Voluntary immobility: indigenous voices in the Pacific

Carol Farbotko

In recent years, the international community has been paying increasing attention to the movement and planned relocation of people affected by climate change. In the Pacific region, however, many indigenous people are saying they intend to remain on their ancestral lands.

Indigenous people of the Pacific are increasingly expressing a preference to stay on their lands for cultural and spiritual reasons, even in the face of significant deterioration in health and livelihoods associated with climate change. In some cases, they say that they are prepared to die there rather than relocate. Those working on climate change-related planning and policymaking need to recognise indigenous people's concerns, and communicate with them in ethically and culturally appropriate ways.

Indigenous people, who form a majority in many Pacific communities, tend to have a good understanding of the risks associated with climate change, such as coastal areas becoming uninhabitable. In some cases, communities have been engaging with climate change issues for several decades, and their governments have been active in international climate change negotiations since their genesis in the 1980s. Changing environmental conditions in the Pacific, affecting weather patterns, crop yields and fish stocks, have been widely identified and discussed in indigenous knowledge systems, and local climate change adaptation initiatives – often funded by international donors – are now commonplace, even in remote areas.

Normalisation of climate change in everyday Pacific life notwithstanding, for some indigenous people climate change is


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From the village of Natalai, Fiji, April 2017; the village suffered extensive damage during Cyclone Winston in February 2016.

an existential threat to their culture, identity and connections to land and sea, a risk to their self-determination and indigenous rights, and some individuals cannot countenance life without a homeland to live in or return to. A range of indigenous leaders, elders and activists across the Pacific Islands are clearly articulating their carefully considered intention to remain on climate-impacted indigenous territories for cultural, spiritual and political reasons. The most important issue, according to those voluntarily resisting mobility, is not 'where will we go?' or 'how will we survive?'; it is 'how do we maintain our identity and build pathways to a self-determined, resilient future?'. Voluntary immobility is an important coping device, helping to strengthen cultural and spiritual agency among those facing the loss of their homeland.

Supporting voluntary immobility

The voices of the voluntarily immobile are not being listened to closely enough, nor are their needs being taken into account in mainstream climate adaptation and mobility policy frameworks. Indigenous choices need to be better recognised and supported, even if only a minority of indigenous people choose voluntary immobility.

Voluntary immobility cannot be addressed by externally developed policies or simply by providing more information about climate risk. Those who choose immobility are already closely attuned to knowledge of climate risk, and the complex links between climate, people and place. Rather, international humanitarian responses must support voluntary immobility through employing approaches that are ethically and culturally appropriate. Perhaps most importantly, indigenous people should not feel that they are forced to make a binding decision about mobility or immobility at any particular point in time, since such pressure is likely to exacerbate anxiety associated with loss of homelands. As livelihoods deteriorate over time or as a disaster occurs, indigenous people may need to be able to change from being voluntarily immobile to voluntarily mobile and perhaps even back to voluntarily immobile. Support processes therefore also need to be capable of adapting; different types of support – political, legal, psychological, cultural and physical – may be needed as conditions change.

Prior to any disaster, discussions about voluntary immobility in a changing climate present an opportunity for indigenous communities and external partners to rethink development, mobility and adaptation to climate change in ways that are culturally meaningful. Disaster planning, for example, might include indigenous elders as key experts on voluntary immobility options, which might perhaps be adopted as interim measures depending on changing environmental conditions. After a disaster,

humanitarian assistance must proceed in partnership with indigenous leaders.

The Government of Fiji is pioneering relocation processes in the Pacific, working closely with Fijian communities in vulnerable coastal areas and offering an emerging example of voluntary immobility good practice. Fiji's draft relocation guidelines include a procedure to follow when physical relocation is deemed necessary but a community decides not to move. This procedure involves: respecting voluntary immobility first and foremost; investigating the reasons for voluntary immobility; holding discussions with the community about adaptation options and land tenure; including climate change issues in secondary and primary education curricula; and ensuring psychological and emotional preparedness for climate impacts.

However, the guidelines also state that relocation might be enforced in a worst case scenario, that is, to guard against loss of life. If, hypothetically, a set of guidelines were to stipulate that relocation would **not** be enforced in the worst case scenario, there would also need to be strong ethical and legal support for the voluntarily immobile to ensure that human rights and human dignity are maintained. This would include legally acceptable evidence that all local adaptation options have been exhausted, that detailed dialogue about the consequences of immobility have been held, and that the choice to be immobile is entirely voluntary. Binding legal rules would need to be developed to ensure that human rights and human dignity are the highest priority in such situations.

Conclusion

Voluntary immobility requires cross-cultural dialogue and new types of support for human rights and human dignity, with specific attention paid to better understanding and supporting indigenous senses of belonging. Whether or not governance frameworks are in place to allow such dialogue and protection is an important question for research and policy in forced migration. Indigenous senses of belonging are often articulated but not heard because international institutions are not sufficiently receptive to indigenous worldviews. Expressions of voluntary immobility become ethically challenging when articulated in terms of a right to die. How can the international community engage with this? Certainly new policy and legal frameworks are needed and, for that to happen, voluntary immobility among indigenous communities must be taken seriously by the research and policy communities concerned with forced migration, not dismissed because of the emotions involved and the ethical complexity.

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