

Impacts on Climate Refugees of the Carterets Islands, Papua New Guinea

Climate change is an urgent and terrible reality for women of the Carterets Islands in Papua New Guinea. They are among the world's first climate refugees. Increasing sea levels forced them out of their homes and they now live in resettlement camps on the outskirts of Buka Town. The women of these atoll communities have already lost their homes because of climate change, and continue to be threatened by its effects every day.

Sudden changes in temperature and weather patterns are greatly affecting the livelihoods of these women. Erratic weather like unexpected dry seasons or heavy rainfall and flooding are changing the agricultural system the women rely on. Women living in the resettlement camps depend on the agricultural products of small food gardens to feed themselves and their families. They also sell the surplus at the market to earn an income. They depend on this income to support themselves and their families. When the food gardens are flooded or fail to produce good crop harvests the families slip further into poverty and hunger. When there is no food, children do not go to school to stay with their mothers to forage for food or sources of income. Unable to provide food for their families or send their children to school the women often suffer under feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and failure.

This issue of sustainable food sources is the primary concern for the women of the resettlement camps. The only

semi-reliable crops available to them currently are coconuts, breadfruit, and bananas. Fish is the only possible source of protein, as a recent outbreak of cholera on the island has stopped the families from raising any livestock.

Women of the resettlement camps lack the resources and capacity for climate change adaptation. Climate change has also reinforced many social issues in the atoll communities, like increased domestic violence against women as well as abandonment by husbands who migrate to look for work. When a husband leaves, the woman's responsibilities are doubled yet her opportunities and access to resources remain extremely restricted. Women share that they have limited control over financial, political, and social capital when dealing with climate change. Their inadequate access to resources and information combined with their devastating poverty leave the women extremely vulnerable to natural disasters, and reduce their capacity to recover after the fact.

The geographic isolation and inaccessibility of the atoll communities are another huge problem for the women. Rates of infant mortality and women that die during childbirth are high. Health facilities available to the climate refugees are often unmanned and without adequate medicines. Ships coming to and from the resettlement camps are few and far between. When medical issues are very bad families often try to get to the larger islands by dinghies. Many families have capsized and drowned, and many continue to die in the resettlement camps of curable diseases.

For women of the Carteret Islands resettlement camps, the threats and risks of climate change are a part of their everyday reality, and have already cost them their homes. The experiences of some of the world's first women climate refugees deserve to be recognized in international climate agreements on mitigation, adaptation, and recovery.



International Recommendations

- Commit to a **radical and urgent transition from extractive, profit based economies to people centered models** that are just, equitable, gender-sensitive and locally driven;
- Commit to a **comprehensive, ambitious and binding** new climate agreement which aims to **limit global warming below 1.5°C** above pre-industrial levels;
- **Mitigation:** the new agreement should target the elimination of all fossil fuels and the use of 100% renewable energy by 2030 for developed countries and 2050 for others;
- **Mitigation** should not include commercializing of the climate through mechanisms that have failed to reduce emissions including REDD, REDD+, and "climate-smart" agriculture, among others;
- **Adaptation:** Developing countries needs (particularly LDCs and SIDS) should be addressed as a **priority** in the new agreement. Developed countries must recognize their historical responsibilities and fulfill their **obligation to support adaption measures for developing countries**, including through finance, technology transfer, capacity building and the removal of patent and intellectual property restrictions;
- **Loss and damage** must address long term and slow onset loss and damage as well as immediate disaster related damage;
- **Support small-scale**, locally owned and developed ecological responses ensuring **food sovereignty and traditional knowledge and practices of indigenous and rural women** are retained and promoted;
- **Decision-making processes at the local, national and international levels:** Should be led by those most affected by the impacts of climate change, particularly women;
- **Disaster Risk Reduction:** A gender-responsive approach should be integrated in all disaster risk reduction strategies, humanitarian assistance and reconstruction policies and measures;
- **Accountability mechanism:** A strong and effective compliance mechanism to the agreement should be established to ensure the fulfillment of Parties' obligations.

National recommendations

- **Indigenous peoples**, including women, should be **included in all decision-making policies** and measures on climate change affecting them;
- **Gender specific policies** ensuring women's rights to food sovereignty, safe drinking water and sanitation, health services, and adequate housing, including climate refugees, should be **collectively developed**.

Papua New Guinea Country Info

Population: 7.1 Million

Human Development Index Rating: Ranked 157 on Human Development Index of 187

Greenhouse Gas Emissions: As of 2010, PNG contributed an estimated 0.01% of global greenhouse gas emissions and in 2014 has a per capita emission rate of 0.46 metric tons (as compared to 17.5 metric tons for the US, and 6.18 metric tons for China).

Climate Change Vulnerability : Papua New Guinea has long been and continues to be extremely vulnerable to climate change. The UNFCCC has often recognized that small island states “are among the most vulnerable to climate change impacts.” In what was widely reported as the first case of climate refugees due to rising sea levels, the PNG government authorized the government-funded total evacuation of the Carteret Islands in November of 2003. Climate change remains a present threat, with erratic weather patterns, changing temperatures, and ever-rising sea levels threatening the food, land, water, and resource security of Papua New Guinea.

Costs of Climate Change: Findings from a 2013 report by the Asian Development Bank suggest that PNG would experience the most significant economic losses in the Pacific Region due to climate change, with costs reaching 15.2 % of its GDP by 2100.

Community Info

- Research group comprised of 70 women from 3 atoll community resettlement villages in the outskirts of Buka Town, Papua New Guinea.
- All are climate refugees who left their islands which had become uninhabitable because of rising sea level.
- Due to the submersion of the islands, in 2003 the government funded a relocation plan to a neighboring island.
- Carteret Islanders call themselves the Tuluun (meaning Ocean People).
- Women are reliant on agriculture and small-scale food gardens for sustenance and income.
- The education rate is extremely low (only 2 of the project’s 70 women attend school).

Organization Info

The **Leitana Nehan Women’s Development Agency (LNWDA)** is leading research on the mass displacement of the Carteret Islanders of Papua New Guinea. LNWDA collects data on the effects of climate change and the climate induced displacement on the lives of women in the resettlement communities. The organization aims to aid the women in engaging in climate planning and policy decisions.

Climate Justice is a Feminist Issue

APWLD is Asia Pacific’s leading feminist, membership driven network. We hold consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Our 180 members represent groups of diverse women from 25 countries in the region. For 25 years APWLD has been empowering women to use law as a instrument of change for equality, justice, peace and development. We use research, training, advocacy and activism to claim and strengthen women’s human rights.

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