

Talanoa Dialogue at UN Climate Change Meetings: The Extraordinary Encompassment of a Scale-Climbing Pacific Speech Genre

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ABSTRACT

Introduced to the UN by the Prime Minister of Fiji, the Pacific speech genre of talanoa has become a key frame for international discussion of climate change policy. Traditionally associated with kava-drinking ceremonies, talanoa includes practices that temporarily mitigate differences in hierarchy and rank, which help to facilitate the formation of consensus, a process sometimes referred to as ‘The Pacific Way’. This capacity has also motivated its application to a wide range of social interactions and speech events, scaling up from local contexts and national debates to international arenas. This includes talanoa’s contribution to the facilitation of the Paris Climate Agreement by promoting cooperation and the exchange of ideas. The Talanoa Dialogue differs from other speech genres at the UN, including the process of reconciliation through which resolutions and declarations are formulated. Fiji used its leadership role at international climate change meetings to counter representations of Pacific Islanders as passive victims of climate change, including the threat from rising sea levels. The introduction of talanoa to these meetings can be understood as an ideological project of encompassment in which a regional speech genre became an international framework for addressing one of the most consequential challenges of our times, global climate change.

Keywords: encompassment, Fiji, Pacific Islands, Paris Climate Agreement, scale, speech genre, talanoa, United Nations.

The freest English synonym for *talanoa* is a tale; *yaqona* is Fijian for grog. *Talanoa na yaqona* is the title given to the much-honoured custom of indulging in a conversation round the grog-bowl. (Sundowner, Herbert Tichborne, *Noqu Talano: Stories from the South Seas* (1896))

talanoa, talanoa taka: to yarn, chat, relate a story, usually for entertainment, social amusement. (Ronald Gatty, *Fijian-English Dictionary* (2009))

When we *talanoa*, everyone constructively contributes, everyone respectfully listens, and everyone openly engages to collectively identify solutions and to take action to address the problem at hand. This atmosphere of consensus and solution building is created through a common understanding and respect for each other’s stories and contributions. (Inia Seruiratu, Fiji Minister for Rural and Maritime Development. *Fiji Times* (29 April 2018))

TALANOA DIALOGUE

Talanoa, a speech genre shared by people living in Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa, is commonly translated as idle chat, storytelling, and discussion. It is traditionally associated with kava-drinking ceremonies, although the practice is not limited to ritual contexts.¹ In Tongan, talanoa is a compound noun composed of the verb *tala*, or talk, and the adjective *noa*, which can mean ‘common’, ‘ordinary’, or ‘of no particular value or importance’ (Churchward 1959:379).² The practice of talanoa has been described as ‘an open, interactive style of verbal engagement’ or dialogue (Tomlinson 2020:30).

In 2017, Fiji assumed the rotating leadership of the annual conference of the parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, representing the nations of the Pacific.³ As part of the country’s role as the host of COP 23, Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama introduced the speech genre of talanoa as a ‘new way to drive the implementation of the Paris Agreement on climate change’ (*Fiji Times* 27 July 2017). He explained that talanoa encourages inclusivity, participation, and transparency (*Fiji Times* 27 July 2017), values promoted by the United Nations. Bainimarama hoped that the Talanoa Dialogue would help bring ‘together government, investors, civil society and ordinary citizens to call for even greater ambition from every nation on earth—ambition we need if we are to spare our planet from the worst effects of our changing climate’ (*Fiji Times* 27 July 2017).

Speaking at the Petersberg Climate Dialogue in 2017, Bainimarama noted that the purpose of introducing talanoa as a distinctive style of engagement was to ‘accelerate the collective responses of nations’ to the Paris Agreement (*Fiji Times* 18 July 2017). Observers of the process reported that the ‘Pacific-inspired format of the Talanoa Dialogue ... put researchers, activists and lobbyists on an equal footing with government representatives, sitting in a circle and sharing their stories’ (*Fiji Times* 8 May 2018). Bainimarama indicated that when the Talanoa Dialogue was first introduced at COP 23 in Bonn, ‘we witnessed ... a shift in perceptions about the value of this process’. He reported that ‘any initial cynicism quickly dissipated and participants were surprised how much it improved the level of engagement and flow of ideas’ (*Fiji Times* 17 July 2017). He explained that the format of the Talanoa Dialogue encourages the participants to share ideas about how to improve their respective performances in relation to the goals of the Paris Agreement, concluding that ‘The world expects the Talanoa Dialogue to deliver ... concrete action to raise the ambition of our’ climate change commitments (*Fiji Times* 21 June 2018).

The 2015 Paris Climate Agreement calls for keeping the average temperature rise this century to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels while pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC] 2015). As part of this process, the agreement includes annual ‘facilitative dialogues’ leading up to a ‘global stocktake’ scheduled for every fifth year beginning in 2023 (UNFCCC 2015). This exercise will monitor the progress of the participating states in meeting their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), which are aimed at reducing their respective emissions and establishing viable pathways to carbon neutrality. It will also assess whether the parties to the agreement are cumulatively on track towards achieving the long-term goals of the Paris Agreement.

Under Fiji’s leadership at COP 23, the talanoa format was applied to these facilitative dialogues, which are held in parallel to direct negotiations between states to finalize the details of the Paris Agreement. The complementary objective of the Talanoa Dialogue is for the participants to discuss ways to increase decarbonization. This is a critical element of the Paris Agreement because of the shortfall between what each country was willing to pledge when it was originally signed and the cumulative reduction in carbon emissions needed to limit global temperature rise, with the hope that these discussions will

encourage voluntary but progressive ratcheting up of national achievements beyond their initial commitments.

This article examines how and explains why the speech genre of talanoa has been scaled up from its historical association with kava-drinking ceremonies in Fiji to become an official framework for international dialogues about meeting the goals of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. As Irvine (2016) argues, scale-climbing exercises tend to make exclusive claims about how things should be seen and understood, including by whom. She illustrates this point by referring to Malinowski's (1922) description of the kula ring, a system of exchange that connects multiple sociolinguistic groups and islands in southeastern New Guinea. Irvine criticizes Malinowski for asserting that it is the ethnographer's responsibility to provide an overview of the entire system, a perspective he says is lacking among the participants in kula exchange. That social scientists may claim these abilities for themselves while ignoring evidence of comparable scalar projects among the people about whom they write shows how scale-making can be a political and ideological project (Irvine 2016:214).

The introduction of the Talanoa Dialogue to UN climate change meetings provides an illustration of how Pacific Islanders are not only adept at formulating their own scalar projects, but also how they are able to mobilize them to challenge existing power disparities. Fiji used its leadership role at COP 23 to counter representations of Pacific Islanders as passive victims of global climate change, especially the threat from rising sea levels (Kirsch 2020). This includes how countries from the global north have contributed far more than their share of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, yet the consequences of climate change disproportionately impact people living in the global south, including the Pacific. It also refers to their dependence on scientific research that ordinarily travels from 'centres of power to the fringes of the world' (De Wit et al. 2018:4). But instead of accepting their marginalized position in international debates about climate change, Fiji successfully introduced and promoted talanoa as a means to organize and facilitate policy discussions about climate change. Rather than an example of cultural appropriation by a multilateral organization or simply a branding exercise by Fiji, the Talanoa Dialogue is best understood as an ideological project of encompassment in which a regional speech genre has become an important framework for addressing one of the most consequential challenges of our time, global climate change.⁴

The speech genre of talanoa includes practices that temporarily mitigate differences in hierarchy and rank, which help to facilitate the formation of a consensus, a process that is sometimes referred to as the 'Pacific Way' (Crocombe 1976; Mara 1997; Tupouniua et al. 1975).⁵ By examining video recordings of one of the talanoa dialogues at COP 24, held in Katowice, Poland, in 2018, this article shows how political hierarchies at these meetings, including relationships between developed and developing states, and between the heaviest emitters of greenhouse gases and populations disproportionately affected by climate change, are temporarily suspended in favor of collaboration that is intended to enhance mutual understanding and encourage collective aspirations. A key feature of this speech genre is that presentations remain grounded in specific stories that can be shared, 'building empathy and trust' (UNFCCC 2017:1). This is what makes the talanoa dialogues recognizable as examples of Pacific speech by participants from the region. It also makes it possible for countries with different levels of economic development to discuss their respective commitments to reducing the threat of global climate change.

I also show how the Talanoa Dialogue differs from another speech genre common to UN meetings, which facilitates the production of collective declarations, including the final statements released at the conclusion of COP 24 in Poland. Annelise Riles (2000) has described the process of reconciliation used to generate resolutions and other documents at the UN. Although she emphasizes the aesthetic dimensions of these practices, I call attention

to the power dynamics that shape these texts, which can be contrasted with the ‘key messages’ summarized by the rapporteur at the conclusion of each Talanoa Dialogue and shared with the other participants at UN climate change meetings.

Finally, in response to criticism of international institutions for their failure to adequately address the political challenges of climate change (Weisser and Müller-Mahn 2017), I argue that the Talanoa Dialogue provided a valuable counterpart to more formal negotiations between states at climate change meetings. Their contribution has been especially important to the continuation of forward progress in years when deliberations in the primary forum at these meetings are viewed as incomplete or disappointing. Participation in the Talanoa Dialogue also helps to constitute an international community of actors willing to continue collaborating even as some states renege on their prior commitments, and provides an alternative track for the articulation of concrete actions needed to keep ‘the promise of Paris’ alive, as one of the participants in Katowice observed.

To understand how talanoa became a scale-climbing speech genre, however, it is necessary to return to its roots, both literally and figuratively, in kava drinking.

THE ROOTS OF TALANOA

The speech genre of talanoa is commonly associated with kava drinking.⁶ The presentation of the roots of the kava plant and kava ceremonies are important rituals in Fiji (Arno 1993; Eräsaari 2013; Quain 1948; Toren 1999), Samoa (Duranti 1984; Tomlinson 2007), and Tonga (Marcus 1991). Kava drinking in Fiji accompanies a wide range of social activities, which vary from informal gatherings in the afternoons and evenings by small groups of men to the performance of community labor, such as house-building or stretching pandanus to make mats, as well as to important life-cycle events, including ceremonies held to install a chief or welcome a high chief (Toren 1999:33). In all of these occasions, hierarchal relations are formally recognized. The persons of highest status sit ‘above’ the *talanoa*, or ceremonial kava bowl, while those of lower status sit ‘below’ it, facing them. This spatial ordering is replicated in the politics of speaking, as the chief is not only the first to be served and drink kava, but also the first to speak (Toren 1999:96). This mode of kava drinking is considered *vakavanua* (traditional) and ‘eminently Fijian’ (Toren 1999:33). It represents and reproduces their hierarchical social order (Toren 1999:34).

The contrast between hierarchical speech during kava ceremonies and claims made about the open and participatory style of interaction during the Talanoa Dialogue at UN climate change meetings raises the possibility that contemporary references to the character of talanoa may be an example of an ‘invented tradition’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Alternatively, it might be an example of the contrasting pairs that Nicholas Thomas (1992a), also writing about Fiji, refers to as an ‘inversion of tradition’. Thomas (1992b) describes how patterns of exchange known as *kerekere*, referring to requests or solicitations from kin, became emblematic of Fijian culture during the colonial period in reaction to British efforts to ‘foster individualism and dismantle the communal social order’ (Thomas 1992b:72). He argues that *kerekere* only became recognizable as a Fijian custom because it was seen as an inversion or the opposite of the preferences of the colonial administration, although Marshall Sahlins (1993) has challenged this interpretation.

Similarly, it is worth asking whether the language ideology that treats talanoa as an egalitarian form of dialogue may be exaggerated to emphasize the contrast between the informality of everyday interactions between Pacific Islanders, and their perceptions of Euro-American language practices, including extensive use of formal registers and direct rather than indirect forms of speech (see White and Watson-Gegeo 1990:26–9). This would

parallel the way that collective self-representations such as the ‘Pacific Way’ (Tupouniua et al. 1975) and *kastom* in Melanesia (Keesing 1989) have been influenced by the inversion of tradition.

But an alternative explanation for the competing assessments of talanoa is that hierarchy and egalitarian relationships are not mutually exclusive. Toren (1990:117) makes this argument with reference to chiefly power in Fiji, which is dependent on egalitarian relationships between cross-cousins. This includes their participation in kava ceremonies, which she argues ‘contain the challenge that balanced reciprocity poses to hierarchy’ (Toren 1999:164). From this perspective, hierarchy and equality can be seen as mutually encompassing rather than opposed to one another or incompatible (Eräsaari 2013:50; Toren 1999:164–65).

The egalitarian possibilities of talanoa are also evident in contexts in which relations between chiefs and commoners are not always rigidly hierarchical. One of the examples provided for the use of talanoa in G.B. Milner’s *Samoan Dictionary* (1966:233) addresses this possibility. He defines talanoa as ‘chat, make conversation, have a talk’, and provides the following hypothetical illustration: ‘The chief is talking to (me, us, etc.) *as if* we were his equals’ (233; emphasis added), suggesting that one of the properties of talanoa is the ability to temporarily mitigate differences in rank.⁷ Despite the hierarchical order in which kava is served and consumed, other descriptions of talanoa emphasize egalitarian interaction and freedom from hierarchy. These traits are essential to its appropriateness as the organizing rubric of the Talanoa Dialogue on climate change.

Writing about comparable interactions in neighboring Tonga, Marcus (1991) explains that the presence of a chief ordinarily increases the formality of social interactions. This is especially evident during kava drinking, a common pastime of Tongan men. Marcus distinguishes between formal and informal settings for kava drinking. Informal kava sessions take place in the evening and may last until dawn. During these events, ‘the process of kava preparation and distribution is unmannered, and conversation is unrestrained but low-key’ (Marcus 1991:254). In contrast, formal kava ceremonies are temporally limited, lasting less than three hours. High status individuals are the focus of attention in formal kava-drinking ceremonies: they initiate discussion, new topics are raised with reference to them, and they typically have the final say (Marcus 1991:258).

But on occasion, chiefs elect to ‘come down’ to the level of commoners during these events, revealing other aspects of their individual character or personalities (Marcus 1991:243). This allows the other participants to relax in their presence and engage in ‘idle talk’, the gloss Marcus employs to refer to talanoa. Invoking Goffman’s (1961:108; cited in Marcus 1991:245) notion of ‘role distance’, or ‘holding a role off a little’, Marcus explains that Tongan chiefs seek to ‘hold their nobility apart’ during these interactions. By showing that he is able to be ‘a man of the people’, a chief reinforces his own social standing, and thereby reaffirms the hierarchical system. Such practices of mitigating differences in rank also illustrate the coexistence of hierarchy and equality, and help to explain why talanoa is currently represented as an egalitarian mode of dialogue.

In his analysis of Fijian kava-drinking partners, Arno (1993) shows how the majority of men choose to talanoa with their cross-cousins, with whom they have egalitarian relations. He describes the ‘symmetrical, free-flowing communication’ that occurs between cross-cousins and distantly related individuals, who are able to engage without restraint ‘in discussion, debate, storytelling, and joking’ (1993:76). In contrast, when other people are present, including the members of one’s patrilineal group, the resulting conversation tends to be ‘hierarchical and restricted’ (Arno 1993:85). The choice of kava-drinking partners thus favors egalitarian relationships over hierarchical modes of communication (Arno 1993:104). The preferred form of informal talanoa involves interactions between people who are able to share their views without restriction or social deference.

These examples suggest that even though the speech genre of talanoa includes ritual contexts in which deference in accordance with rank and hierarchy is central, talanoa commonly takes place between equal partners, it is sometimes associated with practices that temporarily mitigate differences in rank, and there is a preference for interactions characterized by ‘free, symmetrical communication ... without restraint’ (Arno 1993:76). These examples help to explain why talanoa is represented as being open and free, an unrestricted context for sharing ideas. They are also crucial to explaining how the practice of talanoa has expanded to cover a variety of social interactions and speech events, including the Talanoa Dialogue at UN climate change meetings. But as I describe below, talanoa did not become an internationally-mobilized speech genre in a single intellectual or epistemological leap; there is a history of invoking talanoa and its regional cognates as forms of mediation in a variety of contexts.

EXPANDING TALANOA AT HOME

The speech genre of talanoa appears in a wide range of contemporary contexts in Fiji.⁸ It was used to describe meetings between politicians and their constituents in a newspaper story about the National Federation Party (NFP) ‘hold[ing] a *talanoa* session with candidates and supporters ... NFP leader Professor Biman Prasad will be present along with candidates from Nadi contesting in the general election’ (*Fiji Times*, 24 October 2018). It was also invoked to refer to meetings between corporations and members of the public: ‘Fiji Sugar Corporation CEO Graham Clark opened a *talanoa* session with farmers at Drasa Seaside farmer Hira Naidu’s residence this morning. He said it was always good to speak to farmers and to hear their issues, challenges and suggestions. About 100 growers are attending the *talanoa* session’ (*Fiji Times*, 4 October 2018). Talanoa has also been employed to describe meetings between government officials, teachers, and parents at local schools (*Fiji Times*, 10 February 2018).

Even more significantly, after the May 2000 coup in Fiji, the East–West Center at the University of Hawai’i sponsored a series of talanoa sessions with the leaders of the competing political factions ‘in an effort to promote interethnic harmony and national unity’ (East–West Center 2004:7; see Hassall 2009:87). The organizer of the event explained that talanoa was ‘based on the principles of reconciliation, inclusion, honesty, [and mutual] respect’ (Halapua 2000:4). The contributors were asked to participate without preconditions (Halapua 2000:2). Specific dialogues were convened on land reform, sugar reform, constitutional reforms, and race relations, all contentious topics (East–West Center 2004:7). The Fijian Prime Minister at the time, Laisenia Qarase, explained that talanoa was an example of the ‘Pacific Way’, which draws on ‘island traditions of consensus’ (East–West Center 2004:7). The format from the talanoa addressing conflict in Fiji was also applied to a reconciliation process that brought people from Malaita and Guadalcanal together after the ‘ethnic tensions’ in the Solomon Islands (East–West Center 2004:7).

Why is the speech genre of talanoa invoked in all of these contexts, from a politician speaking to members of his electorate, a corporate manager meeting with farmers, government officials interacting with teachers and parents, and ethnic groups on the opposite sides of violent conflicts? In the first three examples, there is a pre-existing hierarchy the organizers wish to temporarily collapse to facilitate a more egalitarian mode of dialogue. In the mediation of political disputes, conducting an open-ended dialogue was seen to be essential (Halapua 2013). By the time that talanoa was proposed as a forum for international dialogue on climate change policy, the speech genre had already demonstrated its scalar capacity in a variety of novel contexts. The resulting dialogues differed significantly from the primary speech genre at the United Nations, which facilitates the production of UN declarations.

THE MAKING OF UN DECLARATIONS

Writing about the contribution of Fijian women to international meetings on women's rights, Annelise Riles (2000) describes the process through which declarations are produced at workshops and conferences sponsored by the UN, including meetings on climate change. The expected output for most UN meetings is a set of resolutions that summarize the discussion (Merry 2006:38–44; Riles 2000:78–91). Although Riles focuses on the textual form of these international legal instruments, she also describes the speech genre that gives rise to their production. The texts typically begin by quoting passages from previous declarations and reports that form the starting point or baseline of the new resolutions. Key points from the discussion are then added to the text, often from materials prepared in advance or during 'after-hours' meetings organized by a steering committee or another subset of the group. When differences of opinion or competing positions arise during the discussion, they are bracketed off, where they remain sequestered from the remainder of the text until the differences can be satisfactorily resolved. Riles (2000:86) refers to the bracketed-off text as political 'rabbit holes' that the participants seek to avoid. She describes how discussions focus on replacing the contested text contained within brackets with more neutral or delimited claims. The resulting documents conceal political differences and disagreements.

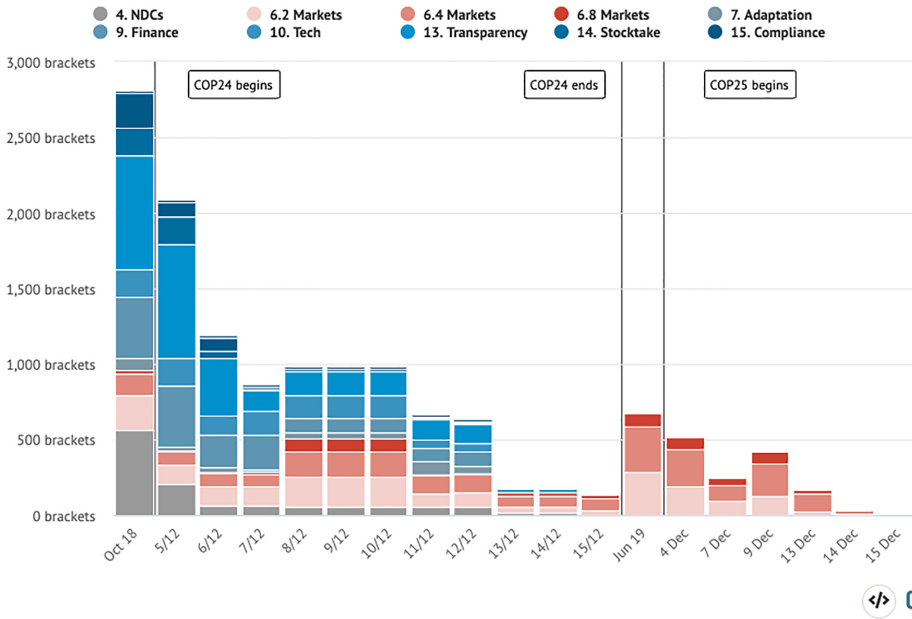
The process of reconciling bracketed text is also the means by which the Paris Agreement will be finalized. Important discussions take place during multiple side-meetings, hallway conversations, and in backrooms where delegates hammer out key sections of the text (see Weisser and Müller-Mahn 2017:811). In some cases delegates have been instructed by the countries they represent not to alter certain predetermined positions, such as whether developed countries owe compensation to developing countries for loss and damage resulting from climate change. The persistence of disagreements in the form of text sequestered 'within brackets' has led to sticking points at the last two international climate change meetings in Poland and Spain. In 2018, COP 24 was nearly derailed from the outset when several states refused to 'welcome' the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2018) report on the consequences of exceeding 1.5°C, even though the final scientific document had been laboriously vetted line-by-line by state representatives. They were concerned that welcoming the report implied acceptance of its findings and recommendations. Instead, they were only willing to 'note' the reception of the report, which downgraded its significance and value for the ensuing meeting.

Similar disagreement clouded the final declaration that emerged from COP 25 in Madrid. The participants were unable to reach a consensus on reporting requirements seen as essential to the implementation of the Paris Agreement for 2020, including the rules for a new global carbon market mechanism (Evans and Gabbatiss 2019), especially the avoidance of double-counting carbon trades (see Schneider et al. 2019). The effort to reach an agreement on these issues extended the end of the meeting an additional 44 hours beyond its scheduled conclusion, with the process of gradually replacing disputed sections of the text with acceptable alternatives ultimately falling short, engendering frustration and recrimination (see Fig. 1).

In her analysis of the production of UN declarations, Riles (2000) emphasizes the aesthetic dimensions of the process, that the final document must have the look and feel of other UN declarations, including the incorporation of prior, settled passages. But as Hull (2012:26) argues, 'one does not have to choose between proceduralism and reference', or between form and meaning when analyzing these documents or the discussion that produced them. Although the emphasis on consensus building in the formulation of these texts suggests a level playing-field,

By the close of COP25, the **Article 6 carbon markets** rulebook texts were all but agreed

With just one set of [brackets] surrounding each of the three texts, parties were nevertheless unable to reach consensus



Number of unresolved sections of text in square brackets in the draft Paris Agreement rulebook, broken down by each article of the deal. Progress is shown during negotiations at COP24 in Katowice, at the June 2019 intersessional meeting in Bonn and during COP25 in Madrid. Apart from the Article 6 rules for international cooperation and carbon markets, all of the other rulebook items were agreed by the end of COP24. Source: Carbon Brief analysis of draft negotiating texts. Chart by Carbon Brief using Highcharts.

Figure 1: Bracketed text in the Paris ‘rulebook’ at COP-24 and COP-25 in Madrid. The three parts of Article 6 (which refer to carbon market mechanisms) are shown in shades of red, and the other parts of the agreement, which were resolved at COP-24, in shades of blue.

Source: Carbon Brief (Evans and Gabbatiss 2019). Accessed at: <https://cbhighcharts2019.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/article-6/COP-text-Madrid.html>.

the ability of particular parties to revise or block text contained within brackets indicates the role of political power in these interactions (Kirsch 2014:206–7).

It is worthwhile to briefly compare the participation of Fijian women at UN meetings on women’s rights that Riles (2000) describes with the Talanoa Dialogue that is the focus of this article. The political objective of the Fijian women attending these meetings was their inclusion and contribution to the larger policy process. The specificity of their Pacific background was marked by gifts of mats, which are produced and mobilized by Fijian women in local exchanges, to other participants at these meetings with whom they exchanged documents (Riles 2000:72). Riles suggests that the aesthetic similarities between the handling of mats and the production of documents at UN meetings facilitated the ability of Fijian women to contribute to the process of turning brackets into text. In contrast, kava-drinking, a key context of the Talanoa Dialogue, is historically identified with men, although it has expanded to include women as community members and political actors (Tomlinson 2007). In both cases, Fijian participation was intended to mark the presence of the Pacific at these international meetings, albeit following alternative politics of inclusion and encompassment.

TALANOA DIALOGUE AT COP 24

The instructions given the participants in the Talanoa Dialogue at COP 24 were that their contributions should be ‘constructive, facilitative and solutions oriented’, and ‘should not lead to discussions of a confrontational nature in which individual Parties or groups of Parties are singled out’ (UNFCCC 2017:1). This process is intended to ‘advance knowledge through common understanding’, resulting in ‘better decision-making for the collective good’ (UNFCCC 2017:1). The dialogue asks three general questions. ‘Where are we?’ refers to the current status of efforts to achieve climate change goals. ‘Where do we want to go?’ refers to the refinement of those shared ambitions. ‘How do we get there?’ refers to the process of achieving the goals they have set. The instructions to the participants conclude by stating that ‘It will be important to send clear forward looking signals to ensure that the outcome of the dialogue is greater confidence, courage and enhanced ambition’ (UNFCCC 2017:4).

The following discussion is based on my transcription of a video recording of a ministerial-level Talanoa Dialogue held during COP 24 in Katowice, Poland, on 11 December 2018. The participants in the dialogue represented five countries, a private sector energy provider, and an environmental NGO, which is comparable to the composition of the other twenty meetings of the Talanoa Dialogue in Poland. Participation in these dialogues was scheduled in advance, with ten to twelve slots per session, although not all of the registered participants were able to attend their assigned meetings. Although the formal organization of these meetings differs significantly from impromptu participation during informal talanoa sessions in the Pacific, the dialogue was nonetheless intended to encourage mutual understanding.

This particular dialogue was moderated by Ralph Regenvanu, the Foreign Minister from Vanuatu. The first hour was taken up by short presentations, with an additional fifteen minutes allotted for discussion and an overview presented by the official rapporteur. The meeting spaces for the Talanoa Dialogue were materially and symbolically differentiated from the other venues for discussion at COP 204 by the display of woven mats, wooden *tao* bowls for serving kava, and other artifacts from Fiji (see Fig. 2). The moderator began by explaining the format:

As we know, the Talanoa Dialogue is a forum for telling stories that can assist us in moving forward in this question to provide a better world for future generations. Talanoa Dialogue is based on telling stories, having discussions, and getting some key messages that we can take from this group back to the larger group by the end of today...

He asked the participants to focus on the

third question in the Talanoa Dialogue mandate, ‘How do we get where we want to go?’ How do we get there? Achievements, progress, challenges, experiences, [and] in particular, lessons. That’s what we want to hear out of this dialogue, is some key take-aways that can be shared with other countries that can assist them in giving ideas as to how do we get there, how to do we get where we want to go.

The contributions to the Talanoa Dialogue were heterogenous. They offered practical lessons as well as allegories.⁹ They avoided criticism or confrontation even when addressing contentious issues such as the responsibility of developed states to support developing states in their transition to renewable energy. One country invoked the challenges of being a small nation in Russia’s orbit and its desire for membership within the European Union as the

driving force behind its commitment to the Paris Agreement. Several of the presenters commented on the value of the Talanoa Dialogue and advocated its extension to other contexts. I provide three extended examples from the dialogue that represent the views of a developed state, a corporation, and a developing state.

Lessons from the European Union about achieving climate change goals

The representative from the European Union presented a story about how it is reaching its goals under the Paris Agreement, offering lessons to the other participants in the dialogue. I quote at length from his presentation, which is both chronologically and didactically organized:

I come to tell a story of success. I'm speaking on behalf of the European Union and its twenty-eight member states. I think that we have a good [example?]. The first lessons we have to learn is that in order to have ambitious policies, you need four elements. You need a long-term vision: 'Where are you going?' You need to establish legislation in all the areas of the economy. All economic sectors have to contribute to reducing emissions. You have to have support mechanisms to facilitate the energy transitions. And you have to have strong governance.

We have all of these elements in the European Union under the Kyoto Protocol [the predecessor to the Paris Agreement, which was completed in 1997]. We had a roadmap in 2011 to decarbonize our economy by 80 percent in 2050, at the beginning. We had all the needed legislation in renewable energy, in energy efficiency ... in the sectors of transport, waste, buildings, and agriculture, with binding targets of [reduced] emissions for the 28 member states, and sanctions if we don't achieve [them]. And ... in our multinational framework, 20 percent of the budget was allocated to climate action.

So, we have the means and a strong governance. The commission was making sure that the targets were achieved. What has been the impact? We have under the Kyoto Protocol a target to reduce by 20 percent compared with 1990 numbers. In 2017, we have cut already our emissions by 22 percent. But our GDP [Gross Domestic Product] grew by 58 percent. So, we have coupled reduced emissions with economic growth. We have shown that you can grow economically and at the same time reduce emissions. First lesson.

What have we done afterwards? We presented our NDC [Nationally Determined Contributions]. And now we already have the needed legislation in place to deliver our commitment, our NDC.

What has happened is that while this process was continuing the [indecipherable] was more ambitious and now we're in a position with a stronger renewable energy policy and stronger energy efficiency to reduce our emissions by 45 percent in 2030. With this legislation in place, in 2050 already we will reduce by 60 percent ... And we need more effort. That's why we have launched a long-term strategy with eight different pathways and carbon technologies and actions, and we have in two of the pathways, new elements to reach the 1.5° target.

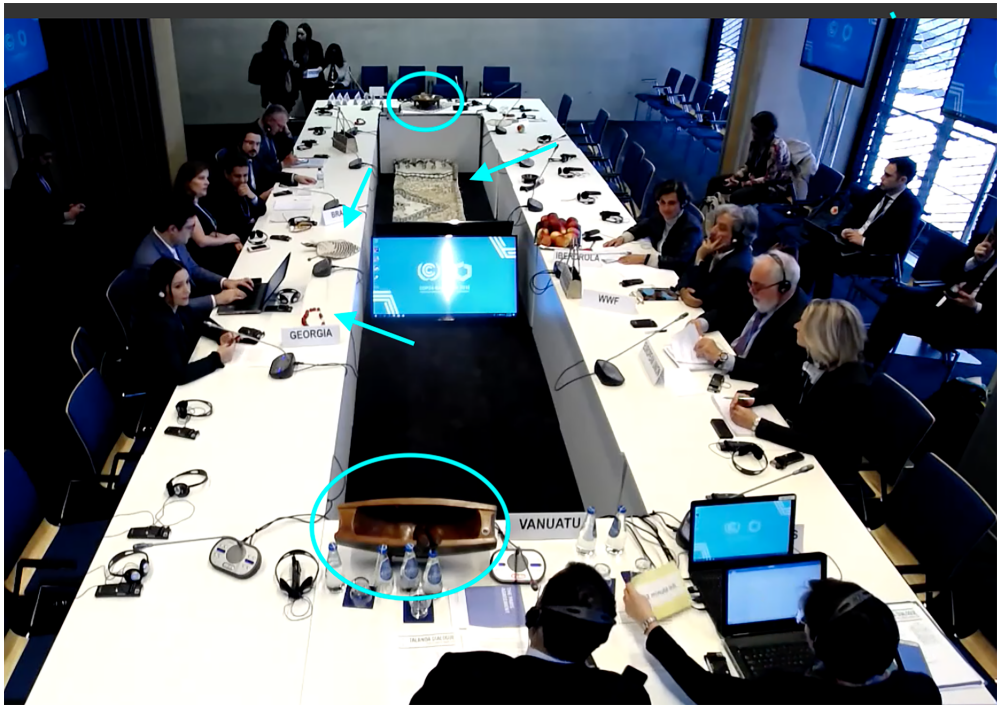


Figure 2: Ministerial Talanoa Dialogue at COP-24 in Katowice, Poland, moderated by Ralph Regenvanu, Foreign Minister of Vanuatu. (11 December 2018). Blue circles and arrows indicate strategically-placed artifacts from Fiji, including a *tanoa* and a mat.¹⁰

The objective of the European Union is to become climate neutral ... by 2050. It will be the first major economy to have a target of this nature. It is possible if you combine all the technologies that you have now, you have to combine with biomass, with carbon capture, use, and storage, and with sinks, increasing the capability of [carbon reservoirs in] the landscape.

So, our lesson, our recommendation is: it can be done, it has to be done, and you need to support other people to be able to do so ... We will achieve two things, to develop technology that other people will use in the future. And, also, at the same time, we have to have financial solidarity and that's why the European Union has supported with public finance [for] developing countries and in 2017 the contribution for European Union member states ... totals more 20 billion Euros, which are the largest contributor of climate finance.

So: Ambition, solidarity, ambition.

In his presentation, the representative of the EU walked the delegates through the steady ratcheting up of its commitments to renewable energy, greater efficiency, and decarbonization from the Kyoto Protocol to the Paris Agreement. In particular, he emphasized how the EU has been able to decrease its emissions from fossil fuels while simultaneously increasing its GDP, an issue of concern for developing countries reluctant to risk compromising their economic growth by directing resources towards their climate change

goals. His presentation illustrates the goal of the Talanoa Dialogue to share successful experiences from which other countries can learn and subsequently emulate. He also emphasized the EU's solidarity with these countries by its willingness to share technology and provide financial resources to assist their transition.

Importance of the private sector

Unlike the main forum of the UN, which is a representative body of member states, the Talanoa Dialogue includes participants from the private sector. This reflects a larger trend in which nonstate actors increasingly play a role in multilateral forums (Corson et al. 2014:22). A representative from the Spanish energy utility Iberdrola describes how the company's business strategy was aligned with the goals of reducing climate change, allowing the company to present what it described as a 'very optimistic and positive message'. The presentation from Iberdrola also emphasizes the lessons that other private sector actors could follow, although the representative made it clear that the private sector could not achieve these goals on its own, pointing to the need for policies regarding carbon pricing. She also adopts a historical approach to the development of successful interventions:

Iberdrola is a public utility that is fully committed [to a] sustainable and competitive energy model. Nearly two decades ago, we started investing in clean energy, in particular in on-shore and off-shore wind and hydroelectric energy, together with the development of networks [and storage] to integrate all this new energy.

Our commitment in those moments has made the company well-positioned in the worldwide scenario with the renewable capacity of almost 30,000 Megawatts. Half of it is located in Spain. Our experience in this journey has allowed us to send a very optimistic and positive message. This is that the opportunities that arise with [a] business strategy aligned with climate change goals are huge.

So, our contribution to this Talanoa Dialogue is precisely this experience and how to achieve our climate goals. I will sum up our story in three main ideas ... First, the energy sector is at the root of both the problem and the solution. So, climate change is mainly caused by the current energy model based on fossil fuels. So, if we want to tackle climate change we need to decarbonize and change completely the energy model through energy efficiency and renewable energy.

We know that decarbonizing the energy sector by 2050 is possible both technologically and economically. Thanks to the evolution, or I would say ... [the] revolution of clean energy based on renewables ... [technologies that] only a few years ago were complex and costly, now are viable. And not only viable but sustainable because we [also] find some other benefits while changing the energy model...

[The] second idea is that [private sector companies] are ready to play their role, but we need also policy frameworks that now are lagging far behind. While talking about policies, I would like [to] highlight that we consider essential to move into a low carbon economy by environmental tax reform based on the

‘polluter pays’ principle by putting a price on CO₂ and other pollutants to eliminate carbon distortions and send the [necessary] price signals to investors and customers.

[The] third idea is that all of us should be on board to face this huge challenge. Energy is one main pillar of the economy, therefore transforming the way that we produce and use energy, we will transform the whole economic system. But I would like to stress that we need to pay attention to the most vulnerable groups, communities, and sectors. Because according to the International Labor Organization ... achieving the Paris Agreement will result in a positive balance of 18 more million jobs. There will be 24 million jobs ... completely new[ly] created, and we will [lose] six million jobs. So, it’s a good balance, but we have to recognize that some of our areas will be losing their jobs. So, we have we have to support ... new strategies ... giving them ... [economic] opportuni[ties].

The representative from Iberdrola makes three key points. First, she emphasizes the economic viability of investments in renewable energy, a key issue for both the public and private sector given the concern that shifting away from fossil fuels will result in financial losses, providing encouragement to other entities making this transition. Second, referring to the need to compensate people who lose their jobs as a result of this transformation, including coal miners, she supports the call for a ‘just transition’, as it is referred to later in the dialogue. Third, while presenting a story of the company’s success to date, she also addresses the limits of what the private sector can be expected to accomplish on its own without accompanying transformations in public sector legislation, echoing a point made earlier by the representative from the EU, including the need to implement carbon pricing to accelerate the transition to renewable energy. This suggests that both the public and private sector have important roles to play in solving the climate crisis, rather than just one or the other.

Responsibility of heavy emitters to compensate vulnerable populations

Global discourse about climate change often distinguishes between actors who bear a disproportionate share of the responsibility for the production of greenhouse gases, sometimes referred to as ‘perpetrators’, in contrast to those who contribute little but are significantly impacted, who are sometimes labelled ‘victims’ (Orlove et al. 2014:261). In his presentation, the representative for Vanuatu, who is also the moderator, eschews this divide as well as the temptation to assign blame (see Rudiak-Gould 2014). I quote at length from his presentation:

The story I want to tell is of the installation of a micro-desalination plant in my home island, which is a tiny little island in the South Pacific ... We have all our power generated by solar. At times we use diesel generators, but generally for lighting, it’s solar. But we have no water source apart from rain water tanks and ground wells. And with rising sea levels, the ground wells are becoming salty. And so, when there are extended periods of draught, which is also happening with climate change, the tanks run dry and [access to] water has become a serious problem.

We had a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer working on the island who had skills in writing project proposals. He wrote a project proposal with the community to his

organization and USAID. We were able to get funding. The community itself raised half the money through [its] fundraising efforts; the other half of the money we were able to get from a German NGO we applied to. Also, through Peace Corps, USAID was able to give us some money. And we were able to engage this company in Australia that makes very innovative, cutting edge micro-desalination plants. We were able to install one of these plants [which is] fully solar powered.

The opening took place about three months ago and it was a time of great celebration and joy on my island because for the first time ever in the history of our island, including all of our previous generations that have passed, our ancestors, we'd never had this situation, where we had a reliable source of drinking water that wasn't ... a ground well, wasn't a rainwater tank. And so, this was a huge step forward that was achieved by a partnership between our community, a Peace Corps volunteer, the U.S. government, a German NGO, [and] the Australian technology company.

I think it is a success story of how communities, when they identify their needs and work passionately for them in partnership across the globe, we can achieve solutions that really transform [the] lives of communities.

While the other stories in this Talanoa Dialogue focus on questions of mitigation, referring to the reduction of fossil fuel emissions, this account emphasizes adaptation, or successful adjustment to changing environmental conditions. While the Foreign Minister from Vanuatu does not invoke the language of equity or fairness that appears later in the dialogue in relation to the need for a 'just transition', he nonetheless presents an account in which a problem is solved by transferring financial resources and technology from more developed countries to a less developed country. Instead of criticizing the other participants in the dialogue for their disproportionate contributions to global greenhouse emissions, he presents a positive story about how adaptation can be improved through international cooperation.

Later in the dialogue, the representative from the EU responded to a question about its approach to environmental tax reform based on the principle of 'polluter pays' to obtain the financing needed to support adaptation to climate change impacts. He acknowledges the validity of the principle of 'polluter pays' and noted that it is 'clearly embedded' in their 'internal legislation'. With reference to the larger context of the question, the representative from the EU explains that the European Union is the largest 'provider of public finance to developing countries', albeit without explicitly linking this position to the question of economic responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions. He also points to the different starting points of the signatories to the Paris Agreement, acknowledging that the EU has already begun to reduce its overall emissions, while many developing countries have yet to do so: 'We are reducing our emissions. The[irs] have not yet peaked'. Finally, he acknowledges the need to broaden the responsibility for supporting the transition to renewable energy sources: 'those countries in the position to do so, should also cooperate, in order to facilitate ... the transition, which is complex and difficult'.

In each of these statements, the positive example of collaboration, and the discussion about the responsibility of historically large emitters to assist the transition of other countries to renewable energy, the participants in the Talanoa Dialogue strive to avoid confrontation or conflict in an effort to reach consensus on these issues, rhetorical strategies that are strikingly different from the politicized negotiations in the main forum of the meeting.

CONCLUSION

The key messages from each of the 21 talanoa sessions were incorporated into the final report for COP 24 in Katowice, Poland in 2018. The rapporteur for the session examined here repeated Brazil's claim about the importance of governments listening to communities and the value of local solutions.¹¹ However, referring to the story told by the representative from Vanuatu, she noted that solutions often require partnerships, as well as finance and proper technology. Drawing on the presentation from the EU, the rapporteur emphasized the role of strong central governance and a legal framework that can withstand changing political perspectives. Referring to the presentations by the EU and Iberdrola, she underscored the importance of showing solidarity with countries that have yet to make the transition. Climate finance is required to 'ensure a just transition', she pointed out, and the principle of 'polluter pays' is one way to provide support to those adversely affected. Invoking the presentation by Iberdrola and comments made by the participant from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), she noted the contribution of nonstate actors to solving these problems, and that climate action can be a business opportunity. But this requires a stable regulatory framework, she stated, which the EU has shown how to provide. Finally, the rapporteur cited a comment made at the end of the Talanoa Dialogue, which paraphrased one of the opening statements at COP 24, that success depends on long-term political will, which the novel format was intended to encourage, rather than short-term political interests.

The discussion during the Talanoa Dialogue provides a valuable counterpoint to the contentious political negotiations over the details of the Paris Agreement. The moderator from Vanuatu explained how 'telling stories', and especially 'success stories', can help other countries achieve their climate change goals. Other participants also emphasized the value of sharing their experiences through the talanoa format. As the delegate from the EU noted, 'Our contribution to this Talanoa Dialogue is precisely [sharing] this experience and how to achieve our climate goals and the point is how much these lessons, stories, have raised the importance of partnership and dialogue as a way to build a long-term vision'. He later added: 'We are having now, a very good Talanoa Dialogue ... all over this COP [conference], no'? Several of the presenters emphasized the importance of conducting talanoa dialogues at the domestic level, including the representative from the EU: 'I think it will be very important to maintain this spirit of dialogue within the different countries to prepare these future strategies and help support our citizens. Because we will never achieve climate neutrality if there is not the support of the citizens'. Apparently responding to the Yellow Vest protests against the increase in fuel prices the previous month in France, he continued, 'citizens will have to change their behavior. That requires ... many talanoas in all our countries'. Similarly, the minister for the environment in Brazil described how his country had already undertaken talanoa dialogues 'with indigenous peoples, with academia, with civil society, with the public sector and the private sector' on identifying solutions to climate change challenges.

The primary goal of the Talanoa Dialogue is to encourage states and other actors to 'raise their ambitions from one climate meeting to the next to achieve the promise of Paris', as the representative from WWF noted in his comments. Yet under the terms of the Paris Agreement, these commitments cannot be compelled; they must be voluntary. Given the cumulative nature of the problem, it is important not to ostracize countries that fall behind or drag their feet, because their continued participation is necessary. It is precisely this dynamic of facilitating collaboration, avoiding criticism, and promoting consensus that makes the Talanoa Dialogue an appropriate and effective speech genre in which to conduct these discussions.

The Talanoa Dialogue is described as being held without preconditions or obligations. It is intended to emphasize potential solutions instead of being punitive or critical.

It acknowledges the different starting points of the participants, as the representative from the EU noted with reference to developing economies: ‘We are reducing our emissions. The[irs] have not yet peaked’. These are the features of talanoa that have been emphasized by its proponents as fostering dialogue in which the participants actively listen to each other, respect alternative points of view, and seek solutions that are mutually beneficial.

But there’s an additional aspect to these interactions that helps to explain why the Talanoa Dialogue is more than an example of cultural appropriation by a multilateral organization or an empty branding exercise by Fiji. The transcript from the Talanoa Dialogue analyzed here shows how global discourse about policies to limit climate change is facilitated by a speech genre and deliberative process that emphasizes the formation of a consensus, a practice commonly referred to as the ‘Pacific Way’ (Crocombe 1976; Mara 1997; Tupouniua et al. 1975). In these interactions, existing hierarchies such as the relationship between developed and developing states, or between the largest emitters of greenhouse gases and populations especially vulnerable to climate change, are collapsed in favor of collaboration that enhances mutual understanding and encourages collective aspirations. A key feature of this genre of speech is that it does not become more formal, more abstract, or more generalized as hierarchical differences and social distance between the participants increases. Instead, the emphasis on shared stories is meant to encourage empathy and trust. This is why it retains an identifiable quality as Pacific speech to the participants from the region, and why it works as a vehicle for countries at different levels of economic development to discuss their commitments to reducing the threat of global climate change.

These properties of talanoa also explain how and why it has successfully been scaled-up as a speech genre from both formal and informal kava-drinking ceremonies to discussions between sugar companies and sugar cane farmers, politicians speaking with members of their electorate, and elected officials, teachers, and parents at local schools in Fiji. In all of these contexts, there is an implicit hierarchy or social distance the organizers wish to collapse to facilitate dialogue, much like the role distancing of Tonga chiefs when they wish to discuss matters informally with commoners. The emphasis on dialogue without preconditions instituted after the coup in Fiji also makes talanoa an appropriate format for conducting these international discussions.

Not only was Fiji able to mobilize the scale-climbing properties of talanoa to counter representations of Pacific Islanders as passive victims of climate change, but it was also able to establish the value of a regional speech genre in helping to raise global ambitions to limit climate change. As a result, the Talanoa Dialogue has become a dominant frame for discussing the response to global climate change, achieving the promise of the Paris Agreement, and protecting the future of the planet. Now that’s encompassment.

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ENDNOTES

1. Kava is a muddy, intoxicating beverage made from the root of the plant *Piper methysticum*, the effects of which are generally described as relaxing.
2. In Samoan, where *noa* only appears in compound words, it means ‘of no importance, worthless, easy, done without particular object or purpose’ (Milner 1966:157). In contemporary Tongan parlance, *noa* also means zero (Halapua 2000:1). In Hawaiian, *noa* refers to things that are free of taboos or restrictions (Pukui and Elbert 1986).
3. COP 23 was originally designated the ‘Pacific COP’, and Fiji has been criticized by its neighbors for coopting the leadership of the COP and sidelining the other countries in the region (Rika 2018).
4. In her analysis of how the Latin American speech genre of *testimonio* was mobilized by Colombian activists lobbying the U.S. Congress, Tate (2013) provides an example of another regional speech genre that has been scaled-up for political purposes. She argues that personal forms of representing suffering through *testimonios* promote solidarity between human rights claimants and government policy-makers.
5. Cromcombe (1976:15) indicates that ‘Talking things over rather than taking rigid stands, preparedness to negotiate, flexibility, adaptation and compromise are frequently spoken of as key features of The Pacific Way’, although Lawson (2010) explains that these ideas differ from the original articulation of the concept, which was more conservative and hierarchical in terms of promoting deference to traditional leaders (see Mara 1997).
6. Writing about the use of the term *talanoa* by Indo-Fijians, Brenneis (1984:504) notes: ‘Talanoa is one of the relatively few loan words taken into Fiji Hindi from Fijian. In Fijian it means general conversation rather than gossip *per se*. Its use in Fiji Hindi carries some connotation of idle chatter, sustaining the Fiji Indian stereotype of Fijians as given to pointless socializing’.
7. I am grateful to Susan Philips (pers. comm. 2019) for this turn of phrase.
8. The speech genre of *talanoa* is increasingly invoked by Fijians and other Pacific Islanders as a culturally appropriate research method (Naboba-Baba 2006; Vaioleti 2006), a theological principle (Halapua 2008; Tomlinson 2020), a journalistic style (Robie 2019), and a distinctive mode of discussion or dialogue.
9. The representative from Georgia presented a parable about how the people in her country came together in response to heavy raining and flooding in Tbisili, in which 20,000 volunteers worked together to clean up the capital city: ‘The society was united. They worked together’. She argued that such collaboration offers a model the country needs to follow in addressing climate change, involving contributions from civil society, the private sector, and multiple government agencies.
10. Accessed at: <https://attend-emea.broadcast.skype.com/en-US/2a6c12ad-406a-4f33-b686-f78ff5822208/b1279c01-146f-43f0-ad48-059c7fbc0eb4/player?cid=5cfatdzt2ntems77zlcjs6j6fhqykegeduhmykfbmlqlcmk4uq&rid=EMEA>. (This video recording is no longer available online, although the transcript produced by the author remains in his possession).
11. These discussions took place prior to Jair Bolsonaro’s inauguration as president; one of his first official acts was to cancel Brazil’s sponsorship of COP 25 in 2019.

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

FIJI TIMES (Suva).

NUI TALANOA DIALOGUE (COP 24, Katowice, Poland). Moderated by Ralph Regenvanu, the Foreign Minister from Vanuatu. 11 December 2018. Accessed at: <https://attend-emea.broadcast.skype.com/en-US/2a6c12ad-406a-4f33-b686-f78ff5822208/b1279c01-146f-43f0-ad48059c7fbc0eb4/player?cid=5cfatdzt2ntems77zlcjs6j6fhqykegeduhmykfbmlqlcmk4uq&rid=EMEA>. (This video recording is no longer available online, although the transcript produced by the author remains in his possession).

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