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A joint publication of Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education &
The School of Education, Australian Catholic University

Climate changing our neighbours' future

Low lying pacific nations

such as Tuvalu, Fiji, Tonga and Kiribati will be amongst the first to face the impact of climate change and rising sea levels. There are also growing concerns about the future for Australian Indigenous communities in the Torres Strait. Kiribati (pronounced Kiribas) has no obvious destination for evacuation, and no high ground to retreat to hence it is an important case study of the threats facing low-lying islands.

Kiribati, with a population of nearly 84,000 people has had a long association with Australia. Most Kiribati imports come from Australia and they use Australian currency. The Kiribati people or I-Kiribati (as locals are known) centre their lives around the village *maneaba* (meeting house) and their subsistence economy is based on the sea. The Republic of Kiribati is comprised of 33 islands most of which are tiny coral atolls that span an area of 3.5 million sq km across the equator in the central and western Pacific Ocean.

The atolls of Kiribati are particularly vulnerable to climate change and rising sea levels as most rise no more than 2 or 3 metres above sea level. The major water source for coral atoll islands is ground water which collects in a water lens below the islands. Rainwater ensures the lenses are recharged and although overuse and seepage of pollution do affect the water lenses, the biggest threat is the contamination from rising seawater especially during king tides and storm surges.

Since the mid 1990s scientists have been focused on the impact of climate change on the most vulnerable areas of the world, particularly upon the Pacific.

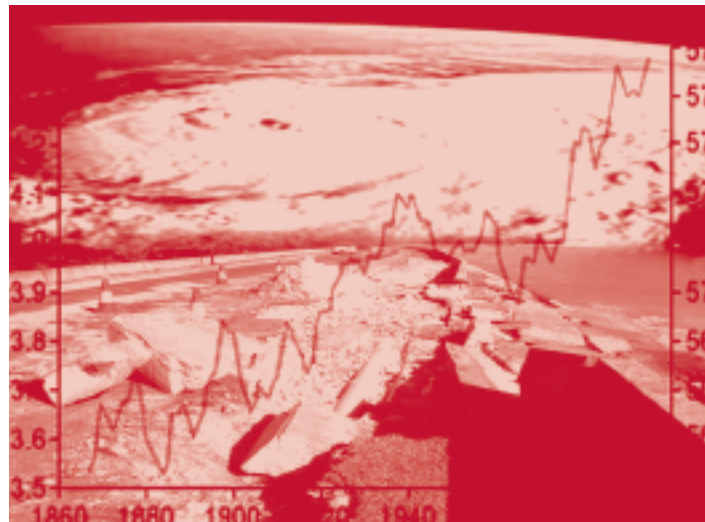
Effects include:

- Loss of coastal land and infrastructure due to erosion, inundation and storm surges;
- increasing storm frequency and intensity;
- Changes in rainfall patterns with increased droughts in some areas and more rainfall and flooding in other areas;
- Threats to agricultural production and eco-systems through sea water incursion;
- Human health impacts with an increase in incidence of dengue fever and diarrhoea.
- Loss of eco-systems due to increasing sea temperatures
- Droughts caused by El Nino and the Southern Oscillation have intensified.

(IPCC, Climate Change 2001: Impacts Adaptation and Vulnerability.)

Australia's Greenhouse Gas Emissions

The effect on the Pacific raises important challenges for Australia. While Australia only accounts for around 1.4% of global greenhouse gas emissions, its emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂ - the main greenhouse gas), are among the highest per person in the world. In 2002 about 17.36 tonnes of CO₂ were emitted for every Australian. According to the International Energy Agency (2004) only the US, among the members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), had a higher



rate of emissions of CO₂ per person. Australia's large emissions per person can be attributed to three factors: the high usage of coal in electricity generation; the high dependence on car travel for urban transport, and road freight for haulage; and the aluminium smelting sector.

*(Year Book Australia 2006, Australian Bureau of Statistics, p582
[http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/67E47661AA446A24CA2570FC00119006/\\$File/13010_2006.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/67E47661AA446A24CA2570FC00119006/$File/13010_2006.pdf) accessed on 28/08/06)*

Political perspectives on climate change and the Pacific

Australia has had a long association with many Pacific nations in the areas of trade and aid, and more recently focusing on security. As one of the leading developed nations in the Pacific region Australia not only has obligations to its smaller neighbours but also a responsibility to minimise its own impact on climate change in the Pacific.

"...there is a strong feeling in the Australian community and Government that we have an obligation to assist our close neighbours in the Pacific."

Prime Minister John Howard.

http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/spacific/pm_transcript_0304.html

The Australian Government does not support and has not ratified the Kyoto Protocol as it views this agreement as having "no overall greenhouse benefit" arguing that it is "ineffective" and does not include all major emitters such as the USA, although it has committed to limiting carbon emissions to 108% of 1990 levels by 2008-12. (See www.dfat.gov.au/environment/climate). Instead they argue that they have been working with other major polluting countries such as China and the USA on an alternative agreement to Kyoto, the "Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate." This partnership, according to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, aims to "complement, and not frustrate, economic development." This is despite recent findings from the Lowy Institute that show that over 80% of Australians believe improving the environment is a greater foreign policy concern than terrorism, and two-thirds believe urgent action is needed on climate change even if this comes at significant economic cost.

The environment movement argues that the Australian Government's approach undermines international support for the Kyoto Protocol, in part by tacitly supporting the USA's decision to opt-out. While these groups welcome efforts to work collaboratively to lower emissions, they question the Australian approach which seems to prioritise short term economic growth, and which sets much weaker targets for emission reductions.

The Government argues that it has recently committed to reducing the vulnerability to Pacific island communities to climate change through

involvement in the "Kiribati Adaptation Program" which focuses on sea level and climate monitoring, vulnerability and adaptation, and climate prediction. In this context, Australian aid for Kiribati, is focused on aid and "adaptation" (which involves, for example, population settlement planning) and will reach an estimated \$13 million dollars in 2006 and 2007, (*AusAID website <http://www.ausaid.gov.au/country/country.cfm?CountryID=20&Region=SouthPacific&CFID=5727086&CFTOKEN=46369460>*). While this has been welcomed in Kiribati, Australia's reluctance to do more to address climate change continues to be of great concern. A report released in October 2006 by a coalition of aid, development, environment and church NGOs, the Climate Change for Development Round Table, recommended that 'future Australian aid must be framed within the reality of the many changed conditions that will come with expected climate change impacts.' (*Australia Responds: Helping Our Neighbours Fight Climate Change*)

The Australian Labor Party released a detailed alternative approach to dealing with the threats facing the Pacific. Their discussion paper outlines plans to support the current adaptation and mitigation programs, but also to plan for evacuations and increase planned migration and settlement. The ALP has since committed to reducing Australia's green house gas emissions by 60% by 2050. In doing this the ALP has joined the Greens and Democrats who both support resettlement and evacuations of those in the Pacific threatened by climate change, and who both support significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

The World Bank is urging all governments to act now as damage has already been done. The major problem in adapting to climate change is not in formulating policy or technical responses but rather in garnering the political will necessary to enact change.

Messages from I-Kiribati

"Environmental issues, and in particular, climate change, constitute security issues for low-lying coral atoll countries such as Kiribati." ("Adaptation To Climate Change in The Pacific Does Not Mean Surrender, Says New Report.")

-Ms Teaa Tira, Spokeswoman for the President of Kiribati.

Pacific Calling Partnership

Recently the Edmund Rice Centre has begun a campaign in solidarity with people in Kiribati to highlight the implications of climate change for low-lying Pacific Islands. On a recent trip to Kiribati we received a series of messages for the Australian Government from a workshop examining the issues of climate change and the impact on Kiribati. A Senate motion was moved on September 15, 2006 in support of the campaign. The workshop recommendations included:

"On behalf of the Kiribati people, we ask that Australia sign the Kyoto Protocol, as we are small nations and we need your help on this matter...We ask Australia to find a place for us if we are in big trouble."

Just Action

- Join the Pacific Calling Campaign – there are opportunities for research, community education, planning, lobbying, promotion, fund-raising, networking etc-email jillf@erc.org.au
- Write to the Minister for Environment Ian Campbell through your local member about your concerns for the people of Kiribati, the Torres Strait and the Pacific...
- See also Australian Conservation Foundation website, <http://www.acfonline.org.au/news>

Full references on the ERC website



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