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Scott Kloeck-Jenson Fellowship Report

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (2018)

Last year, I visited the Marshall Islands, a low-lying atoll nation in the Central Pacific, twice as part of my dissertation research, once January-March and again August-November. A Scott Kloeck-Jenson Fellowship generously supported my first trip. This research addressed vulnerability and internal migration within the Marshall Islands, evaluating how upstream factors linked to capitalism shape contexts and inequalities of vulnerability and influence major migration drivers. Within this larger research question, I examined the extent to which migration is forced by certain needs or constrained by migration costs and difficulty, how migration experiences differ by social status and other circumstances, and outcomes of migration on social vulnerability.

My research's primary data collection was in-depth interviews with people who had moved from outer islands to the main island of Majuro. I also interviewed government officials and members of civil society. I began both sets of interviews during my first trip. However, my first visit was primarily spent connecting with stakeholders and partners and revising research questions and methods to fit relevant research needs and interests. I established a formal research partnership with a local nonprofit, the Marshall Islands Conservation Society (MICS), as well as the local office of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). These partners cultivated my understanding of relevant debates, guided the direction of my research, and supported trusting interactions with research participants, since both partners are well-known and well-regarded in the Marshall Islands. During this time, I also developed connections and friendships through my daily activities, which allowed me to have earnest conversations about topics related to my research. Following this first trip, feedback on preliminary findings informed the focus of my second trip. This is important since iterative stakeholder involvement increases the likelihood that findings capture subtle themes and are a trustworthy representation of reality rather than a reflection of my own biases.

Media frequently cites the Marshall Islands as on the frontlines of climate change, sea level rise, and environmental migration. Related rhetoric sometimes refers to the Marshall Islands as “sinking” or “drowning” and to the current population as a “last generation.” While

terms like “climate refugee” are useful for their reference to the “climate debt” that Northern countries owe Southern countries like the Marshall Islands for creating climate change and its effects, most felt in the Global South, this term is disempowering, minimizes the agency of those affected, and, in the Marshall Islands, is currently inaccurate.

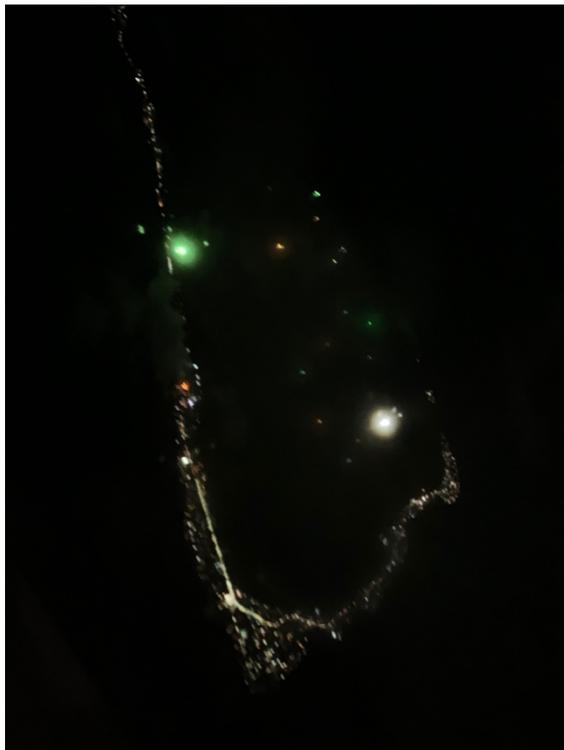
My preliminary findings indicate that, contrary to this rhetoric, migration decisions are most often spurred by an immediate health, education, or economic need that cannot be met on outlying islands. People move for aspirational reasons, in search of better work or to continue their education, or for critical health care needs. Few opportunities and services are available on remote outlying islands. In many cases, migration is thus the only feasible option. A major factor raised in interviews driving aspirational migration is a mindset that considers cash work and moves to a more westernized economy and society as automatically positive. This mindset persists despite widespread knowledge of the many challenges faced when moving from a subsistence economy on outer islands to Majuro where people have to earn money to live (let alone moves directly to the United States, which creates even further shocks).

Participants frequently expressed that they felt more economically vulnerable on Majuro compared to outer islands where they could live off the land. Stronger familial networks and more traditional practices on the outer islands also provide a basic safety net since people tend to look out for each other more compared to Majuro. Many women also shared that they felt less safe on Majuro. Nevertheless, while participants typically preferred life on the outer islands, particularly older participants, they did not want to return because of limited services, luxuries, and economic opportunities and because many of their families had already moved to Majuro as well. This social dimension to migration is also relevant to onward migration to the United States (Marshallese may legally move to and work in the United States because of the Compact of Free Association). Many move to the United States to provide childcare for relatives who have already moved and are busy working.

The Marshall Islands is, however, a highly stratified society, and some migration options, particularly onward migration to the United States, are only available to those with networks that can afford to front the high cost of air travel. In addition to having fewer migration plans, cash-poor participants also returned to outlying islands less frequently. The degree to which economic and other stressors affect migration may similarly vary widely and result in contrasting levels of migration and adaptation agency. This has implications for economic development and disaster

preparation and management. Over the coming months, as I continue to analyze the data I collected and begin drafting this chapter of my dissertation, I look forward to highlighting policy-relevant takeaways and presenting my research in ways that are useful to research partners and accessible to community members more broadly. (I hope to go back to the Marshall Islands again to do this!)

On a personal note, my trips to the Marshall Islands were incredibly illuminating and rewarding. I made many friendships and fell in love with a place I had never been before but which is now very special to me. My trips this past year have not only shaped my dissertation work but also my larger research interests and plans. Perhaps even more significantly, these experiences influenced who I am and reinforced what I value, not just related to my research but in my life. One of the participants I interviewed expressed, “On the outer islands, everyone is equal.” Degrees, money, and social status bring no additional prestige. No one cares. I liked that.



Majuro Atoll from above



Majuro Atoll also from above