

FOCUS ON MIGRATION: A CLOSER LOOK AT 'CLIMATE REFUGEES'



Image credit: Jocelyn Carlin/Panos

Speed read

- Climate refugee is a popular term in media stories about island communities
- But migration away from such islands is about more than rising sea levels
- Such oversimplification overlooks the multicausal nature of human movements

On the sidelines of last month's international conference on small island developing states (SIDS) in Samoa, Kiribati's president, Anote Tong, said: "I have never encouraged the status of our people being refugees." [1]

It was a strong denial of the term 'climate refugee', which appears in media stories galore. Sadly, such stories often portray the risk of displacement for inhabitants of Pacific island states such as

Kiribati and Samoa in a way that is reminiscent of cartoons of a shipwrecked man on a desert island.

Of course, we should not dismiss the threat of sea-level rise. Numerous low-lying islands, deltas and coastlines could lose land not only as a direct impact of it, but also due to increased erosion and wave impacts.

Yet in reality, it is not solely the prospect of the edges of their homelands sinking that drives people from islands, as new research shows.

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Max Martin

A study led by Robert Stojanov of Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic analysed key environmental factors considered to influence population movement in Tuvalu. [2] They found that, though this Pacific island state is threatened by sea-level rise, many other factors including water insecurity, some of which interact with climate change, drive large population movements.

The authors examined existing types of environment-related migration and displacement — namely migration for economic reasons and displacement due to development projects, as well as events such as rising sea level and cyclones.

Their study shows that Tuvaluans who can foresee climate and environment-related impacts get enough time to plan their movements. But other research shows that sometimes people are forced to move without such plans because they experience events such as unusually high tides — known locally as ‘king tides’ — that increasingly inundate parts of the islands. [3]

Inhabitants of low-lying islets have also been evacuated due to freshwater shortages or cyclones

or tsunami warnings. And, periodically, there are less obvious pressures: during the Second World War, for instance, many Tuvaluans were displaced by a development activity, the construction of a US airfield.

These observations show that catch-all terms such as ‘climate refugee’ are problematic — it is important to acknowledge their limitations and put them in context. Stojanov’s team concluded its paper by cautioning against allowing the term ‘refugee’ to be redefined in this way. I agree. And not least because the term is too ‘sacred’ a notion in international politics, as I have said before, to be redefined willy-nilly.

Besides, for people living in SIDS, migration is frequently for multiple and complex reasons, says Ilan Kelman, a UK-based co-author of the study from University College London.

The recent study illustrates the same multicausal, fuzzy, context-specific nature of human movements as an earlier one about Tuvalu. [3]

But the media rarely cover papers providing such a nuanced view, while sensational projections tend to get widely publicised. For instance, *The Independent*, a UK newspaper, reported in 2008: “As many as one billion people could lose their homes by 2050 because of the devastating impact of global warming.” [4] Such statements based on half-baked studies get worldwide media attention, though critics call them ‘unserious’ and ‘alarmist’. [5]

A popular newsroom joke about such sensational reporting goes: “It’s an amazing story — I hope it’s true as well.” The notion of ‘climate refugees’ certainly falls into this category.

Source : <http://www.scidev.net/global/migration/analysis-blog/focus-on-migration-a-closer-look-at-climate-refugees.html>