**Submission responding to the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change on the issue of “Promotion and protection of human rights in the context of mitigation, adaptation, and financial actions to address climate change, with particular emphasis on loss and damage”**

We are the Veraibari Village, a coastal community, in the Kikori Delta region (“**Kikori Delta**”) of Papua New Guinea (**PNG**). We are part of a greater community of clans and villages in the Kikori Delta. We bring to your attention the plight of our village which is suffering from rising sea levels, increased intensity of storm surges, increased frequent flooding and salination of soil and fresh water sources as a result of climate change. These effects of climate change have forced our community to relocate, forced changes in our traditional lifestyles, harmed our precious culture, caused water and food insecurity and harmed the biodiversity of the Kikori-Delta. What we are facing is in common with many other villages in the Kikori-Delta.

**BACKGROUND: THE KIKORI DELTA**

Veraibari village is located at the mouth of the Kikori River in the Gulf Province of Papua New Guinea. The Kikori River is 445 km in length and is Papua New Guinea’s fifth largest river. The Kikori River is included in the Kikori River Basin and is on the tentative list for World Heritage because of its biodiversity and cultural diversity values. The Kikori River drains the Hegigio and Tagali Rivers of the Southern Highlands and Hela Provinces of PNG into the Gulf of Papua.

The Kikori River Basin and its drainage extends from the Southern Highlands Province and its alpine grasslands to the extensive mangrove wetlands of the Gulf Province. The delta includes large alluvial plains below 40m elevation covered in mangroves and dissected by a distributary system of river channels meandering extensively across the Gulf of Papua. The Kikori and the Purari deltas together comprise the largest continuous area of mangroves in Papua New Guinea. Rainfall in this area is one of the highest recorded in the world at between 4 – 8 meters annually.

The coast of the Kikori Delta comprises of delta islands exposed to the Gulf of Papua. The Kikori Delta is a very dynamic environment, coastal beaches, sandbars and islands are created and destroyed by wind and wave action, a process that is reflected in the migratory history of the Kikori people, local legends and customs as well as the ever-changing physical environment. The dynamic environment of the Kikori Delta and changes to its coastline have been exacerbated by climate change.

The Kikori Delta has a wet and dry season. The wet season is also known as the storm season and runs from June to September of every year although seas are rough from late May to October. The storm season has increasingly become prolonged and ferocious with storm surges and increased flooding as a result of climate change. Our village is caught between the fast-flowing Kikori River and the rising seas of the Gulf of Papua. During the storm season we are effectively isolated and cut off from the rest of the country and from health and other services provided at Kikori town, the nearest semi-urban centre.

**SUBMISSIONS ON LOSS AND DAMGE**

We respond to Questions 1 and 4 of your invitation under the headings of:

1. Displacement;
2. Land;
3. Culture;
4. Biodiversity; and
5. Food and water insecurity.

**Displacement**

The Veraibari Village is made up of the Urama tribe and the Pai’ia tribe. We also accommodate some settlers from the Demaibari village who were forced to resettle on our lands some decades ago after, in their words, the “sea took our village so we moved.” Prior to 2017 and the increased or accelerating impacts of climate change that we have observed and experienced since then, we had a permanent population of 419 people. Since 2017 we have experienced population flux. Some of our people permanently live in Veraibari Village and some live in Veraibari village during dry season (October- May) and migrate to live in squatter settlements on the fringes of the Kikori town during the storm season (June-September) so as not to be cut off from services during that period.

We first started feeling significant impacts of climate change in Veraibari Village between 1991 and 2000 when we observed increased force in the wave action on our coast where our village is located, which slowly claimed the first school that was established in our village. The school serviced several communities in the Kikori Delta area.

In the late 1990s we relocated the school further away from the shoreline, however, by 2001 the strong waves managed to claim the relocated school, including several homes belonging to our community members. The school was relocated for a third time sometime before 2014. In 2014 the school was upgraded with stronger infrastructure by ExxonMobil and the PNGLNG Project, as part of their corporate social responsibility for their nearby gas project.

Between 2017 and 2020, the rate of destruction caused by rising sea levels and storm surges increased. The king tides got higher and the wind and waves got stronger. We started to feel the impact of climate change with increased ferocity and strength.

Between March and August 2020, the upgraded school was destroyed by wind and waves again (third time) and two teachers’ houses also got destroyed. The school is an especially significant loss for us and our nearby communities because the Gulf Province of PNG, where our village is located, has the lowest rates of education in the country and literacy levels were last estimated to be around 4 per cent.

Between 1997 to 2020, we kept a record of the number of families’ homes destroyed by storm surges and rising sea levels. There were 26 family homes destroyed during this period. It is our custom to live with extended family, thus the destruction of a family home affects more than a “nuclear family”, it affects an extended family. The impacts on our extended families is not just loss of shelter but the centrality of home for our family dynamics and the security it provides financially, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Our homes are built upon ancestral lands of significant cultural meaning and are central to our cultural security.

In 2020, we formed the Veraibari Village Development Program with the aim to coordinate the relocation of our entire village further inland. We have designed a new village to cater for 178 houses, a graveyard, churches and the basic necessities of the village as well as a *dubu daima*. This will be the fifth time in fifty years that our village is forced to move because of the rising sea and storms and this will be the fourth time the school will be carried to a new location since it was first built less than 20 years ago. The only Government support we have received so far are sand bags from the Provincial Government. Our Provincial Governor has also pledged further support and we await it eagerly.

**Land**

We are custodians and rights-holders of the lands, seas and water-ways of the Urama and Pai’ia tribes. Our ancestors have lived on these lands and navigated and fished upon these waters for time immemorial. Rights of these lands and waters are passed from father to son within the tribe.

We have lived in unison with the wind and wave action that is integral to the formations of the lands and waterways of our village. Our migratory history, local legends and customs encompass this natural phenomena. However, the onset of climate change has altered the natural pace, time and strength and movement of the wind and wave action. We are unable to adapt at the pace at which the climate is changing our environment nor can we use our ancestral knowledge and connection with our environment to predict the changes that continue to occur at a rapid pace.

We rely on our ancestral land and waters for food, water and shelter. The impact of climate change has diminished the land available to us to plant and harvest our traditional food sources as well as to build our homes and cultural structures and it has diminished the fishing areas and diversity of catch available to us. As we move our villages further and further inland, we are not only at risk of encroaching upon the ancestral lands of others but we are limiting the resources and space available to our current and future generations.

Our people, and those of our neighbouring villages, who have moved to live in Kikori town and Port Moresby are already facing the social issues that come with living on lands and waters that belong to other tribes. They are unable to use the waters nearby to fish for food nor are they able to live freely on the lands because they can only do so with the consent of the original clans. This not only creates tension but also food and water insecurity issues.

**Food and water insecurity**

Salination and contamination of freshwater and groundwater sources due to rising sea levels, increased storms and flooding have raised water insecurity issues for our people. The increased salination of our soil as well as land shortage has left us with limited healthy soil to plant our traditional crops. The sago plant (a culturally significant plant) is one that takes time to mature and is planted by current generations for future generations. It provides a staple food source for us and is also being affected by salinated soil and high waters. This has raised food security issues for us.

We have not yet received any Government assistance in finding ways to secure food and water sources for our village, although we acknowledge the Provincial Government’s pledged support. We have recently begun a partnership with the Piku Biodiversity Network to assist us with identifying and planting alternative food sources with essential nutrients, however, we still require more help and infrastructure to secure food and water sources long term. Some of the crops we can no longer plant are culturally important to us and the inability to cultivate them is undermining our traditional ways.

**Biodiversity**

The Kikori Basin is on the tentative list for World Heritage because of its cultural and biodiversity value.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Kikori Delta is listed as an Important Marine Mammal Protected Area by the IUCN because of the presence of the Australian snubfin dolphin and the Australian humpback dolphin (which only exist in limited waters, including ours).[[2]](#footnote-2) We also have 41 species of sharks and rays, 28 of which are on the IUCN’s red list. Of the 28 species on the red list, 4 are critically endangered, 6 are endangered, 6 are near threatened and 12 are vulnerable. The Kikori Delta also has one of the last healthy populations of sawfish in the world.

The extinction of the sealife is due to both direct and indirect impacts of climate change. In order for us to raise money to fund the relocation of our village we have resorted to fishing measures that place our extensive sealife at risk- the Kikori River has the second highest freshwater fish diversity in PNG. We are fishing with large nets to catch and sell the “scaly jewfish” for the swimbladder fish market. The fish are purchased from us, at a price of USD14,000 per kg, for sale on the Chinese market. The swimbladder fish market is currently unregulated in PNG.

We use fishing nets to catch fish in the sea and near the mouth of the river. This means we not only have unintended catch but we stop sealife from moving between the river and the sea, an essential movement for many sea creatures to find food and reproduce. This fishing method threatens the survival of many sea creatures including our fabled dolphins who we have been told will be extinct in the next two years if we do not change our fishing practices. This is the awful dilemma we find ourselves in, where we are having to trade in our environment and culture to meet our basic needs for shelter.

**Culture**

Our customary stories are entwined with our environment. We believe that the wind and waves are controlled by sorcerers who have the power to move the land, sea and water with rhythm and purpose. It has now become difficult to reconcile these beliefs with the unpredictability of the weather and its harmful effects on our lands and waters. It has also raised tensions in the village with some of our older population who are believed to have those powers of sorcery.

We believe that the Australian snubfin dolphin are our ancestors who were once in human form and walked our lands. We, therefore, hold them in reverence and do not intentionally hunt them. As climate change has forced us to fish unsustainably for income, we have now placed our dolphins at risk of endangerment and this would have a lasting impact on our beliefs and the laws and lore that we pass onto our next generation.

We have 31 different types of mangroves that naturally occur in our village. The different mangroves have different qualities that traditionally lent themselves to be used in different parts of the houses we built. However, with the onset of climate change impacts upon our homes, we have been forced to change our traditional way of making homes and instead rely on only one type of mangrove, the mangrove cedar, which is a hardwood that can withstand climate change induced pressures to a higher degree.

The mangrove cedar does not exist in abundance in swamp areas and is scattered in small patches and this is why we have traditionally used it sparingly. Our increased use of the mangrove cedar has placed significant pressure on the mangrove cedar population. Rising sea levels have also affected the rate of growth of the mangrove cedar as seeds are only able to germinate in shallow brackish waters.

The most central culturally significant infrastructure in our village is our men’s long house or *dubu daima.* Our village was traditionally organised around the long house which is where all the discussion and decision-making concerning our community takes place as well as cultural practices and rituals. We are known for having the biggest long houses in the world and significant archaeological studies on it contributed to the Kikori Basin’s tentative listing as a World Heritage Area.

The building of a *dubu daima* is a ritual that takes time, selected materials and precision. We plan to build one at our relocated site, however, the method and materials we use will change in order to build a climate resilient structure that serves more as a resource centre to keep our cultural information safe. With the climate migration that is occurring around us, we fear it is inevitable that our people will also begin permanent migration and that the building of the *dubu daima* will have little effect on preserving our traditional social and political structure and knowledges and rituals.

**RECCOMENDATIONS**

Given the above, we make the following recommendations to the Special Rapporteur:

1. We invite the Special Rapporteur to visit our village and use it as a case study of the loss and damage faced by the most vulnerable people who so centrally rely on a safe climate for the maintenance of our precious culture and our livelihoods.
2. We request financial and technical assistance from the PNG Government as well as the Governments of the countries who are the biggest contributors to climate change to assist with our village relocation and food and water insecurity. We should not have to choose between our culture and livelihood when we have not contributed at all to the problem of climate change.
3. The Government of PNG, in partnership with regional and international inter-governmental bodies, fund and focus on increasing education and knowledge dissemination of climate change throughout all levels of the PNG Government and throughout communities most vulnerable to climate change impacts.
4. Increased funding, sourced from major climate change contributing states and businesses, is channelled towards measures to protect and safeguard traditional knowledges and customs of our people and others at risk of losing their culture and identity due to climate change.
5. The PNG National Fisheries Authority regulate the fish swimbladder/maw market and there be greater strategic cooperation among the Pacific States and the region to ensure regulated and sustainable fishing practices. Further, that point of sale countries, such as China, require proof of sustainable catch.

1. https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5060/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.marinemammalhabitat.org/portfolio-item/kikori-delta/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)