

Don't give up on Pacific Island nations yet

Written by Jon Barnett, Professor, School of Geography, University of Melbourne

Fiji's presidency of this year's [United Nations climate summit](#) has put a renewed focus on the future of low-lying Pacific Islands. And while we should not ignore the plight of these nations, it is just as damaging to assume that their fate is already sealed.

Many people in Australia consider island nations such as Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands to be almost synonymous with impending climate catastrophe. After returning from Papua New Guinea in 2015, federal immigration minister Peter Dutton [infamously joked](#) that "time doesn't mean anything when you're about to have water lapping at your door".

If influential and everyday Australians, and the rest of the world, hold the view that Pacific Island nations are [doomed to succumb to climate change](#), the danger is that this will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Read more: [Australia doesn't 'get' the environmental challenges faced by Pacific Islanders](#)

When we deny the possibility of a future for low-lying small islands, we are admitting defeat. This in turn undermines the impetus to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and find ways to help communities carry on living in their island homes. It leaves us unable to discuss any options besides [palliative responses](#) for climate refugees.

There are other consequences of this pessimistic framing of islands. It may undermine efforts to sustainably manage environments, because a finite future is anathema to the sustaining resources in perpetuity. It can also manifest itself in harmful local narratives of denial or [self-blame](#). And it can lead to climate change being blamed for environmental impacts that arise from local practices, which then remain unchanged.

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We would do well to listen instead to what the leaders of low-lying island nations are saying, such as Tuvalu's Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga, who [told the 2013 Warsaw climate summit](#) :

... some have suggested that the people of Tuvalu can move elsewhere. Let me say in direct terms. We do not want to move. Such suggestions are offensive to the people of Tuvalu. Our lives and culture are based on our continued existence on the islands of Tuvalu. We will survive.

Those sentiments were echoed by the late Tony de Brum, former foreign minister of the Marshall Islands and described as the "[voice of the Pacific Islands on climate change](#)", who [said in 2015](#)

:

Displacement is not an option we relish or cherish and we will not operate on that basis. We will operate on the basis that we can in fact help to prevent this from happening.

Determined to survive

These leaders are determined for good reasons. Small islands are likely to respond in a host of different ways to climate change, depending on their geology, local wave patterns, regional differences in sea-level rise, and how their corals, mangroves and other wildlife respond to changing temperatures and weather patterns.

Evidence suggests that even seemingly very similar island types may [respond very differently to one another](#) . In many cases it is too early to say for sure that climate change will make a particular island uninhabitable.

But perhaps even more important in the future of low-lying small islands is the way people adapt to climate change. There are all sorts of ways in which people can adapt their environments to changing conditions. Indeed, when the first migrants arrived in the low-lying atolls of Micronesia [more than 3,000 years ago](#) they found sand islands with no surface water and little soil, and settled them with only what

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they had in their small boats. Modern technologies and engineering systems can transform islands even more substantially, so that people can still live meaningful lives on them under changed climate conditions.

Adapting islands to climate change will not be easy. It will involve changes in where and how things are built, what people eat, how they get their water and energy, and what their islands look like.

It will also involve changes in institutions that are fundamental to island societies, such as those concerned with land and marine tenure. But it can be done, with ingenuity, careful and long-term planning, technology transfer, and meaningful partnerships between governments and international agencies.

Failure so far

Frustratingly, however, the international community is so far failing island states when it comes to this crucial adaptation. Despite their acute vulnerability having been recognised for at least 30 years, low-lying atoll countries such as Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu are attracting only [low or moderate amounts of international adaptation funding](#) . This is mostly as part of larger regional projects, and often focused on building capacity rather than implementing actual changes.

It is we who have failed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to help low-lying islands adapt, and it is we who cannot imagine any long-term future for them. It seems all we can do is talk about loss, migration, and waves of climate refugees. Having let them down twice, this defeatist thinking risks denying them an independent future for a third time. This is environmental neo-colonialism.

Read more: [Islands lost to the waves: how rising seas washed away part of Micronesia's 19th-century history](#)

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The international community has a moral responsibility to deliver a comprehensive strategy to minimise the risks climate change poses to remote low-lying islands. People living on these islands have a legal and moral right to lead dignified lives in their homelands, free from the interference of climate impacts. People who live in affluent countries high above sea level have several responsibilities here.

First, as [most of us agree](#) , we should reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. We have some control over that through how we consume, invest, vote and travel. Second, we should insist that our governments do more to help low-lying states to adapt to climate change. It is our pollution, after all. And we should argue for a reversal in our [declinin](#)
[g aid budgets](#)

And finally, and perhaps most importantly, we should all stop talking down the future of low-lying small islands, because all this does is hasten their demise.

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