

RISING TIDES

An Interview with Aunese and Sunema Simati

Tuvalu is a small nation of islands near Fiji with a combined population of about 10,000 people. Internal flooding, loss of vegetation, and the threat of devastating tropical storms are just some of the issues that its people face today. The Pacific nation is one of the first countries in the world to see its livelihood threatened due to these problems. Tuvalu's Permanent Representative to the United Nations (UN), Aunese Makoi Simati, and his wife, Sunema Pie Simati, sat down with the *Journal* to discuss some of the challenges their nation faces and their hopes for the future.¹

Journal of International Affairs: *What is the attitude of the people in Tuvalu with regard to the many significant problems faced by the country?*

Aunese Simati: We have people who are migrating out of our country. It is a survival choice. But we have diehards who will never leave their place of birth. The reality, though, is that we have to move.

Sunema Simati: But there are very limited choices for all of us. The New Zealand Pacific Access scheme allows seventy-five people from Tuvalu to permanently migrate to the country. It is like a lottery. If you are picked, then you have to satisfy all the necessary criteria. A job offer is the hardest thing to get. New Zealand will help look for a farming job or a cleaning job for example, just to get a job over there.

Aunese Simati: Those who are chosen will do anything to get a residence stamp on their passport, and then when they get there, they will look for a better job.

Sunema Simati: They are desperate. Thinking about our kids and other people's kids: We have two kids with New Zealand passports who were born there. But what about our other two kids? There are very limited choices for permanent migration.

Journal: *You have been an ambassador at the UN for about three years now. What challenges are you encountering in bringing attention to Tuvalu's situation?*

It is really hard to convince people here in the UN to pay attention to climate change because everybody's tired of it.

Aunese Simati: It is not easy. When Hurricane Sandy happened, people woke up and said, "You know, it can happen to us, too." But if anything that devastating happened to us, that would be the end. Our islands are as small as Roosevelt Island [in New York City]. Here, people have options to go further inland or go higher, but we do not have those possibilities. Our islands are very small.

One of our biggest initiatives right now is to make clips or short videos. There is enough talk about it; there is enough written about it. This is the age of technology; we have to get the message out in other ways. People are tired of the message in black and white. Some people might never get it. But others, if you engage all their senses, they might realize, "Oh, wow, [Tuvalu] is really that small."

For us, when we fight against climate change, we feel like we are not just fighting for Tuvalu. There are people in Bangladesh, millions who live on the coast, just like here, for example. But they have chosen to live there. For us, we are emphasizing the issue because 100 percent of our population is affected. It may not be one million people, but it is still 100 percent.

Sunema Simati: We try to say to other countries, "We are the ones affected now, [but] you will be soon, very soon. After we disappear, maybe someone else will take over the frontline efforts. We are at the frontline now, but you may be there in the very near future."

Aunese Simati: It is really hard to convince people here in the UN to pay attention to climate change because everybody's tired of it. But for us, we will never get tired of it.

Sunema Simati: The way the process goes is: We make the statements, then there is an outcome document, and then our position is not included, so we have

a revised statement. It is a long process. Sometimes we ask, “What are we doing here?”

Journal: *What hopes do you have for the climate change negotiations in Paris this year?*

Aunese Simati: We need more actions than words. It has been so many years, and still, the negotiations continue. Of course we want a reduction in emissions, but I do not think they are going to turn out the way we want. The people who are negotiating are backed by big companies. So when we talk with the ambassadors, they are very understanding, but in terms of the negotiations, they are not there.

The United States and China have agreed to reduce emissions, and I think they are starting to come around. They have to take leadership. We are talking about more than a billion people in China. Their view is that they are less developed and that they are more of a middle-income country. Well, they are not. They are one of the fastest growing countries in the world.

Journal: *What policy options can you pursue, besides reduced carbon emissions?*

Aunese Simati: In countries like Kiribati, they have made it a government policy to buy land where their people can migrate. They have bought land in Fiji. For us, that is not a choice for the government to make. We believe it is a private choice. Like other people around the world, if you want to move, you move. We do not want to make it a government policy, as if we are pushing our people out.

We may have a smaller population than other countries, but it is our sovereign right to remain where we are. We consider this a human right. It is our right to exist, and hopefully the world will understand. Our small countries are very religious. We believe that our lands are God-given. If you have cultures that disappear, it is not really good for society because you are missing people who have existed for thousands of years.

That is why I think the government is not pushing to buy lands—it is a means to keep our sovereignty. If we do that, it is almost like we are giving up. But that is just one perspective; that is how we see it. Buying out and moving out of our land—that is an option, but it is an option for a person, not for the whole nation.

Journal: *What major issues are the people who remain in Tuvalu facing as a result of climate change?*

Sunema Simati: The problem now is internal flooding. We talk a lot about sea level rise or coastal areas, but then for us, it is also internal flooding. The water comes up from underneath the land and into the houses. It is damaging the vegetation, in addition to the coast. People have to build their houses raised up now.

Aunese Simati: Tropical storms are getting more regular, but we have been lucky so far. We now know when a tsunami is coming. When the warning comes for the whole of the Pacific, the disaster coordinator comes on the radio. They say, “Please get your children from school and go to the highest point.” And they keep on repeating that instruction. It is so funny to me, because we are all at the highest point.

Sunema Simati: When the [2011] tsunami happened in Japan, Aunese was on the disaster committee. So I am at home, and they called a meeting for the committee every hour. And he kept going there and then coming back to the house. [I said,] “What are you doing? Stay with your family. If a wave comes, you are with your family and helping the small kids.”

Aunese Simati: Or saying goodbye.

Sunema Simati: I was thinking, “What are you doing discussing at this time, as if it would help?” I was starting to get angry.

Aunese Simati: Do not worry, the wave will come and take us all to the ocean, and then we have to swim back [laughs]. If the land is still there, and if it is not, then we are done [laughs again].

The tsunami that happened in Japan—that is the worst-case scenario.

Journal: *What do you see for the future of Tuvalu?*


Aunese Simati: We have a trust fund; there is a lot of aid money. But we tell the UN that this is not sustainable. If we struggle to maintain our economy, we cannot also have additional burdens from climate change, like from coastal erosion. Around here, there are a lot of protections. If you look at Roosevelt Island, it has walls around it, but we do not have that. Here, the only waves come when the boats make them, but with our islands, the waves are natural. The waves break from the coral and hit the islands.

The older generation will stay there and die there. But for us, we have a choice. For us, we tell our children, you do not have a choice, you better move out.

Education is the only choice for them. At least that way, when they move to a new environment, they can survive and find a job, even if it may be hard for them. In Tuvalu, you can survive without a job.

In the UN you have this definition of poverty, but it is not the same to everyone. Tuvalu may be poor because we do not have money in the bank, but in terms of food and shelter—no one in Tuvalu is poor in that way. Because of the small community, everyone looks after everyone else. I find it very awkward that this [the United States] is a very developed country, but there are so many people who do not have shelter. We do not have money in the bank, but there is no one that is that desperate.

We do not say that other countries have a responsibility, but they could do more.

Sunema Simati: I think one other option for permanent migration is other schemes. One or two other schemes would really help. At the moment, we have only one permanent migration scheme. We do not say that other countries have a responsibility, but they could do more. If we just ask Australia maybe to take thirty people a year, that would really help. But we would leave it for the people to decide. 

NOTES

¹ This interview is a condensed and edited version of the exchange between the *Journal* and Aunese and Sunema Simati.