



A PACIFIC CLIMATE–PEACE NEXUS

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Introduction

This policy brief argues that the Pacific Islands region offers a distinct and instructive approach to thinking about the relationship between climate change and peace. Rather than emphasizing a ‘climate–conflict nexus’,^[1] Pacific Island experiences suggest this relationship can be better understood through the lenses of social cohesion, relational security, cultural continuity and ecological stewardship. From this perspective, the Pacific Islands region does not simply sit outside the climate–conflict debate but rather offers a distinctive way of thinking about a *climate–peace nexus*.

Rethinking the climate–conflict debate?

Debate on the climate–conflict nexus has evolved considerably over the past two decades.^[2] Earlier work suggested a relatively direct relationship in which climate shocks—through scarcity, displacement or livelihood disruption—might increase the likelihood of violence. Recent research suggests a more indirect relationship, showing that climate change does not in itself produce conflict, but rather interacts with existing political, economic and social conditions such as inequality, weak institutions and unresolved grievances. In this sense, climate change is more commonly understood as a threat multiplier than as an independent cause.^[3]

At the same time, attention has increasingly turned to the ways in which climate responses themselves may produce tension. Adaptation and mitigation measures can increase climate insecurity and conflict risk where they redistribute land, water, infrastructure or finance in ways that bypass local authority, privilege certain groups, or fail to account for social difference.^[4] For example, Rudge describes a ‘military-adaptation complex’ in Guam which indirectly reinforces the climate change impacts of military action (including carbon emissions and the destruction of the environment through warfare and military buildup),^[5] deprioritizes non-military related adaptation, and obstructs more ambitious climate action. Recent research in the Solomon Islands suggests that externally driven adaptation initiatives that do not take into consideration relational processes or bypass local mediation systems can undermine social cohesion and customary resilience structures thereby enhancing insecurity.^[6] Such evidence has contributed to a growing emphasis on conflict-sensitive climate action and on approaches that place climate policy in closer conversation with peacebuilding and human security.^[7]

[1] Daoudy, M. (2021). Rethinking the climate-conflict nexus: a human-environmental-climate security approach. *Global Environmental Politics*, 21 (3): 4–25; Pacillo, G. et al. (2024). Measuring the climate security nexus: the integrated climate security framework. *PLOS Climate*, October 21: 1–25; Ide, T. (2025). Rethinking climate conflicts: the role of climate action and inaction. *World Development*, 186: 1–7.

[2] Ide, T., Koren, O., & Derrick, L. (2026). Climate-related disasters and temperature extremes are not associated with conflict risk in Pacific Island Countries. *Environment and Security*, 22 January: 1–14.

[3] Doran, J. (2024). The climate-conflict nexus: An examination of causality in the threat multiplier discourse of climate and conflict. *Routes*, 4(2): 114–121.

[4] Adger, W.N., J.M. Pulhin, J. Barnett, G.D. Dabelko, G.K. Hovelsrud, M. Levy, Ú. Oswald Spring, and C.H. Vogel (2014): 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* [Field, C.B., et al. (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA, pp. 755–791; Dabelko, G. D. et al. (2013), *Backdraft: The Conflict Potential of Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation* (Environmental Change & Security Program Report Vol. 14, Issue 2). Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars; Aina, F.

(2026). Fighting climate change in the Sahel is worsening conflicts – new research shows. *The Conversation*, 20 January, <https://theconversation.com/fighting-climate-change-in-the-sahel-is-worsening-conflicts-new-research-shows-how-273673>

[5] Rudge, K. (2025). Military-adaptation complex: Re-shaping shores across the U.S. Pacific empire. Conference Presentation at Adaptation Futures Conference, 14 October 2025, available at <https://www.kierenrudge.com/research.html>

[6] World Vision Australia, Unpublished paper, ‘When the Fabric Frays: Climate Security and Relational Resilience in Solomon Islands’.

[7] Dabelko et al. (2013); Raleigh, C. et al. (2024), Climate finance and conflict: adaptation amid instability. *Lancet Planet Health*, 8 (e51), [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196\(23\)00256-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196(23)00256-5/fulltext);

While there have indeed been examples of climate related conflict in the Pacific Islands region,[8] the Pacific Islands region offers more than simply an empirical case within a wider global debate. If much of the international literature asks when climate change contributes to conflict, the Pacific invites us to approach the question from a somewhat different perspective: what social, cultural and ecological practices enable communities to absorb stress without violence, and how might these inform a more grounded understanding of climate and peace?

A Pacific climate–peace nexus

A regional dialogue on climate security in March 2026 hosted by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) and the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme, (SPREP) identified the need to better understand what climate security means to Pacific Islanders. For example, it was suggested that instead of emphasizing security and conflict, a Pacific approach might start from the basis of peace, relationality and social cohesion. New research on the climate–conflict nexus in Fiji, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands shows that neither temperature extremes nor climate-related disasters affect conflict risk, even after controlling for political, economic and environmental context factors.[9] While these findings reinforce the suggestion that prevailing global models do not necessarily map neatly onto Pacific settings, they also have more profound implications: if climate stress does not translate straightforwardly into conflict in the Pacific, then greater attention needs to be given to the factors that may be moderating or absorbing these impacts.

Indeed, Pacific communities have a long history of practicing cooperation and conflict resolution that have helped them deal with acute crises. The *Wokbaot wetem kalja* project, for example, demonstrated how communities in Vanuatu maintain cultural safety nets through reciprocal networks.[10] Through evoking historical customary relationships, communities evacuated due to volcanic eruptions on Ambae Island were able to access lands on neighbouring islands until it was safe to return. Similarly, *case studies* of climate (im)mobility across the Pacific show that collective resilience, family networks and cultural continuity remain central to how communities navigate climate (im-)mobilities[11].

Pacific scholarship on relationality and the irreducible connections between the environment, land and people in Pacific contexts,[12] helps explain why investments in cultural governance and relations matter.[13] From this perspective, the climate impacts that matter are not only to infrastructure or livelihoods, but more so the disturbances to social and ecological relationships through which belonging, governance, and wellbeing are sustained for both humans as well as nature and the spirit world.[14] For example, recent research from the Solomon Islands, describes how communities experience climate change not simply as physical exposure to hazards but as a disturbance in relational balance—unsettling the social, ecological and spiritual relations through which resources are shared, authority is exercised and cohesion is maintained.[15] Therefore, climate peace is realized not simply when, for example, community infrastructure is protected from hazards but also when the relational fabric of Pacific communities that makes resilience and climate adaptation possible is supported and protected.[16]

[8] Post Courier (2022). Peace talks in place for Mengar, Basis communities. *Post Courier Online*, 16 June, <https://www.postcourier.com.pg/peace-talks-in-place-for-mengar-basis-communities/>.

[9] Ide, T., Koren, O. & Derrick, L. (2026).

[10] Naupa, A., Organo, V. & Huffer, E. (2025). Culture and displacement management: lessons from the 2017–2018 Ambae Island evacuations, Vanuatu. In U. Vaai et al. (Eds), *Climate Change in Pasifika Relational Perspectives*. Suva: PCU Press.

[11] Farbotko, C. & Campbell, J. (2025). (Un)inhabitability and relational security in Pacific atolls. In U. Vaai et al. (Eds), *Climate Change in Pasifika Relational Perspectives*. Suva: PCU Press

[12] Boege, V. (2025). Ontological Security: Part I. *Ontological Security, the Spatial Turn and Pacific Relationality Part I*, Toda Peace Institute. Boege, V. (2025). Ontological Security and Pacific Relationality: Framing the challenges of climate mobility in the Pacific. In U. Vaai et al. (Eds), *Climate Change in Pasifika Relational Perspectives*. Suva: PCU Press.

[13] Vaai, U. (2025). Climate change in Pasifika Relational Itulagi. In U. Vaai et al. (Eds), *Climate Change in Pasifika Relational Perspectives*. Suva: PCU Press

[14] Ibid.

[15] World Vision Australia, 'When the Fabric Frays'.

[16] Ibid.

Pacific leadership for climate peace

These cultural strengths are also being translated into bilateral and regional policy innovations. At a bilateral level, the government of Fiji has offered land to other Pacific Island governments whose people may be forced to move due to the impacts of climate change, while the Falepili Union Treaty between Australia and Tuvalu is grounded in the traditional values of good neighbourliness, duty of care and mutual respect. The Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration, endorsed in 2025 by Pacific Islands Forum Leaders, explicitly grounds regional peace in ‘the Pacific Way’, drawing on the depth and diversity of the region’s cultural practices and indigenous knowledge systems. Supporting and strengthening the integration of traditional relationship structures and conflict resolution practices into climate security priorities could therefore be key to supporting a Pacific climate–peace nexus.

Pacific leadership at the global level also shows that the region is seeking to shape international norms in ways that are consistent with a Pacific approach to climate change and peace. Vanuatu’s initiative and leadership on the International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on the obligations of states regarding climate change, for example, has helped place climate justice more centrally within international legal debate, while also reinforcing Pacific claims to normative leadership. During opening remarks delivered at a Climate Justice Week in Suva, Fiji, in May 2026, Vanuatu Minister Ralph Regenvanu emphasized the importance of translating the ICJ Advisory Opinion into Pacific reality, shaped by Pacific peoples, values and traditions. He further highlighted that across the Pacific, “customary law and traditional knowledge systems have always embodied the essence of environmental rights. Our principles of stewardship, reciprocity, respect for land and ocean, and intergenerational responsibility are not new concepts introduced from outside. They are deeply rooted in who we are as Pacific peoples”.^[17] Therefore, through asserting its Pacific Way approach to climate change and peace, the region is well positioned to lead the world on translating the ICJ Advisory Opinion into concrete actions to ‘make peace with nature’.^[18]

[17] Regenvanu, R. (2025). Opening remarks at Climate Justice Week, Suva, May 25.

[18] The *Making Peace with Nature* report by UNEP argues that transforming humankind’s relationship with nature is key to securing peace and development for the future. Further, in the UN Secretary General’s Remarks to the General Assembly – Priorities for 2026, he emphasized making peace with nature as the defining task of the coming decades. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statements/2026-01-15/secretary-generals-remarks-the-general-assembly-priorities-for-2026>

Recommendations

1. **The Pacific Island Forum should consider integrating a regional climate–peace agenda in the regional Peace and Security Action Plan 2026–2030.** Such an agenda would bring together the region’s greatest security threat [19] with the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration, while articulating a Pacific framing of climate security that places greater emphasis on peace, cohesion, relationality and ecological resilience. A climate-peace agenda could be coordinated by PIFS in partnership with SPREP, SPC and UNDP and could also support dialogue across climate, disaster, environment and security policy communities.
2. **The Pacific Islands Forum could develop a regional instrument on environmental rights.** Through a member-led, and legally informed process, the Pacific Island Forum could establish a regional instrument, protocol or mechanism that operationalises the ICJ Advisory Opinion of 23 July 2025 and codifies the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in the Pacific. Doing so would further extend the Pacific’s leadership on the ICJ Advisory Opinion and reinforce Pacific relationality through emphasizing the inseparability of environmental rights and all other human rights.
3. **Pacific Island governments could integrate the promotion and protection of customary relational systems into national and regional policies and mechanisms for climate adaptation, mobility and disaster risk reduction.** This would involve recognizing customary authority, reciprocal networks, faith-based actors and community leadership not only as stakeholders for consultation, but also as practical resources for prevention, mediation and resilience.
4. **The Pacific Climate Mobility Partnerships programme [20] could develop guidance and tools for national governments to embed Pacific climate peace assessments into assessments of climate displacement risk.** This guidance could be developed by Priority Action Committee 4 on rights based, inclusive and culturally appropriate climate mobility action in collaboration with Priority Action Committee 1 on climate displacement risk assessments. The guidance or tool should help national governments and communities assess the impacts of climate change on relational peace, including social, ecological and spiritual harmony through which resources are shared, authority is exercised and cohesion is maintained.
5. **Development partners and climate finance providers should recognize relational systems as core infrastructure for climate adaptation and preventing climate related loss and damage, including non-economic loss and damages.** In addition to climate financing that targets hard infrastructure and/or nature-based solutions for minimizing the impacts of climate change, investments in relational systems as community level resilient infrastructure would further strengthen climate peace.

[19] The PIF 2018 Boe Declaration states, “We reaffirm that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific.”

[20] The Pacific Climate Mobility Partnerships programme is funded by NZ MFAT and led by IOM in partnership with PIFS, PDD, UNOHCHR, SPC and SPREP. The programme supports the implementation of the Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility Implementation Plan 2025–2030.



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