

Speech by Adi Mariana Waqa At Cop26 March for Creation, Suva, Fiji on 6/11/2021



Religious leaders, distinguished guests, families, and our children – A good afternoon to you all and thank you for being present today as we call upon the international community to do more towards reducing greenhouse emissions and alleviating the human-induced stress we have caused on the earth.

Almost 16,000km away from Suva the world has gathered in Glasgow, Scotland in an attempt to save our planet from climate catastrophe and the threat to life as we currently know it. Over 100 global leaders along with their negotiators, representatives, business leaders, non-governmental organisations, and private citizens are engaged in 12-days of talks to determine not only the future of our natural environment but the survival of humanity and all living things.

In August of this year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a report confirming that human activities have without a doubt been a contributing factor to a warming planet, and that climate change and its impacts are now “widespread, rapid, and intensifying.”

Scientists around the world are also providing further research that demonstrate how climate change is fuelling increasingly severe weather patterns such as floods, heatwaves, and droughts. Alongside this, the extinction of animal species, melting of ice-sheets, and rising sea levels, coincide with greenhouse emissions already within the earth’s atmosphere which are set to heighten temperatures further if we do not do make drastic changes now!

COP26 is a pivotal moment for international diplomacy and negotiations as countries update their climate action plans under the 2015 Paris Agreement and for large economies, this provides yet another chance, particularly for large economies, to pursue ambitious targets towards 2030 through their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) to reducing THEIR greenhouse gas emissions.

I say THEIR “greenhouse gas emissions” because when looking at the 2015 Paris Agreement and the % of Greenhouse gases for each country, it is evident that small islands states such as those of the Pacific region contribute between 0.00% to 0.01%, and yet it is our people and communities who are amongst the most vulnerable to climate change impacts in the world.

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COP26 has global leaders negotiating on trillion dollar climate financing schemes that are already spread thin across regions and at best trickle down to the communities who are in need of it the most, leaving those of us in the Pacific, fighting for the survival and dignity of our children and a future that can very well leave them with nothing!

This is not a game for us, our Pacific cohorts at COP26 come to the table of climate negotiations to remind the international community that the future of our children and their children's children is at stake and with the guidance of our elders, traditional leaders and faith leaders, we can promise you that our generation will not go down without a fight.

This continued rhetoric of international commitments to net zero of greenhouse gas emissions are in the expression of Greta Thunberg earlier this year, BLAH BLAH BLAH to those of us at the frontlines of this environmental emergency. The Kainaki declaration of 2019 from Tuvalu implored G7 and G20 countries to phase out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies and the just transitions from the use of fossil fuels to renewable energies for the sake of our Pacific islands and people.

Yet our close neighbour here in the region, Australia, through the leadership of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, has bolstered its efforts on protecting the fossil fuel industry. Not only that, but we now hear news from Glasgow that the Australian pavilion is sponsored by Santos – Australia's second largest independent oil and gas producer.

Is this some kind of joke at the expense of Pacific people and the future of our island homes and oceans? How many times do we need to shout from our rooftops that climate change is real and it is destroying the livelihood of our communities?

How many images does the international community have to see of king tides, threats to our food security, category 5 cyclones and their destruction on our homes and families? It's a foolish mockery of our dignity as Pacific people, to be recipients of aid in the aftermath of a violent storm when those very countries delivering the help and touting their financial contributions in the millions, are on the other hand upholding industries that subliminally contribute to the increasing severity of storms in our region.

A recent Greenpeace report has confirmed that the Pacific region will experience increased salinity in our waters and that rising sea levels will inevitably continue, meaning that islands in Kiribati, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands will become uninhabitable. The 2009 Moana declaration by Pacific church leaders issued a prophetic statement on climate induced calamities on the region's food and water security, as well as the now lived realities of the forced relocation and displacement of entire villages in our region.

Our peoples are exhausted from having to tell and retell our shared experiences to the world with little to no effect. The Pacific is not here to entertain or be a testing ground for wealthy countries to hypothesize on the impacts of climate change for when it finally reaches them. Not only is that unjust and immoral, but we can assure wealthy countries that if you do not act fast enough to change the course of our current trajectory towards what is being predicted as being 3.6 Celsius degrees above pre-industrial levels by 2100, then you too will suffer the same fate.

Next year, it will be 30 years since the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) began,¹ meaning that when I was a child, world leaders at the time already knew that the catastrophic climate events of our generation would occur.

So, knowing what we know right now about the unbearable effects of human activity and greed on our planet earth, what can we do today? I hope that in 30 years' time our Pacific children will not look back and accuse us of not doing enough for their future and the safeguarding of their identity and protection of their island homes.

I would like to suggest that as Pacific leaders' fight for the survival of our island homes on international platforms, whereas back here in our communities, we as Pacific people must prioritize the education of all children. We must not forget the children or sideline them at this pivotal time of our history.

To our children and youth of school age throughout the Pacific, please, work and study hard, because education is going to be one of your most powerful tools to not only navigate the current state of the world but to also give back and support your communities because the Pacific region can no longer wait or rely on others to help us.

Climate change impacts in the Pacific go beyond our natural environment and into homes where increased cases of domestic violence and abuse can be symptomatic of external pressures such as lack of food or fresh water upon the family unit.

As a region, the faith of our Pacific people is widely known as the backbone of our societies. This afternoon we stand together with our religious leaders knowing that their continued prayers for the region has contributed to the ecological conversion of many believers to speak up and advocate on behalf of God's "good and precious" creation.

We are called to be good stewards of our natural environment which is a gift and life-giving force, without which humanity could not exist.

Let us not be a generation of people who are ever hearing, but never understanding; ever seeing, but never perceiving. Let us not be callous in heart and close our eyes and ears to the violence against God's creation and most especially our countries on the frontline who are bearing the blow of human destruction.

COP26 must not fail to accelerate international efforts towards net zero carbon emissions by 2050, because if we fail, the consequences will be astronomical, beginning with our children and people.

The earth is our common home, and in these unprecedented times where climate change is no longer a threat, but a reality for those of us in countries on the frontline, the international community cannot continue turning a blind eye or deaf ear to what is happening to our people. It is unjust and immoral to think that what is happening to us is okay because we may not have the economic power and fortitude as smaller developing states in this post-modern world.

Our survival is not your testing ground for climate change resilience where you sprinkle your loose change to determine what environmental mechanisms work or do not work – **YOU MUST ACT NOW!**

¹ In 1992 the UNFCCC set ground rules and expectations for global co-operation on combating climate change. It was the first time the majority of nations formally recognised the need to control greenhouse gas emissions, which causes the global warming that drives climate change.

To our leaders at COP26, I will end with a quote from a children's book titled, "The Lorax" - "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."

— Dr. Seuss, The Lorax