



Voices from the Front Lines of Climate Change

An Interview with Tagolyn Kabekabe, Pacific Facilitator for the Anglican Alliance

Tagolyn Kabekabe is the Pacific Facilitator for the [Anglican Alliance](#), which “brings together those in the Anglican family of churches and agencies to work for a world free of poverty and injustice, to be a voice for the voiceless, to reconcile those in conflict, and to safeguard the earth.” She was previously the Development Coordinator – Church Partnerships Program for the Anglican Church of Papua New Guinea. She was speaking with Elizabeth Perry.

What are some of the water-related challenges that affect people in the Solomon Islands?

People in the Pacific face a lot of challenges with water.

In particular it's to do with water harvesting... With the impacts of climate change we have very unstable patterns of rain and that really affects water collection... as it makes us use up water too soon. Most of our rural communities are on small, low-lying islands, which do not have rivers so we very much depend on rainwater.

But the issue of the rain water is that we need to have proper catchments to store the water for longer periods of time... but a lot of people in communities cannot afford to buy them given that the main resources by which our people get their money is fish and a little bit of vegetables.

How have rainfall patterns changed?

There are two major changes we have experienced in the region: one is that we don't get the rains when we expect them and two, when we get the rain it's just too much – or maybe too little. So the rain patterns have been affected. A good example was last year. September and October are usually towards the end of the dry season for us and last year we had unusual rainfall during those two months and it really affected a lot of our people, especially our atoll communities. By then their swamp taro crops are just about ready. And so when [there's] too much rain – especially when it's not at the time it's expected – it actually rots the tubers and so it affects the food supply for the people and the atolls.

What impact does this have on people in the Islands?

When this happens people do not get their supply of root crops and they have to find an alternative... People now start to depend more on (imported) rice and flour products and though they are very good because they fill the gap, they also bring about other issues like health issues, such as obesity and NCDs (non-communicable diseases). There is an increase in diabetes, increase in blood pressure - diseases that we do not know of in the past. Traditionally our people are very healthy.

How do people find the money to buy the rice and flour? They have been used to growing their own crops and now they're having to buy imported food. How is that financed?

That's a good question! For our very rural people who are subsistence farmers and who very much live off the land, it's a struggle to be able to buy the rice, which means that what little crops they have, they have to sell, or, if they have children who are working in towns and cities, they depend on them. That is one of the patterns we are now experiencing - that our families who live in the villages now depend on the children who are working and earning money to actually supply the rice for them. It puts a strain on our community.

What about the other impact of climate change with rising sea levels? How much of the Pacific region would you say that affects?

The whole of the Pacific is affected by rising sea levels... For example in January this year I was listening to a radio programme and the elder was talking about having a very unusual high tide earlier this year that affected his village; so his village is talking about – and he is on the mainland of Malaita –about relocating inland, to higher ground.

So when we talk about the impacts of rising sea levels it affects everybody, but it is worse for the low-lying islands, because we've had incidences like a few years ago when we had a spring tide that actually washed through the islands and it washes everything with it... the chickens, the pigs, it washes through the kitchen taking the pots, the pans, everything into the sea. And so these are experiences that people are now experiencing, which a lot of people say never happened in the past. They used to have high tides, but they know it was only half a meter but that has changed so much in the last ten years.

And what about the problem of salination of crops?

When we have this rising sea level and unusual high tides and things like that, it actually destroys whatever crop is grown – not necessarily along the beach or coastline, but it also affects inland... A lot of people plant swamp taro and swamp taro needs a certain salinity to be able to grow well and produce tubers. But when you have extra salt it disturbs the level of salinity, it becomes too salty and it affects the crop. It actually rots the tubers and in the long run it actually kills off everything. And that's not only the swamp taro, but things like bananas, things like bread fruits, even coconuts are affected by too much salt in the soil. So a certain level of salt is suitable for these plants but too much actually kills them.

Then, with the unusual rain pattern and the rainfall, it also affects them the same way. Too much rainwater disturbs the balance. So it's both ways and it is really things that our people can have no control over. The biggest challenge for us is how can we control these things, which are really beyond us? We cannot control sea level rise, we cannot control how much rain falls onto the crops. And so our people are left with nothing in the sense that they cannot protect themselves from these things and so the people simply go with what happens.

How much do ordinary people on the islands understand about what is happening and why the changes are happening?

I did some awareness in my community. It's very interesting that people notice the changes but in my local language there is no word to describe climate change. So people notice the changes like the sea coming in, they notice the impacts when too much salt kills all the plants along the beach and all that, but to connect it to the impacts of climate change is something that is very new to them.

And how do people react when they find out what's causing it?

At first – it was interesting – they said, 'well maybe this is nature'. And because they are a Christian community they say, 'maybe this is how God made the world to be'.

And so in my discussion with them I had to come in very slowly to explain to them what are the other things that are contributing to all these changes. And one of those things I covered was that some of the actions that we do ourselves contribute to this – like excessive burning of rubbish in our gardens... and that contributes to some aspects of climate change. When I say that to them they say, 'oh, we didn't know that. We didn't know that. That is our subsistence way of making gardens – we burn everything to clear the place so that we can plant our crops. And in burning we also burn the pests and the parasites that affect our garden'.

But then, when they learnt that such things as globalization contributes to climate change, like the industries that we have, that so much rubbish is going into the environment, then they say, 'oh, that is not fair. That is not fair that people in neighbouring Australia have all these big industries that gives off a lot of rubbish into the atmosphere – that is not fair. We only make small fires to burn our rubbish, not those big machines that continue to pump out all that rubbish into the air day and night. That is definitely not fair.'

The biggest challenge for me is when they ask the question, 'are they going to help us control the sea coming up, and the unusual rainfall and all that?' And I say, 'to a certain extent they *might* help us, but we can do some other things ourselves. And they say, 'what can we do?' So I said, 'what *can* you do?' And so it was very interesting that they said, 'we can plant mangroves along the sea front to stop the sea from coming in. We are not going to totally stop the sea from coming in but at least it becomes a barrier'. So they understand a lot of these things themselves as to what they can do.

What are some of the practical things the church is doing to help? Salt-resistant seedlings – those kinds of things?

Yes. So this is the project funded by Episcopal Relief and Development and delivered by the Church of Melanesia. It's the crop adaptation programme that's going on in the islands. So it's really finding crops that are resistant to salt. And they've actually found some that are very traditional crops, trees and so on, that they have introduced to the island and they are doing well. They can do well for the next 10 – 15 years, but then after that the salt becomes the issue and there's nothing they can do about that.

So with that is the discussion on resettlement and that is the biggest discussion and challenge that the churches are faced with, resettling these people from those islands to the big islands in the country.

How well do you think resettlement is likely to go should it happen?

Well, resettlement is a very sensitive issue, especially for the people on those islands. From the discussions that have come back to us, the young people are willing to be resettled to wherever it is; the old people are not willing and they would rather go down with the island than to be moved somewhere that they are not familiar with, where things are different... These are 'salt water' people who live on the sea, so you cannot relocate someone from the sea inland. It's going to cause a lot of problems for them. So while the young people are willing to resettle because they can adapt easily, old people are not very willing.

How would you like people in the west / richer countries – or anywhere in the world – to respond, or do? How would you like them to pray? What message do you have for them?

I think the first message is, as Christians, we used to say to ourselves as island people that we live every day through the blessings of others and through the prayers of the faithful. And so the first thing we ask for is their prayers – that we don't continue to have these unusual rainfalls and strong winds and all these things... So I think that's the first thing – we need everybody's prayers in our situation.

The second thing is that with the developed countries, the Western countries, what we need as people of the Pacific is greater understanding of the issues we are confronted with. We don't want people to throw money at us and say, 'that's the money, now fix your problem'. I think what we really need is their understanding, to put their foot in our shoes and really understand how we are affected by the ocean, how we are affected by the wind, how we are affected by the rain, by the sun. And having that greater understanding of how we are affected, then they will respond positively to us, in a way that will have a long-term impact on us and also maybe a sustainable impact on our people. So those are my two messages.

What is your theological understanding of the ocean?

As a Pacific person, to me, the ocean is life. It's God's life-giving gift to us, the people of the islands. It's our life and we are connected to the ocean for everything.