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Mobility and immobility in climate migration in the Pacific Islands

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Climate migration is a multifaceted phenomenon, which is considered as one of the most significant issues related to climate change. Predicting the numbers of those migrating in the future and the routes of climate migration is challenging. The decision-making of individuals, households and communities in connection to climate migration is complex. The reasons for moving within a region, country or across international borders can vary between actors and geographical areas. For a long time mobility has been in the centre of migration research. Migration researchers have been studying people who move but they have not concentrated so much on those who stay behind. However, mobility and immobility both play a role in migration in the small Pacific Island states, which are regarded to be on the frontline of climate change.

Mobility and immobility in the Pacific Islands

Migration between the Pacific Islands (figure 1.), where the ocean forms the basis for life, has been significant globally and locally both historically and in present-day. The Pacific was the first ocean to be explored and settled. Migration has occurred for thousands of years from the ancient voyaging (estimated to have taken place 50 000 to 25 000 BCE) to current day. The means for migration may have changed from sailing simple rafts to taking an airplane but the environment has always

played an important role in migration and in island livelihoods.

Today the Pacific Islands are seen as being on the frontline of climate change. Climate change is being experienced by islanders in various ways. The shifts in seasonal patterns of rainfall and tropical cyclone tracks are more frequent, more intense rainfall causes flooding and mudslides, there are more frequent and longer droughts, and more hot days. In addition, there is sea-level rise leading to increased coastal erosion and risks to important crops and seafood through saltwater contaminating freshwater supplies and coral bleaching. The impacts of climate change differ between and within the Pacific Islands as they have distinct physical geographies.

For a long time, it was thought that the only feasible adaptation solution to climate change was migration from the small island states to other countries such as New Zealand and Australia. It was wrongly assumed by many that all islanders would want to move abroad. Instead of simply assuming that islands will sink and due to this people will move abroad, the social, cultural and other realities of Pacific Islanders should be better observed. In addition, the resilience of residents in the Pacific should not go without notice.

To understand local residents' thoughts on living on islands with climate change impacts will increase our knowledge on the so-called *voluntary immobility*. In the climate migration



Figure 1. The Pacific Islands in Oceania (source: P.H. Furian, iStock 2020).

context, voluntary immobility refers to a person choosing, on a voluntary basis, to stay in place in spite of climate change impacts. A person who is voluntarily immobile is able to choose if s/he moves or not – thus s/he has agency, s/he is able to refuse migration. This is a crucial aspect when voluntary immobility is compared to so-called *trapped populations*. Trapped populations consist of people who aspire to move and who need to move for their own protection but who nevertheless are not able to do so due to lacking, for example, financial or social means to migrate.

When talking about voluntary immobility in practice, ethical questions connected to rights of persons are strongly present. If the everyday life, livelihood possibilities or environmental conditions on an island become so difficult that it is no longer possible to survive there, should the people who refuse to move have the right to stay even if this, in the worst case scenario, means that they will die? In this type of a situation, should the authorities have a right to force people who insist on staying to leave a place? Even if climate change may not yet have forced us to face this type of a situation in practice, there should be more discussion on ethical aspects of voluntary immobility.

Another issue that should be better taken into consideration, and which might be an aspect we need to think about with more depth, is a person's right to change her/his mind. Climate change-related events and a person's, household's or community's situation may differ in time, which means that the decision on mobility can also change. If a person does not want to move right now, s/he should have the right to move later and vice versa. Decision-making on mobility and immobility in climate migration, like in any other type of migration, can alter as do people's personal situations and resources for moving. Thus, the ability, desire and need to migrate can vary.

Plans for mobility

Climate migration in the Pacific is ongoing and when everyday life has become difficult due to flooding, sustaining a livelihood or for other reasons, some people have already moved from an atoll to an urban centre or to higher grounds within islands. It has been noted, however, that future climate change impacts are seldom on their own the primary reason for individual migration or relocation. Factors in connection to climate are more likely to play a role in migration deci-

sion when people have experienced damaging climate events (like flooding or tropical cyclones) first-hand.

A planned relocation of vulnerable communities impacted by climate change is regarded as a significant strategy to decrease exposure to climate-related disasters. John Campbell refers to community relocation when there is permanent or long-term movement of a community or a significant part of it from one location to another. The important characteristics of the original community, including its social structures, political and legal systems, cultural characteristics and worldviews are retained.

The much discussed international relocation of households and communities is not new in the Pacific. Some examples include a relocation as early as in 1945 when the Banabans from present-day Kiribati were relocated to Fiji due to on-going phosphate mining. The partial relocation of the Vaitupuans from present-day Tuvalu to Fiji took place in 1947 and the relocation of Gilbertese to Gizo and Wagani in the Solomon Islands occurred between 1955 and 1964. There are differences in agency what comes to decision-making in these relocations. Whereas the Banabans state that they were forced to move, the Vaitupuans made themselves the decision to move.

The more present-day examples include, for example, the cases of Fiji and Kiribati. At least 42 villages were identified by the Fijian government for planned relocation as a potential adaptive response to climate change risks. In 2014 Fiji's interim government implemented climate-induced relocation of a Fijian Vunidogoloa village in Cakaudrove. This is in the same province on Vanua Levu Island where the government of Kiribati later officially purchased the Natoavatu Estate, which was said to be for development and investment purposes but in practice it is believed to be for future relocation.

Kiribati has been active in promoting the migration idea as an adaptation solution for climate change. Kiribati's policy of Migration with Dignity is part of a long-term relocation strategy for Kiribati citizens and it is aimed at creating possibilities for those who wish to migrate abroad. In order to help people to migrate, the policy targets at activating the communities already abroad (e.g. in New Zealand and Australia) to support newcomers. The policy also aims at improving the levels of education and vocational qualifications available for islanders in Kiribati and thus promoting the ability to match those skills needed in countries of destination. International and internal community relocations

are not straight-forward. The entire communities are more difficult to accommodate than individuals or individual households. Also, the questions of keeping the community's culture, language and social and legal traditions alive are not easy. In addition, the customary land tenure complicates the ability for communities to relocate and persons to own land, thus making mobility more difficult.

Why immobility?

Moving locally compared to large-scale international relocations is preferred by residents and the authorities in many island states. For many, entire communities relocating abroad is seen as an option of the last resort. However, internal or international migration is not always a suitable choice for a local resident. People who have not experienced climate change impacts first-hand, may not even give much thought on how the future will be, let alone on the option of moving elsewhere. Those who consider migration, for instance for environmental and livelihood reasons, are often very much tied to their ancestral lands. Maintaining sovereignty, cultural identity, self-determination and territorial rights are very important to Pacific peoples when talking about migration.

On a local level, people in general have an extremely strong bond with the land and ancestral burial sites. It is a great worry for islanders when sacred places are affected or cemeteries are being flooded by the incoming sea. There is also a great respect for the ocean and God in the Pacific societies, which can affect the agency of local residents who believe God has a central role in the changes taking place on the islands.

Many families have relatives abroad so they are familiar with aspects of living abroad and they know that the Pacific lifestyle may not be possible if one moves overseas. The competition related to employment and education, weather and attitude of people towards foreigners in the potential place of destination may not encourage people to move. Migrating is often considered too costly socially, culturally and identity-wise and one's own style of life, land and home are highly valued.

Discussion

Fortunately, nowadays when climate migration in the Pacific is discussed, it is better understood that the voices of local residents should be heard. If relocations are planned, communities should be participating in

planning and implementation of relocation projects. Relocation should only take place with the consent of people and communities concerned. If people are forced to move reluctantly, this can lead to a traumatic displacement experience and to social tensions between the relocated group and the recipient community.

What comes to voluntary immobility, there is a need to discuss more the rights of local residents affected by climate change and the authorities making political decisions. Also, there is a need to recognise that the situations of people affected by climate change fluctuate. People's needs, desires and actions for mobility and immobility may change. If migration is not a feasible way forward at some point, it may become so later on. Pacific people should not be seen as passive victims but as having resilience to climate change and as agents in connection to mobility and immobility. The voices of Pacific Islanders should be heard and taken into consideration now and in the future.

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