



PACIFIC REGIONAL MEETING ON CLIMATE DISPLACEMENT


The Peninsula Principles on Climate Displacement Within States - the Peninsula Principles - were adopted by a group of international experts and legal scholars in 2013. This standard is the world's first policy framework designed to assist governments worldwide to secure the rights of people displaced internally by climate change. These principles provide a comprehensive normative framework, based on principles of international law, human rights obligations and good practice, within which the rights of climate displaced persons can be addressed.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Peninsula Principles.

They remain more relevant than ever for climate displaced persons everywhere.

KEY POINTS

- » The Pacific region is on the **frontline of climate change** and is a global hotspot for climate displacement.
- » Atoll nations and island groupings such as Tuvalu, Kiribati, Tokelau, Marshall Islands, Carteret Islands (PNG), Ontong Java Atoll (Solomon Islands) and others face the **most severe** existential threats.
- » By 2050, Kiribati is projected to become the **world's first country to be completely submerged** due to sea level rise.
- » Accessing clean safe drinking water is a daily challenge in Kiribati due to contamination from rising seas.
- » Communities living in low lying islands and atolls in the Pacific are faced with the question of how to preserve their culture when their territorial land has disappeared.
- » Since 2012, the Fijian government has identified **48 villages for relocation** due to the impacts of climate change. The Fijian government has publicly released guidelines outlining the process for community relocations which provide a human rights-based model for the region.
- » Pacific Island states lack the capacity and funding to access resources or implement frameworks aligned with relevant standards, further exacerbating climate-induced challenges.



On 16 August 2023, Displacement Solutions held the third of eight regional meetings to mark the 10-year anniversary of the Peninsula Principles and to explore innovative approaches to climate displacement around the world. This report provides a summary of the key themes of the discussions.

Pacific's Existential Crisis – Sinking Islands

Displacement Solution's Director **Scott Leckie** opened the meeting by highlighting the dire situation that climate change presents in the Pacific. He noted *"Every country in the world will suffer the negative consequences of climate change but very few regions will suffer to the extent that the Pacific is already suffering and will continue to do so in the future. Climate change presents an existential threat for many parts of the Pacific, quite literally involving the potential disappearance of the physical territory of nations, particularly the Atoll nations – the stakes could not be higher."*

As the Pacific is among the most climate-vulnerable regions in the world, there is an urgent need to find innovative solutions to the threat of climate displacement that are consistent with the needs and wishes of the communities affected. Despite increasing attention to climate displacement at the global and regional level, however, the resources, policy, laws, and ingenuity that are required to mitigate the consequences of climate change have not yet been forthcoming.

Challenges of Relocation and Relocation Frameworks

"Planned relocation for climate displaced communities should be the last resort for relocation. One simply has to look at this history of relocation to see its ad hoc nature and negative impacts it had on the communities relocated" – Kelera Railoa

Sabira Coelho from IOM outlined recent efforts to develop a regional framework to guide both government and non-government stakeholders to address climate related mobility. Since 2019, an extensive consultation process has been underway to inform the development of the framework, involving national and regional level consultations that engaged community representatives and government officials across various countries. The draft regional framework was developed and overseen by a joint intergovernmental working group at the end of 2022. It is expected to be endorsed as official policy by Pacific country leaders later in 2023.

At the individual state level, a number of Pacific countries already have climate displacement policies and guidelines in place. However, this is not the case with Atoll nations facing existential threat who wish to avoid climate related displacement as far as possible and to remain in place to preserve the state. **Linda Uan** (Nei Tabera Ni Kai Video Unit Inc., Kiribati) noted that the current government in Kiribati does not believe in climate change, and this makes it challenging to even discuss these issues.

Human rights challenges with relocation in the region have included loss of livelihoods, movement restrictions, lack of security of tenure, and customary land issues. Human security challenges include gender-based violence, general personal security, and threats to vulnerable groups.



Joe Foukona from the University of Hawaii noted that the Solomon Islands government published relocation guidelines in 2022. The guidelines outline processes for managing displacement or undertaking planned relocation. However, there are significant challenges in implementation in part because they are State-centric when the government is not present in many locations in the Solomons and is only considered as a “guest” by many local communities. In order to access land for relocation there is a need for traditional owners to agree rather than the State. There is also a need to allow communities to identify what they want and what would make their life easier if they are living in an area that is facing climate threats and whether they should move or not.

Most population movements in the Solomon Islands are informal and occur without state involvement, so people end up in ever expanding informal settlements in the city of Honiara, where they live in precarious living conditions, are very vulnerable and exposed anew to natural disasters such as flooding and are often displaced again.

Kelera Railoa from the University of Fiji outlined Fiji’s experience with planned relocations. The government identified 48 villages for relocation in 2012 but has subsequently acknowledged that some of the first relocations have been problematic. The government did not take into account the intangible social, emotional and cultural losses caused by relocation, including ties to land. Other more tangible problems included loss of livelihoods for communities linked to the sea who were relocated inland to areas where there were no jobs, security problems, and lack of compensation for land. Planning for relocation needs to better take these factors into account, which often underlie the resistance of many communities to relocation.


The government has subsequently recognised that planned relocation should only be a measure of last resort. Relocation should also not be to a land site and housing circumstances that is worse in terms of access to education, livelihoods, and services. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to reflect this have also been developed to supplement the government’s relocation guidelines, which were made publicly available in March 2023. Under the SOPs the government has agreed to monitor and evaluate relocations, and there are also grievance procedures. It is expected that the 48 villages identified for relocation will grow, so the guidelines and SOPS will become increasingly important.

Scott Leckie noted that the Fiji government’s position that people should not be moved to a worse situation and the SOPs provide a human rights-based approach that could provide a model for other governments in the region.

Voluntary Immobility and Remaining in Place

Volker Boege of the Toda Peace Institute expanded on the dilemma faced by Pacific Island communities in choosing between remaining on their ancestral lands or relocating due to increasing climate adversity. The connection between Pacific Islander people to their land, sea, and ancestors, is very deep. This bond transcends material considerations and extends into the realm of spirituality and cultural identity.

At the same time, the region has always experienced significant mobility and migration. Problems occur when the movement is not voluntary because the home place has been deemed uninhabitable by outsiders who only consider material and physical rather than spiritual and cultural factors.



More attention needs to be given to the notion of “voluntary immobility”, where villagers are unwilling to relocate despite the looming threats. The deep connection to their land and place, often embodied in burial sites, is one of the most significant barriers to relocation. For this reason, potential resettlement sites are perceived as uninhabitable, and elders will often express a preference to die on their land rather than move.

Scott Leckie noted that more needs to be done to support on-site adaptation to assist people who want to stay. The idea of adaptation in place needs to be further explored to identify innovative, even if temporary, approaches. Some measures may not allow people to stay indefinitely in areas that are particularly affected, but some adaptation measures such as stiling of homes, floating platforms, land reinforcement, may enable people and communities to remain in place for far longer than would have been the case without such measures.

He also referred to other proposals to create floating islands or for land reclamation using advanced engineering technology, particularly in the Atoll states, and queried whether these proposals might provide viable approaches.

Linda Uan said that her preference as an I-Kiribati is to remain in her place, culture and language. Measures such as land reclamation is what I-Kiribati’s are striving for, given the importance of having their own land to be I-Kiribati. Innovative engineering would be required to create a viable and sustainable solution. Floating islands might be useful e.g. for establishing desalination plants, which are already required due to the contamination of ground water by rising sea levels.

Land Issues and Preservation of Culture

Volker Boege noted that another reason that some villagers might not want to move is the loss of culture and potential conflict with traditional landowners in relocation sites. The experience in the Cartaret Islands and Bougainville provide illustrative examples of the conflict which can occur.

In the Pacific, land is not just a physical entity; it is a living embodiment of community and ancestry. As such, even unoccupied land is not considered “empty”, so access to relocation sites requires significant negotiations which can be extremely complex and can also lead to conflict. These negotiations go beyond the state, and usually involve traditional owners, neighbours, and the church, also a large landowner. An illustrative example of some of the dilemmas involved is the purchase of land at Naviavia in Fiji by Kiribati (under former President Anote Tong’s government) as a potential resettlement site for people from Kiribati. This land was owned by the Anglican church and occupied by the descendants of blackbirded Solomon Islander cane workers who have nowhere else to go, but the Anglican church sold it to the government of Fiji, who then sold it to the government of Kiribati.

Planning for relocation, therefore, requires looking beyond the traditional mechanisms of the state: state institutions are not present in villages, so it lacks the grassroots insight and trust needed to navigate the complexities of negotiating relocations. Community elders and traditional leaders, the church have to be fully involved and the community itself has to define if their home village is uninhabitable and whether and where they wish to resettle.



The overarching issue revolves around how to preserve cultural identity after resettlement. This will require efforts to fully engage community leaders in developing a strategy that takes this into account in the planning process. Previous experiences of migration and displacement in the Pacific need to be studied and learned from to identify what worked and what did not. For example, the Banaban people resettled on Rabi island in Fiji decades ago have demonstrated the ability to adapt to new circumstances while retaining their culture.

Linda Uan noted that despite the desire of many to remain in Kiribati and the difficulties of talking about climate change relocation in Kiribati due to the position of the government, the people need to prepare for how to preserve their culture – what they want to take with them, and what they want to leave in Kiribati.

Nic Maclellan (Pacnews, Islands Business (Fiji) correspondent) talked about the need to learn from communities who had been displaced in previous decades and the lessons for climate displacement.

Parallels can be drawn between historical relocations due to nuclear testing and mining and the emerging scenarios of climate displacement. For example, the United States undertook 67 atomic and hydrogen bomb tests in the Marshall Islands from the 1940s to the 1950s, which caused significant radioactive contamination and displaced local communities from Bikini, Rongelap and elsewhere from the 1940s through to the 1980s.

Elders in the Marshall Islands have invested considerable work in trying to preserve their culture for younger generations who do not have the same connection to their traditional home, which is uninhabitable. On their national day, for example, children in Ejit are educated about how and why the community was displaced as a way to connect them with their traditional place.


The experience of the Gilbertese who were compelled to relocate to the Solomon Islands highlight displacement difficulties, eg. problems with property rights, cultural alienation, and also provide valuable lessons for how to effectively respond to future climate displacement scenarios.

The Marshall Islands government is crafting national adaptation plans for COP discussions within the UN Framework on Climate Change, which have been guided by extensive community consultations. These plans incorporate the nuclear legacy of the islands, linking past events to present climate action strategies. The approach aims to use historical lessons to inform strong and modern climate policies.

Funding

“Funds need to be accessible, sustainable, predictable, and transparent. The mere existence of funds is not enough.” - Sabira Coelho

Sabira Coelho noted that climate change adaptation funding is shifting from strategies to remain in place towards labour migration and climate resilience. There are various potential funding sources— regional, international, or bilateral - but all are difficult to access for climate mobility projects. The vertical adaptation funds are extremely difficult to access and the criteria for funding need to be changed. In short, the funds need not only to exist, but be accessible and sustainable.



Joseph Foukona referred to the challenges faced by the Solomon Islands in implementing the government's relocation guidelines. The state lacks both the capacity and the financial resources to implement planned relocation projects that would meet these standards or even to formulate proposals to access funding for this purpose. He also noted that this is also the case in relation to broader climate change related strategies such as Vanuatu's request for an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice on the rights of citizens to be protected from climate change: many Pacific states lack the capacity and financial resources to make such submissions or take similar actions.

Nic Maclellan, highlighted the importance of control mechanisms in managing funds to support displaced communities. As a glaring example of inadequate controls, he cited the mismanagement and alleged corruption of trust funds allocated for the displaced communities from Bikini atoll to address harm caused from nuclear testing. To combat such issues, he stressed the significance of enabling grassroots communities and community elders to have a say in determining funding priorities.

Broader Migration

Scott Leckie asked participants to consider whether the creation of a Pacific-wide migration scheme, where Pacific citizens could move and resettle freely in other Pacific states, could be a viable way forward.

Linda Uan responded that this is an idea that should be further explored in case "the worst comes to the worst." However, it would be essential to plan and test the concept carefully before actually involving people and their lives.

She also referred to the dilemma created by existing labour and permanent migration trends to countries like Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. While these movements are primarily financially motivated and voluntary, they also create a brain drain from Kiribati. Many who are migrating are key personnel within government and various service providers. The dilemma is complex; on one hand, individuals are seizing opportunities to secure better futures amidst predictions of Kiribati being uninhabitable by 2050 due to rising sea levels. On the other, the exodus of skilled people could potentially undermine the country's capacity to address climate change challenges.

Kelera Raloia noted that Fiji's relocation guidelines and SOPs contained similar policy to a Pacific-wide migration scheme, so these could be used to form the basis for such a scheme. However, movements would need to be properly planned in advance and adequate infrastructure put in place in order to ensure that there would be proper livelihoods and other conditions for those moving.

Sabira Coelho noted that in addition to labour migration, there is also a need to develop humanitarian pathways such as temporary protection in Australia and New Zealand.



This meeting brought together climate change experts and community members who have first-hand knowledge and lived experience of the devastating impact of climate change in the Pacific Islands.

The discussions covered a broad range of issues, from the deep cultural bond that Pacific populations have with their land and sea and the desire of many to remain in place, to the lessons that can be learned for managing climate displacement from the long history of forced displacement within the region. The discussions also stressed the urgent need for accessible, sustainable, and transparent funding support that is crucial for effective strategies to address climate displacement. There was unanimous agreement that not enough is being done by the international community to provide this financial support.

Other issues highlighted included the importance of grassroots community consultation to the success of adaptation and relocation efforts, the need to address tangible issues such as livelihoods, land rights and security, as well as the preservation of cultural identity and social connections. The development of human rights-based climate displacement policies by countries such as Fiji provide an encouraging model for the future. If adapted more widely, this kind of planning for climate mobility will help Pacific communities cope with climate displacement threats, reduce vulnerability and prevent loss and damage.

Please check out www.displacementsolutions.org for all of the latest information on this project and all other activities by DS and its partners and associates.

Participant Biographies



Joseph Foukona

Dr. Joseph D. Foukona is an Assistant Professor in the History Department and the University of Hawai'i. He was born and raised in Honiara, Solomon Islands. He received his LLB and LLM degrees from the University of the South Pacific in 2000 and 2001, and an LLM from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand in 2003. He completed a PhD on land, law and history at the Australian National University. Joseph was a lecturer for ten years at the University of the South Pacific. He has undertaken research on customary land tenure, climate change and natural disaster displacements and relocation, urban land, land reform, constitutional, and governance issues in the Pacific. Through research, training, and teaching experience Joseph has detailed working knowledge of development and governance, land, law, and history in the Pacific region. His work has been recognised through professional associations, publications, and academic awards.



Kelera Railoa

Kelera Railoa is a passionate environmentalist and dedicated climate activist whose career journey has seamlessly blended her commitment to sustainability with her professional expertise currently serving as the Project Manager for the University of Fiji's USAID PAF Aquaculture project. Kelera has co-authored research papers on climate displacement and place attachment, traditional medicine and climate adaptation. Having acquired extensive industry experience in the fields of pharmaceuticals and nutraceuticals, alongside a strong academic foundation in biology and chemistry, Kelera is currently undertaking postgraduate studies focused on climate change with the hope to address complex challenges at the intersection of science, sustainability, and public health.



Lina Uan

Linda Uan, an I-Kiribati national, together with her late husband John Anderson from New Zealand, established and operated Nei Tabera Ni Kai Video Unit Inc between 1996 to 2018. Over 400 films were produced and distributed throughout Kiribati, the Pacific Region and wider afield. Films have documented more than two decades of social, environmental, health, education and significant cultural issues in Kiribati. She is a regular media commentator on climate migration and has written numerous press articles, a book chapter and films on the impact of climate change in the Pacific.



Nic Maclellan

Nic Maclellan is a correspondent for Islands Business magazine (Fiji) and a contributor to Pacnews, Inside Story and other regional media. He has reported extensively on climate finance in the Pacific islands and participated in projects on environment and development for UNICEF Pacific, Oxfam International, the Lowy Institute, the Nautilus Institute and other research centres. He was awarded the 2015 "Outstanding Contribution to the Sector" award by the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), and the Walkley Foundation's 2020 Sean Dorney Grant for Pacific Journalism. His book 'Grappling with the Bomb' (ANU Press, 2017) – a history of British nuclear testing in Kiribati – was shortlisted for the EPAA Scholarly Book of the Year in 2019.



Sabira Coelho

Sabira Coelho currently serves as the Programme Manager at IOM Fiji for the three-year joint-programme, “Enhancing protection and empowerment of migrants and communities affected by climate change and disasters in the Pacific Region”, being implemented along with UNESCAP, ILO, OHCHR, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and Platform on Disaster Displacement, with funding from the UN Trust Fund for Human Security. Previously, Sabira served as the Regional Migration Environment and Climate Change Officer at the IOM’s Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific providing technical support to IOM missions, undertaking research to assess the nexus of climate change and migration and support capacity building of policymakers across the region.



Scott Leckie

Scott Leckie is the founder and Executive Director of Displacement Solutions. He is an international human rights lawyer, academic, author, social entrepreneur, environmentalist and recognised as one of the world’s leading global housing, land and property (HLP) rights experts. He is the world’s most widely published author on HLP themes, having written more than 200 books, articles and substantive reports on these issues. At the age of 25, he was already being described by leading human rights scholars as an international human rights pioneer.



Volker Boege

Dr phil., peace researcher and historian. Senior Research Fellow at the Toda Peace Institute, Tokyo, Japan, in charge of the Institute’s workstream on Climate Change and Conflict. Dr. Boege has worked extensively in the areas of peacebuilding and resilience in the Pacific region. His focus was on the themes of peacebuilding, hybrid political orders and state formation, non-Western (‘traditional’ or ‘customary’) approaches to conflict transformation, and environmental degradation and conflict. His current work addresses climate change, conflict and peace in the Pacific. Dr Boege is also Honorary Research Fellow at the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland (UQ). From the early 1980s through to the mid-2000s, Volker worked with a number of peace research institutions and universities in Germany and Switzerland. He moved to Australia and started work with UQ in 2005, and in 2018 he joined the Toda Peace Institute. Volker has published numerous journal articles, book chapters, reports, conference papers and books on peace and conflict studies.