

Decoupling development from nature



A CONVERSATION ABOUT THE FUTURE WITH /

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Thanks very much, Penehuro, for your time today. It's great to be able to chat with you about the critical climate change issues facing our country and region, and all the diverse peoples within it. I know you are very active in the international climate resilience space, particularly with respect to Pacific nations – New Zealand's neighbours, and a region with which many people in New Zealand obviously have a strong connection. Could we begin by talking a bit about your recent work in the area, and the concerns you're addressing?

It's great to be here. I've worked in this space for 30 years, coming from a climate science background then slowly moving into the policy space and understanding more about the legal side of climate negotiations. My focus has been on how you take the scientific evidence and apply it at the national, local, regional and international levels. That's where you need a lot of data analysis and that's the space I'm in now.

My recent work has been about helping Tokelau develop their climate change strategic plan. They wanted to complete their Nationally Determined Contribution report in the lead up to the Paris Agreement, when I became involved and advised them not to, because they don't have baseline data to be able to make realistic projections or scenarios of where they want to go.

Most developing countries, including Pacific Island countries, were pushed into coming up with voluntary Nationally Determined Contributions without fully understanding what they were getting themselves into. The developed countries were in an advantageous position because they were locked in under the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, so they had started producing their Greenhouse Gas National Inventories since 1994. The history of gathering the data is there, so developed countries can set realistic targets.

Many Pacific Island countries did not have any of that information. Because of the need for all the Parties to have some sort of deal in Paris, most Pacific Island countries said "Okay, 20% renewable energy by 2012." It was a political target, not based on emissions coming from the energy sector or the sort of energy mix that they wanted.

There was a disconnect between the political high-level stuff and what was going on on the ground. It was wrong to move down this path for everybody, with all Parties having to have a target without actually knowing what their baselines were or how they were going to get to their targets.

One of the first things I did for Tokelau was to do the climate change strategy work first. I kept it very simple. In any country, whether developed or developing, there are three climate resilience investment pathways: mitigation, adaptation and human development. You need the public



to go along with it before you put in place any policies. What we did in Tokelau was to look at their highest priorities not just for climate change per se, but framed in the context of resilience. It's about managing risks, whether from energy security, economic, or physical impacts. It's been well received everywhere.

What we've done since then was work with New Zealand experts – the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (MFAT) Environment Division, the Ministry for the Environment (MfE) – to prepare Tokelau's greenhouse gas inventory. What's really amazing for me is how our work has raised the profile and understanding from all Pacific Island countries. So now there is a Pacific Nationally Determined Contributions Hub, up and running in Fiji.

What about your research work?

My continuing work in research is about looking at the data and addressing the fact that there is no way we're going to meet the 1.5 or 2 degree target as enshrined under the Paris Agreement without major, planetary scale technological intervention. Whether you're in Asia or Africa, the three driving factors are sustainability, economic growth and increased welfare of people. It is very nice in a Convention or Protocol to refer to "common but differentiated responsibilities based on national capabilities", but there's no way you can stop somebody in Bangladesh building a coal-fired power station. They need to get their people out of poverty, and that's where Agenda 2030 comes in.

After 30 years of negotiations, 84% of our current energy use needs are still fossil-fuel based, heavily subsidised. It's important to drive the discussion at high political levels, but that's not going to reduce the emissions quickly enough under voluntary commitments. That's why I'm working now on climate engineering technologies, like solar geoengineering, also known as Solar Radiation Modification, which is simply dimming the sunlight coming to Earth. For me, from a strategic perspective that's the bigger battle now globally – you need major emissions reduction, but you also need some sort of insurance policy or technology. The decarbonisation pathway is not going to happen overnight.

What are the biggest issues we should think about on the decarbonisation pathway?

Most of the talk about climate change is about physical impacts, changed weather patterns, weather extremes and so forth. For me, the more important issue is this text carefully buried in the preamble of the Paris Agreement: "... recognising that Parties may be affected not only by climate change," – that's the physical bit – "but also by the impacts of the measures taken in response to it." That means economic impacts.

A very quick example relevant to the region – shipping and aviation fuels. In 1997 when we were negotiating the Kyoto Protocol, the European Union pushed strongly to include these fuels as sectors in the Protocol. All AOSIS [Alliance of Small Island States] negotiators went along with the EU

position. I said it wasn't good for Pacific Island countries or small Island countries. The EU was being disingenuous in a way, because at the time, Germany was going to replace all the inefficient power stations in East Germany and the UK was closing a lot of their coal-fired power stations, but France was increasing their nuclear power production capability, so they were sharing the burden. Nothing to do really with climate per se.

The other problem that I have with the EU proposal is that it's just a very small bloc of countries. You can fly from one side to the other. They hardly have any oceans. What I said was, you need to look at the economic impacts. We rely heavily on tourism. We fly people from outside to the region. What they're saying is you're going to add a carbon price on your airfares. Likewise, the biggest industry in our region is fishing through our exclusive economic zones. It did not go through, which was good. To this day, it still hasn't been resolved.

That's the bigger one for me. You're not going to wait for the physical impacts – the new agenda of decarbonisation will have an immediate impact on Pacific Island communities. It's like having an oil crisis.



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New Zealand needs to be careful with how we frame this. New Zealand is a small market and heavily dependent on international trade, multilateralism and globalisation. This is the other really interesting thing in the preamble to the Paris Agreement: "Emphasizing the intrinsic relationship that climate change actions, responses and impacts have with equitable access to sustainable development and eradication of poverty", and "Recognizing the fundamental priority of safeguarding food security and ending hunger, and the particular vulnerabilities of food production systems to the adverse impacts of climate change". That's not a problem for New Zealand but it is in some of the Pacific Island countries. Finally, "Taking into account the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities".

These are really about how Pacific communities, in my view, need to be dealt with. You need to engage with these communities and to analyse the implications specifically for these communities.

You cannot lump Pacific Islands all into one basket. Everybody is different. Tokelau, for example, is very unique – they're very safe because of their geographical location. In the last 50 years, most tropical cyclones formed just below Tokelau and then shot downwards. Tokelau is pretty safe, too, in terms of tsunamis, which we look at for coastal inundation

risk. Samoa acts as a wall for tsunami created in the Tonga trench, and if anything comes in from Japan, it's so far north that by the time it reaches Tokelau, it's just ripples.

When you did your work with Tokelau, how did the communities there respond to this message about resilience, and managing that at the same time as lifting living standards?

My co-director, who is an affiliated research faculty member at the University of Hawaii Social Science Research Institute advised strongly that before we drafted any of this work we had to consult the communities first and foremost. What we found is that once people understand what it's all about – because their view of climate change tends to be very narrow – they buy in. So in Tokelau, we consulted with the leaders, with the village councils, with the women's community, the youth and so on before we put it together. Now almost all the projects in the implementation plan are funded.

That sounds like a great outcome. You made the point that the circumstances of the different Pacific Island countries are quite different geographically and geophysically. Even so, are there any common themes in your work with the Pacific coming through?

The region is divided into three subregions, with similar circumstances. Melanesia – Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomons, Vanuatu, New Caledonia – are bigger countries with forestry. The Micronesian countries are very much like Tokelau. Any countries within the Polynesian triangle from Hawaii down to New Zealand and to Easter Island to the east are kind of in between Melanesia and Micronesia but with very different cultures, similar to Samoa.

To put it simply, to a bigger country, there's less separation between mitigation and adaptation issues. For the smaller communities, the Resilient Development framing is far more important than trying to follow the bigger countries. The developing countries, including small islands, are pushing for adaptation to be on the same level as mitigation, because of the way funding was set up in the Convention where a mitigation project has to be done first.

The other issue that they're pushing in the region is for the ocean to be part of Nationally Determined Contributions – but that's not yet officially accepted under the Convention. The reason why we didn't include the ocean is because we didn't have enough science and data to be able to say categorically how the ocean matters. We know the ocean takes out a lot of the heat, but how do you measure the contribution of the Tokelau's Exclusive Economic Zone towards the global climate system? There's a big push for Pacific Islands to include the ocean, but I'm very cautious and you do need the scientific evidence. It's also hard because it's mainly the 1983 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea which covers governance of the ocean. You have to be careful what you wish for.

As well as food and energy security and economic development concerns, are there cultural issues around land use that play out in these conversations?

It's really, really contentious. In Samoa, for example, where more than 80% of the land is customary land and is not being used, the Government is pushing hard to get it for afforestation and development purposes. They're amending the law and that's what the tension is now – allowing China, for example, to buy land. You see that in Fiji, in Papua New Guinea, in Vanuatu – that's going to blow up if it's not carefully managed.



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How are governments managing that tension?

The transitioning is happening. My experience in Samoa, for example, and Fiji and Papua New Guinea is that it's very much top down and that's the scary thing. You see that happening around the region. The ADB and World Bank are purely looking at it from an economic growth perspective and building industries and getting people to work.

In terms of the workforce, one of the issues that can have a huge impact in New Zealand relations with Pacific Island countries is the Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme, and its interaction with the agricultural side of things and short-lived gases like methane. Agriculture is a lightning rod.

To what extent are New Zealand diaspora Pasifika engaged in this conversation?

I've not seen many Pasifika people involved in the conversation at all, because they're worried about paying the rent tomorrow and finding a house to live in. One of the big challenges is that as we transition into zero carbon, you need a carbon neutral house, for example, which is not happening. What was fascinating for me is to find out that the only government department that has all the carbon calculated is the Ministry for the Environment. Treasury hasn't done it.

These are real issues. It will have a huge economic impact on the affordability of housing for future generations. We already struggle with the very, very high cost of real estate and stagnating income. How do you bridge the gap? These are the projections.

That's not unique to Pasifika, of course, but those communities are among the ones that bear the most burden of poor housing.

That's right. Because most of my work is international, I haven't spent much time domestically. I do think there needs to be more engagement on this very important policy debate that will have major implications for Pacific people and their children. Not just domestically but through the link back to the home islands. How the policies going on in Samoa and Fiji will impact their relationships, like with the land issue that we just talked about, and more pressure when they're already stretched to the limit. There are so many layers and it's fundamentally about lifestyle.

Clearly this is a very difficult, complex issue with many tough choices. Yet we carry on. Of all you've seen and done in your travels, what makes you hopeful or optimistic?

I'm always an optimist. I believe that we can solve problems no matter what. That's why, when we see how political negotiations go around in circles, we continue a lot of our work under the radar on climate technologies. It's basically about the realisation that you have to decouple development issues from nature and the transition into energy security and decarbonisation. The only way you can do that is through technological innovation. Carbon capture and storage and solar radiation modification – I'm working on both. That's how optimistic I am. I don't think we can just give up.