

Hope and Resilience in Kiribati

**A report on a visit to Kiribati
with a PCP delegation in August 2017**



'I returned inspired by a resilient people who refuse to sit and wait for the world to save them from the impacts of climate change.'

Pacific Calling Partnership

**by Usha S. Harris
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In July this year I had the opportunity to visit Kiribati for the first time as part of an Australian delegation organised by Pacific Calling Partnership and hosted by KiriCAN (Kiribati Climate Action Network). I went to Kiribati with a misperception that there was little hope for its people who faced a bleak future due to sea level rise. Instead, I returned inspired by a resilient people who refuse to sit and wait for the world to save them from the impacts of climate change. They are focused on finding sustainable solutions in turning the resources of the ocean and the thin sliver of land on which they live to productive use.



On Tebunginako, sea has slowly engulfed land that once produced food

There is a sense of both hope and sadness in Kiribati. Hope because the I-Kiribati are making every effort to find solutions so that they can continue to live on their islands by adapting to the changes. Sadness because people do not want to leave their ancestral homeland, and because they feel that the people who caused the problem won't take responsibility for the damage.

'... we didn't break it but we are having to live with it'.

Linda Uan, a veteran media producer who has made hundreds of videos about the many social and environmental issues in Kiribati, sums up the feeling of many people in Kiribati when she says: "In Kiribati culture when you do a wrong, when you make a mistake, when you cause a damage, you repair it...Our people are saying we didn't break it but we are having to live with it. You are telling me I can't laugh anymore, I can't joke anymore, I can't go and fish and do what I like because I have to get up and fix the damage that's been caused by the white men?"

The I-Kiribati decision makers emphasise: Adaptation is about giving people choices. This means assisting those who want to migrate to gain new skills so they can migrate with dignity, and helping those who want to stay in Kiribati to live at home with dignity. This means having access to clean water, the skill to grow food and build strong structures and safe homes which will withstand increasingly severe weather events as a result of climate change. But to do this

Kiribati needs the support of the international community in the form of technical assistance (specialists who can share their skills and knowledge with local people) and funds to build the adaptive capacity of current and future generations.

There is undeniable evidence that the islands are being affected by severe coastal erosion caused by increasingly severe storm surges, salt water inundation of both productive agricultural land and available freshwater.

Visit to Abaiang Island



The delegation at Terau Beach Bungalow.

From left: Kaboua John owner of Terau Beach Bungalow, Mike Bowers - the Guardian, Ula Majewski -Oxfam, Aso Iaopo- KATEP leader from Tuvalu, Simon Bradshaw - Oxfam, Phil Glendenning - Director of the Edmund Rice Centre, Claire Anterea Tangaroa, tour coordinator - KiriCAN, Usha Harris - Macquarie University, Tinaai Teaua - KiriCAN

We visited two villages, Tebunginako and Tanikabaai Villages on Abaiang Island where the sea has claimed homes, churches, roads, petrol stations and productive agricultural land.

A village elder woman at Tebunginako told us, “The sea is eating our homes.” Part of Tanikabaai village has become a dead zone. People have moved a few meters inland, but there is not much more land further in for relocation because the island is bordered by the ocean on one side and the lagoon on the other side.

On Abaiang Island we also met Kaboua John, an inspiring young man, who is determined on economic and cultural renewal of the island. While his parents have migrated overseas, Kaboua returned to Abaiang to fulfill his father’s dream of building beach bungalows. Over the past two years, he has transformed the land from scrub into an attractive holiday destination based on ecological principles using local knowledge and by engaging his community.



Kaboua John with vegetables from his garden

The Terau Beach bungalows are built to traditional design and use local material such as coconut trunks and pandanus leaves which grow in abundance on the island.

Kaboua is also the agricultural officer on Abaiang where he is teaching the islanders about composting and ways to grow fresh vegetables. “I want to work with my community and make them strong. That is my dream,” he told me.

Media training

On Tarawa I had an opportunity to provide participatory media training to a group of proactive youth from the Kiribati Climate Action Network. The young people were enthusiastic about learning how to use digital media to tell their own stories. In a short two-hour workshop they gained skills in digital story telling by using their mobile phones to take pictures and tell stories about the social and environmental challenges facing their community and offering possible solutions.



KiriCAN team members who participated in the media training

It is important to share this story of hope and resilience about Kiribati which is constantly portrayed in international media as a country that is in imminent danger of disappearing into the ocean. Linda Uan would like to see more balance in the way Kiribati is covered in International media: “We are not basket cases. We are human beings. At the moment when they speak in the media it is like we are nobodies. We are missing in action...If something is dying and it is left to die than it isn’t urgent...it is about our very survival... We are not saying give us money so that we can buy more air conditioning. We want to live here.”

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About the Author:



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