Global Justice Overcoming Poverty

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"You're doing this to benefit your children, because you have to think about tomorrow and the day after and the years coming."

~ President of Palau Tommy Remengesau Jr

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THE SUCCESS OF THE PARTIES OF THE NAURU AGREEMENT

In 2018, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations announced that almost 90% of the world's marine fish stocks are now fully exploited, overexploited or depleted, but a group of Pacific Island countries have been striving to ensure fishing in their region is sustainable.

In April 2010 the Parties of the Nauru Agreement (PNA) was launched. Its aim for the members – Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu plus Tokelau – is to sustainably manage tuna and increase economic benefits for their people. These countries own water which supply 25% of the world's tuna, and 50% of the global supply of skipjack tuna, the most commonly canned tuna.

There was strong resistance from the industry when PNA began its Vessel Day Scheme (VDS) for the purse seine fleets fishing in their exclusive economic zones, which extend 200 nautical miles off their coasts. Until then these countries had received only 2.5% of value of the tuna taken from their waters. In 2010, the eight countries received US$60 million in revenue, but with the introduction of the VDS, in which vessel owners bid for days they want to fish, by 2018 that had increased to US$500 million. With the VDS, PNA members agree on a limited number of fishing days for the year based on scientific advice about the status of the tuna stocks. Fishing days are then allocated by country and sold to the highest bidder. In addition, observers are placed on each

fishing vessel, although, this 100% observer coverage has been compromised over the last 15 months due to COVID-19.

PNA has banned for three months each year the use of fish-aggregating devices (FADs), which are floating objects, that attract fish schools. Skipjack schools congregate around floating objects such as these, but so do sharks, turtles and juveniles of other tuna species, which make up 20% of the catch. Eighty per cent of bigeye tuna are caught as by-catch as juveniles, never growing to their full size and weight of over 100 kilograms, when they are a valued long-line catch and sold for high prices on the sushi and sashimi markets. The three-month ban of FADs has stabilised the bigeye tuna numbers. In addition, since 2011 the PNA skipjack tuna caught without using FADs has been certified by the Marine Stewardship Council as sustainable, creating the world's largest sustainable tuna purse seine industry.

Marine Sanctuaries

Not only are the PNA countries using their increased fishing revenue to benefit their people, but also to protect their waters. The Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA), which is 11% of Kiribati's exclusive economic zone, an area of 405,755 square kilometres with over 500 species of fish, became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2010, and since 2015 PIPA has been closed to commercial fishing.

In 2020, the President of Palau, Tommy Remengesau Jr, banned commercial fishing in 80% of its marine territory, an area of 500,000 square metres. This marine sanctuary is to allow coral reefs and fish stocks to recover, providing a sanctuary for juvenile tuna and other species. The remaining 20% of Palau's exclusive economic zone is reserved for local fishermen, so fish is landed in Palau and sold domestically, and for some vessels from the Japanese island of Okinawa, which have fished there for centuries. The reserve was announced in 2015 and phased in over five years, and it has been observed by researchers from the University of Hawaii that within two years the number of fish had doubled in areas under protection compared to in unprotected waters.

Sources: Parties to the Nauru Agreement www.pnatuna.com; 'How Eight Pacific Island States Are Saving the World's Tuna' by Christopher Pala, 5 March 2021, Foreign Policy; '90% of fish stocks are used up – fisheries subsidies must stop' by Mukhisa Kituyi and Peter Thomson, 13 July 2018, UNCTAD; 'This Pacific island has banned fishing to allow the marine ecosystem to recover' by Kate Whiting, 11 December 2019, World Economic Forum and 'Protecting the Pacific: Important Pieces of the Regional Conservation Puzzle', 23 July 2014, the Pew Charitable Trusts.

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BANABA'S WATER CRISIS

The people of Banaba Island had no clean water when the desalination plant broke in November 2020. The 300 residents had no fresh drinking water, no water for bathing or growing crops, until in mid-March 2021 a ship arrived from the Kiribati capital of Tarawa with a new desalination plant, water tanks, and bottled water, as well as materials to mend the water tanks on the island that had cracked due to heat.

The residents were living on a diet of solely fish, because their crops had failed, and because they were forced to drink contaminated water many had skin diseases and diarrhoea. Community leader, 68-year-old Roubena Ritata says:

"This water crisis goes back years and yet we do not have a permanent solution. While we are thankful, we are calling for an ambitious rehabilitation plan for Banaba, which has been devastated by 80 years of mining.''

"Desalination plants are not a solution. How long until this one breaks and we're back in the same situation: What we need is rehabilitation of our island.''

According to The Guardian's article by Joshua McDonald, *The island with no water: how foreign mining destroyed Banaba* elders in Banaba are asking for support from Australian and New Zealand governments to restore an underground network of caves, known as *te bangabanga,* which were traditionally used to capture and collect water.

From 1900 to 1979 phosphate mining stripped away 90% of the island's surface. Until 1919 it was mined by the Pacific Phosphate Company, and later the British Phosphate Commission (BPC), which was jointly managed by British, Australia and New Zealand governments. In 1945, 700 Banabans were resettled on the Fijian island of Rabi 2100km southeast of Banaba. They were told their relocation was because of the destruction of their island during WWII. However, mining continued on the island and when BPC left in 1979 over 22 million tonnes of land had been extracted.

In the 1970s the Banabans sued the British government for the island's devastation. They were awarded a 50% stake in phosphate export revenues, but that ended with the depletion of the island's phosphate reserves. In 1981, the Banabans accepted a one-off payment from Britain of AUS$10 million on condition they took no further legal action. Now the Banaban leaders are appealing to Australian and New Zealand governments to send a team of experts to assess the damage and repair the caves.

Sources: The Island with no water: how foreign mining destroyed Banaba by Joshua McDonald, The Guardian 9 June 2021; Fresh water and a new desalination plant arrives in Banaba, PacNews, 15 March 2021

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INVESTIGATING BLACK SAND MINING IN FIJI

Fiji's largest island, Viti Levu, has recently become the site of the first ever black sand mining operation in Fiji, with another mine in the exploration phase. Black sand mining involves extracting the iron ore, magnetite, from mineral sands through the excavation of the sea floor, beaches or dunes. The process, which often involves extensive dredging of the sea or river floor, can result in devastating environmental impacts, including destruction of habitats for crustaceans, snails and corals, erosion and land subsidence, damages to mangroves and reduction of fish stocks.

Jubilee Australia Research Centre and Macquarie University's Professional and Community Engagement program in collaboration with Caritas Fiji and Fiji Council of Social Services has published *A Line in the Sand: Investigating Black Sand Mining in Fiji*.

In Ba Province, on the north-west coast of Viti Levu, Amex Resources Ltd, owned by the multinational Waratah Group, which has offices in Australia, mainland China and Hong Kong, began dredging for magnetite at the mouth of the Ba River in 2019. While an exploration licence was granted to Amex Resources Ltd in 2009, and a mining lease in 2012, community members reported they were only made aware of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in 2017. Community members have also stated that they did not know that mining was to commence, and believed that agreement had been given for exploration only. However, according to the ABC's Pacific Beat, a spokesman for Amex Resources, when approached by the ABC in 2020, said the company had undertaken all the necessary environmental impact assessments and followed all government guidelines.

Impacts on crabs and fish

Community members and volunteers working in the community have described some changes in the marine environment since the sand mining works began. Local community members have reported that coral reefs and seagrass have been buried under waste and mud, and that the corals are beginning to die and turn white. Locals reported that the seafloor is transformed into a thick,

brown, unsettled dead substance. Locals have also noted that there has been a substantial reduction in the number of dolphins, sharks and fish in the sea.

Some community members have observed that they are now experiencing a steady decline in the number of crabs they are able to catch and a reduction in *kai* (river mussels). Prior to the mining, women were able to go down to the river and catch and sell a sufficient amount of crabs within a few hours. However, villagers now claim that it takes almost a full day. This impacts most heavily on women, who traditionally rely on catching crabs and *kai* for income.

Reductions in fish numbers have also been observed. A local member of the youth emphasised the reliance of the village upon the ability to fish. He stated that he was able to receive an education as a result of his family income from crabs and fish. The reduction in fish, prawns and crabs also means these survival skills cannot be passed on to children, severing an important cultural tie between generations.

The reduction in the number of fish means that fishermen must travel further out to sea, which is more expensive, unsafe and requires additional fuel. This puts further strain on the livelihoods of the local residents. One villager reported that local fishermen are unable to support the cost of fuel with the reduced amount of fish they are catching and are opting to sell their boats and nets.

‘’We need to have this stopped so that less damage can be done, otherwise by 20 years’ time, everything will be gone, we’ll have nothing with us,’’ says Votua village elder.

Impacts on mangroves

The EIA for the Ba Ironsands project highlighted that the project posed risks to mangroves.

Villagers have reported that since the project began, the mangrove forests have been damaged and are dying out, potentially a result of the constant dumping of sand back onto the sides of the river. Mangroves are vital for the sustenance of coastal fisheries and local communities who utilise mangroves for medicines, construction wood and other products.

On the south coast of Viti Levu, the Sigatoka River is also under threat from a black sand mining proposal by Magma Mines Ltd, a Fijian subsidiary of the Australian mining company Dome Gold Mines. The proposal is located near the Sigatoka Sand Dunes, which have been tentatively listed for World Heritage Status. The project is in its exploration phase, with sonic drilling in 2017 confirming the existence of iron sand deposits. Communities within and nearby the exploration area have voiced their strong opposition to the project, raising concerns about the impacts on their livelihoods, their environment, and on future generations.

There are serious questions about Free, Prior and Informed Consent in each project and a lack of a clear social licence to operate. Evidence from large-scale dredging and onshore sand mining operations overseas highlights the complexity of the possible ecosystem impacts from this work, many of which are still only partly understood. An approach of ‘mine first, pay later’ could see coastal communities in the project areas losing access to environmental and cultural resources for generations to come.

Resources: ‘A line in the sand – investigating black sand mining in Fiji’ Jubilee Australia Research Centre; ‘New report urges blacksand mining companies in Fiji to stop mining’ by Rani Hayman, Pacific Beat, ABC, 26 May 2021.

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