

OPRI Perspectives No.18 [2021]

# “Information Divide”-Associated Difficulties Faced by Overseas Migrants from Pacific Island Nations

Mikiyasu NAKAYAMA, Professor Emeritus, The University of Tokyo

Miko MAEKAWA, Senior Research Fellow, The Ocean Policy Research Institute, The Sasakawa Peace Foundation

## 1. Anticipated Overseas Migration from Island Nations Resulting from Rising Sea Levels Caused by Climate Change

“Climate refugees”—a term that occasionally appears in the media—refers to people who are forced to move to another location because the environment of their home region has worsened due to climate change, making it difficult for them to continue living there. However, technically speaking, the expression “refugee” is inaccurate. This is because the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees provide that a person who leaves his or her country for fear of being persecuted for his or her race, religion, or political standing is called a “refugee.” Ordinary refugees arise suddenly due to an interstate conflict or civil war, while so-called “climate refugees” tend to attract less attention because they emerge gradually in step with the slow progression of climate change. However, the World Bank predicts that approximately 150 million people will be forced to relocate within their countries due to climate change in three regions—sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America—by 2050. This and other developments will present a significant threat to the international community.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the “Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate” (SROCC), which was issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2019, predicts that, by 2100, sea levels will rise as much as 1.10 meters compared to the 2000 level as a result of melting ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica, the loss of glaciers, and thermal expansion of the oceans caused by climate change.<sup>2</sup> In atoll countries, where the average elevation is low at about two meters, implementing effective adaptation measures in response to predicted sea level rises is difficult. Consequently, there are concerns that many citizens will be forced to migrate outside their countries as “climate refugees.” What measures should the countries “sending” migrants and those “receiving” them take for those people to become settled and establish livelihoods in their new countries? This is an important question being posed to the international community.

<sup>1</sup> Rigaud, K., et.al.(2018). Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration. Washington, DC: The World Bank

<sup>2</sup> The Ocean Policy Research Institute, The Sasakawa Peace Foundation. (2019). “[Sanka Hokoku] Kiko Hendo ni kan-suru Seifu-kan Paneru (IPCC) ‘Kaiyo-Seppyoken ni kan-suru Tokubetsu Hokokusho (SROCC)’ ([participatory report] adoption of the Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Environment (SROCC), Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)), September 26, 2019. <https://www.spf.org/opri/news/20190926.html>

## 2. Migration from Island Nations to Other Countries—A Phenomenon that is Already Occurring

Migration from island nations to other countries is already occurring. However, rising sea levels from climate change are not the main cause. Instead, it is taking place for reasons associated with hopes for better education or income, family circumstances, and health. For example, it is reported that there are some 30,000 migrants from the Republic of the Marshall Islands (hereinafter “RMI”) in the United States of America (US).<sup>3</sup> If it is considered that the population of citizens residing within the RMI is about 58,000, this means that a number of citizens equaling about half that population currently reside in the US. The reason for such large RMI migration to the US is the existence of an agreement between three countries—the RMI, the Federal States of Micronesia (FSM), and the Republic of Palau—and the US called the “Compact of Free Association” (COFA). The COFA allows citizens of those three countries to freely enter the US and its territories without a visa and gives them the right to live and work. The largest concentration of RMI migrants living within the US is found around the city of Springdale in northwestern Arkansas. Their number is estimated to be around 15,000.<sup>4</sup> Opportunities to work at several large poultry factories in the area are a major incentive for many Marshall Islanders to settle in Springdale. Many citizens of the FSM are also migrating to the US. According to estimates for 2012, 49,840 lived in the US and its territories and 24,048 lived in the continental US. Migrants from the FSM to the US are concentrated in two regions: (a) northwestern Oregon (Portland and Salem) and (b) Kansas City, Missouri.

## 3. The “Information Divide” Problem Faced by Migrants to the US

Do migrants from the RMI and FSM to the US experience problems when establishing livelihoods in their new country? If so, then investigating the causes of those problems and exploring promising solutions can offer useful hints on how the international community should assist so-called “climate refugees” when they are eventually forced to move from island nations to developed nations as a result of climate change. With this in mind, a collaborative international research project was conducted on the topic of “aspiration and livelihood re-establishment for migrants from the Pacific to abroad” between 2017 and 2019.<sup>5</sup> Participants included the Sasakawa Peace Foundation’s Ocean Policy Research Institute, Hosei University, Tohoku University, the University of Tokyo, the Environmental Law Institute (ELI; in the United States), the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI), the

---

<sup>3</sup> PBS NewsHour. (2018). Marshall Islands: A third of the nation has left for the U.S., 16 December 2018. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/marshall-islands-a-third-of-the-nation-has-left-for-the-us>

<sup>4</sup> Keating, J.(2020) .Why the Marshallese community in Springdale, Arkansas, became a COVID-19 hot spot. SLATE. 15 September 2020. [https://slate.com/technology/2020/09/marshallese-covid-arkansas.html?via=taps\\_topww](https://slate.com/technology/2020/09/marshallese-covid-arkansas.html?via=taps_topww)

University of the South Pacific (USP), and the College of Micronesia-FSM (COM-FSM). One of the questions addressed by this collaborative international research project was “Are people who have already migrated to the United States successfully establishing their livelihoods after migrating?” To shed light on this, it conducted surveys in the area around Springdale, Arkansas, and in Portland and Salem, Oregon. It is pointed out that, when talking about migration in the context of climate change, migration should only be a “last resort.” Nonetheless, “planned migration” has recently gained attention as an important means of avoiding “forced migration” as much as possible when responding to the inevitable impacts of climate change.

The surveys asked targeted migrants to fill out a questionnaire and conducted interviews with people who support migrants in the surveyed regions. The results revealed that an “information divide” exists as a major problem among migrants. The concept of an “information divide” is derived from the “digital divide.” It is a term widely used in the English-speaking world. Although its definition is not fully established, in this paper “information divide” refers to a situation in which migrants cannot obtain adequate information on living and working in their destination, the US, while they are still in their home countries. As a result they face problems in their livelihoods and employment after migrating. It should be noted that Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right of freedom to seek, receive and impart information, regardless of frontiers. Nonetheless, migrants cannot always get all of the information they need to migrate with respect to language, culture, education, surroundings, and awareness.

In Arkansas, only 49% of questionnaire respondents were employed; 46% were not working. It must be recognized that not all respondents were looking for employment, as some could not work due to family care duties or other reasons. However, considering that the US’s average unemployment rate at the time of the survey was around 4%, the employment rate among migrants is quite low. One reason for the low employment rate is the fact that migrants do not get sufficient information on what it takes to find work immediately after migrating while they are still in their home countries. Almost none of the respondents had a degree from a four-year university, only 2% had graduated from a junior college in the RMI, and 13.5% had attended a junior college but not graduated. Forty-two percent had graduated from high school, while 40.5% had attended high school but not graduated. Two percent had received no more than primary education. Additionally, 46% of the respondents said that their English abilities were limited, 23% indicated that they had sufficient ability to converse in English, and only 30% said that they spoke fluent English.<sup>5</sup> One reason for the low employment rate is an “information divide” that leads to poor

---

<sup>5</sup> McClain, S. N., Seru, J., & Lajar, H. (2019). Migration, Transition, and Livelihoods: A Comparative Analysis of Marshallese Pre-and Post-Migration to the United States. *Journal of Disaster Research*, 14(9), 1262-1266.

recognition among migrants that employment opportunities are limited in the US for people who do not have a high school diploma and cannot speak English fluently.

The Oregon survey revealed that the unemployment rate for Micronesians was 27%, which was lower than the rate found by the Arkansas survey. Nonetheless, it is still undeniably higher than the US average.<sup>6</sup> One factor behind the high unemployment rate is that many migrants are unable to stay employed for long and end up being dismissed. Among the obstacles to continuing employment that Arkansas respondents gave were inability to secure stable transportation to their workplaces (34%), inability to arrive at their workplaces before the start of their shifts (15%), and inability to understand their superiors' instructions due to insufficient English skills (15%). Similar trends were observed in the Oregon survey. These problems are also attributable to the "information divide."



Photo 1: Seawater flowing ashore through gaps in a levee during high tide (Majuro, RMI)

Photo 2: A seminar to present study results held with migrants to Oregon from the FSM (Washington, DC, United States)

#### 4. Causes of the "Information Divide"

So what causes the "information divide" to occur? The following presents a few patterns based on the surveys' results.

##### 4.1 Lack of knowledge concerning what is necessary to live and work in the US

The vast majority of respondents to the Oregon survey (84%) reflected that they should have gained more knowledge on life in the US before leaving. Among the requirements they mentioned for establishing a livelihood in their new country, were being provided with information on life in the US before leaving their home countries (84%), receiving life skills

<sup>6</sup> Drinkall, S., Leung, J., Bruch, C., Micky, K., & Wells, S. (2019). Migration with Dignity: A Case Study on the Livelihood Transition of Micronesians to Portland and Salem, Oregon. *Journal of Disaster Research*, 14(9), 1267-1276.

training (21%), and improving their English language skills (13%). Similar lessons were learned among migrants in Arkansas. Thus, the “information divide” also arises in the form of poor communication of lessons that migrants learned through actual experiences to others who are preparing to migrate in their home country.

#### 4.2 Sudden migration without sufficient preparation

The fact that many people migrate “suddenly and without preparation” is another hotbed for the “information divide.” In the cases of the FSM and RMI, almost all residents of those countries have family members or relatives living in the US. And when they receive invitations from those family members—perhaps along the lines of “I’ll send you an airplane ticket, so why don’t you come?”—they tend to leave “right away.” Forty-two percent of the Arkansas respondents migrated suddenly, 30% prepared for between one and three months, and 21% prepared for at least three months. None prepared for a year or more.<sup>7</sup>

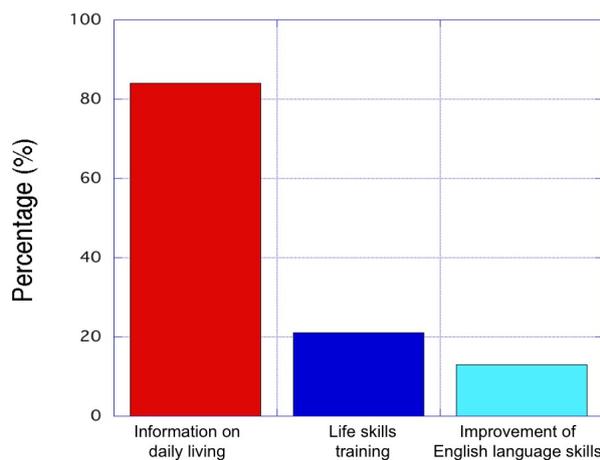


Figure 1: Information and skills that should have been acquired or reinforced before migrating (migrants to Oregon)

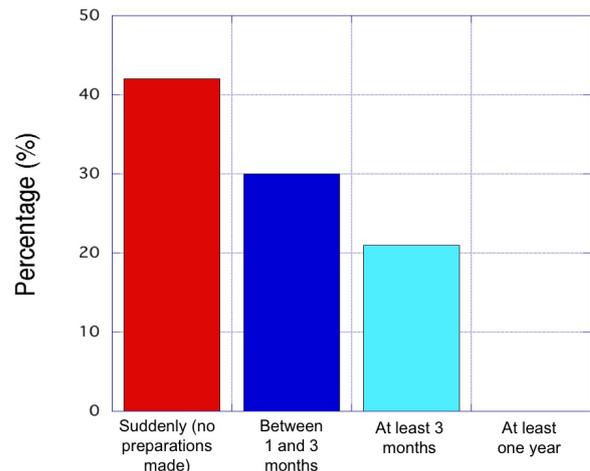


Figure 2: Amount of time spent preparing before migrating (migrants to Arkansas)

#### 4.3 Migrants’ keeping the lessons they learned to themselves

Another cause of the “information divide” is the fact that migrants to the US are perceived as successful people back home. This leads them to avoid communicating the “inconvenient truth” that they later regretted their lack of preparation before leaving, as it conflicts with their reputation back home and their image of themselves. This also leads to the “information divide.”

<sup>7</sup> McClain, S. N., Bruch, C., Nakayama, M., & Laelan, (2020). Migration with dignity: a case study on the livelihood transition of Marshallese to Springdale, Arkansas. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 21, 847–859.

## 5. Narrowing or Eliminating the “Information Divide”

The information divide’s existence appears to be well recognized, even by the RMI consulate in Springdale, for example. However, no specific actions to address it are being taken. This may be because, as will be mentioned below, the nations concerned do not encourage their citizens to migrate to other countries. Additionally, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has a branch office in the RMI’s capital of Majuro that occasionally holds “preparatory courses” for people planning to migrate to the US. However, knowledge of the courses is not widespread and the number of participants is limited. So what measures can be taken to narrow or even eliminate the “information divide?”

### 5.1 The role of school education will almost certainly be limited

It may be possible, for example, to narrow the “information divide” through education. However, the governments of the FSM and the RMI do not encourage their citizens to migrate outside their countries. Therefore, it is doubtful that they will promote education that is oriented toward migrating overseas in their school curricula. Moreover, using school education will be ineffective for people who have already completed their schooling.

### 5.2 Utilizing the one media that is available in home countries will be important

Another possibility is to provide information through the media. It must be noted, however, that medium-wave radio is the only media available in migrants’ home countries. Newspaper readership is limited in both the FSM and the RMI. No local television stations exist in either country. And although mobile phones are common in both countries and are widely used for text messaging, the segment of the population having constant access to the Internet is extremely limited. This means that social media and other Internet platforms can target only a small number of citizens. On Pohnpei island, which is the home of the FSM’s capital, and on Majuro atoll, which is where the RMI’s capital is located, there are medium-wave radio stations that cover almost the entire territory of their respective countries. However, interviews with those stations revealed that they have never broadcast educational programs on the topic of “migration.” Given that medium-wave radio has many listeners, including listeners on remote islands, the presentation of “things that people planning to migrate to the United States should know” through medium-wave radio as a regular program, for example, could be a practical way of addressing this problem.

### 5.3 The challenge for the international community

Migrants to the US have accumulated a large store of information that should be disseminated, and the potential demand for it among people in the FSM and RMI is

considerable. In light of this, attempting to narrow or even eliminate the “information divide” by utilizing the media currently available as an information source should bring benefits. An example might be to produce a weekly 15-minute “interview program” in which people from the RMI or FSM who have migrated to Arkansas or Oregon speak about their own experiences. The program’s audio files would then be sent via the Internet to radio stations in those countries for broadcast. Such an approach would not be costly in terms of either money or human resources. The fee for broadcasting a 15-minute program once a week for one year through those radio stations would amount to no more than a few hundred dollars a year. Such an undertaking could also be made part of official development assistance (ODA) provided to the RMI and the FSM by developed countries. The measures that concerned governments, the IOM, and others are taking to help migrants gain access to information are not functioning as well as they should. Thus, effecting broad improvements toward tackling the “information divide” is an urgent issue for the international community, both in the sense of benefiting “sending” countries and “receiving” countries alike and in consideration of future global migration issues.