

Pacific voices urge experts to 'decolonise' adaptation at New Zealand's largest climate forum

Pacific leaders believe climate experts are missing an opportunity to incorporate indigenous knowledge into adaptation measures.

The call has been made as hundreds of scientists, global leaders, and climate adaptation experts around the globe gather at the Adaptation Futures Conference in Christchurch.

At the conference's opening session, Tuvalu's Environment Minister Maina Talia explained how sea level rise is damaging agricultural land and fresh groundwater is becoming saline.

"The figures are alarming, this is not just for Tuvalu and this is not a Tuvaluan problem, it's not even a small island developing states problem, it's a global economic bomb," he said.

Incorporating indigenous knowledge into climate adaptation has been a major focus of the event.

Talia told RNZ Pacific he feels adaptation is generally presented in a Western lens.

"We need to decolonise our mind, decolonise our soul, in order to integrate community-based adaptation measures."

The highest elevation in Tuvalu is only four and a half metres. A 2023 report from NASA found much of Tuvalu's land will be below the average high tide by 2050.

To combat rising seas the government has started reclaiming land, which is one of the island nation's flagship adaptation projects.

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Talia said a "decolonisation approach" gives communities ownership of the work being done.

"It's all informed by our elders, informed by our youth, informed by our women in society, we cannot come with the idea that this is how your adaptation measures should look like."

Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) director-general Sefanaia Nawadra, on a similar line, said the "biggest difference" of incorporating indigenous-led solutions was giving people a sense of ownership.

"It's management by compliance rather than management by regulation, where you're using a stick to say, 'ok, if you don't do this, you will be penalised'."

Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change president Cynthia Houniuhī said those on the front line of the adverse effects of climate change are often indigenous people, which is almost always the case in the Pacific.

"Who knows the place better than the ones that have lived there, so imagine that experience informs the solution, that's the best way, it's kind of like a cheat code."

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) head of adaptation Youssef Nassef said it is not always clear how national adaptation plans included input from indigenous people.

He also said climate knowledge is not always accessible to those who need it most.

"We create knowledge, we put them in peer-reviewed publications but are the people who are actually needing it on the frontlines of climate change impacts really receiving that knowledge."

Pacific climate activists are coming off a high after [a top UN court found](#) failing to protect people from the adverse effects of climate change could violate international law.

Houniuhī was one of the students who got the advisory opinion in July from the International Court of Justice.

But she told those attending the conference it means nothing if not acted upon.

"We must continue this same energy, momentum and drive into the implementation of the ruling. As one of our mentors rightly said, 'the law has now caught up to the science, what we now need is for policy to catch up to the law'."

Houniuhī said the advisory opinion provides "more weight to influence demands". She expects the advisory opinion to be used as a negotiating tool by Pacific leaders at COP30 in Brazil next month.