

# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



EUROPEAN CONSORTIUM FOR PACIFIC STUDIES

RESTORING THE HUMAN TO CLIMATE CHANGE IN  
OCEANIA: Voices and Perspectives from the Pacific

10 August 2014

## INTRODUCTION

“Friends, the fight against climate change is a test of our human character. Governments play to their constituencies, which in turn pursue their short-term self-interest. But our response to the climate challenge must rise above this. Together with empathy and foresight, our collective response must be driven by the legitimate hopes and inspirations of our future generation. Combating climate change is all about survival – about saving humanity. But it is humans who must decide to save humanity.”

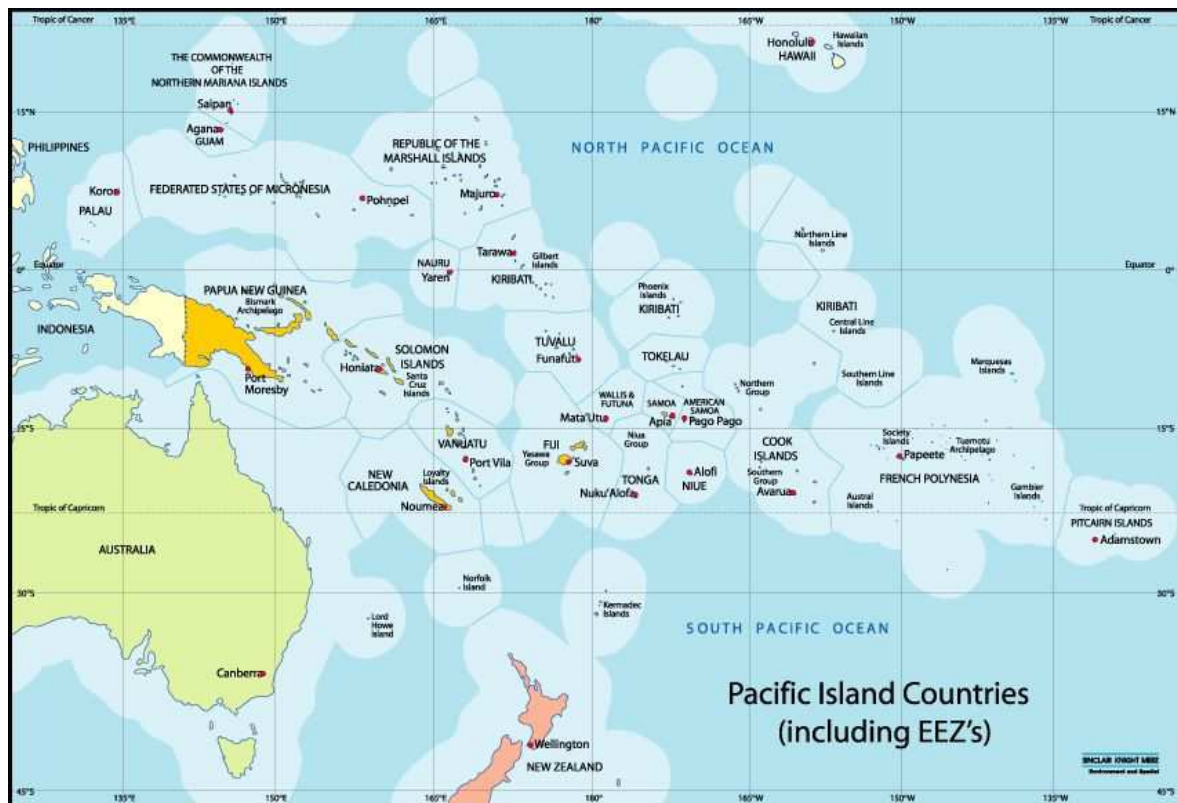
Honorable **Tony de Brum**, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Republic of the Marshall Islands, in his opening keynote to the ECOPAS conference  
“Restoring the Human to Climate Change in Oceania”

The European Consortium of Pacific Studies (ECOPAS) is a network project funded by the European Union through its Seventh Framework programme, and is dedicated to creating new channels for research-based social science and humanities knowledge and engagements with policy making at the Pacific-EU interface. The ECOPAS Consortium includes two Pacific and four European partner institutions of research and higher learning. The six project partners have a collective agenda of developing new forms of knowledge exchange to address the challenges faced by the Pacific Islands region and its inhabitants in the face of global climate change. In December 2013, ECOPAS arranged a major conference, *Restoring the Human to Climate Change in Oceania*, at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji. This Policy Brief conveys some of the messages from that conference, in order to give glimpses of what the people of the Pacific themselves think about climate change right now.

## EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

The present situation of the Pacific Islands in terms of climate change and its environmental effects – low contribution to global warming, massive exposure to its effects – is well known. In this field, the Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) of the Pacific are major global players, through the influential roles of their diplomatic representatives and task-oriented organisations in UN contexts

and elsewhere, as seen most recently through the *Majuro Declaration for Climate Leadership* (2013) and the hosting by Samoa in 2014 of the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States. In the Majuro Declaration, the leaders of the nations that compose the regional Pacific Islands Forum collectively voiced their dedication to work for the reduction of greenhouse gases worldwide, while simultaneously committing their own nations to spearhead that process through radical measures. In late September, the president of the Marshall Islands presented the Majuro Declaration to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon in New York, offering the Declaration as a “Pacific gift” to the UN.



The Pacific Islands region represents a globally unique diversity of languages, cultures and state formations, extending for thousands of kilometres in the tropical zones on both sides of the equator. Small and large groups of islands constitute culturally distinct nations with populations ranging from a few thousand (e.g., Tuvalu, Tokelau, Niue) to several million (Papua New Guinea). The Melanesian, Polynesian and Micronesian peoples of the Pacific represent the world’s largest linguistic diversity. Nearly 25%, or 1500, of the world’s 6000 languages are spoken in the region. Culturally, politically and economically there is immense diversity among the islands and archipelagos, with marked differences apparent even within states.

There is, however, a widespread regional sense of belonging to what the Pacific Islanders themselves often refer to as Oceania – a maritime world where islands have been historically connected rather than isolated. The people of Oceania share experiences of living on islands surrounded by ocean but simultaneously linked, historically, culturally, economically and politically, to neighbouring islands. Some of the smallest island nations of the Pacific are small only in terms of land and population, as they have control over some of the world’s largest Exclusive Economic Zones – some Pacific commentators have proposed that nations like Kiribati and the Marshall Islands should be seen not as Small Island Developing States or SIDS, but rather as “Great Ocean States”.

The ECOPAS conference *Restoring the Human to Climate Change in Oceania* brought the voices of government, diplomacy, academia, NGOs, regional organisations, performative arts and environmental activism, and students of university and high school, together in new and original ways. Below are observations, expressions and opinions on climate change as they were voiced at

the conference. Lightly edited to form a coherent whole and interspersed with direct quotes, this presentation of Pacific voices represents a diverse conference gathering of about 200 participants from just about all corners of the great region of Oceania and all walks of life. The conference announcement from the University of the South Pacific sets the stage:

“The people of the low-lying islands of the Pacific are among the most vulnerable to the onset of climate change. They have to deal with rising temperatures and sea levels, acidification of the ocean, changes in rainfall patterns and extreme weather. In order to survive, Islanders seek solutions on a daily basis. Many are now faced with the possibility that they may have to abandon their ancestral homelands and relocate. But where can they go? What must they give up in order to be accepted by new hosts? And what will they do with the bones of their ancestors? This conference will focus on culture, traditional wisdom, climate science and adaptation in Oceania and what it means to be human in a changing climate. For the islanders of the Pacific, climate change is an immediate reality to be responded to. Their responses involve knowledge and skills developed over thousands of years of living with changing, often volatile Oceanic environments.”

**Vilsoni Hereniko**, Fiji, conference co-organizer and executive producer of “Moana: The Rising of the Sea”

To this must be added the observation that additional consequences of global warming beyond sea level rise affect the entire Pacific region, including its high islands. Changing seasonal weather, more frequent droughts, floods and other bursts of extreme weather, ocean acidification and warming, coral bleaching, coastal erosion and saltwater inundation are now facts of life for all Pacific islanders, and an increasing number of initiatives towards near and far resettlement are taken.



From the premiere of “Moana: The Rising of the Sea”. Photo by Eilin H. Torgersen, ECOPAS

The conference opened with the world premiere of “Moana: The Rising of the Sea”; a Pacific cultural performance which through music, dance and drama explores the human dimensions of climate change in ways aimed both at entertaining and at moving to action. In the “Moana” performance, the inhabitants of the fictional Pacific island of Marawa are challenged by the violent forces of a

rising sea to find a way out. In a gripping performance where islanders face the prospect of being engulfed by what for ages been their life-giving great ocean, new connections are forged between humans and the spiritual forces of nature, ultimately enabling the Marawa islanders to mobilise their collective creativity and overcome their vulnerability to the rising sea, while also having to make the painful choice of whether to stay or to leave. The outcome of the drama is open-ended, leaving the audience to ponder over what the future holds for Pacific islanders faced by the onset of global climate change and its effects.

Changes in the climate and the environment are nothing new for Pacific islanders. They have always had to deal with earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tropical storms, tsunamis, droughts and flooding, and other forces of nature that may rapidly change the environments of land and sea on which people's lives depend.

"We are people of the sea, and so we have learned to live with all the different changes that come from the sea. People may not have heard about climate change, but they have already *lived* through its effects."

**Tammy Tabe**, Solomon Islands, conference speaker

Pacific islanders are therefore used to adapting to environmental changes, and have had their own adaptation strategies for thousands of years, including migration. Today, problems are becoming global to a greater degree than before, with climate changes becoming more extreme and people being more aware of the anthropogenic effects on the climate. And so for Pacific Islanders climate change is not something that may happen in the future. It is an immediate reality that they are trying to respond to.

That Pacific Islanders possess the strength and knowledge to observe and deal with climate change effects locally is of crucial concern to educational policy. Pacific knowledge and wisdom should be brought to the forefront in developing the region's capacity for adapting to the climate uncertainties and challenges. Innovation in climate change curricula should be sought, from a perspective that does not see climate science and Pacific knowledge as incompatible but as complementary. Climate change education grounded in both the local and the global are also important for the future politicians of the Pacific.

*... tell them about the water  
how we have seen it rising  
flooding across our cemeteries  
gushing over the sea walls  
and crashing against our homes  
tell them what it's like  
to see the entire ocean\_\_level\_\_with the land*

From the poem "Tell Them" by **Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner**, the Republic of the Marshall Islands. The poem was used with her permission to open the ECOPAS performance "Moana: The Rising of the Sea"

A number of conference participants expressed the grassroots view that climate change must no longer be seen only as a topic for high level politicians to discuss at high level meetings, but rather as a matter of immediate survival for human beings. Recognising that high-level discussions are ones that directly affect people living on the islands of the Pacific, it is important to bring back to islanders the science that can complement what they already know from the experience of generations, and to blend a formula that works for education and awareness and encourages local involvement. How have villagers in the islands survived droughts and floods before? How have they coped with the destruction caused over the generations by earthquakes, tsunamis and cyclones?



If temporary resettlement or permanent migrations are options for responding to environmental transformation, whether caused by sudden natural disaster or gradual effects of climate change, how can such population movement take place in the Pacific context? Ultimately there is a widespread resistance against leaving one's homeland:

*... we know we might be uprooted from this island, for the mighty rising sea chases us to higher ground. We can't leave our home island for higher ground. This is our land, culture, our identity and home ground. Our memories, dreams, history and all that we are, are entwined and embedded in this ground. We are who we are, Please don't uproot us from this ground, or you tear the heart out of who we are.*

From poem by **Lucille Apis-Overhoff**, Pohnpei (Federated States of Micronesia), conference participant

Nevertheless relocation to new lands looms in the background. It is seen as a possible future scenario for the Pacific, and is explored by some Pacific governments. This is not without its challenges: Moving people from their traditional place of habitat creates potential conflicts, since throughout the Pacific land is mostly owned through customary law and not controlled by the powers of the state. Precedents from the late colonial times, when many islanders from what is now the atoll nation of Kiribati were re-settled in the Solomon Islands and Fiji after phosphate mining and colonial interpretations of population and economy caused their home islands be more or less uninhabitable, speak to and illuminate these challenges of today.

Furthermore, climate change and its projected impacts in the Pacific raise a number of very complex questions relating to sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly for low-lying atoll nations. The possible disappearance under the sea of the territory of a state has never been contemplated before on the international stage, and will require new initiatives in international law.

"How unfortunate are the circumstances that bring us together here."

**Viliamu Iese**, Samoa/Tuvalu, conference co-organiser and master of ceremonies

Building on the darker sides of the projected future for much of the Pacific, several conference speakers addressed the frequent role assigned to, and taken by, the Pacific as a victim of global climate change. Some reservations were expressed against this role:

"At some stage I said to people around the world, when they felt sorry for the islands, that I got frustrated with the sympathy: 'I don't want your sympathy, what I would like you to do is to do something about it, I want you to change your lifestyle because your lifestyle is hurting the way I live and where I am from.' Everybody claims vulnerability, even industrial countries. So when we talk about climate change and sustainable development, it becomes an interesting discussion about the level of vulnerability and expectations. Unless we claim the ownership of the concept of climate change, we will have problem with the discussion of climate change. We cannot resolve the problem when we always ask others for solutions."

**Fe'iloakitau Kaho Tevi**, Tonga, conference speaker

An alternative global role for the Pacific was proposed at the conference in terms of its lack of contribution to the causes of global warming, and from the perspective that the great ocean in which Pacific islanders live in fact contributes significantly to decreasing the world's rate of carbon emissions – though not without injury to what islanders see as their own living sea:

"The only thing that slows the rate of CO<sub>2</sub> is the state of the world economy. Our voices from the Pacific have not been heard. What are the Pacific Islands' emissions? They are in fact already negative; the region is taking up far more carbon than it is emitting. That carbon is acidifying our ocean. The Pacific should therefore ask to be reimbursed, since the Pacific 'net emissions' are worth billions on today's Carbon Trade

Exchange. Meanwhile, we also need to reduce our own emissions by reducing fossil fuels, and to aim for true sustainable development.”

**Elisabeth Holland**, University of the South Pacific, conference organiser



Majuro, 3 March 2014. Photo by Are E. Brandvik, ECOPAS.

The issues raised here converged in a particularly acute and concrete way in the central Pacific on 3 March 2014, when Majuro, the capital of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, was brutally jarred awake by a rising sea. That morning an extreme king tide caused storm waves to pass over the reef and smash with full force into the oceanside neighbourhoods of this low-lying atoll town. As waves hit the shore, their impact dug away at the ground. The foundations of the house seen above were left hanging in thin air, later to collapse. Elsewhere in Majuro the bones of ancestors were exposed as waves broke their tombs apart. The homes of hundreds of people were destroyed, and a national state of emergency was declared. Pacific climate researchers believe these high tide floods and storm surges, such as the one of 3 March 2014 that built up near Japan and hit the atolls of the central Pacific, will increase in frequency and magnitude in the coming years.

“For decades, climate change was seen as a topic almost entirely of science: the degree to which our climate is changing, the extent to which human activities are responsible,

and what needs to be done to stop it. While these are of course important discussions, too often they forget one very important element: the human factor [ ... ] This is not just an issue for the Pacific. It is an issue for all of humanity. As the Pacific goes, so too will the rest of the world. We might be on the frontline and among the most vulnerable, but others will follow.”

Honorable **Tony de Brum**, Minister of Foreign Affairs,  
the Republic of the Marshall Islands, in his opening keynote.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Pacific voices conveyed in the pages above should speak for themselves. We will argue that the perspectives presented here have implications for policy, not least concerning EU-Pacific relations, and provide the following recommendations:

- ECOPAS recommends that **greater attention is given to the human dimensions of climate change in the Pacific Islands and globally**. The Pacific can provide particularly powerful examples of this.
- At the frontline of global climate change, the people of the Pacific have strong feelings about their predicament, but also many creative responses. **Pacific Islanders should therefore be listened to closely in global climate change debates**.
- Educational policy should seek an **integration between the models of climate change developed by science and in the local knowledge of Pacific Islanders**.
- **The social sciences and humanities, including the performative arts**, have a long and vibrant record in the Pacific, and are **well placed to suggest new connections between climate science and the knowledges of Pacific peoples**.
- It is recommended that **closer dialogues between policy-making and these agendas of research are developed**. The ECOPAS conference from which this Policy Brief has been built provides some examples of how such dialogue may be achieved.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

ECOPAS is a Coordination and Support Action and as such is tasked with creating, maintaining and developing networks among research communities in and beyond Europe, and between those research communities and a multitude of policy-making arenas in the EU and the Pacific. The ECOPAS Consortium includes the leading centres for Pacific research in Europe, the Pacific region's own premier research university, and a leading policy think-tank in Papua New Guinea. This Consortium composition allows for the development of a diversity of strong research agendas to complement the coordination and networking responsibilities of ECOPAS as a whole. This Policy Brief indicates in the clearest possible way that research networks concerned with the Pacific need a strong base in the Pacific region itself.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

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