

Social Impact of Sea Level Rise and Community Resilience

- Lessons from the Pacific Islands

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A B S T R A C T

This article examines social impact of sea level rise in the Pacific Islands, with a particular focus on four areas of issues. First, the submersion of land into sea water frequently removes the areas that have cultural significance to local communities. Second, internal migration caused by land loss frequently enforce migrants to compromise their cultural and religious practices in order to settle into new host societies. Third, an uncoordinated process of migration generates many issues of urbanization in many Pacific Island countries, making young children particularly vulnerable to domestic violence and crimes. Fourth, international migration implemented as a way to address sea level rise requires migrants' loss of self-dignity and disconnection to their home communities. All in all, the climate change and the Pacific Island countries' responses to it have had a critical and negative impact on many community members' cultural identities and self-dignity.

Key words: climate change, sea-level rise, migration, the Pacific Islands

1. Introduction

Climate change has become a buzzword in the contemporary academic debates in Peace and Conflict Studies. An extensive amount of studies have examined the issues related to climate change ranging from the physical impact of natural disasters to people's livelihoods to the opportunities for conflict resolution that a common environmental challenge may offer. Despite the large volume of empirical studies, however, many of them approach the climate change issue more as a natural disaster (that requires an immediate and urgent responses) or a symptom of global-scale environmental issues (that require a response to address the root causes). In this process, the examination of the impact of climate changes often neglects their influence on multi-layered social issues.

This article is a concept note that is prepared as the first step to address this bias in the academic debates. It aims to demonstrate a few social and cultural issues that are caused by 'sea level rise' in the Pacific Islands, based on the review of project reports and academic studies that reflect local actors' perspectives. Specifically, it will focus on the loss of traditional practices, pressure on migrants to compromise their cultural and religious practices,

urbanisation, and the loss of self-dignity in relation to international migration.

2. Sea Level Rise and its consequences

Among others, sea level rise is one of the most concerning issues that are caused by global climate change. The rising tide has rapidly submerged the land in seashore areas across the Pacific, and most countries in this region have been severely affected by it (Volker and Shibata 2020). In response, the governments and local communities in the Pacific Islands have conducted a wide range of projects. For instance, the construction of seawalls was conducted to protect their land from high tide, which were made of coral, mangrove wood, or man-made walls. Moreover, as the availability of fresh water has been reduced due to sea level rise, governments and external supporters like EU and UNICEF have provided equipment for storing rain water for local communities (Pacific Community, 2018). When the impact of sea level rise is significant, some governments have encouraged people to migrate to either other locations in the same country or to overseas countries (Walsh, 2017).

3. Social Impact of Land Loss

3.1. *The loss of traditional practices*

An immediate consequence of sea level rise is the submersion of land into sea water. It causes many practical issues, such as the loss of arable property, reduction of the land that produces fresh water, and the loss of land routes for mobility. However, an equally important issue is a loss of traditional practices. In many Pacific Islands, land has a cultural significance that represents their ancestors, identity, and roots of belonging. In many cases, clans have their own customary lands (frequently seaside beaches) where bodies of the deceased are buried and many symbols of ancestors are stood. Many cultural practices that commemorate birth, marriage, and death are conducted in connection to these sacred places (Ritiata 2020). As Corlew (2012, p. 13) states, in most Pacific Islands, people's identity is usually understood in relation to the location of where they are. Referring to Fiji, Herman and Kempf (2017, p. 250) mentioned that many people consider themselves as "the lawful owners and guardians of the land of the forebears." Many words and expressions imply a critical ontological unity between men and land.

Hence, for many people in the Pacific Islands, the loss of land frequently means the loss of their connection to their ancestors, future generations, and their own identities. In response to this loss, some local communities attempt to preserve their memory related to the lost land and continue their cultural practices without the land. For instance, in iKiribati, a group of people have created over 400 films that recorded cultural events in their local areas, which could be due to land loss and subsequent migration (Teaiwa, 2019, cited in Ritiata 2020).

3.2. *Pressure on the religious identity of migrants*

Sea level rise causes many people in the seashore area to relocate into inner areas. This type of migration unavoidably requires the people in the inner land areas to share their space with new migrants, and the tension between the original inhabitants and migrants often becomes salient. Out of the various issues that may galvanise such tension is the pressure on new migrants to conform to the dominant religious practices in the host communities. In many Pacific Islands, indigenous religions that have been practiced since the pre-colonial period and Christianity introduced by Western missionaries co-exist. In some areas like Hinduism in Fiji, other religions are also introduced by foreign migrants. Hence, the local communities in different locations may have dissimilar religious affiliations.

Under such a circumstance, when the residents of a seashore area are divided into smaller groups and relocated into a number of places in a scattered manner, it was difficult for these residents to carry on the collective religious practices as they used to

be. It is especially true when the original inhabitants in the host community have a dominant religious identity. They are often strongly encouraged (if not enforced) to join religious activities of the original inhabitants in order to get connected to local human networks where important information and resources are shared and disseminated (Kuruppu 2009).

3.3 *Urbanisation*

Related to intra-state migration, one frequently occurring issue is the intensifying urbanisation of the host communities. Urbanisation itself has been a major social issue in many Pacific Island countries for decades. The migration of the population from rural areas to cities has been encouraged by multiple factors, such as better education opportunities, job availability, and accessibility to medical and other social services. Nevertheless, recent climate change has forced a large volume of the population to move to major cities without proper pre-coordination.

Accordingly, most new migrants end up living in a suburb of a major city where the infrastructure for managing life (e.g. water supply, sanitary facility, road connection to the city centre, house) is poorly managed and the conditions for security and safety are inappropriate (Boege and Shibata 2020). As the work opportunities are limited, a large number of migrants rely on casual, low-income labour-intensive work. Children in these families are frequently vulnerable to unhealthy food, contaminated water, domestic violence, and crime (Campbell 2019).

3.4 *Loss of self-dignity in relation to international migration*

An increasing number of Pacific Island countries explore international migration as an important measure to address the challenges of sea level rise. As the entire territory of these countries is relatively small and many parts of their islands are vulnerable to the recent climate changes, the governments of these countries understand that internal migration is not a sustainable solution. In such cases, these countries attempt to create routes to enable people in the areas affected by higher tides to move to a foreign country with lower vulnerabilities. While Australia and New Zealand have been considered as two major destinations, some Pacific Islands also explore the possibility of sending people to other island countries in the same region.

Many people who have moved to overseas countries due to climate change issues have suffered from losing their self-dignity and being disconnected from their home communities. The migrants face various challenges such as mobilizing funding to survive in a foreign country, getting the approval

for immigration, settling into a new society, and securing income sources with their limited language proficiency and cultural familiarity. This impact became more salient in the cases where the migrants had not had previous experience of visiting foreign countries, and had conservatively preserved their own traditions.

4. Conclusions

Thus far, this article has reviewed four types of challenges that many community members in the Pacific Islands are facing due to sea level rise. In some, (1) the submersion of land causes the loss of sacred land that has cultural significance to community members; (2) people who are forced to migrate to new host societies often need to compromise their cultural and religious practices; (3) they also face many social issues relevant to 'urbanisation' partly caused by the process with insufficient coordination, and (4) some community members need to move to an overseas country, which make them lose their self-dignity and connection with home communities. These findings confirm that the challenges that climate change generates are not only about security, economy and public health, but also about people's identity, cultural practices and mental health. Based on this finding, as the next step, this project will conduct a series of qualitative interviews with community members as well as multiple visits to their communities for observation, in order to confirm and examine these social issues.

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Profile

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