

The Spirit of “It Is What It Is”: Emotional Resilience and Entrepreneurship in the Midst of Tourism in Crisis

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This paper will look at how Samoa’s tourism sector operators have coped and built their resilience during the time of global pandemic. It argues that their strong spirit of resilience and entrepreneurship that keep them moving forward in the seemingly never-ending challenges faced by Samoa’s tourism sector. The study was inspired by the presentations given by accommodation owners during a class field trip undertaken by Development Studies programme at National University of Samoa in September 2021. These accommodation owners have given permission to use excerpts from their presentations.

Tourism has become one of the most significant drivers of sustainable development of developing economies including Samoa as it generates much needed foreign exchange, investment, and employment. Tourism, however, is extremely susceptible to external forces including war and terrorism, economic and political crisis, and natural disasters. In fact, Samoa’s tourism sector has faced successive challenges including the devastating tsunami in 2009, cyclone Evan in 2021, cyclone Gita 2018, the measles outbreak in 2019, and currently COVID-19. Samoa’s national borders have been closed since March 2020 with no international tourist arrivals for over 19 months. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected Samoa’s economic growth for the fiscal year of 2021 would be contracted by 7.8 percent (International Monetary Fund 2021) but the impact of such long-term border closure on tourism sector cannot be measured simply by economic terms.

Tourism has been a key source of development of Samoa for the last few decades and its importance has grown remarkably. In 2019, the tourism sector accounted for about 25 percent of national GDP, employed 15 percent of the country’s workforce, and generated one third of foreign exchange earnings (Ministry of Finance 2021). The number of international visitors has grown at the rate of four percent annually for the last 20 years. In 2019 alone, approximately 180,000 tourists visited Samoa.

The Samoa 2040: Transforming Samoa to a Higher Growth Path, the national development plan published in March 2021, provides a roadmap to stimulate economic growth for the next 20 years. It looks at economic opportunities with highest potential and identifies tourism as one of the four crucial areas that will determine the future of Samoa’s prosperity. According to Samoa 2040, Samoa has the potential to be a prominent tourist destination in the Pacific region and host as many as 400,000 visitors annually by 2040. That number of visitors would boost Samoa’s total tourist spending to SAT\$1.7 billion and significantly enhance the national GDP. By 2040, a mature tourism sector could employ about 22,000 people and generate substantial demands for local products (Ministry of Finance 2021).

Serious challenges are unavoidable, but Samoa 2040 sees the COVID global pandemic as an opportunity to reset the tourism sector and address some structural issues that have constrained the further growth of tourism (Ministry of Finance 2021, p. 15). Samoa’s competitiveness in the Pacific Islands tourism has been held back for various reasons including limited air access. Despite the rise in

the number of international visitors, Samoa's market share on air arrivals in the Pacific Islands region has remained around 8 percent while the neighbouring country Fiji accounts for over 40 percent (South Pacific Tourism Organisation 2018). The number of accommodations and rooms has increased significantly over the last 10 years, but demand has not yet kept pace with the growth of supply. Accommodation owners have suffered from low occupancy rates especially during the low season, thus limiting their capacity to maintain and improve hotel standards (Samoa Tourism Authority 2014; Ministry of Finance 2021)

According to a visitor survey, lack of public facilities, unsatisfactory hospitality and service standards, relatively high prices despite the poor quality, and social issues including prevalence of rubbish and activity of child vendors are some of the aspects that do not appeal to of tourists. Samoa 2040, therefore, suggests utilizing this quiet period to address some of these impediments and improve Samoa's competitiveness in the Pacific tourism market for a longer term (Ministry of Finance 2021).

The local newspaper Samoa Observer, however, presents another view. An article titled 'Samoa 2040: Beating the dead horse of tourism', published by the editorial board on 13 March 2021, maintains it is the time to give up the idea of tourism-led development. The article points to Samoa's small market share in the Pacific tourism despite the considerable funding has been poured into the sector. The fact that tourism levels have remained about the same for two decades, makes them wonder 'if we are just beating the same half-dead horse?' (Samoa Observer Editorial Board 2021b). The uncertainty of international visitor arrivals due to the border closure and unpredictability of tourism sector due to climate related events are additional issues which led the editorial board to question the future of tourism. They ask if Samoa should shift its focus to other areas like agriculture and fisheries, digital economy, or labour mobility for the country's future development.

Since Samoa 2040 was published under the previous government, the new government may have different views on tourism-led development. Nevertheless, there has been a growing concern about relying heavily on tourism for Samoa's development because of the industry's high vulnerability to internal and external shocks. For instance, the 2009 tsunami destroyed the majority of coastal infrastructures for tourism on the southeast of Upolu including most popular beach *fales* and resort hotels. This deadly tsunami spread a negative image of Samoa as an unsafe destination for tourists (Jiang et al. 2015). Furthermore, frequent tropical cyclones and sea-level rise have caused considerable damage to tourism infrastructure and the COVID induced border restrictions have created unprecedented uncertainty about international tourism. All these events illustrate the high vulnerability of Samoa's tourism.

The long absence of tourists has had multidimensional impacts on Samoa's economy but most severely on the tourism sector. According to International Monetary Fund (2021) job losses due to the pandemic are concentrated in tourism and related sectors. Within one month of border closure in late March 2020, 70 hotels and tourism-related businesses were closed, leaving 1,000 people without employment. For instance, Return to Paradise Resort gave 100 out of 130 staff extended leave. Saletoga Sands Resort & Spa laid off 120 of 150 staff members. Sheraton's two resorts laid off 480 out of 600 staff. By the end of 2020, many more hotels and tourism-related businesses laid off most of the staff or retained them on reduced work hours (Connell and Taulealo 2021).

No tourists means little or no income for the owners of tourism-related businesses. Many tourist sites in Samoa are owned by either a village or a family that collect entrance fees from visitors. A common entrance fee at popular spots like To Sua Trench is SAT\$20-30 per person, which could generate several hundred tala a day. This is an important source of income especially in rural areas where cash income generating opportunities are otherwise very limited (Connell and Taulealo 2021). Other tourism-related businesses like bars and restaurants, car rentals, taxis or even musicians who play at hotels or restaurants also lost their income sources.

The nonexistence of tourists has decreased the demand on local market, affecting the income of local suppliers. As hotels and restaurants need less much food, local farmers and fishermen have no other place to sell their products. Urban markets are also affected by oversupply of local products like handicrafts. According to a UN ESCAP report, women in cottage industries for handicraft production have lost their income source as a result of the tourism sector collapse (United Nations ESCAP 2020). Overall, Samoa is experiencing a considerable reduction in employment, which has increased the poverty rate especially among women and youth whose participation in formal employment is limited (International Monetary Fund 2021).

Tourism sector operators and workers who had lost their employment and businesses, have adopted a wide range of strategies to cater for the loss of income. According to a Massey University researchers' report on the adaptability of Pacific Island tourism operators and workers (Scheyvens and Movono 2020), 60 percent of study participants from the region experienced a significant decline in financial wellbeing. Interestingly, despite the financial hardship, many of them indicated their mental wellbeing was improved as a result of having more time with family and more time to do other things. In other words, they enjoyed a less stressful lifestyle outside the tourism setting.

Physical wellbeing also improved because of returning to the land, engaging in more physical activities such as farming, gardening, fishing, and doing work around the house. These adaptations led to a more sustainable life style. Some respondents even described the impact of COVID-19 as a 'blessing' or 'wakeup call' that provided them the opportunity of renewal. One might, however, ask where their optimism and ability to manage mental wellbeing in the mid of tourism in crisis comes from? The report attributes such optimism to Pacific people's appreciation for the social and cultural gains that stem from returning to land and family, in addition to their Christian faith that gives them strength. A look at what tourism operators in Samoa say, provides additional context and raises more questions.

Annandale (2021) of Sinalei Reef Resort & Spa, Samoa's first luxury boutique hotel located at Siumu, and Afioga Taufua Sili Apelu of Taufua Beach Fale, one of the first and most established beach fales located in Lalomanu, shared their views with students on the aforementioned class field trip (Apelu 2021). Their accommodations are located on the southeast coast of Upolu, one of Samoa's most vulnerable locations to natural disasters. Yet, they were able to see things in a positive light during these hard times. Taufua Sili (Apelu 2021), for instance, actually mentioned he was enjoying this quiet time, being away from busy life of dealing with in and out of international tourists every day for last few decades. He now has more time with family, children, and grandchildren, which he has not had for a long time. For a large-scale business owner at the forefront of tourism crisis, suffering from immense financial damage, dealing with enormous pressure under uncertainty and so many responsibilities for family, employees and village, to say 'I'm enjoying this quiet time' illustrates a

strong resilient mind-set. Given the scale of businesses they operate, one can easily imagine that they are not genuinely enjoying such prolonged period of lockdown and travel restrictions. Still, they are able to see their current hardship in a positive light and describe it with hope. Such emotional resilience is, I would argue, built upon the spirit of 'it is what it is'.

Annandale (2021) used the phrase 'it is what it is' multiple times when he described the hardships he went through due to cyclones, the tsunami, and the measles outbreak, and most recently COVID pandemic. Although Taufua Sili did not use the same phrase, he demonstrated the same spirit, that is, the spirit of 'it is what it is'. According to Dictionary.com, 'it is what it is' is an expression used to describe a challenging situation that cannot be changed and must be accepted. In short, deal with it (Dictionary.com 2021). For these accommodation owners, however, it is a spirit of courageously accepting the reality—the reality of how much they have lost and the reality of hardships they face—but firmly determining to move forward regardless. They have cultivated this spirit of resilience as they have gone through consecutive extreme challenges in operating big business in the Samoa's most vulnerable sector, namely tourism, and at locations most vulnerable to climate related events. Furthermore, their entrepreneurial behaviours have made this spirit of 'it is what it is' stronger and more sustainable. In other words, their high adaptive capacity emerges as resilience and entrepreneurship intersect. Emotional resilience reinforces entrepreneurial objectives while entrepreneurial approaches nurtures resilience (Korber and McNaughton 2017). Although this study is based on the view of two accommodation owners, it still contends the resilience of Samoa's tourism sector is underpinned by the emotional resilience and entrepreneurship skills of these businessmen and businesswomen who refuse to give up.

They accept 'it is what it is' and continue their endeavours. Tourism sector operators have used this quiet time to upgrade their skills and preparing physically and psychologically for the reopening of international tourism. With support from the Events Marketing and Distribution (EMD) Samoa, Samoa's only marketing company, Samoa Tourism Authority (STA) has organized digital marketing trainings for tourism related business owners and employees to make their business more visible virtually using social media like Facebook. Many of the training participants have now developed their own Facebook page and posted pictures, stories, short clips, and special deals to promote their accommodations to both international and local tourists.

At the same time, the STA and EMD have initiated a series of campaigns to more effectively target the domestic tourism market. The first campaign called Talimalo (hospitality) offered various accommodation and meal packages with reduced prices designed especially for couples, families, and friends. It targeted accommodations in Savai'i where the impact of the absence of international tourists hit harder than that in Upolu. The STA even invited local journalists to a tour to Savai'i to promote the big island's natural beauty (Samoa Observer Editorial Board 2020). In October, White Sunday in Aleipata campaign involved several beach *fale* operators who worked together to bring more local guests to Aleipata during the long holiday weekend. A Palolo Deals promotion in late October, offered different packages for locals to participate in paloloⁱ fishing. In addition, many accommodations offer special deals and packages with much reduced prices to attract local market. Saletoga Sands Resort & Spa, for instance, offers a villa at the cost of SAT\$180 per night for two people including breakfast, which is a significant discount from the regular price of NZD\$385 (SAT\$680) per night. As a result of these efforts, domestic tourism seems to have grown although is still limited to particular resort hotels on Upolu on weekends and holidays.

ⁱ Palolo is the spawn of a sea organism which rises to the surface of the sea at predictable phases of the moon, and is a caviar-delicacy.

In conclusion, I would ask a question in conjunction with the conference theme—Enhancing Samoan resilience during the pandemic: Are you willing to take part in enhancing the resilience of Samoa’s tourism sector during the pandemic? If your answer is yes, the next move is very simple. Go on a ‘vacation’. Take time for a relaxing getaway with your family, loved ones, or friends and spend a night at a hotel or beach *fale*. The concept of taking a vacation or spending money to relax is yet to be part of Samoan culture. But why shouldn’t we spend less on *fa’alavelave* and more on our own family, and take them on a vacation? Why shouldn’t we take advantage of reduced accommodation prices and make taking a vacation a new norm in Samoa? Such participation would support the growth of domestic tourism and is what accommodation owners is looking for. The three aforementioned accommodation owners had the same response when asked, “How can we, as a member of the community, help you and your business?”. They all said, “Come and stay at our place”.

In the late October, the government announced a SAT\$5 million of stimulus package for tourism sector operators which aimed to revitalize the industry (Samoa Observer Editorial Board 2021a). This is a timely and needed support. It is, however, a onetime offer used mainly to renovate or maintain their properties. For long term support, accommodation owners need guests. The loss caused by the absence of international tourists cannot be offset by domestic tourism, but domestic tourism would help accommodation owners keep some employees and maintain facilities and properties. So I ask again, are you willing to take part to enhance the resilience of Samoa’s tourism sector by taking a vacation and taking your family for a hotel getaway? A solution is in your hands.

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