

COP29: Pacific countries cannot be conveniently pigeon-holed

Opinion - "We will not sign our death certificate. We cannot sign on to text that does not have strong commitments on phasing out fossil fuels."

These were the words of Samoa's Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, Toeolesulusulu Cedric Schuster, speaking in his capacity as chair of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) at the UNFCCC COP28 in Dubai, last year.

Outside, Pacific Climate activists and allies, led by the Pacific Climate Warriors, were calling for a robust and comprehensive financial package that would see the full, fast, and fair transition away from fossil fuels and into renewable energy in the Global South. This is our Pacific Way in action: state parties and civil society working together to remind the world as we approach a "finance COP" with the upcoming COP29 in Azerbaijan that we cannot be conveniently pigeon-holed.

We are people who represent not only communities but landscapes and seascapes that are both vulnerable, and resilient, and should not be forced by polluting countries and the much subsidised and profit-focused fossil fuel industries that lobby them to choose between mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage.

Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) are the uncomfortable reminder for those who want smooth sailing of their agenda at COP29, that while we are able to hold the tension of our vulnerability and resilience in the Pacific, this may make for choppy seas.

I recently had the privilege of joining the SPREP facilitated pre-COP29 gathering for PSIDS and the Climate Change Ministerial meeting in Nadi, Fiji, to provide spiritual guidance and pastoral support. This gathering took place in a spiritually significant moment, the final week of the Season of Creation, ending, profoundly, on the Feast Day of St Francis of Assisi, patron saint of the environment. The theme for this year's Season of Creation was, "to hope and act with Creation (the environment).

I looked across the room at Climate Ministers, lead negotiators from the region and the regional organisations that support them and encouraged them to begin the preparatory meeting and to also enter COP29 with hope, to act in hope, because to hope is an act of faith, of vision, of determination and trust that our current situation will not remain the status quo.

Pacific Church leaders have rejected this status quo by saying that finance for adaptation and loss and damage, without a significant commitment to a fossil fuel phase-out that is full, fast and fair, is the biblical equivalent to 30 pieces of silver (the bribe Judas was given to betray Jesus).



The general secretary of the Pacific Council of Churches, James Bhagwan. Photo: RNZ / Jamie Tahana

In endorsing the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty and leading the World Council of Churches to do the same, Pacific faith communities are joining their governments and civil societies to ensure the entire blue Pacific voice reverberates clearly into the spaces where the focus on finance is dominant.

As people with a deep connection to land and sea, whose identity does not separate itself from biodiversity, the understanding of the "groaning of Creation" (Romans 8:19-25) resonates with Pacific islanders. We were reminded of the words of St. Saint Augustine that says: "Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are."

As we witness the cries and sufferings of Earth and all creatures, let righteous anger move us toward the courage to be hopeful and active for justice. Hope is not merely optimism. It is not a utopian illusion. It is not waiting for a magical miracle. Hope is trust that our action makes sense, even if the results of this action are not immediately seen. This is the type of hope that our Pasifika household carry to COP29.

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