

Stopping the Slow Wave of Destruction

By Patricia Cochran and Taito Nakalevu

Three years ago, when a tsunami washed away the lives and livelihoods of people in South-east Asia, the rest of the world acted with commendable compassion. Tents, blankets and food were sent, reconstruction teams poured in, and people around the world sent millions of dollars to help.

Now another devastating wave is threatening the lives and livelihoods of people globally - from the fringes of the Arctic to the Caribbean and the scattered islands of the South Pacific. This wave of global warming also brings devastation in its path, but it is moving so slowly that some people fail to recognize its destructive power. Arctic regions and small islands around the world are being hit hardest.

No other region of the world is warming as fast or as much as the Arctic. Earlier this year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change noted that Arctic ecosystems and habitats are vulnerable due to the speed and extent of change. The peoples of the Arctic who rely on the natural environment are vulnerable also. The IPCC says "traditional ways of life are being threatened and substantial investments are needed to adapt or re-locate physical structures and communities." Melting of previously frozen ground is causing havoc in some Arctic communities as roads, buildings, and pipelines sag and warp with the sudden thaw. New insect pests and diminishing ice are affecting entire populations of wildlife on which Arctic peoples rely. Seasoned hunters traveling traditional routes have been lost due to changes in ice and water that the hunters can no longer predict.

The small islands of the world are also particularly vulnerable to the effects of change, as their finite land mass severely restricts their adaptation options. Projected changes in rainfall can bring extremes of drought and flood. The recent IPCC reports say extreme weather events are likely to become more frequent and severe as a result of climate change, causing damage and destruction to islands. Increasing sea surface temperatures will result in coral bleaching, destroying the reefs that now provide protection for many islands, and breeding places for the fish that feed many islanders. The most low-lying of the islands also have to deal with the threat of rising sea levels, projected to rise by about a metre this century. The island state of Tuvalu has already appealed to both Australia and New Zealand to take in its citizens.

Given the similar levels of impact, peoples of the Arctic are working together with people in the small islands of the South Pacific, Caribbean and elsewhere to cooperate on ensuring that the moral imperative of taking action on climate change is heard. At the present meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on climate change, this coalition – called Many Strong Voices – is asking for three things.

First, we are asking countries to aim for a global agreement that keeps temperature increases as far below two degrees Celsius as possible. This will mean large reductions in the emission of greenhouse gases. The IPCC's Fourth Assessment Report clearly indicates that even if temperatures are kept below this level, vulnerable regions and countries, including the Arctic and Small Island Developing States will be severely affected by the inevitable impacts of climate change caused by past emissions.

Second, we ask countries to be open to learning from the experiences of indigenous peoples and islanders on adaptation and to assist these communities in building upon their traditional knowledge in this area. Countries involved in the negotiations also need to appreciate that there are limitations to our capacity to adapt in the context of runaway climate change.

Third, we are asking the world's richest countries to help the vulnerable countries to adapt to change by providing an adequate financial and technical assistance. For the Small Island Developing States and other particularly vulnerable developing countries, this means living up to existing commitments and properly funding adaptation to the impacts of climate change. Arctic peoples need a commitment from their own countries to fund local adaptation efforts in the Arctic regions.

Our peoples are not asking for your tents, your blankets, your reconstruction teams – but if the influential countries of the world do not avert disaster now, we may well need all of those things later. What we ask for is your help to deal with this entirely avoidable disaster. At this next meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom have the power to prevent this wave of devastation. We call on you to use that power.

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