

Pacific Island (Im)Mobilities in the 21st Century: Issues and debates

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Introduction

Interest in the linkages between human mobility and climate change has surged since the beginning of the 21st Century alongside growing awareness of the role of humans as environmental agents at the global and planetary levels (Chakrabarty, 2021). Indeed, migration from several countries in the Pacific region has grown in recent decades and many Pacific islands and their people have been negatively affected by global environmental changes manifested in many ways at their local levels. However, there remains considerable debate about the extent to which the two processes (migration and climate change) are connected.

This Policy Brief (PB), the third in a series of four exploring climate change and (im)mobility in Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs), seeks to explore these issues. [The first PB](#) laid out the context for the study and outlined the key concepts that informed it. [The second PB](#) focussed mainly on internal or domestic climate change-related mobility and particularly addressed issues of community relocation. Earlier PBs ([37](#) and [49](#)) addressed the significance of the land in relation to population mobility and the links between urbanisation and climate change (see also Campbell, 2022). This PB is mainly on so-called induced or voluntary climate change migration and focuses on international migration mostly, but not entirely, from Pacific Island locations to countries on the Pacific Rim. The fourth PB concentrates on the domestic effects of emigration from PICTs including implications for exposure and vulnerability to climate change and *in situ* adaptation.

The PB starts by examining the processes likely to ‘drive’ migration, acknowledging that climate change (albeit in many manifestations) is only one of numerous possible influences on people’s migration decisions. It looks at the prospect that climate change may increase rates of international migration (mostly in the form of individual and family migration rather than community relocation), and the implications for climate change induced Pasifika migrants. The PB briefly but critically reviews the concepts of the ‘climate change migrant’ and the ‘climate change refugee’, acknowledging the discursive nature of their construction and the negative implications of this. It addresses the contested views on the role of climate change in contributing to migration and its consequences. Most discussion of climate-related mobility focusses on the material nature of environmental changes, much of which will be in the form of degradation, that some Pacific Island people may already, or are likely to, face and which will require some kind of response – be it *in situ* adaptation or some form of mobility. Balanced against this is the need to consider non-material changes that Pacific people may also experience both in terms of staying in place or having to leave. Given the complexity of their relational security (Farbotko and Campbell, 2022) it is important that planners, international organisations and consultants enable Pasifika people to make their own decisions about the habitability or otherwise of their homelands and possible (im)mobility, and recognise and address the loss and damage incurred by those who choose to stay on their ancestral land, and by those who feel induced or compelled to leave it.

The PB then outlines the existing distribution of Pasifika people outside their cultural homelands, identifying large diaspora populations (in relation to the small domestic populations of most of the countries of origin) in three main locations, namely Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia and the United States. Next, the PB discusses some of the future issues relating to possible climate change influenced international migration from PICTs. It considers possible problems faced by CC migrants and the obligations on the three main receiving countries (all high per capita greenhouse gas (GHG) emitters), their governments and citizens, to ensure that the economic, social and cultural costs of both *in situ* adaptation and migration are minimised. Finally, the PB reflects on some of the unresolved issues relating to climate change mobility in Oceania. There remains not just uncertainty but also competing narratives that people in PICTs are having to negotiate in their decision-making about their (im)mobility futures. Researchers, policy makers and planners in both PICTs and destination countries, and international donors, must address a number of issues in order to lessen the confusion and support Pacific Island people in making their own decisions about their futures.

The Dilemmas of Climate Change Mobility

Before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge a number of dilemmas in the writing of this PB. Stated briefly, how important is climate change migration¹ likely to become? Is it inevitable in large numbers or is it likely to be something of a false alarm? Views seem to be strongly one way or the other, but I find myself sitting in the middle, moving occasionally

¹ This PB focuses on migration, sometimes referred to as induced or voluntary climate change migration in comparison to forced community relocation which is dealt with in PB 132.

to one side of the argument and then to the other. On the one hand, there is little empirical evidence from migration studies in the Pacific region that climate change has or is 'driving' migration (either urban or international) (Mortreau et al., 2022). On the other hand, as this series of PBs indicates, both emigration rates (where external access is available) and urbanisation (especially where it is not) have increased significantly over the last few decades.

For several reasons, I am concerned that climate change migration discourses such as 'climate refugees' reinforce tropes that belittle island people in ways that their supposed innate vulnerabilities are reified. There are also definite echoes of environmental determinism. They, too, contribute to racist tropes in developed countries some of which may be seen as destinations for climate change migrants. As well, the constant designation of islands as sites of looming uninhabitability has the potential for significant negative psychological effects on island people (e.g., Gibson, 2018; Gibson et al., 2020; Tiatia-Seath et al., 2020; Torres and Casey, 2017). It is important to stress that people on Pacific Islands have the right to stay on their homelands, their **banua*², if they so wish, and to return after temporary migration if that is their desire. I also have serious concerns about the roles of 'experts' (scientific, technical, environmental, planning, economic, etc.³) making pronouncements about the habitability or otherwise of Pacific places and whether people should move from them. It is critically important that Pacific people have the final say on their futures, be they in adapting in their homeland or elsewhere. Equally important is for Pacific Island people, including those in communities at the frontline of climate change effects, to be centrally engaged in research, policy and planning from the outset. As well, mobility is an Oceanic tradition with deep roots and long distances (Hau'ofa, 1993) and while climate change may influence mobility patterns, human mobility is by no means a new phenomenon.

Alternatively, climate change is a very serious issue with major implications for Pacific Island people. If localised environmental degradation, specifically that caused by climate change, does not result in the need for some form of mobility response, and adaptation is relatively easy, why are we worried about climate change at all? The implication is that humans will be able to adapt their way out of increasingly difficult conditions, something that appears to have little evidence of occurring to date – indeed probably no more than the evidence that changing environmental conditions up to the present can affect mobility. Failing meaningful reductions in GHG emissions, *in situ* adaptation indeed should be the first response, and polluters should pay for it (an idea that unfortunately has little support among the high emitting nations and corporations), but just as with decisions to migrate, communities would need to decide what level of modification of their **banua* would be acceptable. As an extreme and hypothetical scenario, would living on a concrete platform be tolerable for people whose vibrant and spiritual homelands have become otherwise

² The proto-Polynesian term, **banua* is used here to avoid focussing on one particular usage such as *vanua*, *fenua* or *fonua* (Chave-Dartoen, 2014; Suliman et al., 2019). The term nevertheless remains problematic in relation to many places in the region outside of Polynesia and Fiji although the essential relationship between people and their land is similar (Campbell, 2019).

³ While I do not claim to be an 'expert' I must acknowledge that some of my work may be described as falling into some of these categories.

unliveable? At some point, if projections are to be accepted, and deteriorating conditions are experienced, staying in place may become increasingly difficult or unpleasant.

Farbotko and Campbell (2022) use the term relational security to describe the security individuals and groups derive from the material and non-material bonds they have with their **banua* (broadly defined to include land, ocean, non-human species, non-living things and spiritual connections as well as people). While mobility may be invoked to overcome the loss of material security of a place, it may not provide the relational security that the **banua* embodies. However, at what point of transformation in the *in situ* adaptation process would the relational security also be jeopardised? These bleak scenarios have little to do with the supposed vulnerability of island people, but with the exposure of their lands to degradation. Relocation of entire communities, or worse, their decimation or disbandment are disruptive processes, and the longer the planning period the less disruptive the process is likely to be. A major challenge, then, is to find ways of implementing long-term planning for possible future mobility (should it be needed) without causing unnecessary or premature fears and tensions among members of communities before the point in time if or when the movement becomes necessary (see Lipset (2013, 2014, 2017) for discussion of these issues in relation to the Murik Lakes estuarine area in coastal Papua New Guinea).

Recent trends in several PICTs indicate that international emigration is increasing, and for those countries without external migration access, urbanisation is rapidly growing. This would indicate increasing levels of desire to move to towns and cities (pull factors) and/or growing dissatisfaction with, or hardship in, rural life (push factors). In the case of international migration, these push factors may exist in relation to life in the home nation generally, given difficulties associated with urban migration (Campbell, 2019, 2022; Jones, 2012, 2017). It is evident that people in the region are prepared to migrate. But as will be shown, migration need not be a rupture between home and away, and following the work of Lilomaiava-Doktor (2004, 2009a, b), origins and destinations are by no means separate phenomena. The homes of many Pasifika migrants and their descendants 'are neither here nor there but are in both places simultaneously' (Heather-Latu (2007), quoted in Bedford (2008)). Most Pasifika diaspora remain connected to their **banua* as parts of transnational kinship networks. Ironically, given the context of this report, the existence of the **banua* is an important prerequisite for migration. Even for those migrants who don't return, and their descendants, the possibility of return to their spiritual homelands remains critically important. This tells us that migration is not a problem for Pasifika people, as long as the possibility of return is not foreclosed.

So, what then are the issues? First, the volume of migration may create some difficulties especially in home areas that lose too many people and at destinations where employment opportunities may be limited, access to government services such as health and education are restricted and migrants are subjected to racism and other forms of discrimination. Second, while 'voluntary' migration may be acceptable, it does become problematic if people feel they have no choice but to leave degrading environments, with the degradation caused by the actions of others. Third, from a simply material perspective, migration is very expensive involving air fares, rents at destinations (given that few migrants can purchase homes, the options are to rent or stay with relatives who must then share some of the

financial costs), medical costs and so on. We must, then, carefully tread a path between positive and negative aspects of climate change-induced mobilities. Fourth, how do we address the issue of lost relational security? Given this is bound inextricably to place, departure from that place, in combination with the lack of an essential bond to a new location, has the potential to cause considerable relational insecurity. This is likely to worsen if the place of origin becomes deserted and the critical community **banua* bond is broken.

Finally, there is the issue of smallness (of populations and land territories) which is difficult to avoid. Epeli Hau'ofa's (1993) "sea of Islands" makes an extremely important critique of smallness tropes that belittle island people and deprive them of hope for a prosperous future. Indeed, the idea that 'vulnerable' Pacific Island people will struggle with the effects of climate change is part of this discourse. People throughout the region have agency, with traditions of resilience and contemporary capacities both at home and in diaspora destinations. I concur with Hau'ofa's statement, and there is little doubt that much of the vulnerability discourse imposed upon Oceania Island people is based on an unproven assumption that being small makes places, including countries, and the people who are part of them, inherently vulnerable (Barnett and Campbell, 2010; Campbell, 2009). However, in the analysis conducted for this PB, population size does appear to have some important implications for climate change mobility, though not as a source of vulnerability. Again, very careful treatment of the notion of smallness is required.

It Is Not A Numbers Game ... Or Is It?

This brings us to the issue of 'numbers' that has arisen in relation to climate change-driven migration in which there appears to be an obsession with the quantum of likely migrants forced or induced by climate change. Numerous reports suggest very high numbers of people will be displaced. Many of these reports have used these extreme estimates of likely numbers of 'refugees' and climate migrants, largely, to be charitable, to draw attention to the high levels of disruption climate change will bring to many people's lives: an attempt to shock the world into reducing GHGs. Unfortunately, these numbers have had the effect of engendering racist and xenophobic objections to the notion of wealthy countries (GHG emitters) making available opportunities for climate change migrants. Durand-Delacré et al. (2023) make the very important point that 'climate change is about people, not numbers', with which it is difficult to disagree.

But the numbers do count. The important issue is to always remember that each of these numbers is a person. If the numbers of climate migrants grow, planning will be essential – how many new houses would be needed, what culturally appropriate planning for health, education and other community services would be needed, and at what scale? In addition, livelihoods would need to be addressed such as the provision of jobs or arable land and access to fisheries.

Is Climate Change Likely To Be A Migration Driver In Oceania?

We would witness a mass exodus of entire populations on a biblical scale, and we would see ever-fiercer competition for fresh water, land and other resources.

– [UN Secretary-General António Guterres](#), 14 February 2023

As noted, the issue of international migration as a form of climate change mobility is highly contentious. On the one hand is the view exemplified above by the UN Secretary-General when addressing the Security Council in 2023. This view is widely held, tracing back to the projections made by Norman Myers (1993, 1997, 2002) several decades ago. It has been picked up by many environmentalist groups and development-based INGOs including Christian Aid which suggested a billion people would be displaced by 2050 (Baird et al., 2007). These projections saw the narrative of the climate change refugee emerge and then be used by racists, xenophobic nationalists and national security establishment figures to justify harder border restrictions in likely destination countries (Durand-Delacre, et al., 2021). On the other hand, increasing numbers of observers have taken the position that few people have migrated because of climate change to date and there is little to indicate that mass migration will result from climate change, based on current and historical evidence, and, anyway, environmental factors are just one of many drivers of migration and (im)mobility may take many forms (Boas et al., 2019, 2022; Piguet, 2021). In addition, there is a strong critique that most work, both in the fields of causes and effects of climate change and the drivers of all forms of migration, ignores the power relations and neoliberal political economics that underlie both climate change itself and any associated (im)mobilities that may result, as well as the two processes taken together (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2022; Bettini and Gioli, 2016; Faber and Schlegel, 2017; Felli, 2013). Discourses of mass forced migration, climate refugees and trapped populations have been critiqued by many of these researchers concerned at the negative implications of alarmist rhetoric that create contradictory tropes of dangerous others on the one hand and hopelessly vulnerable people on the other. While taking on board and agreeing with such concerns, it remains important that we don't neglect those whose lives may be negatively affected by climate change, in some cases very seriously.

Projections of future climates and continuing sea level rise and associated effects indicate a greater magnitude and rapidity of change than has been manifested to date, especially if the higher GHG emissions scenarios play out (IPCC, AR6, WGI, Technical Summary, p77; Mycoo et al, 2022). If this is the case, island and low-lying coastal communities around the world may become increasingly difficult to sustain. Thus, while contemporary levels of international outmigration resulting from climate change may be limited, it would be dangerous to discount the need to plan for future mobility, including in some cases international migration. It may be asserted that adaptation including mobility, should not be given priority and every effort be made to reduce greenhouse gas emissions instead. How could one disagree with this sentiment? It is entirely reasonable. Unfortunately, for decades, countries around the world have failed to heed this call, most forcefully made in the 1990s by the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). As far back as 1997, developed nations committed, in the Kyoto Protocol, to modest reductions in their GHG emissions. By the time of the Copenhagen Conference of the Parties in 2009 it was evident that the commitments had not been met and anticipated additional reductions were out of the question. In 2015,

countries committed to ‘nationally determined contributions’ to GHG reductions with a vague ambition to restrict global warming to no more than 1.5 or 2.0°C. Since Kyoto, four major IPCC assessment reports have indicated increasing certainty about the processes of climate change and the seriousness of its impacts. Despite this, the major emitters have been intransigent in taking any more than a few steps to meet their obligations. Moreover, the GHG emitters remain loath to provide anything but inadequate funds to help affected countries, and their populations barely cope with the effects they are facing.

Figure 1 outlines some of the various influences on mobility decision-making in the Pacific region. The key area of concern in relation to this report is the role of environmental degradation – is it increasing, or likely to increase, the numbers of people making decisions to move away from where they normally reside? At the same time, it is important not to lose sight of the other influences on migration decision-making.

High Mobility	Driver Categories	Limited Mobility
Large population High Population Density High population growth rates	Demographic	Small population Low population density Low population growth rate
Reduced livelihood security Reduced resource availability Loss of markets Inadequate funds for in situ adaptation Funds for migration	Economic	Secure livelihoods Adequate resource availability Existing/new markets Adequate funds for in situ adaptation Limited funds for migration
High levels of envir. degradation Reduced habitat security Resource limitations Adaptation difficult	Environmental	Low levels of environmental degradation Sustained habitat security Resource adequacy Adaptation possible
Colonial status Limited post colonial connections Immigration access to destination(s) Need for remittances at origin	Political	Colonial status Post colonial connections Lack of migration access to destination(s) Limited need for remittances at origin
Diaspora at destination Support for migration from kin/community Need for remittances at origin Relational insecurity	Social/Cultural	Small/no diaspora at destination Limited need for remittances at origin (or Adequate existing remittance flows) Relational security

Figure 1. Mobility drivers in Pacific Island Countries and Territories

Given the reluctance to mitigate climate change, its effects are anticipated to worsen, perhaps at an increasing rate. Adaptation will become increasingly important and costly. From this perspective, there are important reasons for addressing the issue of international migration from and to PICTs in the context of climate change. First, there are several countries where options for migration by individuals and/or families or relocation of communities are limited because ‘safe(r)’ sites are difficult to find domestically. Second,

urban migration, the most likely outcome for domestic 'climate migrants', poses numerous difficulties (which are likely to grow) for migrants (Campbell, 2019, 2022). Third, there is already a very large diaspora of Pasifika people, particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia and the United States, indicating that international migration is already a realistic option, even if not for reasons of climate change. Fourth, the image of the international Pasifika 'climate change refugee' has strong acceptance, often with negative connotations, in many contexts that may worsen xenophobic and racist attitudes towards Pasifika people living in so-called metropolitan countries. In contrast, there is strong opposition to the notion of forced or induced migration within many PICTs where people still desperately wish that reductions in greenhouse gas emissions could happen immediately, and that much greater financial support be given to adaptation, so they can remain at home should they so wish. Pacific countries face a difficult task in the international arena, on the one hand stressing the existential dangers that climate change poses to them while on the other rejecting ideas that their people may be forced or induced to migrate.

'Voluntary' or 'induced' migration has been portrayed by many observers as a rational form of adaptation (to name a few: Adger et al., 2020; Barnett and Webber, 2010; Black et al., 2011; Gemmene and Blocher, 2017). Often this was to push back on the alarmist and racist discourses associated with the climate refugee or 'forced' migrant. In many ways this seems a realistic approach. However, it has been subject to critique on the basis that climate migrants are providers of cheap workers in the international division of labour, and migration as adaptation reinforces neoliberal policies creating further injustice and inequality (Bettini and Gioli, 2016; Bettini et al., 2016). Indeed, it may be claimed that the excesses of capitalism that cause climate change are now benefitting capitalists through climate change-induced labour migration. From this perspective, one may cynically observe that there is little incentive to mitigate climate change.

Contemporary Pasifika Mobilities

Contested terminology: Pasifika Diaspora

The term Pasifika has its genesis in Aotearoa New Zealand, initially coined and used by people of Polynesian descent (various sources have attributed the term to people from Niue, Samoa and/or Tonga while others have credited it to government departments). Later, it has been applied to other people of Pacific origin, though mostly to Polynesians (and Fijians⁴) though numerous sources apply the term to all people of Pacific origin living in Aotearoa New Zealand. The term, however, usually excludes Māori, the *tangata whenua* or indigenous Polynesians of Aotearoa. For some it provides an alternative to the terms 'Pacific Islander' or simply 'Islander', which are often used in a pejorative manner in Aotearoa New Zealand.

⁴ The regional terms Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia (and Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian) are used in this report while noting their cultural, ethnic and geographical problems. They are used within the region where there are regional political grouping among the countries of the three respective regions. Fiji, part of Melanesia, lies on the blurred boundary between Polynesia and Melanesia and is often included in Polynesia in Aotearoa New Zealand discourse, such as 'Polynesian' rugby stars.

There is a lively debate over the use of the term. On the one hand it appears to have originated from within the Pacific community in Aotearoa New Zealand as an inclusive concept and counter to racist discourses, while on the other hand, there is concern that it conflates a variety of ethnic communities into one monolithic group. Paradoxically, then, Pasifika can be seen as both an inclusive and othering term. Several writers have referred to Albert Wendt's observation that people only become 'Pacific Islanders' when they arrive at Auckland airport from their home country (e.g., Enari and Haua, 2021; Mila-Schaaf, 2010; Thomsen et al., 2022).

The term Pasifika diaspora, then, needs to be used cautiously and care needs to be taken not to meld all Pasifika people under a single cultural identifier. Each Pacific migrant group has its own cultural identity, and sometimes this is most important at the subnational level. The broader term tends to dismiss this. On the other hand, where there have been several generations of Pasifika living in a colonial settler state such as Aotearoa New Zealand, a new perspective may be emerging (Macpherson and Macpherson, 2009; Thomsen et al., 2022). Moreover, there are increasing numbers of people with more than one Pasifika ethnicity, some with more than two. The term is also getting increased use in Australia, but often, unlike in Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori are often included while indigenous Australians are not (see for example, Enari and Haua, 2022; Hawkes, 2019). From this perspective the term refers to migrants and their descendants. In the USA, there is developing use of the term to distinguish Pacific people from Asians as in the US the two are often grouped together as one category in demographic statistics, with Pacific people being overwhelmed in numbers (Ramirez, 2023). In the decennial USA census, Pasifika are combined with 'Native Hawaiians' as a demographic category ('Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander' – NHPI).

Elsewhere in the region, the use of the term is limited. Pasifika is drawn from the colonial term for the Pacific Ocean and some people are critical of this, preferring the term Moana, but this is predominantly Polynesian and would serve to exclude Melanesian and Micronesian people, the problematic nature of these cultural identifiers notwithstanding. The term is used in this PB as a way of identifying Pacific Island people living (permanently or temporarily) outside their home countries to acknowledge that despite their heterogeneity they are distinguishable from other immigrant groups, indigenous peoples of destination countries, and colonial settler populations. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Māori (and other Polynesian variants) term *tangata* Pasifika may be a way of identifying people from the Pacific region but leaving their specific identity secure.

Traditional and indigenous mobilities

Eveli Hau'ofa in 1993 reminded us that people in the Pacific Islands have always been great travellers and that the ocean was how many (so-called) small and isolated islands were connected. Rather than being belittled by a (post)colonial 'small island' discourse, he suggested that the Pacific Ocean, of which Pacific people were/are part, be recognised as the largest feature on the Earth's surface, and rather than being a barrier was a highway connecting islands and their people. Mobility for Pacific people also has been characterised by its fluidity: people often return, sometimes frequently, or move on to new locations, secure in the knowledge that they may return to their **banua* if they wish. Lilomaiva-

Doktor (2009, p1) tells her readers that the Samoan word for mobility is *malaga*, which literally translated means to come and go:

The Samoan concept *malaga*, usually translated as “travel” or “movement,” implies going back and forth. As I argue, this concept makes explicit both local understandings of migration and the connection of migration to development; it also suggests that the scholarly dichotomies of village/metropolitan and local/global, as found in migration literature, are misleading.

This is an important concept in a discussion of climate change mobility, as migration is not necessarily perceived by Pasifika peoples to be a form of disruption that is often implied in much of the climate change discourse. It may be anticipated that kinship groups may well send members to find overseas employment in the face of climate change generated local environmental degradation. Oakes et al. (2016, p59) found in a survey of I-Kiribati, that 75 per cent of families indicated that, if it were possible, they would send one or more members overseas if sea level rise continued (see also Voigt-Graf and Kagan, 2017) and over 70 percent of participants indicated similar responses if floods (71 per cent) or saltwater intrusion (73 per cent) become more serious and cultivating crops became more difficult (73 per cent). It would therefore appear that climate migration decision-making is not an individual but rather an extended family process. Such a consideration needs to be accounted for in climate migration planning and policy development.

Given the notion of *malaga*, it is hardly surprising that where there are pathways open to Pasifika people for mobility, they are well taken. In most cases where the diaspora is small, it is not because of a lack of desire to move, but a lack of opportunity. Pasifika people may be found living in all corners of the globe (Hau’ofa, 1993), and large numbers of Pasifika people migrated long before climate change became a known issue. Indeed, the settlement of the region was a migratory process of great skill and significance, covering thousands of square kilometres of ocean. While long-distance voyaging may have come to an end with the onset of the Little Ice Age around 1350AD (Nunn, 2007; Nunn and Britton, 2001; Nunn and Campbell, 2020), interisland and intra-island interconnections continued for purposes of trade, kinship, and coping with environmental disasters (see also various chapters in Chapman, 1985 and Chapman and Prothero, 1985). More recently, beginning around the middle of the 20th century, people from what were then colonies began some movement to countries on the Pacific rim, particularly Aotearoa New Zealand, the United States and Australia.

The contemporary distribution of the Pasifika diaspora

In much migration research, the drivers of international migration from PICTs to the rim countries have been represented as demographic and economic (Bedford and Hugo, 2012). Put simply, many PICTs have young and growing populations with insufficient opportunities for employment, and the rim countries have aging populations with increasing demand for both skilled and unskilled workers (Bedford and Hugo, 2012). These imbalances are increasing, and the impetus for economic migration is unlikely to disappear. However, Lilomaiava-Doktor (2004, 2009a, b) challenges both the predominance given in contemporary migration research to economic rationality in migration decision-making at the cost of cultural imperatives, and the bimodal modes of thinking that consider origins

and destinations as separate entities. Invoking the traditional concept of *vā* (a relational, liminal space that connects people and places) she shows that for Samoan people living in their village in Samoa, or in parts of Auckland or California, the sense of separation is limited, and people identify themselves as all being part of one *aiga* (extended family). She shows that migration is managed and coordinated with the interests of the *aiga* paramount: migration research based on notions of individual decision-making does not tell the full story.

Table 1. People of Pacific ethnicity in recent censuses: Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and the United States Note: In all three censuses people could claim more than one 'ethnicity.'

	Aus 2021 Ancestry	NZ 2018 Ethnicity	USA 2010 Race
Fijian ^a	48354	35070	32304
New Caledonian	367	114	
Ni-Vanuatu	2380	990	91
Papua New Guinean	22668	1131	416
Solomon Islander	2704	777	122
FSM ^b			8716
Guamanian or Chamorro			147798
I-Kiribati	1263	3225	401
Mariana Islander or Saipanese			1422
Marshallese			22434
Nauruan	571	135	
Palauan			7450
Cook Islander	27494	80532	
Niuean	6225	30867	
Pitcairn	1123	216	
Samoan	98022	182721	184440
Tahitian	1504	1737	5062
Tokelauan	2544	8676	925
Tongan	43469	82389	57183
Tuvaluan	995	4653	
Pacific People. nec, nfd ^c	15839	18099	278666
Total	275522	451332	747430
Percentage of total population	1.08	9.62	0.24

^a The data for Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand include Indo-Fijian. It is not clear if this group is included in the US racial category.

^b Includes people identified as Caroline Islander, Carolinian, Chuukese, Kosraean, Pohnpeian, Yapese

^c Includes people not elsewhere classified, not further defined or 'other' Pacific Islander, Other Micronesian etc.

Bedford and Hugo (2012, p50) report that by the end of the first decade of this century, 800,000 people of Pacific ethnicity or ancestry lived in three Pacific rim countries: Aotearoa New Zealand (350,000), USA (300,000), and Australia (150,000).⁵ This was equivalent to roughly eight per cent of the population living in the Pacific region at that time. According to the latest available data, the size of the Pasifika population living outside the region is continuing to grow (see Table 1). Data is difficult to compare among the statistics from the three main destinations. For example, figures on country of birth are not evenly available at the scale of individual PICTs, and the three jurisdictions use different terms for peoples' cultural origins: ethnicity, ancestry, and race. Moreover, many census respondents in all three destination countries have more than one cultural origin so there tends to be significant overcounting. For example, according to 2018 census data, the total Pasifika population of Aotearoa New Zealand was 381,642, but the count of people's ethnicities provides a total of slightly more than 450,000, suggesting a large number having more than one Pasifika ethnicity. For comparisons among the three receiving countries the different ethnicity definitions are used in this PB as that is what is available, but it must be remembered that these figures all include some double (or more) counting. In comparison, those people who are second generation and beyond do not appear in the Country of Birth statistics as being from PICTs. Table 1 shows the most recent census data on the distribution of Pasifika 'ethnicities' in the three destination countries. As the table shows, almost one and a half million instances of Pasifika ethnicity were recorded.

The table shows that the USA appears to dominate in terms of absolute numbers of Pasifika people residing there. This includes 240,179 simply defined as 'Other Pacific Islander'. The next two categories are Chamorro or Guamanians and Samoans (many of whom would have their origins in American Samoa). These two groups, together with the 'other Pacific Islander' category, account for almost more than 80 per cent of the Pasifika people enumerated in the census.

Table 2 shows the ethnicity and country of birth for migrants to Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand combined. Most of the Pasifika migrants are Polynesian and some of the populations of people identified by ethnicity far outnumber the populations of their corresponding 'home' country, with the extremes found in the Pacific REALM countries linked by Free Association with Aotearoa New Zealand, namely Cook Islands and Niue, and Tokelau, an Aotearoa New Zealand territory. The patterns of migration from these countries have a long history, and there are very large numbers of second-generation people and beyond. For example, the number of people with Niuean ethnicity or ancestry is 23 times the size of the population in-country itself. It is also noteworthy that most Polynesian people in Australia arrived there by way of Aotearoa New Zealand.

⁵ Bedford and Hugo also indicated that a smaller diaspora (50,000) lived in Canada which would bring the total in the four Pacific rim countries to 850,000.

Table 2. Pasifika populations in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand combined

	Population in NZ and Australia combined		Population of 'origin' ^a	As percentage of population in country of 'origin'	
	Ethnicity or Ancestry	Country of Birth		Ethnicity or Ancestry	Country of Birth
PNG	23,799	36,352	8,935,000	0.27	0.41
Solomon Islands	3,445	4,071	712,100	0.48	0.57
Vanuatu	3,370	6,546	294,700	1.14	2.22
Fiji	83,424	142,380	895,000	9.32	15.91
Kiribati	4,488	3,266	118,700	3.78	2.75
Cook Islands	108,026	19,885	15,300	706.05	129.97
Niue	37,092	4,932	1,600	2318.25	308.25
Samoa	280,743	89,892	198,700	141.29	45.24
Tokelau	11,220	1,891	1,500	748.00	126.07
Tonga	125,858	43,736	99,800	126.11	43.82
Tuvalu	5,648	2,104	10,600	53.28	19.85

^a The term origin is used here to denote the country to which the ethnicity is attached to. Many of those in these columns were born in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

Sources: Based on data extracted from Australian Census, 2021; New Zealand Census, 2018

The Pasifika diaspora has grown rapidly in recent decades. In Australia, the Pasifika population almost doubled (1.9 times) between 2006 and 2021 and accounted for 1.3 per cent of the national population. The annual average growth rate for the period at 4.3 per cent per annum, increasing to 4.5 for the last intercensal decade, was also double that of the total Australian population (Liu and Howes, 2023). In the 2018 census of Aotearoa New Zealand ([Stats New Zealand](#)), 381,642 people identifying as having Pacific Island identity were enumerated. This was an increase of 29 per cent over the previous census in 2013 (when 295,941 Pacific People were enumerated) and 44 per cent more than in 2006 (265,974). If we look at the Pasifika population as a percentage of the total of the three destination countries respectively, Pasifika play the most predominant role in Aotearoa New Zealand, representing eight per cent of the national population in 2018. Interestingly, the number with Pasifika ethnicity in 2018 was 50 per cent greater than 12 years earlier in 2006, again suggesting growing numbers with more than one Pasifika ethnic background. The growth in Pasifika people enumerated as being born in a PICT increased by only 26 per cent, reflecting both the increasing number of Pasifika people being born in Aotearoa New Zealand, but also increasing numbers of people with more than one Pasifika ethnicity. In comparison, the total Aotearoa New Zealand population had increased by only 13 per cent over the period between 2006 and 2018. One thing is clear: in combination, Pasifika form growing and increasingly significant demographic groups and cultural components of Aotearoa New Zealand society. The influence of Pasifika in Aotearoa New Zealand is expanding, with 11 out of the 120 MPs in parliament being of Pasifika ethnicity, including the current Deputy Prime Minister (as of mid-2023).

The data on the Pasifika population in the USA is complicated by the use of race rather than ethnicity, the combination of Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders (NHPI) together in Census data, and several groups (American Samoan, Mariana Islanders and Guamanians or Chamorro) being from islands that are US territories. Furthermore, the category Oceania in, for example, place of birth statistics, includes Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Nevertheless, it appears that in the 2020 census around 1.5 million people were enumerated as 'Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander Alone or in Combination'. It is not yet possible to determine how many of these people were non-Hawaiian. Accordingly, it is difficult to determine exactly how many people with Pasifika ancestry live in the USA. Nevertheless, the absolute number is much higher than Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, though of course their percentage of the national population is much lower. While Pasifika numbers represent a small proportion of the US population, they represent a much higher proportion in comparison to the numbers living in several of the island countries and territories of origin.

A total of 365,730 people having a single NHPI group racial category, excluding Native Hawaiians, were enumerated in 2010. If we take those with more than one NHPI category, there are a further 26,412 responses, but the number of actual respondents is not available. At the other end of the data is NHPI in combination with any other racial group which (excluding Native Hawaiians) totalled almost three-quarters of a million responses. Most Pasifika people in the USA originate from American Territories (American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and Guam) and the Compact of Free Association (COFA) countries (Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Palau and Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI)).

An important question is what role climate change may play in these migration processes. Will, or indeed, is, climate change-initiated environmental degradation exacerbating the imbalances between the island Pacific and rim countries and influencing migration decisions? Further, is climate change likely to intensify pressure on diaspora populations to provide increasing volumes of remittances or support growing numbers of kinfolk stimulated to migrate by these climate change effects?

Atoll countries

There are three independent countries and one territory that are entirely or mostly composed of atolls: Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Tuvalu and the territory of Tokelau. Migration and other demographic processes on, and from, atolls show considerable variation. It seems evident that those atoll PICTs with emigration access have high rates of outmigration. Tokelau has a long history of migration to its colonial metropole, Aotearoa New Zealand. Altogether there are about 12,000 people with Tokelauan ethnicity living in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia and the USA, which is eight times the resident population (see Table 1 above).

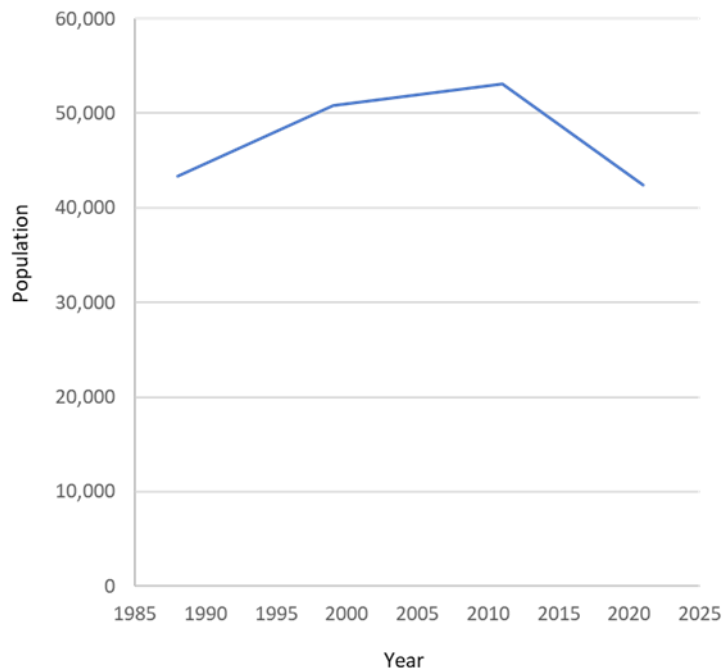


Figure 2. RMI total population 1988 to 2021. (Source of data: Marshall Islands Economic Policy, Planning and Statistics Office (EPSSO), 2012, 2022)

In comparison, it appears that outmigration from the Marshall Islands has increased very rapidly in more recent times (see Figure 2). In the last intercensal period from 2011 to 2021, the population has declined markedly by 20 per cent (from 53,158 to 42,418) (Johnson, 2021; Marshall Islands Economic Policy, Planning and Statistics Office (EPSSO), 2022). Nevertheless, the number of people of Marshallese descent in the USA is still less than the resident population of the atoll nation, although final results of the 2020 USA census have not been released for these data. What are the causes of such a high rate of outmigration? It is difficult to determine but it is synchronous with a period of increasing rates of global warming. The two other atoll states, Kiribati and Tuvalu, have fewer open pathways for migration; however, the latter has a significant and growing diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand. Kiribati appears to be the atoll state with the lowest rates of emigration. The fourth PB of this series investigates atoll PICTs in greater detail.

Temporary workers in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand

A relatively recent development (although there have been antecedents) has been the introduction of temporary visas for Pasifika workers in agricultural, especially seasonal horticultural and viticultural, industries in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. Beginning initially in New Zealand (2007) and later established in Australia, these programmes have seen steadily increasing numbers of temporary workers from the Pacific in both countries. While there was a lag in Australian figures initially, by 2019 the number of visas to Australia topped those to New Zealand for the first time (Lawton, 2019). Between 2007 and 2022, 101,840 visas were awarded under the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) Scheme for work in Aotearoa New Zealand although a very large number were to return workers such that the number of individuals involved in RSE work was little more than a third (36,675) of the total visas awarded, raising concerns about the equitable distribution of

opportunities to participate in the scheme with some source locations favoured over others (C. Bedford and R. Bedford, 2023; R. Bedford and C. Bedford, 2023; Nunns et al., 2020). These schemes have had both successful and unsuccessful outcomes for the migrants, their families at home and their home countries in terms of human rights concerns in some work and accommodation places, costs deducted from wages for travel and accommodation, and amounts remitted (Davila et al., 2023; Dun et al., 2020, 2023; ILO, 2022; New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2022) although the large number of return workers suggest, at least among these migrants, some level of satisfaction.

It also needs to be noted that the overall numbers are quite small and most of the RSE workers in Aotearoa New Zealand are not from countries that are highly exposed to climate change such as the atoll nations, although it is not clear what specific locations workers from Vanuatu, Samoa and Tonga (the majority of workers) are from. These three countries also have the highest number of seasonal workers per capita (based on their 2020 population estimates from SPC).

There have been suggestions that temporary migration may be a means of offsetting environmental losses in islands affected by climate change (e.g., Coelho, 2020). Dun et al. (2020) found that Solomon Islands labour migrants did invest in development and *in situ* climate change adaptation in their home communities, but that more formal programmes to support climate change adaptation were necessary.

The costs of the schemes (airfares, accommodation and food) fall upon the migrants rather than the GHG emitters. By and large, the notion of temporary labour migration and circulation as an adaptation to climate change begs the question of why should the costs of such responses fall on the communities and individuals that made little contribution to climate change? At the same time the returns from seasonal migration may be diverted from local or kinship 'development' activities into measures to cope with climate change effects. In this way desires to improve local social and economic well-being may be thwarted as communities use remittances to just maintain the status quo.

Pacific people in other PICTs

It is difficult to get comprehensive data on the number of migrants or the descendants of migrants living in PICTs. There are old groups such as descendants of those involved in the 19th and early 20th century 'labour trade' in Fiji and to a lesser extent Samoa, as well as South Sea Islanders (also descendants of indentured labourers) in Australia. While having been established for over a century in the countries where they currently live, they are subject to various restrictions such as rights to vote or access to land. For example, Baleinakorodawa (2022) outlines the uncertainties faced by a community of Melanesian descendants of labourers in Vanua Levu, Fiji, when the land they were on was sold by the Anglican church to the Government of Kiribati. More recently, around mid-twentieth century, groups from the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (now known as Tuvalu and Kiribati) were relocated by the colonial governments of the time to places in Fiji (from Banaba to Rabi) and Solomon Islands (from islands in Kiribati to Wagana and Gizo) (Tabe, 2019; Teaiwa, 2015). A third group from Vaitupu (Tuvalu) independently purchased the island of Kioa in Fiji in 1946 and a significant portion of the population moved there (Falefou, 2017).

Burson and Bedford (2013) and Burson et al. (2021) identify 'clusters and hubs' of Pacific migrants in Pacific countries other than the one in which they were born. The data indicate, for around 2019, that there were relatively small numbers of Pacific-born persons in other PICTs (71,780 compared with a total regional population of 12,326,150 in 2020 (SPC). It should be noted that these figures do not include second or later generations of intra-Pacific migrants. The numbers of migrants within the Pacific are also a very small proportion of the numbers in the Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia and USA Pasifika diaspora (less than five per cent of the total in Table 1 for example). Burson et al. (2021) identify intra-Pacific migration hubs in Guam (Micronesians from American 'flag territories'), New Caledonia (people from French territories) and Vanuatu (formerly a French/British Condominium) and American Samoa (people mostly from nearby Samoa). They also show that most intra-Pacific migration takes place within each of the three subregions respectively, with relatively few exceptions.

Fiji is often seen as a focal point for recent and contemporary migration from some countries in the South Pacific, and Guam similarly for PICTs north of the equator. The most recent Fiji census does not include ethnicity data, nor does it include place of birth outside of Fiji. According to the 2007 Census 6,659 'other Pacific Islanders' were enumerated of a total population of 837,271 so the numbers were apparently low (only 0.8 per cent of the total population). Nevertheless, there is a feeling among many that people from PICTs who are forced to leave their home nations might be best resettled in other Pacific countries. In this case, lessons could be learned from the relocation of the i-Kiribati and Vaitupu communities to Solomon Islands and Fiji. Many of the problems around domestic relocation, especially around land, are likely to apply to international relocatees, should such an outcome be realised. Despite this, the former Prime Minister of Fiji, Voreqe Bainimarama stated in 2015:

... in 50 years or so [places like Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands] may no longer exist. And we may have to give some of these people homes in Fiji...
[b]ecause we will never turn our backs on our island neighbours.
(Bainimarama 2015).

Of the 153,836 enumerated on Guam in the [2020 census](#), 83,368 persons (54 per cent of the total enumerated) were native Hawaiian and/or other Pacific 'alone or in combination'. Of this group, 63,035 were Chamorro, alone or in combination. This would leave at least 20,333 (13 per cent) of the people on Guam from other Pacific islands, the great majority with ethnicities from FSM, particularly Chuukese.

The Costs of Pasifika Climate Change Migration

As noted above observers have a range of views about climate change migration. Many see it as a useful vehicle for adaptation to climate change, that migration is part of the human condition, and it has many positive outcomes. In the preceding sections, the benefits of migration have mostly been represented as economic. Migration is often described as an extremely important development activity that benefits both migrants and those they leave behind as well as host and destination countries. Others, however, see climate change

driven migration as ‘adaptation failure’ in which *in situ* attempts to cope with climate change effects have been ineffective or insufficient (Campbell, 2008).

This section briefly outlines some of the costs of migration as adaptation. In terms of socio-economic considerations, members of the Pasifika diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia and the United States fare relatively badly with often high rates of unemployment or underemployment, significant health problems and difficulties in accessing care, housing issues including overcrowding and homelessness and exposure to racism. As shown in part IV of this series of PBs, while touted as having significant benefits to home communities and countries, remittances are often a major burden for migrants, especially when disasters strike at home (which may become more of a problem under climate change). For migration to be a successful adaptation, the livelihoods of those who stay behind should not be diminished and remittances not be diverted from original kinship group development initiatives as detailed by Lilomaiva-Doktor (2009a, b). If climate change migration simply maintains the status quo, it would no longer be a kinship development initiative. Moreover, if climate change impacts continue to grow, as projected, the demands placed upon migrants to sustain home communities could only be expected to grow.

Among the major difficulties facing Pasifika people is racism in ‘host’ countries which has been widely reported. In most cases, early migrants to Aotearoa New Zealand were to fill the need for low-paid ‘unskilled’ jobs when unemployment was low. When unemployment levels increased, the migrants were often made to feel unwelcome. This includes both institutional and personal racism. In Aotearoa New Zealand, during the 1970s, Pasifika people were subjected to early morning home incursions by police looking for ‘overstayers’. Despite an official and formal apology from the Prime Minister in 2021, steps were not taken at government level (Heron and Barrow, 2023) to stop the practice with intermittent dawn raids still continuing (McGregor, 2023). While the dawn raids have mostly stopped, the scars remain among many members of Aotearoa New Zealand’s Pasifika communities and until officially proscribed will continue to be a serious concern for migrants.

A particular apprehension for people from Federated States of Micronesia, Palau and the Marshall Islands in the USA—to which they are entitled to migrate under the Compact of Free Association (COFA)—is that they are not eligible for many federally-funded social services that other immigrants may access. Some states have singled out Micronesian people particularly for reductions in state-provided health care. The plight of Micronesians, including Marshallese, in the face of economic hardship, homelessness, health care restrictions and racial discrimination is relatively well recorded in Hawai’i, a major destination (Blair, 2015; Epler, 2015; Halliday and Akee, 2020; Molina et al, 2020). Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner (2011) bluntly summarises the angst of Micronesian migrants in Hawai’i in her powerful poem *Lessons from Hawai’i* in which she illustrates how racism may lead to self-loathing among young people from Micronesia.

This is not to disparage members of Pasifika diaspora. Despite these challenges, they have forged vital communities and contribute greatly to the countries to which they and their forebears have migrated. But these successes have not been without significant costs. The previous president of Kiribati, Anote Tong, coined the term ‘migration with dignity’ as an adaptation strategy for his country. The current administration instead focusses on *in situ*

adaptation as the way forward, a stance evidently supported by a majority of i-Kiribati (e.g., Herman and Kempf, 2019). Today, such a political position can be found in most PICTs, but for those with migration access, as we have seen, the numbers of emigrants are growing. Unlike much of the past experience of Pasifika migrants, it is incumbent upon the destinations to ensure that all migrants (including climate change migrants) and their descendants are treated fairly and with dignity and cultural sensitivity.

Most of these problems may be seen as having their causes in the social, economic, cultural and (post)colonial characteristics of the destination countries – not the migrants. Accordingly, a great deal of work will need to be completed by the countries to ensure the migrants are not left to face these costs of climate change migration. Despite these issues, it is evident that many members of Pasifika diaspora have established thriving diaspora communities.

Conclusion

This Policy Brief has focused on international migration from and within the Pacific region. Its aim has been to clarify some of the issues that link climate change with migration as well as to provide a baseline understanding of contemporary migration patterns in the region. Hopefully this provides some context for considering the role of climate change-influenced migration that may have already occurred in some instances, and which may be anticipated in the future.

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