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Climate justice and Pacific Island countries – a case study on grassroots advocacy

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ABSTRACT

Many Commonwealth member states face the brunt of the climate crisis. In the Pacific Island states and the wider Pacific region, the frequency of severe weather events has increased. For instance, in 2023 the island of Vanuatu was impacted by cyclones Judy and Kevin in March and afterwards by cyclone Lola. According to Vanuatu officials, more than 10,000 homes were destroyed and the storms caused massive destruction to Vanuatu's infrastructure and economy. Facing the likelihood that the global temperatures will reach or surpass the 1.5 degrees Celsius target between 2021 and 2040, a grassroots student movement was launched at the University of the South Pacific (USP) based on Emalus Campus, Vanuatu, which ended with a United Nations General Assembly resolution on climate justice and Pacific Island states. Even so, the situation remains alarming for many Commonwealth Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the Pacific and there are important questions as to how these states will adapt to and mitigate climate change and also address the climate justice issues they face. This article provides a case study on climate justice and Commonwealth member states and looks at measures currently being considered or implemented by political leaders and other stakeholders.

KEYWORDS

Commonwealth; climate justice; vulnerability; inequalities; injustice; Pacific region

Introduction

Every year, at the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, countries from around the world meet to deliberate on important issues concerning climate change. COP events have recently produced agreements by the Parties on 'ambitious climate action' to address the increasing adverse impacts of climate change.

At the recent COP28, which took place in Dubai, UAE from 30 November to 12 December 2023, the Commonwealth General Secretary, Patricia Scotland, echoed in one of her speeches ahead of the summit that:

The worst predictions of climate change have become a daily reality. In the Commonwealth's most vulnerable countries, fertile lands are turning to dust, wells are running dry, storms and floods are overwhelming communities, and the ocean is rising. This represents not only a threat to the health, welfare, and survival of millions of people, but to our collective stability and economic prospects. Yet as climate change advances, the gap on

emissions, finance and justice has widened, while the window for action continues to narrow. COP28 must close that gap. Every day of delay makes life more dangerous, and makes climate action more complex, challenging, and expensive. There can be no more delays, and no more excuses – this is the time for implementation.¹

The Secretary-General's statement reveals the widening concerns regarding the vulnerability of many Commonwealth member states to climate change, and the inequalities people in the affected countries will continue to face, even if drastic measures are implemented by political and community leaders and governments. This underscores the need for urgent and accelerated actions from all levels of decision-making to ensure that the welfare of citizens and residents is secured, and that the climate injustices suffered are addressed adequately.

Throughout the past years, there have been many international conferences and meetings held around the world to find possible solutions to deal with the rising impacts of climate change, but there are still huge gaps on how to fully address these problems. Many treaties and regulations have been developed and signed by many Commonwealth nations in the knowledge that concrete and tangible climate actions will be taken to deal with the impacts of climate change. But, so far, there has been very little commitment by the highest emitting countries, like the G77 and several Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, which makes it very difficult to achieve climate justice for vulnerable Commonwealth nations like the Pacific region (The Commonwealth, 2023).

Thirty-three of the now 56 Commonwealth member states are classified as Small Island Developing States (SIDS),² and these countries are on the front line of the adverse impacts of climate change. SIDS are faced with a greater risk of facing the many problems that climate change will inflict on their respective economies. To make matters worse, research by the Commonwealth Secretariat (Rena, Commonwealth Secretary General: Small Islands Developing States need finance to tackle Climate Crisis, Commonwealth Secretariat, 2023) shows that SIDS like those in the Pacific region are at risk of losing out on an estimated US\$4.1 billion of aid opportunities and development assistance,³ particularly because they do not have the right capacity to deal with the complex process of managing the assistance that has been given to them.

With these impacts of climate change continuing to affect many Commonwealth nations, this has caused a huge fallback to their economies as many Pacific nations are currently facing the brunt of the climate crisis but do not have the funds to support the mitigation and adaptation of their countries. Climate Finance Funds, which were said to be accessible by all nations to adapt and mitigate climate impacts, have now become very difficult to access as the process and procedure itself has been complex. Many Commonwealth Pacific states have tried many times in recent years to tap these climate finance opportunities but the complex application and qualification processes make it difficult for them, given their limited capacity.

Yet, the SIDS in the Pacific region continue to show some resilience amid all the frequent disasters many have faced. The Pacific region is expected to experience a high increase in average temperature and will experience more extreme hot days (Campbell & Warrick, 2014), more extreme rainfall events, ocean acidification, and sea-level rise,⁴ which will result in significant consequences for the livelihood and the well-being of many Pacific Islanders. This is why there needs to be a shift in the policy reforms that are

aimed to counter the climate crisis, so that these Commonwealth nations can better adapt to and mitigate the changing weather pattern.

In this rapidly changing world, where severe climate events and weather-related disasters have become increasingly frequent, how can climate justice be achieved for the vulnerable commonwealth nations like Tuvalu, Kiribati, or Nauru that have caused very few carbon emissions yet have suffered the worst of climate change? Indeed, many Pacific SIDS have been severely affected by rising sea levels, which have destroyed homes and taken away the lands where their families live and earn their livelihoods. However, these countries on their own are unable to do anything effective against climate change because they have limited capacity and resources of their own. This is the sad reality of the small vulnerable states in the South Pacific.

Instead, to address climate change, Commonwealth member states – indeed, the entire international community – needs to continue working collectively to address the anthropogenic causes of climate change and to adopt policies and measures which ensure that climate justice is obtained for the vulnerable population and communities that are experiencing the worst impacts of the climate crisis.

Challenges faced in pursuing climate justice

It has always been a huge challenge for many of the developing countries in the Commonwealth to address the adverse impacts of climate change, especially as many member states do not have the resources or capacities to do so on their own (Disability and Climate Change, 2022), unlike the developed countries. Research is ongoing by various organisations on identifying appropriate adaptation measures that Pacific SIDS can undertake to help them ensure that their citizens, residents, and communities have the tools to respond to climate change, and the myriad injustices of climate change many face as a result of structural and societal inequalities (Munoz, 2019). Challenges still remain and new forms of climate injustice continue to emerge or become known in Pacific SIDS. For instance, in Papua New Guinea (PNG), vulnerable communities in the Carteret Islands face ‘coastal erosion and food and water insecurity due to anthropogenic climate change’.⁵ PNG, one of the most biodiverse countries in the Commonwealth, indeed in the world, is more and more ‘vulnerable to floods, droughts, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic activity and even sea level rise, and some of these are expected to increase in frequency, magnitude, and intensity due to climate change’ (Papua New Guinea, 2021).⁶

For the entire Pacific region, there is an urgent need to adapt to climate change as there are so many challenges facing vulnerable communities and populations, such as increased coastal erosion, loss of coral reefs, increased sea-level rise causing massive loss to coastal land and coastal infrastructure, increased saline intrusion causing freshwater contamination to many freshwater sources, and unpredictable intense weathers like severe droughts, cyclones, hurricanes, and increased rainfall, which have affected the production of natural resources.

Achieving climate justice for affected persons and communities is neither an easy task nor an easy journey. The entire process is fraught with challenges and the different types

of climate injustices resulting from inter-generational, structural, and socioeconomic inequalities may warrant different responses. To understand this better it is useful to discuss these.

Structural inequality

Among the Commonwealth Pacific nations, the impacts of climate change will not be the same across the different countries and even within countries. Indeed, climate change will affect people and communities differently, and their experiences will be uneven due to differences in their demographic makeup and socioeconomic status. For example, women in the atoll nation of Nauru will be more severely affected by sea-level rise and coastal flooding and erosion or ‘king tides’ than women in the Solomon Islands, who have more access to land for farming and planting their local food produce. The women in the Solomon Islands live on higher ground, while those in Nauru have limited access to land and live in low-lying areas. Moreover, the land areas they do have access to were destroyed by phosphate mining, which has affected the soil’s fertility and this has resulted in turn in lower agricultural yields and loss of production, including for subsistence farming by women, which has led to issues of food security for the affected women and their families (AECOM, 2014). At the same time, sea-level rise has significantly increased, further limiting significant areas of the coastal lands utilised by women for their smallholdings.

Most of the adverse impacts of climate change are more deeply felt by women and children compared with men in the majority of cases. This is because women in most places are those who have worked extra hard to earn and make a living for their families. As in many Pacific Communities, women play a huge role in the agricultural sector but often do not have equal access to agriculture opportunities, resources, and services or even the power to take part in a decision-making process that concerns climate change and agriculture (SPC, 2012). Given these circumstances, women now have lower access to important information adaptation and mitigation efforts, which then increases their vulnerability, their capacity to create communities and households’ ability to be resilient in the face of climate crisis. These findings show how important it is for women to be well informed regarding relevant opportunities in order for them to best support and drive adaptation and mitigation efforts in their communities and countries. Women’s participation and involvement can bring change and positive drive in climate change policies that countries have already signed and ratified but which are yet to be enacted within their domestic laws and legislation. Lastly, for climate efforts and solutions to be effective in our systems, all leaders must strongly consider the inclusion of gender equality and women’s empowerment throughout the task of addressing climate action.

Another group that is impacted by climate change is those with disabilities and other marginalised groups who are also at higher risk of facing the worst of climate change, as it will pose a threat to their health and well-being, food security, livelihood, and access to essentials like clean water and sanitation. A report released by the Pacific Disability Forum⁷ stated that climate change will increase their hardships and likely degrade the quality of life and well-being for persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups within communities. It will also affect their ability to adapt effectively to the available livelihood opportunities and maintain resilience.

Intergenerational inequity

In this current phase of the twenty-first century, the younger generations have been the most vocal and most confident to arise and advocate strongly on all these issues of climate change to which they have not contributed. They have taken huge initiatives to rally against their leaders and governments to hold them accountable for their inaction. Many children and young people are now beginning to stand up to their leaders and tell those leaders that they have not done enough for their future. Many have seen these leaders as failures for not being strong enough and not fully using their political will to develop climate policies and reforms that will safeguard their future from the adverse impacts of climate change.

The saddest reality is that these young generations have made very little contribution to climate change but they will be the ones who will bear the brunt of the impacts of this climate crisis as they grow and advance through life. Climate change has threatened the effective enjoyment of their basic and fundamental human rights like their right to life, right to a clean environment, right to clean water, right to health, right to self-determination, and their right to culture and development (IPCC, 2023; SPREP, 2023).

For example, for the people of the atoll nation of the Marshall Islands their highest point is about 2–3 metres above sea level, which is not safe at all for their land and their water sources.⁸ They are faced with frequent, almost weekly coastal erosion, which has then increased salinisation of their freshwater sources, which has contaminated the water they drink and use for essential needs like cooking and washing. The increased salinisation in the soil and groundwater has caused huge damage to their food security. This damage, caused by sea-level rise, has deprived them of the right to access clean water and the right to healthy food, which violates one of the important fundamental human rights stated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Socioeconomic inequalities

In almost all fora, such as the COP, SB60s, SIDS and many others, the low-lying states like those in the Pacific have been voicing their concern about how they are faced with the worst of climate change, yet they have limited access or no access at all to the right resources, funds, and capacities to properly address and deal with the impacts their populations are faced with every day. Pacific countries differ in the urgency of water security, Vulnerable countries such as Tuvalu, Kiribati, Nauru, and the Marshall Islands face difficulties in managing their limited water sources, as saltwater intrusion has destroyed most of their groundwater sources. Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and New[AQ18] face fewer challenges than the low-lying atoll nations.⁹

In the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) *AR6 Synthesis Report on Climate Change 2023*¹⁰ it clearly states that the 10% of households with the highest per capita emissions globally contribute 34–45% of global household greenhouse gas emissions while the bottom 50% contribute 13–15%, which means that many low-income and vulnerable countries are more susceptible to experiencing the loss and damage attributable to climate change. Climate change as experienced today threatens many low-income nations like those in the Pacific where more reliance is placed on natural resources for survival. IPCC reports have found that global surface temperatures

have increased faster since 1970 than in any other 50-year period over at least the last 2000 years.¹¹ It is patently clear that Commonwealth Pacific nations will not be able to survive such irreversible economic loss covering agriculture, forestry, fisheries, tourism, and energy. Extreme weather and climate events will expose many people and communities to acute food insecurity, reduced water security, and substantial damage to their coastal and ocean ecosystems, thus causing adverse impacts on human health, key infrastructure, and the livelihood of the affected people and communities.

Why climate justice is important for Pacific Island states

One of the main questions that has frequently been asked when trying to address climate justice is: *What does 'climate justice' mean for the Pacific nations or the vulnerable nations in your context?* Officials and representatives of PICs are asked this repeatedly. The answer to this question varies from country to country according to the effects of the climate crisis felt by their communities and their people (Greenpeace, 2023).

The Pacific is known as one of the most climate-vulnerable regions in the world that are impacted daily by the adverse impacts of the climate crisis, yet its island nations have contributed least of all to the climate crisis, i.e., PICs account for only 0.03% of global greenhouse emissions historically,¹² which is very low compared with the major industrial countries such as the UK, those in the European Union, and the USA, and, more recently, increasingly China and others. Although the PICs are negative emitters, they are on the frontlines of climate change and islands in the Pacific region are increasingly facing more severe weather events, including more frequent and intense cyclones, coastal flooding, droughts, failure of subsistence crops, loss of coral reefs and mangroves, and water and food scarcity. Indeed, food security as a result of climate change is becoming a common problem for many PICs and the people living there.

Given the lived experiences of climate change of many Pacific islanders, the Pacific has stood up and taken a leading role in addressing climate change. For the leaders and governments of some if not all PICs, this has become one of their main priorities, as they have witnessed how climate change has affected societal welfare, the livelihoods of vulnerable communities, their economy, and their food security. Thus, the leading role played by some PICs in pushing for urgent global change on the issues of achieving climate justice in the international arena has become increasingly visible. The PICs have enjoyed some success in framing climate change as a human rights issue, and have supported this view with relevant stories and accounts of the effects of climate change and how the human rights of people in Pacific Island countries have been impacted. One outcome of this is that the Marshall Islands has become the smallest country ever to secure a seat on the UN Human Rights Council, and it has used this platform to raise awareness of and advocate for climate justice for vulnerable nations, especially small island developing states (SIDS).

In an opening statement at the Climate Vulnerable Forum in COP25, President Heine of the Marshall Islands, one of the leading advocates for climate justice for Pacific island countries, stated that:

The most vulnerable – atoll nations like my country – already face death row. Water covers much of our land at one or other point of the year as we fight rising tides. As we speak

hundreds of people have evacuated their homes after large waves caused the Ocean to inundate parts of our capital, Majuro. It's a fight to the death for anyone not prepared to flee. As a nation, we refuse to flee. But we also refuse to die. So not to come forward with a new, improved NDC – with a stronger national effort – by next year. This is the same as a government deciding to pass sentences on our future (Climate Vulnerable Forum, 2019). To force our country to die. That's an injustice if only because we know these governments can act. We know it is not impossible . . . It's quite the opposite. It's why climate change is a major human rights issue . . . Climate is the most serious human rights issue we have ever faced.¹³

Another example is the atoll nation of the Republic of Kiribati, where currently land is just 2% of the total area (Tong, 2015)¹⁴ and currently the indigenous people are faced with the worst case scenarios of sea-level rise through which it is predicted that their islands will be submerged under the sea by 2080 and will be uninhabitable well before then, which will lead to forced displacement. This is the lived reality that the atoll is faced with every day and in the near future. The people of Kiribati are aware that if their island is submerged due to climate change, it would be the end of Kiribati as a sovereign state, a sad but very high probability for its people physically, mentally and emotionally. For the people of Kiribati, and for many other Pacific islanders as well, the loss of land amounts to a the loss of their ancestral heritage and also their cultural identity and practices that are closely tied to their livelihoods, and would result in such means of support being lost as well. To make matters worse, the possibility that they will need to relocate from their ancestral homes to entirely new environments and lifestyles could lead to increased levels of poverty¹⁵ and a rise in societal conflicts. Thus, climate change not only impacts people's well-being and income possibilities, but may also trigger displacement and internal conflicts.

Given these scenarios, climate change is increasingly viewed as a fundamental human rights issue that is affecting people's basic rights to enjoy their life and the environment in which they traditionally live. People should have full enjoyment to exercise their human rights with dignity but are faced with a climate crisis, and the increasingly frequent weather events and disasters impede their right to enjoy a good environment and the right to good health. Indeed, many in the Pacific islands have experienced continuous heatwaves, air and water pollution, and more frequent and stronger cyclone events that have had significant health impacts. As a result, in Pacific Island states, people are now more likely to face major disease outbreaks, at-risk food security, water shortages, short- and long-term trauma and severe malnutrition in young children.

These issues could be dealt with if political leaders were to use their political will and power to negotiate strongly for better policies and reforms that would safeguard the people's rights. However, because of greed and corruption, these important issues have been ignored, as evidenced by the decision to invest more in coal power and energy, one of the leading causes of the increase in global greenhouse gas emissions in the world, or failure to tackle the massive pollution caused by cruise ships. Commonwealth Pacific nations are in a desperate state.

Climate justice for the Pacific is seen now as a very important aspect of the way forward to a just and equitable transition towards a sustainable future for the coming generations. Pacific Island states have raised and strongly emphasised via all platforms and global discussions available to them that climate change is a major existential threat

to their way of life and that it is a violation of human rights for their people. The daily lived experiences of the Pacific islands offer first-hand evidence as to why climate change is a human rights issue and one that must not be ignored by leaders when addressing the outcomes of climate change issues, which pose an imminent threat to the livelihood of many people.

Recently, Pacific Island states joined forces and cooperatively engaged in initiatives that seek climate justice for their vulnerable communities; they have garnered support from almost 130 countries and more to support them in achieving climate justice. Pacific Island states can no longer sit and wait to see change as they have done in the past; now they are standing up for their nations and people and leading change on all platforms in global discussions and spaces that are given to them. They see that climate change knows no boundaries, which implies that international cooperation is crucial amongst the global community and is very important for them to ensure that their fight for climate justice is heard by all nations.

Vanuatu's advocacy on climate justice: a case study

Over recent years, we have seen that many vulnerable nations from SIDS in the Pacific region have called attention to the climate injustices they face. Political leaders, policy-makers, civil society, and climate activists have increasingly advocated for ambitious climate action and for financial support to address the myriad cases of climate injustice people and communities have faced over the preceding decades. Indeed many young activists, including high school and university students, have led various rallies and demonstrations that have been a powerful driving force in bringing attention to issues of climate justice in Pacific island countries. However, the prevailing narrative that the Pacific island countries are 'small and isolated . . . reinforces the idea that climate change impacts are primarily happening in places remote from wealthier nations' (Morgan & Petrou, 2023).

In 2019, a group of 27 enthusiastic law students from the University of the South Pacific (USP) based on Emalus Campus, Vanuatu carried out research for a course on Environmental Law to find the most climate-ambitious tool that can push global negotiations for better outcomes. Citing frustrations caused by a world lack of adequate action on climate change and almost no delivery on climate justice, students were tasked with researching legal avenues available to push more accelerated action. Following their research, the students found that seeking an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) – the world's highest court – was the most ambitious avenue, and argued that a potential legal option could produce accelerated action for Climate Justice. Subsequently, in 2019, students from eight Pacific nations came together and launched an organisation within USP known as the Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change (PISFCC). The objective was to persuade Pacific Island states to take the issue of climate change and human rights to the International Court of Justice.

This unique campaign has brought together grassroots initiatives and forged collaborative partnerships from all around the national, regional and international fronts to join their campaign. This started with the #EndorseTHEAO campaign, which brought together various university lecturers, academia, and policymakers from various Pacific Island states to support and endorse this campaign. The #EndorseTHEAO campaign was

centred on themes of intergenerational equity and argued that future generations and their rights must be safeguarded and protected as it is they who will be facing the brunt of this climate crisis, so their rights must be protected as of now. The campaign also argued that whatever decisions on climate change are taken today will affect future generations of Pacific Islands residents and hence it is important that, in addressing climate change, intergenerational inequities must be highlighted by the region's leaders and decision-makers.

The PISFCC engaged and had various dialogues with the Vanuatu Government. Ralph Regenvanu, Vanuatu's Foreign Affairs Minister at the time, was very open to hearing what the students had to bring to the discussions and this interaction started the campaign's global journey to the United Nations. Two years later, in 2021, the Vanuatu Government announced that it had agreed to take up the PISFCC's proposal to put forward an Advisory Opinion on climate change and human rights to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2022. Thus, at UNGA 2022, Vanuatu officials lobbied other United Nations member states to join the core group and vote for the resolution once it is tabled at the UNGA.

On the 29 March 2023, the UNGA made history when it unanimously adopted Resolution 77/276 calling on the ICJ to issue an advisory opinion on the obligations of states relating to climate change and human rights. This resolution was led by the Vanuatu Government and co-sponsored by 132 countries, which included most of the Commonwealth Pacific Nations. This was a breakthrough and a landmark achievement for the Small Islands Developing States that have been impacted by the climate crisis, as it was adopted by consensus whereby no country opposed the vote on this advisory opinion. This advisory opinion is not legally binding, but it carries great moral and legal authority, and once it is issued by the International Court of Justice could give strong effect to the *Paris Agreement*, *Law of the Sea* (ITLOS), and other treaties relevant to climate change. Vanuatu believes that having the world's highest court issue an advisory opinion on the matter of climate justice in Pacific Islands states could encourage these states and others to push for more ambitious action at COP and other climate negotiations, especially as it relates to the high-polluting countries paying for climate injustices, especially if they (the developed country and high emitters) fail to significantly reduce their carbon emissions in line with meeting the 1.5-degree Celsius objective.

Conclusion

Small Island Developing States in the Pacific, among Commonwealth member states most vulnerable to climate change, continue to face growing incidents linked to climate justice. This article has showed that advocacy and concerted action started by young people from the Pacific and later championed by the government of Vanuatu, including at the United Nations General Assembly, was successful in getting an advisory opinion on climate injustice and the Pacific adopted as a resolution. This will undoubtedly help Pacific Island states to address climate justice issues and could increase the use of legal measures by vulnerable states in addressing the myriad climate challenges they face. It could also help nudge Pacific Island states towards establishing new legislation and national policies that are mutually aligned with their national development interests and responsible climate action, and in this way increase accountability for all forms of climate injustice.

Notes

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