

Climate Change and Migration: An urgent Pacific issue

Wed, 20 May 2009

Suva, Fiji -- Over the coming years, Pacific Island countries face the likelihood of increasing numbers of people compelled to leave their homes and livelihoods as a consequence of environmental changes produced by global warming.

Professor Vijay Naidu, Director of Development Studies and the Head of the School of Governance and Development Studies at the University of the South Pacific (USP) said, “According to the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) there is no question about continuing increase in global temperatures. Climate change is upon us. Extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, cyclones and accompanying waves and tidal surges are already impacting communities globally. For Pacific island countries these natural hazards and rising sea level pose serious challenges that cannot be wished away.”

Accordingly, from 14-15 May 2009, the UNESCO/Asia Pacific Migration Research Network (APMRN) and the School of Governance and Development Studies jointly hosted an important two day workshop on ‘Climate Change Related Migration in the Pacific’ at the USP Graduate School of Business, Statham Campus, Suva, Fiji.

The workshop brought together over 30 leading Pacific experts in the fields of climate change and migration, representatives from key Pacific regional institutions and postgraduate students from the University of the South Pacific, University of Auckland, University of Waikato, University of PNG, UNESCO/APMRN, The Pacific Island Forum Secretariat, and the UNDP Pacific Centre.

Pacific island countries will need to increase their attention to climate change adaptation, because while atoll states are most vulnerable to the loss of fresh water lenses and inundation, those living in river deltas and high altitude regions of larger islands are also exposed to flooding and frost.

The workshop therefore provided an overview of environmentally forced migration in the Pacific region, including climate change and gender relations. Participants examined the widespread socio-political, cultural and economic impacts of climate change for Pacific Island countries, with specific focus on tourism, agriculture, food security, fisheries, marine resources, and on fragile coastal zones.

This included case studies relating to sea level rise and relocation of Carteret Islanders in Papua New Guinea, and climate change and floods in urban Fiji.

Workshop participants are collaboratively developing a regional agenda for policy and research.

According to Professor Naidu, “As climate change impacts negatively on human

livelihoods there is a likelihood of people seeking to relocate within countries and from one country to another. Migration both rural to urban and internationally is already a reality in most Pacific countries. It is critical that such movements be anticipated and planned for and when they occur, appropriately managed, otherwise numerous problems including inter-community tensions and open conflict are likely to arise. There are cultural, gender, generational, livelihood and sovereignty matters at stake which researchers and policy makers should address now.”

During the workshop, a selection of short films from the SPREPS Climate Change Film Festival were also shown, including films from Kiribati, Cook Islands, Fiji and Federated States of Micronesia.

For further information on the workshop please contact Shirley Tagi, Media, PR and events Manager, USP at +679 3232355 or email tagi_sh@usp.ac.fj