

Climate change adaptation and mitigation, impact assessment, and decision-making: a Pacific perspective

Mr. Kosi Latu

The Director General of the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), Mr. Kosi Latu, delivered a keynote address to the NZAIA19 conference in Auckland, November 2019. In his opening remarks he said:

“Climate change is the most pressing, single most serious threat to all our survival. Here in the Pacific it impacts us in every way. Imagine having no rivers, having no forests. Most of our culture is related to the ocean, land and the forest. If these things are impacted, then our culture will be gone as well; therefore, it is very important that we understand climate change impacts us in every matter of living. We are already facing problems of access to reliable drinking water, food security and other climate-dependent natural resources, linked to sanitation, poverty and access to financial and technological resources. We need to act, we need to respond to sustain our environment - but all too often we rush to act in small self-centred attempts to preserve what we have without considering the bigger picture. What are the impacts of our choices? We need a coordinated and informed decision making process, we need to assess our plans, be willing to reject detrimental projects and put in place effective mitigation that does not create more problems for the environment we depend on, our neighbours, or ourselves”.





Mr. Latu highlighted the importance of walking the talk and emphasised that people must action what they speak about because it is very common that people speak about an issue, propose solutions, but then do the opposite.

He further reflected on the importance of EIA policies but pointed out that “In the Pacific, we need more than just the policies; we need legislation and the resources as well to back it up. In the region, we have legislation, but they are not being enforced and implemented in a way that they should be because we lack buy-in from decision makers and this is reflected in our poorly supported environmental agencies. And that is one of the many challenges that we in the region face.

[O]ur region is experiencing an unprecedented proliferation of large scale development projects due, in most cases, to well-intentioned efforts to adapt to climate change. For example, solar farm projects; the Pacific as a region leads the world in its commitment to a 100% renewable energy target – but many of our islands are very small and land is a premium. How do we balance the need for energy with the need for land?

One of the ways we can work toward better decisions is to have more informed decisions and this relies on data, specifically environmental data that in many cases already exists but which, for many reasons, is not readily available. Development projects need to collect data to inform their EIAs. All of these projects generate a lot of environmental data which if used correctly and combined with other sources of verified data can inform better decisions for sustainable development. The importance of environmental data in the Pacific is widely acknowledged with many data portals created both within and outside of the Pacific by NGOs, Universities, UN agencies, intergovernmental agencies and the list goes on. It is the matter of then finding and accessing the data in all these portals that becomes another challenge, to reduce the siloing of data and making it easy for decision makers to access the most relevant information.

SPREP recognised this issue and developed an approach to strengthen environmental data collection, monitoring, and analysis and reporting on results, nationally and regionally. The SPREP- and UNEP-funded Inform project (long name: "*Building National and Regional Capacity to Implement Multilateral Environmental Agreements by Strengthening Planning and the State of Environmental Assessment and Reporting in the Pacific*") has established a Pacific Island Country (PIC) network of national and regional databases for monitoring, evaluating, and analysing environmental information to support environmental planning, forecasting, and reporting requirements at all levels. There are already MoUs with SPC (Pacific Data Hub) and government agencies in place not only to store environmental data relevant to each PIC but also actively to harvest data from other data portals to bring Pacific environmental data into a central location. The real benefit of this portal project is that the countries own them and manage them and run them with SPREP's support; this national buy-in is what is needed to continue to build the knowledge base. The project continues to form MoUs with other portals and harvest their data, as well as data from defunct databases, to make it easier for environmental assessors to locate and use relevant environmental data.

By better understanding our environment through up-to-date data and using robust planning tools such as EIA and SEA we can make better sustainable developments that account for climate change and avoid or mitigate unintended impacts.

It is important we share our lessons and learn from our mistakes.”