

PNG AND THE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Theresia Nakankwien is a Sister of Mercy from Wewak on the north coast of Papua New Guinea. While spending time in Australia she volunteered at the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education in Sydney. One important focus was climate change.



While at the Centre, Theresia was involved with the **Pacific Calling Partnership** which raises awareness of the impact of climate change on the lives of small islands in the Pacific and supports them in advocating for changes by developed nations in policies relating to climate change. This is a real experience of living our Mercy Chapter statement- responding with compassion and justice in the

earth community being shattered by displacement. Theresia took part in a programme that **Pacific Calling Partnership** was conducting for young leaders from Kiribati and Tuvalu.

A highlight of the programme was actual experience in advocacy and lobbying. The group undertook a two day visit to Parliament House in Canberra, where the team held media conferences and visited politicians to inform them and seek their support. The visit received wide media coverage and was included in news bulletins on ABC and SBS. In the report from ABC Political Network Editor Catherine McGrath we read:

“Songs of the Pacific have been heard at Parliament House as islanders from countries likely to be most threatened by rising sea levels braved the Canberra winter to highlight the issue of climate change.”

“In traditional dress, the group performed a cultural dance and spoke about their concerns: When it comes to high tide you can see the tide everywhere it seeps through the whole island. It kills the crops- it kills our traditional root crops.”

Maina Talia

“The delegates, from Kiribati, Tuvalu and Papua New Guinea, are meeting federal politicians and officials representing the Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop and Environment Minister Greg Hunt. They are seeking a cut in carbon emissions and more assistance for their countries' climate change mitigation.”



Villagers on the island of Abaiang stand in the sea where their homes used to be.

Photo: Justin McManus

[Read more, watch dancing and listen to songs here.](#)

In her time at the Edmund Rice Centre, as well as experiencing firsthand the work of education, advocacy and lobbying that the Centre undertakes with the people of Kiribati and Tuvalu, Theresia explored the impact of climate change in Papua New Guinea.

Theresia now shares some of her experiences.

Reflections on Climate Change

I am learning about climate change and beginning to understand what its effects are, and how it impacts on the lives of the people and the natural environments. Climate change is a new topic for me. It has been an overwhelming experience. I learned a lot and take to heart the stories and the experiences. It has brought me to reflect on the situation in my own country, in particular the Wewak Province, my life there and the effects of climate change we are now facing.

Life in Wewak

Wewak is made up of the mainland, twenty-one islands and settlements along the Sepik River. According to the [Pacific Climate Change Science Program \(PCCSP\)](#) water temperatures in the Papua New Guinea region have risen gradually since 1950s. Since the 1970s the rate of warming has been approximately 0.11 degree Celsius per decade. The acidification of the ocean will continue over the course of the 21st century. PNG has two consistent seasons – they are the hot and the wet, but most of the time it rains and is wetter than normal and that can cause a high number of floods and landslides.

The sea level is rising and is affecting the township of Wewak

The township of Wewak is built near the beach. In previous times the sea was very far away from the town, but now the sea water has washed away the sand, stones and trees and is coming into the town. It is very hard to build the sea walls for the sea is very strong. In the near future the town will be removed. One of our community markets, Grea, is nearly gone. The general hospital of Wewak is nearly washed away by the sea. Soon it will have to be moved to another place. Winjama, a beautiful beach hotel in Wewak is half washed away by the sea and roads built near the sea are also washed away. It seems that the sea is very determined to come in every day, and it's not going to stop.



Our community house

My house in Kaindi, Wewak was two kilometres away from the sea but is now in the path of the sea. When there is too much rain the water rises and surrounds our house. Each year we have heavy rain fall every second day and the water table is very high and the grounds are very wet. When the rain comes the water rises up like a wall of flood and can carry objects away.

How the weather is changing

My young brother Benjamin lives in a PNG village with his family. He works every year to grow plenty of vegetables as their staple food. My brother has been complaining about the weather not being helpful to his crops. His experience is that the climate is changing from year to year and is affecting many farmers and especially subsistence farmers. He is feeling the pain of his crops failing and soon the people will face shortages of food and some people will face starvation. He complains that each year there are longer periods of rain and sun. He said in the olden days they used to be able to tell the weather but now this type of changing weather is unstable and unrealistic. This affects some traditional varieties of staple foods such as Taro which are not so easy to grow. So now people are

more dependent on rice which is more expensive and only available for rich people. The poor must survive on very limited availability of food, potentially leading to malnutrition and skin diseases.

Forestry and agriculture

Eighty-five percent of the PNG population live a subsistence lifestyle in rural areas. These people depend on traditional agriculture and fishing for their lifestyle. Mining and oil production are the main sources of revenue for Papua New Guinea and agricultural crops are still a major source of revenue, in particular copra, coffee, palm oil and cocoa.

According to the Office of Climate Change and Development, in Papua New Guinea forestry and agriculture are found to contribute to more than 90% of greenhouse gas emission in PNG. This is mainly through large scale logging and the conversion of forests into agriculture use. If PNG continues as it is now, greenhouse emissions are expected to rise as much as 32% by 2030. This increase would be in sharp contrast to the country's commitment to reduce emissions by 50% compared to a business as usual (BAU) baseline and becoming carbon neutral by 2050.

I'm very concerned for the future in regard to what's going to happen with climate change in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere in the Pacific.

Visit to Parliament in Canberra



The delegation to Parliament. Theresia Nakankwein is second from the right

The delegates from Tuvalu, Kiribati & PNG spoke to the media and put on a traditional dance. Everyone told their stories; our hearts were so moved for it was very touching to hear those stories. The saddest story is that our small country islands will be washed away by the sea erosion.

May we be living stories and our stories be heard. For inside our stories are the realities of our livelihood. We want you to hear that we fear to face the future for our inheritance and our people and its culture, and the environment around us. All of this is our identity and it gives us dignity. We are being threatened by the effect of climate change.

Our Message to the Politicians:

Listen – with ears for justice!

Look – with eyes for justice!

We don't know what do with different forms of climate change. Our reason for talking to the politicians is that they can make strategies to help reduce greenhouse emissions and make adjustments to provide funds for climate change in the Pacific nations that are affected by climate change.

The delegation was divided in two groups and we talked to eight politicians a day and in two days we may easily have seen sixteen politicians. At all the interviews/meetings in Canberra we were very well received and heard. From my observation it was a big job well prepared and a job well done.

I pray that what we shared with the politicians may turn into positive action for climate change in our countries.

Theresia Nakankwien & Daphne McKeough

References: Pacific Climate Change Science – www.pacificclimatechangescience.org
Office of Climate Change and Development Papua New Guinea - www.occd.gov.pg/REDD