

# 70 Year Protecting People Forced to Flee

## Short regional panel reports

*Please complete this form for each regional panel hosted by your institution. Each panel report should be approximately 1000 words.*

*All regional reports will be compiled into a final document. The purpose is to provide a general description of what took place in each panel and provide specific policy/advocacy recommendations for stakeholders. Please write in paragraphs rather than bullet points.*

**Region: Asia-Pacific**

**Hosting/organising institution: Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, University of NSW, Sydney, Australia**

**Session Title: RE-EXAMINING DISPLACEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF DISASTERS AND CLIMATE CHANGE: A PACIFIC PERSPECTIVE**

**Context/Background of the panel** (*you may wish to use your panel concept note to provide context to your panel's topic*):

This panel problematizes and critiques the notion of 'displacement' in the context of disasters and climate change. While the threat posed by climate change is real, its manifestations are not as straightforward as we might think. For instance, the idea that rising sea levels will displace millions of people and create 'climate refugees' is a popular trope, but it has little evidential grounding. Within the Pacific, multiple and diverse types of mobility, as well as immobility, have been used as coping strategies over centuries. This panel explores how a more nuanced understanding of displacement in the context of disasters and climate change, and its relationship to international protection, can open up possibilities for different kinds of durable solutions.

### **Major points arising from speakers and discussions:**

- Most Pacific Islanders want to remain in their homes, but there is also widespread recognition that people need to have options to move out of harm's way before disaster strikes. Almost all movement in the Pacific is internal (which was the focus of the discussion).
- Internal relocation is already one way that communities are moving out of harm's way – Fiji and Vanuatu have developed guidelines on internal displacement and/or relocation.
- We need to adopt a more attenuated approach to projections of sea-level rise and the impacts on settlements. The media is often captivated by doomsday scenarios, and while it is absolutely clear that climate change is having extensive (negative) impacts on communities, the relationship between those impacts and human mobility is more complex.

- International refugee law is generally not a good fit in this context, although it may offer protection in some circumstances (given the interaction between climate change and other drivers of movement). Other international legal frameworks, such as human rights law and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, are relevant/ There is now considerable international guidance that has been developed to address internal and cross-border movement.
- Consultation and planning with affected communities is essential, and the voices of Pacific scholars can also provide enormous insights into people's needs, adaptive capacity and resilience.
- Land, ocean and people are interconnected in the Pacific.
- Planned relocations may create new opportunities (eg to build more sustainable communities, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals) but they can also result in more negative impacts (eg changing diets, loss of ancestral lands)
- A lot of cross-border labour mobility has been temporary; more permanent opportunities are needed as well.

**Recommendations/Conclusions on the way forward** *(These should be actionable and directed to specific actors):*

- GAIN should seek to build a critical mass of Pacific scholars as part of its network
- The voices of Pacific communities and scholars should be included in future panels convened to discuss displacement in the context of disasters and climate change, and included in policy discussions (GAIN/UNHCR/Platform on Disaster Displacement)
- Empirical evidence should always underpin/drive policy/legal recommendations on this issue (all actors)

**Top two quotations from the session:**

‘The question of who decides you should move is of significance because it determines the level of expectation. ... In terms of consultation, it’s not just several visits to the villages to the community to inform them of the plans for relocation, but also just really understanding their perceptions and feelings. And how they see the relocation would be in terms of their future as well.’ (Dr Tammy Tabe)

‘The Pacific has largely avoided the pandemic ... . A lot of people have cited the remoteness of Pacific islands as a major factor, but actually the Pacific Islands have been incredibly effective at taking proactive steps locking down borders, taking rapid action. And I think this is the same in the climate change space: they are often held up as these iconic sites of vulnerability and risk and exposure, yet the Pacific Islands are also places where some of the

most forward-thinking and active policy and community action is occurring, so there are lots of synergies and complexities ... and definitely lessons to be learned.' (Dr Celia McMichael)