

Caring for creation

Brother Christopher John is the Minister General of the Society of St Francis. "Franciscans believe that our mission to care for our sisters and brothers in creation includes the whole of creation". This is how Brother Christopher captured the driving belief underlying this project. In Solomon Islands, Franciscan brothers, along with the community, have been faced with highly destructive commercial logging of the forests. Together, they have started to challenge what is happening. This is the story of the beginning of that challenge, and plans for the future as told by Brother Christopher.

What / where are Solomon Islands

The Solomons are a cluster of six major islands and over 900 smaller islands, mostly uninhabited, east of Papua New Guinea and north of Australia. Some islands are mountainous and surrounded by coral atolls, while other islands are no more than low-lying atolls

Climate change

The islands themselves are already experiencing the consequences of climate change. As the sea levels rise, water supplies become salinated. Coral reefs, which absorb a lot of the energy of the waves, become less effective. This leads to erosion of the coastline and increasing pressure on the narrow band of flat coastal land used for housing and cultivation. So rising sea levels have a considerable impact on human habitation. And the temperature is increasing as rainfall is decreasing.

As a result, climate change is on people's lips. They talk about it. And they talk about the logging on the islands which is having a direct effect on the environment.

Logging

Extractive logging has become increasingly common in Solomon Islands. And we are not talking about just cutting down a tree here and there. Traditional use of the forest was sustainable. If you wanted to make a canoe, you would cut down a tree. If you needed bush material to make your house, you would take it. It has been like that for thousands of years.

This is something else. This is the total commercial clearing of forests. Nothing is left standing, because it's easier just to clear everything. And there is no replanting or land rehabilitation. They just leave a great mess.

As Franciscan brothers we have been there for 50 years, going out on mission, walking from village to village. We have seen this problem growing and we have become deeply concerned about both the environmental and the social impact.

The environmental effects

There is soil erosion around the rivers and creeks. There are agreements that logging companies have to keep a certain distance away from waterways. But in practice they don't. Soil erosion leads to sediment in the rivers which makes the water undrinkable, as well as impacting on irrigation and the fishing waters. As one person put it, "fishing inside the bay is a problem now because the mud is covering the corals and causing them to die. But the people who like logging they don't like to listen to us women. They say they don't worry about these things. They like logging, they like development. But what kind of development is this when it damages everything? Is that development? Or is it damage?"



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And there is damage to the habitat for hunting. There is damage to the sources of leaves and bark for traditional medicines. The cleared land floods quickly when it rains, and the flow-off of mud adds to damage to the reefs and fisheries. And the removal of the trees takes away a vital windbreak, exposing cleared land and villages to stronger winds, endangering agriculture and putting settled areas at greater risk during storms.

Then the loggers also cut smaller trees to provide a slipway for dragging the trees down to the river. This slipway is treated with gallons of diesel oil to make it slippery. The result is pollution and loss of soil fertility.

Social and spiritual impact

A self-sustaining economy was suddenly transformed by cash. And the effect that has on a fairly traditional sort of island society is huge, on the social life, but also on the spiritual life. A sense of connection with the land gets lost. The forest is part of a complex network which serves our needs, and that connection has been ruptured.

Among the social effects is alcohol consumption. Every kilometre or so there is another bottle shop or stand selling cans of beer. This is a new development. And alcohol consumption fuels domestic violence. Gender based violence, domestic violence, is amongst the highest in the world. 64% of women aged 15–49 have reported physical and/or sexual abuse by a partner.

And logging brings conflict. Within households, within villages and clans, between clans, and with the company. As one community elder put it, "Logging pollutes the land, sea, bush, river and at the same time it pollutes the relationship between people. Everything touched by logging gets polluted and possibly leads to conflict."

And there is sexual exploitation. Girls from the village are often taken by the loggers to be their women. And there is no protection. As one resident put it, "there is security on the log pond, but they don't pay attention to the girls who are roaming around or walking up to the logging camp. They are paid to protect the machines, so that is what they do, but nobody protects our girls."

No benefit

And for all the damage that is being done, the people of the Solomon Islands see little benefit, "they take all the trees and all we get in return are some leaves from the tree [a handful of royalties]. It is like we are hunting dogs: the dogs do the work, but all they get are some bones to eat, while the hunter eats the meat."

Sometimes there are promises. Sometimes the logging companies might build a village hall or a church or a meeting place or a school. But it is not enough to compensate for the loss of the forest.

Role of the church

As Franciscan brothers, over the last 50 years, we have engaged with people in villages and in the urban areas; with some of the poor in prison; with the sick in hospitals; and in the parish. In fact our mission has been with people. Our 50th anniversary in 2020 was an opportunity for us to reflect. And part of that reflection was that our mission has mainly been with people. But in fact, we're Franciscans. And St Francis articulated the relationship humans have with all of creation; that we are brothers and sisters; that we were all created by the same God. So it is our role to care for our sisters and brothers in creation because of who they are and what their role is. That includes the whole of creation.

God gave us trees and we harvest them to meet our needs. In return we reinvest in replanting so that God showers continuous blessings, because of appropriate environmental stewardship.

And as Franciscans, we have grassroots contact with the people in the villages. So we are in a good position to be witnesses of climate change and of human rights abuses. And also, as Franciscans, we are part of a global community. That allows us to communicate what we have witnessed.

This was the seed that grew into our project.

UN process

We discovered that the United Nations conducts a process called the [Universal Periodic Review](#). The UN describes this as “a unique process which involves a periodic review of the human rights records of all 193 UN Member States.” Every four and a half years, every country is reviewed again. The Solomon Islands was due for its next review in 2021.

So we decided that we were in a good position to present the stories of the Brothers on the islands to the United Nations. To do this, we partnered with [Franciscans International](#): “Franciscans International advocates at the United Nations for the protection of human dignity and environmental justice”. So they were perfectly placed to take the stories of the Brothers on the ground and present them in the required format for the review. This would help to draw attention to those issues and perhaps help to bring about some possibility of change in government policy.

And what emerged from this process was a small victory – out of the seven major areas which we raised in our report, six of them were accepted by the Government of Solomon Islands. This acceptance represented a commitment to improve, to do it better.

This whole experience has given us growing confidence to engage in new activities, such as lobbying diplomatic missions and taking part in the UPR process. We have, for instance, been able to set up some meetings with diplomatic representatives in the capital, Honiara, and discuss the issues first-hand.

Partners

Partnering has been important. [The Dominicans for Justice and Peace](#) is a NGO at the UN that performs a similar role to that of Franciscans International. In fact they share office space. And through them we made contact with the Dominican Sisters and the Friars and some of their lay people in the Solomons. This has significantly broadened the geographic spread of places covered by our network.

Our long-term goals

We are hoping firstly that we can achieve much better management of the forest. We want to bring a halt to the mass, indiscriminate destruction and ensure that there is rehabilitation. And then we

would also like the nation to benefit more from the logging process. Export of round logs gives very little to the local economy. Processing the wood before it is exported would be of much greater benefit.



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Next phase

We realise that this is only the beginning of the process. Without mechanisms of accountability, it will be very easy for it to come to little or nothing. So we are looking at how we follow up. We are now doing some human rights training. We have started using Zoom and we hope to have something in person later this year.

We have also realised that the government lacks monitoring capacity; it doesn't have adequate resources. But the church has got brilliant, trusted networks in every village. The religious communities are very much integrated into church and village life, and they are very well spread around. So we could provide a valuable service by training people in how to monitor and document violations of logging agreements, for example.

We are still at the very early stages of developing this, but we have made a start. We now need to build on the buy-in we have got from the government. It's easy for governments to say yes, especially to something that's in the future.

Our hope is that, as a result, many in the communities will be better informed about the issues. They will be more highly motivated and committed to responding to the challenges of reforestation and forest protection, environmental care and rehabilitation. And they will be better equipped to ensure that their responses are appropriate and effective.

Future stages of the project could involve mission programmes for villages, teaching about the effects of logging on their human, social and spiritual life.

And in a very practical way, the brothers themselves have suggested that when they go round on mission programs to the villages, they could take seedlings and plant them and help people learn about the trees.

We have taken the first steps. And any good we do for creation is a blessing of some sort.