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## ‘HOW MUCH SPACE AM I SUPPOSED TO TAKE?’: UNDERSTANDING ‘DIGITAL INCLUSION FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT’ THROUGH FA’ASAMOA

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### Introduction

It is widely held that efforts to achieve the United Nations’ 2030 Sustainable Development Goals must sit alongside efforts to achieve ‘universal’ digital inclusion; to ensure global access and increased literacy in the effective use of digital and information and communications technologies (Graham, 2019). In the independent state of Samoa, local and foreign governments have argued digital inclusion will ‘leapfrog’ the nation into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2020). Comparatively, Samoan academics and community leaders have continued to foreground *fa’asamoa* (the Samoan way) within conceptions of socioeconomic and cultural prosperity (Enari, 2021).

As ‘culture lived’ (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009), *fa’asamoa* hinges on the *vā*; the contextual, multi-dimensional, sociospatial relationality that guides knowledge and action (Tugalu, 2008). Commitment to the *vā* can be seen in Samoa’s social structure (the *fa’amatai*, or chiefly system) and conceptualisations of identity (such as through *tautua*, or service, and responsibilities to *aiga*, or family) (Tugalu, 2008). Indeed, through *fa’asamoa*, the Samoan self is constructed as ‘dividual’; as “an identity that is deeply dependent on others and burdened with obligations” (Besnier, 2011, p. 20).

However, “the dividual self competes with ideological orientations that actively seek to disembed the self from structures of exchange, remove it from the tyranny of obligation, and distance it from expectant others” (Besnier, 2011, p. 21). The ascription of such ‘autonomy’ or ‘empowerment’ underscores discourses of (Western) ‘modernity’ (Giddens, 1991). In the context of ‘international development’—both industry and ideal (Slater, 2013)—such ‘modernity’ is intertwined within broader mechanisms of ongoing coloniality, such as capitalism (Appadurai, 2001) and informationalism (Castells, 2010). The latter is especially influential to the extent that inclusionary paradigms of technology

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for social ‘progress’ (such as digital inclusion) are deeply encoded (practically and conceptually) into ‘knowledge’ of how the future (‘the modern’) can, or should, be obtained (Unwin, 2017).

This paper discusses findings from an on-going qualitative, mixed-methods, study that employs decolonial thinking to investigate perceptions and experiences of ‘digital inclusion for international development’ amongst Samoans from a *fa’asamoa* standpoint. In following Mignolo (2007), it scrutinises the ‘knowledge’ underlying ideologies and practices of ‘digital inclusion for international development’ and critically questions the effects of on-going (Western) hegemonies in the construction of ‘modern’ subjectivities and enactment of ‘modern’ life.

### **Centering Fa’samoa Through (Decolonial) Co-Design**

In recognition of critiques of decolonisation within the digital humanities as an ‘empty metaphor’ (Risam, 2018), the study’s methodological approach ascribes agency and authority to participants, as ‘peer researchers’, by ‘distancing’ the primary researcher from the design of objectives, actions, and anticipated results (Taboada et al., 2020). ‘Stepping back’ from the central position of control acknowledges my position as a non-Samoan and additionally responds to calls for research communities “to be fundamentally changed via the transfer of resources and authority from the center to Indigenous communities” (Latulippe & Klenk, 2020, p. 8).

The initial findings discussed below draw from a co-design workshop conceived and facilitated in late-2021 in collaboration with Samoan members of two Pasifika-led community organisations based in Brisbane, Australia. Engaging with Samoan diaspora responds to the interconnectedness of Samoan communities beyond geographic boundaries, the unique sociocultural positionality of *fafo* (abroad, overseas) Samoans, and the related significance of *fa’asamoa* as a transnational knowledge framework (Lilomaiva-Doktor, 2009).

Within the workshop, the peer researchers were guided to create mind maps (Buzan, 2010) to draw forth peripheral knowledge and create a snapshot of connections and relationships within their experience and understanding of ‘digital inclusion for international development’. An additional activity (incorporated whilst the workshop was in progress) further defined the group’s understanding of ‘digital inclusion’ through *talanoa*, a Pasifika method that centres on establishing *noā* (equilibrium) between individuals to create a power neutral context in which deep, rich *tala* (talk, conversation) can occur (Enari, 2021).

### **Initial Findings**

The design artefacts and discussions emerging from the workshop draw attention to how the emergent tensions between *fa’asamoa* and current (Western) structures and practices of ‘digital inclusion for international development’ are (consciously and unconsciously) navigated by the peer researchers in their everyday and envisioned engagement with ICTs and digital technologies. The relevance or applicability of ‘digital inclusion for international development’ is mediated by the extent to which it strengthens

key cultural practices and values within *fa'asamoa* (cultural relationality) and further by the extent to which 'digital inclusion' (distinctly named as a colonial agenda by the group) is perceived to have an innate connection to matters of power, control, and domination.

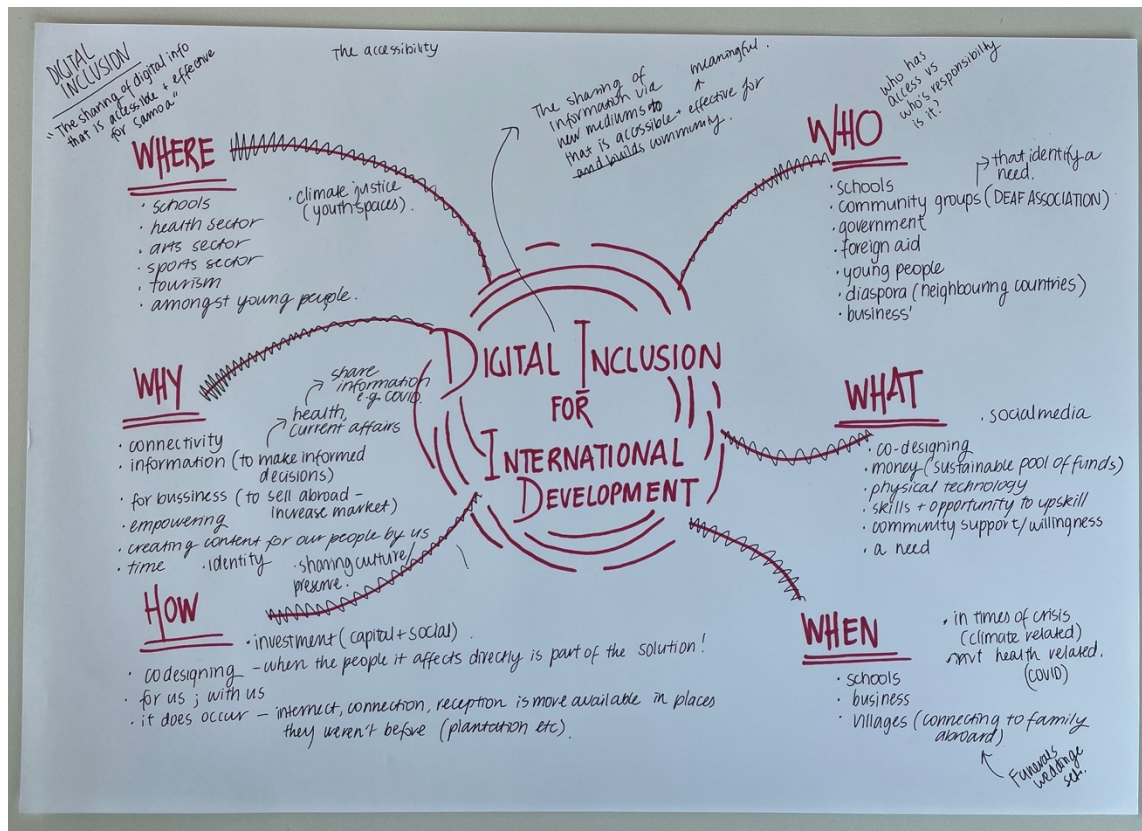


Figure 1: The peer researchers' mind maps explored 'digital inclusion for international development' through six key considerations.

In bringing forth critiques of 'digital inclusion for international development' as 'empowering', I argue that the findings from this first stage of the study suggest a level of appropriation of ICTs and digital technologies is occurring to allow Samoans (as 'modern' subjects) to define their past, present, and future on their own terms. In the remainder of the study, due for completion in late-2022, two additional workshops have been devised through which the peer researchers will more deeply examine the dynamics of the emergent 'Samoan digital culture'. In doing so the study will contribute to understanding the role of digital technologies in relation to the discursive and practical conception of alternatives to modernity/coloniality.

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