



Making a place for climate-impacted displacement in the Paris Climate Accord

Chloe NEY

Geography & Environmental Studies B.A. University of California Los Angeles

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2015, New Zealand had the seventh highest gross emissions per person out of 41 industrialized countries, making it a significant contributor to the impacts of climate change (Gudsell, 2017). New Zealand is also in a region that is already experiencing severe climate displacement. One report estimates 318,000 people in Oceania have been displaced by sudden-onset disasters over the past five years - in 2012, Samoa and Fiji were among the ten countries worldwide with the highest per capita levels of displacement (Petz, 2013, as cited in Burson et al, 2013, p.10). As the impacts of climate change become more severe and more frequent, New Zealand and the remainder of industrial countries in the international community have a duty to confront the impending issue of climate-impacted displacement.

This paper analyzes how climate-impacted displacement is dealt with in the Paris Climate Accord, the most recent embodiment of efforts to develop an international environmental policy framework to address how to adapt to climate change impacts. Using Adger et al's (2006) 'four principles of fair adaptation', I argue that despite its focus on poverty reduction, the Accord perpetuates the structural inequality that has been present in previous international climate policy, such as the Kyoto Agreement. Therefore I suggest that new forms of governance are needed that have powers to monitor and enforce adaptation strategies that seek to

resolve climate change justice issues. I also argue that New Zealand should not wait for the development of such international policy. It needs to begin to develop and implement immigration and resettlement programs for Pacific Island migrants.

2. INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE POLICY AND INEQUALITY

Underlying efforts to develop international environmental policy to address climate change is persistent structural inequality. Structural inequality identifies that the world is politically organized based on global political-economic inequalities that result from the 'North-South line,' the political-economic divide between industrialized countries (the global North) and developing countries (the global South), upon which it is assumed that the North has the majority of bargaining power in international political-economic matters (Paterson, 2006).

This inequality in climate policy is both a procedural justice issue and a distributive justice issue. It is a distributive justice in nature in that it is concerned with disproportionate climate change impacts that the South must adapt to compared to the North (Paterson, 2006, p.65). It is also a procedural justice issue in nature because measures to address climate change are controlled by and benefit the North and minimize the political-economic needs of the South (Adger et al, 2006, p.599). Paterson suggests that the structure of the world economy has developed so that 'inequalities are

integral to its operation and tend to be self-producing.’ These inequalities are ‘both at the root of the generation of environmental degradation and of the conflicts which pervade attempts to resolve them’ (Paterson, 2006, p.64).

Prior to the Paris Climate Accord, international environmental policy has relied on negotiating mechanisms like the Convention and the Kyoto Protocol. While making important steps towards international cooperation on climate change, these arrangements have also been challenged for reinforcing this structural inequality. One analysis is offered by Neil Adger and Jouni Paavola (2006), who argue that a climate change regime can only be designated as ‘fair’ if it is able to operationalize four principles to resolve key social justice issues in climate change: ‘avoiding dangerous climate change, forward-looking responsibility, putting the most vulnerable first and equal participation of all’ (Adger et al, 2006, p. 594). Such an approach seeks to equalize climate change adaptation by protecting the South from serious impacts while also empowering them.

According to Adger et al (2006), the climate change in 2005 regime was considered not ‘fair’ because it failed to address these four key social justice issues that have arisen in past approaches to climate change policy. The crucial concerns the climate change regime has with addressing these social justice issues are its inability to operationalise assistance and eliminate obstacles for fair participation for the benefit of the global South. This is because, past agreements like the Kyoto Protocol and the Convention do not have explicitly articulated plans or targets for addressing social justice issues, and therefore are unable to hold the global North accountable for making the climate change regime ‘fair’ (Adger et al, 2006, p.594 and pp.598-600).

3. THE PARIS CLIMATE ACCORD

The Paris Climate Accord made some significant changes in regard to climate-related inequality. Above all, parties that signed the Accord agreed not only to reduce emissions, but also to

alleviate global poverty. This emphasis on the intrinsic relationship that climate change actions and impacts have with the eradication of poverty is an important first step in addressing the structural inequality that underscores international environmental policy.

However, in many respects the Accord also continues many of the issues identified by Adger et al in their analysis of previous international climate policy regimes. Adger’s first principle of fair adaptation – seek to avoid ‘dangerous climate change’ – presents several difficulties for the Accord because it is impossible to avoid dangerous climate change in some areas. In the Pacific region parts of the island nation of Tuvalu have had to be abandoned because of the severe impacts of climate change (Farbotko, 2012, p.385).

Another problem is the focus in the Accord on mitigation strategies, with comparatively little attention given to strategies to lessen the impact of climate change. Reflecting on earlier international climate policy, Adger et al argue that there is too much emphasis on mitigation efforts and too little on adaptation strategies for threatening climate change impacts that are threatening developing countries now. This focus persists in the Paris Climate Accord. Each state has a specific goal for reducing their greenhouse gas emissions as stated by the Nationally Determined Contribution in order to keep the increase in global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, and to attempt to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C, (Ministry for the Environment 2016). New Zealand itself is committed to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent below that of 2005 levels by the year 2030 (Ministry for the Environment 2016). By contrast, the goals for adaptation are ‘enhancing the ability of countries to adapt and reduce vulnerability to the adverse impacts of climate change’ and ‘making sure that financial flows support the development of low-carbon and climate-resilient economies’ (Ministry for the Environment 2016). These are very vague aims compared to the specificity of emission reduction goals, with no state-specific adaptation planning strategies or budgeting

proposals for meeting these goals, and are ambiguous to the point of dysfunction. Ultimately, the provisions of the Accord do not seem like they will be effective for the goal of 'avoiding dangerous climate change'.

This mitigation-centred approach almost by default violates the remaining three principles of fair adaptation. It fails to be 'forward-looking by not developing specific strategies to adapt to climate change. It fails to 'put the vulnerable first' by focusing on mitigation rather than the urgent need for adaptation, instead placing the needs of countries exposed to climate change impacts on the backburner by failing to enforce the measures (however vague they are) that the Accord puts out for industrialized countries to aid developing countries. The Accord also fails to hold industrialized countries responsible for compensating developing countries for the harmful effects of anthropogenic climate change because it favors adaptation strategies that maintain possibilities for economic growth and competition over resolving climate change inequalities (Adger et al, 2006). Lastly, because the Accord is nonbinding, it fails to enforce the obligations of industrialized countries to meet their climate change goals, and therefore diminishes the participation of nations most exposed to climate change in planning for their own futures. This is because they are directly affected by the amount of aid for adaptation they do or do not receive from industrialized countries.

4. DEVELOPING CLIMATE-IMPACTED DISPLACEMENT LEGISLATION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEW ZEALAND

Addressing the structural inequalities embedded in climate change justice issues requires a paradigm shift, one that more directly addresses the needs to climate-impacted displacement. One suggestion is for the development of an international agency to oversee North-South relations in international climate policy (Biermann, 2006; Adger et al, 2006). This agency could develop a specific visa category for climate-displaced migrants, as no provision exists under United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees Refugee convention to recognize these migrants as either refugees or as internally displaced peoples (Williams, 2008). Williams argues for the use of regional agreements between developed and developing states that operate under an international umbrella framework, such as world environmental organization, for planning to receive and resettle migrants.

However, with the increasing frequency and severity of climate change impacts, it would be unwise and irresponsible for industrialized nations to wait for the development of such an agency. In regards to low-lying island nations in the Pacific, climate change impacts are affecting residents now, and will intensify in the future. As a member of the region, New Zealand has a crucial role to play in supporting these nations to plan both short-term and long-term resettlement strategies.

There is also a need for New Zealand to develop a visa category for climate-displaced migrants from Pacific Island states like Kiribati, Tuvalu, Tonga, and Samoa. New Zealand already has the groundwork for this laid out in the Pacific Access Category (PAC) that forms part of this country's refugee quota. PAC is a labour programme initiated in 2002 that grants residence to citizens of Tonga, Tuvalu, Kiribati and Samoa (Burson et al 2013, p.24; Farbotko et al, 2012, p.386; Patel, 2006, p.736). At present, PAC cannot currently effectively include climate change refugees because of the exhaustive restrictions it places on migration such as : stringent application restrictions and a ballot system that slow down the approval process; small entry quotas that are unable to cope with the resettlement of an influx of migrants; and its simple lack of design for urgently addressing the needs of migrants fleeing immediate, severe climate change impacts (Burson et al, 2013, p.24; Farbotko et al, 2012, p.386; Immigration New Zealand 2016). However, it has the potential to serve as a baseline framework for New Zealand to establish regional agreements with Tuvalu, Kiribati, Tonga, and Samoa to address climate-impacted migration.

5. CONCLUSION

Structural inequality that has led to and perpetuated the impacts of climate change continues to underscore international climate legislation, including the Paris Climate Accord. Climate-impacted displacement itself is a direct result of structural inequality that is becoming more and more pressing as climate change impacts become more frequent and severe. This paper argues that new forms of governance are needed that reduce climate change justice issues resulting from structural inequality, for instance through the development of a world environmental agency that oversees regional adaptation strategies around the world. However, New Zealand should not wait for the development of such an agency. In particular, there is a need for New Zealand to develop and implement an immigration and resettlement program for Pacific Island migrants.

6. REFERENCES

- Adger, Neil W. and Jouni Paavola. (2006). 'Fair adaptation to climate change'. *Ecological Economics* 56, No. 4: pp.594-609
- Biermann, Frank. (2006). 'Global governance and the environment.' *Palgrave advances in international environmental politics*, edited by Michele Betsill, Michele Merrill, Kathryn Hochstetler, and Dimitris Stevis, pp.237-264. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Burson, Bruce and Richard Bedord. (2013). 'Clusters and Hubs: Toward a Regional Architecture for 'Voluntary Adaptive Migration in the Pacific.' *The Nansen Initiative: Disaster-Induced Cross-Border Displacement*. December 9
- Carter, Neil. (2001). *The Politics of the Environment: Ideas, Activism, Policy*. Cambridge University Press
- Farbotko, Carol, and Heather Lazrus. (2012). 'The first climate refugees? Contesting global narratives of climate change in Tuvalu.' *Global Environmental Change*, 22.2 pp.382-390.
- Harris, Max (2017). *The New Zealand Project*. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books Ministry for the Environment. 'The Paris Agreement'. Accessed October 1, 2017 <http://www.mfe.govt.nz/climate-change/why-climate-change-matters/global-response/paris-agreement>
- Paterson, Matthew. (2006). 'Theoretical Perspectives on Environmental Politics.' *Palgrave advances in international environmental politics*, edited by Michele Betsill, Michele Merrill, Kathryn Hochstetler, and Dimitris Stevis, pp.54-81. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. 'The Paris Agreement'. Accessed October 1, 2017. <http://bigpicture.unfccc.int/#content-the-paris-agreement>
- Williams, Angela. (2008). 'Turning the tide: recognizing climate change refugees in international law.' *Law & Policy* 30, No. 4 pp. 502-529