

THE INTERSECTION OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

In November 2019, the 25th Conference of the Parties (COP25) will take place in Chile where leaders and stakeholders will meet to discuss the progress of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. COP is the body in charge of monitoring the progress made by signatory states to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and takes place every year. Along with 196 other parties, leaders from Australia will be meeting to assess the progress that has been made in tackling climate change and reducing carbon emissions.

In July this year, the Pacific Islands Development Forum gathered in Fiji to discuss climate change in the region as well as the security risks that are emerging in many Island nations. In a plea issued at the conclusion of the forum, leaders stated that a lack of “comprehension, ambition or commitment” from developed nations like Australia was posing a grave risk to their people.

This edition of Just Now, explores how climate change is fundamentally a human rights issue that uniquely impacts our neighbours in the Pacific. Unfortunately, there is insufficient international recognition and support for people displaced by climate change related disasters and rising sea levels.



What questions can Catholics ask about this issue?

How can the international community better address the impact that climate change has on forced migration? How can domestic policy be improved to better recognise the way in which Australia's inaction on climate change has grave international implications?

Pope Francis reflected upon the urgency of these issues in his 2015 Encyclical *Laudato Si*. He states, “There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever.”

Pope Francis' reflections raise questions of how it may be possible for Catholics to better advocate for those affected by the human cost of climate change when there are no legal frameworks in place that demand their protection.

WHAT DOES THE UNFCCC MEAN IN AUSTRALIA?

The importance of the Convention cannot be understated. As a signatory, Australia is bound to the obligations contained within it and will need to report on our progress at COP25. In February this year, Chief Justice Brian Preston of the NSW Land and Environment Court even cited the framework as a key reason for blocking the construction of a new coalmine in the Hunter Valley.

Despite this, the Coalition's climate change targets are not projected to reach Australia's goal of a 26 – 28 per cent decrease from 2005 levels by 2030. The Department of Environment and Energy states that this target is in line with the targets set by New Zealand, Canada, Japan, the United States and the European Union. However, a majority of climate experts predict that Australia will not reach this goal, especially considering that emissions have steadily risen since the national carbon tax was repealed.

WHY IS CLIMATE CHANGE A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE?

Most political discourse surrounding climate change in Australia is focused on ecological and economic impacts. What is frequently lacking is an acknowledgement of the fact that the effects of climate change are one of the biggest direct challenges to human rights in the world today.

According to the Australian Human Rights Commission, there are a number of internationally recognised rights that are directly challenged by the effects of climate change. These include the right to life, to adequate sanitation and food, to health, human security and the rights of Indigenous peoples to continue their meaningful engagement with the local environment. This is brought about not only by rising sea levels but also by the growing frequency of natural disasters such as droughts, floods, cyclones and heatwaves.

THE NADI BAY DECLARATION

The Nadi Bay Declaration issued on 30 July 2019 by the Pacific Island Development Forum called for the urgent and immediate reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in developed states. As the Pacific Island states contribute negligibly to global climate change in comparison with large developed countries, the Declaration called on Australia to act immediately.

The leaders highlighted the fact that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns that there is a real possibility that the coral atoll nations could become uninhabitable by 2030 and become completely submerged by 2100. Presently, fewer than half the population of many Island states have access to safe drinking water as a result of rising sea levels and drought. By 2050, it is projected that 200 million people will be displaced by climate change.

Another key aspect of the Declaration was an appeal to member states of the UN to establish a legal framework that would protect those displaced by climate change. Without such a framework, the displaced have limited access to the basic rights for life including sanitation, food and housing.

Fundamental Rights Impacted by Climate Change



Stepping up or down in the Pacific? Australia's Foreign Policy Obligations with regard to Climate Change

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has consistently re-iterated the importance of fostering improved engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

This step up in engagement was highlighted as a top priority in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper which outlines that Australia's "development assistance will support efforts to build a stable and prosperous world, with a focus on the Indo-Pacific." The document also acknowledges the impact of climate change on creating irregular migration patterns which affect many countries in Australia's immediate region. This will disproportionately affect small island states and will see an increased need for international disaster relief.

Despite Prime Minister Scott Morrison describing the Pacific Island countries as "family," little has been done to engage with the increased risk of climate displacement. The Pacific Island Forum which took place in Funafuti, Tuvalu in early August demonstrated the apathetic nature of Australian priorities in the region.

Despite acknowledging that climate change was the primary threat to the security of Pacific Island nations, our Prime Minister was fundamentally at odds with leaders from all other Pacific Island states. Without Australia's preoccupation with coal power, the forum would have come to a unanimous decision to support a global ban on new coal mines and plants.



Climate and Forced Migration: Why is "Climate Refugee" a Faux Pas?

As established by the Nadi Bay Declaration, the growing risk of displacement caused by climate change is intensifying. The term 'climate refugee' has been frequently used to describe someone who is forced to leave their home due to weather related incidents that render the environment unliveable or unsafe.

The current understanding of a refugee under international law is contained in the Refugee Convention of 1951 and defines a refugee as someone who has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. As this definition is inherently connected with the role of persecution, those displaced by climate events cannot access refugee protection.

As the term 'climate refugee' fails to encapsulate the

distinction between climate migrants in need of assistance and those fleeing persecution, it also fails to recognise the unique challenges that accompany climate displacement. These include the fact that displacement is often internal, the migration is not always forced and those affected do not wish to be described as refugees.

Dina Ionesco, the Head of the Migration, Environment and Climate Change Division at the UN migration agency sums up the distinction perfectly.

"[Some] emblematic small island States, among others, speak out that they do not wish to become climate refugees; they want to be able to stay in their homes, or to move in dignity and through regular channels without abandoning everything behind."

What needs to change?

The Sabin Centre for Climate Change Law at the Columbia Law School makes several key recommendations on how party states to the UNFCCC can integrate human rights concerns into their climate change mitigation and adaptation undertakings. These include:

- More ambitious mitigation targets to ensure that the global average temperature increase remains at or below 2°C.
- The fundamental connection between human rights and climate change should be acknowledged by the Conference of the Parties.
- The safeguards for the various climate finance mechanisms should be made uniform and revised to ensure full respect for human rights.

- States should increase financial and technical assistance to developing countries that are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, to protect human rights in those areas.

- States should continue to discuss the issue of loss and damage in a transparent way that addresses the concerns of all affected countries.

The obligation upon state actors to work towards these goals is not mitigated by the way in which they are ambitiously stated by the Sabin Centre. Achieving sound climate change policy in Australia is achievable and requires all individuals to get involved and engage with the issues and their local community.

WHAT CATHOLICS ARE DOING AND HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

PACIFIC CALLING PARTNERSHIP

The Pacific Calling Partnership supports communities in the Pacific Islands to make their voices heard in regard to the devastating effects of climate change in their region.

The Partnership offers workshops that examine the effects and human impacts of climate change. Modules include:

- Coping with the impacts of climate change
- Exploring the threat climate change poses for Pacific Island culture
- Examining the effects of climate change on Water/Health and the pressure to relocate
- Creating the future of the Pacific Islands
- Human rights and climate change in the Pacific.

Workshops can be booked by emailing jillf@erc.org.au or vincents@erc.org.au or by calling 02 8762 4200.

GLOBAL CATHOLIC CLIMATE MOVEMENT

The GCCM aims to empower Catholics to take action on climate justice by creating a global movement with action at a local level. Their website provides a number of useful resources that provide:

- accessible information on climate related issues
- guidance for establishing initiatives within your parish and
- how you can lead events for special occasions such as Earth Day and the Season of Creation.

Visit their website here:

<https://catholicclimatemovement.global/>.

PACIFIC CLIMATE WATCH: INTERCONGREGATIONAL VOICE ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE PACIFIC

The Pacific Climate watch is an inter-congregational voice that advocates in solidarity with those negatively affected by Climate Change in the Pacific. You can get involved with their 'Climate Change isn't a joke' social media campaign.

Instructions:

1. Create a poster with the wording 'Climate change isn't a joke. We need climate action now.' Take a photo of yourself or others holding the poster.
2. Alternatively, create a 30 – 100 second video on the same topic.
3. Send the photo or video to mscjust@smartchat.net.au.
4. It will be posted on the Pacific Climate Watch Facebook page and website.

A GUIDE TO A CATHOLIC SEASON OF CREATION

The Season of Creation will be taking place from 1 September to 4 October. The St Columbans Mission Society has prepared a guide of materials to help celebrate September as a Catholic Season of Creation.

The resource offers suggestions for praying the designated Scriptural Readings of particular Sundays in September with an ecological focus and environmental awareness.

The guide is available here:

[https://www.columban.org.au/media-and-publications/educational-resources/a-catholic-season-of-creation-sundays-of-september-\(year-c\)](https://www.columban.org.au/media-and-publications/educational-resources/a-catholic-season-of-creation-sundays-of-september-(year-c)).