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Human & environmental security: what the Pacific can teach NZ & Australia about climate change

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This paper assumes knowledge and general acceptance of how climate change issues are affecting the Pacific region. It is understood that globally there is a need to limit human induced temperature rise and the fact that sea water intrusion, flooding, storms and droughts are already increasing in intensity. The issue of water is a particular concern and as an immediate security threat to the sustainability of Pacific populations may be more urgent than any of the other threats of climate change.

Rapidly growing towns and urban settlements across the Pacific, as well as overcrowding, growth of informal settlements and poor living conditions associated with growing hardship are exacerbating issues arising from climate change.

There is a danger of representing Pacific islanders and their countries as inherently vulnerable and unable to survive (new 'failed states') without a large amount of assistance from donors. Vulnerability can exacerbate fear, increase feelings of disempowerment - yet these are qualities not widespread in the Pacific at present. Pacific islanders are not only fighting back, especially in the run up to the Paris meetings, but they have always responded to threats of loss of territory and the impacts of storms and flooding using local knowledge and innovation.

Responses include historical actions such as relocation, migration, traditional alliances, food storage, understanding of weather patterns and construction of artificial islands. Many of these responses continue today and it could be said that traditional resilience can outshine and even derail some western donor practices. A case in point was Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu where news media (and donors) were confused by Vanuatu's approach to post-cyclone rehabilitation which took into account age-old local practices.

Highly technical fixes for climate change such as engineering solutions of seawalls and complex artificial islands can risk failure if not carefully thought out. The mode of public 'education' being propagated can also be problematic. In Australia for example, the inundation approach to remote Aboriginal communities caused so much anxiety about what might be coming (with images of a nuclear holocaust or worse, memories of stolen children) that entire communities feared for their lives and had to flee to avoid being forcibly removed to centralised communities (see Meg Parsons work). In the far north of Australia, especially Torres Strait, communities have limited or no control now over their own lands and borders due to the wider concerns of illegal migrants and this makes it much harder to deal with issues of climate change.

It is important to listen to local communities and to respect the knowledge that exists. This is not only in traditional, village based communities, but also in towns. There is evidence that new urban Pacific islanders are building on what they already knew – there is an indigenization of towns and the development of new communities not yet understood by donors.

Regionally it is crucial to work with the fact that there is unity about climate change in Pacific Island countries. Populations do not need to be convinced and there are few sceptics and naysayers. This is nowhere more evident in the new forms of governance being developed, for example the PIDF which essentially was forged from the perceived failure of the Pacific Islands Forum to protect country interests. The fact that PIDF excludes Australia and New Zealand is a lesson in

listening, and the Suva Declaration on Climate Change demonstrated this very strongly, particularly in the emphasis on seeking local solutions. Greg Fry, an Australian National University scholar said: "A Pacific Islands Forum with Australia and New Zealand as members is hampering the ability of the Pacific island states to defend their interests, and in the case of climate change policy, their very survival" (Fry, 2015:1).

It is also understood that while traditional ways of coping can be models for other parts of the world, scale and magnitude may overwhelm some islands and so preparation for other means of adapting, such as relocation, are already underway. PICs continue to contribute to global research and policy to 'turn the tide'. It may be too late for some low lying islands, but active engagement in seeking actions aimed at "safeguarding biodiversity and ecosystems; ensuring food, water and energy security; and supporting future socio-economic development by becoming climate resilient" is ongoing.

Finally, some new environmental/human security threats are emphasized, noting that growing epidemics of weather & climate-sensitive infectious diseases e.g. malaria, dengue, leptospirosis will challenge the NCD crisis in the Pacific and will not only have a devastating effect on human health and socio-economic development, but will also severely overburden the health systems in PICs. These illnesses have implications for overcrowded settlements and the poor in Pacific urban areas in particular.

Dengue is a global crisis and endemic in more than 100 countries where it is largely a disease of urban areas, although it is spreading to rural areas (Dobson, 2015: 334). It can now be considered a most important and rapidly spreading viral disease exacerbated by climate change. Of particular concern is the arrival of the new vector *aedes albopictus,* which unlike *aegypti* will bite at any time and is moving south into cooler areas. *Albopictus* transmits chikungunya as well as dengue. Squatter settlements are the 'hot spots' for all of these diseases, for example, of the 27,000 cases of dengue in Fiji 2013-14, the majority emanated from settlements and poorer neighborhoods.

Implications for Pacific Island countries which are clearly now facing increasing temperatures and inundation, as well as more storms and flooding due to climate change, are growing cases of severe illness and death. These have impacts on human resources as well as the ability to sustain education and employment, not to mention the financial burden (WHO, 2013).

Climate change is a significant environmental and human security issue. As PICs already demonstrate that they are skilled at adaptation, then traditional and new practices should be recognized by building on historic and local practices and using community knowledge. The traditional resilience utilized by the peoples and government of Vanuatu during Cyclone Pam is just one example of what can be done. These lessons need to be listened to by Australia and New Zealand where there is still a great deal of skepticism about climate change.

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