

**KIRIBATI'S CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY: A CONSTRUCTIVIST  
THEORETICAL ANALYSIS**



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## **Introduction**

Small states in the middle of the ocean currently are facing the risk of inundation – and the nation of Kiribati, a country in the central Pacific Ocean is among them. In regard to the severity of the issue, Former President of Kiribati Anote Tong said that “Our entire survival is at stake” (ABCNews, 2014, as cited in Baker-Jones & Baker-Jones, 2015, p. 102). The whole nation of Kiribati is predicted to be sunk due to the rising sea level by the year 2100. However, the entire nation will most probably be uninhabitable way before that due to the current environmental degradation, e.g., the land is becoming barren and the water is becoming saline (Baker-Jones & Baker-Jones, 2015).

Kiribati is chosen because it is indeed a small state according to its territorial, population, and economic size. According to World Bank (2020), the GDP of Kiribati is only \$ 194.647 million – which means that it is less than 0.001% of the world’s GDP and it only has about 117,000 people as its residents. Those two criteria confirm the status of Kiribati as a small state as explained by (Maass, 2009). Moreover, it is chosen because of its vocal critic to the international community for not taking climate change seriously (Storey & Hunter, 2010).

This paper seeks to analyse Kiribati’s climate change policy with the help of the theory of constructivism. Katzenstein’s theory of state-centric constructivism, as explained by John Hobson in his book titled *The State and International Relations* (2003), will be used as a tool to understanding the topic. In its entirety, this paper is going to stick to the commonly accepted notion of constructivism that the behaviour of a particular state is influenced by its interest. Whereas, its interest is shaped by identity – which is shaped by social norms.

Questions to be answered by applying the constructivist theory of international relations are: what are the motives behind Kiribati's climate change policy? what is the I-Kiribati national identity – which shaped its behaviour, particularly in climate policy? what is the social norm shaping I-Kiribati national identity?

This paper assumes that Kiribati's climate policy is mainly motivated by the fact that it is a microstate in the middle of nowhere and is prone to any detrimental effects caused by the climate change. The identity is shaped by the awareness of the people that they are not an advanced economy and hence any kind of change which will further endanger their life is not needed at all. Last but not least, it is also shaped by the way the international community view it as a powerless state which ought to be helped.

In answering the questions, the overview of Kiribati's climate policy is put at the first point to give a context to the whole discussion of the answers of the aforementioned research questions. Other than that, the answers to the questions shall be presented under the result section in sequence.

## **Research Methodology**

When it comes to methodology, it is noteworthy that there are three important aspects to be explained, i.e., the ontology of the research, the method of the research, and the data sources which are going to be used. This research departs from the notion of constructivism which perceives international relations as a social construct determined by social norm which shapes national identity. In term of research method, this study is a qualitative study where the data come from various sources related to the issue.

Theory-confirming case study as explained by Arend Lijphart in his article titled Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method (1971) is the employed method for

this study. This study also employs deductive reasoning. It will scrutinize on how the constructivist view of international relations can be used to explain a very specific case study of Kiribati's climate policy.

In order to get the necessary data, content analysis is employed. The sources of the data used in this study are journal articles, news, and reports from which the answer to the research questions can be got.

## **Results**

### *Overview of Kiribati's Climate Change Policy*

When it comes to climate change, Kiribati has a very clear stand, i.e., every citizen of the earth must act now or else be ready to face the catastrophes caused by it. The implementation of its stance is reflected in the climate change policy pursued by Kiribati – in relation with the stakeholders both inside and outside of Kiribati. The internal policy pursued by Kiribati is the implementation of the Republic of Kiribati Joint Implementation Plan for Climate and Disaster Management (KJIP). Whereas, the external policies it conducts are enjoining the whole world to contribute to preventing the environmental catastrophe caused by the climate change while pursuing a multilateral cooperation in the same theme such as the Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action (SIDS SAMOA) and Pacific Blue Shipping Partnership (FAOLEX, n.d.; Storey & Hunter, 2010; IISD, 2019; Johnson, 2019).

The KJIP consists of different sets of frameworks to be pursued in different sectors inside the country. It originated from various international agreements and frameworks, inter alia, the Paris Agreement and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (FAOLEX, n.d.; Government of Kiribati, 2014; NAP Global Network, 2019). Among the

instances of the implementation of KJIP (according to FAOLEX, n.d.) are in the field of food security by improving “food preservation and storage techniques to avoid food shortages and increase food availability through use of both modern and traditional skills and knowledge” (p. 13) and health security by developing “a governance framework to guide the health sector’s work on climate change and disaster risk reduction.” (p. 17).

Prior to that, the former president of Kiribati – Anote Tong – bought 2000 hectares of land in Fiji so that when the time comes, the whole population of Kiribati can be evacuated to a higher land. However, it was a very unpopular action and the reception by the people was not that good. The I-Kiribati are not willing to relocate somewhere else because they do not want to be disconnected with their homeland, history, and culture (Johnson, 2019).

The SIDS SAMOA is a set of frameworks of development adopted by the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) after the third International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS Conference) held on 1-4 September 2014 in Apia, Samoa. It contains the issues which must be paid attention to in those small states in the middle of the ocean, e.g., the employment of more sustainable technologies and way of life so that they can at least adapt to the changing condition of the nature and that it is also other countries’ responsibilities – particularly the developed ones – to help those states to survive (UNGA, 2014).

Whereas, the Pacific Blue Shipping Partnership is a multilateral cooperation between nations in the Pacific Ocean involving Fiji, Marshall Islands, Samoa, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu launched in climate week in 2019. It aims to cut the emission of CO<sub>2</sub> originating from shipping by 40% by 2030 (IISD, 2019).

### *The Motives behind Kiribati's Climate Policy*

Kiribati's current climate change policy is primarily driven by its interests. Those interests are primarily driven by the fear that the people of Kiribati will lose their home. They are aware of the risk they are facing for being a nation which consists of scattered small islands surrounded by ocean. The reason why they started doing ambitious actions when it comes to climate change is to make sure that they do not have to migrate to other places because, as previously explained, the I-Kiribati people are unwilling to do so (Johnson, 2019).

The issue of climate change is a global issue. It means that each and every country in this world has to bear the headache it shall cause. However, the rich and developed countries shall bear the huge costs incurred by it – as a moral or even legal obligation due to their “sin” of polluting the world too much prior to and on their current state of being industrialised nations (Biermann & Boas, 2008; Biermann & Boas, 2010). If the issue of climate change and its effect to the forced-outmigration of millions of people is not taken seriously, humanity will witness an enormous conflict due to every victim being concerned about their own survival (Hartmann, 2010; Baker-Jones & Baker-Jones, 2015; Gemenne, 2015).

The fear of having to receive millions of climate refugees from various affected nations is used by Kiribati to get the international attention to help it in realising the KJIP. They need help from the international community because it is simply not feasible for them to fund all the necessary programmes – due to the fact that they are among the least developed countries and that poverty is rampant among the I-Kiribati people (FAOLEX, n.d.; Government of Kiribati, 2014).

### *I-Kiribati National Identity & the Shaping Social Norms*

The widely accepted fundamental notion of constructivism is that the behaviour of a particular state is influenced by its interest. Whereas, interest is shaped by national identity – which is shaped by social norms. In this section, the national identity of Kiribati shall be discussed, followed by the social norms which shaped the identity itself.

The followings can be considered as the national identity of Kiribati as a nation: it is still mainly a traditional society, its people are aware of the huge risk they face by living in the middle of the ocean, and that it is a powerless state which needs to be helped by the international community (Government of Kiribati, 2014). The first two identities are attributed to the natural condition of the country, i.e., determinism. Whereas, the third identity originates from the hierarchy of world politics based on the power each country possesses.

It is very important to note that according to constructivist approach, no country knows its identity. They get to know their identity because of the help of international and domestic norms. The norms, be it from either domestic society or international society of states, can form the identity if and only if the particular country fully accepts that the norm “claims on oneself through appropriating of a corresponding identity” (Wendt, 1999, pp. 272-273, as cited in Alexandrov, 2003, p. 36). Wendt (1999, p. 250) suggested that “a state observes the cultural norms that it perceives as legitimate” (as cited in Alexandrov, 2003, p. 36).

In regard to the notion of national identity and social norms, Katzenstein (1996: 42, 20) suggested that “generally speaking social norms in the international society of states are less dense and weaker than those in domestic society” as cited in Hobson (2003,

p. 165). However, in the case of Kiribati, they fully embrace the identity emerging from both social norms, i.e., its status as a not-so-advanced economy and the risk it is facing due to the natural condition and the notion that it is a powerless nation in the midst of ever-competing powers in the international stages.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has successfully answered the research questions. It has confirmed that a very specific case study, i.e., Kiribati's climate change policy, can be explained using the international relations theory of constructivism. It thus means that the purpose of this study, i.e., theory-confirming, has been reached.

Kiribati's climate change policy – be it the Kiribati Joint Implementation Plan for Climate Change and Disaster Management (KJIP), enjoining the whole world for more ambitious actions to slow down and adapt with the climate change, or the Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action (SIDS SAMOA) – is motivated by its interest, i.e., to keep the country inhabitable. The interest is driven by the I-Kiribati national identity of being a small country in the middle of nowhere and the view by the international community that it is a small and powerless country which must be helped. Those identities originated from the concept of determinism and the status quo of international relations, i.e., states are stratified based on the power they possess.



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