

# Putting People First

Area based approaches for  
better disaster recovery in the Pacific  
*Fiji, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands Regional Synthesis*



*For Discussion*

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Cover photo: urban flooding, Fiji. Photo credit: Reverend Gerald Billings

Table of Contents

<i>Executive summary</i> .....	4
Key Takeaways.....	6
Acronyms .....	7
Acknowledgements .....	8
<i>Introduction</i> .....	9
Research approach .....	10
An overview of area-based approaches .....	11
Pacific disaster challenges and adaptation.....	12
Climate threats.....	12
Rapid urbanisation .....	12
<i>People Centred Approaches</i> .....	13
Localised responses/Existing Structures.....	13
Community participation and assessment .....	16
Place-based Assistance .....	19
Application of traditional knowledge and practices.....	19
<i>Multi-Sectoral Approaches</i> .....	20
Collaboration .....	21
Assessments .....	22
<i>Adaptive processes</i> .....	24
<i>Reflective practice</i> .....	26
<i>ABAs in the Pacific?</i> .....	26
Next steps .....	28
Box 1: Key Issues for Further Consideration.....	28
<i>References</i> .....	29

## Executive summary

Pacific Island Countries (PICs) are at threat of increased frequency and severity of tropical cyclones and floods, fuelled by climate change. At the same time, PICs are rapidly urbanising. This brings many benefits, but also presents new challenges concerning disaster preparedness, protecting often flood prone densely populated settlements, and making critical infrastructure more resilient.

Recent successful urban post-disaster recovery experiences globally have highlighted the need for approaches that are locally focused, multisectoral, people-centred and highly participatory. Area-based approaches (ABAs) championed in particular by the Global Shelter Cluster in other parts of the world, embody these criteria, and are quickly gaining traction among humanitarian actors as an effective means of working within urban complexity.

This synthesis report presents findings from research undertaken in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu concerning each country's urban response to naturally-triggered disasters, and the degree to which key elements of ABAs are in place and are utilised. These elements are: locally focused, people centred response; adaptive processes; multi-sector collaboration and assessment; and reflective practice (Figure 1). The research comprised 40 key informant interviews across the three countries, as well as a review of existing reports and literature. While the focus was on urban areas, the lessons were drawn from nationwide experience.

One key finding is that effective governance and co-ordination structures are critical to ABAs' effectiveness. Across our case studies significant system enhancements and strengths were identified that contributed to governance and coordination. In the Solomon Islands, positive factors include the development of a National Disaster Management Plan (NDMP) and strong coordination by the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) on a cluster/sectoral level, strengthened links among civil society organisations (CSOs), international non-governmental organisation (INGOs) and government actors, and more regularised and formalised communication channels, including an assessment tool common to all actors.

In Vanuatu, the disaster management 'cluster' system was found to be relatively effective at the national level, and following recent efforts is strengthening multiagency and sector collaboration at the provincial and community level. Other positive findings include processes of institutional learning and continual improvement over each successive disaster, improved communications systems, emerging and strengthening informal response networks, and an integrated role for traditional leaders. There is an increasing representation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in cluster work, however, the role of community-based organisations (CBOs) and faith-based organisations (FBOs) is still to be fully recognised and integrated.

In Fiji, significant improvement and investment in disaster management occurred following Tropical Cyclone (TC) Winston. The strengthening of existing structures and relationships among response agencies is evident. CSOs are working in close partnership with local government structures in support of recovery work and preparedness, and are increasingly being integrated into national response efforts.

## *For Discussion*

The existing local government structures in Fiji are strongest in rural villages, with strengthening of engagement needed in urban settlements. Many of the CSOs highlighted the efficient use of resources by provincial governance structures, but identified a need to strengthen resource sharing and communications from national to local levels. As with Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, the Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP) platform in Fiji seems to have created the space to bring together different groups from sectors and programmes, creating opportunities for collaboration. The platform has also brought key government agencies under one organisational structure. More work is still required to integrate and empower local NGOs, CBOs and FBOs, and ensure that key government agencies have high visibility of NGO disasters response work.

Across the case studies, there are some positive examples of emerging social protection mechanisms following recent cyclones, including cash transfers. Three months after TC Winston beneficiaries of cash transfers in Fiji were more likely to have recovered from factors such as sickness or injury, repaired their houses or other village infrastructure, bought food stocks and fixed the damage to agricultural land, relative to comparable households that did not receive additional assistance. Scaling up social protection mechanisms remains challenging in most contexts.

Looking to the future, there was a focus on better identifying and assisting groups who are vulnerable or marginalised, but critical to recovery. In the Solomon Islands, women's organisations and disability networks are being engaged to identify and include people at risk of economic hardship, personal security threats, or other issues relating to food, health and human security during disasters. In Fiji, efforts were being made to better include marginalised groups including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) and informal communities in disaster response and recovery. In Vanuatu, opportunities for engagement with cultural advocacy groups representing women and vulnerable minorities were identified as a means to improve municipality emergency planning.<sup>1</sup>

A number of challenges still exist across the three countries, which include: existing community structures are sometimes not used, ignored or by-passed by response agencies; NGOs, CBOs and FBOs are frequently absent or insufficiently represented in cluster meetings and early rapid assessments; roles and responsibilities of different agencies and government departments could still be better clarified; and urban areas often receive lower priority than rural areas for national response and recovery efforts.

Despite significant gains, the current post-disaster assessment process is still judged by many as cumbersome and prone to duplication of effort in some areas and neglect in others, pointing to a need for better mapping and coordination of response efforts. Many believed gaps remain in learning from one disaster to another. Scaling up by applying lessons from previous disasters is occurring but not necessarily systematically. In most cases disaster preparedness and recovery data could be better centralised or standardised to ensure the needs of all people affected by disasters are met.

Gains in response, and importantly resilience building, could be achieved with greater collaboration with, and resources for, urban municipal councils and community groups who are often the first responders for disaster response and management. Currently, municipal councils are not directly part of most NDMO operational structures. Greater integration and support could help ensure urban

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<sup>1</sup> UN Habitat (2020) Recommendations for Actions for Resilience and Sustainability Port Villa.

## *For Discussion*

planning and management gives more consideration to climate and disaster resilience which is currently inadequate. Models which are adapted to urban contexts may also help to ensure urban planning efforts take better account of climate risks.

Other system efficiencies could be achieved by more streamlining of external or donor interventions, and collaborative reflection on experiences both between sectors and across countries. Many observed that 'parallel structures' are often created by external agents to manage disasters and evaluate performance. Some international NGOs have established networks to reach into local communities and improve opportunities for support which is to be commended. Recent coordination efforts among Pacific island countries through the Pacific Island Forum initiated Pacific Resilience Partnership is advancing knowledge sharing.

### Key Takeaways

An ABA lens adds insight into what has proven to work effectively for disaster response, such as a support for local communities to enable better self-recovery, and the need for stronger and more unified coordination for those providing assistance. Opportunities identified included:

**Active collaboration during disasters and in times of stability could still be improved.** Strong preparedness requires systems to be in place and functioning across sectors (via the Cluster system) to build resilience and maintain connectivity. In some countries, this will require better resourcing and refining the operations of the Cluster system to be more inclusive.

**Ensuring governance arrangements that coordinate disaster preparedness and response build on existing national and community structures and are tailored to place.** This includes providing greater attention to the different needs and diverse social structures of urban areas and how this impacts disaster preparedness and response.

**Establishing protocols and standards for community interventions by external donors, NGOs, CBOs and FBOs.** This may be assisted by the adaptation of common assessment tools like the Kobo Toolbox, and multistakeholder dialogues about values, standards and commitments for protocols.

**Strengthening existing systems and partnerships to account for and respond to the needs of those most vulnerable.** This may include increasing the role and capacity of local CBOs and FBOs to better assess and address the needs of the marginalised groups that they support.

**Realistic and flexible timeframes for interventions which consider long term needs and impacts.** Strengthening collaborative partnerships between humanitarian and development sectors would support the integration of short- and medium-term recovery planning with more long term systemic measures to transform urban systems and their sustainability.

**Strong accountability to ensure fair and equitable allocation of scarce resources.** Identify and address power and representational dynamics that impact disaster preparedness and response. Consider accountability mechanisms suitable to place which may curb the politicisation of aid.

**Ensure reflective practices and 'lessons learned' are locally accessible and shared across sectors.** A regional community of practice may offer an opportunity for shared learnings across NDMOs.

## Acronyms

ABA	Area Based Approach
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADRA	Adventist Development and Relief Agency
AHP	Australian Humanitarian Partnership
CBOs	Community Based Organisation
CDC	Community Disaster Committee
CDCCC	Community Disaster Climate Change Committees
DCOSS	District Council of Social Services
DDA	Detailed Damage Assessment
DMC	Developing Member Countries
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
FBO	Faith-Based Organisation
FCOSS	Fiji Council of Social Services
FNPF	Fiji National Provident Fund
FRDP	Framework for Resilience Development in the Pacific
GSUA	Greater Suva Urban Area
IDA	Initial Damage Assessment
IPCC	International Panel on Climate Change
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex
NDMO	National Disaster Management Office
NDMP	National Disaster Management Plan
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PDNA	Post Disaster Needs Assessment
PEBACC	Pacific Ecosystem-based Adaption to Climate Change
PEOCs	Provincial Emergency Operation Centers
PIC	Pacific Island Country
RPF	Rainbow Pride Foundation
SIRCS	Solomon Islands Red Cross Society
SIAHN	Solomon Islands Alliance for Humanitarian NGOs
SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics
SPREP	Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme
TC	Tropical Cyclone
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

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These contributions are gratefully appreciated, particularly as this report was being produced during a period of significant disaster upheaval across the Pacific Island Region, including the COVID-19 pandemic, TC Harold, TC Yasa and TC Ana.

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The views expressed in this report, and any errors and omissions, remain those of the authors.

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## Introduction

Pacific island countries (PICs) are among the most vulnerable in the world to the impacts of climate change.<sup>2</sup> The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns that, as a worse-case scenario, current once-in-a-century disasters may become annual events by 2050.<sup>3</sup> The impacts may be severe, and tropical countries face temperature increases, changes in precipitation patterns, increased heavy rainfall and sea-level rise.<sup>4</sup> Sea-level rises in the Pacific are four-times greater than the global average, with regional sea level rise likely to be more than 1 metre by 2100.<sup>5</sup>

Most PICs are rapidly urbanising. The 2020 Asian Development Bank (ADB) Pacific Urban Update reported that of their 14 Pacific Developing Member Countries (DMCs), seven have more than half of their population living in urban areas. All DMCs except for the Cook Islands and Samoa are experiencing increasing urbanisation.<sup>6</sup> Rapid urbanisation leads to many recent arrivals living on land in poorly designed and planned settlements, increasing risk. Urban planning and management are struggling to keep up, with areas of vulnerability increasing and levels of service provision proving inadequate.<sup>7</sup> The IPCC predicts with high confidence that the combination of rapid urbanisation, coastal development, an absence of climate adaptation, and more intense and frequent extreme climatic events will increase annual flood damages up to 2-3 times by 2100 in low lying islands.<sup>8</sup>

The Pacific Island Forum Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (FRDP) calls for greater preparedness and mitigation measures, identifying preparedness as a key goal and calls for ‘support for national capacity building’, but systemic approaches to learning, evidence collecting and capacity building across jurisdictions remain weak. The ADB’s Strategy 2030<sup>9</sup> prioritises integrated, multisector planning for urban areas to build climate and disaster resilience. The UN Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction provides a basis for the development of local approaches.

Recent successful urban post-disaster recovery experiences in non-Pacific regions have highlighted the need for approaches that are geographically focused, multisectoral and highly participatory.<sup>10</sup> Area based approaches (ABAs), championed in particular by the Global Shelter Cluster<sup>11</sup>, embody these criteria and are quickly gaining traction among humanitarian actors as an effective means of working within urban complexity.

This report provides a summary of research undertaken in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu concerning how the essential elements of ABAs are enacted in each respective context in post-disaster recovery activities undertaken by communities, government authorities, local and international non-

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<sup>2</sup> WHO (2015) Human Health and Climate Change in the Pacific Island Countries.

<sup>3</sup> Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2019). The Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate. IPCC.

<sup>4</sup> Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2014) “Small Islands – Chapter 29” in in Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, Part B: Regional Aspects, Working Group II Contribution to the Fifth Assessment Report of the IPCC.

<sup>5</sup> Asian Development Bank (2020) Pacific Urban Update 2020.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> Oppenheimer et al (2019) Sea Level Rise and Implications for Low-Lying Islands, Coasts and Communities. In: IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate

<sup>9</sup> ADB (2018) Strategy 2030: Achieving a Prosperous, Inclusive, Resilient, and Sustainable Asia and the Pacific.

<sup>10</sup> Urban Settlements Working Group (USWG)(2019) Area-based approaches in urban settings: Compendium of case studies.

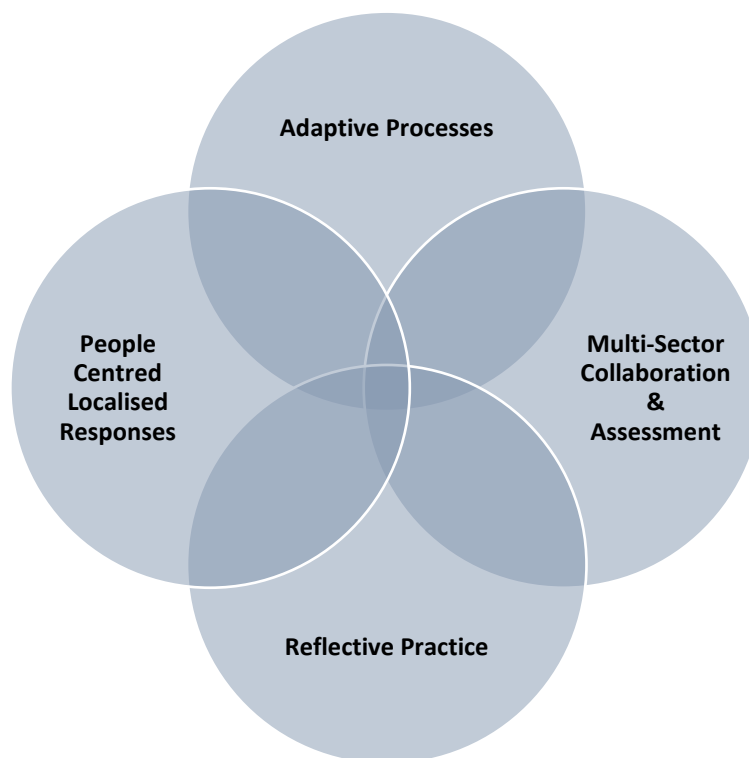
<sup>11</sup> <https://www.sheltercluster.org/working-group/settlements-approaches-urban-areas>

government organisations (NGOs) and others, such as faith-based organisations (FBOs). The main focus is on urban settings, which previous research has indicated can be overlooked after a disaster.<sup>12</sup>

### Research approach

The research comprised 40 key informant interviews across the three countries (18 in Fiji, and 11 in both Solomon Islands and Vanuatu). The interviews were conducted in-country by local researchers to explore post-disaster recovery in urban areas, particularly in relation to people-centred approaches, geographical targeting, multi-sectoral approaches, realistic timeframes and working with existing structures. The research was overseen by a steering committee comprised of experts and practitioners from Australian National University, University of New South Wales, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Australian Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity and the Humanitarian Advisory Group.

The research was structured according to principles identified for good practice in enacting area-based approaches,<sup>13</sup> a locally-oriented approach to disaster recovery (see below). In consultation with our locally based researchers, these principles were slightly modified for the context, and included locally focused, people centred response; adaptive processes; multi-sector collaboration and assessment; and reflective practice (Figure 1). These principles formed the basis for the interviews, and the subsequent structure of this report.



*Figure 1 Adapted principles of ABAs*

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<sup>12</sup> See for instance Sanderson & Bruce (2020) (eds) *Urbanisation at risk in the Pacific and Asia. Disasters, climate change and resilience in the built environment*. Routledge, New York

<sup>13</sup> Sanderson & Sitko (2017) *Urban area-based approaches in post-disaster contexts. Guidance noted for Humanitarian Practitioners*. IIED, London.

Each country also produced its own report and undertook feedback sessions with relevant stakeholders on key findings to ensure accuracy. Where necessary, clarification was sought and critical reflections incorporated into final reports.

### An overview of area-based approaches

Area based approaches to post disaster response and recovery have gained increased attention and consideration in recent years. Defined as actions that ‘support people after a disaster in a specific location to transition effectively from relief to recovery’,<sup>14</sup> ABAs apply lessons from development approaches by planning for longer timeframes, considering long-term outcomes, exploring opportunities for wider application and scale, and focusing on collaborative, people centred approaches (Figure 2). ABAs are also known variously as settlement or place-based approaches. ABAs in recent years have been increasingly used as an urban-specific approach to disaster recovery, but many approaches and lessons are more widely applicable. While ABAs can be complex and difficult to enact, this reflects the complexity of disaster response efforts, particularly in urban settings.<sup>15</sup>

Most recently, ABAs were endorsed in the 2020 ‘Sphere Urban Guide. Part Two’ – ‘Successful ABAs promote local ownership to the extent possible through all stages of the project management cycle’<sup>16</sup>, and have been adopted by local Pacific agencies such as the Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS) through the District Councils of Social Services (DCOSS) Coordination and Support in all of its programming work. Additionally, Red Cross National Societies in numerous PICs have embedded ABA principles into their programming.

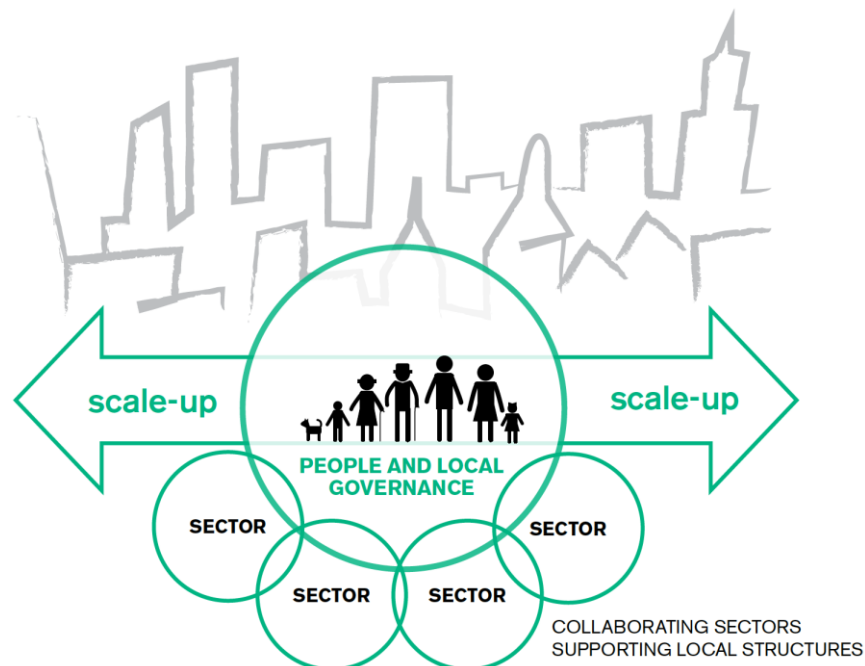


Figure 2 ABAs as people-centred approaches. Source: Urban area-based approaches in post-disaster contexts. Guidance note for Humanitarian Practitioners. IIED, 2017

<sup>14</sup> Sanderson & Sitko (2018) Ten principles for area-based approaches in urban post- disaster recovery, Humanitarian Exchange, Overseas Development Institute.

<sup>15</sup> Sanderson (2017) Implementing area-based approaches (ABAs) in urban post-disaster contexts, Environment and Urbanization, Vol 29, No 2, October 2017, P 349–364

<sup>16</sup> Sphere (2020) Using the Sphere Standards in Urban Settings, PART TWO, p12, Sphere, Geneva.

## Pacific disaster challenges and adaptation

### Climate threats

PICs are among the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.<sup>17</sup> The climate related issues in PICs are extensive, complex and interconnected. Global warming, sea level rise, changing weather patterns and extreme events, pressures on food and water systems, human health risks, and impacts to wildlife and ecosystems are all considered major climate related threats in the Pacific region. The current and projected climate related impacts present critical challenges to local economies, livelihoods, human health, wellbeing, and mobility including internal displacement and migration.

Despite notable and important similarities between PICs, it is critical that the region is not viewed as homogenous.<sup>18</sup> The physical dispersment and cultural diversity of the Pacific Islands region brings with it additional challenges when considering localised climate projections and adaptation strategies. One senior government representative from Vanuatu explained that each country has its own formal and customary governance structures that need to be recognised. Climate is impacting in very unique ways depending on the geography, settlement patterns and livelihoods, and as such priorities differ. Therefore, one size does not fit all. Failure to recognise and respond to the diversity of cultural and traditional climate adaptation practices in policies and response mechanisms would be detrimental to Pacific Island communities.<sup>19</sup>

### Rapid urbanisation

The Pacific is rapidly urbanising.<sup>20</sup> Urban population growth across the region is at globally high levels with the most rapidly urbanising cities, Honiara (Solomon Islands) and Port Vila (Vanuatu) set to double their urban populations by 2040. While cities have the potential to provide greater economic opportunity, increased access to health care and education, and more formal systems of governance; they have equally been shown to increase social and economic vulnerabilities including poverty and wealth disparity, gender-based violence, food security issues, and access to safe and clean water and sanitation. In developing countries, the complexity of urban systems has been increased by migration, new technologies and unmanaged development.

Informal settlements with limited services are particularly vulnerable to climate risks. A 2016 UN Habitat report indicated Fiji's informal settlement population to be 90,000 – 100,000 with approximately 60% living in Greater Suva.<sup>21</sup> In Port Vila (Vanuatu), about 25% of the population live in urban areas and about one third of these in informal settlements.<sup>22</sup> In the Honiara, the most quickly urbanising city in the Pacific, urban areas are growing at almost twice the rate of the nation, mostly in informal settlements, which will result in a population doubling every 16 years.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> World Health Organisation (2015) Human Health and Climate Change in the Pacific Island Countries.

<sup>18</sup> Gero et al (2013) Disaster Response and Climate Change in the Pacific, University of Technology Sydney.

<sup>19</sup> Kumar et al (2020) Climate Change and the Pacific Islands. In Kumur (eds) Climate Change and the Impacts on the Pacific. Springer Climate. Springer, Cham.

<sup>20</sup> Keen & Connell (2019) Regionalism and Resilience? Meeting urban challenges in Pacific Island States, *Urban Policy and Research* 37(3), 321-337.

<sup>21</sup> UN Habitat (2016) Urbanisation and Development: Emerging Futures.

<sup>22</sup> Vanuatu National Land Use Planning Policy (2013).

<sup>23</sup> Keen et al (2017) Urban Development in Honiara. Harnessing Opportunities, Embracing Change, State, Society & Governance in Melanesia Program.

## For Discussion

In many Pacific Island countries, the critical infrastructure that could enhance urban resilience, livelihoods and security is often inadequate and not strategically planned. There is little consideration of changing climatic conditions and implications for building standards and settlements. Additionally, rapid urban migration has resulted in an increase in informal settlements, established as a result of limited access to land and affordable housing. These new settlements are often constructed in coastal and riverine areas further increasing vulnerability to cyclones, storm surges, coastal and river erosion, landslides and sea level rise.

Rapid urbanisation, climate related disasters and health security are three of the most pressing issues threatening the resilience of Pacific Island countries — all three are interrelated. The future impacts of climate change will increase the vulnerability of urban populations<sup>24</sup>; however, the effects will vary markedly depending on the exposure, level of vulnerability and adaptive skills.<sup>25</sup>

This complex interaction of natural and built environment challenges is contributing to an increase in inequalities and disaster related vulnerability.

## People Centred Approaches

Placing local people at the centre of disaster preparedness, response and recovery empowers them in determining their own futures. The principles of people centred approaches focuses on supporting affected populations in their own recovery through the adoption of consultative processes; listening to experiences and local knowledges, and the application of tools such as participatory assessments which are applicable to local context.<sup>26</sup>

## Localised responses/Existing Structures

All three countries demonstrated a national commitment to disaster response as indicated by the extensive suite of national legislation and policy addressing disaster preparedness, risk reduction and response (Figure 3).

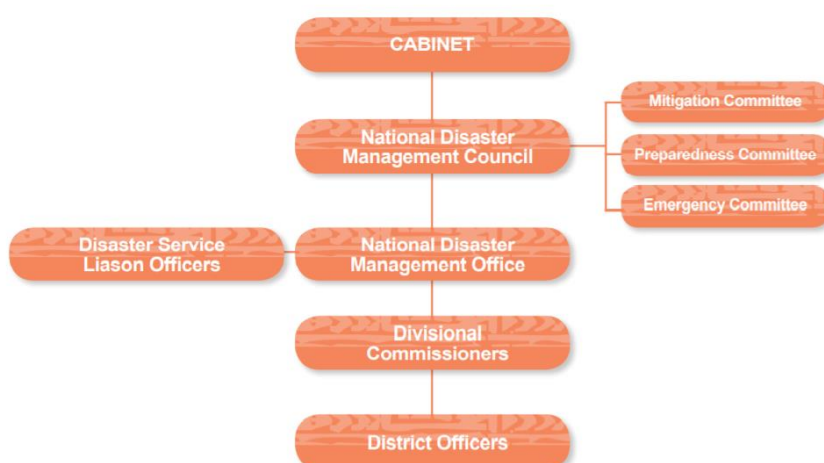


Figure 3 Permanent bodies in Fijian disaster management (Source: Fiji Shelter Handbook)

<sup>24</sup> McEvoy, Mitchell & Trundle (2020) Land tenure and urban climate resilience in the South Pacific, *Climate and Development 12 (1)* 1-11.

<sup>25</sup> Gero et al (2013) Disaster Response and Climate Change in the Pacific: Understanding the Pacific's adaptive capacity to emergencies in the context of climate change, *University of Technology Sydney*.

<sup>26</sup> Sanderson & Sitko (2017) Urban area-based approaches in post-disaster contexts. Guidance noted for Humanitarian Practitioners.

## For Discussion

As the complexity of the system increases, with more government agencies, NGOs and civil-society organisations (CSOs) involved, the challenges of local inclusion, and multi-sector and stakeholder coordination also grows. Coordination issues across sectors and scales remains difficult, and at times accentuated by power dynamics and grabs for resources to advance interests or political standing.

Progress is being made. Researchers from the three countries acknowledged the improvement in national disaster response, especially coordination between national level agencies, following the implementation of National Disaster Management Plans (NDMPs) and the cluster systems. These institutional structures have significantly contributed to an overall strengthening of national response efforts including clearer definition of roles and responsibility, legislative mechanisms for action, and the ability to review and update systems after each disaster. Additionally, reforms are reducing duplication and improving coordination among the multitude of stakeholders engaged in the response and recovery process.

*“...over the last three years since Winston, working closely with the commissioner’s office and the NDMO there has been a level of trust that we have built between partners and so the sharing of information I have experienced this time around was much easier than it was previously”*  
Fiji NGO Respondent.

In Fiji, rapidly growing urban populations and the emergence of more formal practices of governance and leadership have highlighted the need for stronger mechanisms to respond to disasters within a local urban context. The hierarchical system of disaster recovery, including the cluster system whereby

*“A thing different to that of communities in rural areas, is that communities in Honiara are overpopulated. We do not have registered streets and communities. Overseas they have streets and numbers. For example, if we say Kukum, we do not know where it starts and where it ends. So, we do not really know the size of a community.”*  
Solomon Island  
Government Respondent

assessments and coordination occur at a national level often result in a gap of genuine representation from the local level. This is proving to be a pressing issue in urban settlements as there can be a breakdown of local or traditional leadership creating uncertainty about who is representing communities.

It was noted by most interviewees that local control of disaster responses and projects depended heavily on formal recognition of local governance including the ability of an area to be defined as ‘a recognised community’, to organise themselves at some local level, for example church, chief,

women’s or youth-based groups, and to generate a sense of trust and legitimacy of governance structures. The issue of politicisation of disaster response was raised, particularly when the distribution of funds was controlled by those with vested interests. Across the case studies, there were concerns that resources often flowed through channels to advance political or economic interests, and not necessarily in response to need.

*“...strong political influence tends to govern and dictate the recovery efforts including where funding should be spent...”*  
Vanuatu Respondent

In urban settings, enhancing local inclusion is not without challenges. According to key informants, local and often traditional governance mechanisms are breaking down in urban contexts, at times leaving a governance and local engagement ‘vacuum’. Research into resilient Pacific cities identified that “strong community networks, shared resourcing approaches, and locally adapted traditional

## For Discussion

knowledges and coping mechanisms also provided novel adaptation pathways that were otherwise unrecognised by formal institutional actors at city, sector-specific or ward scales.”<sup>27</sup>

Leveraging off existing community structures (traditional or emerging) was recognised as fundamental to localised responses in the Solomon Islands. One of the best buffers against hardship after disasters are communally organised savings and support groups organised through family, church or women/youth organisation networks.<sup>28</sup> This was witnessed during the market closures brought about by COVID-19. A women’s led savings group in a community in West Guadalcanal had almost \$140,000 SBD<sup>29</sup> in community savings. They were able to create their own stimulus package whereby households could access \$25,000 SBD<sup>30</sup> in assistance to deal with problems they were facing such as reduced access to food markets to sell produce and job layoffs.

In Vanuatu, the use of existing community structures was referred to in relation to evacuation centres. Centralised and externally driven approaches that do not support and incorporate cultural norms and

*“TC Winston invited a lot of humanitarian actors. Some from overseas with experience from Syria, from Iraq and they all applied the same context to Fiji. But in Fiji, its completely different”*  
Fiji Government Respondent.

community structures could raise tensions. Rather than providing separate evacuation facilities for disaster affected and displaced communities, a more effective approach was to support the host community to expand their existing health, housing and education services to accommodate those seeking temporary refuge with them. In the medium to long term this also provided co-benefits for community-based disaster response. It built community relationships,

rather than rivalries and resentment about uneven resource allocation between host and disaster affected migrants. Fiji also found that tailoring external approaches to context was key (see quote).

As with locally formed support groups, churches are an important source of assistance to Pacific Island communities and their ability to respond to disasters. In addition to providing faith-based guidance in times of upheaval, churches offer a sound existing structure to bolster a multitude of disaster related supports, including counselling and psychosocial support, facilitation of cash or in-kind contributions, central meeting spaces and conflict resolution. The *Disaster Ready*<sup>31</sup> project, delivered through the Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP) seeks to support communities in preparing and updating disaster management plans, and coordinating humanitarian responses from national NGOs and faith-based organisations.

*“Most of our NGOs have their catchment communities’ areas that they already implement most of the activities. They have good linkages and networking within the communities, perhaps, the resources are still limited to reach all communities where developments are needed.”*  
Solomon Island  
CSO Respondent

<sup>27</sup> Trundle (2020) Resilient cities in a Sea of Islands: Informality and climate change in the South Pacific

<sup>28</sup> Ha’apio, Gonzalez & Wairiu (2018) Is there any chance for the poor to cope with extreme environmental events? Two case studies in the Solomon Islands. *World Development* 122 (2019) 514–524

<sup>29</sup> Approximately \$22,500 AUD

<sup>30</sup> Approximately \$4000 AUD

<sup>31</sup> Australian Humanitarian Partnership Disaster Ready (2019) Progress Update

## For Discussion

A national-level working group of ten faith-based organisations established with *Disaster READY* support provided a central contact for church engagement with the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO), Solomon Islands Alliance for Humanitarian NGOs (SIAHN), and other *Disaster READY* partners following the January 2019 floods. The effectiveness of the working group in supporting this response has resulted in increased recognition of the faith-based organisations within the Solomon Islands' humanitarian sector. Two churches are now represented on national and subnational coordination committees.

### Community participation and assessment

A strong consensus across the three countries was the importance of community representation and participation throughout the disaster preparedness and recovery stages. While approaches to community engagement varied, all stakeholders noted the value of community ownership, local resourcing and mobilisation, and recognition of more traditional knowledge and practice.

*“Assessments are participatory, we go house to house, and talk with elders and pastors in communities and also have community profiles to work from and then talk with each household. If people in the community understand our work its good, the challenge is not to set expectations too high so people do not complain when we come in. There is often delays in responses, depending on funding, so it's best to work with communities to help them help themselves.”*

Solomon Island  
SIRCS Respondent

Interviewees generally agreed that communities needed to play an active role in disaster response, including assessment and prioritisation of responses by intervenors. The remoteness and dispersed nature of Pacific Island communities (even in cities and their settlements) often results in local people/community groups being the first responders to disasters, with external assistance from government and other organisations sometimes taking days or even weeks to arrive.

Pacific Islands communities have developed adaptive strategies to respond to disasters. In Vanuatu, the Community Disaster Climate Change Committees (CDCCCs) provide coordinated support for disaster risk reduction whereby local people are trained to actively recognise, assess and mitigate risks identified within their community's context. The CDCCCs were noted to have played a vital role in responding to Tropical Cyclone (TC) Pam, assisting communities to access recovery support faster and more effectively.<sup>32</sup> While not all communities across Vanuatu have an established or active CDCCC, stakeholders noted that local contacts in the communities were often able to verify information, and recruit and train volunteers from that community to undertake survey assessments. These local insight and response mechanisms were reported across all three countries.

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<sup>32</sup> SPC (2016) Tropical Cyclone Pam Lessons Learned Workshop Report – June 2015. SPC Pacific Community, Suva, Fiji.



## For Discussion

Those interviewed from the Solomon Islands highlighted that participatory approaches are varied and often include: focus group discussions and community consultations; locals assessing impacts; and, communities distributing assistance. Additionally, community organised savings and support groups run through family, church, women's groups and other community-based agencies rapidly respond to disaster impacts on livelihoods and assets, but often lack support across humanitarian assistance networks

*“During the processes, communities are the key responders within their own setting. They are involved in the assessment. One thing that the community can participate in is to provide information regarding impacts it has on their community. In Honiara there are different ethnic groups and settings and the community can be involved in leading assessment teams. Villages have their own systems so assessment teams have to adhere to what the community tells them to do...”*

Solomon Island  
Government Respondent

to develop their reach, responsiveness and capacity. These community networks, shared resourcing approaches, and locally adapted coping mechanisms can provide resilience pathways, and better integrate formal and informal institutional actors at city, sector-specific or ward levels of governance.

Recognising the strength of community representatives trained in disaster preparedness and response, efforts are underway in Fiji to strengthen local response capacity and capability. NDMO is currently piloting a 'Community-based Disaster Risk Management Training Manual' to train community volunteers. This pilot involved training youth volunteers in on-the-ground assessment and relief work following a disaster. NDMO is working towards an online platform for an inclusive approach to initial damage assessments (IDA) and Detailed Damage Assessments (DDA), whereby trained community volunteers undertake local assessments. The intention is to develop a standardised manual, similar to one used to facilitate training in WASH related issues, for use by CSOs. This would help to ensure a consistent standard of training that has greater coverage.

*“I think participation is limited especially when we count the participation of women, youths and people with disabilities, their voices are still forgotten when it comes to disaster response”*

Solomon Islands  
CSO Respondent

Also, in Fiji the Red Cross Committees in villages and settlements enable local people to take an active role in recovery efforts. Alongside the *Turaga ni Koro*<sup>33</sup>, a community selected committee comprised of youth, women, LGBTQI and male representatives meet monthly to discuss local disaster related projects. The Red Cross Committee members are trained in early warning, early action, disaster response, and first aid. The active function of the

committees varies significantly with some engaged in regular meetings and activities and others lacking momentum and in some cases lying dormant. In Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, the Red Cross National Societies have varied and localised responses depending on the committee priorities. Like Fiji, community dynamics influence operational success. More consistent resourcing and performance of local committees would enhance responsiveness.

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<sup>33</sup> *Turaga ni Koro* is the title for the head of a village, who is usually elected or appointed by villagers. Similar to a city administrator, they play a key role in the modern Fiji government structure and are paid a small government allowance.

## For Discussion

*“Localisation - I am having difficulties, not really to have something bad to say about internationals coming in, but when people say localisation, I say: localisation for who?”*

Solomon Island  
Government Respondent

Community participation and leadership appeared to be stronger in rural areas. In urban areas, a combination of poorly defined formal governance structures, the weakening or absence of chiefly leadership, and the increase in urban employment conditions contributed to engagement challenges within informal settlements. In Fiji, a lack of coordination among the numerous international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), local NGOs who support communities, and government agencies was reportedly contributing to a disjointed response with unnecessarily duplications and gaps. FCOSS is currently working to implement a new CSO Directory and Protocol which aims to promote localisation and disaster risk reduction (DRR) coordination through a series of guidelines which will help to address some of the urban settlement response issues. Similar, in Vanuatu, an absence of urban CDCCCs is being addressed as NDMO works with partners to train and introduce the concept of CDCCCs in more communities to ensure their establishment in urban contexts.

Despite challenges with urban community engagement, steady progress is still occurring. The Red Cross Committees initiative established in several informal urban settlements has proved highly effective in response to TC Harold and the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, by accessing the committee network, the Red Cross successfully reached out to 83 communities in a month, 38 of which were in the Greater Suva Urban Area (GSUA). While volunteers' skills were limited in relation to the health needs of COVID-19, they were trained and successful at identifying post-cyclone damages and community needs.

*“Most of our NGOs have their catchment communities' areas that they already implement most of the activities. They have good linkages and networking within the communities, perhaps, the resources are still limited to reach all communities where developments are needed.”*

Solomon Islands  
CSO Respondent

Several interviewees noted that participation across society remains uneven. In both Fiji and Vanuatu, greater data disaggregation is helping to enhance system responsiveness and better target recovery efforts. Following the AHP platform trainings about indicators that measure disability, these were included in government post-disaster data collection to enable better targeting of marginalised groups. The ability to access disaggregated data also provided increased opportunity for cross-cluster collaboration, and evaluation of outcomes. For example, nutritional deficiencies in malnourished children are further exacerbated following a disaster with the increase in food insecurity. The combined data on children and their status from the Protection, Food Security, and Health Clusters may provide a more comprehensive understanding of needs, opportunities for coordination, and outcomes beyond what each individual cluster would initially be assessing.

*“We use existing structures as an entry point but when it comes to the disaster committee we have to look at representation, a good representation, some women, some youths that takes a lot of time to discuss, to have a fair representation in disaster committees, working with senior people in the village and churches of course”*

Vanuatu NGO Respondent

Disaster response can be complex when differences in power and representation occur. The affect of power dynamics was noted in all three countries. In Fiji, the dichotomy that exists between Fiji's centralised government administration and the longstanding chiefly leadership contributes to differing preferences for disaster response approaches. In general, most felt current assessments and

## For Discussion

coordination mechanisms are often bureaucratic, resulting in a gap of genuine representation at a local level. Similarly, in the Solomon Islands concerns were raised around the politicisation of disaster response and the dispersal of assistance influenced by MPs, resulting in certain members of the community benefiting more than others.

### Place-based Assistance

CSOs indicated that locations for assistance are generally chosen by government in the initial rapid assessment, in consultation with INGOs, which have high degrees of influence because of their knowledge of certain communities, experience in related projects, and capacity to leverage funds. One key informant explained that in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, AHP organisations decided to split up into different locations, responding to the existing communities where they were already working. This left gaps in assistance for communities without pre-existing relationships, but with high needs. Some of these gaps were filled by a system whereby INGOs working with two different communities, would identify any communities in between, visiting them in an effort to scale up assistance efforts, ultimately, increasing the impact without significantly increasing the workload. Even so, geographically isolated or remote settlements, such as in some peri-urban areas, could be neglected.

Part of the decision making for locations is based on information from communities provided to the government or the INGOs. The existence of political connections, strong communication channels to government or NGOs, or aid projects can bias responses and resources. Some stakeholders consulted felt that assistance for risk reduction and longer-term projects was disproportionately focused on rural rather than urban locations. Rural policy biases have been noted in other research.<sup>34</sup>

*“In disaster work in Honiara city, an issue is that bigger disaster projects that look at disaster, climate risk, preparedness projects to help communities, always goes to the provinces and not Honiara. Honiara only has projects like women's saving clubs but not disaster projects. Provinces are targeted areas for projects. They did not realise that the same risks in the provinces are also being faced by people in Honiara. When they go down to the rural areas often, Honiara is being missed out. Honiara has a lot of populated areas and it has a different setting, different ethnic groups and everything depends on money. In the community, you can find food in the bush. But in Honiara, everything depends on money. So, when a disaster happens in Honiara, people are more affected than those in the rural area because of its cash economy. When there is no food, there is basically no food, unlike those in the rural areas where they will still have access to food.”*

Solomon Island Government Respondent

### Application of traditional knowledge and practices

A strong theme across all countries was the highly valuable but often overlooked application of traditional knowledge and oral histories to prepare for and respond to disasters. Previous surveys undertaken in Nea, in the Solomon Islands identified that their primary source of information about disasters was oral history, not media sources.<sup>35</sup> Studies of adaptive capacity have illustrated the “highly context-specific nature of adaptive capacity” due to cultural diversity, traditional knowledge and situational differences of communities and regions across Solomon Islands.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Barbara & Keen. (2017). Urbanisation in Melanesia: The Politics of Change. Development Bulletin. 78. Pp 16-19.

<sup>35</sup> Ride et al (2013) Information in Natural Disasters. Honiara: Australian Aid/ABC/NDMO/RAMSI

<sup>36</sup> Warrick et.al. (2016) The 'Pacific Adaptive Capacity Analysis Framework': guiding the assessment of adaptive capacity in Pacific island communities. Regional Environmental Change.

Oral histories indicate that Vanuatu people have adapted to weather extremes and sea levels changes over centuries through a range of mechanisms, including communal pooling of resources, food and water storage, elevated settlements, and rituals for predicting climatic and environmental variability.<sup>37</sup> These traditional practices are increasingly being recognised as vital resources for adaptation. Examples of this include traditional leadership structures in the Pacific Ecosystem-based Adaptation to Climate Change (PEBACC), a five-year project collaboration between the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) and the German Government.<sup>38</sup> The project aims to build resilience to climate change in urban areas by establishing a baseline for ecosystem services combining traditional knowledge with scientific understanding.<sup>39</sup>

The importance of traditional leadership structures and local knowledge was identified as a key factor in Vanuatu's resilience to disaster following TC Pam in the Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) conducted by the Vanuatu Government, UNESCO, the EU and World Bank.<sup>40</sup> In 2013, the Nikoletan Island Council of Chiefs released the country's first traditional authority declaration on climate change. The declaration, which came as the result of meetings with government departments and civil society and faith-based organisations highlighted the benefits of traditional adaptation responses along with scientific approaches, such as the government recognising the important role played by local weathermen "tupunas" in enhancing agricultural production and food security.<sup>41</sup>

*"We find closer to urban centres communities are a lot less engaged, further up we go, they are more engaged. Informal settlements are a whole different culture. It is almost individualistic"*  
Fiji NGO Respondent.

Social consequences of urbanisation have led to the erosion of traditional knowledge and practices relating to climate change and disaster resilience in urban communities.<sup>42</sup> Across the three countries examples of social, economic and environmental instability in cities were associated with the breakdown in traditional practice. These include a breakdown of communal land tenure and increase in

unstable and illegal squatting, a shift in social protection mechanisms including changes to 'collectivity and the role of the community', and limited preparedness for the likely impacts of adverse weather on urban environment. While all three case study countries have identified a need to integrate resilience as a core development action strategy across sectors, scales and regions, the means to better account for cultural resilience and traditional knowledge has not been clearly defined, particularly as second and third generations urbanites lose this knowledge and the subsequent ability to respond and recover to disaster.<sup>43</sup>

## Multi-Sectoral Approaches

Sector-based approaches in recovery often rely on single-sector assessments and single-sector implementation that can be siloed and insufficiently capitalise on multi-sectoral opportunities.<sup>44</sup> In

<sup>37</sup> Campbell, J. R. (2006). Traditional Disaster Reduction in Pacific Island Communities.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.sprep.org/pebacc>

<sup>39</sup> [https://dailypost.vu/news/vanuatu-s-traditional-architecture-makes-a-community-more-resilient-in-the-face-of-climate-change/article\\_51486a58-5684-11ea-87b8-7fbca9d59365.html](https://dailypost.vu/news/vanuatu-s-traditional-architecture-makes-a-community-more-resilient-in-the-face-of-climate-change/article_51486a58-5684-11ea-87b8-7fbca9d59365.html)

<sup>40</sup> Government of Vanuatu (2015) Vanuatu Post Disaster Needs Assessment: Tropical Cyclone Pam.

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.nab.vu/press-release-nikoletan-chiefs-declaratio%E2%80%8Bn-climate-change-vanuatu>

<sup>42</sup> Kiddle et al (2017) Unpacking the Pacific Urban Agenda: Resilience Challenges and Opportunities, *Sustainability* 9: 1878.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*

<sup>44</sup> Sanderson (2019) Coordination in urban humanitarian response, *Progress in Disaster Science*.

## For Discussion

urban areas this can lead to wasted investments and duplicated efforts. An ABA approach promotes multi-sectorial approaches that better reflect the reality of complex lives and urban systems. More effort is being made to ensure assessments are participatory and enable impacted communities to identify and understand the cross sectoral challenges. This promotes collaboration, increases efficiency and reduces the over-assessment (or total neglect) of affected communities.<sup>45</sup>

### Collaboration

Positive experiences of collaborative partnerships were identified across the three countries. In the Solomon Islands, most stakeholders interviewed positively acknowledged multi-sector and multi-agency collaboration, and noted the marked improvement of both since 2010. Of specific note was the formulation and adoption across government and non-government agencies of the NDMP as a guiding document for all disaster projects and assistance, and the establishment of coordinating committees for key functions (e.g. shelter, water/sanitation).

*"Relationships are key to responsiveness"*  
Vanuatu Government Respondent

The importance of collaboration across every level of government in response to naturally-triggered disasters was highlighted at a recent workshop (November 2020) facilitated by the Fiji Ministry of Defence and National Security, and the Australia Pacific Security College on Climate Induced Security challenges. Collaborative decision-making across the whole of government, as well as civil society, was identified as critical for well-integrated responses to climate-induced security challenges. This was referred to as a 'whole of nation' approach. Leveraging military capabilities and resources to support disaster response can boost responsiveness, as long as the relevant line agency remains in the lead. By engaging a wide range of existing agencies, systems and processes, and working with a shared purpose, NGOs, civil society and government can effectively foster resilience.

*"...over the last 3 years since Winston, working closely with the commissioner's office and the NDMO there has been a level of trust that we have built between partners and so the sharing of information I have experienced this time around was much easier than it was previously"*  
Fiji NGO Respondent.

disasters was highlighted at a recent workshop (November 2020) facilitated by the Fiji Ministry of Defence and National Security, and the Australia Pacific Security College on Climate Induced Security challenges. Collaborative decision-making across the whole of government, as well as civil society, was identified as critical for well-integrated responses to climate-induced security challenges. This was referred to as a 'whole of nation' approach. Leveraging military capabilities and resources to support disaster response can boost

The AHP<sup>46</sup> was recognised by stakeholders as an effective mechanism for collaboration and strategic coordination whereby collaborative partnerships are fostered across governments, INGOs/NGOs and CSOs. The AHP use Australian Government resources to leverage NGO networks and expertise to deliver humanitarian assistance. The flexibility of the AHP program promotes better coordination and collaboration across government and NGOs enabling partners to identify the range of agencies best placed to respond to each disaster – this may include joint efforts.

*"...we are trying to work with our AHP partners because we know our reach is limited. We cannot be in all communities but the partners they work in different areas so for us, [partnerships] are transforming our work from status quo to transformative."*  
Fiji CSO Respondent.

<sup>45</sup> Sanderson & Sitko (2017) Urban area-based approaches in post-disaster contexts. Guidance noted for Humanitarian Practitioners. IIED, London

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.australianhumanitarianpartnership.org/>

## For Discussion

*"I think the approach toward coordination can still be improved ... done in a way that at the end of the day it's about the beneficiaries and not us. It's about the beneficiaries, it's about getting out to them as quickly as possible but in a coordinated manner so that we are not replicating and there's a lot of inefficiency that takes place"*  
Fiji NGO Respondent.

Those interviewed indicated that coordinated and collaborative responses are occurring at the national level. However, they often lack consistency and tend to break down between the initial rapid response and the longer-term recovery efforts. Additionally, while collaborative practices are improving there continues to be a siloing of sectors, with governments institutions collaborating with other government institutions, and NGOs working alongside other NGOs. This system weakness can be further magnified by international agencies applying "one-size-fits-all" approach or implementing unsolicited activities, which create friction,

as these operated outside the coordinated system of government and non-government approaches.

At a regional level the Pacific Resilience Partnership<sup>47</sup> was identified as being a positive step towards collaboration across Pacific island countries. Greater regional collaboration supports lessons sharing and the dissemination of information to respond to disasters more effectively and efficiently. Stakeholders recognised the value of this mechanism and noted the opportunities for further development including establishing a stronger platform for disaster response agencies, like NDMOs, to work together in times of crisis.

## Assessments

Varying approaches to post-disaster needs assessments were evident across countries. Despite the differences, all countries appeared to be working towards a more coordinated and collaborative assessment process whereby duplication is minimised and those most vulnerable are not left behind.

Improvements are still possible. In Fiji and Vanuatu, assessment duplication, the absence of centralised and standardised data and assessments, and gaps in implementing learning from previous disasters were judged by informants to contribute to post-disaster assessment inefficiencies which ultimately lead to the needs of some people affected by disasters not being met. In Fiji, despite the IDAs and DDAs being coordinated by government bodies, there continues to be instances whereby organisations undertake their own assessments using separate forms leading to assessment duplication and disparity of data. Currently, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and NDMO are collaborating to develop a standardised assessment form to be used across government, Red Cross, and civil society organisations. However, this process is in its early stages.

*"That's an issue for us. To develop a standard Initial Detailed Assessment. Sometimes the communities get overwhelmed with the assessment that is going on. The first group they come in and do the assessment, then another group they come and do different assessment. And then they are looking out...waiting for assistance..."*

Fiji Government Respondent

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<sup>47</sup> <http://www.resilientpacific.org/pacific-resilience-partnership/>

## For Discussion

*"We always work together with NDMO, so we use the KoBo Toolbox, sometimes paper and pen but the same form, and use local volunteer teams to go out and do assessments to feed into the operations centre."*  
Solomon Island  
NGO Respondent

In contrast, the Solomon Islands have demonstrated that the adoption of a common assessment tool is a key factor to multi-agency collaboration. The use of the KoBo Toolbox<sup>48</sup> assessment tool across government and NGOs, whereby data entry is recorded and shared using KoBo Toolbox software, has improved the accessibility and integration of data across sectors. The tool, one of many, was developed by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and was adapted for a Solomon Islands context. Its application is coordinated by Solomon Islands NDMO and, used by NDMO, Red Cross, and the AHP

as well as local NGOs and CSOs.

To ensure its contextual suitability, it has been updated and adjusted periodically based on feedback from committee members. In addition to the KoBo Toolbox, locally focused vulnerability and capability assessments have proven valuable. Local staff and communities are engaged and have ownership of the process and shape future actions and assistance. The Community Based Risk Reduction Handbook for Local Facilitator (SIRCS/NDMO) offers practitioners a practical guide on how to identify communities, conduct a Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment, raise disaster awareness, and produce Village Risk Reduction Action Plans and Village Response Plans using a local and participatory approach. The approach allows considerable scope for communities to set priorities and have ownership of DRR and response.

Not only do shared assessments reduce duplication of data and over-assessment of communities, they strengthen collaborative relationships between organisations and help to break down engagement barriers with vulnerable and diverse groups. In Fiji, an example of multi-sectoral collaboration was provided whereby FCOSS advocated for the Rainbow Pride Foundation (RPF) to participate in a joint assessment in Kadavu with the Fijian Government post TC Harold. This was RPFs first time collaborating in a multi-sectoral assessment with the Fijian government, having previously conducted their own assessments through community networks. The relationship, facilitated by the AHP platform, has supported the improvement of data collection tools to better integrate questions that capture information on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) and disability. Similar integrative approaches are being developed and applied in urban areas by groups like FCOSS.

The need for more sharing of experiences and responses across sectors was raised. Following TC Harold, AHP partner organisations along with district officers in Fiji identified positive examples of collaborative multiagency assessment, whereby partner organisations targeting specific community groups were able to support the assessment of other community groups simultaneously through shared assessments. For example, the Fiji Disabled People's Federation shared their assessment findings with Live and Learn to inform their recovery for persons with a disability. Likewise, in the Solomon Islands, larger INGOs and CSOs are working together to train smaller CSOs in how to use the Kobo Toolbox common assessment tool so that local actors can use the tool during disaster assessment and response. During interviews, Guadalcanal Council of Women and People with

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.kobotoolbox.org/>

## For Discussion

Disabilities Solomon Islands explained how they used the tool with their particular networks to gather information for disaster assessment.

Community focused assessments carried out by the government and NGOs have also supported the targeted identification and distribution of post disaster assistance including food packages, cash, seeds and seedlings. For example, Adventist Development and Relief Agency International (ADRA) were able to distribute seeds to communities in high need. Conversely, the absence of locally focused assessments could have resulted in seeds not being distributed at all, or a blanket distribution including to those without the need.

### Adaptive processes

Recovery programmes may take years, which may be beyond the traditional relief to recovery timeframes of some organisations.

Stakeholder feedback identified that, at times, there were delays in government responses often occurring because of the distance or accessibility between Honiara-based assistance and some affected disaster areas. The remote nature of the peri-urban settlements (some with very limited road access) has contributed to NDMOs' preference not to put set timelines on assistance.

*"It depends on government processes to set a time frame. Sometimes people demand things to be done immediately. But it all depends on the government's processes which are different to people's opinions. When the government has its time frame, it is set in a way when resources will be available. Somehow people expect response to be immediate and mainly right after a disaster and they thought that it is an easy task, where the next day after a disaster, supplies arrive."*

Solomon Island  
Government Respondent

Delays contribute to uncertainty, but are almost inevitable. Given stretched resources, there is a need for a high degree of self-reliance and preparedness to quickly address food and water shortages. The reality is many communities need to take the lead and implement their own strategies to improve preparedness and long-term recovery. There is evidence that NGOs and CSOs operating in-county are adapting their engagement approach to consider longer timeframes and the sustainability of response mechanisms, and how both contribute to sustainable development.

*"Instead of a big, but short, project that will raise expectations, something that will happen over a long time, in my view it's better for the Solomon Islands context".*

Solomon Island  
CSO Respondent

The Red Cross National Societies in the three PICs studied have all moved from a project to programme approach. Moving away from short term project based funding to longer term programming initiatives. In this way, Red Cross National Societies can deliver more flexible and predictable programs which support communities and align to the organisation's longer strategic vision.

The rigidity of many INGO timeframes continues to be a challenge with reported pressures to exhaust funds and complete activities in donor-set deadlines. This was experienced with the recent economic downturn compounded by COVID-19 with one INGO noting that the first round of funding they received was small and intended to be for a short period of time. The key informant noted that while the second phase of funding was longer, around 18 months, when it came to food security and



## For Discussion

livelihoods, these time frames are not enough to change livelihood practices and outcomes. Initiatives such as small farms, markets, cash crops for export like noni and kava all take time.

There is a need for government responses to be adaptive to the changing needs of each disaster. In response to TC Harold and COVID-19, Vanuatu's Provisional Emergency Operations Centres (PEOC) which were established following TC as part of the decentralisation of disaster management were adjusted to respond to the lack of international engagement because of closed borders. NDMO deployed staff to regional PEOCs which reportedly improved coordination, efficiency and transparency of response efforts. With the absence of international actors, national workforce and CSO representatives were able to assume greater leadership roles, becoming the central response mechanism for coordination.<sup>49</sup>

*"...funding opportunities should allow for some flexibility. Flexibility in design - events can occur that can require us to reprogram and I think that flexibility need to be allowed for even in humanitarian program."  
Fiji NGO Respondent*

Not only do programs need to have realistic timeframes to promote genuine and sustainable development, they need to be adaptive to local context and feedback. The shelter response initiated by the Fiji Red Cross in response to TC Winston offers an example of flexible and agile programming that adapted in response to local challenges and unanticipated complications. The initial recovery efforts of Red Cross involved constructing permanent shelters; however, complex approval processes and challenges with land acquisition ultimately resulted in a project standstill. In response, the Red Cross replaced their shelter program with the shelter kit and supported communities to rebuild themselves with the support of construction materials and skill development. Red Cross now works with other stakeholders in the shelter cluster including Habitat for Humanity and the Ministry of Housing to respond to disaster recovery with the shelter kits that focus on toilets, bathrooms, access ramps and other essential shelter facilities.

Other adaptive and innovative initiatives identified include cash benefit schemes which were first introduced across the region following TC Winston and provide a mechanism for impacted communities to allocate the funds as needed. In Fiji, cash benefit schemes were distributed using existing social welfare protection mechanisms to get cash support quickly and efficiently to impacted communities. Larger cash injections occurred across the country facilitated by central agencies. The Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF) provided members access to their superannuation following TC Winston. The World Bank (2017) reports more than 9,000 members withdrew money during this period. A similar scheme was also available post TC Harold and COVID-19 which included a top-up by the government.

The Solomon Islands, via the AHP platform, are piloting cash vouchers as a way to support disaster affected people. This pilot is being implemented following evaluation and feedback after disasters, with calls for cash schemes being requested since the 2001 tsunami.<sup>50</sup> Recently, the Solomon Islands government, responding to high unemployment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, passed a substantial stimulus package inclusive of funding to churches, state-owned enterprises, members of

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<sup>49</sup> HAG & VANGO (2020) No Turning Back. Local leadership in Vanuatu's response to Tropical Cyclone Harold. *Humanitarian Horizons Practice Paper Series*

<sup>50</sup> Ride & Bretherton (2011) Community Resilience in Natural Disasters, *Palgrave MacMillan, New York*.

parliament, and individual applicants and groups. The stimulus reflects the development of a social protection system in the country which has, until this point, been largely lacking.

## Reflective practice

Reflective practice offers an opportunity for collaborative learning, planning and action.<sup>51</sup>

All three countries noted that the evaluation and lessons learned process following several large disasters has contributed to the establishment and refinement of the current NDMO and cluster system. Workshops in Solomon Islands following the 2007 tsunami to review disaster assistance and develop the National Disaster Management Plan was cited as having a large impact on disaster responses, as it was followed by funding for the National Disaster Management Plan, cluster committee structure and other improvements to coordination, strategic decision-making and implementation.

In the context of Fiji, AHP are providing technical and funding support to build the capacity of their 12 partner organisations in monitoring and evaluation. A baseline study has been conducted and joint forums held. AHP has given funding to FCOSS to develop a CSO protocol for accountability which will be shared with government and other CSOs to set a consistent standard for interventions and establish a reporting framework to inform how these organisations operate in humanitarian settings. There is also a push for assessment processes to be better integrated and coordinated across international to local scales.

*“when studies come and nothing is done about it, then we will just fill our shelves with reports.”*

Vanuatu  
Government Respondent

When projects were not inclusive of communities, the result can be that evaluations become “just for the donor.” In these cases, the evaluation is more about meeting externally set aims and outcomes of the project, rather than serving sustainable community resilience. One key informant from the Solomon Islands reported that evaluations done by government ministries and other high-level evaluations (such as by UN agencies) had good recommendations but they tended not to be followed by funding to implement sector-wide change. A stakeholder working on disaster response described an experience where the evaluation was conducted by international donors, but the stakeholder had not seen the report. This highlights some of the challenges associated with evaluation processes and outcomes which do not adequately involve local communities and fail to ensure distribution to local staff.

## ABAs in the Pacific?

There is no question that the Pacific will continue to face large scale disasters and continuing rapid urbanisation. Urban areas, and the people who live in them, need to be better protected. Aid approaches need to ‘urbanise’: they need to be better tailored to urban contexts, embrace urban complexity; and above all, *put people first*. This report has found that the PICs engaged in this research possess, to varying degrees, possess the key capabilities of enacting ABAs.

ABAs are not a panacea, but they are built on evidence of what works in urban settings, and as such deserve attention and scrutiny as an effective approach for urban disaster recovery. The ABA principles provide an alternative framework to support disaster response in the Pacific that

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<sup>51</sup> Keen, Brown and Dyball. (2005) Social Learning in Environmental Management: Towards a Sustainable Future. London: Earthscan.

### *For Discussion*

is contextually focused, leverages existing structures, and promotes increased sector and agency collaboration and coordination. Additionally, they promote the adoption of agile and adaptive response mechanisms and a focus on more sustainable and developmental outcomes. National government, aid actors and aid providers cannot afford to ignore the pressing challenges of urban disaster recovery, and as such should consider promoting approaches such as ABAs, in policy, practice and funding.

## Next steps

There is a compelling argument for the Pacific to adopt ABAs as a complementary approach to disaster response; however, it is critical that this is locally driven. As such, this paper presents an opportunity for further discussion and lesson sharing across the Pacific region to better understand how, and if, ABAs can offer an approach to disaster response that strengthens what currently exists. A summary of possible areas for consideration is summarised in Box 1.

### Box 1: Key Issues for Further Consideration

*What is the most effective way to support active collaboration during disasters and in times of peace?*

This is required across sectors (via the Cluster system) and all levels of government and include community representation. This may require refining the Cluster system and donor evaluation processes

*How best can governance arrangements which coordinate disaster preparedness and response build on existing national and community structures that are tailored to place?*

This includes providing greater attention to the different needs and diverse social structures of urban areas and how this impacts disaster preparedness and response

*Recognising the challenges of assessment and intervention inconsistencies, how can protocols and standards for community interventions by external donors, NGOs, CBOs and FBOs be established?*

This would include the wider adaptation of common assessment tools like the Kobo Toolbox.

*What is the most efficient way to strengthen existing systems and partnerships to consider, account for, and respond to the needs of those most vulnerable?*

This may include leveraging off and increasing the role and capacity of local CBOs and FBOs to better assess and address the needs of the marginalised groups they support

*How do we consider promote realistic and flexible timeframes for interventions which consider long term needs and impacts?*

Strengthening collaborative partnerships between humanitarian and development sectors would support the integration of short and medium term recovery planning with more long term systemic measures to transform urban systems

*What mechanisms are required to promote stronger accountability and ensure fair and equitable allocation of scarce resources.*

Identify and address power and representational dynamics that impact disaster preparedness and response. Consider collaborative development of accountability mechanisms suitable to place which may curb the politicisation of aid.

*Ensure reflective practices and 'lessons learned' are locally accessible and shared across sectors.*

A regional community of practice may offer an opportunity for shared learnings across NDMOs.

*Testing the system and our networks through scenario exercises, a good way to learn?*

Disaster response is complex and changing. Would carefully structured scenario exercises across sector and across countries help to reveal where information flows, collaboration and, even regional action, could be strengthened?

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