

EMERGING HUMANITARIAN ISSUES BRIEF: PACIFIC

February 2021

INTRODUCTION

Located within the tropics and the Rim of Fire, the Pacific Island countries are prone to natural hazards such as cyclones, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, droughts and floods. Many of these hazards are compounded by climate change. In addition, epidemics such as the measles outbreak in Samoa and subsequently COVID-19 have placed further strain on the wider humanitarian system in the Pacific.

This emerging humanitarian issues (EHI) brief outlines EHI in the Pacific region, with a focus on Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. It was developed to inform the 2021–24 phase of Humanitarian Advisory Group's [Humanitarian Horizons](#) research program, and support humanitarian actors by outlining emerging humanitarian issues in Pacific. It was prepared by Josaia Osborne, Deputy Director of the Pacific Island Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (PIANGO). The process involved a review of current context of the Pacific and consultations with key humanitarian stakeholders (3 national actors, 3 regional actors, 2 international actors), during September and October 2020.

AT A GLANCE – MAJOR INCIDENTS IN THE PACIFIC (2015–20)

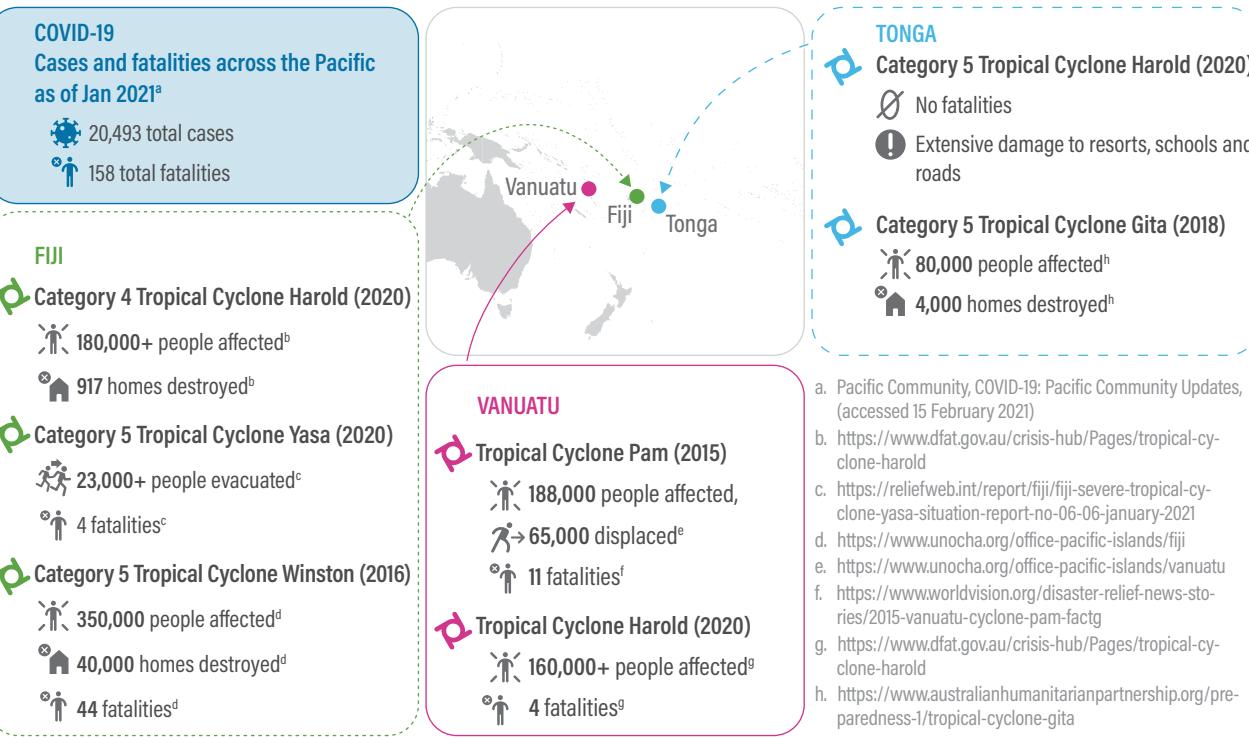


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Pacific Islands Association of
Non-governmental Organisations

Association Des Ongs
Desiles Du Pacifique

HUMANITARIAN
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ONGOING CHALLENGES

Managing multiple crises

During the last five years, Vanuatu, Fiji, Samoa and Tonga have experienced category 4 and 5 cyclones that caused severe destruction and loss of life. In 2015, the devastation caused by Tropical Cyclone (TC) Pam in Vanuatu claimed 11 lives, damaged thousands of homes and buildings, left 75,000 people in need of emergency shelter, and destroyed 96% of food crops.¹ It was estimated that more than 64% of Vanuatu's gross domestic product was lost as a result of Cyclone Pam.² In 2018, there were volcanic eruptions in Ambae, Vanuatu and in Papua New Guinea, displacing thousands. The same year, TC Gita caused devastation in Tonga and parts of Fiji. In April 2020, TC Harold caused severe devastation in Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga.

In addition to natural hazards, the impacts of pandemics such as the 2019–20 measles outbreak in Samoa, and subsequently COVID-19, have strained the wider humanitarian system in the Pacific. Other health outbreaks, such as dengue fever and typhoid, added to the stress on health systems.³

"Locals are now taking action and ownership; there is a lot of leadership being displayed at the country [level]; however, the capacity is still insufficient. Our systems have never been tested because we closed down; you wonder [about] the ability to cope if a pandemic strikes."⁴

The socio-economic effects of COVID-19 have exacerbated the vulnerabilities faced by communities and highlighted gaps between humanitarian and development efforts. At the development level, countries in the Pacific are still trying to address poverty, gender-based violence and the inclusion of people with disability, but as a result of COVID-19 the Pacific has witnessed an increase in poverty and violence against women.⁵

These multiple and overlapping crises, intensified and amplified by climate change, will be an ongoing humanitarian challenge for the region. Their economic, social and environmental costs are mostly borne by the affected communities or by their respective governments, which face major budget constraints. This means that national actors in the Pacific will have to rely on support from international agencies to assist in their own response and recovery phases. Ideally, any international support should be led by national counterparts and should complement the work of the states or the local actors.

"Scenario planning that directly involves and is grounded in ensuring dignity for communities is key, including taking into account and building on the strength of communities for more sustainable humanitarian response measures."⁶

1 Bolitho (2015): [Tropical Cyclone Pam: Why the Vanuatu death toll was so low](#)

2 ILO (2015): [Cyclone PAM causes devastating impact on employment and livelihoods](#)

3 Interview 6

4 Interview 3

5 Pacific Women (2020) [Thematic Brief - Gender and COVID-19 in the Pacific: Emerging gendered impacts and recommendations for response](#)

6 Interview 1

Localisation

As evident during TC Harold, there has been progress in terms of local actors leading their own responses as a result of border closures.⁷ Remote support, which poses both a challenge and an opportunity, has increased and is likely to continue beyond COVID-19. Following the pandemic, it will be important to determine whether localisation has accelerated and to bring new evidence to this process. What has changed? Is it making a difference? Is it effective? More stories on “Champions of Localisation” – research about change agents and how they have managed to do it – would help to drive change and should be shared widely.⁸

“COVID and TC Harold has brought to the fore the importance of community volunteers and their participation. The space which was normally filled with experts has now been filled with volunteers who have just undergone basic training with limited resources and have proved that they can do more than those overpaid internationals. It [is] proven that community respondents can do the work with much better coverage and effective results ... does this mean that the resourcing will shift more to the local responders? This is the question.”⁹

As the quote above shows, localisation of resources remains an issue despite perceptions of progress in other areas. This relates to how the funding for humanitarian response is still donor driven, and situations in which national actors have been “too dependent on external resources”; they see “a need to commit our local resources to build our people’s resilience”¹⁰

Greater understanding of the feasibility of governments tapping into resources to be self-sufficient is needed. To support meaningful localisation, governments should set aside budgets to respond to their own disasters instead of relying on external support. Some have argued that there is a need to re-examine the interface between the international and national humanitarian systems, because it is creating dependence on international support. There is a need to utilise international support during peaceful times so as to cultivate competence to respond independently.¹¹

There are also calls for more complementary roles for local and national actors. Decentralisation of government responses, from national to sub-national level, is one element; how non-government organisations can work with but also independently of states is another. At the regional level, there is concern that partnership configurations are too regional-centric, with insufficient ownership at the national level. Critical viewpoints suggest that regional organisations are overrepresented in joint forums and in setting agendas compared to their limited capacity to lead in implementation.¹²

7 Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4 & No Turning Back Report by HAG

8 Interview 1

9 Interview 1

10 Interview 4

11 Interview 3

12 Interview 3

RISING TRENDS AND ISSUES

Frameworks for effective response

The multiple crises during TC Harold and the COVID-19 pandemic have shone a spotlight on public financial management (PFM) systems in the Pacific. There is a need to attune our PFM systems to support the work of national government agencies, such as National Disaster Management Offices (NDMOs), in leading national humanitarian responses.¹³ The bottlenecks in Pacific governments' PFM systems can delay humanitarian response and recovery.

Legislation is important in guiding humanitarian responses and defining actors' roles. Some countries' laws focus on disasters but need to be broadened to incorporate aspects such as pandemics or conflict. Some countries have initiated steps to update their legislation frameworks. For instance, Fiji has reviewed its Natural Disaster Management Act (1998), which will be updated to a National Disaster Act that covers any national disaster – whether due to a natural hazard or a pandemic.

Legislative frameworks can also contribute to strengthening coordination. There has been some progress in coordination by NDMOs since TC Pam. However, during COVID-19, weaknesses in coordination were evident in some countries, with humanitarian actors less well integrated in responses led by health ministries. Moreover, in some countries, legislation needs to better articulate the roles of civil society organisations, how governments connect at different levels, and connections with the United Nations cluster system. In some countries, legislation ensures

that support reaches communities in a timely and effective manner. However, interviewees suggested that:

"There is still some confusion as to how it relates to the layers between disaster management right to the district; if not, it becomes top down. We need to have appropriate legal frameworks that are relevant as well as standards which are important when operating in civic spaces; ethics etc."¹⁴

Mobility and adaptation

The compounding impacts of climate change have already led to the displacement or relocation of some communities. The incidence of displacement or relocation will increase as more communities become vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Thus, governments must manage displacement via appropriate policies and guidelines.¹⁵ This could include setting up a cluster on displacement management and for a coordinated approach. Disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities and evacuation policies should be in place to support displaced and at-risk communities. As one interviewee noted, "displaced people need different levels of support; a lot for economic reasons".¹⁶

Deeper understanding of displacement, migration and relocation will be important because it will be an ongoing and contentious

¹³ Interview 3

¹⁴ Interview 1

¹⁵ Interview 5

¹⁶ Interview 5

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issue. In addition, there is a need to consider transitional displacement due to COVID-19.¹⁷ Data on displacement needs to be linked and integrated into multiple hazard analysis. The New Zealand Research Action Plan, which relates to climate mobility, should be explored and its insights digested.¹⁸ Moreover, further research on the Pacific island diaspora is vital in considering migrant populations within the region and their integration. This includes the issue of land tenure, which intersects with DRR response; tenure systems can either facilitate or hinder the

response to a disaster that involves displacement or relocation.

The idea of bridging the development and humanitarian nexus is prominent at regional and national levels, but examples of best practice need to be documented for learning – for example, to ascertain the effectiveness of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions or to replicate successful food security projects. In some cases, activities are being overlooked due to stakeholders not identifying with the humanitarian or development sectors.

PRESSING DATA DEFICITS

Information and knowledge management

More data is needed in key areas to promote best practice and help mobilise resources. Remote data collection has presented challenges, although some regional agencies have shared tools.¹⁹ Some respondents sought data around how governments and communities are working together at the sub-national level.²⁰ Others highlighted a need for socio-economic data, including on the effects of disruptions of the global market caused by COVID-19 and opportunities to diversify Pacific economies.

There is a need for better capturing data on the immediate priorities of disaster-affected people. The lack of this information has led to resources distributed during disasters being poorly matched to the needs of the affected population.²¹ In some countries, such as Tonga, there are efforts to standardise data collection through a standard needs assessment process. Having a standard form for incident management aims to ensure that the response is based on analysis instead of making assumptions about needs on the ground.²² Some

respondents also called for improvements in designing questions, disaggregating analysis and reporting back to participants.

In addition, to build and maintain knowledge, data needs to be consistent and accessible. There is a need for data sharing among all humanitarian actors in order to address the duplication of assistance during any response. Some governments do not accept survey data other than from their own statistics bureaux, but community-based surveys can generate up-to-date information from affected communities.²³ At the regional level, there is a need to customise standards of assessment during a disaster, similar to the Pacific incident management form under development at the Pacific Community (SPC). If successful, this would foster inter-regional incident management.²⁴ Finally, information and knowledge management processes could be employed to enable science, traditional knowledge and local assessments to contribute to rapid, informed decisions that produce efficient and effective outcomes.

17 Interview 5

18 Interview 5

19 Interview 6

20 Interview 1

21 Interviews 1, 2, 8

22 Interviews 2, 6

23 Interview 2, 8

24 Interview 3

Inclusive analysis for inclusive response

The lack of plans or standards for inclusion has limited the participation of people with disability in humanitarian action and its appropriateness for their needs. Training of humanitarian actors who interact with people at community level can help ensure that people with disability are included. In addition, there is a need for greater inclusion of people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) in humanitarian response.²⁵ One of the respondents highlighted the need for greater:

"... inclusion of women, people with disability and youths in decision-making bodies – from village, district and national bodies. Many women are not taking part in the decision making except as attending a "Fono²⁶" where there is no debate or opportunities for women and youths to voice their opinions."²⁷

To support these goals, Pacific countries require disaggregated data on disability, gender and age, and how diverse people are involved in decision-making. "Nothing about us without us."²⁸ In addition, more analysis should examine the situations people with disability face, such as the extent and nature of their assets, limitations on their participation in sustainable livelihoods, and opportunities for support mechanisms. In addition, humanitarian actors highlighted a question that needs to be answered: "How can we enable different populations; by looking at different diverse groups to cross learn in [order to] building their resilience?"²⁹

Pacific resilience systems

The potential to use traditional knowledge to build resilience is currently insufficiently recognised and understood. While knowledge exists, it is not always valued in comparison to the dominant models in the international humanitarian sector or accessible for sharing and learning.

The consultations brought forth calls to use traditional knowledge in multiple ways.

"Pacific resilience systems and how it can be used formally and supported, protected and mainstreamed to build resilience in our communities. Documentation of how our traditional knowledge [supported] resilience; how our forefathers lived through the disasters."³⁰

25 Rainbow Pride Foundation, Edge Effect and Oxfam (2018): [Down by the River](#)

26 Pacific term used for council or meeting between people both formal and informal

27 Interview 2

28 Interview 4

29 Interview 4

30 Interview 1

Islanders' ancestors were able to recover from a cyclone by rebuilding better. There were also suggestions to use data on traditional resilience to inform national legislation and humanitarian and disaster response. "We need to capture this data when you have senior citizens who are still among us."³¹

However, one interviewee asked:

"Are we losing sight of the traditional knowledge? When we talk about "building back better", is it according to who – our Western system or Pacific system such as using the forest to rebuild using traditional knowledge?"³²

In addition, there is a need to learn or know more about traditional coping mechanisms. Traditional knowledge should inform not only our work as humanitarian actors, but it needs to be included in school curriculums.³³

More data is needed on how to re-centre Pacific cultures and knowledge as essential to community resilience. There are concerns about having "gone away from our culture, from the people that we were" and instead imitating the Western system.³⁴ For instance, studying how social networks have been supporting people during emergencies would provide examples of traditional resilience and coping mechanisms. One of the respondents highlighted that to "deal with economic loss; we need to deal with resilience ... back in the olden days there [was a] surplus of food".³⁵

31 Interview 4

32 Interview 8

33 Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8

34 Interview 8

35 Interview 4

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RESEARCH FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

The findings in this brief will inform the design and implementation of HAG's Humanitarian Horizons research program in 2021–24. The Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade funded the first two phases of Humanitarian Horizons. The program elevates the expertise and commitment of HAG and our research partners to make a unique contribution to the humanitarian sector in Asia and the Pacific.

The third phase will increase the program's emphasis on research that enables concrete steps towards improving humanitarian responses. By analysing how change happens in the humanitarian sector, by learning from models elsewhere, and by creating user-friendly frameworks and approaches, Humanitarian Horizons aims to generate evidence-based research and build momentum for transformative change.

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