

## Article

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# Balancing Climate Action and Food Security: The Pacific's Call for an Equitable IMO Transition

## Introduction

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) is advancing mid-term greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction measures as part of its 2023 Strategy, aiming to decarbonize the global shipping sector. However, for Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS), these measures present both an urgent climate necessity and a severe economic challenge—particularly concerning food security and trade costs.

A new Micronesian Center for Sustainable Transport (MCST) report, to be presented at IMO's Expert Workshop 6 next week highlights the complexity of the issue. On one hand, the Pacific region faces the most immediate and severe consequences of climate change, making rapid decarbonization a non-negotiable priority. On the other hand, the region's extreme dependence on imported food and its fragile shipping links mean that increased transport costs could exacerbate hunger and economic hardship in the world's most vulnerable nations.

MCST's new report, *Potential Impacts of IMO GHG reduction measures on Pacific Food Security*, assesses both perspectives—the argument for a strong carbon price as the most effective pathway to climate and economic resilience, and the need for measures to mitigate potential food security impacts on Pacific SIDS.

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## The Case for a Strong IMO Carbon Price: Decarbonization and Resilience

The MCST expert paper argues that delaying strong action will only worsen food security risks in the long run. The impacts of climate change—rising sea levels, saltwater intrusion, extreme weather events, and declining fish stocks—are already threatening Pacific food systems. If emissions continue to rise unchecked, the cost of inaction will far outweigh the immediate cost of decarbonization.

## Why a High Carbon Price is the Best Solution

The 6PAC+ alliance (Belize, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Tuvalu,) has consistently advocated for an ambitious carbon levy, arguing that it:

- Generates much-needed revenue to help vulnerable states transition and offset rising shipping costs.
- Incentivises shipping decarbonization, leading to the lowest long-term increase in transport costs.
- Ensures that polluters pay, directing funds towards both industry mitigation and climate adaptation and resilience investment in climate vulnerable developing countries, in particular SIDS and LDCs
- Prevents a food crisis caused by runaway climate change, as worsening climate disasters will harm food production, trade, and infrastructure far more than short-term shipping cost increases.

*“The Pacific cannot afford weak climate policies,” said **Dr. Peter Nuttall**, one of the report’s authors. “A high and early carbon price is the only way to cut emissions fast enough while also ensuring the financial resources we need to protect our food security.”*

Under the 6PAC+ proposal (Belize et al. ISWG-GHG 17/2/14), a high carbon levy would generate significant revenue, some of which could be redirected to Pacific SIDS to offset food security impacts.

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## The Case for Managing Food Security Risks: Protecting Pacific Economies

At the same time, the Pacific is uniquely vulnerable to the cost increases that will accompany shipping decarbonization. The MCST report highlights that Pacific SIDS already face some of the highest transport costs globally, and even a small increase could jeopardize essential food imports.

### How Shipping Costs Affect Food Security

Kiribati’s food imports already face a trade cost margin of 19.2%, significantly higher than the global average of 7.5%, making the country highly vulnerable to fluctuations in transport costs. Any further increase in shipping expenses could drive up the price of essential imported staples, such as rice, wheat, and meat, by millions of dollars annually, placing additional strain on households and national food security. For some remote islands, a single shipping route serves as the only access point for essential goods, including food, medicine, and fuel. If decarbonization measures make these routes financially unviable, entire populations could face severe supply disruptions, compounding existing vulnerabilities in these climate-exposed nations.

The report argues that while IMO must push ahead with the strongest possible climate policies, the transition must be just and equitable. If not managed properly, the costs of decarbonization could place an unfair burden on the Pacific, despite the region contributing the least to global emissions.

*“Pacific nations should not have to choose between climate action and feeding their people,” said **Maria Sahib**, a co-author of the report. “We support ambitious IMO*

*measures, but these policies must include financial support for SIDS to manage the transition.”*

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## Finding the Right Balance: A Just and Equitable Transition

The MCST report makes it clear: any pathway to IMO decarbonization will increase transport costs — but the Pacific must ensure that these costs do not lead to a humanitarian crisis.

The 6PAC+ coalition proposes that revenues from a high carbon levy be used to directly compensate vulnerable states, rather than granting blanket exemptions that weaken the overall climate policy.

*“We reject exemptions because they only delay necessary action,” said **Ambassador Albon Ishoda**, Special Envoy for Maritime Decarbonization. “Instead, we demand compensation mechanisms that provide direct financial support to those most affected by higher transport costs.”*

*“African nations are just as vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The only way we can secure any form of climate justice is by joining our Pacific and Caribbean partners to leverage our collective voices for this,” said **Eldine Glees**, MCST Expert Advisor.*

### A well-designed compensation system could:

- Ensure shipping cost increases do not worsen food security, particularly for remote and vulnerable islands.
  - Provide funding for Pacific governments to invest in local food production, reducing reliance on imports.
  - Support alternative shipping solutions, including low-emission vessels for domestic and regional transport.
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## Conclusion: The Pacific’s Call to the IMO

The report’s lead author, Pacific expert and IPCC author **Dr Morgan Wairiu**, succinctly summarizes the core issue: “The IMO is now faced with a critical choice. The only rational approach is to:

- Implement the agreed ambitious decarbonization policies with a strong carbon price—ensuring shipping emissions are cut rapidly.
- Directly support Pacific SIDS and other climate vulnerable developing states through revenue from these policies, preventing food insecurity and economic hardship.
- Reject ineffective exemptions that only delay action without providing real solutions for vulnerable states.

The Pacific has spoken clearly: decarbonization cannot wait, but neither can the need for equity.”

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#### About 6PAC+

6PAC+ is a fast growing alliance of SIDS from the Pacific, Africa and the Caribbean nations advocating for climate action at the international level, particularly within the IMO. The coalition seeks to ensure that climate policies in the shipping industry are equitable, aligning with the principles of justice and the 1.5°C climate target.

#### About MCST

The Micronesian Center for Sustainable Transport (MCST), a Marshall Islands government-owned research center, is dedicated to promoting sustainable transport solutions in the Pacific region and beyond. MCST collaborates with various stakeholders to address the challenges of climate change and support the transition to a low-carbon future.

Website: <https://www.mcstrmi.org>