

Impact of Climate Change in various Islands in the Pacific Region

Now we heard about Tonga, one country of the many island countries in the Pacific. I have chosen other island countries of the Pacific to briefly share with you the impact of “Poverty and Environment” and their realities during the last five years.

Small Island developing States of the Pacific (SIDS) have their own peculiar vulnerabilities and characteristics, so the difficulties they face in the pursuit of sustainable development are particularly severe and complex.

- Small size
- Isolation
- Climate change and sea-level rise
- Natural and environmental disasters

The ocean covers more than two thirds of our planet, and small island developing States are generally somewhere in the middle of it. The balance of population and resources is critical for the future. From the perspective of the island countries, the ocean is still an unlimited resource relative to the present scale of their human impact¹.

Therefore, climate change not only poses a major challenge to achieving sustainable development, but it threatens the very existence of many of them.

Some are barely one metre above sea level, which makes them most vulnerable to climate change, such as the republic of Kiribati, Marshall Islands and Tuvalu. Many of them have weak economies that are heavily dependent on subsistence agriculture, fisheries, remittances and aid.

There has been work done for the protection of coastal shores to prevent depletion and poisoning of marine lives on shore to ensure environmental sustainability such as mangrove planting.

Another island territory, Tokelau, recently began producing 100% of its energy from solar sources. And as the vice-president of Seychelles remarked in the most recent General Assembly general debate, SIDS are ideal locations for pilot projects in renewable energy and other areas, which can then be rolled out in other countries on a larger scale. SIDS are also leading the way in ocean conservation efforts, and some of the largest Marine Protected Areas in the world are being established in the Pacific and incorporated into the Pacific Island Forum Ocean scape initiative².

The University of the South Pacific and the World Bank launched a regional report “Hardship and Vulnerability in the Pacific Island Countries. The report provides comprehensive new analysis of hardship and vulnerability across the region. Drawing on evidence from Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Tuvalu, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Kiribati, Fiji and Vanuatu, the report finds that extreme poverty remains rare in the Pacific, but that over 20 percent of people in most countries live in hardship – meaning they are unable to meet all of their basic needs such as food, fuel and medicines.

“Pacific Island Countries are some of the world’s most at risk countries to economic and environmental shocks and people face a number of growing threats, from NCDs to natural disasters,” said Melissa Adelman, World Bank Economist and Lead Author of the report. “Increasingly when these shocks occur, they threaten to push families, and sometimes entire communities, into hardship.”

“These are critical issues for development policy in the Pacific region,” said Michael Carnahan, Chief Economist (Development) at the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. “People, communities, enterprises and governments are better equipped to pursue productive opportunities and take risks when they are not suffering or vulnerable to hardship.”

Some key findings of the report include:

- Family and community networks are central to life in Pacific Island Countries and act as critical “safety nets” for people when shocks occur. However, household surveys show that traditional systems do not always reach everyone: those in deepest hardship may be least likely to be part of gift-giving networks. Studies also show that gift-giving may sometimes require greater generosity than many households feel they can truly afford.
- People in the Pacific are uniquely vulnerable to economic and natural shocks, as a result of countries’ small size, geographical isolation and high exposure to natural disasters. Dependence on global commodity markets for a large part of basic needs and incomes leaves households vulnerable to large swings in prices for items like food and fuel.
- Households headed by less educated people, elderly people, and households with more children, are more likely to live in hardship in all countries covered by the report. Women-headed households are more likely to live in hardship in Kiribati and the Solomon Islands, but are less likely in the other countries³.

Solomon Islands

The role of women in mitigating climate change should not be under-estimated, particularly in areas in which women are already active. The use of efficient energy systems at the household level (e.g. cooking stoves and ovens) could reduce emissions and harness the potential of women as actors for mitigation measures, with a knock-on effect of boosting income-generating activities. Paid post-disaster recovery interventions can also help women get back on their feet faster⁴.

Women and poverty

The trend toward more single-parent families has only made things worse and women have become more and more vulnerable to their environment. They find themselves forced to feed the poverty cycle by living in poverty with their children. The economic impacts of climate change affect women more significantly than men due to gender inequalities and persistent power imbalances in access to education, training, resources, and relevant information⁵.

Pacific women’s role in food production, whether through subsistence farming to feed their families or growing cash crops for income, is an indispensable part of food production and consumption practices. Given the unique knowledge and skills held by women, development planning for the region needs to acknowledge and effectively utilise women’s contributions in order to adapt to climate change impacts.

In Totoya Island in Fiji, for example, coastal flooding and erosion from climate change, in addition to unsustainable land management, reduced the land available to grow crops, leading to lower yields. The Totoyan women have existing knowledge on production of local nutritious food, and traditional food preservation methods. This knowledge is now being used to grow resilient crops in vegetable garden and to make flour, both of which will help to reduce reliance on imported products⁶.

NGO's encourages gardening through outreach programmes to homes seeking assistance on planting cabbage and other vegetables. I believe that good governance and good management of resources will remain the best way to tackle both problems of environment and poverty.


The challenges may seem daunting, but to preserve the environment, reverse ecological destruction and provide decent livelihoods, the Pacific island states need to take a greener, more inclusive and resilient approach to development. Only by addressing vulnerability and exclusion can development become more equitable and sustainable⁷.

Islands are thus a potential model for the future, facing now what must become the long-term preoccupation of the whole world as resource degradation approaches the limits of the planet⁸.

Pope Benedict XVI insists, "Before it is too late, it is necessary to make courageous decisions" to restrain climate change.

We Catholics have a moral obligation to care for both the poor and creation. Our faith demands prudent action especially the impact of climate change falls most heavily on the poor and the marginalised of our society.

Question for Reflection:

 Do I hear the cry of the poor?

 What **response must** I make? Where can I put my energy? Personally, in 2015?

¹ UN Conference on Small Island Developing States: Action Platform

² UN Conference on Small Island Developing States: Sustainable Developing Knowledge Platform

³ Press release: 11 March 2014, Fiji: Hardship and Vulnerability are pressing issues for Pacific Island Countries

⁴ UN Women in the Pacific

⁵ www.poverties.org/women-in-poverty.html

⁶ UN Women: Climate Change, Gender and Food Security in the Pacific

⁷ UN Conference on Small Island Developing States: Sustainable Developing Knowledge Platform

⁸ UNEP Earthwatch – Small Islands Environmental Management