

Responding to community NEEDS IN REMOTE PNG

For nearly eight years, Mercy Works Inc. has been partnering with the Diocese of Daru-Kiunga to support a number of community development projects in Papua New Guinea's remote and mostly rural Western Province. Stephanie Thomas reports on some of these projects and how they are responding to community needs.

Women empowering women

Odraina and Anna are two of many women who are contributing to, and benefiting from, activities at the Women's Development Centre in St Gerard's Parish, Kiunga.

Odraina is married with three young boys. She and sisters Rita and Lila, and their mother Patricia, have been involved in the Centre for about six years and appreciate what it has to offer women in their community.

Last year Odraina became the Centre's Vice Co-ordinator. Since then she has participated in a leadership course and other skill-development activities. Now she is passing on her skills and experience to other women by leading cooking and sewing classes.

"We want to learn new things and encourage other women to come and learn new things," she explains.

When Anna first came to the Centre she couldn't read or write. Now she is participating in a Tok Pisin (Pidgin) literacy course and can sign her name. Anna loves being able to read words and feels satisfied, more open-minded and happy that she is learning.

"I think the Centre is good because it is available for women to learn many skills and open to women of all faith traditions," she says.

By supporting the Women's Development Centre, Mercy Works Inc. is offering women in Kiunga, like Odraina and Anna, skill development opportunities and supportive experiences that many would otherwise not have.

According to Sister of Mercy, Catherine Corbett, St Gerard's Parish Women's Animator, many women are coming to the Centre and participating in courses to develop skills for themselves and their families. She believes that "their confidence is building, they are much more relaxed, and they are speaking up about issues".

While it is great news that growing numbers of women are participating in the Centre's activities, Catherine recognises a challenge. Many of the women bring their pre-school-aged children and there is an urgent need for them to be occupied so that the women can focus on their classes. The possibility of establishing a childcare centre is being developed and the women have already started to consult with the local community.



Farm project for young men keeps on growing

Mercy Works Inc. is supporting an innovative project which is helping unskilled and unemployed young men at risk of joining PNG's notorious 'raskol' gangs to gain farming skills and employment.

The Emmaus Farm, located on 72 acres near Kiunga, is home to 20 young men at any one time, and is steadily being developed. Phase one involved the development of farm infrastructure, such as building a road, fences, houses and a bakery; installing irrigation systems and planting fruit trees, vegetable gardens and forest trees.

The farm is now moving into its second phase: growing chickens, ducks and fish. Not only will the young men learn vital skills, but by producing an ongoing supply of meat and eggs, the farm will have protein-rich food for its own consumption, but also to sell to the local community.

Frank is one of many young men who is benefiting from Emmaus Farm. He heard about the project through local radio.

According to the farm's Co-ordinator, Daughter of Wisdom Sister, Aurore Gagnon, Frank has a garden at his family's home, but after two years of cultivation, he wanted to know how to produce better soil and crops.

"The soil of the Kiunga region is not as good as the rich soil found in the New Guinea Highlands," Aurore explains.

"Composting was his answer and he came to learn different methods of composting. He is also enthusiastic about starting his own fish pond and duck pond. An eaglewood plantation interests him a lot but he understands that he cannot do that alone. He would need the help of his family."

Aurore says Frank is a hard worker. "I am confident that eventually he will succeed in doing all he wants to do on his land."



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NEW PROJECTS FOCUS ON WOMEN & FAMILIES

Mercy Works Inc. is supporting two new projects in the North Fly District that focus on the needs of women and families.

A group of women from St John's Parish, Matkommai have wanted to run a literacy programme for women in their local language, Aekyom, since the late 1990s. For many women in PNG, especially in rural and remote areas, education opportunities are limited.

The Matkommai literacy project will be driven by, and for, local women. In this pilot phase, two women from each village will conduct classes twice a week in 11 villages of the parish. The women believe this initiative will make a significant difference to the lives of women and their families.

Meanwhile, the Diocese of Daru-Kiunga's Family Life Service is commencing a programme for men and women which focuses on promoting 'right relations' in the family. The programme will provide opportunities for men and women to come together and talk about issues affecting the family and learn positive communication skills. This preventative programme aims to combat the very high rates of domestic violence in PNG. ■



From left to right: Anna loves being able to read words; Odraina with her three boys; 55 village birth attendants have been trained to work in remote villages.



Reducing maternal and child deaths in remote villages

Throughout PNG, maternal and child death rates are excessively high, but they are even higher in remote and rural areas like the North Fly District.

For Sister of Mercy, Maureen Sexton, who has been working in the area since 2003, one of the main reasons health outcomes for mothers and children are so poor is "because basic health services don't reach the people in their villages and communities".

Providing health services in remote areas is a huge challenge. She names factors such as lack of transport and fuel, extremes of weather, difficult terrain and under-resourcing of remote aid posts and health centres.

"It is also true that in remote villages, customs, traditions or decisions by the people responsible for them mean that pregnant mothers don't come into health centres when it would be

preferable," says Maureen.

"The reasons often given are lack of transport, no means of housing or support when they go to the health centre, and these days, no money."

To help reduce these disturbing health trends, Mercy Works Inc. is supporting a resourceful and grassroots "safe motherhood" training programme in remote villages.

Women who are respected in their local communities are chosen to undergo training as village birth attendants. At this stage, 55 village birth attendants have been trained to work in remote villages of the North Fly District.

Maureen believes the programme is improving the health and well-being of women, children and their families because it is grounded in, and understood by the community. But ongoing training and support of village birth attendants remains crucial. ■