Day to day fluctuation in our weather is normal. ‘Climate change’ is not. ‘Climate’ refers to the average weather experienced over a long period, typically 30 years; whilst the Earth’s climate has changed many times in response to natural causes over many years, the changes we are currently experiencing are ‘unprecedented over decades to millennia’ (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2013’).

The IPCC concludes that:

Warming of the climate system is unequivocal. The atmosphere and ocean have warmed, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished, sea level has risen, and the concentrations of greenhouse gases have increased.

Human influence on the climate system is clear. This is evident from the increasing greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere, positive radiative forcing, observed warming, and understanding of the climate system.

As part of the Rio Earth Summit on Sustainable Development in 1992, countries agreed to work together to limit average global temperature increases and the resulting climate change, and to cope with whatever impacts were, by then, inevitable. These countries (Parties) signed up to an international treaty, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The two-pronged approach of the UNFCC translates into: lowering greenhouse gas emissions from existing and new developments (mitigation), either through their design and/or their use of ‘clean’ energy; and making them ‘climate resilient’ (adaptation).

Whilst seemingly a ‘common sense’ approach, this required a legally binding agreement to ensure its delivery; the Kyoto Protocol, in 1997, committed Parties by setting internationally binding emission reduction targets.

Almost thirty years and many meetings and legal refinements later, the twenty-first session of the Conference of the Parties (COP21) will take place from 30 November to 11 December 2015, in Paris, France.

COP21 seeks to take international agreement beyond limiting emissions to achieving limits on warming; it aims to achieve a new legally binding international agreement on climate to keep global warming below 2°C. This is largely seen as being achieved by developed countries enhancing their mitigation ambitions and achieving deeper cuts in industrial greenhouse gas emissions than those to which they have committed to date. For many countries, committed to economic growth and increased housing supply, this will be a significant challenge.

A further objective of the conference relates to funding for developing countries. Climate change knows no geographical boundaries and will affect all countries of the world to a greater or lesser degree. Whilst developed nations have historically emitted far more greenhouse gas emissions, it is predicted that the effects of global climate change will be more acutely felt by developing countries. In 2010 the Green Climate Fund was established, initially with $10 billion to attempt to address this issue, by promoting a shift towards low emissions, climate resilient developments in developing countries. COP21 will seek to build on this, ten-fold and aims to mobilise $100 billion per year from developed countries. This will be used to enable developing countries to reduce their contributions to and combat the effects of climate change. This may help to alleviate the apparent ‘environmental injustice’ of climate change.

For some countries, the sense of injustice is felt keenly. There is genuine concern of inundation not only of coastal settlements but of whole tracts of islands which may disappear beneath increased sea levels.
Increased salination from seawater in groundwater and risks at the highest tides have led already to the relocation of villages in Fiji to higher ground which is available. This is pro-active and consistent with an approach which seeks to work with rather than fight against the anticipated environmental change. It acknowledges the futility and irony of building sea defences which expend further carbon and transfer the problems of risks of flooding elsewhere.

The physical relocation of communities involves substantial expenditure, notwithstanding how to address losses to culture, tradition and history. However local relocation is feasible only where there is alternative ground available. For some islands and their communities, the low-lying land means complete evacuation and resettlement appears inevitable.

The Paris talks have left open the possibility of setting a 1.5 degrees Centigrade rather than 2 degrees limit on warming. The prospect of funding major help for climate change adaptation, such as sea walls, new types of crops and relocated facilities is welcomed by some developing nations.

However, at a time when the status of migrants and how to deal with them as high on the agenda of the developed countries of Europe, there is no longer a proposal for the organised planning and undertaking of relocation of communities due to climate change.

There clearly will be much to address in COP21 and the issue of equity between developed and developing countries will continue to be a high concern.

Chris Slater, TEP, November 2015