SMALL ISLAND STATES AND THE NEW CLIMATE CHANGE MOVEMENT

The case of Kiribati

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1 Introduction

There has been continued emphasis that aspects of climate justice need to play a bigger role in the global negotiations dealing with climate change in order to overcome the stagnancy in agreement talks (Parks and Roberts 2010). This applies to the international negotiations on climate change in the case of the UNFCCC as well as to the debates on environmental or climate migrants, in which there exist no political mandates or judicial instruments for their protection.

Even in the island state of Kiribati in the central Pacific, the issue of climate justice influences the negotiation processes around anthropogenic climate change, and its results. The group of 32 atoll islands, which makes up Kiribati, has approximately 100,000 inhabitants and a population density of 136/km². The islands extend over 2,500 km along the Equator, but have a very small surface area. As they lie very flat in the water and almost all inhabitants live directly at the coast, the island state and its people are especially affected by the current and predicted results of climate change, such as stronger tropical storms and the rising sea level (Mimura et al. 2007: 687). By 2100, the sea level could rise by 124 cm (Rahmstorf 2010) with some researchers even speaking of a rise of more than 200 cm (Grinsted et al. 2009). Some prognoses by climate researchers state that the islands’ sweet-water budgets are at great risk of salt-water contamination, as well as declining rainfall and longer droughts (WBGU 2006). The question of climate justice and “multidimensional inequality,” which Kristina Dietz discusses in relation to the effects of climate change and the relationship between the Global North and the Global South (Dietz 2009: 186), apply particularly to islands such as Kiribati. They have a limited responsibility for anthropogenic climate change, due to low per capita emissions, yet they are the most strongly affected by its results. Along with strong socio-economic problems and few opportunities for financing adaptation operations, Kiribati suffers from additional structural inequalities on various levels. These include the effects of these islands of colonial history. Kiribati belonged to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony, which gained its freedom in 1979 and became the free states of Kiribati and Tuvalu. Another example is the limited access to resources and social
services, as well as limited participation and arrangement opportunities of international as well as regional political negotiations (see Dietz 2009: 186). Adaptation opportunities such as the change in agriculture, which the inhabitants of Kiribati have brought about for a long time, may not be enough in the future to secure their existence on these islands. The uninhabitable nature of this territory needs to be considered in the medium and long term (Barnett and Adger 2003: 326; Risse 2009). Aside from the political and legal questions, as well as conflicts around migration and resettlement projects for the inhabitants of Kiribati, questions around sovereignty and the future of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Kiribati remain open (Esteban and Yamamoto 2010). In relation to these perspectives, Kiribati is active in various official and unofficial global and regional arenas of negotiation around climate justice, curbing emissions, and adaptation to climate change.

Overall, the social effects of climate change, and the uncertainties that come with the prognoses made by climate researchers, are a great political challenge for Kiribati as well as all other island states. The political measures related to these prognoses reach far into the future, and must consider the interests of coming generations. The island states of the Pacific agree on the point that climate change is a serious threat for them, and that industrial nations need to reduce their emissions drastically (McNamara and Gibson 2009: 482). In order to reach this goal and exert pressure primarily on the countries causing these emissions, diverse alliances and organizations have been created in the Pacific as well as other areas. The appropriate politics in relation to future scenarios are still under dispute (McNamara and Gibson 2009: 482). While governments of certain island states view international migration as an unacceptable option for their citizens, Kiribati is already taking an active role in negotiations around what Kiribati itself calls programs for climate migration (Bedford and Bedford 2010; Klepp 2012).

Kiribati is one of the first countries in the world in which issues such as climate justice and the search for strategies for climate migrants culminate and become tangible. Here people of all classes are affected by these issues, which are of existential importance for the future of all citizens, even though the problem of poverty determines the daily lives of many I-Kiribati (citizens of Kiribati). The government of Kiribati has become an important actor in global climate policy as well as movements around climate because it is itself stricken by these issues. Kiribati has a special role given to it by its own government and others due to its own fate as well as the future of other countries affected by climate change, which can be viewed with ambivalence. As this article shows, through the fight against climate change, the island state gains new resources and allies on the one hand, but neglects problems on the other hand. The debates around climate change can also have far-reaching consequences such as a lack of other adaptation strategies than migration, which may have a negative impact for the preservation of the island state. From its on-site research, this article can contribute to current debates based on Kiribati’s citizens’ own assessments and observations.

After a short introduction on the subject of climate change discourse in the Pacific, struggles around climate justice as well as the alliances and strategies in which Kiribati and other island states are involved, will be empirically described. Even the rather locally embedded level will be integrated, as a change in norms and values, based on discourses on climate justice, is taking place here. The island of South Tarawa, which was the area of my field research in April and May 2011, is the central island of the republic of Kiribati. Debates around climate change have spread throughout Kiribati, due to the devastating predictions for the islands. In relation to this, comments such as “Australia should pay for our sewage system, since they are responsible for climate change and should now pay compensations” can be heard. These result from an interesting combination of the discourses around the effects of climate change, the legacy of postcolonialism, and globalization. They also show that the discussions around the social consequences of climate change
change cannot be conducted separately from the controversies around North-South justice, even with the successful continuation of UNFCCC negotiations in mind.

2 The Pacific islands and the climate change discourse

The predictions of the devastating consequences of climate change determine the media and academic discourse around climate change in the Pacific region. The issues of these often technically oriented debates are "geographic objects" (Barnett and Campbell 2010: 2), such as coastlines, as well as statistics about sea level rise and precipitation. Their own interpretations on climate change and possible strategies of the islands' inhabitants, which they have been traditionally and currently using, in the context of environmental change, are barely addressed (Barnett and Campbell 2010: 2). The island states are seen as marginalized, vulnerable, and in need of development, as well as small, poor, and not designed for economic growth (Kempf 2009). These constructions are an expression of constellations of knowledge and power, which were reconfigured in the context of climate change. Tools of othering, used as tools of power during the colonial period, have gained new meaning. Carol Farbotko explains that they change the political agency of these countries and create a new "eco-colonial" perspective on these islands (Farbotko 2010: 58). Above all, the atoll island states of Kiribati and Tuvalu are characterized as "Titanic States" (Barnett and Campbell 2010: 168). Headlines such as "Sinking islands ding to Kyoto lifebuoy," "Rising sea level forcing evacuation of island country," or "... will Tuvalu disappear beneath the sea..." (quoted after McNamara and Gibson 2009: 479), dominate media discussions. According to Barnett and Campbell, the Pacific islands have become a warning symbol for the effects of climate change as well as a field experiment for Western researchers, journalists, and organizations of international cooperation, which create a distorted image of victimization for the Pacific area, as well as a scandalizing image of the effects of climate change (Barnett and Campbell 2010: 177). On the other hand, it must be stated that some governments of the island states, foremost Kiribati's President Anote Tong, play an active role in the debates around climate change, and partly contribute to the image of sinking islands, as will become apparent below. Even in the day-to-day discussions on the islands, the subject of climate change is continually discussed, even though the people often have other pressing worries in need of a short-term solution.

McNamara and Gibson state that most Pacific island states reject the role of victim or supplicant on the international stage, and demand a stronger reduction in greenhouse gases (McNamara and Gibson 2009). Carol Farbotko emphasizes the increased position of moral power of countries such as Tuvalu and Kiribati, which had an important role in the negotiations in Copenhagen in 2009. Various alliances have been created, in order to bind together the efforts of small island states, such as in UNFCCC negotiations. Here, especially the international organizations Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) must be named, which I will describe in detail later on.

The government of the republic of Kiribati, the first in the world to do so, researches strategies for finding medium- to long-term migration possibilities for all of its citizens. Therefore, apart from reductions in greenhouse gases and comprehensive resources for adaptation services, entry into the job and education markets outside of Kiribati are a focus for the support center of the government of Kiribati. In addition, prospects are obtained for resettling entire villages across national borders (Bedford and Bedford 2010; Klepp 2012). Various political and judicial levels and state and nonstate actors, which are now described in more detail, are included in negotiation processes for new rights and resources for environmental migrants in the Pacific area as well as adaptation to climate change.
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3 The case of Kiribati – a sinking island?

Like other island states in the South Pacific, Kiribati is dependent on payments from international donors and money transfers from international migrants outside of the country. Therefore, Kiribati’s economy, the same as its neighbors, is often described as a MIRAB economy. MIRAB is an acronym for Migration, Remittances, Aid, and Bureaucracy, and points to a high dependence on international donors, international migrants, and an inflated public sector (Marsters et al. 2006). In addition, subsistence farming, especially the fisheries, are an important economic factor. World Bank estimates for the Tarawa Atoll of Kiribati alone project the costs of climate change at $8–16 million for the year 2050. This would account for 17–34 percent of Kiribati’s gross domestic product (Barnett and Campbell 2010: 21).

3.1 Negotiations around climate migration

Since his election in 2003, the island president Anote Tong has been appealing to the international community in various global and regional forums, to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and take on their responsibility for the fate of the island as “victim of climate change” and for the “climate refugees of Kiribati” (BBC 2009). At the World Environment Day of the United Nations in June of 2008 in Wellington, New Zealand, Tong stated:

None of the atolls that make up our country are more than two meters above sea level. We will be submerged by the end of the century, as things stand right now.... However, what happens before is equally devastating. Entire villages are being relocated as the sea encroaches upon the land. People are being asked to move from places that have been home for them. It’s a human tragedy.

(Times of India 2008)

Tong strives for a gradual evacuation of the island. Today, part of the population already lives in New Zealand and other countries, and sends remittances to Kiribati. When, how, and where these evacuations will take place in the future, is a question of climate justice, according to Tong (BBC 2009).

International migration and the full evacuation of the island in the long run play an important role in the deliberations of the government of Kiribati (Kempf 2009: 191; Bedford and Bedford 2010). In relation to this, migration is propagated as an adaptation strategy. For the migration strategies of Kiribati, President Tong is formulating a long-term plan, “so that when people migrate, they will migrate on merit and with dignity” (Risse 2009: 281). Aside from migration projects of individual citizens, they call for help from neighboring countries such as Australia and New Zealand, to initiate resettlement projects. However, none of these countries have yet made a formal agreement with Kiribati. New Zealand has created a yearly quota for the Pacific islands of Kiribati, Tuvalu, and Tonga for labor migration under the name Pacific Access Category. In this way, 75 migrants can migrate from Kiribati to New Zealand every year (Immigration New Zealand 2005). In addition, migration programs for New Zealand have been created in the area of harvest work (Recognised Seasonal Employment – RSE) and for Australia for the education and employment of nurses (Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative – KINA). However, neither project acknowledges any connection between climate change, environmental change, migration, and a responsibility of industrial countries (McNamara and Gibson 2009: 482).

For some time, negotiations have been made with Fiji, which focuses on the resettlement of entire villages. On the border of the round of UNFCCC negotiations in Copenhagen in 2009,
the president of Fiji was positive toward this option (Bedford and Bedford 2010: 90). In 2012, negotiations started for the acquisition of 2,000 hectares of land on Vanua Levu, the second largest island of Fiji. Fiji is made up of a group of islands that are mostly made of volcanic rock and are above sea level, meaning that it is affected less by the effects of climate change than Kiribati. According to media coverage, around 500 inhabitants of Kiribati are to resettle in Vanua Levu, in order to grow fruits and vegetables and raise animals, which will be exported to Kiribati. How these plans will be carried out will be seen in the future (BBC 2012).

There are opposing views to the active negotiations Kiribati is actively participating in, from other Pacific countries, as explained by McNamara. Some Pacific island governments reject the idea of describing migration as an adaptation strategy (McNamara 2009: 482), but rather that it is a form of failed adaptation (Campbell 2010). In academic discourses, the link between migration and climate change is disputed and considered one of the greatest political challenges (see Black 2001; Jönsson 2010; Nicholson 2011). Historically seen, these relations are not doubted, but the current nation-state system makes traveling across international borders much more difficult than it was in the past. Aside from debates around the acknowledgment of climate migrants, the government of Kiribati is also involved in several other alliances and forums, which will now be described.

3.2 Kiribati’s fight for climate justice – diverse strategies and alliances

Kiribati has organizations similar to the international organizations, which push for regional and international climate justice and are active in UNFCCC negotiations. First among these is the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), which came out of the organization of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). AOSIS is an alliance of island and coastal states, which are nearly all vulnerable to climate change. AOSIS is the negotiating voice for the Small Island Developing States, at the United Nations. The group currently has 42 members from the Pacific Ocean, Africa, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea. At the UNFCCC negotiations and the discussions for the Kyoto Protocol, the AOSIS representatives are among the tireless advocates calling for effective climate protection policies. From the SIDS the ‘Malé Declaration on Global Warming and Sea Level Rise’ is a pioneer, which was brought into being in 1989 and was recreated by SIDS in 2007 as the ‘Malé Declaration on the Human Dimension of Global Climate Change.’ The declarations of SIDS and AOSIS express that their member countries have made relatively little contributions to climate change, but are now strongly affected by its consequences. They demand to be provided with the necessary tools and resources to self-determinedly deal with the effects of climate change and make their own decisions. Even within regional alliances, such as the Pacific Island Forum (PIF), the question of climate justice is always addressed, as in the ‘Niue-Declaration on climate change’ which was created in the frame of the 39th PIF meeting in 2008.

In addition, several religious institutions and actors are active in the debate around climate justice in the Pacific area. Representatives of Christian churches, which are organized in the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), which has its headquarters in Suva, Fiji, published the ‘Moana-Declaration’ in 2009, which calls for climate justice and contains conventions for environmental migrants and solutions for their resettlement and migration projects. The call is aimed explicitly at the countries of the Pacific Islands Forum, whose members include Australia and New Zealand. Here it becomes apparent that in the area of soft-law instruments, defined by Francis Snyder as “those rules of conduct which, in principle, have no legally binding force but which nevertheless may have practical effect” (Zerilli cited by Snyder 2010: 7), a growing number of instruments related to the debate around climate change and justice exist.
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A large amount of campaigns for climate justice, in which Kiribati is involved, is initiated by NGOs. This has doubtlessly promoted the debates around climate justice and the vulnerability of Pacific island states. However, the NGOs’ tendency to describe the islanders as victims of climate change has been critiqued (McNamara and Gibson 2009: 479). One such example is a report written by the Friends of the Earth Australia in which they state that “the future of the Pacific Island states seems bleak” (cited in McNamara and Gibson 2009: 479). This representation of island states, which are often described as having no chance of survival, can also be politically harmful. Investments which would otherwise have been made might be withheld. In addition, Barnett and Adger point out that a too one-sided focus on doomsday scenarios might get in the way of directing the discourse toward adaptation strategies (Barnett and Adger 2003: 330). These victim discourses may produce numerous side effects, which I will detail more below.

NGOs such as Many Strong Voices (MSV) play a very different role. This coalition between the Small Island Developing States and the coastal arctic inhabitants, which was founded with the goal to fight climate change and its side effects, focuses on empowerment. Various actors of civil society and government are brought together, and experiences around climate change adaptation and political fights around climate justice are exchanged. In Kiribati, debates around climate change and climate justice take place primarily in church groups of various denominations, as the inhabitants of the island are very religious and, through my observations, there seems not be much civil engagement outside of this.

The government of Kiribati is also represented in the large international movement for climate justice, which focuses on human rights and the cultural and environmental rights of indigenous peoples and minorities, and was formed since the beginning of the twenty-first century (Tokar 2010: 8). In the frame of the official UNFCCC climate negotiations, this leads for example to the implementation of alternative events, to draw attention to the limited participation of smaller countries and indigenous peoples, and the opportunities they have for gaining influence (Baer and Reuter 2011: 3). The activities of this movement, whose members and actions are illustrated in this book, are often initiated by NGOs. For example, the network, Climate Justice Now! was created in the frame of the UNFCCC negotiations in 2007 in Bali by more than 30 NGOs and grassroots organizations. Similar movements joined at the People’s Summit Klimaforum09 in Copenhagen in 2009, including Climate Justice Now! In the case of the People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, in April 2010 in Bolivia, the government of Bolivia initiated the congress for a large movement for climate justice (see Kruse in this book). In this case, the same as with the aforementioned organizations and forums, the creation of a counter discourse against the UNFCCC negotiations was attempted, which did not focus on a reduction in greenhouse gases and a solution for climate change through a ‘greening’ economy, but rather demands a radical system change. The People’s Agreement, created at the congress, demands far-reaching rights of self-determination such as access to water, land rights, and food production “through forms of production that are in harmony with Mother Earth and appropriate to local cultural contexts.”

A growing number of voices in the Pacific area, in the context of the debates around climate justice, are demanding a new transnational solidarity and unity, to reduce the effects of climate change. One example of the new movements taking up this argument is Pacific Voyaging. In this case, traditional cross-border sea voyages are used in the creation of large sailing groups, coming from various countries in the Pacific, to raise awareness about the effects of unsustainable industry, climate change, and other environmental problems (Farbotko 2012). One demand, linked to postcolonial arguments, sees a dual responsibility for the former colonizing countries. Since they were the cause of anthropogenic climate change as well as the inequality and injustice that
began during the colonial period, the former colonial powers are obliged to take in the inhabitants of the threatened islands of the Pacific (see also Campbell 2010: 25). Political arguments, based on the colonial period and tied to global discourses, are used, which connect to legal arguments.

The German social anthropologist Wolfgang Kempf, following Lazrus (2009) underlines the importance of acknowledging and implementing the abilities, experiences, and networks of the people of Oceania in the fight for climate justice and the adaptation to climate change (Kempf 2009: 195). Too often, top-down measures, which neglect cultural and regional aspects, have been implemented in the climate change-adaptation projects in the Pacific area, and have worsened the situation.

In the demand for climate justice, especially in relation to financial compensation, increased resources are being set aside for countries particularly threatened by climate change (Tanner and Allouche 2011: 4). Over the last decades the international negotiations have, in this case, gained ground in the stagnating rights debates. Since 2003, infrastructure and sensitization programs for adaptation to climate change in Kiribati have been carried out, through the Kiribati Adaptation Program (KAP), with financial assistance from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and other organizations and donors. Next is the National Adaptation Program Action (NAPA), which is the cornerstone of Kiribati adaptation policy on a national level. However, even with a community-based approach, these programs are also criticized in that they are of too little use to the affected communities and inhabitants (Storey and Hunter 2010: 176).

Against the background of climate change, possibilities of an ever more fragmented political and legal landscape are being used. Sachs emphasizes the importance of dealing with climate change as a decidedly rights based issue, meaning that the problems, brought forth in often technically framed questions from scientific experts, should be reframed as human rights issue (Sachs 2009). The main actors, above all the government of Kiribati as well as the advisors and transnational networks and NGOs, who act as knowledge brokers (Merry 2006: 40), base themselves on concepts such as human rights, which have a global reach and can be used in moral and legal arguments. These knowledge brokers (Merry 2006: 40), who explain climate change, its effects in the area, and are supposed to mediate between the different actors during the project work, have gained importance in Kiribati, as almost every project and even the government of Kiribati itself, employ such consultants. They often bring these so-called 'universals,' who build the core of the current humanitarian projects (Tsing 2005: 7), into the debates. They increasingly become deciding factors in the context of climate change debates and demands for ‘climate justice.’ Interviews in Kiribati, conducted in April 2011, show the present state of the discourse around ‘climate change’ in Kiribati. Kaia Miller, an employee of the environmental department states that “The head of the unit, the minister actually said that … ‘Australia should buy us this and that, because climate change is all their fault.’” Here, delegations of responsibility for climate change, and the financial and legal demands that go with them, become clear.

### 3.3 Climate justice on the ground

Even on the local level, where the public and private spheres in the small island state of Kiribati often overlap, the interpretations and perceptions of the climate change debates are marked by discussions around climate justice. Since the settlement of the island group, the inhabitants of Kiribati, the I-Kiribati, have been confronted with a very dynamic environment. Environmental changes and climate variability are closely linked to spiritual ideas (Di Piazza 2001: 35). A living mythology exists in Kiribati, which includes the flora, fauna, weather phenomena, and the environment. Local patterns are based on cultural symbols and categories, which allow people
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to understand the changes in their environment, and to assess and influence them. In the frame
of extreme situations and climate change, the meaning of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is
often accentuated (Lazarus 2009). Berkes describes TEK as traditional knowledge and behavior
passed down through generations, based on the relationship between individuals and their
material and living environments (Berkes 1993: 3).

Interpretation systems such as TEK and their inherent ideals and norms not only influence
the awareness and understanding of environmental impressions, but also the agency of the affected
people, in the context of extreme situations (Kuruppu 2009: 805). They are defeated by con­
tinuous change processes and mirror changing power constellations (Lazarus 2009). Before the
colonial period, important decisions were made in village assemblies (Maneabas), which were
structured through age groups (Di Piazza 2001). Today several decisions fall to the democratic­
ally elected elites and above all religious leaders (Kuruppu and Liverman 2011). While the Cath­
olic Church describes climate change as anthropogenically caused and actively advocates for
adaptation services, the Seventh Day Adventists, for example, surmise that climate change is a
punishment for humanity’s sins and must, therefore, be passively accepted. On a local level
aside from Christian confessions, the government of Kiribati, local and regional media, and
NGOs, influence the discourse around climate change. Media and NGOs partly construct
doomsday scenarios, similar to those posited by Seventh Day Adventists. However, they support
these scientifically. Aspects of climate change and the responsibility of emitting countries play a
big role in the diverse adaptation workshops offered by the church, as well as other organiza­
tions for developmental cooperation and NGOs. However, the blame placement remains relat­
ively diffuse, and lacks concrete rights based argument.

In addition, according to Connell, the danger in Kiribati is that the government of Kiribati
uses climate change as a sort of ‘garbage can,’ in order to divert from failed policies (Connell
2003: 103). Environmental dangers are increasingly described as exogenous factors, which are
out of the political control of the Pacific island states (Storey and Hunter 2010: 172). Therefore,
climate change is described as a cause for various local environmental changes, often due to a
lack in resource management. Ecological degeneration no longer counts as inadequate resource
management, but as rather outwardly caused by climate change (Connell 2003: 103). Connell
(2003) and Storey and Hunter (2010) assume that through the partly dramatic climate prog­
noses, the effects of non-sustainable development maintain a small media presence and get
pushed into the background. Furthermore, Kuruppu and Liverman (2011) accuse the gov­
ernment of Kiribati of abusing the adaptation discourse to reproduce power dynamics in relation to
local actors.

Initial studies indicate that many actors feel increasingly helpless toward predicted climate
change. In spite of everything, few I-Kiribati are ready to emigrate (Kuruppu and Liverman
2011: 665–667). What stands out in Kiribati is that the government mainly brings forth the
negotiations around climate migration. As various interview partners in Kiribati explained, on
the other hand in the above-mentioned forums, the fight for climate justice is supported and
carried out by a large part of the population.

4 Conclusion

The government of Kiribati has decided to proactively address the social effects of climate
change, which are discussed as devastating for the island state, and plan a future for its citizens
outside of Kiribati. What is critical in the case of islands such as Kiribati, which have to invest
in adaptation services, is to pursue various adaptation strategies. This means a combination of
tactics and a wide range of adaptation services in the fields of agriculture, water management,
and coastal protection, as well as the support of citizens’ individual migration projects in addition to state planned resettlements of village communities (Bedford and Bedford 2010: 93). Not all of these measures should be carried out by Kiribati alone, but through the lens of climate justice, demanding the support from various regional and global institutions and actors.

Overall, it becomes apparent, on the one hand, that due to the climate change discourse, more resources are being set aside for the development of Kiribati and the adaptation to climate change in the frame of international cooperation. On the other hand, there are also tendencies, which point out changes in norms and awareness of the government and inhabitants, such as the ‘garbage can’ phenomenon, which could be unfavorable for the development of Kiribati. The change in knowledge, values, and norms, which seems to go hand in hand with the climate change discourse, influences processes and practices within the country, but will still play an important role in transnational negotiation processes for new resources and rights, such as in the form of new expectations. These negotiation processes have multilayered effects on the sustainable development of Kiribati. The negotiated migration programs, as well as victim debates could produce side effects, which are difficult to control. For policymaking, the challenge comes in creating positive conditions for large changes for the future of Kiribati, which at the same time will not negatively affect the development of Kiribati.

The representation of various forums and strategies, which Kiribati uses, shows that the government, the elites, such as church leaders, and civil society in Kiribati, connect to the diversity of international climate change and official climate negotiations. One option for Kiribati’s commitment, in accordance with the division of the movement, which is asserted in the analyses of the global movement for climate justice, cannot be observed. Kiribati receives support from Western groups, which seek to mitigate climate change through a modernization of the economy, as well as from various NGOs and grassroots groups from the Global South and North, which seek an increased system change, and joins their campaigns. The island state is also represented in international organizations and takes part in official UNFCCC negotiations.

The negotiation efforts, which focus on a life without outside influence for current and future generations of I-Kiribati, a reduction of emissions, and on a fair distribution of adaptation services, are still in the early stages. They are often influenced by the negative attitude of countries that could potentially donate or take in citizens, above all the richer OECD countries, in the area of New Zealand and Australia. However, the successes of Kiribati need to be recorded, and instead of mainly subscribing to the role of victim of climate change, the government succeeds in achieving results through various negotiations, which have a positive effect on the situation of I-Kiribati, such as remittances from migration programs and increased financial support for adaptation projects.

In the question of the importance of Kiribati in the climate movement, the role of the island state becomes clear through a view on the circulating images and discourses, described above. A change in policy, as well as other areas, needs to be altered with stories of sinking islands and partly exaggerated horror scenarios. With this, Kiribati and other atoll islands become argumentative resources, fitting perfectly into the globalized media world, but which goes along with a relative public callousness and an erosion of the symbolic ‘sinking island states.’ For Kiribati, the side effects of the discourse are wide reaching and cannot be overlooked.

Notes
1 Interview with Kaia Miller, employee of the environmental department of Kiribati, on April 14, 2011 in her office. The name has been changed on request.
2 Interview with Catholic nun in Bairiki, Kiribati on April 15, 2011.
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