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Climate Justice: Taking Responsibility

To our North and East lie the

Pacific Islands, a vast region that is at the forefront of human induced climate change. Within this collection of archipelagos and atolls lie Kiribati, Tuvalu, and the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI), whose people have seen the quality of their lives deteriorate from the impact of rising sea temperatures and tides. Human induced climate change is the cause, and is exacerbating existing human development issues that face the atolls.

That the world needs to reduce its emissions can no longer be in doubt if these island nations are to remain intact, both as a collection of land and as cultural groups, by the end of the century. Australia, as the highest per capita greenhouse gas emitter in the world and their neighbour, can and must do more to lead the way in reducing emissions. At our current rate, we are likely to see a rise in sea levels of 0.6 metres and 4 degrees in temperature by 2100¹. This is a fearful prospect for our low lying neighbours.

While reducing emissions is essential to their long term futures and prosperity, we also cannot afford to ignore their more immediate future. Climate change has already dramatically altered life on the atolls, eroding traditional ways of life in these materially poor countries. They need funds for adaptation, the right kind of aid, and they need more than is currently being supplied by Australia. They need climate justice.

“Climate justice links human rights and development to achieve a human-centred approach, safeguarding the

rights of the most vulnerable and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its resolution equitably and fairly.”² Australia, who the atoll nations look up to as a “big brother,” can better engage in an equitable relationship and deliver climate justice.

The Current Situation

At the heart of the situation currently faced by Kiribati, Tuvalu and RMI is the confluence of climate change effects and the impact of human development. At every turn, climate change is heightening existing social pressures and limiting opportunities.

Inshore fishing, the mainstay of the local economy and traditional way of life across all three countries, is under threat from even slight rises in water temperatures³. It has resulted in helping to fuel a concentration of the populations of the atolls, as the potential to thrive on the outer islands is stripped away. Kiribati has seen this internal migratory trend towards its capital, Tarawa, due to the enticements of human development and the lack of opportunities and jobs on the outer islands⁴. However, king tides are now hitting 2.8m, just below the peak of this densely populated island, which stands at 3m above sea level.

Tarawa is overpopulated, and poor sewage infrastructure is tainting the water supply and spreading disease. To compound matters, rising sea levels are also causing the water lenses beneath the atolls to shrink, further reducing the fresh water supply. Reverend Tioti



Timon, a climate change advocate, recounts seeing a well on the island of Kiebu Makin being used by over 500 people turn increasingly brackish and undrinkable⁵. Digging deeper was not an option, as the shrinking water lens meant that their efforts were greeted with more salt water.

On May 7 2013, the government of RMI declared a national emergency after severe droughts. Phillip Muller, RMI's foreign minister, recounted the situation to the *Washington Post*: “This humanitarian crisis is climate-induced. About 6,000 people are affected by severe water shortages and are surviving on less than one litre of water per day. All of the affected communities have lost the staple crops that provide their daily food. The drying water wells are contaminated with bacteria and salt. Diarrhea, pink eye, flu and other drought-related diseases are on the rise, particularly among children, and we are on the brink of a much wider outbreak.”⁶

The atolls of the Pacific need more support than currently being offered, to counter both the effects of climate change and to help propel their development. They need adaptation funding to protect their shorelines and water lens, as well as retaining aid levels for greater sanitation infrastructure and education, not sacrificing one for the other⁷. That would be equitable, that would be climate justice.

Pilot Schemes and the Needs of the Atolls

“They need to find employment, not as refugees but as immigrant people with skills to offer, people who have a place in the community, people who will not be seen as second class citizens.”

Anote Tong, President of Kiribati

Australia’s aid programs directed at the atolls have combined increased training and education opportunities with adaptation funding. The Kiribati-Australia Nurses Initiative (KANI) was started in 2006. A pilot program, it has seen 81 young i-Kiribati receive tertiary training in nursing and the right to stay and work in Australia, or return to Kiribati. It is hoped that funds towards a successor program for further nurse training, once the pilot finishes in 2014, will be committed⁸.

There are separate interests amongst the people of the atolls that are assisted by programs such as KANI. Anote Tong, President of Kiribati, has put in place a vision of “migration with dignity”, where the burden of unsustainable population increase and the effects of climate change can be eased through the education and

successful migration of willing elements of the population.

In contrast, Tuvalu, wants access to programs such as KANI and for seasonal work opportunities to improve the economic situation at home, rather than encourage migration: “We need assistance to become more economically independent. Tuvaluans want to go to Australia for seasonal work to provide their families with remittances but also return home.”⁹

It is a very complicated situation facing the island nations of the Pacific. They are ‘MIRAB’ economies reliant on Migration, Remittances, Aid, and Bureaucracy to function and develop¹⁰. Climate change threatens their very existence unless more can be done for them, not in 20 years but now.

Equitability

Climate change is not an intangible or far removed threat to future generations. It is impacting upon our neighbours right now, in immediate and devastating fashion. Nor is Climate change’s impact restricted to atolls: new research from the Climate Institute suggests that there is a very strong link between the extreme weather we have seen recently in Australia, such as the 2010 and 2011 Queensland floods, and Climate change¹¹.

The often ignored human element of the climate change narrative is unfolding across the atolls, where individuals, communities, and neighbours are suffering through no fault of their own. Never the less, these small island nations remain determined to create a positive future for their cultures, communities, and children. The Majuro Declaration of 2013 demonstrates the Pacific Islands’ dedication to combating climate change¹², but they cannot act alone.

They need and crave greater certainty for their futures, a precious commodity we take for granted in Australia. Australia has the means, and should have the will, to provide this certainty and encourage hope, by putting in place effective aid and climate change policies that are driven by compassion, morality, a sense of equity, and, most of all, courage. Australia can provide climate justice to the atolls of the Pacific, and should not be afraid of leading the world in helping our neighbours, both now and into the future.

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