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

The Majuro Declaration: Pacific island leaders get down to tin-tacks

The coral atolls and other

low-lying islands that dot the Pacific Ocean are just a few meters above sea-level. These islands will experience a higher sea level rise than other parts of the world and Pacific peoples are already exposed to the adverse effects of climate change, something that is not of their own doing. They are compelled to attend to their very survival.

Various Islands expect to be flooded, bringing salination of water supplies, a loss of land through erosion, and population displacements that increase population density or forced emigration, even though identity and culture are tied to peoples' islands¹. In Kiribati's Tarawa population density equals London's, with almost all land for dwellings taken². Islanders' sense of injustice regarding the lack of a genuine, equitable global response by the rich developed world has now spurred them to take the lead.

Mainstream science indicates that warming and rising seas are affected by a combination of highly variable weather patterns and as a result of human activity³. Despite climate sceptics' distortions and misrepresentations of scientific assessments, climate change adds to factors that threaten the fragile ecology of the Pacific countries⁴. Australians may be surprised by warnings that Sydney Councils and the NSW state government, at a multi-billion dollar cost, will need to strengthen and maintain hundreds of kilometres of sea walls vulnerable to higher sea levels⁵. Pacific Island nations cannot afford to wait any longer; that is a luxury belonging to developed nations.

A "Pacific Gift" to the World

The plight of Pacific peoples was given a strong shake-up on the fifth of September this year by Pacific Island Leaders gathered at the 45th Pacific Islands Forum representing fourteen South Pacific Islands spread throughout a vast area of 3.5 million square kilometres of ocean: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. To many Australians these islands simply represent attractive vacation places of sun, sparkling seas, palm trees, and exotic cultures. For these Small Island Developing States (SIDS), however, it is not a question of "if" coral atolls will be flooded by the sea, but "when" they will disappear⁶.

A Flea Speaks to the Elephant

In Majuro, capital of the Marshall Islands, Forum members, together with Australia and New Zealand, signed the "Majuro Declaration for Climate Leadership."⁷ A text of only twelve pages, the Majuro Declaration dares to speak to the world community as if a flea speaking to a mighty elephant, the elephant in the room.

Demonstrating deft political diplomacy, the Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, as projected in the Declaration, presented the document to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and nations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as "a Pacific gift" to the world. It supports the UN's efforts to mobilise the world community to come to a legally-binding climate change



agreement by 2015, something that will demand enormous ambition, an equitable arrangement, justice, and political resolve.

"I have gone first. Follow me."

The significance of the document lies precisely in the firm political leadership of the Pacific Islands. Now, stepping up to even greater leadership, they "commit to being Climate Leaders." Because "to lead is to act" they make a compelling case for others to follow their lead. Tired of waiting for others to "go first," the Pacific's plucky new approach recognises that developed countries have other agendas, but at the same time "if the Pacific Islands disappear... it will be too late for everyone else."⁸ This echoes the assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change⁹.

Important steps shape the way forward

Earlier efforts to gain support and commitments to do more to stop climate change in this region have not had the same 'muscle' as Majuro, for example, the 2010 Ambo Declaration

forged in Kiribati¹⁰. The Ambo text does not mention targets for reduction in greenhouse emissions, and received significant support, e.g., from China, Australia, and New Zealand, but not enough. It deliberately did not include targets as the aim of the Conference was to find points of agreement and build on those – the “Pacific way.”

Pacific Island efforts have always expressed alarm and concerns, which, until Majuro had largely centred around the causes and adverse impacts of climate change. As we will see further on, Majuro gives stronger emphasis to developing responses around adaptation and mitigation. While prior efforts may appear feeble, together they form a series of important steps towards the Majuro Declaration.

The Least Developed Countries

The Majuro document not only accepts the need to move to low-carbon development but “galvanizes” Pacific countries’ own commitments by listing or pledging their own new, more ambitious commitments, urging others to intensify efforts to greater emissions reductions and to turn to alternative, renewable energy. The target of the Cook Islands, Niue, and Vanuatu, for example, is that by 2020, 100% electricity generation will come from renewable energy, as also for the Solomon Islands by 2030. To succeed, such pledges require enormous resources, especially finance, because the impact of climate change most effects the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), including Pacific Island Nations. LDCs are economically vulnerable, with a per capita gross national income under \$750 USD, suffer inadequate nutrition, poor health and education, instability of agriculture production, and basically, lack the technologies to meet the challenges involved¹¹.

Dialogue Partners Called to Account

The Pacific Climate Leaders therefore call for their dialogue partners to concretely enhance, accelerate and ensure effective delivery of their support. They want greater leadership from major emitting countries: Canada, People’s Republic of China, the European Union, France, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, UK and USA, as well as governments, economic entities, and civil society organisations.

Pledges to reduce American emissions cannot be dependent on whether other major economies agree to limit their emissions as well. Unfortunately, New Zealand, in the Majuro Declaration, mirrors the US, as does Australia with its \$4.5 billion cut in overseas aid, and its cut in climate change policy.

A Proactive Future: Energy Revolution

The Majuro Declaration’s focus has shifted forward with its focus on proactive risk management rather than the traditional approach of ‘wait and mitigate’¹². The Pacific Leaders’ initiative for a “Pacific Regional Data Repository for Sustainable Energy for All,” part of the Majuro trajectory, will overcome gaps in data and knowledge about national and regional energy planning and policy choices, and identify options for adaptation¹³. In preparation for the 2014 Climate Summit Pacific Island Nations have prepared comprehensive reports to reduce the risk of disasters and climate variability. Details set out future specific actions, including the case for resilience, and the retraining of people forced to emigrate to gain suitable employment there¹⁴. The vision of the Majuro Declaration is the strongest yet for moving forward in the Pacific Islands.

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