

# COP23: A “Pacific COP” with “islandised” outcomes?



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**Abstract:** Fiji presided over the 23rd Conference of the Parties (COP23) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in November 2017. This was the first time a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) assumed the Presidency of a UN Climate Change Conference. Considering the dramatic consequences of climate change for island states, this article examines to what extent Fiji was successful in making COP23 a ‘Pacific COP’ and forging ‘islandised’ outcomes that can be considered a success for those most vulnerable to impacts of climate change. The article also looks at the difficult circumstances of Fiji’s Presidency in light of the announced withdrawal of the United States of America from the Paris Agreement and the fact that the international community is far from achieving its targets to limit temperature rise to well below 2°C or even 1.5°C. It also links COP23 to Fiji’s geopolitical aspirations that go beyond climate change.

**Keywords:** Fiji, Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Climate Change, COP23, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

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In November 2017 the 23rd Conference of the Parties (COP23) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) took place in Bonn. Fiji presided over COP23, the very first time for a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) to take the role of President of a United Nations Climate Change Conference. Never before, the conference was chaired by a country as vulnerable to climate change as Fiji. Considering the dramatic consequences of climate change for Fiji and its neighbouring island countries and the long marginalisation of the Pacific Islands Region in international politics, this step was long overdue and an important way to draw greater attention to the needs of the most vulnerable states and people.

However, COP23 took place under difficult global circumstances. After many years of unsuccessful negotiations, the parties to the UNFCCC finally agreed on the Paris Agreement in December 2015 (United Nations 2015). The Paris Agreement beat the records as the global treaty moved into force most quickly: not even one year after COP21 in Paris, it was signed and ratified by as many states as was needed to move it into force. After the initial euphoria subsequent to the adoption of Agreement and its quick ratification, the focus shifted to more complicated questions of the implementation of the Agreement. The world is facing the reality that the international community is currently far off the track to reach the goals set in the Paris Agreement. The Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) submitted by the parties to the Paris Agreement are not sufficient to limit the average global temperature rise to well below 2°C or even 1.5°C as agreed in Paris. Furthermore, the announced withdrawal of the United States of America under President Donald Trump from the Paris Agreement can be considered a major setback for the climate change negotiations and generated the fear of ‘ripple effects’ by further countries bailing out (e.g. Guardian 2017).

The goal to limit temperature rise to 1.5°C is vital for the Pacific Island countries. Many of the smallest and most low-lying islands nations like Tuvalu or Kiribati consider a temperature rise of more than 1.5°C as the threshold of climate change that will make their islands uninhabitable over the next decades (Benjamin/Thomas 2016). Enele Sopoaga, the Prime Minister of Tuvalu, consequently proclaimed that the outcome of the 'Pacific COP23' under Fiji's Presidency needed to be 'islandised': Fiji and its neighbouring Pacific Island countries should push for outcomes that clearly bear the signature of small and vulnerable island states.

Looking back at COP23 and its outcomes, this article examines to what extent Fiji was successful in making COP23 a 'Pacific COP' and forging 'islandised' outcomes that can be considered a success for the most vulnerable to impacts of climate change. In analysing the outcomes of the conference and Fiji's success, this article gives reference to the uneven distribution of power in the climate negotiations and the numerous criteria that influenced both the decision-making at COP23 and Fiji's Presidency. It also considers the very diverse expectations towards Fiji's Presidency. Next to an assessment of the decisions taken by COP23, the article also draws on media analysis especially in the Pacific region and numerous exchanges of the authors with various actors during COP23. In order to analyse the outcomes of COP23 and Fiji's influence on the conference, it is important to understand the circumstances of the COP23. Therefore, this article will also look on the current status of the global climate change negotiations, the vulnerability of the Pacific Island countries as well as Fiji's increasing activities in international politics and its motivations.

## The results of COP23

COP23 took place from 6 – 17 November 2017 in Bonn. More than 25,000 people from around the world participated in the conference, including delegates from the parties to the convention, observers from international organisations and civil society, and journalists. For the first time, a COP was conducted in two different zones: the negotiations took place in the so-called 'Bula Zone' with access only for the representatives of



Figure 1: 'Bula Spirit' in Bonn, Germany: performance by Fijian warriors at COP23.

the parties and a limited number of observer delegations, while most of the side-events took place in the so-called 'Bonn Zone' with access for all registered delegates. In the Bonn Zone there were also numerous pavilions at which states, the UN system and other organisations presented their work on climate change.

This section looks not only at the formal outcomes of the COP23 negotiations (which have been analysed extensively elsewhere, e.g. Obergassl et al. 2018), but also gives reference to the promotion of Fijian ideas in the context of the formal outcomes. In further chapters, more consideration is given to the indirect outcomes of the conference – including the Fijian 'Bula Spirit' that was brought to Bonn – and Fiji's relationship to other actors.

## Rulebook for the implementation of the Paris Agreement

The expectations regarding the outcomes of COP23 have been rather low prior to the conference. According to the time frame of the international climate change negotiations, the main task of COP23 was to draft a rulebook for the implementation of the Paris Agreement to be adopted by COP24. The rulebook is meant to address some of the uncertainties of the Paris Agreement and aims to produce comparability and verifiability of the implementation. While the negotiations on the rulebook are technical, they are nonetheless very important for the process of implementation of the Paris Agreement. As the Nationally

Determined Contributions (NDCs) by the parties to the Paris Agreement are voluntary commitments, the parties seek to establish standards for these commitments to make them verifiable and the successes in the implementation measurable.

By compiling a text collection for a rule book on the implementation, COP23 delivered on the relatively low expectations. As the rulebook will only be adopted by COP24 in Poland this year, its success remains to be seen. Some of the smaller and most vulnerable Pacific Island countries had argued to adopt the rulebook already in Bonn to advance the progress and to use the momentum of Fiji's presidency to make progress – an ambition that was not shared by a critical number of countries.

## Talanoa Dialogue

Fiji left its footprint on the UNFCCC process: one of the major Fiji-driven outcomes of COP23 is the so-called *Talanoa Dialogue*. *Talanoa* is a concept widespread in different Pacific Island countries:

"*Talanoa* is a generic term referring to a conversation, chat, sharing of ideas and talking with someone. It is a term that is shared by Tongans, Samoans, and Fijians. *Talanoa* can be formal, as between chiefs and his or her people, and it can be informal, as between friends in a kava circle. *Talanoa* is also used for different purposes; to teach a skill, to share ideas, to preach, to resolve problems, to build and

maintain relationships, and to gather information.” (Johansson Fua 2014:56)

In this sense, its non-confrontational nature and the emphasis on skills like listening and exchanging may make *talanoa* an appropriate tool for climate change negotiations. *Talanoa* as a concept for the climate negotiations was promoted by the Fijian presidency as a means of open, inclusive and transparent exchange of views. Fiji's Prime Minister and COP23 President Voreqe Bainimarama explained the idea of the dialogue by stating: “[...] we will not be negotiating. We will be talking to each other. And we will be listening. This is the perfect setting for adopting the *talanoa* spirit that is so much a part of what Fiji brings to the presidency” (Fiji Times 2017e).

The international climate change negotiations are highly uneven. Like negotiations in other policy fields, UNFCCC and its climate change negotiations are characterized by asymmetrical power relations between its parties (Medalye 2010, Stevenson/Dryzek 2014).<sup>2</sup> While island states have been considered a moral voice in the negotiations, they are disadvantaged due to their modest capacities in negotiations with actors that inhibit more power (Shibuya 2013, Barnett/Campbell 2010). For Fiji and other small and vulnerable states, *talanoa* offers the benefit of taking a different approach to the negotiations, providing an opportunity to break through the highly uneven power dynamics of the climate change negotiations.

During COP23, the Fijian presidency and other civil society stakeholders adopted the concept, attempting to bring together diplomats and experts to have an open and transparent exchange at eye level across differences in opinion. At Bonn Zone, a *Talanoa Space* was established to provide a platform for diplomats, observers and non-high-level participants of COP23 to engage in *talanoa* by sharing their own experiences or personal stories. *Talanoa* sessions, e.g. at the Fijian Pavillon at COP23, were used to bring together different stakeholders, including e.g. diplomats and representatives from the youth. This played an important role in creating a Fijian Bula Spirit (see further explanations below) and a positive atmosphere, especially in the Bonn Zone.

More importantly, the idea of

*Talanoa* will continue to have an impact beyond the conference as COP23 agreed on a *Talanoa Dialogue*, a facilitative process that is to start in spring 2018. In the run-up to COP24 it aims at providing a platform on the basis of the *talanoa* principles on the status quo of the existing Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) on the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Furthermore, it aims to explore the scope of further action needed in order to reach the goals set in the Paris Agreement. The idea of such a facilitative dialogue format was already agreed upon at COP22 in Marrakech in Morocco. The governments of Morocco and Fiji want to push forward this process that is now called *Talanoa Dialogue* together after the parties agreed on the general conditions of the process at COP23.

The basic notions of *talanoa* seem to be in line with the concept of the Paris Agreement and the international negotiations in recent years that strongly focus on voluntary commitments and self-obligations. *Talanoa* is still regularly used in the Pacific in regional or national politics, but some of its components are rather in contrast to the traditional patterns and strategies of the Pacific Island countries at the UN climate negotiations who traditionally argued for legally binding CO<sub>2</sub> emission reduction targets and more obligatory mechanisms (Barnett/Campbell 2010) than provided by the *Talanoa Dialogue*. While *talanoa* is a Pacific infusion to the climate change negotiations, it also shows that Fiji confronted the reality of uneven power in the climate change negotiations by turning away from the traditional strategy of the Pacific Islands on climate change.

### **The Ocean Pathway and Fiji's Presidency over the UN Ocean Conference**

For Island States, healthy oceans are naturally a matter of utmost importance. Next to an economic dependency on fisheries and other marine resources, oceans also play a vital role for the global climatic system. The critical role of a sustainable management of the oceans including a sustainable use of ocean resources as well marine protection has been highlighted at the 1st United Nations Oceans Conference on the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal No. 14 that took place in June 2017 under the Presidency

of Fiji and Sweden in New York. As a follow-up to the presidency, Fiji drafted a COP23 ‘Ocean Pathway Initiative’ (Ocean Pathway, 2017).

The initiative, pushed by Fiji and like-minded countries including other Pacific Island and Scandinavian countries, aims to affirm the Call for Action adopted at the Ocean Conference, in order to establish healthy oceans as a UNFCCC agenda item until COP25 in 2019, to further the insertion of oceans into NDCs and to release climate change funding for projects to support marine ecosystems (Ocean Pathway, 2017). The argumentation of the document recognises “the significance of their [Small Island Developing States] role as Large Ocean States with more than 90 percent of their national boundaries made up of ocean” (Ocean Pathway, 2017), a notion that increasingly gains popularity among small island countries to turn the focus from “smallness” to the great potentials of their exclusive maritime zones.

Making oceans a formal UNFCCC agenda item is no completely new endeavour and was already discussed at COP21 in Paris. However, it gained new momentum at COP23 with discussions among like-minded countries about establishing a working committee and a secretariat in Fiji's capital Suva in order to coordinate the efforts. COP23 also featured an ‘Oceans Action Day’, during which further countries signed the so-called ‘Because the Ocean’ Declaration (2015) that was signed by the first states during COP21 and aims at the inclusion of oceans in NDCs.

Despite these efforts, there was some disappointment within Pacific delegations that Fiji did not push the issue even further. Tuvalu's Prime Minister Sopoaga stated at a side event that “the absence of Ocean and climate change in the COP23 agenda is a disappointment and this needs to be addressed in COP24 and the way forward.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Gender Action Plan & Platform on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**

Facing pressure from civil society, COP23 also adopted two decisions that pay special attention to groups that are particularly vulnerable to climate change, namely a Gender Action Plan and a Platform on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In many regions affected by the consequences of



climate change, women are suffering the most. A frequently used example to illustrate this particular vulnerability refers to the fact that getting water is still a job usually done by women. In the face of climate change, the distances women have to travel to the next well with clean drinking water can increase significantly.<sup>4</sup> Another group that is particularly vulnerable to climate change is indigenous peoples. Despite criticism from indigenous groups, so far there has been no UNFCCC mechanism to ensure adequate participation by indigenous peoples. The Platform on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was created by the Paris Agreement, but only at COP23 the parties agreed on the principles of operation to bring the platform into action. It is supposed to concentrate on three main functions, namely to provide indigenous groups with knowledge on climate change, with capacity for engagement in the climate change negotiations and to support them in the development and implementation of climate change policies and actions.

### **Loss and Damage & Climate change-induced displacement**

For vulnerable island countries, loss and damage, including the demand for compensation, is another important subject. Even though the official time frame of UNFCCC did not anticipate loss and damage to become a major issue of COP23, the Fijian Presidency managed to initiate discussion on loss and damage. Naturally, positions vary strongly between countries in terms of financial interest; the discussion on loss and damage raises questions about the 'polluter pays' principle. As Steffen Bauer from the German Development Institute outlines, this includes an international expert dialogue at the margins of the intersessional UNFCCC meeting in May 2018 and, for the first time and despite opposition from Australia and the US, an explicit reference in the perambulatory text to "the increasing frequency and severity of climate-related disasters" (Bauer 2017). Bauer concludes in his assessment of COP23:

"While this may appear somewhat trivial, achieving such progress in the procedural miniature of multilateral climate policy should not be underestimated. It is safe to assume



**Figure 2: The 'Pacific Climate Warriors' (first row) present their HaveYourSei-Declaration to Pacific leaders, including the Secretary-General of the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), Francois Martel, and the former President of Kiribati Anote Tong (second row).**

that this will be referenced from now on in future rounds of negotiations. And this would probably not have been achieved without the symbolic clout of Fiji's Presidency" (Bauer 2017).

Various side events at COP23 also pointed to the question of how to deal with displacement of people as a consequence of climate change. Climate change induced displacement is not just a future horror scenario anymore, but a dramatic reality for many people in the Pacific region. This includes cases of cross-border migration as well as internal displacement. Fiji, as one of the bigger Pacific countries, may be concerned both by internal migration as well as a host country for immigration from other SIDS in the Pacific (Sutton 2013:376). However, so far, the international community has failed to agree on any qualified legal protection and recognition of people displaced as a consequence of climate change.

Despite the ongoing discussions about this issue at the margins of COP23, the conference has not been able to deliver any pioneering success on the protection of the people most affected. Tuvalu's Prime Minister Sopoaga announced that his country was preparing a treaty to be introduced to the UN on the status and rights of climate displaced persons, but more details are yet to come and it seems that amidst the global refugee crisis with more people on the run than ever

before who are protected by the United Nations Refugee Convention, most states are reluctant to deal with the climate change dimension of migration

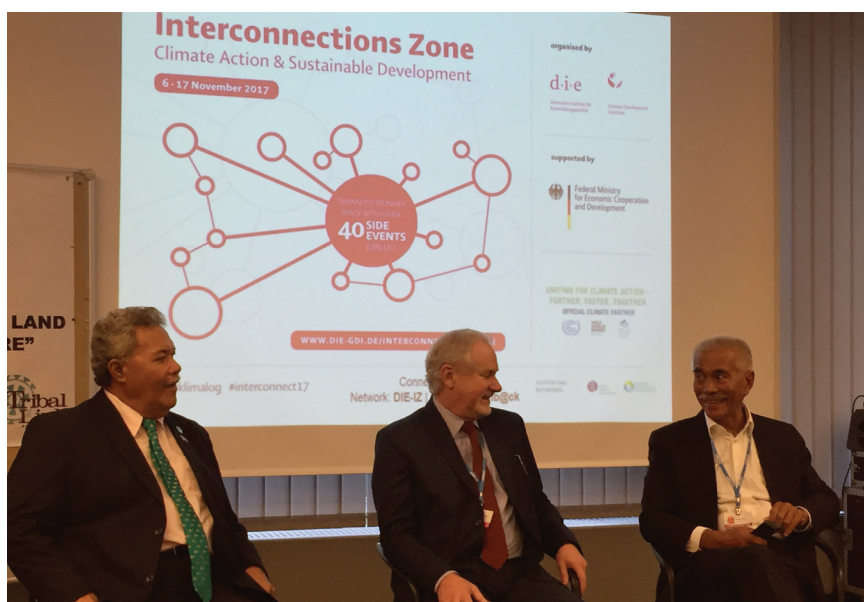
### **Vulnerable Pacific States: Fiji and its Pacific neighbours**

The Pacific Island States are amongst the most vulnerable nations to the effects of climate change in the world. While their contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions as catalysts for climate change is very little, they suffer most from the severe effects, especially of sea level rise and extreme weather events.

Some of the states of the region, including Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands, are threatened in their mere existence. As small, low-lying atoll nations with islands only a couple of metres above sea-level, their habitability and future depend heavily on sea-level rise (or rather the minimisation thereof). Some politicians like the former President of Kiribati, Anote Tong, even argue that limiting global temperature rise to 1.5°C or less will not be enough (Fiji Broadcasting Corporation 2017, Bowers 2017). Climate change has advanced so far that there are irreversible effects that will result in great shares of the populations having to be resettled in a near future.

In the run-up to the conference, Fiji as the President of COP23 clarified that it was pushing the particular challenges and needs of the Pacific Island countries in the focus and was

Source: Oliver Hasenkamp 2017.



**Figure 3: The Prime Minister of Tuvalu Enele Sopoaga (left) and the former President of Kiribati Anote Tong (right) discuss with the moderator Phil Glendenning, Director at the Australian Edmund Rice Center, at the Interconnection Zone of the German Institute of Development Policy.**

acting on behalf of the entire Pacific Islands Region. In doing so, Fiji created great expectations among its Pacific neighbours towards the outcomes of COP23. However, Fiji was in a conflict of interest. On the one hand, like its neighbour countries, it needs to see urgent action to mitigate climate change and desires to promote itself as a leader of the Pacific States and Island States in general. On the other hand, Fiji has increasing geopolitical and strategical aspirations that go far beyond the issue of climate change. These aspirations can be in contradiction with taking the lead in defending the interests of SIDS in climate change negotiations, since good political and economic ties with big countries defending another line of interest are delicate and important.

### Climate Change and Fiji

Even though island states like Fiji are among the larger ones in the Pacific region, they are still micro-states from a global perspective and face climate change as a reality already today strongly impacting the lives of its citizens, as Fiji clearly stated by in the run-up to COP23.<sup>5</sup> While Fiji and other non-atoll Pacific Island States are partly quite mountainous, most of the population lives at the coastline. Many Pacific Islanders have shared emotional personal stories on the effects of climate change on their families during COP23, including e.g. the reigning Miss Pacific Islands from Fiji, Anne Dunn. Together with other young Pacific Islanders from the

Marshall Islands, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Samoa, Dunn was selected to participate in COP23 for the project “Pacific Voices in Unison”. The aim of the project, initiated by the German Development Co-operation Agency (GIZ), is to empower Pacific youth to demonstrate to the world how they build resilience to climate change. Dunn’s story illustrates the great importance of land in the Pacific cultures:

“My family is from Toguru settlement in Navua, Fiji, where my paternal ancestral burial grounds are being clawed away by rising sea levels. Climate change to me means my family and I could not use these burial grounds to bury my late father and uncle who passed away this year” (Fiji Times 2017a).

The term *vanua* in Fijian, and similar terms in other Pacific languages (e.g. *fenua*, *whenua*, *honua*) describes the close relationship between people, their ancestors and their land<sup>6</sup>:

“It (*vanua*) does not mean only the land (*qele*) area one is identified with, and the vegetation, animal life, waters and coasts (*qoliqoli*) and other objects on it, but it also includes the social and cultural system. The people, the traditions and customs, beliefs and values, and the various other institutions established with the aim of achieving harmony, solidarity, and prosperity within a particular social

order. Its social and cultural dimensions are a source of security and confidence and it provides a sense of identity and belonging. To most Fijians, the idea of parting with one’s *vanua* or land is tantamount to parting with one’s life.” (Ravuvu 1983:70)

This centrality of land and its relevance to people’s identity demonstrates the cultural impact of climate change. Consequently, Dunn continues her message by stating that “[t]hose like us around the globe dealing with the changing climate are losing our traditional knowledge, resources, and our culture. We value what we have inherited from our ancestors. We defy reliance, we strive in our resilience” (Fiji Times 2017a).

Apart from rising sea levels, extreme weather patterns associated to climate change including storms and droughts are impacting the Pacific Island countries. In February 2016, Fiji was hit by Cyclone ‘Winston’, the strongest cyclone ever recorded to make landfall in the Southern Hemisphere (Johnston 2016). The severe tropical cyclone killed at least 42 people, ten thousands of people were cut off from the outside world. Cyclone ‘Winston’ is only one of many heavy storms to hit the Pacific Island countries in recent years. In March 2015, Cyclone ‘Pam’ killed at least 24 people in Vanuatu and destroyed 90 percent of the infrastructure in its capital city Port Vila.

Cyclone ‘Winston’ even made it into the logo of COP23, which does not only portray a wave, but at the very same time can be understood as the eye of a cyclone. Cyclone ‘Winston’ also played a significant role in the self-conception of the Fijian society after 2016 and for Fiji’s delegation at COP23. It was an important narrative for Fiji to remain confident and build up new confidence. The announcement of Fiji’s *Ministry of i-taukei Affairs* (Fijian Affairs) of the intention to spend 35,000 Fijian Dollars (approximately 14,200 Euros) for a welcoming party for the COP23 delegation provoked heavy protests by climate activists and civil society in Fiji. They criticised that the reconstruction after the cyclone should be a priority before spending money for parties. The unusually open criticism even in the media pushed Fiji’s government to cancel the party in its original format (Fiji Times 2017b, 2017c). This shows how relevant the cyclone and the



ongoing reconstruction still are for Fijian society.

### A Pacific COP – Long overdue

Considering the vulnerability of the Pacific Island states to climate change, Fiji's presidency of COP23 was long overdue in respect to rebalancing the unheard voices of states most impacted by climate change. It can be considered as an important signal to finally give more relevance to the most vulnerable and most affected states and people in general and to the Pacific Island countries in particular. Pacific Island countries have been largely marginalised in international affairs for many years. Until a few years ago there was little attention given to island states and their particular needs in general. With many of the Pacific Island states gaining independence and entering international organisations like the United Nations comparatively late and having very limited capacities for international affairs, there was little experience in influencing global decision-making processes or even making one's own voice heard.

Yet the activity of the Pacific Island states in international climate change politics has provided them with increasing experience in global negotiations over the last years and finally resulted in greater recognition and slowly rising visibility in international affairs. Backed by its good relations with China, Fiji was able to push the United Nations in 2011 to rename its Asian regional group to 'Group of Asia and the Pacific Islands' to accommodate the fact that over a fifth of the group's members were Pacific Island states and assumed chairmanship of the Group of 77 (G77) in 2013 (Hasenkamp 2014; Herr/Bergin, 2011). In 2014, Samoa hosted the 3rd United Nations Conference of Small Island Developing States.

In 2015, several negotiators from the Pacific region played a key role in forging a so-called 'Alliance of the Ambitious' to bring together like-minded states from different regions and break through the traditional blocs of developed and developing countries, paving the way for the adoption of the Paris Agreement. This included the late Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Marshall Islands Tony de Brum who has been honoured at COP23 by a remembrance session and the denomination of a negotiation room



Figure 4: Young delegates and observers engage in a talanoa session and drink cava, while the Prime Minister of Fiji and COP23 President Voreqe Bainimarama stands in the back.

as 'Room de Brum', and Kiribati's former President Anote Tong.

Offering to host a UN Climate Change Conference was thus the next consequent step for the Pacific Islands countries in raising their profile. However, their limited capacities made it difficult to host an international conference of these dimensions in the Pacific. Fiji's offer to host COP23 came as a surprise for many, some argue even for its Pacific island neighbours (Fiji Times 2017d). It is likely that Fiji's offer was fuelled by the absence from offers by other states from the Asian-Pacific region which was due to host COP23, and the readiness of Germany to logistically host the conference in Bonn.

### The 'Bula Spirit' at COP23

As COP23 did not take place in Fiji, it was one of the challenges for the Fijian Presidency to bring a Fijian 'Bula Spirit' to the conference nonetheless. It was supported in this endeavour by Government of Germany, which made clear that despite its role as logistical host, COP23 was a Fijian and not a German conference. The Fijian term "Bula" literally translates to 'life' or 'good health' and, as the abbreviated version of the more formal "Ni sa bula vinaka" ('wishing you happiness and good health'), is most commonly used as a word of greeting. However, in a broader context the word nowadays is, similarly to the Hawaiian term "Aloha", used as an expression of 'Fijiness' and the Fijian way of life more in general.

Most of the delegates, especially those who have spent their time in the 'Bonn Zone', agree that Fiji was successful in infusing COP23 and the city of Bonn more generally with a Fijian 'Bula Spirit'. Fiji did not only participate with a huge national delegation, but the presence of Fiji and the Pacific was also reinforced by the participation of many non-governmental observers from the Pacific region. By bringing Fijian artefacts to the conference venues, organising numerous cultural activities and side events, and infusing the conference with Fijian concepts such as 'Bula' and 'Talanoa', Fiji as the host of the conference was very visible.

Probably never before had so many people from the Pacific Islands gathered in one place in Germany and so many people from around the world enjoyed the opportunity to experience the vivid Fijian culture. This in itself may be an important success for Fiji and the Pacific Island countries. In the best case, one of the consequences of COP23 may be that leading diplomats from around the world will have a different attitude when hearing about Fiji and the Pacific Island countries in other contexts the next time. Only time will tell if this hypothesis is confirmed and if Fiji left a lasting memory presiding over a COP.

### Other Actors and Strategic Considerations

While every country has its own agenda at the COP and would deserve to be analysed in detail, two countries

Source: Oliver Hasenkamp 2017.

were given particular attention at COP23 – apart from Fiji, whose role has been discussed above:

### **Germany's role in COP23**

Since Fiji was reluctant to host COP23 in Fiji due to limited logistical capacities, Germany offered to logistically host the conference in Bonn. This apparently altruistic support provided by Germany most likely, at least partly, had strategic reasons. Germany aims to be elected as a non-permanent member to the United Nations Security Council in 2018 and counts on the votes of island states. Furthermore, Germany is still perceived as cutting-edge in climate change policy. Arguably Germany hoped to stabilise its image as a global leader on climate change, despite recent criticism that it is going to lose this role due to setbacks in its own national climate policy. However, after the elections in Germany in September 2017, the transition government was visibly constricted. This complicated the situation for Fiji's Presidency, because Germany virtually dropped out as an important ally; its transition government was paralysed by the ongoing exploratory talks for government negotiations.

For Europe, and Germany in particular, Fiji's presidency and the logistical support provided by Germany was a historical opportunity to give more recognition to the Pacific region and strengthen its political as well as cultural ties with the region. But with Germany's reluctant policy at COP23 and current focussing on the formation of a stable government, it seems that this was a missed opportunity.

### **The US at the climate negotiations**

The concept of *talanoa* which was promoted by the Fijian Presidency during COP23 also can be understood as an attempt to keep on the dialogue between actors regardless of heavily diverging opinions, including with the United States of America. There is great disagreement on the future engagement of the United States between different Pacific stakeholders. The popular Pacific Climate Warriors of the organisation 350.org, for example, who had numerous joint contributions with leaders from the Pacific at side events at COP23 even call in their *Have Your Sei Declaration*

to "Kick the big polluters out of the climate talks" (Have Your Sei Declaration 2017) – a demand that is not only contrary to the *talanoa* approach, but to the whole idea of the UN climate negotiations.

In fact, the role of the US at COP23 was highly anticipated by observers. There was the concern that other countries could join the US in trying to slow down the climate negotiations or even follow the US in announcing their withdrawal. The fact that this did not happen is maybe one of its most important results of COP23. In contrast, with Syria announcing to join the Paris Agreement, the US are isolated as the only country in the world that will be not part of the agreement, once its withdrawal becomes effective (New York Times 2017). Indeed from an international law perspective, the earliest date when the withdrawal of US from the Agreement can take effect is in November 2020. Consequently, the United States are still considered a party to the Paris Agreement and therefore participate not only in the general elements of the COP to the UNFCCC, but also in the sessions explicitly focused on the implementation of the Paris Agreement. There has been a very visible unofficial US delegation, composed of governors, mayors and climate activists, who underlined the important role the Federal States and cities can play in the United States to continue climate change policies and that there are many forces in the US opposing the policy of US President Trump. While Fiji did avoid to openly criticize the US delegation during COP23, the Presidency together with the UNFCCC Secretariat strongly supported the unofficial US Climate Action delegation e.g. by inviting them and meeting with prominent critics of the climate policy of US President Donald Trump.

### **Anti-coal alliance**

Next to the official decisions by COP23, one other outcome sparked the attention of the media. Under the lead of the United Kingdom and Canada, 20 countries announced to join forces in a so-called "Global Powering Past Coal Alliance" aiming to end the use of coal for power generation before 2030. Next to the United Kingdom and Canada, the alliance also includes important industries like France and Italy as well as a number of other

European Union countries, including Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Portugal. They are joined by Angola, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Mexico, New Zealand, Switzerland and the Pacific Island countries Fiji, the Marshall Islands and Niue. In addition, six US and Canadian states signed the declaration. The initiating countries hope that by the time of COP24, more than 50 states will have signed the declaration (BBC 2017; Deutsche Welle 2017; Powering Past Coal Alliance Declaration 2017).

However, important countries with a lot of power generation by coal did not join the alliance, including the United States of America and Germany. Especially Germany was criticised for not joining the coalition. This was partly due to the limitations of manoeuvre by the German interim government in place during COP23, but also because when considering the larger picture of the anti-coal alliance, difficulties arise from a German perspective: Unlike Germany, all countries that joined the alliance only produce a small share of their power supply from coal; the large countries who have joined the alliance all have a great share of nuclear energy in their energy mix. In contrast to Germany, they do not plan to reduce the share of nuclear energy, but even want to further increase nuclear power generation.

Despite these reservations, the anti-coal alliance can be considered as a success from the Pacific perspective. Reducing or even better completely banning power generation by coal as one of the major drivers of climate change has been one of the main issues, not only discussed by the official delegates of the Pacific Island countries in Bonn, but also by civil society organisations. In fact, the Pacific Island countries already agreed in 2016 at a meeting of the Pacific Islands Developing Forum (PIDF) in the Solomon Islands to consider the drafting and the adoption of the world's first treaty to completely ban fossil fuels from their region (Guardian 2016). The anti-coal alliance may at least partly be a response to civil society activities in many countries: The most vulnerable countries have called for a ban on coal energy for many years, and the massive civil society activities against coal during



COP23 have been supported by civil society representatives from the Pacific – actions which may have pushed the countries involved in coal to form the alliance.

### **Fiji's Strategic Interests**

To understand Fiji's motivations to host COP23 and to strengthen its role in international diplomacy in general, it is important to understand the country's regional role. While from the global perspective Fiji is a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), it perceives itself as regional leader. Geographically, Fiji is located in the centre of the Pacific Islands Region and is host to the secretariats of most important regional organizations, embassies and regional institutions like the University of the South Pacific. Even though Fiji was not the first Pacific Island country to gain independence in 1970, it was the first one that joined the United Nations in the same year and regarded itself as a "spokesman" of the entire region (Fry 1980). Unlike many other Pacific Island countries, which only started to get interested in the United Nations when climate change got relevant, Fiji has a long history of engagement in UN Peacekeeping.

As mentioned before, the Pacific Islands Region has been marginalised as a global actor in international politics for many years. Only in recent years the region and particularly Fiji as a regional leader gained greater recognition within global institutions (see Hasenkamp, 2016b; Ratuva, 2016). Fiji's striving for greater involvement in international politics is closely related to internal political struggles. In 2006, today's Prime Minister and COP23 President Voreqe Bainimarama overthrew the elected Fijian government in a coup d'état after the government announced an amnesty for those involved in a civilian coup d'état in 2000. In 2009, Australia and New Zealand enforced Fiji's suspension from the most important regional organization, the Pacific Islands Forum, after a deadline for democratic elections in Fiji lapsed. As a consequence, Fiji shifted capacities from regional cooperation to the international level and encouraged its neighbouring Pacific Island countries quite successfully to prospectively pursue international cooperation more independently from Australia and New Zealand (Hasenkamp 2014,



**Figure 5: Opening of the Talanoa Space at COP23 with the Fiji's Minister for Environment Lorna Eden, the German Federal Minister for the Environment Barbara Hendricks, Fiji's High Level Climate Champion Minister Inia Seruiratu and the Mayor of Bonn Ashok-Alexander Sridharan (from left).**

Source: Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz, Bau und Reaktorsicherheit.

2016a). Fiji's objective to split the Pacific Island countries on the one hand side and the traditional regional hegemony Australia and New Zealand on the other hand side, and its desire to establish itself as a new regional leader, most likely was facilitated by the great frustration of many Pacific Islands countries with Australia's reluctant climate change policy (Barnett/Campbell 2010).<sup>7</sup>

Even after the democratic election of Bainimarama as Fiji's Prime Minister in 2014 and attempts by Australia and New Zealand to relax the tensions with Fiji, Fiji continued its opposition against the two countries e.g. by setting up own regional institutions to counter Australia's and New Zealand's influence in the Pacific Islands Forum. Fiji's international activities are consequently also a means to establish itself as a leader in the Pacific region independent from Australia and New Zealand, while at the same time pursuing closer ties to China and other Asian states. One could argue that Fiji has a broader vision of 'islandising' – or 'Fijianising' – international politics that goes far beyond COP23. While there is no doubt of the significant role of climate change to Fiji and the countries true desire for urgent actions, COP23 not only allowed for Fiji to push forward the negotiations, but also the country's desire of playing a more powerful role in international relations in general. Fiji's international activities peaked in 2017, when Fiji was not only President of COP23, but also co-chaired the United Nations Ocean Conference and Fiji national Peter Thomson presided over the United Nations General Assembly from September 2016 to September 2017, before he was appointed the

first United Nations Special Envoy on Oceans.

Fiji's regional and global activities also fulfil the function of legitimising the Fijian government in domestic politics. While there was hardly any discussion on the military background of Fiji's current regime or accusations of human rights violations against Fiji at the global stage during COP23, it remains arguable and needs further research whether COP23 was a success for Fiji domestically. Even though it remains very likely that Fiji's Prime Minister Bainimarama will be re-elected with a huge majority in the elections later this year, it is striking that there were unusually open and controversial discussions about its COP23 Presidency and especially the related costs in Fiji, as for example the outcry over the planned welcome party for Fiji's COP23 delegation.

### **Conclusion: Was COP23 a success?**

Looking back at COP23, it is not easy to assess the success of the conference and Fiji's Presidency, because many different criteria need to be considered. Next to the difficult global circumstances this particularly includes the very diverse expectations, ranging from scepticism whether a small country like Fiji would be capable of chairing the conference to almost hope of a revolution of global climate change politics by finally giving the Presidency to a most vulnerable island state.

Without any doubts, Fiji proved that it was capable of chairing COP23 and it successfully made the parties stick to the – yet not very ambitious – time frame by drafting a collection of texts for a rule book to be agreed at COP24.



However, the demand of Tuvalu's Prime Minister Sopoaga and others to 'islandise' the outcomes of COP23 must have been largely disappointed.

On the one hand, Fiji was successful in infusing the conference with a Fijian "Bula Spirit". There was a lot of discussion about the issues of particular importance to the Pacific Island countries especially in the Bonn Zone. Not only Fiji, but also other Pacific Islands have been well represented at panels and podiums of side events. Policy- and decision-makers have been made aware of the challenges in the Pacific Islands and left the conference informed about the Pacific. This in itself can be considered a success for Fiji, considering the long marginalisation of the Pacific countries. On the other hand, the decisions taken at COP23 are by no means pioneering in delivering actions on climate change that are so desperately needed by island states. The discussions at COP23 and also its outcomes, particularly the Ocean Pathway, recognize and address the particular challenges of island states. However, the outcomes are only first steps and it remains open how they will be implemented by the member states.

Steffen Bauer from the German Development Institute summarises the outcomes of COP23 as "not great, but good enough", underlining that Fiji met the basic requirements of warranting "an organised run-up towards COP24" and that COP23 "delivered significant and adequate progress" (Bauer 2017). While he compliments Fiji for some of the successes of the conference including the debate on loss and damage and the *Talanoa Dialogue*, he also notes that "the cumbersome nature of the Bonn round of negotiations hardly give cause for exuberance" and "[m]any civil-society organisations and climate advocates had hoped for more, especially given that COP23 was the first under the Presidency of a small island state that is particularly vulnerable to the consequences of climate change" (Bauer 2017).

Clearly, one of the major successes of the Fijian Presidency is the *Talanoa Dialogue*. While the basic notion of *talanoa* is somewhat contrary to the traditional strategy of the Pacific countries to call for binding and authoritative solutions on climate

change, the new format can provide a platform for open exchange about the serious deficits in global climate change policy and in a brutally honest way illustrate what further actions are necessary to reach the goal to limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C. Furthermore, *talanoa* as a concept for the climate change negotiations offers the benefit to island countries that the open and transparent exchange at eye-level can even out some of the asymmetric power dynamics of the negotiations. Consequently, the *Talanoa Dialogue* may be a good vehicle for Fiji and other island states to continue sharing their stories and pushing for urgent actions on climate change without the usual limitations of formal rules.

Even though there were great aspirations among Pacific countries and in the civil-society for the first SIDS Presidency, it is hardly surprising that Fiji could not fulfil them all. The small progress made cannot be considered as given. The Presidency of COP23 gave Fiji some influence in setting the agenda and especially pointing to the particular challenges of island countries, but, of course, the role as President also came with some limitations. Fiji was very keen to be seen not only as a vulnerable state that wanted to 'tell the others where to get off', but also as a moderator capable of meeting the international expectations of the Presidency of a big international conference. In regards to its efforts to further climate action on oceans at COP23, Fiji explicitly notes in its Ocean Pathway strategy the importance of "maintaining the neutrality and effectiveness of the Presidency" and therefore the need "to form a partnership of countries and stakeholders that can lead on various opportunities where the Presidency role is limited" in order "[t]o implement an effective pathway that will strengthen the role of the ocean in the UNFCCC" (Ocean Pathway, 2017).

Fiji had numerous motivations for presiding over COP23, ranging from a real need to address climate change to geopolitical aspirations, the desire to consolidate its role as a Pacific leader and the need to steady the standing of the Fijian government internally. From the global perspective, Fiji has demonstrated its capability of taking global responsibility and strengthened its position. There has been hardly any

discussion about Fiji's democracy and human rights deficits during COP23. It is very likely that it will be regarded as the 'Pacific leader' in future by the outside world. In contrast, some of Fiji's Pacific neighbour states have been rather disappointed with the outcomes of COP23. At least partly, this is a result of Fiji actively raising the expectations towards COP23 among its neighbours. However, Australia and New Zealand have not been able to present a valid alternative to Fiji's regional leadership on climate change. Considering the unusually open discussion over the costs of Fiji's COP23 presidency, it is interesting and requires further analysis that it is not obvious whether Fiji was successful in bolstering the regime's standing internally.

To summarise, COP23 came with mixed results both for Fiji and the Pacific Islands Countries. COP23 may not have been "the year we saved Tuvalu and saved the world" as Tuvalu's Prime Minister Sopoaga demanded (Samoa Observer, 2017). However, it was a step forward for the Pacific Island countries who received greater recognition for their challenges at COP23 than ever before and can hope that the outcomes of COP23 can provide for a continued debate about how to address these challenges in the future.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Enele Sopoaga made the comments at a side event called "Our People, Our Land and Our Future" co-organised by the Tuvalu Action Network (TuCAN) and the Australian Edmund Rice Center's Pacific Calling Partnership at Interconnection Zone at the German Development Institute in Bonn during COP23 on 10 November 2017. Further information on the program at Interconnection Zone is available at: [https://www.die-gdi.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdfs/veranstaltungen/2017/20171103\\_InterconnectionsZone\\_Broschure.pdf](https://www.die-gdi.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdfs/veranstaltungen/2017/20171103_InterconnectionsZone_Broschure.pdf) (accessed: 28 January 2018)

<sup>2</sup> For a broader analysis of asymmetrical power relations between the Pacific Island countries and larger states, also see Holtz (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Enele Sopoaga made the comments at a side event called "Our People, Our Land and Our Future" co-organized by the Tuvalu Action Network (TuCAN) and the Australian

Edmund Rice Center's Pacific Calling Partnership at Interconnection Zone at the German Development Institute in Bonn during COP23 on 10 November 2017. Further information on the program at Interconnection Zone is available at: [https://www.die-gdi.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdfs/veranstaltungen/2017/20171103\\_InterconnectionsZone\\_Broschure.pdf](https://www.die-gdi.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdfs/veranstaltungen/2017/20171103_InterconnectionsZone_Broschure.pdf) (accessed: 28 January 2018).

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the Agenda Action Plan: see article by Marion Struck-Garbe in this volume

<sup>5</sup> Site of the Fijian Presidency of COP 23: <https://cop23.com.fj/fiji-and-the-pacific/how-fiji-is-affected-by-climate-change/> (accessed 12.03.2018)

<sup>6</sup> For more in-depth information on the concept on vanua see for example Tuwere (2002) or Lin (2015).

<sup>7</sup> Australia is one of the countries with the highest CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per capita in the world and continues to invest in coal mining as one of the country's most important industries. Australia refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol agreed by the parties to UNFCCC in 1997 until 2008 and has also declined all requests by Pacific Island Countries to give guarantees to accept climate change-induced migrants from their countries (see e.g. Barnett/Campbell 2010).

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