

Indigenous Defenders of Pacific Islands: A Briefing for Funders

A report by Maureen Penjeli, Coordinator of Pacific Network on Globalization



Traditional shark calling in Kontu of New Ireland Province in Papua New Guinea. Photo: Claudio Sieber

Overview

The Ocean is considered the ‘blue heart’ of the planet and its importance to the stability and sustaining of life is underscored by its contribution to global climate regulation. The ocean provides 50% of atmospheric oxygen and its circulation dynamics of currents make our planet habitable. Of all the oceans and seas, the Pacific Ocean is the single largest geographical feature covering almost one-third of the Earth’s surface (1), an area larger than all the land of the planet combined.

It is home to extraordinary biodiversity and unique ecosystems, which provide a global service to the functioning of our planet. No matter where you live on this planet, people directly or indirectly benefit from the health and more importantly the resilience of the Pacific Ocean under the guardianship of indigenous people, which is now under threat.

The Oceanic world gave rise to unique indigenous ways of life and for many Pacific Island peoples, the Ocean is a single living, moving, sacred entity and the bloodline of the people. The indigenous peoples who first navigated the Pacific were renowned for their ocean voyaging abilities and skills. Their cultural practices are crucial for the protection and conservation of ocean resources, which has sustained them for millennia.

In the modern context, the Pacific region consists of 24 Pacific island countries – of which 16 are sovereign countries, while the remaining are trust territories, namely New Zealand, Niue, Cook Islands and Tokelau. Nine other territories belong to France, Indonesia, UK and the US.

The traditional indigenous worldview perceives the ocean as a contiguous environment that needs to be protected, which collides with the modern regime of demarcated nation–state boundaries. Today, the Pacific Ocean has once again become a contested space, likened to the 19th century “scramble for Africa”, between geopolitical powers of the Western world and new emerging powers, like China. Framed as an untapped, under-explored and under-exploited region in the world, much of this contest is to secure corporate economic interests over resources of the Pacific.

These worldviews place Pacific peoples resistance struggles at odds with and against the relentless assaults of extractive industries, militarization, consumerism, climate change and colonialism and present grant makers with challenges around the longevity and the complexities of the issues. Given these complexities and their root causes, indigenous communities require sustained long term engagement with grant makers that seek to break the cycle of short-term project focus on outcomes and outputs.

Yet in spite of the challenging conditions faced by indigenous human rights defenders today, there’s much to celebrate and learn from their resistance as they remain at the forefront protecting indigenous territories. Grantmakers have a unique opportunity to learn from the leadership of indigenous groups and movements in the Pacific and

respond to their call in a proactive and respectful way. Across the Pacific region, indigenous organizations like the Vanuatu Indigenous Land Defense Desk, the Melanesian Indigenous Land Defense Alliance, Ole Siosiomaga, Edimondik and Pasifika are organizing and collaborating to present an alternative and ensure the continuation of indigenous customs and knowledge that have for centuries put the wellbeing of communities and the ocean ahead of unsustainable development practices.



Children from Duke of York Islands in Papua New Guinea making a firm message against experimental seabed mining. Photo: PANG

Our Success Stories

In recent years, indigenous human rights defenders particularly from Papua New Guinea (PNG), have successfully mobilised support across the Pacific and globally to protect the Pacific Ocean from being the first region in the world to begin experimental seabed mining.

“Our people are very much dependent on the Bismarck Sea for their daily sustenance and with this new form of exploitation taking place it will affect our people... We are calling on our leaders to ban this untested technology of mining and we will continue to stand with our people,” said Cardinal Sir John Ribat, the Archbishop of PNG.

“We survive on the our ocean and it is our life. Therefore, it is for our children and their children that we are protesting against this experimental project in our waters,” said Dailly Liu, Community Leaders, Ramu Iana Islands, East New Britain Province of PNG. Supported by scientists, the legal community, academics, churches, feminist movements and policy makers, indigenous human rights defenders have been able to

assert the principle of Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) to successfully challenge transnational corporations, such as Nautilus Inc. and seek redress at the national level. They have also been successful in taking their advocacy regionally and globally, building successful allies and alliances to defend their oceanic territories from exploitation of minerals [2]. Their advocacy has helped to shift global players, particularly within the civil society organizations to consider supporting a global ban on seabed mining.

Sea bed mining is a global proposition that takes place against a backdrop of questions around the health of the oceans to sustain life now and into the future. Problems with overfishing and pollution are further complicated by the impacts of climate change, which is already affecting fresh water sources and king tides and storm surges are forcing communities to relocate. Indigenous human rights defenders from small island states have remained the moral authority on issues that affect their very existence, having played almost little to no part in the causes of climate change. In the Pacific there are wonderful stories of resilience [3] of people to the very real existential threat posed by climate change. A new report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [4] paints a very stark picture for small island nation, such as those in the Pacific if the world does not curb greenhouse gas emissions to below 1.5 degrees within the next 12 years.

“We are the last generation that will be remembered to guarantee humanity’s survival. We have one shot at getting it right. Let us not fail our people and the future of humanity,” said Samuel Manetoali, Minister of Environment, Climate Change, Disaster Management & Meteorology, Solomon Islands [5]. The impacts of climate change particularly on small island states raise challenging questions for the international community, including funders around the questions of sovereignty, identity and cultures as island nations and territories slowly submerge as a result of sea level rise.

These successes are based on relationships and solidarity within and beyond the Pacific, which some grantmakers have continued to support, leading to success on a greater scale for indigenous communities. Some of these grantmakers, such as the Christensen Fund, Bread for the World, a German church grantmaker, have deliberately located themselves in the region and accompanied these processes for a long time, establishing strong relationships with communities and partners and developing a deeper understanding of the context of the region. Although the initial investment and maintaining a presence in the region comes at a considerable cost compared to other regions in the world, the long term gains in terms of the relationships give grantmakers, such as the Christensen Fund and Bread for the World a comparative advantage over other grantmakers. Many grantmakers tend to prioritize efficiency by keeping their officers in metropolitan centres over relationship building, which is not conducive to secure the long term impact that communities are working towards.

In this brief, we seek to highlight two distinctively different case studies that have similar root causes: 1) Indigenous communities in West Papua continue to struggle for fundamental human rights and freedom, which have implications on their systems and

territories under occupation, such as customary land tenure, language preservation and kastom practices tied with health of well being of people; 2) In the Marshall Islands, we examine the links between climate change and historical nuclear testing. We also provide some clear examples of how funders have and can continue to support the efforts of indigenous human rights defenders in the Pacific.



Tongan fishermen are more concern about the impact of seabed mining in their waters. Photo: PANG

CASE STUDY 1

West Papua: A Melanesian state in waiting

West Papua is located on the western half of the island of New Guinea, adjacent to independent Papua New Guinea with which it shares a land border. West Papuans are Melanesians. Collectively they speak over 250 distinct languages and share a similar culture to other Melanesians in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Bougainville, Vanuatu, Fiji and Kanaky (New Caledonia). It is considered an area of global priority for biodiversity conservation [6].

Politically, West Papua has endured three successive occupations, first by the Dutch, then by the Japanese and finally by the Indonesian government. It is still not free. Since the Indonesian Government took control of West Papua in 1963, conflict has been characterized by a stark power asymmetry between the Indonesian government and the indigenous West Papuans. The underlying root causes of conflict and violence in West Papua are structural, multiple, complex and varied. They include:

- Historical grievances
- State-sanctioned human rights violations and impunity
- Economic and environmental exploitation resulting in biodiversity destruction
- Unregulated and deliberate migration from other parts of Indonesia

West Papuans have never had a chance to freely and fairly determine their own political destiny because of the marginalization of the indigenous Papuan population and institutional racism. A sham vote known as the Act of Free Choice – Papuans call it ‘The Act of NO Choice’ – took place in 1969. Less than 0.01% of the population participated (1022 people). Since then the West Papuans’ civil, political, economic, social, environmental and cultural rights continue to be denied despite the ongoing public statements by successive governments and in particular the current one.

There is no freedom of press, or expression, and Papuans are routinely arrested and tortured by the Indonesian police for no other crime than being young and West Papuan. Today it is still forbidden to display the Morning Star flag and other symbols of indigenous Papuan identity. West Papuans are arrested and detained for simply holding cultural gatherings. Indigenous land is forcibly seized by extractive resource industries for mining, oil and gas and plantations, like the sprawling 2.5 million hectare Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate. The Indonesian government, together with Indonesians and transnational corporations, bring in migrants, displacing the indigenous population so that today they make up less than half of the population.

These grievances form a narrative of betrayal and suffering at the hands of the international community, the Indonesian state and global capital, resulting in high levels of frustration and a near total distrust of the central government. Yet, despite the ongoing challenging situation on the ground, community groups and movements continue to mobilize internally within West Papua, while forging strong alliances, including revival of cultural connections within the Pacific region most notably in Melanesia. Some of the most exciting activities around cultural revival include the kundu and canoe festival [7], slow food movement [8], and the arts festivals much of which has been supported by progressive grantmakers, such as the Christensen Fund. Groups and movements in the wider Pacific have made conscious decisions to include West Papua on wider Pacific issues, such as resource extraction, conservation measures, and oceans.

Papuans in 2018, particularly students and youth, continue to peacefully mobilize around their shared desire for basic rights to freedom and self-determination. There are diverse understandings, and perhaps misunderstandings, of what this means but at its root, Papuans desire to be masters of their own destiny, which is literally expressed as being masters of the land (tuan atas tanah). At the same time as demanding political self-determination and democratization, Papuans want recognition of their basic rights as Indigenous people living on their customary land. The struggle for self-determination and demands for basic human rights cannot be separated. One influences the other; they are two sides of the same coin.

The pool of funders and grantmakers supporting indigenous rights for political self-determination struggles has shrunk considerably over the recent years due to fears of political interference in what is considered sovereign matters. Some grantmakers view West Papua as part of the Asia funding landscape, instead of being an integral part of the Oceanic world, and have exposed human rights defenders in West Papua, leaving them without the necessary international funding support.

We appeal to grantmakers to reconsider West Papua as part of their Oceanic grantmaking as a way to make funds available to groups on the ground. In addition, we exhort funders to consider supporting complex issues, such as self-determination and human rights of West Papuans to rebuild trust with groups on the ground. The issue of self-determination is not going away and will remain a key issue for Pacific movements and struggles given the list of territories that remain under occupation, including but not limited to, Bougainville, Kanaky (New Caledonia), Maohi Nui (French Polynesia), Guam, Hawaii, and Rapa Nui.



Youngsolwara members protesting outside the New Zealand parliament house and the Indonesian Embassy in Wellington.

CASE STUDY

Republic of the Marshall Islands

How do traditional leaders look after their people who are displaced first by nuclear testing and then by climate change from their ancestral territories?

“We know in ways very few others do why nuclear weapons must be eliminated... Because it cannot and will not be that the Marshallese will ever again bear such global

burdens (nuclear and climate change),” said Late Tony de Brum, Foreign Minister for the Marshall Islands. [9]

Encompassing two million square kilometres of ocean, an area roughly the size of Saudi Arabia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) comprises 29 atolls and 5 islands totaling just 181 square kilometres of land. A sovereign nation for 39 years, the RMI continues to suffer from the legacy of German and Japanese colonization, and the legacy of US nuclear testing and ongoing military occupation. The traditional Marshallese system of governance through chiefly leadership has eroded in favor of Western democracy that has had a detrimental impact on traditional practices essential to indigenous communities.

Marshallese chiefs are considered the bedrock of custom, whose duties include the protection of land, sky, and ocean resources, along with the rights and wellbeing of their people. Their worldview and customs are diametrically opposite of the Western, freehold (Torrens title) systems of land tenure, which is individually owned as opposed to communally shared. While traditional leaders bear a heavy burden in protecting indigenous Marshallese landscapes, the current regimes compromise, and in some cases completely alienate, the human rights and biodiversity stewarded by traditional stewards.

The Enjebi people of Enewetak Atoll are an internally displaced community; they became refugees from their own atoll by US nuclear weapons testing. Between 1946-1948, the US detonated 67 nuclear and thermonuclear bombs in the RMI. Enjebi and Enewetak peoples were forcibly exiled while the US conducted 43 tests at their atoll, mostly on or near islands under the domain of Enjebi people. After minimal remediation, both communities were resettled to the atoll and forced to live on three islands falling under Enewetak chiefs. Consequently, the Enjebi traditional leaders are unable to fully realize their duties in exile. Enjebi leaders are largely ignored by the national government, and the elected leadership of Enewetak Atoll discounts and discredits the chiefly system of governance and stewardship.

Most Enjebi people have migrated to Hawai'i and the US. Like other Marshallese communities forced to relocate due to the effects of nuclear testing, militarism, and climate change, they have been stripped of their voting rights by RMI law stating that those outside of the national borders are ineligible to vote. This is particularly problematic for traditional leaders who are compelled to protect both their lands and people even while in exile. Furthermore, RMI national laws have demarcated reefs and ocean areas that were once under traditional stewardship to be now under the control of Western systems of governance driven by Marshallese elected officials. National policies regarding climate change mitigation and response, including issues of water and food security, disregard communal sovereignty and blatantly ignore the biological and physical legacies of nuclear testing as conventional donors are by and large nuclear states.

While Cactus Dome [10] on Runit island is often considered the nexus of the climate change and nuclear legacy, to Indigenous human rights defenders from Enjebi and Enewetak, the dome represents ongoing systematic oppression and institutional violence. Too often journalists, activists, and academics refer to the nuclear testing on Enewetak and the subsequent waste storage on Runit in a compartmentalized manner, disregarding traditional responsibilities and systems for safeguarding ancestral homelands.

It's important to support indigenous human rights defenders in the Marshall Islands conduct citizen science programs to build scientific capital, while building independent data through the leadership of traditional stewards and human rights defenders.



The “Baker” explosion, a nuclear weapon test by United States military in Bikini Atoll in Marshall Islands.

Indigenous Organizations in Action

It is against the backdrop of this global economic and planetary significance of the health and resilience of the Pacific Ocean, and our roles as custodians, that deep sea mining has been, must be and will be resisted in the region. In 2011, a collective which included feminist community groups, regional Non-Governmental Organizations and faith-based organizations[1] began to organize initially around research and analysis to better understand the issues and its implications for Pacific peoples and the ocean as a response to the economic imperatives for deep sea minerals.

Working closely with impacted community groups, scientists, academics and human rights lawyers, the collective began to mobilize significant public opinion on the issue to re-engage and hold governments, transnational corporations and regional and international agencies to account. In 2012, the collective mobilized over 8,000

signatures to caution Pacific Island Forum Leaders over deep sea mining, while in 2014 the Lutheran church issued a signed petition representing over 1 million of its members to the PNG Government over growing concerns over impacts of deep sea mining. Ongoing community resistance, including a legal case in 2017, has frustrated efforts by Nautilus Inc., which was set to begin commercial mining in 2016 at its Solwara 1 project in PNG.

In Vanuatu, working closely with the Vanuatu Council of Churches and the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta, the collective was able to persuade the government to review the 140 licenses that were issued without the prior knowledge of previous governments, the parliament let alone the custodians of the ocean. Globally, activists from PNG and Fiji made an appeal in Europe in 2014 to garner support for a ban in sea bed mining; it took 3 years of lobbying and advocacy efforts by European partners until 2017 before the European Parliament supported a moratorium on deep sea mining.

Palau has placed a ban on commercial activities, including fisheries and mining within its territorial waters, while Samoa has indicated some initial concerns regarding deep sea mining. The director of Mineral Resources of Fiji has publicly announced that it will not be issuing any further new licenses for exploration for seabed minerals. Although these are some initial successes of ongoing resistance, at the writing of this paper 3 machines weighing over 300 tonnes each are currently being wet water tested in PNG for the anticipated start of commercial mining in PNG.



Traditional shark calling in Kontu of New Ireland Province in Papua New Guinea. Photo: Claudio Sieber

Key Lessons for Grantmakers to Consider:

- Building a strong presence in the region is necessary, despite the costs of establishment – this foundational engagement is absolutely necessary to understand the context;
- Sustain a presence in the region even when the trends suggest that the region can be more efficiently managed from metropolitan centers. Being in the same time zone and establishing long term-relationship with partners will have favorable returns for both partners;
- Provide long-term support for indigenous groups that are doing important work in the region based on the understanding that being indigenous is located to and connected to a place and peoples and is predicated on long-term maintenance of relationships;
- Take the time to deeply understand indigenous worldviews and approaches, which involves a commitment of time;
- Finally it's important to cultivate the practice of deep listening to appreciate the nuances, complexities, and beauty that lies within indigenous systems that is worth the patience.

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Footnotes

[1] The Pacific Oceans covers almost 40 million sq km of area (70% of the moon's surface area). While the combined land area is less than 1.3 million sq km of which 85% is in the continental islands of New Guinea, New Zealand and Hawaii.

[2] https://www.asienhaus.de/archiv/asienhaus/erklaerungen/Position_paper_on_Deep_Sea_Mining-web.pdf

[3] In Vanuatu there has been a focus on kastom food for example yam which is being affected by Climate Change. Efforts such as modifying yams to be more resilient to climate change so that kastom practices can continue into the future,

[4] www.ipcc.ch/reports/sr15/

[5] www.oxfam.org.au/2016/09/10 quotes that show why the Pacific nations are leading the world on climate action

[6] <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/12/01/the-future-papua-s-biodiversity-alarming.html>

[7] <https://fbiradio.com/we-dont-cross-borders-they-cross-us-sorong-samurai-artists-on-jack-off/>

[8] http://dailypost.vu/news/the-tanna-tupunis-declaration/article_df16ca0a-35e3-5a44-8e3e-e5946a29a67c.html

[9] <https://www.rightlivelivelihoodaward.org/speech/acceptance-speech-tony-de-brum-the-people-of-the-marshall-islands/>

[10] Cactus Dome is what the US terms a 'temporary low-level nuclear waste storage site' and is a concrete structure that holds