

## Climate change: The tipping point

*Mindful of the forthcoming Copenhagen meeting on climate change, the Pacific islands of Kiribati and Tuvalu are calling upon all nations to reduce their carbon emissions so that they might be able to stay in their countries and not be forced to relocate elsewhere. Over the past two years JRS Australia, in collaboration with the University of NSW Psychiatry Research and Teaching Unit, has been investigating the psychosocial effects of displacement resulting from climate and other ecological changes in Pacific Island nations. Sr Maryanne Loughry, JRS Associate Director, explores some of the preliminary insights that have stemmed from this research.*

When I visited Kiribati and Tuvalu in May 2009 I asked elders, policy makers and government workers about their five biggest personal fears for the future. Among the top concerns were prospects for their children and the economy, an uncertain future, cultural change and climate change.

Apart from climate change, the people of Kiribati and Tuvalu are also dealing with complex global issues such as overcrowding, unemployment, poverty, pollution, and modernisation. Climate change is viewed as a significant factor that compounds the effects of these stressors, and some describe it as a tipping factor that will eventually make the other problems unmanageable. Climate change is a driver for some of these issues as well as a multiplier of their effects.

Significantly, people in both Kiribati and Tuvalu told me their concerns about climate change escalate when there is a severe climate event—a tsunami warning, a hurricane or a king tide—in other vulnerable parts of the world. On Kiribati and Tuvalu there would simply be no place to run to. One has only to think of the devastation and fear caused by the recent tsunami in Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga to know that the people of the Pacific are grappling with a major global stressor over which they feel they have no influence.

Both nations have different political discourses about climate change and its future prospects for the population. What does seem to be clear from these responses, however, is that each nation is facing multiple challenges and climate change is only one among many. The adults who were interviewed were very concerned about the future of their children and the opportunities that they might have in the future. They also recognised that their culture is changing and that one of the consequences of climate change may be the need for people to migrate.

When Kiribati and Tuvalu students in Year 13 (the final year of secondary school) were asked to brainstorm and then rank the things that they worried about, their lists included rising sea-levels, unemployment, education, overcrowding, a change in culture, health concerns, development and an increase in the cost of food.

Clearly these adolescent sample groups were very aware of the impact of climate change on their country, among the other difficulties currently being faced. What was most apparent from this research, and the accompanying interviews conducted with government officials and other stakeholders, was that both these nations believe they have a major role to play in advocating for nations to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions as a matter of urgency. They believe that they are presently experiencing the effects of climate change, effects that could result in their own countries becoming unviable unless drastic actions are taken by the world's political leaders.

*Sr Maryanne Loughry RSM recently visited Bougainville and the Carteret Islands to collect further data on climate change displacement.*

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