

'We Don't Want to Lose Our Roots' Dwelling on Pacific climate migration

Betsan Martin, May 2018

Introduction

Speaking at the UN Climate Conference in Bonn in 2017 a leader from the Island of Tuvalu said 'Join us in our fight to keep global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius. We do not want to become forced migrants, to lose our roots, to have no point of reference on the face of the planet.'

The first priority for Pacific Peoples is to reverse climate change, which means action from industrial countries.

Some relocation is inevitable as Pacific Island nations bear severe cyclones, loss of fresh water and as food production restricted, or destroyed.

There is disagreement about legal status of climate migrants. Ideas of using 'climate refugee' status and special visas have been discussed to address the forced relocation for Pacific peoples.

A new 'Humanitarian visa' would allow for the dignity of choice. However, Visas and extending refugee status to climate-displaced people are individual criteria, whereas those displaced by climate change are villages and whole communities.

Self-determination is a key concern for Pacific peoples climate change and relocation policy – an interest protected in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples. The question of international solidarity comes to the fore as the matter of climate justice responsibilities come to the fore.

Rev. Tafue Lusama from the Island nation of Tuvalu spoke at the Fiji-hosted UN Climate Conference in Bonn in 2017. He said 'Join us in our fight to keep global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius. We do not want to become forced migrants, to lose our roots, to have no point of reference on the face of the planet.'

Despite the plea to halt global warming, the displacement of some Pacific Island communities is inevitable because even if the large industrial countries reduce their emissions and hold warming to 2 degrees, there will be major losses for Pacific Island peoples. The melting of ice, acidification of oceans from absorbing CO₂ and climate-related droughts and floods are already in train.

Priorities and Options

The first priority for Pacific Peoples is to reverse climate change and for neighboring countries such as New Zealand to move much more intentionally towards playing our part with climate policy, such as the newly proposed Zero Carbon Act. It seems certain that we need to join in the international efforts to prepare to support people displaced by climate change.

One option for people facing displacement is to move within a country. Fiji is already relocating villages to higher land. The other option is moving to new territories, or 'cross-border relocation' such as Pacific Island people migrating to New Zealand, or to other Pacific Islands. This becomes imperative as livable land areas become reduced and freshwater becomes scarce – often due to salt-water intrusion into freshwater springs. Storms, droughts and higher seawater reduce the space for agriculture and put the ability to grow food at risk. Crops are destroyed by hurricanes and disaster.

In 2014 Kiribati bought 20 sq. kilometers of land on Vanua Levu, Fiji, made available by the Anglican Church. Kiribati President Tong spoke of this purchase as providing for food security; subsequently he spoke of the possibility of relocating some of Kiribati's population of 110,000 to this Fijian location.

Migration to neighbouring countries needs preparation

There is disagreement about how to provide proper support in the face of not being able to stay in Island homes. Ideas of using 'climate refugee' status and special visas are discussed to address the forced relocation for Pacific peoples.

The new New Zealand government says it is considering introducing a 'humanitarian visa' to enable immigration on the grounds of climate displacement. Immigration allows for the dignity of choice – and requires a focus on vocational training so that migrants are able to find work and take their place as contributing members of society.

It's Not So Simple! Collective Issues and Discussion with Māori

The idea of Climate Refugees is a common term used for support people forced to leave their homes because of climate change. A Kiribati man Ioane Teitiota sought climate refugee status in the NZ courts in 2015. Teitiota's case was not accepted due to being outside the legal definitions for refugee status. Climate change provisions need different formats.

Visas and Refugee based entry are individual criteria, whereas those displaced by climate change are villages and whole communities.

There needs to be full and careful consultation with Māori before New Zealand proceeds with introducing special provisions for relocation. If we were to consider making land available who would provide it, and where would it be? How does this sit in the face of the historical taking of Māori land, which has only been partly restituted by the Treaty Settlement process? If land were made available, how would it be paid for? Would the NZ government contribute to the costs? Would it be paid for through the UNFCCC (UN Convention on Climate Change) climate finance and adaptation funds?

Self Determination and Decisions with Dignity

Minister for Pacific Peoples 'Aupito William Sio considers self-determination of indigenous peoples as important to climate change and relocation policy.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples includes self-determination and includes principles of cultural integrity, autonomy and participation in all decisions affecting them.

Culture is a matter of context and is bound to land, water, oceans, and spirituality. Food production, housing, health and provisions for education are all linked to land, water, and climate and make up the interwoven system of cultural integrity.

Taking account of relationships with ancestral lands and how culture can be sustained and adapted in a new environment requires deeper attention than provision of visas and the means to resettle. Providing for continuity of language and welfare and cultural practices will need careful dialogue and attention to options preferred by those facing relocation.

New Zealand Can Join German and Bangladeshi Platform Discussions

When considering options for New Zealand to step up our engagement with Pacific nations, we can also look further afield to multilateral initiatives to look at climate dislocation.

While we have immediate interests and responsibilities in the Pacific region, the issues of displacement in Bangladesh, Vietnam are at a vast scale of population displacement. The Norwegian and Swiss governments set up the Nansen Initiative 2011-2015 to develop a coherent international approach to climate-related displacement (<https://www.nanseninitiative.org/pacific-consultations-intergovernmental/>)

With New Zealand's intentions need to include further discussion with Pacific governments and churches, and seeking participation with the Nansen group and with the German and Bangladeshi 'Platform on Disaster Displacement' discussions on climate related displacement.

World Council of Churches

The World Council of Churches is actively engaged displacement as an important aspect of climate justice. They contributed to a side-event at COP23 in Bonn, where Rev. Lusama of Tuvalu reiterated the issue that has been brought to the table of Nations over many years, especially for the Paris Agreement, that holding global warming at 2 degrees will not stop Pacific Islands from disappearing.

In the face of this extreme dimension of loss, Pacific Islands have raised the vexed matter of compensation for Loss and Damage through climate finance. Rev. Grape, coordinator of the World Council of Churches Working Group on Climate Change said, 'loss of homeland cannot be accounted for only in economic terms'.

Rev. Lusama asked a question in Bonn that we can listen to in New Zealand and other high emitting countries: 'How can we practice solidarity?'

New Zealand is preparing more active climate change responsibilities and as the government embarks on the Zero Carbon Act – but there are no provisions in sight for liability for atmospheric damage, such as in France's 2017 Duty of Vigilance law.