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# Pacific communities face cultural genocide

GRAIN interviews SANDY GAUNTLETT

*How is the climate crisis affecting life in your part of the world?*

The impacts of climate change vary from country to country in the Pacific region, with the low-lying islands being particularly badly affected. In some of the worst affected communities fresh water is becoming scarce as the local supplies get salinated from seawater leaching into the supply areas. In the islands of Kiribas [Kiribati] and Tuvalu, in particular, king [spring] tides now wash straight into people's homes and lands, and it is not unusual during these tides to see the roads under water and at times even the airport runway. You have to remember that these are long and extremely narrow islands with a maximum altitude of two or three metres above sea level. There is no natural protection against the ravages of nature except the coral reefs surrounding

the islands, and these reefs are deteriorating as a result of climate change. In other areas (like New Zealand), the impacts of climate change have been much less obvious, but what we are experiencing as a region is devastating.

*How are the Pacific indigenous communities reacting to the climate crisis?*

Governments in both Kiribas and Tuvalu have been calling for far more radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions than are being considered under the climate convention. And these reductions are absolutely necessary if we are to avoid what will amount to cultural genocide. To suggest that people abandon their lands, territories, culture and countries so that the first world can continue to enjoy a lifestyle based on exploitation of the planet and its resources is, of course, a gross breach of human rights. Yet that is exactly what we are suggesting if we accept the premise that developed nations can continue to buy their way out of their responsibilities to the rest of the world.

Many small, isolated communities do not understand why the storms are getting worse or more frequent, and serious resources must be invested in capacity building in these nations so that decisions are made on the basis of complete understanding. This is not meant as a criticism of the small islands' leadership, by the way. Their representatives at the climate convention have at times been heroic in their attempts to address climate justice. It is simply a statement of fact that more money is spent on underwriting new methods of introducing the market into the equation than on



Photo: International Institute for Sustainable Development

Sandy Gauntlett



## Nuku Alofa declaration\*

From 29 to 31 July 2009, over 15 participants from 8 different countries in the Pacific/Oceania region, from Indigenous peoples, civil society and governments, gathered in Tonga to discuss global issues that severely impact our region on a daily basis: climate change, forest protection, and the role of Indigenous peoples and local communities.

### Preamble

We [Indigenous peoples of the Pacific] are deeply alarmed by the accelerating climate devastation brought about by unsustainable development, and we are experiencing profound and disproportionate adverse impacts on our Pacific cultures, human and environmental health, human rights, wellbeing, traditional livelihoods, food systems and food sovereignty, local infrastructure, economic viability and our very survival as Indigenous peoples.

Consumer nations must adequately address the issue of ecological debt to the global south and not shift liability for their own unsustainable production and consumption to those nations not responsible for the high level of climate emissions.

We remind the parties that Indigenous peoples are on the front line of climate change, whether they are from “developed” nations or not, and do not automatically have access to the benefits of a developed economy.

### Call for Action

We are concerned that in its current form REDD is misleading and is a false solution to climate change, erodes Indigenous land rights and fails to account for the long term and ongoing conservation and land management of forested areas by Indigenous peoples and forest dependent communities.

**We call for all nations in the Pacific to sign on to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).**

**We call for any agreement on forests to fully and explicitly uphold the rights under UNDRIP, the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).**

All rights under UNDRIP must be included in the CBD and UNFCCC, and the customary and territorial land rights of Indigenous Peoples and forest-dependent communities must be recognised and enforced by any international agreement on forest policy.

**We call for the suspension of all REDD initiatives in Indigenous lands and territories until such a time as Indigenous peoples’ rights are fully recognised and promoted, and community consent has been obtained.**

The linkage of REDD to markets risks allows Annex-1 countries to avoid responsibility for reducing emissions in their own countries and could even increase net carbon emissions. Carbon offsetting and the inclusion of REDD credits in carbon markets will do nothing to address the underlying causes of climate change, nor will carbon offsetting and market mechanisms provide the predictable and reliable funding required for addressing deforestation.

**We demand that forests not be included in carbon trading schemes, and call on all governments to halt deforestation and keep fossil fuels in the ground; not trade one for the other. Forests need to be protected, but they must be protected by strengthening and enforcing forest legislation, not using market mechanisms.**

**We support the call for binding emissions reductions targets for Annex 1 countries of at least 45% below 1990 levels by 2020, and at least 95% by 2050. Annex 1 countries must therefore deliver on their commitments to making real and effective emission reductions.**

**We call for real and genuine solutions to climate change, not false solutions like ocean fertilisation, REDD, biofuels and monocultures for plantations that erode and violate the rights of Indigenous peoples and forest-dependant communities, and destroy biodiversity.**

Any definition of forests must strongly differentiate between plantations and natural forests to incorporate fundamental Indigenous understandings of forests and account for the vast differences in carbon storage capacity.

**We call for accurate carbon accounting on forests, and for ANY funding for the reduction of emissions from deforestation and degradation, and appropriate technology transfer to be prioritised for community-based forest management schemes, managed through strengthened mechanisms within the UNFCCC. Donor nations should not fund international financial institutions like the World Bank to implement projects that support flawed solutions to climate change.**

\* This is an edited version of the Declaration





*Pita Meanke watches a "king tide" crash through the sea wall into his family's property, Betio village, Kiribati.*

Photo: Greenpeace/Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert

and there is nowhere to run if or when a disaster occurs.

*What real solutions can help to address the problem?*

We need a full-scale halt to logging indigenous forests. We need a commitment to remove all inner-city car parking and to introduce energy-efficient, eco-friendly transport systems in every major city in the world. We need a cancellation of third-world debt so that developing nations are able to fund real savings in their own emissions. We need a reduction in the amount of waste and exploitation in development, especially in the consumer nations of the global North, and we need to make politicians accountable for the decisions they make, decisions that could result in mass deaths from climate disasters.

reducing in real terms and at source the emissions that are creating the problem.

*What is the Maori perspective on the issue?*

There is no single Maori perspective on climate change, but those Maori who are engaged at the international level are very concerned about what is happening in our region. Partly because we are not yet being affected so badly as a country and partly because the reality of what is happening in our region is so horrible to contemplate, there is right now a lack of real understanding of what is happening. There are some Maori who are working on getting developed nations to accept their responsibilities in terms of climate emissions, while others work on recognising that we share common ancestors with some of the communities in the Pacific and should thus work closely together.

*There is currently a lot of discussion about the Copenhagen climate conference in December. In your opinion, how important are its outcomes and discussions for groups on the ground?*

I cannot really answer this question until I know what the outcomes are. If, as many of us now fear, no real commitment is made to massive emission reductions, then that is literally a death sentence for some people, and we need to hold the consumer nations responsible for what they are doing. If, as we all hope, there is agreement on large-scale and extensive reductions in emissions, then this might help to safeguard the future of the worst-affected communities. Copenhagen is, of course, hugely important in terms of achieving a commitment to real change for all of us, but for communities living on small, vulnerable islands, time is running out,

*For those of our readers who may be less familiar with your part of the world, are there instances of community adaptation that you might like to share?*

For the smaller island nations, adaptation is not something that can easily be achieved, as their emissions are not a major contributing factor. It is more a case of them having to adapt to the result of other nations' greed. But in some communities in the larger nations, there are schemes where people are leading their governments by example. In New Zealand, we are adapting our lifestyles to an extent and encouraging walking and cycleways as an alternative to the motor car. New Zealand has larger *per capita* car ownership than California, and much could be done in terms of transport and energy policies to reduce our emissions. But again, in order to ensure that these improvements have large-scale impact, we need our governments to lead the way and to increase in real terms the level and nature of public participation and decision-making, as well as putting large funds into improving public understanding. In a famous recent incident we had one of our celebrities call on the Prime Minister to commit to 40 per cent reductions in our emissions and his reply was that she should stick to acting. This type of arrogance can no longer be tolerated from our politicians, and if there is a high level of misunderstanding of climate change (which there is), then there is a responsibility on the part of our government to improve the capacity building programmes in our country (which they committed to under the Convention on Biological Diversity). There needs to be a commitment to funding NGOs so that the information on climate change that reaches the public comes from a wide range of sources.

