

Holomui ki mu'a: Pacific catalytic action at IMO proves the power of small

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Abstract

In the space of a decade, a small alliance of high ambition PSIDS has demonstrated their capacity to engineer catalytic action within a sector many described as 'too hard to abate'. That this small grouping from the world's smallest of micro-states has been able to exert the leverage it has is remarkable. But it has been no random undertaking. In this paper we follow the development of a successful indigenous 'recipe' for catalytic action from its genesis in the challenge of the Tongan philosopher Hau'ofa in the 1990's to the conventional narrative of the Pacific as a post-colonial region of weak, dependent and remote micro-states. Hau'ofa instead recast self-reliance and confidence in the certain knowledge of an ancient but living Oceania of Large Ocean States as a shield to the trap of a dependency spiral. Such thinking, re-emulated by future Pacific academics and politicians in the furnaces of successive COPs and related engagements can be traced through the call of the late Tony de Brum at IMO in 2015 for targets commensurate with a 1.5°C agenda and progressive introduction of cutting-edge policy design on GHG emissions pricing and concepts of equitable transition by a next generation of Pacific diplomacy. Seen through the lens of past learning, the development of the Pacific's catalytic action at IMO appears as the disciplined application of a learned process rather than a random event. In this paper we consider the thesis that catalytic action is essential to creating paradigm level change and that action is the result of the application of small but powerful interventions stemming from careful understanding of past knowledge.

Keywords: International shipping; revenue disbursement; Just and Equitable Transition; GHG emissions pricing

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The issue of revenue disbursement is where negotiations on pricing GHG emissions from shipping ultimately failed at IMO more than a decade ago.¹ The underlying assumption then was that shipping would use some form of offset trading scheme to essentially buy its way out of its emissions. IMO reported to UNFCCC in 2009 that it supported revenue use for a broad range of priorities, including mitigation of shipping emissions and wider development and climate change goals.²

Today IMO is delicately poised to deliver at MEPC83 one of three outcomes; a. a high price on emissions that can be used to drive industry mitigation and empower a truly equitable transition, b. a cheap and insufficient credit trading scheme or c. fail to agree and kick the can again. For the climate most vulnerable, only the first option is available to us and, we argue, to the world. It would also appear to align with the most recent ITLOS advisory.³

The last negotiations ultimately failed in 2013 because the two major negotiating blocs of that day could not agree on how much money should be given by who to who. The emissions pricing can was effectively kicked down the road for more than a decade. If a 1.5°C agenda is to be upheld in any shape or form, it can be kicked no further. Climate change warnings have hardened dramatically since and the global carbon budget available has shrunk equally drastically with the latest research putting the remaining carbon budget for a 1.5°C future at around 150 Gt – that's about three years at current emissions levels.⁴ The cost of inaction for shipping is recognised as

much greater than the cost of immediate action. Everyone agrees that if we get it wrong it is our States that will suffer most and we are the least culpable and least capable of our own defence.

There is now a fast ticking clock. The IMO has one narrow window in which to achieve a global consensus on delivering the most ambitious and equitable transition pathway for any sector. Time is short and the jury is still out. For real progress to occur now, the issue of revenue use must be dealt with by maturity and under urgency. But the negotiating landscape this time around at IMO has changed dramatically in the past decade.⁵

There is an increasingly fast rising tide in the participation of the most climate vulnerable states. Historically smaller and poorer states have had marginal direct political participation in IMO's negotiations. Since 2015 a small cohort of Pacific States pressing for a 1.5°C agenda has now evolved into a broad and growing geographic alliance of SIDS and least developed countries.

This change in representation dynamic has far reaching consequences, with a shift from what was essentially a developed/developing world bi-polar negotiating landscape – large western and Asian shipping and trading countries on one side and the large emerging economies from the BRICS and petro-states on the other.⁶ It is potentially strong enough to fully turn the dial at IMO and ensure option 1 prevails.

In the space of a decade, a small alliance of high ambition Pacific

¹Nuttall, P., Irvin, A., Newell, A., and Bordahandy, P.J. (2021) "To tax or not tax, the case for a 1.5°C carbon price on international shipping at IMO - perspectives from the climate most vulnerable nations". *Ocean Yearbook Online*, 35(1), 173-209 doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/22116001_035010071

²MEPC 60/Inf.9, United Nations Climate Change Conference 2009, IMO submissions and activities, includes: "the development of technical and operational measures for new and existing ships, as well as market based instruments to, inter alia, act as an incentive for the shipping industry to invest in more fuel-efficient technologies, and also serve other purposes such as raising funds for climate change mitigation and adaptation activities, research and development and the offsetting of emissions".

³<https://verfassungsblog.de/unlocking-unclos/>

⁴Forster, Piers M., Chris Smith, Tristram Walsh, William Lamb, Robin Lamboll, Bradley

Hall, Mathias Hauser, et al. "Indicators of Global Climate Change 2023: Annual Update of Key Indicators of the State of the Climate System and Human Influence," May 8, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.5194/essd-2024-149>.

⁵Peter Nuttall, Alison Newell, Atina Schutz, Maria Sahib, Aileen Sefeti, John Fatuimoana Kautoke, John Taukave and Pierre-Jean Bordahandy (2024) Disbursement of Revenues generated by IMO's emission reduction measures: Is contributing to a just and equitable transition that leaves no state behind an empty slogan? How much should be spent on what by who? MCST Working Paper 2024-001, Majuro. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/disbursement-revenues-generated-imosp7vic/?trackingId=eMs9y9gqQU%2BGgPiTIE5VVA%3D%3D>

⁶Ibid.

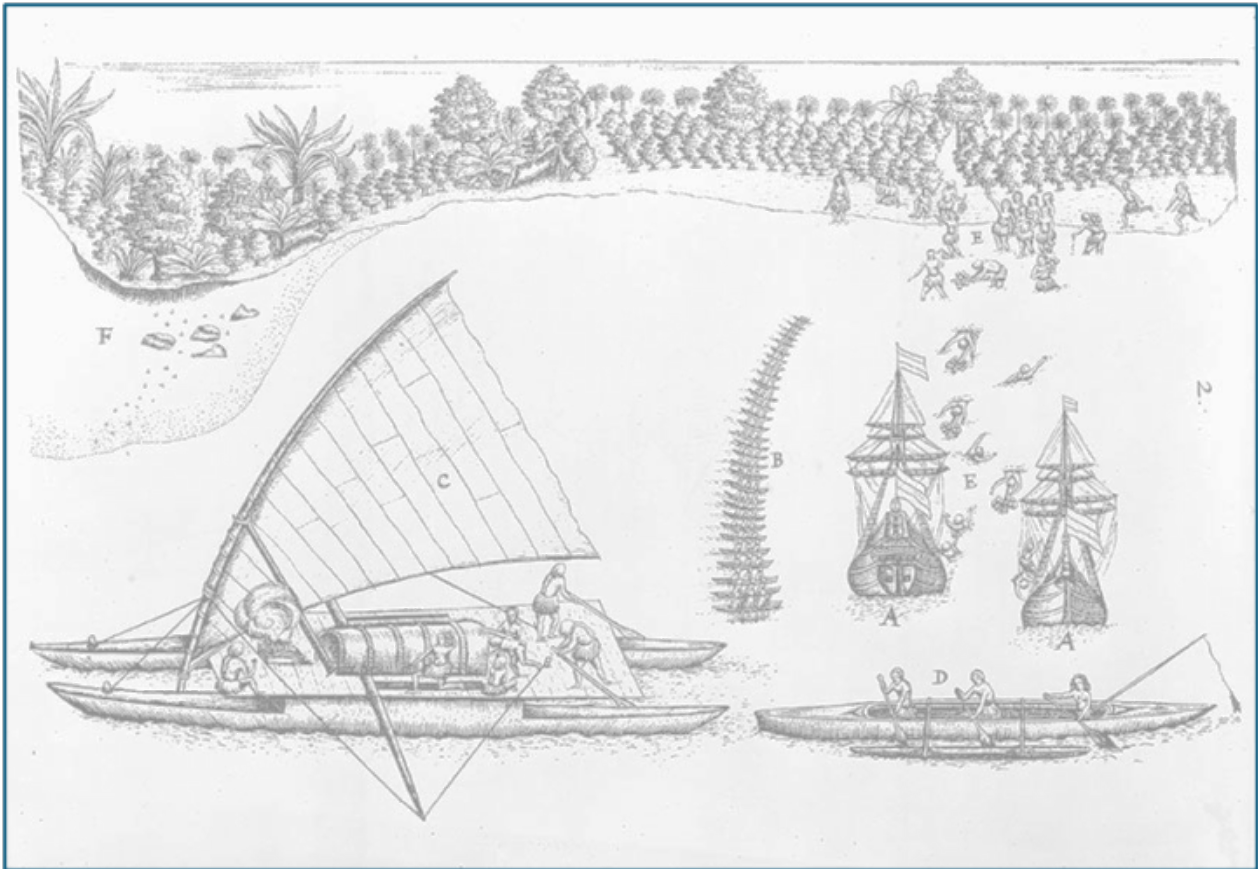


Figure 1. Tongatapu in January 1643, Abel Tasman's ships moored alongside Tonga double canoe, fishing vessel, small canoes coming to the ships National Library of New Zealand ref PUBL-0106-001

States has demonstrated their capacity to engineer catalytic⁷ action⁸ within a sector many described as 'too hard to abate'.⁹ That this small grouping from the world's smallest of micro-states has been able to exert the leverage it has is remarkable. In this paper we suggest that this has been no random undertaking. We follow the development of a successful indigenous 'recipe' for catalytic action from its genesis in the challenge of the Tongan philosopher Hau'ofa in the 1990's to the conventional narrative of the Pacific as a post-colonial region of weak, dependent and remote micro-states.

Hau'ofa instead recast self-reliance and confidence in the certain knowledge of an ancient but living Oceania of Large Ocean States as a shield to the trap of a dependency spiral. Such thinking was re-emulated by future Pacific academics and politicians in the furnaces of successive COPs and related engagements. It can be traced in the IMO through the Pacific-echoed call of the late Tony de Brum in 2015 for targets commensurate with a 1.5°C agenda and progressive introduction of cutting-edge policy design on GHG emissions pricing and concepts of equitable transition by a next generation of Pacific diplomacy.

Seen through the lens of past learning, the development of the Pacific's catalytic action at IMO appears as the disciplined application of an ancient, learned process rather than a random event. In this paper we consider the thesis that catalytic action is essential to creating

paradigm level change. That action is the result of the application of small but powerful interventions stemming from careful studied understanding of past knowledge.

Hau'ofa's seminal 1993 paper, "Our Sea of Islands" challenged the conventional narrative of the Pacific as a region of small, weak, isolated and dependent states with an alternative vision of an empowered Oceanic peoples, the descendants of giants that were navigating and settling the world's great ocean at a time when snakes still roamed Ireland and the day that Rome was built had still to break. Hau'ofa argued that how we see ourselves is a matter of perception and that this understanding is the first step to enabling change. That paper was the genesis of the current catalytic action by high ambition Pacific states at IMO.

When Hau'ofa was writing 30 years ago, the Pacific region was emerging from a frenzied transition from post-WWII colonial dependency to a scattered mosaic of independent and semi-independent micro-States and economies. It was a world of dynamic growth, the end of the cold war, an emerging industrial China and other BRICS causing a race of globalization and seemingly limitless growth potential driven by a blossoming IT and communications technology rich future. Climate change was at best a dark squall line on a distant horizon.

In that period in our distant island homes, we were coming to grips with the harsh realities of independence and a growing realization that increasing debt and dependency of our resource poor and natural disaster-prone economies was a growing reality. In the global order we were almost invisible and then we were noticed, our existence was framed with terms like small, isolated, limited, dependent and vulnerable. We had little to trade, some fishing licenses and logging concessions, some limited agriculture, alluring tourist beaches with hefty flight prices.

Our ancient civilizations simply don't fit into the global economic

⁷Catalysis (/kætəˈlɪsɪs/) is the increase in rate of a chemical reaction due to an added substance known as a catalyst (/kætəlɪst/). Catalysts are not consumed by the reaction and remain unchanged after it. If the reaction is rapid and the catalyst recycles quickly, very small amounts of catalyst often suffice; mixing, surface area, and temperature are important factors in reaction rate. Catalysts generally react with one or more reactants to form intermediates that subsequently give the final reaction product, in the process of regenerating the catalyst. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catalysis#retrieved23May2024>.

⁸Lee, J.Y.; Waddock, S. How Transformation Catalysts Take Catalytic Action. *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 9813. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13179813>.

⁹Corbett, J et al 2020., "Climate governance, policy entrepreneurs and small states: Explaining policy change at the International Maritime Organization," *Environmental Politics* 29, no. 5 (2020): 825–844. doi: 10.1080/09644016.2019.1705057.

marketplace. With only a few million people scattered over the world's largest Ocean, try as we may, we have no economies of scale, no capacity to develop any real form of economic base. We are entirely dependent on imported fuel and have the longest, thinnest and most expensive connectivity links in the world. They called us MIRAB economies – Migration, Remittances, Aid and public Bureaucracy.¹⁰

Hau'ofa reminded us, that while the world might see us as small, weak and isolated, our ancestors were not. They were huge giants in fast ocean-going canoes who lived sustainable lives on remote islands and for whom the Ocean was a bountiful supermarket, highway, friend and father. Building superior maritime vessels of exceptional size, speed and efficiency from a resource base of sticks, stones and grass – there was no metals – the Pacific was a living Ocean of sail. Hau'ofa challenged us to examine our own mindset and perceptions, to see ourselves as Large Ocean States not as small island developing ones.

It is this determination, this simple understanding that small can be powerful, flexible, dynamic and ultimately catalytic, that has seen our micro-states consistently over-perform diplomatically in our current world of turbo-capitalist, fossil-fuel charged growth, now bristling with the fastest growing arms expenditure in history and hurtling at seemingly unstoppable speed into a deepening climate crisis. We, the small island villages scattered across the Pacific, are still the ancestral custodians of this ocean. Nothing can change that. It is our home and has been forever. We don't want to leave it or lose it. Epeli reminded us that we can't lose it or leave it for we and it are one.

Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous, Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces that we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed places, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom.¹¹

Through channelling this ancient and simple knowledge and understanding, our people from village mat to President's offices have chosen not to submit to an inevitable fate but to continue to follow in our ancestors wake and will not stop fighting. We do not accept that we can be beaten just because our numbers are small and our pockets empty.

Nor can the world afford for us to lose our Ocean. It is the greatest protector of our planet. It absorbs more heat and more carbon than any other source. If our land and our economies are micro, our EEZ's are anything but. Isn't it our and other large maritime nations whose waters are our planet's last and only real buffer against GHG emissions? What lessons can we draw on to further remind us that we can be effective and catalytic. In 2015 in Paris, we proved that we can successfully project an alternative narrative through relentless, persistent and patient diplomacy with our consistent quiet arguments based on a fundamental belief in the universal human rights of all States to exist and anchored firmly to the moral high ground of only being a few meters above sea level. 1.5to stay alive evolved from a whisper to a rumble to a roar.¹²

We have continued that momentum into being the driving force of high ambition at IMO in its initial strategy of 2018¹³ and its revised

strategy in 2023.¹⁴ We have learned to be asymmetric and flexible with support to our student's legal strategy to the ICJ on the liability of States.¹⁵ From the classroom to the UNGA to the courtroom. Now Tuvalu and Antigua have demonstrated our growing legal capacity, catalyzing the ITLOS advisory opinion that GHG's are pollutants and that the law of the sea imposes specific legal obligations on States and there were consequences for those that do not comply. States are found to have specific obligations under international law to act urgently, ambitiously and equitably, to protect oceans from the drivers and impacts of climate change. And ITLOS is clear it considers States must control greenhouse gases from international shipping and aviation.¹⁶

Not all our attempts at catalytic innovation have been successful. De Brum's attempt to have the Security Council declare climate change a global security threat¹⁷ proved a Quixotic tilt at the windmill. But while it failed in gaining its ultimate objective, each attempt serves to empower and uplift our peoples collective determination not to lose. We continue to experiment, now with policy as Vanuatu explores its call for a Fossil Fuel Non-proliferation Treaty.¹⁸ Each attempt inspires the next generation to strive ever harder. We may not know our future, but our past is gospel.

It is this smiling passive belligerence that has sustained us for the past decade at IMO. First we clove to our known ground of high ambition, repeating again and again that shipping is not the hardest to abate sector, that the cheapest option is to act decisively now, that we cannot offset or deflect, that only demanding and agreeing the highest ambition targets possible allows this sector a pathway to transitioning at speed and scale necessary. The ripple became a wave became a cascade. In seven years shipping has gone from no targets to commitment to full decarbonisation 'around' 2050.

While it is positive to see these advances, we are not there yet and the devil, as always, is in the detail. And the simple reality is we have dallied too long to get to this point anyway.

Paris also taught us that ambition without financial and legal commitment was an empty victory. And so in 2021, RMI and the Solomons, again with strong Pacific family support, challenged the unspoken convention of not referring to levies and market based measures after the failure of IMO members to reach agreement in 2013 and proposed the most obvious solution – a universal and mandatory GHG levy with a high enough entry price to signal the market and provide the economic incentive needed for subsidising industry mitigation and enabling an equitable global solution.¹⁹

And there it was again, the Pacific added in another catalyst – equity – to the debate. Unlike our other attempts to name legal principles, the Pacific having made several submissions requesting having the polluter pays principles specifically named, this time the question was dropped almost accidentally into a side panel – “Please sir, can we have an equitable transition, a transition that leaves no State behind?” And again the ripple, repeated in Pacific interventions, becomes a small wave, and then a rising swell as every delegation at MEPC79 that spoke on the floor ended by echoing “leave no state behind”.

Let's not wax too lyrical. By MEPC80 most delegations had learnt how to say “leave no state behind” while simultaneously being unable to support hard language to define and prioritise hard text being taken forward in plenary. Now we are left to wrangle the meaning of “contribute to”. Does it mean, as we hear the phrase, a contribution at least equal to shipping's historic and future liability for its pollution and considerate of the industries considerable financial capacity. Or is it more akin to the contribution you make to the charity jar on the

¹⁰Tisdell, C, 2014. "The MIRAB Model of Small Island Economies in the Pacific and their Security Issues: Revised Version," Social Economics, Policy and Development Working Papers 165087, University of Queensland, School of Economics.

¹¹Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works*

¹²Jepsen, Henrik, Magnus Lundgren, Kai Monheim, and Hayley Walker, eds. *Negotiating the Paris Agreement: The Insider Stories*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

¹³Corbett, J et al 2020

¹⁴<https://www.sprep.org/news/pacific-delegates-spearhead-crucial-discussions-on-greenhouse-gas-reduction>

¹⁵<https://time.com/6197027/pacific-island-nations-vanuatu-climate-change/>

¹⁶<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/may/21/greenhouse-gases-are-pollutants-that-kill-marine-life-court-rules>

¹⁷https://press.un.org/en/2013/130215_mi.doc.htm

¹⁸<https://fossilfuel treaty.org/>

¹⁹<https://lloydslist.com/LL1136097/Marshall-Islands-demands-protect-T1\textdollar100-tax-on-shipping-emissions>

bar at closing time?

But the trick with genie's – they are hard to put back in the bottle. Now that the collective IMO membership has agreed that IMO must contribute, where does that leave us if the contribution from IMO's revenues is insufficient to meet the real cost of a transition that is to the benefit of all? Surely the commitment to enable a just and equitable transition for all states remains.

Although no proper quantitative costing of an equitable transition has been thus far undertaken, we assume it to be significant, at least as significant as the cost of mitigation. The only other source of funds is for the developed states to pay under the principle of CBDR-RC. So the only other option to using levy revenues for the large and powerful states at that point is to pretend the commitment to an equitable transition for all was not made in reality - and can be ignored. The recent ITLOS advisory would appear to make this line of action unattractive at Court.

We still have some way to go at IMO. Ultimately for us, the ones most at risk, it is a matter of international trust that the IMO will both deliver on its commitment to the highest ambition action and to ensuring the needs of the climate vulnerable states are met. If they are not, then only two courses of action appear open, accept the failure or seek recourse via the courts.

So what will we do, the Large Ocean States, if we can not get the world to see sense at MEPC83? Oceania's highly regarded poet, the late Teresia Teaiwa, calls out to us to remember who we are and why we will continue to protect our Ocean:

We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is
really in our blood.²⁰

We will of course continue in our belief that we are not weak and powerless and look for new and innovative ways to be catalytic. In Pacific cultures, it is quite acceptable to fight and cry at the same time. If we are to collectively survive this deepening climate crisis that now engulfs us, we must learn new ways of being. *Holomui ki mu'a, to walk backwards into an unknown future with our eyes on the learnt lessons of our past*, is one way we have learnt to make small powerful.

²⁰<https://uhpress.hawaii.edu/title/sweat-and-salt-water-selected-works/>