A double disaster in the Pacific

In recent weeks, the Pacific region has been responding to a double disaster. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Tropical Cyclone (TC) Harold struck the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga. The Category 5 storm caused significant damage and destruction across the four affected countries. Vanuatu was most heavily impacted, with 160,000 people affected, primarily in the northern provinces.

Although numbers of known COVID-19 cases remain low, national governments are instituting large-scale measures to prevent virus spread and prepare for future impacts. The Pacific Humanitarian Pathway has been established to expedite the movement of medical supplies for the COVID-19 response.

About this overview

This summary outlines how humanitarian actors can support locally led responses to disasters in the Pacific. It summarises lessons from previous responses, findings from localisation research in the Pacific, and emerging thinking about localisation in the context of COVID-19.

Building on what we know:

Five ways to support locally led response

There is a strong evidence base around the localisation of humanitarian aid in the Pacific, including key existing challenges and opportunities for strengthening locally led response. In a context where international support must adapt, this evidence can be used to support national responses to both COVID-19 and TC Harold. Five key ways are outlined below.

Localisation of disaster response and COVID-19

International assistance for TC Harold has been considerably limited due to COVID-19 restrictions. Governments have declared that responses will be nationally led, and travel and quarantine restrictions make international assistance very difficult. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the cyclone, the Government of Vanuatu declared that the response would be an internally run operation due to COVID-19, with heavy restrictions on foreign personnel entering, including a requirement to undergo 14 days of quarantine. International travel has been heavily reduced, with few or no routes open between some countries. International supply chains have also been affected through restrictions on movement of goods, quarantine processes, and the banning of commercial flights.
1 STRENGTHEN PARTNERSHIPS AND COMPLEMENTARITY

What we know: Relationships and partnerships between international and national actors are critical. Research and evaluations of humanitarian aid in the Pacific show that strong relationships also support effective national leadership. They help international actors to maximise the quality and timeliness of localised responses. Lack of strong relationships in advance of a crisis can make constructive discussions about complementarity and coordination processes more difficult, reducing the quality of the response. Four localisation country baselines produced by Humanitarian Advisory Group and the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO), indicated some progress on developing equitable partnerships between national and international actors in the Pacific, but national actors perceive room for improvement to support more effective and efficient response.

Opportunities in this response

Relationships and partnerships with national actors will be even more critical to supporting an effective response in the context of COVID-19. Suggested actions are outlined below.

- Ask your national and local partners how you can effectively provide support in the context of COVID-19 restrictions, including remote engagement or limited contact support roles.
- Establish some partnership principles to guide the way you will work in this context.
- Ensure that partnership agreements include details of two-way commitments e.g. reporting to national partner on support provided / review at end of response by the national partner.
- Identify and fund national consultants to work with partners on the design, monitoring and evaluation of programs. Buddy the national consultant up with head office M&E expertise.
- Conduct joint activities with other partners and networks in order to minimise risks; for example, joint assessments and joint program monitoring between agencies will reduce travel, duplication and COVID-19 transmission risk.
- Publically recognise nationally led responses and partners in communications, media and reporting.

Example tools: ICVA Partnership Principles

Definitions

Localisation: This overview uses a definition of localisation developed by Pacific actors: “Localisation is a process of recognising, respecting and strengthening the independence of leadership and decision-making by national actors in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations.”
ADAPT POLICIES, SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES TO ACCOMMODATE NEW WAYS OF WORKING

What we know: Supporting nationally led response in the COVID-19 context requires actors to be able to adapt standardised policies and programming. Evaluations highlight that flexible approaches that support the priorities of national partners can strengthen responses. Research highlights the need to contextualise policies and processes to national contexts across the Pacific. Adapting processes for providing international support in the response to TC Harold to accommodate the restrictions and implications of COVID-19 is essential.

Opportunities in this response

- Structure program plans and agreements to enable flexibility should the context change drastically due to increasing cases of COVID-19.
- Discuss and agree with project teams and partners about adapted processes for reporting, and monitoring and evaluation (e.g. are waivers needed to account for gaps in some data, or are there limitations on reporting?).
- Amend measures, standard operating procedures and contingency funds to be able to quickly and flexibly respond to contextual changes.
- Support improvement of partners’ communications or system infrastructure to adapt to remote working or remote international support.

3 FUND LOCAL AND NATIONAL ACTORS TO SUPPORT LOCALLY LED RESPONSES

What we know: Evaluations and research highlight that direct funding to local and national actors in the Pacific is insufficient, despite some progress. For example, some donors are working to track and report on funding to national and local actors more effectively. Funding of national actors will be important for this response, particularly when other forms of support are restricted significantly.

Opportunities in this response

- Clearly articulate how much funding will go to national partners; track and report on this publicly. Discuss funding implications where international assistance costs are likely to be lower.
- Agree with partners how funding can be used flexibly to respond to TC Harold. For example, what provisions can help partners to adjust activities and approaches in line with rapid changes in context?
- Ensure that program funding is appropriate to context. For example, what safety and security investments are required to prevent staff and affected populations contracting or transmitting COVID-19? Is there a need to bolster the communications budget to cater for remote working and minimising social contact?
- Discuss how risk transfer to partners can be avoided as a policy priority. Agencies should consider risk transfer when working with national staff and partners.

Example tools: Flexible Funding for Humanitarian Response and COVID-19

4 SUPPORT NATIONAL COORDINATION MECHANISMS AND PROCESSES

What we know: Research and evaluations suggest that there has been progress on more effectively supporting national coordination platforms and mechanisms. They are playing a strong role in the TC Harold response, but remain under-resourced. The COVID-19 response is also putting stress on existing coordination structures and processes.

Opportunities in this response

- International actors and donors can actively resource civil society coordination mechanisms.
- Ensure that coordination resourcing is considered in discussions with partners, and factored into program budgets, particularly where costs will be higher in responding to both COVID-19 and TC Harold.
- Coordinate and share information about approaches that do and don’t work.
- Ensure that support to locally led coordination mechanisms also covers the safety of coordination forums.
- Discuss how to strengthen and support remote coordination modalities if appropriate.
5 SUPPORT ETHICAL LOCAL RECRUITMENT, LOCAL SURGE AND HUMAN RESOURCING

What we know: Supporting localised surge and ethical recruitment strengthens national capacity to respond. Evaluations show that supporting local recruitment has been an important mechanism of locally led response, and research has revealed opportunities to support local and national human resourcing creatively.7

Opportunities in this response

- Establish budget lines for technical support for partners in areas such as accounting / HR.
- Identify how technical support could be sourced locally or regionally.
- Discuss initiatives that can be supported or complemented by international support, and how this will work in practice.
- Agree with partners on how gaps in personnel can be filled remotely.

- Consider resourcing mentoring or remote support to be provided between Pacific countries (e.g. supporting the salary of a staff member in the Solomon Islands to provide remote support to a counterpart in Vanuatu).
- Pilot or promote inter-agency joint surge mechanisms.

Example tools: START Network HR Good Practice for Surge Response

Endnotes


3 Localisation in Vanuatu, Tonga, Fiji and Solomon Islands baseline reports https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/our-publications/

4 This definition comes from the Australian Red Cross research Going Local: Achieving a more appropriate and fit-for-purpose humanitarian ecosystem in the Pacific, 2017.

5 Australian Red Cross, ‘Going Local: Achieving a more fit-for-purpose humanitarian eco-system in the Pacific,’ 2017, localisation baselines

6 Localisation baselines.

7 Localisation baselines; Evaluations of Australian aid to TC Pam and TC Gita.