



Pacific Calling Partnership Information Sheet

Human Mobility and Climate Change

THE IPCC FIFTH ASSESSMENT REPORT

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the foremost authority on the science of climate, has said that sea level rise is a threat to low-lying islands (1). Relocation and displacement are considered to be the likely result of sea level rise when combined with salination of fresh water lenses and coastal erosion. The Fifth Assessment Report recognises that the high costs of adapting on low lying islands could lead to the need for migration.

The IPCC suggests that climate change is an existential threat to some of the low lying island nations in the Pacific.

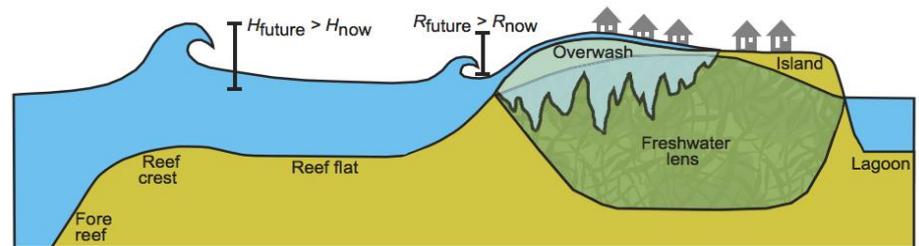
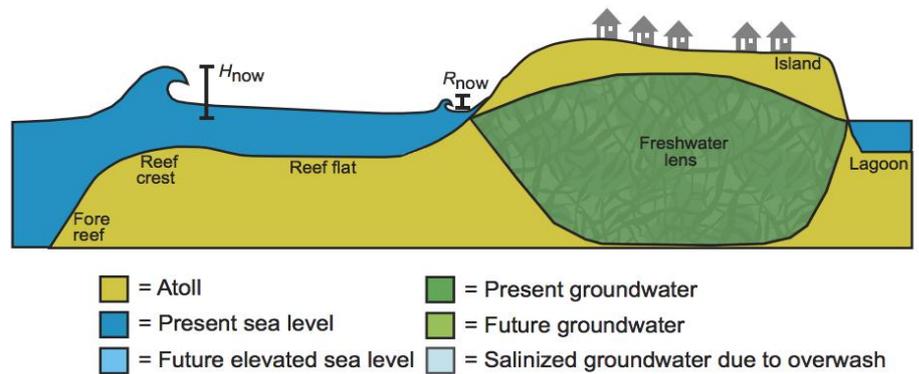
While climate change will impact on almost all the island states in the Pacific, some communities are considered more susceptible and are likely to require the assistance of surrounding developed states with which they have strong historic links such as Australia and New Zealand. As the study by Storlazzi demonstrates (2), atoll countries such as Kiribati and Tuvalu are very vulnerable to salt water intrusion into their ground due to sea level rise. They also lack significant fertile land for agricultural production. They are highly dependent on subsistence fishing, but their fish stocks are likely to feel the impacts of ocean acidification and the consequent damage to their coral reefs. Magnified by the predicted sea-level rise, the impacts of storm surges and king tides will almost certainly result in the need for migration. Internal migration will be difficult due to a lack of available land so cross border migration will be the likely result (6).

MORE RECENT STUDIES

Some recent scientific studies suggest that atolls may become uninhabitable much earlier than originally thought. A recent paper by Storlazzi et al suggests that inundation by wave action accompanied rising sea levels could lead to the salination of the fresh water

lenses rendering the islands uninhabitable by as early as the mid 21st century.

The analysis of NASA and European satellite data also suggested that global sea levels are rising more quickly than previously thought (3).



THE UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

The Human Rights Council recognises that climate change can adversely affect the enjoyment of human rights (4). There is concern that climate change can fuel human mobility. There is evidence that large numbers of people are already being displaced by weather related disasters such as storms and cyclones. It has been suggested that since 2008 some 22 million persons per have been forced to move because of these sudden climate events. The Human Rights Council, however points out that slow onset effects of climate change, such as sea level rise, ground water salination, drought, and desertification is likely to magnify that figure considerably.

With regard to the Pacific Islands, the question of human rights is complicated by the region's traditional law which sees human rights as pertaining to the group or community and not so much the individual.



It has been said by many community leaders in Kiribati and Tuvalu that migration per se is not regarded as an ideal outcome for their communities and that the community and its identity is paramount. It is for this reason that former President Anote Tong has bought land in Fiji. It has been seen as an attempt to maintain the potential migrant community as a community with its history and culture intact and not as a people dispersed in a foreign land, such as Australia and New Zealand, without its identity or traditions.

GAPS IN PROTECTION

At present, international law, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, does not address the issue of human mobility due to climate change. While slow onset effects of climate change may lead to conflict, or at least be a contributing factor, this may not always occur. Refugee law only provides protection for those forced to move as a result of conflict or persecution. Slow onset climate change may force displacement for other reasons such as loss of fertile lands or lack of clean water.

In the absence of such a right, migrants displaced by climate change are put at risk and are sometimes subjected to the use of violence and coercive behaviour, at times even by public authorities.

THE TASK FORCE ON DISPLACEMENT

The United Nations is increasingly concerned about the threat of displacement caused by climate change. On the 19th of September 2016, the United Nations General Assembly adopted what is known as *The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants* (5), which aimed to address the question of large movements of refugees and migrants including those that moved due to “*the adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters...or other environmental factors.*”

Furthermore, Article 49 of the Paris agreement requested the Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism, the main vehicle to address loss and damage under the UNFCCC, to establish a task force to develop recommendations in relation to displacement caused by the impacts of climate change. The Task Force on Displacement met for the first time in May 2017 and will, in due course, make recommendations to address displacement.

AUSTRALIA AND PACIFIC MIGRATION

Although seeing this as a last resort, the former President of Kiribati, Anote Tong, has for some years been calling on the international community to provide his people with the opportunity to migrate. His appeal

for “migration with dignity” has as yet not been directly responded to by the Australian Government but, in September 2017, a new Pacific Labour Scheme was announced by the Australian Prime Minister which would enable citizens of Pacific island countries to work in rural and regional Australia for up to three years at a time. The Scheme is scheduled to start in July 2018 with an initial intake of up to 2,000 workers. It would form part of the initiatives announced in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper (7) launched by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Hon Julie Bishop, and would be intended to respond to the “*significant long-term challenges faced by our partners in the Pacific, including: climate change and responding to natural disasters.*” While welcome, the Scheme only allows Pacific Islanders to work for a limited time in Australia and does not provide permanent relief for those islanders facing displacement as a result of climate change.

As suggested by the World Bank in a policy paper, *Pacific Possible* (8), Australia and New Zealand should allow open migration for citizens of Pacific nations threatened by climate change. It is only through an open access migration that real relief for Tuvalu and Kiribati will be provided.

NEW ZEALAND AND PACIFIC MIGRATION

The Prime Minister of New Zealand recently revealed that she is considering the creation of a special refugee visa for Pacific Islanders affected by rising sea levels. At present the scheme is still being discussed, but the New Zealand government has indicated it plans to start with 100 places annually. Such a scheme, if emulated by Australia and other developed countries around the world, would provide some level of relief for Pacific nations faced by the prospect of losing their homelands to rising sea levels and other climate related impacts.

References

1. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Fifth Assessment Report, Section 29.3.1
2. Most atolls will be uninhabitable by the mid-21st century because of sea-level rise exacerbating wave-driven flooding, Storlazzi et al, *Science Advances* 25 Apr 2018:Vol. 4, no. 4.
3. Climate-change-driven accelerated sea-level rise detected in the altimeter era, R. S. Nerem et al, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*
4. The Slow Onset effects of climate change, Human Rights Council, March 2018
5. *The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants*
6. The risk of disaster-induced displacement, South Pacific island states, Chris Lavell, Jan 2004
7. Foreign Policy White Paper 2017
8. *Pacific Possible*, World Bank, July 2016

