

CHAPTER 2

CURRENT AND PREVIOUS DISASTER-RELATED ACTIVITIES

2.1 NATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Disasters, and in particular tropical cyclones, are a part of life in the South Pacific and disaster preparedness measures have been carried out from early times. Still, in most contemporary Pacific island countries the major response strategy to disasters is to react to the events once they have occurred through the provision, receipt and redistribution of relief assistance. Similarly, rehabilitation of infrastructure and major economic activities (eg agriculture, tourism) are major tasks following disasters.

While large amounts of bilateral and multilateral assistance are required for disaster relief and rehabilitation, it is widely considered that it accounts for only a small portion of public and private sector losses. Cyclone Kina [1993] in Fiji is a case in this point. The total assistance for disaster relief amounted to US\$4.37 million, while the redeployment of government funds from the 1993 budget exceeded US\$26 million, including provisions for relief food supplies for 115,000 people, costing the government more than US\$7 million.

The region recognizes the need to provide effective and expedient emergency management, disaster relief and reconstruction. It also attaches great importance to assisting communities and sectors of society to prepare for natural hazard impacts and to reduce the risks to which communities are exposed. The activities carried out in this respect have been constrained by limitations in resources and by other pressing priorities. Nevertheless, progress has been made in disaster preparedness and disaster reduction. There has been increased attention to improve disaster preparedness, especially in the form of community awareness programmes. Primarily these include some public awareness activities combined with limited arrangements for disaster preparedness of government departments. These activities were adequate given the limited resources, but disaster preparedness definitely requires strengthening.

Disaster mitigation, as a deliberate activity to reduce the effects of future natural hazard impacts, has been practised as part of our traditional coping mechanisms, but has received less attention as a separate activity in present day activities by disaster authorities. In most countries in the region, disaster reduction has however been undertaken to a certain extent as part of normal, on-going development efforts, often not linked to disaster management. These include flood control schemes, coastal protection, improvement of building standards and other activities that have reduced the risks to which communities are exposed.

Natural disasters have in some cases been a concern of those involved in development planning and practical programming. Yet we have not yet been able to systematically include disaster considerations in development planning and programming. This is in part due to the lack of institutional capabilities to appraise potential disaster impacts and identify possible remedies, and partly due to a lack of comprehensive assessments of hazards and vulnerabilities. We are further becoming increasingly aware of the risks of complacency. After a few years free from a major disaster, sometimes priority

for disaster preparedness and reduction fades and is shifted to on-going and every day needs associated with the provision of government services and with management and initiation of development activities, sometimes irrespective of their vulnerability to disaster. Maintaining a state of alert and preparedness and bolster linking disasters to development are two of the more critical challenges facing the region.

For a more detailed account of activities in individual countries, refer to the IDNDR Country reports, as prepared by individual countries for the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction.

2.2 REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Regional organizations play an important role in the South Pacific. Because of the limited human resources in individual countries, regional organizations provide specialised services to member countries, mainly in the fields of environment, applied geosciences, agriculture and fisheries. The Universities of the South Pacific [USP] and Papua New Guinea (UPNG) provides tertiary education to the region and there are several fora for policy coordination.

Regional support for disaster management has been somewhat fragmented over the last decade. The most sustained period of regional disaster reduction activity was in the early and mid-1980s when the Pacific Island Development Programme [PIDP] at the East-West Centre of the University of Hawaii, conducted a five year disaster preparedness project. The programme was funded by USAID. It produced some 30 manuals and publications that included: a comprehensive overview of disaster experience and response in Pacific island countries; surveys of housing vulnerability in a number of countries and the production of manuals showing simple ways to strengthen homes; a housing demonstration project in the Solomon Islands; production of manuals on disaster preparedness planning and post-disaster assessment; and production of disaster profiles for selected countries. PIDP also held a number of meetings and workshops. The main problem with the programme was the lack of in-country follow-up activities, yet programme outcomes may still serve as a basis for building in-country capabilities and institutions.

Following this programme, the Forum Secretariat had a regional disaster adviser for a period of three years. Unfortunately, this did not lead to any regional disaster reduction programme. The South Pacific Forum meeting is an important policy making body for the region. The Forum Secretariat operates a regional trust fund for disaster assistance. This fund provides relief assistance to member governments up to approximately US\$13,000 per event.

Over the years, regional organizations, in particular SPREP and SOPAC have increasingly started to integrate disaster matters within their own mandates. SOPAC's involvement in disasters is linked to the work on geological processes which are recognized as hazards in the island nations of the Pacific. The organization has been involved in post-disaster assessment after numerous cyclones and other disasters, focusing on coastal erosion and accretion, landslides and other on-shore geological processes and damage to infrastructures. As part of its coastal management programme, SOPAC has assessed the impact of hazards, including cyclones, storm surges, tsunamis, coastal erosion and sea level rise on the coastal zones of Pacific island countries. The results are applied to development projects to optimize the design and operation of coastal structures and minimise any adverse impacts. SOPAC is further involved in the mapping of geological hazards and its training programmes continue to foster a better understanding of geological processes and potential resultant hazards and disasters.

Through its current programmes, SPREP's involvement in natural disasters is mainly linked to medium and longer term environmental changes and processes, and their actual as well as possible impact on Pacific island countries. SPREP has been called upon in the past to assess environmental impacts of natural disasters, in particular the effect of tropical Cyclone Ofa on the native forests of Western Samoa. SPREP's expertise in this area is available to all countries in the region. The SPREP climate change programme has close linkages with natural disasters, and the risks they impose. SPREP has carried out a number of studies in several Pacific island countries to assess the coastal vulnerability and resilience to climate change and sea level rise. SPREP is currently in the process of including a number of new disaster-related projects in its work programme. These include hazard assessment and mitigation in the framework of integrated coastal zone management and appraisal of hazard impacts on the natural environment.

2.3 INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

Most donor countries and other organizations that are active in development cooperation in the region also provide relief assistance after natural disasters. Australia, New Zealand and France have recently signed a formal agreement to coordinate their disaster relief assistance. For other donors, no such arrangements exist, and support is given on a country by country basis. Assistance for disaster rehabilitation is also provided by a large number of donor countries and, organizations often concurrent with existing programmes.



Emergency supplies arrive at Port Vila, Vanuatu following Tropical Cyclone Prema, 1993

An important activity in tropical cyclone prediction is the biennial World Meteorological Organization [WMO] Tropical Cyclone Programme [TCP] meeting. This meeting has identified the need for strengthening the capacity of Pacific meteorological services through training, technical assistance and upgrading of equipment. Other WMO Programmes, such as the World Weather Watch [WWW] and the World Climate Programme [WCP] are fundamental in determining meteorological hazards in the region.

Several donors are contributing, (or have done so) to the improvement of cyclone forecasting capabilities in the region. USAID funded a programme to enhance the satellite data receiving capability of SPSSD system at the Tropical Cyclone Warning Centre in Nadi and AIDAB has undertaken to install two wind surveillance radars in Fiji.

Substantial assistance to natural disaster reduction was provided by UNDP in the fourth cycle regional programme through funding of the "Regional Tropical Cyclone Programme" (RAS/86/109). This programme provided equipment, technical assistance and training to improve and upgrade regional tropical cyclone forecasting and warning services and regional communication.

Support to disaster reduction activities further included Australian-assisted preparation of building codes for several countries in the region such as Fiji and Tuvalu. Within the framework of IDNDR, Australia has further helped develop a number of cyclone preparedness and assessment guidelines for Vanuatu and Solomon Islands. Other proposed Australian support for disaster management in the South Pacific includes in-country training workshops, printing of the revised disaster plan in Fiji, development of a media based awareness campaign for Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, and the provision of Australian disaster awareness materials and guidelines. Australia is currently funding a national disaster management adviser in Vanuatu. Assistance has been on-going for two years and has considerably strengthened Vanuatu's disaster management capacity, in particular in disaster preparedness and emergency operations. More detail on these programmes can be found in the Australian National Summary Report to the IDNDR World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction.

Other disaster management assistance includes the South Pacific Programme Office of the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs [DHA-SPPO], which provides technical assistance to Pacific island countries on a wide range of disaster management subjects. USAID has recently re-activated its post of regional disaster adviser, in cooperation with the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance [OFDA]. Several of the New Zealand bilateral development aid projects have disaster components. These include assistance to meteorological offices, geographic information systems, environmental and forestry projects, and assistance in the training of rural carpenters in Fiji. As part of a disaster rehabilitation programme, the Asian Development Bank is currently funding technical assistance in disaster management in the Marshall Islands. In Palau, Federated States of Micronesia and Marshall Islands several disaster mitigation projects are currently undertaken under an arrangement providing for USA Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA].

In recent years a number of workshops and meetings involving NGOs and government officials have been conducted with support from a variety of agencies. AODRO, a former Australian coordination body of NGOs has held a series of workshops for disaster preparedness for NGOs in most countries. Recent regional meetings of disaster managers have been organized and funded by DHA-SPPO (Fiji, 1991) and the Australian IDNDR Coordinating Committee (Solomon Islands, 1992 and Vanuatu, 1993). The most recent regional workshop was the South Pacific Workshop of the UN Disaster Management Training Programme, which was held in Western Samoa in 1993.

A relatively large number of disaster managers have participated in overseas training by the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre [ADPC] in Bangkok and by the Australian Emergency Management Institute [AEMI] at Mount Macedon in Australia. Participation in ADPC courses was mainly funded by USAID, Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB), ODA and EC, while funding for AEMI courses is generally provided by AIDAB. In all, a considerable amount of training and workshops have taken place in the region. Unfortunately, countries of the region has not yet been able to build a long-term programme of activities based upon these efforts in a way that steadily enhances human resources in disaster management in the region.

It is important to draw together all these initiatives. Collaboration amongst the various aid agencies needs strengthening. Improving the flow of information, and an on-going mechanism to enhance the national disaster management capabilities would contribute to an improved framework for disaster mitigation, preparedness and response. The region advocates for a concerted and coordinated effort by all to ensure effectiveness and sustainability of programmes at regional and national levels.

COOK ISLANDS - BROADENING OF THE DISASTER ORGANIZATION

Disaster awareness in the Cook Islands has increased considerably over the last ten years. Following two major cyclones, Cyclone Sally in 1985 and Peni in 1990. The Hurricane Safety Committee, which was chaired by the Commissioner for Police and was the coordinating agency for emergency response activities began to look at the issue of disaster preparedness and mitigation. Officials from relevant agencies were sent on disaster training courses and technical assistance was provided by UNDP/DHA-SPPO in Suva. A National Disaster Preparedness Workshop in March 1992 developed recommendations and prepared future action plans.

Partly, as a result of that Workshop, a National Disaster Management Committee (NDMC) was formed. The NDMC, chaired by the Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department, is charged with co-ordinating all disaster related activities in the Cook Islands. NDMC membership includes a wide range of government and private agencies to ensure that the members of the public are fully represented, and their voices can be heard at the policy and decision making levels.

The NDMC recently completed a draft Civil Defence Act, which encompasses both natural and man-made disasters and will replace the Hurricane Safety Act. Assistance is now being sought for a consultant to produce an associated Civil Defense Plan. Other activities include on-going public awareness media campaigns, as well as disaster preparedness and mitigation. The committee is working successfully and is fully committed to achieving IDNDR goals and objectives.