



PNG drought response: reporting from Goroka

By Paul Kelly

Papua New Guinea has been suffering one of its worst droughts on record and for many remote communities the next few months will be critical.

I've just returned from Goroka where [CARE](#) have been preparing teams to provide drought assistance to six districts across three provinces of the PNG Highlands - Eastern Highlands, Chimbu and Morobe.

Communities in these areas live a subsistence lifestyle. Food insecurity is an ever-

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present reality. Provision of government services is virtually non-existent. Health and education indicators are miserable.

People here are used to hardship, but this has not been a usual year. By September 2015 water sources had dried up and crops and home gardens had been destroyed or failed. Families are currently surviving on one meal a day, and, even then, many mothers will miss meals so their children can eat.

With funding from the Australian Government's [Humanitarian Partnership Agreement](#), CARE will provide water and sanitation kits (including water containers to carry and store water, purification tablets and soap), along with hygiene and nutrition promotion, as well as seeds and training to help communities re-establish gardens.

The irony is that it rained every day I was in Goroka, and there has been welcome rain across much of the Highlands of PNG since December. So my first question for our teams was, "Does that mean the urgency is over?"

The rain may change the focus of people's needs but the response that we are providing is as important as ever.

While water sources such as rivers and creeks are now filling, the water quality is poor due to the high levels of sediment washed from exposed soil and other contaminants. People still need to collect and store water, and purification tablets will help people avoid diarrhoea and waterborne diseases such as typhoid. This is complemented by health and hygiene promotion. It will take four to six months for people to re-establish crops that they can use to feed themselves.

We are seeking to align and coordinate our work with a PNG Government lead, however the lack of presence or effectiveness of government in remote areas of PNG is impacting our planning. Just down the road from the CARE office in Goroka, the headquarters of Eastern Highlands Province has been effectively closed for two weeks. It has been closed intermittently for the previous year as

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two people (and their supporters) contest their claims to be the legitimate provincial administrator. The debate has shut down the government offices, including the provincial disaster management office. Many staff haven't been at work since the beginning of the year and it doesn't look like the matter will be resolved anytime soon. At the national level, Prime Minister Peter O'Neill has [stated](#) his intention for the PNG Government to lead the response to the drought and to take responsibility to provide food primarily through the District Services Improvement Program (DSIP) funds that MPs then essentially control. Because of this commitment, the Australian Government funding does not include support for food. Unfortunately, at the moment the effectiveness of the PNG Government's assistance is unclear and many communities have not received any food assistance.

When CARE was undertaking assessments of the impact of the drought, communities told us they expected to run out of food by the end of 2015. When we start to distribute assistance this month, people will welcome our support for water and seeds, but some will ask why we aren't providing food too. We wish we could. People are starving. You can understand that they might feel abandoned and desperate.

Our assistance program provides the opportunity for our teams - accompanied where we can by local government authorities - to continue to speak with communities on how the drought has affected them. While we will be bringing in relief supplies, we will also be collecting updated qualitative information on, for example, food availability and health impacts. Sharing this information and coordinating with the PNG and Australian governments and other partners is an important part of ensuring that we all do everything in our power to stop people starving to death.

PNG can be volatile and our teams feel anxious about the challenges that they will face over the coming months. Our teams know much of the Highlands country well. They have built relationships with communities over many years and they

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understand people's needs and challenges, but provision of large scale relief supplies has not been done since the El Niño event of 1997. It's unusual for our teams and for the communities. Security and safety, managing community expectations, and maintaining relationships are some of the issues that our team discuss and prepare for.

My visit has reinforced for me how critical the next few months will be for many Highland communities and how challenging our relief distribution program will be for the CARE teams. It has also confirmed how critical and potentially lifesaving the response is.

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