

Suva office have been on multiple technical visits to Tonga since 2014 to work with the government on shelter awareness and preparedness. They have also conducted shelter kit training with the Tonga Red Cross Society and government counterparts in order to prepare them to respond to disasters at a local level.



Prior to and during the cyclone, approximately 5700 residents sought refuge in public shelters. In its role as co-convenor of the emergency shelter cluster in natural disasters, the IFRC was requested by the Government of Tonga to deploy a shelter coordination team to support and advise the cluster lead on humanitarian shelter response. Nearly 12000 people were subsequently provided with safe and adequate shelter and settlements.

The importance of local media

As in any large-scale disaster, there was local and international media interest in the impact of Tropical Cyclone Gita. Red Cross' role in affected communities means that providing information to the media was important to ensure that communities were kept informed and the media was able to report on what was needed most in the communities.

Seventy per cent of beneficiaries received information from Tonga Red Cross Society via television and radio. Another 33 per cent got information from social media (Tonga Red Cross Society). This showed that providing information via television, radio and social media can be extremely effective for reaching affected communities.

Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF)

IFRC's DREF provides immediate financial support to National Red Cross Red Crescent Societies, enabling them to carry out their unique role as first responders after a disaster. Tonga Red Cross Society applied for the DREF and received 296517 Swiss francs (298000 USD) to enable their response and relief operation to reach the estimated 18000 people who needed assistance. National Societies can request this support even if the government has not declared an emergency.

Resource allocation and decision-making are all held locally through the DREF. It is then allocated following an operations strategy that is developed by the local Red Cross and IFRC disaster response teams. Red Cross' main activities included: deploying trained staff and volunteers to support needs assessments and relief distribution; meeting urgent health needs and sharing awareness messages; shelter coordination support and logistics.



The IFRC is an international network of 191 National Societies and 12 million volunteers who work to meet the needs and improve the lives of people in need. In the Pacific, IFRC provides coordination, financial and technical support for disaster operations and longer-term development programmes.

There are 14 Red Cross National Societies in the Pacific, all operated by local staff and volunteers, offering programmes and services such as emergency response, disaster preparedness, first aid, health, and water and sanitation.

Red Cross in the Pacific

- 6442 volunteers¹
- 14 national Red Cross societies
- 62 local Red Cross branches¹
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (Suva, Fiji)
- International Committee of the Red Cross (Suva, Fiji)
- Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre

The mission of Red Cross in the Pacific is to save lives, promote dignity and make sure no one is left behind. Red Cross volunteers walk the first and the last mile in an emergency; they are there before, during and after any crisis or disaster.

Every Red Cross national society is auxiliary to the government. They are formed through a government decree, which allows Red Cross and their volunteers to work in partnership with public authorities when disasters happen.

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LOCALISED HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IN THE PACIFIC

- Tropical Cyclone Gita

"It is important that the response is as local as possible; we know the context, we understand the culture and traditions of the people." - Anaseini Iotebau, Disaster Management Officer at Tonga Red Cross.

When Tropical Cyclone Gita hit the Pacific in 2018, it was the local communities, agencies, governments and Pacific Red Cross National Societies who led and coordinated the humanitarian response. Red Cross assisted more than 12000 people following the disaster through direct engagement with those in need and relevant in-country agencies.



What is localised response?

Localisation is when resources and decision making are in the hands of local and national responders. When a disaster or crisis hits, it is the people on the ground that have the ability to respond and help the people affected. Local actors play a crucial role in ensuring early response and access, community acceptance, cost effectiveness and linking with development initiatives.

The aim of localisation is to improve humanitarian response; ensuring that everyone has access to quality, impactful and sustainable assistance that is efficient, effective and fit for purpose. Localisation is also about complementing local and international action in order to maximise the comparative advantages of both and to increase effectiveness of the humanitarian response.

Red Cross National Societies, governments, local and international non-government organisations have developed their own definition (Annual Pacific Red Cross DRM Forum 2017) of localisation as 'a process of recognising, respecting and strengthening the independence of leadership and decision making by national actors in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations'.

¹ Excluding Papua New Guinea, Australia and New Zealand.

Tropical Cyclone Gita

Severe Tropical Cyclone Gita tore through the South Pacific in February 2018, affecting multiple islands nations and territories.

Tonga was the hardest-hit, with severe damage in the main island of Tongatapu and 'Eua, a smaller outer island. The category five storm destroyed more than 300 homes and damaged more than 2000. Destructive winds left the two islands largely without power and heavy rain flooded low-lying areas.

In Samoa and American Samoa, torrential rains and damaging winds caused widespread damage, rivers flooded homes and cut off roads. In Fiji, the outlying Lau islands were significantly affected - homes were destroyed and damaged, and nearly 300 people were provided shelter. Minor damage was reported in Niue, Wallis and Futuna, and Vanuatu.

For Tonga, it was the most intense tropical cyclone to impact the Kingdom since records began. A state of emergency was declared by the Tongan Government on 12 February 2018 to allow international support to assist in the disaster response, but the response was led and coordinated from start to finish by local communities, agencies and the government, particularly in the nine days before international assistance arrived.

Disaster preparedness

"Preparedness works. Having the communities have a plan and understand the dangers and knowledge works." - Fiji Red Cross Secretary General Filipe Nainoca.



Pacific Red Cross National Societies prepare for the annual cyclone season all year round, working with local authorities to support communities in understanding how to prepare and respond to disasters. Understanding weather warnings, having an emergency plan and kit and knowing a safe place to evacuate can save lives.



From Torres Island in Vanuatu to Mauke in Cook Islands, the Red Cross network has approximately 100 storage sites in the Pacific with Red Cross standard emergency relief items such as household hygiene kits, tarpaulins, blankets, jerry cans and mosquito nets. This makes Red Cross the largest humanitarian logistics network in the Pacific and allows Red Cross National Societies to distribute household relief supplies quickly to impacted communities.

Australian Red Cross and New Zealand Red Cross also keep a stockpile of the same standard Red Cross emergency relief items and can supplement supplies when needed and requested by their neighbouring Pacific National Societies.

Local volunteers as first responders

Red Cross National Societies are made up of local staff and volunteers who are therefore often responding to events that impact them, their families and their communities.

Red Cross has an extensive network of more than 5000 volunteers trained in first aid, emergency preparedness and response, both across villages and remote outer island communities in the Pacific. They work with communities to prepare for emergencies and identify actions they can take in order to minimise the impact and risk of the disaster.

Red Cross Societies' emergency response teams (ERTs) are often activated before and after an emergency. These teams assist with tasks such as setting up emergency operations centres, conducting assessments and distributing non-food items (NFIs).

Responding to community needs

The response was led by Tonga Red Cross Society's team of experienced and trained staff and volunteers who were already working in the communities most affected by Tropical Cyclone Gita.

For example, at 'Ofa Tui 'Amanaki, Tonga Red Cross Society's school for children with disabilities, the teachers joined the wider Red Cross team to help with the Tropical Cyclone Gita response, particularly to ensure that the needs of the students and other people with disabilities were met.



Tonga Red Cross also provided outreach and talked to community members to identify people with disabilities who needed further support. The number of students at the school has tripled since Tropical Cyclone Gita, as the assessment team identified others who were either shy or faced barriers to come to the school before the cyclone or had no knowledge of the existence of the school.

Local health lens

Tonga Red Cross Society also co-ordinated closely with the Ministry of Health to develop the health action plan for Tropical Cyclone Gita response. This was particularly important given there was already a dengue outbreak in Tonga before Tropical Cyclone Gita made landfall.

The health awareness activities focussing on epidemic prevention and control activities were conducted to prevent dengue, acute respiratory infections and diarrhoea outbreaks in close coordination with the Ministry of Health.



Around 11540 people were reached with the health messages and clean-up drive. Several communication methods were used to disseminate health information, such as door-to-door visits, school visits, television and radio programmes and social media. The Tonga Red Cross Society also distributed a total of 1924 mosquito nets and 1624 mosquito coils to affected households.

Planning ahead

Tonga Red Cross Society, like other Red Cross National Societies across the Pacific, had prepositioned aid supplies across their islands. These supplies, stored in towns, villages and remote outer islands, meant that Red Cross volunteers could begin to distribute lifesaving emergency aid immediately.

Tonga Red Cross Society prepositioned relief supplies in 14 sites – five sites in Tongatapu, five sites in Ha'apai, one site in 'Eua Island, one site in Vava'u Island and two sites in the far northern Nuiua islands. At each site, Tonga Red Cross Society volunteers were trained in basic logistics processes to facilitate and track the transport of pre-positioned stock to distribution sites. These stocks could serve the needs of up to 2000 households across the country.

The prepositioned stocks in Tongatapu and 'Eua were distributed to affected populations and were supplemented by family tents and hygiene kits stored in Vava'u and Ha'apai. More than 2000 tarpaulins and 500 shelter tool kits were distributed by Tonga Red Cross in the first month after Tropical Cyclone Gita hit. The items distributed were quickly replenished so that Tonga Red Cross Society is ready if another disaster occurs.

Building new shelter

In Tonga, the shelter cluster has been active since Tropical Cyclone Ian in 2014. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has been leading the Pacific shelter cluster since its activation in 2012, as a part of the Pacific Humanitarian Team. Support staff from IFRC's