

Paradise in peril

Hurricanes, flooding, extreme drought – ever more island states in the Pacific are declaring a climate emergency ever more frequently. While international negotiators wrangle over support measures and compensation, local initiatives are launching their own projects. One of them is the Bismarck Ramu Group in Papua New Guinea.

By Kristina Balbach

When Thomas Lalos looks across from his cabin to the opposite shore of Sek Harbour, he can see what little remains of the once densely forested land of his ancestors – a few trees defiantly clinging to life amidst a sea of concrete. “A better life ahead” is the advertising slogan for Papua New Guinea’s largest industrial zone. And Thomas Lalos believed it. He dreamt of decent jobs for the people in his village, a good living for himself and his children. But today, he is living a nightmare.

The idea of a Pacific Maritime Industrial Zone (PMIZ) north of the coastal town of Madang on the Bismarck Sea was conceived 20 years ago. Port facilities and around a dozen factories on hundreds of hectares of land were to generate vast amounts of cash from one of the world’s most abundant tuna fish stocks – mainly for major investors China and RD Tuna Cannery, based in the Philippines. And also for the government of Papua New Guinea, which will happily trade in land which belongs not to the state itself but to minority communities or clans. The first fishing fleets put to sea some 10 years ago. But lately, RD Tuna has had to cancel shifts and the ships have lain at anchor in port. Yields have slumped, they say. Energy prices have risen and the fishing grounds are depleted. Repeated requests for a statement from RD Tuna have so far gone unanswered.

When concerned villagers initially objected to the construction of the industrial zone, Rosa Koian and the local environmental organisa-

tion Bismarck Ramu Group (BRG) were at their side. Today, the environmental activist is keen to gain an insight into local conditions. With fellow activist Bonnie, she manoeuvres the small boat past the large trawlers that belong to RD Tuna and heads for Admosin Island, home to members of the Sek minority community like Thomas Lalos.

Factory jobs instead of fishing

Camilus Manat was also born on Admosin. He has been a BRG activist for years. “Our lives have changed, and not for the better,” he says. “Day in, day out, we have to cope with the noise. The water in the bay is polluted. But this is the water that provides us with our food each day.” Thomas’s daughter Cecile left school to take up the offer of a job in the fish processing factory. Today, the 20-year-old stands at a conveyor belt and sorts the tuna by size and quality. She was promised 100 kina a week – roughly 25 euros – but this has been replaced by a piece-work wage, sometimes paid in the form of shopping vouchers for the Chinese stores. Some of the villagers have been working in the factory for years. Others have given up and are trying to get back into fishing. And others in turn provide the seafarers with a floating market, offering fruit and coconuts in exchange for cash or, increasingly often, for fish.

Now 58 years old, activist Rosa Koian was born on the coast herself. As she sees it, the sit-



The rising sea level and more powerful swell are eroding
Photos: Jörg Böhling

uation of the Admosin islanders is just one example of many that show how New Guineans are forced to cope every day with the pressure of an energy-hungry world. First to be affected was the rainforest, once the third-largest on Earth and covering more than 80 per cent of the surface of the island state. Vast areas of land were cleared in just a few decades for the harvesting of tropical timber and to make way for plantations. And finally, mines were dug in the mountains in order to extract nickel, cobalt and gold. In her neighbourhood, the rivers have been transformed into polluted streams of effluent and biodiverse forests into bleak wastelands. Entire villages have been deprived of the very basis of their lives and livelihoods. Meanwhile, new and controversial large-scale projects are announced, such as deep-sea mining to source manganese nodules for the global energy transition. The land and its nature – a spiritual place for New Guineans – are ailing.

Being mindful of one’s own power

“We have 50,000 years of history behind us,” says Rosa Koian. “We can’t allow it all to be



Cecile Lalos left school to take up the offer of a job in the fish processing factory.



The islands’ locals protect their coasts from flooding with car tyres and cement.



Activist Rosa Koian is alarmed by the loss of vegetation cover.



the beach of the small fisherman island of Mazaz.

destroyed in such a short time.” For Rosa, it is clear that the pace of this so-called development has marginalised large swathes of Melanesian society. “We now have to find our role,” she says. By that, she means a new and powerful self-confidence – based on “Melanesian identity”, the Melanesian self. This is something that the Bismarck Ramu Group is working on. John Chittoa, who has coordinated the group since it came into being almost 30 years ago, invites us to a meeting in the mangroves near the village of Riwo. The network was intentional in setting up its headquarters here. The small meeting room was constructed using natural materials and stands on stilts in the shallow sea. From here, the team – which brings together members of several ethnic groups and widely diverse social backgrounds – has a view of the natural world besides keeping sight of its to-do list. Its area of operation expanded beyond the Ramu River and the Bismarck Sea long ago: “Our highlight for this year is the exchange with groups in Palau and Fiji,” John Chittoa tells us. “We’re developing a strategy to show how the Melanesian voice can gain strength across the entire region.”

The practical implementation of the project lies in the hands of people like Aileen Baretta. The daughter of a clan chief, she spent her entire childhood on an island. She is now a driving force behind a learning project. “New Guineans have traditionally lived from day to day. But that no longer works. We must learn to look to the future and launch initiatives in which everyone can participate and make things happen,” Aileen Baretta explains. “Environmental protection and climate change don’t yet play a role in schools. So we’re making a start.” The BRG now raises awareness

of these topics at the country’s largest teaching training college. It also delivers village-based programmes on issues such as coral restoration. As John Chittoa says: “People need to be well-informed so that they are in control and can make decisions. We then ensure that the echo of the Melanesian voice continues to resonate.”

A vanishing beach

But in some places, the Melanesian voice sounds more like a cry for help – on Mazaz, for example, one of around 200 islands in the Bismarck Archipelago. After a good half-hour crossing on a calm sea, palm trees appear on the horizon, seemingly growing out of the ocean. Scarcely bigger than one half of a football pitch, Mazaz lies barely a metre above sea level. Fallen trees protrude into the sea. There is an audible intake of breath from Rosa Koian: “I haven’t been here for a long time,” she says. “The difference is shocking. What has happened to the beach?”

The island of Mazaz is home to around 40 permanent residents, some of whom have lived here for generations. There’s a handful of self-built cabins. Chickens run hither and thither. The islanders capture rainwater for drinking. Solar panels provide lighting, cold storage for fish and a chance to charge the mobile phones. Hand-built outrigger canoes and an outboard motor boat are pulled up on the tiny beach. Every morning, one of the islanders takes the motor boat across to Madang, with a cool box full of fish and octopus as cargo, along with all the schoolchildren. While they are in class, the fish is sold at the market, and fruit, vegetables and grain are purchased.

Until a few years ago, the island was much larger, the residents say. The rising sea level and more powerful swell are eroding the beach inch by inch. After the island was flooded several times, its one and only mango tree fell victim to the saltwater. This happened again at the end of last year during the “king tide”, a flood that recurs in a regular annual cycle. It’s something that the Melanesians have learned to live with. But never before had the waves completely inundated the island. Community elder Simon Jaking shares his memories: “The huts and equipment were in the water. My bed, which has always stood under a roof outside in the sand, was in the sea. It was never like that in the past.” The 68-year-old, who is no longer able to walk with ease after a fall, is troubled: “I wonder what kind of life my grandchildren will have, and where they’ll go.

We make a living from the sea. And there’s not enough vacant land to find a place elsewhere.”

The young generation want a new way of thinking

Three days later, Rosa Koian is back in the capital Port Moresby. She has invited young people to a workshop on the northwest edge of town. “If people in Europe think that resettlement is the solution, they don’t understand,” says Rosa Koian about the troubles faced by Mazaz. “Every square metre is ancestral land that has been inhabited for generations.” That includes the land that the government or the churches once appropriated. As she sees it: “The churches need to listen as well. It’s their responsibility to stand with the communities.”



Vast areas of land were cleared in just a few decades for the harvesting of tropical timber.

We arrive in Badihagwa. Rosa Koian has good contacts and has found someone willing to open up their house. “It’s not an easy neighbourhood,” she says – and is happy that the course is taking place at all. Only last week, there was unrest in the district again. The men consume bootleg alcohol and most of the children and teens leave school early, if they attend school at all. For her workshops, the environmental activist, who has studied communication, deliberately chooses venues like this and specifically focuses on young women and men. As she sees it, the new media are the key. They can help awaken the young generation’s interest in being well-informed and in working to build a better future for their country. Rosa Koian says: “Only with a powerful voice will the concerns of the people of Oceania be heard” – in Sek Harbour and around the world.

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