



Climate-induced Migration in the Pacific: The Role of New Zealand

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Climate change is now a reality and is one of the most rapidly evolving issues for the 21st century. The link between climate change and human mobility is complex as it is aligned with different social, environmental, economic, cultural and political factors. The adverse impacts associated with climate change, such as sea-level rise, floods, drought and storms, are displacing millions of people every year across the globe. These displacements create multifaceted impacts on people and their livelihoods by changing their way of living, causing stress, uncertainty and, in the worse cases, loss of lives and property.

Although there are no comprehensive global statistics of climate-induced human migration (IOM, 2020), the global displacement data by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) shows that approximately 255.6 million people were displaced internally between the years 2008 and 2019 because of climatic disasters worldwide (IDMC, 2020a). In addition, human displacement is likely to increase in future (Wilkinson et al., 2016).

If global temperatures continue to rise at predicted rates, and slow and/or sudden onset hazards increase, these will result in mass displacement of human populations. Therefore, climate-induced migration is considered as a significant global challenge, and is recognized as a considerable threat (Apap, 2019; Ionesco et al., 2017).

In 2019, 23.9 million people from 140 countries and territories were displaced due to climatic disasters, and the Pacific was one of the most significantly affected areas globally. Although some people are forced to move to other countries, the majority of mobility occurs within the borders of countries (IOM, 2020). In many cases, people attempt to settle in new places after losing their home, and these new locations are also highly exposed to future hazards, but they have no choice. It is predicted that at least 50,000 Pasifika people could lose their homes each year due to the increasing frequency and severity of climate-related extreme hazards (IDMC, 2020b).

In the context of Pacific nations, small island countries like Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu are highly susceptible to climate-induced displacement (Burkett, 2011; IDMC, 2020b). This is because of their low-lying nature and lack of available land for habitation and agriculture compared to larger countries like Australia and New Zealand. In such a situation, the climate-vulnerable island people tend to migrate to a safer location within their own countries or across borders. It is evident that



within the last decade, one in ten people in Kiribati, Nauru, and Tuvalu have already migrated due to worsening climatic conditions (Apap, 2019; Kawajiri, 2018).

There are limitations to cross-border migration for climate-vulnerable people, including, state sovereignty of other countries, and lack of international law, policy and legislative action (Apap, 2019; IOM, 2020; Ionesco et al., 2017; Murray, 2010). Climate-induced migrants are not covered by the 1951 Geneva Convention, which provides grounds for refugee status (Apap, 2019). This means that, unlike those with refugee status, climate-vulnerable people cannot easily migrate to overseas countries. In some situations, relocation offers with humanitarian visas are made, but this is rare; for example, the United States, Brazil and Argentina offered visas for Haitians following the earthquake in 2010 (IOM, 2020).

Climate-induced displacement has fallen into gaps in the current global policies for migration (Wilkinson et al., 2016), and appropriate management of climate migration is rapidly becoming a national and international policy issue (Boncour & Burson, 2009). Moreover, many scholars are calling for regional and international frameworks for climate-induced migration (Kawajiri, 2018). For example, the African Union initiated the 'Kampala Convention' in 2009, which is the first legally binding regional instrument to protect and assist internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Africa. In 2012, Norway and Switzerland introduced the 'Nansen Initiative' to address the potential legal and protection gaps for people in cross border migration induced by environmental change and extreme weather conditions.

International organizations are also trying to deal with current policy failings to address the climate migration challenge. As a result, the United Nations launched the 'Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration' in 2018 that covers all dimensions of international migration in a holistic and comprehensive manner considering the risks and challenges for individuals and communities in countries of origin, transit, and destination.

Aligned with the collective global responsibility to respond to climate change and its impacts, the Government of New Zealand is committed to contributing internationally along with strong domestic action on climate change. Accordingly, in November 2019 New Zealand passed a Zero Carbon Act to help reduce global warming and lessen the impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities.

New Zealand has been also playing a leading role in the Pacific in response to climate-induced displacement for many years, by providing adaptation and mitigation programmes such as installing renewable energy supplies, protecting fishing resources, conducting different aid and research projects on disaster relief, ocean acidification and resilience building (Ardern, 2018).

Remarkably, in 2017, New Zealand introduced an "experimental humanitarian visa" for people who were being displaced from Pacific Island countries due to the adverse effects of climate change. However, the initiative was not continued, and New Zealand dropped the plan for issuing "climate refugee" visas. Pasifika people wanted to stay in their home countries to preserve their society and culture, and the term "climate refugee" was problematic on many levels as they think it does not reflect the actual dimensions of their



problem (ABC News, 2014).

The New Zealand government provides legal migration pathways, offering specific access category visas for Pasifika people at risk of climate displacement. For example, New Zealand accepts 250 people from Fiji, 75 from Kiribati, 250 from Tonga and 75 from Tuvalu every year through the Pacific Access Category (PAC) visa and provides them residency (Kawajiri, 2018). In addition to this, the Seasonal Worker visa scheme in New Zealand is another door that is always open for the Pasifika people (although the scheme has been temporarily suspended in 2020 due to travel restrictions following the Covid-19 pandemic). The most recent initiative by the New Zealand Government is developing an action plan to build a greater evidence base of the social and economic impacts of climate-induced migration on New Zealand and Pacific Island nations (MoFA, 2018), suggesting that New Zealand is growing increasingly concerned about the climate-migration issues in New Zealand and the Pacific region as a whole.

Climate-induced migration is not hypothetical—it is happening in different parts of the world right now. A recent systematic review by the author identifies the Pacific region as one of the global hotspots of climate-induced displacement. Many Pasifika people are seeking help to navigate a future that may lead to climate displacement. Providing better livelihood opportunities for them is now a global responsibility.

In response to this, New Zealand must work towards improving current migration policies to account for increasing climate migration trends, particularly in the Pacific. But to do this, there is a pressing need for an evidence base to support decision-making. Addressing the future needs of climate-induced migrants who come to New Zealand, and assessing their socio-economic, environmental, and cultural impacts on a broader scale is the first step. Impact assessment is a vital tool for identifying the potential future impacts of climate migrants in New Zealand and Pacific.



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