



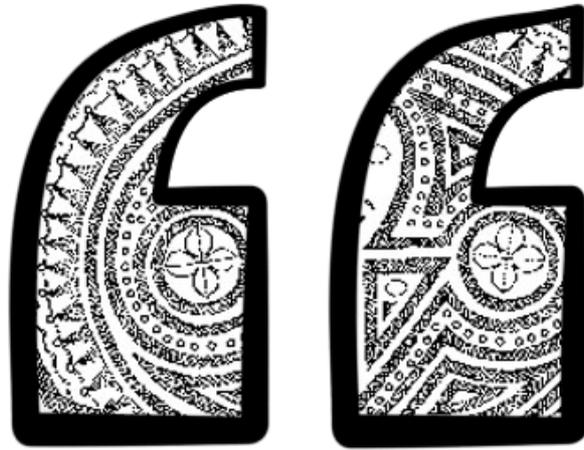
MELANESIAN SCHOOL  
**DEBATE**



# CLIMATE REFUGEES

Motion Analysis 2





# MELANESIAN SCHOOL DEBATE

## MOTION:

# MELANESIAN COUNTRIES SHOULD ACCEPT CLIMATE CHANGE REFUGEES FROM OTHER PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES



**Pacific Institute  
of Public Policy**

CLIMATE REFUGEES, Motion Analysis 2

Published by the Pacific Institute of Public Policy, November 2015

Front Cover Image © The Guardian Australia

The Pacific Institute of Public Policy is the leading independent, non partisan think tank serving the Pacific islands region. We exist to stimulate and support informed and inclusive policy debate in and about the Pacific island countries

Our Motion Analysis are short papers that dissect and further inform debate motions that have been put forward in the Melanesian School Debate 2015.

The Melanesian School Debate is and is an annual event bringing Melanesian Youth together to debate pressing policy issues affecting our region.

This year's event is hosted by the Pacific Institute of Public Policy, in association with the Vanuatu Ministry of Education in Port Vila, November 2015

# Climate Refugees

**WE ARE ALL AWARE** of the devastation climate change poses to our way of life in the Pacific. As temperatures and sea levels rise, our low lying island states face an ominous future. But are we ready to open our doors to neighbouring countries when they come knocking for help?

**Despite being frequently used, the term 'climate refugee' does not yet exist in international law. As it does not fall under the 1951 UN refugee convention, a person fleeing their home due to climate change cannot legally be recognized as a refugee. Despite this technical setback, we are already starting to see people in the Pacific being displaced by the effects of climate change. Although there is no legal basis for climate refugees yet, the underlying issues are already a reality.**

Pacific leaders are predicting dire consequences, with talk of 'sinking islands' that will no longer support their communities. Global scientists agree, with confirmation that sea levels are rising at an unprecedented - and alarming - rate. Inundation by salt water, coastal erosion and destruction of sea walls is already a reality for many of our smaller low lying islands. An increase in devastating natural disasters is wreaking havoc throughout the region, with one of the strongest cyclones in history devastating Vanuatu, and now followed by one of the worst droughts seen in almost 40 years now affecting the region.

Already we are seeing the physical toll that changing climate has on our Pacific citizens. In 2009 the inhabitants of the Carterets Atolls in Papua New Guinea became famous when some families from the islands emigrated to the mainland of Bougainville. They are seen as the world's first climate refugees. Meanwhile, early this year a Kiribati man made international headlines attempting to claim refuge status in New Zealand due to climate change, but was unsuccessful. On a larger scale, the Kiribati Government has already started to look at their options - buying land in Fiji and even discussions to design a floating city to rehouse their citizens.

Although it is impossible to predict the future, every country in the Pacific is being touched by climate change,

and therefore needs to start considering both inward and outward migration. To date however, displacement has received little recognition within national, regional and international frameworks. Where will they go? Will the Pacific be left to face this challenge on their own?

Despite growing acknowledgment and action on climate change, there is still great reluctance to accept the term "climate refugee". Without legal recognition, it is unlikely developed nations will be willing to accept this new category of refugee. Will it instead be left on the shoulders of Pacific nations? If so, should Melanesia step forward and assist the citizens of Kiribati and the Marshall Islands as their low lying atolls disappear?

Countries in Melanesia have accepted refugees in the past; Papua New Guinea has been home to tens of thousands of West Papuan refugees; the Solomon Islands had many internally displaced refugees during its civil war; and now Fiji has agreed to take i-Kiribati climate refugees as part of their "dignified migration". Due to its isolation the Pacific has not had to deal with a global refugee crisis. But climate change demonstrates that Pacific communities are not immune to refugee issues, and need to strategise the best way forward. Accepting refugees - or building resilience in home countries so they do not have to leave? What is in Melanesia's best interest?

# Key Terms to Define

**DECONSTRUCTING THE MOTION** will ensure you are clear in the parameters of your debate. By understanding and analyzing each term you can gain a deeper understanding of the underlying issues.

## TERMS to deconstruct

**ACCEPT:** Does this suggest permanent resettlement? What would some of the repercussions on host countries be? Would host countries be supporting refugees financially? Do Melanesian countries have the resources or finance to do so? Would large intakes from other countries affect our region's sovereignty/ peace/ development/ economy?

**CLIMATE CHANGE REFUGEES:** how are they defined? what exactly does it mean to have refugee status? Is there a universal definition for climate change refugees? If not, what challenges could arise from loose/ inconsistent definitions? What would the application/ acceptance process look like, and who would design this?

**OTHER PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES (PICS):** does this exclude accepting climate change refugees from Melanesian countries? What responsibility lies with the country of origin?

## CONCEPTS to research

UNHCR  
Resettlement obligations and strategies  
International Relations  
Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat  
Internal refugee resettlement  
United Nations  
education and early prevention  
COP 21 Paris  
Diplomacy  
Climate impacts on health  
culture and religion  
Refugees impact on local economies  
Bougainville and Carteret  
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate change  
Disaster Risk Reduction  
sea level rising  
Skilled workforce  
international obligations  
Migration

# Essential Reading

**IN DEPTH RESEARCH IS CRUCIAL** to constructing a convincing and accurate argument. Be creative and use different methods to collect your research materials. Talk to organisations, find case studies in the newspaper, look up books or search through journal articles online.

**REMEMBER! All sources should be as recent as possible. Try not to use sources older than 5 years - from 2010-2015 is best! Here are a few to get you started:**

United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 'United Nations Convention of the Refugee' 2011  
<http://www.unhcr.org/4ec262df9.html>

Pacific Institute of Public Policy, 'Climate Security' *Discussion Paper 23*, 2012  
<http://pacificpolicy.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/2/files/2012/10/D2P-CLI-121012c.pdf>

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 'Chapter 12 Human security. In: Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects'. *Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*  
[http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/wg2/WGIIAR5-Chap12\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/wg2/WGIIAR5-Chap12_FINAL.pdf)



# DEBATE IT!

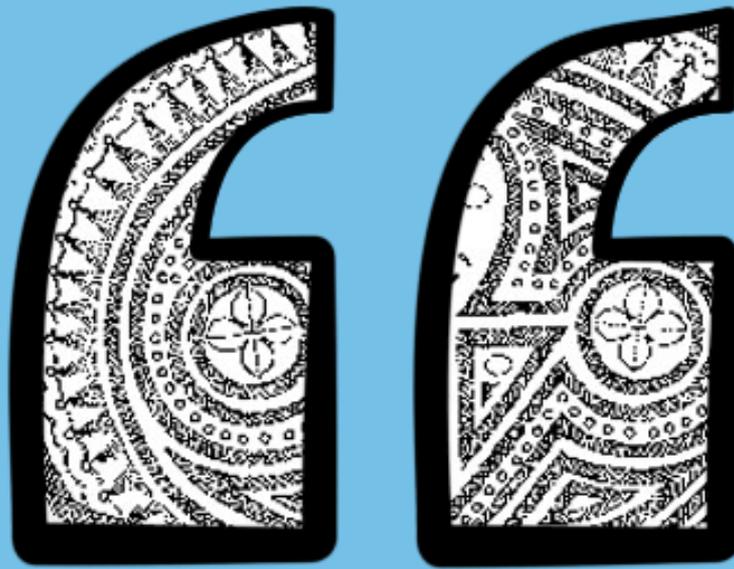
## AFFIRMATIVE

- We are all Pacific islanders, and must work together to ensure prosperity within the region. It is the “Pacific way” to be opening and accepting of our neighbors, especially in times of need. Although climate change will seemingly affect us all, it is our brothers in Micronesia, Kiribati and the Marshall Islands on low lying atolls that will most likely need help in the immediate future. We should be open and ready to accept them with the resources we have to offer.
- Being relatively isolated from the rest of the world, the Pacific has escaped the current global refugee crisis, with millions of people fleeing their countries due to conflict and violence. While many countries around the world, a large percentage developing countries, have accepted hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighboring countries, Pacific nations have been somewhat protected from the crisis, with little obligation to assist. When the tables are turned, and it is people in the Pacific fleeing their homes, not due to conflict but climate, we have a regional and global obligation to assist.
- With similar lifestyles, culture and religion refugees from other Pacific countries will easily adapt into our society. This easy transition will relieve some of the pressures on host governments to provide support, making it a more feasible process.
- Incoming refugees will bring new skills to our employment industries, and can even assist to boost local economies bringing new business and supporting current ones. A case study of Syrian refugees arriving in Lebanon shows surprising results, with the inflow of refugees arguably helping the Lebanese economy. Refugees have been an important source of demand for locally produced services in Lebanon, funded from own savings and labor income, from remittances of relatives abroad and from international aid. The same could be said for potential incoming climate refugees into our Melanesian countries.
- Select governments in the region are currently implementing strong policy against action on both climate change and refugee intakes. If such policy is retained, there is a strong possibility the plight of Pacific climate refugees may fall on deaf ears. If neighboring developed nations are not able to step up and help, Melanesian countries should be there to ensure our Pacific brothers and sisters are not left stranded in their greatest time of need.

# DEBATE IT!

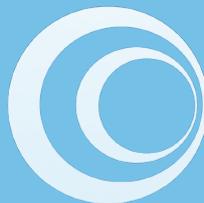
## NEGATIVE

- Accepting traditional refugees – escaping conflict or persecution can be both a temporary or permanent measure, housing them until it is safe for them to return to their home country, or providing long term citizenship. With climate refugees, if their city or country is destroyed by climate change, there is very little chance that they will ever be able to return. They will need to be permanently resettled in the new host country for good. This will require support financially, for housing, finding employment, schools and other forms of assistance. Melanesian countries do not have the resources, funds, capacity or legislature to enable the successful permanent rehoming of potentially thousands of refugees.
- Melanesia countries are facing their own challenges, both in terms of their current development and living standards for their own citizens. The burden of climate change refugees should be put on countries with the resources, capacity and inherited responsibility, such as Australia, New Zealand, France and America.
- Melanesian countries are just as susceptible to the plight of climate change in the coming years. Already islands around Bougainville are facing displacement due to sea erosion. Our countries may need to be rehoming climate refugees internally as low lying communities are pushed off their traditional lands. These communities should be a priority first.
- Legally the concept of a ‘climate refugee’ does not currently exist. Despite the term being frequently in use, it does not yet fall into the definition of refugee in the 1951 United Nation’s Refugee Convention. With no universal definitions or recognition of climate refugees, the onus is put back onto individual countries to set criteria and application processes to manage refugees. This could become increasingly challenging for our Melanesian governments, with limited capacity and no prior experience. It could become impossible to identify between true refugees, and those who are taking advantage to seek opportunities – economic or social - elsewhere.
- Mass migration may not necessarily be the best way to deal with climate change. Instead of looking to accommodate climate refugees from low lying countries, we should be looking to develop flexible adaptation strategies that will provide communities with the tools they need to stay and thrive in their traditional homes.



# MELANESIAN SCHOOL DEBATE

Proudly hosted by



Pacific Institute  
of Public Policy

in association with the Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training

[pacificpolicy.org](http://pacificpolicy.org)