



PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM DIPLOMACY FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE AT COP29

Ika Sri Hastuti¹, Muhamad Irvan Rifki Ramadhan² Rekha Kersana³

Hubungan Internasional/Universitas Pasundan / ika.srihastuti@unpas.ac.id

Abstract

Climate change represents an existential and multidimensional challenge for Pacific Island countries, despite their limited contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions. This article examines how the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) transformed regional climate vulnerability into collective diplomatic agency at COP29 in Baku. Using qualitative document analysis, the study examines UNFCCC decisions, PIF and SPREP documents, regional declarations, official statements, and relevant academic literature. Climate diplomacy serves as the primary analytical framework, supported by international regime theory and regional organisation perspectives. The findings demonstrate that PIF employed four mutually reinforcing strategies: coalition building, normative pressure, agenda-setting, and evidence-based negotiation. These strategies strengthened Pacific visibility and helped sustain climate finance, the 1.5°C objective, adaptation, and loss and damage on the negotiation agenda. However, PIF's influence remained constrained by material power asymmetries and the distributive limitations of COP29's climate-finance outcome. The study concludes that PIF diplomacy was procedurally effective and normatively influential, but substantively constrained.

Keywords: *Climate Diplomacy; Climate Justice; COP29; Pacific Islands Forum; Small Island States*

INTRODUCTION

Climate change has become one of the most complex challenges confronting contemporary global governance. Its consequences are no longer confined to environmental degradation but extend to economic development, food and water security, human mobility, public health, infrastructure, territorial security, and political stability. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023a) concludes that human activities have unequivocally caused global warming and that every additional increment of warming increases the frequency and severity of climate-related risks. These consequences are distributed unevenly, with Small Island Developing States (SIDS) experiencing particularly severe impacts despite their comparatively limited contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions (Barnett & Waters, 2016).

Pacific Island countries constitute one of the clearest manifestations of this asymmetry. The region faces accelerating sea-level rise, ocean warming, marine heatwaves, ocean acidification, coastal erosion, freshwater insecurity, and increasing stress on marine ecosystems (Goulding, 2015). The World Meteorological Organization reports that sea-level rise in large



parts of the South-West Pacific exceeds the global average, while sea-surface temperatures have increased approximately three times faster than the global average since 1980. Marine heatwaves have also approximately doubled in frequency and become more intense and prolonged (WMO, 2024).

These changes have profound political and socioeconomic implications. Many Pacific communities, economic activities, transport systems, hospitals, schools, and other public facilities are located in low-lying coastal areas. Rising seas therefore threaten not only physical territory but also livelihoods, infrastructure, freshwater availability, food systems, and the habitability of settlements. For low-lying atoll countries such as Kiribati, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands, climate change increasingly raises questions concerning the long-term viability of national development and human settlement (World Bank, 2024).

Climate change has consequently become inseparable from regional security and political identity in the Pacific. The 2018 *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* formally identified climate change as the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security, and well-being of Pacific peoples (PIF, 2018). The *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* subsequently incorporated climate change into a wider regional vision connecting political leadership, human security, economic development, ocean governance, and regionalism (PIF, 2022). The strategy emphasises that the Blue Pacific contributes only a small share of global emissions while remaining at the frontline of climate impacts and requiring timely access to scaled-up and sustainable climate finance.

These circumstances provide both a material and normative foundation for Pacific climate diplomacy. Materially, Pacific states require increased adaptation support, resilient infrastructure, disaster-risk financing, and resources to address loss and damage. Normatively, the asymmetry between limited responsibility for global emissions and disproportionate exposure to climate impacts strengthens claims based on equity, historical responsibility, climate justice, and differentiated responsibilities. Climate diplomacy therefore becomes more than an instrument of conventional foreign policy: for Pacific Island countries, it is increasingly connected to questions of national survival, sovereignty, development, and intergenerational justice.

The Pacific Islands Forum occupies a central position in this process. PIF functions as the principal political organisation through which Pacific governments articulate regional priorities, coordinate political positions, and engage external partners. It also connects political leadership with a broader institutional network involving organisations such as the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), the Pacific Community, and other members of the Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific. This regional architecture is particularly important because most Pacific Island states possess limited diplomatic and administrative capacities compared with major negotiating powers.

The significance of regional cooperation is evident in the history of Pacific participation in international climate negotiations. Morgan, Carter, and Manoa (2024) demonstrate that Pacific Island countries have exercised diplomatic influence disproportionate to their material power through coordinated negotiations, coalition politics, moral authority, and sustained engagement in global climate processes (Morgan et al., 2024). Likewise, research on small-island participation in UN climate conferences shows that collective organisations such as the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) increase the visibility and bargaining opportunities of small states, although substantial inequalities in delegation size and negotiating capacity remain (Klöck et al., 2024).

COP29 in Baku provided an important test of this diplomatic agency. Climate finance occupied the centre of the conference because Parties were required to agree on the New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance (NCQG), replacing the previous USD100 billion annual goal. COP29 ultimately established a goal of at least USD300 billion annually for developing countries by 2035, while calling on all actors to work toward scaling total climate finance from public and private sources to at least USD1.3 trillion annually by 2035 (UNFCCC, 2025).

For Pacific Island countries, however, the critical issue was not merely the aggregate quantum of finance. Their negotiating priorities included accessibility, predictability, grant-based support, adaptation finance, loss and damage, the special circumstances of SIDS, and protection against additional debt burdens. Pacific representatives also consistently emphasised the survival significance of the 1.5°C objective. Immediately before COP29, the PIF Chair stated that Pacific survival could not be compromised and identified climate finance, mitigation, adaptation, loss and damage, just transition, oceans, and social inclusion as principal regional priorities (PIF, 2024a).

Existing scholarship provides substantial insight into Pacific vulnerability, small-state climate diplomacy, regional politics, and climate finance. Morgan et al. (2024) document the historical development of Pacific climate diplomacy. Ledger and Klöck (2023) demonstrate that climate finance must be assessed not only according to volume but also through the principles of adequacy, predictability, additionality, accessibility, and justice. Klöck et al. (2024) highlight the opportunities and inequalities experienced by small island states in UN climate negotiations. Nevertheless, relatively limited attention has been devoted specifically to how PIF, as a regional organisation, converted shared vulnerability into collective diplomatic agency at COP29 and how this agency translated into different forms of influence (Ledger & Klöck, 2023; Morgan et al., 2024).

This study addresses that gap by asking: **How did the Pacific Islands Forum transform regional climate vulnerability into collective diplomatic agency at COP29, and to what extent did this diplomacy influence the negotiation process and outcomes?**

The article advances the argument that **PIF transformed structural climate vulnerability into collective diplomatic agency through regional coordination, coalition building, normative pressure, agenda-setting, and evidence-based negotiation**. Its diplomatic effectiveness was strongest at the procedural and normative levels, while its ability to determine distributive outcomes remained constrained by structural power asymmetries within the international climate regime.

The central contribution of the study is therefore not simply to demonstrate that Pacific states engaged in climate diplomacy. Rather, it explains the process through which vulnerability becomes political agency and proposes a differentiated understanding of diplomatic effectiveness: **procedural effectiveness, normative influence, and substantive outcomes**.

ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

Climate Diplomacy as the Primary Analytical Framework

Climate diplomacy refers to the diplomatic practices through which states, coalitions, international organisations, and other actors attempt to influence international cooperation on climate change. It encompasses formal negotiations under the UNFCCC, coalition building, agenda-setting, climate-finance bargaining, scientific advocacy, normative framing, and efforts to shape the interpretation of international climate principles.

Climate diplomacy differs from conventional diplomacy because climate negotiations combine environmental science with economic distribution, development politics, finance, technology, justice, and security. Disputes therefore concern more than emissions reductions.

They also address who should act, who should pay, who should receive assistance, how much support is adequate, and what responsibilities follow from historical emissions and unequal vulnerability.

The Paris Agreement further increased the importance of diplomacy because its architecture combines universal participation with nationally determined commitments rather than uniform centrally imposed obligations. The result is an institutional environment in which persuasion, reputation, coalition politics, technical expertise, and normative leadership become particularly important.

For small states, these instruments can partially compensate for limited material capabilities. Research demonstrates that small-island states often exercise influence through specialised negotiating expertise, collective positions, moral claims, and sustained institutional participation rather than through economic or coercive power (Klöck et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2024).

This study operationalises climate diplomacy through four dimensions synthesised from the literature:

- **Coalition building** refers to the creation of common positions and alliances designed to increase negotiating leverage.
- **Normative pressure** refers to the strategic use of climate justice, vulnerability, historical responsibility, equity, and the 1.5°C threshold to legitimise political demands.
- **Agenda-setting** concerns the capacity to elevate particular issues such as climate finance, adaptation, loss and damage, and simplified financial access to the centre of international negotiations.
- **Negotiation strategy** refers to coordinated interventions, technical preparation, evidence-based claims, political messaging, and strategic participation within formal and informal negotiating processes (Fry & Tarte, 2016).

These dimensions draw upon scholarship on climate diplomacy, loss-and-damage politics, and small-state agency (Earsom & Delreux, 2023; Falzon et al., 2023; Klöck et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2024).

International Environmental Regime as the Institutional Context

International regime theory provides the institutional context within which climate diplomacy operates. Krasner (1982) defines international regimes as sets of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge within particular issue areas (Krasner, 1982).

The international climate regime is centred on the UNFCCC, the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement, supported by annual Conferences of the Parties, specialised funds, transparency mechanisms, adaptation institutions, carbon-market arrangements, and technical work programmes.

In this article, international environmental regime theory is not treated as a competing analytical framework to climate diplomacy. Instead, it explains **where and under what institutional conditions PIF conducts diplomacy**.

Four regime dimensions are relevant.

- **Principles** include equity, the 1.5°C objective, and common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.
- **Norms** include expectations concerning assistance to vulnerable states, progressive ambition, climate justice, and international cooperation.

- **Rules** include formal arrangements governing climate finance, adaptation, transparency, loss and damage, and carbon markets.
- **Decision-making procedures** include consensus negotiations, technical dialogues, ministerial consultations, draft decisions, and formal adoption.

This framework is particularly useful because it demonstrates that institutions both constrain and enable small-state agency. Small states cannot unilaterally determine outcomes, but institutionalised negotiations provide channels through which they can introduce proposals, mobilise coalitions, challenge language, invoke accepted norms, and influence consensus formation.

Regional Organisations and Collective Diplomatic Agency

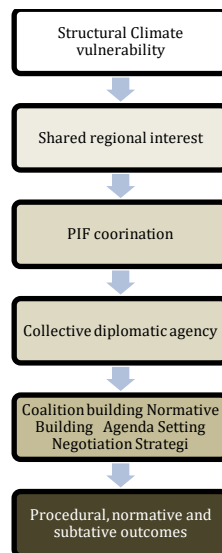
Regional organisations increasingly operate as intermediaries between national politics and global governance. They can coordinate positions, pool expertise, aggregate interests, mobilise resources, and represent shared priorities internationally (Marx et al., 2021). For small states, this coordinating role is especially significant. International climate negotiations contain multiple simultaneous workstreams requiring legal, financial, scientific, and political expertise. Small national delegations cannot easily monitor all discussions independently. Regional institutions can therefore create what may be described as **collective diplomatic capacity**.

In the Pacific context, PIF performs three relevant functions. First, it aggregates national preferences into regional political positions. Second, it connects political leadership with technical institutions such as SPREP and the broader CROP architecture. Third, it contributes to the construction of collective regional identity through the idea of the **Blue Pacific Continent** (Smith & Wesley-Smith, 2021).

This identity has diplomatic significance because it transforms geographic fragmentation into political connectedness. Pacific states are presented not as isolated small islands but as members and stewards of a vast oceanic political community. Consequently, vulnerability is reframed not merely as weakness but also as a basis for legitimate political authority.

From Vulnerability to Collective Agency

Combining these perspectives produces the following analytical sequence:



Sources: processed by author

This model differs from approaches that assume vulnerability itself generates international influence. Vulnerability creates common interests and moral claims, but influence requires institutional organisation. The central analytical proposition is therefore:

PIF converts dispersed national vulnerabilities into collective diplomatic agency by organising common positions, coordinating technical and political resources, constructing regional identity, and projecting Pacific interests into the international climate regime.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical design based on a focused case study of PIF climate diplomacy at COP29. The principal unit of analysis is the **Pacific Islands Forum as a regional diplomatic actor**, while the UNFCCC constitutes the institutional arena within which diplomatic interaction occurs.

The principal temporal period is 2021–2024. This period captures the consolidation of Pacific climate coordination from COP26 through COP29, including negotiations on loss and damage, climate finance, adaptation, and the NCQG. Formal UNFCCC documents published in early 2025 were used only to verify decisions formally adopted at COP29 in November 2024. They were not treated as evidence of information available to negotiators before or during the conference.

Data Collection

Data were collected through documentary analysis and structured review of relevant academic literature.

Primary documentary sources included:

- official UNFCCC decisions and COP29 conference materials;
- PIF leaders' declarations, communiqués, and statements;

- *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*;
- COP29 statements by the PIF Chair and Secretary General;
- SPREP materials concerning Pacific negotiating priorities;
- regional climate-policy documents.

Secondary material included peer-reviewed research concerning Pacific climate diplomacy, small-state agency, climate finance, international environmental regimes, regional organisations, climate justice, and negotiation strategy.

Documents were selected according to four criteria: institutional authority, relevance to the research question, temporal relevance, and sufficient substantive content to support qualitative analysis.

Data Analysis

The analysis combined qualitative document analysis and thematic coding. First, documents were screened and reduced according to relevance (Miles et al., 2014). Second, the material was coded according to the four climate-diplomacy dimensions:

1. coalition building;
2. normative pressure;
3. agenda-setting;
4. negotiation strategy.

Additional categories included regional coordination, Blue Pacific identity, climate-finance accessibility, grant finance, debt vulnerability, adaptation, loss and damage, and negotiating power asymmetry.

Third, empirical evidence was compared with formal COP29 outcomes.

Fourth, PIF effectiveness was assessed through three categories:

- procedural effectiveness; ability to coordinate participation and sustain collective engagement;
- normative influence; ability to shape political framing and legitimacy;
- substantive effectiveness; extent to which preferred demands were reflected in final outcomes.

Validity and Limitations

Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation. Official COP29 outcomes were verified against UNFCCC decisions, while Pacific positions were compared across PIF, SPREP, regional documents, and peer-reviewed literature.

A transparent chain of evidence was maintained by separating:

- official negotiation outcomes;
- PIF political positions;
- regional technical assessments;
- academic interpretations.

The principal limitation is that the research relies on documentary evidence and does not include interviews with negotiators. It therefore cannot reconstruct confidential bargaining or attribute particular final decisions exclusively to PIF. For this reason, the study evaluates **contribution and influence rather than exclusive causality**. (Nowell et al., 2017)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Climate Vulnerability as the Foundation of Collective Regional Interests

The first finding is that Pacific climate diplomacy originates in a shared experience of multidimensional climate vulnerability.

Climate change threatens far more than natural ecosystems. Sea-level rise affects coastal settlements, freshwater supplies, public infrastructure, cultural heritage, agricultural land, and territorial continuity. Ocean warming and acidification threaten coral reefs, fisheries, and marine biodiversity. Extreme weather events generate recurrent economic losses and public expenditure (IPCC, 2023b).

WMO describes the combined effects of accelerating sea-level rise, ocean warming, and acidification as a “**triple whammy**” threatening the socioeconomic viability and, in some instances, the physical existence of Pacific island countries (WMO, 2024).

The severity of these impacts produces a shared regional interest in ambitious mitigation, adaptation, predictable climate finance, and effective responses to loss and damage.

However, the findings also demonstrate that vulnerability is politically significant because of the asymmetry between responsibility and exposure.

Pacific Island countries contribute only a small share of global greenhouse gas emissions, yet face some of the world's most severe climate risks. The *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* places the region's contribution at just over one per cent of global emissions while simultaneously emphasising its frontline exposure to climate change (PIF, 2022).

This asymmetry enables Pacific governments to frame climate negotiations through distributive and corrective justice.

Their claims are not simply: “we require assistance.”

They are more fundamentally: **those who contributed least to climate change should not bear disproportionately the cost of its consequences.**

This framing connects Pacific interests directly to established regime principles of equity and differentiated responsibilities. Climate vulnerability consequently performs three political functions. First, it generates common regional interests. Second, it produces moral legitimacy for demanding stronger global action. Third, it provides urgency to climate-finance, adaptation, and loss-and-damage negotiations.

PIF and the Transformation of Vulnerability into Collective Agency

The second finding is that vulnerability alone does not generate diplomatic influence. Influence requires organisation.

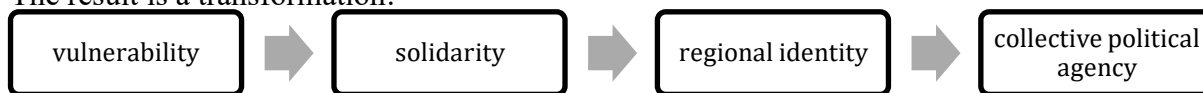
- PIF performs this function by transforming national experiences of climate vulnerability into regional political positions.
- This process occurs through institutional coordination, political declarations, technical cooperation, and collective identity construction.
- The Blue Pacific Continent provides a particularly important discursive foundation.

Rather than portraying Pacific countries as geographically isolated and politically marginal islands, the Blue Pacific framework presents them as members of an interconnected oceanic political community.

This framing creates a political identity based on:

- shared ocean stewardship;
- common vulnerability;
- collective responsibility;
- regional solidarity;
- common diplomatic interests.

The result is a transformation:



Sources: processed by author

PIF's role is reinforced by cooperation with technical regional organisations. SPREP contributes scientific expertise, climate-negotiation preparation, environmental information, and technical capacity, while PIF provides higher-level political coordination. Ahead of COP29, Pacific SIDS identified common priorities including climate finance, mitigation, adaptation, just transition, loss and damage, oceans, transparency, and the Global Stocktake. Preparatory meetings were organised to develop strategic direction and regional positions, while support was provided for delegates as part of strengthening the **One Pacific Voice** (SPREP, 2024b).

This institutional division of labour is important because it enables political claims to be supported by scientific and technical credibility. The findings therefore challenge interpretations of PIF as merely an intergovernmental consultation forum.

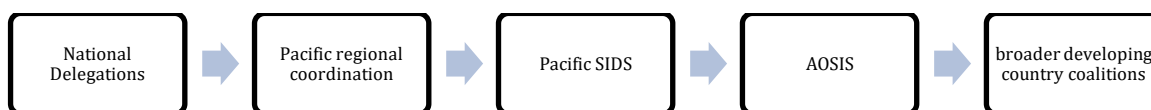
PIF performs the functions of a **regional diplomatic actor** because it:

1. aggregates interests;
2. coordinates negotiating positions;
3. mobilises political leadership;
4. connects technical expertise;
5. constructs collective identity;
6. projects regional priorities internationally.

The Architecture of PIF Climate Diplomacy at COP29

Nested Coalition Building

Coalition building formed the institutional foundation of Pacific diplomacy. Pacific diplomacy operates through several overlapping layers:



Sources: processed by author

This can be conceptualised as **nested coalition diplomacy**. Each layer provides different diplomatic resources. PIF provides regional political cohesion. Pacific SIDS facilitates technical negotiating coordination. AOSIS increases collective visibility of small island states. Wider developing-country coalitions increase numerical bargaining leverage. This structure is particularly useful for small states because UNFCCC negotiations are highly fragmented into parallel technical discussions.

Klöck et al. (2024) demonstrate that collective organisation through AOSIS creates important diplomatic opportunities, although significant inequalities remain among island states in terms of delegation size and negotiating presence. Coalition membership therefore does not eliminate capacity constraints. Nevertheless, nested coalitions allow Pacific actors to divide responsibilities and increase access to negotiating spaces. This constitutes an important form of procedural power (Klöck et al., 2024).

Normative Pressure: Survival and Climate Justice

The second element of PIF diplomacy was normative pressure. Pacific representatives consistently framed climate change through the language of:

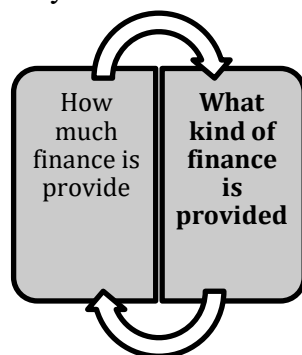
- survival;
- historical responsibility;
- equity;
- justice;
- human dignity;
- intergenerational responsibility.

The 1.5°C objective occupied a central position in this framing. For major powers, 1.5°C may be negotiated alongside considerations of economic adjustment, technology, and energy security. For vulnerable Pacific states, however, the threshold is framed as a question of survival. Before COP29, PIF Chair Hu'akavameiliku explicitly stated that Pacific survival could not be compromised and reiterated that climate change constitutes the greatest threat to Pacific livelihoods and security (PIF, 2024b).

PIF Secretary General Baron Waqa similarly stated at COP29 that the 1.5°C objective represents a critical survival threshold and called for accessible and simplified climate finance appropriate to the circumstances of Pacific SIDS (PIF, 2024a).

Normative pressure also shaped financial demands. Pacific actors opposed a climate-finance architecture heavily dependent upon debt. From a climate-justice perspective, requiring climate-vulnerable states to borrow extensively to address impacts they contributed little to creating reproduces structural inequality.

Ledger and Klöck (2023) demonstrate that climate-finance justice cannot be evaluated solely according to financial volumes (Ledger & Klöck, 2023). Adequacy, predictability, accessibility, additionality, and the balance between loans and grants are equally significant. Accordingly, Pacific climate diplomacy contested both:



Sources: processed by author

Agenda-Setting: Finance, Adaptation and Loss and Damage

COP29 was widely characterised as the “finance COP.” PIF sought to ensure that the NCQG reflected not only a larger numerical commitment but also the circumstances of vulnerable SIDS.

Pacific priorities included:

- accessible climate finance;
- simplified procedures;
- adaptation support;
- loss-and-damage finance;
- grants and non-debt-generating instruments;
- recognition of SIDS circumstances.

SPREP's documentation of Pacific COP29 preparations confirms that climate finance, adaptation, just transition, mitigation, loss and damage, oceans, and transparency were among

the central Pacific SIDS priorities. Pacific representatives were particularly concerned about accessibility.

Small public administrations frequently face substantial procedural burdens when attempting to obtain international climate finance. Complex accreditation systems, project-development requirements, co-financing expectations, and extensive reporting can delay access even where vulnerability is internationally acknowledged. This produces an important distinction: **availability does not automatically mean accessibility**.

Pacific negotiators therefore pressed for simplified and timely financial mechanisms. The same logic applied to adaptation. Adaptation is particularly important for Pacific countries because climate impacts are already occurring. At COP29, Pacific adaptation negotiators emphasised that Global Goal on Adaptation indicators should reflect the circumstances of SIDS while avoiding excessive reporting burdens (SPREP, 2024a).

Loss and damage constituted another central concern.

For Pacific states, loss and damage includes both economic and non-economic losses:

- infrastructure destruction;
- ecosystem degradation;
- cultural heritage;
- ancestral land;
- social identity;
- territorial continuity.

Maintaining loss and damage as a distinct agenda is politically important because not all climate impacts can be prevented through adaptation.

Evidence-Based Negotiation

The fourth dimension was the integration of normative advocacy with scientific and technical evidence. Pacific negotiators did not rely exclusively on moral appeals.

Claims regarding existential vulnerability were supported by evidence concerning:

- accelerating sea-level rise;
- marine heatwaves;
- coral degradation;
- freshwater insecurity;
- coastal vulnerability;
- economic losses.

This combination strengthens diplomatic credibility. Scientific evidence translates regional experiences into categories recognised by the international climate regime.

For example:

- coastal flooding becomes an **adaptation-finance requirement**;
- irreversible ecosystem damage becomes a **loss-and-damage concern**;
- administrative capacity becomes an **accessibility issue**;
- sea-level rise becomes an argument for **mitigation ambition and the 1.5°C objective**.

Evidence therefore performs a diplomatic function. It enables Pacific representatives to move between local experiences and formal international negotiations.

COP29 Outcomes: Institutional Progress and Distributive Insufficiency

COP29 produced important institutional developments. The most prominent was Decision 1/CMA.6 establishing the NCQG. The agreement calls for at least **USD300 billion annually by 2035** for developing countries, with developed countries taking the lead, while broader efforts are expected to scale finance from public and private sources toward at least **USD1.3 trillion annually by 2035** (UNFCCC, 2025).

From an institutional-regime perspective, this constitutes meaningful progress. Nearly 200 Parties operating through consensus created a new quantified benchmark.

- The decision therefore generates:
- institutional expectations;
- future reporting requirements;
- political benchmarks;
- additional negotiation processes.

However, institutional progress should not automatically be equated with distributive justice. For Pacific and other vulnerable countries, critical questions remain:

Is USD300 billion adequate?

How much will be public rather than private finance?

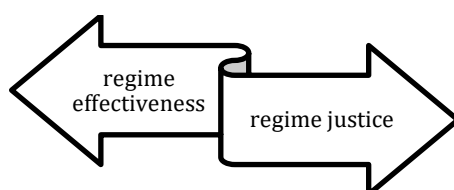
How much will be grants rather than loans?

How much will reach adaptation?

How easily can SIDS access the resources?

Will finance be additional rather than repackaged existing assistance?

These questions explain why the COP29 agreement can simultaneously represent institutional advancement and distributive insufficiency. The result therefore exposes an important distinction between:



A regime may successfully produce common decisions while still distributing costs and benefits in ways regarded as inadequate by vulnerable members. This is particularly important in climate finance because aggregate figures conceal the political economy of financial instruments (Biermann et al., 2009).

A USD1 billion package dominated by loans has fundamentally different implications from USD1 billion in grants. Similarly, private investment designed for commercially viable mitigation projects does not automatically address community adaptation or irreversible loss (Venner et al., 2024).

Constrained Influence: Evaluating PIF Diplomatic Effectiveness

The central finding is that PIF exercised **meaningful but constrained influence**. Its diplomacy should therefore not be evaluated through a simple success/failure binary. Three different dimensions provide a more accurate assessment.

1 Procedural Effectiveness

PIF demonstrated procedural effectiveness through:

- coordination of regional priorities;
- preparation of Pacific negotiators;
- mobilisation of political champions;
- cooperation across CROP institutions;
- strengthening the One Pacific Voice;
- participation across multiple negotiating tracks.

This regional coordination partially compensated for limited national capacities. However, it did not eliminate differences in delegation size and technical resources compared with major powers.

2 Normative Influence

PIF exercised significant normative influence through consistent framing of climate change as a matter of:

- survival;
- justice;
- equity;
- responsibility;
- human dignity.

The Pacific narrative reinforced the political salience of the 1.5°C objective and challenged climate-finance approaches that transfer additional debt burdens to highly vulnerable countries.

Normative influence is significant because international regimes depend not only upon formal rules but also upon the legitimacy of competing claims.

Pacific states possess limited coercive power, but they can influence which arguments are regarded as legitimate.

3 Substantive Effectiveness

PIF's substantive influence was more constrained. COP29 produced a higher climate-finance target, but the final agreement remained below the financial scale and qualitative conditions sought by many vulnerable developing states.

There was no guarantee that sufficient finance would be:

- grant-based;
- directly accessible;
- concentrated on adaptation;
- dedicated to loss and damage;
- free from additional debt burdens.

Therefore, PIF helped shape the political environment of negotiations without possessing the material power to determine the final distributive bargain. This is the essence of constrained influence. PIF shaped agendas and legitimacy more effectively than it shaped the final distribution of resources.

Theoretical Implications

The findings generate four broader theoretical implications. First, vulnerability is not itself a source of power. Vulnerability becomes politically meaningful only when organised through institutions, coalitions, narratives, and negotiating strategies. PIF provides the institutional mechanism through which fragmented national vulnerability is transformed into collective agency.

Second, regional organisations can operate as diplomatic actors. PIF does more than aggregate existing preferences. Through the Blue Pacific identity, it contributes to the

construction of a shared understanding of regional interests. Regional organisations therefore influence both **what states want** and **how those interests are represented internationally**.

Third, power in international climate negotiations is multidimensional. Pacific Island states possess little military or economic power compared with major emitters. Nevertheless, they possess issue-specific diplomatic resources:

- moral legitimacy;
- scientific credibility;
- institutional knowledge;
- coalition cohesion;
- normative authority.

These resources cannot eliminate structural inequality but can influence agendas, legitimacy, and negotiating discourse.

Fourth, institutional effectiveness and justice must remain analytically separate. COP29 demonstrates that an international regime can generate formal institutional progress while simultaneously producing outcomes viewed as distributively inadequate. This distinction is particularly important for climate finance.

CONCLUSION

This article examined how the Pacific Islands Forum transformed climate vulnerability into collective diplomatic agency during COP29 in Baku. The findings demonstrate that climate change constitutes a multidimensional and potentially existential challenge for Pacific Island countries. Sea-level rise, ocean warming, marine heatwaves, ocean acidification, freshwater insecurity, ecosystem degradation, and climate-related disasters affect not only the physical environment but also infrastructure, economic development, food security, livelihoods, culture, territorial continuity, and political security.

These shared vulnerabilities provide the material foundation for collective regional action, but vulnerability alone does not generate diplomatic influence. The Pacific Islands Forum converts dispersed national experiences into a regional political agenda. Through institutional coordination, political leadership, technical cooperation, and the construction of the Blue Pacific identity, PIF transforms shared vulnerability into collective diplomatic agency.

At COP29, this agency was exercised through four mutually reinforcing strategies: coalition building, normative pressure, agenda-setting, and evidence-based negotiation. Coalition building enabled Pacific actors to operate through nested diplomatic structures involving regional coordination, Pacific SIDS, AOSIS, and wider developing-country coalitions. Normative pressure framed climate change through survival, equity, historical responsibility, and climate justice. Agenda-setting maintained climate finance, adaptation, loss and damage, the 1.5°C objective, and financial accessibility as prominent negotiating issues. Evidence-based negotiation connected scientific assessments of regional climate impacts with formal UNFCCC policy categories.

The COP29 outcome illustrates both the potential and limits of this diplomacy. The adoption of the NCQG represented an important institutional development, establishing a goal

of at least USD300 billion annually by 2035 and calling for broader mobilisation toward USD1.3 trillion annually. Nevertheless, the agreement did not resolve questions concerning adequacy, additionality, accessibility, grants versus loans, adaptation allocation, or debt vulnerability. COP29 can consequently be characterised as **institutional progress accompanied by distributive insufficiency**.

The study therefore concludes that PIF diplomacy was **procedurally effective, normatively influential, but substantively constrained**. PIF strengthened coordination, increased Pacific visibility, sustained climate-justice framing, and helped preserve central Pacific priorities within the negotiation agenda. However, it could not independently determine the financial commitments of major powers or eliminate structural inequalities within the climate regime.

This finding supports the concept of **constrained influence**. Small states and regional organisations may exercise meaningful diplomatic agency without controlling final outcomes. Their influence operates through agenda visibility, coalition cohesion, normative legitimacy, procedural access, and the institutionalisation of issues over successive negotiation cycles.

Theoretically, the study contributes to international relations in three respects. First, it conceptualises Pacific climate diplomacy as a process through which structural vulnerability is transformed into collective diplomatic agency. Second, it demonstrates that regional organisations can act as diplomatic actors by aggregating interests, coordinating expertise, and constructing shared political identity. Third, it proposes a differentiated understanding of diplomatic effectiveness that distinguishes procedural effectiveness, normative influence, and substantive outcomes.

For PIF, future diplomatic effectiveness will depend on maintaining regional cohesion, strengthening technical and negotiating capacity, deepening cooperation with Pacific regional institutions, and monitoring the implementation of COP29 climate-finance commitments. Particular attention should be devoted to ensuring that future finance is additional, predictable, accessible, responsive to adaptation needs, and does not exacerbate debt vulnerability.

Ultimately, Pacific diplomacy demonstrates that materially small states are not necessarily politically insignificant. Through regional organisation, coalition politics, scientific credibility, and normative leadership, Pacific Island countries have converted vulnerability into collective political agency. Yet COP29 also demonstrates that such agency continues to operate within an international climate regime characterised by profound inequalities in resources, responsibility, and bargaining power.

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