

# Caritas State of the Environment for Oceania 2018 Report - summary

The report bears witness to the stark reality that millions of people in small islands states are suffering the impacts of climate change, though they did very little to contribute to it. We highlight the actions that the government and people of Australia can take to act in solidarity with our Pacific neighbours and respond to climate change.

In 2018, Caritas Australia once again joined with Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand, Caritas Papua New Guinea, Caritas Samoa and Caritas Tonga to publish the annual Caritas State of the Environment Report for Oceania.

Evidence continues to flow from communities that climate change is here and now in the Pacific – and has been for at least two decades.

**Sea level rise** Long-term coastal issues arising from sea level rise are causing concern and uncertainty. Many people are relocating, but it is still largely undocumented and unco-ordinated, and the region needs to face up to the long-term implications and possibilities for relocation and displacement, while always seeking to avoid it as much as possible.

In October 2016, king tides forced more than 160 people from their homes on Maledok Island, part of the Tanga Group in Papua New Guinea. The impact of king tides will continue to increase with sea level rise. Caritas Co-ordinator for Kavieng diocese Patrick Kitaun reported:

*Village cemeteries washed away. A dug water hole covered with sand and other debris with the coastal vegetation cover slowly wilting and dying away following the sea water bath. Tree crops such as coconut and betel nut trees now wilting and dying. Additionally, some terrestrial animals and a number of household livestock animals were reported dead. People now are in*

*extreme risk from waterborne diseases and likewise, more vulnerable to sickness from the impact of the damages.*

**Extreme weather** Climate change is linked to an increasing severity in cyclones. Several tropical cyclones had significant impact on the Pacific in 2017-2018. Gita, Hola and Keni were particularly severe. Cyclone Gita impacted the Pacific as a whole with Samoa and Tonga most devastated. Cyclones Josie and Keni caused massive flooding in Fiji, and coupled with other extreme weather events in April caused eight deaths.

Gita, the most powerful cyclone in Tonga's recorded memory, hit the main island of Tongatapu on 12-13 February 2018. It destroyed homes and severely damaged infrastructure. One person died and 80 percent of the population was affected ... 271 houses were ... totally destroyed, and more than a thousand badly damaged.

**Food and Water** Climate change is impacting coastal and inland food and water supplies, as are some abusive extractive or intensive practices with regard to logging, forestry, agriculture and mining. Major disasters such as Cyclone Gita and the Papua New Guinea earthquake highlight the vulnerability of many Pacific Islands' food and water sources and the need to provide a range of options as well as emergency supplies. The Carteret Islanders story is an 'early warning' to all of the threat posed to food supplies by climate change:

Two elderly people died from lack of nutrition during the year on the Carteret Islands, offshore from the Autonomous Region of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea, according to Ursula Rakova. She is Executive Director for Caritas partner Tulele Peisa which is managing the long-term migration of Carteret Islanders from their home atolls to mainland Bougainville. People on the islands rely on fish and other seafood; there is no starch available, as traditional root crops no longer grow in land that has become too salty through sea level rise.

### **Communities are responding with resilience**

As weather patterns become more unpredictable the value of strong community networks is vital. The report showcases different examples of how Pacific communities are responding with resilience and preparation. These practical community resilience measures make a difference and are vital to save and protect lives, livelihoods and infrastructure.

### **But they need us to act in solidarity to tackle climate change. How do we respond?**

We need to respond by doing our fair share for climate action, with a special focus on small and isolated communities, and marginalised peoples most susceptible to sea level rise, threats to food and water security, and changing and unpredictable weather patterns.

**The Australian government** must prioritise reducing emissions to help keep global warming below 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, as well as helping our more vulnerable neighbours adapt. For many in our region, this is an imperative for survival. This means:

- Adopting stronger emissions reduction targets in Australia as well as a credible plan to reach these targets;
- Ruling out major new fossil fuel projects in Australia or the expansion of existing ones;
- Contributing our fair share of funding for global 'climate finance'. Climate finance refers to funding to help poorer countries tackle the impacts of climate change and reduce their emissions.
- Ensuring that the way Australia provides climate finance does not impose further foreign debt and burden on Pacific states and the people that reside within them. This means

through grants rather than loans.

- Adopting the Global Compact on Migration, which will provide a common global understanding for all countries to save lives, protect rights, and manage the scale and complexity of human mobility in the 21st century, including increasing forced relocation due to climate change.

**As individuals**, we can all take action for stronger, more urgent climate action in Australia. See [www.caritas.org.au/climate-act](http://www.caritas.org.au/climate-act) to find out how you can take action.

**Decision-makers** around the world need to take on board Oceania voices, such as those from our partner agencies. As the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania said in April 2018:

We...appeal to all people, particularly those in the continents of industrial strength, to hear our voice from the south. In your hands lies the power to make sustainable, responsible, economic development ... we again implore governments to exercise responsible leadership in favour of the common good, future generations and our mother earth.

**Download the full report at**  
[www.caritas.org.au/oceania-report](http://www.caritas.org.au/oceania-report)

