

Strengthening Australia's relationships with the Pacific Islands

Writer Introduction:

[REDACTED] which is the initiative of the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education. PCP is committed to listening to what Islanders are saying about imminent threats to their way of life due to climate change and collaborating with them in passing this important message on.

I was born on the island [REDACTED] in Kiribati and I grew up on the island of Beru, which is my spiritual home and where my parents and the rest of the family used to live. My parents have passed away but my siblings continue to live on this coral atoll island of Beru. My husband and I are now residing in Sydney despite the fact that our families including our son are all in Kiribati. Although we both love our country and would prefer to live in Kiribati, besides having to deal with the complexity of our lives here in Australia we have to face challenges as it was already hard to leave our son and families behind. We both work hard and continue to support our son by sending money, clothes and stationaries. At times we both find it difficult to live in Australia in terms of no close families and we also at times struggle to survive but we know that if we go back to Kiribati then we won't be able to support our son the way we are doing now.

Nevertheless, over ten years, I have been an advocate about how climate change is affecting the Pacific islands and the need for action. Part of my work is also to build a strong relationship between Australians and Pacific Islanders in order to work together to combat climate change. I also have represented the Pacific Calling Partnership overseas for climate change conferences, meetings and speaking tours in the UK, Austria, Germany, Samoa and Fiji and also been a key member of Pacific Calling Delegations to UNFCCC Climate Change conferences in Copenhagen, Cancun, Doha, Paris and Bonn. In the past six years, I helped to guide and implement the Kiribati Australia Tuvalu Exchange Program (KATEP) which has provided leadership and advocacy training to young climate change advocates from Kiribati and Tuvalu

Australia's relationship with Kiribati:

Australia has a longstanding relationship with Kiribati based on shared development since the 1900s when Australia, the United Kingdom and New Zealand operated the Pacific Phosphate Company. To this day Kiribati and Australia have continued to have a more discreet relationship based on development and security goals. Australia agreed to commit to support Kiribati's economic prospects and its environmental resilience.

Australia's aid objectives are overseeing with the Kiribati government priorities and shared assessment of key constraints to economic growth and poverty reduction. Australia is also expanding its support for labour mobility through the seasonal workers' programme, which allows the Kiribati people to undertake work in Australia for a period to 9 months – 3 years.

Background:

Kiribati consists 33 coral atolls and scattered across the Pacific Ocean with two to three metres above sea level. Its population is approximately 116,000 people. Due to Kiribati's isolation its economic growth is weak and the youth unemployment is high. The increasing population density in the capital, South Tarawa has led to a growing and pressure on basic services and infrastructure.

The submission is informed by series of interviews with the I-Kiribati community, which I conducted in Australia over the last two months. In order to respect the privacy of those whom I interviewed, names of interviewees are not included. Some of the interviews I conducted were via the phone calls and some were done in person. Interviewees came from Victoria (6) NSW (12) Brisbane (8).

In recent years, labour mobility was identified as a very critical component of effective development in the Pacific. Kiribati is one of a country in the Pacific that has very limited labour mobility opportunities and also one of the poorest countries in the world. It is unlike other Pacific Islands like the Cook Islands, French Polynesia, the Marshall Islands and American Samoa, which are associated with New Zealand, USA and France and are citizens of these countries. On the other hand, Kiribati, along with other Islands like Tuvalu, do not have this system. Kiribati is also facing a huge challenge with climate change. Climate change is affecting the basic needs of people in Kiribati and the families in Kiribati are experiencing water shortages, seawater intrusion and more storm surges.

Messages from the Interviewees:

Interviewees agreed that the Kiribati diaspora in Australia has three main ethics: identity, internal groups or organisation and symbolic level of contact with their homelands. According to those I interviewed, "extended families are the greatest cultural and cohesive importance in the Kiribati tradition." Australia plays a significant role in this by supporting Pacific Island communities, for example, providing free venues for Pacific Island communities for their gatherings and events.

They also acknowledge Australia's many contributions to Kiribati. Australia is seen by Kiribati and Pacific Islands as a close neighbour and even as a big brother/sister to them.

It is very interesting though that they also mentioned how the Chinese are moving fast towards the Pacific Islands like Kiribati and the Solomon Islands. China is becoming a big influence on those two countries. Some acknowledged that they don't like the idea of China taking over the Pacific but, they are also saying that if Australia does not increase its support for the Pacific Islands on climate change, then Kiribati will tend to lean more towards China. The Australian government needs to be more supportive in this area and to be a good leader on climate change action. They felt that Australia is not doing enough when it comes to climate change.

While the Pacific is not an important source of migrants to Australia, for the Pacific Islands, Australia is a very significant migration platform for Pacific Islands. They would like to see the following happen:

- Australia as a close neighbour needs to show more leadership on climate change action
- Australia needs to open its doors to I-Kiribati people to migrate to Australia as people are struggling to survive due to climate change
- Australia needs to open its doors for products from Kiribati and the Pacific Islands
- Australia needs to provide more jobs for I-Kiribati people through the Pacific Seasonal Workers Scheme

According to some interviewees who participated in the Pacific Seasonal Workers scheme, the payment under this scheme is quite low. For example, many struggled to pay the rent and other basic needs. At some stage, there was not enough work for them and this means that when there is no work, there is also no income. This creates extreme hardship.

In the context of the changing environment in Kiribati and throughout the Pacific Islands, as well as within the economies of those islands. Climate change is becoming a big challenge and issue which affects the relationships nationally. As a result, the traditional way of living is getting harder. Climate change is making a subsistence living more difficult, also there is a lack of employment opportunity.

Therefore, labour mobility properly run is one way of helping the people of Kiribati so that the Seasonal Workers can send money back to their families.

In 2010 when interviewing the Kiribati people who were under the Pacific Seasonal Workers scheme who in Victoria, they were all grateful to Australia for giving them the opportunity to come and work in Australia so that they could provide money for their families back home, but they also recognise the needs of inclusiveness within the Australian community. They felt that they were not making any connection at all with the Australian community where they were living. They all agreed that they would love to see more interactions with the Australians so that they could learn more about Australia. At work, their interaction was generally limited to Pacific Islanders.

Their culture is their identity and the way to maintain this is through the Kiribati diaspora. In Australia, the Kiribati diaspora has a significant relationship and special ties with their people back in Kiribati. The multicultural communities within the diaspora help to maintain a relationship for them through meetings and activities. Meeting up and celebrating special events like the anniversary of Kiribati Independence allows them to re-connect with their roots and their culture which makes them who they are as I-Kiribati. They are very connected to their culture, land, sea and everything surround us. The way to maintain this is by:

- staying in touch with families and friends in Kiribati
- celebrating Kiribati independence every year
- visiting Kiribati families and friends in Australia
- teaching young people about the culture within families & communities
- respecting what surround us in Australia (land, sea, the environment)

In conclusion, the work of Australia and the relationship is well recognised by the Kiribati people and valued this long relationship with Australia. Despite this, Australia, as a big country in the Pacific, Australia needs to take things more seriously especially on climate change policy. If Australia wants to keep the relationship with the Pacific it needs to show greater support to them and amplify the voices of the Pacific Island people in the international arena especially at the United Nations Conference on Climate Change.

Reference

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