

## Problems in Papua New Guinea

The Melanesian countries of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji are especially prone to floods, cyclones and droughts as well as earthquakes and tsunamis, unrelated to climate.

The western perception of the Pacific as a paradise is profoundly ironic: it is a deeply troubled region.

Papua New Guinea is the largest and least developed of them (ranked 139 out of 177 worldwide on the 2006 Human Development Index), yet it is also one of the most diverse countries in the world, with hundreds of distinct language and tribal groups. It faces immense social, political and economic problems.

The health and nutrition status of the population is poor, life expectancy low and infant mortality high. With ever greater urbanization there is a growing underclass of marginalized people living in precarious conditions in squatter camps in the capital Port Moresby and elsewhere.

PNG is a textbook example of a country that faces a cocktail of seismic disasters and worsening climatic extremes, yet is only very poorly equipped to adapt.

### **The Red Cross knows malaria is out there**

In 2005–6 Papua New Guinea was hammered by heavy rains for months on end, causing chaos and destruction in many vulnerable communities. Relief operations were disrupted when at least one major highway was washed away. Central coordination was poor.

The PNG Red Cross, after the immediate relief phase ended, planned in-depth assessments focusing on health and sanitation. The National Society hoped the health-awareness element built into its existing community-based self-reliance programme would provide relevant health-promotion messages for affected people.

Malaria is one major challenge they face. For many years, Papuans have watched malaria occurring at higher and higher altitudes as the climate warmed. As long ago as 1998 a report by the Centre for Pacific Islands Studies of the University of Hawaii said “the past ten years” had seen outbreaks of malaria 2,000 metres above sea level where previously it was too cold for malarial mosquitoes to survive.

The National Society in PNG knows malaria is out there in remote highland areas where it was unknown before. But with very limited resources it is struggling to get an accurate assessment of exactly where.

Fundraising for such mundane, preventive fieldwork is an even greater challenge, when donors often prefer the post hoc relief operations for tsunamis and volcanoes that grab the headlines.

Human populations “vary in their susceptibility” to climate change, says the WHO’s publication *Climate Change and Human Health*, “depending on factors such as population density, economic development, local environmental conditions, pre-existing health status and health-care availability.”

The people of Papua New Guinea and their Pacific neighbours are already highly susceptible and getting more so.