



- The Frieda River Mine and the Threat to the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea
- No Women in the Parliament of Vanuatu
- The Economic Effect of COVID-19

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~ Emmanuel Peni of Project Sepik

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THE FRIEDA RIVER MINE AND THE THREAT TO THE SEPIK RIVER IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

The Frieda River gold, silver and copper mine, which is proposed in PNG’s remote Sepik region, would be the largest mine in PNG history, and one of the largest in the world.

The mine has been proposed by an Australian registered company, PanAust, which is owned by Chinese state-owned enterprise, Guandong Rising Asset Management (GRAM). It would be situated on the Frieda River, a tributary of the longest river in PNG, the Sepik. But chiefs representing communities along the Sepik have called for this mining project to be stopped. Twenty-eight *haus tambarans*, the village spiritual, cultural and political meeting houses, have issued the Supreme Sukundimi Declaration calling for a total ban on the Frieda River Mine. The declaration says:

“The River is the life of the Sepik and therefore it must be protected at all costs. It is our innate role to guard the River from exploitation and destruction by outsiders. Our future is in peril from this proposed mine and therefore we have gathered together as Guardians of the River to stand firm as one.”

In March 2020 a local Civil Society Organisation (CSO) called Project Sepik, called for the rejection of the Frieda River mine on the grounds that PanAust's Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was 'unfit for purpose'.

The call came with the submission of ten independent expert reports on the EIS to PNG's Conservation and Environment Protection Authority (CEPA). The reports were obtained by Project Sepik in collaboration with PNG-based legal advocacy group, Centre for Environmental Law & Community Rights (CELCOR).

The submission made the following three points about the EIS:

- 1) The EIS has done nothing to reassure experts about the fact that there is **no secure way of storing the massive amount of mine waste (tailings)** safely without damaging the river. The project is being developed in a seismically active area of PNG which is also subject to extreme rainfall. The likelihood of the tailings dam breaking at some point, and causing catastrophic damage, is believed to be inevitable.
- 2) There is **no evidence of free, prior and informed consent** of all impacted customary landowners, including communities on the mine site and along the Frieda and Sepik Rivers. This evidence is essential for the project to proceed.
- 3) The **EIS is missing critical reports and information** including reports relating to the tailings dam and seismic reports. Also missing is vital information about the operation and closure of the mine, an assessment of the proposed airport, a resettlement plan for the four villages requiring relocation and a cost-benefit analysis.

"This mine could not be built safely, and now these ten expert reports prove it," said Emmanuel Peni, Coordinator of Project Sepik. "We call upon CEPA to reject this incomplete and defective EIS and reject this Project....The 100,000 people who live on the Sepik don't want this mine. It will not bring the promised benefits to my people and it will endanger the beautiful Sepik river, which provides us not only with our home but our livelihood and also defines our identity."

Project Sepik submitted its expert reports on the same day it launched a campaign called 'Save the Sepik', in collaboration with Jubilee Australia and Aid/Watch Australia.

"We have seen this movie of Australian-based companies causing havoc to PNG's rivers before," said Dr Luke Fletcher, Executive Director of Jubilee Australia Research Centre. "We all remember BHP's Ok Tedi disaster, and we are still tracking the ongoing tailings disaster in Bougainville. In both cases the tailings released into these rivers contaminated and killed fish, caused mass flooding and the spread of contaminated mud, decimated land previously used for growing food and led to the leaching of heavy metals."

"The Sepik region is a haven of biodiversity, and home to some of PNG's rarest plants and animals," said Natalie Lowrey, Coordinator of AID/WATCH. "It is the largest unpolluted freshwater system in PNG and one of the largest and most intact freshwater basins in the Asia Pacific. Yet if the mine were to go ahead, the region could face catastrophic and permanent destruction. Instead of allowing this mine to proceed, the PNG government should commence the next step in protecting the Sepik – formally nominating the region for World Heritage Status," said Ms Lowrey.

The River is Not Ours

Jubilee Australia and Project Sepik released the report, *The River is Not Ours*, in June 2019 about PanAust's proposed Frieda River Mine project. It investigates the project's environmental and social impacts. It is largely based on the findings of an awareness tour of riverside villages conducted by seven team members from Project Sepik. The mine will rely on the Sepik river for access, transport and tailing dispersal. If approved, the mine could have serious environmental and social impacts for the 400,000 indigenous people who rely on the river for their food, drinking water and transport.

“The river is not ours, it belongs to the future. We are only vessels of the Sepik spirit that dwells to celebrate and protect it. We will guard it with our life,” says Emmanuel Peni of Project Sepik.

Sources: ‘Papua New Guinea chiefs call for halt to plan for country’s largest ever mine’ by Ben Doherty, The Guardian, 18 June 2020 / Jubilee Australia 31 March 2020 / ‘The River is Not Ours: The Frieda Mine and the Threat to the Sepik’ by Luke Fletcher and Emmanuel Peni, published by Jubilee Australia and Project Sepik, June 2019 / www.savethesepik.org / Edited by Rosamund Burton

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NO WOMEN IN THE PARLIAMENT OF VANUATU

There were 17 female, and nearly 300 male candidates, contesting Vanuatu’s 52 parliamentary seats in the national elections on 19 March 2020. Not one woman gained a seat, so the country now has its third consecutive all-male parliament. The last time a woman was elected to national parliament was 2008.

Vanuatu is one of only three countries in the world which have no females in their parliaments. The two others are the Federated States of Micronesia, which has never had a woman in parliament, and PNG. In PNG’s 2017 national election, 165 women ran for parliament out of a total of 3,000 candidates, and no women were elected, including the three female incumbents.

Since Vanuatu gained independence in 1980 there have been five female MPs. The first was Motoralivoa Hilda Lini, who was elected in 1987 and served three terms. From the island of Pentecost, she is one of very few female chiefs in Vanuatu. Her brother, Father Walter Lini, was the country’s first prime minister after independence.

She has always been an advocate for women’s rights and in 2018 she was approached by the Vanuatu National Council of Women to set up the Pacific’s first ever woman-led party, the Leleon Vanua Democratic Party, because the larger, established political parties were not supporting women. In the 2020 election of the three top ranking political parties, the Graon mo Jastis Pati and the Reunification Movement for Change endorsed no female candidates, and only two of the Vanua’aku Pati’s 27 candidates were women.

A month before the March 2020 elections the Leleon Vanua Democratic Party announced it would not contest the election due to lack of funds. Despite its fund-raising efforts the Leleon Vanua Party couldn’t compete with the sponsorship that the major parties attracted.

The Pacific nations have some of the lowest rates of female political representation in the world, and one issue across the countries is a lack of economic equality between men and women. In Vanuatu, many people believe in the traditional culture, the idea of ‘kastom’, that women are to support and serve men, rather than take leadership roles.

To take their places in parliament women need acceptance by the community that they can be political leaders, and also to receive financial backing from political parties. Programs working with men and community leaders are in place to instigate cultural change and acceptance of female leadership. The Leleon Vanua Democratic Party will contest the next election in 2024, but its secretary-general, Andrina Komala Lini Thomas told the ABC,

“It’s going to take many years and a lot of educated work to assist men to change and transform their mindsets, that women should also have a place in the decision-making of a nation.”

Sources: ‘The 2020 Vanuatu Elections: How Did Women Fare?’ by Elise Howard, In Brief 2020/11, Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University / “2020 will be my year”: the push to elect women in Vanuatu, a nation with no female MPs’ by Yasmine Bjornum, The Guardian 15 March 2020 / ‘Vanuatu’s election sees 17 women contest seats – again almost 300 men’ by Jordan Fennell and Prianka Srinivasan, ABC, 19 March 2020 / Edited by Rosamund Burton.

THE ECONOMIC EFFECT OF COVID-19

Pacific island states saw their economic links weakened in recent months with the evaporation of tourism, severe disruptions to international trade, and a reduction in remittances. For these countries, the COVID-19 pandemic may cut deeper than even some of the worst cyclones over the years.

Shrinking global demand is also affecting the islands dependent on commodity exports, and supply chain disruptions—including in the fisheries industry—are affecting the islands, as well as their licensing revenues.

The drop in global demand is reflected in much lower commodity prices, impacting commodity exporters such as PNG. Globally, shrinking employment and repatriation of guest workers are expected to lead to a fall in remittances of around 20%. Remittances average about 10% of GDP in the Pacific islands (excluding PNG) and exceed 40% in Tonga and 15% in Samoa and the Marshall Islands.

Many island economies in the region are already reeling from the sharp collapse of tourism due to the pandemic. Tourism accounts for up to 20-30% of economic activity in countries like Samoa and Tonga, and tourism is a prime source of employment and foreign exchange for such countries as Fiji and Palau. In Vanuatu 70% of tourism workers have lost their jobs. The Cook Islands has experienced an 60% drop in GDP.

Tourism accounts for between 10 and 70% of GDP and up to one in four jobs across the South Pacific, and there are calls for the Pacific Islands to be included in the proposed trans-Tasman travel corridor. Australians and New Zealanders make up more than 50% of travellers to the region - two-thirds of visitors to Fiji and three-quarters to the Cook Islands are Aussies and Kiwis.

“No visitors means we’re marketing to ourselves, and no one has money to spare on nonessentials,” Samoa-based business owner Nikki Mariner-Peseta told PBS NewsHour. Mariner-Peseta, who co-owns an art business in Apia, Samoa’s capital, relies on tourism and international orders through social media to sell paintings and carvings. As a result of shipping delays, because of Samoa’s strict lockdown on international travel, her business has had to offer large discounts to international buyers. With a temporary rent waiver from her storefront’s landlord, Mariner-Peseta believes that, with difficulties, she can sustain the business for about a year.

In lieu of formal safety nets, many Pacific islanders rely on their extended family networks and traditional subsistence lifestyles, which has worked in their favour. In PNG people can return to their villages where there is a common wantok system, whereby clan members share resources. Mariner-Peseta is not scared of becoming homeless or going hungry, as “the culture and lifestyle wouldn’t let people go without food or shelter.”

The Pacific’s COVID-19-enforced isolation may also be shaping life in some positive ways. Mariner-Peseta explained families are working their farms and spending time on their land. “Eating more fish and local produce feels good,” she said.

Sources: Pacific Islands Threatened by COVID-19, IMF Country Focus, 27 May 2020 / ‘Many Pacific islands are untouched by COVID-19. Its arrival could be disastrous’ by Maea Lenei Buhre, PBS NewsHour, 7 May 2020 / ‘Covid 19 coronavirus: Should the Pacific be included in New Zealand’s travel bubble?’ The Conversation by Regina Scheyvena and Apisalome Movono, Massey University, New Zealand, 8 June 2020 / Edited by Rosamund Burton

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