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THE 2020 CLIMATE CHANGE REGIME – FIT FOR PURPOSE
FOR THE PACIFIC?

*Adrian Macey**

7.1 Introduction

Small island states left the 2015 Paris Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC),¹ known as COP21, feeling that they had at last been listened to. This was a contrast to many preceding COPs where these states, negotiating under the umbrella of the Association of Small Island States (AOSIS), were left frustrated. A common pattern was for their concerns to be squeezed out towards the end of these annual climate summits as the big countries crafted the final deals. The issues dividing the major players were often not relevant to the small island states.

The moral force of the small island states' appeals to the global community was inescapable. They were among the most vulnerable to climate change and at the same time the least responsible for it. The message has been eloquently conveyed by a number of small island state leaders, at times quite dramatically, such as when the 2009 Copenhagen COP collapsed into chaos (Vidal, Stratton and Goldenberg, 2009). For them, the survival of their countries was at stake. This gave them a strong interest in universal participation in an agreement, an ambitious temperature goal and a recognition of the importance of adaptation, technology and finance. Until Paris, these interests were far from having been met.²

What made the difference? Much credit must go to France's hard work in the 12 months leading up to COP 21. France's energetic diplomacy built trust in their forthcoming presidency among the parties. It also brought increased engagement with local government and business, which paid off in increased pressure on governments to conclude a deal. The Pacific was not left out. Shortly before the COP, France convened a "France-Oceania Summit" where Pacific leaders were able to set out their

* Adjunct Professor, New Zealand Climate Change Research Institute, Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand; Senior Associate, Institute for Governance and Policy Studies, Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand; Fellow, Institut d'études avancées, Nantes, France.

1 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 1771 UNTS 107 (opened for signature 4 June 1992, entered into force 21 March 1994) [UNFCCC].

2 The role of the Association of Small Island States (AOSIS) in the negotiations is discussed in Timothee Ourbak and Alexandre K Magnan "The Paris Agreement and climate change negotiations: Small Islands, big players" (2018) 18(8) *Regional Environmental Change* 2201; and Ian Fry "The Paris Agreement: an insider's perspective - the role of Small Island Developing States" (2016) 46(2) *Environmental Policy and Law* 105.

main concerns and their expectations for the conference.³ This gave them the opportunity to lend weight to the Suva Declaration on Climate Change, agreed three months before.⁴ The Declaration called for a temperature goal of below 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and for action commensurate with it. The urgent need for fast-track finance and assistance with energy transitions such as in the maritime transport sector in the Pacific was also highlighted.

7.2 Pacific gains from the Paris Agreement

The Paris Agreement goes a long way towards meeting many of the Pacific concerns.⁵ It is universal, both in terms of the membership and commitments. The Pacific countries had long supported an agreement that would include all major emitters, developed and developing, recognising that this was the only way to achieve the necessary reductions in emissions. The temperature goal of "well below 2 [degrees Celsius] ... and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 [degrees Celsius]" does not go quite as far as the Suva Declaration, but nonetheless was a real breakthrough in the negotiations.⁶ It had previously been the subject of some strong opposition, especially by fossil fuel dependent countries.

The Paris Agreement breaks new ground in giving adaptation and finance equal status to mitigation in the objectives of a climate treaty. Article 2(1)(a) states the temperature goal; article 2(1)(b) refers to adaptation, resilience and low-carbon development; and article 2(1)(c) calls for finance flows consistent with these needs. Additionally, there is a global goal on adaptation in article 7.

Thus, the new legal framing is better aligned with the Pacific requirements for both adaptation and mitigation. In the Paris Agreement and the accompanying decisions, there is new language on loss and damage, technology and capacity building, the latter being given higher status with a new committee. Importantly for the Pacific, it was made explicit that the Green Climate Fund (GCF), established in 2010 to invest in low-emission and climate-resilient development in developing countries, would serve the Agreement.⁷ The Fund has a coordinating role and maintains links with multilateral agencies outside the UNFCCC, including the Global Environment Facility.

The stronger recognition of non-state actors in the Paris Agreement also has the potential to be of use to the Pacific in the future. Non-state actors (or non-party stakeholders as they are now called) include cities, other sub-national entities such as states and provinces, business and civil society. The UNFCCC was among the first United Nations bodies to recognise these actors and give them observer

3 Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) "PIDF Participates in France-Oceania Summit" (4 December 2015) <www.pidf.int>.

4 Pacific Islands Development Forum "Suva Declaration on Climate Change" (Pacific Islands Development Forum Summit of Leaders (PIDF3), Suva, Fiji, 2-4 September 2015) <www.pidf.int/suva-declaration-on-climate-change/pacificidf.org>.

5 Paris Agreement 55 International Legal Materials 743 (adopted 12 December 2015, entered into force 4 November 2016).

6 Id, article 2(1)(a).

7 Green Climate Fund "About GCF" <<https://www.greenclimate.fund/about>>.

status in the negotiations. But they often felt frustrated by being confined to the margins, with little or no explicit recognition of the contribution they could make to either the negotiations or the various UNFCCC programmes. Some parties were reluctant to accord non-state actors any formal recognition. The Paris Agreement strengthens their role, both by a generic reference in the Agreement itself,⁸ and a listing in the accompanying decisions from COP21.⁹

Agreeing to uphold and promote regional and international cooperation in order to mobilize stronger and more ambitious climate action by all Parties and non-Party stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, financial institutions, cities and other subnational authorities, local communities and indigenous peoples.

Apart from the overdue recognition, there is an operational value to these provisions, since they give a potential mandate for inclusion of non-state actors alongside governments in the activities carried out under all the bodies under the UNFCCC. To take just one example, the GCF gives a prominent role to non-state actors in the financing of mitigation and adaptation projects. Recognition of non-state actors also serves the mitigation goal because the huge investments necessary to bring about the energy transition will be done largely by the private sector. Similarly, for adaptation, cities are at the forefront of adaptation to climate change.

Another landmark for the Pacific from COP21 was the decision to invite the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate change (IPCC) to do a special report on 1.5 degrees Celsius (IPCC SR15) – both on impacts of this amount of warming compared and possible emissions scenarios that could meet this target.¹⁰ Previously, most scientific literature had focused on the higher two degrees Celsius figure and there was uncertainty over whether 1.5 degrees Celsius was achievable in any circumstances. So, having an objective scientific analysis was a necessary complement to the political "win" of securing the reference in the Paris Agreement. If there were no conceivable pathways to 1.5 degrees Celsius, it would remain a dead letter. The publication of the special report in 2018 had a major impact and has increased support for the 1.5 degrees Celsius goal.

8 Paris Agreement, above n 5, preamble at [15]: "*Recognizing* the importance of the engagements of all levels of government and various actors, in accordance with respective national legislations of Parties, in addressing climate change".

9 Conference of the Parties, UNFCCC *Report of the Conference of the Parties on its twenty-first session, held in Paris from 30 November to 13 December 2015 — Addendum — Part Two: Action Taken by the Conference of the Parties at its twenty-first session* FCCC/CP/2015/10/ Add.1 (2016), Decision 1/CP.21 "Adoption of the Paris Agreement", preamble at [16].

10 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (V Masson-Delmotte et al (eds)) *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty* (2018) <<https://www.ipcc.ch>> [IPCC SR15].

The Paris Agreement also consolidates various elements of the UNFCCC institutions and mechanisms and points to further consolidation as the Kyoto Protocol¹¹ – whose second commitment period covers the gap between the first commitment period (2008-2012), and 2020 when the Paris Agreement comes into effect – gives way to the more universal single framework. This is helpful and should avoid duplication.

7.3 Building on Paris

After the adoption of the Paris Agreement, negotiations returned to their familiar slow pace, with ever longer texts, increasing bureaucracy and institutional content, but no progress on the emissions reduction "ambition" – the *raison d'être* of the Agreement. But other aspects relevant to the Pacific have taken shape, and new dimensions added.

The concept of "loss and damage" was a latecomer to the negotiations, having been advocated by AOSIS for some time. It has gradually secured a place among the many UNFCCC institutions and mechanisms.¹² Under the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage, it began working on a comprehensive five-year work plan.¹³ There is nothing to criticise in the plan itself, which is well designed, but the different components add more dimensions and more complexity. While new topics such as early warning mechanisms and risk transfer (insurance) were included, there has been no recognition of liability or compensation and hence no additional source of finance. It is difficult to see why such issues could not have found a place under existing umbrellas in the UNFCCC, such as adaptation. Needless complexity has also afflicted some longer-established entities such as the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism,¹⁴ where the evolution of its rulebook owed as much to non-expert negotiators as to experts in markets and finance. A similar analysis could be applied to two other subjects important to the Pacific, technology and capacity building.

Yet another subject heading for more complexity and institutionalisation is that of "response measures",¹⁵ a topic originally introduced into the negotiations by Saudi Arabia and other oil-producing states to reflect their concerns about the effects on their economies of the transition away from fossil fuels in the developed world. For a long time, the content of decisions on the topic was vague and non-operational. But it has gradually broadened its coverage, so that it is now relevant

11 Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 2303 UNTS 162 (opened for signature 16 March 1998, entered into force 16 February 2005) [Kyoto Protocol].

12 On the history of loss and damage prior to the Paris Agreement, see Erin Roberts and Saleemul Huq "Coming full circle: the history of loss and damage under the UNFCCC" (2015) 8(2) *International Journal of Global Warming* 141.

13 Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism "Five-year rolling workplan of the Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage associated with Climate Change Impacts" UNFCCC <<https://unfccc.int>>.

14 Kyoto Protocol, above n 11, article 12.

15 Paris Agreement, above n 5, article 4(15): "Parties shall take into consideration in the implementation of this Agreement the concerns of Parties with economies most affected by the impacts of response measures, particularly developing country Parties."

beyond its original sponsors. It has grown into a forum with a permanent governance structure, a committee of experts and a multi-year work programme.

Overall, progress has been mixed. The proliferation and expansion of institutions and mechanisms under the UNFCCC has continued as the examples discussed above show. Apart from this needless complexity, there have been some major blockages in the negotiations. The important issue of carbon markets was left unresolved at COP24. The GCF became dysfunctional towards the end of 2018 because of serious disagreements among board members; its director resigned suddenly.¹⁶ Undertaking governance of a body with such a critical role through a body mixing climate negotiators with finance specialists was never going to be easy.

These limitations and setbacks have not derailed the implementation of the Paris Agreement. By far the single biggest step forward since Paris was the adoption at COP24 of the "Paris rulebook",¹⁷ the term used to describe the set of more detailed decisions needed to make the Paris Agreement operational. Though still incomplete,¹⁸ the information, transparency and review requirements are enough to enable the Paris Agreement to come into operation on time. The fact that the Paris work programme met its deadline was also a political success, which will build confidence in the robustness of the Agreement.

7.4 A Pacific contribution

The Fijian COP23 presidency invigorated and gave a Pacific character to the "facilitative dialogue" that COP21 had decided would take place in 2018. The purpose of the dialogue was to assess collective efforts towards the long-term goal of the Paris Agreement, and help parties to draw up their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). It was launched under a new title of "Talanoa", a term that reflects a Pacific way. Involving story-telling and sharing, it is non-confrontational, inclusive and transparent, thus being an antidote to the often fraught and non-transparent character of the negotiations. It both avoids conflict and builds trust. This cultural contribution to the somewhat impersonal ways of international interaction recalled the South African "ubuntu" that were held a few years earlier and helped bring the Durban COP (COP17) to a successful conclusion. The ubuntu spirit of "I am because we are" also encouraged a sense of unity through sharing.

The talanoa process broadened the range of participants and gave a greater role to non-state actors compared to the ubuntu. Its value was both to inform and to show the benefits of collective action,

16 Jess Shinkleman "Climate Changed. UN's Green Climate Fund at 'Low Point' After Director Resigns" (5 July 2018) Bloomberg <www.bloomberg.com>.

17 Conference of the Parties, UNFCCC *Report of the Conference of the Parties on its twenty-fourth session, held in Katowice from 2 to 15 December 2018 — Addendum — Part Two: Action Taken by the Conference of the Parties at its twenty-fourth session* FCCC/CP/2018/10/ Add.1 (2018), Decision 1/CP.24 "Preparations for the implementation of the Paris Agreement and the first session of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement". For a full analysis of the COP24 decisions, see 12(747) *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* <<https://enb.iisd.org/vol12/enb12747e.html>>.

18 The main outstanding point has been carbon markets under article 6 of the Paris Agreement, which was still unresolved a year later, after COP25.

which too often get lost sight of when parties clash over issues in the formal negotiations. The idea was that while convened centrally, it would be a catalyst for local and regional initiatives, all contributing ideas back to the centre.

The simple questions contributors were asked ("Where are we? Where do we need to be? How do we get there?") were refreshing in their clarity and encouraged new thinking. Inputs were sought from, and grouped under, presidencies, parties and non-party stakeholders. The dialogue was given a platform at the UNFCCC where views and experiences could be shared online. It was made good use of by governments, non-governmental organisations and the range of non-state actors and is a useful resource for Pacific countries. Small island states responded well to the dialogue. AOSIS commented: "[f]or too long we have avoided some of the central questions that must be addressed if we hope to avoid the worst impacts of climate change before it is too late".¹⁹ AOSIS also proposed continuing the format until the Paris Agreement becomes operational: "Identify steps to take the Talanoa Dialogue forward through to 2020, including how it might feed into the 2019 Secretary-General's Climate Summit."²⁰

The Talanoa Dialogue had achieved good momentum before COP24 in Katowice. It was used there as a forum for discussion of the IPCC SR15.²¹ The final stage of the dialogue, also at COP24, was the political phase involving ministers. It concluded with a "call to action" by the Polish and Fijian COP presidents, which was criticised as too weak and non-binding by some observers.²² But this was to ignore its value as a consensual call for greater ambition.²³ The final decisions from COP24 invited parties to consider the results of the dialogue. While this brought a formal close to the Talanoa Dialogue itself, the success of the format may well mean it can be re-used. It is a more inclusive and higher-level version of the informal processes that have taken place over the years.

7.5 The role of the IPCC SR15

The IPCC SR15, discussed at the Talanoa Dialogue, but also widely covered in the media around the world, was a boost to Pacific interests in several ways. It demonstrated that impacts from the extra 0.5 degree Celsius of warming compared to two degrees Celsius were significantly more severe; it was more than a marginal difference. Naturally, Pacific Island states would be amongst the most severely affected by the impacts highlighted in the report. Greater sea level rise, more intense tropical storms, saline intrusion into aquifers are all at the forefront of Pacific concerns. Of equal importance

19 AOSIS Representative "AOSIS Statement at Talanoa Closing" (May session's closing dialogue, 9 May 2018).

20 Ibid.

21 IPCC SR15, above n 10.

22 Vijeta Rattani "COP24: Talanoa Dialogue ends with a weak declaration" (13 December 2018) Down to Earth <downtoearth.org.in>.

23 Antonio Guterres "Remarks at the closing of the High-Level Segment of the Talanoa Dialogue, COP24" (12 December 2018) United Nations Secretary-General <www.un.org>.

to the Pacific, the report shows that it is still technically possible to keep within the 1.5 degrees Celsius limit, albeit with some heroic assumptions about the effectiveness of future international cooperation.

Aside from these two broad findings, the status of SR15 means that it has been accepted by the parties to the Paris Agreement – approval of the summary for policy-makers requires the agreement of government representatives. The importance of these factors and their implications for the future explains the arguments at COP24 – which dismayed and puzzled many observers and held up progress of the negotiations – over whether or not the report should be "welcomed". The small island states pushed for "welcoming" rather than "noting", which was the term in the draft negotiating text. Four fossil fuel producing states, Kuwait, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United States of America, opposed the change. The United States explained that "approving" the report would imply endorsement, a subtle difference given that it was a consensus document from the IPCC. But it was entirely consistent with the United States position at the IPCC meeting itself ("acceptance of this report ... does not imply endorsement by the United States of the specific findings or underlying contents of the report").²⁴

In the end, the small island states and their many supporters were unsuccessful. But they had achieved something possibly more useful than a word change – greater public awareness of the IPCC's findings, and of the fact that they contained some inconvenient truths.

7.6 Pacific prospects for 2020 and beyond

As the new climate regime takes shape, likely future climate impacts on the Pacific continue to be alarming. Recent studies since SR15 have addressed the effects of warming in the physical environment. Impacts on temperature, acidity, sea level rise and storms and waves are already being detected.²⁵ Some of these changes are observed to be affecting biodiversity of mangroves, corals and fish.

The priorities of the Pacific are clearly heavily towards adaptation and resilience, which dominate government expenditures on climate change. This means that mitigation per se becomes secondary. But there is not always a clear distinction. A good example is the solar energy project in Tokelau, involving a complete shift from diesel to solar power supplemented by renewable generation source in the form of biofuel from surplus coconut. This is serving adaptation, resilience and mitigation goals all at once. The project provides resilience and reduces running costs through eliminating the transport by sea of drums of diesel and providing a large reserve potential well beyond Tokelau's current consumption. The successful implementation of this transition has allowed Tokelau to call itself the world's first truly renewable energy nation.²⁶ Such projects, most of which would be on a much larger

24 Coral Davenport "Major Climate Report Describes a Strong Risk of Crisis as Early as 2040" *The New York Times* (online ed, 7 October 2018) <nytimes.com>.

25 Ella L Howes, Silvana Birchenough and Susana Lincoln "Impacts of Climate Change Relevant to the Pacific Islands" [2018] Pacific Marine Climate Change Report Card: Science Review 1. See also Chapters 2 and 4 in this book.

26 See Government of Tokelau "Solar Project: The world's first truly renewable energy nation" <www.tokelau.org.nz>.

scale than in Tokelau, are an excellent example of how Pacific countries can benefit from finance and technical assistance. Sometimes, small-scale projects can be an advantage, as they can serve as pilots for new approaches.

While much argument in the negotiations has been over quantified climate finance goals and commitments within the UNFCCC, this should not be a major concern of the Pacific. Bilateral and other aid programmes universally include a climate change component, as do those of the United Nations and other multilateral agencies. Availability of funds on a scale appropriate to the Pacific does not appear to be a serious problem. Accessing the money and other support is where difficulties exist; requirements for funding proposals can be complex and burdensome. Bilateral aid partners working directly with Pacific Island states can help them navigate funding sources.

Pacific Island states face a crowded landscape of facilities for climate change, in and outside of the UNFCCC. They have grown in an uncoordinated fashion without an overall strategy. Each will have its own criteria and application procedures. Even where the mechanisms most directly serve Pacific priorities, the requirement to be part of their governance and work programmes can be a burden for government officials.

The need to advance so many separate subjects has led to a proliferation of simultaneous meetings at each of the main sessions through the year. This has been frustrating for small countries who cannot send large delegations to the sessions. At any time, meetings will be happening under several bodies – the UNFCCC, the Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement and their subsidiary bodies. The result is duplication and a bewildering complexity to anyone unfamiliar with the UNFCCC world and to some of those within it. Indeed, it has become so complex that a second layer of mechanisms in, or outside, the UNFCCC is growing to help governments and other users learn how to access them and/or find out what activities they are already supporting. Technology and climate finance, both key for the Pacific, are cases in point.²⁷

7.7 Conclusion

The Pacific nations have their concerns fully registered on the new climate map. The inclusion of the 1.5 degrees Celsius target in the new climate treaty that will govern the climate regime over the next decades is a reference point for collective and national action. The case for supporting small island states' adaptation and mitigation needs does not need to be made. But the multiple "windows" for financial and other assistance – each apparently serving a distinct purpose – are counterproductive. The UNFCCC system remains complex and bureaucratic and taxes the resources of small countries wanting to access it. The fact that money and support are there, but not easily accessed, does not appear to be about to change.

27 The UNFCCC's website has a useful overview of climate finance: UNFCCC "Climate finance: the big picture: introduction to climate finance" <unfccc.int>. An independent guide is Robert Tippmann and others *Accessing climate finance: a step-by-step approach for practitioners* (Climasouth E-Handbook N.8, Climasouth, Project, EU, 2016). Another independent study, which includes commentary on Australian and New Zealand aid programmes in the Pacific, is Nic Maclellan and Sarah Meads "After Paris: Climate Finance in the Pacific Islands" (September 2016) Oxfam Australia and Oxfam New Zealand <oxfam.org.au>.

There are ways around these difficulties. Bilateral aid can often be simpler because only one external partner is required. As part of their support, bilateral partners can also help Pacific Island states navigate the UNFCCC system. There is potential for more involvement of the private sector and non-governmental organisations as already provided for in the GCF. All these options can lessen the administrative overheads for small countries.

Finally, ever-increasing complexity is not a fatality. Some of the institutional build-up is a by-product of negotiating the core treaty rather than a considered response to clearly identified needs. Once the Paris Agreement is bedded in and fully functioning, it should be possible to rationalise the too-numerous bodies that are serving it. In the meantime, the best approach for Pacific Island states is to focus on clear identification of their needs and to make the bureaucracy adapt to them, rather than the reverse.

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