

PNG villagers call for help

OPERATOR:

Villagers, Sepik River region, PNG

REPRESENTATIVE:

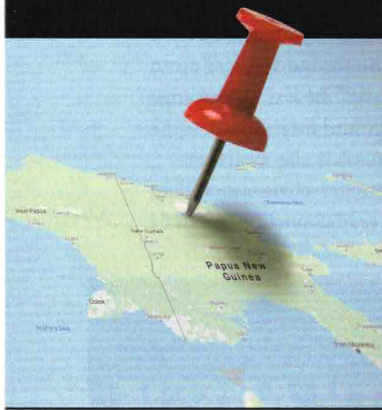
Emmanuel 'Manu' Peni,
Coordinator, Project Sepik

LOCATION:

Sepik River region, northern PNG

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Jetty at Korogu village, Sepik River (Photo courtesy E. Peni)

Every day is a battle for villagers in the Sepik region of northern Papua New Guinea (PNG). Poor-quality tools and power equipment, inadequate communications, and the potential environmental hazards of a proposed large-scale mining project, are just some of the threats undermining stability in the area. John Power reports.

For most Australians and New Zealanders, the purchase of a new chainsaw usually involves a few price comparisons, and perhaps a quick visit to a local equipment dealership.

By contrast, if Emmanuel ('Manu') Peni – a villager from the outskirts of Wewak in the Sepik region of PNG, and a passionate advocate for his community as coordinator of 'Project Sepik' – were to make such a purchase, it would require several days' travel, payment of extortionist prices and possibly bribes for substandard equipment, followed by months of waiting for a delivery to arrive.

In this article, we will focus on two important, interrelated challenges facing Manu and his

community: the practical burden of obtaining satisfactory tools and equipment for himself and his neighbours, and the potential perils confronting him and 400,000 fellow Sepik villagers' rural livelihoods if a massive Chinese-owned mining enterprise proceeds as planned.

Australasians can assist in relation to both these challenges by:

- (a) contributing to this magazine's campaign to donate equipment to Manu and his community (See 'Donate Equipment Now' on the following page), and
- (b) supporting political efforts to safeguard the Sepik region from inappropriate mining activities.



TOOL TRAUMA

Let us start with the basic trauma of sourcing tools and power equipment. Villagers in the Sepik region adhere to traditional village practices, with up to 100 communities lining Sepik River and its tributary, Frieda River. Monthly earnings may be as little as 760 kina (less than AUD\$400). Most villagers are involved in subsistence farming activities operated as family businesses. Major crops are cocoa, vanilla bean, and betel nuts, though a minority of villagers mine alluvial gold or manage copra from coconut or mustard seed plantations.

Manu has experienced first-hand the hardships of obtaining high-quality equipment to help villagers maximise returns on their crops and minimise manual labour. Items like water pumps, generators, chainsaws and grinders are in great demand.

“In 2016, together with the Institute of National Affairs, we did a research survey for the Asian Development Bank (ADB),” Manu said.

“It was a consumer protection survey and we found that PNG is swamped with very low-grade equipment and materials; really the poorest-quality products coming out of China, Bangladesh, corners of Vietnam, and maybe some parts of India. Things just don’t last.”

In most cases, a Sepik villager seeking equipment has to travel by river to a large town like Wewak, or even consider journeying west across the border to Jayapura, Indonesia.

“For example, people in my village along the river take about nine hours to get to town (Wewak), and then another three days to get to Vanimo, and then they go through customs [at the Indonesian border] and pay bribes to go to Jayapura to get their power equipment,” Manu explained.

“The equipment is of very poor quality in Jayapura. People get home and within three or four weeks everything falls apart.”

Manu said it is possible to buy some tools and powered devices in Wewak; however most villagers opt to travel further afield in the hope of securing better deals.

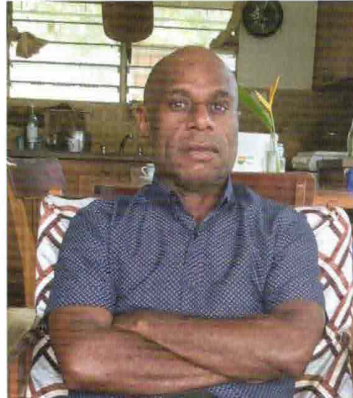
“I have bought a chainsaw; I couldn’t buy one in Wewak, so I bought it for 7,000 kina (more than AUD\$3,000) in Port Moresby. It took more than two months to ship it, and cost an extra AUD\$400 for shipping!”

“I bought the chainsaw to help the young people in my village to harvest their timber and make little carvings, and my next plan – for which I’ve already budgeted some money – is to buy a big grinder so they can sharpen their axes and bush knives. So, I bought the chainsaw for the whole of my village – there’s 2,000 people in my village alone who speak my language.”

The importance of obtaining basic equipment, Manu said, struck him recently while he was offering financial literacy training to villagers.

When shown how to use a mobile phone to access the Internet, “One of the very first things they said was, ‘I want to buy a chainsaw to cut all the timbers I have.’”

An online order for a piece of equipment from Australia, he added, would cost less than travelling to Jayapura for an inferior product. According to Manu, the prohibitive costs and poor local availability



Emmanuel Peni, Coordinator, Project Sepik.

of high-quality power equipment have far-reaching impacts on his people and their ongoing self-determination.

NEED FOR QUALITY EQUIPMENT

The obvious question is: would better-quality power equipment, ideally donated by supporters of this magazine, help Manu’s community achieve greater control over their local commercial activities?


“Oh my goodness, you don’t know what that would mean – I’m almost in tears at the thought of it,” Manu said.

“It would be really useful. We believe that agriculture, tourism, sustainable development, all of those things are the way forward, and this [better equipment] could only add to it. You would be doing more than just marketing tools or supporting people, it goes down to the philosophically deeper level of connecting to the land and developing, growing, and exploiting and managing our resources in sustainable ways.”

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE


Of course, improved tools and equipment are meaningless without stable and reliable civic infrastructures to safeguard village life and culture.











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Unfortunately, Manu said, a proposed mine – known as the Frieda River Project, comprising the largest copper and gold mine ever created in PNG, a hydroelectric plant, as well as associated power grid – threatens to contaminate or destroy immediate and downstream river systems, and ruin the traditional ways of life of 400,000 people. Specifically, tailings containing toxic chemicals, impossible to control and treat effectively in an isolated, rugged and seismically active region like the Sepik, could affect fish stocks and human health well beyond the physical confines of the project; similarly, altered river flows could harm villages and associated farmlands.

The Frieda River Project is an initiative of PanAust, an Australian-registered company that is 100 per cent owned by the Chinese Government.

Described by PanAust as ‘a new nation-building pathway’, Manu and his fellow villagers query which nation – PNG or China – is actually doing the ‘nation-building’.

“You know the Belt and Road initiative? Well, we are part of it, and for China we are the gateway to the Pacific,” Manu said, adding that the mine’s commercial value is clearly secondary to its strategic and geographical values.

“The PNG government has to play by the rules because it is in debt to China by more than several billion dollars,” he said.

It is worth emphasising the sheer size of the project, which would be larger than all the mines combined that have ever operated in PNG.

In order for the project to proceed, Manu said, it would have to satisfy a two-part approval process, involving (1) an environmental permit issued by the PNG Conservation Environment Protection Agency (CEPA), followed by a mining license issued by PNG’s Minerals Resource Authority. At the time of going to press the Frieda River Project has just finished receiving submissions for the environmental permit.

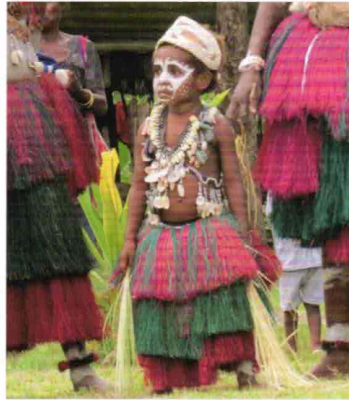
Manu has received four death threats in relation to his advocacy work against the Frieda River Project, and his own government is seeking to prosecute him for allegedly inciting violence via social media. Nevertheless, he continues to publicise villagers’ objections to the project, citing a lack of transparency about the project’s local and downstream physical impacts, negligible consultation processes with villagers, as well as inadequate consideration of villagers’ rights. So far he has collected more than 6,000 signatures for a petition against the project.

Despite the incompleteness of the approval process, “they have already started bulldozing, cutting trees, clearing roads: all those things without any permit or agreement,” Manu said.

STRONG INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

Manu’s advocacy work with Project Sepik enjoys the support of human rights organisations and corporate watchdogs around the world, including the Australian-based not-for-profit Jubilee Australia Research Centre (JARC).

Executive Director of JARC, and Visiting Fellow, University of NSW School of Social Sciences, Dr Luke Fletcher, said the Frieda River Project, scheduled to be operational by 2022, was one of half a dozen



A young girl in traditional dress.

major practices or proposals on JARC’s radar, “and over the last six months the Frieda River Project has been our primary focus.”

Dr Fletcher said he and JARC colleagues had concerns about the politicisation of the project and its approval process, and the fact that it clearly did not enjoy the consent of local villagers.

He said that while he and colleagues respected the authority of the relevant PNG licensing agencies, he hoped they would take careful account of the potential harmful environmental impacts of the project, and its likely deleterious effects on hundreds of thousands of people in nearby and faraway locations.

Dr Fletcher also questioned the promised financial returns of the venture, noting that other mining projects in PNG had not lived up to expectations in terms of social and civic returns on investment.

ONGOING FIGHT

Manu said he would continue to fight for his community, whether the challenge involved a day-to-day task like sourcing a power tool, or a larger battle like preserving traditional villagers’ culture and livelihoods.

Such seemingly different missions, as stated above, are interrelated to the extent that the villagers’ capacity to fight for their rights are aligned to the success of their businesses... which is why donations of power equipment are so vital.

DONATE EQUIPMENT NOW

Villagers in the Sepik region of PNG are in desperate need of decent-quality outdoor power equipment, including water pumps, generators, chainsaws, and grinders.

For many villagers, the purchase of a simple piece of equipment can involve several days’ travel – all for expensive, substandard gear.

Poor equipment hampers commercial progress, which in turn leaves villagers vulnerable to exploitation.

Power Equipment Australasia invites readers, retailers and manufacturers to help equip Sepik villagers with outdoor power equipment so they can make the most of their agricultural businesses.

NB: We urge all donors to notify the editor Elaine Sharman (Elaine.Sharman@glenv.com.au) of their donation so a ledger of received goods can be created. We will publish the names of donors in an upcoming issue of the magazine.

Please send equipment directly to:

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UPNG Post Office,
Waigani,
Papua New Guinea.