



CLIMATE CHANGE AND CONFLICT RISKS IN THE PACIFIC



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AUTHORS:

The Climate Change and Conflict Risks in the Pacific paper was developed and written by Kate Higgins and Ciaran O'Toole, with inputs from Adi Vasulevu, Paolo Baleinakorodawa, Alex Azarov and Bianca Monteiro.

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552 Victoria Street
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Australia

Burghley Yard, 106 Burghley Road
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United Kingdom

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SUMMARY

The Pacific region is experiencing the environmental effects of climate change, including an escalating rate of natural disasters, along with coastal erosion and land salinity as a result of rising sea levels. These environmental effects are likely to only increase in the coming decades. In a region with a high reliance on the economic use of land, and land playing a central role in kinship and community identity, these environmental impacts pose significant economic and social challenges for the region.

However, it should not be assumed that these challenges will lead directly to violent conflict.¹ Pacific communities have evolved around cooperation, resolving conflict and building peace for many centuries, including weathering the social effects of environmental change. There are many examples of Pacific communities working together to address these challenges peacefully.² Examples include the use of flexible land tenure arrangements and gift giving in the Solomon Islands, and resettlement efforts of Carteret Islanders in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea.

Although it is important to avoid alarmism, there is a need to analyse and understand the conflict risks associated with climate change, and the potential for increased social tensions and violence. Such analysis can support governments, civil society, international organisations, and Pacific communities in their efforts to take a conflict sensitive approach to mitigating and managing the environmental and social changes to come.

This paper identifies and briefly outlines a number of climate change conflict risks within the Southwest Pacific region.³ It is based on emerging work by Conciliation Resources, focused on the climate change and conflict nexus in the Southwest Pacific (see Box 1). The paper also provides three initial recommendations for civil society organisations, national governments, international organisations and donors who are seeking to work with communities and governments to understand and prevent violent conflict arising from the impacts of climate change. These recommendations include:

- 1. Conducting community level analysis of conflict risks**, including developing an understanding of community level conflict drivers, along with community conflict resolution mechanisms.
- 2. Employing adaptive people-centred approaches**, including working with, and adapting with, the complex local community governance and justice systems.
- 3. Support inclusive and accountable governance**, in particular supporting a vibrant civil society and media.

BOX 1: CONCILIATION RESOURCES CLIMATE CHANGE & PEACEBUILDING PROGRAMME

Conciliation Resources in partnership with Transcend Oceania, the Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding, and the 'Climate Change and Conflict in Oceania network' led by the Toda Peace Institute have embarked on a peacebuilding programme to understand and address growing social, political and environmental conflict risks associated with climate change.

Based on the knowledge gained from working with communities, Conciliation Resources and Transcend Oceania have developed a conflict analysis and peacebuilding resource designed to engage with rural community members in a contextually sensitive way. This Adaptive Peacebuilding Methodology tool consists of five phases. The tool centres community engagement within community worldviews or the – Vanua Context – and is inclusive of different intersectional identities (see Box 3). We have begun to carry out phases of this methodology in three communities in Fiji: Vunidogoloa, Vunisavisavi and Naviavia.

Future work in the programme will also include several informal urban settlements in Suva, Fiji. The Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding will undertake an action research project in these settlements, providing valuable understanding of the challenges and conflict risks facing informal urban settlements.

The final component of this programme focuses on policy and advocacy, including the sharing of learning from this work across the Southwest Pacific and to wider audiences.

MAPPING CONFLICT RISKS IN THE SOUTHWEST PACIFIC

The following categorisation of conflict risks provides a basic breakdown of the climate change–conflict nexus in the Southwest Pacific region. Categorisation of such complex conflict issues is an inexact process, but can provide a guide to enable further localised contextual analysis. As such, this categorisation should be balanced against how communities themselves understand the conflict challenges they face, along with the abilities of Southwest Pacific communities to transform conflict and build peace.

Risk factor 1: Climate change, land use and community conflict

Central to analysing the effects of climate change in relation to conflict is understanding how land is managed and governed in the region. The majority of land and resources are managed by small land ownership groups. Land and access to its resources play a major part in local community identity, with a strong link to history, belonging and customary practice. The systems by which land and resources are governed, managed and distributed are not uniform across the region. There are levels of structure and hierarchy in some areas (the Fijian Vanua), with more complex community governance and dispersed leadership and decision-making in others.⁴

Managing community conflicts that arise from the management and distribution of land and resources, within and between kinship groups, is central to community governance and leadership in the region. Community leaders are often 'selected' based on their ability to manage such conflict. Likewise indigenous conflict resolution and peacebuilding practice, including community dialogue and reconciliation processes, often include the distribution of land and resources as the means to resolve conflict and build peace. These practices also tend to rely on community governance and leadership for management and initiation.

These community land and resource governance systems are at risk of becoming strained as a result of land degradation. The pace at which such land depletion is occurring as a result of climate change exacerbates this risk. Such change can also expose existing weaknesses within community governance and resource management. This in turn risks producing community conflicts and/or exacerbating existing tensions within and between communities. The indigenous conflict resolution and response mechanisms required to build and maintain peace, typically reliant on community governance, can also weaken under such circumstances.

Risk factor 2: Climate change related displacement and relocation

Given environmental impacts such as more severe and frequent weather events (tropical cyclones, floods, droughts etc.), and increased salinity and coastal erosion, communities in the Southwest Pacific are becoming displaced and/or are actively relocating. These trends are likely to continue and grow in the coming decades. There are several forms of relocation occurring, with three primary types described below.

Firstly, there are formalised programmes which relocate (or attempt to relocate) villages or townships. Such programmes are undertaken by governments, churches or civil society actors (e.g. Tulele Peisa in Bougainville). These programmes bring into contact local community worldviews, linked to community history and indigenous structures, with the worldviews of the newer 'settler' communities. These programmes also bring communities into contact with unfamiliar bureaucratic change processes (primarily state processes). Such programmes of resettlement and change can challenge existing communities' understandings of history linked to land, and their sense of community belonging. As mentioned, there are many cases where communities have managed these changes successfully, but such change, especially if implemented at pace, risks producing conflict within existing communities and between existing and settler communities.⁵

There are also questions around how indigenous conflict prevention and peacebuilding practices in these existing communities can work in such new resettlement arrangements. These peacebuilding practices, such as dialogue and mediation, tend to rely on common understandings of community history, kinship and belonging.

Second, there are examples of customary negotiations between indigenous landowning groups within indigenous frameworks, where kinship groups negotiate resettlement or land use between themselves.⁶ These are often peaceful, however, this can be complicated by intergenerational dynamics. What has been negotiated orally in one generation, may not have the same legitimacy in the next. In considering histories of settlement which have occurred throughout the region, climate change related resettlement could lead to tensions around land and resources in future generations. This conflict challenge can be seen in Naviavia, in the Wailevu District of Fiji, where there are complex issues over land, settlement, and potential resettlement, involving chiefs, existing settlers, those intending to settle, surrounding communities, tourism industry developers, the government and a prominent church.⁷



Third, and the most common form of resettlement, is ungoverned climate change-related mobility contributing to urban drift. This creates new peace and conflict challenges for the growing urban centres of the Southwest Pacific. Migrants relocate to informal settlements with reduced access to services, including clean water, public health and education. Such settlements are often excluded from economic opportunities (such as transport links). They also tend to be located in climate-vulnerable disaster-prone areas. Such marginalised settlements, with families and individuals often removed from their community governance systems, can result in a sense of disaffection, in particular among young people. (This is an area for further research within Conciliation Resources' climate and peacebuilding programme, see Box 1).

Risk factor 3: Conflict arising in the wake of natural disasters

Over centuries, the Pacific region has developed indigenous knowledge to prepare for, survive and recover from significant natural disasters. However, climate change is increasing the severity of their impact. Such natural disasters create immediate scarcity, and place government and local services under severe strain, testing the population's trust

in government, local authority, and even traditional governance. This strain is further tested where natural disasters affect already vulnerable and under-served areas, such as in informal urban settlements, with the potential for already excluded and marginalised groups, in particular urban youth, to engage in violence.⁸

The distribution of humanitarian aid in the aftermath of natural disasters, although essential, especially under circumstances of scarcity and vulnerability, can inadvertently create new forms of inclusion and exclusion (real or perceived), and exacerbate existing intergroup tensions (see Risk factor 4). Natural disasters can also affect various groups differently, putting some people at more risk of harm than others. For example, women or members of LGBTIQ+ communities may be subject to physical or sexual violence in evacuation centres in the aftermath of natural disasters (see Box 2).

Risk factor 4: Climate change responses causing conflict

Climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction, relocation, or environmental conservation programmes can disrupt existing conflict prevention/transformation systems. Tight timeframes for programme delivery, combined with communication and logistical difficulties associated with implementing such programmes

in rural and remote areas, can lead to limited community consultation and inclusion in project design and implementation. These programmes run the risk of failing to fully and meaningfully engage with often complex local governance and leadership arrangements, leading to leadership competition and challenge, and even inter-group conflict. There are several examples of development projects in the Southwest Pacific which have contributed to community conflict.⁹

Risk factor 5: Climate change and national governance

Crises, in particular natural disasters, can often increase existing power imbalances, and promote exclusion and marginalisation, especially in state-level decision-making processes. Crisis leadership favours quick, reactive, and less consultative processes, and leads to decision-making becoming concentrated in the hands of smaller groups of powerholders. This tightening of decision-making processes can be justified in the short-term, and is often driven by fear and actual expectations from the population. However, this process tends to reduce access to political power, in particular for marginalised groups, including women and youth.

With the potential for an increased frequency and severity of crises (natural disasters, migration etc) as a result of climate change, there is a danger that a form of crisis leadership begins to become normalised in states most affected by frequent natural disasters (such as Fiji), especially at a state governance level. This climate change effect could contribute to undermining democratic practice and norms, including undermining past progress in the participation of marginalised groups and women in decision-making. Such changes in governance practices, towards more authoritarian and centralised power structures, could ultimately contribute to increased political and social tensions, and conflict.

Crisis management can also take the form of increased and prolonged use of states of emergency and security responses. Such use of security forces, especially military, if sustained and prolonged in post-disaster events, can normalise the use of armed force as local forms of authority and justice. In certain parts of the Southwest Pacific region, for example in post-conflict areas and areas with separatist desires, such deployments may also constitute a particular conflict risk, including the risk of triggering past trauma, (e.g. in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands).

BOX 2: CONTEXTUALISE GENDER AND INTERSECTIONALITY WITHIN COMMUNITY FRAMEWORKS TO PROMOTE INCLUSION

It is important when conducting community level analysis to contextualise gender and intersectionality. A key challenge to working with communities is navigating who is included and excluded and impacts on how widely peace is experienced.

There is a need to be wary of blanket categories of men, women and youth as these categories can fail to identify issues of exclusion and marginalisation resulting from how power actually works within both community and national scales. Western categories of intersectional power – race, class, education and so on, may apply, but these analytical categories require interrogation. In the Pacific, appropriate intersectional identities may relate to who ‘can speak’ for land and resource use, who has customary powers, where does church leadership sit, who is related to whom, who is married into a community, who is able to employ both formal education and indigenous knowledge to negotiate outcomes and so on.

Meaningful inclusion based on contextualised power analysis of different community identities will require transformation of project and policy mechanisms to allow for greater inclusion of voices and the experiences that these voices represent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Conduct community level analysis of conflict risks

Gaining an understanding of the conflict risks associated with climate change in a particular area requires investing in grounded / community level conflict analysis, including an understanding of the drivers of conflict and the associated levels of conflict risk. This analysis should also include building an understanding of power and decision-making processes (see Box 2), along with community conflict resolution mechanisms. Such analysis needs to be done as part of a participatory process with communities. In understanding a community level conflict system(s), peacebuilding practice can then be orientated towards addressing how communities, civil society and governments might respond to the conflict challenges as climate change impacts increase, or as climatic events occur.

In undertaking climate change related work, such as relocation programmes, community level analysis is essential. Early identification and mitigation of conflict risks can help to prevent conflicts or to manage them effectively throughout the project. Part of conducting such analysis, and gaining an understanding of conflict sensitivity, is ensuring projects take a do-no-harm approach.¹⁰ The principles of do-no-harm are based on an understanding that when an intervention – whether it be humanitarian, development or peacebuilding – enters a context, it becomes part of that context, and needs to be considered as part of the analysis.

Recommendation 2: Employ adaptive people-centred methodologies

For organisations implementing climate change related work, it is important to include indigenous knowledge, and existing peacebuilding and justice systems. Such localised knowledge, and governance systems, developed over centuries, form a complex social environment within each community. Global anxiety and the perceived need for urgency of action as a result of climate change needs to be balanced with the time and patience needed to understand and work with this complex system.

In responding to environmental and social challenges, within such complex environments, there is a need to take an adaptive programming approach. This involves analysing both the context and the programme's interaction with the context on a continuous basis, paying special attention to conflict risks. Through this analysis the programme can both adapt to answer to conflict risks, and identify new opportunities for conflict management and prevention that may arise as the work progresses. There should be an ongoing dialogue

with communities, enabling them to interact with, and provide input and feedback on the programme in real time.

Community and national peacebuilders, including individuals, organisations and government officials with peacebuilding skills and a depth of understanding of indigenous knowledge and practice, play a crucial role in enabling a people-centred approach. Such local peacebuilders (who do not always self identify as peacebuilders) should form part of project implementation teams, as analysts, advisors, mediators and/or interlocutors.

The adaptive peacebuilding methodology described in this paper (see Box 3) provides one approach for international organisations, government ministries, and for communities themselves to co-design responses within existing community frameworks.

Recommendation 3: Support for civil society

Whilst speed is of the essence in responding to immediate crises (such as following natural disasters), and governments must be able to react quickly in deploying resources, this should not override and degrade governance accountability mechanisms into the longer term. Important to maintaining inclusive and accountable governance, as the number and severity of crises escalate, is a vibrant and independent civil society and media. These institutions should be supported to advocate for, and use, state transparency and accountability mechanisms to maintain a level of monitoring and reporting on political power-holders and state governance more broadly.

As crises affect men, women, youth and marginalised groups differently, civil society also plays an important role in identifying specific needs and providing localised and targeted support, working with communities in ways that are sensitive to local conflict dynamics. As such the conflict effects of climate change make it even more important for a vibrant and effective civil society to work with and coordinate with state government institutions in times of crisis, while maintaining their role of holding state governance to account.

BOX 3: ADAPTIVE PEACEBUILDING METHODOLOGY

The adaptive peacebuilding methodology is based upon complex systems thinking, which recognises that resilience and agency is embedded within the complexity of each community context, such as the complex governance, relationships, and conflict resolution systems within a community. The role of outside actors and programmes is often limited, with top-down change potentially doing more harm than good. The adaptive peacebuilding methodology focuses on establishing relationships which facilitate the building of insights, encourage inclusion, and facilitate internal and external networking. This is a way of supporting sustainable change as a result of externally-resourced actions.

The adaptive peacebuilding methodology is based around six key peacebuilding phases. For the most part the methodology follows a sequential process, however, the phases are non-linear and can overlap, may occur multiple times or in different orders. This mirrors our understanding that change itself is non-linear.

An important aspect of this adaptive methodology in a crisis prone environment is the need to quickly stop and adapt during an emerging crisis (for example immediately following a cyclone). In establishing trust and relationships in communities, the project needs to be able to contribute to supporting the community at these times.

The first phase is entry and relationships, which recognises existing legitimacy around decision making in communities and lays foundations for exchange between community members and those entering into the context. This is also an opportunity to understand how to work within existing community frameworks (or with cultural practices), and to assess the major conflict risks to inform phase two. Phase two is research and inquiry and draws together different transformative research methodologies to understand conflict risks in more detail. This phase should also seek to be inclusive of a wide range of perspectives (see Box 2).

The third phase is sense-making which is a process by which people give meaning to their collective experiences. It involves joint analysis of key themes, stories and meta-stories with communities and external actors in a way that is accessible and oriented towards actions. The fourth phase is community-led peacebuilding initiatives which draws together the grounded analysis to develop peacebuilding actions.

The final two phases can and should occur throughout the methodology, but can be done as discrete activities within the sequence. The fifth phase is reflections, learnings and new actions which asks questions such as what has changed or stayed the same and why? Which peacebuilding strategies are working or what adaptations could be made to improve outcomes, what would people like to see happen next in their community, nationally, regionally and at the global level? This can feed into the final phase which is advocacy and learnings at scale which aims to connect experiences and stories to regional, national and global scales. This connection can work across geographies and scales, and can be facilitated through a variety of methods such as comparative learning or joint analysis workshops or policy advocacy.



ENDNOTES

1. The word Conflict can have different meanings in different places, and likewise can have different understandings across the Pacific. For the purposes of this paper, Conflict can be defined as serious disagreement or arguments between groups of people, and typically protracted. Violent Conflict can be defined as these disagreements resulting in violent clashes and or violent incidents, and can be between individuals and groups, and can also include the destruction of property.
2. For example, communities in Solomon Islands have been able to draw on flexible land tenure relations to adapt to coastal erosion and facilitate relocations. Gift exchange, practiced in Solomon Islands and other parts of Melanesia, may enable migrants to access land belonging to another group; the land is not alienated from the original custodians, but gifting relations may provide access to land for subsistence purposes and migrants may develop other social relations with the group through marriage or adoption (Fitzpatrick, D., & Monson, R. 2015. Land Law and Natural Disasters in the South Pacific. *Alternative Law Journal*, 40(3), 195–198: 249).

Another example is the Carteret Islands in Papua New Guinea. The Carteret people established their own NGO, Tulele Peisa, to coordinate the relocation of islanders to mainland Bougainville due to rising sea levels and salt water intrusion. Tulele Peisa has drawn on existing kinship networks and engaged in reciprocal gifting with host communities, including through exchange programs with chiefs, women and youth, to attempt to avoid resentments in the post-conflict context (George, N. 2016. Institutionalising Women, Peace and Security in the Pacific Islands: Gendering the ‘architecture of entitlements’? *International Political Science Review*, 37(3), 375–389). The relocation program has explicitly incorporated the needs and interests of host communities to ensure they also benefit from health, education and income generation opportunities – this is to avoid preferential treatment of the relocated community and avoid jealousy and tensions between the communities (Boege, V., & Rakova, U. 2019. Climate Change-Induced Relocation: Problems and Achievements – the Carterets Case. *Toda Peace Institute*, 33: 5).
3. Conciliation Resources has worked in the Southwest Pacific, the sub-region of the Pacific, often referred to as Melanesia, for over 25 years. Our existing programming includes a regional programme which shares comparative knowledge and practice across this region, plus specific programmes in Papua New Guinea (including the Autonomous Region of Bougainville) and Fiji. It is important to note that the challenges facing the atoll islands and nations will vary significantly from those presented here.
4. For example, chiefs and elders, tribal leaders, religious authorities, healers, big men and wise women can be in charge of the governance of communities, natural resources and the environment. They regulate resource use and can solve disputes (Boege, V. 2018. Climate Change and Conflict in Oceania. *Toda Peace Institute*, 17).
5. In the 1950-60s, due to environmental pressures, British colonial administrators resettled groups of Gilbertese people originally from contemporary Kiribati to the Solomon Islands, after a failed relocation to the Phoenix Islands (Taba. 2019. Climate Change Migration and Displacement: Learning from Past Relocations in the Pacific. *Social Sciences*, 8(7), 218). Sixty years after resettlement, uncertainty around land tenure remains and there are tensions between the Gilbertese and Melanesian groups (Donner, S. D. 2015. The legacy of migration in response to climate stress: Learning from the Gilbertese resettlement in the Solomon Islands. *Natural Resources Forum*, 39(3–4), 191–201).
6. Monson, R., & Daniel F. 2015. Negotiating relocation in a weak state: Land tenure and adaptation to sea-level rise in Solomon Islands. *Global Implications of Development, Disasters and Climate Change*. Routledge: 260-275.
7. Baleinakorodawa, P. 2021. “China, Kiribati, Fiji, and a Village on Vanua Levu: A Textbook Example of the Multi-Scalar Effects of Climate Change.” *Toda Peace Institute*.
8. This was the case in the 2014 riots in Honiara, the Solomon Islands, after the flooding that hit the capital, Honiara.
9. Allen, M., Dinnen, S., Evans, D. & Monson, R. 2013. Justice Delivered Locally: Systems, Challenges, and Innovations in Solomon Islands. Justice for the poor research report. World Bank, Washington, DC.
10. CDA Collaborative. Conflict Sensitivity and Do No Harm. <https://www.cdacollaborative.org/what-we-do/conflict-sensitivity/>

Conciliation Resources is an international organisation committed to stopping violent conflict and creating more peaceful societies. We work with people impacted by war and violence, bringing diverse voices together to make change that lasts.

Conciliation Resources
552 Victoria Street
North Melbourne VIC 3051
Australia

Burghley Yard,
106 Burghley Road, London NW5 1AL
UK

@ cr@c-r.org

+44 (0)20 7359 7728

www.c-r.org

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