

CHARITY (AND CLIMATE) BEGINS AT HOME

BY

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When President Trump first announced the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Accord in 2017, the decision sparked outrage globally. Now, with his recent decision to step away again, the world is reminded of his reasoning: the agreement places unfair financial burdens on developed nations while allowing major polluters like China and India to increase their emissions—and, ironically, even receive funding.

Meanwhile, smaller nations like New Zealand continue to pay millions annually into a system that promises much but often delivers little. New Zealand commitments include a NZ\$1.3 billion climate finance commitment for 2022–25, which flows both within and beyond the Pacific region. But has anyone stopped to ask whether this money is producing measurable results? Or could it be better spent addressing real environmental issues at home and within our region?

Reallocating Funds for Local Impact

Our international climate finance should prioritise self-sufficiency first, ensuring New Zealand isn't adding to the global waste crisis. We should be solving problems at the source rather than paying to manage the symptoms. New Zealand is paying into climate finance but failing to invest in its own waste solutions, missing an opportunity to lead by example.

As someone who has worked closely between New Zealand and Japan for over three decades, I've seen firsthand how real solutions—not abstract promises—can make a difference. Japan offers a model of how practical technologies can transform waste management:

Tyre Pyrolysis Plants: Facilities that can process millions of tyres annually, converting waste into valuable by-products like carbon black, oil, and recovered steel are becoming a reality. A single plant could eliminate New Zealand's tyre waste problem for decades to come for less than one year's contribution to the Paris Accord.

Subcritical Water (SCW) Technology: SCW systems that uses pressurised and super-heated water only to process organic waste (including all plastics), creating energy and usable materials while reducing landfill dependency.

Additionally, waste-to-energy plants, such as Copenhagen's Amager Bakke facility, demonstrate how incinerating waste can generate electricity and heat while significantly reducing landfill usage.

These systems demonstrate how innovation can tackle environmental issues while driving economic growth. Having observed these technologies in action, I am convinced that New Zealand could adopt similar approaches, turning waste from a liability into an asset, and ensuring we manage our waste today instead of dumping it on future generations.

A Collaborative Regional Approach

By partnering with Australia, which has also made significant financial commitments under the Paris Agreement, we can amplify our environmental impact in the Southern Hemisphere. Together, New Zealand and Australia could achieve true self-reliance in waste management and environmental sustainability. Once this foundation is established, we would be in a strong position to assist our Polynesian neighbours and other Pacific nations with their own environmental challenges.

The Pacific region faces significant pollution and waste management issues due to its unique geography and economic constraints. Is our climate finance support to the Pacific, which is a large part of our international climate finance, solving tangible environmental issues? Much of this funding supports warehousing and supply chain resilience. This is useful for disaster response but does not address the root causes of climate change, such as waste management and emissions reduction.

By sharing technologies like SCW, pyrolysis, and waste-to-energy plants, we could help these nations develop systems to clean up their environments. Our nation has the potential to lead in waste-to-energy innovation, not just domestically but across the Pacific. Tangible waste and pollution removal must translate into action that addresses the so-called intangible crisis we are told about. Instead of abstract goals, we can create real, visible differences that everyone can see and benefit from.

The Bigger Picture

This approach sends a clear message to our Northern Hemisphere counterparts: It's time to take responsibility and clean up your own act. By demonstrating what localised, tangible solutions look like, we can inspire others to focus on visible, real-world results instead of bureaucratic processes that often fail to deliver.

This isn't about abandoning global agreements or shirking responsibilities. It's about critically assessing where our efforts and resources can have the most significant impact. There is no direct funding for waste processing solutions in New Zealand or the Pacific, despite waste being a measurable contributor to climate change. Instead of vague, unaccountable bureaucratic spending, even a fraction of our international climate finance could fund real solutions like pyrolysis plants and SCW technology.

By stronger investment in local and regional initiatives, New Zealand and Australia can lead by example, not only transforming our own environmental future but also helping our Pacific neighbours address their challenges.

Resilience Over Rhetoric

New Zealand stands at a crossroads. It can continue paying into Paris Accord initiatives, which risks funding abstract goals with little accountability, or it can pivot to tangible, measurable actions that strengthen its energy systems, address local environmental issues, and prepare for the demands of the AI era.

By taking the latter path, New Zealand can do more than fulfill its climate obligations—it can lead. A clean Pacific, a resilient energy grid, and a thriving technological sector would speak louder than any global pledge. Real progress doesn't come from rhetoric; it comes from rolling up our sleeves and solving the problems we can see.

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