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Examining Participatory Development in Internationally Funded Climate Adaptation Programmes: Insights from the Marshall Islands

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YOSHIKO YAMAGUCHI

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Abstract

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) faces threats from climate change, necessitating urgent and effective adaptation strategies. This research examines participatory development approaches in climate adaptation within the RMI, assessing their effectiveness, inclusivity, and alignment with local needs and cultural knowledge. Despite global recognition of the importance of participatory development, adaptation projects in the RMI remain largely donor-driven, often failing to integrate local perspectives. Existing literature highlights the theoretical benefits of participatory approaches, yet critiques indicate persistent power imbalances between international donors and local stakeholders. This study evaluates how participatory development principles are applied in RMI climate adaptation initiatives, determining the extent to which they empower local communities and enhance project sustainability.

Utilizing a qualitative methodology grounded in narrative inquiry, the research incorporates semi structured interviews, focus groups, and an interpretive approach to data analysis. Respondents included RMI government officials, NGOs, development partners, and community members engaged in adaptation efforts. A key methodological feature is the use of Bwebwenato, a traditional Marshallese storytelling approach, to ensure culturally relevant data collection and analysis.

Findings reveal that while participatory rhetoric is prevalent in adaptation discourse, implementation often falls short due to top-down decision-making, rigid funding structures, and limited local autonomy. Although national policies emphasize community involvement, international funding mechanisms frequently dictate project priorities, constraining meaningful local engagement. However, integrating traditional knowledge systems with participatory frameworks presents a viable pathway to more effective and contextually appropriate adaptation solutions. The findings emphasize the need for adaptation strategies that genuinely reflect Marshallese voices, prioritizing equitable stakeholder collaboration. By highlighting gaps in current participatory development practices, the research contributes to discussions on improving climate adaptation governance in the RMI. Its conclusions support advocacy for structural reforms in donor-recipient relationships to enhance the inclusivity and sustainability of adaptation efforts in the RMI and beyond.

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I never expected that writing the acknowledgments for this thesis would be one of the more emotionally difficult parts of the process. It is hard to have a word limit when I am the product of a collective, and my community played a fundamental role in shaping my thoughts and the choices I've made in life.

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This thesis marks the conclusion of a chapter that began with a lunch at the Marshall Islands Resort deck, where I met with a beautiful soul who was just starting her own research journey. She shared the enthusiasm and passion she had for studying in the same master's programme, at the same University, under the same Supervisor, and with the same scholarship that led to this thesis. Months later, she sent me her completed dissertation, with my name in her acknowledgments. I promised her I would return the favour. This thesis is dedicated to Kalena Kattil-Debrum—without her, this achievement would still be a distant dream.

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Abbreviations

ACWA- Addressing Climate Vulnerability in the Water Sector
ADB- Asian Development Bank
CCD- Climate Change Directorate
COFA- Compact of Free Association
CPF- Country Partnership Framework
DIDA- Division of International Development Assistance
EPPSO- The Economic Policy, Planning, and Statistics Office
GCF- Green Climate Fund
GIZ – Deutsche Gesellschaft fur Internationale Zusammenarbeit
IOM – International Organization for Migration
IPCC- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
KADA- Kwajalein Atoll Development Authority
JICA- Japan International Cooperation Agency
KEITI- Korea Environmental Industry & Technology Institute
MIOFA- Marshall Islands Organic Farmers' Association
MOFBPS- Ministry of Finance, Banking and Postal Services
NAP- National Adaptation Plan
NDMO- National Disaster Management Office
NGO- Non-governmental Organizations
NZ MFAT- New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade
OEPPC- Office of Environmental Planning and Policy Coordination (former CCD)
PIC- Pacific Island Countries
PIFS- Pacific Island Forum Secretariat
PREP II- Pacific Resilience Project Phase 2
RMI- Republic of the Marshall Islands
SIDS – Small Island Developing States
SOP- Standard Operating Procedures
SPC- Pacific Community
TTEC- Tile Til Eo Committee
UNDP- United Nations Development Programme
UN-ORLLS- United Nations Office of High Representative for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries, and Small Island Developing States
USAID- United States Agency for International Development
World Bank IDA- World Bank International Development Association
WUTMI- Women United Together Marshall Islands

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Overview

> *"Climate change activism cannot just be about climate change; it needs to be about social and economic equity and fairness for all... Why is it sometimes so hard to become an activist? For a start, there are clear barriers designed to prevent many from participating." Jayson Maika Capelle, age 14 at time of publication (Capelle & Capelle, 2021).*

As global attention on climate change intensifies, small island nations, particularly low-lying atolls like the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), confront pressing challenges (Ahlgren et al., 2014; Gheuens, et al., 2019). Severe droughts have led to water shortages, while king tides and storm surges have caused widespread coastal flooding and damage to infrastructure. The country has faced new health threats with outbreaks such as dengue fever straining public health resources, and the nation's primary exports of tuna and copra are threatened (Government of RMI, NAP, 2023). These increasing impacts of climate change affect some communities more than others and demonstrate the need to explore how to achieve effective, equitable, and inclusive approaches to climate adaptation. International donors play an important role in supporting this work, but empowering local leaders and communities will be essential for long-term adaptation success (Betzold, 2015).

This research seeks to explore the relationships between international donors and local leaders in the RMI, and the impact on the effectiveness and inclusivity of climate adaptation strategies. It explores the level of local input in RMI adaptation initiatives and the extent to which it fulfils the promise of participatory development. To this end, the research analyses internationally-funded climate adaptation programmes in the RMI through a framework borrowed from the existing participatory development literature. Participatory development approaches claim to enable all community voices to be heard, ensuring that decision-making processes are inclusive, representative, and reflective of diverse perspectives (Brett, 1996). Furthermore, adopting an inclusive participatory approach is argued to enhance the effectiveness of climate adaptation initiatives by leveraging local knowledge, ensuring that interventions are contextually appropriate and suitable (Ross et al., 2015).

While writing this thesis, the World Meteorological Organization reported that 2024 marked the year global warming exceeded the 1.5°C threshold, with temperatures reaching 1.55°C above preindustrial levels (Poynting et al., 2025). As the impacts of surpassing the 1.5°C threshold materialize, the need for urgent, effective climate action has never been clearer (Masson-Delmotte et al., 2019).

Since the Paris Agreement was adopted seven years ago, the RMI has been a strong voice in calling for ambitious goals to both mitigate and adapt to climate change, aiming to demonstrate leadership

within the Paris Agreement framework (Ourbak & Magnan, 2018). However, the escalating impacts of climate change demand urgent adaptation, as mistakes or delays, given limited resources and time, would be too costly to afford. These pressing challenges underscore the importance of understanding the RMI's unique vulnerabilities and developing context-specific strategies to address them (Roland, 2024).

This research explores the intricate socio-political, cultural, and environmental landscape of RMI, emphasizing its unique characteristics and the urgent need for context-specific climate adaptation strategies. This chapter provides a brief introduction to the intersection between climate adaptation and participatory development while offering insights into RMI's current context and practices. It then examines key scholarly discourse that shaped the research questions, outlines the methodological approach, and concludes with an overview of the thesis structure, previewing the subsequent chapters that further develop the study.

1.2 Background

Low-lying atoll nations are among the most climate-vulnerable globally (Mimura, 1999). They face severe risks from rising sea levels, more frequent extreme weather events, and ocean acidification, despite contributing little to global greenhouse gas emissions (Magnan et al., 2019). As a result, while mitigation remains a global imperative, adaptation has become the most practical and urgent strategy for addressing climate change in the RMI (Bordner et al., 2020).

The significance of adaptation is evident in its inclusion within RMI national legislation. According to the Ministry of Environment Act, Subsection 602.1.a, "adaptation refers to adjustments in ecological, social, or economic systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli and their effects or impacts" (Ministry of Environment Act, 2019). This formal definition underscores the central role adaptation plays in addressing the existential threats posed by climate change. Building upon this foundation, the RMI has further strengthened its commitment through strategic planning frameworks designed to promote resilience and sustainability.

One key initiative is the Til E Til Eo 2050 Climate Strategy, which facilitated the establishment of three working groups—mitigation, adaptation, and cross-cutting (Government of RMI 2018). As the RMI's long-term, low-emission climate-resilient development strategy under the Paris Agreement, the strategy provides a roadmap to achieving net-zero emissions and 100% renewable energy. Moreover, it integrates adaptation and climate resilience into broader goals for protecting and ensuring the prosperity of the nation's population, including women, men, and youth (Government of RMI, 2018).

The progress achieved through the Til E Til Eo 2050 Climate Strategy led to the adoption of the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) in 2023, reaffirming the RMI's commitment to resilience across key sectors such as infrastructure, health, food security, and water resources. The NAP integrates scientific research with traditional knowledge to develop sustainable, context-driven strategies. A core aspect of the plan is its emphasis on community-led adaptation, ensuring that local priorities shape both planning and implementation. The approach, thus, highlights the importance of inclusive, participatory efforts in strengthening climate resilience in the RMI (Government of RMI- NAP, 2023).

While traditional coping mechanisms have historically enabled communities to navigate environmental challenges, these strategies are increasingly inadequate in the face of uncertainty surrounding rapid climate change impacts (Barnett, 2001; McNamara et al., 2022). The accelerating impacts underscore the necessity of combining traditional resilience practices with innovative scientific and participatory approaches to meet current and future challenges effectively (Mcleod et al., 2019; McNamara et al., 2020). By fostering collaboration between local communities, scientific experts, and policymakers, the NAP aims to create adaptive solutions that are both inclusive and enduring (Government of RMI- NAP, 2023).

Another example of the value of inclusive community feedback is reflected in the Marshallese proverb, *"Iben dron ej walok kajoor"*—"Working together brings strength." This principle underscores the cultural importance of collective effort in achieving common goals. *Iben dron*, or togetherness, highlights the power of collaboration, reinforcing a strong local disposition towards participatory development. When thoughtfully implemented, this approach empowers local actors by incorporating their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives into adaptation strategies, ensuring these strategies remain rooted in local realities and effectively address community needs.

Cultural practices such as *"Wa kuk wa jimor"*—"The canoe brings us together, and the canoe belongs to everyone"—further exemplify the value of inclusivity and collaboration (Miller, 2010). The tradition reflects a communal ethos, encouraging contributions and active engagement from all members in shared endeavours. By drawing on such culturally rooted values, adaptation initiatives can strengthen collective ownership and foster more resilient and locally relevant outcomes (Nalau et al., 2018).

However, although *Iben dron* is widely practiced across the Marshall Islands in collective activities, it is not formalized in legislation. Instead, it is deeply embedded within the cultural fabric of Marshallese society, where communal values naturally guide participation (Kabua, 1992). Traditional protocols require engagement across all levels of society. In the climate adaptation sector, participation has often been facilitated through extensive communication efforts, including media

outreach via radio stations and newspapers, as well as community engagement sessions known as *bwebwenato* - storytelling/discussions.

Existing policies reflect a preference for participatory approaches by mandating collaboration across ministries, ensuring that updates and activities are mainstreamed and informed by expertise at every level. For example, the Socio-Economic and Climate Change Summit that took place in January 2025 provided an opportunity for representatives from all atolls and islands to receive updates from government agencies and ministries (Government of RMI 2025). These gatherings exemplify institutionalized efforts to encourage collaboration and exchange among diverse stakeholders.

Given the increasing threats posed by climate change, it is essential to reexamine current approaches to internationally funded climate adaptation against the principles of participatory development to evaluate whether, or the extent to which, they align with local knowledge and cultural understanding. While existing initiatives promote stakeholder engagement, participatory development principles require they go beyond surface-level inclusion to actively incorporate the perspectives, values, and lived experiences of Marshallese communities. Cultural frameworks like *Iben dron* and *Wa kuk wa jimor* provide significant insights into how collective action and shared ownership can be leveraged to enhance resilience. Moreover, failing to align adaptation strategies with local knowledge risks undermining their effectiveness and sustainability (Rarai et al., 2022). By analysing climate adaptation programmes through a participatory development lens, the RMI can assess how well existing strategies align with culturally appropriate contexts, ultimately fostering more robust, inclusive, and locally relevant solutions to address the multifaceted challenges of climate change.

1.3 Significance of the Research

Adaptation strategies in SIDS rely heavily on external funding and frameworks, which can lead to concerns about their relevance and effectiveness in addressing localized needs (Robinson & Dornan, 2017). According to the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries, and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS), SIDS frequently face significant barriers in accessing climate finance (UN-OHRLLS). This results in a mismatch between the support provided and the actual needs on the ground (Bhandary et al., 2021). For the RMI, this challenge underscores the necessity of ensuring that adaptation initiatives are not only adequately funded but also grounded in the cultural and environmental realities of local communities.

This research is essential at this point in time as the RMI grapples with ongoing climate impacts. By critically examining the extent to which participatory development is operationalized in the RMI, this study aims to evaluate whether these processes align with and address local needs.

Ensuring that participatory development aligns with local needs has been widely recognized as essential for effective climate adaptation in SIDS (Nalau et al., 2018; Rarai et al., 2022). Such alignment ensures that strategies are culturally relevant, locally tailored, and reflective of community priorities. This research seeks to explore how well climate adaptation policies and programmes align with participatory processes to determine if they honour these knowledge systems while addressing the pressing challenges associated with external funding and top-down approaches. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader discourse on climate adaptation by emphasizing the importance of participatory approaches that align with local knowledge and cultural values.

1.4 Thesis Overview

This introductory chapter sets the stage for a deeper exploration of these topics in the following chapters. Chapter Two examines the historical, geographical, and socio-political context of the RMI, providing essential background on the nation's vulnerabilities and challenges. In Chapter Three, the existing literature on participatory development and climate adaptation is reviewed, critically analysing key theories, models, and ongoing debates while assessing how power imbalances influence implementation. Chapter Four outlines the research methodology used in this study, highlighting the integration of local knowledge systems alongside Western scientific approaches through qualitative methods, including narrative inquiry and thematic analysis. Chapter Five and Six presents the study's findings, organized thematically to directly address the research question, demonstrating how donor priorities, administrative inefficiencies, and financial disparities shape adaptation efforts. Finally, Chapter Seven discusses the significance and implications of these findings, offering recommendations in RMI's climate adaptation policy and planning processes through a participatory development lens.

Chapter 2- Understanding RMI: History, Geography and Socio-Political Context

In examining the physical geography of the Marshall Islands, it becomes evident that the nation's atolls present a host of environmental challenges. Limited land area, low elevation, porous and infertile soils, unpredictable rainfall variability, limited groundwater reserves, and susceptibility to droughts and typhoons combine to create a particularly difficult living environment (Nakayama et al., 2022). However, while these conditions are often cited by external observers as significant barriers to permanent settlement, Marshallese locals perceive them differently. For them, these environmental realities are simply part of life, integral to their sense of home and resilience (Roland, 2024).

This chapter provides essential background on the island nation's socio-economic structure, its historical interactions with external powers, and the contemporary challenges it faces, particularly in relation to climate change. The RMI's geographical vulnerability to rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and freshwater scarcity is highlighted, positioning climate change as a significant threat. The socio-political landscape is also explored, with attention to the dynamics between local communities and external actors, such as international donors and development organizations, that influence the development of adaptation strategies.

2.1 Aelon Kein Ad[1]-

Aelon Kein Ad or RMI shares a historical similarity with many Pacific Island nations, tracing its first human settlements to Austronesian voyagers who navigated the vast Pacific by canoe thousands of years ago (Thomas, 2008). Like its regional sister nations, much of this early history was preserved through oral traditions, leading to cultural losses over time due to external influences and colonial disruptions (Hau'Ofa, 2017; Tobin, 2001). Despite this, historical accounts and anecdotal evidence indicate that the Marshallese possessed sophisticated scientific and mathematical knowledge long before recorded external contact (Davenport, 1960; Genz et al., 2009). This expertise is particularly evident in their advanced navigation systems, which enabled them to explore and settle over two million square kilometres of ocean while maintaining linguistic and cultural cohesion among widely dispersed atoll communities. While modern technologies have influenced contemporary navigation, traditional methods remain in practice, particularly for inter-island travel within atolls (Genz et al., 2009). This collaboration of ancient techniques with modern advancements underscores the resilience of Marshallese cultural identity, demonstrating adaptability and continuity despite external pressures.

[1] This term translates into 'Our Islands.'

Located just north of the equator, the RMI embodies the typical tropical island setting. The geographical composition of the country includes 29 atolls and 5 coral islands, with the average height of the land about 2 meters above sea level (Government of RMI 2022). Despite the country's composition of low-lying atolls, linguistic evidence in the Marshallese language reflects an understanding of geographical features beyond the atolls themselves. For instance, the word *tõl* translates to "mountain," despite no mountains existing on the islands. According to oral tradition[2], this linguistic richness stems from the extensive travels of Marshallese ancestors throughout the Pacific and continental rims. This is also why there are Marshallese names for islands beyond the nation's borders, such as *biit* (Kiribati, to the south) and *kabilõn* (FSM, to the west). Oral histories recount ancestral journeys, trade, and warfare beyond "aelon kein ad" (our islands), where the Marshallese language historically extended.

Written records of the Marshall Islands, which extend beyond oral traditions, commence with the first documented contact by Spanish explorers in 1526—a relatively late arrival compared to many other nations—due to the islands' long and rich history preserved through oral storytelling, akin to many Pacific Island nations. The earliest recordings of the islands began when English Captain William Marshall first visited in 1788 (Hezel, 2003).

Life and culture continued in their traditional forms until 1857, when New England missionaries heralded a shift toward external influences and colonial interactions. In 1878, the high chiefs Kabua Kabua and Letabalin agreed to a treaty allowing the establishment of a German trading post on Jabor Jaluit. This marked the beginning of German occupation, which was largely driven by economic interests, particularly in the copra trade (Hezel, 2003). The period of German occupation lasted until the end of World War I, when Japan took control of most German colonies, including the Marshall Islands. Japan occupied the islands until WWII drew to an end, when they were placed under the trusteeship of the United States (Tobin, 2001; Hezel, 2003).

Fast forward to post WW2, between the years of 1945 and 1958, the United States conducted 67 nuclear tests on the islands, forcing the relocation and continued displacement of the people who lived in Bikini and Rongelap Atolls (Barker, 1997). The outcome of the sequence of nuclear testing was immense and continues to have long-lasting impacts on the affected populations. Until today, the displaced communities are advised to not go back to their home islands. Nuclear testing drastically affected Marshallese society in many ways—damaging the social, political, and cultural relationships to place, besides its long-lasting health and environmental damages (Barker, 1997).

[2] Oral Tradition provided by my grandfather when discussing Marshallese words that were borrowed or passed down.

Additionally, the long-lasting effects are closely tied to the impacts of climate change, since the Runit Dome on Enewetak, where all the nuclear waste was disposed of, is leaking and is increasingly vulnerable due to the rising sea levels (Gerrard, 2015).

The belief that external experts hold greater authority in determining how Marshallese communities should navigate island life has long clashed with local recognition of ancestral achievements. For generations, Marshallese settlers successfully voyaged across vast oceans and developed innovative agricultural techniques, particularly for farming in coastal environments. These practices exemplify their ingenuity and resilience, similar to other Pacific Island Countries, challenging assumptions about expertise and emphasizing the significance of local knowledge in shaping effective adaptation strategies (Ishiwatari et al., 2025; Nakashima et al., 2018).

2.2 Government

The RMI operates within a mixed parliamentary-presidential system, where the President, elected by the Nitijela (the lower house of the bicameral legislative body), serves as the head of government (Government of RMI 1979). This structure balances modern governance and traditional authority by incorporating the Nitijela and the Council of Iroij, an upper house of appointed traditional leaders. The political system reflects the country's commitment to merging democratic principles with traditional and customary practices (Lynch, 1984). The structure itself mirrors goals of participatory development as it aims to incorporate and include people's voices. This arrangement is outlined in the RMI's Constitution, adopted in 1979 following independence from the United States administered Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.

The Nitijela is made up of 33 members elected through popular vote every four years. Each member represents one of the inhabited islands or atolls in the nation. Similar to other parliamentary structures, the Nitijela's mandate is to draft and approve laws, which includes the national budget.

The President is elected through the Nitijela members and is accountable to the legislative body. The President then has authority to form her Cabinet and appoint Ministers. The Cabinet manages day to day governance and is responsible for implementation of laws.

The judicial branch remains independent, although a Minister of Justice is appointed into Cabinet. The judiciary includes a High Court, a Traditional Rights Court, a Supreme Court, and several other lower courts. The Traditional Rights Court plays a particularly significant role in resolving disputes related to land ownership and customary titles, reflecting the importance of traditional land tenure in Marshallese society (Lynch, 1984).

The government also emphasizes decentralization, with local councils governing the various atolls and islands. These councils, while operating under the guidance of the national government, enjoy a level of autonomy in managing local issues such as infrastructure, community services, and local law enforcement. This decentralization ensures that the unique needs of each island community are addressed while maintaining a cohesive national governance structure.

Another significant component of the RMI government is the Compact of Free Association (COFA), which was signed with the United States in 1986 and renewed in 2003 and 2023. This agreement grants the U.S. military access to Marshallese territory in exchange for financial assistance and defence support (COFA, 1986). COFA has been fundamental to the growth of the RMI, with the 2023 renewal emphasizing sustainable economic development and the long-term sustainability of a trust fund established to support the nation after COFA. This renewal also included funds allocated for climate initiatives (Government of RMI 2024). That allocation can be seen within the context of the 2025 budget below.

Earlier this year, the RMI announced its largest budget to date for the fiscal year 2025, as presented by Finance Minister David Paul to Nitijela. The anticipated revenue amounts to USD$675.7 million reflecting significant increase from the 2024 budget of $417.7 million. The breakdown of the government allocated budget for 2025, according to the Appropriation Act 2024, is below.

TOTAL GENERAL FUND	**97,663,191**
TOTAL ALL COMPACT FUNDS	**378,332,248**
TOTAL ALL SPECIAL REVENUE	**12,268,981**
TOTAL ALL US FEDERAL GRANTS	**13,873,075**
TOTAL OTHER DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE	**165,840,488**
TOTAL ROC CAPITAL PROJECT	**7,759,545**
TOTAL ALL EXPENDITURES	**675,737,528**

Figure 1- Taken from the Appropriation Act 2024- used with permission from the Ministry of Finance, Banking and Postal Services, RMI

This breakdown will be revisited in a later chapter in an exploration of the dynamics of international funding entering the RMI. For now, it serves solely to provide context for understanding the operations of government initiatives in the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

2.3 Geography and Environment

RMI embodies the tropical imagery of pristine beaches lined with coconut trees. Geographically and historically, the nation is divided into two island chains: the Ratak chain to the east (sunrise) and the Ralik chain to the west (sunset). Its distinctive landscape consists of narrow strips of land surrounded by a thriving marine ecosystem, home to coral reefs, diverse fish species, turtles, and marine mammals (EPPSO, 2022).

As a low-lying island nation, it is increasingly threatened by rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and ocean acidification—factors that jeopardize infrastructure, economic stability, and public health (Government of RMI, 2023). A quick internet search on the RMI underscores this reality, as climate change is consistently cited as an urgent and existential threat (Adger et al., 2011; Bordner & Ferguson, 2020; Nakayama et al., 2022; Storlazzi et al., 2018).

The atolls themselves are coral reef formations that developed in tropical and subtropical oceanic environments through the accumulation of carbonate sediments from reef and benthic organisms. Most atolls began forming in the mid-to-late Holocene, approximately 5,000 to 2,000 years ago, though some emerged within the last 1,000 years (Ford & Kench, 2015). The shorelines of these islands remain dynamic, constantly shaped by storms, tsunamis, and tidal forces.

The continuous effects of climate change have a profound impact on daily life and essential activities in the Marshall Islands. According to the IPCC and the National Adaptation Plan (NAP), the islands are facing more frequent and severe wave inundations, extended dry seasons, and accelerated heat. These environmental changes are worsening the already precarious living conditions for the Marshallese people. For example, Typhoon Nangka in 2014 caused significant damage to schools and health facilities, forcing closures and displacing many residents as it swept through rural areas, creating widespread fear and disruption (LaBriola, 2017).

This increasing climate unpredictability, characterized by long droughts followed by periods of intense rainfall, directly affects the availability of fresh water for drinking and irrigation. The islands' reliance on rainwater harvesting as the primary source of freshwater is insufficient, leaving them highly vulnerable during dry spells. This fragile system cannot meet the needs of the population during extended dry periods, which threatens not only water security but also food security.

Moreover, saltwater intrusion further complicates agricultural efforts, stressing crops and reducing already limited food production. The harsh climatic conditions mean that farmers can barely grow enough to feed the population, resulting in widespread nutritional deficiencies (Ahlgren et al., 2014). Together, these factors present a growing risk to the health, well-being, and survival of the

Marshallese people, as they face increasing challenges in accessing sufficient food and water.

2.4 Climate Adaptation in the RMI

The IPCC states that adaptation is:

> *The process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects. In human systems, adaptation seeks to moderate or avoid harm or exploit beneficial opportunities. In some natural systems, human intervention may facilitate adjustment to expected climate and its effects. (IPCC, 2022, pp 4).*

Effective climate adaptation requires the modification of a system to manage both the shorter and longer term impacts of climate change (Adger et al., 2003). For island nations, such as the RMI, immediate ad hoc solutions are most often the chosen route over long-term planning designs, and strategies because of lack of funding and limited understanding of successful approaches (McNamara et al., 2020).

Highlighting adaptation recognizes the environmental challenges while also valuing the resilience and flexibility of the Marshallese people, leading to sustainable solutions that are specifically designed for their context (Ahlgren et al., 2014). A key component of the RMI's adaptation initiatives is the National Adaptation Plan (NAP), which was adopted in 2023 (Government of RMI 2023). This plan provides a strategic framework to improve climate adaptation and tackle the effects of climate change across vital sectors such as infrastructure, health, food security, and water resources. It combines scientific and traditional knowledge, emphasizing the significance of Marshallese cultural heritage in developing effective climate adaptation strategies. Notably, it is the first plan to include extensive community input in shaping recommendations for future adaptations.

Annexed to the NAP is the community report *My Heritage is Here - Eñin ej Jolet eo Aõ* that was conducted during the NAP development stage (IOM, 2023). It reveals that the Marshallese people are opposed to migrating from their islands. Over 123 days, various methods were employed to gather input from 1,362 individuals (3% of the national population) across 15 atolls and islands. The consultations revealed that Marshallese wished to remain in their homelands, relying on local natural resources that are essential for their sense of place and security. Despite the prevailing global view that the islands may become uninhabitable, the Marshallese maintain a sense of optimism, with over 99% of respondents indicating that they wish to remain at home in their islands (Nakayama et al., 2022; van der Geest et al., 2020). However, the science cannot be denied, and climate change poses a

significant threat to this desire, as rising sea levels, increasing temperatures, and erratic rainfall will continue to impact the islands and people (Masson-Delmotte*, 2019).*

The differences between local resilience and global narratives has been explained by reference to the politicization of aid resources and the power imbalances within climate change funding systems (Taylor & Middleby, 2023). The RMI receives funding through Official Development Assistance, including direct budget support and programmatic backing from the Compact of Free Association (COFA), along with contributions from bilateral donors like Taiwan, Japan, the European Union, and Australia. Significant funding also comes from multilateral development banks, such as the ADB and World Bank (PIFS, 2014). Since the year 2000, all public capital expenditures in the RMI have been funded by grants, with the majority of the domestic budget directed towards operational costs in government sectors such as administration, health, and education (UNDP, 2019).

Adaptation support for the RMI is primarily funded by organizations such as the Adaptation Fund, World Bank International Development Association, and Green Climate Fund. From 2014 to 2019, approximately US$3 billion was allocated to climate change initiatives in the Pacific region, with US$1.5 billion designated for adaptation, US$0.9 billion for cross-cutting projects, and US$1 billion for mitigation efforts. Specifically, the Marshall Islands received US$58.4 million (Fouad et al., 2021).

However, in their 2024 study, Incerti and Barnett identified a significant disparity between the allocation and distribution of adaptation finance in the RMI. The available international funding is insufficient to address the country's vulnerabilities, which are exacerbated by its small economy, geographic isolation, dependence on the US dollar, and a scattered population that drives up public administration costs that further burdens the national income.

There is, therefore, a clear need to critically examine both the language and practical aspects of international support for climate change adaptation in the RMI. The aid landscape is in Pacific Island Countries (PICs) is changing, increasing driven by privatized and politicized agendas (Taylor & Middleby, 2023). Moreover, donor-driven top-down approaches can worsen existing challenges, highlighting the necessity for precise vulnerability assessments and the need to address inequitable socio-political dynamics to facilitate transformative adaptation (Eriksen et al., 2021; See et al., 2022).

Effective climate adaptation necessitates capacity building that actively engages local communities and diverse stakeholders, focusing on systemic approaches and ongoing learning (Klinsky & Saggar, 2022). While national institutions in PICs should lead this effort, challenges remain in defining and developing the needed capacities (Warrick et al., 2017). Given its low-lying geography, vulnerability to extreme weather events, and the legacy of U.S. colonialism disrupting local institutions and creating social challenges, the RMI faces significant climate change risks. Despite these obstacles,

Marshallese efforts toward climate adaptation are commendable, exemplified by initiatives like the Joint National Action Plan for Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Management, along with meaningful contributions to international climate agreements (Burkett, 2015; Government of RMI 2014). These challenges underscore the importance of locally driven approaches that prioritize Marshallese voices and knowledge in shaping adaptation strategies.

2.5 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the RMI and aspects of its socio-economic structure, historical influences, and environmental challenges. The nation's susceptibility to climate change is a key concern, as emphasized by Nakayama et al. (2022). These challenges brought on by rising sea levels, erratic rainfall seasons and other environmental changes in addition to social challenges underscore the critical need for systematic changes to take place (Adger et al., 2011; Bordner & Ferguson, 2020, Storlazzi et al., 2018).

Despite external pressures and historical disruptions, the Marshallese have maintained a strong sense of identity and resourcefulness. Ishiwatari et al. (2025), and Nakashima and Krupnik, (2018) all emphasize the critical role that indigenous knowledge plays in helping Marshallese communities navigate these challenges. The locals' expertise in agriculture and navigation, rooted in traditional practices, has been key to their resilience in the face of environmental and cultural disruptions brought on by external forces.

Understanding the historical context and governance structures of the RMI is essential for addressing the contemporary challenges faced by the nation. Lynch (1984) provides valuable insight into the country's governance system, which blends democratic principles with traditional practices through the incorporation of both the Nitijela and the Council of Iroij. The RMI's Constitution and Appropriation Act 2024 further elaborate on the legal and political framework guiding the nation's operations, including how financial support is allocated for climate initiatives and other national development priorities.

As the impacts of climate change intensify, the RMI must adopt a balanced approach to adaptation that integrates both traditional knowledge and modern innovations. Ahlgren et al. (2014) and Nakayama et al. (2022) highlight the importance of utilizing both indigenous and scientific knowledge to develop effective climate adaptation strategies. In addition, Taylor & Middleby (2023) stress the need for equitable participation, ensuring local communities are prioritized in the shaping adaptation measures.

These key themes will be further explored in subsequent chapters, particularly regarding the implementation of adaptation projects and the significant role that external stakeholders play in shaping the nation's future. Barnett (2001), McNamara et al. (2020), Eriksen et al. (2021), and See et al. (2022) discuss the challenges faced by island nations in securing adequate external support for climate adaptation and the importance of engaging local populations in these efforts. The power dynamics at play in international funding mechanisms and the politicization of aid are critical factors that could be considered when developing sustainable and equitable climate adaptation solutions.

Chapter 3- Participatory Development in Climate Adaptation: A Review of the Literature

This chapter examines arguments for participatory development as they relate to climate adaptation, with a focus on their application in SIDS like the RMI. It begins by reviewing the emergence of ideas promoting participatory development, and critiques of this approach that question whether collaboration in development has been achieved in practice. It goes on to discuss issues related to participatory development as it relates to climate adaptation, and specific questions about the extent to which it is being realised in the RMI. It identifies a gap in how participatory development is applied in the climate adaptation planning in the RMI.

A significant amount of literature has been produced on development organizations, which frequently hold substantial influence over climate adaptation initiatives through key roles in shaping directions and priorities in projects (Bordner et al., 2020; Bordner et al., 2023; Incerti & Barnett, 2024; Krzesni & Brewington, 2022; Roland, 2024). Much of this scholarship reveals how top-down approaches fail to incorporate local knowledge and priorities (Bordner et al., 2020; Kapoor, 2002; Taylor & Middleby, 2023). When local perspectives are marginalized, adaptation strategies are found to be less effective and are less likely to be accepted by the community (Vunibola, 2023). A key finding is that power imbalances between international development agencies and recipient nations result in strategies that do not align with the needs of the people they are meant to benefit, thereby diminishing their impact and effectiveness (Meki & Tarai, 2023).

Another challenge to effective development is the potential for cultural mismatch between the values and practices of the Marshallese people and those of the development organizations implementing adaptation initiatives (Bordner et al., 2020). When development projects do not align with the cultural norms and values of local communities, they risk alienating those they aim to support. There is evident when mainstream development models clash with local norms, it can result in inequities that negatively affect the outcomes of such initiatives (Taylor & Middleby, 2023). For the Marshallese, whose cultural practices are deeply embedded in communal relationships and shared responsibilities, a mismatch between development strategies and cultural values can hinder effective participation and the long-term success of adaptation efforts (Bordner et al., 2020).

Local knowledge and practices offer valuable insights into sustainable environmental management and can lead to more culturally relevant adaptation outcomes (Nalau et al., 2018). Incorporating these perspectives respects the deep understanding that local communities have of their environment and fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility for the solutions developed.

It is crucial, therefore, to ensure genuine participation from local communities in development initiatives. Facilitating true participatory processes, where local voices are actively heard and valued, has been found to lead to more effective and accepted adaptation strategies (McNamara et al., 2022). This requires creating platforms for open dialogue and decision-making that reflect the communal values of the Marshallese people, allowing them to have a meaningful role in shaping the adaptation process.

3.2 Emergence of Participatory development

The recognition of the importance of local agency aligns with the broader shift toward participatory development, which emerged in response to criticisms of conventional top-down approaches (Cornwall, 2019; Hickey & Mohan, 2004; Mansuri & Rao, 2012). In reaction to substantial criticisms of conventional development paradigms, the concept of participatory development surfaced and surged in popularity throughout the 1970s and 1980s. This approach champions the active engagement of local communities across all phases of development, encompassing planning, decision-making, execution, and assessment (Chambers, 1994). Anchored in principles of empowerment, long-term viability, and fairness, participatory development aims to rectify deficiencies inherent in top-down development approaches (Oakley, 1991).

By placing emphasis on the requirements and viewpoints of the most marginalized, participatory development sought to establish fairer and more egalitarian societies (Mohan, 2002). Initiatives become more tailored to specific contexts and more closely aligned with local demands.

The idea of participatory development gained traction and international organizations started incorporating participatory methodologies into their initiatives. For instance, the UNDP has placed greater emphasis on local involvement in its Human Development Reports and numerous projects (Cornwall, 2006). Likewise, the World Bank has incorporated participatory approaches in certain poverty alleviation and community-led initiatives (World Bank, 1994). These shifts reflect a growing recognition of the value of participatory development in achieving more effective and sustainable outcomes.

The concept of participation has undergone a substantial transformation, evolving to a point where questioning its true value is often discouraged. This shift has led to a more unquestioned acceptance of participation as inherently beneficial, leaving little room for critical examination of its effectiveness, relevance, or potential drawbacks in various contexts. As a result, the need for a more nuanced understanding of participation in development work is becoming increasingly important, particularly

when evaluating its impact on local communities and their ability to adapt to challenges like climate (Cleaver, 2001). Participation is:

> *"based on three main tenets: that participation is intrinsically a 'good thing' (especially for the respondents); that a focus on 'getting the techniques right' is the principal way of ensuring the success of such approaches; and that considerations of power and politics on the whole should be avoided as divisive and obstructive" (*Cleaver, 2001, p.36).

This perspective has been seen to empower individuals to transcend the role of passive recipients, assuming agency in shaping their developmental trajectories (Oakley, 1991). More importantly, Stiglitz (2002) observes that genuine participation in decision-making processes cultivates a greater propensity for individuals to embrace resulting outcomes, contrasting with the likelihood of rejection when decisions are imposed upon them.

Theorists have often used the public participatory approach as a model to shift away from the business-as-usual top-down approach and to ensure inclusive decision-making processes (Cleaver, 1999). Participatory development, at its essence, demonstrates a profound confidence in the capabilities and cooperation of individuals and communities towards a collective outcome (Oakley, 1991). This approach is underpinned by the conviction that community participation not only constitutes a fundamental right, but it also serves as an enhancement to inform better quality and appropriate approaches for development outcomes. Chambers, (2012) further notes that it plays a pivotal role in fostering enduring self-reliance and self-determination through decision making processes and often time leads to establishments of community led institutions.

In 1990, the World Bank formed a Learning Group focused on Participatory Development, which subsequently led to the publication of the report, "The World Bank and Participation" in 1994 (World Bank, 2001). In this document, participatory development was defined as, "*a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, and the decisions and resources which affect them"* (World Bank, 1994, pp 1).

Therefore, it is essential to consider the specifics of how participation is conceptualized and measured. Brohman (1996) emphasizes that effective participation in development necessitates a focus on power relations. He suggests that distinguishing between participation as a "means" and as an "end" provides a crucial framework for measuring empowerment in participatory development projects. This distinction is particularly relevant for research by RMI and the World Bank, where empowerment is defined as "a process of enhancing an individual's or a group's capability to make and express choices and to transform them into desired actions and outcomes" (World Bank, 2004).

Understanding empowerment in this way ensures that development initiatives are not merely participatory in form but are genuinely transformative in practice.

Thus, the integration of these perspectives—addressing power dynamics, distinguishing the means and ends of participation, and fostering contextualized empowerment strategies—is proposed as creating a robust framework for participatory development that truly empowers communities and ensures that development aid fulfils its intended purpose (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2006).

Utilizing decision-making methodologies and knowledge-sharing practices, we not only deepen our understanding of the technical and scientific dimensions of climate change but also generate additional benefits. These methods cultivate a collaborative environment, allowing diverse stakeholders to share their viewpoints, resulting in more well-rounded insights and to climate issues. Additionally, participatory methods play a pivotal role in fostering transparency and accountability by involving stakeholders directly in planning and implementation processes. This inclusive participation ensures actions are more resilient and socially just, thereby improving preparedness and responsiveness to complex issues. As a result, engaging a broader range of actors enriches both the scientific discussions and strengthens the ethical and practical components of climate governance (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2003; Cloutier et al., 2015).

3.3 Participatory development critical review

The current academic literature emphasizes the importance of further investigation to understand how participatory development is utilized in international development administration (Cornwall, 2019; Sieglinde et al., 2023; Westin, 2019). This is prompted by critical evaluations that uncovered inherent deficiencies and obstacles linked to its implementation (Kapoor, 2002; Williams, 2004).

One such critique centres on the approach's tendency to emphasize technical fixes rather than addressing the complex social and organizational dilemmas inherent in community engagement and decision-making processes (Easterly & Williamson, 2011; Mosse, 1994). Furthermore, participatory projects have been criticized for unintentionally exacerbating power imbalances and subjecting vulnerable populations to compromised situations which leads to emotional strain (Ghazala & Rao, 2004). Moreover, Mosse (1994) argues that the notion of "participation" in community development often reflects the biases of facilitators, potentially marginalizing certain knowledge types and reinforcing existing power structures.

The prevailing model in international aid policies often adopts a one-size-fits-all approach, originating from the capitals of donor nations and implemented through development organizations.

Historically, insufficient consideration has been given to the contextual nuances of recipient developing countries during policy formulation, as highlighted by Easterly and Williamson (2011). This oversight underscores a critical gap in understanding the intricate socio-economic and administrative landscapes crucial for effective aid implementation.

Critical scholarship calls for a paradigm shift towards more inclusive and transformative development strategies. Cleaver (1999) stresses the importance of deeper community involvement beyond project management, advocating for a nuanced understanding of broader socio-economic dynamics and power structures. This entails redefining traditional ideas of “community" and "institutions" to encompass social connections and acknowledging the potential exclusionary effects of participatory practices. Fast forward two decades later, and scholars such as Baldwin et al. (2023) caution against the potential partisan biases inherent in participatory development aid, highlighting its potential to exacerbate inequalities among different political factions.

There is substantial evidence pointing to ongoing challenges with power imbalances between the different actors involved in implementing development aid, even when participatory approaches are used. These power dynamics often undermine the effectiveness of such approaches, as they can influence decision-making, resource distribution, and the genuine inclusion of local communities in the process. Scholars like Reid and Huq, (2014) and McNamara et al., (2020) emphasized the essential necessity of modifying policy processes to promote community empowerment, allowing them to pursue their own initiatives in addressing climate change. However, much of the current literature has yet to fully explore the intricate nature of power dynamics that influence the operation of local institutions. Additionally, important issues remain unaddressed regarding how priorities are determined, the means through which various groups express their demands, and the social and political factors s that frequently obstruct their capacity to do so (Kirby & O’Mahony, n.d.).

While scholarship also highlights the potential benefits of decentralized, community-based approaches to climate adaptation in specific contexts (Ayers et al., 2014; McNamara & Buggy, 2017; Reid & Huq, 2014), a critical analysis reveals that genuine participation of local communities is often constrained by a lack of decision-making authority. Local communities frequently describe their involvement as tokenistic, and that in practice they are granted minimal or no decision-making power. When community perspectives diverge from those of external agencies, the latter tend to disregard local input. If communities persist in advocating for their preferences, external agencies often cite financial constraints, technical challenges, or project objectives misalignment as reasons to dismiss community suggestions. Consequently, projects may be withdrawn or reassigned to other communities, with non-cooperation framed as a justification. This dynamic compels communities to

yield to decisions made by external agencies, undermining the principle of authentic participatory engagement (Samaddar et al., 2021). This highlights the need for a shift towards more equitable decision-making processes that genuinely incorporate local knowledge and priorities.

An additional but more prominent critique of participatory development by Cooke & Kothari (2001) cautions of the dominance exerted by multinational agencies and funders when employing participatory approaches, particularly evident in project implementations. Operational guidelines that are established beforehand by these agencies, have been found to direct decision-making processes into predetermined paths. For instance, resource mobilization that prioritizes areas such as adaptation and biodiversity may well constrain local actor ability to influence goals. Although local decision-making may seem evident, factors such as predetermined conditions regarding timeframe, focus areas, and types of local knowledge to be utilized tend to be established beforehand, leaving little room for reflexive adjustments. The imposition of rules at the outset, particularly through project frameworks, limits genuine participatory input, often resulting in the adjustment of local perspectives to align with project deliverables (Christens & Speer, 2006).

Transitioning away from a structured project cycle poses a significant challenge: there is often insufficient time and resources allocated to mobilize and involve the community, leading to a focus on funder priorities rather than those of the communities (Robinson & Dornan, 2017). Incorporating social knowledge and activating participatory processes and community involvement in adaptation planning, which is multifaceted and spans various sectors, is thus crucial. However, effective participation requires significant time and financial resources, which are often limited in public administration, especially within smaller entities (Eckerd and Heidelberg, 2020). This underscores the necessity for adequate support and funding to ensure effective community involvement and the successful execution of adaptation plans.

3.4 Adaptation and Participatory Development in RMI

In the RMI context, the World Bank plays a vital role as a donor partner in adaptation efforts. Additional research into the World Bank system revealed that the project process is structured around six key steps. These key steps in their project process are: "*Identification, Preparation, Appraisal, Negotiation/Approval, Implementation, and Completion/Focus group & Evaluation".* Both the World Bank and the RMI as the recipient nation have formally prescribed roles in each step (World Bank, n.d.). In the Identification phase, for example, the RMI is invited to suggest projects for World Bank funding, working together to create a Country Partnership Framework (CPF) that highlights the country's development priorities. Then, in the Preparation stage, the RMI is also invited to lead project planning, carrying out assessments and studies while the World Bank offers advice on

design and setup. In the Appraisal phase, the project's design is carefully reviewed to make sure it will work, following World Bank rules. The Negotiation/Approval stage involves finalizing project details and sending these to the Bank's Board of Executive Directors for approval.
Once approved, the RMI as recipient is involved in the management of the project's execution in the Implementation phase, with support from the Bank to improve results and handle risks. Regular reporting is a way of informing if any changes are needed through the implementation process. Finally, in the Completion/Focus group & Evaluation phase, the project's outcomes are evaluated to learn from mistakes. Throughout this process, there is the appearance of collaboration between the World Bank and the RMI in pursuing development goals. There are, however, significant questions about the extent of that collaboration given outcomes and actions are predefined, leaving no flexibility for modifications during implementation.

Participatory methods are, therefore, employed by international development agencies such as the World Bank and UNDP to design and implement adaptation strategies. An inclusive approach aligns with arguments that a thorough adaptation process requires a clearly defined framework that equips decision-makers with evidence rooted in local insights (Easterly & Williamson, 2011). It recognises the importance of inclusive governance supported by stakeholder involvement in cooperative adaptation planning (Suškevičs, 2019). An absence of inclusivity threatens the legitimacy and acknowledged effectiveness of an adaptation strategy and will encounter challenges when put into action.

A part of the rationale by donors in adopting participatory methods is ‘capacity building’. Concern arises from the potential misuse of capacity building resources to serve the interests of the assisting agency or country. A critical aspect of the capacity development process perpetuating dependency on external aid occurs when development experts, aligned with dominant institutional structures, enforce their own agendas and priorities without sufficiently acknowledging other valid knowledge systems (Eriksen et al., 2021; See et al., 2022; Webber, 2016). Within the Pacific, case studies have noted the importance of promoting such reflexivity within the aid sector as most of development practices require data that does not recognize the lived, human experiences of the Pacific people (Meki & Tarai, 2023; Vunibola, 2023). These studies have suggested that instead of imposing predetermined notions of 'capacity' onto target communities, donors should engage authentically in dialogue and partnership-building processes that recognize and respect local knowledge systems and capacities (Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Roland, 2024). Such an approach necessitates a willingness to relinquish power and aligns with democratic principles centred on the participation of local communities.

Resource constraints further complicate the implementation of participatory development (Mosse, 1994). Many local communities in the RMI face limited financial and human resources, which restrict their ability to engage meaningfully in the adaptation process. This lack of support can prevent the full potential of community-driven adaptation strategies from being realized. Without the necessary resources to support their involvement, local actors may struggle to contribute to the development and implementation of climate adaptation strategies (Lebel, 2013)

Financial investments are mainly directed towards large-scale urban civil works projects, often backed by multilateral institutions. Pacific Island countries are often portrayed as small and vulnerable, perpetuating a narrative that emphasizes their purported lack of adaptive capacity (Incerti & Barnett, 2024). This framing legitimizes external actors' intervention and control over the adaptation process, driven by financial incentives to maintain the status quo of dependence on external aid.

The prevailing approach to adaptation interventions, predominantly informed by Western scientific knowledge, frequently overlooks considerations of injustices and vulnerabilities. The failure to recognize the inherent linkages between knowledge and power poses a significant risk of perpetuating fundamental injustices within the adaptation process. Klepp and Funfgeld, (2021), shed light on the knowledge and power dynamics inherent in adaptation interventions through their examination of the Kiribati Adaptation Project. Their study reveals challenges associated with external consultants, standardized consultancy knowledge, and bureaucratic hurdles, all of which impede meaningful participation and input from local communities in the adaptation process.

This sentiment is echoed by Roland (2024), whose study in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) suggests that traditional adaptation practices and resource-sharing mechanisms have significant protective effects. Moreover, networks and cultural practices in outer islands may present opportunities for contextually appropriate adaptation strategies. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating local knowledge systems and community participation in adaptation efforts to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability.

3.5 Implications for the Analysis of Participatory Climate Adaptation in the RMI

While participatory development has gained considerable scholarly attention for its potential to address power imbalances and foster empowerment, significant gaps remain in terms of its application, particularly within the context of climate adaptation. One major gap lies in the lack of detailed analysis on the power dynamics involved in participatory frameworks in planning for climate adaptation. Although participatory approaches are heralded for their potential to empower

marginalized groups, analyses of these approaches often fail to fully account for the complexities of power relations which undermine their intended impact (Cornwall, 2019; Brohman, 1996). Further research is needed on how power is perceived and distributed within communities to ensure that participatory processes lead to genuine empowerment rather than reinforcing existing inequalities.

Additionally, there is insufficient exploration of how participatory methods are tailored to local contexts, especially in small island nations like the Marshall Islands (RMI). While there is growing acknowledgment of the importance of context-specific adaptation strategies (Ahlgren et al., 2014), many development policies still adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, which fails to account for the unique socio-economic, cultural, and environmental landscapes of recipient countries (Easterly & Williamson, 2011). This gap suggests the need for more nuanced research that incorporates local knowledge, priorities, and investigates the barriers to authentic participation in decision-making processes (Samaddar et al., 2021).

The intersection of adaptation and participatory development also remains underexplored, particularly with regard to the capacity-building process. Many studies have highlighted the imposition of external agendas during the adaptation process, often undermining local knowledge systems and contributing to dependency on external aid (Eriksen et al., 2021; Webber, 2016). Research that critically examines the role of external actors and the extent to which they respect local knowledge and decision-making practices is crucial for fostering truly transformative adaptation strategies (Roland, 2024).

Finally, there is a need for more research on the practical implementation of participatory methods in climate adaptation, particularly in relation to financial and institutional constraints. Existing literature often overlooks the challenges faced by smaller organizations in mobilizing communities and ensuring genuine participation due to resource limitations (Eckerd & Heidelberg, 2020). This gap calls for further examination of how financial resources and policy structures can better support inclusive, community-driven adaptation planning in vulnerable regions like the Pacific Islands.

3.6 Research Focus and Questions

The effectiveness of project-based funding for adaptation aid in small island nations like the RMI is a critical yet under-researched area in climate change financing and adaptation studies. Several factors contribute to the lack of research on this topic, raising significant concerns about the appropriateness and suitability of these mechanisms for RMI's small communities.

One major issue is the absence of direct, practical research that directly examines participation within the design, implementation and outcomes of project-based approaches within the adaptation aid

context. Most studies and reports focus on broader policy or the global trends rather than the lived realities faced by community members on the ground. Without knowledge of these local lived realities, it is challenging to pinpoint the impacts of these projects on the lives of the recipients.

As mentioned, participatory development approaches emphasise the benefits from including community voices in planning for climate adaptation. There are, however, real questions about whether these aspirations are achieved in practice. This research, therefore, seeks to understand whether and how participatory approaches are being realised in climate adaptation in the RMI. The overarching research question is, "To what extent are the principles of participatory development for climate adaptation in the RMI effectively implemented in practice?" Answering this will provide a deeper understanding of how local community members, government officials, and external actors, such as international donors, view and evaluate the role of participatory development in the RMI's climate adaptation efforts. Given this research focus, the research objectives are:

- To investigate how project-based funding approaches are understood and experienced by key stakeholders in the RMI.
- To assess the extent to which participatory development processes align with local needs and priorities.
- To evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of participatory methods in achieving sustainable adaptation outcomes in small island contexts like the RMI.

3.7 Chapter Conclusion

The emergence of participatory development represents a shift away from conventional, top-down development models, emphasizing community involvement in decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. This approach has gained recognition from international organizations such as the UNDP and the World Bank, reflecting its perceived value in fostering empowerment, sustainability, and social equity. However, critiques highlight challenges in implementation, including power imbalances, tokenistic participation, and the prioritization of technical solutions over social dynamics.

In practice, participatory development has been incorporated into climate adaptation efforts, particularly in the Marshall Islands, where community engagement is essential for addressing environmental vulnerabilities. The RMI's National Adaptation Plan (NAP) integrates both scientific and traditional knowledge, recognizing the importance of local perspectives in shaping sustainable strategies. However, structural limitations, including donor-driven agendas, financial constraints, and limited decision-making power at the local level, continue to hinder truly transformative participation.

The intersection of adaptation and participatory development underscores the necessity for inclusive governance, stakeholder collaboration, and systemic approaches to capacity building. Effective adaptation strategies must move beyond rhetoric to ensure that participation is not merely a procedural formality but a mechanism for genuine empowerment. Addressing power dynamics, fostering transparent decision-making, and securing adequate funding are critical to making participatory development a meaningful tool for resilience in the face of climate change. Without these considerations, participatory approaches risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than addressing them.

Chapter 4 - Methods

> *"Narrative is everywhere, present in myth, fable, short story, epic, history, tragedy, comedy, painting, dance, stained glass windows, cinema, social histories, fairy tales, novels, science schema, comic strips, conversation, journal articles" (Richardson, 1990, 20-21).*

This research employs a qualitative approach based on narrative inquiry. To address the research questions, the study required data that captures the complexities of relationships, local participation, and underlying power structures. The qualitative approach was selected for its ability to explore the socio-cultural and political dynamics that shape socially embedded phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This research relied on both primary data, gathered through semi-structured interviews, in addition to secondary data derived from academic and policy literature.

Due to the research objectives unique to Marshallese context, a Marshallese storytelling technique – bwebwenato[3] was utilized to explore respondents' experiences and lived realities. As context is key in exploring nuances within the RMI, storytelling allows for the research respondents to provide data in their own words and their own truths (Taylor et al., 2015). To accommodate the nuances by which the data was collected, trust needed to be established and build for direct communication with the respondents (Smith, 2021). The choice of qualitative methods is justified by their ability to capture the intricate social, cultural, and political factors influencing participatory development in the RMI. Qualitative approaches prioritize depth and contextual understanding over broad generalization, making them particularly effective for studying phenomena embedded in specific cultural and historical contexts (Silverman, 2013). Alternative methods, such as surveys or quantitative data analysis, were deemed unsuitable due to their limitations in addressing the research question's complexity.

As this research is grounded in contextual understandings, it adopts an interpretivist paradigm to examine the subjective experiences and meanings attributed to participatory development by various stakeholders. To achieve this, the study employs a multi-method qualitative approach that integrates a literature review, purposive, snowball and maximum variation sampling, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group meeting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Discussions with the Climate Change

[3] Bwebwenato is a form of storytelling in the RMI. It is a noun and verb. Bwebwenato means story and bwebwenato also means storytelling.

Directorate team in RMI allowed for stakeholder mapping to identify key actors engaged in climate adaptation initiatives, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, international development partners, and local community representatives. This process aimed to ensure comprehensive inclusion and to capture diverse perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with 15 stakeholders, using purposive sampling to select respondents. These interviews explored power dynamics, participatory processes, and the distribution of benefits from climate adaptation projects. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility, enabling respondents to elaborate on their experiences while maintaining a consistent focus on the research objectives (Yin, 2015).

This chapter outlines the methods and tools used. Care was taken to ensure these methods were contextually appropriate, ethically sound, and aligned with established practices for studying participatory development in small island settings. They will serve as a basis for an analysis that enhances understanding of how international organizations interact with local communities. This will assist in assessing whether participatory development efforts are inclusive for local communities.

4.1 Respondents and Site Selection

The respondents for this research comprised a diverse group of stakeholders involved in the RMI climate adaptation sector. This included government officials, policymakers, community leaders, NGO's, global entities, private sector representatives, and local experts. Participants were selected based on their expertise, role in decision-making, and direct involvement in the environment, climate change, and adaptation field, ensuring a well-rounded and informed analysis of the issues at hand.

Majuro, the nation's capital, was selected as the primary site for this research due to its central role in adaptation efforts. As the capital, it is home to most of the key actors involved in major adaptation projects, including government officials, non-governmental organizations, and development partners. The concentration of these stakeholders makes it an ideal location for gathering insights and understanding the dynamics of adaptation initiatives. Additionally, Majuro serves as the hub for mainstreamed climate work, where national strategies and policies are coordinated and implemented, further emphasizing its significance as the research site.

4.1.1 Semi-structured Interview Respondents

This research employed purposive sampling, snowball sampling, and maximum variation sampling. At the start, it was clear that the focus of the sample would be from Majuro, specifically those who have either had experience within the space of adaptation and project-based grants. As the goal of the

selection was to have respondents who provided the most relevant information, it was important to keep within the network of the two listed fields of work.

Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select prior to the data collection names of those who would be able to provide first hand experiences (Yin, 2015). Since this research aims to gather diverse perspectives and ensure comprehensive data collection, a maximum variation sampling approach was also employed. This strategy allowed for the inclusion of a wide range of viewpoints, capturing differences across stakeholder experiences, backgrounds, and roles in adaptation initiatives. In incorporating diverse perspectives, the aim was to ensure a more nuanced understanding of participatory development and its impact on various communities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In several instances, an issue would emerge during the interviews where someone else was identified as being able to provide further details on an event or situation and was thereby being recommended. There were two respondents who were selected through snowball sampling and the remaining by purposive and maximum variation.

Prior to conducting the field research, I had submitted a list of names to two colleagues who work within the environment sector in the RMI to validate if they reflected the appropriate stakeholders. The list was approved and from there, I began scheduling and reached out to each respondent via email with the respondent information sheet (annexed) attached to request for scheduling of times where they would be able to meet in person. During the meeting for the semi-structured interviews, respondents were given a consent form and prior to the start of the interview, we went through the consent form and if they permitted, the interview would commence. There was a total of fifteen respondents.

4.1.2 Focus group Respondents

To validate preliminary findings, a stakeholder focus group discussion was organized to engage respondents in refining the analysis and conclusions. The aim was to mitigate potential biases and negative perceptions associated with the research—particularly those arising when findings challenged prevailing community narratives. This approach also helped bridge gaps between the researcher and the community, promoting trust and mutual understanding while refining the study's findings (Maxwell, 1992). The discussion emphasized collaborative dialogue, and feedback was incorporated into the final analysis. This step enhanced the credibility and relevance of the research, aligning with qualitative research principles (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The focus group was held with adaptation working group members - a collective of stakeholders working on climate adaptation in the RMI. The meeting was held on September 12, 2024, where the prior research findings were

presented in a format that protected the anonymity of participants. Discussions were then facilitated by the researcher to enable respondents to provide further input.

4.2 Research tools and procedures

4.2.1 Mainstreaming Bwebwenato

The use of Bwebwenato sessions was a continuous thread woven throughout the study. Bwebwenato, akin to Kaupapa Māori methodology (Smith, 2021), was integral to the inquiry process, guiding the research approach in a way that meant it was more than just the production and analysis of data. Similar to Kaupapa Māori, which emphasizes a Māori-centred approach where respondents are considered experts in their own right and challenges traditional power dynamics, Bwebwenato fosters an environment where local knowledge and perspectives are placed at the forefront.

The goal of this methodology was to bridge local Marshallese methods with Western research techniques, combining narrative inquiry and thematic analysis to ensure that the findings are meaningful and relevant from a Marshallese perspective (Smith, 2021). By employing this approach, the research not only adhered to culturally significant practices but also provided a platform to validate and amplify local voices, offering a holistic view of the subject matter that resonates with the community's experiences and worldviews. This fusion of methodologies allowed the study to draw on the strengths of both local and Western knowledge systems, ensuring that the research was both culturally appropriate and academically rigorous.

4.2.2 Literature Review

An initial literature review served as the cornerstone of the study, providing a comprehensive and critical analysis of existing research and reports related to participatory development, power dynamics, and climate adaptation. Academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and institutional repositories were extensively utilized, ensuring a broad and robust range of sources. Through the review, several key themes emerged, notably the influence of power in shaping participatory processes, the structural constraints that limit the effectiveness of participatory approaches, and the broader implications of these dynamics for resilience and long-term sustainability in climate adaptation efforts.

Additionally, the review revealed the limitations inherent in traditional participatory models, and the risk they inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities rather than address them. By drawing on both global and local literature, the review contextualized the challenges of participatory development

within the RMI and pointed to the necessity for more inclusive, locally driven models to foster sustainable climate adaptation.

4.2.3 Semi Structured interview

The primary data for this study was gathered through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for a flexible yet focused approach to collecting insights from a diverse range of stakeholders. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that respondents with varying experiences and perspectives on climate adaptation and participatory development in the Marshall Islands were included. This method facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the topic, enabling the research to capture nuanced views from local community members, government officials, and external actors involved in the adaptation process.

The interviews were conducted from late June to the mid-August 2024. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and notes were taken.

4.2.4 Focus group

To enhance the credibility and accuracy of the findings, as mentioned above, a focus group discussion was conducted. This provided an opportunity for stakeholders to review the data, offer feedback, and ensure that their perspectives were accurately represented. Incorporating this feedback into the research helped refine key observations, adding rigor and increasing the reliability of the conclusions drawn. These methodological choices are in line with established best practices in participatory research, particularly in the context of SIDS. This approach aligns with the study's goal of producing meaningful, locally grounded insights into climate adaptation practices in the RMI.

Specifically, the focus group meeting took place on September 12, 2024, with members of the adaptation working group in attendance. This group included a mix of individuals—some who had directly participated in the study and others who had not—offering a broader range of insights and perspectives. During the meeting, early findings and emerging themes from the collected data were presented. It provided an opportunity to cross-check the initial results and gather valuable feedback. Stakeholders were encouraged to engage critically with the findings, raise questions, and offer additional insights or clarifications.

Incorporating stakeholder feedback at this stage strengthened the validity of its conclusions and upheld principles of participatory research by fostering collaboration and co-ownership. Such an approach aligns with best practices in participatory methodologies, ensuring that the research

outcomes are both accurate and grounded in the realities of those most affected by climate adaptation policies and practices.

4.3 Data analysis

The data analysis followed Yin's (2015) five-step process: compiling, breaking down, reorganizing, interpreting, and concluding. This structured approach was well suited for analysing the interviews, as it allowed for a systematic breakdown of complex narratives into clear themes. First, data from interviews, observations, and documents were organized to ensure consistency. Then, key ideas were identified by breaking the data into smaller segments. These pieces were later reorganized to reveal patterns related to adaptation strategies. In the interpretation phase, connections between these patterns were analysed to understand their significance within the context of adaptation. Finally, conclusions were drawn by summarizing the findings into a clear explanation of adaptation responses.

The Figure below, adapted from the original source, outlines the key steps followed through the process.

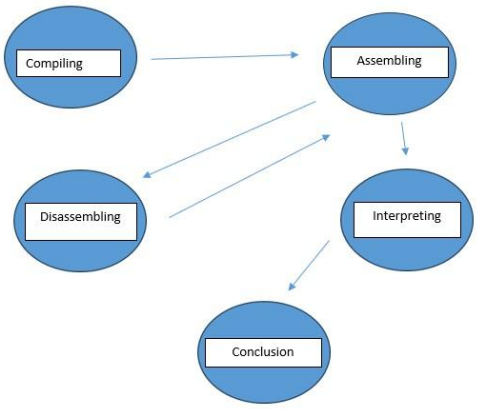

Figure 2-adapted from the original source, Yin, 2015

4.3.1 Interpretive approach

The interpretive research model, as outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), focuses on gaining an in-depth understanding of specific contexts and situations, rather than seeking universal laws. It emphasizes that knowledge is constructed from the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals, with a particular focus on human behaviour, actions, and experiences (Willis, 2007). Researchers in this paradigm draw on their own background knowledge to interpret respondents' viewpoints, recognizing the importance of understanding human beliefs, experiences, and issues in generating insightful and meaningful results (Smith, 2021).

In this approach, the interpretations of respondents regarding their behaviours and socio-cultural contexts are central. Researchers are expected to adopt the perspective of the participants, engaging with the situations from their point of view, rather than applying their own interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). For example, when exploring socio-cultural dynamics in different spaces of development work, an interpretive researcher would seek to understand the respondents' beliefs, attitudes, and experiences toward learning.

The paradigm highlights the interactive process between researchers and respondents, where knowledge is co-constructed through mutual engagement (Denzin et al., 2008). Researcher interpretations are deeply rooted in respondent perspectives, ensuring that conclusions are grounded in their lived experiences, and supported by logical and rigorous argumentation.

4.3.2 Thematic analysis

This study employed narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of local experts in the RMI within the climate adaptation space. Narrative inquiry, a qualitative research approach, seeks to understand perspectives through respondents' stories and experiences (Bresler, 2006). Given the inherently subjective nature of this method, data triangulation was employed to enhance the reliability and validity of findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Data triangulation involved comparing firsthand accounts from respondent interviews with secondary data from reports published by implementing organizations and finally a focus group discussion with the stakeholders. This approach, complemented by the researcher's observations, helped validate the findings and provided a nuanced view of the alignment—or divergence— between rhetoric and reality. While differing perspectives emerged, the triangulation process allowed for the examination of varying discourses presented by different actors in the adaptation process (Yin, 2015).

Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions were analysed using a combination of thematic and narrative analysis. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), identified recurring patterns and themes, particularly focusing on power dynamics, participation challenges, and adaptation outcomes. Simultaneously, narrative analysis delved into stakeholders' personal stories, offering deeper insights into how they interpret and respond to participatory initiatives. This dual approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the complex interactions within the adaptation landscape.

The interview data, once transcribed, were input into NVIVO for analysis. The coding process involved organizing the data into categories of meaning, which informed the development of themes

discussed in subsequent chapters. By integrating multiple analytical methods, the research achieved a robust understanding of the challenges and dynamics shaping participatory development in the RMI.

Table below shows an example of how several sub-themes were grouped:

Table 1 – Themes identified in analysis.

Subthemes	**Description**	**Example**
Power imbalance • **Keywords/Indicators for Coding**: "External" "donor dominance," "consultant-driven," "marginalized local voices," “nonMarshallese” "hierarchical."	External consultants often dominated decision-making sideline Marshallese input	“External consultants from these organizations imposed their perspectives, which sometimes led to conflicts with local viewpoints.” S9 res, NGO representative “There was a moment in one of the projects, where I specifically requested NO to an ask, 2 weeks later, I read an email that the item I said no to was going ahead.” S4 res, government representative
	Resistance to local input	“When the draft (for NAP) was shared widely with government for consideration and comments, our government experts provided so much comments and were met with a block where the project managers did not incorporate their thoughts and feedback.” S2 res, government representative “There was a lot of back and forth with the drafter, he was non Marshallese and contracted through the World Bank PREP 2 project… It took a lot of back and forth so at some point, I had to go up to higher ups to alert them to the changes that I had made and to flag and pay attention to. So yeah, that was quite stressful.” S1 res government representative,
	Donor priorities dictated project focus, leading to disconnects with local needs.	“Changes in priorities does have an effect on the agency …Sometimes at a community level, there is a fine line where it doesn’t really matter because ultimately you are just preparing for the next event.” S6 res, development agency, local hire
	Urgency/pressure from donors through project	“Once, we had requested for a project that would allow our community members to be trained and certified in technical

	sometimes misaligned projects with local contexts	fields. We were told by the donor that we needed to provide tangible outcomes. By tangible, we needed to come out of the project with visible proof of success. I asked them if there was a way that we could measure success with knowledge gain? They said that would be for a different project. It was as if they came and demanded we do things for them instead of providing support for us." S11 res, community member
	Changes in donor funding priorities impact project focus.	"We saw a shift in change in priority areas of funding during the Trump administration and that also contributes to having an impact to these global funds as these developed countries tend to be the biggest donors." – S6, development agency, local hire
	Issues arising from donor expectations and community practices.	"It is always hard to liaise between community members and donors. Donors would want us to go do activities at a specific time because it was when the high people in their agencies were visiting. We would counter and say, we cannot go at that time because the community members have an important event planned, we have to cancel and they would push to have it continue." S12 res, CSO/ community representative
	mismatches with local priorities	"The priorities do come from the government. Of course, there has to be alignment with the overall goals of the organization or donor providing the support but ultimately the priorities come from the government. That mismatch between government and local community, well, that is another issue" S10 res, development agency, local hire

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Ensuring an ethically sensitive research approach was a paramount consideration in this research, particularly given the involvement of human respondents in semi-structured interviews and the focus group discussions. Measures were taken to uphold ethical standards, such as obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring they understood the research purpose and their right to

withdraw at any point, safeguarding confidentiality and anonymity of interviewees by securely storing data and anonymizing personal details in the final report, and conducting the study with cultural awareness, sensitivity and respect for local customs. Engaging with the stakeholders in a way that recognizes and values their knowledge and experiences was also a crucial ethical aspect (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2009).

The research was approved by the ethics committee (see annex). It was integral to this study to ensure that research respondents were treated with respect and sensitivity. Respondents were fully informed of the research objectives and provided written consent prior to their involvement in the language of their choice, English or Marshallese. Additionally, the researcher employed culturally sensitive practices to respect local norms and values, drawing on the principles outlined by Smith (2021) for ethical engagement with local communities.

4.5 Self-reflexivity

I was born and raised in Majuro, the capital island of RMI. As a Marshallese woman fluent in both English and Marshallese, I would first like to acknowledge my privilege of growing up in a middle working-class family and having access to tertiary education opportunities. I do not state this to flaunt, merely to indicate that most of my experience and worldviews are positioned by this upbringing. Additionally, in our small island nation, community members are closely connected and familiar with each other's genealogy, so much so that my family names are recognizable by those who have lived on the island for several years. Majuro does not have any street names, possibly because there is only the main road and less than 10 backroads. I vividly recall catching taxis as a young girl and simply stating "Ij too ilo mwon Jimma Lajan (Drop me at my grandfather Lajan's house)" and they would not require any further directions. These ties to my family and community have afforded me various privileges, particularly the trust that I have garnered within the spaces that I have worked.

Professionally, I have spent over a decade in the development sector, managing projects with UNDP GEF Small Grants Programme and Peacebuilding Fund's Climate Security Project at the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Through these roles, I was able to access communities across most of the atolls and islands in RMI. I have always been met with a certain level of trust as a Marshallese as there is a clear assumption that Marshallese have the best interests of another Marshallese. This trust has been instrumental in my ability to effectively engage and collaborate with other Marshallese.

I believe it is essential to acknowledge and respect an individual's knowledge as valid, regardless of its form or origin. There are many instances I have witnessed where Marshallese knowledge is met with

scepticism if an individual does not have any certificated merits. My perspective is that knowledge is deeply rooted in unique experiences and cultural perspectives. This perspective prompted me to approach my research through narrative inquiry, recognizing that understanding experience in a narrative form involves the centrality of relationships between the researcher and respondents. These relationships are examined across time, within distinct locations, and through complex, multilayered contexts (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Such an approach is pertinent in the context of adaptation in the RMI as it emphasizes the importance of capturing the genuine voices and lived realties of the Marshallese people.

4.6 Chapter Conclusion

In summary, this chapter outlines the methodological approach employed to examine relationships between external and internal actors in RMI's climate adaptation efforts, and the effectiveness of participatory development approaches. By incorporating diverse stakeholders working on climate adaptation in the RMI, the aim was to ensure a comprehensive representation of perspectives, facilitating a well-rounded understanding of climate adaptation efforts. The strategic selection of respondents through purposive, snowball, and maximum variation sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2015) ensured the inclusion of key decision-makers, community leaders, and experts with direct experience in adaptation initiatives. The use of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion strengthened the validity of the findings, aligning with participatory research principles. Additionally, the incorporation of Bwebwenato methodology provided a culturally relevant approach, ensuring that Marshallese perspectives were central to the research process, thus aligning with indigenous research methods (Smith, 2021). The data analysis adhered to Yin's (2016) structured process, employing thematic and narrative inquiry to extract patterns related to power dynamics, participatory challenges, and donor influence. The use of NVIVO facilitated systematic coding, revealing recurring themes and supporting the triangulation of findings through multiple data sources (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This methodological rigor was essential in capturing the complexities of participatory adaptation efforts in the Marshall Islands.

Finally, ethical considerations were central to the research, with measures ensuring respondent confidentiality, informed consent, and cultural sensitivity. These principles guided the research's approach, ensuring that findings were not only methodologically robust but also respectful of the communities engaged in the study (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2009). By integrating participatory and culturally grounded research methodologies, this study offers a locally informed perspective on climate adaptation challenges and opportunities in Majuro.

Chapter 5- Participatory Development in the Project Design

As indicated in Chapter 3, there are six main steps in the World Bank's project cycle*: Identification, Preparation, Appraisal, negotiation/Approval, Implementation, and Completion/Focus group & Evaluation*. Throughout the duration of the research, respondents typically discussed these phases as either project design or project implementation. The design phase incorporated the first four steps in the World Bank cycle – Identification, Preparation, Appraisal, Negotiation/Approval. Additionally, the GCF's concept note requires consultations and feasibility studies to be undertaken during the design phase (Green Climate Fund 2016). This chapter analyses the responses of research participants as they relate to these four steps in the design phase (World Bank n.d.)). This chapter presents three key themes identified during the data review, reflecting discussions on participation in the design process: Participatory Development in Climate Adaptation Design, Participatory Development in Negotiations, and Participatory Development in Conditions. Additionally, to objectively assess participatory development, some positive input was also incorporate to ensure all collected data from the semi-structured interviews was accounted for.

The design phase is crucial for securing external aid but also reveals power imbalances. At the time of the research, the RMI was implementing two major adaptation projects: the Pacific Resilience Project Phase II (PREP II) and the Addressing Climate Vulnerability in the Water Sector (ACWA) project. PREP II, a $40 million initiative, is managed by the World Bank and funded by the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and the World Bank. ACWA has $24.7 million from the GCF, the RMI
Government, and Australia, with UNDP as the implementing agency. Respondents in interviews and focus groups commonly referenced these projects when discussing adaptation efforts.

Both projects introduce external resources, including financial support and expertise, which are essential for adaptation efforts. However, reliance on external aid often comes with conditions that limit local decision-making authority. This tension emerges early in the process, as funding mechanisms and donor priorities shape project goals before implementation even begins. These dynamics tie into one of the critical notions within the scholarship indicating that, while aid is crucial, it can inadvertently erode sovereignty by imposing external conditions (Mosse, 1994; Taylor & Middleby, 2023). The design-phase power imbalance illustrates how local voices are sidelined. This chapter explores these findings in greater depth.

Lastly, it is important to note that the findings reflect the perspectives of individuals who participated in this research and may not represent the entirety of the RMI's viewpoints.

5.1 Participatory Development in Climate Adaptation Design

Participatory development policies are designed to promote local involvement in decision-making processes to ensure that projects align with community needs (Chambers, 1994). However, their effectiveness varies depending on the extent to which they integrate local laws and governance structures (Mosse, 1994). A key objective of this research was to assess how well stakeholder engagement processes align with the needs and expectations of local actors. The findings suggest that participatory development is most effective in the initial stages of a project when local stakeholders feel their input is genuinely valued. This aligns with requirements from funding and development agencies such as GCF (GCF, concept-note-template), World Bank IDA, and UNDP, which promote the importance of early engagement in ensuring community needs are reflected in the beginning stages of the project. A government representative highlighted a form of this effectiveness of participatory development, noting that the initial stages of the project provided a space where local voices were genuinely considered.

> *"In the beginning stages of the project, that is when we are listened to. It's the middle process of negotiating that the issues start to arise, but for the three projects that I have assisted in, the beginning stage was the best. It was when the donor really listened to our needs… When we were trying to find out how to get funds to the outer islands because we were in the middle of a drought, we had UNDP send people in to do a scoping because GCF had just launched. There were assurances, and the space was made to feel like we were listened to" (S3 res, government representative).*

This response is an indication there were positive instances of participatory development in project design. These insights relate to both ACWA and PREP II which adopted structured consultation processes to foster broad stakeholder engagement and community-driven decision-making.

For the ACWA project, UNDP partnered with the RMI Government and Office of Environment Planning and Policy Coordination (OEPPC), former Climate Change Directorate (CCD) to design the project, gathering input through consultations, technical assessments, focus group discussions, surveys, and community visits. From 2015 to 2017, five national consultations and six technical missions, supported by UNDP, NZ MFAT, USAID, and KEITI, informed project design. Thirty-three community visits involved men's and women's group consultations and water infrastructure assessments, with WUTMI, MIOFA, GIZ, and SPC playing key roles. Surveys across 36 communities, where 64% of respondents were women, reinforced inclusivity. The process culminated in a Project

Validation Meeting in 2018, integrating technical expertise, policy considerations, and local knowledge (ACWA, project proposal, 2019).

Similarly, PREP II engaged key stakeholders from the 2016 scoping mission to its 2016 pre-appraisal. Consultations at national and atoll levels, particularly in Kwajalein, gathered input from government agencies, local governance bodies, and senior leaders. Ministries, the Chief Secretary's Office, and KADA contributed to project design, while Nitijela Cabinet members and key ministers provided oversight. Development partners, including IOM, the Asian Development Bank, and JICA, further refined the strategy, ensuring a coordinated and inclusive implementation approach. Both projects demonstrated a commitment to participatory development, integrating diverse perspectives to enhance climate resilience and local ownership (PREP II, project proposal, 2018).

Moreover, it was also noted by the respondents that the institutional support mechanisms, not just within the project themselves, but also a part of the Division of International Development and Assistance (DIDA), under the Ministry of Finance, Banking, and Postal Services (MOFBPS) were deliberately structured to enhance local voices and strengthen national ownership. Multiple respondents highlighted the collaborative efforts between the government and the World Bank in establishing and maintaining these roles. The government, therefore, can be said to have ensured meaningful participation by assigning specialists within the DIDA office, providing a direct channel for local input, as the following quote indicated:

> *"They have Specialists in the DIDA office. They are put there to assist in any complaints we have if the projects do not allow us space to voice our concerns. We see the gaps and we are trying to address them" (S5 res, government representative).*

While there were procedural challenges, the statements above underscore the efforts to achieve local input in decision-making processes. The following sections explore how, despite these efforts, there were significant shortcomings in practice. While the frameworks suggest inclusivity, real-world application frequently exposed gaps that hindered effective implementation and genuine participation.

5.2 Participatory Development in Negotiations

While positive aspects of participatory development were evident, the data revealed that the process was influenced by complex power dynamics between local stakeholders, external donors, and

government entities. These dynamics were particularly evident during the negotiation stage, the first step in securing project funding. Once the government expressed interest in a project to donor partners, the process moved into the design phase, where negotiations took place. At this stage, project objectives were defined, and conditions were established before funding was granted. This section examines the negotiation process, assessing whether it genuinely reflects participatory development.

A key theme in the design phase is the dominance of donor priorities in negotiations, often overshadowing local needs. Adaptation projects in the RMI typically stem from bilateral agreements with donors like the World Bank's International Development Association (IDA) and the Green Climate Fund (GCF). While these partnerships provide critical resources, their strict negotiation terms can override local objectives. For example, focus group discussions revealed that a simple request for water supply materials during droughts became a lengthy process due to donormandated reports and social compliance requirements. This is captured in the following quote:

> *"Yes, they did their due diligence in meeting with everyone and organizing time for document reviews. But look at the start of the proposal writing and the time when we received the funds. It took seven years for the entire planning and negotiation phase. Imagine with adaptation because of all the challenges now? How long should it take for us to be able to meet the needs of the communities?" (S9 res, NGO representative)*

A major frustration reflected in the data is the prolonged timeline for projects to materialize. Respondents identified the negotiation phase as the primary cause of these delays due to extensive back-and-forth between external donors and local stakeholders. Although mechanisms exist to incorporate local input, the process is slow, making it difficult to translate contributions into actionable outcomes. One respondent reinforced this concern, emphasizing the challenge of timely implementation despite structured opportunities for participation. Another government representative discussed the significant delays caused by donor-imposed conditions, transforming a straightforward request into a prolonged and complex process, as stated in the following quotes*:*

> *"We have our priorities outlined in the strategic plan, the President's statements, and the National Adaptation Plan (NAP). Once shared with our development partners, the opportunity of the funds is determined. But almost always, conditions are imposed before accessing these funds. For instance, when the government requested support from the Green Climate Fund (GCF) to address water supply insecurities during drought and dry seasons, the process turned into years of writing reports, conducting studies, and meeting social*

indicators. What started as a straightforward request for water supply materials became a complicated drawn-out process" (S3 res, government representative).

“Most of the drafting was done by outsiders… little to no Marshallese. This is because we are already overworked. Juggling our job mandates plus taking on additional projects” (S2 res, government representative)

The data highlight the RMI’s limited control over project timelines, even when initiatives originate locally. The negotiation phase often dictates the pace, as external donors and funding agencies set conditions that must be met before moving forward. To expedite the process, compromises are sometimes made to shorten delays, even if it means sacrificing certain local priorities. Respondents shared that when they strongly advocated for their ideas, they were often met with feedback requiring significant restructuring—sometimes forcing them to restart the process entirely to integrate their input. In a similar tone, a government representative described the compromises made during the negotiation phase, where local requests for specific resources were altered due to donor conditions, as mentioned in this quote:

"We had requested specific elements, such as user-friendly RO units, radios, emergency response supplies… but when the draft came back, it was entirely different, there were new and innovative materials and more research required. We had to compromise just to move forward" (S4 res, government representative)

Shifting donor priorities, influenced by global trends and political changes, directly affected the design of adaptation projects in the RMI. Local actors must constantly adjust their plans to meet evolving donor expectations. For instance, in 2016, following the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, USAID proposals had to be revised to exclude language aligning with the agreement’s targets, even when those targets aligned with the RMI’s adaptation goals. This constant need for negotiation at the project design stage fosters a reactive rather than proactive approach to adaptation. While external aid remains essential, it often imposes conditions that limit local autonomy, reinforcing broader concerns about how aid structures can diminish sovereignty by prioritizing donor agendas over local needs (Bordner et al., 2020).

Donor funding is frequently tied to strict compliance requirements, placing an additional burden on already limited government capacity (Taylor & Middleby, 2023). Respondents also noted that external actors, particularly from donor organizations, often lack a deep understanding of the local context, which can hinder meaningful participation. This underscores the need for capacity-building initiatives to bridge knowledge gaps between local stakeholders and external donors.

The RMI's small bureaucratic capacity makes it difficult to meet the demands of external funding, leading to disproportionately high compliance costs (Bertram, 2006). This strains government resources, making it harder to independently set priorities and effectively manage aid projects. As a result, local actors face increasing conditions and structural pressures to absorb external funds, further limiting their ability to shape adaptation efforts on their own terms.

5.3 Participatory Development in Conditions

Another significant challenge in the design phase is the reliance on rigid standard operating procedures (SOPs) imposed by donors in the form of conditions. These procedures often lead to bureaucratic inefficiencies, delaying project implementation and creating administrative burdens for local staff. For instance, one participant described how their team had to manage compliance for multiple projects, each requiring similar but distinct documentation to meet donor-specific formats.

A critical issue arises where the imposition of conditionalities embedded by SOPs with donor agencies can stifle genuine local participation. This duplication of effort placed immense stress on limited human resources, diverting attention from substantive project activities. The lack of coordination among donor agencies further compounds this issue, as each agency imposes its own set of requirements, leaving local actors overwhelmed by administrative tasks.
The burden of these conditions can extend beyond financial implications, as demonstrated by a government representative's experience in this quote:

> *"At one point, we were trying to secure funding for three projects at once, all requiring a designated focal point. With limited staff, I assigned one person to manage the process, but they were overwhelmed with 15–20 conditions per project. These conditions were mostly similar, but each donor required them in their specific format. This meant our staff member had to rewrite the same information for different templates under tight deadlines. It was incredibly stressful" (S4 res, government representative).*

This account also underscores the administrative strain placed on small teams, revealing how the multiplicity of donor requirements can lead to bureaucratic inefficiency and staff burnout. Further discussion on the institutional barriers will be presented in the next chapter.

Moreover, the lack of coordination among donor agencies exacerbates these challenges by providing numerous conditions that are repetitive and places further strain on the local staff who have to meet the requirements as noted by this quote:

> *"Each agency requires different documents and reports to meet their specific conditions. This makes me question how genuine these projects are in addressing our needs, when from the start, we have to adjust to meet their requirements. There's often no flexibility, and even after all the effort, meeting the conditions isn't guaranteed. We end up doing what they want, not what we need" (S5 res, government representative).*

This observation calls into question the authenticity of the development process, suggesting that the priorities of external donors often overshadow the genuine needs of the communities they intend to support.

A key challenge in this dynamic is that small states often struggle to maintain a functionally efficient government, making it difficult to meet the complex requirements of external funding (Bertram, 2006). In the RMI, limited bureaucratic capacity leads to high compliance costs, further straining the government's ability to effectively manage and implement aid projects. This burden depletes essential resources and restricts meaningful participation, as internal actors face constraints that limit their ability to independently define and pursue their priorities.

Furthermore, the influence of donor funding extends beyond project implementation to shaping RMI's policy landscape. To access external funds, the government often enacts new laws or policies dictated by donor requirements. As one respondent explained in this quote:

> *"To secure the funding, we had to introduce new policies and adjust existing laws. It's not always in line with what we would have done, but it was necessary to access the resources. We did not have a policy in place for one of the projects, we had to get a policy advisor during the design phase to draft and endorse a policy that would allow us to move forward in the negotiations" (S1 res, government representative).*

This aligns with critiques by Cornwall and Brock (2005), who highlight the ways in which donordriven agendas reshape governance structures in recipient countries, often to the detriment of local autonomy.

A recurring theme in the interviews was the perceived imbalance in decision-making power. This imbalance in power is primarily influenced by the individual in power, which, in this case, refers to those overseeing the participatory process during negotiations, as noted in this quote:

> *"It really depends on the person liaising between you and the bank. Sometimes they just come in, do their requirements, and leave without considering local perspectives deeply" (S10 res, development agency, local hire).*

This insight reveals that while engagement is possible, it often hinges on the willingness of external actors to genuinely incorporate local needs to the point where compromising meant restructuring.

The marginalization of local voices in project design reflects broader power asymmetries, wherein donor frameworks dictate the terms of engagement. Local priorities outlined in strategic plans and the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) are often diluted or altered. As respondents noted, projects are repeatedly redesigned to accommodate shifting donor agendas, leaving little room for long-term capacity building or proactive adaptation strategies.

The imposition of stringent conditions by donors exacerbates the challenges faced by local stakeholders. Financial and human resource constraints within the RMI's government institutions amplify the burden of meeting these requirements. Local actors are compelled to invest significant time and resources in fulfilling donor mandates, such as conducting redundant studies and meeting reporting obligations, which often detract from addressing immediate local needs.

The administrative strain imposed by these conditions is particularly acute. As highlighted in one case, a single staff member was tasked with managing compliance for multiple projects, each requiring the fulfilment of 15–20 overlapping but distinct conditions. This inefficiency not only leads to staff burnout but also undermines the government's ability to execute projects effectively. Moreover, the lack of coordination among donor agencies exacerbates these challenges, further diverting resources from local priorities to bureaucratic processes. This condition process would be drawn out with repetitive requirements that would end up discouraging local actors to the point where they would cater to the conditions in order to move the process forward, even if it meant compromising their positions as reflected in this quote: *"We end up doing what they want, not what we need." (S5 res, government representative).*

Additionally, several conditions reveal a fundamental misalignment between donor-driven objectives and community needs. From the data input, there was indication that the rigid frameworks imposed by donors often prioritize measurable outputs, such as infrastructure, over intangible but essential outcomes like capacity building and knowledge transfer. Moreover, the conditions by which these frameworks impose translate to all levels of local actors whether they are in government or in civil society. This statement is reinforced by the following quote:

> *"Once, we had requested for a project that would allow our community members to be trained and certified in technical fields. We were told by the donor that we needed to provide tangible outcomes. By tangible, we needed to come out of the project with visible proof of success. I asked them if there was a way that we could measure success with knowledge gain? They said that would be for a different project. It was as if they came and demanded*

we do things for them instead of providing support for us and the things we wanted to do" (S11 res, CSO/community member).

The necessity of meeting donor conditions often means that national adaptation planning is shaped more by external funding structures than by locally identified priorities. In many cases, this results in projects and policies that frequently fail to achieve long-term sustainability beyond the funding cycle because local actors, initially compelled to participate, disengage once external support ends. The lack of incorporation of local input from the outset leads to the eventual collapse of motivation within project initiatives. Likewise, the government's dependency on project-based funding makes it difficult to maintain long-term programmes without continued external support, leading to inconsistent implementation due to repetition, strain on local actors, and compromising of local voices lead to loss of institutional knowledge over time.

5.4 Chapter Conclusion

Although mechanisms exist to support participatory development, misalignments emerge when these frameworks are put into practice. The findings highlight a disconnect between participatory principles and their real-world application, particularly in the project design phase. While participatory efforts such as consultation and stakeholder engagement seek to promote inclusivity, power imbalances remain evident in negotiations, funding conditions, and administrative burdens.

The positive aspects of participatory development were observed in the early stages of project formulation. Respondents acknowledged that initial consultations often reflected genuine efforts to incorporate local perspectives. Projects such as PREP II and ACWA were designed with structured community engagement, reflecting a commitment to participatory ideals. However, as the process advanced, tensions arose when donor priorities overshadowed local needs, particularly in the negotiation phase.

Negotiations revealed a critical misalignment in the practice of participatory development. While local stakeholders contributed to project discussions, final decisions were largely shaped by donor conditions. The rigid nature of funding agreements often delayed implementation, as compliance requirements and administrative processes took precedence over immediate community needs. Respondents expressed frustration over the prolonged timelines, citing examples where urgent requests for water supply solutions were delayed due to bureaucratic hurdles. This demonstrates how procedural inefficiencies undermine the intended benefits of participatory development.

Additionally, conditions imposed by donors further complicated project implementation. The requirement for standardized reporting and compliance with multiple donor agencies placed

significant strain on the RMI's limited bureaucratic capacity. Government officials and project staff frequently faced administrative burdens, diverting resources away from substantive project activities. The duplication of efforts across different funding streams created inefficiencies, reinforcing concerns that donor-driven priorities often take precedence over locally identified goals.

Ultimately, while participatory development frameworks are designed to empower local stakeholders, their execution remains constrained by external influences. The findings indicate that meaningful participation is often contingent upon the flexibility of donor agencies and the willingness to accommodate local perspectives beyond procedural requirements. The RMI's experience highlights the need for improved coordination between donors and local actors to align project priorities with community needs. Addressing these misalignments requires a shift towards more equitable negotiation processes, reduced administrative burdens, and recognition of non-tangible outcomes such as capacity building and knowledge transfer.

Chapter 6 Participatory Development in Project Implementation

Theoretical insights from critical development literature underscore the adverse impacts of unequal resource allocation and highlights how development practices often marginalize local knowledge by prioritizing external expertise (Samaddar et al., 2021). Similarly, literature findings emphasize that the financial benefits of development initiatives tend to accrue to external actors, thereby perpetuating economic dependency (Christens & Speer, 2006). In the context of RMI, this dynamic undermines local capacity-building efforts and diminishes the economic benefits that adaptation projects could bring to the community.

The chapter discusses these themes as they relate to the implementation of climate adaptation projects in the RMI. Ultimately, the findings underscore the necessity of structural reforms to enhance the long-term sustainability and success of adaptation projects in RMI and similar contexts. To ensure clarity and coherence, the chapter is divided into subsections that reflect emerging themes: Project costs, Authority of External vs. Local Experts, and Institutional Barriers. These divisions allow for a more detailed exploration of the challenges associated with the implementation of climate adaptation projects in the RMI.

6.1 Participatory Development in Project Costs – A look into external and internal spending

As mentioned in the Chapter 2, Section 2.2, a significant part of the government's operating budget relies on sources like the Compact of Free Association (COFA) and development assistance. In 2021, the RMI received $1,693 in foreign aid per capita, one of the highest rates globally, compared to Papua New Guinea's $79 per capita (Data compiled from multiple sources by World Bank, 2025 – with minor processing by Our World in Data). However, while this indicates substantial aid contributions, the local benefits often appear superficial. To give better understanding to the input from the respondents, this chapter will analyse how adaptation aid funding is utilized by examining the World Bank's PREP II project.

The focus on the utilization of funding ties directly to the research objective to investigate how project-based funding approaches are understood and experienced by key stakeholders in the RMI. This heavy dependence on external funding not only overburdens the government but leads to limited control over crucial development aspects, supporting the critical insight from the literature that aid intended for adaptation often constrains participation rather than enhances it (Bordner et al., 2020).

Additionally, financial disparities play a significant role in the success of participatory development initiatives. The availability of resources—both financial and technical—can either enable or limit the scope of local participation. Respondents frequently mentioned that project implementation was often constrained by financial limitations, leading to gaps between what was promised during the planning stages and what was delivered during the implementation phase. The discrepancy between project commitments and actual outcomes eroded trust and diminished the effectiveness of the development process. This limit on local actors to engage effectively is reflected in the following quote*:*

> *"We were involved in discussions, but in the end, the implementation was largely driven by external decisions. Financial resources were a major factor in that. Without sufficient funding from our end, it's hard for us to fully participate" (S8 res, government representative).*

Given that most respondents' experiences with implementation relates to PREP II, this section will further examine its budget. With an estimated US$48.6 million (funded by GCF and IDA World Bank), a substantial portion is allocated to administrative costs and external consultants which outlines an imbalance in the spending for local experts, local businesses, external experts, and external businesses. The contracts published through the World Bank database align with indications from respondents on considerable funds that were allotted for external consultants, who were compensated significantly more than their local counterparts. This respondent's statement confirmed their agreement with this viewpoint:

> *"It is not an equal space from the start. The external consultants are making five to nine times what we make, and yet we are doing the majority of the groundwork" (S13 res, development agency, local hire).*

In RMI, this situation is confirmed with local experts earning substantially less than external experts, despite having comparable qualifications and a deeper understanding of the local context. This disparity fosters feelings of injustice and resentment, undermining collaboration and productivity within climate adaptation and development projects.

The figures below are taken from the PREP II adaptation project to show salary discrepancy between two hired contracts from the UK and RMI. While one might suggest that the salary disparity is related to the job terms of reference (TORs), the overall project contract awards tell a different story. Out of 25 contracts for individual services, only two were granted to Marshallese individuals.

These contracts pay between $70,000 and $83,000 for a two-year period, whereas other contracts are valued at approximately $480,000 for the same duration.

Small Assignment Contract Award

Project: P160096-Pacific Resilience Project II under the Pacific Resilience Program
Loan/Credit/TF Info: IDA-D1830
Bid/Contract Reference No: MH-PREP II-PIU-163846-CS-INDV
Procurement Method: INDV-Individual Consultant Selection
Scope of Contract: Climate Change Adaptation Specialist
Notice Version No: 0

Contract Signature Date (YYYY/MM/DD): 2020/08/15
Duration of Contract: 18 Month(s)
Awarded Firm/Individual:
Individual Consultant
Country: United Kingdom
Price:
Currency: United States Dollars (United States Dollars)
Amount: 303,000.00

Small Assignment Contract Award

Project: P160096-Pacific Resilience Project II under the Pacific Resilience Program
Loan/Credit/TF Info: IDA-D1830
Bid/Contract Reference No: MH-PREP II-PIU-234808-CS-CDS
Procurement Method: CDS-Direct Selection
Scope of Contract: NAP Coordinator
Notice Version No: 0

Contract Signature Date (YYYY/MM/DD): 2021/09/02
Duration of Contract: 15 Month(s)
Awarded Firm/Individual:
[redacted]
Country: Marshall Islands
Price:
Currency: United States Dollars (United States Dollars)
Amount: 83,625.00

Figure 3 - Contract: taken from: https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/projectprocurement/P160096

Figure 4 - paid positions- ***Contracts for paid positions***

Position	Country	Amount	Length
1. Environmental Specialist	NZ	$23,879.00	3 months
2. Project Manager	Australia	$490,000.00	24 months
3. Legislative Drafter	Australia	$101,710.00	8 months
4. Financial Management Specialist	Thailand	$88,749.75	5 months
5. Emergency Communications Network Specialist	Australia	$91,700.00	5 months
6. Disaster and climate resilience donor coordination advisor	US	$140,490.00	21 months
7. Climate Change adaptation specialist	Canada	$117,000.00	9 months
8. Vulnerability and Planning Consultancy Firm	NZ	$395,053.00	7 months
9. Implementation Support Specialist	Fiji	$120,000.00	19 months
10. Design of New warehouse and structural analysis	India	$248,886.00	8 months

11. Senior Emergency Communications Network Commissioning Specialist	Australia	$80,300.00	16 months
12. Communications and Media Firm	Fiji	$218,501.11	18 months
13. NAP Coordinator	RMI	$83,625.00	15 months
14. Civil Engineering Advisor	New Zealand	$470,000.00	24 months
15. Local Communications and M&E officer	RMI	$70,000.00	24 months
16. Project Management Support Specialist	Australia	$82,200.00	6 months
17. Coastal Engineering Design and Supervision Firm	Australia	$2,897,518.50	49 months
18. Project Manager	Australia	$442,000.00	24 months
19. Climate Change Adaptation Specialist	UK	$303,000.00	18 months
20. Project Manager	Australia	$480,000.00	24 months
21. Civil Engineering Adviser	UK	$480,000.00	24 months
22. Coastal Vulnerability Assessment Firm	Netherlands	$592,782.00	24 months
23. Strategic Emergency Communications Advisor	Solomon Islands	$63,880.00	2.5 months
24. Emergency Communication Specialist	Fiji	$64,425.00	4 months
25. DRM and CCA Advisor	France	$324,000.00	24 months

In addition to salaries, spending discrepancies are also evident in the way the compensation for external businesses are alarmingly inflated compared to that of local counterparts. For example, the coastal engineering design and supervision firm from Australia is contracted for $2,897,518.50 over 49 months, underscoring the vast financial resources allocated to foreign firms. Additionally, the civil engineer advisor from New Zealand receives $470,000 for a 24-month contract, which far exceeded

the compensation spent for local hires. This pattern of financial allocation not only reflects an imbalanced prioritization of external expertise but also raises questions about the overall impact of these expenditures on local economies. As indicated in Incerti and Barnett (2024), this project's funding, similar to that of other climate adaptation projects in the RMI, are channelled outside of the Marshall Islands, which limits the economic benefits to the local community and undermines the potential for local experts to contribute meaningfully to development initiative.

The consequences of these compensation disparities extend beyond mere financial inequity; they foster a significant power imbalance in development projects, especially for participatory development. For example, while the external Disaster and Climate resilience donor coordination advisor from the US receives $140,490 for a 21-month contract, local contract for the communications and M&E officer, is undervalued with a lower salary of $70,000 for a longer commitment. To adopt a more effective approach to true participation, it is essential to address these compensation disparities and prioritize the empowerment of locals while ensuring that more project funds remain within the Marshall Islands to support local economies and capacity-building efforts.

In addition to the differences with local and external hires, the research also found through the analysis of PREP II contracts, gaps with procurement and utilization of local and external businesses. A considerable portion of resources is being directed outside the RMI. During the interviews, respondents expressed concern about this practice, stating:

> *"We try to really fight to have some of the bids contracted to local businesses, knowing the benefits it would do to buy locally, but we are always met with foreign businesses winning these contracts. It reflects how minimal our voices really matter within the system" (S10 res, development agency, local hire).*

This situation raises concern for the continuation of climate adaptation work as each time project funds are disbursed; doubt is casted on how much remains within the local economy.

Examining the expenditures associated with PREP II revealed a consistent reliance on external vendors. Major contracts awarded to international suppliers include HF communication equipment from Australia for $510,031.15, coastal protection work for $11,185,621.37 (with an RMI bidder notably rejected), and emergency communications equipment totalling $228,205. Local contracts included refurbishment work for the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) at $14,890, IT equipment for $58,221.46, office furniture for $3,103.45, and a project vehicle for $36,995. With only 15% of funding spent to date allocated to local services, opportunities for workforce development—essential for true participation—are significantly restricted. This dependence on foreign expertise not

only stifled local growth but also perpetuated a cycle of reliance on external consultants and services. A breakdown provided for further interpretation can be found in the table below:

Figure 5- Procurement Contracts for Equipment/Material/Services

Type	**Country**	**Amount**
HF communication equipment	Australia	$510,031.15
Coastal Protection work	Australia (RMI bidder rejected)	$11,860,832.26
NDMO refurbishment work	Marshall Islands	$14,890.00
Design of Emergency Radio Antenna Fixing	New Zealand	$36,000.00
IT equipment	Marshall Islands	$58,221.46
Emergency communications equipment supply	Australia	$228,205.00
Mast and antennas for emergency communications network	Australia	$259,898.89
Installation of communication equipment and training	IOM-Majuro	$1,136,432.56
Office Furniture	RMI	$3,103.45
IT equipment	USA	$2,096.72
Non IT equipment	RMI	$631.42
Non IT equipment	RMI	$13,617.76
Office equipment	RMI	$10,933.08
Office equipment	RMI	$13,928.33
Office equipment	RMI	$10,734.50
Project Vehicle	RMI	$36,995.00
NAP Community Consultations	IOM-RMI	$500,000.00
IT equipment	RMI	$24,402.70
IT equipment	RMI	$14,281.53
IT equipment	RMI	$471.64
PIU IT support	RMI	$26,050.00
Community DRM and Emergency Communications Training	IOM-RMI	$500,000.00
TOTAL		**$15,261,757.45**

The distribution of PREP II project contracts as shown in the above table, demonstrated a significant reliance on external businesses and personnel, with 85% of the total $15.26 million expenditure

awarded to overseas companies, while only 15% went to Marshallese/local businesses. This dependency is a product from operating procedures that required compliance with donor-driven conditions. Despite the project having a National Steering Committee, external funding priorities as indicated from these numbers restricted RMI's autonomy in sustaining the funds, thus limiting local economic opportunities.

6.2 Participatory Development and Staffing - Lived Experiences of the Locals

Another key finding from the interviews was the challenge of prioritizing local perspectives over external viewpoints during the project implementation process within the project staff members themselves. Once a project is approved and implementation commences, individuals hired for management roles—such as project managers, coordinators, and leads are external representatives. These positions, while contracted by the RMI government, hold significant decision-making power, as they can approve or reject proposed activities as noted by these two quotes:

> *"I applied for a project management position before with World Bank seeing as I have experience in environment work. I was told that I did not make the first round of applications. The person who got the position had a better degree than I. I was asked to apply for the local position which was a coordinator position. When I got the position, I ended up doing more than what was required like planning, translating, being the middleman. At one point, I wrote an email to say, I am not the project lead, please refer to him instead of me" (S15 res, government representative)*

> *"I applied for UNDP but was told that because I did not have a master's degree, I could not get the position as it was managerial position, and they have different hiring scales that group us based on our qualification. It's the same with all the UN offices and projects, the top positions are only reserved for international hires so I cannot even apply to those because I am a Marshallese citizen. The job ads are listed duty station RMI and then listed as Internationals only. I was really upset because I have more than 20 years of experience working plus, I helped them a lot when they came in to do the design of the project so I knew the ins and outs of what was expected of the project" (*S11 res, CSO/community member).

Despite the intention to encourage open participation, the hiring process creates considerable barriers for locals from the beginning. The point system used in recruitment places greater emphasis on qualifications like years of experience and advanced degrees, which tends to favour candidates from outside the island. Consequently, this system often leads to the selection of individuals with

strong academic credentials, but who lack the crucial local knowledge and understanding of the island's context, resulting in a disconnect between their qualifications and the actual needs of the community as stated in the following quote:

> *"It was confusing to me because when our project boss was hired, all of a sudden, I had to organize for things outside of my work requirements. When we heard, he was coming to Majuro, I had to find a way to secure a place for him because at the time of his visit, the two hotels on island were booked and there was no apartment space available that he could book online. So, I had to ask my friends if they knew of someone renting out a space. On top of that, I had to sort out his visa requirements with immigration and connect him to them. When he arrived, I had to pick him up from the airport, take him shopping for food and one time I even had to take him to the hospital at night because he didn't have anyone with him. I am not complaining I am just explaining that sometimes these agencies don't know how much we do for them" (S13 res, development agency, local hire).*

This sentiment is also echoed by a few external experts that were hired through this process. Input from international experts, who were brought in through the same hiring process that has been criticized for favouring external candidates, are acknowledging the gaps in understanding the island's unique context as reflected in the following quote:

> *"I don't think the current system is meant to cater to the needs of the RMI and the rest of the Pacific. Places where people have strong connection to the community and land. I was hired to work here in this international organization through rotation. It was easier for me from a western-centric nuclear family lifestyle to adjust and migrate here. I don't think it is a fair system. If international agencies like the UN want really good, qualified people in these roles, they shouldn't reserve them for international hires because really, someone who was Marshallese could do my work, but to get to this position, they have to rotate around the Pacific which means they won't ever hold a position like mine in their home countries"* (*S7 res, international agency respondent)*.

In addition to the challenges with the hiring process, external experts faced difficulties during the implementation stage due to their lack of familiarity with how Majuro operates. The island lacks street addresses and public transportation, relying instead on private taxis that must be hailed. This made navigation difficult unless someone provided guidance on the local layout. Frequent power outages are common, so locals are accustomed to storing water in advance. The hospital operates on specific days for checkups, and there is no emergency helpline like 911. All this context needs to be

explained to newcomers, as it often conflicted with project expectations and timelines, particularly for those who are unfamiliar with the local realities.

This often led to tensions, as local actors were required to serve as guides for external experts to advance the work. In some instances, the island's unique context diverges so significantly from conventional project delivery expectations that local experts struggle to explain processes that made sense to them but confusing to external experts as demonstrated in the following quote:

> *"One time, we had a deadline to meet. The project was ending before the new phase kicked in and the visit to the outer island that we had planned had to be on specific dates before the cut offs because then we would lose the funds and couldn't move forward with the reporting. Anyways, I had to advise our manager that we couldn't go because the Mayor had told us there was big event in the community, their independence day and the people were not ready to welcome us into the island. It was a small island. My boss could not understand why we could not prioritize the visit as the deadline was near. The plane got cancelled anyways because of maintenance problems so we couldn't go. But it was easier to justify the delay on his end because of a plane malfunction that it was to say we couldn't meet the deadline because the community wanted to celebrate instead of work"* (S6, *development agency, local hire).*

As seen in the quote, local actors often navigate complex cultural and logistical factors that external experts may overlook or misunderstand. When project requirements take precedence over community needs, it can create frustration and erode trust. This misalignment not only hampers immediate project success but also raises concerns about long-term sustainability, as stakeholders may become disengaged when their realities are not adequately considered. Ultimately, this approach contradicts the principles of participatory development, which emphasize inclusive decision-making and respect for local agency.

This disconnect between external expectations and local realities underscored a broader issue: when donor-driven objectives take precedence over local priorities, projects risk losing community trust. By focusing on short-term, measurable outcomes, these projects risk alienating local stakeholders and failing to address the deeper, systemic causes of vulnerability. This is reflected in the quote:

> *"Sometimes we are met with consultants who don't care about the outcome, but sometimes we are met with people who really want to assist and go out of their way to find solutions. There was one consultant on one of the projects we partnered with who would always say, 'That doesn't align with our procedures,' and that would be the end of the conversation. But*

within the same project, that person left, and a new person came in. When asked about leniency, they would say, 'Let me see what I can do'" (S10, development agency, local hire).

The reliance on external funding and the need to conform to donor conditions often shifted priorities away from community-driven development, undermining local ownership and long-term sustainability. While such funding was essential, it imposed rigid frameworks that prioritized shortterm, measurable outcomes over deeper, systemic change. An example is the following quote:

"A key issue in adaptation work is the unclear distinction between project staff and government employees. Consultants hired through donor projects sometimes assume authority over government processes, leading to conflicts. We on the inside need to have clearer role definitions and greater autonomy for government-led adaptation coordination" (S7, implementing agency representative).

This highlighted how externally driven agendas overshadowed local governance structures, limiting meaningful participation and decision-making. Such dynamics contradicted participatory development principles, which emphasized empowering communities to lead their own adaptation efforts.

Local experts viewed their external counterparts as both necessary and challenging to work with. While external hires brought funding and technical expertise, their limited understanding of local systems often created inefficiencies. The hiring process favoured degrees over experience, sidelining qualified locals and reinforcing external control over decision-making. As a result, local hires took on roles beyond their job descriptions, bridging logistical and cultural gaps. The rigid, donor-driven structures often dismissed local input, creating tensions and undermining community ownership. These highlighted broader issues of power imbalance and the need for more inclusive, locally led development approaches.

6.3 Participatory Development within Policy and the Project Structure

Power imbalances necessitated a deeper examination of the existing structures and mechanisms that enabled these inequities between external and local experts. From the outset, addressing these disparities was constrained, as challenging a system perceived as essential for facilitating adaptation funding proved difficult. The authority to allocate funds created an imbalance, despite such initiatives being framed as partnerships. Government officials remained cautious about expressing concerns, as illustrated by the statement: *"It's either we conform or we lose out on the funding and then, we won't have any resources to move forward with the goals and priorities that we have set out this year" (S1*

res, government representative). This pattern was evident across the Pacific, where researchers highlighted the overvaluation of Eurocentric external knowledge and the undervaluation of local knowledge. Furthermore, this confirms the current argument presented by Pacific researchers that stated the prioritization of Eurocentric knowledge over indigenous expertise, further deepening these imbalances (Meki & Tarai, 2023). Aid and development discussions often focused on financial figures, charts, and statistics from a donor perspective, overlooking the lived experiences and contextual realities of Pacific communities. Vunibola, (2023) supports this argument demonstrating how these hierarchies' privilege external experts while marginalizing local voices.

In the case of the PREP II project, local participation efforts were constrained by externally imposed frameworks, where technical language and procedures did not relate back to local experts, as stated in this quote:

> *"I can see there is an attempt at participation and input from us. I remember when PREP 2 Disaster Training Workshop was held. It brought all the disaster focal points from the outer islands to Majuro for us to provide input into the new structures and procedures. Some of us did not know most of the words that were used in that workshop, so many vocabularies and terms, but I know that the project tried to bring us together for participation. At first, we were told we had to make emergency protocols for our islands. But we already had those in place with the disaster office. It didn't matter; we had to re-do them, so they fit the template of the project" (S11, NGO/Community representative)*.

To secure external funding, the government often established policies, task forces, and committees dictated by donor requirements rather than locally identified priorities, conflicting with existing ones, and the same individuals frequently serve on newly formed task forces, mirroring those from the previous year. To access these funds, the government frequently finds itself compelled to draft and submit new laws, policies, or regulatory structures that align with donor requirements as reflected in the following quote:

> *"To secure the funding, we had to introduce new policies and adjust existing laws. We also had to form new taskforce or committees. It's not always in line with what we would have done, but it was necessary to access the resources… I remember we had to wait an entire year for things to move forward because the PREP II required us to have a national adaption policy position paper. I don't even know where that paper is and what its purpose is for, but I remember the name because it took us two years of back and forth on why there was no movement within the project" (S2 res, government representative).*

This results in duplicated efforts and conflicts within government structures.

One of the most frequently discussed issues during the interviews was the occurrence of multiple agencies conducting separate but overlapping consultations. This practice placed additional pressure on government staff, who were tasked with engaging in redundant discussions with various stakeholders, often reiterating the same points. The organization of consultations for scoping, reviewing, monitoring, and networking with on-the-ground personnel from these agencies consumed significant time and resources. Most of the tasks and responsibilities fell on local experts, as they already had the necessary knowledge and established relationships, making it easier to navigate and schedule these events. The frustration in the repetitiveness of the process is reflected in the following quote:

> *"I had to organize someone to have a 7th consultation of the same thing… frustrating" (S6* res, *development agency, local hire).*

Although this point contributes to the theme around tensions stemming from the responsibilities of the local expert, it is important to note that the duplication of work through numerous consultations did not capture the purpose of the participatory process. Often, local experts on the ground experienced consultation fatigue.

This fatigue was also attributed to short-term funding cycles, which prolonged the planning phase significantly that by the time implementation begins, there is already lose in interest. Adaptation initiatives in the RMI were primarily funded through project-based grants, restricting both the timeline and flexibility of execution. As a result, local stakeholders often questioned the feasibility and long-term impact of these projects even before they began and throughout their duration. Awareness of the impending funding deadlines further discouraged confidence in the success and sustainability of these initiatives as mentioned in the following quote:

> *"One of the challenges in addressing climate change is the short-term nature of donor funding, influenced by funding timelines. Projects often receive only a year of support so from the start, you know it is not all that sustainable" (S8 res, government representative).*

Another addition to the fatigue is structural restrictions within the project process. SOPs intended to provide accountability to projects often hindered progress due to the misalignment of the islands' context. For example, purchasing project materials require procurement processes that include multiple bids, yet in many cases, only a single business exist to supply the needed products. Similarly, the logistical realities of conducting projects in the neighbouring islands should expect delayed or rescheduling due to maintenance issues as reflected by a local staff in the following quote:

> *"Almost every week we have to write note to file paperwork to justify why we are jumping hoops over our own procurement processes or sometimes HR processing because we have to hurry, hurry, hurry because the project deadline is soon." (S13 res, development agency, local hire).*

The effectiveness of participatory processes during project implementation was hindered by power imbalances, rigid donor-driven frameworks, and misaligned procedures. Local experts were marginalized by external mandates that conflicted with indigenous knowledge and practices. Shortterm funding cycles and redundant consultations led to fatigue and scepticism about the sustainability of projects. Structural constraints, such as procurement policies and logistical issues, further delayed progress. These factors resulted in a participatory process that was more procedural than impactful, limiting meaningful local engagement and hindering project success.

6.4 Chapter Conclusion

The findings indicate that despite some instances of local advocacy influencing project implementation, the prevailing structure of development aid perpetuates economic dependency and limits genuine participation. Financial constraints, disproportionate consultant salaries, and the dominance of external firms in procurement processes further exacerbate these challenges. The distribution of PREP II contracts highlights a stark imbalance, where the majority of funds are allocated to international actors rather than reinvesting in the local economy.

Theoretical insights from the critical development literature reinforce these observations. Escobar (1995) argue that development practices frequently marginalize local knowledge and prioritize external expertise, a trend clearly evident in the RMI. The unequal distribution of financial resources and decision-making power reinforces dependency and limits the potential for capacity-building within the local workforce.

Additionally, the structural constraints imposed by donor-driven agendas shape the governance landscape in ways that often prioritize measurable outcomes over meaningful participation. The reliance on external funding, while providing crucial financial support, also dictates the terms of engagement, reducing opportunities for locally led adaptation initiatives.

To address these disparities, future climate adaptation projects in the RMI must integrate structural reforms that promote equitable participation, prioritize local expertise, and redirect financial resources to strengthen community resilience. A shift towards policies that centre local decisionmaking, ensure fair compensation, and foster economic self-sufficiency is essential for achieving sustainable adaptation outcomes.

Ultimately, while participatory development offers a promising pathway for enhancing climate resilience, its success in the RMI remains contingent on addressing systemic inequalities that restrict local agency and economic benefit. Without these critical reforms, adaptation efforts risk perpetuating the very vulnerabilities they aim to mitigate.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

"Marshallese people are navigators and as such, it is in our blood to know when a tide is turning... We can no longer afford to base our hope on an international financial architecture that holds us in the past. That perpetuates inequality. There is no shortage of proposals for how to reform these institutions. What has been missing is the willingness to make it happen". President Heine, statement at COP29

This research has examined the design and implementation of climate adaptation projects in the RMI, through a participatory development lens. By analysing the intersection of donor influence, financial structures, and local agency, it has revealed key systemic challenges that shape adaptation efforts. The findings highlight how external funding mechanisms, while providing essential resources, often impose constraints that limit local ownership and decision-making.

The study employed a qualitative research approach, integrating narrative inquiry with thematic analysis. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, incorporating the Marshallese storytelling method, bwebwenato, to capture local perspectives. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of stakeholders engaged in the research, from government officials to community representatives.

Three key findings emerged from this study. First, despite the rhetoric of participatory development, donor priorities continue to dominate project planning and execution, reducing opportunities for genuine local involvement. Second, fragmented and burdensome administrative requirements create inefficiencies that hinder timely and effective project implementation. Third, financial disparities, particularly in the distribution of adaptation funding, reinforce economic dependency on external actors rather than fostering local economic empowerment.

These findings underscore the need for a paradigm shift in climate adaptation governance in the RMI. Structural reforms must prioritize locally driven decision-making, fair resource allocation, and institutional capacity-building. Addressing systemic inequalities is critical to ensuring that adaptation efforts in the RMI genuinely increase community empowerment rather than perpetuating dependency. By placing greater emphasis on equitable participation and transparent financial governance, future adaptation initiatives can better align with the needs and priorities of Marshallese.

7.1 Toward a Paradigm Shift

The findings presented in this study highlight key challenges and opportunities in participatory development within the project design and implementation phases. While participatory development frameworks emphasize inclusivity, local ownership, and stakeholder engagement, the research revealed persistent power imbalances that limit genuine participation. These issues are particularly evident in negotiations and the conditions imposed by donor agencies, which influence the extent to which local needs are prioritized.

The study reaffirms existing critiques of participatory development, particularly those highlighting the superficial nature of community involvement. The literature underscores how international development agencies claim to integrate local perspectives, however, impose externally defined priorities (Bordner et al., 2020; Meki & Tarai, 2023; Taylor & Middleby, 2023; Vunibola, 2023). Respondents indicated that their input was often disregarded or selectively included to align with pre-existing agendas, echoing previous studies that describe participation as a rhetorical tool rather than a transformative practice (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Overton et al., 2018). Moreover, the findings also confirm that financial and administrative constraints hinder genuine participatory engagement. This aligns with research that suggests that participatory initiatives often serve as tools to legitimize donor-led interventions rather than empowering local communities. In the RMI, the urgency imposed by funding cycles and reporting requirements limits the flexibility of adaptation projects, preventing meaningful local consultation and decision-making.

While the study conclusions support many critiques found in the literature, it also challenges certain assumptions regarding local agency. The dominant critique of participatory development suggests that communities lack decision-making power due to external constraints (Baldwin et al., 2023; Christens & Speer, 2006; Cleaver, 1999; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Cornwall, 2003; Cornwall, 2019; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2006; Kapoor, 2002; Oakley, 1991; Vunibola, 2023). However, this study reveals that local actors within the RMI government and community-based organizations actively resist and negotiate with donors, sometimes successfully influencing project implementation. Several participants recounted instances where they challenged externally imposed project frameworks, forcing revisions to better align with Marshallese needs and cultural values. This suggest that while participatory development remains constrained by external power structures, there is more room for local agency than some critical literature acknowledge.

Additionally, the study challenges the assumption that all participatory failures stem from donordriven influences. Some limitations were found to originate within the national governance structures, particularly regarding coordination across ministries and between national and

community-level actors. Duplication and competition among agencies sometimes hindered participatory process. This extends the critique beyond external actors and highlights the need for internal governance reforms.

7.2 Redefining participatory development by integrating local knowledge

This study extends current literature by highlighting the intersection between local knowledge and participatory adaptation strategies. While previous research acknowledges the importance of integrating traditional knowledge in climate adaptation (Nalau et al., 2018), this study reveals the challenges of operationalizing such integration within the constraints of international funding mechanisms. Respondents noted that traditional decision-making structures, such as bwebwenato, were often sidelined in favour of Western-centric consultation processes, limiting the depth of community engagement. The findings suggest a need for adaptation frameworks that explicitly centre local governance systems rather than treating them as supplementary components.

Furthermore, the study extends the discourse on financial inequities by illustrating how changes in donor funding priorities directly impact participatory outcomes. Existing literature discusses financial dependency in SIDS (Robinson & Dornan, 2017), but this study provides concrete examples of how shifts in donor preferences result in abrupt project realignments, disrupting long-term adaptation planning. The unpredictability of donor funding emerges as a significant structural barrier to participatory development, necessitating alternative financing models that enhance local ownership and continuity.

7.3 Policy and Practical Implications

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of participatory development and improve the project process for adaptation in the RMI.

First, there is a need for greater flexibility in donor requirements to better align with local priorities and contexts. The rigid structures imposed by external agencies often create significant administrative burdens, delaying project implementation and limiting the ability of local actors to influence decision-making. Donor agencies should adopt more adaptive approaches that allow for greater responsiveness to local needs. This includes streamlining reporting requirements, reducing redundant bureaucratic processes, and integrating flexible funding mechanisms that enable quicker response times during climate emergencies.

Second, strengthening local capacity is essential for ensuring meaningful participation in the design phase. The findings indicate that while local stakeholders are engaged in early discussions, their

influence diminishes during negotiations due to donor-driven conditions. Building technical expertise within government agencies and local organizations can enhance their ability to advocate for priorities effectively. Capacity-building programmes should focus on policy development, financial management, and negotiation strategies to empower local actors in decision-making processes.

Third, improved coordination among donor agencies is necessary to reduce inefficiencies and duplication of effort. The research highlights instances where local staff were overburdened with managing compliance requirements for multiple projects, each with similar but distinct conditions. Establishing a centralized framework for donor coordination can help standardize reporting processes and harmonize funding conditions, easing the administrative strain on local institutions. This could be achieved through a multi-donor coordination platform that facilitates informationsharing and joint planning.

Additionally, enhancing transparency in negotiations between donors and recipient governments can foster greater accountability. Many respondents expressed frustration over the prolonged timelines and shifting donor priorities that influence project outcomes. Establishing clear guidelines for participatory negotiations, including public disclosure of funding agreements and decisionmaking processes, can help mitigate these concerns. Local communities should be actively involved in reviewing project agreements to ensure alignment with their long-term needs and priorities.

Finally, future research should explore the long-term sustainability of donor-funded projects beyond their initial implementation phases. Many adaptation projects in the RMI are heavily reliant on external support, raising concerns about continuity once funding cycles end. Investigating alternative financing mechanisms, such as blended finance models or localized revenue-generation strategies, could provide valuable insights into reducing dependency on international aid while strengthening local resilience.

7.4 Limitations of the research

This research had several limitations. Its qualitative approach provided rich, in-depth insights but limited the generalizability of findings beyond the RMI. My positionality as a researcher allowed for a deeper contextual understanding, yet it also introduced the potential for bias in interpretation. Additionally, time constraints restricted data collection, making it difficult to assess long-term project outcomes. Despite these challenges, this study offers valuable perspectives on participatory development and donor influence, laying a strong foundation for future research in this field.

7.5 Recommendations

More research is needed to better understand the long-term impact of donor-driven adaptation projects on local governance and community resilience. Future research should concentrate on developing frameworks that balance donor accountability with local autonomy. Additionally, investigating the role of local knowledge systems in adaptation planning could provide valuable strategies for sustainable development.

An implication of these findings is that adaptation policies must shift toward a model that prioritizes local agency and equitable partnerships. The findings of this study have important implications for development agencies, urging them to rethink power dynamics and resource distribution in adaptation planning. Ultimately, by challenging conventional donor-centric approaches, this research calls for a more inclusive and just model of climate adaptation in the Marshall Islands.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Ethics Approval Letter

Te Wānanga o Ngā Kete | Division of Arts, Law, Psychology & Social Sciences

The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton 3240
New Zealand

Te Kura Whatu Oho Mauri
School of Psychology
Dr Oleg Medvedev
Tel: +64 7 837 9212
Email: oleg.medvedev@waikato.ac.nz
www.waikato.ac.nz

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Yoshiko Yamaguchi
yoshikocapelle@gmail.com

Professor Priya Kurian
Associate Professor Pat Barrett

Te Kura Aronui
School of Social Sciences

28 February 2024

Dear Yoshiko

Re: **FS2024-04: Reclaiming Autonomy: An analysis of climate adaptation institutions, policies and practices in the Marshall Islands**

Thank you for submitting your revised application to the ALPSS Human Research Ethics Committee. We have reviewed the final electronic version of your application and the Committee is now pleased to offer formal approval for your research activities.

We encourage you to contact the committee should issues arise during your data collection, or should you wish to add further research activities or make changes to your project as it unfolds. We wish you all the best with your research. Thank-you for engaging with the process of Ethical Review.

Kind regards

Dr Oleg Medvedev, Convenor
Division of Arts, Law, Psychology & Social Sciences Human Research Ethics

Appendix B – Participant information sheet

DIVISION OF ARTS, LAW, PSYCHOLOGY & SOCIAL SCIENCES HUMAN ETHICS RESEARCH

Project Title: Reclaiming Autonomy: An analysis of climate adaptation institutions, policies, and practices in the Marshall Islands
Name of Researcher: Yoshiko Yamaguchi

Participant Information Sheet

Iakwe ____,

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Yoshiko Yamaguchi, and I am a researcher affiliated with the University of Waikato, New Zealand. I am reaching out to invite you to participate in my research project titled "Reclaiming Autonomy: An analysis of climate adaptation institutions, policies and practices in the Marshall Islands".

This study aims to understand and enhance the effectiveness of climate adaptation planning in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). I am specifically interested in exploring the factors influencing decision-making in adaptation funding.

I would like to invite you to participate in an interview on your experience of climate adaptation projects in RMI. The questions will cover aspects of adaptation implementation, governance, and gaps within RMI. An interview may take up to 60-90 minutes and follow-up interviews can also be scheduled, if required.

The interview can be organized in a location that is suitable for you and at a time that is convenient. The interviews will be audio-recorded. You may ask for the audio recorder to be turned off at any point and may also decline to answer any questions; you can withdraw your participation at any point in the interview itself. You can also withdraw from the project at any time before the interview, during the interview and two weeks after. You may ask any questions about the research during your participation.

The information obtained from the interviews will be used to complete this research project and may be used in presentations and publications arising from the research.

All information provided will be treated confidentially, and participant identities will be anonymized in any publications or presentations. The collected data will be securely stored, accessible only to the research team, and retained for five years after which it will be securely destroyed.

While participants will not be provided direct access to the research findings due to the anonymized nature of the data, summaries may be made available upon request.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and your decision will not impact your relationship with the University of Waikato or any other organization.

This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Division of Arts, Law, Social Sciences and Psychology. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to the Secretary of the Committee, email alpss-ethics@waikato.ac.nz , postal address, Division of Arts, Law, Psychology and Social Sciences, University of Waikato, Te Whare Wananga o Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240.

The research is conducted by me, Yoshiko. For any queries or concerns, please feel free to contact me at yoshikocapelle@gmail.com or 022 427 9375.

Thank you for considering being part of this study. I look forward to the possibility of working together on this important research.

Sincerely,
Yoshiko Yamaguchi,
Research Lead
University of Waikato

Appendix C – Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Reclaiming Autonomy: An analysis of climate adaptation institutions, policies and practices in the Marshall Islands
Researcher: Yoshiko Yamaguchi

Name of person interviewed: _____

Please complete the following checklist. Tick the appropriate box for each point.	YES	NO
I have received a copy of the Information Sheet describing the research project and/or the researcher has read the Information Sheet and explained it clearly.		
Any questions that I have, relating to the research, have been answered to my satisfaction.		
I understand that I can ask further questions about the research at any time during my participation, and that I can withdraw my participation at any time up to two weeks after the interview.		
I understand that the interview and/or focus group discussions I am participating in will be audio-recorded		
During the interview and focus group discussion, I understand that I do not have to answer questions unless I am happy to talk about the topic. I can stop the interview at any time, and I can leave the focus group discussion meeting if I feel uncomfortable and not willing to participate anymore		
When I give consent through the researcher's audio recorder, I will retain ownership of my interview, but I give consent for the researcher to use the interview for the purposes of the research outlined in the Information Sheet.		
I wish to remain anonymous in the research findings		
I wish to receive a copy of the: • interview recording, • transcript, • summary of the focus group discussion and a summary of the research findings. My email address is:		

Participant : _____ Researcher : _____

Signature : _____ Signature : _____

Appendix D- Semi-structure Interview questions

Guiding questions

1. What inspired you to get into the adaptation and development field?
2. What role do you usually play in a project team?
3. Can you describe a project that you're particularly proud of? Why is it significant to you?
4. I'm interested to know if there were any challenges. How did you overcome them?
5. Do you feel projects, accurately capture the needs of the local communities? What is a good project example of how this was captured?
6. Has there been a time when you had to change your approach based on feedback or new information? If YES- Could you tell me more about that?
7. What has been the most rewarding part of your work in this field?
8. What does a successful project look like to you? Is there an example you can think about?
9. What happens after you successfully implement a project and meet all its requirements?
10. Do you believe that more effort should be directed towards adaptation within the development sector, or do you think the current initiatives are adequate?

Follow-up Questions:

1. Are there any projects that stand out as particularly impactful or memorable? Why?
2. How did you respond to challenges you faced in your projects?
3. Can you share a story of a collaboration that went particularly well?
4. How do you handle conflicts or disagreements within a project team?
5. What advice would you give to someone new entering the adaptation and development space?
6. Have there been any surprising outcomes from your projects? What were they?
7. How do you balance short-term needs with long-term goals in your projects?
8. How important is it that you reach milestones, and what are the implications for extending opportunities for locals to take ownership in these projects?
9. Can you talk about a time when you had to advocate for a specific idea or approach?
10. What are your hopes for the future of adaptation and development work?

International/National Participants:

- What inspired you to get into the adaptation and development field?
- What role do you usually play in a project team?
- Can you describe a project that you're particularly proud of? Why is it significant to you?
- Have you faced any challenges while working on a project? How did you overcome them?
- How do you stay updated with new developments and trends in your field?
- How do you measure the success of a project?
- Can you tell me about a time when you had to change your approach based on feedback or new information?
- What has been the most rewarding part of your work in this field?
- How do you incorporate sustainability into your projects?
- What advice would you give to someone new entering the adaptation and development space?

Local/Community Members:

- Do you ensure that the needs and voices of local communities are heard in your projects? Can you provide examples?

- Are there any projects in your community that stand out as particularly impactful or memorable? Why?
- Can you share a story of a collaboration that went particularly well?
- Have there been any surprising outcomes from your experience with projects? What were they?
- Can you talk about a time when you had to advocate for a specific idea or approach?
- What are your hopes for the future of adaptation and development work?
- How did you respond to challenges you faced in your projects?