PRAGMATIC DISCOURSES and ALTERNATIVE RESISTANCE: RESPONSES to CLIMATE CHANGE in the PACIFIC

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THIS PAPER explores the portrayals of climate change by United Nations diplomats, ambassadors and representatives from intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Counter discourses are also revealed through interviews conducted with ambassadors representing small Pacific states at the United Nations. Among the literatures that posit climate change is occurring, there has been a broad consensus that the impacts of climate change threaten the long-term capacity for people to continue living in small island states such as Tuvalu or Kiribati.[1] Pacific island states are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change as their fresh water reserves are limited to a shallow subsurface lens which is susceptible to depletion in drought and contamination from salt water. Further, the height of these atoll states above sea-level rarely exceeds two metres, which makes them highly susceptible to wave damage. The ecological balance of these systems is in threat even due to minor alterations to global climate. Even by the most conservative estimates of climate change, major alterations in the response of the hydrologic behaviour of these islands will ensue.[2]

Norman Myers is an ecologist and academic who has written extensively on the links between environmental change, security and population displacement.[3] Myers draws a simplistic causal relationship – if lands become degraded or forests disappear or seas rise, then people will be forced to flee their homelands and become environmental refuges. One of Myers' publications specifically focused on the role that the impacts of climate change played in the environmental refugee debate.[4] Myers[5] maintained that large numbers of environmental refugees would result from climate change with encroaching shorelines, coastal erosion and flooding, extreme weather events and agricultural disruption. The estimates provided by Myers[6] were developed on the basis of a scenario of the world affected by climate change in 2050 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.[7] This scenario used a business as usual setting for climate change, which meant little or no control of global greenhouse gas emissions at 1990 levels up until 2050. From this forecasted scenario of the impacts of climate change on the world, Myers[8] numerically projected the flows of environmental refugees. For example, Myers[9] estimated that 30 million people from China would be forcibly displaced, as would 14 million people from Egypt and 1 million people from island states. All these figures were considered conservative estimates.

This study adopts a poststructuralist approach to assist in uncovering social constructions implicit in how we perceive issues, people and place. Poststructuralism is a paradigm or method that analyses 'power as networks of local power relations, and discourse as polyvalent and productive'.[10] The adoption of a poststructuralist approach means that categories, terminology and the merit of particular knowledge's are not taken for granted. In the current study then, multiple and shifting discourses of climate change are explored. Discourses are the ideas and statements that allow us to make sense of things – 'language in action'.[11] Waitt[12] explained that Foucault 'conceptualizes discourses within a theoretically informed framework that investigates the rules about the production of knowledge through language (meanings) and its influence over what we do (practice)'. In this way, discourses are the system of signs that surround us and as such can influence and regulate our thoughts, actions, and understandings of self and of those around us. Foucault[13] argued that discourses generally refer to a type of language associated with an institution, as they include ideas and statements that express an institution's values. Discourses work through institutional settings, informing and shaping how individuals see the world and act within it. These discourses can be analysed at different levels, from basic statements to accrued discursive formations and events. Discourses are also associated with games of truth, which work within institutions such as the United Nations, to authorise what can be judged as a truth, or untruth.[14] Foucault[15] argued that knowledge and truth allow for and justify the way people are regulated and governed, which can demonstrate how power is exercised.[16]

Literature on the culture-nature distinction informs this paper and is interpreted as part of the poststructuralist framework. Culture (or society), seen as a uniquely human trait, has largely been socially constructed as the binary opposite of nature.[17] The binary between culture-nature has been one of the most constant to order our political and intellectual existence.[18] Such binaries, along with man-woman and white-black (concepts cemented in the period of Enlightment) have had extensive impacts on the ordering of societal categories[19], despite the ecological fact that humans are a primate species and very much a part of nature – indeed inseparable from it. Geographers have long sought to explain this interface.[20]

Binary constructions of culture and nature are problematic given that humans are in the privileged position to exercise power over much of the non-human world and establish unequal relationships of power.[21] Demeritt[22] has argued that the relationship between society and nature is often the root of environmental destruction.[23] Demeritt[24] argued that through a better understanding of how nature has been socially constructed we can 'acknowledge the power of humans to shape nature both through our concepts and through the material practices that lead to and follow from those ways of constru(ct)ing nature'. Challenging the social categorization of nature can shed light on how environmental problems might be addressed or alleviated. One way of challenging such a categorization is through the close and critical scrutiny of texts (speeches, transcripts, reports and so on). Through an analysis of interview transcripts with various actors at the United Nations and within the IGO and NGO fields, this paper explores the constitution of representations of climate change, particularly in relation to impacts among Pacific small island states. To this end, this paper is concerned with *how* United Nations diplomats, ambassadors and representatives from IGOs and NGOs consider the

appropriate response of the international community to the threats posed by climate change. Indeed, the interdependent relationship between culture and nature is at the heart of the issue of climate change and its associated impacts on human societies.

Research Approach

The key method utilized for this research was in-depth semi-structured interviews. Prior to this however, some ethnographic work[25] was undertaken at the key loci of United Nations policy-making; the United Nations' headquarters in New York. The purpose of this ethnographic work was to better understand the inner workings of the United Nations, including personalities, terminology and structure, as well as to develop a greater appreciation of the most current United Nations initiatives in the area of climate change. By establishing an internship with a prominent NGO in New York that monitors global policy-making at the United Nations (Global Policy Forum), access was gained to United Nations conferences, panel discussions and working groups. This ethnographic work was crucial for the initial research phase as it allowed a greater appreciation of the functioning of the United Nations, and in identifying key people at the United Nations in regards to climate change issues including population displacement.[26]

Based on the ethnographic work, I developed a list of potential informants and each were requested for an interview. These interviews (listed in Table 1) were held with Pacific ambassadors (including the Australian ambassador), United Nations diplomats and representatives from IGO and NGOs. The United Nations diplomats selected included for example those working on climate change issues with UNEP or the Division for Sustainable Development in the Secretariat, or on refugee issues with UNHCR. As for the representatives from IGOs and NGOs, these were selected on the basis of whether their organization worked in the environment, international policy, refugee or migration fields and in the Pacific region. A total of forty-five interviews were held between March and October 2004 in New York, Washington, London, Geneva and Bangkok.

Table 1: List of informants (the italics indicate how these informants are referred to throughout the paper)

Informants	Number	Location
Pacific ambassadors (a-h) from Pacific countries including Australia	8	New York
Other ambassadors (a-b) from other small island developing states	2	New York
Diplomats (a-b) from Australian and New Zealand missions	2	New York
Under Secretary General (a) for small island developing states	1	New York
United Nations diplomats (a-n) who advise or work with Pacific small island states	14	New York, Geneva, Bangkok
IGO representatives (a-j) who work in the environment, international policy, refugee or migration fields <u>and</u> in the Pacific	10	New York, London, Geneva
NGO representatives (a-h) who work in the environment, international policy, refugee or migration fields <u>and</u> in the Pacific	8	New York, Washington, London
TOTAL	**45**	

Qualitative methods, such as interviewing, are considered to be a flexible and rich form of data collection that gives voice to those that may otherwise not be heard.[27] While in-depth interviews were selected as the most appropriate method for this research[28], a rigid interview format was not employed as it was not necessary to compare the responses of informants to questions worded or ordered in the same way. Instead, a guide containing a list of topics to cover in the interview was used[29] to allow for the dialogue to flow freely and informants were able to shift the dialogue if they so wished with ease. The topics included in the interview differed according to the informant; however the broad themes addressed across the course of the interviews were climate change (including its role in population displacement), Pacific states and their capacity to have their concerns addressed by the United Nations, and the mechanisms of United Nations policy-making. Interviews were almost always held at the informant's office, and only in a few cases did informants request to conduct the interview outside their office – for instance preferring to meet in a local cafe. Informants were asked before the commencement of the interview if it could be recorded digitally – the majority of informants consented to this and were made aware that the recording could be paused or stopped at any stage of the interview.

Discourses of pragmatic bilateralism

Three major themes were revealed in interviews with diplomats, ambassadors, and IGO and NGO representatives. The range of responses to the issue of climate change included perceptions that action should only be taken in a crisis situation, when the time comes to deal with the impacts, and only through bilateral means rather than at the multilateral level.

Discourse 1: "Crisis-only"

This section explores how United Nations diplomats and IGO and NGO representatives have portrayed the issue of climate change and in turn contributed to a dominant pragmatic discourse on the international response to this issue. In doing this we can begin to better understand how the United Nations responds to transnational environmental problems such as climate change. In an interview with a diplomat from the Bangkok-based Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, questions were raised about the extent of their work in providing assistance to small Pacific states that have been affected by unpredictable weather patterns and sea level rise. The diplomat responded that:

> We have to think of donor countries' priorities and hence we examine those natural disasters that can displace people that are emergencies. Those that pose a longer-term risk such as climate change are therefore not considered a disaster. It does come down to a matter of priorities for the people concerned and also with the priorities of the donors and then you need to be accountable.[30]

On this basis it appears that some environmental issues, particularly those transnational in nature such as climate change, are not seen as acute disasters and thus do not warrant the immediate aid of the United Nations. In this way, *how* environmental issues and concerns are socially constructed matters.[31] The United Nations response to issues or events is on the basis of how environmental issues are selectively constructed as a disaster or crisis.

As part of this research, interviews were also sought with those involved at the multilateral and intergovernmental level in relation to migration and refugee concerns. At the time of fieldwork, the Global Commission on International Migration had only begun its work to develop a normative, functioning and universal framework on how to handle all types of forced migration. An interview was sought in Geneva with the Director of Policy and Research at the Commission, and it soon became obvious from the Director that the stance on the issue of climate change and displacement was that solutions would just emerge:

> I really think that the way in which the international community responds is very much dependent on the type of the problem that you've got. If it's a problem of a typhoon and people lose their housing and shelter then United Nations Centre for Human Settlements might play a role because that's their role. If you have an epidemic, it might be the World Health Organization. So it's very much the nature of the thing, and if children were involved it might be UNICEF. Say schools and educational institutions were destroyed then it might be UNICEF plus UNESCO.[32]

Based on this account by the Director, international responses to environmental and social issues – and indeed the nexus between the two – are not clear-cut. Rather, they are determined only once the severity and scope of that issue has been established. This reactive, wait and see mentality is shaped by how these events are portrayed. Again, issues gain attention and policy momentum at the United Nations on the basis of whether they are constructed as a crisis.[33]

For small island states this implies that they would have to be constantly battered by cyclones and other severe weather events to gain attention and action from the international community. In this context, the interviews with United Nations diplomats and IGO representatives indicated that the international community would only deal with those impacted by climate change in a crisis situation. Reiterating this point was a head researcher with a Washington-based NGO that assess international migration and refugee policy. In discussing how the international community should respond to small Pacific states facing the impacts of climate change, the researcher argued that:

> When it comes to the Pacific, it has to get to crisis point before anyone does anything. For example, when the water turns so salinised that there is no way they can drink it, then something will happen, but not until then.[34]

This quote exemplifies the importance of the specific social constructions of crises. It is on this basis – the immediacy of an issue – that the international community is triggered into action. Masters[35] argued that the response of the United Nations for instance to environmental problems and issues is to 'wait for environmental crises to occur and it is only then moved to aid some of the victims some of the time… the culture of reaction'. The United Nations is reactive to the level of environmental crisis, which weakens the United Nations' ability to mitigate long-term, accumulative environmental problems, such as climate change.

A high-ranking diplomat in the Treaty Section of the United Nations Secretariat was asked in an interview about how they saw the United Nations position on people being forced from their homelands as a result of climate change. The diplomat stated that 'maybe it is no longer considered to be important, if it happens it happens. And something will be done to accommodate these people'.[36] This view reflects how actions by the United Nations only follow crises of a certain type. While this position might be because of stretched resources at the United Nations, such a policy position defers genuine debate about the long-term impacts of climate change, particularly in small island states, and any protective frameworks for those affected by potential displacement as a result of these impacts.

Discourse 2: "Deal with it"
This section begins with a brief analysis of one of the keystone multilateral documents relating to the sustainable development of small island developing states. An early United Nations initiative that sought to address the sustainable development of these states in light of climate change was the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (in 1994) held in Barbados. This event resulted in the United Nations Barbados Programme of Action [37], a blueprint for small island developing states and the international community to address and support their sustainable development. In the Programme's assessment of climate change and sea level rise, there was an overriding emphasis on adaptation strategies for these states such as building technological capacity and resources for them to deal with climate change. For example, it was recommended in the Programme that the governments of these states must develop 'adequate response strategies, adaptation policies and measures

to minimize the impact of climate change, climate variability and sea level rise'.[38] This United Nations initiative imposed a deal with it situation for these small island states, leaving them to bear the burden of the impacts of climate change. This situation, imposed by the United Nations (on the basis of the Programme initiative), reveals how the United Nations negotiated a discourse on island states affected by climate change. The governance of transnational environmental pollution was de-centred from the multilateral to national scales. Responsibility for the impacts of climate change fell on the governments of small island states to adapt.

This "let them deal with it" attitude was further probed in interviews conducted in 2004 for this paper. Interviews were held with diplomats from two United Nations agencies (the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction and the Office of the High Representative for Small Island Developing States). The diplomat from the International Strategy was asked to reflect on how they assisted small island states, particularly in the Pacific, in reducing their risk to the impacts of climate change. The diplomat responded that:

> So far our main concern for small island developing states is to put in place risk sharing mechanisms so they can deal with the impact of climate change and related extreme weather events… Hopefully, small island developing states governments will be taking a broader approach to this issue and encouraging a wide range of measures related to risk reduction and adaptation in small island developing states to reduce their very special vulnerabilities.[39]

According to this diplomat, small island states must prepare themselves for climate change and deal with the impacts it brings. This position was discursively different to those interviewed from other United Nations agencies that made the case that they would only assist these states in a crisis situation. Here, the agency was pro-active, but these small island states were still expected to bear the burden of change being inflicted upon them, by adapting to the impacts of climate change.

The role of the Office of the High Representative for Small Island Developing States is to provide support for these states by advocating their special needs in the media, to donors, through various United Nations offices and to IGOs and NGOs. The Under Secretary General for this United Nations Office was asked in an interview whether the displacement of people and communities in small island states of the Pacific was inevitable and if so who should be responsible for assisting these states and communities. The Under Secretary General argued that:

> Population movement as one of the dimensions of climate change is very important to take note. What should be realized is that climate refugees for the small islands is a reality and they cannot deny it – the negative aspects of this reality, so each of the islands will have to adapt itself to the new situation… These are very, absolutely serious matters for people of those countries and those countries themselves.[40]

The Under Secretary General recognized and expressly discussed the negative aspects of climate change, contrasting starkly to the dismissive attitude of diplomats from other United Nations agencies. Yet the language of adaptation persisted. The Under Secretary General argued that each of the small island states will have to

individually adapt to the impacts of climate change. That is, these low-lying, small island states will be forced to bear the burden of environmental damage, expected to deal with it internally, and find local coping mechanisms. In this way, the discourse shifts the representation of small island states affected by climate change into managers and adapters. There is a clear injustice with this situation – the poor are expected to bear the burden of environmental changes initiated by others. Small island states are at the forefront of dealing with the impacts of climate change and sea level rise, yet they have contributed very little to the root causes of the problem. According to Davissen and Long[41], small island states have contributed only 0.06 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Although the Under Secretary General appeared to be empathetic to the situations faced by these states, the dominant discourse stemming from the interview, and echoed in other interviews with diplomats in United Nations agencies was that these small island states must adapt. This served to silence the urgency required to mitigate the root causes of climate change.

Discourse 3: "Push for bilateralism"
As illustrated in the above section, the Under Secretary General for small island states at the United Nations presented a case that these states must adapt to climate change. Further into the interview however, the Under Secretary General argued that if adaptation was not possible and if the impacts of climate change were far-reaching to cause population displacements, then bilateral agreements would need to be forthcoming:

> I believe that with respect to climate refugees, we will have to really wait and see, but Australia and New Zealand could take up some of the people who are coming out of Tuvalu. For Tuvalu it's good that Australia and New Zealand are there, and Australia is a vast country.[42]

This position mirrored earlier discourses stemming from United Nations diplomats that stipulated the need for a pragmatic approach to the issue of climate change. The argument here is that solutions will emerge when (and if) the time comes that those living in small island states of the Pacific can no longer adapt to the impacts of climate change. One solution posed by the Under Secretary General was for bilateral agreements between Pacific countries, such as between Tuvalu and Australia or New Zealand. Ad hoc agreements could be struck between regional geopolitical powers and small island states for one-off emergency in-takes. This approach therefore obviates multilateral institutions such as the United Nations of their responsibility to work with countries and communities affected by the impacts of climate change.

In part, this can be attributed to the trend in recent years of countries moving away from multilateral to unilateral, bilateral or regional actions. For example, United States foreign policy has focused on moving away from United Nations-sponsored activities to those of a more bilateral or unilateral nature. One of the most obvious examples has been the largely unilateral military intervention in Iraq in 2003.[43] Moreover, in the case of the international trading system, there has been a

recent resurgence in bilateral and regional trade agreements, as argued by Fortin[44] in the wake of the failure to reach consensus through the World Trade Organization.

A similar argument about bilateral pragmatism came from a diplomat based in Bangkok at the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. The informant argued that a regional or bilateral response would be more appropriate to address the specific issue of displacement of people in Pacific states as a result of climate change:

> Well the way I understand it, the way the system works, the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat in the region would have no choice; they have to act on this. It's a regional arm, whether they like it or not, that's their responsibility, they will have to do it. I think the United Nations and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific probably would come in later but I don't think in terms of very immediate needs – that's the responsibility at least for the Forum that much I know – to help with the immediate response… I don't think the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific has the money to come in and say look here's the money, I think that's a matter that's best handled by the Forum Secretariat and the New Zealand and Australian governments. I'm sure they would respond that's the first thing they will do.[45]

The Bangkok-based diplomat was adamant that the immediate responsibility for those displaced as a result of climate change would be borne by the Pacific Regional Forum or the Australian or New Zealand governments – not the United Nations and its consortium of member countries.

Interviews were not only sought from ambassadors of small Pacific states but also from Australia and New Zealand. In interviews with both the Australian ambassador and diplomatic officials from the Australian mission, the discourses on climate change and potential displacement were unified – a pragmatic bilateral response should ensue. In raising the question about responsibility for communities affected by climate change, including possible relocation, the ambassador responded:

> What are you saying? Are you wanting to say that we need an international instrument to make it easier for South Pacific Islanders to come to Australia when climate change affects them adversely? If yes, I would say to you that that's a very, very foolish way to go. It may be desirable in some ways but it would be a whole lot better to have an Australian policy that welcomes such migration to make it a lot easier. So the issue really is one about Australian national policy.[46]

For the ambassador, bilaterally negotiated agreements were considered as the most appropriate means to assist those impacted by climate change such that they are no longer able to remain in their homelands. A diplomat from the Australian mission to the United Nations provided further insights into why there was such a strong push for bilateral agreements in the case of climate change and subsequent population displacements:

> The executive committee, which is made up of 59 states, gives policy advice to UNHCR as a United Nations implementing agency on refugees. It is very focused on the Refugees Convention, which dates from 51 and the 67 amendments, it is based on a very narrow definition obviously. There will be real resistance in any

attempt to expand that definition… I think what you'll see are ad hoc arrangements, such as Australia-Tuvalu, done at a bilateral level and in many ways, bilateral and regional approaches are going to be much more effective and that has been our general point of departure in the Pacific in the past few years.[47]

Here was a deflation in optimism for a multilateral approach and solution to the issue of climate change and displacement. Multilateralism refers to multiple countries working together on a certain issue such as this. Instead, a strong push for bilateralism resonated – a political relationship between two states. The reasons for this discursive train might be many. For one, it might be that the diplomat considered a multilateral legally-binding instrument (that protects those displaced because of climate change) creates a new layer of responsibility for receiving countries. Another explanation might be linked to Australia's foreign policy position on climate change at the time of fieldwork. The (Howard) government at the time had refused to commit to multilateral initiatives such as the Kyoto Protocol. If the Australian government had decided to develop a bilateral agreement to accept people from affected nearby countries of the Pacific, because of the impacts of climate change, this could have further absolved them of their international responsibilities to curb climate change. Australia would have been seen at the multilateral level as helping their Pacific neighbours, deflecting attention from their moral obligations to substantially reduce global greenhouse gas emissions as part of a multilateral effort such as Kyoto.

The research director at the Global Commission on International Migration further explained the position held by the Australian ambassador and diplomatic official. The Director, who had previously held research and policy-making posts with UNHCR, reflected on the geopolitical arena in which these debates about climate change and potential population displacement are occurring:

The United States and a number of the other industrialized countries including Australia are taking a very hostile approach to any kind of multilateralism, particularly on migration. Their position is basically that we do what we want and we don't want any multilateral interference… The phrase that you hear all the time at the United Nations now is non-binding framework – of course these governments are happy to sign up to any kind of non-binding framework because they don't have to respect it.[48]

According to the Director, desires to find multilateral solutions to issues affecting the world and its people were on the decline. This is deeply troubling, given the inherently transnational, and hence multilateral, nature of contemporary environmental problems such as climate change. It indicates an emerging rift in the moral geography[49] of human-environment relations. Individual nations can over-exploit the environment, without becoming culpable at a global level for the impacts of their behaviour. Bilateral agreements might find homes for those displaced by climate change, but they absolve the guilt of offending nations, and in the process downplay the importance of multilateralism to global issues.

Alternative discourses of resistance

As explored above, discourses on the issue of climate change varied among United Nations diplomats and IGO and NGO representatives. For some, solutions would emerge pragmatically when needed – such that action on climate change was required only in crisis situations, and in the meantime small island states will just have to adapt to the impacts of climate change. For others, solutions in the form of bilateral agreements were considered an appropriate way of providing assistance for those displaced as a result of climate change. This section examines how ambassadors representing small Pacific states at the United Nations articulated a position on both the climate change debate, and on the possibility of being forced to flee their homelands as a result of the impacts of climate change.

A call for global action: climate change is a threat now
A common position of the ambassadors from small Pacific states was that climate change posed the primary threat to the survival and sustainability of their homelands. One ambassador concisely argued that 'the main issues for my country and the very existence of our nation are climate change and sea level rise'.[50] Likewise, another ambassador made the case that 'this is an issue for my country also, we have many fragile coral atolls and this climate change severely threatens their existence'.[51]

As examined above, the common discourse from employees at the United Nations and IGO and NGO representatives working in this field was that the international response to the impacts of climate change would ensue following crisis situations. However, according to Pacific ambassadors interviewed, the impacts of climate change were already being felt on the ground in their homelands – crisis situation for them was already occurring. For one ambassador:

> The adverse impacts are already happening. Climate change is already happening. To ask further for evidence to prove this, or to address uncertainties, or to argue on the basis of uncertainties, is to fly in the face of these casualties being incurred by small island developing states like Tuvalu. And not only because of these incidences, but in the day-to-day management of life, of living on the islands, there are serious water problems, because freshwater from the ground is being polluted by the intrusion of seawater… We are talking about a series of bad effects that are really affecting the security of the people – food security, water security and livelihood.[52]

The ambassador provided strong counter-arguments to discourses that climate change is not a serious threat or crisis.[53] Instead, the ambassador appeared frustrated in the interview that there were people at the United Nations who contested the severe reality of climate change, given the above account of the everyday problems incurred in their homelands as a result of the impacts of climate change.

Interviews were also conducted with ambassadors from two countries in the Indian Ocean. At the time of fieldwork in 2004, one of these countries held the chair of the Alliance of Small Island States at the United Nations. In an interview with the Alliance Chair (and ambassador), a similar discourse to the Pacific ambassadors emerged – that the impacts of climate change were already being experienced in their

homelands. The ambassador strongly criticized the pitiable response of the international community to climate change:

> Climate change has been affecting first and foremost the islands and the island communities. We have been calling attention to the international community to the effects of climate change. But now we are beginning to see the results of the inaction in the field of climate change with the increase in extreme weather conditions and events that epitomize this… We always feared that this was going to happen and now it is… Countries like Tuvalu and the Maldives are being threatened, seriously threatened by rising sea levels.[54]

The ambassador expressed shock over the position of some governments on climate change, arguing that 'I don't understand how these governments, like Australia, can claim nothing is happening'.[55] The ambassador appeared frustrated in the interview, as did a number of these ambassadors from small island states, over the international community's general denial of the seriousness of the impacts of climate change on these states.

The decision to interview a second ambassador from the Indian Ocean was based on the President of this country being the first to raise awareness at the United Nations in 1987 of the vulnerability of small island states to the impacts of climate change. In the interview with this ambassador, again this frustration over the limited action on climate change by the international community prevailed:

> The ill-acceptance by the communities of this world that this critical phenomenon is occurring and something has to be done, especially those parties who have contributed, is inconceivable. I find it all to be inconceivable that many, many people cannot be sensitive to this particular issue… This is the sad part of it, and as you can see, the United States has a strong 'will not sign Kyoto' position and Russia is reluctant to sign, these are very bad signals, very bad signals.[56]

The ambassador was disappointed that a much-needed international response to the issue of climate change had been shrouded by ill-acceptance. The second part of the above quote also signals awareness among small island states of the move away from multilateralism, on the part of industrial powers. Small states especially rely upon multilateral institutions because of their geopolitical marginality, and limited capacity to wield power in the fields of international diplomacy and trade. That industrialized countries might back away from taking climate change seriously was one thing; the retreat of the United States and such countries from important multilateral initiatives was another, far more significant concern.

More mitigation, less forced adaptation
This section examines how ambassadors of small Pacific states further negotiated discourses on climate change and resisted constructions as adaptable subjects as a result of climate change. For many Pacific ambassadors at the United Nations, it was crucial to push for the mitigation of climate change. Many expressed their strong aversion to adapting to the impacts of climate change, especially while the international community was doing little to prevent such impacts from occurring. The argument of these Pacific ambassadors for more mitigation and less adaptation

was confirmed in an interview with an environmental lawyer working with a London-based NGO, who assisted small island developing states at the climate change negotiations that took place in the 1990s:

> At the negotiations we focused on mitigation, to prevent climate change from happening, we didn't focus a great deal on adaptation. The idea was that the responses to climate change in terms of adaptation would be modification and retreat and I remember the small islands at the time thinking it was really offensive; this [retreat] was not an option that they wanted to consider.[57]

Focusing on off-shore migration as an adaptation strategy to climate change had the potential to portray these small island states as acknowledging defeat in the climate change battle. It sent a message, particularly to richer countries, that mitigation was not as important as adaptation. This last point was particularly crucial, because if adaptation was equated with relocation from one's homeland, there would be no premise to persuade the major polluters to mitigate and prevent further damage in those affected countries.

This point was further exemplified by the response of the diplomatic regional advisor in the United Nations Secretariat in relation to the climate change negotiations during the 1990s. In an interview, the diplomat explained that:

> We wanted to have it clearly stated that we wanted to prevent situations where places become uninhabitable, so that's why we started along this path by talking about avoiding greenhouse gas levels that would be dangerous.[58]

The diplomat asserted that small island states did not push for adaptation measures at these multilateral climate change negotiations. Such a stance would have sent the message that these states had given up on mitigation measures to avert climate change and its associated impacts.

Coal, gas and oil drive the world's dominant systems of production and transportation. These have allowed richer countries to enjoy lavish lifestyles, in comparison with the poorer world that are at the forefront of dealing with climate change. This was an inequality that small island states did not accept. In interviews for this research, it was clear from the ambassadors representing small Pacific states at the United Nations that they wanted to continue to push for the mitigation of climate change. As one ambassador firmly stated:

> Our position is to address the root cause of climate change and that has been set out in the Kyoto Protocol, a negotiated international instrument that addresses climate change. Our position is to support the Kyoto Protocol.[59]

Most member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development have signed the Kyoto Protocol to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. However, at the time of fieldwork in 2004, the United States and Australia have refused to commit to this multilateral effort to curb climate change. So while the above ambassador welcomed multilateral initiatives such as Kyoto, further into the interview the ambassador explained how people living in Pacific small island states were already being forced to adapt to climate change:

> We are now being forced to take adaptation as a means of solving our problems and that to us is not acceptable, but I guess that's the reality of matters… And therefore adaptation we accept has to be part of the solution to the problem but now, as I said our basic decision is that for countries that are contributing to climate change to take responsibility and act to reduce the effects of their contribution to climate change and that is basically really our decision on that.[60]

In the context of climate change, those impacted have been forced to adapt. At first, this construction appeared to echo those made by a United Nations diplomats and the Under Secretary General – that those impacted by climate change should be adaptable subjects. Yet, it differs from such constructions because of the coercive element involved. This construction of those affected by climate change as subjects forced to adapt suggests that those affected must deal with it. This consequently relieves the United Nations – and in essence its member states – of duty to develop an international mechanism to protect those affected.

For the ambassador, there was strong opposition to the idea of his people being forced to adapt to climate change. This was not denial of the problem, nor denial of adaptation strategies, but rather a discrepancy in interpreting the moral geography of environmental problems.[61] The ambassador pointed out that the impacts of climate change are not evenly felt between rich and poor countries and that the actions of some countries have most certainly adversely affected others. It was on this basis that the ambassador argued that those responsible for climate change must change their actions to prevent further damage, rather than bear the burden of forced adaptation themselves.

In the case of Tuvalu, citizens have already been forced into taking adaptation measures as a result of the impacts of climate change. In February 2004, the nine low-lying atolls of Tuvalu were submerged by king tides with peaks of three metres.[62] With the highest points on those islands 4.5 metres, these tides washed over much of the country, affecting freshwater sources and damaged food crops.[63] Such tides, which used to be rare events in the country, now occur each year and have been linked to one of the impacts of climate change – extreme weather events. In such situations the people of Tuvalu have very little choice but to adapt to such situations. In reference to these events, one ambassador in an interview stated that 'there was nothing else for the people to do. They had to adapt. Tuvalu takes it that with events like the King Tides, we have to adapt to look after our people'.[64] The ambassador made the case that that this forced adaptation should be an awakening that climate change is a serious crisis and problem that the international community can no longer continue to ignore:

> It should be taken into account that by adapting, it should not be an excuse for the international community not to look at the base cause of the problem. And that's what we have been asking and pointing out from the AOSIS point of view – that industrialized countries have to reduce emissions as that is the cause of the problem. So it's not only a problem for small island developing states by throwing the burden onto us and saying yes you adapt… No; the international community, especially the industrialized countries, also to have to reduce domestic greenhouse gas emissions. That's the cost that has to be borne by them.

Because our people, we feel sad. I personally feel very very sad about the situation into which our people and communities in Tuvalu have been thrown into and not because of our doing but because of the actions of others.[65]

The ambassador was frustrated that calling on the international community to assist them to adapt or relocate would be perceived as a decision by them to give up on mitigation. If adaptation and relocation dominated the United Nations climate change negotiations then the fear from Pacific small island states, according to the ambassador, was that the international community would not attempt to mitigate the root causes of climate change, and practices would not be altered to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions.

In interviews conducted in New York with Pacific ambassadors, there was a strong sentiment that they had been unfairly impacted upon by climate change. This was particularly so because of domestic efforts to reduce emissions. When I was conducting fieldwork in 2004, ambassadors from a number of Pacific states explained that their countries had both begun to shift their diesel-based economies to renewable energy sources. With the help of the Climate Institute, Tuvalu for example has launched a renewable energy program, which derives energy from the wind, sun and ocean. This was part of the Climate Institute's Global Sustainable Energy Island Initiative to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions Pacific states produce. In an interview the Director of the Island Initiative argued that:

These small island states are the least responsible to cause climate change and the emissions, and they're most worried about the effects of climate change, extreme weather events and sea level rise. So at the same time, they have their national resources set up for renewable energy, they have solar, they have sun 360 days a year, they have wind from their shores, they have volcanoes that could be used to generate energy. So they can utilize energy from their natural resources to generate electricity and show to the world that they are the most vulnerable and least responsible for climate change, but are taking steps to reduce their emissions to prevent global warming. And then if we get little countries moving in that direction we can make an impact on the bigger countries to follow the example so that's the basic concept behind this initiative.[66]

These initiatives illustrate the commitment of the Climate Institute – and certainly a number of Pacific small island states – to preventing further damage to their homelands due to climate change.

The push for multilateral actions
In interviews with diplomats and officials for this research, there was a strong push from both United Nations diplomats and Australian officials for bilateral pragmatism. It is likely that this position was driven by the (then Howard) Australian Government not wanting to be bound by their international responsibility to not only mitigate climate change, but share the blame and compensate the countries and communities that have been affected. The position held by Australian diplomats was contested and countered by ambassadors and diplomats from Pacific

small island states in interviews conducted for this research. As one Pacific ambassador argued:

> I guess some countries would have the concern that if you open up the definition of refugees that you might open up Pandora's Box. Most countries would not be afraid of let's say of a couple people from Tuvalu coming over. But they would be afraid that immediately there would be other terms of refugees declared. And as you probably know, refugee status gives you certain rights coming to the country. Not a lot of countries would be happy to give those rights… If you create the term climate or environmental refugees, it comes with responsibilities. But also, if you have a refugee, you normally have a cause for that and somebody has produced that cause. And, not a lot of countries would be happy to admit guilt on that part.[67]

Here the ambassador indicated that there are concerns with the term environmental refugees based on fear. That is, if the term environmental refugees was created at the United Nations and the policy idea was institutionalized as part of international law, many countries would be afraid of the implications of this. With Conventional refugees (those protected with the 1951 United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees), a third party is to blame. However, in the case of displacements as a result of climate change, those that might intake subsequent environmental refugees are to blame. As the ambassador alluded to, countries would prefer bilaterally negotiated agreements that handle those people displaced from their homelands as a result of climate change. This shift away from a multilateral policy on environmental refugees would remove the associated culpability of states for transnational environmental pollution. This push towards bilateralism emphasizes pragmatics over fundamental rights issues, but shrouds strategic geopolitical re-scaling of international relations.

The Alliance Chair (and ambassador of a small island state in the Indian Ocean) argued that population displacements as a result of climate change was an issue for the international community to resolve:

> The damage is done by everybody else. There should be a responsibility for what one causes. One has to be responsible at least if one cannot stop it. Why not take the responsibility for it? So I can't see any reason why it should not be a consideration at the international level… Environmental refugees, it's not a bilateral issue, it may be bilaterally considered but the issue is not a bilateral issue, it is a multilateral, global issue.[68]

The issue of population displacement is multilateral and according to the ambassador, those responsible for environmental change must be made responsible for their actions at the multilateral level. The ambassador maintained the discourse of the Pacific ambassadors that those directly responsible for climate change should be brought to task to mitigate; and if the impacts were irreversible and far-reaching to the point of relocation, this was to be dealt with at the international level, and not through bilateral means:

If the time comes with these countries and they actually get into serious danger of 'going under' then yes we would be forced to look at migration, but that would be a collective action by the international community. I think the international community will have to take responsibility for a country like the Maldives for example. But it is not coming out as a kind of requirement for us that you open your doors for our people.[69]

For the ambassador, the issue of population displacements because of climate change was one that must be handled through international channels. These arguments by the ambassadors representing a number of small island states at the United Nations strongly opposed calls for bilateralism by certain United Nations diplomats and representatives in the Australian mission to the United Nations.

Conclusions

If observations and predictions about climate change are correct, this environmental problem is, and will continue to be, inherently transnational in nature, and thus requires multilateral action. Climate change is also inherently intergenerational. Future generations are those most likely to be impacted by changes triggered by the current lifestyles of people living predominately in richer countries. Indeed, the interdependent relationship between culture and nature is at the heart of the issue of climate change and its associated impacts. A lawyer who assisted small island developing states at the climate change negotiations in the 1990s, again argued in an interview that 'the basic rules of state responsibility are that all states are responsible for the impacts of the activities that take place in their territory and in the territory of others'.[70] However, some United Nations diplomats and IGO representatives interviewed sought to diffuse and temporarily destabilize the serious nature of climate change.

This paper explored specific discourses on climate change, both as an issue and as a trigger for population displacement. Based on the interviews conducted, a prominent policy direction by United Nations diplomats and IGO and NGO representatives on the issue of climate change was that the international community would only respond in a time of crisis. This pragmatic position illustrates that the United Nations responds to situations in relation to perceptions of crisis and disaster.[71] This position reveals that only certain environmental incidents – such as tsunamis, earthquakes or flash flooding – are socially constructed as the type of sudden and catastrophic events that would trigger the United Nations and others into action, while other gradual environmental issues such as climate change are overlooked. This tells us how the United Nations responds to environmental change based on the perceived level of crisis of that change or event. This is problematic, as the ability of the United Nations to respond to long-term environmental problems, such as climate change, is weakened. The second discursive train relating to pragmatism was that of a "deal with it" response, which only deflects blame away from the perpetrators of climate change. United Nations diplomats at the time of fieldwork constructed those impacted by climate change to be adaptable subjects, which demands that those impacted by climate change must bear the burden of change that had been initiated by the actions of others.

The issue of climate change and its far-reaching impacts also raised questions about responsibility and the primacy of the nation-state. Many environmental problems and their impacts are transnational. The policies of certain states and the actions taken by citizens of these states have begun to affect those in other states. However, as this paper revealed, the United Nations appears ill-prepared to deal with displacement that may eventuate from climate change. The Director of the Climate Change Programme at a prominent London-based NGO that deals with environmental and development issues argued that 'next year will be the tenth year of the Climate Change Convention coming into force and if you look at those ten years, we haven't achieved much, and we are worse off'.[72] This is largely a result of the economic and political decisions of powerful states who are responsible for excessive fossil fuel consumption and who exercise authority within multilateral political institutions. Consequently, responsibility of richer nation-states for climate change is re-scaled away from the multilateral level. This paper cemented a core argument about shifts away from multilateralism. In interviews conducted, United Nations diplomats and Australian national officials to the United Nations argued in favour of regional or bilateral approaches to the issue of population displacement as a result of climate change impacts in the Pacific. This position serves to lessen the multilateral obligations of governments such as Australia to work collectively to mitigate climate change, and also works to alter the field of subjects to be governed. In light of humanitarian concerns, this is deeply problematic, given that multilateral channels have always sought to address basic human needs by upholding basic human rights.[73] In theoretical terms, it demonstrates how formal geopolitical practice involves strategic re-scaling (from global to regional) in order to exclude problematic subjects.[74] In this case, those forced from their homelands because of environmental change are problematic not as individuals, but because they are evidence of culpable behaviour on the part of industrialized nations. They become less problematic when considered as asylum-seeking individuals from partner states (with whom bilateral agreements have been signed) than when they are potential subjects to be governed through multilateral institutions.

This paper also presented alternative discourses of resistance to the above dominant discourses of bilateral pragmatism. Based on interviews with Pacific ambassadors to the United Nations, skeptical discourses on climate change were strongly countered. For these ambassadors, climate change was considered a real threat, with impacts already being felt in many of their respective homelands. Moreover, the sentiment that these ambassadors be adaptable in the threat of climate change only served to deflate the urgency to mitigate the root causes of climate change. With this in mind, these ambassadors at the United Nations argued that climate change must be curbed and this approach required multilateral action. Bilateral agreements (deemed as solutions by those in the Australian mission to the United Nations) were considered by these ambassadors as defeatist. Although they might assist individual nations in times of crisis, bilateral agreements obviated the need for international discussion of the causes of, and blame and responsibility for climate change. In effect, bilateral agreements enabled richer countries to absolve themselves of responsibility for collective action on greenhouse gas emissions. These ambassadors re-asserted their subjectivities as representatives of sovereign people with rights to land and culture who wanted climate change to be curbed to prevent

any need to flee their homelands. Given that small island states of the Pacific have contributed so little to the problem of climate change[75], reassertions of sovereignty and the right to survive on their own land were also simultaneously statements about the need for multilateral institutions to intervene in the mitigation of global environmental problems.

Increasingly, key powerful nation-states are attempting to denounce and contain multilateralism as part of a struggle over defining the political community to be governed. There has been a move away from multilateralism and a push towards regional, bilateral or unilateral actions, which emphasizes pragmatics over fundamental rights issues. One possible reason for this shift might be that large-scale environmental displacements test the limits of multilateralism. The net effect of this shift away from multilateralism is that the primacy and supremacy of certain nation-states is upheld. Certain nation-states are able to continue to produce environmental degradation and geographical inequalities through transboundary environmental pollution.[76] This is particularly the case for climate change whereby the government policies and the actions of citizens in these countries produce pollution transcending their own national borders. For example, at the time of fieldwork, Australia had not only refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, it had also relinquished its responsibility to assist those countries that bear the brunt of climate change through multilateral channels. Australia's inaction on greenhouse gas emissions and refugee programmes will impact the security and freedom of future generations of these countries. As this paper has attempted to illustrate, multilateralism has in this instance failed those most vulnerable to environmental problems.

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