

Climate Change and Planned Relocation in Oceania*

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Abstract: In Oceania, the resettlement of communities due to the effects of climate change is increasingly being considered, although numbers of actual relocations and of affected people are currently still small. Planned relocation is a specific form of climate change adaptation. Different types of planned relocation are conflict-prone to varying degrees. Whether the escalation of violent conflict can be prevented depends on good migration governance. In Oceania, migration governance is not an issue for state institutions alone, but also for non-state actors from civil society and the customary sphere. Conflict-sensitive migration governance thus should be based on the complementary efforts of state and non-state customary and civil society institutions.

Keywords: Climate change-induced migration, conflict, migration governance, Oceania

Stichworte: klimabedingte Migration, Konflikt, Migrationsmanagement, Ozeanien

1. Introduction

If the small island states of Oceania are on the radar of politics and the wider public outside of the region at all, then it is in the context of climate change. The sinking islands of the Pacific have become a symbol for the consequences of man-made global warming. They are presented as the “canary in the coalmine” (Jakobeit and Methmann 2007, 16), foreshadowing climate change-related environmental and social developments that will affect other parts of the world sooner rather than later. In the current academic and political discourse, migration figures prominently among the social effects of climate change, and climate change-induced migration is seen as “one of the most plausible links from climate change to conflict” (Gleditsch, Nordas and Salehyan 2007, 4). Since 2007, a considerable number of researchers have explored the climate change-migration-conflict nexus, and research and findings have become ever more complex and sophisticated, trying to disentangle the “long and uncertain causal chains from climate change to social consequences like conflict” (Gleditsch, Nordas and Salehyan 2007, 8).¹ In a more recent review of the academic literature on climate change and conflict, Theisen, Gleditsch and Buhaug state that “one of the most frequently mentioned yet critically understudied topics is the effect on migration and its social consequences including conflict”, and, accordingly, they see “the likely future implications of climate change on migration and conflict (...) as one of the most important (but also challenging) priorities for future research on security implications of climate change” (Theisen, Gleditsch and Buhaug 2013, 621).

Migration is widespread in Oceania today, and the region has been the theatre of several violent conflicts in recent times. However, the nexus of climate change-migration-(violent) conflict has not yet been explored explicitly for Oceania. This article can make only a small contribution to such an exploration, focusing on a specific form of migration, namely, planned community relocation, and arguing that conflict-sensitive migration governance is key to conflict prevention. It thus engages with the critical observation,

made in another recent review of the climate/conflict literature, that “there is a tendency in this literature to underestimate or outright ignore the importance of institutions and quality of governance” (Buhaug 2015). The article draws to a considerable extent on findings from interviews conducted in the context of fieldwork carried out by the author over the last decade in various Pacific Islands Countries (PIC) – Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Fiji. The topic was raised on many occasions, even when the interviews did not explicitly focus on climate change-induced migration.²

The article is structured as follows: first, the environmental and social effects of climate change on PIC are sketched very briefly. Planned community relocation is then presented as a particularly relevant form of climate change-related migration in Oceania. After that the article turns to the conflict-prone challenges of relocation. Finally, options of conflict-sensitive migration governance are explored.

2. Environmental and social effects of climate change in Oceania

It is common knowledge today, confirmed by the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Assessment Report of 2014, that climate change in Oceania leads to sea level rise and an increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as tropical cyclones and storm surges, increasing air and sea surface temperatures, and changing rainfall patterns, including protracted droughts (Nurse/IPCC 2014, 1616).

Sea-level rise and associated submersion, storm surges, salt water intrusion, salinization, erosion and other coastal hazards degrade fresh groundwater resources and reduce the amount of land available for agriculture, settlements and infrastructure. Sea surface temperature rise results in increased coral bleaching and reef degradation, which in turn has negative impacts on fisheries and other marine-based resources (ibid.). The high vulnerability of many islands is due to their extreme exposure and their constrained options for adaptation. This holds particularly true for small atoll islands.

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1 As an elaborated example of such endeavours see Scheffran, Link and Schilling 2012, and as the most recent take on this topic see the G7-commissioned report, ‘A new climate for peace’ from April 2015 (Rüttinger et al. 2015).

2 The limitations of space preclude the detailed citation of interviews in this article. For the same reason, references to the relevant literature have had to be kept to a minimum.

Due to the environmental effects of climate change, PIC are confronted with challenges to land security, livelihood security and habitat security (Campbell 2014, 4-5), which includes water security and food security as well as health. Land security is compromised by coastal erosion and inundation, livelihood and habitat security by reduced quantity and quality of water supplies and loss of food production. Atoll communities are particularly affected, but coastal locations, river delta communities and inland river communities are also suffering.

Options for *in situ* technical adaptation – such as planting mangroves in order to reduce coastal erosion, building seawalls in order to contain storm surges, setting up rainwater tanks for fresh water supply – are limited. They are often technically not feasible or too costly, and effective mostly as interim measures only. Movement to locations that are less exposed might be the better – or even the only – option in certain cases.

In this context, migration can be seen as an alternative to *in situ* adaptation.³ In extreme cases resettlement “is likely to be the only option left when the life-support systems (land, livelihood, and/or habitat security) of a community’s territory fail. In such cases, the migration becomes forced, and the movement may involve whole or large portions of communities” (Campbell 2014, 7).

3. Community relocation

Planned relocation of entire communities is but one form of migration in Oceania today. It is of minor significance in the overall picture of migration in the region, but at the same time it is the one form most directly linked to the effects of climate change.

Migration in the region today mostly takes the form of individual or family/household migration, induced by a combination of various economic, political, social, demographic and environmental factors (ADB 2012). People move from rural areas to the (few) urban centres or from outer islands to the main islands, mainly in search of employment opportunities, but also because they want better access to public services, particularly in education and health. There is also considerable international migration to the big industrialised countries of the Pacific Rim, such as the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (ADB 2012, 35-36). Qualitative research conducted in sending and recipient communities, including interviews and focus group discussions as well as household surveys, have so far found that climate change is rarely mentioned as a major driver of current individual/family migration (see e.g. Birk and Rasmussen 2014). People usually do not cite ‘climate change’ as a reason to migrate; sometimes, however, they refer to environmental factors which today are seen as linked to climate change, such as problems in agriculture due to water shortages or coastal erosion; or they refer to the increase in extreme weather events that make life in their home communities more insecure (Birk and Rasmussen 2014; Locke 2009; MacLellan 2012; Oxfam 2009).

3 Scheffran, Marmer and Sow, for example, build a case for “migration as a contribution to climate adaptation” (2012, 119), based on experiences from the Western Sahel region.

While this type of migration can be seen as (partly) induced by climate change, planned community relocation, in the course of which significant parts of communities or even entire communities are moved from one location to another and resettled there permanently,⁴ is much more directly linked to the discourse on climate change. These relocations are driven by the insight that there are no other viable options left – at least not long-term –, and there is no return option. Hence they can be seen as ‘forced’;⁵ but given that there is time for relatively long-term planning and decision-making, such relocations differ from forced displacement due to rapid-onset events such as cyclones or earthquakes.

Today there is a lot of talk in Oceania about the need to relocate, often quite alarmist and sensationalist. But there is much less planning for relocation and even less actual relocation happening. There are many ideas and scenarios floating around, often imagining the relocation of whole island nations. At the moment, however, planning for, and actual, permanent community resettlement is an internal affair.⁶ Some governments have commenced planning for relocation in the context of national climate adaptation plans, and some have begun with the actual relocation of vulnerable communities. The first was Kiribati. In 2005, the Kiribati government finalised an Integrated Land and Population Development Programme as part of a broader national Climate Change Adaptation Strategy. The programme envisaged large scale inter-island relocation of up to 30,000 people (out of a population of 100,000) from smaller islands and from the severely overcrowded and critically water scarce capital island of South Tarawa to the largest island of the country, Kiritimati, which comprises about half of Kiribati’s land mass, but had only approximately 5,000 inhabitants as of 2005 (ADB 2006). This plan was overambitious and unrealistic from the start, as conditions on Kiritimati would not have allowed for the settlement of such large numbers of people. Furthermore, Kiritimati is 3,000 kilometres away from Tarawa, and it is very low-lying too. People were actually very hesitant to relocate; many of those who did migrate to Kiritimati “have ended up as squatters”, and the government was unable to provide basic infrastructure.⁷

Less ambitious plans in Fiji have led to first actual relocations. The Fiji government has identified 45 coastal or river bank villages affected by climate change (sea level rise, coastal erosion, high tides, salt water intrusion, damages to homes

4 On different sub-categories of planned relocation see Warner et al. 2013, 32.

5 Climate change-induced migrants “have a choice between staying and leaving, or about who goes and who stays”; by contrast, climate change-forced migrants are those “who have lost the land, livelihood, and/or food security of their homeland to such an extent that it is no longer habitable” (Campbell 2014, 11). For a detailed debate about the ‘forced’ – ‘voluntary’ problem see Warner et al. 2013, 38-43. For more recent contributions to the extensive debate on this topic see also Mc Adam 2014, Nishimura 2015, Ober 2015.

6 The only potential exception to date is the Kiribati-Fiji case. In September 2014, the Kiribati government bought around 2300 ha of freehold land on the Fiji island of Vanua Levu from the Anglican Church (Kiribati buys a piece of Fiji <http://www.climate.gov.ki/category/news/in-the-news/climate> (accessed 18 Nov 2015)). This is one of the largest free-hold land areas in Fiji (and it equals approximately 10% of Kiribati land area) (Campbell and Bedford 2014, 180). Currently, however, there are no plans to relocate people from Kiribati to Fiji, but to use the land for food production, forestry and fisheries. However, resettlement from Kiribati to Fiji remains an option for the future.

7 Technical Assistance Completion Report 21 Dec 2009, prepared by Edy Brotoisworo, ADB.

and crops) which have to be relocated (out of 800 communities altogether identified as being affected by climate change).⁸ The first village that was relocated is Vunidogoloa on the island of Vanua Levu. It was shifted two kilometres inland after years of coastal erosion and flooding had made the original site inhospitable (Compendium 2015, 50).

In the Solomon Islands spontaneous unplanned relocations of communities from smaller outer islands to bigger islands (in particular the most populous island of Malaita) have been under way over the last few years, with severe, even conflict-prone, problems. Only recently, government planning for relocation has begun. In Choiseul province the provincial capital Taro will be relocated from Taro Island to the adjacent mainland because of its vulnerability to storm surges and other coastal hazards. The relocation planning is based on an integrated climate change adaptation plan which found that “the only viable option for the long-term safety of the community is relocation of the entire population to a safer site on the mainland” (Haines 2014, no page). The Solomon Island government is now looking for the support of international donors in order to implement the relocation plan.

The most advanced climate-related relocation programme in Oceania to date is the resettlement of Carterets islanders from their atoll to the main island of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Due to sea level rise and its effects (most notably salt water intrusion and salinization of soil and water) the food security of Carteret Islanders (approximately 3,500 people) has become compromised to such an extent that the decision was taken to permanently relocate. Currently, two resettlement programs are pursued, one by civil society and another one by state authorities, with the former more advanced. It commenced in 2006, when the Carterets community leaders decided to establish an NGO to organize resettlement. The organization was named ‘Tulele Peisa’, which in the local language means ‘sailing the waves on our own’. “This name choice reflects the elders’ desire to see Carteret islanders remain strong and self-reliant” as the organization’s Executive Director Ursula Rakova explains (Rakova, 2009, 2). Tulele Peisa elaborated a detailed resettlement plan, the Carterets Integrated Relocation Programme (CIRP) which aims at the relocation of approximately 1,700 Carteret islanders to four locations on mainland Bougainville (Tulele Peisa, no date). In April 2009, the first settlers arrived, the heads of five families with around 100 family members. They were resettled on land provided by the Catholic church. Currently (2015), eight families live at the Tinputz resettlement site on mainland Bougainville (personal communication Ursula Rakova 18 April 2015).

The state-run relocation program so far has moved even more slowly. In October 2007, the PNG government allocated 2 million Kina (800,000 USD) for an official ‘Carterets Relocation Program’. It is not clear how much of the money has been used already for preparatory work, and how much is left for actual resettlement (personal communication ABG official 19 August 2015). So far an office in charge of relocation has been set up

by the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG)⁹, and the ABG adopted an ‘Atoll Integrated Development Policy’ (AIDP) and formed a multi-sectoral ‘AIDP Steering Committee’ (Lange 2009, v). In 2009, after lengthy consultations with local landowners, resettlement land was secured, and an ‘AIDP Ground Committee’ with participation of representatives from local communities was formed (Lange 2009, v-vi). In the following years, several rounds of surveys were conducted, asking atoll islanders about their concerns, needs and aspirations regarding resettlement. Over the years, workshops and focus group discussions were held, interviews carried out, expectations raised, but so far no actual resettlement in the context of the state program has taken place (personal communication ABG official 19 August 2015).

To summarize this point: so far planned community relocation as a response to the effects of climate change is in-country rural-rural – from the coast inland, from outer islands to main islands.¹⁰ Within this type, several variations can be found: It is either short-distance migration on own lands or proximate to others’ (neighbouring communities’) lands, or long-distance to others’ lands (Campbell 2014; Campbell and Bedford 2014).

Relocation to the lands of others is often fraught with tensions; it can lead to local violent conflict between settlers and recipient communities.

4. Challenges of relocation

Relations between relocating communities and recipient communities seem to be a major conflict-prone issue in the context of climate change-related relocation. Resettlement does not only affect those people who have to leave their homes, but also those who have to accommodate them in their midst. There are no empty spaces left in Oceania, to the contrary: land is scarce all over the region.

The land-people connection is of utmost importance for communities in Oceania (Crocombe 1971). There is hardly any private ownership of land; land usually is held under various forms of communal customary title, it is at the heart of the entire social, cultural and spiritual order of communities. Hence, loss or scarcity of land does not only pose economic problems, but has far-reaching effects on the social structure, the spiritual life and the psychic conditions of the affected groups and their members. This holistic notion of land and the intimate relatedness of people and land can be found everywhere in Oceania. Abandoning one’s land is a traumatic experience. Chief Paul Mika from the Carterets explains: “The hardest thing will be to lose our sacred places, our tambu places” (quoted from Pacific Institute of Public Policy, 2009, 2). But not only “for relocatees, to be forced from one’s land is likely to be highly traumatic, but the giving up of land to relocatees by destination communities may be equally difficult” (Campbell

8 See <http://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Center/Press-Releases/Making-communities-the-focus-of-climate-change-rel.aspx> (accessed 18 Nov 2015).

9 According to a peace agreement, which in 2001 terminated a decade-long secessionist violent conflict, Bougainville and adjacent smaller islands today form an autonomous region within PNG, with the ABG as the government of this Autonomous Region of Bougainville.

10 By contrast, individual and family migration induced by climate change is mostly rural-urban migration, both in-country and international.

2014, 15). As most land is customary land it “cannot be bought, sold or even given away unless sanctioned by traditional forms of land exchange which are relatively rare. This is an important issue when considering migration and relocation within the region – the loss of the link to land happens both for migrants and people at the destination whose land may be used for resettlement” (Campbell and Bedford 2014, 186).

The problem is aggravated by the fact that communities need to be relocated in their entirety. People in general are not willing to relocate on an individual or family basis or as fragmented groups. They are afraid of losing their culture and their customary social support networks, which are based on locality and kinship relations. To disperse people over different resettlement sites would mean that people cannot stand together as a community and thus would lose their resilience. Therefore, communities from the Bougainville atolls, for example, have made it perfectly clear that they insist on relocation as entire groups (Lange 2009).

Concerns of (potential) relocatees very much revolve around the question of how relationships with host communities will play out: will they be hostile or friendly? Anxieties abound, and experiences of relocatees are often not good. Most difficult are the cases where relocatees have to negotiate access to customary land. Respective negotiations between Carterets islanders and landholding communities on Bougainville in resettlement sites, for example, have started in 2007 and are continuing. Getting access to land and maintaining good relationships requires more than legal title.¹¹ Above all, it requires customary forms of link-building. This is why Tulele Peisa deliberately promotes intermarriages between Carterets islanders and members of host communities: they can create bonds and social cohesion and provide newcomers with access to much needed land. While some settlers agree with this approach, others are opposed to intermarriages, arguing that they will be destructive for the maintenance of one’s own culture (Lange 2009, 90). In the long run, intermarriages will lead to new problems, for example disputes between relocatees who gained access to land because of marrying into the host community, and those without access because they did not.

Tulele Peisa’s relocation plan envisages “exchange programs involving chiefs, women and youth from host communities and the Carterets (...) for establishing relationships and understanding” (Rakova, 2009, 2). Several such programmes have been actually carried through. Tulele Peisa was also very cautious to take into account the needs of the local host communities so as to “ensure that these host communities will also benefit through upgrading of basic health and education facilities and training programs for income generation” (Tulele Peisa, no date, 5). Preferential treatment of relocated newcomers could cause resentment, frustration and animosities from the side of host communities.

Despite all these efforts there have been re-relocations of Carterets islanders back home to their islands from the Tulele Peisa resettlement site. And people from another Carterets relocation site on the neighbouring island of Buka report ongoing conflicts

over land use and fishing rights.¹² Relocatees are the target of hostilities from their neighbours who destroy their houses and food gardens or their garden products when they take them to the market or attack their young people or rape the women (Lange 2009, 104). As a consequence, “many families returned to the Carteret Islands due to difficulties integrating with the host community” (Lange 2009, 104). This kind of “intergroup violence below the state level” usually remains under the radar of research into the climate change-conflict nexus.¹³

Even if the resettlement land is formally legally free (so called alienated freehold land) and thus in principle available for resettlement, in most cases there are people already there, dwelling and making a living on that land – ‘illegally’ perhaps according to state law, but referring to long-established customary rights of usage. Examples are the land acquired by the Kiribati government in Fiji or the land acquired by the ABG for the resettlement of atoll islanders. The freehold land bought by the Kiribati government in Fiji from the rightful legal owner, the Anglican Church, had been occupied and used by local people for a long time. The Kiribati government had to go to the courts to enforce access rights, and at the same time also negotiated with the squatters so as to allow them to stay on the land and harvest all their crops before they had to move.¹⁴ The ABG secured land which is legally freehold land, but nevertheless it had to negotiate access with the neighbouring communities whose members have used this land for a long time (personal communication ABG official 19 August 2015).

The only type of relocation that is not burdened with the issue of access to land and hence is conflict-free is short-distance resettlement within the boundaries of one’s own ancestral customary land (the case of the Fiji villages).

5. Conclusion: Migration governance beyond the state

In a fragile post-conflict environment (such as in Bougainville or Solomon Islands), or under conditions of state fragility more generally, migration governance poses particular challenges. The small fragile states in Oceania with their limited institutional capacities have much more difficulties in dealing with the effects of climate change than stable states (the ‘climate-fragility risk’ (Rüttinger et al. 2015)). Lack of capacities and ensuing lack of effectiveness in dealing with those effects diminishes the legitimacy and trustworthiness of state institutions in the eyes of the people on the ground, and lack of legitimacy makes it more difficult for state institutions to effectively implement adaptive measures, including planned relocation.

12 In an earlier resettlement endeavor, related to the war of secession on Bougainville, 30 families from the Carterets had been relocated to the west coast of Buka island.

13 Gleditsch posits that “while so far there is not much evidence that robustly links climate change to major armed conflict (...), there is a more plausible argument that it may influence intergroup violence below the state level” (Gleditsch 2012, 5; see also Theisen, Gleditsch and Buhaug 2013, 622; Brzoska and Froehlich 2015).

14 Kiribati buys a piece of Fiji <http://www.climate.gov.ki/category/news/in-the-news/climate-change> (accessed 18 Nov 2015); Fijilive 30 Sep 2014.

11 The following is based on various conversations with Ursula Rakova, Carterets relocatees in Tinuput and ABG officials in 2013 and 2015.

In such fragile situations non-state actors can and do play important roles, as the example of Tulele Peisa shows. The interesting thing about Tulele Peisa is that it is not just a civil society organisation in the Western understanding of the term, but is closely linked to non-state actors who do not neatly fit into the Western 'civil society' category: it was set up at the request of the local Carterets Council of Elders, that is, traditional authorities from the customary sphere of societal life. It can be seen as an example of a "bridging organisation" (Petzold and Ratter 2015, 40), which connects local customary life-worlds and the 'outside' world of state and civil society under conditions of hybridity of political order.¹⁵ This hybridity (Boege et al. 2009) has to be taken into account when it comes to migration governance. While the importance of non-state customary actors and institutions and of indigenous non-Western approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding is increasingly acknowledged in the context of the recent 'local turn' and 'hybrid turn' in peace studies (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2015), this has not yet filtered through to the study of the climate change-migration (governance)-conflict nexus so far. An ethnographic research approach, however, informed by the local/hybrid turn and by political anthropology, and grounded in solid field research/action research, would be extremely helpful to take the study of this nexus further.

Such a political anthropological approach reveals that the resilience of communities and the adaptive capacity in PIC societies very much rest with densely knit customary societal networks of support and reciprocity, with customary authorities and institutions as effective and legitimate governance actors and mechanisms. Relocation is not just an issue that can be dealt with in the framework of the state and according to the laws of the state, implemented and enforced by state institutions, but it has to include local customary non-state (as well as civil society) institutions.

Traditional authorities – chiefs and elders, tribal leaders, religious authorities, healers, wise men and women – are of major importance for the organisation of everyday life in the weak states of Oceania. They are in charge of the governance of communities, natural resources and the environment; they often follow customary law (and not the written law of the state), they regulate resource use and solve disputes (not least disputes over land and other natural resources) according to local customs. Hence communities' adaptive capacity – seen not as a technical issue, but in its political and social dimensions – rests with them.

Such customary institutions are of major significance in particular with regard to the establishment and maintenance of peaceful relations between settlers and host communities and with regard to a holistic approach to the 'land' issue with all its aspects, including the 'soft' – cultural, psychological, spiritual – dimensions. The same holds true for the churches as the most important civil society organisations in PIC. The vast majority of Pacific Islanders are devout Christians. State institutions in PIC might not reach far beyond the urban centres, but the churches are everywhere on the

ground. They can provide valuable leadership in adaptation and resettlement governance. Engaging with the churches and with traditional authorities like chiefs and elders, however, requires respect for their ways of operating and their worldviews, and this first and foremost means acknowledging the cultural and spiritual dimensions of the resettlement issue.

The latest IPCC assessment report in its chapter on Human Security stresses the importance of this dimension, by saying that climate change threatens "cultural practices embedded in livelihoods and expressed in narratives, world views, identity, community cohesion and sense of place. Loss of land and displacement, for example on small islands and coastal communities, has well documented negative cultural and well-being impacts" (Adger/IPCC 2014, 2).

'Western' actors such as international donors, international organisations and INGOs which come in with good intentions, willing to provide financial and technical support, all too often underestimate or misunderstand these 'soft' aspects of relocation. They are well advised to overcome a narrow technical and economic approach in favour of an integrated and holistic approach which builds on the complementarity and collaboration of all governance actors who are of relevance for resettlement governance under conditions of fragility and hybridity of political order.



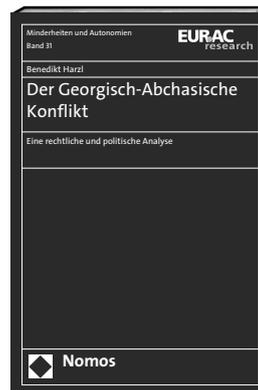
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¹⁵ On "bridging organizations" and their role in climate change adaptation strategies, in particular with regard to connecting various actors and supporting reciprocal transfer of knowledge, see Petzold and Ratter 2015.

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Der georgisch-abchasische Konfliktfall belastet bis heute die Entwicklungschancen der gesamten Region des Kaukasus. In dieser Studie nimmt der Autor eine sowohl rechtliche als auch politische Analyse dieses eingefrorenen Konflikts vor und betont die Wichtigkeit eines verstärkten Engagements der EU.

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