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The Risk of Climate Change and Climate Migration in the Perception of the People of Chuuk, Micronesia

Climate change acts as both the catalyst and amplifier of global and local weather extremes and their consequences, such as droughts and floods. People exposed to extreme weather conditions, are in many cases indigenous or otherwise vulnerable people who are poorly equipped to deal with the situation and they are often ignored and neglected by the authorities. As a consequence, these groups are forced to adjust both their economic activities and settlement structures. As a last resort, these people are often forced to abandon their traditional settlements and seek refuge somewhere else. Because places of religious and cultural significance represent a large part of a community's identity, migration from traditional settlements leads "climate refugees" to lose a sense of spatial connection to their ancestors. Furthermore, refugees are not guaranteed economic security or social acceptance in their new surroundings.

The shallow islands of the Pacific are very vulnerable to the effects of human interaction with the environment, and the first climate-related migrations have already taken place. As a result, these islands have become a symbol for the pending humanitarian crisis. Therefore, the scope of human resilience, dictated by the local perceptions, evaluations, and possible mitigation strategies, has to be identified and improved.

My project concentrates on the indigenous perception of climate change and its consequences, using the island of Chuuk, in the Federated States of Micronesia, as an example. On this island, the loss of traditional settlement sites is especially tragic. Here, land is profoundly connected to prestige and political rights. Taro, an important staple food as well as focus of the local identity, is also grown on these traditional settlement sites, significantly increasing the relative value of the land.

This emic approach towards climate change risks and climate migration shows the difference between Western European perspectives and those of south Asian regions. Identifying and assessing these differences could help further the integration of local perceptions of future legislation on climate protection and climate refugees. As climate change is seen as one of the main reasons for future migrations, such research will become even more important