



Pacific dialogue (*talanoa*) at the International Maritime Organization

John Fatuimoana Kautoke & John Taukäv

To cite this article: John Fatuimoana Kautoke & John Taukäv (12 Mar 2026): Pacific dialogue (*talanoa*) at the International Maritime Organization, Journal of Cultural Economy, DOI: [10.1080/17530350.2025.2605070](https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2025.2605070)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2025.2605070>



Published online: 12 Mar 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Pacific dialogue (*talanoa*) at the International Maritime Organization

John Fatuimoana Kautoke ^a and John Taukäve^b

^aMicronesian Center for Sustainable Transport, College of the Marshall Islands, Delap-Uliga-Djarrit, Marshall Islands;

^bAmsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 19 October 2025; Accepted 2 December 2025

Editors' note: This is an edited and abridged transcript of the presentation by John Fatuimoana Kautoke and John Taukäve at a workshop in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where the participants responded to Stuart Kirsch's (this issue) position paper on compliance capitalism and global supply chains. Kautoke represents the Micronesian Center for Sustainable Transport (MCST) and sits with the delegation of the Kingdom of Tonga at the International Maritime Organization (IMO). Taukäve also represents the MCST at the IMO. Kautoke and Taukäve showed us how they introduced the Pacific speech genre of *talanoa*, which facilitates dialogue and encourages open exchange (see Kirsch 2020, 2021), to discussions at the IMO about regulating the impact of the shipping industry on the climate. They began by inviting everyone at the workshop in Ann Arbor to participate in a *kava* ceremony, which involves sharing a beverage made from the powdered root of the plant *Piper methysticum*. As they recounted to us, Kautoke and Taukäve helped persuade the International Maritime Organization to establish the first global carbon price, which covers all of the cargo ships that transport 70% by value and 80–90% by volume of all commodities traded worldwide. Funds raised by the carbon levy are intended to retrofit existing vessels and upgrade port infrastructure so that the shipping industry will reduce its carbon emissions in alignment with a 1.5 degree limit on temperature increase as agreed to in the Paris Climate Accord, a goal first articulated by the visionary diplomat Tony de Brum from the Marshall Islands. The experiences of Kautoke and Taukäve – who sought to both inform and generate empathy among their fellow representatives at the International Maritime Organization about the vulnerability of Pacific Island nations to sea level rise and other impacts from climate change – offer an inspiring example of compliance capitalism, i.e. of forces that seek to reduce environmental impacts that both complement and exceed the capabilities and power of the state. Their influence on climate decisions at the IMO parallels the way other Pacific Islanders have similarly played outsized roles in the formulation of global climate change policies at the annual meetings of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (see Kirsch 2020). —**Jatin Dua and Stuart Kirsch**

John Taukäve: On behalf of the peoples of Oceania, my brother John Kautoke from the Kingdom of Tonga and I extend a heartfelt thank you for inviting us here to share our story and host this dialogue, where culture, tradition, protocol, and practice come together. We have in front of us a *tanoa* vessel carved from hardwood. And the drink we are sharing with you in this *tanoa* is called *kava*. *Kava* comes from the dried root of a pepper plant in the Pacific and its consumption encourages open dialogue. Whether you're relaxing with your cousins after a hard day of work on the plantation, coming back from a fishing trip, or just at home in the late afternoon or evening, *kava* ceremonies are an important context for sharing information. At the village level, chiefs come together and discuss important events at *kava* ceremonies. At the state level as well, political leaders discuss issues of national significance over *kava*.

To share kava with you today is a very heartfelt moment for me. I want to include everyone. Cup your hands like this. When I clap, I will open this space, and everyone responds by clapping three times. One, two, three, go.

So that's how we open the space and officially start sharing. And when you are offered the kava bowl, you clap three times, take the bowl, drink it like a shot, and then you pass it back and clap three more times. It is an acknowledgment that you are receiving the land and that you're receiving the *mana*, the power of what it means to be engaged with Oceania. So, we'll share one round of kava and then my brother and I will present what we came here to say, but we'll be doing so in the form of a dialogue.

You can discuss how the kava tastes. You are literally tasting the land. It's peppery. It's not alcoholic. It's not a drug. It creates a relaxing feeling. And so the more kava you drink when you're having a dialogue, the more relaxed you'll feel.

And that's the spirit of including this ceremony from the village at national and international levels, whether here in Ann Arbor or at meetings of the International Maritime Organization. It builds relationships. It promotes trust and respect. We hope that sharing this kava ceremony will help you understand the work we've been doing at the International Maritime Organization. Shall we begin? Now my brother John (Kautoke) will start our open dialogue.

John Kautoke: Why are negotiations with international shipping companies important to us? Since the colonial period, the Pacific Islands have been dependent on goods that are imported from other countries and have neglected the foods that historically grew on our islands. Some of our populations rely heavily on imports, importing up to 80% of what they consume. In some cases, this is despite the fact that home-grown foods can sustain the population. The situation will be made worse by climate change. With changing rainfall patterns, the people living in the Pacific will increasingly rely on imports, exacerbating the dependency spiral. Countries like Tonga have enough fertile land to maintain their population through agriculture. But we also have low-lying atoll islands in the Pacific like the Marshalls, Tuvalu, and Kiribati, that don't have enough agricultural land to support themselves. In the case of the larger islands, the overdependence on imported goods is linked directly to shifting societal norms and a desire for goods consumed by Western developed countries. Due to colonialism, Pacific peoples have come to view all good things as coming from the outside. And so since the 1970s, we saw a dramatic shift in the Pacific towards a Eurocentric economic model of development and the establishment of neoliberal constructs in our islands. It's what colonial powers taught our people that success looks like. And so we have arrived at the current situation in the Pacific, namely that we are heavily dependent on international shipping to feed our population.

This leads me to the work we're doing at the International Maritime Organization, which regulates international shipping, since in addition to being an important opportunity to tackle climate change in a globally binding way, the negotiations over greenhouse gas emissions also have the possibility of bringing about transformative changes that could start to break the dependency spiral in the Pacific, empowering our region.

The IMO is a specialized branch of the UN. Historically, the focus of the organization since it began operating in 1958 was on the issue of safety in maritime shipping. Initially they had no intention of regulating the environmental aspects of international shipping. But they had to deal with multiple major oil spills over the years, which set the stage for addressing additional environmental concerns. Through the Marine Environment Protection Committee, they established regulations concerning pollution from ships, from dumping garbage at sea to air pollution. The IMO also participated in the 2015 meeting that resulted in the Paris Climate Accord and argued that it was the appropriate body to ensure compliance with the agreement by the international shipping industry. Consequently, emissions from cargo ships are not included within the obligatory reporting of greenhouse gas emissions under the Paris Accord but are the responsibility of the IMO.

It is important to note the special organizational features of the IMO. Like other UN bodies, the primary actors are representatives of member states. But in the plenary sessions at the IMO, there

are also observers who represent the shipping industry. They are able to observe negotiations and influence decision-making.¹ Traditionally, the large seafaring and shipping nations have had the most influence at the IMO. Major leadership roles, like the chair of important committees, are controlled by the large flag states, under which thousands of ships are registered. It can be difficult to change the direction of the International Maritime Organization because of the influence of these powerful shipping registries. Very few government officials from the Pacific actually get to attend IMO meetings or are regularly updated. Other countries always send large delegations to these meetings.

We saw that the IMO process was leaving the people from climate vulnerable states and their voices behind, both by failing to take climate action and by consistently favoring the interests of major shipping states and their powerful industries. How could we overcome this? We realized it was very important for people at the IMO to understand where communities like Oceania and the Pacific were coming from. And what we did within the IMO, I wanted to share that with you today. I wanted you to see how we bring who we are as peoples of the sea, of the ocean, into the IMO.

We learned from the great Pacific scholar Epeli Hau'ofa (2008), who referred to the Pacific as a 'Sea of Islands' in contrast to the view I mentioned earlier, seeing ourselves as living on small islands dependent on outsiders. Instead, Hau'ofa encouraged us to recognize how Pacific Islanders do not live *on tiny islands* in the sea but are from *large ocean states*. He also reminded us that the Pacific Ocean is vast and home to many unique cultures and stories. And I think this recognition really influenced how we approached the space of the International Maritime Organization.

Coming from this sea of islands, we see that the ocean is the basis of our livelihood. We see that the ocean connects us, and the *vakas*, our canoes, are a symbol of that connection. For millennia, our ancestors voyaged back and forth with ease, managing trade relations between islands. And so the *vaka* has become a new symbol of empowerment, of reconnection. And this understanding became a key component of our participation in the negotiations at the IMO.

John Taukëve: And this is where my introduction of storytelling into IMO frameworks through different mediums of performance, whether chanting, music, or dance, came into being. We recognized the importance of sharing stories and building relationships, nurturing our ties to the other countries participating in the negotiations. We were focused on responding to the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security, adopted by the leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum, which identified climate change as the 'single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific'.

Last year, for example, at the meeting of the Marine Environment Protection Committee to discuss the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from the shipping industry, I performed a *Ki*, a Rotuman war chant and dance that was given to me by a Rotuman elder and sub-chief named Gagj Taimnav, who composed it for me to perform at that meeting of the IMO.² How awesome is that? Where I get to share a little bit of where I am from in Rotuma? And pose a war challenge to the Secretariat of the IMO and to everyone, all of the countries there, showing the solidarity of the Pacific Island nations in forwarding our arguments? That was a very touching moment for me.

We understood that we needed to form a new coalition, and so we began reaching out to the representatives from the countries in the Caribbean, in Africa, and in Latin America, building an alliance based on climate change concerns and economic development, forging common understandings so we could support each other on the negotiating floor. And kava was the medium that facilitated these connections between each and every one of us. It was something encouraging and empowering. And I think it is really important that you know how practices like these were involved in shaping the decision of the IMO to establish a carbon price.

John Kautoke: A market-based mechanism to address emissions pricing had originally been proposed in the 2010s, but the different parties at the IMO couldn't reach an agreement on the specifics. The Europeans were supportive of the initiative, but the BRICS³ countries – which include

Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – were opposed. Especially China, which wanted a gradual transition so that they could ensure they were meeting their targets. And they were suspicious of European efforts like Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanisms (see Santer, this issue) that they viewed as driving up the price of Chinese goods going into Europe.

But the BRICS countries weren't united. There were some issues on which they agreed, like limiting the costs to member countries. But then there were other issues where they were divided, right? Because Brazil has a huge interest in biofuels. And while India doesn't have the capacity to produce low carbon fuels for ships in the short run, it does have the ambition to produce them in the long term, and they wanted incentives to develop this capacity.

But in the end, the BRICS countries saw that the United States was quitting the negotiations and that China was also threatening to walk away, and consequently they realized that they had to adopt something, that they couldn't risk losing two major superpowers, which would undermine any agreement. So the final choice was between the European proposal and a Chinese version that was less ambitious, and the compromise ended up being right in the middle of the two.

The decision came down to a vote, which is uncommon at the IMO because the decisions are usually based on consensus, like other UN bodies (see Kirsch 2021; Riles 2000). Saudi Arabia called for a vote because they did not like the proposal the chair of the plenary session had put forward. The Pacific Island countries faced a dilemma, because if we also voted 'no', everyone would think that Oceania was siding with Saudi Arabia, an oil-producing state, which we did not want to do. But we didn't like the proposal, which was nowhere near ambitious enough to ensure that global warming remains below 1.5°C, the limit backed by Pacific Island states and enshrined in the Paris Agreement. So we felt compelled to abstain.

It was at that moment when our Pacific leaders, especially our ministers of transport who were at the meetings with us, reminded us of how long we had been negotiating to reach the goal of establishing a carbon price on global shipping. They also reminded us that we were voting on behalf of our communities in the Pacific, whose very existence was at stake.

That was the bitter part of the decision, to accept the compromise of a carbon price that was not in compliance with 1.5°C. But the sweet part was that we had built a solid negotiating block within the IMO, and it is critical to hold onto these connections. And essential to these relationships were the talanoa dialogues over kava, so that we were able to discuss these issues freely with an open heart with the other countries represented at the IMO, like we have been doing with you today.

Right now, the IMO plan is not ambitious enough. It is not compliant with the Paris Climate Accord. It needs to be strengthened but we can do that.

While the IMO membership did not agree to put a price on all greenhouse gas emissions from global shipping, it did agree to establish a carbon levy on some of them. Given our desire to pursue a just and equitable transition, we also needed to consider how these revenues will be distributed so that climate vulnerable states are not left behind. If we were going to contribute to the revenue, we needed to benefit from it as well through access to alternative energy and technology transfer.

We needed to make sure that our voices were heard, which is why we invested in this space. For us, the transition is not simply an economic proposition. It is an existential question. The Pacific Islands are at the forefront of climate change impacts. If not enough is done, in the next 10 or 20 years, low-lying atoll nations like Kiribati and Tuvalu will cease to exist. So this is existential for us. And that's why we have been continuously participating at the IMO. And I am very inspired by the Pacific movement in this space.

Jatin Dua: I wanted to add to what John Kautave has been saying about the existential field within which you approach these questions, but also ask about the role of flags of convenience for shipping fleets. Historically speaking, efforts to evade various forms of regulations can contribute to the establishment of new forms of power. This is visible in the power dynamics you describe in your presentation: when shipping companies moved their fleets away from spaces dominated by states in Europe and the U.S. to registries in marginalized countries like Liberia, the Marshall

Islands, and Panama, they also created a new source of power they were able to leverage during negotiations at the IMO.

For example, for years delegations from Liberia, Panama, and the Marshall Islands were composed of shipping company representatives who nominally represented their ‘flag countries’ but cared most about and advocated primarily in the interest of shipping companies based in Western Europe and the United States. As I’m sure you know, the Marshall Island shipping registry, which is a U.S. company based in Delaware, has no interest in limiting climate change to 1.5°C. So how did you manage to challenge its conservative position?

John Taukåve: The Marshallese political leader Tony de Brum was the first to call out the responsibilities of shipowners who use the flag of convenience to register their vessels in the Marshall Islands. He threatened their ability to continue registering their ships in the Marshall Islands unless they supported new policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the shipping industry (see De Beukelaer 2023; Kirsch 2020, 834). At the same time, the government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands asserted control over the country’s position at the IMO on all climate-related issues, sending a powerful signal about whether the registry or the government is speaking at these meetings.

John Kautoke: The mechanism is expected to generate between 11 and 15 billion dollars a year, which is huge. Obviously, there are still other issues to address, but this will be one of the largest environmental funds in the world. Initially, the BRICS countries wanted to use the funds for the incentivisation only, that is mainly to reward ships that meet these targets, but the Pacific Islanders and their allies pushed for a more equitable distribution of the funds. We argued that the funds should be used to support the energy transition to cleaner fuels and technologies like green hydrogen and wind, as well as the upgrading of ports and other coastal infrastructure to support these changes.⁴ These funds can also be used to help us escape the dependency spiral, by facilitating inter-regional exchange between Pacific Island nations based on low carbon or carbon neutral technology, like the wind, which has more potential than people think.

Jatin Dua: Do you see this decision having a larger impact beyond the IMO space?

John Kautoke: We definitely see the IMO decision as a template that can be applied to other contexts, something that can be replicated in other parts of the economy. It still needs to be strengthened, but that was our priority: to set a precedent.

Notes

1. Editors’ note: This is part of a larger trend in which private sector actors increasingly have influential roles in multilateral forums (see Corson, Campbell, and MacDonald 2014).
2. See: <https://anthroposea.substack.com/p/what-is-john-taukave-telling-us>
3. Originally Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, the BRICS alliance was formed as a counterweight to Western influence in global affairs, and was later joined by Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia.
4. Editors’ note, with thanks to Christiaan De Beukelaer: Otherwise, the system would penalize the countries without the means to invest in the transition upfront: initially for continuing to pollute, but also by having to upgrade their fleets and infrastructure without IMO support. This would require the poorest countries in the world to subsidize improvements for the remainder of the shipping industry.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

John Fatuimoana Kautoke  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9198-9656>

References

- Corson, C., L. M. Campbell, and K. I. MacDonald. 2014. "Capturing the Personal in Politics: Ethnographies of Global Environmental Governance." *Global Environmental Politics* 14 (3): 21–40. https://doi.org/10.1162/GLEP_a_00237
- De Beukelaer, Christiaan. 2023. "Marshall Islands, A Nation at the Heart of Global Shipping, Fights for Climate Justice." *The Conversation*. <http://theconversation.com/marshall-islands-a-nation-at-the-heart-of-global-shipping-fights-for-climate-justice-202613>.
- Hau'ofa, Epli. 2008. "Our Sea of Islands." In *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works*, 27–40. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Kirsch, Stuart. 2020. "Why Pacific Islanders Stopped Worrying about the Apocalypse and Started Fighting Climate Change." *American Anthropologist* 122 (4): 827–839. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13471>
- Kirsch, Stuart. 2021. "Talanoa Dialogue at UN Climate Change Meetings: The Extraordinary Encompassment of a Scale-Climbing Pacific Speech Genre." *Oceania* 91 (3): 330–348. <https://doi.org/10.1002/occe.5314>
- Riles, Annelise. 2000. *The Network Inside Out*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.