



Pacific Data Sovereignty

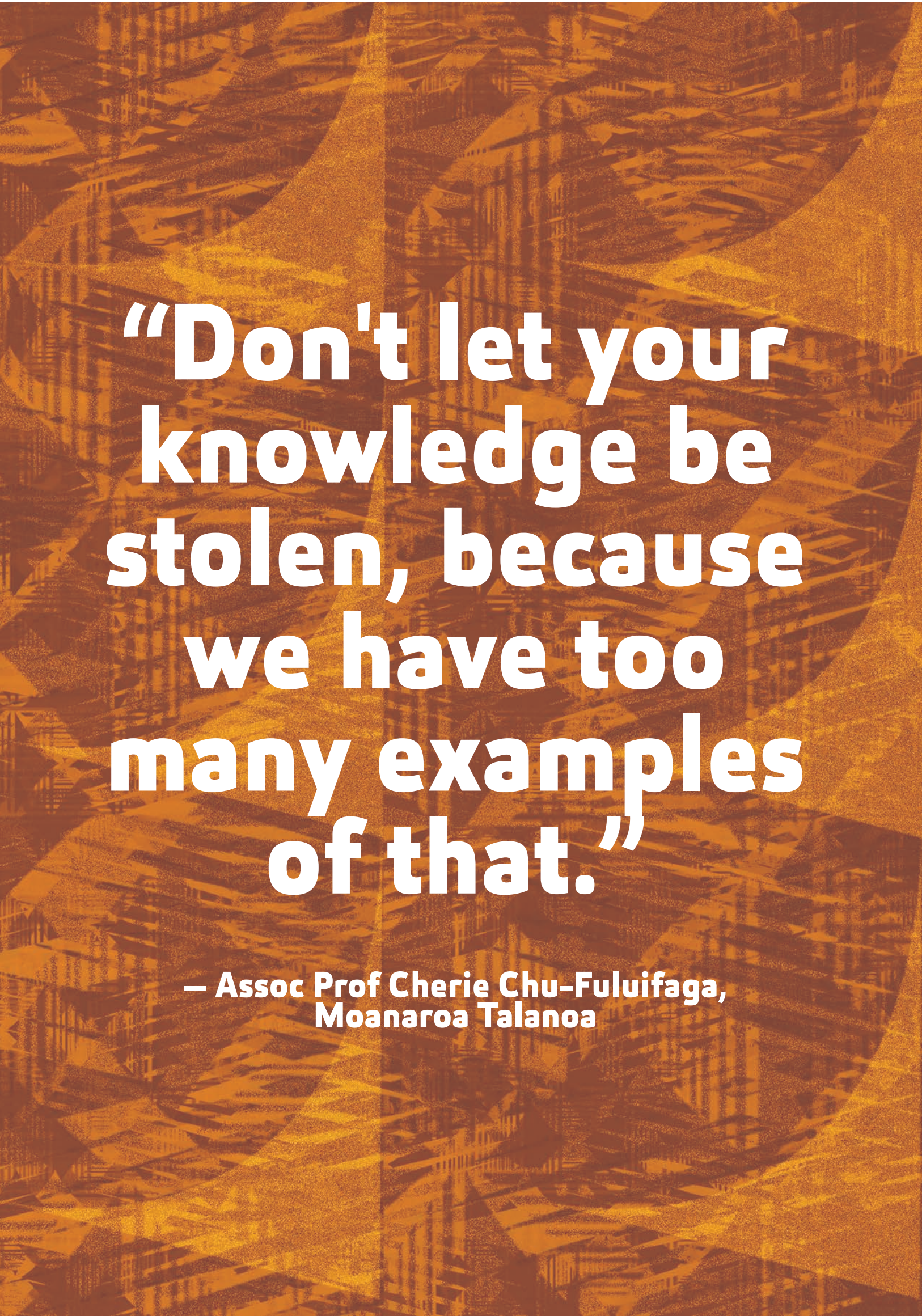
Pacific Data Sovereignty

Introduction

Pacific data is a vital part of Pacific ways of being and holds the potential to deepen understanding of Pacific lands, oceans, communities, histories, migration patterns, and the interconnection that shapes our wellbeing. It informs decision making across critical areas such as climate resilience, health, education, science, migration, and cultural revitalisation. In today's digital era, data is not only abundant but also increasingly commodified and circulated globally, often without regard for Pacific Peoples' rights and values. Tech giants profit from data as a key economic asset, reinforcing systems of power and control. From social media algorithms to policy development, data now influences how we think, behave, and relate to each other.

Historically, surveillance has been a tool of colonial control, used to monitor, classify, and manage Indigenous populations, including Pacific Peoples. In Aotearoa and other settler-colonial contexts, state institutions have long subjected Māori and Pacific communities to surveillance practices that reinforce racialised social divisions and colonial hierarchies. These practices have evolved from physical monitoring to digital datafication, where biometric and algorithmic surveillance now deepens power asymmetries and perpetuates harm. As Cormack and Kukutai (2022) argue, contemporary data environments continue the legacy of colonialism by extracting and commodifying Indigenous data without consent, often under the guise of neutrality and objectivity.

Safeguarding Pacific data is not just about protecting information, it is about upholding the mana of our stories, knowledge systems, and collective futures. Pacific data sovereignty affirms the right of Pacific communities to control how Pacific data is generated, collected, stored, used, and shared, in ways that are accountable to Pacific Peoples and grounded in their Indigenous knowledge systems (Koya-Vaka'uta, 2017).



**“Don't let your
knowledge be
stolen, because
we have too
many examples
of that.”**

**— Assoc Prof Cherie Chu-Fuluifaga,
Moanaroa Talanoa**



As a region, the Pacific Islands face rapid digital transformation and growing pressures around climate change, health, economic development, and governance. The concept of data sovereignty in the Pacific encompasses the cultural, social, and political aspects of data management, recognising the region's unique priorities in the face of external pressures, such as global data flows and international agreements.

The MPP has acknowledged advancements in government data systems since the 1990s, when Pacific Peoples gained the ability to self-identify with certain Pacific ethnicities (MPP, 2023). However, the MPP (2023) briefing also highlighted the significant inequity that persists concerning Pacific data, ultimately

impacting Pacific wellbeing, and the misalignment between government decisions and Pacific knowledge systems.

The need for Pacific data sovereignty has historic and ongoing challenges that relate to postcolonial practices where

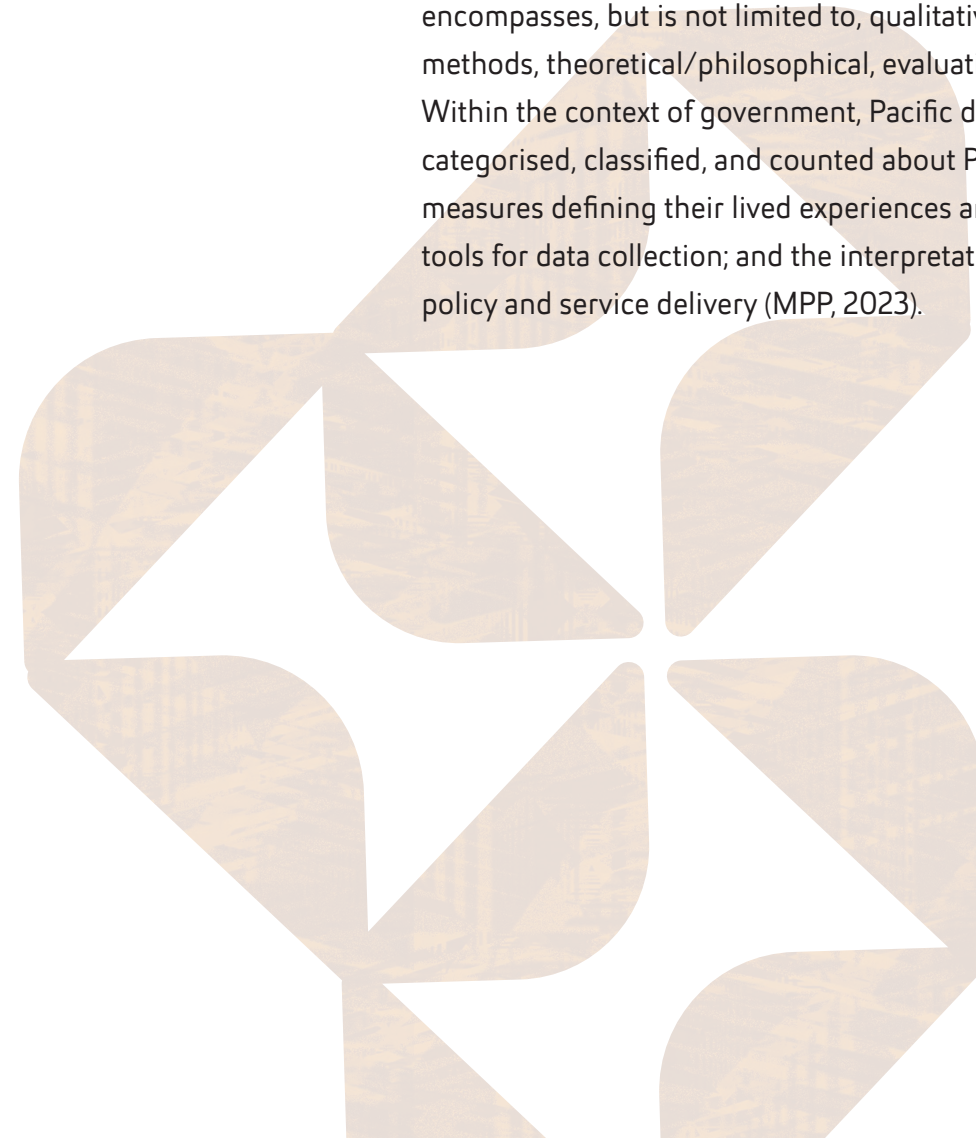
outsiders, including government, businesses, researchers and institutions, have collected, interpreted, and disseminated information about Pacific Peoples without their full participation or consent.

“Ensuring ethical practice around data sovereignty, especially in the context of Indigenous and Pacific communities, means respecting their right to own, control, access, and govern data that relates to their people, cultures, lands, and knowledges. Ethical data sovereignty practice centres on self-determination, accountability, and relational responsibility.”

— Moanaroa member, Moanaroa written submission

Data, in the broadest sense, is defined as any type of information recorded or collected in a variety of forms to be categorised, analysed, and/or used to help decision-making (MPP, 2023). This includes, for example, information about people, land, water, and animals (Lovett et al., 2019; Royal Society Te Apārangi, 2023). In everyday usage, data are things given or granted; things known or assumed as facts; and can make the basis of reasoning or calculation (Kukutai et al., 2023). Data is a powerful way to tell the story of peoples (MPP, 2023). It is important to recognise that, from the outset, Indigenous Peoples and Pacific Peoples have their own vibrant, meaningful bodies of data, over which they have sovereignty (Gegeo, 2001; Pool, 2016).

Drawing from broader Indigenous data sovereignty discussions, Pacific data refers to digital or digitisable information or knowledge that is for, by, or about Pacific Peoples and their connections to places and spaces (Kukutai et al., 2023; PDSN, 2021). The use of Pacific data in research encompasses, but is not limited to, qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, theoretical/philosophical, evaluative, and applied practices. Within the context of government, Pacific data includes information categorised, classified, and counted about Pacific Peoples; indicators and measures defining their lived experiences and wellbeing; methods and tools for data collection; and the interpretation and use of this data for policy and service delivery (MPP, 2023).



“Research must be about making it better for our people, challenging the system, the status quo, making sure that the narrative is ours and that it is also accessible to our people, not just to the high-mature generation. It should be accessible.”

**— Assoc Prof Cherie Chu-Fuluifaga,
Moanaroa Talanoa**

PDSN (2021) not only defined Pacific data as emphasising Pacific-specific cultural frameworks but also recognised that Pacific data is dynamic, interconnected, and inherently tied to Pacific knowledge systems, values, and identities. This understanding of Pacific data echoes the work of Indigenous data sovereignty (Walter, 2016) and Māori data sovereignty movements (Royal Society Te Apārangi, 2023). Pacific data includes, but is not limited to:

- data about Pacific Peoples that is used to describe or compare Pacific collectives and individuals;
- data about Pacific Indigenous knowledge systems that emerges from research and exists beyond the bounds of the research timeframe;
- Pacific environmental data from fanua, vanua or land, moana or seas and oceans, skies and atmosphere, interconnected ecologies, and Indigenous environmental knowledge;
- Pacific material culture including tangible expressions of Pacific identities, histories, and knowledge systems including artefacts or objects, architecture and built environments, clothing and adornment, artworks and visual expressions, performance-related items, and cultural technologies; and
- data about Pacific Peoples from organisations and businesses.

Pacific data is a living expression of Pacific knowledge, relationships, and identity. When data is collected for Pacific Peoples, it often serves external agendas such as policy, funding, or academic outputs, without necessarily reflecting community priorities. When data is collected by Pacific researchers, it carries the potential for cultural integrity and relational accountability, yet may still be constrained by institutional ownership, ethical frameworks, or funding conditions that privilege Western paradigms. Data with Pacific Peoples implies co-design, shared governance, and reciprocal benefit, but this ideal is often challenged by systemic power imbalances, histories of surveillance, and the commodification of Indigenous knowledge.

Key Tensions Relating to Data For, By, With, and About Pacific Peoples

Data for Pacific Peoples Intended for benefit, but still with external control

Key Tensions	Detail	Potential for harm
Lack of access and timeliness	Pacific communities and government agencies find it difficult to access their own data held by government agencies.	Government can have a limited understanding of what is working for whom and why, leading to less effective policy and service design.
Absence of feedback loop	The feedback loop of data is often absent, and data is not shared well or presented in accessible ways (e.g. long reports, charts).	Government can have a limited understanding of what is working for whom and why, leading to less effective policy and service design.
Erosion of trust and misinformation	The lack of access and poor data sharing impact trust and confidence in government data systems.	Limited access to and inadequate sharing of data can undermine public trust in government systems, fostering misinformation, as seen during COVID-19 (MPP, 2023). This misinformation has had lasting impacts on Indigenous communities and is linked to negative perceptions of children’s immunisations (Charania et al., 2024), coinciding with record lows in immunisation rates (Rice, 2024). Pacific preschoolers, for instance, experience higher hospitalisation rates from infectious diseases (Lewycka et al., 2023). Moreover, the information environment itself can significantly influence health-related beliefs, behaviours, and outcomes (Palmer & Gorman, 2025).
“Done to” vs. “done by”	Without Pacific involvement in the design phase, data has not been designed for Pacific Peoples. Markers of success that do not reflect Pacific values are often measured against mainstream ideals, such as individualism.	Measures and indicators do not meaningfully reflect the wellbeing and aspirations of Pacific Peoples, and are often deficit-focused, further perpetuating negative stereotypes (MPP, 2023).
Open data vs. Indigenous Pacific control	The global shift towards open data and open science can create tension as it can overlook existing power imbalances and historical contexts (PDSN, 2021).	Open data can lead to Indigenous data being extracted and exploited for profit by researchers, governments, and organisations (Cormack & Kukutai, 2022).

Key Tensions	Detail	Potential for harm
Deficit-based narratives and misrepresentation	Government data-collection practices and systems tend to reflect mainstream worldviews of success, which can result in deficit-based narratives of Pacific Peoples and a “misleading impression that Pacific communities are underachieving” (MPP, 2023, p. 22).	Data can fail to capture the realities, voices, and values of Pacific Peoples. It can also fail to reflect Pacific individual, family, and community perspectives and ignore the past as it relates to the present (MPP, 2023)
Inaccurate accounting and undercounting	Pacific Peoples have lower participation rates in census and national surveys, leading to collective undercounting and reliance on administrative data of variable quality. To illustrate, the 2018 census data collection process failed to address how digital inequity would impact census returns. As a result, lack of consideration for digital inequity saw a 4.9% undercount for Pacific Peoples, translating to around 19,600 people (MPP, 2023).	The census data of 2018 saw a 70% response rate for Pacific Peoples, with the rest of Pacific data being derived from administrative and imputed methods. This means that 54,000 Pacific Peoples could not be placed in households (MPP, 2023). Pacific Peoples are underrepresented in the household data and data from responding households was also reported as being potentially biased. For example, data may not adequately capture household size, such as those consisting of larger families, or two or more families, and sole-parent households (Stats NZ, 2020).
Lack of disaggregation	Government agencies often use a high-level ethnic classification for the Pacific population, which perpetuates the homogenisation of Pacific Peoples and limits meaningful disaggregated analysis.	Lack of disaggregation ignores the diversity across over 18 Pacific ethnic groups, each with unique languages, cultures, and migration stories, as well as geographic differences within Aotearoa (MPP, 2023). This can add to misguided policy and resource allocation. Without disaggregated data, resources might not be equitably directed.
Dominant Western lens and methods	Current data processes are typically not informed by Pacific norms, leading to missing data and an undervaluation of Pacific-focused data methodologies, such as qualitative data or Talanoa.	Conventional Western data collection methodologies frequently employ standardised and decontextualised tools, which may not adequately account for the cultural, spiritual, and collective dimensions that are integral to Pacific epistemologies and ontologies. This can result in significant aspects of Pacific wellbeing being underrepresented in datasets, thereby limiting the extent to which Indigenous knowledge systems are recognised within research.
Limited access and accountability	Both government agencies and Pacific communities find it difficult to access Pacific data, and the feedback loop between agencies and communities is often insufficient or absent.	Limited access to Pacific data can result in less effective policy and service design. This also influences trust and confidence in the data process and government.
Data serving external agendas	Data collection on Indigenous Peoples, including Pacific Peoples, has historically been viewed as primarily serving government requirements rather than supporting Indigenous development agendas.	Data reflects the needs, priorities, and concerns of government rather than Pacific Peoples.

Key Tensions

Detail

Potential for harm

Power imbalance

It can be difficult to maintain meaningful partnership and influence when external entities hold primary decision-making power and resources.

Even when Pacific communities are relegated to advisory roles or consultation, a significant power imbalance can emerge. This can undermine the ability of Pacific Peoples to exercise data sovereignty, shape narratives, and influence decisions that directly impact their wellbeing. There is a risk of data being used to reinforce deficit-based framings and misaligned policies, and to exclude Pacific priorities, values, and lived experiences.

Methodological mismatch

Inadequacy of conventional data collection and analysis methods to capture Pacific realities and diversity.

Important aspects of wellbeing, identity, and community experience are either misinterpreted or excluded altogether, resulting in interventions and policies that do not reflect the needs or strengths of Pacific communities.

Expertise and capability

Lack of statisticians or researchers to provide cultural lens over data systems (MPP, 2023).

Pacific staff within agencies are being asked to provide cultural services and support over and above their roles, without proper remuneration or recognition.

Data accessibility and feedback

Data production and dissemination is either inaccessible to Pacific communities, or available in long reports and charts.

Data sharing across government agencies is often inconsistent, ad hoc, and misses the insights of Pacific Peoples that influence policy and decision making (MPP, 2023).

Key Tensions	Detail	Potential for harm
Control and ownership	Even when Pacific data is collected by Pacific Peoples, their rights to control and ownership of that data may be constrained by existing regulations, institutional policies, and the requirements of external funders.	When external regulations, institutional policies, or funding requirements take precedence over community priorities, there is a risk that colonial dynamics may be unintentionally reinforced. For example, data collected by Pacific Peoples can still be governed by frameworks that privilege institutional or external funder interests, rather than recognising Pacific rights of ownership, control, and use. Such dynamics can limit the ability of Pacific communities to determine how their knowledge and data are represented, shared, and protected.
Collective rights vs. individual privacy	The communal nature of Pacific communities in which data may have collective significance with Western frameworks that emphasise individual consent and privacy. Pacific data may carry cultural and genealogical knowledge that belongs to families, villages, clans, or entire islands, and is not meant for wide dissemination.	Inappropriate exposure of personal and/or family information can lead to familial and personal shame, especially given the small, overlapping nature of Pacific communities (Anae et al., 2001). Information shared is considered taonga (treasured) and, in some settings, considered taboo to share widely. Researchers have the responsibility to discern, protect, and validate the appropriateness of sharing such information.
Capacity and resources	Collecting data that can be turned into information and later organised into meaningful information is a costly process (Snipp, 2016).	Research can sometimes place additional pressure on Pacific communities, many of whom are already navigating limited resources and competing demands. Without careful attention, there is a risk that Pacific knowledge systems may be overlooked, and that decisions affecting Pacific Peoples continue to be shaped without their full authority or self-determination. This highlights the importance of approaches that value Pacific expertise, respect cultural protocols, and create space for Pacific voices to lead and guide research processes.
System compatibility	Indigenous worldviews and methodologies need to be reconciled with established Western statistical systems (Walter, 2016; Walter et al., 2020).	Data can be used to further perpetuate negative narratives and stereotypes, often leading to Indigenous Peoples being blamed for their own inequality. When data is presented through this deficit lens, it is far more likely to perpetuate these narratives than to solve complex Indigenous policy issues (Walter et al., 2020).
Underrepresentation of Pacific statisticians or researchers in some settings.	Pacific staff are often informally relied upon to provide a cultural lens over data without proper remuneration or recognition.	Pacific underrepresentation in some contexts may contribute to risks such as the over-reliance on a small number of cultural experts, tokenistic engagement, and added cultural burden. It can also affect the protection of data sovereignty, create challenges for ensuring quality and integrity in data interpretation, and lead to reduced trust from Pacific communities.

What Is Pacific Data Sovereignty?

The use of Pacific data needs to be self-determining and relational, and demonstrate an interconnectedness with Pacific communities and their environments. Data relating to Pacific Peoples can originate from individuals, communities, organisations, cultural practices, and resources (MPP, 2023). This includes traditional, customary, and contemporary cultural knowledge and practices; oral stories; ancestral wisdom; Pacific ways of knowing; language; and histories of tribes, villages, families, or clans. Data collected by government agencies and nongovernment organisations encompasses, but is not limited to, commercial, demographic, legal, health, and social information. Pacific data also covers resources and environments, such as land histories, migration stories, and voyages (PDSN, 2021).

For Pacific Peoples, data represents the tangata (a person), 'aiga (family), or community, from the past and the present (MPP, 2023). There are clear distinctions between data for Pacific Peoples, data about Pacific Peoples, data by Pacific Peoples, and data with Pacific Peoples.

Pacific data is considered a living taonga (treasure) that reflects and derives from Pacific Peoples' history, present realities, and future aspirations (PDSN, 2021). Data sovereignty, in this sense, is of key importance in preserving and protecting taonga. Pacific data is inherently influential, shaping lives at both the individual and collective level (PDSN, 2021). It is important that it is conceptualised and understood from emic (insider) Pacific perspectives and within Pacific frameworks rather than etic (outsider) frameworks. Preferably, these frameworks are collated, analysed, accessed, managed, and shared by Pacific Peoples through a Pacific lens (PDSN, 2021); although we recognise and acknowledge the importance of protective measures that are actively upheld by non-Pacific collaborators in the use of Pacific data.

Pacific data sovereignty is the inherent right to govern the generation, collection, ownership, application, and sharing of data pertaining to Pacific Peoples. It ensures control and decision-making over data that reflects the diverse cultures, histories, and future aspirations that are grounded in shared Indigenous research principles that ensure nothing is done about us, as Pacific Peoples, without us (Royal Society Te Apārangi, 2023, p. 27).

Pacific Data Sovereignty for Policy

This policy guide responds to calls for Pacific data sovereignty, or the right of Pacific Peoples to govern the collection, access, use, and stewardship of their data in ways that uphold cultural integrity, community wellbeing, and self-determination. Grounded in Pacific philosophies and Indigenous research ethics, this guide offers policy makers practical insights to support data governance that is for, by, and with Pacific communities.

A Note on Pacific Advisory Roles: When Pacific Expertise is Invited but not Centred

For studies that do not explicitly prioritise Pacific Peoples, but seek out Pacific advisory support, it remains important to hold both the integrity of Pacific ethical practices and the practical realities of being in a supportive advisory role. In this setting, it is important to make clear that these roles are not to endorse the study, but rather to offer guidance on how the research might minimise harm to Pacific Peoples, encourage alignment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, advocate for mana-enhancing practices, and clarify the limits of what can be claimed in terms of Pacific responsiveness.

Pacific Data Sovereignty Policy Guide

Pacific Peoples—Our Interests, Rights, Values, and Knowledge

Key Actions

Protect: Safeguard Pacific data from misuse, ensuring its use remains under the control of Pacific communities.

Promote: Reinforce Pacific voices by supporting data practices that reflect and serve Pacific knowledge systems.

Honour: Recognise the sacredness of Pacific data by affirming cultural values, protocols, and relational accountability.

Points to consider

- Are the outcomes of data use beneficial and equitable for Pacific Peoples?
- Does the data reflect Pacific knowledge systems, experiences, and aspirations?
- Are Pacific values, such as collectivism, humility and service embedded into the data design?

Authority of Autonomy for Pacific Peoples

Key Actions

Stewardship: Pacific Peoples are the rightful custodians of their own information.

Authority: Pacific Peoples have the authority to control data through governance.

Control: Pacific Peoples have the inherent right to govern data collection, ownership, application, and sharing of data about their communities.

Points to consider

- By whose authority are you engaging in this research or data collection?
- Do you have a clear mandate from the Pacific community you are working with?
- Are Pacific leaders/experts involved in decisions about data definition, generation, collection, use, and sharing?
- Have Pacific communities agreed to engage with the data process, and do they understand how their data will be used over time?
- Does the approach enable Pacific-led and Pacific-driven data collection?

Facilitating Relationships and Authentic Engagement

Key Actions

Strengthen relationships: Actively build and nurture meaningful, trust-based connections within Pacific communities and with trusted non-Pacific collaborators who respect Pacific leadership, values, and relational ways of working.

Engage authentically: Participate with honesty, humility, and respect for Pacific values and ways of being.

Elevate together: Mobilise and honour Pacific communities through leadership, knowledge, and action.

Points to consider

- Is there meaningful involvement of Pacific communities at all stages of the data use, including design, collection, analysis, access, and dissemination?
- Are strong, reciprocal relationships being built with Pacific communities?
- Are there deliberate, long-term partnerships in place between institutions, organisations, and Pacific communities/experts?
- How are communication and feedback loops ensured to share data findings back to community?

Collective Action for Collective Gains

Key Actions

Centre wellbeing: Ensure Pacific Peoples' wellbeing remain the core purpose throughout the entire data life cycle.

Empower: Ensure data ecosystems are designed to empower Pacific Peoples to derive benefit.

Reciprocate value and benefit: Ensure that data initiatives actively produce tangible benefits, inclusive development, innovation, improved governance, and equitable outcomes for Pacific Peoples, rather than just observing or documenting their circumstances.

Points to consider

- Are Pacific communities and researchers able to readily access the data and findings generated?
- How are data initiatives contributing to the development of Pacific researchers and data professionals?
- Are there Pacific data analysts on the research team, or is capability being built within the Indigenous community for data analysis?
- Are connections between Pacific Peoples and other Indigenous Peoples being supported to enable the sharing of strategies, resources, and ideas for common goals?
- Does the initiative support the development of a Pacific workforce in data creation, collection, management, security, governance, and application?

Integrity and Ethics

Key Actions

Respect protocols: Honour Pacific knowledge systems, leadership structures, and community values in every part of the data journey.

Share benefits: Ensure that the research meaningfully contributes to Pacific communities, not just in outcomes, but in process and relationships.

Protect mana: Safeguard the dignity, identity, and authority of Pacific Peoples by ensuring data is interpreted, governed, and stored in ways that affirm Pacific ownership and control.

Points to consider

- How might this data support or harm Pacific Peoples, now, and into the future?
- Are Pacific cultural ways guiding how data is accessed, protected, and used?
- Does this uphold the mana and dignity of Pacific communities?
- Is harmful or deficit-based analysis being avoided?
- Has free, prior, and informed consent been truly honoured?
- If consent is unclear, is strong Pacific-led governance in place?
- Is there a trusted Pacific data space this can be returned to?

Influencing and Informing Policy and Practice

Key Actions

Actively transform: Shift from deficit-framing to strengths-based, aspirational approach, and acknowledge lived realities shaped by Pacific knowledge systems. Ensure data tells the story of what Pacific communities prioritise, and not what the system prefers to measure. Ensure diversity in Pacific-led governance and systems.

Genuine partnership: Engage Pacific communities as genuine advisors, and co-leads, across all stages of the data journey. Seek permissions, build trust, and honour community leadership and decision-making throughout.

Reciprocate: Be transparent about how data is used, by whom, and for what, always grounded in community benefit. Share findings in culturally safe ways that honour those who have contributed to it. Invest in Pacific workforce development so Pacific Peoples shape their own data futures.

Points to consider

- Does data reflect Pacific strengths, nuances, resilience, goals, successes, aspirations, lived realities, and not just disparities or disadvantage?
- Is the data driving policies and services that truly improve Pacific outcomes?
- Is it supporting Pacific-led data systems and secure infrastructures?
- How is accountability to Pacific Peoples shown in the use of their data?

Pacific Data Frameworks and Relevant Models

Key Actions

Cultural resonance: Data collection and analysis needs to align with Pacific values, culture, and existing Pacific frameworks.

Holistic narrative: It is important that data captures the full experience and lived reality of Pacific Peoples, offering more than statistics of disadvantage to encompass their resilience, goals, and successes. Data collection needs to reflect the diversity of Pacific subgroups and geographical contexts, moving beyond homogenising approaches to provide nuanced insights at the community level.

Holistic methodologies: While quantitative data may show scale, qualitative methodologies like Talanoa reveal context, culture, and meaning. Seek completeness and balance when designing the use of data, ensuring data serves both policymakers and communities.

Points to consider

- Do the chosen data collection and analysis methods align with Pacific values, culture, and existing Pacific frameworks?
- Is data being collected using concepts and methods that capture Pacific Peoples' experiences and lived realities, including diverse subgroups and geographical contexts?
- How can different methods be combined to provide meaningful insights within practical constraints?
- What approaches best capture the key aspects of the research topic?
- In what ways can qualitative and quantitative methods complement each other to build a coherent narrative?