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Households on sinking Pacific islands eye migration

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[PARIS] More than 70 per cent of households in Kiribati and Tuvalu and 35 per cent in Nauru would **migrate** if the effects of **climate change** worsen, such as floods, sea level rise or droughts.



But only roughly a quarter of households in those countries have the financial resources to migrate, which could leave many “trapped” in increasingly difficult environmental climates, according to the first nationally representative household survey conducted on climate change and migration in the Pacific.

About 6,852 people representing 852 households spread out over the three island states were interviewed in the survey carried out by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the UN University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS).

“...if nothing is done urgently and if more extreme weather is coming, we’ll have no choice but to move.”

By Tuvalu prime minister Enele Sopoaga

“We know [these] already, the findings just formalised them into text,” Enele Sopoaga, the prime minister of Tuvalu, tells *SciDev.Net* on the sidelines of COP21. “It’s [already] happening within the country. People from the outer islands are migrating to the capital island.”

Tuvalu has slightly higher international migration versus internal migration while the number of people who migrated internally in Kiribati was more than five times the number who migrated internationally.

Still, a fact sheet summarising the findings of the survey notes that internal migration in both countries is not a solution because most people go to already overpopulated capital cities. Funafuti in Tuvalu and South Tarawa in Kiribati have high rates of unemployment, limited access to clean water and are highly vulnerable to climate change.

“There’s a provision in the survey that says if nothing is done urgently and if more extreme weather is coming, we’ll have no choice but to move,” Sopoaga notes.

But people leaving their countries due to climate stressors are not considered refugees under the Geneva Convention, which has jurisdiction over refugee status and claims for asylum and associated protection, Koko Warner, a senior expert at UNU-EHS, tells *SciDev.Net* on the sidelines of COP21.

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The Geneva Convention clearly states that a refugee is someone who is fleeing a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”.

“Climatic or environmental factors are not recognised as persecuting factors and only some countries grant temporary protection status and waive visa requirements for migrants whose home country faces a severe natural hazard,” Warner explains.

She cites the example of Ioane Teitiota, a man from Kiribati who overstayed his permit in Auckland, New Zealand, then sought to be the world’s first climate refugee. Teitiota claimed that climatic stressors prevented him from enjoying his basic human rights, such as the right to life, food and adequate shelter. Courts in New Zealand rejected his claim and he was deported last September.

“In part, the case failed because from the scientific evidence presented, threats to the Kiribati man were not sufficiently imminent,” Warner says.

>Link to the fact sheet

This piece was produced by SciDev.Net’s South-East Asia & Pacific desk.



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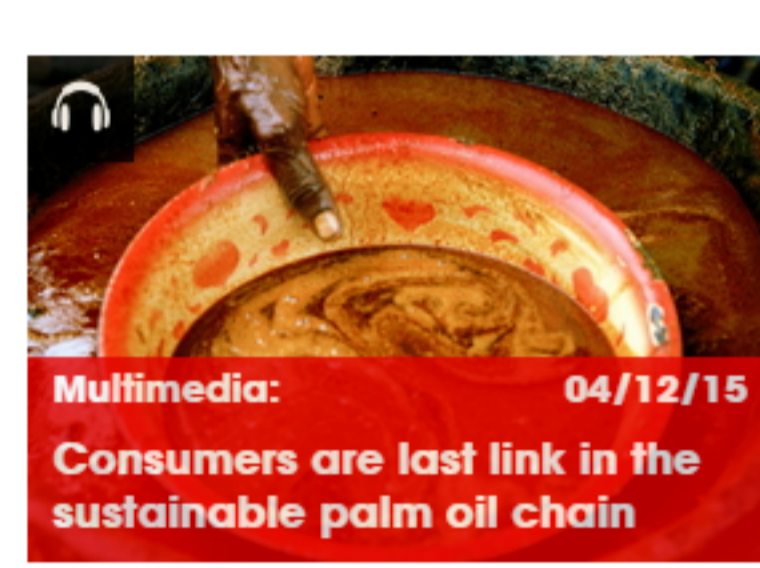
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