

# Disaster response systems in the Pacific

## Policy Brief for Pacific Island Countries

March 2013

### WHAT WAS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Climate change is likely to affect the pattern of some disasters in the Pacific, and therefore the organisations and systems involved in disaster response. The aim of this research was to provide recommendations to policy makers and practitioners in the Pacific and Australian disaster response sectors on current adaptive capacity of Pacific island countries to climate related disasters (e.g. tropical cyclones), and identify the resources, policies and systems needed in the coming years to enhance this capacity. A further aim was to inform improved planning and more effective response through analysis of the Australian disaster response system and related organisations' capacity, role and obligations to assist Pacific island countries (PICs) in times of disaster.

This Policy Brief is part of a series, presenting research conducted in 2012 which focused on how the immediate humanitarian needs following disasters are met by various stakeholders, both in the affected country and those offering support from outside and the capacity of these systems to adapt under a changing climate. This Policy Brief provides recommendations for *PIC national stakeholders* on policy related issues. Others in the policy brief series focus on *Regional* and *Australian* stakeholders.

### WHAT DID THE RESEARCH INVOLVE?

A qualitative research methodology was used which prioritised stakeholder participation and end-user engagement. The research was guided by a

*"Pacific island countries are inherently vulnerable to climate change given their small size, topography, insularity and remoteness and limited disaster mitigation capacity".*

conceptual framework (presented as Figure 1) which was developed to frame the scope and concepts associated with the research. The concept of 'adaptive capacity'<sup>1</sup> was used to assess both the resilience of individual organisations and the robustness of the broader system of disaster response. Specific determinants of adaptive capacity were used to assess the 'disaster response system' (DRS), comprised of actors and agents from government and non-government sectors, and the governance structures, policies, plans and formal and informal networks that support them. Four case study countries (Fiji, Cook Islands, Vanuatu and Samoa – see Figure 2) were chosen for deeper investigation of the range of issues present in the Pacific.

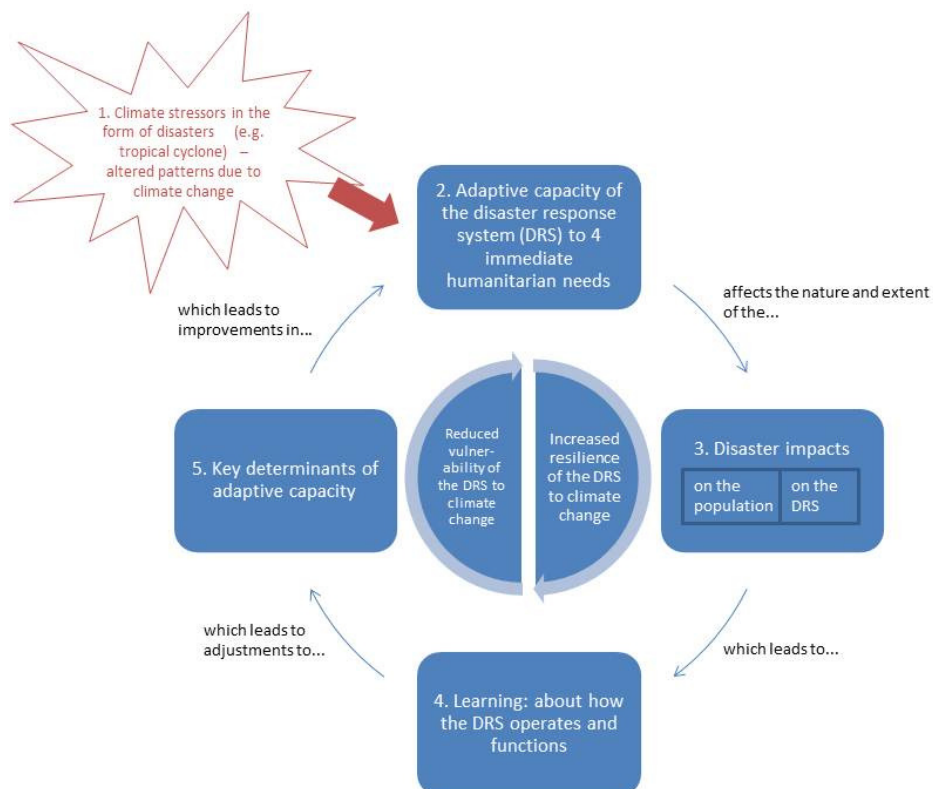
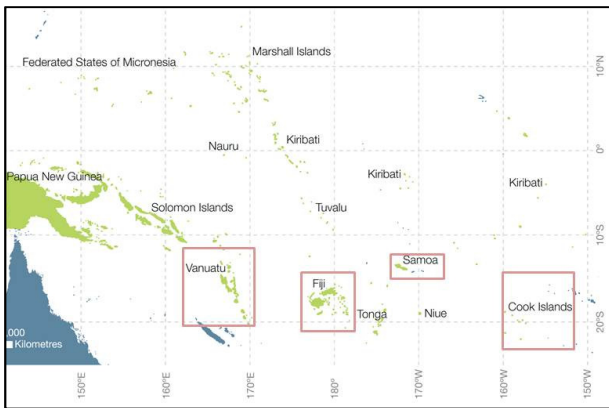


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

<sup>1</sup> 'Adaptive capacity' describes the ability of a system to adjust to climate change (including climate variability and extremes), to moderate potential damages, to take advantage of opportunities, or to cope with the consequences. (IPCC TAR, 2001)



**Figure 2. Map of the Pacific, and case study countries**

The research team drew upon background literature as well as interviews and workshops with numerous Australian, New Zealand and Pacific island stakeholders from the disaster, climate change, health and development sectors to draw out key challenges, gaps and complexities present in Pacific disaster response.

Examples of organisations contributing to the research (through participation in interviews and workshops) include:

**Interviews from Australia:**

- AusAID and other Australian government disaster response organisations
- Australian NGOs including Humanitarian Partnership Agreement organisations
- Australian Red Cross
- Faith based disaster response organisations

**Interviews from the Pacific:**

- National Disaster Management Offices
- Ministries of Health
- Ministries of Finance and Foreign Affairs
- Pacific and international NGOs
- Red Cross Societies of the Pacific
- Faith based disaster response organisations
- Regional organisations including SPC/SOPAC
- United Nations agencies (WHO, UNOCHA, UNDP)



**WHAT WERE THE KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS?**

The research found that the following elements supported **adaptive capacity** of the disaster response system, both from the Australian and Pacific perspectives. Elements supporting adaptive capacity:

- High levels of trust and relationships between key individuals
- Strength in both formal and informal communication, relationships and partnerships
- Strong inter-organisational mechanisms to facilitate exchange and sharing
- Recognition of critical coordination role of national disaster management offices
- Coordinated disaster assessments
- Clear Pacific national policy and supporting mechanisms for requesting overseas assistance
- Participation of a wide range of stakeholders in planning and decision making, including both traditional leaders and churches
- Ongoing disaster risk reduction efforts to reduce vulnerability

*“In small Pacific island bureaucracies, responsibility and capacity often rests with individuals rather than organisations.”*

**Adaptive capacity** was found to be constrained by a number of factors.

- Limited local human resources for health and disaster response across all four case study countries, both in times of disaster response and in day-to-day operations.
- Insufficient engagement between health ministries and other response organisations
- Gap in the provision of psychosocial support
- Limited capacity of Australian medical services to meet needs faced in the field during disasters
- Limited recognition for Pacific in-country systems, capacity and governance structures during times of disaster by external agencies
- Lack of a future focus to incorporate uncertainty and changing risk into planning processes.

The following section presents key recommendations for *PIC National* organisations which address the need to take into account uncertainty, and other key factors found to constrain adaptive capacity.

## **Recommendations for Pacific Islands' national disaster response organisations:**

### **1) Organisations of the PIC DRS encouraged to actively participate in and support national and regional networks and maintain formal and informal relationships in order to support adaptive capacity through the building of trust and the efficient flow of information in times of disaster. In particular:**

- PIC DRS Organisations to encourage new disaster response organisations to align with the culture that is based on both formal and informal relationships and trust to assist in the flow of information in times of disaster and supporting the adaptive capacity of the DRS.

- Active involvement of PIC DRS organisations in regional policy discussions (e.g. current negotiations surrounding a joint DRR and CCA policy)

- PIC DRS organisations to ensure that personnel selected for regional meetings is based on involvement in issues being discussed.

### **2) Review and update policy on meeting disaster response needs:**

-PIC DRS organisations (with NDMO as key coordinating agency) to develop and implement disaster sound policies and plans (for e.g. based on an 'all hazards approach') where they currently do not exist, which appropriately balance flexibility and clear SOPs for all stakeholders.

-The National Disaster Council (NDC) or equivalent, with the DRS support, to review, simplify and streamline policy and processes for requesting overseas response through the development of clear guidelines which can be understood and followed by all stakeholders.

-Ministries of Health in PICs with the support of other DRS organisations to develop clear guidelines for in-coming health personnel to be registered to facilitate efficient and effective HRH management, immigration and customs processes in each country.

- Ministries of Health in PICs to develop clear and transparent policies on staff welfare and remuneration of health workers during disasters, and maintain systems to implement these policies.

- Ministries of Health in PICs should ensure that new or revised Human Resources for Health (HRH) strategic policies include adequate considerations for HRH needs for disaster response under a changing climate in PICs. These are to include adequate provisions to meet the specific psychosocial needs of disaster response personnel.

### **3) Disaster response training and capacity building to be undertaken through a coordinated and collaborative approach:**

- PIC DRS organisations, under the leadership of NDMOs, to better coordinate a consistent approach to capacity building, technical up-skilling and training programmes relating to disaster and health response. This is to include needs based content and systematic selection of participants.

### **3 cont'd) Disaster response training and capacity building to be undertaken through a coordinated and collaborative approach:**

- Ministry of Health in partnership with other PIC DRS organisations to provide ongoing educational support and continuing professional development for nurses, especially those who are first respondents to the disaster.

- Ministries of Health with the support of WHO and development partners to look at how in-country capacity can be built and how in-coming support can best meet the psychosocial needs of the affected population.

### **4) PIC DRS organisations to create an enabling environment for multi-stakeholder involvement and accountability for disaster response and disaster risk reduction across all levels of governance.**

-NDMO to ensure systems are in place to facilitate a structured post-disaster debrief that encourages a feedback of lessons learned from all agencies into national policy and planning processes;

-The NDMOs as key coordination agency to engage traditional leaders in remote and isolated communities in building resilience at the community level; and allocating adequate resources to ensure their involvement in disaster planning at village, provincial and national level.

-National Disaster Council to ensure that faith based organisations are formally involved in disaster planning and response at the national level.

-Ministries of Finance to lead discussion on the best approach to provision of access to emergency funds in times of disaster.

- PIC DRS to improve coordination of disaster assessments through the development of clear Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and reporting guidelines for relevant clusters or sectors.

-PIC DRS to adopt a nationally and culturally appropriate version of the Pacific Humanitarian Team as evidenced by the effectiveness of same in Vanuatu (VHT) and its potential for increasing the adaptive capacity of the national DRS.

### **5) Recognise the potential impact of climate change on disasters, and incorporate a more strategic planning outlook to disaster response with a view to increasing adaptive capacity**

- PIC DRS organisations led by NDMO as key coordinating agency) to embrace a strengthened 'future' focus for disaster response to enable incorporation of changing risk to shift the mentality towards one which acknowledges capacity challenges and uncertainty associated with climate change. This is likely to involve strengthening DRR initiatives which incorporate planning for uncertainty as a means to strengthen adaptive capacity.

### **6) Areas for Further research**

- PICs DRS to seek supported from development partners to conduct an urgent comprehensive assessment, including further research of psychosocial support needs and technical capacity in each of the case study PICs, both in terms of affected populations, health providers and other first respondents to disasters.

- Further research into the optimal financial management approaches, to ensure effective DRM in PICs should be undertaken; including the use of nationally led and owned Trust Funds as a specific modality.





## UTS RESEARCH TEAM

The research team was comprised of researchers from the Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF), and the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre (WHO CC):

Name	Research Project Role	Position
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Professor James Buchan	Expert Advisor (Policy)	Adjunct Professor, UTS: Health
Dr Natasha Kuruppu	Expert Advisor (Climate change)	Senior Research Consultant, ISF
Michele Rumsey	Senior Researcher / Project Manager	Director of Operations and Development, WHO CC UTS
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Stephanie Fletcher	Researcher	Research Officer, WHO CC UTS
Jodi Thiessen	Researcher	Project Officer, WHO CC UTS

## PROJECT REFERENCE GROUP

The research was guided by inputs from a Project Reference Group (PRG):

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Lisa Conlon	Asia Pacific Emergency Disaster Nursing Network (APEDNN)
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### Additional research outputs:

- Full research report: *"Understanding the Pacific's adaptive capacity to emergencies in the context of climate change"*
- Country reports for Samoa, Cook Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji
- Projected climate change impacts in the Pacific
- Policy Brief Series (includes recommendations for Australian, Regional & Pacific National stakeholders)

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