

# Exploring the Layered Perspectives of Samoan People on Chinese Aid Projects—A Case Study on the Proposed Chinese-funded Vaiusu Wharf Project in Samoa

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**Abstract:** *China is a relatively new donor and player in the Pacific. Exploring how Pacific people perceive China's aid is important for improving the effectiveness of China's aid projects. However, while the literature on local perspectives on China's assistance is not entirely absent, existing studies remain limited. This paper attempts to contribute to this discussion through exploring the divergent perceptions of Samoan people regarding the Vaiusu Wharf, a proposed Chinese-funded project in Samoa, and considering the implications for Chinese aid to Samoa and the wider Pacific region. To do so, this paper utilises a blended research strategy that combines case study and thematic analysis. This study explores the perceptions of this wharf project from two levels, including the then Samoan government and everyday Samoan citizens, based on a thematic analysis of archival materials. At its core, this paper argues that while both groups criticize the self-motivation part of China's aid, they use divergent lenses and view the project from different positions, which complicates how the project is received in Samoa. Specially, while the project was welcomed at a government level, it was greeted with suspicion by many in the general public. Thus, considerations must be made by China and Samoa to ensure that any aid project takes into meaningful consideration of the public's perspectives if it is to succeed.*

**Keywords:** *Chinese Aid, Samoa, The Pacific, Case Study*

## 1. Introduction

Pacific Island Countries (PICs) have been described as a region that relies heavily on foreign aid<sup>[1]</sup>. Multiple factors have been cited as constraining PICs' economic growth, including their smallness, remoteness, isolation from potential markets and vulnerability to natural disasters<sup>[2]</sup>. However, Pacific people themselves do not view their region within this framework of smallness and disconnectedness. Hau'ofa rejects the notion that PICs are too small, resource deficient and too isolated to develop any degree of autonomy<sup>[3]</sup>. This, to many, including Hau'ofa, is a framing that sits in line with the interests of neo-colonial relationships that are nestled within dependency.

Hau'ofa<sup>[4]</sup> expresses that contrary to its stated aim of decolonization and self-reliance, aid has often been used by Australia and New Zealand as an integrative mechanism for protecting their national security. In other words, PICs cannot reduce their aid dependency and achieve self-reliance because they are not allowed to<sup>[4]</sup>. Hau'ofa is not alone in this criticism, other studies<sup>[5][6][7]</sup> also demonstrate the multifaceted ways Australia and New Zealand use aid funding to serve their own national interests. According to Hau'ofa<sup>[3][4]</sup>, Pacific people are not unaware of the self-motivation part of aid provided by Australia, New Zealand and other development partners.

This interpretation is important to note, as China is a relatively new donor and player in the Pacific, and its motivations have come under recent scrutiny. China's rising influence in this region through its aid has drawn attention from not only local actors, but traditional donors who have dominated in the region. It is clear that their interests are being tested by China's presence in the region<sup>[8][9]</sup>. Against such a backdrop, PICs are caught in a delicate geopolitical situation marked by international competition for influence<sup>[10]</sup>. Therefore, it is necessary to pay close attention to how China's aid is perceived by people from within the PICs.

This paper aims to contribute to this discussion by exploring the layered perspectives of many local actors in Samoa towards the case study of the Vaiusu Wharf, a construction project that was once

suggested to be funded by China in Vaiusu Bay in Samoa<sup>[11]</sup>, via a thematic analysis based on archival materials. This paper gathers perspectives from the then Samoan government and everyday Samoan citizens to examine the variety and depth of perspectives that exist around this very topical issue and the implications of these divergent perspectives for Chinese aid in Samoa and the wider region. This paper attempts to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the various perspectives of the then Samoan government and everyday Samoan citizens regarding the Vaiusu Wharf project?
- 2) What are the implications of these divergent perspectives for Chinese aid projects in Samoa and the wider Pacific region?

At its core, this study argues that while both groups criticize the self-motivation part of China's aid, they use divergent lenses and view the project from different positions. Specifically, while the proposed Chinese-funded wharf project was welcomed at a government level, the project was greeted with suspicion by most of the general public. Thus, considerations must be made by China and development partners to ensure that any aid project takes into meaningful consideration the public's perspectives if it is to succeed.

## 2. Literature Review

Discussions around China's presence in the Pacific region have been dominated by scholars from Western countries. Some scholars hold the view that China's aid and presence in the Pacific is largely driven by economic interests<sup>[5][12]</sup>, because Chinese aid, provided mainly through loans and tied to Chinese goods and services, may help China export its overcapacity to other countries<sup>[5]</sup>. The view that China's assistance is economically driven seems to have the support of other scholars<sup>[13][14]</sup>, who note China's preference for concessional loans when providing aid to the region. A study shows that China used to provide grants or interest-free loans which were eventually forgiven, which is largely different from its current funding orientation towards concessional loans<sup>[13]</sup>. And China's aid funding practices have attracted the attention of some, who warn that China might cause debt sustainability problems to the Pacific, and encourage China to pay attention to the volume of its lending, provide sufficiently concessional financing terms, and closely monitor its loans to countries that already have high debt levels<sup>[14]</sup>.

China's influence is also interpreted through a geo-political lens. China's efforts are often seen by traditional players in this region as a strategy to extend its geopolitical influence<sup>[8]</sup>. Some believe that if China continues to strengthen its bilateral engagement with PICs, chances are it will have a greater impact on Pacific regional politics than traditional powers, such as Australia and New Zealand<sup>[15]</sup>. However, there is a contrasting view that the impression of a rising China is actually unrelated to the nature of its aid; instead, this rising China image is deliberately shaped by leaders in PICs as a way to fight against the influence of Australia and other traditional powers<sup>[5]</sup>.

In contrast to the abundant literature from the West on China's aid to the Pacific, a limited number of studies have attempted to shed light on how Pacific people themselves perceive China's presence and aid, and they often add contrasting views on how Chinese aid is portrayed by scholars from the West<sup>[9][10][16][17][18][19]</sup>.

Considering China's relatively recent entry into the development space in the Pacific, it may not be surprising that suspicions around Chinese motivations have been expressed locally. Although many Pacific people believe PICs will have to pay for China's assistance, they are not quite sure to what extent and what this would entail<sup>[17]</sup>. Some in Vanuatu mentioned that there were rumors circulating locally that China wants a representative in parliament and more rumors circulating around a Chinese military base<sup>[16]</sup>. Some people identified China's motivation as the upholding of the One China Policy and PICs' votes on the international stage<sup>[10]</sup>. This criticism of China for its hidden motives also extends to other aid donors, which have also been described as using aid for instrumental purposes<sup>[10]</sup>.

This suggests that Pacific people are cognizant of wider geopolitical interests and their role within this wider regional posturing. As such, Pacific voices have expressed notions that position China's presence in this region as an opportunity, instead of merely a threat. Some argued that as the Pacific is caught up in the competition between different powers, there is a space for Pacific interests to be advanced by playing off one power with another<sup>[9][10]</sup>. Having said that, Pacific countries seem very aware of the high stakes of such a foreign policy approach, noting that benefitting from the escalating tensions in the region is challenging as it requires them to develop good relations with both<sup>[9]</sup>.

Other local people perceive China's aid as being driven by economic interests, which aligns with the view held by some Western scholars<sup>[5][12]</sup>. They raised the use of Chinese workers and goods in Chinese aid projects as an issue, and worried that this "tied aid" may help Chinese take over jobs or businesses from local people<sup>[10]</sup>. Local people also flagged concerns over China's funding orientation towards loans<sup>[16][18]</sup>, which has been perceived to contribute to their rising debt distress<sup>[18]</sup>.

Despite this criticism of China for pursuing economic returns for itself, Pacific people do acknowledge the merit of China's aid. Chinese aid is seen as being complementary to aid from other major donors, as Chinese assistance is more focused on large-scale infrastructure projects and other areas of much-needed investment<sup>[10][16][18]</sup>. This is perceived to be largely different from aid projects other traditional donors engage in<sup>[18]</sup>.

A review of relevant literature reveals that studies conducted by Western observers often see China's presence in this Pacific from a geopolitical lens. By contrast, while Pacific people are cognizant of wider geopolitical interests and their role in this international competition, their focus tend to be on what benefits China's presence and aid may bring locally. Despite this acknowledgement of prior literature on this topic, studies relating to Pacific people's conceptions of China's aid in the region remain quite limited. And there is often a lack of comparison between different local perceptions. This appears a significant gap in the literature as different social standing may lead to inconsistent views on Chinese aid projects<sup>[19]</sup>, and a failure to understand local perceptions as divergent may reduce the effectiveness of these projects, making it difficult to for China to deliver assistance in ways that make sense locally. Moreover, existing studies have tended to lump China's aid projects under the umbrella of "Chinese aid" when exploring the perceptions of Pacific people. This approach does not take into consideration the different development areas that China's aid covers and assumes perceptions of different aid projects are homogenous. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to this discussion by examining the layered perspectives of then Samoan government and everyday Samoan citizens towards the case study of the Vaiusu Wharf, a construction project that was once suggested to be funded by China in Vaiusu Bay in Samoa<sup>[11]</sup>, via a thematic analysis based on archival materials.

### 3. Methodology

The methodology for this paper combines case study and thematic analysis. After reviewing some research on case study<sup>[20][21]</sup>, it can be understood that case study is a detailed investigation of a phenomenon or issue, and this often involves gathering different types of in-depth data over a period of time to understand the case in its context. Given the research purpose, this study also adopts a case study approach, addressing how the then Samoan government and everyday citizens view the case of the Vaiusu Wharf, a proposed China-funded project.

The Vaiusu Wharf project originated during the tenure of Samoa's former governing party, the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP), led by the country's former Prime Minister Tuila'epa Sailele Malielegaoi, who had been in power for over 22 years before the General Election held on 9th April 2021<sup>[22]</sup>. However, after the election, Samoa underwent significant changes in its political landscape, with the new ruling party Fa'atuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi (FAST) taking office on 24 May 2021 and forming a new government under the leadership of Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa<sup>[22]</sup>. According to the *Samoa Observer*, as of January 2021, a feasibility study and all assessments on the wharf project had all been completed, and the following step was negotiating financing with the Chinese government<sup>[23][24][25]</sup>, and the construction of the Vaiusu Wharf was scheduled for 2021-2026<sup>[26]</sup>. It was only after the FAST Party took power that they terminated the project and ceased further negotiations with China<sup>[22]</sup>. Therefore, it should be noted that since the negotiations and progress of this project all took place during the tenure of the former ruling party HRPP, this research relies on the archival materials back then for analysis.

This paper relies on a thematic analysis of archival materials to shape the case study. As a qualitative analysis method, thematic analysis requires researchers to recognize patterns of meaning across a dataset through the process of data understanding and familiarization, data coding, theme development and revision<sup>[27]</sup>. Prior literature shows that thematic analysis can be used to analyze most types of qualitative data<sup>[28]</sup>. Therefore, this paper also uses thematic analysis to identify the themes concerning the research questions in the archival materials.

Materials used for analysis of the then Samoan government's attitudes towards the project or Chinese assistance include three interviews conducted by the *Savali Newspaper* and Samoa's Government Press Secretariat with the former Prime Minister (FPM) Tuila'epa Sailele Malielegaoi (accessed on 26

November 2024)<sup>[29][30][31]</sup>. The media outlet *Samoa Observer* posted many reports concerning the Vaiusu Wharf project on their official Facebook page between September 2016 and 1st April 2021. This study filters and analyzes the comments the Samoan public made under these posts to represent everyday Samoan citizens' perspectives towards the project. Of all the comments made by the Samoan public, only those that directly reflect how people view the proposed project or in a broader sense, China's assistance, are considered as speaking to the research questions. Moreover, as the researcher does not speak Samoan, comments entirely or partially made in Samoan are also excluded from subsequent analysis, with the exception of those whose key information is expressed in English. This study relies on filtered comments for analyzing public views (accessed on 26 November 2024). No identifying information is included in this paper as a way to respect confidentiality. The following section presents the themes that were identified in the analysis of these archival materials.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 *The View of the Then Samoan Government*

The then Samoan government was cognizant of the geopolitical dimension associated with the aid game and sought to protect its own agency in the three-way power dynamics. It denied the nefarious interpretations of China's aid as debt trap diplomacy with the underhanded goal of establishing military bases. For the then government, the wharf project demonstrated China's strengths in providing support for infrastructure that Samoa's other donors do not offer, and represented an opportunity for Samoa to achieve its own development goals. And the decision to build this wharf was made after a careful assessment of its debt service capacity and the project's economic returns. In the following section, I present my research findings across 3 different themes: Samoa's agency, China's motives, as well as Samoa's debt level and economic returns of the project.

#### 4.1.1 *Samoa's Agency*

The Australian Minister for International Development and the Pacific told an Australian newspaper that China was funding useless buildings in the Pacific<sup>[32]</sup>. When asked how he thought of such comments, Samoa's FPM said this was "insulting" as these comments questioned "the integrity, wisdom and intelligence of the leaders of the Pacific Islands to judge what is good" for their own people, and that Samoa welcomed China's assistance<sup>[31]</sup>. In fact, PICs have long been considered by Australia and New Zealand as a backyard, which holds the key to their national security<sup>[4]</sup>. The Minister's comments reveal that China's increasing influence in this region has drawn close attention and has been interpreted through a geopolitical lens to impose diplomatic pressure on Pacific governments. However, the FPM's response showed that Pacific governments refuse to be passive objects to great powers, and they seek to protect their agency and independence by asserting the practical benefits of Chinese assistance and conveying the message that Australia should not overly interfere with their domestic affairs.

Although the FPM termed the Australian official's comments as "insulting," he also softened his tone and expressed gratitude to Australia and New Zealand for their assistance<sup>[31]</sup>. This is an expression of his sensitivity to the geopolitical dimension associated with the development aid game in the Pacific and indicates that the Samoa's then government intended to keep good relations with all sides to benefit from this three-way power dynamic. This sits in line with the findings of prior literature<sup>[9][10]</sup>.

#### 4.1.2 *China's Motives*

The FPM said the "One China Policy" when asked about what China gets in return for its aid to Samoa<sup>[31]</sup>. This observation sits in line with prior literature that shows China's presence in the PICs has been driven by competition with Taiwan<sup>[10]</sup>. China has been described as luring away Taiwan's allies in this region through aid, trade and investment in infrastructure, and this strategy has worked in some instances, such as the Solomon Islands' switching its diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019<sup>[9]</sup>.

Previous studies on Pacific people's perceptions of China's aid find that there have been suspicions around Chinese motivations among local people, with rumors circulating around military bases<sup>[16]</sup>. In contrast with these studies, the FPM said that China respects Samoa's "Sovereignty" and "Independence" for their own "decision making"<sup>[31]</sup>. The FPM denied the military agenda behind the Vaiusu Wharf<sup>[30]</sup>, stressing that all Chinese-funded projects "are all based on what we [Samoa] asked for" no matter they are "from grants or concessional loans"<sup>[31]</sup>. The FPM explained that its request for China to build the Vaiusu Wharf was the end result of what appears as an exhausting of all avenues without success to

secure financial support from its traditional donor partners<sup>[30][31]</sup>. These opinions espoused in those remarks are supported by previous literature that have identified complementarity as one of the advantages of Chinese aid<sup>[18]</sup>.

#### **4.1.3 Samoa's Debt Level and Economic Returns of the Project**

According to the FPM, the then Samoan government was not blind in taking up loans from China, as its financial watchdogs had been keeping a careful watch over the country's debt level<sup>[29]</sup>. The FPM made it clear that borrowing to promote development is necessary<sup>[29]</sup> and that they will not take up the option of loans unless the returns generated by the project enabled by the loan is enough to pay off the amount borrowed<sup>[29][31]</sup>. The FPM had confidence in Samoa's debt management capacity<sup>[31]</sup> and believed the Vaiusu Wharf would be "a major contribution" to their GDP growth<sup>[30]</sup>. According to the FPM, to build the Wharf is necessary as it will ease the burden placed on the Matautu wharf which is already heavily congested and where ships are threatened by dangerous swells, which will get worse as a result of climate change<sup>[31]</sup>.

However, despite the confidence the then Samoan government had in its debt management capacity, the FPM expressed concerns over China's concessionary loans whose "grant element is about 27% compared to the grant element of 35% on loans from the soft windows of the World Bank, the IDA, and the ADB" and expressed Samoa's preference for a higher grant element<sup>[31]</sup>. This aligns with previous literature<sup>[18]</sup>, showing China's aid is provided to benefit itself as well<sup>[5][12]</sup>.

#### **4.2 The View of the Samoan Public**

This part of the study focuses on the key themes and insights derived from the filtered comments. These comments reveal that the Samoan public held suspicions around China's motivations. They also expressed concerns around the country's debt distress, cited China's practice of debt trap diplomacy and expressed confusion around what the wharf would be used for. In addition, compared with the then government, Samoan citizens paid more attention to the project's influence on the ground, such as the impact on local families and environment.

##### **4.2.1 China's Motives**

Despite several comments calling for a rational analysis of the China military threat discourse, most comments concerning China's motives remain quite negative. This is consistent with prior literature<sup>[10][16][17]</sup>. The Samoan public expressed concern over the possible use of the wharf as a military base and worried that China will remove their people from their own land, and take over the country. Some pointed out that China's true intentions go beyond taking over Samoa. Instead, China was described as intending to take over the South Pacific. Australia and New Zealand were, therefore, described as China's adversaries and barriers for realizing this ambition. These interpretations stand in contrast with the then Samoan government's declaration about China's motives<sup>[31]</sup>.

The dubious nature of these claims aside, this suggests that everyday Samoan citizens are aware of their precarity as a country that could fall victim to geostrategic posturing in the competition between different powers. However, the Samoan public perceives China's presence solely as a threat, without mentioning the potential opportunity for the country to leverage it to maximize Samoa's interests by playing off one power against another. This runs contrary to the findings of previous studies that have examined local perceptions of Chinese assistance in the Pacific<sup>[9][10]</sup>.

##### **4.2.2 Samoa's Debt Level and Economic Returns of the Project**

Many comments under this theme revolve around the country's debt distress and China's practices of debt trap diplomacy. Some expressed concern over Samoa's debt level, arguing that Samoa already had no more money to pay back Chinese loans. Some also proposed the Samoan government not to start a new loan until it pays back previous ones. Parts of the public considered the building of the wharf as China's debt trap diplomacy. According to those comments, if Samoa defaults on this loan, China will take over and run the wharf. This shows the public was not fully convinced of former Prime Minister's remarks on Samoa's debt level and repayment ability<sup>[29][31]</sup>.

Moreover, many Samoan citizens were aware of the loan-oriented nature of China's aid and the non-policy conditions attached to China's aid projects, i.e., the use of its own labor. This is one of the key issues underpinning Samoan individuals' opposition to building this wharf. This sits in line with the observation of earlier literature on the Pacific region that China's aid is used to serve China's interests as well<sup>[13][14][16][18]</sup>. This is also where the Samoan public's perceptions align and overlap with the perspectives

of the then Samoan government<sup>[31]</sup>.

Many also raised the issue of necessity regarding the wharf, because they saw Samoa as a country with a limited supply of resources for export and such a wharf would increase its shipping capacity to an unnecessary level. Other views in opposition to the wharf can be classified as an issue of prioritization and opportunity cost. As Samoa is a country which has many needs regarding improvement of infrastructure, many believed that the proposed funds that will go to the wharf development should be diverted to other areas. This suggests that a sizable group of Samoan citizens were confused around what the Vaiusu Wharf will be used for and its economic returns. The message given by the then Samoan government that the wharf is of benefit for the country was not resonating with them<sup>[30][31]</sup>.

Having said that, there are also some who supported the building of the wharf, because they saw this project as a game changer for Samoa's economy. According to them, the construction of Chinese-funded projects will create jobs for local people and boost tourism development.

#### **4.2.3 Impact on Local Families and Environment**

Some raised the potential resettlement of local families for the construction of the wharf as an issue. It is clear that many were worried that families in the area will have to be removed, and so will their ancestors who are buried on these lands. Moreover, they also warned that local families, who rely on what the ocean provides for them on a daily basis, may lose their food source after resettlement. Others mentioned the environmental impact of the project. These concerns revolve around the destruction of mangroves and the dredging of the seabed, which many pointed out will lead to the loss of biodiversity.

### **5. Discussions**

#### **5.1 Differences and Connections Between the Two Levels of Perspectives**

It is clear that different groups use divergent lenses and view the project from different positions. While the proposed Chinese-funded project, Vaiusu Wharf, was welcomed at a government level, it was greeted with suspicion by most of the general public in Samoa. This demonstrates the need to acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of how the Vaiusu Wharf is perceived in the Samoan society.

The then Samoan government is well-positioned to grasp the wider lens and larger picture. The former government rejected nefarious interpretations of China's rise in the region, conveyed the message that Australia should not overly interfere with its domestic affairs, and meanwhile expressed gratitude to its traditional donors. This is an inevitable consequence of Samoa's positioning in the global order as a small Pacific nation, a situation that requires countries like Samoa to navigate different foreign influences to maximize the benefits it may obtain from this tripartite power dynamic<sup>[9][10]</sup>. In contrast, everyday Samoan citizens were overwhelmingly suspicious of China's motives, and despite their awareness of Samoa's posturing in this tripartite power dynamic, they perceived China's presence solely as a threat to national and regional stability, instead of a potential opportunity.

Moreover, from the government's perspective, no country can depend on its internal revenue sources for development alone. This means borrowing is inevitable and the decision to build the wharf was made after a careful assessment of the country's debt management capacity and the economic returns of the project. China's offer to build the wharf was being framed as complimentary to the assistance provided by its traditional donors. However, the public raised concerns over Samoa's capacity to repay China's loans, with some explicitly articulating a belief that this is debt trap diplomacy. Many also expressed confusions around what the Vaiusu Wharf will be used for. Further, compared with the then Samoan government that was trying to fulfill its goal of promoting the economic development of the country, the public paid more attention to the project's influence on the ground, such as its influence on local families and environment.

These divergent views in part could be attributed to the different positions from where they view the wharf and the information gap that exists between the then government and the public. However, in spite of their differences in opinion, the then Samoan government and the public do share the same view on one point, that is, China's aid is provided to Samoa to benefit China primarily. This study shows that this is a sticking point from both levels of Samoan society and is well-documented by previous studies as a concern in many contexts<sup>[5][12][13][14][18]</sup>. This echoes the findings of prior literature that has articulated the self-motivation aspect of development aid<sup>[33]</sup>.

This paper finds that the then Samoan government's perceptions of the Vaiusu Wharf project are

consistent with the positive perspectives found in previous studies on Pacific people's attitudes towards Chinese aid, which highlight the opportunities brought by China's increasing influence in the region<sup>[9][10]</sup> and the complementarity of its aid to that of traditional donors<sup>[18]</sup>. On the other hand, everyday Samoan citizens' views roughly echo the negative perspectives found in this literature, including skepticism about China's motives<sup>[10][16][17]</sup> and concerns about Samoa's debt levels<sup>[16][18]</sup>. Compared to previous research, the value of this paper lies in its focus on not viewing Samoans as a monolithic group. This study has considered how one's social standing might influence their views, leading to divergent perceptions.

### **5.2 Possible Factors that Shape How the Public View the Wharf**

The then ruling HRPP government had held the reins of power almost uninterrupted since 1982, which led many to argue that the country is a one-party state, and Samoa's political record is fraught with allegations and actual cases of corruption<sup>[17]</sup>. Thus, Samoa's political environment is conducive of distrust, fear and suspicion<sup>[17]</sup>. This study finds that this distrust in the then HRPP government applied to the Vaiusu Wharf. Comments made by people show many citizens believed the HRPP government might have been bribed to serve China's interests, and a large number of people's comments expressed criticism of the accountability and transparency of the HRPP, and their willingness to vote for FAST Party, which opposes the construction of the wharf, in the 2021 election. Also, many believed the then HRPP government had not done a good job to fill the information gap between them and the government to justify the building of the wharf. Thus, this distrust of the HRPP government, combined with a lack of information disclosed by them has probably fueled the inherent doubts held by Samoan people regarding China's aid, the country's debt level and repayment capacity as well as the project's impact on local families and environment.

Moreover, in this research, certain people mentioned they had learned about the possible use of the wharf as a military base for China from New Zealand news. This is supported by previous literature, which shows that New Zealand and Australia newspapers are indeed reporting rather negatively on China when it comes to diplomacy and geopolitics<sup>[34]</sup>. The fact everyday Samoans are aware of this suggests that there is a link between foreign media and the way local perceptions are being formed as well.

Further, as people's comments were made under the reports posted by the *Samoa Observer* on Facebook, the overall tone of this media outlet is important in generating responses from the public. A review of these reports finds that this media outlet, as part of Samoa's fourth estate, was trying to fulfill its job responsibility by critiquing government decisions, and this inadvertently contributes to the negative comments on China's aid project among the public. Existing research has shown that news coverage may have an important effect on citizens' perceptions of the mainstream perspective in the community<sup>[35]</sup>. As such, the public is willing to articulate their views online when finding a trend in favor of their viewpoint<sup>[36]</sup>. In contrast, those who take a different view may not speak on their opinions in online spaces, as they think their viewpoint is not widely shared, a phenomenon which has been termed the "spiral of silence"<sup>[36]</sup>.

### **5.3 Implications for China, Samoa and the Wider Pacific Region**

This study finds that on Samoa's side, the government's accountability and transparency hold great importance as to whether a foreign aid project can be well received by its own people. Although the FAST Party did not continue further negotiations with China as to the Vaiusu project after it took power, this finding still has profound implications for its future work and the work of other PICs in the wider region. It is important for these governments to respond to the concerns of their own people and disclose sufficient information to justify any aid project in order for these projects to have full local buy-in.

This study also has profound implications for China. China is a relatively new regional aid donor, so its motivations, are naturally up for scrutiny as the "new kid on the block." As parts of the general public greet China's aid with suspicion, China should conduct more people-to-people exchanges to facilitate cultural cooperation with Samoa, rather than merely communicating at a government level. For example, some point out that China may consider providing more soft power incentives to build stronger relationships with PICs through encouraging Chinese students to take up the learning of Pacific languages to tell a better China story and recruiting Pacific students to study in China to help develop greater understanding between Pacific people and Chinese people<sup>[37]</sup>.

Besides, China may also consider investment in partner-led studies on PICs to accurately understand their historical and cultural background, economic development, diplomatic relations and political system, and development needs. The study of PICs is indeed a relatively new research field in China. It

was not until the early 21st century that systematic research on the PICs began to take off and gradually developed into a research field in the country<sup>[38]</sup>. As China and PICs largely differ in culture, history and political systems, studies on PICs may inform the policymaking of the Chinese government, thus improving the effectiveness of their aid programs so that they can be better located contextually in local needs.

## 6. Conclusion

This study finds that different social groups in Samoa, while reaching an agreement on China's economically driven funding practices, use divergent lenses and view the proposed Chinese-funded project, Vaiusu Wharf, from different positions. While the project was welcomed at a government level, it was greeted with suspicion by most of the general public. Everyday Samoan citizens, as people designed to be the end-users of the Chinese-funded project, relied on information disclosed by the government to make sense of government decisions on the wharf. Due to the political environment of Samoa fraught with distrust, insufficient information disclosed by the then government, the critical role of the media, the potential influence of foreign media and the inherent doubts over China's motives, public sentiment was not completely convinced that the wharf is of benefit for the country. Thus, Chinese and Samoan governments have to ensure that any future aid project takes into meaningful consideration public perspectives and respond appropriately if it is to succeed.

## 7. Limitations of the Study

As this research is a case study on the Vaiusu Wharf, a specific project that was once suggested to be funded by China in Samoa, there is no desire to generalize the findings of this study. Considering the broad fields that China's aid covers and the different national contexts that exist across the Pacific, the goal of this research is to not only add depth of understanding, but also open up spaces for further research projects that are capable of exploring the complex realities of the reception of Chinese-funded projects in the PICs. Besides, this research is mainly based on online comments when analyzing public perceptions, which may privilege the view of those with access to the internet. Future studies should aim to expand the sample for broader representation of public views.

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