

SEEDS OF TRANSFORMATION: CULTIVATING CHANGE IN REMOTE PNG THE DARU-KIUNGA DIOCESE PROJECT



Danielle Hayes, Mercy Works Fundraising and Marketing Manager with Sr. Sally Bradley rsm, the Executive Director of Mercy Works.

As the sun's first rays kiss the horizon, a small girl begins her day in a humble village along the Down Fly River in the vast and remote western Diocese of Daru-Kiunga, Papua New Guinea. Life here is a tapestry of challenges and dreams. With each dawn, she embraces the hope that someday, things will be different. Her steps, like those of the generations before her, are marked by resilience and determination.

For over twelve years, Mercy Works has dedicated its efforts to assisting those struggling in this challenging environment. Recently, in January 2023, it was decided to engage a Papua New Guinean consultant to conduct a thorough evaluation of past operations, setting the stage for a remarkable new collaboration. In February 2023, the recommendations from the Evaluation Report were discussed at a pivotal meeting held in Kiunga, a bustling town on the fringes of this district. In attendance were key members of the Mercy Works team including Sally Bradley RSM, Executive Director and Maria Prescilla, Program Manager – Overseas, local leaders, and Vicar General, Fr Andrew, a steadfast supporter of the project. “During the gathering, it became evident that the West Papuan refugees residing within the Diocese confront shattering hardships and are among the most impoverished and disadvantaged in the world”, Sally reported. After fleeing their homeland during the resistance fight against Indonesian occupation in the early 80s, these resilient people settled in two main areas of unwanted and unforgiving land: Iowara, comprising 18 villages, and the Down Fly River, often referred to as the ‘Border Villages’ which includes ten more communities. It is within this locality that the seeds of the new initiative were planted. In partnership with the local population, Mercy Works and the Diocese have embarked on a journey to launch a Livelihood Program with the primary goal of addressing the root causes of poverty and elevating living standards. In July 2023, the program officially began, and will have a strong emphasis on sustainable livelihoods, agriculture, health, and education.

Cycle of Poverty

Problems encountered by the residents of Iowara, and the Down Fly River are multifaceted. The constant threat of food shortages and the elusive quest for a sustainable income source have cast a long shadow over their lives. Agriculture, the primary livelihood for many, is hampered by limited arable land, a shortage of crops, infertile soil, drought, and flooding.

These obstacles have perpetuated the cycle of poverty. For refusing to relocate, many refugees have paid a high price, forfeiting powerful inducements like recognition, schools, and health care. Basic services as well as access to markets, are exceedingly scarce due to the remoteness of the area and the lack of support from the PNG government. Sally says “this is particularly so for the Down Fly River villages because the government refuses to officially recognise this region as a refugee resettlement area. This has left the Catholic Church as the primary service provider over many years.” Residents of this area often confront difficult travels on treacherous roads, with the way into Kiunga, the nearest urban centre, sometimes only achievable by boat in some parts.

Hygiene and sanitation conditions are dire, with open defecation being the norm. Clean water is a luxury, and pit latrines a rarity. Moreover, perennial flooding along the Border Villages washes away crops, latrines, and contaminates water sources. The presence of the Ok Tedi mine which pollutes and destroys the Fly River system, only adds to the environmental woes.



Aerial view of the remote Kiunga region.

Grassroots Empowerment

With the commencement of the program, a renewed sense of optimism has emerged. Over the next three years, in partnership with each village, this program aims to address the wide-ranging challenges experienced by these communities. The need for community mobilisation with leadership capability building was considered as essential to empowering leaders to help drive positive change within their own communities. So, to finalise activities that will occur during the program Tony Karolus, Program Coordinator, and members of the Diocesan Livelihood Program team set out to consult with participating villages.

Consultative Planning

The team provided an introduction to and briefing of the program to discover numbers of participants and which aspects of the program were of interest and best suited to circumstances and locality. Some villages want to improve their knowledge in animal husbandry and other villages have requested materials for flower arranging and table skirting. As explained by Maria, “it’s not a one-size fits all scenario. For example, you don’t encourage the breeding of ducks when there is no water. Our focus is on building the capacity of people so that they can be self-sufficient and self-reliant at the end of the program.” A key component will be skills training encompassing a wide spectrum of endeavours from improved farming practices to financial and small enterprise management alongside income-generating ventures. Tony affirmed that the visits had seen visible enthusiasm “we have identified and collected lists of names for fish nets, sewing and seed distribution and also contact persons for the exchange of information and communication. The communities have already planned training dates.” Other crucial elements of the program will focus on enhancing the availability of clean water, and on improving health, sanitation, and education, especially for young children. Additionally, the formation of local savings and credit groups (also known as microfinancing loans) will seek to instil a culture of saving and offer ongoing access to funds, ensuring financial stability. The challenges are undeniable, but the determination to overcome them is even stronger. The significance of the program lies not only in the tangible improvements it will provide but also in the intangible sense of optimism it will instil in the hearts of those it touches. The launching of this program serves as a testament to human resilience and the power of collaboration to make a difference. As we look ahead, we see the seeds of promise taking root, reminding us that even in the most challenging circumstances, transformation is possible.

This article was first published in The Bilum Magazine, December 2023 / 9, the newsletter of Mercy Works in Australia, with special thanks to Danielle Hayes, Mercy Works Fundraising and Marketing Manager for the photographs and content. For more information on Mercy Works, please visit their website: <https://www.mercyworks.org.au/>



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