The *Mana* of the Pacific Youth Voice in Climate Action

Exploring the Impact of Human Rights-Based Approaches on the Operations of Pacific Youth-Led Organisations and the Empowerment of their Members

A research report presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of International Development at Massey University, Manawatū, New Zealand

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Abstract

Anthropogenic climate change is considered to be the defining challenge of our time (United Nations, n.d.). Perturbed by the threat of climate impacts, youth around the world have been mobilising to demand stronger action from political bodies and polluting industries and have taken on leadership roles aiming to influence climate policies (Mutiarini, 2025, p.125). Pacific youth activists are particularly prominent champions of this cause, injecting a renewed momentum into the global climate effort. Their advocacy for more rapid progression towards a sustainable future for people and planet has led to climate action by political bodies at the national, regional, and international levels.

Previous research has found that climate-focused youth organisations around the world have placed human rights at the heart of their endeavours, "pioneering a rights-based approach to climate change" (Gasparri et al, 2021, p.105). As the lands and livelihoods of Pacific youth are set to be among the most negatively impacted by climate change (UN Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, n.d.), this report aims to contribute to the literature by specifically spotlighting three Pacific climate-focused youth-led organisations. It seeks to understand the extent to which they have adopted human rights-based approaches, and the extent to which this has impacted their operations in national, regional, and/or global political fora, as well as the empowerment of their members.

This research foregrounds the uniquely Pacific perspectives and understandings of human rights-based approaches held by these organisations, which offer both an invaluable contribution, and challenge to, dominant Western human rights approaches. It also elucidates the complexity and contentious nature of the concept of youth empowerment in the Pacific context, and throws into sharp relief the alternative value proposition that Pacific youth bring to the global climate conversation — one that is rooted in the protection of the rights of present and future generations, their lands, cultures, and traditional knowledges. Also reflected upon are the emerging and salient themes, namely the power of the Pacific youth voice which is grounded in local perspectives and cultural identities, the reclaiming of narratives, and the ability of a human rights focus to bring about change. Further research undertaken with a greater number of Pacific youth-led organisations would be advantageous to build upon these findings, and to contribute a richer understanding of Pacific perspectives to these domains of knowledge.

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This report is dedicated to Pacific youth
who are leading the charge against climate change.
The power of your collective voice upholds the *mana* of your
people, past, present, and future, and of your large ocean states.
The world has much to learn from your uniquely Pacific
perspectives, cultural identities, and environmental stewardship.
Thank you for your inspiring leadership.

Abbreviations

COP	United Nations Climate Change Conference
HRBA	Human rights-based approaches
ICJ	International Court of Justice
LSA	Lanulau'ava Student Association
PCW	Pacific Climate Warriors
PISFCC	Pacific Island Students Fighting Climate Change
PYLO	Pacific youth-led organisation
UN	United Nations

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Chapter One
Introduction

1.1 The Inspiration for this Research Report

"Land is our mother, a living timeless plain where generations past, present and future converge, interconnected and sustained in an unbroken cycle of life… It is upon our land that our values and principles are rooted, preserved, and transmitted across generations… Climate change is undermining our ability to uphold this sacred contract… Without our land, our bodies and memories are severed from the fundamental relationship that defines who we are. Those who stand to lose are the future generations." (PISFCC, 2024).

Youth are the future of the Blue Pacific Continent[1]. Amidst the climate crisis, tides are also changing demographically in the Pacific, with youth set to become the largest proportion of its population. In 2024, more than half of the region's population was under the age of 23 (Duke and Ahsan, 2024, para. 10), and youth are also highly represented among the Pacific voices calling for stronger and more meaningful climate action. Pacific youth-led organisations (PYLOs) are proving to be agents of change, ushering in a bold new era of climate activism. Political bodies at the national, regional, and international levels are taking notice and, crucially, taking action.

In an exemplary case, the Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change (PISFCC) spearheaded a campaign which lobbied the Vanuatu Government to seek action from the United Nations (UN), on behalf of Pacific Island Forum member countries, with regards to climate change and the upholding of human rights and intergenerational equity. Vanuatu called on the UN General Assembly to adopt a resolution which would request that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) provides an advisory opinion on UN member states' obligations to protect the rights of current and future generations from adverse climate impacts. In March 2023, for the first time in the history of the UN General Assembly, this advisory opinion request was unanimously adopted by consensus (PISFCC, n.d.). A year later, in another historic moment, the ICJ received the largest number of submissions in any advisory opinion proceedings (PISFCC, 2024).

[1] The Blue Pacific Continent, a term which was coined in 2017 at the Pacific Islands Forum, encapsulates the interconnectedness, collective interests, and shared cultures and challenges of the Pacific Island nations (Storey, n.d., para. 2).

By December 2024, the campaign arrived at the ICJ where public hearings were held on this request to seek an advisory opinion (UN Web TV, 2024). At these “landmark climate change hearings” (UN News, 2024), the PISFCC’s members delivered their unifying message on the Pacific’s call for climate justice (PISFCC, 2024), and the highlighted the nexus between human rights and climate change (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. In December 2024, representatives of the PISFCC took their historic campaign to the ICJ in The Hague. (PISFCC, 2024).

This research seeks to make a contribution to the literature at a critical juncture, where, after six years of campaigning, the PISFCC, and the wider Pacific community, and observers around the world await the decision on 23 July 2025 from the ICJ on its first advisory opinion on the obligations of states in respect of climate change (PISFCC, 2025, para. 2). By spotlighting three climate-focused PYLOs, including the PISFCC, this research seeks to understand the extent to which these organisations have adopted human rights-based approaches (HRBA) within their advocacy, and the extent to which HRBA have impacted their operations in national, regional, and/or global political fora, as well as the empowerment of their members.

1.2 Research Aim, Question, and Objectives

1.2.1 Research Aim

This research aims to understand the extent to which climate-focused Pacific youth-led organisations have adopted human rights-based approaches and how this might have impacted their operations in national, regional, and/or global political fora, and the empowerment of their members.

1.2.2 Research Question

To what extent have climate-focused Pacific youth-led organisations adopted human rights-based approaches, and how has this impacted their operations in national, regional, and/or global political fora, and the empowerment of their members?

1.2.3 Research Objectives

- **Objective 1:** To define human rights-based approaches and understand the extent to which Pacific youth-led organisations have adopted human rights-based approaches in their advocacy.
- **Objective 2:** To define youth empowerment and understand the extent to which an adoption of human rights-based approaches by Pacific youth-led organisations has impacted the empowerment of their members.
- **Objective 3:** To understand the extent to which Pacific youth-led organisations have adopted human rights-based approaches, and how this has impacted their operations in national, regional, and/or global political fora.

1.3 The Pacific Context

Without urgent action and ambition by the international community within the next five years, the best available science and climate modelling shows that humans will suffer the impacts of climate change for thousands of years (Gusman, 2024, p.3). As previously mentioned, the lands and livelihoods of Pacific youth are set to be among the most negatively impacted by climate change (UN Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, n.d.). Pacific Island countries, comprising thousands of islands with diverse landscapes and elevations (Fig. 2), are considered to have

been at the forefront of the climate crisis for many years (SPREP, 2012, p.2). As some of the Pacific's low-lying atolls peak at approximately three metres above sea level, sea-level rise represents an existential threat to these atolls (Pacific Meteorological Desk, 2022, p.1).

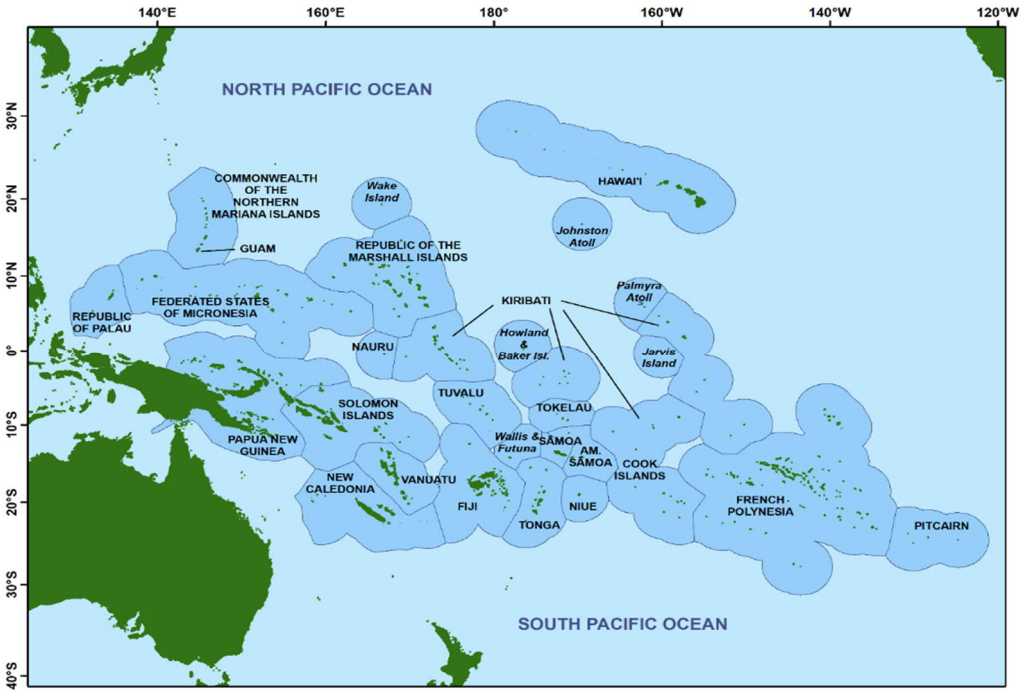

Fig. 2. The Pacific Islands region comprises thousands of islands, with diverse landscapes and elevations, with some atolls rising approximately three metres above sea level. (Pacific Meteorological Desk, 2022, p.1).

Among the adverse effects of climate change, is a perpetuation and intensification of the impacts of colonialism in Pacific Island countries, including the degradation of their natural environment, "forced displacement, and eradication of traditional knowledge" (Boege, 2023, p.23). Pacific Island countries have sought to protect their traditional knowledges by creating digital repositories of their traditional knowledges and cultural heritage, such as Fiji's national culture mapping initiative, and Tuvalu becoming the world's first 'digital nation' by creating a "digital twin" that catalogues the country's cultural heritage and practices (Gusman, 2024, p.20).

Outsiders with varying agendas have also long positioned Pacific Island states as small and vulnerable, which has affected how Pacific societies have viewed themselves, and their "ability to act with relative autonomy" and "survive reasonably well within the international system" (Hau'ofa, 2008, p.29). Pacific Island leaders have therefore sought to create a "new regional

identity", which recognises that their boundaries are not defined by the size of their lands, but the oceans that surround them (Si'isi'ialafia-Mau & Percival, 2024, p.66).

Pacific youth, in particular, are emerging as proud representatives and defenders of these large ocean states, which is symbolic of their challenge to the myriad impacts of climate change, political inaction, and these harmful narratives that have been created and perpetuated by 'outsiders' to the region. Pacific youth have declared that they do not have the option of giving up, and that they need to hold space for their voices, to prevent 'outsiders' occupying their space and speaking on their behalf (p.23). As perceptions and narratives can influence "policymaking, social action, and overall regional collaboration" (Si'isi'ialafia-Mau and Percival, 2024, p.67), the endeavour of Pacific youth to reclaim narratives around their identity and international standing has significant potential for charting a new course for climate responses in the Pacific and further afield.

1.4 Research Report Structure

- **Chapter One:** This chapter has introduced the research topic and the proposed relevance of this research and placed the research in the chosen context of the Pacific Islands region and the leadership of its youth-led organisations.

- **Chapter Two:** This report begins with a discussion of the plurality of HRBA, and then a discussion of the existing literature within general development scholarship. A discussion of HRBA in development that pertains to the Pacific context follows, before concluding with a discussion of HRBA that have been exhibited in the advocacy of PYLOs.

- **Chapter Three:** This chapter begins with a brief word on the nexus of HRBA and the concept of empowerment and then seeks to define and understand empowerment in development, including an acknowledgement of the critiques of empowerment. It also discusses youth empowerment in development discourse, as well as that which pertains to the Pacific context.

- **Chapter Four:** This chapter is dedicated to the research design of this report. It discusses the utilisation of qualitative research methods, the two methods for gathering information, a literature review and document analysis and semi-structured interviews, and the chosen research participants. It also includes a discussion of the pertinent ethical considerations.

- **Chapter Five:** This chapter includes the provision of the key learnings and themes that have emerged on the advocacy of PYLOs, including an acknowledgement of the different origins and operationalisation of PYLOs, a discussion of their various forms of advocacy, the primacy of cultural identities and environmental stewardship, their efforts to shift external narratives, and the barriers they can face as they undertake their unrelenting fight against the climate crisis.

- **Chapter Six:** This chapter presents the research findings, drawn from literature reviews and document analysis, as well as the semi-structured interviews.

- **Chapter Seven:** This final chapter discusses the findings that have been presented in Chapter Six, the limitations of this research, and concludes with a reflection on the themes and salient learnings that have emerged from this report.

Chapter Two

Human Rights-Based Approaches

2.1 Introduction

HRBA are a central and guiding element of this report. Exhibited not only in the overarching research aim, HRBA also feature in each of the key research objectives, as they offer a conceptual lens through which the operations of climate-focused PYLOs can be examined. In order to undertake an examination of this phenomena and address each of the key research objectives, it is important to first dedicate a chapter to understanding HRBA. From this basis, this report can go on to address the remaining key objectives. This chapter will begin by seeking to define and understand HRBA in general development discourse, and subsequently development discourse that pertains to the Pacific context, and finally it will provide a brief discussion as to where HRBA have been exhibited in the advocacy of PYLOs.

2.2 HRBA in Development

2.2.1 The Emergence of HRBA

Since their conceptual emergence in development discourse, generally understood to be in the early 1990s in the post-Cold War era (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004, p.1420), HRBA have held prominence within contemporary development theory and practice. Development scholarship has not only documented a widespread embrace of HRBA development actors throughout this time (p.1420), but these approaches now routinely feature atop actors' priorities and as central guiding principles within their strategies (Oestreich, 2020, p.452).

However, it is important to acknowledge from the outset that academics have highlighted an absence of a singular, widely-accepted conception of a HRBA, and that there is in fact a plurality of approaches. It is considered that these approaches have discernible theoretical origins and underpinnings, as well as varying implications for development practice (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004, p.1415). In recognising this plurality, development thinkers have also endeavoured to appraise and challenge the "different versions and emphases" of the different approaches (p.1415).

Since HRBA have risen in prominence, development actors have claimed to have adopted these approaches, as, "like other fashions", they had become "the latest designer item to be seen to be wearing" (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004, p.1415). However, there was concern that development actors had jumped on this bandwagon to offer a perception that they had oriented their operations towards, or prioritised human rights, and that this had ultimately been a guise "to dress up the same old development" (p.1415).

2.2.2 Characteristics of HRBA

HRBA can centre upon the promotion of human dignity through seeking to "empower excluded groups" and to "create socially guaranteed improvements in policy (including but not limited to legal frameworks)" (Uvin, 2004, p.163). HRBA can also exhibit a "dual top-down and bottom-up approach", whereby state actors (the duty-bearers) hold the overall responsibility for protecting the rights of their citizens (the rights-holders) under international law - this being the top-down element (Campbell et al, 2019, p.6). Then, in turn, supporting actors, such as development organisations, are responsible for protecting the rights of citizens where states do not have the capacity to so, assisting citizens with claiming their rights, and supporting state actors to improve social services - this being the bottom-up element.

HRBA have varying focuses, such as "social justice, non-discrimination, engagement of civil society" and accountability (Buse & Hawkes, 2015, p.6). In addition, the emphasis that they place on including 'vulnerable groups' will vary, depending on the primary target groups, and there are differences in the extent to which approaches involve the role of legal instruments. There are also differences in terms of how "explicitly human rights standards are addressed" (Broberg & Sano, 2017, p.665).

Given that there are differences within HRBA, six commonalities have been identified which can assist with creating an understanding of how actors can operationalise HRBA, and how observers of development can understand HRBA. An outline of these six respective common characteristics will follow.

The first common characteristic, considered to be the most essential, is the utilisation of the concept of rights itself, whereby an actor adopts rights-based thinking and principles to pursue the realisation of rights entitlements for citizens. While actors support citizens to claim their rights in this approach, crucially, in HRBA citizens are not passive recipients of rights from development actors (as in the traditional development assistance approach), but through HRBA

they are supported to become active rights-holders (Broberg & Sano 2017, p.667). The second common thread is that 'rights-holders' must be able to assert their rights against the duty-bearers, such as state actors, and that there, therefore, must be a corresponding obligation between the two parties (p.667). In practice, rights-holders require access to legal or political representatives at the local and national levels, and therefore, the ability for HRBA to efficiently enact positive change depends upon state actors to be "sufficiently well-functioning" (p.667). This is arguably a shortcoming of HRBA, as there might be limited scope to successfully operationalise HRBA in contexts where state actors do not uphold their responsibilities as duty-bearers. As a result of this shortcoming, the third common characteristic is that actors will focus on supporting duty-bearers, such as state actors, to uphold their responsibility in responding to rights-bearers' claiming of their rights, and ensure that rights-bearers are empowered to claim the "minimum core-rights regarding health, education, housing and/or social security" (p.668).

Three further commonalities within HRBA will now be considered. The fourth common characteristic is the recognition that discrimination and inequality are among the main drivers of poverty. Where traditional development assistance has focused on targeting the poorest populations, HRBA understand that a focus on poverty should be complemented by a focus on "marginalisation and vulnerability to discrimination" (p.668). The fifth common thread is that they apply the two crucial components of activism and advocacy, which can both enable the participation and inclusion of citizens in "political, economic, cultural and social processes" (p.668), and therefore cooperation between rights-holders and duty-bearers (p.669). The sixth common characteristic is the recognition that every form of development cannot be directly considered as a single, distinct right. For example, addressing corruption is connected to right-holders' access to official information and participation in state processes, however, addressing corruption is also connected to the ways in which societal institutions operate. Therefore, the "interactions between different centres of power" prevent some forms of development, such as addressing corruption, being considered as a defined, distinct right that can be targeted in isolation (p.669). This recognition within HRBA is important, as development actors can seek to apply HRBA that holistically consider the interconnected nature of different forms of development, which correspond to different rights for citizens. The identification and consideration of these six characteristics offers a useful guide when examining the extent to which PYLOs have adopted HRBA, and the extent to which this adoption has impacted the empowerment of their members and their operations.

2.3 HRBA in Development Within the Pacific Context

In the context of Pacific Island states, HRBA are often featured in relation to existing challenges to human rights. For example, in Vanuatu, such existing challenges to women rights-holders accessing their rights include gender-based violence and barriers to participating in decision-making and political processes (Scott and Salamanca, 2021, p.102). Given that Pacific Island states, particularly the atolls, are considered "the highest per capita disaster risk globally" (Robinson, 2018, p.2), Pacific states feature prominently in development discourse with regard to the threat of climate change impacts. There is, therefore, much concern that climate change risks exacerbating the existing challenges to human rights, due to the threat to Pacific peoples' homes, communities, and livelihoods.

Development scholarship in the Pacific context therefore often relates to the actions taken by state actors (duty-bearers) and non-governmental organisations (supporting actors) to prioritise human rights in climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts for the wellbeing of rights-holders, as well as the natural world. Using the lens of HRBA when analysing Pacific state responses to natural disasters has highlighted specific areas which require policy changes, in order to improve human rights protection. For example, applying HRBA has assisted with analysing the impacts of, and responses to, Tropical Cyclone Pam in March 2015. This cyclone was one of the largest in the South Pacific in recorded history, and Mataso Island in Vanuatu was one of the places most affected. Applying HRBA, particularly considering the third common characteristic within HRBA, to the cyclone's impacts and the responses to it, revealed that the Mataso people's access to 'minimum' and 'core' human rights were severely undermined, including the "rights to life, health, housing, food, water, sanitation and education" (Scott and Salamanca, 2021, p.106).

In development scholarship, and with regard to the Pacific context, HRBA are also linked to the issue of food security, particularly due to the risk that climate change poses to food systems. Climate change impacts, such as "land degradation, deforestation and the loss of biodiversity, coastal erosion and the pollution of lagoons", threaten the supply of food from agriculture and fisheries, as well as infrastructure for food distribution, to Pacific communities (Barnett, 2020,

p.25). Furthermore, applying HRBA also revealed secondary impacts which can stem from food insecurity as a result of climate change. Affected agriculture and fisheries sectors also threatens the livelihoods of Pacific peoples that depend upon these modes of production, and this might result in urban migration, and in turn, urban poverty or overburdened healthcare services (p.35). Ultimately, the lens of HRBA demonstrate that climate change threatens the core human rights of Pacific Island communities to have access to "sufficient, safe and nutritious food at all times" (p.36).

It is important to note, however, that the appropriateness of applying HRBA to understand human rights issues within non-Western contexts has been contested. Human rights, "as currently reflected in the international human rights system", are considered to be based on Western liberal values" which might not apply to non-Western societies (New Zealand Law Commission Study Paper 17, 2006, p.69). In development theory within the Pacific context, rights-based agendas have been critiqued due to their focus on Western individualistic ideas. Zheng (2019, p.249) asserted that, "at an extremity" the entrenched dominance of Western, "hegemonic voices" within rights-based discourse "facilitates a colonial and imperialistic standard…[that can] undermine the universality and effective application of rights-based doctrines in non-Western contexts" (p.243), such as Pacific Island countries. However, in recognising the overall value of HRBA, Zheng argued that, to begin to dismantle the "normative understanding" and dominance of Western, hegemonic voices in these approaches, HRBA need to be reimagined to ensure that "local-cultural" voices and "social values" from non-Western communities are upheld and prioritised, in order to attain the "genuine achievement of 'universal' human rights" (p.249). This research endeavours to take such an approach.

Acknowledging the crucial role of culture and custom in HRBA, Subedi et al., (2021, p.542) argued that an institutional lens to rights-based discourses is also needed. While Pacific countries might have increasingly ratified international human rights treaties, there has been insufficient institutional reform to ensure there are capacity and resources to protect and promote human rights (p.542). Furthermore, the "local and national ownership" of institutional reform within Pacific countries is essential to initiate the required changes, and governments must be held to account by citizens (p.543), and arguably by civil society and PYLOs, to make the necessary changes.

2.4 HRBA Exhibited in the Advocacy of PYLOs

Pacific youth have demonstrated an adoption of HRBA when engaging with authorities to have a greater influence in decision-making. Fijian youth-led organisations have formed based on rights and youth-involvement approaches, which are different to "typical" youth groups, such as church, sports, and village groups (Vakaoti, 2012, p.10.) Pacific youth have upheld HRBA when advocating on social justice issues, such as gender, sexuality, and climate change (Craney, 2019, p.138). For example, Fijian youth-led activism has risen due to contemporary challenges faced by those with "diverse sexual orientation and identities" (Vakaoti, 2012, p.11). A Fijian gender rights activist, Tura Lewai, asserted that "young people are taught to be seen but not heard" (Craney, 2019, p.139), and PYLOs have sought to resist a cultural "structural minimisation" and "expectations of their subservience" (p.138). These youth are seeking to "overcome hierarchical hindrances" (p.153) and advance their engagement in decision-making. Adopting HRBA has assisted their pursuit to be "full and active citizens" (p.138) who can shape the future of their communities (Vakaoti, 2012, p.11).

Climate-focused PYLOs have also been documented to adopt HRBA. Their advocacy within national and regional political fora for stronger climate action has exhibited rights-based principles of "participation, equality and non-discrimination, accountability and transparency" (Gasparri et al, 2021, p.97). For example, the climate-focused PYLO '*Be the Change'* has sought to expand opportunities for youth in decision-making, by advocating for participation and meaningful engagement in policymaking (p.98). An increasing advocacy of PYLOs, including those focused on climate change, arguably demonstrates an adoption of varying principles within HRBA. These approaches can expand the scope of influence of these organisations, to not only meaningfully engage with political bodies, but to determine their own narratives and futures. This issue will be explored in chapters to follow.

2.5 Summary

This chapter has sought to provide a foundation for this research, not only to partially address the first research objective of defining HRBA, but also to provide a conceptual framing through which this report can seek to address the central research aim, and each of the respective research objectives. The next chapter will now build on this foundation, considering the concept of youth empowerment within development.

Chapter Three
Youth Empowerment

3.1 Introduction

Youth empowerment is another key concept that is utilised within this report, featuring within the overarching research aim and one of the key objectives: to define youth empowerment and understand the extent to which the adoption of HRBA by climate-focused PYLOs has impacted on the empowerment of their members. It is therefore important to establish a theoretical foundation of what is meant by the concept of empowerment, as well as youth empowerment.

3.2 The Nexus Between HRBA and Empowerment

As mentioned in the previous chapter of this report, there is a notable connection between HRBA and the concept of empowerment. HRBA are in fact considered to be "complementary" to the concept of empowerment, as empowerment can "expand and deepen democratic spaces" (Gready, 2008, p.743). One of the six common characteristics within HRBA, mentioned in Chapter Two, is to ensure that rights-bearers are empowered to claim the "minimum core-rights regarding health, education, housing and/or social security" (Broberg, 2017, p.668). Therefore, the inherent connection between HRBA and empowerment is evident in that the concept of empowerment is considered to imply that every person, or a collective group, can "acquire the ability to think and to act freely, to take decisions and to fulfil ... [their] own potential as a full and equal member of society" (p.668). This follows that one of the main objectives of HRBA is to allow both individuals and collective groups to acquire "political, social and/or economic power, so that they are better able to take care of their own (rights-related) interests" (p.668). Moreover, not only can HRBA and empowerment allow people to gain and maintain control of their lives, they can allow local populations to gain control over the development process (p.742).

3.3 Empowerment in Development

Empowerment is a dominant concept in development scholarship, however, as is the case with HRBA and other common concepts that feature within development, it is considered to lack a singular, uncontested definition (Hennink et al., 2012, p.202). Due to this, development thinkers have developed frameworks through which the concept of empowerment can be

understood. For example, a conceptual framework has been developed to assist with understanding how the concept is defined and operationalised at the community-level. A 2012 publication, contributed to by 49 organisations, developed a framework of empowerment which comprised "six mechanisms that enable empowerment": knowledge; agency; opportunity; capacity-building; resources; and sustainability. In addition, within this framework, there were considered to be "five domains of empowerment": health; economic; political; resource; and spiritual, across the individual, community, and organisational levels (p.202). Relatedly, another significant empowerment framework that has been developed, applied in the context of the impact of ecotourism initiatives on local communities, identified four dimensions through which the process of empowerment could be analysed and considered: psychological, economic, social and political (Scheyvens, 1999, p.247).

It is also important to note that development thinkers have made a distinction between empowerment being both a process and a goal, however, it is considered that these are often closely linked (Scheyvens, 2009, p.119). An example of how empowerment can be considered as a process is through the mobilisation of individuals to engage in collective action, which can allow individuals to discover shared interests with others in their community. Through undertaking this process, individual action can be undertaken in the pursuit of empowerment (as a goal itself). An example of how empowerment can be considered as a goal is an individual or group pursuing empowerment so that they can enact positive change, such as gaining more control over resources (Scheyvens, 2009, p.119).

Furthermore, in seeking to understand empowerment as a process, it is also important to acknowledge that there are different forms of power, and to differentiate between them. Conventional Western thinking on empowerment predominantly focuses on a 'power over' definition of power (Rowlands, 1997, p.11), however, different forms can be considered as:

> • "power over: controlling power, which may be responded to with compliance, resistance (which weakens processes of victimisation) or manipulation
> • power to: generative or productive power (sometimes incorporating or manifesting as forms of resistance or manipulation) which creates new possibilities and actions without domination
> • power with: 'a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together'

• power from within: 'the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each one of us and makes us truly human. Its basis is self- acceptance and self-respect which extend, in turn, to respect for and acceptance of others as equals" (Rowlands, 1997, p.13).

Notably, in the context of this report, as this research is focused on looking at the extent to the adoption of HRBA by PYLOs has impacted the empowerment of their members, it is considered that this research relates to, and seeks to understand the process of empowerment through, the aforementioned "power to", "power with", and "power from within" forms of power. The frameworks that have been developed, and the recognition that empowerment can be both a process and a goal, indicate that empowerment itself is "multi-dimensional, context-specific," and "…demands redistribution of power to marginalised groups" (Scheyvens and van der Watt, 2021, p.2).

A critique of empowerment in development, however, is that it might be employed by external, powerful actors who claim to seek to empower marginalised groups in order to promote and entrench their own prescribed agendas (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2008, p.311). Powerful external actors might also expect that marginalised groups pursue and deliver on the development priorities set by these external actors (Scheyvens and van der Watt, 2021, p.2). Using empowerment as an instrument to achieve development goals, or as the gift of external resources from external actors in this way has been referred to as "liberal empowerment" (Sardenberg, 2016, p.22). However, this does not serve to shift existing power relations that are responsible for the unequal relations, or "exclusion, poverty and disempowerment" of these groups (Scheyvens and van der Watt, 2021, p.2). It is therefore important when researching youth empowerment that one does not hold a preconceived expectation of what research participants must have achieved to demonstrate that they are empowered to an "outsider", or that participants have met an objective, true, threshold of empowerment. Rather, one could seek to understand the extent to which the participants consider that they are empowered, or the extent to which participants exhibit various elements of dimensions of empowerment and forms of power.

3.4 Youth Empowerment in Development

Globally, youth are "generally defined as young people aged between 15 and 24" (Chang et. al., 2022, p.1), however, this age range is considered to be greater in the Pacific context. In development, youth are often considered to be among socially disadvantaged groups, as well as women, for example, and development thinkers seek to understand this disadvantage and suggest how this can be addressed, such as presenting possible opportunities that can allow youth to have a voice within decision-making (Scheyvens, 1999, p.247). In recent years, youth empowerment is often referred to in relation to participation in social or political climate and sustainability action. For example, youth empowerment is considered to be "vital" for the "societal ecosocial transition", in relation to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (Chang et. al., 2022, p.1). 'Empowered' climate-focused youth activists, such as Greta Thurnberg, have also gained prominence in recent years, and are considered to adopt a narrative in their advocacy that frames climate change as a justice issue (Han and Wuk Ahn, 2020, p.13).

Conceptions of youth empowerment include emphasising youth strength and the promotion of active participation and "influence in settings which affect their lives (Chang et. al., 2022, p.1). Development thinkers have also sought to distinguish, and conceptualise, youth empowerment, as conceptual understandings and dimensions of empowerment are generally applied in relation to adults, and do not recognise the "multifaceted nature of the social contexts in which youth empowerment takes place" (Úcar Martínez et. al, 2016, p.410). Therefore, in seeking to define and understand youth empowerment, development thinkers have also sought to identify particular dimensions that represent youth empowerment.

A 2016 study, which analysed more than 454 academics works, identified six particular, yet interrelated, dimensions when seeking to conceptualise youth empowerment:

1) personal growth and wellbeing: "the reinforcement of self-esteem";
2) relational: changing dynamics and "the sharing of power between young people and adults";
3) educational: "the gaining of competencies" such as "critical thought and socio-political awareness" and "involvement in change";
4) political: the ability to make decisions and influence political institutions;

5) transformative: developing the ability to critically reflect and take action for social change; and

6) emancipative: young people gaining the confidence to make decisions and cause change in their own lives and in the lives of others (Úcar Martínez et. al, 2016, p.410-411).

While there are similarities and crossovers between the considered dimensions of empowerment and youth empowerment, such as those that relate to political and social dimensions, the youth empowerment dimensions, arguably, have a particular focus on the gaining of confidence to make decisions, and the dismantling of unequal power relations between young people and adults, so that, with this foundation, they can then pursue change at the societal level.

In terms of the critique of both empowerment and youth empowerment, the concepts have been criticised on the basis that they are simplistic assumptions that a particular group within a community are "homogenous entities" who share the same interests and cultural and political beliefs and values, and who mobilise to resist power relations (Yuval-Davis, 1994, p.194). However, this "identity politics" places people in social categories, without regard to their diverse cultures, traditions, values, internal power differences and conflicts of interest (Yuval-Davis, 1994, p194). In the case of young people, there are also internal power structures and dynamics that exist between them, and people can have different interests or beliefs, based on their gender, culture, class, or disability (Ashan, 2009, p. 393).

In considering these critiques, it is therefore important to recognise that there are different specific "positionings" that participants can hold in the process of empowerment, and to recognise the potential for individuals' "positionings" and knowledge to grow and evolve. This idea, considered to be one of "transversal politics" as opposed to "identity-politics", recognises these differences and avoids placing people in "homogenous" social categories and groupings that assumes a collective positioning and view (p.194). It is important to consider and uphold the motivations, interests, and different perspectives of individual members of PYLOs, when seeking to understand the advocacy of their organisations through the lens of youth empowerment, whilst also considering the communal nature of Pacific societies.

3.5 Youth Empowerment in Development Within the Pacific Context

Within the Pacific context, local and international development actors have claimed that youth empowerment is a priority for their initiatives. For example, the UN Development Programme stated that youth have "traditionally faced challenges in fulfilling their potentially important roles", and developed pilot programmes in Fiji that sought to promote youth empowerment in two areas; by improving "capacities on economic livelihoods for rural and urban youth", and by creating "safe spaces for effective dialogue and engagement on key economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights" (UNDP, 2023). A local actor that has recognised the need for a guide to youth empowerment initiatives in the Pacific, and can enable a greater understanding on how youth empowerment is understood in the Pacific context, is Ola Fou Pasifika Youth Development, an educational programme aimed at supporting Pacific-based youth and community workers. This programme developed a model of practice over six years to "guide a Pasifika approach to youth development" in the region, with the intention to understand how youth, as well as youth workers, can "contribute positivity" within their communities. The outcome of this work was the creation of the Youth Empowerment Strategy (YES) Pasifika, which includes six principles that can guide work with youth in the Pacific (Pitanoe et. al., 2018, p.4). These principles centre on:

1) having a youth development-focus;
2) being strength based, as a way to reject the "negative conceptualisations" that have been associated with Pacific youth;
3) the promotion of participation;
4) taking a holistic approach to well-being;
5) fostering strong relationships between youth themselves, as well as with youth workers; and
6) building positive connections between youth and their wider families, communities, and society (Pitanoe et. al., 2018, p.5).

Much of the academic literature on youth empowerment in the Pacific context relates to health promotion (Tupai-Firestone et. al., 2018, p.63-72; Firestone et. al., 2021, p.197-205; Firestone et. al, 2021, p.57-68; Prapaveissis et. al., 2022, p.56-61; Tin et. al., 2022, p.259-261. One particular academic work, also connected to health promotion, focused on Fijian youth entrepreneurs involved in the fruit and vegetable business sector, where entrepreneurs were

found to be “important players in improving the health of their communities”, as they “possessed a high level of social awareness around food and activism in the community” (Cammock, Conn & Nayar, 2021, p.128). Youth entrepreneurs also considered that traditional knowledge “systems and family were integral” to how these youth “envisioned and developed their businesses” (p.127). Recognising that these youth entrepreneurs drew strength from traditional knowledge systems is important when examining the advocacy of Pacific youth through the lens of youth empowerment.

Crucially, discourse on Pacific youth empowerment demonstrates that Pacific peoples consider the concept differently. As opposed to relating youth empowerment to Western individualistic ideas, which often relate to the acquisition of one’s own “education, qualifications,” or “material prosperity”, youth empowerment relates to cultural values, such as “building community skills and social relationships” (Mason, 2011, p.1). An example of this is Melanesian people learning from a young age how “to fish, to plant, build houses from locally available materials”, and to establish their place in their wider community (p.1). A review of youth development programmes tailored for Pacific youth living in Aotearoa New Zealand and the United States of America found that programmes were successful when they were “deeply rooted in Pacific cultural values and traditions” (Eng et al., 2023, p.1029), and prioritised leadership opportunities with the support of mentors who were culturally responsive or who shared a similar background (p.1029). Drawing on the experiences of South Pacific youth, faith can also be a source of empowerment. Pacific youth with a Christian faith might consider that youth empowerment involves reciprocity, through the sharing of “gifts, values, and concerns” (Mason, 2011, p.1). In addition, their collective voice is brought about by their shared faith and can allow for “transformation and growth for their community and nation” (p.13).

3.6 Summary

In considering the nexus between HRBA and empowerment, seeking to define and understand empowerment and youth empowerment, acknowledging the critiques of these concepts, and framing youth empowerment within the Pacific context, this chapter has sought to address the overarching research aim and a key objective, and to contribute to the theoretical foundation for this report. From here, an analysis of the existing literature on the advocacy of PYLOs will be undertaken.

Chapter Four

Research Design

4.1 Introduction

As outlined in the previous chapters, this research project seeks to explore the extent to which climate focused PYLOs have adopted HRBA, and the extent to which this has impacted PYLOs' operations in national, regional, and/or global fora, as well as the empowerment of their members. This chapter sets out the methodology I have utilised to undertake an examination of these phenomena and address each of the research objectives. It will discuss the utility of qualitative research for this report, the chosen research participants, and the two methods used to gather information; document analysis and informal interviews. Finally, this chapter will set out the pertinent ethical considerations.

4.2 A Qualitative Approach

This report has drawn upon qualitative research methods to address the research questions, given their scope to understand the "processes, lived experiences, and belief systems" that are part of individuals, groups and institutions (O'Leary, 2017, p.142). A qualitative approach is also appropriate for research that searches for holistic meaning and that is undertaken with small numbers (p.142). In this case, this approach is suitable and beneficial as this project has sought to draw on the lived experiences and perspectives of PYLOs with regard to HRBA and youth empowerment, the extent to which they have adopted HRBA, and the extent to which HRBA have impacted their operations in political fora.

While the successes of PYLOs in climate action are documented and listed in media publications, and members themselves might be able to quantify the number of instances where their organisations have engaged with political bodies to demand action on climate change, some activists have shared that some of this engagement has not been meaningful or genuine. Qualitative research allows for this complexity and their subjective experiences to be showcased. Narrative and phenomenological qualitative research elements also allow for the participants' lived experiences to be upheld.

Given the intention for participants' subjective experiences and insights to be the centrepiece of this research, narrative and phenomenological research elements therefore have significant utility. Narrative research allows for the telling of a story, comprising rich descriptions, from the perspective of a small number of individuals (Tenny et al., 2022, para. 7), and phenomenological research also has a focus on describing phenomena from the perspective of those with lived experiences (para. 8).

4.3 Participants

Three PYLOs which have undertaken advocacy in climate action, namely the Pacific Climate Warriors (PCW), the Lanulau'ava Student Association (LSA), and the PISFCC, were chosen for this research as they had shown that their advocacy included a focus on human rights. Therefore, they were chosen so that I could seek to understand the extent to which they had adopted HRBA, the extent to which this had impacted the empowerment of their members, as well as their operations in political fora.

I sought to recruit research participants by contacting them at their publicly-available email addresses. As PYLOs actively promote their advocacy efforts online, I could locate their contact details. However, while members of PYLOs responded with polite and keen interest and they endeavoured to find time to meet, ultimately, I was only able to undertake two interviews. One interview was undertaken with a former member of one of the three youth organisations, who continues to be actively working in human rights in Samoa, and who shared insights about the Association's work while it was still operational. The other interview was undertaken with a key informant, Dr. Justin Sobion, who is a Senior Tutor at the University of Auckland and who represented Caribbean nations at the December 2024 ICJ oral hearings. Dr. Sobion also worked closely with members of the PISFCC and could share insights on the ICJ campaign.

4.4 Methods

4.4.1 Literature Review

A literature review is one of the integral methods that has been utilised throughout this project, which can be characterised as "a systematic way of collecting and synthesising previous

research" (Snyder, 2019, p. 333). "An intensive immersion" with the literature at the beginning of the process, and throughout, is essential as it is a task that "must be updated and revised throughout" the writing process (Kamler and Thomson, 2006, p.35). This process involved reviewing and analysing online materials, which were primarily each of the PYLOs' websites and social media accounts, as well as academic journal articles that had been published about the organisations, climate action in the Pacific, HRBA, and/or youth empowerment (Broberg & Sano, 2017; Gusman, 2024; McNamara & Farbotko, 2017; Rikimani, 2024; Si'isi'ialafia-Mau & Percival, 2024; Steiner, 2015; Gusman, 2024; Zheng, 2019).

While Pacific youth, and in particular Pacific youth climate activists, feature in academic literature and many media articles, I was not able to identify another academic work comprising a dedicated focus on the adoption of HRBA by climate-focused youth-led organisations in the Pacific Islands. However, a significant number of media articles have highlighted the PISFCC's campaign to seek an advisory opinion from the ICJ, and the subsequent ICJ hearings in December 2024 (France 24, 2024; Greenpeace, 2024; The Pacific Community, 2024).

When reviewing the academic and grey literature that has been published on PYLOs, HRBA, and youth empowerment, I undertook a thematic analysis to identify key themes and learnings that could be distilled from these materials. For example, when reviewing the academic and grey literature on the advocacy of PYLOs, I identified a focus in this existing material on themes which included the primacy of cultural identities and environmental stewardship.

4.4.2 Webinars

As previously mentioned, while members of PYLOs endeavoured to find time to meet, the interviews that I hoped to undertake with members of each of the chosen PYLOs did not eventuate. In addition to gathering information from interviews and key documents to provide the basis for the findings, I pivoted by attending two publicly available webinars so that I could gather insights from the PISFCC's members and key informants. The two publicly held webinars I attended, were the Climate Mobility and Human Rights in the Pacific webinar hosted by the Pacific Climate Change Migration and Human Security Programme on 19 February 2025, and a webinar hosted by the PISFCC, the Center for International Environmental Law, and World's Youth for Climate Justice on 13 March 2025. The PISFCC's Director, Vishal Prasad, and President, Cynthia Houniuhi, delivered insights at each of these

respective webinars and I have cited the insights from these leaders of the PISFCC within the research findings.

4.4.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are a useful tool in qualitative research as he open-ended phrasing of the questions aligned with qualitative traditions (O'Leary, 2017, p. 133), allowing for participants to share their subjective experiences and interpretations through open-ended answers and storytelling (Ofe-Grant, 2022, para. 8). I used semi-structured interviews in my research, which were one-on-one conversations and designed to be open-ended and informal in nature, to allow for participants to feel comfortable to share their rich experiences and perspectives on advocacy, HRBA and youth empowerment. I advised participants that my intention was for the interview questions to be prompts that could guide and facilitate an open dialogue, rather than the interview style being formal and entirely structured.

When recruiting participants, I provided them with a copy of an information sheet, which contained: an outline of the central research question, the project description, an invitation for them to participate in this research, information about how the information will be managed, and also their rights as participants.

At the beginning of the interviews, after introducing myself and the research topic, I spent time seeking to get to know the participant, with the aim of allowing a rapport to be established. The interview comprised different parts relating to each of the research's central questions, and these parts were used as a guide throughout the interview. Each part is outlined below:

1. The first part comprised questions which asked participants to share their general insights on the organisation, its beginnings, and its overarching motivations.
2. This part comprised questions which sought their insights on their conceptualisation of human rights in general, followed by their insights on HRBA within climate change advocacy in the Pacific context.

3. This part comprised questions which sought their insights on their conceptualisation of youth empowerment in general, and then how it related to their organisation and whether they perceived an impact of HRBA on their organisation's members.
4. This part comprised questions which sought their insights on the successes and breakthroughs that they were most proud of, and the extent to which HRBA played a role. It also sought their insights on whether they perceived that any genuine action had since been taken by institutions or government bodies that recognised human rights issues within climate change.
5. The final part of the interview sought any further insights that they wished to share, including areas of focus that I had not touched on.

It was very important to me that I listen respectively and learn from the participants' responses, as this can help to reciprocate and honour the time that was "gifted" by participants (Flavell and Cunningham, 2022, p.14). In this way, I was not focusing on the next question or steering the conversation along a particular agenda, and this also meant that I did not ask some pre-planned questions. For example, one participant shared that they preferred the concept of youth participation to youth empowerment, as they considered that tokenism and a lack of meaningful engagement with political bodies had not allowed for genuine youth empowerment. The participant felt that the concept had been used by political bodies in some instances to give a perception that they were contributing to youth empowerment, however, the participant did not feel this was the case. We then spoke about youth participation and the meaning of this to them.

After transcribing the interviews, I was able to discern instances where participants had shared their perceptions that corresponded to how they viewed HRBA, their utility in their engagement with political bodies, as well as the empowerment of their members. After the interviews, I provided participants with the opportunity to review their insights prior to them being included in the final report. One participant requested that their name was not included in the final report, and this wish was respected by their insights being assigned to 'a former member of the organisation' when referred to in this report.

4.5 Ethical Considerations and Positionality

4.5.1 Youth Participants and Obtaining Informed Consent

Prior to undertaking the research with participants, the proposed research project underwent the Institute of Development Studies' In-house Ethics Review process, which is based on the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants Revised Code 2017 (Massey University, 2017). This involved submitting a formal ethics application to my Supervisor, followed by a meeting with my Supervisor and another Professor where I discussed the ethical considerations around my proposed research. I was subsequently advised that this research had received a low-risk notification (notification number: 4000029942), and the details of this project had been recorded by the Health Research Council Ethics Committee and the Massey University Research Committee.

It is important to acknowledge that this research has been undertaken with youth-aged participants, however, as the participants are aged sixteen and over, the additional considerations that apply to research being undertaken with children did not apply in this case (Massey University, 2017, p. 13). While there is not a "widely-accepted definition" of youth across Pacific countries, Pacific governments have referred to people in their 30s as being within the youth demographic (Lee and Craney, 2019, p.2). In Fiji, previous research on youth participation in politics and civic engagement found that there was a local preference to refer to youth as being aged 18 to 35 (Vakaoti, 2014, p.2). I chose to interview members of PYLOs that are youth-led, and their membership is representative of youth who are a wide variety of ages.

Informed consent is considered to be "the hallmark of ethical research" and comprises a "three-step process" (Loveridge, 2010, p.4). This process includes ensuring that participants receive an adequate level of information about the research, including that they have a right to withdraw consent, and ensuring that they understand the process (p.4). As previously mentioned, when recruiting participants, I provided them with a copy of an information sheet, which detailed their rights as participants, and I also provided them with the opportunity to review their insights after the interview.

4.5.2 Pacific Research Principles and Positionality

As with development practice, ethics is concerned as much with the means, as it is with the ends of the process. In addition, development research can itself be empowering or disempowering, depending upon the way it is practised (Stewart-Withers, 2020, p.2). The

following features the various considerations and reflections that I have given to Pacific research principles, and my positionality, while undertaking this research.

With my positionality as a non-Pacific Islander based in Aotearoa New Zealand, who was born in the United Kingdom, it is important to reflect on my identity as an 'outsider' to the Pacific. As someone who is not from the country or region where the research participants are based, there are particular principles that needed to inform my research. In this case, these principles relate to respecting the knowledge and traditions of the participants and their communities (Stewart-Withers, 2020, p.6), reciprocity, prioritising the common good, as well as holism (Pacific Research & Policy Centre, 2017, p.17), which recognises the interconnectedness of cultural, social, environmental, spiritual and physical aspects of Pacific research. Considering this framing and worldview that is embodied within "values, practices, behaviours and protocols" (p.19) is important, and aligns with the cultural identities inherent within Pacific youth activism which will be discussed in the next chapter.

I endeavoured to build trust and meaningful relationships with PYLOs and the key informant from my initial communications with them, and during and after the interviews. I also sought to underscore the expertise and moral leadership of the Pacific youth participant and the wider Pacific climate movement within this research. As researcher-participant relationships evolve when there is a building of trust, this can also reduce a researcher's "fixed identity" as either an outsider or an insider (Flavell and Cunningham, 2022, p.14), however, this is particularly in instances where the researcher has spent considerable time in the community alongside the participants.

In the Pacific context, respect is also demonstrated through valuing relationships (Pacific Research & Policy Centre, 2017, p.13), emphasising the importance of upholding and honouring the relationships between the researcher and participants, and, crucially, between participants and their existing relationships within their communities and organisations. In Pacific research, there is also the important notion of "service and prioritising the common good" for Pacific people throughout the research process, including how the research is undertaken, and how the information is "disseminated" (Pacific Research & Policy Centre, 2017, p.13). Therefore, this research has been undertaken and presented with the aim of recognising and paying respect to participants' insights, and their existing relationships with their communities and the bodies with which they engage within their activism.

Practising reciprocity is an “integral part” of the research process in the Pacific context, as it helps to ensure that the research is beneficial for participants and their communities (Pacific Research & Policy Centre, 2017, p.12). Reciprocity also encapsulates the “essence of communal and collective values”, and furthermore, Stewart-Withers et al. (2014) consider it to be the "glue that builds and binds the social capital of communities” (as cited in Pasifika @ Massey Directorate’s Office, 2017, p.13). It is also important to recognise the differences in what might be considered ethical, in terms of reciprocity, from Western and Pacific perspectives. For example, Western perspectives might consider acts of reciprocity as potential conflicts of interests, however, from Pacific perspectives, these acts might be in service and respect of relationships and obligations to others in communities (Stewart-Withers, 2020, p.2). As well as ensuring access to the research findings, reciprocity can be demonstrated through gift giving, and “time and service” (Pacific Research & Policy Centre, 2017, p.17). In this case, I have sought to “recompense in an equivalent or alternative manner” (Massey University, 2017, p. 13) by offering to contribute to these organisations in any ways that are most meaningful for them, for example making a monetary donation to their organisations, or by contributing to any upcoming written materials or publications for these organisations.

Having aimed to build and maintain a positive, mutually-beneficial relationship with members of PYLOs for the duration of this research process, and beyond the completion of the research, I hope to foster an ongoing relationship with research participants. I also consider that this relates to this common thread of reciprocity, as I believe that researchers are indebted to research participants and should endeavour to reciprocate the time and valuable insights that have been provided during the research process. Ultimately, in endeavouring to honour and respect the research participants, their associated organisations, communities, I have sought to be accountable to these parties and wish to “prioritise the impact” that this research could have on these communities (Massey University, 2017, p.13).

4.6 Limitations

While the aim was for the interviews to be undertaken with at least one member of each of the three chosen PYLOs, ultimately, I was unable to secure interviews with a member of each organisation. I exchanged warm correspondence with PYLOs for many months and also engaged a young Pacific leader who had an existing relationship with members of some

organisations and offered to provide introductions. Despite their willingness to participate, due to competing demands on their time, unfortunately, these interviews did not eventuate. This led to pivoting to another strategy and attending publicly available webinars. This research was also limited as I did not have the resources to travel, and it was therefore desk-based. Ideally, these interviews would have been undertaken in person and made for more meaningful connections with participants, and this would have certainly garnered richer research findings.

As a Pākehā student based in Aotearoa New Zealand and someone who does not share a cultural connection with the participants, I am an outsider to the Pacific and therefore, participants might feel that I am therefore not able to relate to their circumstances. In the Pacific context, participants might respond differently to researchers "depending on their age, gender, cultural rank or community standing" (Violeti, 2006, p.22). However, to mitigate this, I worked to form warm and positive relationships with participants and expressed immense gratitude for the opportunity to meet with them and hear their insights.

4.7 Summary

Prior to embarking on this research project, I was conscious that my research design might evolve, as one's perspectives might "invariably shift" as different phases of the project unfold (Murray and Overton, 2014, p.17). The intention to utilise qualitative approaches has remained, and while I would have undoubtedly preferred to conduct in-person research, the literature review, webinars, and semi-structured online interviews have provided important findings, and have given primacy to the insights and perspectives of Pacific youth. An analysis of the literature on the advocacy of PYLOs will be presented in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five

The Advocacy of Pacific Youth-Led Organisations

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of the literature that foregrounds the advocacy of climate-focused PYLOs. Drawing upon academic and grey materials, it comprises a description of the three chosen PYLOs and their origins, a discussion of their various forms of advocacy, the primacy of cultural identities and environmental stewardship, their efforts to shift external narratives, and the barriers that PYLOs can face as they undertake their unrelenting fight against the climate crisis.

5.2 The Origins of the Chosen PYLOs

Pacific youth-led climate activism can stem from, and occur within, various areas within society. For example, youth groups that already exist within faith-based organisations might pivot to incorporate climate activism, or external youth activists might also choose to partner with these organisations, aware of the potential to engage with far greater audiences and deliver their messaging around climate adaptation efforts (Fache and Fair, 2020, p.241). Other PYLOs may originate from groups formed on university campuses. One of the chosen organisations, the PISFCC, began in 2019 with 27 law students from different Pacific Island countries, based at the Emalus Campus of the University of the South Pacific in Vanuatu (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025). Another chosen organisation, the LSA, was formerly based at the National University of Samoa (it is currently inactive), and it was made up of approximately 20 members. Whereas, the other chosen organisation, the PCW, is the Pacific arm of the global grassroots social movement 350.org. This global movement comprises members from Pacific Island countries, Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, and the United States of America, with most of its membership under the age of 35 (350 Pacific, n.d).

5.3 Forms of Pacific Youth Advocacy

Pacific youth activists have demonstrated various forms of advocacy for stronger climate action (Si'isi'ialafia-Mau & Percival, 2024, p.65). PYLOs are also "harnessing both traditional and digital avenues" of climate activism within their communities, and at the national and international levels (p.65). The LSA, formerly operational at the National University of Samoa in Apia, organised educational initiatives to promote the protection of the environment, ocean, and culture (Samoa Observer, 2020). Pacific youth climate activists have also centred Pacific culture and traditions within their advocacy, using art and storytelling to illustrate the threat of climate change to their islands (Si'isi'ialafia-Mau & Percival, 2024, p.68). For example, the PCW have organised protests and parades (Fig.3), as well as performance-based awareness initiatives at key events that feature singing, dancing, and war challenges to convey their lived experiences of culture and climate change to the world (Steiner, 2015, p.151).

Fig. 3 The PCW held the Build Better Now Parade in Tonga to demand stronger climate action (Te Ao Māori News, 2024).

5.4 Pacific Cultural Identities and Environmental Stewardship

The pivotal role of PYLOs in the global climate movement is especially due to their climate activism being grounded in Pacific environmental stewardship and ontologies that inherently recognise the interconnectedness between the health of their culture, society, and environment (Newport et al., 2024, p.540). Given this interconnection, Pacific youth therefore understand that environmental degradation and "existential sea-level rise" (Ahmed, 2024, p.3) also threatens the erosion of their cultural identity and practices that their ancestors have upheld for millennia (Gusman, 2024, p.11). PYLOs can also be perceived as "uniting under a shared Oceanic identity" (Si'isi'ialafia-Mau & Percival, 2024, p.69), that seeks to protect their *fa'asinomaga*a, Samoan-derived concept that encompasses this united identity, ancestry, and "sense of belonging that are ingrained in many Pacific cultures" (p.65). Notably, this shared identity differentiates their approaches from "Western and Eurocentric notions of climate activism" (p.65) that primarily focuses on scientific data.

5.5 Shifting External Narratives from Victimhood to Agents of Change

A clear message distilled from the literature on climate-focused PYLOs is that they are striving to shun outsiders' perspectives of Pacific Islanders as drowning within the climate crisis. Refusing to abide the notion that Pacific Island peoples are "passive victims of climate change" (McNamara & Farbotko, 2017, p.23), PYLOs are showing that Pacific Islanders are active agents of change and leaders who are fighting for their people, lands, and oceans (Fair, 2015, p.58). A dedicated analysis of the PCW showed that, in addition to "historical patriarchal dominance" being addressed through female warriors taking a central role in upholding the importance of kinship, religion and ancestral wisdom in climate activism (p.24), the organisation is reclaiming their own narrative on the world stage. The centrepiece of their prominent 2014 campaign saw warriors setting out in traditional canoes to block coal ships from entering the world's largest coal port in Newcastle, Australia (Fig.3), which demonstrated the warriors' resolve to "resist narratives about the future demise of their homelands" (p.24).

Fig. 4. On October 14, 2014, members of the PCW set out in traditional canoes to block coal ships from entering the world's largest coal port in Newcastle, Australia. (Tan and 350 Pacific, 2014, as cited in McNamara, 2017).

5.6 Barriers Faced by PYLOs in their Climate Advocacy

While there are exceptions such as the example of the female PCW outlined above, research in the Pacific and Asia has highlighted that gender norms and discrimination can prevent girls and young women from accessing resources and decision-making (Tran et al, 2023, p.3), and youth representatives have therefore been called upon to work to foster a safe civic space for girls and young women to be able to meaningfully engage in climate action (p.4). In addition, PYLOs have experienced tokenism when seeking engagement with political bodies and decision-makers, for example when attending international conferences (Boege, 2023, p.22). Youth activists have found that while they have been appointed to positions and "symbolic roles", there has been an absence of meaningful and genuine engagement with these political bodies (p.22). PYLOs have also faced barriers in accessing climate finance needed to undertake their advocacy efforts. For example, the Coalition of Youths for Environmental Sustainability in the Solomon Islands operate locally-led climate change adaptation efforts and have experienced barriers to accessing funding, such as "overly complex donor processes and requirements" (Fidali et al., 2023, p.4), a lack of recognition by donors of the value of the organisation's role, and challenges with navigating relationships and power imbalances with both donors and state governments (p.4).

PYLOs have also faced barriers within their communities as they have sought to challenge their roles and standing in society, and negotiate change to traditional ideas of leadership (Craney, 2022, Unlocking the Power of Youth section, para. 6). While the PCW have sought to challenge these traditional ideas of leadership, members of this organisation also recognised that it is important to uphold the notion of leadership to effect change (para. 5). Although young people have not been seen as traditional leaders in society, the organisation has targeted young individuals who have demonstrated leadership potential as "agents of change", and nominated them to lead the organisation's advocacy efforts in the individual's country (para. 6).

5.7 Summary

This chapter has discussed the existing academic and grey literature on the advocacy of climate-focused PYLOs, focusing on key learnings and themes that have emerged from this material: the areas of society where the three chosen PYLOs originate from; the various forms of their advocacy; the primacy of Pacific cultural identities; their efforts to shift external narratives; and the barriers they can face within their advocacy. This chapter has illustrated that PYLOs are carving out space for their unique advocacy and promoting narratives that honour their leadership and embody their collective potential. Following this and the preceding chapters that have focused on the conceptual and methodological elements that underpin this research, the next chapter will outline the research findings.

Chapter Six
Research Findings

6.1 Introduction

Having addressed the definitional components of the key research objectives in previous chapters, this chapter will present findings which address the remaining components of the three key research objectives: to understand the extent to which PYLOs have adopted HRBA in their advocacy; to understand the extent to which an adoption of HRBA by PYLOs has impacted the empowerment of their members; and to understand the extent to which HRBA has impacted the operations of PYLOs in national, regional, and/or global political fora. The findings presented in each respective section will draw on insights from research undertaken with, and of, each of the three chosen organisations: the PISFCC; the LSA; and the PCW.

6.2 The Adoption of HRBA in the Advocacy of PYLOs

6.2.1 Revisiting the Identified Commonalities of HRBA

Chapter Two of this report identified six commonalities between different HRBA, which can assist with creating an understanding of how actors, such as PYLOs, can adopt these approaches. A brief reminder of these six commonalities within HRBA are as follows:

1. The first is the utilisation of the concept of rights itself, whereby an actor adopts rights-based thinking and principles to pursue the realisation of rights entitlements.
2. The second is that rights-holders must be able to assert their rights against the duty-bearers, and there must be a corresponding obligation between the two parties.
3. The third is that actors will focus on supporting duty-bearers to uphold their responsibility in responding to rights-bearers' claiming of their rights, and ensure that rights-bearers are empowered to claim their minimum core-rights.
4. The fourth is the recognition that discrimination and inequality are among the main drivers of climate injustices.
5. The fifth is that they apply the two crucial components of activism and advocacy, which can both enable the participation and inclusion of citizens.

6. The sixth is the recognition that climate change impacts cannot be directly considered in relation to a single, distinct right which can be targeted in isolation.

In order to understand the extent to which PYLOs have adopted HRBA in their advocacy, this research has identified where PYLOs have exhibited some of the aforementioned common threads within HRBA. The relevant commonalities are discussed in turn below.

6.2.2 The Adoption of Rights-based Thinking and Principles

The advocacy of PYLOs has exhibited the adoption of rights-based thinking and principles to pursue the realisation of rights entitlements for citizens. However, in this context, the advocacy of PYLOs has adopted rights-based thinking that contrasts to Western conceptualisations of human rights.

The LSA ran community outreach workshops, particularly in rural areas, where facilitators would visit schools to educate young people on environmental issues, including pollution and plastics, as well as climate change. A former member recalled a workshop that was run by five facilitators for approximately three hours at a school on Savai'i Island, Samoa. They considered that, throughout this workshop and others, the organisation adopted rights-based thinking to educate young people on how climate change posed a risk to their rights and different societal groups. This consideration of the impacts of climate change on the rights of groups aligns with a common conceptualisation of human rights in Samoa. The former member noted that unlike Samoa, the Western conceptualisation of human rights does not take into consideration the familial aspects of human rights.

> "There is not the individualism that exists in Western societies, you're part of a whole, you have to consider your rights and what you should have in the context of your family, your church, or your community" (a former member of the LSA).

The PISFCC has placed rights-based thinking and principles at the very heart of its endeavours. From seeking support from the Vanuatu Government, to Pacific governments, this led to the Pacific seeking a majority vote at the UN General Assembly, which would request that the world's highest court, the ICJ, provides "an authoritative advisory opinion on the legal obligations of states with respect to climate change and human rights" (Prasad, PCCMHS

webinar, February 19, 2025). Put simply, the PISFCC campaigner, Siosiua Alo Veikune, reflected that upholding human rights in addressing the climate crisis is "generally bringing people to the core of the solution" (ABC, 2024, para. 3).

With most of the PCW's membership being under the age of 35, this is representative of their belief that, as youth will experience the worst impacts of human-induced climate change, youth should lead the efforts to address it (Craney, 2022, Case Study II: 350 Pacific section, para. 2). The advocacy of the PCW has adopted rights-based thinking through its focus on the protection of lives, livelihoods, and homes from the impacts of climate change. In particular, the organisation has adopted rights-based thinking and principles, recognising the threat of climate change to indigenous rights. In 2020, Mary Moeono-Kolio, a member of the PCW, warned of this threat to the rights of Pacific peoples.

> "For over 3000 years, our cultures have been tied to our environment … It's personal because it's the lives and livelihoods of our families and friends that are being destroyed" (Earthbeat, 2020, para. 6).

6.2.3 The Assertion of Rights and Supporting Duty-Bearers to be Responsible

The advocacy of PYLOs has sought to ensure that 'rights-holders' can assert their rights against the duty-bearers, and support duty-bearers to uphold their responsibility in responding to rights-bearers' claiming of their "minimum core-rights.

The PISFCC's Director, Vishal Prasad, noted in a webinar that an advisory opinion would aid with an assertion of rights and support duty-bearers to be responsible.

> "Citizens can hold states accountable and affirm that the crisis we face is not just an environmental emergency, but a profound human rights issue that imperils future generations" (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025).

Following the UN General Assembly adopting a "historic resolution" in March 2023 which requested an advisory opinion on climate change and human rights and where, under Vanuatu's leadership, over 130 countries co-sponsored the resolution by consensus, 80 states then submitted written submissions in March 2024 to shape the advisory opinion (WY4CJ, n.d.,

para. 6). From 2-13 December 2024, the ICJ held oral hearings on the campaign for an advisory opinion on climate change and human rights, where the PISFCC declared how international law could ensure that states are required to uphold the rights of present and future citizens. In particular, Prasad outlined the following five themes that Pacific representatives brought to the oral hearings:

1. The Paris agreement, "while important, is insufficient on its own to secure climate protection".
2. "Climate treaties do not impose binding obligations to mitigate or adapt to the crisis and the ICJ must clarify these requirements of states".
3. "Environmental principles must be reaffirmed and expanded to cover greenhouse gas emissions, despite their diffused origins".
4. "Legal rights for future generations must also be recognised".
5. "The production and consumption of fossil fuels are the primary drivers of climate change. Therefore, states must be obligated to phase out fossil fuels and seize actions that harm the climate system" (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025).

This campaign to seek a legal instrument from the ICJ, which would set out states' obligations under international law, has demonstrated how the PISFCC have asserted their rights against the duty-bearers (states), and sought to support states to uphold their responsibility to rights-bearers' (citizens') claiming of their minimum core-rights regarding their lands and livelihoods.

> "Human rights law has traditionally not addressed climate change directly, yet the [Pacific] region argued that the devastating impacts of climate change undeniably affect human rights, and states have a duty to prevent, minimize and remedy these violations" (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025).

The advocacy of the PCW has also sought to ensure that citizens can assert their rights against state actors, and support states to uphold their responsibility in responding to citizens' claiming of their rights. The organisation has directly lobbied local government representatives, organised demonstrations, initiated online campaigns to enable people to contact their representatives, and continued to publish video and photo content showing how climate change is already affecting their daily lives (Craney, 2022, Case Study II: 350 Pacific section, para. 4).

The organisation also publishes resources to encourage people to up-skill and build their capacity in climate activism, such as facilitating workshops, deepening knowledge about the climate crisis and recruiting others (350 Pacific, n.d.). A Coordinator for the PCW based in Fiji noted in 2022 that their organisation endeavours to "embed a sense of ownership and leadership" in their local communities, by responding to their specific needs. They noted that this is done in a way that works best for the community, which can ultimately encourage ownership and leadership "from the ground up" (para. 5).

It is important to note that the LSA was founded to raise awareness among youth about climate impacts and allow a platform that "empowers youth to raise their voices and tell their stories" (Global Citizen, 2021, para. 2), rather than having a particular focus on holding the state accountable to protect the rights of citizens. A former member of the organisation confirmed that their efforts were directed towards educating and empowering other youth, particularly in schools, so that they had awareness of how climate change could affect their rights and their lives, as opposed to directly seeking to hold decision-makers to account. They also noted that they were "wary" of trying to hold their government to account, as given the size of Samoa's population, the government is "very particular about criticism in any form, because it can affect future prospects that they have in the workforce".

6.2.4 The Recognition that Discrimination and Inequality are Drivers of Climate Injustice

The advocacy of PYLOs has exhibited the fourth common characteristic within HRBA, which is the recognition that discrimination and inequality are among the main drivers of climate injustices in the Pacific.

The advocacy of the LSA sought to address the vulnerability and marginalisation of youth, as well as particular groups of youth in Samoan society, to empower them with the education on environmental issues and climate change they needed in order to have a voice. A former member noted that the organisation focused on "supporting particular groups, such as girls, people with disabilities, children, and students, who may indiscriminately bear the brunt of climate impacts".

Acknowledging the inequity of climate change impacts on future generations, the PISFCC's President, Cynthia Houniuhi, declared that the current generation's duty to live and thrive with their environment is their "understanding of the legal principle of intergenerational equity" (PISFCC, 2025). Director, Vishal Prasad, noted the climate injustice that is particularly

impacting “the most vulnerable communities in the Pacific”, and that developed nations “could be held to account for supporting vulnerable countries” and other communities who are on the front lines of climate change (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025). The PISFCC’s campaign is seeking to ensure that “environmental law recognises the principle of intergenerational equity”, so that legal rights are in place for future generations (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025).

The advocacy of the PCW has also sought to highlight the injustice of climate change disproportionately impacting Pacific Island countries, and it recognises that the climate crisis risks the exacerbation of existing inequalities in societies.

> “Climate change is a symptom of deeper injustice and inequalities. Gender justice and women’s human rights and empowerment is a precondition for climate, social, economic, ecological, and climate justice” (350 Pacific, n.d., Top Line Messages section, para. 5).

This recognition of the complexity of the issues that climate change causes demonstrates the organisation’s commitment to supporting those in society who are set to bear the brunt of the worst climate impacts.

6.2.5 Facilitating the Participation and Inclusion of Citizens through Advocacy

The advocacy of PYLOs has exhibited the use of activism and advocacy to enable the participation and inclusion of citizens in “political, economic, cultural and social processes” (Broberg & Sano, 2017, p.668).

A former member of the LSA reflected that their organisation endeavoured to bridge the gap that made it challenging for young people to participate in climate action. They championed the “active participation of youths in climate change” and noted that it was important to present the issue of climate change to young people in a language that they understand, and how it would directly affect them. In addition, a specific pilot project undertaken in partnership with the Samoa Conservation Society, the Ministry of Education Sports and Culture, and the National University of Samoa, aimed to “educate Samoan youths on the science behind the cause and effects” of climatic changes, and to give them the tools to carry out carbon audits to calculate the carbon footprints of their schools (National University of Samoa, 2021, para. 2).

Ultimately, the organisation hoped that this pilot project would lead to “curiosity and passion” within the students and “encourage community participation” (para. 10).

The PISFCC’s activism has also placed the participation and inclusion of citizens at its core. Its campaign to take the issue of climate change and human rights to the ICJ has been to use “grassroots initiatives and forge collaborative partnerships” (Rikimani, 2024, p.381) to ensure that the voices of Pacific citizens are elevated and considered by international law makers. The statement of Director, Vishal Prasad, as part of the oral hearings in December 2024, gave voice to Pacific citizens, including a citizen from Kiribati, Isabella Teueu, which Prasad requested that the ICJ keep in mind, as well as other testimonies, as they deliberate following the oral hearings (PISFCC, 2025).

> “The ocean, once a nurturing mother, has become a vengeful giant, swallowing the land it once cradled. It no longer only gives life - it now takes it, inch by inch. Where it once offered sustenance, it now brings destruction, its rising tides a cold and unrelenting force that pulls homes, cultures, and futures into its depths” (PISFCC, 2025).

The PCW’s activism and advocacy has also sought to facilitate the participation and inclusion of citizens. Ahead of the UN Climate Change Conference 2021 (COP26), the PCW supported the development of demands from the Pacific region. Within the prevailing messages put forward by the PCW to states attending COP26, was the demand that negotiations are inclusive, that they should “not dare to marginalise the voices of Pacific Island peoples” (350 Pacific, n.d., Top Line Messages section, para. 6-7).

> “Your emissions are already responsible for the loss of human rights and environmental rights of Pacific people, communities, and ecosystems” (350 Pacific, n.d., Top Line Messages section, para. 6-7).

6.2.6 Awareness that Climate Change Threatens a Range of Human Rights

The advocacy of PYLOs has recognised the multifaceted and interconnected ways that climate change poses a threat to a range of citizen's human rights.

A former member of the LSA discussed the organisation's recognition that climate change threatens many basic rights of citizens. They considered that one of the most critical rights that climate change threatens in Samoa is the right to food security, because of the impacts on local fishing supplies as well as crops from droughts, flooding, landslides, and cyclones.

> "When we look at climate change in the context of human rights, we need to consider that there are so many rights that can be lost … Our plantations follow along the rivers, which are prone to flooding and overflowing. In the wet season, it's dangerous with landslides and a lot of plantations can be gone just like that".

Among the other critical rights they considered that climate change threatens is access to clean water due to saltwater intrusion and the degradation of the water supply, as well as and the rights concerning the dignity of a person. They also recalled the many impacts on the rights of communities in Samoa following the destruction from Cyclone Evan in 2012.

> "When it hit Samoa, a lot of families were evacuated and displaced, it was very destructive. My school was an evacuation centre, and during this time, we saw that there was a lot of violence that went on. There was a lot of sexual exploitation of girls and children. So, if this happens more often, we have more violence. That's why I think it is very important to consider climate change in a human rights aspect as well."

The PISFCC's activism demonstrates a strong awareness of the multifaceted and interconnected ways that climate change poses a threat to a range of human rights, and this was a salient part of their message during their campaign to the ICJ.

> "The climate crisis significantly impacts human rights in all its dimensions", which includes "infringing the right to life" (PISFCC, n.d, para. 1), as well as the right to "adequate food, water, health, housing, productive use of property, cultural practices and traditions" (para. 4).

The PCW also demonstrate a recognition that climate change poses a risk to a variety of human rights. An example of this is the organisation sharing stories of their members' lived experiences on the frontlines of climate change. One of their members from Kiribati, Itinterunga Rae Bainteiti, shared their family's story of forced migration after Australia and New Zealand discovered phosphate on Banaba Island and forced its people to relocate to the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Tarawa, and Rabi island in Fiji in the 1920s (350 Pacific, n.d., Itinterunga Rae Bainteiti section, para 1).

> "Climate change is forcing another wave of migration and we know how important it is for there to be plans in place to make sure that … they can do so with dignity … We want to ensure that they are guaranteed basic human rights. The right to life, the right to access their homeland and the right to be their authentic selves wherever they want to call home" (para. 5-6).

6.3 The Impact of HRBA on the Empowerment of PYLOs' Members

6.3.1 The Impact on the Empowerment of the PISFCC's Members

The adoption of HRBA by the PISFCC has arguably had an impact on the empowerment of their members. Through their membership and participation, which has drawn on HRBA, the youth activists have demonstrated self-confidence and a strengthening of social cohesion around a common purpose, which are hallmarks of empowerment (Scheyvens and van der Watt, 2021, p.11). A Senior Tutor at the University of Auckland who represented Caribbean nations at the December 2024 oral hearings at the ICJ and worked closely with members of the PISFCC, Dr. Justin Sobion, considered that it was evident that the adoption of HRBA had impacted the empowerment of their members. From their grassroots beginnings, the students went on to approach the Vanuatu Government, which Sobion reflected was "alone a big thing to get one state to listen to you". He reflected that their strategic and altruistic focus on human rights, in particular the rights of future generations, is "a hallmark of their lobbying", and empowered them to pursue a "cause that they are really fighting for". Sobion also reflected that the empowerment of the members was particularly evident during their remarks as part of the oral hearings at the ICJ in December 2024.

> "The youths became a state unto themselves. We have 193 states at the UN, and if you could name a 194th state, it would be the Pacific Island students. They did not depend on anybody else, they knew what they wanted, and they stuck to that plan. Youths at the ICJ were never before heard of. They were highly empowered in my view. I was really impressed with the work they did" (Dr. Justin Sobion).

The upskilling and training of youth members, a hallmark of empowerment, is evident in the PISFCC's journey. Justin Sobion reflected that the PISFCC have learned how they could use technology to their advantage in their activism to promote the protection of human rights, which made them "movers and shakers at the ICJ". He noted that while the industrial revolution and science has led us to the climate crisis, the use of technology might also lead us out of this crisis. Another example of their focus on human rights contributing to the empowerment of members of the PISFCC is through their efforts to challenge existing power dynamics at the national and international levels. The spearheading of this campaign to the ICJ, and the lobbying of state governments throughout this journey, has resulted in political leaders engaging with, and upholding, the youth voice. A government official from a Pacific state shared with Justin Sobion that the youth members presented themselves in such a way, and had exhibited "a kind of aura", that there "was no way he could refuse their demands".

6.3.2 The Impact on the Empowerment of the PCW's Members

In addition to the PCW adopting HRBA in their advocacy to empower their communities in the face of the climate crisis, the adoption of HRBA has arguably had an impact on the empowerment of their members. Akin to the PISFCC, throughout PCW's journey, members have created resources and undertaken training to up-skill, a hallmark of empowerment, so that they can make a greater impact in promoting the protection of the rights of their communities. The organisation established the Pacific Pawa Up Fellowship, where youth members from nine Pacific countries attended a 12-week training course to strengthen their skills and deepen their knowledge about "Pacific activism and identity" (PISFCC, 2024, para. 16). During the COVID-19 pandemic, this training course provided members with the opportunity to equip with "essential skills" needed to develop as climate leaders, and particularly amid a "rapidly changing landscape" (Pasifika Environews, 2020, para. 2). In another particular instance, the PCW promoted the upskilling of Pacific Islander youth living across Australia, ahead of the

2025 federal election. The two-day training session encouraged Pacific youth based in Australia to exchange stories and equip themselves "to return to their communities as powerful advocates for climate action" (Pacific Climate Warriors, 2025).

The adoption of HRBA by the PCW, such as seeking to hold duty-bearers and powerful bodies accountable and enable the participation and inclusion of citizens, has also arguably impacted the empowerment of members, for example by strengthening social cohesion and networks among youth. Using HRBA in their advocacy, such as the organising of events to increase opportunities for participation in climate discourse, speaking up "inside closed-door meetings" (350.org, 2024, para. 9), and engaging with civil society, has arguably contributed to increased empowerment for both members and the wider Pacific youth community. Instead of beginning with "big bank accounts, big funders, or big email lists", the PCW have used "a unique approach" of empowering members and other young people to "understand the issue of climate change and to take action to protect and enrich our islands, cultures, and oceans" (350 Pacific, n.d. para. 8).

> "What we do have is a network of courageous young Pacific Islanders - from Niue to Tuvalu - that have been learning new skills and campaign tactics to take on the challenge of achieving global action on climate change - the future of our islands depends on it" (para. 10).

6.3.3 The Impact on the Empowerment of the LSA's Members

The adoption of HRBA by the LSA arguably had an impact on the empowerment of their members. A former member noted that HRBA had a direct connection with empowerment.

> "When you take a human rights approach, you're talking about how you can uphold the esteem and protect the dignity of another person, how can we treat them with respect, and that's something that is very dear to Samoan hearts." [HRBA] "are very empowering for Samoan people because we are one people, we need to take care of everyone, and [through HRBA] you're saying, how can I protect my community?".

As with the other two organisations, through a focus on HRBA, the youth activists demonstrated an increase in their self-confidence, a hallmark of empowerment. The former member reflected that it was this increase in confidence that encouraged them to join the organisation. “One of the reasons why I aspired to be a part of it was because I did see a lot of confidence in members”.

As with the other two organisations, members of the LSA also undertook training prior to facilitating the education workshops with school students. Members participating in the “outreach programmes had to up-skill first” and ensure that they had awareness of climate impacts before engaging with the school students. A former member also noted that this collective focus on the rights of different communities within their advocacy did increase the social cohesion and networking within, and across different, organisations. However, they noted that this cohesion was also in part due to members being required to follow and respect the guidelines and structures that had already been established. In the event that they had proposed a change to the established operations, they recalled that it might have been difficult to do so, as they were required to respect those who came before them. They reflected that this notion of following existing guidelines aligned with “Samoan communities being based on respect”, and particularly “a respect for elders”.

While this former member expressed that they had observed an increase in elements of self-empowerment within their organisation, such as an increase in confidence, up-skilling, and social cohesion and networking, they had come to “resent the concept of youth empowerment” generally, as they had seen “a lot of tokenism” around the concept. In relation to government initiatives or decision-making processes which claimed to empower youth, the former member considered that youth were often only invited so that they were seen to be included, as opposed to being able to meaningfully engage in political processes. They noted that this tokenism and insincerity around youth empowerment meant that they preferred the concept of active participation, as this gives genuine regard to the youth voice.

6.4 The Impact of HRBA on PYLOs' Operations at Different Levels

6.4.1 The Impact of HRBA on the PISFCC's Operations

The adoption of HRBA by the PISFCC has proven to have significant utility within their operations at the national, regional, and global levels. From their campaign's beginning as students sharing ideas and common frustrations at university, their sphere of influence has seen a continued rise, elevating through the national, regional, and global levels.

6.4.1.1 The Impact of HRBA on their Operations at the National Level

The PISFCC's Director, Vishal Prasad, reflected that, as university students, they were "frustrated by the lack of traction in the collective global action on the climate crisis", and they pondered a key question: could "international law serve as the vehicle to demand and secure real climate justice?" (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025). As part of their university studies, members undertook an Environmental Law course and researched the "most climate-ambitious tool that can push negotiations for better outcomes" (Rikimani, 2024, p.381). Recognising the intersection between climate change and human rights, they came up with the "audacious and ambitious idea" of the advisory opinion (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025), and they began engaging with the Vanuatu Government. Through discussion with Vanuatu's Foreign Affairs Minister, at that time, on the human rights implications of climate change, the Minister listened to their concerns, and after two years of dialogue, this led to the Government agreeing to take up the organisation's proposal to put forward an advisory opinion on human rights and climate change (Rikimani, 2024, p.382).

6.4.1.2 The Impact of HRBA on their Operations at the Pacific Regional Level

At the regional level, the PISFCC's adoption of HRBA led to all of the Pacific Island nations coming on board to "support Vanuatu's push for an ICJ advisory opinion" in relation to climate change and human rights (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025). Joanna Gusman, a former Regional Adviser for Human Rights and Social Development at the Pacific Community, supported the PISFCC on the journey to the ICJ. She reflected that this campaign "made history in many ways", including that the written submissions from Pacific countries ahead of the ICJ

hearings represented the highest level of Pacific participation in history (Gusman, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025).

In preparation of the written and oral submissions from each Pacific country, regional writing workshops were held to discuss legal strategies and how countries could present issues on behalf of the region in a harmonised way (Gusman, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025).

> "Human rights were a central theme" in the Pacific's submissions, particularly in relation to climate-induced displacement and relocation, detailing "exactly how human rights are potentially violated in those situations", from rights relating to "education, to food, water, and the safety of woman et cetera… The success of this campaign, and the Pacific's collective action, may be studied by students and legal scholars in the future." (Gusman, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025).

The PISFCC's campaign is also considered to have demonstrated the "effectiveness of the Pacific model" and "the strength of Pacific regionalism", through uniting Pacific voices and "drawing on the collective power of regional solidarity" (Si'isi'ialafia-Mau & Percival, 2024, p.65). This regional collaboration is also considered to highlight the organisation's "evolving strategy that leveraged both local and regional cooperation" for impactful climate advocacy (p.69).

6.4.1.3 The Impact of HRBA on their Operations at the Global Level

The adoption of HRBA within the PISFCC's campaign has also ultimately led to climate action at the global level. Following the organisation's lobbying of the Vanuatu Government, and gaining support at the Pacific regional level, this led to the campaign reaching a "historic milestone" with the UN General Assembly adopting a "groundbreaking resolution by consensus with 132 co-sponsors" to request an advisory opinion in relation to climate change and human rights (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025). After this resolution, the "91 written submissions, 62 written comments, and 107 oral submissions" presented to the ICJ led to this campaign setting "a new record for the world's biggest climate case" (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025). This advisory opinion has also received the most submissions in the ICJ's history, since it was founded after World War II "to ensure peace and harmony across our planet" (Pacific community, 2024, Pacific by numbers section, para. 1). The deliberations by the ICJ of this advisory opinion in relation to climate change and human

rights demonstrates the power of this Pacific movement, spearheaded by this youth-led organisation, and their adoption of HRBA in climate advocacy.

As noted by Joanna Gusman, "the potential impact that this could have is quite immense" from centering climate change as a human rights issue, and human rights law could be used to "prevent the various violations" of the climate crisis (Gusman, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025). The ICJ's advisory opinion could "give strong effect" to various climate-related international treaties, promote greater ambition from other countries, and lead to "high-polluting countries paying for climate injustices" (Rikimani, 2024, p.382).

At a webinar on 13 March 2025, the PISFCC's President, Cynthia Houniuhi, reflected on the ICJ's oral hearings.

> "To see the Pacific show up in such an impactful way [and to have young people considered by the Court and given space in this forum] meant so much for the pioneers of the PISFCC. It has not been significant just for us, but for other young people [who have observed this journey] and see it as a source of inspiration for leadership in the region. Young people are worried about their future and future generations … [so] it was important that we are part of any solution, and that came to life at the ICJ" (Houniuhi, World's Youth for Climate Justice webinar, February 19, 2025).

6.4.2 The Impact of HRBA on the PCW's Operations

The youth representative on the PCW's Council of Elders, Brianna Fruean, reflected that "activism has been so important, as this has been our way we have pushed our demands over the line - being present in negotiating rooms, at protests, running campaigns, making our voices heard locally, regionally, and internationally" (TheCoconetTV, 2024). As opposed to relying on government bodies, private organisations, or civil society organisations to enact stronger action on climate change, the PCW have advocated for their voices to be heard by "domestic, regional and international leaders and change makers" (Craney, 2022, Case Study II: 350 Pacific section, para. 3). The organisation's advocacy has drawn on HRBA to promote stronger climate action at various levels.

6.4.2.1 The Impact of HRBA on their Operations at the National Level

The PCW have adopted HRBA in their advocacy at the national level, across the different countries that make up their membership. The organisation submitted to Aotearoa New Zealand's Environment Parliamentary Select Committee in 2019, outlining their recommendations for the Zero Carbon Bill, stating that the Bill, as it had been drafted, failed to "acknowledge the rights and needs of climate displaced people" (Medium 350 Pacific, 2019, section 4, para. 1).

In addition, in 2024 and 2025, the organisation has been mobilising Pacific communities, seeking to elevate the voices of Pacific peoples registered to vote in Australia, ahead of the Australian Federal Election in 2025. Their campaign 'Pawa to the Ballot' is advocating for "a safe and liveable climate, renewable energy access, job security, and a genuine Pacific partnership", so that Pacific Islanders who live in Australia and across the Pacific have the right to self-determination - "to determine what their future, and the future of their homelands looks like" (350 Pacific, n.d).

The PCW's adoption of HRBA has also led to action affecting the coal industry in Australia. In 2023, the PCW's advocacy, and their collaborator 'the Move Beyond Coal movement', caused a significant setback for a major coal mining company, which had proposed to expand its operations. Following "protests, social media campaigns, and engagement with financial institutions" which drew on HRBA to promote the safeguarding of "people's lives, livelihoods, and precious ecosystems" (350 Pacific, 2023, para. 12) and ensuring that citizens' voices were heard, one of the leading national banks in Australia withdrew its financing for an expansion of this coal operation. The PCW considered that this achievement sent a "powerful message to the coal industry, financial institutions and governments worldwide."

> "People power can effectively challenge the status quo and hold powerful actors accountable for their contributions to the climate crisis" (350 Pacific, 2023, para. 13).

6.4.2.2 The Impact of HRBA on their Operations at the Pacific Regional Level

At the Pacific regional level, the PCW have used diplomacy and e-diplomacy, such as the creation of websites, social media, publications, video material, to support their activism (Carter, 2015, p.216). As mentioned in Chapter Five, the organisation has also carried out large-scale campaigns, such as the blockade of coal ships from entering the world's largest coal port in Newcastle, Australia, which was considered a 'David versus Goliath campaign' and the second most important global sustainability campaign of 2014 (Buckingham, 2014, para. 3). The organisation's rising influence across Pacific countries has also led to their members participating in regional decision-making forums, including the drafting of the Pacific Youth Development Framework (Craney, 2022, Case Study II: 350 Pacific section, para. 8).

Following the 2023 cyclones that affected Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Tonga, Fiji, Niue, and the Solomon Islands, the PCW, alongside the Pacific Islands Climate Action Network and Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty, rallied Pacific governments to "commit to a Fossil Fuel Free Pacific" (350 Pacific, 2023, para. 2), advocating for states (duty-bearers) to be responsible to citizens (rights-bearers) and elevating the voices of their communities. This advocacy led to a "groundbreaking agreement" from governments, demanding "an end to the development and expansion of fossil fuel extracting industries" (para. 2). Within this agreement, the governments called for "international bodies and legal institutions" to uphold "the legal rights of redress of communities and peoples being impacted" by the use of fossil fuels, and the "strengthening of international and domestic law" to "protect the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment from environmental degradation" related to fossil fuels (PICAN, 2023, p.3).

6.4.2.3 The Impact of HRBA on their Operations at the Global Level

At the global level, the PCW have been "historically powerful voices at UN climate conferences" (350.org, 2025, para. 1), adopting HRBA as part of their activism. The organisation has sent delegations to COPs, urging at COP26 that "gender justice, and human rights be integrated with all-climate responses" and that the Pacific peoples are prioritised before profit (Scoop, 2021, para. 11). Ahead of COP29, the organisation's Pacific Regional Managing Director, Joseph Sikulu, sent an open letter to President-Designate Mukhtar Babayev of Azerbaijan, following Babayev's visit to Tonga. Sikulu recalled Babayev's "commitment to amplify the voices" of the Pacific Islands and demanded that Babayev take real leadership and

action to “respect and uphold human rights and civic space” (Climate Home News, 2024, No more empty words section, para. 5).

The PCW also stood with the campaign for an advisory opinion, “to make clear that the climate crisis is a human rights crisis”, and Sikulu noted that the success of Pacific youth demonstrated the power of frontline communities (Pasifika Environews, 2023, para. 13).

> “The power of frontline communities must not be disregarded in building the solutions to the climate crisis … The Pacific refuses to give up hope and will employ every tool at our disposal to end the age of fossil fuels and build a safe and dignified future for our people” (para. 13).

In April 2025, the PCW joined other Indigenous civil society groups from around the world in Brazil, ahead of COP30 (350.org, 2025). The organisation and other Indigenous groups presented a letter to the COP30 Presidency, which demanded that “COP30 must unequivocally commit to ending exploitative and extractive practices that harm both people and planet”, which requires the protection of communities and “upholding human rights” (350.org, 2025, p.2). The PCW’s organiser from Fiji, George Nacewa, remarked that during this Indigenous movement, he had “heard the wisdom of the custodians of the land and shared the wisdom [of the Pacific’s oceans] (Pacific Climate Warriors, 2025). “We need this COP to be the one that spearheads the just energy transition from words to action” and the Brazil COP Presidency must “heed this Indigenous climate leadership” (Pacific Climate Warriors, 2025).

6.4.3 The Impact of HRBA on the LSA’s Operations

The advocacy of the LSA has drawn on HRBA to promote stronger climate action at various levels. As previously mentioned, the organisation facilitated workshops to educate young people on how climate change posed a risk to their rights and different societal groups. A former member considered that the organisation’s adoption of rights-based thinking aligned with the common conceptualisation of human rights in Samoa, which has a prevailing focus on how the rights of groups and communities are affected, as opposed to a focus on individual rights that is akin to Western conceptualisation of human rights. This former member noted that “when it comes to climate change and human rights, we considered human rights in the context of girls, people with disabilities, children, and students”.

6.4.3.1 The Impact of HRBA on their Operations at the Local Level

The adoption of HRBA has impacted the operations of the LSA at the local level. A former member considered that looking at climate change through the lens of human rights impacted their operations by helping to "leverage" their key messaging and ensure a resonance with young people at their education workshops. They noted that if people can tangibly see how their human rights were going to be negatively impacted, and how taking action would be beneficial, they were more inclined to become more involved.

> "When you talk about an island, such as Samoa, where you have big families, people are going to want to protect their families, their churches, their students. Human rights very much help the discussion of the issue [of climate change]" (a former member of the LSA).

The former member also noted that using HRBA can help when approaching different parts of the community to raise awareness about the impact of climate change, for example those in coastal-based communities and how climate change is going to affect their fishing supply, and therefore, access to food.

6.4.3.2 The Impact of HRBA on their Operations at the National Level

The adoption of HRBA has also arguably impacted the operations of the LSA at the national level. The organisation's advocacy centred on the active participation and inclusion of youth in climate change discourse within their society, which is a common thread among HRBA. As previously mentioned, the organisation's activism gained traction and recognition at the national level, and led to a partnership with the Samoan Government, the Samoa Conservation Society, and the National University of Samoa. The partnership developed a pilot programme which aimed to "educate Samoan youths on the science behind the cause and effects" of climatic changes (National University of Samoa, 2021, para. 2) and promote the offsetting of greenhouse gas emissions through planting trees (para. 8). The programme sought to give students tools and advice for conducting a carbon audit, and after a carbon audit of the National University of Samoa campus, the programme resulted in twelve schools around Samoa being

able to self-direct a carbon audit at their own schools (para. 7). The organisation engaged high schools from around Samoa in this programme because they ultimately aimed to "foster curiosity and passion within the youth of Samoa and encourage community participation" (para. 9).

However, a former member of the organisation reflected that while it is "essential" for youth to hold the government accountable, and more broadly the Global North who are "causing these detrimental climate change phenomena", this was not an overriding focus for their organisation. They noted that the workshops facilitated with students were not "heavily focused on holding the Government accountable", as Samoa is a small country and it was important to keep their future prospects in mind. While the organisation is no longer active, a former member shared their hope for the establishment of a Samoan National Youth Council in holding the government accountable, and that it had "a lot of potential to be an impactful structure" so that the youth voice would be heard. "Samoa is a youthful population" and this could help to "encourage structures to empower more youth to participate".

6.5 Summary

This chapter has sought to present the findings of this research undertaken with the three chosen organisations, in order to address the remaining components of the three research objectives. There are indications that PYLOs have adopted elements of HRBA, however, they have upheld uniquely Pacific perspectives and understandings which not only challenge dominant Western HRBA but offer an invaluable contribution to rights and climate change discourses. The adoption of HRBA by PYLOs has arguably impacted the empowerment of their members, where their participation has contributed to an increase in self-confidence, upskilling, the challenging of existing power dynamics, and the fostering of social cohesion. The adoption of HRBA has also shown to impact PYLOs' operations at different levels. A Pacific understanding of HRBA has guided each PYLOs' advocacy and contributed to their campaigns not only having resonance with their communities, but catalysing political leaders and global institutions to take note and action. A fulsome discussion of the research findings presented in this chapter will follow in the final chapter of this report.

Chapter Seven

Discussion and Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

Pacific youth engaged in climate activism have inspired this research. Human-induced global warming is undermining the wellbeing of people and steering the viability of our future on this planet towards extremis (UNFCCC, 2022, para. 1). Pacific youth are alive to this precarity. Without rapid intervention, our current trajectory risks further transgression of the planetary boundaries (Raworth, 2017, e48), and while this imperils humanity's collective future, those most affected are the futures belonging to the youth of today. With rising temperatures and seas, so too is the resolve of PYLOs to take matters into their own hands.

This final chapter begins with a discussion of the findings of this research focusing on three chosen PYLOs, which sought to address three key objectives: to understand the extent to which PYLOs have adopted HRBA in their advocacy; to understand the extent to which an adoption of HRBA by PYLOs has impacted the empowerment of their members; and to understand the extent to which HRBA has impacted the operations of PYLOs in national, regional, and/or global political fora. This chapter will subsequently discuss the limitations of these findings and recommendations for future research, and conclude by reflecting on the salient themes that have emerged. These themes coalesce around the power of the Pacific youth voice, which is grounded in local perspectives and cultural identities, the reclaiming of narratives, and the ability of a human rights focus to bring about change.

7.2 Discussion of Research Findings

7.2.1 The Extent to Which PYLOs have Adopted HRBA in their Advocacy

Drawing upon the findings from interviews, webinars, and internet-sourced material, there are indications that PYLOs have indeed adopted elements of HRBA. Considering the six commonalities within HRBA when examining the advocacy of PYLOs, this research has identified where the advocacy of PYLOs has exhibited the common threads within HRBA.

For example, the three chosen PYLOs adopted rights-based thinking through their focus on indigenous rights and the protection of lives, livelihoods, and homes from the impacts of climate change. In the Pacific context, these PYLOs have shown that rights-based thinking primarily relates to the rights of different societal groups, and the upholding of "local-cultural" voices and "social values" from Pacific communities (Zheng, 2019, p.249). As a former member of the LSA noted, "there is not the individualism that exists in Western societies", and the Western conceptualisation of human rights does not take into consideration the familial aspects of human rights. By prioritising local-cultural voices in their rights-based thinking, PYLOs are arguably helping to dismantle the dominance of Western hegemonic approaches to human rights, which focus on liberal values and the rights of individual citizens (New Zealand Law Commission Study Paper 17, 2006, p.69).

Another example of the PYLOs adopting HRBA is through their assertion of rights and supporting duty-bearers (state actors) to be responsible to citizens. The PISFCC's campaign is seeking a legal instrument from the ICJ, which would set out states' obligations under international law and support them to uphold their responsibility to rights-bearers' (citizens') claiming of their minimum core-rights regarding their lands and livelihoods. The PISFCC's Director, Vishal Prasad, noted that "human rights law has traditionally not addressed climate change directly, yet the [Pacific] region argued that the devastating impacts of climate change undeniably affect human rights, and states have a duty to prevent, minimize and remedy these violations" (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025).

The findings presented in this report contribute to the literature by demonstrating that PYLOs hold uniquely Pacific perspectives and understandings of HRBA, which challenge dominant, Western HRBA and agendas. These Pacific approaches to human rights highlight where universal approaches to human rights do not sufficiently take into account that communal societies, such as those in the Pacific, generally consider the rights and wellbeing of their communities and lands first and foremost, before the rights of the individual. Pacific understandings of HRBA therefore offer an invaluable contribution to human rights discourses, as they convey an alternative framing for considering the rights of people living in non-Western societies.

Pacific wayfinding traditions could also have particular metaphorical utility for reimagining HRBA, for example, non-Western societies could draw upon the concept of wayfinding to renegotiate the dominance of hegemonic Western human rights norms. For thousands of years, Pacific wayfinders used traditional techniques to understand the universe that surrounded them, navigating across the Blue Pacific Continent, and "reading the signs through the stars, the wind, and the waves" (Si'ilata et al., 2023, p.2) to guide them on their journeys. Pacific wayfinding has been explored in recent literature, not only to "reawaken" Pacific Indigenous knowledge of long-distance ocean navigation (Thatcher and Evans, 2024, p.2), but also to recognise its role within the wider Pacific holistic Indigenous knowledge base (p.6). Wayfinding could be perceived as an example to non-Western societies as to how they can carve out their own understandings of HRBA, which derive from their own worldview, culture and traditions.

7.2.2 The Extent to Which an Adoption of HRBA has Impacted their Members' Empowerment

In addition to HRBA, youth empowerment is another leitmotif associated with the advocacy of youth organisations and that has been focused upon within this research. As mentioned in the Chapter Three of this report, in the context of PYLOs, the process of empowerment is considered to relate to the following forms of power:

- "power to: a generative or productive power (sometimes incorporating or manifesting as forms of resistance or manipulation) which creates new possibilities and actions without domination
- power with: a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together, and
- power from within: the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each one of us and makes us truly human. Its basis is self- acceptance and self-respect which extend, in turn, to respect for and acceptance of others as equals" (Rowlands, 1997, p.13).

This is as opposed to "power over: controlling power, which may be responded to with compliance, resistance (which weakens processes of victimisation) or manipulation" (p.13), and is the definition of power that is often focused upon in conventional Western thinking on

empowerment (p.11). PYLOs have demonstrated their 'power to' create new ways of mobilising in order to resist government inaction, their 'power with' collective action, and their 'power from within' through upholding their culture and traditions and the *mana* of their people.

Using youth empowerment as a conceptual lens to consider the advocacy of PYLOs, particularly in terms of an increase in self-confidence, a strengthening of social cohesion around a common purpose, and upskilling and training (Scheyvens and van der Watt, 2021, p.11), the findings from the interviews, webinars, and academic and grey materials arguably reveal that a connection exists between the adoption of HRBA and the empowerment of members of PYLOs. Dr. Justin Sobion who worked closely with members of the PISFCC considered that it was evident that the adoption of HRBA had impacted the empowerment of their members, as their strategic and altruistic focus on human rights empowered them to pursue a "cause that they are really fighting for". In addition, across the three chosen PYLOs, members' participation in these organisations, which sought to promote the rights of their people, contributed to a perceived increase in areas such as self-confidence, upskilling, and fostering a sense of social unity through undertaking initiatives, such as educational and environmental clean-up programmes. PYLOs also designed these programmes to empower others, in turn, and engender meaningful change across their communities.

In addition, the principles that feature in the Youth Empowerment Strategy (YES) Pasifika, which was developed to support Pacific-based youth and community workers (Pitanoe et. al., 2018, p.4) and were mentioned in Chapter Three, can help with understanding youth empowerment in the Pacific context. As demonstrated by the findings on the advocacy of the three chosen PYLOs, youth empowerment in the Pacific context centres on active youth participation, the fostering of positive relationships within organisations and communities, and the rejection of external, deficit-centric narratives of youth in favour of strength-based narratives that uphold the power of the youth voice.

However, while there might have been a perceived increase in members' empowerment within themselves, this research has contributed to the literature by elucidating the complexity and the contentious nature of the concept of youth empowerment in the Pacific context. As reflected upon by the former member of the LSA, powerful actors had co-opted the term youth empowerment and offered token gestures to give the perception that they were seeking to

empower youth, but in reality, youth were often not given opportunities to meaningfully engage. The former member instead preferred the term active participation, as to them, this meant youth proactively pursuing genuine engagement in decision-making processes. This research also highlighted the tension that plays out both within organisations as well as when organisations are seeking to challenge existing power dynamics within society, due to Pacific cultural traditions being based upon respect, and particularly respect for elders. For example, findings showed that Pacific youth may be wary in seeking to hold the powerful to account, as this could affect their future job prospects.

While these research findings have illuminated where members of PYLOs have exhibited various elements of empowerment, in part due to their promotion of HRBA, further interviews with PYLOs would have enabled a greater depth of understanding of their perceptions about the adoption of HRBA and the extent to which this has impacted their empowerment. Nevertheless, the findings have revealed the contestation behind this concept. In addition, these findings have reiterated that researchers, particularly those who are 'outsiders' to the community, must not hold a preconceived expectation of what constitutes youth empowerment, or that participants have met an objective, true, threshold of empowerment. As demonstrated in this case, it is entirely up to the youth themselves to determine how they understand youth empowerment, and how they desire to enact change within their lives and actively participate within society.

7.2.3 The Extent to Which an Adoption of HRBA has Impacted PYLOs' Operations in National, Regional, and/or Global Political Fora

The research findings have also revealed that the adoption of HRBA has also shown to impact PYLOs' operations at the local, national, regional, and global levels. PYLOs have demonstrated the importance and effectiveness of upholding HRBA within their climate advocacy, and lobbying of political representatives, at different levels, to ensure that Pacific youth and their wider communities are active rights-holders, able to assert their rights against duty-bearers such as state and international actors (Broberg & Sano 2017, p.667). At the local level, an adoption of HRBA has contributed to their campaigns having resonance with, and raising awareness of climate impacts among, their communities. At the Pacific national, regional and global levels, an adoption of HRBA has catalysed political leaders and global

institutions to listen to the youth voice and take action. However, crucially, each of the three organisations have woven a uniquely Pacific understanding of HRBA into their advocacy.

In the case of the LSA, a former member of their organisation considered that their adoption of HRBA had impacted their operations at various levels by helping to leverage their key messaging and ensure that young people at their education workshops could understand how climate change was going to impact their rights. At the local level, adopting HRBA was useful when raising awareness in different parts of the community about the impact of climate change. At the national level, the success of their educational workshops led to a partnership with the Samoan Government, the Samoa Conservation Society, and the National University of Samoa, which developed a pilot education programme to raise awareness of the science behind the cause and effects of climate change. However, the former member of the organisation reflected that while it is essential for youth to hold the government accountable, this was not an overriding focus of their organisation's advocacy.

In the case of the PCW, the organisation drew on HRBA within their operations at the national, regional, and international levels. Their advocacy for the protection of human rights involved engagement with Australian and New Zealand domestic politics, and also disruption to Australia's coal industry, ultimately resulting in one of the leading national banks withdrawing its financing for an expansion of this coal operation. Their adoption of HRBA, in order to promote the protection of the rights of people's lives, livelihoods and lands, have enabled their local and large-scale campaigns to have resonance with their communities, project the Pacific voice internationally, and model environmental stewardship.

In the case of the PISFCC, their adoption of HRBA in their advocacy has propelled them to honour their ancestors and defend the rights of present and future generations, and to demand action at the Pacific regional and global levels. Their spearheading of this campaign to the ICJ has set "a new record for the world's biggest climate case" (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025), and this advisory opinion has also received the most submissions in the ICJ's history (Pacific community, 2024, Pacific by numbers section, para. 1). As the ICJ deliberates and considers the obligations of states with respect to climate change and human rights, the PISFCC have already made an invaluable contribution to human rights discourses and become leading voices for stronger climate action at the highest level.

7.3 Limitations of Findings and Recommendations for Future Research

The participants and the research findings would have greatly benefited from in-person interviews, where through building relationships with participants, *talanoa* sessions may have been possible and could have allowed for "more *mo'oni* (pure, real, authentic) information to be available for Pacific research", compared with other methods (Violeti, 2006, p.21). However, I have aimed to honour the spirit of *talanoa* through practising reciprocity, both within the interviews - by listening, knowing when to speak, and knowing that "what one says depend upon what the other has to say" (p.26) - and following the research by seeking to honour their advocacy in my research and contributing in ways that are meaningful for them.

It is recommended that future research in this area is undertaken in person, with strong involvement from Pacific researchers. This research could also be expanded to seek the insights of a larger network of PYLOs. While these findings indicated that the adoption of Pacific approaches to human rights has impacted PYLOs' operations at the local, national, regional, and global levels, further interviews and research undertaken with climate-focused PYLOs would undoubtedly yield more numerous and richer perspectives. It would also allow for a greater understanding of the extent to which the adoption of HRBA has impacted their operations in political fora at different levels, and offer more substantive findings to these discourses.

7.4 Concluding Reflections

Following a discussion of the findings of this project, as they pertain to the key research questions, this report will conclude by reflecting upon the overarching themes and salient learnings that can be distilled from the literature and the interviews. These themes, considered to be the power of the Pacific youth voice, the reclaiming of narratives, and the ability of a human rights focus to bring about change, will be discussed in turn below.

7.4.1 The Power of the Collective Pacific Youth Voice

Undoubtedly, one of the primary themes that has emerged is the power of the collective Pacific youth voice, which is grounded in local Pacific perspectives, values, and cultural identities. Young people are "inherently less responsible for climate change than their adult contemporaries", and the Human Rights Council considers climate change to be "the most significant intergenerational injustice of our time" (Gasparri et al., 2021, p.96). However, it is Pacific youth who are using their voice to stand up for the principle of intergenerational equity, and who recognise the need to protect the rights of "those who are yet to inherit our planet" (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025).

The PISFCC's Director, Vishal Prasad, reflected that their campaign had illustrated the agency and dynamism of the collective youth voice, which had spurred action from state actors, and led to the ICJ deliberating on this advisory opinion. Prasad noted that young people, with the collaboration of governments and regional organisations, had been "the cornerstone of this campaign and that they could not have achieved all of this without each other". "The collaborative model does work, and we must continue this" (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025).

The existing literature on the advocacy of PYLOs highlighted that the power of the Pacific youth voice stems from Pacific cultures and environmental stewardship (Newport et al., 2024) and a shared Oceanic identity (Si'isi'ialafia-Mau & Percival, 2024, p.69). This sets PYLOs' perspectives and advocacy apart from Western activism. As noted by a former member of the LSA, their advocacy is based upon Pacific understandings of HRBA and the rights of societal groups, and unlike the "individualism" in Western societies, "you're part of a whole and you have to consider your rights…in the context of your family, your church, or your community". What also distinguishes the Pacific youth voice from their Western peers is that theirs is a fight for "the preservation of their cultural identity, their heritage" against an "existential threat to their way of life" (Si'isi'ialafia-Mau & Percival, 2024, p.65). The rising power and influence of the Pacific collective youth voice is due to it being more than a "form of protest", but rather, it being "an embodiment of who they are and their roots" (p.72). They are "custodians of their cultures" (p.73), honouring their people on the world stage.

7.4.2 The Reclaiming of Narratives

Another key learning that has emerged is the importance that PYLOs have placed on shifting external narratives and reclaiming their own story. Pacific Island states can often be "misrepresented" and "minimised" in external narratives around climate change (University of Waikato, 2025, para. 5), often framing them as 'vulnerable' and 'dependent'. There has been a rising rejection of these narratives from climate activists as well as Pacific governments. For example, the Tuvalu Government and its people have committed to remaining "where they are and to carry out in situ adaptation measures", "highly critical of relocation [of people to other countries] as a 'quick-fix' solution" (Boege, 2023, p.7).

PYLOs, in particular, have sought to reject external narratives around a Pacific victimhood and passive resignation to the impacts of climate change. A former member of the LSA noted that they often heard the Global South and Pacific Islanders being labelled as "in-need and vulnerable", and that this was "the victimisation of a large group of people". They reflected that it was not Pacific peoples who needed help from others, but, instead, they "want the people who are causing these changes to be accountable. The Global North is causing these detrimental climate change phenomena, and we want this to be the focus". They also noted that previous COPs have been held by countries who are some of those most responsible for climate change, and this has been "whittling away at the accountability that these countries should have".

PYLOs are promoting themselves as active agents of change who are fighting for their people, lands, and oceans (Fair, 2015, p.58). The PISFCC's Director, Vishal Prasad, reflected that a narrative shift is as "equally important" as the legal arguments around the obligations of states in respect of human rights and climate change within their campaign to the ICJ (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025). Prasad noted that they were reorienting "a narrative towards empowerment and innovative solutions by bringing the voices of [their] communities, traditional and indigenous knowledge, and lived realities, to re-shape and transform international law in a completely unprecedented manner" (Prasad, PCCMHS webinar, February 19, 2025).

Reclaiming the narrative of a Pacific steeped in culture, tradition, and indigenous knowledge, aligns with the ancestral Pacific "myths, legends and oral traditions" which did not perceive

Oceania in such “microscopic proportions” (Hau’ofa, 1994, p. 152), and as a region dependent on the “largesse of wealthy nations” (p.150). Rather, they considered the Pacific as a vast sea of islands, and “whose future lies in the hands of [their] people, not of those who would prescribe for [them]” (p.159). Pacific youth are honouring their ancestors and their collective Pacific identity, reclaiming the mana of their people.

7.4.3 The Ability of a Human Rights Focus to Bring About Change

The third key theme that has emerged is the ability of a human rights focus to bring about change. Human rights agendas can be “a critical part” of bringing about social change (Álvarez Icaza, 2014, para. 10). Societal actors, such as movements for indigenous peoples, children, and youth, can “appropriate human rights as a tool for social, political, and cultural change” (para. 16). The PYLOs’ promotion of human rights can be perceived as a distinct tool being deployed in their fight against the climate crisis, as well political complacency. These PYLOs recognise that climate change poses a profound threat to full enjoyment of rights, including “the right to life, right to a clean environment, right to clean water, right to health, right to self-determination, and their right to culture and development” (Rikimani, 2024, p.378).

As noted by Dr. Justin Sobion, “the youths’ focus on human rights and intergenerational equality was a trademark for them. It’s only natural and right for them to push the human rights issue because they have a legitimate right to speak about future generations; they are closest to the unborn generations. The future generations certainly will not consent to the actions which have caused the climate crisis. The youths’ conferences and workshops have pushed this, so I think that message has gotten across. But we hope that it becomes accepted as a norm in international law”.

A former member of the LSA also reflected on the ability of HRBA to bring about societal change. “If humans see something that would benefit them, or negatively impact them, this would make them more involved.” They also spoke of the importance of teaching school children about the impacts of climate change on human rights. “It would be great to start talking about climate change at the primary level. If you have all of the information available to you as a child, you can make informed decisions as you group up and participate in every aspect of life, so it’s very important”.

PYLOs' adoption of HRBA throws into sharp relief the impacts of climate change on the rights of Pacific peoples, both present and future generations, and the effectiveness of upholding human rights to garner positive strides in climate action. The PISFCC's adoption of HRBA led to the "historic" campaign to request an ICJ advisory opinion on the obligations of states with respect to climate change and human rights. Their focus on the human-rights impacts of climate change, particularly on their cultures, heritage, and traditions, has not only disrupted the climate conversation and potentially international legal mechanisms, but provided an invaluable contribution to international rights discourses and the global climate effort. Pacific youth are an example to all climate activists around the world, who may be inspired to draw upon Pacific understandings of HRBA within their future efforts.

7.5 Summary

In their ascension as emerging leaders of the global climate movement, Pacific youth not only decry the severe environmental and climatic impacts of global warming, but its impacts on the *mana* of past, present, and future generations - as well as the ancient wisdom, cultures, and traditional knowledges they behold. This research has shown that PYLOs are leading the ambition and urgency in climate discourse, acutely aware of the gulf that exists between the political will necessary to curtail the worst of climate impacts, and the current reality of watered-down commitments and stagnation at international climate meetings (Pacific Islands Climate Action Network, 2024, para. 7). PYLOs from the large ocean states are wayfinding towards an alternative, more sustainable, collective future on the horizon. As reflected upon by the Pacific Climate Warriors' Pacific Regional Managing Director, Joseph Sikulu, "the Pacific refuses to give up hope and will employ every tool at our disposal to end the age of fossil fuels and build a safe and dignified future for our people".

7.6 The ICJ's Delivery of its Advisory Opinion

After the PISFCC's six-year campaign, which began with 27 law students at the University of the South Pacific, on 23 July 2025 the ICJ delivered its "historic advisory opinion" (Sefeti, 2025, para. 2). The ICJ ruled that states must prevent harm to the climate system, and failure to do so may result in them being "ordered to pay compensation or other forms of restitution" (Kaminski, 2025, para. 2). This advisory opinion, therefore, provides a "legal mechanism to hold states accountable" for the climate breakdown (Sefeti, 2025, para. 7). As the ICJ's President, Yūji Iwasawa, noted, the climate crisis has "severe and far-reaching consequences which affected natural ecosystems and people", underscoring "an urgent existential threat" (Kaminski, 2025, para. 3). The PISFCC's President, Cynthia Houniuhi reflected on what it meant for the youth's collective voice to be heard.

> "When the judges stated that states' obligations are not limited to the Paris Agreement…but also extend to environmental law, human rights law, and international customary law, I cried right there in the courtroom" (Sefeti, 2025, para. 6).

The PISFCC's President, Vishal Prasad, also considered that it was an "incredible" milestone for this advisory opinion to recognise the "the right to a clean, healthy environment (Sefeti, 2025, para. 15). A campaigner for the PISFCC, Siosiua Veikune, also shared their hope that the Pacific's spearheading of this campaign was an example to states around the world.

> "As a young Tongan, I hope we have set a healthy legal standard - a blueprint that can be replicated globally. This duty of care … it goes beyond legal obligations. It speaks to who we are in the Pacific" (Sefeti, 2025, para. 21).

The PISFCC's story, which began on the campus of the University of the South Pacific, is perhaps only just beginning with this historic ICJ advisory opinion. The ruling, which recognises not only the obligations of states in respect of climate change, but ties states' responsibilities "directly to human rights and the lives of frontline communities" (Sefeti, 2025, para. 22), is demonstrative of the power of this Pacific youth-led movement, and the ability of their Pacific approaches to human rights to bring about change.

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