



Policy Forum Article

‘Climate Refugees’: An Oceanic Perspective

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Abstract

The primary argument of this article seeks to highlight the irresponsible and insensitive categorisation of the Pacific peoples as ‘climate refugees’. International actors’ interpretation and use of such a term is damaging as it depicts these peoples as a vulnerable, rather than resilient group. The term effectively strips them of their agency and the potential for their valuable knowledge and efforts to contribute to the fight against a natural phenomenon that proves the most serious threat to humankind today, climate change. In the first section the international perception will be addressed, in the second section the Oceanic understanding will be explored in contrast, and finally in the third section, the implications for International Relations will be outlined. In conclusion, we find that the impact of the term ‘climate refugees’ is detrimental at both the conceptual and experiential level, making its deconstruction a complex but necessary task.

Key words: refugees, climate change, the Pacific, misrepresentation, agency

Use of the term ‘climate refugees’ within the Pacific context is highly insensitive and counterproductive. This misrepresentation by external international actors strips the Pacific peoples of their agency, and dismisses their potential to contribute to the fight against climate change.

1. Introduction

Climate change poses perhaps the most serious risk to humankind today. Although the effects of this natural phenomenon are indiscriminate, they are not equally endured. The Pacific is currently the most affected region in the world, its nations struggling to stay above water, enduring more frequent and intense natural disasters, and struggling to maintain their food security. This distressing reality has led the vast majority of the international community to refer to populations within this region as ‘climate refugees’, a term that is widely rejected by the very subjects themselves. In order to understand the ramifications this term may have within and outside the Pacific, we must deconstruct both the international perception and Oceanic understanding of this group. In doing so we are able to reveal the consequences of the term’s adoption, but also the potential to better our overall approach to climate change at the international level.

2. International Perception

The international perception of ‘climate refugees’ determines both this group’s portrayal and reception within the international arena, and also the way in which the international community chooses to respond to climate change on their behalf. Unfortunately, a

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popular trend within climate change discourse has emerged that culminates in a collective definition of these individuals as a vulnerable and powerless group, effectively stripping them of all agency. Four international actors are guilty of this damaging portrayal; international organisations (IOs), external national governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the media.

2.1. International Organisations

International organisations are perhaps the best equipped international actor to address climate change concerns, however, if they fail to confront ill-perceived conceptions of those most affected, they cannot hope to construct an appropriate and sustainable response to the natural phenomenon overall. IOs may not be directly responsible for the manufacturing of such subjective definitions, however, they are responsible for its convenient adoption. United Nations (UN) agencies have referred to Pacific populations as both 'helpless and passive' or 'resilient managers of change', dependent upon the context (McNamara & Gibson 2009, p.478). It is at this level of international discussion that efforts must be made to employ a more informed and thoughtful perception of the Pacific peoples beyond 'climate refugees'.

2.2. External National Governments

External national governments may not be directly responsible for the construction of these detrimental stereotypes either, but they are accountable for the patronising manner in which they often interact with the leaders of the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) (Kelman 2010, p.606). This marginalisation permits the depiction of Pacific populations as weak and pitiful. Furthermore, these governments' national agendas may actually encourage the proliferation of the term 'climate refugee' narratives rather than scrutinise them, as they provide a valuable opportunity to promote national security in the face of the 'dangerous poor' (Farbotko & Lazrus 2012, p.384). The term's implications therefore extend to Pacific national leaders also, and if left unattended, these

leaders will remain on unequal footing within negotiations that disallows them to properly represent their peoples' interests in relation to climate change within the international sphere.

2.3. Non-Governmental Organisations

Surprisingly, climate change concerned non-governmental organisations are the most frequent culprits of casting Pacific Islanders as passive victims, a process that grants these people compensation but not necessarily due respect. Although well intentioned, these organisations have undermined these individuals' capacity to influence international climate change policy within their own region. A number of documents published within the 1980s established and deployed this poor identity construct (McNamara & Gibson 2009, p.475). The first document to contain the term 'climate refugee' was published by the Worldwatch Institute in 1988 (McNamara & Gibson 2009, p.477). The Washington-based NGO represented this group as 'helpless victims of external environmental changes that had been initiated by others' (McNamara & Gibson 2009, p.478). NGOs' most likely sympathetic categorisation of these individuals as 'climate refugees' has had serious consequences that are still felt today. Firstly, it allows other international actors to legitimise their use of the term, which is problematic for the reasons described above. Most importantly, however, it implies that the only viable response to climate change within this region is relocation, a highly depressing and defeatist vision for the future that many 'climate refugees' themselves would reject (McNamara & Gibson 2009, p.478). NGOs have thus created an identity for those affected by climate change in the Pacific that explicitly denies their control over the situation. It appears that the portrayal of Pacific peoples subject to climate change as passive victims is a near universal trend within the NGO sector (McNamara & Gibson 2009, p.479).

2.4. The Media

The media is also responsible for the proliferation of the term 'climate refugees', however, its

motivations are less likely altruistic. Consistent news reporting running parallel to the efforts of NGOs ensures the continued and ever broadening usage of the term (McNamara & Gibson 2009, p.479). The use of alarmist rhetoric with reference to 'climate refugees' within this medium is common as it creates shock value and attracts audiences (Hartmann 2010, p.233). Dramatic and emotive language, and the use of words such as 'extinction' and 'apocalypse', are used to achieve this (Hartmann 2010, p.233). Insensitive headlines such as 'sink or swim', propositioned in relation to the Tuvaluan population by the New Zealand Herald in 2005, are frequent (McNamara & Gibson 2009, p.479). The cost of such sensationalist journalism, however, is high. The desire of PICs to be portrayed as self-determining and proactive agents of change is sidelined in return for short-term profit.

All four of the above perceptions of 'climate refugees' within the international arena have contributed to the approach the international community has adopted in its response to climate change within the Pacific. The subtext concerning those affected by climate change within this region, established by these actors, is one of vulnerability and victimhood. These underlying tones and attitudes are perhaps part of a validation strategy that already assumes the inundation of these islands, and therefore potentially frees the developed and polluting countries from admitting responsibility, subsequently allowing them to avoid reduction of their own emissions (McNamara & Gibson 2009, p.481). The reality, whether it be due to corruption, disorganisation or incompetence, is that an effective strategy has not yet been reached, and subsequently the peoples of the Pacific continue to face an undefined future. The survivability of Pacific Islands in the face of climate change is yet to be appropriately prioritised at an international level.

3. Oceanic Understanding

The Oceanic understanding of what it means to be a sufferer of climate change contrasts greatly to the international perception. Instead

of submitting to the portrayals imposed upon them by external international actors, the vast majority of the Pacific community seeks to assert their resilience, rather than vulnerability, in the face of environmental devastation. This defiance exists within local populations, those that represent the Pacific within regional and international conversations, and the Pacific media, and therefore determines their ultimate course of action to be taken.

3.1. Local Populations

There is a widespread rejection of the term 'climate refugee' by the peoples of the Pacific due to the negative connotations attached. They do not wish to be labeled as people whom are destined to become helpless refugees, as this contradicts their strong sense of pride and undermines their dignity (Inside Story 2009). They wish to be viewed as valuable members of both their local and the international community, but their ability to contribute to the latter is removed when they are 'boxed away' as 'climate refugees', they are no longer party to the discussions that will ultimately determine their fate. Epeli Hau'ofa's 'Our Sea of Islands' thesis also attests to this term's rejection with emphases on the adaptive capacities of these island communities in response to climate change (Hau'ofa 2008, p.27-40). It is evident that even 'as a merely descriptive term, the refugee label is at best pre-emptive, and at worst offensive, for those to whom it is applied' (Inside Story 2009).

3.2. Pacific Policymakers

The national and governmental representatives of the Pacific peoples are equally opposed to the term 'climate refugee'. Ambassadors to the UN from the Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Tuvalu have all expressed their aversion to an 'exodus' of the Pacific (McNamara & Gibson 2009, p.479). Almost thirty years ago in 1988, the President of the Republic of the Maldives argued that the peoples of the Pacific affected by climate change wanted to remain in their homelands, a message that resonates

throughout the Pacific to this day (McNamara & Gibson 2009, p.479). These leaders defended their populations even at the risk of alienating sympathetic NGOs and activists (McNamara & Gibson 2009, p.476). The Chair of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) from 2006 to 2009, Angus Friday of Grenada, summarised the Pacific sentiment well;

'I think we all are proud islanders and it's not that we want to just look for another place to migrate to. No, what I think that we want is more how we can protect our islands, how we can ensure the sustainability of our islands, how we can ensure the survival of our community. It is not just a question of running away and finding another place and asking the big countries to open their gates to us. No, I don't think that question is something that all islanders would suddenly want to do, leave their own countries and let them drown.' (McNamara & Gibson 2009, p.481)

Before identifying the efforts made by the peoples of the Pacific to tackle climate change, it is important to note that the region is not homogenous, rather each PIC endures a unique reality living with climate change. The Pacific Islands of Carteret, Kiribati, and Tuvalu will help illustrate this variation. From 2005, the Carteret Islands became progressively uninhabitable as they became increasingly submersed (Burson 2010, p.11). In 2006, voluntary migration to mainland Papua New Guinea was arranged by a non-profit association, the Carterets Council of Elders named Tuele Peisa, which translates to 'sailing the waves on our own' (Farbotko & Lazrus 2012, p.383). This particular group's efforts enabled people to 'migrate with dignity' and maintain their agency, even if their sovereign borders were now underwater and undefined. Kiribati faces a similar situation in which the international community is assigning its people no fate other than migration. For this island a refugee solution is too simplistic, the issue is more complex and deserves to be treated accordingly, as President Tong states, 'Some of us might think climate change is just about moving people to a safer place. But it's about equity, identity and human rights' (Farbotko & Lazrus 2012, p.384). Lastly, Tuvalu. This island does not reject the

concept of migration as evidenced by its long history of mobility practices (Farbotko & Lazrus 2012, p.382). It does oppose, however, a construction of mobility that does not provide the subject with agency and self-determination (Farbotko & Lazrus 2012, p.388). As such, the Tuvaluan people call for; 'real solutions that will empower us to make sustainable choices as we adapt to our changing environment' (Farbotko & Lazrus 2012, p.387). These three PICs therefore encapsulate varying experiences and understandings of migration, yet express common concerns for agency, self-determination and justice in response to climate change in their region.

3.3. Pacific Media

The Pacific media's portrayal of climate change suffering in the Pacific paints an entirely different picture to that of the international media. Rather than telling a story of vulnerability and tragedy within the region, the Pacific media largely replicates the views of those whom it is reporting to, the peoples of the Pacific. This is evident in the topics focused upon, and the deterministic style in which they are presented. Articles addressing traditional knowledge, resilience and adaption provide just a few examples. In 2015, the Solomon Star published an article that contained a discussion on traditional knowledge and the potential it held for climate change prediction and strategy (Solomon Star 2015). It expressed relief that this body of knowledge was finally being acknowledged by scientists around the world, as 'In the past, ancestors had ways and means of preparing for disaster through their use of traditional knowledge' (Solomon Star 2015). As recent as July this year (2016), the Pacific Media Centre published an article that detailed funding required for 'Pacific climate resilience' (Pacific Media Centre 2016). It held an optimistic view of how the World Bank report could make 'resilient development strategies...possible using new decision frameworks' (Pacific Media Centre 2016). The last example, provided by the Pacific Islands News Association in 2008, delivered a strong

message from the Pacific peoples; that they would not leave their homes until all other options had been exhausted (Pacific Island News Association 2008). Within the article the director of the Secretariat of the Pacific Environment Programme, Asterio Takesy, was quoted; 'Our first line of defence should be to put in place adaption measures and work with the international community' (Pacific Island News Association 2008). This attitude has prevailed over the past eight years. The Pacific media is therefore highly in tune with the general Pacific consensus and its agenda is largely transparent.

As opposed to climate change action at the international level, within the Pacific the people and their national representatives have been very active in promoting the prevalence and seriousness of the issue. Grassroots activism has been the main avenue pursued by many in an attempt to raise awareness. 350 Pacific is a great example. It is 'a youth led grassroots network working with communities to fight climate change from the Pacific Islands' (350 Pacific 2016) This network seeks to educate and empower youth within the region and provides them with opportunities to participate in UN climate negotiations and challenge the fossil fuel industry (350 Pacific 2016). A protest waged by 350 Pacific's 'Pacific Climate Warriors' sought to further express their opposition towards this industry when they paddled into the oncoming path of a coal ship in Newcastle on October 17th 2014 (Greenpeace Australia Pacific Blog 2014). At the national level, leaders represent their public's interests on a daily basis within multiple forums or bodies, be it the Pacific Islands Forum, AOSIS or the UN. These are just a couple of examples of these resilient populations not only combating the effects of climate change at home, but also the misleading representations abroad.

4. Implications for International Relations

As already alluded to, the categorisation of those affected by climate change in the Pacific as 'climate refugees', has severe implications beyond mere misrepresentation. If left

unquestioned within international perception and discourse, serious definitional and operational ramifications will follow.

4.1. Definitional Consequences

Definitions hold the capacity to mobilise action around certain issues and not others, therefore, it is crucial for them to be accurate and true from their time of conception. Given there is little consensus around the term 'climate refugees' it is necessary to consider the implications its usage may have for both those affected currently by climate change, and those affected in the future. To understand the effect this term may have on those affected currently, it is helpful to draw on the valuable sociological insight that has been presented. This insight reveals two disturbing outcomes; a removal of agency and significant exploitation. As discussed earlier, referring to a person as a 'climate refugee' implies that they are more vulnerable and weak than resistant and strong. Sociological qualitative investigation, such as interviews or ethnographies, allows us to reveal this correlation. If we delve into the construction of the term 'climate refugee', we can reveal the historical relationship between power, knowledge and truth that helped to manufacture it initially (McNamara & Gibson 2009, p.477). Thus, we find that a naturalisation of the dominant definition allows for the marginalisation of its subjects that in turn entrenches them 'in inequitable power relations, redirecting their fate from their hands' (Farbotko & Lazrus 2012, p.382). Along with a loss of agency, these populations suffer significant exploitation. This exploitation is made possible through the commodification of the subjects, rather 'victims', to enable political point-scoring, greater news value, and 'evidence' for even well-meaning western activists (Farbotko & Lazrus 2012, p.386). Therefore, not only is the term 'climate refugees' disempowering, unsubstantiated, and insensitive, it is also exploitative. If it continues to remain unproblematised at a definitional level, then its language and 'knowledge base' will continue to adversely influence our practices.

To consider the effect the term 'climate refugees' has on those affected by climate change in the future, it is helpful to consider the more imminent legal repercussions. Within this discipline there still lies numerous unanswered questions that will have great impact if left unanswered in the future. In addition to the patchy acceptance of the term itself within refugee politics due to the confusion surrounding what it means to possess a 'well founded fear of persecution', many more simple procedural questions remain. For example, if an island like Kiribati does reach total submersion, does this mean that the sovereign state itself ceases to exist? Does this mean that those Kiribati nationals now residing elsewhere have no citizenship or birthplace? Will any compensation be given, and by whom? Will the previously sovereign waters surrounding the submerged island and the Exclusive Economic Zone become default? These are all extremely important questions that will hold serious implications for those directly affected by climate change within this region, and the international community more broadly. Furthermore, we can hold the international community accountable for the negligent use of the term on more than one account. Not only does the term not apply to the vast majority of which it is applied, it also holds no real meaning in international law. Those whom are deemed 'climate refugees' may therefore receive the pity and sympathy that accompanies such a label, however, no real protection is awarded and a gap develops. This goes to show how little thought is given to the term's responsible adoption at multiple levels. It seems we have reached a definitional crisis as not only have we failed to create a definition that resonates at ground level with those defined within, but we have also failed to create a definition that allows us to envisage our most basic responses to climate change in the immediate future.

4.2. Operational Consequences

The operational consequences that flow on from these definitional complications are also severe. If we commit to a problematisation of this term 'climate refugee', however, we are

granted the opportunity and potential to better tackle climate change. Two major strengths are unlocked; a harnessing of local agency, and the employment of more effective methods. Untapping local agency allows us to engage with both local potential and knowledge. In relation to the former, 'alternative ways of knowing about climate change are important for understanding risk and vulnerability in locally and culturally specific ways' (Lazrus 2012, p.290). Without this culturally and socially specific understanding possessed by the very subjects themselves, we cannot hope to justly address their needs and interests at an international scale. These island communities are often underestimated despite their high degree of global connectivity (Lazrus 2012, p.285). We should draw upon their zealous reply to climate change, as touched upon earlier when discussing local activism, for inspiration.

Pragmatically, this means we must incorporate their valuable local knowledge within our response. This type of knowledge has served these populations in the face of environmental devastation for thousands of years before institutions such as the Refugee Convention even existed. To understand how socio-ecological systems are to survive the effects of climate change, both global as well as local knowledge needs to be consulted (McMillen et al. 2014, p.43). The peoples of the Pacific exhibit a long history of environmental resilience, they offer us a unique understanding of how their environment functions and what effects certain environmental changes might have (McMillen et al. 2014, p.43). This type of translation is evident within the Samoans' ability to forecast the onset of extreme weather events by analysing local environmental disturbances, for instance the changes of plant and animal behaviour, changes an outsider would simply be incapable of detecting (Lefale 2010, p.317). In addition to this expertise, local knowledge also provides us with better methods of resource and social management in light of these disturbances (McMillen et al. 2014, p.43). Having lived within this region provides a depth of insight rarely achievable through other means.

More effective methods are revealed to us in our deconstruction of the term 'climate refugee'. Most importantly, these new methods will create space for the under-represented voices to express their opinions within the international arena. Given the more conventional diplomatic and scientific methods have failed to affect this kind of harmonious inclusion, it would seem wise to appeal to the sociological framework that enabled us to deconstruct the meanings, power and consequences behind the term in question, or more specifically, an applied anthropological approach. This may seem far fetched when discussing climate change as an issue of International Relations, however, the international community has proved its failure to grasp the Pacific sentiment, and therefore requires an epistemology that will help it to 'go back to basics' and practice reflexivity. This is anthropology's mission. This underestimated discipline allows us to ask the right questions that address how people ordinarily exist in a certain place, what their narratives are, and how they respond to external disturbances (Farbotko & Lazrus 2012, p.387). Anthropology allows the recommendations of authors such as Eveli Hau'ofa to take effect at an international level. The issues of agency and local ways of knowing mentioned earlier are not alien to this framework, instead they are core to its foundational assumptions. An applied anthropological approach is not to replace the global model, but is rather a compliment to it that enables us to capture the local complexities of the crisis (Magistro & Roncoli 2001, p.91). Within the anthropological tradition itself, an analysis of the climate change issue has been called for since the 1980s (Lazrus 2012, p.295), at the same time when Pacific national leaders were asserting the resilience of their peoples. This conceptual framework provides the opportunity to construct a new narrative of climate change within the Pacific, as its unique interpretations and methods will help provide us with the information we currently lack and allow us to move beyond compulsive classification altogether, as 'We do not need labels but action' (United Nations University 2009).

5. Concluding Remarks

It is therefore simple to appreciate why a generalised adoption and application of the term 'climate refugee' is both ineffective in combating climate change issues, and also highly insensitive to those it encompasses. The peoples of the Pacific are a resilient and strong group and should not be classified otherwise. Failing to consult local populations on the effects of climate change within their region, is comparable to a doctor refusing to listen to a patient's complaints; how can they hope to reach a plausible diagnosis if they do not properly understand the symptoms? The fact that this piece is being written well into the twenty first century indicates to us how little attention has been awarded to the peoples of the Pacific regarding their opinion on the effects of climate change to date. They raised their concerns almost three decades ago, however, as the effects of climate change were not yet being felt significantly by the west, these statements were soon forgotten and their impacts short lived. With the effects of climate change intensifying and multiplying, it is time we gave these people the necessary attention. Furthermore, the Pacific Islands are our barometers of climate change, they are our opportunity to better understand and tackle the very real crisis we face today, so why then are we treating them as a test run? Is the west still treating the peoples of the Pacific as a peripheral 'Other' in the year 2016?

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