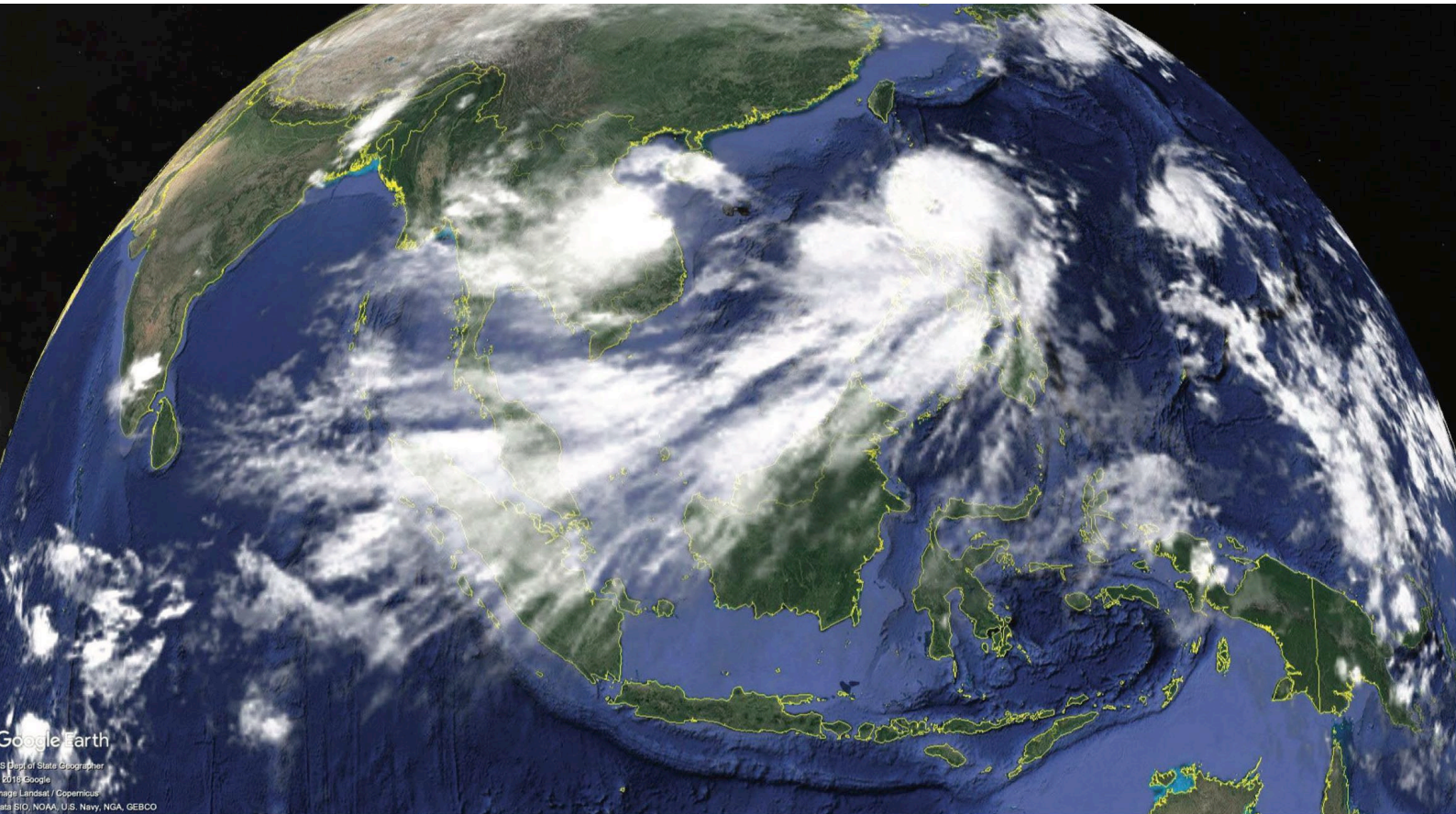




RIVER ABOVE ASIA OCEANIA ECCLESIAL NETWORK

For Peoples, Oceans and Forests



The Pacific Ocean, covering one-third of the planet's surface, is the largest climate determinant on Earth. Oceania and Asia share a common image in the '**River Above**' – the Pacific Ocean is the current of life and the river of Asia feeding all rivers, seasons and lives. The surface area and ocean currents absorb energy and generate thermals and other air flows, forming the weather patterns and events while sustaining their movement westward with the jet stream. This close relationship of water and land forms the weather and longer-term climate pattern as one large biome of interaction sustaining the biodiversity and peoples of the territory. This weather movement continues to flow west, picking up with the Indian Ocean and feeding the monsoon rains going north while moving on to affect Africa and the rest of the globe. This flow is life-giving and life-taking, especially as the climate is changing, biodiversity is being lost, resources are being exhausted and people are made more vulnerable. The welfare of the lands and peoples is inextricably linked to the welfare of the seas. The traditional and Indigenous Peoples of these islands and countries are daily connected with biodiversity and are very sensitive to changes and so these communities hold much of the knowledge needed for adaptation while also call for greater climate action from the consumption centers of the world.

ECCLESIAL NETWORKING AND SYNODALITY

Pope Francis emphasizes the value of Synodality as key for the Church in the Future. In the document Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, the value of inclusion of ecumenical movements was highlighted, stating, “it is important to acknowledge with joy that, in our time, ecumenical dialogue has come to recognize Synodality as something that reveals the nature of the Church, something essential to its unity in the variety of its manifestations.” (116) Synodality literally means “walking together”, referring to “involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church” (SLMC 7).



In March 2019, an Oceania Asia Working Group came together during the Integral Ecology International Conference held as a Synodal Response from the Amazon Region and Other Biomes / Essential Territories for the Care of Our Common Home. The group shared experiences, how they feel about what is happening in the region, and what are important to them. The group decided to launch the ecclesial network for Oceania and Asia. (Not in the photo are Cardinal Gracias and Cardinal Ribat)

“You have to enter in a dialogue knowing who you are. You cannot enter into dialogue by pretending to be somebody else. You have to be secure in your identity. The clarity in identity and mission enables a Christian to listen well, listen with appreciation, with discernment toward the other. Start where we are united, what we hold in common, then from there calmly talk about divergence. Diversity can be a richness of wealth. Appreciate where we differ, be honest in expressing where we diverge, to find points of convergence.” – Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, Archbishop of Manila (2011–2020), Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, and President, Caritas Internationalis

OCEANIA, ASIA AND THE “RIVER ABOVE”

The River Above Us. The winds and the water of the Pacific move always west to Asia, affecting all seasons and all lives. Every farmer and fisher work according to the sky. This is how oceans, forests and peoples are intricately linked.

Oceans, Forests and Cultures. The ocean formed the life and culture of the islands where every current and change, every seascape and sky tell of seasons and the life present while sustaining the people. Forests, too, are vital to the well-being of rural populations, particularly indigenous communities, smallholders, those living near forests, and those who rely on trees outside forests for daily living. In Oceania, forests comprise 70% of the limited land area of small island states. Over 450 million Asians live in or around tropical forests and savannahs, and 84 million of these people live in extreme poverty.

An estimated 210 to 260 million people living in Oceania and Asia identify as indigenous, tribal or local people of the seas and land. Indigenous cultures typically aspire to remain distinct culturally, institutionally and geographically. They usually live within or maintain an attachment to geographically distinct ancestral territories in some cases there are the new population as in the ocean states while the Indigenous Peoples are a minority. Their traditional knowledge is locally

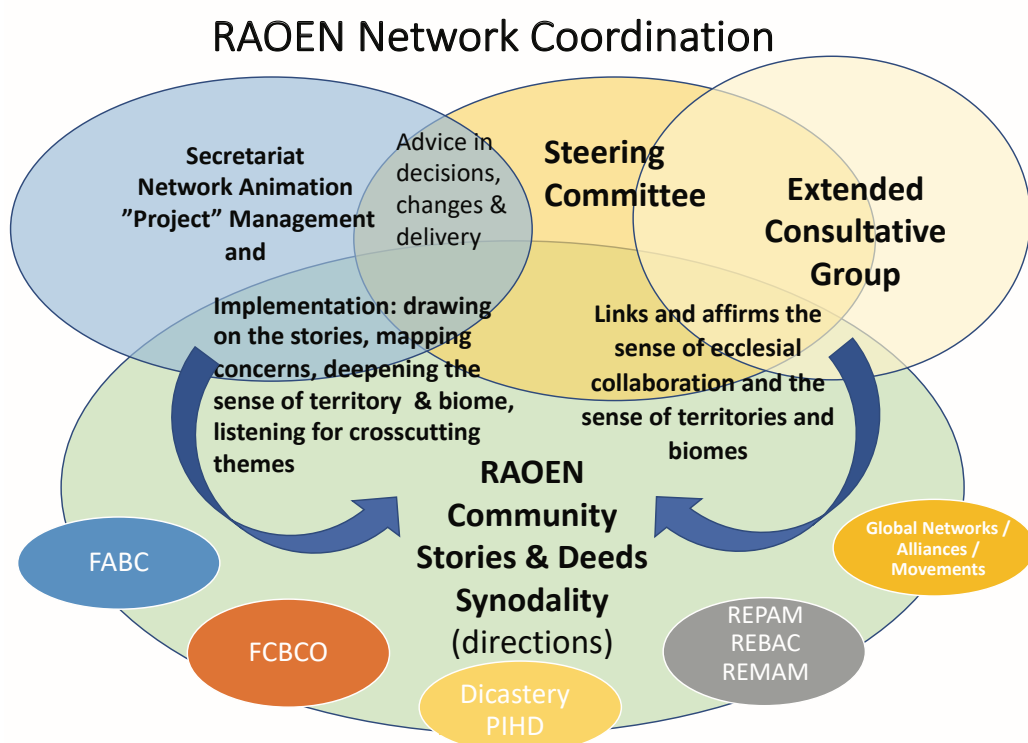
adapted and deeply connected with nature. Indigenous livelihoods respect and protect natural resources. As they represent a small portion of the region's population, many are struggling to sustain their socio-cultural integrity.

Expansive economic threats and climate change. The region faces threats from expansive economic interests that convert our forests to chemical agriculture, mining and logging areas; contaminate our soil and water with plastics and other solid non-biodegradable waste, sediments, agro-toxins, oil spills, and mine tailings and deep-sea mining; and displace our coastal and rural peoples to rapidly expanding cities and overseas migration. Ongoing sea level rise is displacing coastal peoples of the large ocean states from their homes. Apart from these 'slow-onset disaster' that is already happening, people in the region are highly exposed and vulnerable to more intense storms, droughts, floods and landslide hazards

SERVING THE DIALOGUE AND BROADER COLLABORATION INITIATIVES OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL VOICES

RAOEN seeks to serve the dialogue of integral living so that broader collaboration is possible and breadth and integrity of the ecology and territory are maintained. The Federation of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Oceania (FCBCO) accompanies 16 small island states in Oceania, as well as Papua New Guinea, Australia and New Zealand. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) is on the ground in six countries spanning the Mekong River Basin, five countries in the Himalayas including the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, four countries covering the Sundaland, and the island nations of Japan, Korea and the Philippines (Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines).

Moving forward, RAOEN needs to understand the value of connecting with other people of faith in uplifting the calls for change from local communities. RAOEN in collaboration with FABC, FCBCO, Global Alliance of Ecclesial Network, Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, and Caritas aim to create a space for synodality through this dialogue between local voices and Church and ecumenical leaders. The hope is to strengthen collaborations and commitments amongst these groups grounded on the common desire to care for the oceans, forests, and people.



Ecclesial Networks Alliance for Integral Ecology

There is an urgent need to develop a creative dialogical space in an adequate environment in order to respond to the appeals made in *Laudato Si'*, and to enact the structural transformations it puts forward. The Amazon Synod, and the experience of REPAM (Pan-Amazon Ecclesial Network), together with the evolving processes in other territories and biomes including the Congo Basin (REBAC), the Oceania and Asia Region (RAOEN – River Above Asia Oceania Ecclesial Network), Mesoamerica (REMAM), the Gran Chaco and the Guaraní Aquifer territory, as well as those in Europe (ELSIA) and North-America Canada and the USA, with the support of the *Laudato Si'* Research Institute and the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, offer an opportunity to join hopes and strengths to accompany some of the key territorial processes which serve the reforms led by Pope Francis to respond to the cries of the world's poor and of our common home.

To respond to this mission, a platform called the Ecclesial Networks Alliance for Integral Ecology has been created, which seeks to integrate the different territorial ecclesial networks to generate common reflections and actions, and to strengthen the particular work of each of the networks that comprise it.



The Gran Chaco and the Guaraní Aquifer Territory

REFLECTIONS ON OCEANS, FORESTS, PEOPLE AND CLIMATE

DIALOGUE

Forests, Water and People. How do we honor the knowledge and wisdom of local communities and Indigenous Peoples in caring for Creation? Highlighting the voices of the local people and helping them share their stories of vulnerability as well as their integral connectivity with their environment and lifestyle of simplicity can be humbling and enriching for the broader world and a context for seeking real change in caring for our common home.

Interfaith dialogue is a way to connect with diverse peoples in the region taking part in the common mission of caring for Creation and neighbor. Catholics may only be 3% of the region's population, yet being part of the local culture gives us an opportunity for listening and learning to those living on the ocean and lands, and for accompanying and responding to the most in need. Young people can take this forward with support from the Church and the growing commitment to *Laudato Si'* Goals. How do we accompany the youth towards a leadership grounded on their intrinsic integrity and vision for a sustainable future?

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DISCERNMENT

Voices of conscience. As Church, we are challenged to listen from the ground up and build bridges with all faiths to respond to the concerns of indigenous and vulnerable communities across the region in the context of growing disasters, the need to build back better, reduce all forms of vulnerability and sustain the rich biodiversity of these oceans and lands.



“Churches work at the community level. They know where are the people and where they are vulnerable and what can be done. Asia is very religious. If we work through different religious leaders, we can really build up. This is why FABC and FCBCO are important and can give a voice to what is happening on the ground. How do we get communities to say what they need and respond accordingly? Where institutionally does the church want to connect, accompany, support? How can Bishops bring this voice so that it can become the voice of the Church?” – Pedro Walpole SJ, Global Coordinator, Ecojesuit and Network Catalyst of RAOEN

DEEDS

Map existing initiatives. To prepare the ecclesial network to respond to the challenges of this decade of greater action, RAOEN seeks to map the existing initiatives of indigenous and ecology networks that exist or have existed in the region. The mechanism or structure of episcopal conferences – FABC and FCBCO – can be tapped to map what is happening in each country. This map can be the basis of setting up a sharing of experiences, and for creating space to come together in a meaningful and open dialogue on the challenges and opportunities in caring for our common home.

Empower local communities. Local communities are a major force for change. Rural communities in particular are integrally connected with the land and maintain a tradition through cultures. The community is the basic social unit of religion and the basis for action. How can the Church be a source of greater accompaniment to marginalized people so the voices can be heard globally at this critical time?

Network experiences. How are we accompanying communities and peoples in sustaining their forests and waters? How are we reducing disaster risks? What lessons have we learned that we can share? How can we deepen faith and commitment in working with others?

“We represent universality, unity in diversity, a confluence of rivers, processes, lives. We need a huge common embrace, of God, one another, and mother earth. It truly takes a village to put this together.” – Cardinal Pedro Barreto Jimeno, Archbishop of Huancayo, Vice President of REPAM

DREAMS OF A STABLE CLIMATE AND A BALANCED OIKOS

Human Right to a Stable Climate and a balanced Oikos. Recent and growing changes in the ocean due to climate change are driving the extreme weather events and sea level rise, increasing the vulnerability of the people and lands. How do we understand the challenges to climate justice given the diverse context of Asia Pacific’s mega-biome? How can we create a unified voice and re-echo this to those who seek greater climate action?

Transform the business world. Our dream of a stable climate and sustainable world is possible only if the oikos of economics and ecology are balanced as one household. Our global economic system has to promote and learn to thrive within the ecology of our planet. We can only do this together if we have a depolarized techno-society where trust and the common good share in the one fragile reality.

VOICES FROM THE MARGINS



Fiji

"The ocean is probably the most important part of the planet that we need to care for. This is one area that we must put a lot of investment in: caring for the ocean." – **Archbishop Peter Loy Chong, President of the Federation of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Oceania (FCBCO)**



Papua New Guinea

"Free, prior, informed consent (FPIC) in Papua New Guinea is a novel concept. Many are unaware of what FPIC is or yet, it is not discussed, so there will be numerous human rights issues in many [mining] development areas." – **Samantha Kuman, Advocacy Officer, The Centre for Environmental Law and Community Rights**



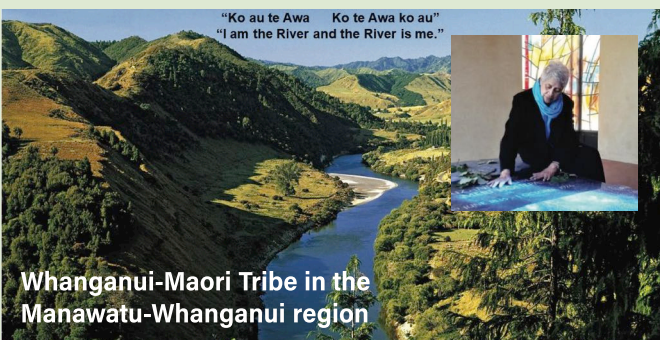
Northern Thailand

"Through the practice of "forest ordination," trees are deemed as sacred. People are thus prohibited from cutting and destroying ordained trees. Engaging in networking through forest ordination activities enables people from different faiths and cultural backgrounds to share their stories and experiences, thereby promoting the exchange of best practices in forest protection." – **Somnuek Sriphornphunsawat, Emmaus Center, Chiang Mai**



Bangladesh Adivasi of the Māghupur Forest, Garo Hills

"In our mother language, we don't have the word for [land] registration or land grabbing. We cannot grab the land because we belong to the land; the land does not belong to us. This is our world view." – **Sanjeeb Drong, General Secretary of the Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples' Forum**



Whanganui-Maori Tribe in the Manawatu-Whanganui region

"Our waters were contaminated with toxins and pollutants as a result of industries which continue unabated today. And the quality of the water was degraded, which led to the destruction of our traditional fishing and the knowledge that comes from the river." – **Sister Makareta Tawaroa, Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart**



Pantaron Mountain Range, Mindanao Philippines

"The health of our soil, water, and the security of our food are at stake, as the increasing high-yield variety corn farming in the uplands has introduced glyphosate and other herbicides in our food systems and land, leading to health and ecological concerns. This is a concern that needs to be emphasized more as it also adversely impacts biodiversity, and our way of life." – **Jason Menaling, Pulangiyēn forester at the Forest, Farm, and Leadership in the Margins (FFLM-APC)**



Sawa Erma, Asmat Regency,
West Papua

"Local authorities are not capable in handling the COVID crisis. They have limited medical devices and they do not have contingency plans when someone gets infected. They also do not provide masks. Measures implemented by local authorities increased the risks [of transmission] such as distributing cash aid and staple food to crowds without the proper health protocols." – *Yeni Kristanti, Sawa Erma Parish*



Province of Ba, Fiji

"[Black sand] mining has caused aggravation in our marine life in the shoreline areas, and many sea and mangrove species have already disappeared. The availability of livelihood in marine life by the mangrove and shoreline areas to fend for our families are no longer plentiful, because our river is being disturbed. Women above all suffer the consequences as they are largely dependent on fishing, crabbing and collecting seashells as their livelihood." – *Mariana Tevurega, Marist sister in Fiji*

How RAOEN is proceeding: Enabling the greater connectivity with local community and faith experiences

On the ground there is a need to connect with local dioceses on synodality and local community experiences. We need to listen to how local communities can be engaged, and what dialogues and engagements are possible to enable greater connectivity with community experiences that can be shared with the bishop conferences, ecclesial networks, and other network partners. This is also a way to keep the momentum going following the RAOEN ecclesial synodality event which highlighted the importance of listening and learning from the voices in the margins. The Church is also in the process of integrating the local synodal experiences at the national and then the continental levels, and this is where RAOEN hopes to engage and further contribute.

The synodal process continues to highlight many of the same pastoral concerns and local challenges as does the ecclesial network process of hearing the indigenous communities, the integrity of these voices and their faith experiences as they care for the oceans and forests, calling for greater unity and hope. RAOEN feels much can be learned by going through country-level synodal reports, highlighting the faith and community experiences locally, and sharing these learnings as our humble contribution to the process.

Dialogue Toolkits: Facilitating a greater expression of relationship and belonging with land, sea, and culture in local communities

A way to directly engage local communities is to undertake community mapping which is "story-telling through a bigger sheet of paper". The concept of community mapping is to enable others to see on paper how local and indigenous communities are expressing their relationship and sense of belonging to the ocean, and how the changes in the ocean and climate are affecting their lives. Community mapping is also a way to highlight the diversity of local knowledge and cultures, the integrity of the realities on the ground, and enable deeper reflection on the faith experiences and sense of community.



Networking Toolkits: Building the advocacy on oceans, forests, and peoples from local to global events

In global discussions such as the UN, it is critical to be more strategic in connecting with groups who are involved in global processes, and how faith can enter these processes more integrally. The need to listen to the voices on the ground, especially the youth and indigenous, is indispensable in grounding the advocacy. It is important to keep building connections with other groups in sharing the advocacy of care for the oceans in global events and processes such as UNFCCC COP27, UN Convention on Biological Diversity (COP15), the 2023 UN Water Conference, and the processes of bishop's conferences i.e., the FABC and FCBCO assemblies. It is also important to highlight the faith dimension of the advocacy as a valid participation in such global events, in the spirit of synodality and talanoa.



Archbishop Peter Loy Chong of the Archdiocese of Suva and President of FCBCO addresses delegates and world leaders at a plenary session at the UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon, Portugal.



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To gather many voices and amplify concerns, we invite representatives of dioceses and indigenous basic ecclesial communities to link with RAOEN and to join our regular meetings for network updates, resources, toolkits and information on upcoming local to global network events.

Learn more about River Above Asia Oceania Ecclesial Network (RAOEN), visit <https://www.raoen.org>

Get in touch! We'd love to hear from you. Email us at raoen.network@gmail.com

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