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'We do not want to leave our land': Pacific ambassadors at the United Nations resist the category of 'climate refugees'

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ABSTRACT

The issue of the social geographical dimensions of climate change is timely and important. This paper sets out to explore one example of this: how people living in the Pacific who are most at risk of being made landless by climate change are portrayed in policy discourse, and how high-level international representatives of Pacific nations have responded to these portrayals. At the heart of this is contention over the portrayal of Pacific Island peoples as 'climate refugees'. This paper analyses a number of documents since the 1980s, largely from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that deploy the identity construct of 'climate refugees'. Fieldwork undertaken at the United Nations in New York in 2004 also enabled seven interviews with national ambassadors representing Pacific small island states. Interviews revealed how Pacific ambassadors have responded to the category of 'climate refugees', and positioned themselves in the discursive field surrounding the climate change debate. A poststructuralist framework, drawing on Foucault's ideas of discourse and subject categories provided a means to critically scrutinise and better understand how people from Pacific countries are imagined in the wider, global geopolitical arena, but crucially, how leaders from these nations also construct themselves in relation to climate change and its associated impacts.

1. Introduction

Climate change is a particularly heightened issue for small island states – those, low-lying coastal islands defined by the United Nations as sharing similar sustainable development challenges such as small population, remoteness and susceptibility to natural disasters (United Nations, 2007). Rising global surface temperatures are predicted to cause changes in atmospheric circulation, create a more active hydrological cycle, and increase the water holding capacity throughout the atmosphere (Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2000; Claussen, 2001; Houghton et al., 2001; McCarthy et al., 2001; Garnaut, 2008). The low-lying island states of the Pacific are particularly vulnerable as their freshwater reserves are limited to a shallow subsurface lens, which makes them susceptible to depletion in drought but also contamination from salt water. Climate change is predicted to threaten the long-term capacity for people to continue living in the majority of low-lying Polynesian and Micronesian countries such as Tuvalu and Kiribati, especially given that many of them are ostensibly atolls rarely exceeding two meters above sea level (Edwards, 1999; Rahman, 1999; Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2000; Barnett and Adger, 2003).[1] Bound up in discussions about these impacts of climate change has been a discussion of 'climate refugees' – those forced from their homeland because of climate change. Pacific islands loom large in such discussions.

While this paper is not overtly concerned with the 'facts and figures' of climate change science, it is interested in how different individuals and organisations uptake and translate information about climate change into their own thinking. As climate change 'talk' further infuses mainstream politics and media coverage, it remains pertinent to cast critical attention to the manner in which climate change is portrayed and translated for mass consumption (Hulme, 2008). Indeed, as an environmental phenomenon escalating to 'crisis' status in the public realm, accompanying climate change has been a series of new discursive categories and labels

[1] While this paper broadly refers to the impacts of climate change in the Pacific, not all countries of the Pacific are vulnerable to these impacts. There are a number of countries in the Pacific that have high islands and large freshwater supplies, particularly Melanesian states such as Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. However, there is broad consensus within the literature that the potential impacts of climate change (such as sea level rise and wave damage) are commonly experienced throughout the region (Edwards, 1999; Rahman, 1999; Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2000; Barnett and Adger, 2003).

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into which processes, people, processes and things are put: 'polluter', 'problem', 'adaptation', 'climate friendly', 'mitigation', 'clean coal' and 'solutions' are just some examples (Head, forthcoming). Some of these categories have quickly come to assume a 'common sense' or 'naturalised' meaning. Yet, as Castree (2002), Pedynowski (2003), Anderson (2007) and others have argued, following on from Foucault and Latour, categories of public debate, environmental science or geographical analysis do not exist a priori as separate, stable, natural compartments of reality; rather, categories are constituted discursively and permeate via public debate, policy discourse, media coverage and everyday conversation (McGregor, 2004; Boykoff, 2008). Understanding how these categories come to be – and what they mean culturally and politically – is thus important, not just for the 'truth-claims' they may support (or alternative truths they shroud from view, particularly in the case of 'green-washing'). Rather, understanding the etymology and affect of discursive categories matters because they generate their own altered realities, setting the terms of debates, changing political landscapes and shifting power relationships between people, institutions and non-human entities (Eden, 1998; Dovers, forthcoming).

For an issue like climate change – where the entanglements between the 'human' and 'nature' appear to be at the very core of the 'problem' in the first place (Castree and Head, 2008; Lein, 2009) – this kind of critical attention appears doubly-warranted. As Hulme (2008, p. 5) powerfully put it:

> Climate change – understood simultaneously as physical transformation and cultural object, as a mutating hybrid entity in which the strained lines between the natural and the cultural are dissolving – needs a new examination... What does climate mean to different people and to diverse cultures? Which of these meanings are threatened by climate change and which can co-evolve with a changing climate? ...What language is used to portray climate risks? Who gains from driving forward ideas of global climate governance? And, in the end, what is our vision of the global future?

In this paper, we seek to answer some of these questions, through our own specific example, by exploring one category produced through climate change 'talk': the category of 'climate refugees'. It is a category that is increasingly applied in a naturalised, unproblematised way to entire nationalities of people in the Pacific region, and for this reason above any other we consider the category of 'climate refugees' worthy of critical analysis. In doing so, we address issues of the language used to depict climate change (and people affected by it), and situate climate change in a geopolitical context of international relations and diplomacy, in which different institutions drive certain agendas and seek to gain particular advantages.

Critical to the very stability of the category 'climate refugees' is a set of assumptions about 'future geographies' (Kitchin and Kneale, 2001), where scenarios are described that entail sea level rise, loss of low-lying Pacific island homelands and resulting mass population movements. In this paper, we do not automatically accept these assumptions about the future as 'true' (nor do we claim they are false either). Rather, we wish to explore how, based on diverging 'visions for the global future', as Hulme (2008) put it, the category of 'climate refugees' comes into existence, is legitimised, or is resisted. 'Climate refugees' is a particular discursive category into which certain groups of people have increasingly been placed, as the climate change debate has escalated. In this paper, we then ask how the category of 'climate refugees' came to be, and following on from this, how leaders representing those people responded to such categorisations. We seek not to identify an accepted definition of 'climate refugees', nor in the same vein prove or disprove whether any group of people constitute 'climate refugees'. Rather we set out to explore how this category came to be, whether well-established or not, and to begin a process of untangling the multiple threads of geopolitical meaning about 'the future' associated with it.

The paper begins by surveying and analysing a number of documents that construct people from Pacific small island states as potential 'climate refugees'. These documents were collected from public and restricted archives at the United Nations in New York, as well as in Geneva and Bangkok, during fieldwork for a PhD in 2004. Documents were sourced from United Nations and NGO records, and proceedings from United Nations symposia and conferences. The time-span for intensive archival searching was 1970 through to 2004 (the time of the primary data collection itself).[2] 1970 provided an appropriate date for starting the detailed analysis of this genealogy, as it coincided with the first wave of contemporary mainstream environmentalism (Young, 1991). After this date, documents were not randomly chosen but selected because they proved to be key influential policy texts on 'climate refugees'. As detailed below, many NGOs and news media have tended to proclaim that people in Pacific small island states need to be internationally protected as the world's first 'climate refugees'. While this subject category may have been produced by well-meaning NGOs, such a construct implies that for many Pacific states the only viable response to the impacts of climate change is relocation – a 'global vision for the future' (Hulme, 2008) in which whole countries will inevitably disappear through catastrophic environmental change.

Public opinion might well increasingly support this view of a vulnerable future for Pacific islands in which their inhabitants will become 'climate refugees'. However, we hope here to problematise the language and geopolitical meaning of such arguments. We contrast discourses contributing to the creation of the 'climate refugee' category, with texts of interviews with Pacific small island state ambassadors – again, conducted in 2004 at the United Nations building in New York. From these interviews, the positions of those representing Pacific small island states at the United Nations is revealed in relation to the category assumed for them of 'climate refugees' (and they are positions that have remained remarkably consistent since). We explore how Pacific ambassadors responded to the category of 'climate refugees', assessed the existing geopolitical discursive field, and rearticulated their own identities as sovereign peoples with innate rights to territory. Our findings were somewhat contrary to our initial expectations. We elaborate here how the subject category of 'climate refugees' was strongly resisted by Pacific ambassadors to the United Nations – even when this position brought with it the risk of alienating sympathetic activists and NGOs (who held similarly critical views about the contribution of the industrial West to climate change), and risked limiting possible future legal recognition of their human rights. It is a case that highlights the fluidity of meanings surrounding climate change categories – and the perils of constructing political arguments based on discourses of victimhood.

[2] Since the time of fieldwork for the PhD upon which this paper is based, there has been a significant increase in public debate on climate change, catalysed by the worldwide success of Al Gore's documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, successive rounds of global climate change talks, and further scientific documentation of climatic/geophysical processes such as the rapid melting of polar ice fields. Nonetheless, discourses of 'climate refugees' as a subject category and the positions taken by Pacific ambassadors in respect to this category have remained remarkably consistent from before 2004. For example, recent interviews held in Tuvalu with former United Nations ambassadors reveals that the position on 'climate refugees' is unwavering and consistent with the positions presented here. It is our contention that data used in this paper – albeit worthy of updating through successive rounds of fieldwork in coming years – remains as pertinent as when captured in 2004.

2. Research framework and approach

Poststructuralism provides a framework for investigating the processes and conditions by which humans are categorised as certain types of subjects. Foucault's genealogical method is a process of revealing the historical relationship between power, knowledge and truth as the basis for these constructions (Foucault, 1987). Foucault developed the idea that this relationship is one that is interconnected through discourses and language (Foucault, 1977). Language assists us in shaping our experiences, while discourses are what we use to describe the individual acts of language (Danaher et al., 2000). Foucault considered discourses within a theoretically-informed framework that examined how knowledge is produced through language and meanings and how this then influences our practices (Foucault, 1970, 1997).

Foucault spent much time considering how human subjects are made and can make themselves (McHoul and Grace, 1998). In his assessment of how different kinds of subjects are created, Foucault routinely examined the historical conditions and events that created varying subjects to begin with (Foucault, 1997). This paper, by examining historical discourses of 'climate refugees', seeks to identify how 'climate refugees' have been produced as a category. Foucault was also interested in how subjects make themselves (Foucault, 1997), and as such raised questions about what one hoped to achieve from presenting themselves as a certain kind of subject or identity. With particular relevance to this research, Furedi (2007a, b) explored how people perceive themselves in relation to discourses of vulnerability. Furedi (2007a, p. 482) argued that 'disasters are interpreted through a system of meaning provided by culture'. This in turn resulted in changing conceptualisations of adversity, with a focus now on vulnerability compared to fifty years ago, when the focus centered on resilience (Furedi, 2007a, b). Echoing Furedi's approach, this paper moves forward from an analysis of how 'climate refugees' have been constructed in global geopolitics, to how Pacific ambassadors situate themselves in relation to the category of 'climate refugees'. Whereas in international affairs vulnerability has replaced resilience as the naturalised focus of attention – a trend reflected here in the construction by international agencies of Pacific Islanders as vulnerable victims, as 'climate refugees' in waiting – we explored in interviews whether and how Pacific ambassadors asserted alternative visions of the future based on active, even defiant self-identities.

In the fieldwork context, the specific methods used were semi-structured interviews, the collection of NGO documents and media articles, and the subsequent critical scrutiny of these texts. Over a thousand public and restricted United Nations and NGO documents on climate change, migration and 'environmental refugees' were sifted-through in New York, Geneva and Bangkok. Access was gained through one author taking an opportunity to work as intern with an NGO (the Global Policy Forum) that has United Nations consultative status in New York. This enabled the researcher to access the United Nations building, libraries and archives with an identity pass, and approach diplomats officially for interview. From the thousand-plus articles sifted at this time, the smaller sample that dealt explicitly with 'climate refugees' have been extracted for closer discussion in this paper.

A media search was also conducted to investigate the response of international news agencies to intermittent international discussions about 'climate refugees', predominately stemming from NGOs. This was conducted via the Factiva database, which allows searches of 473 news publications on any given topic – in this case using the keyword 'climate refugees'. While using only one database, Factiva, as a search engine to trace news media coverage on the term 'climate refugees' might not be comprehensive, decisions had to be made about how to contain the scope of media analysis: we could not for practical reasons read thirty years of every major world newspaper in order to find articles about 'climate refugees'. It would be naive to presume that other articles did not exist beyond those traceable in Factiva. However, articles that were found through Factiva searches have adequately pieced together how the media responded to the category of 'climate refugees' and reproduced it for mass consumption. As a result, a number of media documents form part of the analysis below.

Interning with the Global Policy Forum also allowed one of the authors to access a number of high-level United Nations events, meetings and commissions. Attendance at these events during a six-month period allowed the researcher to identify and approach key interviewees on the topic of climate-induced refugee movements. This mode of research was deemed most appropriate given that interviewing has the ability to capture a diverse range of opinions, experiences and motivations (Pile, 1992; Dunn, 2005; Winchester, 2005).

In total, seven ambassadors representing Pacific small island sates at the United Nations were interviewed, as well as the Chair of the Alliance of Small Island States. Interviews were held with representatives from: Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Tuvalu. At the time of fieldwork, both Kiribati and Palau did not have ambassadors at the United Nations headquarters and so it was not possible to interview a representative from these countries. Although Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu had permanent missions at the United Nations headquarters, the ambassadors from these countries declined to be interviewed, stating that other ambassadors might be more appropriate to discuss issues more broadly linked to climate change (indeed, because of size and topography these island states generally consider themselves less 'vulnerable' to the loss of land from sea level rise and storm surges). Interviews were held at the Mission Offices of the seven participating countries in New York from March to May 2004.

The same key interview themes were presented to all seven ambassadors despite there being no rigid format of questions. Themes ranged from exiled populations as a result of climate change to power relations and the capacity of small states to articulate arguments and affect change in multilateral arenas such as the United Nations (see McNamara, 2009). Prior to the start of the interview, participants were asked whether the interview could be recorded, and were made aware that the recorder (and interview) could be paused or stopped at any stage. While recording of the interview did not prove to be problematic for the majority of interviewees, all wished to remain anonymous in future publications. Hence throughout the paper, those interviewed are referred to as 'ambassador a' through to 'ambassador g'.

3. Tracing the development of the category of 'climate refugees'

While the more encompassing term of 'environmental refugees' can be dated back to nuclear testing in the post second world war (see Ogashiwa (1991) for a discussion of how Pacific states were instrumental in the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone signed in 1985), the first document found naming 'climate refugees' was published by the Worldwatch Institute in 1988. This Institute is a Washington-based NGO that continues to conduct research into the interactions between environmental, social and economic issues. Here, the report's author Jodi Jacobson (1988) explained that local disruptions such as avalanches or earthquakes, chemical contamination, land degradation, and climate change and sea level rise all caused refugee movements. However, as Jacobson (1988, p. 29, 7) asserted:

> Among the various environmental problems that cause the displacement of people from their habitats, none rivals the potential effects of sea level rise as a result of human-induced changes in the earth's climate... Now it looks as if rising seas will supplant encroaching deserts and other forms of land degradation as the major threat to habitability in the not-too-distant future. Global warming, primarily the result of fossil fuel use in industrial countries, will hit developing nations the hardest.

Jacobson (1988) provided an early template for a 'global vision for the future' (Hulme, 2008) for 'climate refugees': the environmental and social impacts of climate change and sea level rise would be severe and far-reaching. Of note is how Jacobson (1988) described the impacts of climate change (including re-settlement) as a far greater threat to humans than any other environmental issue.

The Worldwatch Institute placed blame squarely on the intensive consumption of energy by richer, industrialised countries. In this light, Jacobson (1988, p. 37) portrayed 'climate refugees', or those whose habitability was threatened, as helpless victims of external environmental changes that had been initiated by others: 'developed nations, heavily reliant on the burning of fossil fuels over the past century, must assume the primary responsibility for global warming and its consequences'. Jacobson (1988, p. 37) argued that any denial by richer countries that 'consumption patterns and industrial policies' have not 'fouled the planet' is unacceptable. Those responsible must remediate, and those affected – the victims – must be compensated.

Seeking to raise the profile of climate change on the international agenda, the Climate Institute, a Washington-based NGO, commissioned ecologist Norman Myers in 1995 to examine the issue of 'environmental refugees' (with United Nations financial support). Myers (1995) identified land degradation, climate change, natural disasters, environmental accidents, and infrastructural developments as triggers for refugees. In the case of climate change, Myers, like Jacobson, argued that the impacts of climate change and subsequent exodus of people from their homelands was a direct result of increased greenhouse gas emissions by richer countries. Myers (1995) argued that the processes of change were induced through no fault of those affected, but rather the fault of others so excessively dependent on the use of fossil fuels.

In 2001, the Earth Policy Institute (another Washington-based NGO), which works towards developing an environmentally sustainable economy, published a report on displacement caused by the impacts of climate change (Brown, 2001). This report by the President of the Earth Policy Institute begins with the use of sensationalist language to magnetise people's attention to the issue of climate change:

> As sea level has risen, Tuvalu has experienced lowland flooding. Saltwater intrusion is adversely affecting its drinking water and food production. Coastal erosion is eating away at the nine islands that make up the country. Tuvalu is the first country where people are trying to evacuate because of rising seas, but it almost certainly will not be the last. It is seeking a home for 11,000 people, but what about the 311,000 who may be forced to leave the Maldives? Or the millions of others living in low-lying countries who may soon join the flow of climate refugees? Who will accept them?... Where will these climate refugees go? (Brown, 2001).

Brown's (2001, p. 2) vision for the future is one in which entire communities in the Pacific will be forced to relocate due to the 'rising seas', something that 'they have little control [over]'.

This argument has since been contested. Both Barnett (2005) and Connell (2003) have argued that the impacts of climate change are not the sole factors behind population movements in the Pacific. Instead, population mobility in the Pacific is produced by a complex mix of factors, of which climate change is one, but where other factors such as the desire for greater economic security are also influential. Yet, according to Brown (2001), those directly affected by climate change were portrayed as vulnerable, as external victims of a problem to which Pacific islands contributed least. Brown's recommendation was that the United Nations develops a climate-immigration quota system. Such a system would allocate 'climate refugees' among countries according to the size of their population or based on their carbon emissions and thus contribution to climate change, which had in turn caused the fleeing of people from their homelands. This argument has been extended most recently by Biermann and Boas (2008), who argued the case for the development of an international charter, administered and enforced by the United Nations, for the category of 'climate refugees'.

A year later, the London-based climate justice network, Risingtide, published a report on climate change as a trigger for refugees (Risingtide, 2002). In the report, Risingtide (2002, p. 2, 3) argued that some of the world's poorest communities were amongst the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change:

> The fossil fuel industry – coal, oil and gas – is not only the main factor in climate change, but also a prime example of the racism and social injustice of this system in which the poor – both in the North and in the South – suffer the consequences of the lifestyle demanded by the industrialised nations in the West... One-hundred years of Western industrial pollution, carbon emissions and the general abuse and misuse of natural resources play the leading role in the climate changes which create environmental refugees.

Risingtide (2002) were highly critical of the energy industries and policies of richer countries responsible for sea level rise and climate change, which not only produced 'climate refugees' but other inequitable social consequences. Rather than constructing affected peoples as adaptive, or as 'resilient managers of change' (equally subjective constructions which the UNHCR and the Australian and United States governments have adopted in the past – see McNamara (2006)), those at the forefront of the impacts of climate change were construed in this report as helpless and passive – in need of foreign protection and asylum.

In 2003, the New Economics Foundation (the London-based 'think-and-do tank that inspires and demonstrates real economic well-being' (New Economics Foundation, 2008)) produced a pocketbook, titled 'Environmental Refugees: The Case for Recognition' (Conisbee and Simms, 2003). The study focussed on two major refugee triggers – climate change and large-scale infrastructural developments. Conisbee and Simms (2003, p. 25) argued that climate change will displace millions of people in the future as a result of intensive fossil fuel consumption and over-consuming lifestyles, and consequently the international community had failed in its 'duty' to assist 'climate refugees'. According to Conisbee and Simms (2003), richer countries must face up to the real cost of their energy consumption patterns, as failing to take measures to mitigate climate change equates to harmful and intentional behaviour. In this way, 'climate refugees' were represented as victims who will be forced to flee their homelands through no fault of their own, a portrayal again echoing those from Jacobson, Myers, Brown and Risingtide.

Finally, during 2003 and 2004, Friends of the Earth Australia (a federation of independent local groups that work on social equity and environmental sustainability) ran a climate justice campaign that focused on the impacts of climate change, specifically in Pacific countries (Davissen and Long, 2003). In a report by Friends of the Earth Australia, Davissen and Long (2003, p. 7) provided a generalised argument that the 'future of the Pacific Island states seems

bleak', when referring to the low-lying islands of the Pacific most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. In this light, Davissen and Long (2003) referred to 'climate refugees' as vulnerable and weak, implying little future internal capacity and resilience to remain in their homelands. NGOs appear to almost universally portray potential 'climate refugees' in the Pacific as passive victims.

Parallel to this gradual build up of the use of the category of 'climate refugees' among NGOs, was consistent news media reporting on the issue. Over 300 articles were published in various outlets, including: *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*; *Agence France-Presse English*; *Channel News Asia*; *Financial Times*; *Green Left Weekly*; *Los Angeles Time*; *OneWorld US*; *Pacific News Bulletin*; *Radio Netherlands* and *Sydney Morning Herald*. The language used in these articles to describe the situation particularly faced by small island states has been, on the whole, dramatic and sensational.

For instance, Williams (2001) in a Time Magazine article described the severity of the impacts of climate change in Tuvalu. Williams (2001, p. 26) argued that 'no nation is more convinced that it faces imminent catastrophe than Tuvalu'. Using emotive words such as 'catastrophe' not only portrayed the future impacts of climate change as spectacular and severe but also permanent and far-reaching. Williams' description of the situation faced by Tuvaluans conjured up images of Tuvaluans as innocent victims who were being forced to resettle in another country. This mirrored the findings of Farbotko (2004) who traced the constructions of Tuvaluans in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. From this, Farbotko (2004, p. 207) revealed that Tuvalu was always represented as a 'vulnerable island paradise, unfortunate victim-state', with relocation presented as the only response option left to the impacts of climate change.

In other articles, such as one by Agence France-Presse (in English) (2005), the situation faced by Pacific countries was described as one of 'extinction'. In a parallel fashion, an article in *The Times of India* (Raaj and Sachdeva, 2006) referred to the situation we now all face as a result of climate change as an apocalypse. The title of an article found in the *New Zealand Herald* (2005) insensitively (yet dramatically) propositioned Tuvaluans to 'sink or swim'. Moreover, the title of an article in *Smithsonian* (Leslie, 2004) was 'Will Tuvalu disappear beneath the sea? Global warming threatens to swamp a small island nation'. Collectively, these statements contributed to discourses on climate change and the future; they portrayed it as a destructive and threatening process producing a new category of displaced persons – the 'climate refugee' – helpless victims of a provoked and inhospitable nature.

4. Resistance and reassertion: Pacific ambassadors articulate their identity

From the above accounts from NGOs and the news media, the category of 'climate refugees' was overwhelmingly constructed in relation to an apocalyptic vision for the future, in which those affected by climate change will suffer grave environmental injustice, and thus ought to be given protection and options to legally resettle elsewhere. The subtext was that the people of affected Pacific island states are weak, passive victims with little internal resilience to fight for much more than relocation. The geopolitical context was reluctance from the United States, Australia and other governments to accept that climate change was a problem: hence depictions of entire countries disappearing beneath sea level rise performed a particular function, contributing to a counter-discourse problematising inaction by western governments on climate change. However, such arguments also contributed to the creation of subject categories pertaining to whole nations of people – the representatives of whom had different views about vulnerability and identity. From interviews conducted with Pacific ambassadors in 2004, a different set of visions for the future emerged. The dominant view of these ambassadors was that climate change must be curbed to prevent them from having to flee their homelands. Exodus was simply not part of an acceptable future scenario. Interestingly, this position has not deviated in twenty years, from the original positions of leaders of small island states when they first raised the issue of climate change at the multilateral level in 1987 to the time of writing – four years after field work was conducted.

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom of the Republic of the Maldives was the first to highlight, on an international stage, the vulnerability of small island states to the impacts of climate change and sea level rise; see Gayoom (1998c). On October 15, 1987 at the biannual Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Vancouver, Gayoom passionately told his colleagues about the unprecedented flooding and tidal waves that the Maldives had then just suffered (Gayoom, 1998a). Four days after this meeting, Gayoom raised this matter again in an address to the United Nations General Assembly's 42nd Session (Gayoom, 1998d). There was no doubt in President Gayoom's speech that the expected and already-occurring impacts of climate change were unnerving. Two years on, in a keynote address to the Small States Conference on Sea Level Rise, Gayoom (1998b) argued that the people of affected countries wished to remain in their homelands and pleaded with the international community to mobilise attention and resources to assist. Yet most importantly, he urged international leaders to not make decisions for small island states in the fight against climate change:

> We don't want no sea level rise. There must be a way out. Neither the Maldives nor any small island nation wants to drown. That's for sure. Neither do we want our lands eroded, or our economies destroyed. Nor do we want to become environmental refugees either. We want to stand up and fight. All we ask is that the more affluent nations and the international community in general, help us in this fight (Gayoom, 1998b, p. 29).

Since Gayoom's speeches, the sentiments from small island states concerning climate change have remained remarkably consistent with his initial sentiments.

For ambassadors to the United Nations interviewed for this research, their concerns about climate change were articulated as passionately as Gayoom's in the 1980s. This was typified in a response by a Pacific ambassador at the United Nations:

> But our people, we feel sad. I personally feel very, very sad about the situation into which our people and communities have been thrown into and not because of our doing but because of the effects of others. With that said of course we would want to believe that we could still save, not only my country, but the rest of the world because if the problem continues according to the predictions of knowledgeable experts and the findings of the IPCC, everybody who lives in the coastal low-lying areas of the world will feel the bites of what we are going through already now. So, there is a slight call behind our concern that we might be able to work together with the rest of the world to reverse this. This is a big, global challenge... But we have to face it, realistically and co-operatively. Nobody wants to live outside their home and go and settle in another, unless of course you are really deprived of your fundamental rights... I have the feeling that people in all small island countries would want to continue to live peacefully in the islands... We know there is good will out there, what is lacking is political leadership. It is political leadership that really needs to come forward and say 'ok, we can save countries

> like mine; we are committing to taking up the obligations under the Kyoto Protocol or focus on some cleaner energy sources maybe, renewable energy'. Nobody would die from that, it is only a matter of re-allocating and shifting economic focus to other sectors and everybody would benefit (ambassador a).

For this ambassador the urgency of the imminent threat of climate change was real – the possibility of an apocalyptic future was considered. Yet, there was also resistance to the imposition of the category of 'climate refugees'. Instead, as they navigated through the discursive terrain on 'climate refugees', they demanded that such an identity be replaced with an acknowledgement of them as citizens of a sovereign, independent nation, a homeland from which people did not wish to flee by becoming 'climate refugees'. In part, this was a nationalist reaction, a reaffirmation of sovereignty in the face of media and policy discourses produced by outsiders who had suggested that relocation was the only option available.

A key theme from the interviews with Pacific ambassadors was that focussing on migration instead of mitigation was not only defeatist but a globally irresponsible vision for the future. To illustrate:

> All the other Pacific islands, I am sure all the other countries are being affected by climate change. Our position is to address the root cause of climate change and that... has been set in the Kyoto Protocol, a negotiated instrument, international instrument, that would address the environmental issues including climate change. Our position is to support the Kyoto Protocol. But we are now being forced to take adaptation as a means of solving our problems and that to us is not acceptable... As I said our basic decision is that for countries that are contributing to climate change to take their responsibility and act to reduce the effects of their contribution to climate change and that is basically really our decision on that (ambassador b).

This position is not aggressive, but nor is it passive. It is merely clear on the point that sovereignty remains paramount – those most responsible for contributing to climate change must instead work on reducing future impacts. As put concisely by another ambassador: 'and so now the international community must take their part or role with climate change and overall sustainable development' (ambassador f).

Each of the seven Pacific ambassadors at the United Nations interviewed for this research in New York in 2004 had specific stories that dealt with practical challenges of the impacts of climate change (such as seawater intrusion degrading coastal soil fertility, and changes in the frequency of droughts and floods). However, the ambassadors continued to assert that although climate change was an important issue and challenge for the future, it was not cause to assume that mass population movements was the only future scenario imaginable. As argued by the following ambassador:

> There is a very strong leaning, particularly from the smaller nations, towards climate change as a primary issue, mainly because it's an immediate issue for them, Tuvalu particularly, not to mention the other islands. It is for us too... Relating to the Kyoto Protocol, of course Australia has pulled out of it,[3] where as the majority of us are encouraging Australia, the US, Russia and others, particularly Tuvalu because they're the ones that are immediately affected, to come on board so we can start dealing with the issues and put the Protocol in process... When people talk about climate change affecting some of the islands to the extent that an island state may disappear in 20 years, and one that immediately comes to mind is Tuvalu, it is not something that is taken lightly. But it is also not something that we want to happen at all (ambassador g).

Another ambassador particularly noted the role of Australia in contributing to the impacts of climate change:

> I think that maybe there is a need not for Australia for example to relax its immigration laws but maybe the need for all industrialised countries including Australia to relax their emissions instead. The key point here is that carbon dioxide emissions have to decrease (ambassador f).

This ambassador's rejection of migration 'solutions' squarely contrasts to the earlier proclamations of NGOs and the news media that migration and refugee status should be granted to those most affected by climate change. Instead, these ambassadors avoided welcoming migration for it would have sent the message that they had effectively given up on mitigation measures to avert future impacts of climate change.

In conjunction with interviews held with Pacific ambassadors to the United Nations, an interview was also held with the then Chair of the Alliance of Small Island States. Very early on in the interview, the Chair made it clear that climate change was not a new issue for small island states generally:

> We have always been calling attention to the international community to the effects of climate change. Now we are beginning to see the results of our inaction in the field of climate change and now the extreme weather conditions and events that epitomize this. So, we can't say that we have failed to see that what we have said was happening, but we feel that this was something we warned about. We always feared that this was going to happen, and now it has.

The Chair makes a clear argument that small island states have been at the forefront of international debate and discussions about climate change, and its real and perceived impacts now and into the future. Further into the interview, the Chair reiterated the earlier argument of ambassadors about the need for the international community to work together to help in mitigating climate change:

> The diversity in the islands is something that we all need to be proud of and it's a heritage that we need to preserve. I would have a lot of difficulty seeing that being left to rot and left to disappear. In that sense, I think the whole international community must look at the islands with a renewed focus and a new perspective... We are still hoping that all the members of the international community, especially in the General Assembly, will take necessary action in time to address climate change in such a way that it won't affect us.

The point here is clear. Both ambassadors and the Chair of the Alliance of Small Island States alike believed that the logical first step in combating climate change was to reduce global carbon outputs. As briefly argued by another ambassador, 'my greatest fear for Pacific small island states is without a doubt climate change and the best way forward is to develop an international regime and instrument to combat the polluters and effects' (ambassador c). In this light, the issue of relocation as a result of the impacts of climate change was considered imprudent given that means to mitigate greater future impacts ought to be the highest priority.

There was no doubt that ambassadors presented an unwavering argument about not being forced to relocate as a result of climate

[3] At the time of fieldwork, Australia had refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol. In 2008, following the defeat of John Howard's conservative Liberal party by Kevin Rudd's Labor Party, Australia did eventually sign the Kyoto Protocol – reversing over a decade's denial of climate change as a serious global environmental issue.

change. Put simply: 'we have not approached other countries with respect to environment-induced migration' (ambassador f). Ambassadors to the United Nations deeply defended the sovereign rights of the people in their country when faced with the threat of relocation due to climate change:

> As a matter of fact, most of the discussion on climate change today, is not anymore on preventing it, but on adapting to it, which in my opinion it is kind of sad... In the short and medium term for a lot of Pacific island countries, talk around them having to leave to go to another country is just not what we are after (ambassador d).

Talk of 'climate refugees' is, in other words, geopolitically damaging to Pacific states. At the heart of the contestation over the category of 'climate refugees' is a geopolitical tension between visions for the future. The vision for the future validating the category of 'climate refugees' is based on Pacific islands (as weaker, marginal nations) having to adapt in the most extreme way to problems created by large, polluting nations (rather than those polluting nations curbing their own emissions as 'the solution'). In contrast, Pacific nation ambassadors envision a future as self-determining nation-states, and thus, strongly resist media/policy discourses that legitimise their possible future displacement en masse.

Moving from the ambassadors' personal views on the category of 'climate refugees', ambassadors were also keen to argue that the citizens of the countries they were representing at the United Nations were equally opposed to the idea of relocation. As illustrated by the following statement, worth quoting at length:

> This is my own perspective. Charity starts at home, in that situation you'd probably have to look at the whole region for a regional response... I'm not sure how effective an international solution would be. I mean they'd probably be able to make some recommendations but at the end of the day it's the people who are closest to the situation who would probably make it work, and I have to say that when we talk about displacement, we are just not convinced at all that its something that we want to be a part of... And also most of the time when we talk about displacement, some people are still not convinced that its going to happen so we have to first acknowledge that there is global warming and all these weather patterns are changing slowly. They even have this film 'The Day After Tomorrow'. Last night there was a 10-minute preview of the film, it looks very frightening. This is of service to these people that still need to sign the Kyoto Protocol... I don't think there will be any difficulty in getting the United Nations to make a nice resolution on this issue of displacement, but the implementation aspect is always the critical one and always so slow and so full of trying to accommodate everyone's positions (ambassador e).

Issues of the preferences of affected people were thus combined with frustrations about the slow pace of international diplomacy over climate change mitigation mechanisms.

For another ambassador, resistance to the category of 'climate refugees' was articulated through recourse to rights-based arguments:

> Now of course the issue of relocation and resettlement is a very, very serious issue that we are continuing to investigate, but we do not want to leave our land. It is up to the leaders but I have the sense from the current discourse of discussions in my country that they want to stay on there and we do not want to be forced out simply because of the lack of actions of those responsible. So if it appears that there is no responsibility to address the causes then of course there are issues that we are looking at seriously. I understand that the issue of litigation has been looked at. We are not going to go quietly. There are human rights issues; there are sovereign rights issues that need to be looked at carefully. And certainly if we are injured by the actions of others there are precedents of course that these things can be addressed in certain international processes and for those responsible that are not showing any responsibility to do anything should be taken to counsel. But we want to avoid getting into that sort of complication because we believe there is good will in the international community. So that is basically how we see it, it is a difficult call but there you are (ambassador a).

There was a significant identity consciousness articulated in the interviews held with ambassadors from Pacific countries, defining their sense of who they were. Again the Chair of the Alliance of Small Island States offered his views on how he saw the Alliance constituents:

> We haven't looked into the aspect of migration. 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 or whatever.

The category of 'climate refugees' was thus resisted. Instead, as the Chair argued, representatives of small island states at the United Nations worked to negotiate their own identities as sovereign people who want climate change to be curbed to prevent any need for people in their homelands to flee.

In part this resistance to the 'climate refugee' category was a consequence of not wanting to be portrayed as weak and passive victims of climate change. As discourse analysis in the first half of this paper illustrated, victimhood and vulnerability have often been subtexts to the depiction of 'climate refugees' by NGOs and the news media. Yet for the Chair of the Alliance of Small Island States (and ambassadors earlier in this paper) it was obvious that any mention of being categorised as 'climate refugees' (or helpless victims for that matter) was strongly resisted and in some cases considered offensive.

Given this, focusing on off-shore migration as an adaptation strategy to climate change, although potentially recognising the environmental injustices suffered, had the potential to portray small island states as acknowledging defeat in the discursive battle surrounding climate change and the future. The category of 'climate refugees', while perhaps reflecting a real likelihood of people being displaced from widespread environmental change, also sent a message, particularly to richer countries, that mitigation will not be as important as adaptation. This last point was particularly crucial, because if adaptation was equated with relocation from one's homeland, there would be no premise to persuade the major polluters to mitigate and prevent further damage in those affected countries.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we have sought to contribute to the urgent task of unravelling the discourses, categories and assumptions quickly garnering legitimacy in international debate about climate change. We chose just one category – 'climate refugees' – and sought to show how this came to be a phrase used to depict whole nations of peoples whose future residential stability appears to be under

threat from sea level rise. In contrast, Pacific ambassadors sought to assert a different yet collective 'global vision for the future', centred on retaining territory, nationality and cultural identity. While commonalities existed between the Pacific ambassadors and reports from NGOs and the media on the 'problem' of climate change (including those to blame for it), a different vision for the future was extended. Pacific ambassadors directly opposed the 'exodus' scenario imagined by the institutions and actors that see Pacific peoples as 'climate refugees' in waiting. Thus, albeit marginalized at the scale of international environmental security and diplomacy, ambassadors from small island Pacific states directed serious conceptual challenges to the manner in which places, peoples and environmental 'problems' are categorised in global geopolitics.

Variations and divergences from the arguments articulated here by Pacific island ambassadors have been surprisingly few and far between. Although it has been widely reported in the media and by NGOs that Tuvalu and New Zealand Government's have signed an agreement that allows Tuvaluans to relocate because of the impacts of climate change, the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2008) have repeatedly denied this. New Zealand's immigration policy does allow for a limited number of people from Pacific Access Countries to gain residency in New Zealand with Tuvalu having 75 places allocated annually. However, there is no explicit policy in New Zealand to accept people from Pacific island countries because of climate change. Likewise, although Kiribati representatives have reportedly approached Pacific Rim countries to negotiate resettlement, this has not been formalised nor replaced the overall emphasis in Pacific diplomacy on retaining sovereignty and seeking global responses to climate change.

In media coverage, NGO reports and the texts of interviews with Pacific ambassadors, there was commonality on the 'problem' of climate change, and associated challenges faced by a number of low-lying countries of the Pacific. The consensus among these groups is that climate change will produce displacement pressures on small island states, and that preventative action from industrialised nations is necessary. Where the story becomes more nuanced is in relation to the depiction of the very people affected by displacement. Even when there is consensus on the urgency of climate change, lobby groups, the media and Pacific island ambassadors construct and resist 'climate refugees' as a subject category in different ways. NGOs, media outlets, and some researchers propose that a subject category, 'climate refugees', will be realised if climate change continues without mitigation policies being implemented by the major greenhouse gas producing countries. If rising sea levels drown some island states then it is the responsibility of the major polluting countries to accept this new category of mobile subjects. In contrast, Pacific ambassadors argued that before their people are inundated out of their homes (in other words, before submitting to this subject category), industrialised countries must act to contain and reduce greenhouse gases. Acting in the interests of state sovereignty, ambassadors representing Pacific small island states at the United Nations therefore resisted the very category of 'climate refugees'. This was somewhat contrary to our initial expectations – that Pacific nations would be seeking legitimation for their future claims to climate-related displacement and asylum – as a corrective to injustice. In interviews conducted, ambassadors reasserted their identity as sovereign people with rights to land, culture and a future of their choosing. Fleeing was not an option – simply not part of their 'global vision for the future' (Hulme, 2008). Such arguments were not a denial of the environmental problems capable of creating refugees, but instead were cultural and political arguments about identity, place and human rights to self-determination. The category of 'climate refugees' is problematic for Pacific ambassadors, even when it stemmed from NGOs and researchers who were similarly alarmed by the situations facing low-lying Pacific nations.

In one sense, such articulations of discursive resistance stemmed from nationalism and cultural pride, but in another way, they were also multilateral geopolitical assertions. Given that Pacific small island states have contributed so little to the problem of climate change, reassertions of sovereignty and the right to survive on their own land were also simultaneously statements about the need for multilateral institutions to intervene in the mitigation of global environmental problems. While it might be appropriate to consider that potential 'climate refugees' need protection and options for relocation, this position might then leave open the option that major industrial powers could continue to engage in unsustainable practices, knowing that a 'solution' (relocation) would be forthcoming for future refugees – to be negotiated at a later date (presumably at the moment when islands are critically threatened with imminent environmental disaster). Small island states could find themselves in a situation where guarantees of protection for 'climate refugees' (offered under the auspices of the United Nations, see Biermann and Boas (2008)) means that their citizens do indeed become 'climate refugees': discursive categories producing new realities. Populations could become unstable and their sovereignty would be ultimately challenged – because knowledge of protection available to a legitimised category of 'climate refugees' would lessen the demand on industrialised nations to curb greenhouse gas emissions. At best, the category of 'climate refugees' legitimises future visions of a climate change affected world in which mass population mobility and loss of homelands are considered unfortunate, but acceptable 'solutions' to the problems of the social impacts of climate change. At worst, and more immediately, the category of 'climate refugees' reduces the ability of Pacific ambassadors at the United Nations to pressure for change, lessening the onus on multilateral institutions to curb climate change at all.

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