

Report documents hunger across the Pacific

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In its State of the Environment Report for Oceania (2016), the Catholic aid agency Caritas has found widespread hunger across the Pacific in 2015–2016. The report, *Hungry for Justice, Thirsty for Change*, shows how extreme weather events combined with vast climatic changes are depleting food and water supplies throughout the region.

Released this month, the report documents cases of children eating cassava roots softened with paracetamol in Fiji and people in Papua New Guinea (PNG) suffering severe malnutrition during last summer's drought. A powerful El Niño weather pattern contributed to food and water shortages affecting an estimated 4.7 million people across 13 Pacific countries, leading to widespread suffering and many deaths.

Record-breaking temperatures around the globe in 2015-2016 hit the Pacific hard. Caritas found evidence of multiple social and humanitarian disasters following the impact of Cyclone Pam the previous year. In February, Cyclone Winston, the strongest storm recorded in the southern hemisphere, devastated large parts of Fiji. The report comments that El Niño “brought drought, poor harvests, frosts and fires, and wiped out food and cash crops that people had been relying on for their sustenance and future.”

Drought and cyclones have increased rates of malnourishment in Vanuatu and Fiji, with a shortage of fresh vegetables, fruit and fish intensifying extensive malnutrition. Doctors in Vanuatu reported children dying because inadequate food left them too weak to fight illnesses. Tonga's Ha'apai island group remains in food security stress from Cyclone Ian, which hit in January 2014 and the El Niño drought.

Extreme weather events impact health, education and daily life in the impoverished Pacific islands, where a large percentage of the population exists on subsistence agriculture. Food has become scarce in many places

where it had previously been abundant.

El Niño has brought changes to fish migration patterns, affecting a major traditional source of food. The deterioration of water and foodstuffs has prompted Caritas to elevate its assessment for “lasting and sustained” negative environmental effects to “severe” this year, up from “high” in 2015.

While describing the unfolding humanitarian disaster, the report endorses the Paris Agreement on climate change, signed at the 21st Conference of Parties (COP 21) last December. Caritas falsely claims the agreement offers “much hope” and that it will “change the world” if implemented fully. In fact, the document promises little more than the previous 20 annual conferences which failed to alter carbon emissions and demonstrated the impossibility of addressing climate change within the framework of the capitalist nation-state system.

COP 21 explicitly sidestepped the challenge brought by the governments of Pacific island nations, which told the conference their countries were “bearing the brunt” of global warming. Pacific leaders said rising sea levels were laying waste to broad parts of Oceania. Three low-lying nations—Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands—are already faced with submersion.

The nonbinding target agreed to by the US and the other major powers at the conference, which COP 21 does not enforce, is nowhere near what is scientifically necessary to protect humanity from the worst consequences of climate change.

Coastal communities across Oceania are already losing land as a result of coastal erosion, flooding and a sea level rise. Traditional staples such as coconuts are lost to king tides, storm surges and flooding. Rising saltwater is contaminating water supplies and killing off vegetation.

In the Carteret Islands, locals are moving from offshore atolls threatened by rising seas. One

community leader said: “We’ve had women dying because they do not have the strength to carry on their everyday activities in supporting their children to survive, their families to survive. There are children who are also dying on the island because they don’t have enough food.”

Parts of Tonga suffer extensive flooding whenever there is a high tide or excessive rain. Families who cannot afford to reclaim land are subject to seawater intrusion into their homes. Severe rainstorms hit the island of Tongatapu in June, but there are no official plans to relocate families living along the coastline. Coastal erosion is widespread in Samoa since a tsunami hit the south coast in 2009 compounded by a long-term sea-level rise.

Extreme weather events have exacerbated social crises. PNG has the highest percentage of people in the world—60 percent—living without access to safe water. At the height of the drought, people were walking long distances in search of food and fresh water. Many fell ill and died. At the peak of El Niño an estimated 2.7 million people in PNG were affected with water shortages, food insecurity and disease.

Cyclone Winston devastated large areas of Fiji in February. It killed 44 people, affected 40 percent of the population and destroyed or damaged at least 31,000 houses. The cost of the damage has been estimated at \$US1.4 billion.

The island of Taveuni lost 90 percent of its buildings and 100 percent of its crops, including large numbers of coconut trees and kava, the main cash crop. On Pentecost Island in Vanuatu, water tanks ran dry, and people were struggling to cultivate staple foods. Due to the relatively high cost of meat and tinned fish, there is now little protein in people’s diets. Caritas noted similar reports from the Solomon Islands.

The report underscores that the Pacific is among the most geographically exposed and socially impoverished regions on the planet. Underlying the consequences of weather events and natural disasters is widespread poverty, compounded by governments that are ill-equipped to plan for such events or fund essential defensive measures.

The report also notes that the Pacific was once the site of nuclear tests by Britain, France and the US, and comments that it is now a centre of experimental deep sea mining, with oil companies “circling Pacific

shores” and mining conglomerates lining up to explore or mine the seabed, potentially damaging entire ecosystems.

The world’s first commercial seabed mine had been scheduled to get underway by 2018 at the “Solwara (salt water) 1” site in PNG’s Bismarck Sea. The PNG government is a 15 percent partner with Nautilus Minerals Inc. Exploration for deep sea minerals by a Chinese company began in the waters east of New Britain in August.

The regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, come in for some criticism in the report. Caritas says they are “still doing less than their fair share to minimise emissions” or take practical steps “towards inclusive, global development that cares for both the earth and the poor.” The respective governments have, it says, failed to provide “climate finance” additional to other overseas development funding, which “still falls short of international commitments.”

In reality, the predatory relationship of Canberra and Wellington to the Pacific was highlighted when they seized on the disaster caused by Cyclone Winston to send warships, aircraft and hundreds of military personnel to Fiji in March to advance their own, and Washington’s, geo-strategic interests against growing rivalry with China.



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