

## Chapter 17

# The 1997-98 Drought in Papua New Guinea: Failure of Policy or Triumph of the Citizenry?

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### **The 1997 drought — natural disaster or national disaster**

At first glance, the 1997–98 drought in Papua New Guinea was a natural disaster. Between December 1996 and March 1997 the Southern Oscillation Index (SOI), which is the standardized difference in surface air pressure between Darwin and Tahiti and is the oldest and simplest measure of the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon in the Pacific, fell from +12 to –25. This is the most spectacular fall in the SOI in the post-1950 history of ENSO events. In Papua New Guinea, usually one of the wettest and cloudiest places on the globe, rainfall declined across much of the country. Crops withered and died, local sources of drinking water dried up, and bushfires burned from the coast to the crests of the main mountain ranges, destroying economic trees, sago stands and dwellings. Above 2000 metres altitude, night time temperatures repeatedly fell below zero.

By October 1997 a partial assessment estimated that 150,000 people were eating ‘famine’ foods. By December, this estimate, based on a second nationwide assessment, had risen to 260,000. A further 980,000 people were assessed to be eating poor quality food in reduced quantities. Many people were forced to walk for hours to collect drinking water of questionable quality. Death rates in isolated places almost certainly increased, many schools closed, many health centres were not staffed and had no medical supplies anyway. In some centres town water supplies were threatened. The hydroelectric station at Sirinumu was forced to stop generating (in order to conserve drinking water in the dam) causing serious power failures in Port Moresby. The Ok Tedi mine closed for seven months because the Fly River became un-navigable and the Porgera mine closed for six weeks through lack of water for processing, resulting in a severe loss of hard currency to the Papua New Guinea economy.

From another point of view, however, 1997–98 was a national disaster for Papua New Guinea. The Papua New Guinea government was unable to come to terms with the severity and extent of the drought. For a number of weeks it did almost nothing and was forced into taking action by the international aid-giving

community and in particular by the Australian government which paid for assessments and mounted a large assistance program, implemented by the Australian Defence Force (Lea *et al.* 1999; Barter 2001). Some provincial governments, missions, NGOs and large numbers of ordinary citizens did respond, and offered help to a hungry rural population. But mismanagement of the Papua New Guinea economy, exacerbated by the Asian economic crisis, saw the kina fall from around \$US0.72 to \$US0.48 between September 1997 and April 1998, and many citizens associated the fall of the kina with the drought. It is not drawing too long a bow to suggest that the precipitous fall in the value of the currency, and its continued decline to below \$US0.30, set in train forces which contributed to the fall of the Skate government in 1999. Not the least among these forces were dramatic price rises for imported foods consumed largely in urban areas.

The 'dominant' or establishment view of natural disasters is that, although they are attributable to nature, good public policy, backed up by advanced geophysical and managerial capability, can prevent or ameliorate the impacts (Hewitt 1983). The net impact of a natural event is seen as the outcome of a 'battle' between the forces of nature and the institutional and technical counter forces of the state. This view of natural disasters sees good public policy, emergency measures, plans and relief and rehabilitation as critical. While scientific insights are important they are to be subordinated to action, usually carried out by military or quasi-military organizations.

The establishment view of natural disaster accords with the experiences of disaster events in developed countries. For example, much of the discourse around the recent bushfires in Australia is of a quasi-military character with 'headquarters' receiving 'intelligence' from satellites and aerial 'surveillance', 'bombing' from the air and fire 'fighters' 'attacking' the infernos, which are the work of a dangerous and malevolent Nature. Volunteer fire fighters are lauded as heroes. After the fires have abated, policy questions are debated. Many of them are about resources, regulations and control. Government departments and politicians manoeuvre for the greatest advantage or the least amount of blame.

But in developing countries, such as Papua New Guinea, the establishment view of natural disasters may not apply. In these countries, resources are chronically stretched, effective centralized control of education and health services, let alone quasi-military and military forces, is always questionable and technical capabilities are poor or non-existent. Hewitt argues that the establishment view may even warp and constrain other possible views of the event and hence better ways of managing future events. In arguing this point, Hewitt suggests that in developing countries, the outcome of a disaster is not as dependent upon the geophysical processes and existing policies as it is upon the

values of the society and its institutions and the 'conditions of everyday life'. This alternative view implies that the expectations placed upon the Papua New Guinea state in 1997 by the international aid-giving community and the media were unrealistic and to a large extent unfair. It also explains why the responses to the disaster by Papua New Guinea civil society received little recognition during and after the event, even within Papua New Guinea.

This chapter first examines some of the reasons why the Papua New Guinea state was unable to quickly come to terms with the 1997–98 drought. Secondly, it describes how Papua New Guinea citizens responded to the event. Thirdly, it discusses what can be learned from the 1997 event for future policy-making, both in Papua New Guinea, in Australia and elsewhere. A fundamental dilemma is revealed for those who must make policy in Papua New Guinea and in neighboring relief-giving countries, such as Australia. If the establishment view does not apply, and it is argued that it does not in Papua New Guinea, how does the Papua New Guinea state and the international aid-giving community offer assistance to people who will be left to manage as best they can with their own resources? What alternative policy choices might be available?

## **ENSO and PNG**

The Southern Oscillation is the term used to describe a phenomenon in which the temperature of the sea and the circulation of atmosphere over the Pacific and Indian Oceans move from one extreme to another in a regular pattern. At one extreme, known as El Niño, the eastern Pacific sea surface warms and air pressure falls, while in the western Pacific the sea surface cools and air pressure rises. Rainfall on the normally arid Peruvian coast increases while the higher pressure and cool seas in the western Pacific bring low rainfall conditions to Papua New Guinea. At the other extreme, known as La Niña, air pressure falls in the western Pacific and warm seas bring high rainfall to Papua New Guinea. The system does not oscillate with perfect regularity and is much of the time somewhere between the extremes. For a number of reasons, some not yet understood and some to do with Papua New Guinea's complex geography, extreme ENSO events do not all affect Papua New Guinea with similar severity. However El Niño conditions extreme enough to cause drought, such as that experienced in 1997, have probably occurred about once every 100 years for at least the last 6000 years (Haberle 2000), while less severe events have occurred on average around every thirteen years. Papua New Guinea is a high rainfall equatorial country and La Niña impacts are more difficult to identify, although it is possible that they cause longer and more chronic food shortages in areas dependent on sweet potato than the more spectacular but less common El Niño events (Bourke 1988).

The historical record in Papua New Guinea, which is a little over 110 years long in the lowlands and 50 years in the highlands, shows that severe droughts

have occurred in 1914–15, 1941–42, 1972, 1982 and 1997. It is also likely, but more difficult to demonstrate, that severe droughts were experienced in 1887 and 1901–02. Documentary reports increase in frequency and geographical coverage over time, but even the early reports suggest widespread disruption to food supplies, fires and famine. In 1901 and 1902, 'famine' is reported from Rigo District and Goodenough Island, a 'complete crop failure' was reported from Milne Bay and the sago swamps at Cape Nelson burned. In 1914, E.W.P. Chinnery, the government anthropologist, reported that almost the whole population of New Ireland, including those normally dependent on sago, were 'wandering about in desperation'. He reported 'destructive bushfires along the whole line of the coast' and a 'great loss of life' (Chinnery 1929, 45). In 1941 'abnormal conditions and fires' were reported from Wau, Bulolo, Madang and Wewak, the New Britain coast was 'brown from drought or black from the effects of fires' with 'smoke everywhere like a thick fog' and sago swamps burned out on the Sepik River (*Pacific Island Monthly* November 1941, 6). Food supplies were 'critical' in Western Province and the 'inland mountain districts' of Papua (*Pacific Island Monthly* February 1942, 29). Oral accounts from the highlands include frost in Enga followed by mass migrations from the Upper Lai Valley in which 'many died on the road' (Dwyer 1952). From Tari in the Southern Highlands comes a description of a two year drought that occurred soon after the visit to Hoiebia by Taylor and Black in 1938 (Gammage 1998, 77) when a bushfire burned right across the central basin, the peaty swamp caught fire and a famine occurred 'much worse than what happened in 1972' (Allen *et al.* 1989, 289).

It is probable that severe ENSO events have been occurring for some thousands of years. The general success of Papua New Guinea food production systems in maintaining the population over that period suggests that these events do not have a long-term negative influence on food production, or that systems are adapted to cope. In pre-colonial times, because severe ENSO events occur only every three or four generations, knowledge of how to cope was recorded in oral accounts. The coming 'big one' was used by older people to cajole and threaten young men and women who did not want to work hard in their gardens: 'Work hard', they were told, 'because one day a big famine will happen and you will starve if you don't have large gardens'.

In a bureaucracy, however, an event which occurs only once every 100 years is not likely to be well remembered. In Papua New Guinea there was almost no administration to record the consequences of the 1901, 1914 or 1941 (in the highlands) events. The loss of experience at independence and concerns with other matters since then, means that in 1997, severe ENSO events were not at the forefront of most peoples' minds.

## **The 1972 event — ignorance, politics and food relief**

In 1972, however, the Australian colonial administration was at its greatest geographical extent. It was about to hand over powers of internal government to a Papua New Guinea administration. The 1972 event was less severe than 1941 or 1997 by several orders of magnitude, but to public servants in the highlands it was their first experience of repeated frosts at elevations above 1800 metres. The spectacular destruction of sweet potato gardens by frost and the fear of widespread public disorder and tribal fighting as people began to migrate out of the worst affected areas led to a food relief program, managed by expatriate missionaries and administration officers and carried out with assistance from the Australian Army. At the peak of the program, 150,000 people were being fed. A parallel program distributed planting material of English potato and corn seed and collected sweet potato vines from lower altitudes and transported them into frosted areas, to enable the restoration of the food supply as soon as possible.

Following the completion of the food relief program in 1973, Eric Waddell argued in a report to the government (published as Waddell 1989) that the switch in policy from one that supported local coping in late 1971, to direct intervention by providing food in 1972, was brought about by the severity of the frost and widespread drought, the inability of the Australian administration to judge the severity of the situation because of a lack of knowledge of local agricultural systems, and the widespread belief that the local population had no capacity to cope with the situation. Waddell was primarily concerned that the relief effort had undermined longstanding adaptive strategies maintained by local people to deal with the frost hazard.

However, two serving Australian officers who commented on Waddell's report emphasized that changes in the broader political environment were an important part of the decision to provide food. Between August 1971, when the first frosts occurred, and April 1972, Papua New Guinea's first fully operative national government had taken office and the formal handover of self-government was due to take place in December 1973. Brian Scoullar, then the Department of Agriculture Rural Development Officer at Laiagam in Enga, argued that it was a Papua New Guinea government and not an Australian colonial administration that was responsible for decision-making in 1972 and that the decisions were based on two questions: how many people would die if nothing was done, and could the new government afford to be seen to be responsible for any deaths of highlanders under the political circumstances in force at the time (the new government was led and dominated by lowlanders and highlanders had accepted the move to self-government with some reluctance). John Wallis, Southern Highlands District Rural Development Officer in 1971, also notes that the 'crisis was fused politically' with an emphasis on national unity. Both Scoullar and Wallis believed that without feeding, many deaths would have occurred, mainly

of the very young and the very old, and Scoullar saw this as part of the adaptive strategy. Both also commented on the almost complete lack of knowledge of indigenous food production systems, in particular the effect of frost on sweet potato production (published as part of Waddell 1989).

Waddell (1983, 35) later commented on the politicisation of the 1972 event, noting that 'the new government was concerned to strengthen the very fragile (and artificial) sense of national unity'. The Australian administration and the Christian missions were 'concerned to assume a strong interventionist role as was their custom, thereby countering possible criticism and suspicion...[T]he new government [saw] the relief program as a vehicle for affirming its leadership and demonstrating the solidarity of all New Guineans'.

### **Post-1972: crying 'Wolf!'**

The 1972 event and the generally accepted conclusion that too many people were fed for too long had a number of repercussions for policies dealing with natural disasters. Partly in response to the revealed ignorance of food production systems, the first Papua New Guinea National Food Crop Conference was held in 1975 (Willson and Bourke 1976). Prior to 1972 it would have been impossible to find the resources to mount such a conference. Waddell's argument that food relief undermines local coping was widely accepted by concerned expatriates, but not by Papua New Guinea politicians. A pattern was established in which policy, thought to be sound and sensible, was made by expatriate experts and administrations, often supported by Papua New Guinea public servants, but was not supported by political leaders and their expatriate advisers, some of whom went out of their way to subvert what were supposed to be their own policies.

Decisions were increasingly influenced by those who stood to benefit most from having a 'disaster'. Thus in 1980 when food shortages were reported from many parts of the Southern Highlands, at the time heavily staffed by foreign agricultural, health and nutritional experts under a World Bank rural development project, the foreigners and senior Papua New Guinea public servants argued, against the urgings of local government councillors and provincial politicians, that food aid would cause a breakdown in 'local coping mechanisms' and that it was not warranted in the particular circumstances. The politicians won the day, however, and the National Executive Council approved the spending of K500,000 for 'relief operations to drought frost affected areas' (sic). This decision was recommended by the Papua New Guinea National Emergency Services (PNGNES) and the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF). The PNGDF, which was tasked by PNGNES to distribute the food, was involved in flying national politicians in chartered helicopters on brief visits to affected areas before the decision was made. Very small amounts of food were distributed directly to some local areas and not to others. Provincial public servants were

by-passed by the operation which was directed by local politicians. Clansmen who had not received food aid because they were of a different tribal allegiance to the local member of parliament took out their anger by joining a stone throwing mob in Mendi or by blocking roads and robbing trucks carrying relief supplies in Enga.

In February 1981 the public service was successful in blocking attempts to create a 'disaster'. The Pacific representative of the UN World Food Programme (UNWFP), an American based in Fiji, made his first ever visit to Papua New Guinea. At Mount Hagen provincial politicians took him to Tambul and showed him frost-affected sweet potato gardens and told him people were about to starve. As a result he placed a request directly with the UNWFP in Rome for food aid for 39,597 Papua New Guinea villagers 'totally deprived of subsistence food'. The request was sent back from Rome to Papua New Guinea for confirmation. In Port Moresby, the receipt of this request was the first that the national government knew of the situation. Phil Ainsworth, a retired Australian Army officer working in the National Planning Office (NPO) Coordination Section, pre-empted the director of PNGNES, a New Zealand-born Papua New Guinea citizen Leith Anderson, by establishing an inter-departmental committee known as the National Disaster and Relief Committee. The committee continued to be chaired by Anderson, but comprised senior public servants from Treasury, Finance, National Planning, Provincial and Local Government Affairs, the PNGDF and the police. In a report written by Ainsworth, the committee said that it found itself 'confronted by conflicting information' and noted that 'no objective survey' had been made. A 'technical appraisal team' was formed. It was led by Paul Wohlt, an American anthropologist who had spent 1972 in the field at Kandep, following migrating groups to the lower valleys and back again, and comprised a geographer, a nutritionist and a Papua New Guinean graduate working for the Simbu Land Use Project.

Before the appraisal team had reported, the PNGNES director leaked the details of the UNWFP offer to the press and implied that its acceptance was being held up by uncaring bureaucrats. Senior national politicians, including Paul Torato, then minister for Justice, lambasted the committee in the press, accusing it of ignoring 'my starving people' and stating that '150,000 are starving' and need food for six months. However the appraisal team found that the food aid was not required and the Papua New Guinea Department of Foreign Affairs formally declined the UNWFP offer, the first country ever to do so. The appraisal team's report contained evidence of senior national ministers having food delivered by helicopter and truck to communities in their electorates that had not requested assistance and did not need it. In the Rigo mountains, food received had been carefully stored in villages because people believed some mistake had been made and that it would have to be returned (Wohlt *et al.* 1982). A national election was to be held in 1982.

The only semblance of 'policy' at this time comprised public requests by vested interests, mainly politicians from affected areas, the military and the emergency services staff, that food should be distributed after almost every minor frost or alleged food shortage. Senior public servants and expatriate experts at the national and provincial level, who wanted objective assessments carried out first, opposed these requests. The ability of one side or the other to get their way was influenced to some extent by economic conditions in the country. In 1982, a relatively severe ENSO event that resulted in widespread frosts across the highlands, and a drought that stranded barges on the Fly River, coincided with a collapse in export commodity prices and a doubling of the price of oil. After the experiences of 1980 and 1981, a national ministerial 'assessment committee' was established and the national government refused to release funds until provinces had set up their own assessment teams and produced evidence of need. Provincial public servants, then smarting at levels of political interference that are now accepted as normal, made statements in newspapers that, at the urgings of provincial political leaders, villagers were exaggerating their needs and were hiding food from assessment teams in order to attract relief supplies.

By the end of 1982, a widespread climate of cynicism had developed in which villagers were portrayed as far from helpless in the face of natural disaster. They were viewed as clever and cunning and not only capable of coping, but of tricking supplies of rice and fish out of the government. In addition, the disinterested role of the military and emergency services was openly questioned. The PNGDF had produced a clearly inadequate report on the frosts which was again leaked to the press. This report recommended that the PNGDF be given K1.1 million with which to mount a relief program. This proposal was publicly mocked and rejected by senior Treasury officials. The sad irony was that many people probably suffered severe food shortages for some months in 1982.

### **1997 — a policy failure?**

From 1982 to 1997, Papua New Guinea governments were distracted from making policy on natural disasters by a civil war and a series of economic crises. The PNGDF was engaged in Bougainville and lost interest in 'disasters' as a source of income. The PNGNES remained under the leadership of Anderson, who was seen by many senior public servants as compromised after 1981 and 1982. It was not properly funded and was allowed to run down to the point where it was almost completely ineffective. Rumours abounded in Port Moresby that senior PNGNES staff were receiving kickbacks from suppliers of emergency equipment such as tarpaulins and buckets. One way or another, the PNGNES was demoralized and incapacitated. But in the strange ways of Port Moresby, the director continued to have political support from within and was not replaced. While he remained it was difficult to reform the PNGNES. Various attempts to

improve the organization, including aid projects, ran aground as senior officials played political games to ensure they maintained their positions of influence and control. The PNGNES continued to deal with calls for help from the odd village affected by a flood or a local landslide. But when the Rabaul volcanoes erupted in 1994, destroying the town and creating a large number of homeless, nobody seriously expected the PNGNES to be able to cope and a special task force was set up almost immediately which largely excluded the PNGNES.

Thus in 1997, as the drought increased in intensity, Papua New Guinea had no policy with which to deal with it and had an emergency service which was viewed as a joke by many observers. In June 1997, the Land Management Group at the Australian National University wrote to Anderson, pointing out that the SOI had taken the most precipitous fall for fifty years and that it was possible a severe drought and frosts would occur. He was sent photocopies of parts of a 334 page special edition of *Mountain Research and Development* which contained our knowledge of ENSO impacts in Papua New Guinea to 1985. No acknowledgment was received and phone calls were not returned. In Papua New Guinea, as the situation developed, provincial public servants did not know which agency or department to report to. In August 1997, in response to widespread frosts in the highlands, the Department of Agriculture and Livestock (DAL) organized a meeting in Mount Hagen. The Department of Provincial and Local Government Affairs (DPLGA) had teams in the field collecting information for a new Village Directory (a database of villages and local services), and was getting reports of problems in many locations.

The structure of government in Port Moresby meant that senior officials from DAL and DPLGA (such as Ted Sitapai and Brian Deutrom respectively) who knew that problems were developing in rural areas did not speak with each other. Rather they met Mike Bourke, an ex-DAL research agronomist now at ANU, by chance during a visit by him to Port Moresby in August and asked independently if it would be possible to carry out an assessment. Bourke directed them to the Australian High Commission to request assistance. But it was not until the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a front-page article by Lucy Palmer on 15 September 1997, entitled 'Cry for help as our neighbors start to die' complete with a colour photograph of a woman at Tambul prostrate on a parched and frost-damaged sweet potato mound, that things began to happen. In Papua New Guinea, Matthew Kanua of DAL used the 1989 *Mountain Research and Development* publication and Bourke's 1988 thesis on food shortages in the highlands to write a report to his department secretary. In Canberra, the Land Management Group at ANU was asked by AusAID if it was possible to carry out a national assessment of food supply and drinking water.

The outcomes of the two assessments and the drought and frost relief programs based on them have been described elsewhere (Allen 2000; Bourke 2000; Allen

and Bourke 2001). Sixteen papers covering particular aspects of the 1997 event are included in the proceedings of the 2000 Papua New Guinea Food and Nutrition Conference (Bourke *et al.* 2001). This is not the place to re-visit suggestions for policies on climatic monitoring and ENSO prediction, crop systems research or ways of ameliorating impacts by ensuring schools and health centres remain open (Allen and Bourke 2001). Instead we want to examine how the Papua New Guinea state responded to the crisis that the event created. The question being posed is, should the performance of the Papua New Guinea government in 1997 be judged against the establishment view of natural disasters, or some other criteria.

Lucy Palmer's *Sydney Morning Herald* article, and others even more lurid that followed in quick succession in Australian newspapers, placed pressure on the Australian government to 'do something'. Almost certainly, questions from the Australian foreign minister to his Papua New Guinea counterpart were what stimulated a reaction from the Papua New Guinea government. Following from Mike Bourke's chance visit, a formal request was made for assistance to assess the impact of the drought and this was immediately approved in Canberra. The request was initiated by Brian Deutrom, an expatriate officer in the Department of Provincial and Local Government Affairs through the minister, Simon Kaumi. Shortly after this, Peter Barter, an Australian-born Papua New Guinea citizen and former minister of Health, was asked by Prime Minister Skate to chair a National Drought Relief Committee, the previous committees having quietly faded away between 1982 and 1997. Barter was well known as a relatively successful minister, although he had created unhappiness in some quarters of the public service by outspoken criticism of health staff who did not carry out their professional duties satisfactorily. He was also the owner of a tourist business including hotels, two ships and a personal helicopter. Membership of the new committee comprised senior politicians from all regions and from the government and the opposition, including Simon Kaumi, military and police officers, senior public servants, and NES staff. But before the committee had met, and while he was on a self-sponsored drought relief fund-raising trip to Australian RSL clubs, Barter was replaced by Peti Lafanama, the MP for Eastern Highlands Province and provincial governor. Barter was appointed 'liaison and implementation officer', with no terms of reference, to a committee that did not meet (Barter 2001, 262). Mr Lafanama was facing a court challenge to his election. He immediately left Port Moresby for Goroka and did not return for at least a month. This had a number of consequences.

First, the provinces and other Papua New Guinea institutions had no formal national body to report to, or to request information from. Every province was required to set up its own provincial drought relief committee and in most provinces these committees were sensibly organized, with membership from government, business, NGOs and missions, were active and made realistic and

sound decisions. In general local political representatives were not active members of the provincial drought relief committees, and sought their own funds through political channels. The PNGNES set up a Coordination Centre in the Waigani government offices which was supposed to be manned twenty-four hours a day. The Centre quickly became unreliable, because of unexplained staff absences, incompetence and power cuts (it was set up in a room with no windows) and was soon largely ignored by those working on the assessments and relief planning, at least until Anderson was promised a knighthood and retired, when it was reorganized.

Secondly, with no active committee in place, political pressure built up on the Papua New Guinea government to do something. We are not familiar with the details of the funds made available through the Papua New Guinea government in 1997. However, before the assessment team's reports were received, the national government made an allocation of more than K1 million in total, direct to all MPs on the basis of the number of people resident in their electorates. This meant that MPs whose electorates were relatively unaffected by drought or frost received the same amount of funds, on a *pro rata* basis, as those whose electorates were severely affected. It seems likely that most MPs handed over the money to their personal staff and told them to buy food. In severely affected electorates, the funds were insufficient to feed the numbers of people seriously short of food for more than a few days. In many cases all the allocation was spent on food, with nothing left to pay for transport, and weeks went by while transport was sought. Commonly, business houses in Lae donated trucks to deliver the rice to highlands locations or PMV owners were contracted to pick up rice from Lae but were never paid. At Yonki in Eastern Highlands, for example, a shipping container was dumped outside the police station by the staff of the local MP, and people were told to take rice if they needed it, under police supervision. Old people and those distant from a main road received nothing and there was no accounting of who received the rice.

Thirdly, the international aid-giving community had no single central Papua New Guinea organization to talk to, or to get decisions from. In frustration, the Australian government side-stepped almost all Papua New Guinea government organizations, including the inactive Drought Relief Committee, and, with approval from Minister Kaumi, launched its own \$A30 million relief program to areas accessible only by air and judged by assessment teams to be severely affected (Sudradjat 2001). In its early stages, this program liaised with Papua New Guinea officials only at the uppermost level of government.

Fourthly, a critical task given to the committee, to set up and manage a transparent trust fund into which all contributions to a Papua New Guinea relief fund could be paid, was not completed until December 1997. Foreign governments and international aid organizations refused to place funds into a

general revenue account. But for a number of weeks the Papua New Guinea government insisted that all donations should go into a government-controlled account (Barter 2001, 261). Frustrated members of the diplomatic corps told senior Papua New Guinea public servants in language that was distinctly undiplomatic, that they would not deposit funds into anything other than a trust account because the money would be 'stolen'. As a result many charities directed their considerable funds to the Red Cross, Caritas, the Salvation Army and Oxfam. The Papua New Guinea NGO community formed their own committee under the Papua New Guinea Red Cross to coordinate their efforts.

This summary does not cover all Papua New Guinea government responses to the drought. The formal Papua New Guinea government response improved as time passed. A number of provincial governments (including Enga, Simbu, Milne Bay and Manus) responded with outstanding effectiveness and efficiency; others (including Western Highlands, Eastern Highlands, Morobe, East New Britain and New Ireland) set up effective provincial committees; while yet others did almost nothing. Government agencies became involved in rehabilitation projects using World Bank funds, and DAL organized a third assessment in 1998 with AusAID support. It is enough, however, to attempt to answer the question, was the chaotic response to the crisis in 1997 by the Papua New Guinea government a policy failure?

First, we have argued that in 1997, following a loss of confidence in the 1980s in the institutions that are responsible for responding to natural disasters, there was very little policy in existence that can be said to have failed. Secondly, a policy is only as good as the ability of a government to implement it. In 1997, the Papua New Guinea government had almost no capacity to deal with a major natural disaster in the manner required of it by the establishment view of disaster management. The central coordinating office responsible for disaster management was demoralized, poorly trained and under-equipped. The disciplined forces were inadequately funded and equipped, frequently accused of being poorly disciplined and were suffering demoralizing defeats on Bougainville. The economy was in poor shape. The political organization of the country had just been reformed in a conscious attempt to remove conflict between provincial governments and the national government by doing away with the provincial governments. However, national government departments were poorly prepared to take over the tasks that the reforms demanded and provincial administrations did not know how to make the new system work. Funds became stuck at all levels of government. Even the best policy in the world could not have saved Papua New Guinea from itself in 1997. This was not a failure of policy, but a failure of governance.

Does it follow from this that Papua New Guinea should be encouraged and helped to make better policy about natural disasters and to fix up all of the

things that did not work in 1997, and in general do not work very well most of the time? Or, since, at least in the medium term, it will be most unlikely that all parts of government in Papua New Guinea will function effectively all of the time, is there any point in having a policy that demands a highly managed and coordinated government response to implement it?

Before answering these questions, the response of Papua New Guinea civil society to the 1997 drought needs to be briefly considered.

### **A triumph of the citizenry?**

The AusAID and Australian Defence Force (ADF) relief program provided food to more than 100,000 people in areas accessible only by air (Sudradjat 2001, 219). But the assessment teams estimated that 260,000 people had no food available and 980,000 had severely restricted amounts of food available from gardens. That implies that around 160,000 people who had no food and 980,000 who had insufficient food were left to be assisted by the Papua New Guinea government relief program. We know that Papua New Guinea government responses were inadequate to say the least. The Papua New Guinea national government purchased around 23,500 tonnes of rice for relief in 1997/98 (compared to around 9400 tonnes purchased by AusAID and 7000 tonnes purchased by individual provincial governments) but much of this food was delivered after the most critical period in December 1997 had passed (see, for example, Jonathon 2001, 212–213). How did these people survive?

First, they ate 'famine foods', either foods that are not eaten often, or that are only eaten in times of hunger. Secondly, in rural areas people raised small amounts of cash by killing and selling pigs, cooking and selling pork and vegetables, buying packets of cigarettes and selling them individually, and by selling artifacts. With the cash earned they purchased imported rice and flour. Thirdly, they moved to areas where food was available. A customary coping mechanism in frost-affected areas is to move to lower altitude valleys to stay with relatives. It was estimated that up to 75 per cent of people moved out of the Kandep and Marient basins during 1997 and walked over mountain passes into the Tsaka and Lai valleys. The problem with this response in 1997 was that the drought was so widespread and severe that food in these areas was also critically short. Many people moved further to stay with relatives in towns. For example, an estimated 20–25 per cent of the population from villages at Elimbari in Simbu migrated to Goroka, Lae and Port Moresby (Bourke 2000, 163). Anecdotal reports suggest that many public servants had standing room only in their houses at night and spent all of their salaries and savings on buying food. Fourthly, people employed in urban areas or at mines either sent money to their rural relatives or purchased rice and sent it home.

The overall outcome of these responses and the relief program was a 65,917 tonne or 38 per cent increase in the sales of rice in Papua New Guinea during 1997–98. The important point is that over 80 per cent (54,000 tonnes) of the additional rice was purchased through retail outlets (Bourke 2000, 160; Whitecross and Franklin 2001). This is the rice purchased by people who had sold their collection of empty bottles, or killed their pigs, or cooked vegetable stews, or sold cigarettes. It is the rice that people bought for their relatives visiting the towns and which people sent into the countryside to their home villages. It should be noted that Rice Industries, the importer of almost all rice into Papua New Guinea did not increase prices during 1997, despite the severe drop in the value of the kina (Whitecross and Franklin 2001).

So, although due credit must go to AusAID and the ADF for delivering food to inaccessible areas, credit must also go to the citizens of Papua New Guinea for feeding themselves or feeding their relatives, from their own resources, for around four to six months in 1997–98. They ‘drew upon the “on-going and everyday”’. Their obligations to kin, their long-standing exchange relationships and a truly amazing ability to withstand suffering and hardship, saw them through’ (Allen 2000, 120).

But an unknown number of children and older people died in 1997, directly or indirectly as a result of the food shortages. They died quietly, without fuss, out of sight of the glare of the international media, in out-of-the-way places. An AusAID-funded review of the relief program criticized the assessments of October and November/December 1997 on the grounds that they under-estimated the ability of people to cope using their own resources (Lea *et al.* 1999). On the evidence of the increased rice and flour sales in 1997–98, this is possibly true for the more accessible areas. The assessments certainly did not foresee the remarkable response of the Papua New Guinea citizenry in the feeding of their rural kith and kin. But other evidence that came to hand during 1997 strongly suggests that in isolated places death rates increased significantly (Dwyer and Minnegal 2000; Haley 2001; Lemonnier 2001; Robinson 2001).

## **The need for a bilateral policy**

If 1997 was a ‘failure of governance’ and a ‘triumph of the citizenry of Papua New Guinea’, what does this teach us about the sort of policies that might be developed in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere to deal with the next ENSO event? What are the ‘facts’?

Based on the evidence of past severe ENSO events and on evidence from remote areas in 1997, we conclude that considerably greater numbers of people, mainly small children and old people, would have died in Papua New Guinea in 1997 if there had been no interventions at all. The additional loss of life in 1997 due to the drought and frosts was greatest in the most isolated areas, where

people do not have access to markets for cash crops, to government services, to information, and to effective political representation. Without AusAID's relief program, many more people in these places would have died.

On the other hand, AusAID's program probably damaged the long-term capability of the Papua New Guinea government to deal with future ENSO events. For many reasons that were justifiable in the circumstances, AusAID rode over the top of the inadequate responses of the Papua New Guinea government and put a well-oiled military operation into action. Many educated Papua New Guineans have jokingly suggested to me that Papua New Guinea was completely 'useless' in 1997 and had to be rescued by Australia from its own inadequacies.

If we argue that a policy of no intervention, or minimal intervention should be followed the next time, many people would starve and some would do it in public! Given the great attraction of disasters to the Australian and international media, it would be very tough governments, in Papua New Guinea and Australia, that could stand by and do nothing, with nightly TV pictures of people dying on the screen. Here is the dilemma: do nothing and watch some people die; do almost everything because the Papua New Guinea government cannot, and destroy local morale and the confidence that a crisis can be met with local resources.

However, this need only be a dilemma if Australian policy continues to be one of waiting until Papua New Guinea policy fails and then coming to the rescue with programs that resemble something out of *Apocalypse Now*. The solution would appear to be a joint bilateral agreement between Papua New Guinea and Australia to make policy together. The policy would recognize the strengths and weaknesses of both countries and would seek to use the strengths and avoid the weaknesses of both parties and approaches. Australia could continue to provide the advanced technical assistance, climate prediction, communications, satellite imagery, specialized aircraft, and even perhaps corporate memory. Papua New Guinea could provide local-level monitoring and liaison, knowledge of the country, knowledge of agricultural systems, language skills and so on. Papua New Guinea policy must recognize the importance of the private sector and its role in importing and distributing rice and flour, which are essential to the food security of the country. Both countries should make policies that ensure that rice and flour continues to be imported into Papua New Guinea and retailed at reasonable prices.

Elements of this approach were adopted by the Australian relief program in 1997 when circumstances demanded it. PNGDF soldiers were placed aboard ADF helicopters to act as interpreters, after a bunch of helpful bush-knife wielding villagers, who offered to unload a helicopter, terrified the ADF crew who mistook them for primitive savages with a blood lust. Australian monitors with experience

in rural Papua New Guinea (a number were ex-patrol officers) were posted to provinces to work directly with provincial drought relief committees, where they were accepted and valued. The approach continues to be followed in a number of other ways. The responses to the next ENSO event will benefit from the detailed knowledge that was collected during 1997. Papers on the drought were presented to the PNG Food and Nutrition 2000 Conference, with the proceedings published by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (Bourke *et al.* 2001).

A more sympathetic view needs to be taken of Papua New Guinea's inability to act like a developed country when it comes to natural disasters. Papua New Guinea is not a developed country and the establishment view of disasters will not work there. Australia and Papua New Guinea must make new policy together, policy that draws upon the best of the establishment view of disaster management and the best of the alternative view.

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