

Climate Change and the Pacific Islands: ‘When the Land Disappears, We Will All Disappear’

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Another method rich countries are using to downplay the severity of climate change is to ignore its consequences, or try and pass them off as “natural” events.

Climate change is already leading to rising sea levels, threatening island and coastal communities and devastating food security and access to fresh water. Long-term drought and changes in weather patterns are causing hunger and destroying farming land.

By the middle of the century, it is estimated that as many as 200 million people worldwide may be displaced as a result.

Yet, rich countries have responded to this humanitarian disaster with lock-down and lock-up measures to try and stop vulnerable people trying to flee.

The poorest nations with the least resources — which have had the least to do with the climate emergency — are being left to deal with humanitarian problems.

Climate-related displacement is still not considered to be an important global issue. The United Nations (UN) Charter still does not recognise climate refugees — those who cross international borders to find safety — let alone internally displaced persons due to changes in the climate.

The UN Human Rights Committee handed down a landmark decision last January, after a 2015 case was brought by [Ioane Teitiota](#) from the small Pacific island nation of Kiribati seeking protection in Aotearoa/New Zealand as a climate refugee. His claim was denied by the NZ government.

The UNHRC eventually upheld the NZ government’s decision on the grounds that the situation in Kiribati was not yet dire enough that Teitiota and his family faced an imminent risk to their lives.

However, it added a disclaimer, saying that [“without robust national and international efforts”](#), the effects of climate change may expose people to life-threatening risks or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and countries could not lawfully send people back to these conditions.

Papua New Guinea’s (PNG) islands, including coral atolls, are experiencing saltwater inundation, leading to shortages of safe drinking water and threats to food security.

This is compounded by the legacy of colonial occupation and theft of resources by former colonial powers. Today, neo-colonialism continues in the form of foreign company land grabs for logging and mining (including deep sea mining). In addition, there is a lack of transparency and corruption in government and business sectors.

These people also face the impacts of onshore mining. Gold mining produces tailings that flow down rivers causing mass fish kills (due to cyanide poisoning) and bring sediment downstream to clog rivers and impact ocean ecosystems.

The loss of control by local land owners over the land and resources means they are more vulnerable to underhand land grabs for logging. Policies and laws around sustainable land use either do not exist or benefit foreign interests.

Traditional knowledge, passed down through generations, about land and resource management has not been codified or given proper status.

Islands washing away

Mualim Island, located in the Duke of York Islands in PNG is gradually being engulfed by the sea on its northern and southern tips. The lack of arable land and fresh drinking water means people paddle their canoes to other islands to tend food gardens, collect firewood and fresh water.

Nukumanu (Tasman) islanders are forced to travel hundreds of kilometres by dinghies, risking their lives, to the island of Buka to buy rations, especially rice.

The impact of climate change on PNG’s coral atolls is that most islands experience almost half a year of drought. This means islanders have a limited water supply which often leads to poor sanitation.

According to the [Coral Sea Foundation](#), Potaminam Island is likely to disappear in another few decades due to rising sea levels.

The beach is shrinking and coconut palms are falling into the water. Potaminam is located more than 260 kilometres from the nearest significant high ground.

Rising sea levels mean the people of the Carteret Islands in PNG are now on the brink of starvation: they cannot grow food and crops due to high salt content in the soil.

While the PNG government wants technological solutions to mitigate the impacts of climate change — building sea walls and regrowing corals — the islanders want a response now. They are so worried, they find it hard to sleep.

Ten Carteret Island-displaced families are now living on Bougainville, on land provided by

the Catholic Church in the Tiniput region. Another 10 families are due to be relocated there soon.

Those remaining on the islands (about 2400 people) live precariously. Their diet consists of coconut and fish, but coconuts are not maturing and arable land is becoming scarce and unsuitable for gardening.

The island is slowly being washed away. It could take 50–60 years, or it could happen sooner, advocates say. A humanitarian and immediate disaster response is needed now.

Activists are discussing voluntary migration with communities to what they call a “safe second home” where islanders would have full rights and the right of return to their island if they want to.

Carteret Islands’ community representatives have raised concerns over the use of the term “climate change refugees” as they are internally displaced. They want their human rights, dignity and respect to be guaranteed before they are forced to move.

Organising for survival

Fala Haulangi is a campaigns organiser with E tū union in Aotearoa/NZ. Haulangi is originally from the Pacific island nation of Tuvalu, where the sea level is rising by nearly twice the global average.

Haulangi told a web forum hosted on July 3 by the [Global Ecosocialist Network](#) that climate change and sea-level rise are “everyday challenges” her people are faced with.

“I have been living here in Aotearoa/NZ for about 30 years now, but I am deeply connected to my land — Tuvalu. So, when we talk about climate change, we talk about the survival of my people.

“Continuous rising of sea levels, the increase of salt water [in the soil], means our people are not able to plant their own root crops. The increasing [intensity] of cyclones and drought — they are new things that our people are experiencing nowadays.

“It’s such a shame — we are a small island [with] only 10 square kilometers of land mass. We are only about 4 metres above sea level. The population is about 11,000. But the impact of climate change is a reality to my people.

“One of the wise men in our Tuvaluan community here always says: ‘When we talk about the land — Tuvalu — we are connected to that land. It is about our art, our language, our values and Indigenous culture.

“All this will die because of climate change. When culture dies, our stories die. Our connections and identity dies. When our identity dies, we will be truly lost people. When the land disappears, we will all disappear.”

Haulangi said that despite being “resilient” people, Tuvaluans “live with fear everyday because of climate change”.

E tū union has been campaigning for the rights of *Pasifika* (Pacific islands peoples) living and working in Aotearoa/NZ.

“Our union has been quite proactive, because E tū union has quite a lot of members who are Pasifika migrants,” Haulangi said.

Just transitions

E tū has adopted programs and policies that support the migration of people from the Pacific to Aotearoa/NZ due to the impact of climate change, which are also endorsed by the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions.

The union has also developed a [Just Transitions Plan](#), that aims to deal with “rapid changes” to industries and economic sectors as they restructure in response to government and international commitments to combat climate change.

“Recognition of obligations to Pacific peoples affected by rising sea levels” is included in the plan, she said. “We are trying to make sure that this government recognises that the people of the land should be at the centre of all these discussions of planning [for a just transition].”

“It is very important to us that tangata whenua [those with traditional authority over the land] unions and workers are part of this discussion [with government] from the word go.”

Haulangi said her union wants the government to be “more lenient when it comes to immigration from Tuvalu and islands of the Pacific to Aotearoa/NZ”.

Aotearoa/NZ has a history of racism towards workers from the Pacific islands, who were welcomed in the 1960s to help fill labour shortages and grow the economy, only to be told to “go back where they came from” when things had improved.

Haulangi said a petition before the NZ government now is calling for pathways to permanent residency.

“Our Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, was supposed to deliver an apology to our Pasifika people ... for how they were dealt with in the dawn [immigration] raids in the 1970s.”

During those early-morning raids in the 1970s and ‘80s, authorities demanded families show their papers to prove they were “legal”. Many have [suffered ongoing trauma](#) as a result.

Haulangi said the apology had to be postponed because of COVID-19, but that they were not simply looking for an apology.

“We don’t want the PM to just say sorry ... we want to make sure that the government will look at all the over-stayers here ... not just Pasifika but any other ethnic groups ... to make sure that the government grants them permanent residency.”

This would be a small step for a rich country in a climate emergency.

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