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The evolution of Aotearoa New Zealand's policy discourses on Pacific climate mobilities from 2006–2021

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In 2006 New Zealand government officials found themselves facing a barrage of enquiries arising from an erroneous claim contained in Al Gore's Academy Award-winning climate change documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. The documentary suggested that the government of Aotearoa had agreed to take "all climate refugees" from Tuvalu, an archipelago of nine atolls and coral-reef islands in the South Pacific, as part of a planned response to climate change. At the time, New Zealand did not have any plan, or indeed any intention to create a plan, for addressing climate-induced displacement. The ensuing 15 years saw Aotearoa's official response evolve from one of "correcting misperceptions about New Zealand's position on climate-induced migration" to an adaptive development approach focused on Pacific-led solutions. This paper traces the evolution of that approach through a series of official reviews, focusing on the discursive frames and narratives that were employed by officials and government representatives. The current New Zealand government has expressed a desire to play a role in the development of world-leading approaches to climate-induced mobilities within the region, whilst it also seeks to avoid establishing overly broad policy precedents on climate migration that could apply beyond the Pacific. The paper discusses some of the avenues being explored by government departments, in particular the potential for existing temporary migrant programs to be developed into schemes that actively support an adaptive development framework in response to climate-related mobilities. We consider the range of possible solutions that could be contained within such a response, the opportunities for mutually beneficial approaches and the challenges that they would pose to long-accepted norms and processes embedded in the country's current immigration programs.

KEYWORDS

climate change, climate mobility, migration, displacement, adaptation, Pacific, seasonal migration, circular migration

Introduction

In 2006, Al Gore's Academy Award-winning climate change documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* was released. Highly effective at communicating the seriousness of anthropogenic global warming, the documentary also contained some infamous minor inaccuracies that sparked ongoing debate (Quiring, 2007). Among these was the

suggestion that the government of New Zealand had agreed to take all “climate refugees” from Tuvalu, a small coral-reef atoll island in the South Pacific, as part of a planned response to climate change. Such narratives have contributed to establishing “drowning” Pacific “islands” at the forefront of the global public’s imagination in respect to climate change—an image that is actively resisted by many of its subjects (Fair, 2020). For atoll island countries like Tuvalu, Kiribati and the Marshall Islands, which lie a mere 1–3 m above sea level, climate change does pose a particularly acute existential threat (World Bank, 2017). Collectively, the island nations of the South Pacific are already exposed to a range of natural hazards that produce among the world’s highest annualized disaster losses—estimated at 6.6% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the case of Vanuatu and 4.4% for Tonga (World Bank, 2017). Almost all these hazards are exacerbated by the effects of climate change so that disaster losses are expected to grow in the future, posing a major development challenge for the region.

Globally, climate change effects such as sea-level rise, coastal inundation and saltwater intrusion, intense hydrological events, prolonged droughts, desertification, and heatwaves are predicted to result in significant climate change-induced migration, although numbers vary widely. This is a result of their being dependent not just on the physical impacts of climate change, but on future policies and planning at various levels of governance (IPCC, 2022). The World Economic Forum’s (2022) Global Risk Perceptions Survey rates “involuntary migration” as a top ten critical threat over the next 5–10 years (p. 25). Most evidence to date suggests that the majority of climate-induced displacement is likely to occur over short distances and within country borders, rather than internationally (Cundill et al., 2021).

While the number of people displaced by disasters in the Pacific region is relatively low in absolute terms, the per capita numbers tell a different story—in 2012, Samoa and Fiji had among the highest per capita levels of displacement in the world (Burson and Bedford, 2015), while one in ten people from Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu have already migrated over the last decade, at least partially in response to worsening climatic conditions (Nansen Initiative Pacific Regional Consultation, 2013; Apap, 2019). Where cross-border migration does occur, studies on migration show extensive use of pre-existing pathways making Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand likely destination countries in the Pacific region (Burson and Bedford, 2013, 2015; Oakes, 2019).

Over the 15 years between 2006 and 2021, Aotearoa’s official response to the growing issue of climate-induced migration shifted from “correcting misperceptions,” specifically media portrayals suggesting New Zealand had already agreed to take “environmental refugees,” to a response that prioritizes development- and Pacific-led solutions. In this paper, we trace the evolution of that response through a series of official reviews,

focusing on the discursive frames and narratives that were employed by officials and government representatives.

Approach

Discursive frames produce certain representations or ways of thinking and acting. They order information into cohesive accounts organized as storylines that produce meaning (Dryzek, 2021). Within discourses, some elements are rendered more visible, while others are made invisible; truths are created as legitimate forms or regimes of knowledge and these, in turn, generate what is accepted as common sense (Death, 2015; Dryzek, 2021). Power is inherent in such discourses, creating norms and perceptions that serve some interests while suppressing others. In this analysis, we examine the context in which official discourses about Pacific climate migration arose, to reveal the interests and motivations that are present. We also consider those aspects of the issue that are neglected or made invisible within the Government’s preferred discursive frames. These frames contain elements—assumptions, judgements, intentions, capabilities—that provide the foundations for debate and analysis (Dryzek, 2021). According to Dryzek (2021) “even in the presence of laws and formal organizations, discourses constitute “software” that is important in explaining how institutions work” (p. 33). Subjecting such discourses to critical attention is valuable both in terms of better understanding the functioning of institutions, but also in tracking directional changes or shifts in discourse that alter policy outcomes.

In this paper, we consider the discursive strategies by which the New Zealand government is attempting to make governable at local and regional levels what is emerging as a complex and politically fraught global issue. How societies are made governable is a primary concern of Foucault’s concept of governmentality (Foucault, 1991). Governmentality is concerned with the “political rationality” adopted by a state at any particular point in time—it is through the techniques and technologies of governmentality that the state is able to exercise power across dispersed territories (Jones et al., 2015). We explore how the New Zealand government’s early, frequently reactive engagement with suggestions that it might accept Pacific climate migrants was challenged by the rising power of Pacific regional narratives, shaping the political rationality of its shift toward an active development-based response and into new policy-making realms, seen in the subsequent push for a Pacific-led instrument. This approach sees climate-induced mobility addressed within an adaptive development framework (Agrawal and Carmen Lemos, 2015) that treats migration as a risk mitigation strategy. The objective of the analysis is to provide some insight into the Government’s purpose and the likely direction of travel in policy arrangements addressing Pacific climate-induced mobilities.

Tracing the official response to climate-induced migration

The New Zealand government's 2006 response on the issue of climate-induced migration set out to address and refute the claim that the country had committed to resettle “environmental refugees” from the Pacific or that it had any immediate intention to do so (MFAT, 2008). Pointing out that the term “environmental refugee” had no meaning in international law, officials also sought to reframe the depiction of such people as environmental migrants rather than refugees. The official response redirected attention toward New Zealand's overall “commitment to climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts,” implying that migration was not yet itself being perceived as an adaptive response to an encroaching threat—a position that was reversed in subsequent reviews where it was explicitly acknowledged that migration sits at one end of a continuum of adaptive responses to climate change. Efforts to appeal the refusal of refugee status through national and international tribunals over subsequent years saw development narratives used to legitimize their denial, largely reinforcing the government's approach (Neef and Bengel, 2022).

While the 2006 response was successful in diverting the issue of climate-induced migration from the government's policy agenda for a time, the subject continued to gather steam elsewhere. It was increasingly being raised in a variety of international forums, often by NGOs concerned by social equity and environmental sustainability, and by local media and academia. These concerns were frequently framed in terms of the vulnerability of small island states, representing their peoples as “tragic victims” of environmental displacement (Farbotko, 2005; Howes et al., 2018) and even as an “exemplary portent of global crisis and catastrophe” (Jolly, 2019, p. 176). Farbotko (2005) points out that while such representations function as an awareness-raising tool, they are problematic in their marginalization of alternative discourses about adaptation and “can also operate to silence alternative identities that emphasize more empowering qualities of resilience and resourcefulness” (p. 289). Whilst themselves frequently deploying a vulnerability narrative to emphasize the scale of climate-related impacts, Pacific Ambassadors to the UN were also resisting the construction of narratives that portrayed Pacific Peoples as “refugees in waiting,” hapless victims with little control or agency over their own futures and in need of rescuing (McNamara and Gibson, 2009; McNamara and Farbotko, 2017; Fache et al., 2019). Instead, Pacific leaders emphasized their desire to protect the sustainability of their islands, ensure the survival of their communities and avoid being forced out by the continued inaction of those responsible for emitting greenhouse gases (GHGs). Their objections to being categorized as refugees also served to draw attention to the inherent weaknesses of existing international legal frameworks, including their failure to address the cross-cutting impacts of climate change or to

ensure fundamental rights to self-determination, sovereignty and protection of cultural heritage (McNamara and Gibson, 2009; Burkett, 2011; McAdam, 2012). Embedded tensions within these narratives have since become evident in the case of Kiribati, where former President Anote Tong's focus on environmental science and a plan for “migration with dignity” is contested by the current President T.E. Taneti Maaau's focus on “hope and development *in situ*” amidst the increasing prevalence of “resilience” narratives deployed both within and about the region (Jolly, 2019, p. 185). Political contestation over alternative representations is one manifestation of the plurality of views, options and circumstances that exist in Pacific Island countries (see, for instance Farbotko et al., 2016; Noy, 2017; Oakes, 2019; Neef and Bengel, 2022), and which have given rise to a range of local and regional responses.

A review of New Zealand's official position on climate-induced migration, reiterating and expanding on the 2006 position, was commenced in 2008 (MFAT, 2008) and completed in 2009 (MFAT, 2009). A key narrative deployed in the review reflected the position of Pacific leaders in emphasizing that efforts in the Pacific “should be underpinned by the expressed desire of Pacific Peoples to continue to live in their own countries.” At the time, governments in many countries of the Global North, including Australia and the US, were demonstrating a reluctance to accept the reality or extent of climate change as a problem, leading to policy inaction or delay (Hoffman, 2011; Dunlap, 2013). In this spirit, New Zealand officials seized on the opportunity to “de-problematize” the issue of climate-induced migration by selectively borrowing narratives from Pacific leaders, without proposing any new measures or policies to address the underlying problem, partly because they did not regard climate migration as a problem for Aotearoa that required a specific solution at that point in time, or possibly ever.

“...while the potential emergence of cross-border climate induced migration is unlikely to be realized until the much longer term—if at all—New Zealand's policy response would need to be consistent with our existing relationship with the Pacific.” [...] “New Zealand's existing immigration policy settings are sufficiently flexible that they may be able to form one response to the issue, *should it become a reality in future*” (MFAT, 2009, p. 7, para. 11–12, emphasis added).

The 2009 review document stressed that responses to climate change in the Pacific should continue to focus on mitigation and adaptation, suggesting that any active migration policy might act as a disincentive to adaptation. That year, New Zealand's overseas development aid (ODA) began to shrink as a proportion of Gross National Income (GNI), shifting from 0.30 to 0.28% (OECD/DAC, n.d.). At the same time, its cornerstone mitigation policy, an Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), was moderated to the extent that it could not effectively reduce

domestic emissions to any measurable extent, allowing them to follow a “business as usual” trajectory (Bertram and Terry, 2010; Kelly, 2010; Leining and Kerr, 2016). By 2017, New Zealand’s ODA had shrunk to a low point of 0.23% of GNI, taking it further than ever from the United Nations’ ODA target for developed countries of 0.7% of GNI (OECD/DAC, n.d.). Thus, while recommending to Pacific Island countries that focus remain on mitigation and adaptation responses, New Zealand was simultaneously reducing its own contribution to those ends.

In addition to “kicking the can down the road” by positioning the issue firmly in the future, the review acted to “muddy the waters” by highlighting the complexity of climate-related migration and its relationship to existing migration pressures. The review noted that while climate change would amplify existing migration pressures such as environmental degradation, poverty, governance issues, limited economic opportunities and inflated food prices—warning that New Zealand was “already an attractive migration destination for Pacific Peoples”—the slow onset nature meant that there was no clear threshold at which it could be said to have “forced” migration or displacement. Whilst officials explicitly recognized the many likely contributors and paths to climate-induced migration, they simultaneously highlighted a significant obstacle to any kind of decisive action. Claiming that further analysis and research would be required before New Zealand could determine an appropriate response, officials then neglected to recommend any such analysis or research be undertaken, leaving the barrier to action firmly in place. Instead, the review proposed simply that the position be kept under review, “in case a more specific policy response became necessary in the future” (MFAT, 2009). This offers an exemplar of a third-party state using the blurred line that exists between voluntary and forced movement to justify a lack of action to protect climate-induced migrants, in a manner described by Neef and Bengé (2022).

The review identified two primary concerns for New Zealand that recommendations did make weak attempts to address. The first was the risk that countries might misinterpret New Zealand’s position as indicating a readiness to accept an unlimited number of migrants from the Pacific or indeed, the rest of the world, leading officials to recommend that the country’s position on climate migration be firmly constructed and communicated to dispel that impression. Clearly the government did not wish the country to become a targeted destination for climate-induced migrants either regionally or globally. Second, concern was expressed that New Zealand would not be perceived as sufficiently responsive to Pacific Island country (PIC) perspectives. To address this concern, it was suggested that the response should act to reinforce “our reputation as a long-standing friend and advocate for the interests of Pacific Peoples” (MFAT, 2009, p. 7, para. 15). In other words, the position outlined in the review sought to make the government appear responsive, while averting any material policy action or commitment to future action. In reality, the

ongoing failures of both New Zealand and Australia to support PIC positions on the climate crisis were already contributing to the steady undermining of regional relationships, suggesting that official concerns in this regard were far from misplaced (Fry and Tarte, 2015; Tarte, 2017; Powles, 2018).

A third review of the country’s official position on Pacific climate-induced migration was completed in 2013. The 2013 review was prompted by renewed attention to the impacts of climate change on developing countries at the United Nations (UN) ahead of the 19th Conference of Parties (COP19) in December of that year, at which the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) on Loss and Damage was signed. The WIM established institutional arrangements for addressing loss and damage suffered by developing countries as a result of climate change and was a particularly important development for low-lying PICs. A confirmation of New Zealand’s position on “disaster and climate induced migration” was sought by officials ahead of the first regional consultation of the Nansen Initiative in May 2013, at which a Pacific approach to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) loss and damages negotiations was to be discussed. Led by Switzerland and Norway, the Nansen Initiative was a state-led consultative process aimed at developing a shared set of principles and processes for the protection of people displaced across international borders as a result of natural disasters and climate change. Utilizing the same narratives as earlier reviews, New Zealand officials concluded that the 2009 guidance remained relevant and appropriate to the existing risk environment and that position was taken into the consultation process by the government (MFAT, 2013). Although officials suggested that a further review might prove necessary following the COP19 meeting in Warsaw, this did not eventuate and the government’s deliberately neglectful position on climate-induced migration in the Pacific remained unchanged.

By 2018, the geo-political context in the Pacific had shifted, and a newly elected government in New Zealand announced a broad “Pacific Reset” (since re-branded as “Pacific Resilience”), following a similar initiative by Australia in 2016. This renewed policy focus occurred in a context in which Pacific Island governments were increasingly pursuing “a more exclusive brand of regionalism” that frequently excluded New Zealand and Australia (O’Brien, 2018, p. 11). An array of new Pacific-controlled institutions and ideas had emerged across a region whose interests were being increasingly poorly served by the Australian and New Zealand dominated Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)¹ (Fry and Tarte, 2015; Tarte, 2017). One of the most

1 The Pacific Islands Forum is a regional political body with 18 member countries including Australia, the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

significant of these was the rise of the Pacific Small Island Developing States Group (PSIDS), which became the primary vehicle for Pacific representation at the UN, and within the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and the Group of 77. It became very clear that climate change diplomacy was one of the critical issues on which the PIF was failing to effectively represent Pacific Island nations, with the interests and concerns of the dominant Australian and New Zealand members proving antithetical to the smaller Pacific Island states (Fry and Tarte, 2015). The success of key voices in PSIDS, such as Enele Sopoaga of Tuvalu, Tony de Brum of the Republic of Marshall Islands and Anote Tong of the Republic of Kiribati in creating momentum ahead of the UNFCCC's 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) for consideration of the +1.5°C target speaks to the success of Pacific leaders in developing a powerful and independent Pacific voice (Tarte, 2017; Ourbak and Magnan, 2018). The region's ongoing presence at the international climate negotiation table was further illustrated by Fiji's presidency of COP23 in 2017 (Fache et al., 2019). In addition to these threads was the increasing interest and engagement from China and other countries such as India, Japan, and France throughout Oceania. Indeed, Herr and Bergin (2011) suggest that the number of countries seeking admission as Post-Forum Dialogue partners at Pacific Islands Forum meetings was so great that a more formalized arrangement was needed to cope. China's bilateral assistance (touted as "south-south" aid) and commercial interest in the region acted to heighten attention from the US, Australia and New Zealand, who collectively faced increasing friction with China alongside the growing loss of influence in the Pacific region (Finin, 2011; Herr and Bergin, 2011).

Calls for increasing regionalism are reflected in Teaiwa's (2018) and Fair's (2020) concept of an expanded Oceania, building on Hau'ofa's "sea of islands" vision (Hau'ofa et al., 1993), in which Pacific research, activism and dialogue are energized by climate change and inspired by the drive for self-determination. Increasingly, frames of "resilience" and "resistance" have replaced more fatalistic frames (Jolly, 2019). The resistance frame is perhaps best illustrated by the campaign mantra of the Pacific Climate Warriors, a network of young Pacific Island activists, who proclaim "We are not drowning, we are fighting" (Fair, 2020, p. 341). Jolly (2019, p. 180) suggests that the idea of resilience or strength of Pacific Peoples is derived from "their own embodied experience and knowledge," that having survived many dramatic environmental challenges historically "it is envisaged that they have the resilient capacity to deal with contemporary challenges of climate change." The concept is broadly reflected in the policy language of governments and NGO's particularly in association with efforts to achieve sustainable development (Jolly, 2019). It has also been adopted by regional bodies (e.g., the Pacific Island Forum's "Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific" in 2012) and in specific country plans (such as Vanuatu's Community Resilience Framework and Fiji's National Climate Change

Policy) (Fache et al., 2019; Jolly, 2019). However, in the shift to a resilience narrative, Jolly (2019) also bemoans the way that "resilience has too often been weaponized in global debates to distract from or diminish the responsibilities of the big polluters" (p. 181). This reflects a growing academic debate about the tendency of resilience discourses to shift responsibility away from the state and onto localized communities and vulnerable individuals. Its focus on self-reliance, individual behaviors and material assets and risk management can act to reinforce a neo-liberal hegemony (Cannon and Müller-Mahn, 2010; Welsh, 2014; Gillard, 2016).

The Pacific resets of Australia and New Zealand featured substantially different narratives and frames with increasing potential for divergence on the issue of climate-induced migration. Where New Zealand has shifted toward a more progressive, development-oriented position in the Pacific, seen to be more responsive to Pacific Leaders' calls, Australia's position remains predominantly informed by its regional security and geopolitical concerns (Loyens, 2019). These perspectives reflect two of the four environmental migrant typologies identified by Ransan-Cooper et al. (2015) with New Zealand tending toward a frame in which climate-induced migrants are perceived as "adaptive agents," while Australia continues to perceive migrants primarily as a "security threat." A critical appraisal of the "adaptive-agent" frame has been articulated by Bettini (2014) and Bettini et al. (2017). Bettini et al. (2017) suggest that the increasing focus "on "migration as adaptation" appears to displace justice claims and inherent rights in favor of a depoliticized idea of adaptation that relies on the individual migrant's ability to compete in and benefit from labor markets" (p. 348), which are offered as the main vehicle for adaptation. This echoes the concerns raised by other scholars, mentioned earlier in relation to resilience discourses. Bettini (2014) suggests that the shift from "climate refugee" as security threat to a desecuritized climate-induced migrant is a way to make the "unruly" more governable—rendered both "accessible to government, and malleable to the neoliberal rule" (p. 191). In particular, Bettini (2014) points to the increasing embrace of policies that facilitate circular and temporary migration. The shift in New Zealand's perception of the issue of climate-induced migration and the change in approach is evident in some of the official documents accompanying the Pacific reset, being most directly visible in the deployment of the ODA program and in discussions that have increasingly linked the concept of "migration as adaptation" to the country's seasonal migrant labor scheme, as discussed in Section 5 below.

Two government departments prepared action plans on Pacific migration, including climate-induced migration, as part of the country's "Pacific Reset." The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) addressed the issue of climate mobility within and between Pacific Island countries, while the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) was responsible for addressing the issue of cross-border

climate-induced migration from Pacific Island countries to New Zealand. The two departments produced linked cabinet papers in 2018 outlining their proposed programs. The MBIE paper laid out a program of foundational policy work to take place over 2018–2020, only briefly touching on the issue of climate-induced migration by suggesting any specific response be delayed beyond 2024, after the completion of MFAT's program. The MBIE program would instead review, and seek to improve, current temporary and permanent visa schemes targeting PICs. The first phase of work would focus on issues within New Zealand, such as migrant exploitation under temporary migrant schemes and settlement outcomes under permanent schemes. Following that, the program would consider the impact of these visa schemes on people and communities in their countries of origin including impacts on their domestic labor markets (skills growth in source countries and effects of creating a drain on labor markets) and the achievement of development objectives (effects of remittances and skills on source markets and accessibility across genders), for which specific research was commissioned. Much of this program fitted with strategic objectives being pursued under the PACER (Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations) Plus program. Australia and New Zealand have long sought economic integration across the Pacific, initially through the "Pacific Plan" and the PACER program (Kelsey, 2006; Slatter and Underhill-Sem, 2009). During PACER Plus negotiations, PICs—exercising a stronger independent vision—elevated their demands for reforms to regional labor mobility programs (Loyens, 2019). The proposed review and reform agenda of New Zealand's Pacific migrant visa categories by MBIE appears to respond more to its negotiated obligations under the PACER Plus Labor Mobility Arrangement (LMA), itself reflective of the growing negotiating strength of PICs, rather than a comprehensive engagement with the issue of climate-induced migration.

The MFAT cabinet paper explored the issue of climate change-related displacement and migration more thoroughly than previous papers had done (MFAT, 2018b). Rather than focusing on the existential threat of sea-level rise for low-lying islands, which had tended to dominate media and public interest, the paper considered other aspects of the broader and more complex challenges faced by the region because of climate change, specifying the role they play in climate-related displacement and migration. The paper also explicitly recognized that internal displacement was already occurring, often as a result of climate change related severe weather events, noting the deleterious effects being faced by most Pacific countries in the present. Locating at least some aspects of the issue as currently occurring rather than a future potentiality foreclosed the option of taking the "wait and see" approach previously preferred by policymakers in Aotearoa. A set of core values were determined to guide New Zealand officials in planning a response. These expanded on the long-standing recognition of "Pacific Peoples" desire to live in their own

countries' by also recognizing the importance of social and cultural identity, sovereignty, the right to self-determination and the ability for solutions to be led and owned by the people who are impacted by them. The paper outlined a set of five early steps to address the issue of Pacific climate migration. These included taking steps to facilitate and pursue a regional approach to the issue, supporting the strengthening of international language and frameworks *via* multilateral institutions, championing development of international law, particularly in relation to maritime exclusion zones and commissioning robust research designed to improve the government's ability to respond more adequately to the issue in future. The report also laid out a plan to "utilize ODA to avert and delay climate-related displacement and prepare for Pacific climate migration" (MFAT, 2018b, p. 9). This has included, for instance, ODA funding directed toward internal relocation of communities displaced by climate change in Fiji (Moir, 2020). The language of "avert, delay and prepare" is repeated in several MFAT documents, including the Pacific and Development Climate Action Plan (2019–2022) and the 2019 submission to the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage (MFAT, 2018a; New Zealand Government, 2019).

Echoing MBIE's position, MFAT reiterated the planned delay in addressing the issue of climate-induced cross-border migration to New Zealand until post-2024. Notably, this timeframe separates and delays decision-making on the most politically sensitive aspect of the issue by at least two administrative terms, meaning that it will be faced by a future government—one that is very likely to have a different political make-up. Lending some credence to the authenticity of MFAT's approach, on the other hand, were a set of follow-up actions that set the response in motion. The first was a 27% increase in total ODA funding, restoring support to a level, still low by international standards, of 0.28% of GNI. Of this budget, 65% was targeted at the Pacific region (MFAT, n.d.-b). New Zealand also signed the global compact on migration in late 2018, despite domestic political opposition from the major opposition party who promised to pull out of the agreement if or when they are re-elected to government in the future (Devlin, 2018). More promisingly, a comprehensive and broadly-based research scoping document has been completed. If the research plan is followed, the series of studies would actively deconstruct the current barriers to action and establish a strategic platform for future planning.

Development of a Pacific-led instrument on climate migration has commenced *via* a multi-agency program led by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and including the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS). The process is partly funded by the New Zealand Aid Program. One of the program's three objectives focuses on labor migration as "a sustainable development and climate change adaptation strategy" (PCCMHS, 2019), providing an indication of the degree to which labor migration has been mainstreamed into climate change adaptation approaches. Progress has also been

made on the matter of maritime zone regulations with the joint signing of the declaration on preserving maritime zones in the face of climate change-related sea-level rise (Cogliati-Bantz, 2020; Pacific Islands Forum, 2021).

Issues not addressed in government documents

While the MFAT paper discusses some of the limitations and deficits of international law in relation to “climate refugees,” it does not touch on broader legal issues, such as implications deriving from the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to which Aotearoa is a signatory, or the potential role of domestic legislation such as Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi)². These agreements imply specific rights and protections for Māori and Indigenous Pasifika that need to be accounted for in any planned actions or policy approaches. It is not clear whether Māori were engaged, as treaty partners, in the development of the 2018 action plan, which is silent on the matter of Crown obligations under Te Tiriti (The Treaty) and does not include any Māori tenets within the set of core values that inform the plan (Crossen, 2020). Customary land ownership and cultural heritage are subjects that are frequently missing from climate plans and opportunities to learn from their successful inclusion—such as in the 2018 Vanuatu National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster Induced-Displacement—have been largely overlooked (Yamamoto, 2020).

None of the cabinet papers reviewed here address the issue of Aotearoa’s moral responsibility for the effects of climate change in the Pacific. While the government documents reviewed in this paper make frequent reference to Aotearoa’s particular focus or concern with Pacific Island countries in the matter of climate-induced displacement, they do not offer any explanation for how or why that delimitation is applied. After all, New Zealand’s greenhouse gas emissions do not selectively settle on the Pacific region. MFAT’s, 2008 cabinet paper acknowledged that “New Zealand’s approach to environmental migrants in the Pacific could not be separated from the needs of environmental migrants in the wider world and would need to be consistent with the policy settings of other affected nations” (p. 8). MFAT’s, 2009 document was clear in delineating the relatively few people in low-lying Pacific Islands most likely to be affected by cross-border displacement in comparison to the “vast majority” of potential migrants from other regions (p. 9). Article 3 of the

2 Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi is the founding constitutional document of Aotearoa New Zealand. It is an agreement, in English and Māori, made between the British Crown and about 540 indigenous Māori Rangatira (Chiefs). The document establishes and guides the relationship between the crown (embodied by the Government) and Māori.

Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (OHCHR, 1951) specifically rules out discrimination of refugees on the basis of race, religion or country of origin—an aspect of the convention that Aotearoa has run afoul of in its past refugee policies (Graham-McLay, 2019; Wolman, 2022). However, countries are not so constrained when it comes to regular migration and labor mobility arrangements which are frequently regional in nature. This may provide some insight into the level of caution being applied to the creation of new visa categories for climate migrants or refugees, and the clear preference for addressing the issue using existing regional migration agreements and policies where possible. A proposal from Climate Change Minister and Green Party MP James Shaw for an experimental climate refugee visa for Pacific Peoples was dropped within 6 months after attracting little support on the ground, not least from Pacific communities themselves, for whom a collective rather than individualized approach was seen to better serve demands for self-determination (Manch, 2018). The focus on labor mobility enables some form of governance of regional climate-induced migration to proceed, without having to address the morally and politically complex issue of responsibility for climate impacts. These more challenging aspects of climate-induced migration have been effectively swept under the WIM rug, where global North countries collectively resist the imposition of legal or financial responsibility for the climate damages imposed on the global South by their knowing pollution of the global commons. This supports the contention that Aotearoa has effectively instrumentalized Pacific resilience and adaptation narratives into a depoliticized form of adaptive development that diminishes its own responsibility for causing the conditions that contribute to displacement, whilst rendering its subjects more governable within an individualized, labor market-based mechanism.

Construction of a solution built around regular regional migration pathways enables New Zealand to erect a faux wall around the South Pacific, within which it can aim to demonstrate leadership on a contentious international issue, albeit one that has been shaped into manageable (or governable) proportions that are not replicated elsewhere. This is not to discount the very real benefits for affected countries in pursuing regional solutions, the evident need for more fitting international legal instruments for supporting climate induced migration (Burkett, 2011), or the many economic, strategic and cultural rationales that support a Pacific focus in New Zealand’s climate policy approaches. New Zealand has deep historical relationships in the region including cultural links courtesy of its indigenous tāngata whenua³ and growing tagata Pasifika⁴ populations, realm responsibilities (Niue, Cook Islands and Tokelau), a

3 “People of the land” in Te Reo Māori, in reference to New Zealand’s indigenous Māori population.

4 Translates as “Pacific Peoples.”

colonial history and geographic proximity (Powles, 2018). According to Powles (2018), this is where Aotearoa “draws its Pacific identity—an essential element of New Zealand’s soft power in the region.” (p. 170). One critical benefit of a regionally delimited approach is the potential space that it offers for experimentation and innovation in policy design in a less fraught political atmosphere—particularly given New Zealanders’ broad, if selectively applied, openness to Pacific climate refugee policy (Stanley and Williamson, 2021). Furthermore, the existence of mutual benefits for New Zealand and Pacific Island countries in pursuing a regional solution enhances the likelihood of achieving more successful outcomes.

New Zealand’s pursuit of influence and leadership status in the region through its active engagement on the issue of climate migration is not without contestation. Aotearoa’s right to “lead” and/or “influence” the region as a self-described “Pacific nation” is frequently assumed by politicians but comes laden with colonial overtones that exacerbate long-standing frustrations with Australian and New Zealand dominance of regional institutions (Powles, 2018). The repeated failures to understand Pacific Island countries’ viewpoints or to prioritize issues of importance to the rest of the region, particularly in relation to climate change, contributes nuance and complexity to such efforts. New Zealand’s inability to construct any kind of longer-term plans for climate-induced migration without extensive research and consultation speaks, in part, to the current deficit of knowledge and data, a level of ignorance scrupulously maintained for many years to legitimize inaction.

MFAT’s 2018 paper acknowledges that a spectrum of views on climate-induced migration exist across the Pacific, matched by a broad range of differing challenges experienced by various Pacific Island countries (MFAT, 2018b). These are also fed by long-standing migration discourses relating to issues of self-sufficiency, exodus (see, for instance, Newport, 2019) and the effects of large-scale migration on those left behind (see Barnett, 2012). The issue of immobility, both voluntary (Farbotko and McMichael, 2019; Farbotko et al., 2020) and as a result of resource constraints (Cundill et al., 2021; Benveniste et al., 2022) is increasingly being raised. Migration and labor mobility schemes can actually serve to exacerbate inequity and enhance vulnerability in the context of disasters. Most migrants involved in circular labor mobility schemes are healthy, young and predominantly male, resulting in a range of implications that are gendered, age-based and ableist (Bettini et al., 2017). Meanwhile, wealthier and better connected households are often more able to exploit migration opportunities, widening economic gaps and power relations, thereby increasing the vulnerability of those most at risk (Cundill et al., 2021). Cundill et al. (2021) also found that remittances from labor schemes, often considered a form of long-term household insurance, will be unable to compensate for climate damages

once they begin to accumulate around mid-century. Thus, poorly implemented adaptive development schemes can morph into forms of climate maladaptation (Johnson et al., 2021; Thornton et al., 2021). While recognition of the diversity of existing circumstances and views has prompted some early steps, it is yet to result in sufficiently proactive or responsive programs (Noy, 2017; Oakes, 2019; Thornton et al., 2021).

Seasonal migrant programs as an adaptive development response

The New Zealand Government has clearly signaled its intention to adapt existing migration programs, including the Recognized Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, to address Pacific climate migration (MFAT, 2009, 2013; Walters, 2019). Of the government’s current Pacific-facing migration schemes, the RSE has by far the largest development impact, with a current cap of 16,000 workers who come to New Zealand for up to 7 months (9 for those from Kiribati and Tuvalu who face higher travel costs) during any 11-month period. The scheme is designed to offer circular mobility, with workers encouraged to return to Aotearoa multiple times. The Pacific Access Category (PAC) and the Samoan Quota (SQ)—both permanent migration schemes—by comparison offer just 1,750 places per year (1,100 for Samoan citizens, 250 each for Tongan and Fijian citizens and 75 each for Kiribati and Tuvaluan citizens). While permanent migration offers benefits to a small set of individuals, it is the seasonal worker programs that have the potential to offer an adaptive development response, primarily through the scale of remittances back to the home countries of workers.

New Zealand’s seasonal migrant labor scheme was established in 2007 and has been lauded as a model of its type (Gibson and McKenzie, 2014a). The International Labor Organization (ILO) includes it on their global “Good practices database—Labor Migration Policies and Programs,” citing its positive representation of key thematic areas such as fair recruitment, policy coherence and regional labor mobility (International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2015). A key objective of New Zealand’s RSE scheme was to support economic development in the Pacific Islands. At the time of the scheme’s launch, Winston Peters, then Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that

“The Pacific is the primary focus of New Zealand’s overseas development work and offering Island nations first crack at seasonal labor opportunities will assist that development work in a number of ways. First and foremost, it will help alleviate poverty directly by providing jobs for rural and outer island workers who often lack income-generating work. The earnings they send home will support

families, help pay for education and health and sometimes provide capital for those wanting to start a small business” (Peters, 2006, Para 3–4).

According to the World Bank, an agency instrumental in the set-up of the scheme during its design stages (Winters, 2016), the RSE achieves a rare “triple-win” by successfully benefiting migrant workers, their home countries and New Zealand (Gibson and McKenzie, 2014b). The report concluded that the program was “one of the most effective development interventions for which rigorous evaluations are available,” representing a best-practice model (Gibson and McKenzie, 2014b, p. 25).

While the scheme was consciously designed and established with development objectives in mind, the primary driver of the scheme for Aotearoa are the needs of seasonal employers, as recognized in the PACER Plus Labor Mobility Arrangement (LMA), in which paragraph 5 explicitly states:

“The Participants recognize that the operation of the existing labor mobility schemes is employer-driven and subject to labor market demand in the receiving country Participants” (PACER-Plus Participants, 2017, p. 3).

The RSE is very much a private sector-driven scheme that offers a significant supply of reliable and affordable unskilled labor to the horticulture and viticulture industries, despite the role played by government in its establishment. Several reports conducted during the lifetime of the RSE program have suggested that the two main aims of the scheme often work at cross-purposes and need to be carefully balanced (Evaluate Research, 2010; Bedford et al., 2015; Nunns et al., 2020). Specifically, Nunns et al. (2020) noted that a rebalancing of the New Zealand and PIC-facing aims of the policy was required to mitigate negative impacts being experienced by workers’ families and communities, stating that “while the RSE employers remain the primary driver of the policy, if RSE is to continue to be a best practice scheme, the development aim must be kept to the fore” (p. 9).

To date, delivery of the full development potential of the scheme has been largely contingent on the efforts of governments in source countries. Vanuatu, currently the source country for over 40% of the RSE scheme’s Pacific participants, has taken a particularly pro-active stance toward maximizing employment opportunities and ensuring that source communities benefit from the scheme, in addition to the individual workers (Bedford et al., 2015; MBIE, 2021). According to Bedford et al. (2015), this included sending a marketing manager to New Zealand to promote Ni-Vanuatu workers, while supporting the establishment of a recruitment market in Vanuatu that eases the process of recruitment for New Zealand employers through legislative changes and government licensing of agents. The government

of Vanuatu also provides loans and micro-credit arrangements to workers to cover initial costs of participation (e.g., transport costs), conducts thorough pre-departure briefings, levies social sanctions on workers for performance or behavioral issues while employed in New Zealand and requires workers to contribute to community development funds or projects on their return (Bedford et al., 2015). Some communities in Vanuatu also placed a limit on the number of workers allowed to participate in the schemes during any one season to avoid disruption to regular village-based activities and workflows. Overall, Vanuatu is seen to have adopted a long-term view of the country’s involvement in seasonal worker programs that includes maximizing opportunities to achieve broader domestic development aspirations (Bedford et al., 2015). However, there are marked differences between countries engaged in the RSE scheme, with many smaller PICs lacking the capacity or resources needed to maximize development outcomes (Bedford et al., 2015; Kautoke-Holani, 2017). These countries have lobbied persistently for increased commitment from both New Zealand and Australia to support the development objectives of their respective programs and for enhanced coordination between the two countries, who are recruiting from the same pool of workers (Kautoke-Holani, 2017). The LMA, a wholly voluntary agreement that sits alongside PACER Plus, provides for Australia and New Zealand to spend AUD19 million and NZD7 million respectively on development support—a level that falls well short of PIC aspirations (Kautoke-Holani, 2017).

From a New Zealand government perspective, the current operation of the RSE scheme is weighted heavily in favor of employers’ needs, with development objectives very much a secondary concern. This is reflected in the institutional framework that supports the operation of the scheme, with MBIE bearing primary operational responsibility, while a separate ministry, MFAT, plays a supporting role that sees it taking responsibility for the scheme’s development objectives. To achieve those objectives, MFAT funds MBIE to deliver capacity-building initiatives designed to improve activities such as recruitment and pre-departure briefing and, more recently, to undertake research on the impacts of the RSE scheme on workers’ home communities (Bedford et al., 2020; MFAT, n.d.-a). MFAT also operates skills development courses for seasonal workers while they are in New Zealand (for example English language, finance and business development) through a third-party provider (Roorda, 2011). The primary settings and functioning of the RSE program are under the remit of MBIE, who have historically proved slow to respond to suggestions that the scheme’s dual objectives need to be recalibrated. This is likely to be related to the fact that the department’s strategic objectives for immigration issues center on domestic economic and social outcomes, and border security.

Reimagining Pacific seasonal worker programs to support climate resilience and climate-induced migration

Discussions at the Pacific Labor Mobility Annual Meetings (PLMAM) in 2019 and 2021 centered on potential improvements to existing seasonal labor mobility schemes. These included ideas for how to elevate regional cooperation and strengthen institutional frameworks to ensure skills and qualifications are consistently obtained and recognized. This sits alongside steps being taken by the New Zealand government to expand the RSE scheme toward more skilled employment categories such as construction and fisheries. Efforts to improve inclusivity and reduce barriers to participation for women, older people, and people with disabilities have also been undertaken. Sessions at PLMAM meetings have also addressed the possibility of improvements to the cost and ease of remittances, establishing mechanisms for making contributions to workers' home country superannuation schemes and support for community reintegration of workers. While action in these areas would contribute to improving general development outcomes and the overall climate resilience that participating PICs derive from seasonal worker schemes, none of these actions directly addresses the issue of climate-induced migration pressures.

A session that projected a vision for expanded circular and intra-regional mobility that shifts the focus from "labor" to "workers, their families and communities" was relayed in the 2019 PLMAM Outcome Document (MFAT, 2019). It was appended by a reminder to meeting participants that any new institutional frameworks should build on existing commitments and reflect the current regulatory environment. In reality, regulatory environments are not static, and there is an increasing need for them to be adaptable and malleable in the face of transformative environmental and societal conditions. Adapting the RSE scheme to better address Pacific climate-induced migration and resilience may imply a level of recalibration of its dual objectives that lead to it being driven less by employers' labor needs and more by PICs' development and climate mobility needs. A truly expansive reimagining of the seasonal worker program in Aotearoa would see PICs supported to play a significantly stronger role in directing and managing participation in the schemes in ways that best support their individual development needs. Additionally, redirecting all or some of the income tax paid by seasonal or guest workers to their home countries could have transformative impacts on their governance capacity. With some PICs facing a future in which climate change causes a steady erosion of their ability to support their entire populations on a full-time basis, circular, intra-regional mobility schemes could contribute to the ongoing maintenance of a viable system of representative governance. Provision of pathways to dual citizenship and inclusive diaspora

involvement in schemes would enhance their flexibility and better support the ability of Pacific Peoples to make decisions about their own futures. As greenhouse gas emissions continue to accumulate in the atmosphere, PICs are increasingly forced to consider more experimental modes of existential survival that offer potential for safeguarding sovereignty, self-determination, and cultural heritage.

Limits imposed by current regulatory regimes and by the domestic orientation of the strategic objectives governing the actions of responsible agencies are likely to pose an ongoing barrier to transformational action. This suggests that either the strategic objectives of core agencies will need to change, or the construction of new institutional arrangements will be required. There is significant opportunity for progressively conceived worker mobility schemes to actively contribute to the shaping of a world-leading adaptive development response to climate-induced migration in Aotearoa. However, those aspirations are unlikely to be fully realized by a policy design that keeps employers in the driver seat, rather than in a position as key stakeholders and mutual beneficiaries of a successfully operated developmental response to climate mobilities.

Conclusion

Action on Pacific Climate Migration "reflects the government's ambition for New Zealand to become a global leader on climate change" (MFAT, 2018b, p. 1). Interviewed by Al Gore during his "24 h of Reality" event in 2017, current New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern responded to a question about the impact of the climate refugee issue on New Zealand by highlighting the potential to respond by adapting existing seasonal employment schemes (*The Climate Reality Project, 2017, 1:11.50*). In pursuing that approach, the New Zealand government has been forced to start from a place of research fundamentals—one that opens the possibility for an authentic PIC point-of-view to emerge. This, alongside the ability to render the project governable through regional geographical delimitation, provides a unique opportunity for Aotearoa to conduct a program of broadly conceived policy experimentation and innovation. Doing so will require a re-imagining of the way in which Pacific migration is conceived and managed, a re-arrangement of strategic objectives in core government agencies and possibly the establishment of new institutional settings for primary management. Making the issue of Pacific climate-induced mobility governable at a local and regional level has involved obscuring or side-lining the complex moral and political issues of responsibility for extra-territorial climate damage resulting from New Zealand's GHG emissions. It has also involved instrumentalizing Pacific Peoples' own discursive narratives to render them more governable within a market-based adaptive development framework. This is reflective of a governance style in New Zealand that tends to eschew deep public deliberation of complex moral and

political issues in favor of more utilitarian forms of distributive justice that align with the country's long and tight embrace of neo-liberal governmentalities.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Author contributions

CD: conceptualization, methodology, analysis, investigation, and writing—original draft. AN: writing—review and editing and supervision. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

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