
Rising Tides—Responding to Climate Change in the Pacific

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Since its 2007 election, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) government under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has announced new initiatives to address the adverse effects of climate change on neighbouring Pacific island countries. But while many commentators have suggested that the Rudd government's policies are an improvement on the climate policies of the conservative Howard era, there are still fundamental weaknesses in Australian policies on mitigation, adaptation and climate displacement in the Pacific. This paper contrasts the policies of Australia and the Pacific members of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) on three key areas: reduction of greenhouse gas emissions; access to adaptation funds; and support for communities displaced by the adverse effects of global warming.

Introduction

After two years in office, the Labor Government under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has improved the atmospherics of Australia's engagement with the Pacific islands. At the end of eleven years of conservative government under former Prime Minister John Howard, relations with key Pacific governments were in tatters: the Moti affair and aid disputes had soured relations with Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands; Fiji's interim administration was angry over post-coup 'smart sanctions' introduced by Australia and New Zealand; and John Howard's refusal to act on global warming dismayed the small island states that are already suffering adverse climate impacts.

Climate policy is a key area where the Rudd government has moved to improve Australia's image compared to its predecessor. From the time of the 1997 Forum leaders' meeting in Rarotonga, Australia stood aside from its Pacific neighbours by refusing to ratify the Kyoto Protocol and by delaying efforts to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. For more than a decade, the Howard Government bowed to the transnational corporations that run Australia's coal, steel and aluminium industries, which successfully lobbied to prevent, delay or limit action on climate change¹.

Incoming Prime Minister Rudd won applause internationally when he announced Australia's ratification of the Kyoto Protocol at the December 2007 meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Bali.

From opposition, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) had also promised climate adaptation funding to the Asia-

Pacific region. In 2008, Prime Minister Rudd announced the *International Climate Change Adaptation Initiative* (ICCAI), pledging \$150 million over three years to meet high priority climate adaptation needs in vulnerable countries. The government also launched an *International Forest Carbon Initiative* (IFCI), focused on Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, with a further \$200 million over five years.

Improved regional co-operation on climate was highlighted in August 2009 at the Pacific Islands Forum leaders' meeting in Cairns, when the Australian government issued a new climate policy for the islands region: 'Engaging our Pacific Neighbours on Climate Change.'² In a significant political coup, Rudd also won support from island leaders for Australia's climate strategy, issuing the joint '*Pacific Leaders Call to Action on Climate Change*.'

It's a far cry from the Howard years. But does the new Australian policy really respond to the climate emergency? In a scathing editorial, published in September 2009, the regional news magazine *Islands Business* condemned the deal struck in Cairns:

The outcome of the Pacific Islands Forum meeting on climate change is essentially a death warrant for Pacific Islanders. But if Australia and New Zealand think Pacific Islanders will give up and slink away in the shadows defeated, they are wrong. We remain even more determined than ever because our lives, identities and our future depend on it. The truth of the matter is that

neo-colonialism was the order of the day in Cairns. It was evident in Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's opening statement: 'We are playing our part in international gatherings - including by representing the interests of the Pacific islands nations - in other international fora where Australia participates, including the G20.' That's very gracious Mr Rudd. But who in the Pacific elected you to represent us at the G20? Who appointed you Sheriff of our Pacific county?³

To understand this anger, it's important to go beyond the spin and look at how Australia's interests – as the world's largest coal exporter and a major exporter of uranium – clash with the priorities of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the Pacific. Closer inspection of key areas – on greenhouse gas reduction targets, adaptation funding and climate displacement – show there's a long way to go.

Stronger Targets

The '*Pacific Leaders' Call to Action on Climate Change*' sets out a common position for Forum member countries in the lead up to the December 2009 UNFCCC climate negotiations in Copenhagen:

- We call for a post-2012 outcome that sets the world on a path to limit the increase in global average temperatures to 2 degrees Celsius or less.
- We call on states to reduce global emissions by at least 50 per cent below 1990 levels by 2050.
- We call on states to ensure that global emissions peak no later than 2020.
- We call on developed economies to take the lead by setting ambitious and robust mid-term emissions reduction targets—consistent with the agreed science and the directions embraced by the *Major Economies Forum Meeting* in July 2009.⁴

But this Forum call for a 50 per cent cut in GHG emissions by 2050 is in direct contradiction to the negotiating position of the Least Developed Countries (LDC) caucus and also the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) in global climate negotiations. In its submissions to UNFCCC meetings to Bali (2007), Poznan (2008) and Copenhagen (2009), AOSIS has called for at least 45 per cent reductions by 2020 and over 95 per cent by 2050, which requires much stronger action by Australia and other major industrialised powers. AOSIS has also called for a peak in global emissions by 2015, not 2020.

As detailed in its latest Pacific climate policy, 'Australia is advocating an ambitious global effort to stabilise greenhouse gases at 450 parts per million (ppm)

carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂-e) or lower.'⁷ The government states that this target is needed in order to limit temperature increases to 2 degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels. But this is widely divergent from the latest "agreed science", as set out by IPCC scientists, who see the need to draw down carbon from the atmosphere at much greater rates.⁸

The rapidly changing climate science has highlighted the need for much more stringent GHG reduction targets than set out in existing Australian policy, to avoid catastrophic consequences for low-lying atoll nations. Rather than a 2 degree target, AOSIS has previously called for "well below 1.5 degrees Celsius", and many developing nations are calling for greenhouse gases to be stabilised well below 350ppm. This stronger target is now acknowledged by many leading climate scientists, as noted by the UNFCCC's leading climate scientist Rajendra Pachauri in August 2009:

As chairman of the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC), I cannot take a position because we do not make recommendations. But as a human being I am fully supportive of that goal. What is happening, and what is likely to happen, convinces me that the world must be really ambitious and very determined at moving toward a 350 target.⁹

Seeing the devastation of cyclones and storm surges, business interests from the Finance, Insurance and Real Estate (FIRE) sectors have long recognised the need for stronger action on climate. Australian businessman Ian Dunlop, former chair of the Australian Greenhouse Office Experts Group on Emissions, states:

The target for stabilisation of atmospheric carbon to avoid catastrophic consequences and maintain a safe climate is now probably a concentration of less than 300 ppm carbon dioxide, not the outdated 450-550 ppm carbon dioxide in current proposals.¹⁰

But this will involve the Australian government taking much more urgent action, in the face of ongoing lobbying from the coal, steel and uranium industries. The Rudd government has approved new uranium exports and increased the number of uranium mines, even though attempts to promote nuclear energy are contrary to the interests of developing countries (especially small island developing states which require sustainable, mostly decentralised, low-cost energy systems, adapted both to local needs and available capital, resources and labour). As AOSIS argued at the December 2008 UNFCCC Conference in Poznan:

Technologies that generate additional or new environmental and health risk challenges for the international community, such as nuclear power, should not be included in the energy mix.¹¹

Island governments are making significant investments in renewable energy programs and are concerned that funding for energy programs and technology transfer will be directed away from renewables, as fossil fuel and nuclear corporations attempt to gain government subsidies to protect their industries and profits.¹²

Will Local Communities Ever See Adaptation Funds?

In April 2009, Prime Minister Rudd stood outside Parliament House alongside his PNG counterpart Sir Michael Somare, to acknowledge that Australia's aid program in Papua New Guinea was top heavy with consultants, with too little action on the ground. Rudd said:

Too much money has been consumed by consultants and not enough money was actually delivered to essential assistance in teaching, in infrastructure, in health services on the ground, in the villages, across Papua New Guinea.¹³

The same problem is looming with funds to assist neighbouring island states to adapt to the adverse effects of climate change.

On a global scale, a sticking point for climate negotiations is the need for the developed world to commit adequate funds for technology transfer and adaptation. Developing nations are calling for new and additional funds beyond existing Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) aid commitments and stressing that adaptation funds must be grants, not loans.

Pacific governments have welcomed existing pledges of support for adaptation from donors like Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the European Union. But atoll nations are concerned that adaptation funds may be going into consultants and bureaucracy rather than programs at local level - they want to ensure that donors maintain specific programs around food security, water supply, disease prevention and coastal management. As the Forum leaders' official communiqué in 2008 stressed:

The priority of Pacific SIDS is securing sustainable financing for immediate and effective implementation of concrete adaptation programs on the ground.¹⁵

Another problem for Pacific states is their capacity to deal with a complex array of multilateral and bilateral climate initiatives. Six new bilateral environment funds have been announced over the last three years, including Australia's *International Climate Change Adaptation Initiative* (ICCAI), Japan's *Cool Earth Partnership* and the EU's *Global Climate Change Alliance*. There are also global funds established under the United Nations *Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC) - such as the *Least Developed Countries Fund* (LDCF), the *UNFCCC Special Climate Change Fund* (SCCF) and the global *UNFCCC Adaptation Fund*.

At the United Nations, Tuvalu's Prime Minister Apisai Ielemia has argued for easier access to these funds, which will provide much needed resources to small island states for adaptation programs:

It is very clear that financial resources for adaptation are completely inadequate. . . . SIDS like Tuvalu need direct access and expeditious disbursement of funding for real adaptation urgently because we are suffering already from the effects of climate change. How else can we say it more clearly! It seems however that some key industrialised states are trying to make the *Adaptation Fund* inaccessible to those most in need. I am compelled to say we are deeply disappointed with the manner some of our partners are burying us in red tape. This is totally unacceptable.¹⁶

The challenge is to ensure that more of these adaptation funds can be focussed on community level activities, instead of being soaked up in research and policy making. Speaking after the Small Islands States caucus at the 2009 Cairns Forum, the Premier of Niue and outgoing Forum chair Toke Talagi told the author:

This is something that we discussed at some length. We appreciate the fact that there's a lot of funding out there, but there are problems with accessing those funds. There's also ... the problem that you've highlighted that we need a lot of consultants to advise us which funds are available or not. We also want to correlate what funds are available as well as our plans on climate change.

Much of Australia's \$150 million pledge of climate adaptation funding for 2008-11 will be channelled through consultants and multilateral and regional intergovernmental organisations: \$40 million goes for a World Bank program on climate resilience, \$12 million

on the *Pacific Adaptation Strategy Assistance Program*, \$6 million to Pacific intergovernmental agencies (SPC, SPREP, FFA) and \$6 million over three years to the *Global Environment Facility's* small grants program.

Another \$20 million goes to Australian scientists for climate research. In March 2009, Climate Change Minister, Penny Wong, announced the *Pacific Climate Change Science Program*, to be funded from Australia's \$150 million adaptation fund. This money will support the Centre for Australian Weather and Climate Research, run by the Australian Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO. In April 2009, the government advertised 24 positions for climate scientists and researchers to be based in Hobart and Melbourne.

The allocation of significant amounts from the Pacific climate adaptation initiative to Australian researchers may produce valuable scientific data. But there are questions about how this research is communicated to policy makers in the Pacific, let alone translated into concrete adaptation work in the low-lying atolls of the region. Much of this research will generate climate models as a basis for planning risk reduction, but comes at a time when island governments, universities and NGOs are seeking resources for empirical research and action in the atolls and islands of the region.

The challenge for climate adaptation donors is how to draw on local knowledge and empower grassroots communities across the region. So far, the Australian government has pledged only \$2.7 million of the \$150 million adaptation fund to non-government organisations. Oxfam New Zealand director Barry Coates argues:

A greater proportion of funding from adaptation funds need to be allocated to implementation of basic resilience programs at community level, rather than further studies and consultancies.

Researchers like the University of Melbourne's Jon Barnett agree that there's a need to focus more research and action at local level, to ensure adaptation funding achieves the desired outcomes:

In the same way that aid does not always enhance development and can indeed undermine it, so too may aid for adaptation fail to promote adaptation, and may indeed undermine it.¹⁷

Dealing with Displaced People

The current intergovernmental *Pacific Islands Framework for Action on Climate Change 2006-15* (PIFACC),

developed by the Forum member countries, makes no mention of climate displacement or migration.

This contrasts with many Pacific NGOs and churches, which have argued that Australia and New Zealand, as the largest members of the Pacific Islands Forum, have particular responsibilities to take displaced people from their island neighbours.

When they look at international rather than domestic impacts, climate advocacy groups in Australia and New Zealand have highlighted the issue of 'Pacific climate refugees.' But the threat of climate displacement raises a number of practical, emotional and political responses, for communities who have cultural and economic ties to their land, reefs and islands. As Tuvalu Prime Minister Apisai Ielemia told the December 2008 UNFCCC conference in Poznan:

It is our belief that Tuvalu, as a nation, has a right to exist forever. It is our basic human right. We are not contemplating migration. We are a proud nation with a unique culture which cannot be relocated elsewhere. We want to survive as a people and as a nation. We will survive. It is our fundamental right. *Tuvalu mo te Atua.*¹⁸

In interviews with people around the Pacific, different opinions came from the elderly compared to younger people who have more flexible skills for migration. As one old man told me in Solomon Islands:

They talk about us moving. But we are tied to this land. Will we take our cemeteries with us? For we are nothing without our land and our ancestors.

In spite of this, some Pacific island governments like Kiribati, Tokelau and Niue are openly discussing issues of relocation and resettlement of people affected by climate change. In August 2009, the outgoing chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, Premier of Niue, Toke Talagi, says it may be time for the regional organisation to formally consider the issue of resettlement. Speaking at the official opening of the 2009 Forum leaders meeting in Cairns, Talagi stated:

While all of us are affected, the situation for small island states is quite worrisome. For them, choices such as resettlement must be considered seriously and I wonder whether the Forum is ready to commence formal discussion on the matter.¹⁹

Across the Pacific, there are a number of examples where people are considering relocation from low lying islands after being affected by extreme weather events, tectonic land shifts or climactic change that damages food security and water supply. The case of the Carteret Islands in Bougainville is well known, where Ursula Rakova and the local NGO *Tulele Peisa* are assisting families to resettle on church-donated land on the main island of Buka. There are similar problems looming in other outlying atoll communities, such as the Duke of York atolls (a number of small low-lying islands in St. George's Channel near Rabaul in Papua New Guinea) or the Mortlock Islands in Chuuk State, Federated States of Micronesia. In Solomon Islands, tectonic plate movement and sea-level rise may lead to the displacement of people in outlying atolls like Ongtong Java (Lord Howe) or artificial islands like Walande in Malaita Province.

For many years, Australian governments have been reluctant to publicly address this issue. In October 2006, the then Minister for Immigration Amanda Vanstone stated that her department had not made any plans to deal with people displaced by environmental or climate change, arguing: 'There's no such thing as a climate refugee.'²⁰ In November 2006, the Secretary of the Department of Immigration Andrew Metcalfe told a Senate estimates hearing that the Australian Government had done no planning on how people movement caused by climate change in the Asia-Pacific region might affect Australia.

Since then however, the debate has been flourishing amongst security analysts and strategic think tanks, which have focussed on border protection and the potential for conflict over land and resources. In 2007, the then Australian Federal Police Commissioner Mick Keelty sparked a political debate when he argued that climate change will turn border security into Australia's biggest policing issue this century. He stated that climate change could increase displacement and migration in our region:

In their millions, people could begin to look for new land and they will cross oceans and borders to do it. Existing cultural tensions may be exacerbated as large numbers of people undertake forced migration. The potential security issues are enormous and should not be underestimated.²¹

The security perspective has also been highlighted in *Force 2030*, the May 2009 Defence White Paper issued by the Rudd government. This is the first time the climate issue has been discussed in a Defence White Paper, but it does not really reflect a shift in focus from 'national security' to 'human security.' In the paper, action on

climate change is reframed through the prism of border security:

The main effort against such developments will of course need to be undertaken through co-ordinated international climate change mitigation and economic assistance strategies...should these and other strategies fail to mitigate the strains relating to climate change and they exacerbate existing precursors for conflict, the Government would probably have to use the ADF as an instrument to deal with any threats inimical to our interests.²²

Will people displaced by global warming be redefined as 'threats inimical to our interests'? Social justice activists need to reframe the debate, to highlight the right to development for affected communities wherever they are, rather than just focussing on the need for migration rights.

A worrying sign is that some Australian officials seem to be willing to write off the Pacific. In the face of a call by Tuvalu in Copenhagen for a legally binding climate treaty, key Australian climate advisor Ross Garnaut baldly stated:

The South Pacific countries will end up having their populations relocated to Australia or New Zealand and the rest of the world expects that and in the end, we're likely to accommodate that so there's a solution there.²³

In its latest Pacific climate policy, the Rudd government notes:

The potential for climate change to displace people is increasingly gaining international attention. Australians are aware of and concerned about this issue.²⁴

But the Pacific needs more than awareness and concern. Successive Australian governments have failed to engage in forward planning involving communities and governments around the region, to address the issue of displacement from a rights-based approach.

The Human Dimension

Leaders from Small Island Developing States around the world gathered in the Maldives in 2007, and issued the *Malé Declaration on the Human Dimensions of Climate Change*. Calling for urgent action by developed nations, they "committed to an inclusive process that puts people,

their prosperity, homes, survival and rights at the centre of the climate change debate.”²⁵

As Australian politicians debate the technicalities of an Emissions Trading Scheme and how much compensation to provide the coal industry, it's important we come back to this human dimension. We must never lose sight of the fact that climate change in its essence is about people. Climate change is a matter of human security, as it undermines peoples' rights to life, security, food, water, health, shelter and culture.

By failing to tackle climate change with urgency, developed countries like Australia are effectively violating the human rights of millions of the world's poorest people, including people in the Pacific islands. Australia's current climate policy for the Pacific does not measure up to the challenges of the climate emergency.

Endnotes

1. For detail on the “carbon capture” of the Howard government by the fossil fuel lobby, see Guy Pearse: *High and dry: John Howard, climate change and the selling of Australia's future* (Penguin, 2007). For an updated summary, see Guy Pearse: *Quarry Vision: Coal, Climate Change and the End of the Resources Boom*, Quarterly Essay No.33, March 2009.
2. “Engaging our Pacific Neighbours on Climate Change: Australia's Approach” (Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2009).
3. “We say: Forum's climate stance a death warrant” Editorial, *Islands Business magazine* (Fiji), September 2009.
4. “Pacific Leaders' Call to Action on Climate Change”, Pacific Islands Forum, Cairns, 6 August 2009.
5. Pacific island states are active members of AOSIS, which unites 43 countries and territories from oceans around the world - over 20 per cent of the membership of the UN General Assembly.
6. See for example AOSIS *Input into the “Shared Vision” Assembly Document*, UNFCCC Conference, Poznan, December 2008 (Alliance of Small Island States, 2008).
7. “Engaging our Pacific Neighbours on Climate Change”, p1.
8. For discussion of the dangers of a 2 degree target, see David Spratt: “The 2-degree target - How far should carbon emissions be cut?” Carbon Equity Project 2007 and “350 is the wrong target – put the science first”, Carbon Equity Project January 2009, found at <http://www.carbonequity.info>. For discussion of the concepts of “safe climate”, “climate emergency” and basic climate science, see David Spratt and Phillip Sutton: *Climate Code Red* (Scribe, Melbourne, 2008).
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- Time, Wednesday, 31 December 2008, and Helen Caldicott: “Nuclear power is the problem, not a solution”, *The Australian*, 13 April 2005.
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 20. “No such thing as climate change refugees: Vanstone”, *ABC News Online*, Monday, 30 October 2006
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 23. Interview with Radio Australia's Pacific Beat program: “Ross Garnaut writes off Pacific states on climate change”, Radio Australia, 11 December 2009.
 24. “Engaging our Pacific Neighbours on Climate Change”, p12.
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