

FRESH WATER for FAMILIES and COMMUNITIES

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water, who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste. – *St Francis*



Women washing dishes in a village near Auki on Malaita Island, Solomon Islands.

In the Jubilee Year of Mercy, practice of the second corporal work of mercy reminds us that when we give drink to the thirsty – whether at home or abroad – we are giving to Christ.

The Pacific islands have suffered from drought and water shortages this past summer. It was blamed primarily on an extremely strong *El Nino* effect (a cyclical weather pattern that brings drier weather to much of the South Pacific). Some see the drought as a harbinger of worse to come under ongoing, long-term climate change.

Whether or not this is the case, the extensive drought highlights the vulnerability of poor people and subsistence households to the

vagaries of weather and the reliability of old, neglected or inadequate water lines and pumping systems.

Water is a basic necessity for health and human dignity and scarcity can lead to conflict.

“Access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right,” said Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’*, “since it is essential to human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights. Our world has a grave social debt towards the poor who lack access to drinking water, because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity.”

Extent of drought

Warning bells went off last spring that nearly 5 million people in 11 Pacific

countries faced a severe drought, causing shortages of water and food, ill health and even death. As of April 2016, below-normal rainfall predictions applied across much of the Pacific.

Solomon Islands, where Caritas has extensive partnerships, is among those countries still expecting below-normal rainfall through to June. However, the drought’s impact will be felt long after and in some areas compounding problems arising from earlier uncharacteristic weather – such as days of intensive rainfall in 2014, and Cyclone Racquel in mid-2015 that caused crop damage in many parts of the country.

Impacts

Outside the Solomon Islands’ capital

of Honiara, water infrastructure and supply lines are extremely limited. In emergencies, difficult roads make it hard to truck in supplies of fresh water, while bottled water is very expensive.

Drought does not just affect drinking water. It also affects food production, health and education. Family food gardens and household plots rely on natural irrigation and rainfall to keep crops healthy, while people become unwell from inadequate or inappropriate food, or unsafe water. Some schools have sent children home because of a lack of fresh water.

Caritas sources in the Solomons say the main provincial market in Gizo has a reduced availability of vegetables and fruits, including staple food items such as sweet potatoes.

Response

In response to the need and requests from the Church in Solomon Islands, Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand has put together a drought preparedness and response package focused on the Catholic Dioceses of Gizo and Auki. It also gained funding assistance of \$200,000 from the New Zealand Aid Programme.

Rainwater harvesting, large-scale 5,000-litre water storage tanks, and wells to provide fresh water for non-drinking purposes are being provided through community centres such as churches and schools.

Communities have been involved in how water is distributed, and for safety reasons there are periods during the day when only girls, women and children will have access to the water.

These measures provide both an immediate and a longer-lasting response to environmental conditions which may worsen or become more unpredictable.

With dry weather expected to continue until the middle of the year, concrete improvements to supply and store water promote both wellbeing and peace – the fullness of life that Jesus spoke of.

Permanent solutions

Caritas has also been involved in permanent, durable, community-based

solutions to inadequate, unreliable or dangerous water supplies.

A few years ago, a group of coastal villages near Auki said that their 42-year-old water system needed fixing and extending to serve six communities numbering 1,500 people in total, rather than the single village it was originally installed for. Residents (mainly women) were rowing 500 metres in small canoes to collect water on a daily basis.

Before rehabilitation, Caritas Senior Programmes Coordinator, Nick Borthwick, identified only five out of 12 existing outlets were working. Those that were working had no functioning taps, allowing a continuous drip of water to escape. Although makeshift attempts at taps were made with pieces of wood and plastic, none were sufficient to really prevent the constant loss of water.

In addition, visible portions of pipe were corroded and leaking, and engineers believed underground portions were equally corroded and filled with silt.

On a practical level, these pipes were upgraded to durable PVC (plastic) – offering lower resistance to water flow and higher resistance to silt build-up. The solution is also better for human health and the environment.

However, the role of the community in managing the facility has been important too. The Water Committee comprises nine members (including four women) drawn from the communities served. They are responsible for communication, collecting money and preventing disputes over the water or the land on which the system is built. In Aotearoa New Zealand, community involvement has also been critical in the success of a water supply scheme in Hokianga, Northland, where Caritas is working with local iwi in Motuti and Panguru.

The residents of Motuti relied on rainwater tanks, but contaminants were causing illness, and more visitors and drier summers highlighted problems of supply. People were sometimes trekking over the hill to Panguru where creeks provided a more regular supply.



A child enjoys a drink of fresh water in a village near Auki on Malaita Island, Solomon Islands, where Caritas continues to work with local communities in the area to ensure a reliable supply of clean water.

The joint Panguru/Motuti water project took control of the situation, and with a grant from a community funding agency and assistance from the Ministry of Health's Drinking Water Assistance Programme, they installed a solar-powered pump and tank extension to the existing Panguru supply to reliably service Motuti as well.

"It took a lot of collaboration between the Panguru community, Motuti, landowners and trusts," says project manager Rongo Makara, "but the water lines are locally owned and managed and governed. We retain the source".

As access to clean, reliable sources of water becomes a more pressing issue for countries around the region, the importance of working with communities like those in Solomon Islands and in Hokianga to develop solutions can not be understated. ■



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