

Taking Care of the Pacific Islands on the Front Lines of Climate Change

Last November, I had a chance to visit the Pacific Islands. My dad was on an UN project in Fiji and I got to spend a lot of time at the beach and in the swimming pool. The tropical paradise was really beautiful, people were warm and helpful, and the food was so delicious. However, behind the amazing sunsets hides the dark fear that is on the minds of everyone in the Pacific Islands – the rising waters that threatens the very existence of the land and people in the region. Due to the warming effect of planet earth, the sea waters have been rising and it is threatening many islands in the region. In some countries, the danger is no longer abstract. The country of Kiribati had to purchase an island from Fiji, 2000 kilometers away from home, to move their citizens to safer grounds as their country gets drowned by the rising waters.^{1,2}

There is a scientific consensus that human activity is causing the earth to warm up.³ There is a sense of urgency that if we don't collectively act, we are gradually heading towards a calamity. There is universal agreement that we will see more drastic weather patterns leading to storms and destruction. Rising temperatures is melting the icecaps thus raising the seawater levels around the globe. Crops and vegetation would be affected, conflicts and wars will breakout due to dwindling resources, and the world just won't be a desirable place to live in the long-term.

Thus, for my grant, I will choose to work on climate change in the Pacific Islands as it is ground zero in the fight against climate change. While the melting icecaps and deadly storms in Florida capture the headlines, the rising water in the Pacific Islands rarely makes it to the news. While all SDGs are important, in my opinion, climate change tops them all. If there is no earth, there are no SDGs. It is important to take care of earth and it will take care of us.

I will spend my Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grant to work on my 5-year plan to create awareness of the plight of the people in the Pacific Islands and become an advocate for the cause and solutions to tackle climate change in the region. The first task is to educate citizens of the world on what's happening in the region, that climate change is already impacting the islands and they are essentially an early warning for other coastal cities around the world. There is a lot of data about the climate change that scientists have collected over decades.⁴ It is important to share this data with everyone.

If we don't take immediate actions to stop the rise in temperatures due to greenhouse effect, just like Kiribati, Seattle, San Francisco, New York, Mumbai, Singapore, and Tokyo will be under water in the near future.⁵ In our celebrity-laden culture, it is best to convince a celebrity to believe in your cause and have them produce a series of advertising messages that can be used to gain attention of citizens who would otherwise ignore it. Additionally, I will work on writing letters to the editors of the prominent newspapers to spread the word.

¹ Besieged by the rising tides of climate change, Kiribati buys land in Fiji. Guardian. Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jul/01/kiribati-climate-change-fiji-vanua-levu>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/03/world/asia/climate-change-kiribati.html>

³ Scientific Consensus: Earth's climate is warming. NASA. <https://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus/>

⁴ Climate Change: How do we know? NASA. <https://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>

⁵ <https://www.epa.gov/climate-indicators/climate-change-indicators-coastal-flooding>

Part of the grant will be spent on screening some influential movies like the Inconvenient Truth (produced by former Vice President Al Gore)⁶ that can be shown for free in schools. Kids are more responsive to the messages concerning earth and they are likely to convince their parents to pay attention to this important issue. It is critical for us to understand that climate change is a global problem and not just a local one. It is not just the coastal cities that will be impacted but given that we are all connected, devastation in one part of the world will eventually impact people living in a completely different location. Furthermore, weather patterns are being disturbed as a result of the climate change, so we might see more drought impacting food supplies, or floods after rain creating more economic damage. The hurricane season in the Caribbean might be more intense as we saw last year. India might lose its water supply from the Ganges.

It is important to make the program sustainable so that even long after the grant money runs out, the message of awareness can continue to educate citizens in all communities. I will dedicate part of the grant to creating climate change ambassadors who will become champions of preserving earth in their communities and schools. I will encourage these ambassadors around the country to send letters to their representatives in congress and senate so that the issue of climate change is front and center of the policy makers worldwide.

Finally, I will spend the remaining portion of the grant in education programs that promote reduction in pollution, encourage recycling, and optimize energy usage. While the governments work on big ticket items, we all have the responsibility to do our part. Remember, one person can change the world. We all need to do our part in reducing waste on a daily basis from taking shower to eating food. Recycling helps reduce the waste. By being conscious of our daily energy usage (for example, don't leave your lights on when you are not using it or carpool daily to work or school), our collective efforts can make a significant impact on the climate change problem.

There is nothing more I would like to see than people of Kiribati moving back to their homeland and become an inspiration for us that by collective efforts we can accomplish anything and help control climate change for generations to come.

⁶ <https://www.algore.com/library/an-inconvenient-truth-dvd>