

TEENA BROWN PULU & RICHARD PAMATATAU

Who defines the Pacific Voice?



Photograph Credit: Richard Pamatatau

The United Nations Special Envoy for Climate Change, Mary Robinson, was convinced “this voice” existed, which encapsulated the Pacific Islands’ climate creed. She wanted attention to be paid to “this voice” at the 21st conference of parties for the United Nations *Framework Convention on Climate Change* held in Paris from November 30th to December 11th.

I believe there was a very good strong mood about adopting this resolution because it also had support

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from the civil society and from business, and people know the situation is very serious. I think it's important that this voice is heard in Paris.

Robinson was referring to the *Suva Declaration on Climate Change* signed by seven Pacific Islands' countries – Fiji, the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Tonga, and the Solomon Islands – at the *2015 Pacific Islands Development Forum* on September 4th. The talkfest was hosted by the Fijian government from 2-4 September. The catch was, how did seven out of fourteen independent Pacific Islands' states constitute consensus?

Seven sovereign states were missing from the *Suva Declaration*. Samoa, the Cook Islands, Niue, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu were not signatories. Papua New Guinea who headed the Melanesian sub-region, and Samoa for the Polynesian sub-region, were absent from the mix. Truthfully, the *Suva Declaration* did not symbolise unanimity. There were key actors who did not sign, and furthermore, the text did not gather the majority of states in the Pacific Islands region.

The twist was climate politics were branded by a doctrine of “one voice.” Singleness was intended to characterise Pacific Islands' countries, who to the contrary exemplified the world's largest, and most ethnically and linguistically diverse, ocean region.

Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare of the Solomon Islands was in favour of the “one voice” dogma.

I think most of the views that are expressed are the views that we also share. It's important that we [go] to COP 21 [the 21st conference of parties in Paris] with one voice, and I think that's the objective of this forum, and I think we've achieved it.

Politically, to force the view that the Pacific Islands region spoke with “one voice,” served an agenda of getting climate demands on the Paris negotiations table. However, at risk of being silenced by the outright propagandising were the talking points where Pacific Islands’ states converged and diverged.

Where did Oceania’s island nations agree, as well as beg to differ? There was a general pact on pushing for the upcoming Paris conference to produce a legally binding agreement on climate emissions. The seven countries who signed the *Suva Declaration on Climate Change* at the Pacific Islands Development Forum, attested to this.

[The Pacific Islands Development Forum wants] the 2015 Paris Climate Change Agreement to be legally binding;

The *Declaration on Climate Change Action* signed by the sixteen countries who were party to the Pacific Islands Forum at the forty-sixth summit in Papua New Guinea on September 10th, also saw the purpose of Paris was to arrive at an international settlement on reducing greenhouse gases.

[The Pacific Islands Forum calls] for the timely conclusion of the negotiations under the UNFCCC [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change] to adopt a new, ambitious and legally binding international climate change agreement applicable to all Parties, in Paris at COP 21 [21st conference of parties]:

By contrast, opinions differed on the scientific measurement of what amount of degrees Celsius, in terms of a world temperature rise, should the Paris accord approve. 1.5 degrees Celsius to stay alive had been the catch-theme of the Smaller Island States party to the Pacific Islands Forum – Cook Islands, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, and Tuvalu.

For the *Suva Declaration*, “below 1.5 degrees Celsius” was the limit which the seven Pacific Islands’ countries would allow a world temperature rise.

[We want] the 2015 Paris Climate Change Agreement to limit [the] global average temperature increase to below 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels in order to transition towards deep-decarbonization;

The Pacific Islands Forum *Declaration on Climate Action* took a less dogmatic stand. They were not pushing the 1.5 to stay alive slogan. By the decree of the sixteen forum countries, including Australia and New Zealand, a world temperature “increase of 1.5 degrees Celsius would” be harrowing for the Smaller Island States. But the “global temperature goal” assented to under the United Nations *Framework Convention on Climate Change*, would be the scientific measure to stick with.

[We] declare that an increase of 1.5 degrees Celsius would severely exacerbate the particular challenges facing the most vulnerable smaller island states of the Pacific and urge, all effort be made to stay within the global temperature goal, as noted by the Conference of Parties to the UNFCCC [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change].

Who *really* defined the Pacific voice? Scientific evidence was a catch-phrase politically manoeuvred to sell various climate campaigns on the international stage. In the murkiness, one factor shone out: there was a conflation of science and politics.

Temperature estimates and regional declarations were tangled to the extreme, in that it was uncertain whether the Pacific voice was pursuing United Nations climate funds for

resilience and rebuilding, loss and damage of landmass, the relocation of displaced peoples, or a mixture of everything.

Who knew? In reality “this voice” Mary Robinson alluded to, was politically confusing. The opening grievance noted in the *Suva Declaration on Climate Change* illuminated the muddle.

[We] are gravely distressed that climate change poses irreversible loss and damage to our people, societies, livelihoods, and natural environments; creating existential threats to our very survival and other violations of human rights to entire Pacific Small Island Developing States;