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# Beyond isolated Atlantises in a infinite ocean : Replacing the climate change and migration nexus in the context of territorial networks in the South Pacific

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# Denaturalizing Climate Change: Migration, Mobilities and Space

Friederike Gesing, Johannes Herbeck, Silja Klepp

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# Contents

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<i>Friederike Gesing, Johannes Herbeck, Silja Klepp</i> <b>Introduction</b> .....	4
<i>Martin Mahony</i> <b>Picturing the migratory other: photography, climate change, and the urban imaginary</b> .....	15
<i>Clemens Greiner, Simon Alexander Peth, Patrick Sakdapolrak</i> <b>Deciphering migration in the age of climate change. Towards an understanding of translocal relations in social-ecological systems</b> .....	23
<b>Comment to Greiner/Peth/Sakdapolrak: Anna-Lisa Müller</b> .....	33
<i>Rebecca Hofmann</i> <b>The cultural space of climate change, adaptation, and mobility in the Pacific Islands</b> .....	34
<i>Sara Baptiste-Brown</i> <b>Behind the words – Migration with Dignity in Kiribati</b> .....	44
<b>Comment to Hofmann and Baptiste-Brown: Silja Klepp</b> .....	54
<i>Sara de Wit</i> <b>“Denaturalizing Adaptation, Resocializing the Climate”: Theoretical and methodological reflections on how to follow a travelling idea of climate change</b> .....	56
<b>Comment to de Wit: Julia Lossau</b> .....	65
<i>Emilie Chevalier</i> <b>Beyond isolated Atlantises in an infinite ocean: Replacing the climate change and migration nexus in the context of territorial networks in the South Pacific</b> .....	66
<i>Marlene Becker</i> <b>The discourse about legal protection for environmental refugees: Re-constructing categories – rethinking policies</b> .....	77
<b>Comment to Becker: Anna-Lisa Müller</b> .....	86

# Beyond isolated Atlantises in an infinite ocean: Replacing the climate change and migration nexus in the context of territorial networks in the South Pacific

*Emilie Chevalier*

## 1. Introduction

The Pacific islands are made up of twenty-two countries and territories. Approximately 10 million inhabitants live in about 300 islands (Nansen Initiative, 2013, p. 4). In the last decade, the region has emerged among the media, international institutions and civil society as one of climate change's icons and hotspots. The United Nations Environment Program declared in 2005 that the inhabitants of Lataw (Tegua island, Torres archipelago, northern Vanuatu) were the 'World's first climate change refugees' when the village was moved inland.

In this context, the prevailing iconography and vocabulary associated with the climate change and migration nexus (CCMN) regarding the South Pacific seems to be dominated by the figure of the small island in a geographical sense and of the small island developing state in a political sense. This single-unit based imagery seems to tie islanders with the notions of isolation and powerlessness in a continued process of othering. Carol Farbotko pointed out that such representations could be viewed as "the legacy of the island laboratory" and "[...] enable the exercise and justification of cosmopolitan activism towards climate change that speaks in part through space" (Farbotko, 2010, p. 1).

Building on Farbotko's argument on the politicization of island space, this paper will attempt to show the necessity of varying our perspectives on the nature and scale of island space to understand the dynamics and meanings of the CCMN in the Pacific. One way to do so can be to consider the CCMN as a paradigm embedded in the dynamics of territorial networks. Territorial networks can be defined as multi-scalar systems of customary informal or institutionalized interactions between places, with these systems being experienced, identified and appropriated by social groups as well as embedded in power relations. The interest of this concept is threefold. It can allow researchers to pay a greater attention to the scalar, multi-local and relational dynamics of the CCMN. Secondly, discourses on climate change and migration reveal and may influence the political and social dynamics producing the continuities and discontinuities that structure territorial networks in the South Pacific. Finally,

studying the CCMN in the context of territorial networks in the South Pacific allows an analysis of hierarchies and inequalities between actors and places.

First, I will focus on the need and opportunity to look at island spaces from a relational perspective through the concept of territorial networks. Then I will try to show how it can be applied to the climate change and migration nexus in the South Pacific.

## **2. Shifting our eyes away from the isolated island: Seeing the South Pacific in terms of territorial networks**

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### **Singularization and isolation of Pacific island space in climate change and migration narratives**

Carol Farbotko has shown in several articles how low-lying islands are used to materialize the science of climate change (Ibid.). Her discourse analysis of the of climate change and population displacement narratives about Tuvalu in the Sydney Morning Herald showed the Australian newspaper is an example of how island space and identities are constructed by 'the West' within the framework of sea-level rise (Farbotko, 2005, p. 1). The following examples will demonstrate how her analysis can be applied to a multitude of discourses ranging across various types of actors.

(1) The sea-level rise/small islands pairing was highly publicised in the fall of 2013 in relation to the 'Ioane Teitiota' case. This i-Kiribati citizen submitted a plea to New Zealand's High Court to grant the family asylum based on the negative repercussions that climate change impacts would have on their well-being, were they to go back to Kiribati. The court denied them refugee status on the basis that this situation did not qualify under the Geneva Convention. The case received worldwide coverage. Through a Google News research on the topic on October 24th<sup>14</sup>, I found 20 articles illustrated by a picture. The illustrations fell into three categories according to the images and the accompanying comments: 6 pictures featured men and/ or buildings in Kiribati in, under the water and/or building a sea wall, 11 pictures featured islets, atolls or parts of either one without obvious presence of men and 3 featured images of daily life in Kiribati, a political banner and a polar bear on a tiny iceberg. While the decisive part of the case lies in the interpretation of an international convention by a judge in New Zealand, the pictures are focusing mainly on the island of origin, and more specifically on single atolls or islets, and low-lying shores.

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<sup>14</sup> With the following settings: (1) keywords: 'Ioane Teitiota' (2) 'All results', 'In the past month', 'Sorted by date', and 'Hide duplicates' provided 21 results. The operation was repeated several times and obtained the same proportions, with only one picture featuring a balance of justice. These results are to be read carefully. The search should be carried over a longer period and on various computers and search engines. They can however be considered an indication of the types of images chosen to illustrate this case.

(2) Beyond the media sphere, international organisations have also focused on the case of small and low-lying island states. For instance, in 2012, François Crépeau, Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, prepared a report for the UN General Assembly which includes a “Thematic section: climate change and migration”. In section C “Question of definition: what is climate-change-induced migration?” and two sub-sections dedicated to the identification of “vulnerable people” and “vulnerable places”, low-lying island states are repeatedly identified as “more exposed to environmental migration” (Crépeau, 2012, pp. 8-9). The report also stresses that vulnerability in Oceania is reinforced by the fact that most small island States are developing countries “[...] facing multiple stresses [...]” (Ibid., p. 9).

In “Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Assessing the evidence”, the International Organisation for Migration (IMO) expressed similar views regarding the need for some Pacific islanders to resort to international migration due to the insular context:

*[T]he Pacific small island developing States represent a particular case where ‘statelessness’ could be an issue. Longer distance international migration requires financial resources and social networks which facilitate such a move. [...] While international migration remains out of reach for many of the most vulnerable to environmental stresses and shocks, the residents of some small island states are also limited in terms of their ability to undertake internal migration [...] Similar concerns have been expressed for the populations of some Pacific small island developing States, such as Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Tokelau and Tuvalu, in the context of raised sea-levels and increased storm surge intensity due to climate change [...].* (Laczko & Aghazarm, 2009, p. 23)

In these examples, South Pacific islands are mostly represented as singularised units, both from a physical perspective (the island) or a political one (the island-state). They are marked by the lexical and visual fields of spatial, social and economic discontinuity created by the ocean, and they seem to lack both the spatial capital and resources to overcome these features. Carol Farbotko mobilises “the litany of smallness” (Farbotko, 2010, p. 1) from Epeli Hau’ofa’s 1993 essay “Rediscovering Oceania: Our sea of islands” to develop a postcolonial critique of the notion of the climate change refugee. Both authors’ central argument is that continuing relations of dependence are vehicled and maintained through these representations of the smallness and isolation of Oceanian states in the face of economic development or, more recently, of climate change (Hau’ofa, 1994, p. 151). Adopting a similar critical posture, Uma Kothari argued during the COST workshop “Race, affect and alterity: Rethinking climate change and migration” in Durham in June 2013 that such representations could be linked to colonial and racialised narratives of islands.

## Seeing space differently: Territorial networks and the South Pacific

In “Island Movements: thinking with the Archipelago”, Jonathan Pugh showed that in the 1990s and 2000s, “new spatial ontologies” led to “increasing attention being given to tropes such as ‘networks’” (Pugh, 2013, p. 13). When applied to geography, networks define space as a set of relations (links) between distant places (nodes). But such relations are not neutral or simply factual interactions, as spatial networks are embedded in socio-political and cultural contexts. Bernard Debarbieux (1999) showed how in French speaking social sciences and in geography in particular, the concept of territory is often mobilized to explore such contexts, as a ‘territory’ is not only understood as an administrative unit but the result of the appropriation and identification of space by a social group through social political and cultural relations and structures. And as Di Méo points it, a territory can take the form of a contiguous area or of a network in a topological metric (Di Méo, 2002, pp. 178-179). Hence, a territorial network can be defined as the interactions between several distant territories or the identification and appropriation of these interactions themselves by a social group. With this concept, we can look at the South Pacific region not just as a juxtaposition of individualised and discontinuous surfaces (i.e. islands, continents and ocean) but as a socially and politically constructed and experienced multiscalar set of relations between islands for instance.

Many concepts and ideas used by social scientists, Pacific leaders and inhabitants already mobilise, explicitly or not, the framework of territorial networks in the fields of island and/or Pacific studies. Several theoretical tools exist to try and capture inter-islands territorial networks. A classic instance is the concept of archipelago. Based on his research on the Açores, Louis Marrou defined it in 2005 as a system of geographic, historical and cultural relations between several oceanic islands (Marrou, 2005). Elaine Stratford argued that this concept allows us to see that “island relations are built on connection, assemblage, mobility, and multiplicity”, which “create spaces for growing resilience, association and engagement” (Stratford, 2013, p. 3). French Polynesia is for instance generally described as a group of five archipelagos (The Society islands, The Tuamotu, The Australes islands, The Gambier and The Marquesas) interconnected spatially – by plane and cargo routes such as The Aranui 3 (which circles between Fakarava and Rangiroa in the Tuamotu and the Marquesas) – and politically, as a ‘Country’ within the French Republic. At a different scalar level, French Polynesia is part of what is often called the ‘Polynesian triangle’ which includes the islands lying between Aotearoa / New Zealand, Rapa Nui / Easter Island and Hawai’i. As Barcham, Scheyvens and Overton describe it, this concept was forged by Europeans to gain a representation of “[...] the extent of the Polynesian settlement of the islands of the Pacific [...]” and the “[m]ovement, often over long distances, [that] has characterised the history of Polynesian peoples” (Barcahm et al, 2009, p. 322).



Movements in the Polynesian triangle included for instance religious mobility toward the common religious centre of Raiatea (Society Islands). Interestingly, two years ago this historical network became politically institutionalised through the establishment of the Polynesian Leaders Group.

In this first part I tried to explain why representations of island space should not be solely approached as a number of single entities but as multi-scalar and intertwined territorial networks. I will now try to show what this conceptual framework could bring for the study of the climate change and migration paradigm in the South Pacific.

### 3. Analysing the climate change and migration nexus with the concept of territorial networks in the South Pacific

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Two different geo-imaginaries of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) currently coexist. Figure one is a banner for the 2014 UN SIDS Conference. It features both a tiny isolated islet – which echoes the single palm tree standing alone on Figure 2 – and a circle surrounding several linked dots. The first component is very common in climate change narratives as a symbol of vulnerability. However, the Samoa conference was centered on partnerships, as illustrated with this circle. The Alliance for Small Islands States, that was established in 1990, is in fact a worldwide network of islands, as shown on the map below.

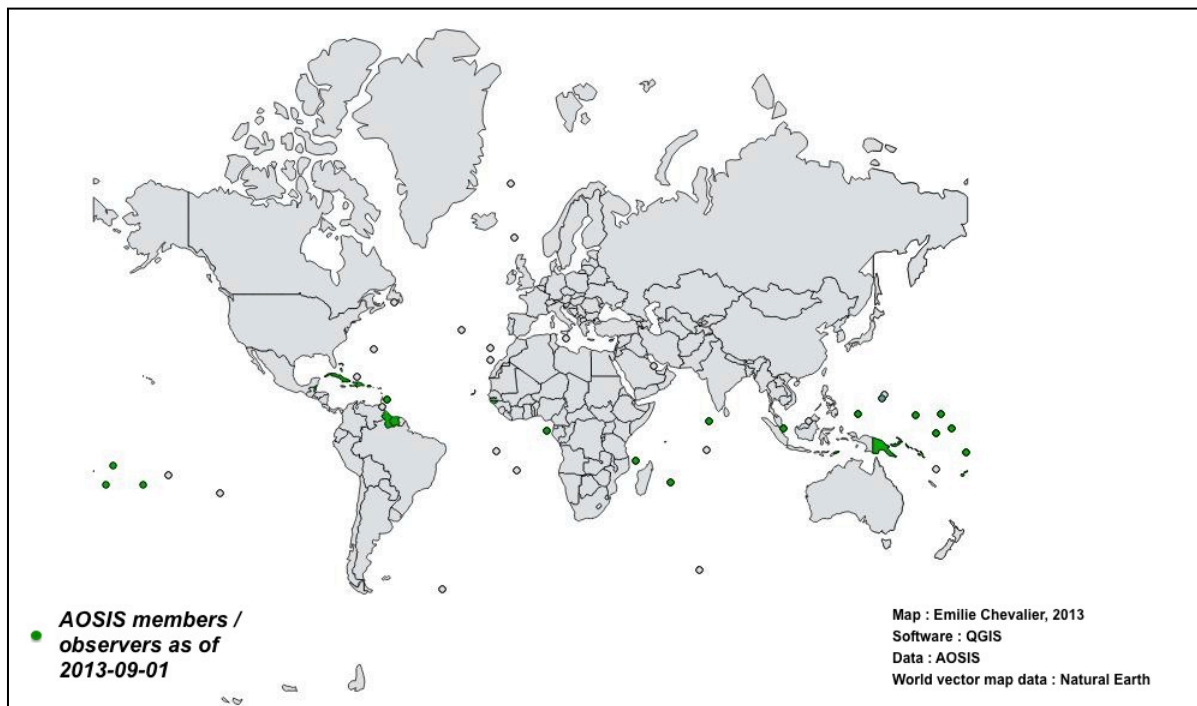


**Figure 1. Ambivalent geo-imaginaries of islandness.**

Source : SIDS Policy and Practice, IISD Reporting Services, « Chairs Summarize Six Multi-Stakeholder Partnership Dialogues on SIDS », October 8, 2014 (website visited on November 21, 2014). <http://sids-l.iisd.org/news/chairs-summarize-six-multi-stakeholder-partnership-dialogues-on-sids/>



**Figure 2. Representing the AOSIS : isolation and/or partnerships ?** One of the AOSIS'logos. Source : SIDS Policy and Practice, IISD Reporting Services, « AOSIS prepares for Lima », November 12, 2014 (website visited on November 21, 2014). <http://sids-l.iisd.org/news/aosis-prepares-for-lima/>



**Map 1: Members of the Alliance of Small Island States**

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The AOSIS network is largely involved in discussions around climate-induced migration. In his opening address to the Nansen Pacific Consultation on Human Mobility, Natural Disasters and Climate Change (Rarotonga, 21-24 May 2013), Hon. Henri Puna, Prime Minister of the Cook Islands spoke about the “Long history of warm relations [...]” between his country and Nauru, the current chair of AOSIS, and of the fact that they are “very close collaborators and partners in terms of helping to drive the Small Islands Developing State agenda” and thanked Nauru's President for “demonstrating a strong interest” in a meeting held to “move forward on this discussion” and “strengthen our collective

Pacific voice”<sup>15</sup>. From this statement, it appears that the government of the Cook Islands and Nauru worked in close connection and aimed at being instrumental actors in the emergence of the topic of climate change-induced human mobility on the international political agenda.

This example shows that the AOSIS can be seen as a territorial network in the sense that it aims at creating a common, relational sense of place. As an organization meant to obtain resources for its members, AOSIS is linked with international politics and power issues. The example also demonstrates that climate change and the CCMN are paradigms that were born on the international arena and that circulate and are renegotiated through the translocal interactions of actors. Thus, identifying and analysing territorial networks could help us understand the dynamics and rationale of the climate change and migration paradigm could help us understand in the South Pacific in three ways.

First, analysing territorial networks in the South Pacific provides an understanding of the spatial context within which adaptation and migration strategies are built. As part of my earlier work (Chevalier, 2010 & 2012) on the impacts of climate variability and change on out-migration in Tuvalu, I showed that environmental constraints – when mentioned – are integrated into a broader set of mobility factors. For instance, a young mother told me that she wanted to leave Tuvalu for the United States since she wanted a higher standard of living for her daughter and that they would obtain a visa since his family was from American Samoa. Furthermore, the specificity of climate-induced migrations lies in the anticipated nature of environmental changes that requires people to factor prospective information from various global, regional and local sources. Another young woman answered that her aunt had migrated to New Zealand and was telling her that Tuvalu was threatened by sea-level rise, suggesting her to join her in Auckland. As we can see from this example, people interacting with migrants, potential or non-migrants intervene in the construction of the island and mobility narratives with regard to climate change. Thus, as Patrick Sakdapolrak explained it in his presentation at the Bielefeld conference on Social Inequalities in Environmentally-Induced Migration in December 2012, “[c]onceptualizing the environmental impact of migration in sending areas [...] would be enriched by ‘trans-local perspectives’”. Combining an analysis of mobility factors and trans-local perspectives can already be conceptualized through theoretical frameworks that analyse territorial networks. At the international level, theoretical frameworks such as transnational spaces, migratory fields or diasporas have already been explored by several researchers (Mortreux &

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<sup>15</sup> Nansen Initiative, & Hon. Prime Minister Henri Puna. (2013). Opening Address. Presented at the Nansen Pacific Regional Consultation “Human mobility, natural disasters and climate change in the Pacific”, Rarotonga, Cook Islands. Retrieved from : [http://www.nanseninitiative.org/sites/default/files/Nansen%20Initiative%20Pacific%20Consultation%20Opening%20Address%20H.E.%20Henry%20Puna\\_0.pdf](http://www.nanseninitiative.org/sites/default/files/Nansen%20Initiative%20Pacific%20Consultation%20Opening%20Address%20H.E.%20Henry%20Puna_0.pdf)

Barnett, 2009; Gemenne, 2010) to analyse for instance processes and impacts of information and resource circulation on population movements as well as of the evolving sense of place in a mobility context in the South Pacific. However, the links between research on the climate change and migration nexus and migration and mobility studies as well as trans-local approaches seem so far limited. Most research on the former seem to adopt an asymmetrical and dialectical approach and focus on designated sending areas through the frameworks of risk and disasters, sustainability, vulnerability and resilience or adaptation and are clearly separated from designated receiving areas that are studied in terms of legal and political openness to climate-induced migration.

Secondly, discourses on climate change and migration can mirror and/or be mobilised to reshape the dynamics of continuities and ruptures that structure territorial networks in the South Pacific. The case of the relations between Australia, New Zealand, Kiribati and Tuvalu concerning climate change and migration illustrate the complex dynamics of the North / South divide in the region. But beyond this highly mediatised divide, other continuities and discontinuities are to be examined. For instance, in 2010, the Tavana (Mayor) of Napuka, an atoll in the North Eastern part of the Tuamotu archipelago in French Polynesia made a plea to his fellow mayors at the Congress of Municipalities (*Congrès des Communes*) in relation to climate change impacts. According to the local newspaper *Les Nouvelles de Tahiti*<sup>16</sup>, Taurai Puarai stressed the challenges of economic development for his atoll due to the remoteness of the island, challenges that would become exacerbated by sea-level rise. The journal then explains that Taurai Puarai sent a letter to the Mayors of the Marquesas to ask for the possibility of relocating his population there in the eventuality of Napuka being submerged, given the fact that the Marquesas are “considerably bigger and higher” and that they share “ties of friendship”.

Three comments can be made on this case. Firstly, local mobilities within an atoll, between islands, archipelagos or between island states are alternative solutions to relocating populations to capital cities, Australia or New Zealand. As such they can be analysed either as forms of inter-island continuities and complementarities or as sources of conflict, potentially caused by the crossing of cultural, social, political, administrative or economic boundaries. Secondly, it demonstrates how local actors can mobilise narratives of political or cultural ties, i.e. of territorial networks as a tool in the context of climate change. This second dimension seems to be highly present in the Pacific. The Pacific Conference of Churches as well as the Fiji based journal “Islands business” have communicated several times on the necessity to build and/or resuscitate an Oceanian solidarity in

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<sup>16</sup> *Les Nouvelles de Tahiti* (2010). Napuka cherche terre d'accueil. Retrieved from <http://www.lesnouvelles.pf/article/lactu-politique-du-fenua/napuka-cherche-terre-d'accueil>

the face of climate change. In the end it illustrates the fact that development and climate challenges and solutions can be defined in a relational way.

Finally, studying the climate change and migration nexus in the context of territorial networks in the South Pacific allows an analysis of the hierarchies and inequalities that can be found between different actors and places. Indeed, since the concept postulates a socialisation of space, it involves dynamics of actors. In this context, the degree of international visibility and/or capability of any particular political entity or social group with regard to the climate-induced migration issue may alter the dynamics of resource and power allocation as well as the hierarchies within networks, as it is already the case with the emphasis on low-lying coastal areas over highlands, or with migrants over non-migrants in the Pacific. Two newspaper articles can illustrate the political dimensions of these dynamics. On the one hand, in May 2013, Moana Carcasses Kalosil, Vanuatu's Prime Minister announced that the country could take in climate refugees. Following this announcement, a journalist for Radio Australia, Pierre Riant, interviewed Kalkot Mormor, former president of the Vaturisu Efate (Council of chiefs)<sup>17</sup>. He stated that due to land scarcity on Efate (the island where Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, is located) he did not agree with this proposal and that the prime minister should have consulted with the councils of chiefs beforehand. This article underlines the multi-scalar relations of power that structure the territorial structure of Vanuatu.

#### 4. Conclusion

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Perceptions and narratives of island space and the impacts on policy making and identity formation have been an ongoing debate in the South Pacific since the 1980s and the accession to independence for many island states. This debate is reflected in Hau'ofa's dialectical analysis of the two “levels of operation” in Oceania: on the one hand the one of national governments, regional and international diplomacy and the other hand the one of “ordinary people, peasants and proletarians” (Hau'ofa, 1994, p. 148) or the Vast ocean states versus Small Island states debate.

During the Durham COST Workshop mentioned earlier, David Goldberg (University of California, Irvine) gave a keynote speech, “Parting Waters: Seas of Movement”, in which he called for a relational approach of places in the context of climate change. In this paper I tried to illustrate the potential benefits of such an approach through the framework of territorial networks. This approach can help reveal processes through which climate change related discourses and practices mobilise or reshape territories and a sense of place.

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<sup>17</sup> Radio Australia (2013). *Efate affiche complet pour les réfugiés du changement climatique*. Retrieved from <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/french/2013-05-30/efate-affiche-complet-pour-les-réfugiés-du-changement-climatique/1138310>

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