

## El Niño and the advent of disaster preparedness among the highlanders of Papua New Guinea

### COP23

As climate negotiators and political leaders gather in Bonn, Germany this week for the annual Conference of the Parties meeting (COP23), the world's climate focus will be fixed firmly on the Pacific. Fiji is co-hosting the event - a first for a Pacific Small Island Developing State.

Much attention quite rightly will be given to the plight of 'climate refugees' and to the impacts of climate change on low-lying island nations, especially as the conference follows so closely in the wake of Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria, September 2017, that brought so much damage and media coverage to the Caribbean (and criticism of the Trump presidency for its alleged inappropriate response in disaster-torn Puerto Rico)<sup>1</sup>.

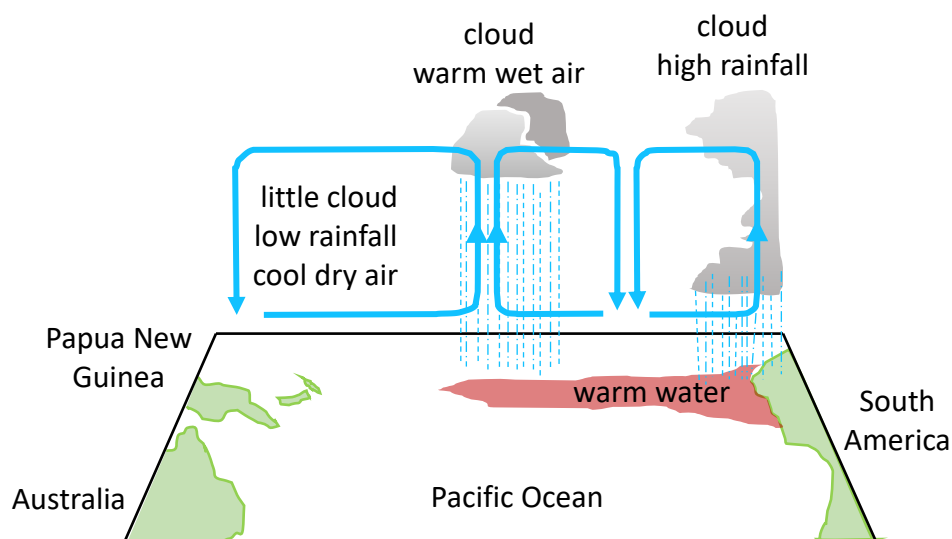


### Consensus

Negotiators gather and climate scientists agree; globally, temperatures will continue to rise, and while predictions are for fewer cyclones, the strength of these tropical systems will intensify - a truly terrifying prospect for those who live in high-risk areas. Winds during Cyclone Winston, February 2016, topped 300 kilometres per hour (almost 200 mph) - and it is little surprise therefore that the resultant devastation attracts the world media however fleeting that attention might be.

### El Niño

Yet, in the Pacific another potentially lethal weather phenomenon generates a relative media drought. El Niño is a naturally-occurring cyclical phenomenon caused by the unusual warming of surface ocean currents off the coast of South America. It occurs once every 2-10 years, and Peruvian fishermen first noted the event around Christmas, hence its name – El Niño – literally the boy child in Spanish, or more seasonally, the Baby Jesus.



<sup>1</sup> Donald Trump was announced as the 45<sup>th</sup> President (Elect) of the United States of America during the COP22 meeting in Marrakesh, Morocco last year, an outcome that cast a shadow of uncertainty over proceedings. The gloom further deepened when, under Trump's presidential guidance, the USA withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2017.

The serenity of the name, however, hides its potentially fatal climatic effects. Drier conditions than usual prevail over Papua New Guinea and northern and eastern Australia as ocean currents to the north of Australia are cooled with the shift in the Southern Oscillation (air pressure) that accompanies El Niño. The associated droughts impact water supplies, devastate crops and bring hardship to island and high-altitude communities alike. In the highlands of Papua New Guinea (anywhere above 1,500m) the relatively clear skies and lack of cloud cover also produce night-time frosts that further compound the drought conditions for the remote, subsistence communities.

Not all El Niño events have the same intensity, however; every few cycles, inexplicably, the El Niño is exceptionally severe with millions of people affected, and when the risk of starvation for some isolated populations becomes a real threat.

The El Niño of 1997-98 was one such event; 40% of the rural population experienced life-threatening food shortages, and in very remote areas, the death rate increased significantly. And just in the last two years, the severe El Niño of 2015-16 caused similar extreme hardship. It was estimated that up to 770,000 people faced either very scarce or extremely scarce food supplies and by November 2015, 13% of the population of Papua New Guinea had insufficient food to live. In response to the dire situation, reports stated that thousands of people migrated from the highlands to lower altitudes in search of food, adding to the food pressures in those already-stretched areas.

### **The experience in Hela Province, one of the worst affected areas during El Niño, 2015-16**

In Hela Province in the highlands, the first sign of the looming crisis was the drying up of small creeks, with women increasingly finding that they couldn't work the food gardens; then crops started to succumb to the drought conditions on a much wider scale.

With little to eat families reduced their food intake to just one meal a day, and some had so little food that they were forced to beg. "Even Christians wouldn't share what little they had with those in need, saying that they themselves had so little. It was a terrible time", said Pastor Philip Urupu.

Times were indeed hard; many people were forced to sell their prized pigs to raise money to buy what little imported food that was available. Yet, with so many pigs up for sale the price received per pig tumbled. During normal times, a pig would sell for between 3,000-4,000 kina (£800-1,000), but at the height of El Niño, people would be asking just 500 kina per pig and accepting as little as 300 kina. "In some cases, animals were given away to friends" said Revd. Clarence Kapali, the former Bishop of Hela Province.

But it was not all despair. There were signs of hope among the harsh realities of trying to survive. Some communities worked together to preserve any available food – seeds were buried, the remaining, surviving crops covered with grass, leaves and soil to protect them from the strong sun and night-time frosts, and people foraged for wild foods, such mountain mushrooms and pandanus nuts, in the bush. Reports also came of communities opening care centres for abandoned children in the homes of those who had left in search of food elsewhere.

And rather harmoniously, there was a cease-fire in hostilities in the area. The normally compensation-seeking highlanders chose to suspend all claims against their rivals, marriages (and the accompanying bride price) were postponed, and even tribal fights were deferred until better times... Apparently, you don't fight on a 'hungry stomach'.

## El Niño emergency response of the United Church of Papua New Guinea

As the food shortages continued into 2016, awareness of the situation grew, and the United Church, in partnership with the United World, Australia and the Australian Government (through the well-established Church Partnership Programme), initiated a Drought Relief Food Distribution to some atoll communities in Milne Bay Province in southern Papua New Guinea and to the highland communities in Hela Province.



“Churches played a critical role during the drought, both in their response to support communities, and in conducting food needs assessment”, said Brendon Jinks, one of the then-managers of the Church Partnership Programme in Papua New Guinea. “Churches were also an important source of information on logistics, security and cultural considerations of disaster response in remote communities”.

In the islands, communities not only had to contend with the drought, but many food gardens were also destroyed by flooding and any surviving root crops eaten by weevils. It’s not just the drought conditions that communities have to struggle with. When rains finally arrive, the sun-baked ground often cannot cope with the sudden downpour.

As a result, two food distributions of rice, flour, cooking oil and noodles were undertaken by the United Church in the Milne Bay area to more than 1300 households; and 12 food needs assessments were conducted by local church staff in Hela and Enga provinces, with follow-up food drops.

“In Hela, we had to ensure that communications were kept open to the very remote, worst affected areas, and that meant keeping ministers in post and holding on to them”, said first responder, James Komengi. Like many others, ministers and their families were seeking food supplies elsewhere. “Giving bags of rice to circuit ministers enabled them to stay to report back on those worst-affected who were unable to relocate. From the information supplied by the ministers, children, schools and hospitals most in need were identified and targeted through the church networks on the ground”.

Many children were either going to school without food in their stomachs or staying home because they were so weak. “We arranged for all Year 6 students, who were coming up to crucial exams, to receive a meal of rice each day at school. Schools that were once empty quickly had children coming to school each day”, said Komengi.

### Disaster Risk Reduction Desk and disaster preparedness

In praise of the accomplishment of the United Church in food distribution, the Regional Pacific Food Security Cluster Co-ordinator, Sandra Hart said: “The Church Partnership Programme El Niño response set a precedent for other country food security clusters across the Pacific to really kick-start their outreach to faith-based networks, particularly in communities that are most at risk to natural hazards.”

As it turns out, involvement in the El Niño response was also just the kick-start that the United Church of Papua New Guinea needed, too. “After our active engagement in the El Niño emergency food distribution, we realised that we could also assist communities before any disaster by raising awareness of the potential hazards that they face, and in so doing, help them to be better prepared and reduce their risk” said the Development Secretary of the United Church, Kali Sete.

## Prayer Points:

- Pray for all peoples suffering daily food shortages because of drought, conflict or poverty, when children go to bed hungry every night.
- Give thanks for the collaborative work of food distribution agencies who respond to emergency food-aid situations.
- Pray for the continued recovery of areas of Papua New Guinea that were drought-stricken in 2015-16.
- Give thanks for the work of the Disaster Risk Reduction Desk and the Development Unit of the United Church of Papua New Guinea.
- Give thanks for the collaborative, 12-year old(!) Church Partnership Programme.
- Pray for the Government of Papua New Guinea as it strengthens its disaster-response capabilities and seeks to build partnerships across all sectors.
- Reflect on the thirstiness of our diets, and our own daily water consumption.
- If you were to front a 'Cap the Tap' campaign, what would you set as the maximum water usage each day?

“And key to our ability to support communities has been the establishment of a Disaster Risk Reduction Desk within the development unit of the United Church”. The desk is now fully operational and its staff keen to engage wherever possible with communities living in high-risk areas.

Currently, the young team of two - Keven Koivi, DRR Co-ordinator, and Stella Vika, DRR officer - is busy investigating the possibility of setting up local DRR hubs across three church regions: the urban area of Port Moresby; eastern PNG in New Guinea Islands; and in the western highlands in Hela Province.

The initial stage of the investigation is to consult with church leaders and representatives in the respective region to seek their views on the idea. Only then, with the community's endorsement and support, can a firm proposal be drawn up. There are many aspects to consider:

- What will the hub look like physically?
- Where will it be located?
- Who will staff the premises?
- What activities will be undertaken?
- How can the hub be resourced and sustained?
- Who will monitor operations?
- And importantly, is it a good idea in the first place?

Signs are promising in Hela Province - the first consultation. The Regional Bishop, Revd. Wai Tege said: “Having a regional disaster hub in Hela is an urgent priority for the area.”



### **Growing enthusiasm for church and community preparedness**

Only a trickle of articles was published outside of the Pacific that highlighted the plight of Papua New Guineans during the 2015-16 drought – most people, even within the region, remained unaware of the suffering. Yet, the humanitarian needs at the time were great and the subsequent lessons learned many. El Niño events will continue in the future, and some will be as severe as 2015-16.

Communities, however, can safeguard against future El Niño shocks by being better prepared. Drought conditions develop over time and recognising the early warning signs will be crucial. And adapting with different drought-resistant crops, using improved water-capture methods, and applying alternative irrigation techniques are all ways that communities can already demonstrate their responsibility of caring for creation, and in so doing, looking after one another.

Living in remote areas will always bring environmental challenges, but with improved levels of preparedness, in the future an El Niño-induced trauma need not turn into an El Niño-induced tragedy.