



PRESS RELEASE

Franciscan Brothers and Sisters of the Church take a stand against environmental destruction in the Solomon Islands

Brothers of the [Society of Saint Francis \(SSF\)](#) and [Sisters of the Church \(CSC\)](#) will use 2023 to take a stand against rampant industrial logging in the Solomon Islands. This unsustainable practice has affected all aspects of life for communities living near by the logging sites. This year, the two religious orders will embark on a series of new mission projects to strengthen the awareness and resiliency of local communities.

Working closely with [Catholic Dominican sisters and friars](#), they will also take the issue of logging to the international community and raise it at the United Nations. In an upcoming report, they will examine whether promises made by the Solomon Islands government to address the negative impacts of logging have been kept.

This work builds on the deep roots of the SSF, the CSC, and the Dominican Order in the Solomon Islands. It is further informed by a series of focus-group discussions in six villages across Guadalcanal Island that this ecumenical alliance conducted in October 2022. These in-depth conversations laid bare the real and daily impacts of logging, which too often remain hidden.

The real costs of logging

Without exception, the communities, who traditionally rely on the forest and sea and their resources, reported severe disruptions caused by logging: streams have been polluted or blocked, deforestation is causing a rise in temperatures which in turn affects agriculture, the barges used to collect logs have damaged coral reefs and fishing grounds, and invasive species are threatening their crops.

“Before, if you planted food, you would enjoy it growing: the wild pigs would not come down from the forest and eat it. The fish in the river, before you could dive and take them: now you can’t take anything from the rivers. Even the [vines] that we use to tie up our leaf houses: there are none in the bush because the machines destroyed them,” said one village elder and brother of the Third Order of the Society of Saint Francis. *“So that’s the difference before and now – before we enjoyed everything in the bush. Now, no.”*

The destruction of livelihoods is made worse by the appearance of invasive species – the Giant African Snail and Rhinoceros Beetle – that were likely introduced into the island’s ecosystem by heavy logging equipment and now devastate local agriculture and cash crops alike.

But the impacts run deeper: the influx of foreign workers has fuelled domestic trafficking, as loggers unofficially marry girls and young women in exchange for financial support or gifts to their families. Oftentimes, these women and their children are abandoned when the loggers return home.

“Normally, girls in this country should not get married before they turn 18. However, because girls can get legally married at 15 there is no protection if the family needs the money,” says Sister of the Church Veronica Vasethe, whose community provides shelter to women who have been abandoned. *“The government does not protect our girls.”*

Meanwhile, logging has also caused a breakdown of societal structures. Promises of development made by the logging companies, such as improving infrastructure or the establishment of schools and clinics, have mostly not been kept. This in turn has led to a loss of trust in traditional leaders, who are blamed for these broken promises.

To ensure that people could freely discuss how they were affected, the discussions took place in different groups, including traditional leaders, women, and youth. Afterwards, the delegation also met with civil society representatives, lawyers, journalists, diplomats, and UN representatives. These conversations helped to further identify the legal and practical barriers to either prevent further logging or compel the logging companies to make good on the promises given to communities.

From the grassroots to the United Nations

Franciscan brothers have taken their fight against this destruction to the international community with the support of [Franciscans International](#), a non-governmental organization representing the global Anglican and Catholic Franciscan family at the United Nations. They first raised the issue of logging during the [2020 Universal Periodic Review of the Solomon Islands](#). Under this mechanism, the human rights records of all UN member states are examined on a rotating basis.

At the end of this process, the government made several promises related to logging to improve the situation of local communities. The focus-groups conducted by the Society of Saint Francis and Sisters of the Church make it clear that these benchmarks have not been met. Franciscans International will use the evidence gathered to continue to raise the damage caused by logging in the Solomon Islands with the United Nations.

The Sisters of the Church have now become active partners in this coalition and together with the Franciscan brothers are discerning what action to take next at the local level. One thing we heard in the focus group discussions was that people didn't have accurate knowledge about the effects of logging. If people living in villages knew what logging would bring, then they mightn't have assented to it. One of the strengths of the religious orders in the Anglican Church of Melanesia is that they have very active mission programmes in each diocese. Each year they go out, sometimes for months at a time, walking from village to village, conducting mission programmes as they go. They already use drama, and so the

Sisters of the Church and the Franciscan brothers are considering using that means to communicate and make vivid the potential effects of logging.

Another area they could include in their mission programmes is education in human rights. And one practical thing could be taking seedlings of suitable trees, to be sown in the villages they visit. The training in the October workshop has given them skills and confidence in interviewing and conducting focus groups which will continue to be useful in supplying data for monitoring future changes.

Logging is only one of the concerns the religious communities are taking on as part of their environmental mission.

The Anglican Church of Melanesia has a programme of developing local environmental observatories. This initiative was developed with the assistance of the Melanesian Mission UK at a pilot stage and is now being expanded throughout the whole church. The Franciscan brothers will be hosting and operating the environment observatory to be set up at their friary on Temotu. These observatories record long-term data on local climate and coastal changes. This data will be freely accessible to all. The very presence of these observatories has an additional local effect of generating interest in climate and the changes which can be observed.

As one of the follow up activities of the human rights workshop in Solomon Islands, Franciscans International made a submission to the newly established UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and climate change, using the information from Anglican Community of Melanesia (ACOM). Freda Fataka and Marie Schlenker raised the issue of how climate change has triggered the displacement of people from Ontong Java Islands to Honiara, as well as the submerging of Walande artificial island in south Malaita and Fanalei Island by rising sea levels.

Franciscans and Sisters of the Church in the Solomon Islands

A key factor in these efforts are the deep roots of both the Franciscans and the Sisters of the Church in the Solomon Islands, stretching back five decades. The brothers and sisters themselves are local and some are part of the affected communities, providing a foundation of trust and a commitment to a long-term engagement.

“Our mission has been defined in terms of people going into schools and parishes, prisons, visiting people in villages, helping them, praying with them, and running mission programs,” says Brother Christopher John, Minister General of the Society of Saint Francis. *“I suggested to the brothers, as they celebrated their 50th anniversary in the Solomon Islands, that we needed to expand our idea of mission to take in all of creation – that our care for creation is also part of our mission work.”*

These efforts dovetail with the larger commitment of the Anglican Church to the environment. This commitment stems from the 5th of the *Five Marks of Mission* of the Anglican Communion, “To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.” Care for creation is not

an optional extra, but an integral part of our vocation as Christians. This was given concrete shape at the 2022 Lambeth Conference when the Communion Forest initiative was launched.

This initiative is simple in concept, but global in outreach. “The Communion Forest is a global initiative comprising local activities of forest protection, tree growing, and eco-system restoration undertaken by provinces, dioceses and individual churches across the Anglican Communion to safeguard creation.”

* * *

For more information, interviews, and additional photos, please contact:

Christopher John SSF

Minister General, Society of Saint Francis
mingenssf@firstorderssf.org

Veronica Vesathe CSC

Provincial, Sisters of the Church
veronica@sistersofthechurch.org

Budi Tjahjono

Asia-Pacific Coordinator, Franciscans International
b.tjahjono@franciscansinternational.org

Thomas Kleinveld

Communications Officer, Franciscans International
communications@franciscansinternational.org

A selection of photos is available at <https://bit.ly/3ViROug>

- Solomon_Islands_1, Solomon_Islands_2, and Solomon_Islands_3: Brothers of the Society of Saint Francis and Sisters of the Church conducting focus group discussions in the Solomon Islands.
- Solomon_Islands_4, Solomon_Islands_5: The delegation visits a logging pond on Guadalcanal Island.

Photo credit should be made to “Franciscans International / Society of St. Francis