Chanda Engle, Student Participant
Centerville High School
Centerville, IA

With Opened Eyes

Having never ventured outside of the United States, and rarely leaving my own small town—my knowledge of poverty in the world is slight, and most certainly not first hand. Seeing impoverished nations on the television with pictures of their daily lives flashing in my face—however unnecessarily wary it may sound—made me wonder if it really is just as those heart wrenching photos portray. Some people like to look for the worst. I brought myself into the blissful denial that maybe none of this was real. Maybe the photos were staged, those children weren't starving, and they weren't living in that state. The truth is—it's time I opened my eyes. All of this is real—more so than many of us like to believe. This experience is here to help me see things from a new perspective. I have decided to first take a peek in the direction of the region that I have more or less put on a pedestal for nearly fourteen years.

When I was a little girl my dad was a Navy man and was stationed on the island of Guam for two years. To this day I take out pictures from my dad's days in the service and marvel at the beauty of the tiny island. I've always been so focused on the beauty that I took little time to worry about lifestyles or economics of the country. During his time in the Navy, my father also traveled to many liberty ports as his ship was being decommissioned. He came home with souvenirs and pictures from Australia and other areas from the South Pacific. As usual, I accepted the gifts and marveled at the pictures without a thought of the "real" life in that region, as opposed to the tourist-based industry. Now that my eyes have been opened, I see this region from an informed perspective instead of from my superficial stereotypes.

It is very difficult to define the typical family in any one country, let alone an entire region of the world. However, generally families in Australia and the South Pacific are said to consist of two parents and 2.3 children. Many rural families in the island nations make a living farming coconut and root crops such as yam, sweet potatoes, and taro, or rely on fishing. The sea happens to be an easily accessible and abundant resource to the island nations. In Australia the main crops include cotton, fodder, grain, hemp, oilseeds, pulses, rice, seed, sugar, peanuts and tobacco.

The education levels that are achieved vary throughout the region, as of course, do the income levels. The island regions generally do not achieve a desirable income due to poor marketing opportunities and a lack of salaried jobs. This leaves the region with little choice on improvement as job opportunities are also limited, which explains why many people have begun to move towards larger, less rural, islands where marketing and job opportunities are more readily available.

To be honest, I was more than a little surprised to see Australia and the South Pacific as a region option for this paper. I had never considered that this particular area might have any real poverty issues. All I had ever seen of this part of the world were beautiful photos and snippets from movies or episodes on the Discovery Channel or Animal Planet. I found it interesting to learn that I wasn't entirely wrong in my assumptions. The people of Oceania are experiencing poverty, simply not the kind I was expecting. The region's rural population is experiencing hardship not so much due to severe hunger and starvation, as to a lack of human development in the rural areas. This also explains why I was not acquainted with the reality of these hardships—rural areas are not nearly as well publicized as the tourist hot spots

Poverty is a cycle, but not a cycle I was expecting to find in Australia and the South Pacific. I have had the concept of the poverty cycle drilled into my mind in various classes over the years, and in my research, I have found that it is true. These countries cannot make enough money for whatever

reason—lack of transport for their goods, lack of jobs, etc., then cannot pay for education to pull themselves out of this deepening rut.

Because this region has a high tourism rate, the poverty problem is a rural one. The rural areas do not have the same marketing or educational opportunities that there are in the more industrialized tourism hot spots. Rural communities lack funds and accessibility to provide things that I take for granted: education, healthcare, clean drinking water. The lack of these common community necessities is something that I consider a huge detriment to the security of these rural regions. Residents have been moving away from the rural areas to more urban zones in hopes of finding new opportunities; however, this creates a crowding problem in urban areas on top of leaving rural regions in poor shape with dwindling numbers.

Identifying a problem certainly doesn't solve it, but knowing that it is there is the first step. Public health initiatives seem a good place to start. Public health initiatives (PHI) would be opportunities provided to improve the rural health, and in doing so, improve the community. Because these countries are not predominately suffering from starvation, but a lack of funding to grow and become independent, starting here seems logical.

There are already programs in place in both Australia and the South Pacific that are beginning to make improvements on the quality of life for the region. The Pacific Umbrella Initiative was started in 2002 and has various programs that are currently under way. The Pacific Islands Information and Communication Technology for Development section of the initiative is projected to run through 2012. Through this program, it is hoped to teach and make development for technology available to every Pacific Islander. Secondary goals include gender equality and health and sustainable development.

The program is currently active in Samoa, Japan, Solomon Islands, Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji. The Fiji School of Medicine will play a big part in achieving health and sustainable development as their role with the initiative is to bring medical knowledge to remote areas that might not otherwise have this care and opportunity available to them. Telecommunications and information services are also on the list of things the initiative hopes to make available to the region. The initiative also plans to provide personnel for information and communication technologies developments so that eventually these countries can flourish on their own.

Another branch of the Pacific Umbrella Initiative with a slightly different focus is Mainstreaming conservation of Biodiversity and associated traditional knowledge in the Pacific Islands. This part of the initiative focuses on the development of small island development nations (SIDS) and of course biodiversity. It's secondary themes include "education, human settlements, biotechnology, oceans and seas, health and sustainable development, forests, agriculture, protecting the natural resource base of economic and social development, and means of implementation" (Pacific Umbrella Initiative: "Mainstreaming conservation of Biodiversity and associated traditional knowledge in the Pacific Islands").

This branch is projected to run through 2007. It is hoped that this program will protect and help manage the fragile ecosystems that make up the South Pacific. The Pacific Umbrella Initiative hopes to preserve not only the wildlife of the region but the cultural heritage as well. Current threats to the ecosystems include pollution, over exploitations, changes in the climate, and new agricultural practices. This initiative plans to fight these risks with knowledge. They plan to provide training to officials in charge of setting up conservation programs, and provide training to local leaders so that they might more effectively manage their own bit of these fragile ecosystems.

This initiative has been split into multiple branches in order to effectively address each of the problems faced by the South Pacific region. Yet another branch that I will mention from this particular initiative is focused on sustainable water management. This branch intends to organize a water network in which various groups will work together in the different fields of water resources to improve the regional coordination of water delivery throughout the region. They also plan to assist the regions in the South Pacific to be able to deliver sustainable management of the water and wastewater. The plan is to use suitable methods and technologies available for water sanitation, and improve the usage of water resources to the advantage of the environment, development interests, and the communities receiving the water.

Because islands in the South Pacific are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters preparation is essential. The association will need to assess hazards of the regions, and take preventative steps. Knowledge is power, and having information on sustainable water and wastewater management available to all members of society could help to get everybody involved. Also, it is hoped that water and sanitation education be integrated into the schools so that knowledge is instilled in the society early on. If training programs were in place, there would be a stable level of people and communities with knowledge of water and wastewater trends. The initiative hopes that with encouragement and appropriate groups working together, water and wastewater management can become a reality in the near future.

The New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID) has been identifying and addressing issues plaguing the South Pacific as well. This program recognizes that achieving good numbers as far (as statistics) is hard to do for the region of the South Pacific due to the wide range of the area in the study. Good numbers in one region can easily be offset by poor results in a neighboring area. The north and west Pacific Islands experienced among the highest population growth in the world, with some Melanesian countries over doubling their population over the course of two decades.

On the other hand, the Cook Islands and Niue have been experiencing declining populations with high rates of emigration. This source also pointed out that with such high population rates in areas of the South Pacific, a good portion of the population is younger, with the median age reaching only 20 years. With such a wealth of young people comes a wealth of opportunities. This region has many young people who, if taught how, can help to alleviate the problems that have unfortunately overwhelmed their region.

Similar to the Pacific Umbrella Initiative, NZAID covers a broad range of issues faced by the island nations. One fact that it stressed particularly was the importance of good governance. Governance is defined in the article as "the exercise of economic political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels . . . it comprises the mechanisms, processes, and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations, and mediate their differences. Moreover, good governance is, among other things, participatory, transparent, and accountable . . . effective, equitable and promoting the rule of the law." It has even gone so far as to say that the most essential of all preconditions to eliminating poverty would be good governance. At a national level, the NZAID foundation will support its belief and hopefully facilitate leaders managing affairs in such a way that opportunities and services can be provided to all citizens in a sustainable form. It is hoped that eventually citizens will feel free to contribute to their government and societies and in doing so give themselves more opportunities and choices. Good governance is key in eliminating poverty. Governance is the driver that will keep these programs on track.

There are twelve areas that NZAID listed as vital towards achieving the goal of poverty alleviation. Primary health care is on the list. These islands need enhanced access to and quality of primary health care. They hope to decrease the occurrence of major illnesses with this improved primary health care, in addition to health program strategies, prevention messages, and early intervention. Once

again the diversity of the region comes into play when health priorities come into question the focus is different depending upon the country. Melanesian countries would still do well to have their program focused on the prevention and/or treatment of communicable diseases. However, Polynesian countries would benefit more from prevention of lifestyle diseases and classes to inform people about reproductive health, fertility rates, and infant/maternal mortality/morbidity.

Another focus was on sustainable economic growth. NZAID will focus on increasing opportunities for women and young people to get jobs. The government cannot create jobs, however, so the burden of supplying jobs falls upon self employment or small and medium-sized businesses. Sustainable resource use/environmental integrity are concerns for Pacific islands due to their fragile ecosystems. The impact of pollution, waste disposal, logging, and the depletion of marine resources could be devastating to these nations. It has taken some creativity to come up with potential solutions to the problems rather than adding to them. By integrating both environmental and human values, eco-tourism has become a viable option for raising funds while still sheltering the environment from the level of "wear and tear" that would surely be taken on it without such precautions.

There are many PHI's out there already being put to good use. I have briefly looked into only two programs that hope to improve this region and I must say that between these two, many problems have been discussed. The fact that there are many other initiatives already in existence fighting for solutions to eliminate poverty makes me of the mindset that things so far as PHIs go are improving. We know that the problem is there and plans have already been set into action on how to solve this problem. These programs have a lot of potential, and if implemented correctly could allow us to see the change within the next few years. The sooner we begin fixing these problems the better.

Public health initiatives in Australia and the South Pacific are necessary if the region plans to rise above its trials. The need has been addressed by some programs already and some very well thought out programs are in place. In order to continue to better the region, these programs—and others—need to be followed through. Education will be a huge issue especially because this region has such a high youth population. If these kids and young adults receive the training mentioned in many of the PHIs I read through, theoretically it not only helps the nation with its problems but provides the person with a job. However, if the population continues to grow at this rate there will be more to worry about than simply jobs. Overcrowding and other problems will arise with population growth as well. In order to stabilize the population, the public needs to know about teen pregnancy, STDs and prevention methods. All of this is easier said than done. The South Pacific knows the problems are there, it's just a matter of taking the right steps to fix it.

When I think about the South Pacific, I still envision the beautiful beaches, waterfalls, dense jungle, and picture perfect sunsets, but now, interspersed between these visions I see a bit of reality as well. I see that many of these nations rely on tourism as a main source of income because they cannot support crops on the land or maybe the location is not ideal for other business and trade. Guam was my own personal definition of what paradise might be like until I was twelve. It sounded amazing, looked beautiful, and somehow screamed "paradise" to me. My dad told me once that Guam is Japan's Hawaii. A lot of Guam's income is from Japanese hotels and tourists. Another big part of Guam is the military presence. It is not as active as it was when my dad was there, but if the military and Japan were to leave Guam, what would be left? These islands have limited ways to get what they need. They rely heavily upon importing and exporting.

These are all things that I never took the time to see before. I was always too busy focusing on the pretty things that caught my eye that I refused to take the time to take a deeper look at what was there. The places that I've heard about all these years now have additional value because I realize what else is

there. Of course I knew these islands were more than just vacation destinations, but I never once that that the region suffered from poverty in any way shape or form. The knowledge took me by surprise and it is not something that I will soon forget. There is so much more to this world than meets the eye. Without leaving my own home, I have managed to glimpse a part of the world that I have never seen before. In researching for this paper, I have found out things that I certainly wouldn't have taken the time to find before. I have found an entirely new part of the world. I've opened my eyes, and I'm seeing things for real now—no more only seeing the good stuff. The less than desirable facts of life became evident in researching this paper. Life is hard and for some it is harder than others. However, it is because of these less than desirable happenings that the good things in life seem that much sweeter.

Unfortunately there is poverty in the world. It is real, and we have to accept that, but won't it be a wonderful day when the programs that have been implemented to help solve this problem have success? I've looked at this part of the world and this situation with opened eyes, and seen everything in a whole new light. I know what's out there, and I've seen it to some extent, now, I'm looking for the silver lining. Someday, this problem will no longer be an issue, thanks to programs in effect today.

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