

# JustComment

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The School of Education, Australian Catholic University

## Climate Change: still a great moral challenge

### To make a moral decision,

it is important to get the facts and the focus right. "Moral imagination" is about focus. It is the capacity to walk in another's shoes, a pre-requisite for a truly moral decision. Some people are not capable of this sort of imagination. It is a tragic failure of humanity but it should not determine how the rest of us act.

### Some facts

Climate change is happening, is primarily caused by human activity and is complex. Studies of various scenarios of temperature rise predict that Australia will experience increasing difficulties with its river systems, with water availability for agriculture, industry, residential purposes and broader environmental needs. There will be coastal flooding due to sea level rise, increasing extreme weather events such as tropical cyclones, heat waves, and extreme precipitation. Infrastructure and public health will suffer. For example:

- a 2-3° rise will mean an expansion of the dengue transmission zone as far as Brisbane and the malaria zones will increase;
- temperature related mortality for those 65 and over will increase by 89-123%, to 200% with a 3-4° rise.

Although Australia has a particularly vulnerable eco-system, it can draw on significant resources to adapt to the changes; resources that it has accrued through GHG pollution.

### Different focus

When President Obama speaks, the world tends to pay attention. However, President Tong of Kiribati is not as 'newsworthy'. We pay attention to Obama because what he represents is large, rich, competitive, important and powerful. Achieving and maintaining

this status of the US has negative effects for others but those effects and people tend to be pushed into the background which is difficult to do when the important and powerful clamour for ATTENTION.

Pacific Island Countries (PIC) should have the attention of our moral imagination with climate change. They

- bear tiny responsibility for climate change,
- have been relatively excluded from the benefits of industrialisation,
- have not been party to a long series of decisions that have affected them,
- are being affected earlier and more severely than most:

Larger king tides and storm waves are swamping every larger areas, forcing people to leave their houses and making roads unusable for longer periods each year.

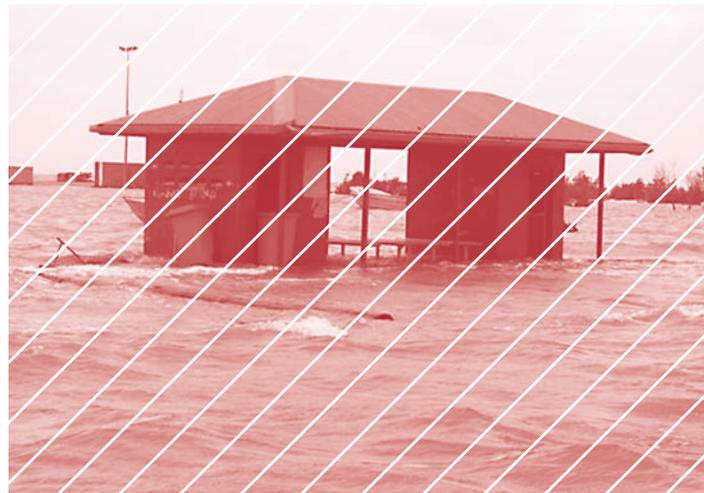
Food production is under greater pressure due to higher salinity levels from sea water and severe weather events such as the recent drought in southern Kiribati. Taro, coconut and bread fruit crops have all been severely stressed.

Many may have to leave their islands within 50 years.

The Association of Small Island States (AOSIS) calls for two important types of action: first and foremost mitigation (reducing emission levels) but adaptation (required to sustain environments, cultures and societies) is also urgent.

### Mitigation

Mitigation depends upon the large emitters. The goal of the UNFCCC is



'stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system', but does not establish what concentration would be 'dangerous'. The recent Copenhagen meeting agreed to a target of 2°C rise, (450ppm). But even that will produce catastrophic events for some PIC in terms of sea-level rise and coral bleaching alone. The agreement had more to do with what the large emitters, with the focus on the costs to their own economies, are willing to 'commit' to. AOSIS is calling for stabilisation at 350ppm (1.5°C rise).

### Adaptation

Climate change is part of a long history of political and economic decisions, affecting Pacific Islanders, but made in far away places such as London, Paris and Washington that has already weakened PIC resilience to storms, droughts and the global economy. For example, settlements were moved from the interior to the coast, a variety of food crops were replaced with fewer cash crops like cassava which in turn reduced the fertility of the soil. So, climate change

adaptation is part of the larger challenge of development where the Islanders', rather than others', welfare is central.

Their common priorities include:

- agriculture and food security,
- improved meteorological services,
- restoration of fisheries, marine and coral resources,
- improved management of water resources,
- management of water and vector borne diseases.

As part of the UNFCCC, funding for adaptation projects is made available via the Global Environmental Facility (GEF). By 2007, GEF had distributed about \$US7.7b of funds but by 2008 only \$US5.8m has gone to the PIC, almost all spent on 'enabling' activities (such as classes on governance).

PIC like Kiribati have approached Australia and New Zealand for help to prepare for probably migration by providing appropriate education and training to allow them to be positive contributors in their destinations. The Australian Government has promised \$A150m for adaptation projects and started a pilot scheme for seasonal workers from the Pacific.

## Climate Change policies for the 2010 elections

Market-based mechanisms place a price on carbon emissions in order to reduce emissions. There are two major types, 'cap and trade' and 'carbon tax', both are 'market mechanisms' which establish a price for emissions, but they are very different in operation.

**The Labor Party's** scheme proposed in 2009, now deferred until 2012, has some concerning features. It

- creates a right to pollute like a property or water right, with \$12b given freely to polluters;
- allows trading internationally of rights with unreliable overall effects, allowing pollution to continue in Australia;

- ignores energy conservation efforts by ordinary Australians which will be traded away by energy producers: no net reduction, merely greater income security for polluters;
- is complex, lacks transparency and difficult to make a judgement about fairness;
- recognises with the announcement of a Citizens' Assembly that citizens were excluded from the negotiations that have produced the current policy, but delays action and it is not clear whether the Government is disposed to change its policy as a result of the Assembly;
- will be ineffective. It claims that its policies will produce a 5% reduction by 2020, the Climate Institute's models project an 18% increase over 1990 levels, which will continue to rise thereafter to an estimated 64% above 1990.

**The Coalition's** Policy largely relies on the 'Emissions Reduction Fund' which rewards businesses which emit less than 'business as usual' levels. It will also be used to increase 'soil carbon' sequestration and to invest in 'clean energy hubs'. The fund will begin at \$300m in 2011-12 and then grow to a cap of \$1b and will not cause further taxation. The Coalition also claims a 5% reduction by 2020.

The Climate Institute's modelling of the entire policy estimates that it will mean an 8% increase by 2020, and would continue to rise to 17% by 2050. However, the modelling lacks reliability: there are no mandated emission levels, just a mandated funding cap.

If no new revenue stream will fund it, money will have to be redirected from other government spending: less for education, public transport, health?

**The Greens'** policy also has a number of elements, five of which really affect emissions: expansion of the Renewable Energy Target; zero net land clearing emissions; energy efficiency targets; a

feed-in tariff and an Emissions Trading Scheme. Although the Greens claim a 40% reduction by 2020, Climate Institute models indicate 25% reduction, leading to a carbon neutral economy in 2050. The Greens have also announced an interim two year carbon tax starting at \$20/tonne while further debate about the target required and the mechanisms to achieve it continues.

Their interim policy announces \$1.3b 'for tackling climate change in poor countries'.

## What should Australia do?

- pay closer attention to what our Pacific Island neighbours are saying.
- act now. Mitigation means establishing targets that aim for stabilised GHG levels less than 450ppm, 350ppm is preferred. 25% reduction by 2020 and carbon neutral by 2050 represent good goals for Australia's contribution to achieve these global goals.
- establish effective mechanisms to achieve those goals guided by transparent, understandable and fair principles that allow all to contribute.
- should not rely on unproven technologies like coal capture and storage, but invest in renewable technologies such as wind, solar and geo-thermal.
- should establish a carbon price of approximately \$26/tonne in the medium term to stimulate sufficient investment to achieve 30% of our energy needs from renewable sources by 2020.
- should consider a carbon tax combined with direct investment in renewable energy sources since it responds well to all the above points.
- should exercise its influence to secure a greater share of GEF funding for PIC for real adaptation projects and expand educational services and programmes such as the Guest Worker Scheme.

Full set of resources and references are on the ERC website [www.erc.org.au](http://www.erc.org.au)



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