Global Justice Overcoming Poverty

Pacific Outlook Bulletin

Issue 42 | April 2024

- Pacific Island Countries call for the end of harmful fishing subsidies
- Combating obesity in the Pacific
- French Banks not funding LPG pipeline in Papua New Guinea

"We need to respect the oceans and take care of them as if our lives depended on it. Because they do."

~ Sylvia Earle, oceanographer

Photo by Kate Estes on Unsplash

PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES CALL FOR THE END OF HARMFUL FISHING SUBSIDIES

As several countries have depleted their own stocks of fish, they have sent their fishing fleets further afield, enabled to do so by massive subsidies. The number of foreign vessels in the Pacific Ocean has been steadily growing, with a seriously harmful effect on the fisheries of the region's small island nations, reliant on their fish stocks for their sustenance. At the 13th Ministerial Conference (MC13) of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), held 26 February to 2 March,

Pacific Island countries called for the biggest subsidisers to halt subsidies and pledge to lower damaging subsidies in the future.

"They should freeze and lower their subsidies, as mandated by the UN Sustainable Development Goal 14.6," says Fiji's Deputy Prime Minister, Hon. Manoa Kamikamica. The Pacific Island countries proposed a clause that asked the biggest subsidisers to stop the subsidies that are only there to allow them to fish in distant waters. Pacific Island countries, like many other developing nations, also need the flexibility to develop their own fleets, increase downstream and onshore processing, and create jobs, food security and livelihoods for their people. "What our Pacific Island nations want this week is fair. We urge the top subsidising WTO members to freeze their subsidies at current levels and cut them in the future. We are concerned that over-exploiting one's own waters should not become a licence to over-exploit Pacific waters," said Hon Kamikamica.

Governments around the world pay $35.4 billion annually to their fishing industries, and a 2019 Pew commissioned[i] report found that an estimated $22 billion of the $35.4 billion are harmful subsidies ie funding for industrial fleets that don't need the money and are using it to accelerate over-fishing. The five entities that are providing the highest subsidies for fishing in other countries' waters, known as distant-water fishing, are China, the European Union, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

More than one-third of fish stocks worldwide are exploited beyond sustainable levels, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, up from 10% in 1974 and 25% in 1990. Research by the University of California, published in 2021, found that ending all harmful fishing subsidies would yield a 12.5% increase in fish biomass worldwide by 2050 – nearly 35 million metric tons of fish.

Adam Wolfenden, spokesman for the Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG), said that the Pacific really fought for an outcome which would hold the big distant fishing fleets to account. The Pacific came to the meeting with a "strong proposal of an explicit mechanism for halting subsidies for distant water fishing and then reducing them by a specified time. This was heavily contested by a lot of big fishing nations."

The Pacific nations earn significant amounts from fishing licences, but that does not solve the over-fishing issue. Cutting subsidies would limit the opportunities for distant fishing nations from catching more than they are allowed, and improve the prospects for Pacific countries increasing their own domestic fishing capacity. But a deal was not reached to that effect.

Auckland University emeritus law professor, Jane Kelsey, said that the refusal of developing countries to be steam-rolled into accepting global trade rules that fail to address their concerns was a significant feature of the meeting. She said that she hopes "the failure of yet another Ministerial meeting will generate an overdue recognition that the neoliberal agenda of the WTO is past its use-by date."

Sources: 'Fishing for Consensus. Harmful Subsidies Talks Intensify as MC13 Nears End', Pacific Islands Forum release, 29 February 2024; 'A Global Deal to End Harmful Fisheries Subsidies' by

John Bailey, Trust Magazine, 1 February 2023; 'No WTO Deal on Fisheries Subsidies for Pacific Nations, but PANG Pleased' by Don Wiseman, Radio New Zealand (RNZ), 3 March 2024

COMBATING OBESITY IN THE PACIFIC

A recent report in 'The Lancet' medical journal showed that the nations with the highest rates of obesity for women were Tonga and American Samoa; and for men, Nauru and American Samoa. The report concerned itself with the years 1990 to 2022 and, most concerning, found that the rate of obesity in children and adolescents has quadrupled over that period. The analysis found that, of the ten countries in the world with the highest prevalence of obesity, nine of them are Pacific Island nations. In the Pacific over recent decades, obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases in every age group have become a major cause of early death and disability. "The drivers of obesity are complex," said Dr Mark Jacobs, World Health Organisation (WHO) Representative to the South Pacific. "In many parts of the Pacific, unhealthy food is cheap, convenient, and pushed heavily through advertising. Healthy food, on the other hand, may be increasingly difficult to get and more expensive in the face of the droughts, floods and rising seas caused by climate change."

A news report, from the McCabe Centre for Law and Cancer in 2020, focused on the root causes of obesity in Pacific Island nations. The Pacific Island nations comprise thousands of islands spread over an area equivalent to 15% of the earth's surface. Traditionally, the region's people subsisted mostly on dark leafy greens, root vegetables and seafood. But over the past few decades many Pacific Island nations have focused on agriculture for export; and low-lying atolls, where land for agriculture is scarce, have become dependent on imported processed foods such as rice and flour, instead of traditional produce like breadfruit, coconuts and fish. Supermarket shelves are stocked with cheaper imported products high in sugar and salt instead of nutrient-rich local alternatives. Daiana Buresova, a Fijian lawyer and, in 2020, the McCabe Centre's Regional Coordinator for the Pacific, said that fishermen are often selling their fresh catch and eating a tin of tuna at home.

Traditional foods and agricultural practices are deeply embedded in the Pacific culture and lifestyle, said Buresova. "Yet the consumption of cheap and processed foods is undermining these systems and the policy of Pacific governments to focus on export agriculture is doing little to reverse this".

In 2014, Pacific Ministers of Health endorsed the Noncommunicable Diseases (NCD) Roadmap, and 14 Pacific Island countries have increased taxes on unhealthy foods and beverages, while 2 have lowered taxes on fruit and vegetables. Obesity is often seen as an individual's health issue, but the McCabe Centre says it intersects with everything from trade law to environmental policies, and ultimately it is a matter of human rights.

"We need to shift away from looking at obesity as strictly a health issue," Buresova said, "and recognise that it is a cross-cutting issue which requires a whole-of-government approach."

Sources: 'Food industry, Lack of Exercise Central to Childhood Obesity Issues – Sir Colin Tukuitonga', 3 March 2024, RNZ; 'Below the Surface: Law and the Roots of Obesity in the Pacific' by Daniel Punch, 4 March 2020, McCabe Centre for Law and Cancer.

FRENCH BANKS NOT FUNDING LNG PIPELINE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA (PNG)

Recently, French banks that finance fossil fuel company, *Total Energies,* announced that they won't be funding its proposed liquid natural gas(LNG) project in Papua, including the project's own financial advisor, Credit Agricole.

This is proof of the power of connecting voices in Papua New Guinea (PNG) to international movements, such as *Reclaim Finance* who spearheaded advocacy to these French Banks, says Luke Fletcher, Executive Director of Jubilee Australia Research Centre.

It is only a year after the Centre for Environmental Law and Environmental Rights Inc PNG (CELCOR) invited Jubilee Australia to build with them a national and international climate justice campaign. CELCOR has been raising the alarm about the climate, biodiversity, human rights and financial risks of the gas project. They want a future built on clean energy, climate action and sustainable development – not chaining their economy to a dirty, dying fossil fuel industry. They spotlight the devastation that the climate crisis is already having on families in PNG. Jubilee Australia's joint research with CELCOR shows that, with proper funding, PNG could dramatically expand energy access and still meet almost 80% of on-grid energy from renewables alone. In short, PNG doesn't need fossil gas and the climate doesn't need it either.

From the *New York Times* to *Le Monde*, calls to 'Stop Papua LNG' have made international headlines over the past year. More excitingly, international attention and news of the French banks' decision has echoed throughout PNG and is spurring on more debate closer to home. It has made front page news and leads people to disbelieve the rosy picture of the benefits of fossil gas that corporations like Total Energies, ExxonMobil and Santos paint may not be the whole story. "While we celebrate this success of persuading some of Total Energies' key bankers to rule out funding the Papua LNG project, there are other banks that still have not, and so the fight continues," says Luke Fletcher. "Our friends at Market Forces are extremely concerned that some Australian and Japanese banks may decide to finance the project any day."

Source: 'Banks refuse to fund the Papua LNG Project', 28 March 2024, Jubilee Australia Research Centre.

Pacific Outlook is produced by the Grail Global Justice Overcoming Poverty Network (Australia). Published in Sydney with 6 issues per year. Contributions to Pacific Outlook and responses to its content are welcomed via the Editor.
Network Coordinators: Alison Healey (info@grailaustralia.org.au) and Mary Boyd (maryboyd@live.ca)
Editor: Rosamund Burton (admin@grailaustralia.org.au)
Design: Thanks to Marian Kelly for her donation of time and talent.

[i] The Pew Research Centre is a nonpartisan, nonadvocacy think tank, based in Washington DC, that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping the world.