

Small yet Strong – Devnet Conference – 29 November

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>> opening slide

Tēnā koutou katoa, Talofa lava, Malo e lelei, Good afternoon.

Thank you for this opportunity to give you an overview of *Small yet Strong: Voices from Oceania on the Environment*. I am the Advocacy and Research Advisor for Caritas – the Catholic agency for justice, peace and development – and lead author of this report.

Oceania is a priority region for us, and environmental justice one of our five strategic priorities, particularly focusing on the impact of climate change on the most vulnerable people.

The Catholic Church has been making increasingly stronger statements on the environment since the 1970s. Pope Francis has also championed the issue – even by his choice of name – and is currently working on a document addressing climate change. Our report title was inspired by words he wrote last year:

***Small yet strong** in the love of God, like Saint Francis of Assisi, all of us, ... are called to watch over and protect the fragile world in which we live, and all its peoples.*

At the dawn of the new millennium, Pope John Paul highlighted our part of that fragile world, when, after a gathering of Bishops of Oceania, he said:

>> Slide 2: Synod Fathers quote

The Synod Fathers called upon the governments and peoples of Oceania to protect this precious environment for present and future generations. It is their special responsibility to assume on behalf of all humanity stewardship of the Pacific Ocean, containing over one half of the Earth's total supply of water. The continued health of this and other oceans is crucial for the welfare of peoples not only in Oceania but in every part of the world.

Even Pope Benedict said that we need to listen to “the voice of the Earth” or risk destroying it and ourselves.

(hold up report) The stories in here represent the voices of the earth – the testament of ordinary people living close to land and sea. They are witnessing the destruction and desecration of their lands and livelihoods, and traditional ways of life. But their stories are also a testament to their hopes and dreams for the future. Our report is about seeing and listening to what they are experiencing. Our conclusions draw on their wisdom and insights.

>>Purpose of the report

Small yet Strong is a ‘foundational’ document for Caritas, to guide our ongoing advocacy for environmental justice in our region. Through it, we gain a human insight into the environmental issues affecting those who make Oceania their home. It is a prelude to what we hope will become an annual ‘State of the Oceania environment’ report – particularly looking at how environmental changes and action are affecting the poor.

>> map - Sources across Oceania

We interviewed people across the region, from West Papua to Cook Islands, as far north as Kiribati and including Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Our interviews were conducted face-to-face, by phone or skype, and by email. We had three key questions: what environmental issues were people experiencing, how were they responding, and what did they want to happen?

>> Key issues and themes

Small yet Strong presents what our contacts told us through 12 inter-related chapters, highlighting issues such as:

- Rising seas eating away shorelines and flooding low-lying land
- Problems of water supply and water quality
- Changing weather patterns affecting food and livelihoods
- Large-scale forestry, mining, and drilling extracting the life out of ecosystems and communities; and
- Ocean life threatened by a changing chemistry, overharvesting and coral-reef destruction.

Looking to the future – we saw and heard both practical examples and visionary dreams for restoration and building resilience.

>>Coastal erosion

Our report opens with villagers battling the sea with sticks and stones, trying to stop coastal erosion with do-it-yourself sea walls. In Papua New Guinea, vertical posts are placed offshore to mark the wall, then logs or planks nailed across them. Finally, stones are put in behind to make a solid barrier. We heard of similar actions in Kiribati, Tonga, and Vanuatu.

>> Fr Denis quote

Here's what Fr Denis Revi from Vanuatu says:

“Some have been making sea walls from stones – they just collect stones and throw them on to try to protect the shoreline. But that creates more problems. The sea erodes other places outside the sea wall, and you often see this happening with investors building hotels by the seashore. Many times it's the village next door that cannot afford to build a wall of stone that will end up suffering the erosion.”

>> Water supply and quality

Around the Pacific, safe drinking water is playing hard to get: there are issues of both water quantity and water quality.

Kiribati has a limited supply of drinking water in freshwater lenses that sit directly under the coral atolls making up this dispersed nation. Tanks are also used to gather rainwater, but there are problems with maintenance, leaks and broken spouting. The outer islands of Kiribati are especially more reliant on freshwater wells, and one of our sources, Boore Moua, tells of communities moving further inland to get fresh water. He mentions one village, Abamakoro on the island of Nonouti, which continues to drink salinated water. He says:

>> Boore Moua quote

“There is only one well that they as a community rely on and assume that it gives them fresher water than the other well, but it is still salinated. They’ve been drinking it for years.”

>> Changing weather patterns

Across Oceania, people are experiencing warmer, and more unpredictable, weather. While the more extreme weather events hit our media, beyond the headlines, changes in the weather are also hitting food and water supplies, affecting livelihoods and ways of life.

In Papua New Guinea, Fr Dominic Maka from Manus Island says changing weather patterns are causing some species to find new ways to survive. He says:

>> Fr Dominic Maka quote

“Animal and fish patterns of feeding have changed. They are not feeding on things that we normally know so they can be easily located and caught for human consumption.”

>> Extractive industries: forestry, mining, palm oil

Mining, logging, drilling and palm oil plantations are having a huge impact in places such as Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Australia.

Bishop Gilles Côté of Daru-Kiunga in Papua New Guinea speaks of the Fly River, and the environmental damage from the Ok Tedi copper and gold mine. He says:

>> Quote -Bishop Gilles Côté

“There are some beautiful, small rivers along the Fly River that I know myself... You see beautiful trees on both sides and then ducks and birds. Now, you go there – dead trees, nothing, all gone, because of the pollution, the sediment and all this. ... the people, they have to go much further now to get food. A lot of the sago places, ... are polluted ..., they cannot use it. And that’s the staple food...”

Papua New Guinea has also seen, this year, the beginning of **deep-sea** mining for offshore minerals – creating a further threat to our ocean.

>>Ocean life threatened by changing chemistry, overharvesting and coral-reef destruction

Our ocean – its rich diversity and source of life – is already threatened by a changing chemistry, overharvesting, and coral-reef destruction.

Gregory Bennett, from Gizo, Solomon Islands, says 87 per cent of his people’s protein needs come from seafood. They are also a vital source of income. But it’s harder now for people to get fish. One reason is unusually heavy rainfall coupled with logging and deforestation. Earlier this year, torrential rain sent a huge amount of sediment into the sea near Gregory’s home. He says of such events:

>> quote – It impacts ...

“It impacts the fishermen – they have to paddle further off shore because the reef’s so murky. There’s no clear visibility within the nearby fishing grounds.”

>>Kaitiakitanga in Aotearoa

Concerns about fish and other local food sources also feature in our report, through Parihaka community's attempts in Taranaki to exercise kaitiakitanga – or environmental guardianship – over their traditional lands and resources. Elsewhere in Aotearoa New Zealand, as many of you will know, there are concerns about chemicals and land uses affecting our waterways.

Gabrielle Huria from Tuahiwi marae of Ngāi Tahu in the South Island says:

>> Quote - *Our traditional ...*

“Our traditional food-gathering places are slowly being destroyed due to heavy metals from drain pipes and cars, and faecal content from stock, in the water. The creeks and streams we gathered watercress from and swam in 10 years ago are not safe for people to swim or eat out of today. We no longer gather kai in the traditional places. ... I would like to see my two sons being able to swim in the Ashley River again like I did at their age.”

>>Facing the future: restoration

Many Pacific peoples recognise that the past may provide the key to the future. That involves protection and restoration, as well as integration with the modern world.

In Tonga, traditional farming systems are being incorporated into an innovative programme addressing climate change and reducing the risk from disasters. At the launch of our report in Auckland, Amelia Ma'afu of Caritas Tonga said the practice of shifting cultivation is the oldest and most sustainable way of securing the livelihoods of Tongans.

>>Traditional farming systems [video will start automatically – 1 min]

Here she is speaking about the practice:

>>Facing the future: Building resilience

Some say we are at the beginning of a 'long emergency' – foreseeing a convergence of multiple crises such as climate change, water scarcity, economic instability and war. Being prepared with survival kits and emergency plans is a basic element of civil defence. But what will we need for the longer emergency?

>> Carteret Islanders, Bougainville

The Carteret Islanders in northeast Papua New Guinea are among those navigating new waters. Through their organisation Tulele Peisa, which means 'Sailing in the wind on our own', they negotiated with the Catholic Church on mainland Bougainville for new areas to live on. This was due to coastal erosion, and sea inundation, affecting their smaller island homes. Those remaining on the islands and those who moved to the mainland are keeping an ongoing mutual exchange of fish for food crops.

At the regional level, Pacific development and disaster experts are working on a new strategy for sustainable development which takes account of both climate change and disaster risk reduction. This integrated Strategy for Climate and Disaster Resilient Development in the Pacific is expected to be adopted in 2015.

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In compiling and listening to these voices from Oceania, it is clear that many people in the region are doing what they can with what they have. But more needs to be done, at every level of society, and with greater coordination and commitment.

>> What needs to be done?

And what needs to be done? In general terms, at both local and global levels, we need to **heal and restore** what has been damaged. We need to find ways to **control and repair environmental damage**, while the people most affected need to have a greater say in decisions that affect them. And we must **minimise** the impact of ongoing environmental changes, to **plan and prepare** for the 'long emergency', so that we are more resilient in our communities and region.

So we are asking decision makers – in our communities, in local and national governments, and in our international institutions, to ensure that they take strong, decisive action to protect our environment, and promote the sustainable development of all peoples in Oceania, including future generations. For ourselves, we are using the report to lobby relevant ministers in our government, to:

- ensure that our climate-related aid funding is focused on the Pacific, and reaches the most vulnerable
- that planned changes to our resource management regime provide strong protection and enhancement of the environment; and allow full and proper consultation with communities and affected people
- and that New Zealand takes a much stronger line in international climate change negotiations, leading up to a 2015 global agreement.

And in that regard, Amelia Ma'afu, whom you saw earlier on the video, is taking these voices and experience from Oceania to the United Nations conference on climate change beginning in Lima, Peru next week.

>> slide – Growing toughness

I will end by explaining the significance of the small green plant on the cover of our report. It's taupata, an extremely tough coastal plant from Aotearoa, with family members throughout Oceania. It can withstand strong winds and salt spray. Birds feed on its bright orange berries – which are also edible by humans – in fact I'm told by DoC rangers, they've even made chutney from it. It's an apt symbol of the resilience and toughness we all need to build into our collective future.