

THE HUMAN FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

MARIA TIIMON

MY NAME IS Maria Tiimon and I come from the island nation of Kiribati situated on the equator in the Pacific. I am employed by the Edmund Rice Centre in Sydney working for the Pacific Calling Partnership. As Pacific Outreach Officer, my work includes giving speeches and running workshops about how climate change is affecting Pacific Islands, and attending as invited and funded international meetings and conferences and taking part in delegations.

Kiribati is one of the smallest and most low-lying island nations in the Pacific. It is made up of thirty-three islands, twenty-one of them inhabited, and most being only two to three metres above sea level. Kiribati used to be known as the Gilbert Islands.

Our small country is facing critically difficult times due to the impact of climate change on our culture and on our future.

The I-Kiribati are warm, friendly and welcoming people. Visitors, and those working in Kiribati, are treated with the greatest respect, politeness and deference. Kiribati is one of the poorest countries on earth, but because the people are so communal, there are no street-people or beggars. Everybody shares and helps each other.

The I-Kiribati people often live in open houses with their extended family. Living and working in harmony with neighbours and family is an essential part of our culture. Few things go unnoticed in a small community, and privacy is not a priority. As each family still fends for itself, things such as the best places for fishing, handicraft techniques and other skills are kept within the family.

The culture of Kiribati has been preserved by the isolation that comes with being in the

middle of the Pacific Ocean. Although missionaries began to arrive on the shores in the 1850's, much of the traditions and beliefs of the people have remained the same.

The people have traditionally lived in a subsistence economy based on crops like taro, breadfruits, coconut and pandanus and fish for their protein. Sadly drought, storm surges, seawater inundation and coral bleaching have already had an impact on these traditional food sources. Several communities in Kiribati have had to move and more can see that they will need to move in the future.

Scientists are still debating about the extent of rising sea levels. I am not a scientist, but what I know is that things are happening that our people have never experienced in the past.

In my recent visits, I had a chance to interview three elderly men from different villages on my home island of Beru.

Iorim Tabuae said, 'The weather changes a lot, now days you cannot predict it anymore as it changes at any minute. There are also places that we have to move houses towards the inland because the land had been eroded. Our islands are so tiny and we are afraid that we'll fall on the other side of the sea water.'

Komwenga Teuarai said, 'The trees are dying out, and now life is getting harder. The breadfruit trees which are one of our main diets are dying out and some of the wells that we used to get fresh water from are becoming salty. Life is very difficult.'

And Bubuti from another village also shared his story with me and said, 'I don't know what it is, but we people of Kiribati are now seeing first hand all the changes that are occurring. There are a lot of these changes with

the weather in comparison to the old days.’

My own father said, ‘Maria I know I am getting old, and I might not be here when this happens. My heart goes to my grandchildren and the young generation. How long will they survive? Where will they be with this issue of climate change?’ He also said, ‘I love my country. This is where I was born and I’d rather die here in Beru.’

The President of Kiribati Anote Tong, is very proactive on this issue and is reaching out to industrialized countries to try and negotiate on cutting down their green-house gas emissions.

The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), which represents forty-three countries, Kiribati is one of them, said it could consider pledges on emissions cuts made voluntarily by rich nations if they were made into legally-binding targets.

The group has consistently demanded that industrialized countries toughen pledges to cut greenhouse gas emissions they made at a climate conference last year in Cancun.

The group could consider the emissions pledges under a legally-binding deal, as a first step to keep climate action on track before a review in 2015, also agreed in Mexico, said Leon Charles,



Maria Tiimon works as Pacific Outreach Officer for the Pacific Calling Partnership. Her role includes raising awareness in schools and communities of how climate change is affecting Pacific islands.

AOSIS chief negotiator. (Quoted from the Environment and Conservation Division – Kiribati government website. www.climate.gov.ki.)

I strongly feel that we I-Kiribati people have every right to save our place of birth, our beloved country called Kiribati. While climate change affects everyone, there’s no doubt that it will hit the poorest and the most marginalized groups the hardest.

As Christians, let us all work together, caring for the earth, all creatures and human beings God has created. My hope and prayer is that all people will be more willing to be good stewards, and help other people especially the voiceless and the marginalized whose lives continue to be threatened as a result of climate change.

[...] the natural environment is given by God to everyone, and so our use of it entails a personal responsibility towards humanity as a whole, particularly towards the poor and towards future generations.

How important it is then, that the international community and individual governments send the right signals to their citizens and succeed in countering harmful ways of treating the environment! The economic and social costs of using up shared resources must be recognized with transparency and borne by those who incur them, and not by other peoples or future generations. The protection of the environment, and the safeguarding of resources and of the climate, oblige all leaders to act jointly, respecting the law and promoting solidarity with the weakest regions of the world. Together we can build an integral human development beneficial for all peoples, present and future, a development inspired by the values of charity in truth. For this to happen it is essential that the current model of global development be transformed through a greater, and shared, acceptance of responsibility for creation: this is demanded not only by environmental factors, but also by the scandal of hunger and human misery.

—Pope Benedict, Videostatement to the UN 2009 Summit on Climate Change.