

World view



By Cynthia
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Pacific Islands students fight climate change

Our voices were crucial in persuading United Nations members to back legal obligations to act on climate change. Here's how we did it.

On 29 March, I stayed up until 1 a.m., for good reason. From Sydney, Australia, where I am studying law, I watched live coverage of the United Nations General Assembly in New York City. More than 130 nations co-sponsored a resolution to put a case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on countries' legal obligations to combat climate change. For the first time, the world's highest court will rule on legal consequences for nations that are damaging the climate "by their acts and omissions". The clout of the ICJ's opinion could drive countries to strengthen their climate plans, and can be cited in domestic legal cases, although it is not legally binding.

As president of the advocacy group Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change, I was ecstatic. The adoption of the resolution is a huge moment – the culmination of four years of hard work and dedication from us and our partners, including the government of Vanuatu and our umbrella organization, World's Youth for Climate Justice. This is a great step for climate justice and the rights of future generations. The adoption of the resolution surpassed our wildest dreams.

Our journey began in a classroom in Vanuatu at the University of the South Pacific School of Law and Social Science: 27 law students from eight Pacific Island countries banded together when our professor challenged us to research the most progressive legal pathways to address climate change and to propose one at the 2019 Pacific Island Leaders Forum Meeting in Tuvalu. We chose to agitate for an ICJ ruling because it was the most ambitious action on our list. And in the face of an existential threat to our people, ambition is what we need.

Each of us brought to the table our stories of living in Pacific Island nations on the front line of global warming. I grew up in the Solomon Islands. Climate change is not a dinner-table conversation for my people – we do not have that luxury. It is what we lie awake worrying about at night. Climate change is the deaths of our people, whose losses we feel; it is lost possessions and homes, swept away by storms; it is wanting to move back to our childhood homes, but knowing they will be flooded in a matter of years; it is the threat of losing the places that our identities are tied to.

In the Pacific Islands, we contribute almost nothing to climate change, but we bear the brunt of it. Communities in Vanuatu lived through Cyclone Pam in 2015, which took more than two years to recover from, and during that time two category-4 tropical cyclones hit just days apart.

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Fiji dealt with one of the worst storms on record in 2016. In 2022, Tonga experienced the eruption of an underwater volcano. On the news, these are 'natural disasters' – but there is nothing natural about their frequency.

As a child, I was surrounded by nature, and my people relied on the environment to sustain us. I learnt how to fish, which plants are edible and our cultural dances that tell stories of people interacting harmoniously with the environment. I understood the value of the land and ocean to my people, and the value that people can bring to the land. Our traditional clothing comes from the land and the ocean: when I graduate, I plan to wear the rorochara – a headpiece made of seashells from the ocean that kisses the shorelines of our lands – that my grandmother wore when she got married.

It is heartbreaking that the journey towards solutions on the international level does not reflect the pace at which sea-level rise, intense rainfalls and storms are hitting my islands and my people.

At least 5 of my country's 992 islands have been swallowed by the rising seas, and another 6 lost large swathes of their land, destroying entire villages. Some communities are losing sacred lands where their families are buried.

What finally pushed me into advocacy work was witnessing the loss of land to rising sea levels in Fanalei, a 2-kilometre wide island of the Solomon Islands. It was home to about 500 people, including some of my family. When I travelled back to the island during holidays, I loved seeing smiling and laughing kids playing football on the beach. It is a beautiful memory. Yet this image is fading as that island disappears before my eyes. When I visited in 2021, to bury my grandfather, food and water were scarce. At least 80% of the island's people have been forced to relocate. Only a few are left on the island.

One day, I will pass my grandmother's rorochara on to my future children. I hope they get to see the place where it came from, but that is not guaranteed. I imagine having nothing to show them but a photograph – and that daunting possibility drives me in this climate fight. I want to be able to look my children in the eyes when they ask, 'Did you do anything to help address this?' and say yes.

In this crucial decade, the world needs transformational change that accelerates climate action. We need guidance, and there is no better than that from the world's highest court. This campaign is my part, and it's an open opportunity for others to join in by lobbying their leaders for legal action on climate change or attending the public hearing that the ICJ is likely to hold in the next year. Look at your home and imagine that it is disappearing under water, as mine is. Ask yourself what action that motivates you to take.

Our world is an island, and it is drowning because of inaction.