 'smallness' is equated with limited resources and low adaptive capacity (Nurse et al. 2001), whereby island economies are often described as 'insular', 'remote', 'isolated' and 'lacking resources'. This language frames small islands as inherently dependent on foreign trade (see Briguglio 1995; see chapters "Social Inclusion and Resilience" and "Wayfinding Resilience") and socio-economically homogeneous. Although more recent debates centre on small islands' relationships to climate change, they continually apply reductive frames that small island populations are backward, helpless, vulnerable and in need of saving by others. While acknowledging that the COVID-19 pandemic and major humanitarian disasters certainly can result in the collapse of small island economies and therefore severely undermine the livelihoods of island peoples, we argue this is not a definitive societal collapse. As discussed in this book, collapse of current ways of life creates space for

the innovation of new, and/or revival of old, ways of life. Therefore, we aim to challenge the dependency imaginaries that have followed small islands throughout their histories.

Another imaginary that needs to be demystified is the similar environmental vulnerability profiles shared by small islands. The physical characteristics of small islands reproduce faulty impressions of vulnerable masses of land that are at the mercy of hazards, which often describe islands as low-lying and having coastal zones that are larger than their total land area (Nunn and Kumar 2018). We recognise the important role that such physical characteristics play in determining the impacts of sea level rise, tsunamis or hurricanes. Indeed, there is a great wealth of research detailing the impacts of such hazards on islanders' everyday lives and livelihoods. However, we contest that overemphasising the physical features of small islands, through common terms such as 'sinking islands', homogenises the diverse geographies of small islands. Disaster risk is simplistically understood as the result of an island's exposure to a hazard. The severity of the hazard becomes the focal point, and insufficient attention is given to the social, political, economic or cultural characteristics of small islands which truly determine their resilience (Rivas 2019; see chapters "Well-being and Resilience" and "Resilience and Resistance").

Emphasising the agency of hazards in disaster risk also justifies technocracy and neoliberal environmental governance as the antidotes. This is most obvious with sea level rise whereby the construction of seawalls (to reduce hazard severity) or the relocation of people (to remove exposure to hazards) is often seen as the most effective solution. These are technocratic solutions borne from top-down external decision-making, which are detached from the everyday lives, needs and concerns of island peoples (Nunn et al. 2021). People living on small atolls are often encouraged to move to larger islands where they can be 'protected'. In cases like in Maldives, discussions continue about how to relocate entire nations. Migration as adaptation has been widely criticised as being ignorant of people's deep ties to places (Felli and Castree 2012). It downplays the social, cultural and spiritual attachment that island peoples have to their land and once more shifts our analytical attention away from the resilience of small islands, and the capacity of island peoples to live *with* hazards. We provide examples from various geographic locations around the world, which challenge the simplistic imagination that small islands and their populations are at the mercy of hazards that can only be addressed with technocratic solutions.

Lastly, we call for one's critical reflection on the isolated and romanticised imaginary of small islands, a typical imagination of many. The social and cultural heterogeneity of small island societies is often eclipsed by the discursive homogenisation of island peoples as primitive and backward populations who exist as 'timeless' and 'unchanging'. While such imaginaries are lucrative for the tourism sector's advertising of exotic experiences (Kothari and Edensor 2003), they have implications beyond tourism. Framing small islands as primitive and peripheral to modernity has been used to justify development interventions which centre on modernising small islands. Development interventions are designed and measured according to

western definitions of development, which do not neatly translate to local cultural contexts. 'Well-being' is, for example, a key element and measure for the success of climate change support strategies on small islands (Meo-Sewabu 2015). Yet, how well-being is perceived and experienced by islanders can differ greatly to the western definitions that centre on materialism, individuality, hedonism and happiness (Diener et al. 2003; see chapter "Well-being and Resilience"). Well-being across small islands is often synonymous with upholding duties of care to one another and to the land (Fletcher et al. 2021). Therefore, western development interventions that aim to increase the resilience of small islands may directly undermine the well-being of island peoples.

As we see, the vulnerability and resilience of small islands are discursively constructed (Kelman 2020). Emphasis on the agency of hazards and the limited resilience of small islands plays into imaginations of passive islanders who are stranded in the middle of oceans simply waiting to be saved by outsiders who can aid in their linear progression towards modernity (DeLoughrey 2019). This victimhood narrative is highly disempowering because fear does not automatically catalyse islanders to pursue resilience, and it does not motivate 'developed' countries to support islands through the reduction of their emissions which cause climate change, for example (Barnett 2017). From this position, the subsequent chapters set out to unsettle these imaginaries and reconsider their validity by drawing on empirical data about island resilience across multiple regions. In this sense, our book speaks to Chandler and Pugh (2021) who identify alternative framings of islands that increasingly and productively challenge the vulnerable, passive and dependent framings that have come to dominate academic, policy and media discourse.

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