Addressing the challenges of climate-induced migration and presenting future adaptation strategies to enable stronger cooperation between Australia and its Pacific neighbours

Author: Ana Colling
6 July 2018

Abstract

This paper will analyse the role of industrialised countries, specifically Australia and New Zealand and their efforts and policies in adhering to the vulnerability of Pacific islands and future climate induced migration. It is important to acknowledge that some of the consequences brought on by climate change are irreversible and therefore adaption is critical. This paper provides a summary of literature of the current migration policies and future strategies for the benefit of both receiving, transit and origin countries. Further, Richards and Bradshaw (2017, p. 11) warn vulnerable populations are the most susceptible to the impacts of fossil fuel industries and unsustainable lifestyles led by developed countries. Therefore Pacific leaders believe industrialised countries are responsible in their role for the future survival of the Pacific as a whole. Despite this responsibility much of the literature exposes Australia’s emission targets proposed under the Paris Agreement as insufficient and far from being achieved.

DOI: 10.25916/5b3ec1effe72a

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this paper are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect the view of APO.

Copyright/Creative commons license: Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 3.0 (CC BY-NC 3.0 AU)
Introduction

Climate change is not only the central challenge of the 21st century, but its effects are disproportionate and exacerbate global inequalities. Richard and Bradshaw (2017, p. 12) indicate that in 2016 weather-related disasters were more than three times accountable for newly displaced people than factors related to conflict and violence. Additionally, Richards and Bradshaw (2017, p. 6) cite an Oxfam study exposed that on average, people in low and lower-middle-income countries are five times more susceptible to displacement from sudden-onset extreme weather disasters than people in high-income countries. Due to the fact underdeveloped countries lack the necessary resources to respond to these new challenges, “Those least responsible for climate change are bearing the brunt of its impact” (Richards & Bradshaw 2017, p. 3). Industrial nations are the largest polluters of greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) that are ultimately posing an existential threat to the human rights and sovereignty of individuals who inhabit the world’s island nations. Furthermore, (Bradshaw 2015, p. 16) reveals that Pacific Island countries and territories emissions account for merely 0.03% of global GHG emissions. As Khoday and Knox (2017) reinforce, their future now rests on the international community to take climate action. In turn, Jillian and Jillian (2016, p. 54) stress that due to geographical proximity, colonial legacies and existing social networks, both Australia and New Zealand are leading destination points for many Pacific migrants.

Environmental Refugees vs. Traditional refugees

Jillian and Jillian (2016, p. 54) affirm that the onset of climate-induced migration, is correlated with greater frequency of natural disasters, rising sea levels and ocean acidification alongside depletion of natural resources, including access to fresh water. All these factors serve as a direct threat to human security and reinforce pre-existing vulnerabilities of many Pacific islanders. Furthermore, currently there is no legal definition of people displaced by climate change, as they are not formally recognised under the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention. Climate-affected people are not guaranteed the same protection, rights and safety as refugees and find themselves in a legal void. Despite significant differences between climate-displaced people and ‘refugees’, often many of their needs are of similar nature and involve loss of households, separation from relatives or in need of medical assistance. Richards and Bradshaw (2017, p. 35) stress that protection is still a priority and necessity, irrespective of whether they have been displaced due to armed conflict, persecution, natural disasters or climate change. Particularly the prevailing conditions including a young demographic, low skilled profiles and the remoteness these populations face, leaves them susceptible of attaining successful migration channels. A positive response to the limited migration options for Pacific Islands and climate change adaptation is the idea of voluntary migration. However, voluntary migration is only an option when a person feels they have a choice between staying and leaving according to their needs. Given the complex circumstances, climate change is one of many variables and therefore makes it difficult to measure the impact climate change alone would have on such decision-making. One approach is to measure the inclination to migrate based on factors such as education, employment, climate change and the capacity determined by financial status, health and ability of visa attainment. Jillian and Jillian (2016, p. 56) argue that in most cases migrants will have the interest to migrate abroad but will lack the ability to make this a reality.

International actions to mitigate climate change were established at the Paris Agreement in 2015. Power (2017) asserts goals were set to limit global temperature rise to well below 2
degrees above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit temperature rise to only 1.5 degrees. Unlike previous global efforts, the Paris Agreement provides flexibility, allowing countries to propose their own emission reduction targets. Nonetheless this comes with its own set of challenges, as many countries, including Australia have not set adequate reduction goals to meet the desired target. “By one estimate, in the long-term, sea-level rise resulting from 2 degrees of warming could submerge land that is currently home to 280 million people globally” (Richards & Bradshaw 2017, p. 4). Khoday and Knox (2017) assert these goals were further reinforced at the Bonn Agreements COP23 in 2017 that acknowledged the threat climate change poses on basic human rights, being the first global environmental treaty to do so.

Pacific Context

Richards and Bradshaw (2017, p. 13) emphasise that for Pacific nations their economies, culture, identity and livelihoods are inextricably tied to the ocean. Therefore communities and government officials view displacement and migration as an option of last resort and rather focus on strategies of climate adaption in order to remain on the islands. Many Pacific Island countries that are acutely vulnerable to climate change are taking actions, Richards and Bradshaw (2017, p. 15) affirm through programs such as the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific. The framework focuses on the need for climate change adaptation and disaster risk management for the future sustainability of these regions, yet is dependent on adequate and accessible funding from the international community. Migration from the pacific abroad is not a new phenomenon; for generations Pacific islanders have migrated for several reasons including economic and educational prosperities. Yet, Jillian and Jillian (2016, p. 57) stress that the major driver for future migration will be the severity of environmental change and the resulting limited resources brought upon by climate change. Internal migration is a limited option particularly for the growing youth demographic and consequently future climate induced migrants are less likely to be skilled or trained and therefore less desired by receiving countries. Migrants in this sense lack choice in regards to the willingness of destination countries to provide skill development beneficial to their employment needs. It is therefore important that Australia takes a leading role in providing greater opportunities for skills development in order to form a circular migration scheme.

Case Studies

Some of the most climate prone island nations include Tuvalu and Kiribati. Noack (2014) affirms these countries lie merely two meters above sea level and could be completely submerged within the next 30 to 50 years. Kiribati straddles the equator and consequently its rate of sea-level rise is double the global average. Richards and Bradshaw (2017, p. 14) stress these atoll nations face an existential crisis from sea-level rise, increased wave heights and higher storm surges that already inundate the land from which communities depend on for their food, and contaminate groundwater on which people depend for fresh water. Damage to the marine ecosystems is critical as Pacific Islanders rely on a local subsistence economy. Half of the populations of Kiribati and Tuvalu live on the atolls of Tarawara and Funafuti respectively, characterised by overcrowded urban areas on narrow stripes of coral with limited access to water and land to grow food on.

Currently people born in Kiribati and Tuvalu make up a mere 1% of Pacific-born migrants living in OECD countries. More effective migration programs from Tuvalu could lead to a
positive development strategy and reduce climate change vulnerability. Often, smaller islands can see the benefits at a quicker rate, a simple increase from 100 people per year to 250 by 2030 would decrease population growth for a nation vulnerable to climate change. In contrast, Kiribati faces a number of obstacles including a high-density urban population that accounts for roughly 41% of the total population of 116,398 in 2017, as well as a rapidly depleting urban environment, alongside rapid population growth and limited overseas diaspora. Due to low migration access, Jillian and Jillian (2016, P. 61) assert the level of net out-migration in Kiribati would have to dramatically increase from the current 100 people per year to 5000 people per year by 2030. Increasing migration out-flows would stabilise population growth, alleviating pressure on scarce resources, allowing a smaller population to remain there for longer (Koser 2012, p. 6; Curtain, Dornan, Doyle and Howes 2016, p. 32).

Due to the inevitable impacts of climate change alongside lack of finance and support for adaptation, former Kiribati President Anote Tong established a policy known as ‘Migration with Dignity’ to ensure greater opportunities for both seasonal and permanent migration schemes. Richards and Bradshaw (2017 p. 16) argue the importance of encouraging the development of expatriate communities abroad, making migration a more attractive option for those with strong ties to Kiribati and ensuring those who are forced to migrate can do so safely and with pride. Both Kiribati and Tuvalu Presidents endorse a slow out-flow migration scheme achieved through a voluntary migration approach, in order to lessen the perception of their peoples as “refugees fleeing a hopeless economic and environmental situation” (Curtain, Dornan, Doyle and Howes 2016, p. 31).

Australian and New Zealand Migration Policies

Australia is expected to be one of the first industrialised nations directly impacted by environmental migration as a consequence of its proximity to the Pacific Island region. Therefore Australia plays a vital role in ensuring viable solutions, with a focus on “adaptation in origin countries and capacity building in transit countries, as well as developing national legislation on environmental migrants” (Koser 2017, p. 12). It is in Australia’s national interest to manage future migration, although Koser (2012, p. 6) fears a lack of adequate policies and measures to counter for environmental migration could see a surge in irregular migration.

Previous efforts in addressing environmental migrants date back to 2007. Jillian and Jillian (2016, p. 59) acknowledge the Australian Greens Party proposed the Climate Refugees Amendment Bill allowing a new visa category to formally recognise climate refugees. This Bill was vetoed by major parties on the ground that it lacked sufficient criteria and excluded other countries who may be experiencing similar environmental challenges. However, Koser (2012, p. 7) reaffirms there is a deeper understanding and clear evidence of the relationship between environmental change and migration than in previous years, thus policies and legislation regarding climate induced migrants should be reconsidered. Berkelmans and Pryke (2016, p. 12) argue that Australia has benefitted from absorbing large numbers of migrants in the past, in particular the post-war migration boom. Despite their unskilled status in most cases, those migrants contributed strongly to Australia’s population and economic growth from 8 to 10 million between 1950-1960. There is no question that Australia could increase migrant numbers, Sherrel and Mares (2016) argue further that in 1980-81 when Australia’s population was just under 15 million people 22,545 humanitarian migrants were resettled. If the same refugee ratio was maintained today, Australia’s annual intake would rise by 75%, under Malcolm Turnbull proposed 19,000 at the refugee summit in New York.
Australia’s Skilled Migration Programme passively excludes many people living in the Pacific, due, among other reasons, to the high eligibility requirements. In contrast New Zealand’s Pacific migration scheme has no minimum skills threshold. A total of nine Pacific Island countries accounted for less than one per cent of all permanent visas granted in Australia in 2013. The Seasonal Worker Programme has a core focus on economic development in the Pacific, by providing access to work opportunities in the Australian market labour. Curtain, Dornan, Doyle and Howes (2016, p. 13) point out Australia has consistently lagged behind New Zealand’s Recognised Seasonal Employer that has continuously allocated 95-100% of its cap with mainly Pacific islanders. For example, in 2013-2014, New Zealand granted over 7,000 visas, compared to Australia’s 2,000 visas. Additionally, New Zealand offers two permanent migration visa lotteries, the Samoa Quota (SQ) specifically for Samoan citizens and the Pacific Access Category (PAC) accessible to citizens of Fiji, Tonga, Kiribati and Tuvalu. The success of the PAC is recognised on its ability to prevent ‘cherry picking’ of migrants based on their qualifications, Curtain, Dornan, Doyle and Howes (2016, p. 26) affirm a total of 1,750 places are allocated whereby applicants must be enlisted in a job offer that meets the minimum wage income, mitigating the possibility of a brain drain affect from small countries.

Despite Australia and New Zealand ranking close to the highest migrant share of all 36 OECD countries in 2013, with a total 28% of the resident population being born overseas, it continues to run discriminatory migration programs. Curtain, Dornan, Doyle and Howes (2016, p. 12) explain the real constraint in Australia is an insufficient labour shortage, as backpackers and illegal workers in the Agriculture sector fill most positions. From this perspective, “it is unfortunate that a scheme that benefits the citizens of poor countries is undermined by one that benefits mostly the citizens of the rich” (Curtain, Dornan, Doyle & Howes 2016, p. 14). Further, Curtain, Dornan, Doyle and Howes (2016, p. 11) assert in 2013-2014 an overwhelming 95% of backpackers came from OECD countries, where their numbers are not capped, while those for non-OECD countries are capped. “This bias denies Pacific migrants access to a migration pathway that could result in permanent residence of a temporary skilled working visa” (Curtain, Dornan, Doyle & Howes 2016, p. 15).

Migration Adaptation and Improvements

Both the Skilled Migration Program and Seasonal Worker Program are criticised by Jillian and Jillian (2016, p. 61) for their failure to prioritise vulnerable populations or to improve climate change adaptation. The Pacific Microstates-Northern Australia Work Pilot is a new semi-skilled visa established in Australia in 2015. Curtain, Dornan, Doyle and Howes (2016, p. 31) affirm it allocates 250 places for Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu populations to work in Australia for up to two years. The nations that are most vulnerable to climate change have the lowest access to international migration. Since climate-induced migration is likely to follow existing migration networks, Koser (2012, p. 5) warns Australia must be prepared for larger migration numbers from Pacific countries. As those Pacific migrants already settled in destination countries, such as Australia and New Zealand will influence future destination of migrants. Koser (2012, p. 5) argues young adults tend to be the most mobile age group and are likely to be another incentive for a growth in migration levels to Australia, due to the large young demographic of the Pacific population. One of the many benefits of supporting permanent migration schemes for Pacific Islanders in Australia and New Zealand include the potential to form diasporas for later generations of migrants.
Additionally, long-term strategies include enhancing existing labour migration programs as a means to extend access to people predominantly affected by environmental change, in turn dismisses any major legislation changes or additional costs. Ultimately increasing opportunities under Australia’s current Seasonal Worker Program available to many Pacific islands is likely to be accepted by the Australian public and “provides migration-based solutions for refugee-like situations” (Koser 2017, p. 13). Doherty and Roy (2017) confirm a shift from conventional thinking towards an open-access migration is suggested by various Australian think tanks as a more effective response than providing aid to counter for climate-threats in the Pacific. Curtain, Dornan, Doyle and Howes (2016, p. 31) assert the limited labour mobility opportunities given to Tuvalu and Kiribati means these countries are in desperate search of greater access to both temporary and long-term employment overseas.

Curtain, Dornan, Doyle and Howes (2016, p. 32) cite a study conducted by United Nations University (UNU), that states 77% of i-Kiribati and 79% of Tuvaluan households believe migration will be a necessary response to rapid sea-level rise, yet a mere 26% of households across both countries claimed they had the financial means required to migrate. Based on these statistics, Australia and New Zealand would see a mere 0.6% increase in their annual migrant inflow – equivalent to Samoa’s annual quota migration to New Zealand. In fact, Samoa had the same population (113,000) in 1962 as Kiribati does now, this helps put figures into perspective and illustrate the achievability of such influx numbers. The small size of Pacific nations reassures the possibility of such proposals being successfully implemented.

Expanding migration opportunities for Pacific Islanders to permanently engage in Australia’s market under an uncapped model would allow Pacific citizens to earn a higher income and improve their living standards. Although it would be difficult to predict how many Pacific Islanders would migrate under an uncapped migration scheme, Berkelmans and Pryke (2016, p. 9) state that the necessary financial means to relocate themselves and their families would still be required. As well as obstacles such as health and character checks associated with gaining a visa would be compulsory. By encouraging a new approach for Pacific labour mobility, Australia could fill its future labour-shortages in sectors including aged-care, agriculture and tourism suited to the skills of Pacific Islanders.

Capacity building in origin and transit countries

The Australian Defence Force has provisions to undergo reforms relevant to climate change induced threats, argued by Craggs (2018, p. 4) in order to effectively engage in Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief programs to assist displaced persons. These reforms include the provision of food and water, medical support, crowd control and supporting local government officials and are highly influenced by the regional stability in countries and island states of the Pacific.

Providing adequate protection in origin countries decreases the pressure to move abroad yet should not jeopardise the security, protection or freedom of movement of those displaced. In turn, capacity building must be implemented alongside a number of other policy adaptations, such as information campaigns and training on the rights of those internally displaced. Despite the challenge of envisioning long-term challenges from environmental migration, creating awareness in both private and public sectors, will alert the respective authorities of their roles and responsibilities in adhering to capacity building efforts.
Australian funding is directed to several sectors in the Pacific including agriculture, fisheries, food security and education. Koser (2012, p. 9) confirms AusAID funds Adaptation to the Climate Change Initiative through the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Additionally, Bradshaw (2015, p. 11) states Australia contributed approximately AUD$150m to the Pacific between 2010-2013 towards assisting climate change adaptation and resilience building. Nonetheless, data suggests following 2013 Australia’s overall support has dramatically decreased.

Geostrategic Competition threatens Australia’s ties with the Pacific

Australia is the largest donor in the Pacific region and benefits from a strong and developing Pacific economy, Colton (2018, p. 6) ensures is why the Pacific Islands is accountable for the largest part of Australia’s aid budget. Furthermore, Australia’s important maritime trade routes means any instability in the Pacific region could affect maritime security, posing additional risks and costs to what accounts for roughly 6% of Australia’s GDP.

Rising Chinese geostrategic competition in the Pacific, particularly its growing economic activities is argued by Colton (2018, p. 10) to simultaneously increase the overall influence China has over the Pacific. Continuous fund through concessional loans between 2006 and 2016 is stressed by Colton (2018, p. 10) to have amounted to over 75% of China’s funding to the Pacific, and resulted in several Pacific countries owing large debts to China. As a result, China has gained significant control over the Pacific nations who may become vulnerable to convert Chinese loans into equity in infrastructure.

In addition to heavy debts, Colton (2018, p. 11) affirms a common practice is sending Chinese workers to infrastructure project sites in the Pacific, granting China all the profits as well as excluding Pacific Islanders from employment opportunities. Furthermore there is a strong correlation with the influx of Chinese workers and an increase in the price of goods and commodities that disrupts the economy of indigenous locals. Nonetheless, the growing ethnic Chinese diaspora across all pacific nations has resulted in Pacific islanders having far more regular contact with Chinese nationals than with Australians or New Zealanders. Moreover, “the protection of overseas Chinese nationals has been included as a formal People’s Liberation Army mission in China’s defence white papers since 2012” (Colton 2018, p. 12).

Colton (2018, p. 16) argues a response to these challenges is to establish a Pacific Maritime Coordination Centre (PMCC) that would provide the infrastructure to enhance maritime security within the Pacific, targeting maritime trade routes, transnational crime routes and regional fisheries. The PMCC could be incorporated within an expanded version of the Pacific Maritime Security Program (PMSP) that focuses only on traditional areas of interest and is controlled by former colonial powers Australia, New Zealand, United States and France.

Another policy recommendation addressed by Colton (2018, p. 17) is to establish an annual multi-agency Intelligence Officers’ course run by the Australian Defence Force School of Intelligence. This would provide Pacific islanders with the adequate knowledge to collect and analysis information relevant to their region, such as illegal fishing and humanitarian relief environmental assessments. In turn, these policies would build awareness and greater resilience in the region than currently exists. The aim is to provide policy recommendations
that forge stronger ties between Australia and the Pacific, and allow effective response to the security challenges, catalysed by a growing geostrategic competition in the region.

**Australia and Climate Change mitigation**

**Steffen, Alexander and Rice** (2017, p. 5) stress ongoing challenges are posed by Australia’s fossil fuel industry that support the development of new coalmines and their desirability to maintain market power. Despite these setbacks, Australia’s appetite for new fossil fuel projects are in decline, as these industries do not offer the same economic benefits as new renewable technologies. **Stock, Stock, Bourne, and Brailsford** (2018, p. 11) state Australia’s ageing, inefficient coal and gas power plants are responsible for over a third of greenhouse gas pollution in Australia. **Stock, Stock, Bourne, and Brailsford** (2018, p. 30) stress the onset of extreme weather events sparked by climate change interrupts the reliability of many coal power plants that are not only costly to maintain but are subject to premature failure and heighten the risk of blackouts.

**Power** (2017) argues Australia has announced a 26-28% GHG emission reduction target below 2005 levels by 2030, falling shortly below New Zealand’s 30% reduction target. However, **Bradshaw** (2015, p. 19) stresses this claim dismisses the fact that Australia has the highest per capita emissions in the developed world, and will continue to have the highest per capita emissions under its proposed 2030 targets. Australia is also the most carbon intensive economy in contrast to all other industrialised nations. **Stock, Stock, Bourne, and Brailsford** (2018, p. 4) argue that despite no credible, long-term national policy to reduce GHG emissions from the Federal Government, majority of states and territories in the National Electricity Market, have adopted policies broadly in line with a goal of a 50% renewable energy by 2030 and committed to zero emissions targets in the electricity sector well before 2050.

Unfortunately, **Steffen, Alexander and Rice** (2017, p. 26) assert that based on Australian Government projections and independent analyses, Australia is not on track to meet this weak target, rather Australia’s emissions continue to rise, with a 1.4% emissions increase recorded in 2016. According to **Burk, Marten, Bals and Hohne** (2018, p. 7) under the climate change performance index that measures GHG emissions, energy use, climate policy and levels of renewable energy, Australia is among the very low-performing countries, ranked 57th out of 60 countries. In order to meet the adequate aims laid out at the Paris Agreement to maintain the global temperature increase below 2 degrees, **Bradshaw** (2015, p. 10) outlines Oxfam has recommended that Australia aim to reduce its domestic emissions by at least 45% below 2005 levels by 2025, 65% below 2005 levels by 2030, and achieve zero emissions well before mid-century.

**Wahlquist** (2018) states Australia’s toxic politics is preventing decarbonisation to take effect and compares United Kingdom’s commitment to climate reduction targets despite Brexit and immigration challenges. Australia has international obligations to pursue positive actions to reduce carbon pollutions and requires a bipartisan approach on energy and climate change policies. Australia has the opportunity to radically cut GHG emissions from its largest polluter- the electricity sector, and transition to clean renewable energy, where “storage technologies are proven, commercially viable and rapidly deployable at scale” (**Stock, Stock, Bourne & Brailsford** 2018, p. 11). If such reduction aims by which Pacific islands are rightly demanding are ignored, both the Australian and New Zealand governments are ultimately
endangering the future of the Pacific, and “threatening the very survival of the Pacific nations” (Bradshaw 2015, p. 10).

Conclusion

Climate Change and the challenges it creates for future environmental migration from the Pacific not only directly affects Australia but also prompt a re-evaluation of the current migration policies as well as its role as one of the highest per capita contributors to GHG emissions. Climate change is posing an existential threat to atoll countries such as Kiribati and Tuvalu, yet can be addressed through suitable reduction targets and a swift transition to renewable energy. Greater opportunities to open-access and uncapped migration schemes would benefit climate-induced migration that is targeting the most vulnerable populations. To ensure a future where collaboration between Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands is guaranteed, progressive policy adaptations and deeper understanding of the current detrimental impacts of climate change is necessary for the benefit of all receiving, transit and origin countries.

Ana Colling is a Bachelor of Arts (International Studies) student at Swinburne University of Technology and completed this paper during an internship at APO.

100595496@student.swin.edu.au
References:


http://apo.org.au/node/118991


http://apo.org.au/node/68386

