



## Climate Induced Migration: Plight of the 'Environment Refugees' in south pacific Islands

Kankana Debnath

Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

### Abstract

This age can be roughly called the age of climate change. The global warming has set off various negative consequences. Migration due to extreme weather conditions is one of them. The Pacific Island nations are among the most vulnerable regions which are gripped by the negative consequences. The migrations taking place in this region has climate change one of its primary causes. The sea level rise, salination of ground water, cyclones are some of the resultant outbreaks of extreme climatic condition which is destroying habitats at an alarming rate. The population which is forced to migrate becomes the refugees and their conditions are subjected to severe human rights violation in some countries. The plight of these displaced population are worth studied and what the international community can do for them is discussed in the paper.

**Keywords:** climate, migration, Pacific Islands, refugees

### 1. Introduction

At the present global scenario climate change (CC) has emerged as a major concern which has grabbed the international attention. This is because of the drastic changes in the environmental occurrences. Industrial Revolution has triggered a worldwide change in the human activities. As the human race progressed technologically so did the burning of fossil fuel and coal which increased the level of greenhouse gas concentration in the atmosphere. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in their assessment reports have reported that average global surface temperature has been increase by 0.6 degree Celsius. The sea levels have almost had a rise of 10-20 centimeters. The concentration of carbon dioxide due to human activities by burning fossil fuel and cement production are the major reasons for the enhanced greenhouse gas effect. This is also known as the anthropogenic effect of the environment. As predicted by IPCC by the year 2100 the global mean surface temperature will rise by 1.4 to 5.8 and the sea will rise by 9 to 88 centimeters. These scary predictions are something which itself can prompt an effective action. Because the days are not far when there will be no way the catastrophic consequences cannot be contained anymore. Severe rainfall pattern, extreme weather, cyclones, droughts and flood will take the world closer to extinction.

But irrespective of its global concern CC has been subjected to very slow progress in the wake of taking action by addressing the negative influences. The political scenario is very bleak while treating CC is concerned. Climate induced migration is something which has started occurring in recent years. The rate of 'climate migrants' <sup>[1]</sup> shot up in the year 2017. The international law till date did not specify or

accommodate the status of people who move out or migrate from one place to another due to changes in the local environment. Since there is no specific definition of the categorization of these types of migrants the whole situation of people forced to displace due to drastic change in climate is uncertain.

Normally it is seen that climate induced migration is something which happens within the domestic borders of a country. There are very few instances of international involvement. The international refugee convention is for those populations which are displaced due to extreme cases of war, economic downturn. These refugees are also protected under the International Labour Organization to provide with economic subsidy. But in recent years there have been cases of population being displaced due unnatural changes. Environmental changes are not included in the traditional framework of migration. The displaced people due to environmental degradation are hence not entitled to the protections and welfare schemes of the governments. The UNHCR has described a refugee as follows, "As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to wellfounded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. In the case of a person who has more than one nationality, the term "the country of his nationality" shall mean each of the countries of which he is a national, and a person shall not be deemed to be lacking the protection of the country of his nationality if, without any valid reason based on well-founded fear, he has not availed himself of the protection of one of the countries of which he is a national." <sup>[2]</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardized their existence and/or seriously affected the quality of their life." defined by Essam El-Hinnawai an expert with the UNEP. See more - [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/621893/EPR\\_S\\_BRI\(2018\)621893\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/621893/EPR_S_BRI(2018)621893_EN.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>

## 2. Migration in the South Pacific Islands

The island nations are small and are generally economically weak. The communities in these island states are face challenges from global climate in the form of rising sea levels, fluctuating precipitation, cyclones, rising air and sea temperatures etc. The CC is something which is happening at present and the islanders are the ones who are actually living the reality of the consequences. These harsh living conditions are prompting them to take up adaptive measures. Migrating to other nations like Australia, New Zealand and United States has become the most favoured form of adaptation. The reason migration has become the most favourable way to escape the negative impacts of CC is that these nations are economically backward and cannot build infrastructure strong and resilient enough to stand the effects of CC. According to the IPCC 12,983 islands of all sizes above 2.5 hectares across the Pacific Ocean including the Philippines and Hawaii would entirely disappear under sea level by 2050. About 1.2 to 2.2 million people will be displaced from the Pacific, Indian and Caribbean Ocean area because adaptive measures such as coastal protection are quite difficult to set up <sup>[3]</sup>. Migration is hence a response which is being embraced by the ethnic population. This is an issue which is subjected to severe emotional traumatic experience to leave the place of birth and childhood. A lot of debates pop up in relation the migration. Now among these debates the one that will be discussed is the condition or status of the population which are displaced or migrated to several countries for a better future.

The Pacific islands populations are mainly concentrated in the coastal area. The main cities and centers for administration and commerce are located along the coastal belt because it is plain land. CC effects like coastal erosion, soil and water salination and contamination, cyclones, tides sets considerable damage on the human settlements. This is the reason migration takes place initially. But the process is generally from the rural to urban areas. In the cases of these island nations is that the urban settlements too are not adequate to withstand severe environmental lashes. The highly migrated population creates more pressure of exceeded capacity to hold the stipulated number of population of the urban areas. Sea level rise which is the most pressing of the consequences of CC is engulfing land areas and making the threatening situation for the coastal communities. Similarly the offset of salination of ground water due to sea level rise is creating shortages of drinking water. Most of the Pacific Island nations have very poor drainage and drinking water management system. Climate models by the experts suggest that the weather will change drastically and that rainfall, droughts and surface and ocean temperature will be at rise. These weather conditions has started to affect the livelihood of the Pacific and hence migration is one of the ways the islanders found to escape the climate effects. The world took the first step towards stopping CC by the landmark 1992 Earth Summit and subsequent establishment of the United Nations Framework for Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The

UNFCCC adopted the legally binding Kyoto Protocol in the year 1997 which was a emission target scheme for the developed and 'economies-in-transition' which are listed as the Annex I nations. The aim to establish these frameworks is the stabilization of the concentration of the greenhouse gases (GHG) in the atmosphere by bringing down the level of the GHGs in order to prevent the anthropogenic effects with the earth's climate. While these above schemes are in more in compatibility with the bigger nations the Pacific Islands are rather much small. In fact these nations do not even contribute 1 percent of the anthropogenic effects of the climate. But the effects are the most severe on these nations because of the complex geographical nature and economically backwardness. So when it comes to taking up adaptive measures the population is left with fewer options. Migration is one of such measures.

## 3. Co-Relating migration and climate change in Pacific

While discussing the co-relation between migration and CC in Pacific the fact that has been expected is that the human migration is the greatest consequences of the anthropogenic climatic degradation. The migrations are happening of all sorts from voluntary to forced and short to long term within and across the national borders. Migration in the Pacific is traditionally regarded as 'the way of life' which indicates how much the populations of the nations are not safe and self-supportive to immobilize the effects through effective and strong infrastructure. The co relation between migration and climate change is something which is very shady and unclear. Yet the implication CC exerts on migration is something which cannot be sidetracked totally especially for the Pacific Islands. There has been very little research done on the correlation between climate change and migration as its consequence. However there are emerging views and studies on the possible implication of climate change prompting migration in the Pacific. Now when it comes to responses towards CC there is either risk management or societal adaptation. That means either you build an infrastructure strong enough to withstand the lashes of Mother Nature through violent storm surges, high tides, sea level rise etc. or you 'flee' to a safe place. The Pacific Islands is the region which embraces migration as the potential response since the first option requires one to be economically stable enough. Sadly the amount of research and work on this issue is very meager. The following statistics of how much displacement has occurred shows the rough truth about what exactly is happening. The predictions are as follows:

- *"Environmentally displaced people by 2010 is 50 million.*
- *Refugees due to climate change by 2050 will be 250 million.*
- *People estimated to become permanently displaced "climate refugees" by 2050 will be 200 million <sup>[4]</sup>.*

The below image will throw some light on how migration takes place in the Pacific region.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2014/03/27/some-15-of-pacific-islands-wiped-out-by-1m-sea-level-rise-ippc/>

<sup>4</sup> Climate Change and Migration in Asia and the Pacific (2009), Asian Development Bank, Link-[https://slidelegend.com/climate-change-and-migration-in-asia-and-the-pacific-preventionweb\\_5a1c7ac21723dddadd6f30f6.html](https://slidelegend.com/climate-change-and-migration-in-asia-and-the-pacific-preventionweb_5a1c7ac21723dddadd6f30f6.html)



Migration patterns in Pacific Islands region  
 Source: Pacific Rental Map Information

Fig 1

Secretary General of Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Dame Meg Taylor is of the opinion that the major legal obstacles in implementing the international climate law in the Pacific region are the two existing law systems. The two systems are the national and traditional law systems. The former consist of the executive and legislation. The traditional or customary laws are the ones which are followed by the clans, families or tribes. This system is referred to as the *Kastom* law which is the main governing law body for the local communities. These types of laws are diverse in nature as every community has different sets of rules and regulations. However both of these law systems enjoy judicial and constitutional sanctions. In this situation the migration that is happening within the national borders of the nations is facing constraints from the customary laws which are different with different communities. Therefore the situation is quite complicated yet something which requires not only national but global attention. Good strategy should be framed especially laws safeguarding the status of these refugees. Because on this onset of severe climatic changes people are opting to migrate off to safer places. UNFCCC Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (FRDP) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are the instances where the Pacific Islanders have recognized the need and importance and responsibility for those populations who are displaced due to extreme climatic conditions. This regional framework is built as a disaster risk management. This is the way to deal with not only climate change but also their offset consequences among which human migration is a major problem. There are big gaps in policies to deal with migration. On global level too there is lack of policy mechanism to answer the questions which are rising due to the migration of Pacific population. And without proper involvement of the local communities that cannot be done. The Pacific Islands posing a threat from the rising CC fears that the entire atoll states like the Kiribati, Tokelau, Tuvalu and Marshall Islands will completely submerge under water. The populations these islands are comparatively higher than any other atolls. So

when these islands will submerge they will have only option left to migrate to other neighboring countries. Australia, New Zealand United States and the countries of Southeast Asia are expected to receive the influx of migrating Pacific population. It will be a matter of great concern because at the present rate of CC the submerging of the islands is something which is a reality and the worst part is that it has started already.

**4. Repercussions of the Migration**

With migration there will be strings of repercussions on a political and social level. The migration flow to the destination countries will create a complex string of problems. Not every country is developed like Australia, New Zealand or U.S. Countries with weaker and not so developed and that could lead to potential social unrest. Apart from that the process of migration is a matter of extreme emotion for the Pacific islanders. They have to leave a homeland and would have to bear the name ‘climate refugees’. No one wants this status. They are entitled to receive rights as refugees but in reality how much of that is maintained is a matter of debate. There should be enough dignity in the situation which they are in. The refugee status which the Pacific Islanders are to face is something according to them is lacking dignity that they do not wish to lose. Pacific Islanders do not want the status of refugees to be a part of the refugee conventions. Even if they have to leave their homeland in any case of extreme climatic disaster they expect to receive and retain the respect they deserve. Experts are of the opinion that there are complex array of reasons for migration. In this situation sometimes the ones who are not the most affected are the ones who choose to migrate. These people are the ones with resources which make them capable to move to safer places. The ones who are not with resources choose to stay back as they cannot afford to travel to safer places. These are the people who are larger in number and should be subjected to safety and wellbeing because they are the ones who will be in destitute and misery. To set up a proper rehabilitation or safety for them is a huge challenging task.

Migration in Pacific is roughly divided into two types. First are the ones who leave on their own. These people are very less in number and are usually are not in groups. The second category is those who are forced to leave. These people are generally migrating in a group or masses. They are ones who has no option left other than moving out of their habitat due to extreme weather. As such there has to be special mechanisms to facilitate the migrated population to help them out in this situation of need. As such “*due to geographical proximity, colonial legacies and existing social networks, Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America (USA) are currently key destination countries for many Pacific migrants. Current migration routes to these countries are largely based on colonial relationships, family reunification, educational pursuits or employment though skilled and seasonal worker programmes. Both Australia and New Zealand have existing seasonal workers programmes. Many Pacific island countries have access to the USA through the Compact of Free Association which grants visa-free access to the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. Similarly, the Cook Islands, Tokelau and Niue have access to New Zealand. Additionally, many Pacific Islanders can access New Zealand through the Pacific Access Category scheme for long term migration. Australia offers limited permanent migration access for Pacific Islanders in comparison with New Zealand and the USA. Some of the countries that may have the largest numbers of potential migrants have the most limited access to international migration opportunities. These countries include Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu, as well as the Melanesian states, especially Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Some of these countries are included in the New Zealand Pacific Access Category (PAC), which provides a mechanism for Pacific islanders to migrate to New Zealand; and in seasonal worker schemes in Australia and New Zealand. However, the numbers of migrants in these categories have been rather low to date. Climate change-related migration may crest demand for greater numbers to be included in such schemes*”<sup>[5]</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

Migration across the Pacific is an issue which has gripped the whole world especially the regions of Africa, Caribbean, Middle East and parts of Asia. However climate related migration is the kind that is happening in the Pacific region rather than, poverty, warfare in the rest of the regions. “*There are 22 island states and territories in the Central and South Pacific Ocean. These are often placed into three categories: Melanesia, composed of Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu; Polynesia, com prises American Samoa, the Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Niue, Pitcairn Island, Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Wallis and Futuna; and Micronesia, consists of the Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, the Northern Marianas and Palau. The combined population of all 22 entities is 8.6 million, of which 5.6 million reside in Papua New Guinea.16 Population growth rates in many of these countries, particularly New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea,*

*the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, are high, although in a few cases, such as the Cook Islands and Niue, populations are contracting. The Pacific islands contain some 20 percent of the world's languages, the majority of which are concentrated in Papua New Guinea*”<sup>[6]</sup>.

The vulnerability of the Pacific Island states to the CC is dependent on the way the climate affects the local processes both in social and environmental systems. Adaptive mechanisms are there to deal with social and environmental issues while mitigation mechanisms are applied in an attempt to reduce the level of emissions. These combined mechanisms make the procedure of lowering the CC effects harder and complicated. Adaption to CC means technically to make adjustments according to the prevailing ecological, social and economic systems. “*UNFCCC refer to the need for adaptation, including much of Article 4. For example, Article 4.4 includes calls for "developed country Parties and other developed Parties [to] assist the developing country Parties that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change in meeting costs of adaptation to those adverse effects."* The most significant activity thus far has been the production of National Communications to the UNFCCC”<sup>[7]</sup>.

The Pacific Islands are among the least developed nations in the world. Unlike the super economies of the world (United States, Russia, China, Europe, Australia, New Zealand etc) it is almost next to impossible for these countries to come up with technology driven mechanisms to deal with the adverse effects of the CC. And it is not very evident that the Pacific Islands are getting enough aid for such. And even if the aid was enough as far as dealing with CC is concerned nothing can stop or contain the increasing effects and their consequences on the islands. This is because it has to be understood that the world is in the threshold of such climatic disasters that mere mechanisms won't hold the populations to get affected by the increasing climatic changes. The receiving countries fear threat to national security due to influx of migrated populations from these islands but isn't clear that their own doing has brought the world into this mess on the first place. The nations which are receiving these migrants are economically advanced nations who contribute the lion-share of the global warming which created a chain effect. So it is pointless to lament on a threat to security when the population of the Pacific is at the brink of losing their homeland.

The saddest part is that the nations whose contribution to global warming is next to nothing have to deal with crisis like migration. In other words it is unfortunate that literary pieces like this are being written on the island nations who hold nothing to contribute other than rich culture. The only ahead to stop the untimely destruction of these islands are to reduce the global warming and abide by the conventions.

<sup>5</sup> Ash, Jillian and Campbell, Jillian (2016), “Climate change and migration: the case of the Pacific Islands and Australia”, The Journal of Pacific Studies, Volume 36 Issue 1, Link- [https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/data/UQ\\_394197/UQ394197\\_OA.pdf](https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/data/UQ_394197/UQ394197_OA.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Barnett, John, “Titanic States? Impacts and Responses To Climate Change in the Pacific Islands”, Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 59, No. 1, The Politics of the Sea: Regulating Stateless Space (FALL/WINTER 2005), pp. 203-219, Published by: Journal of International Affairs Editorial Board, Link- URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24358240>

<sup>7</sup> Locke, Justin (2009), “Climate change-induced migration in the Pacific Region: sudden crisis and long-term developments”, The Geographical Journal, Vol. 175, No.3, Published by: Wiley on behalf of The Royal Geographical Society, pp. 171-180, DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-4959.2009.00317.x, URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25621817>

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