

Pacific Red Cross Societies Preparing for a Changing Climate

Background

Climate Change is here now. It is not something to only think about in the distant future. Scientists and meteorological offices around the world are registering changes to the global system such as increases in temperature, sea level, frequency and intensity of weather-related events as well as changes to where plants and animals live and when they reproduce. Many of these changes can be attributed to an ever growing rate of greenhouse gas emissions which are warming the planet. Greenhouse gases are produced by burning fuels such as oil and coal. As emissions rise, changes will be increasingly noticed and become more pronounced. These global changes will have very real local impacts on livelihoods and health, and have humanitarian implications that the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement is especially concerned about.



Figure 1. High sea level events that can bring salt water onto low lying areas and cause damage such as this are becoming more frequent according to the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2007)

Pacific countries are considered amongst the world's most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Many of the inhabited atolls are very narrow and low lying, bordered on either side by lagoons or the open ocean. These nations have expressed feeling threatened by rising sea levels and changes to weather patterns and extremities. The Red Cross Societies in the Pacific have a growing concern for the impact this is having on

the people they serve. Therefore, the challenge for the Movement is to include climate change as part of its regular mandate to assist the most vulnerable people, particularly in relation to disaster management, health and care.

The Project

The Pacific climate change programme, which kicked off in late 2005, has been funded with assistance from the Canada Fund¹, Japanese Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (The Federation) and the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre. The project began with a capacity building component: increasing knowledge and interpretation of climate change science within National Societies. Rather than presenting climate change as a stand alone scientific issue, it was discussed in the context of regular regional Red Cross meetings, relating to topics such as health and disaster management. By discussing climate change from a Red Cross perspective, the mystery could be taken out of scientific language that can sometimes be daunting. Information from other National Societies around the world that had piloted work on the issue was incorporated into discussions.

Samoa and Tuvalu Red Cross Societies lead the way with pilot projects that have evolved into ongoing activities at the national and community level. Solomon Islands, Tonga, Kiribati and Cook Islands Red Cross Societies have taken on the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre's preparedness for climate change programme, which involves up to four integral steps. This includes a workshop for staff and volunteers on climate change impacts and adaptation, as well as building a network with other actors working on climate such as government departments, including the meteorological office and environment ministry, as well as NGOs. A document assessing how climate change is likely to impact the country and the work of the

¹ The Canada Fund provides financial support for small-scale local initiatives within Canada's six priority areas for overseas development.

National Society is produced and distributed, a regional meeting is attended and activities that address climate risks in the context of regular programmes and priorities of the National Society are developed.



Figure 2. Samoa Red Cross have been integrating climate change into their community based puppet shows photo: M.Bateup

Recognizing the links between disaster management and climate change, attempts are being made at the national and regional levels to build bridges between the two sectors and to encourage sharing of knowledge and lessons learnt. The humanitarian implications of climate change and the importance of disaster risk reduction activities have been communicated in newsletters and regional forums. Subsequently, there has been an evolution of the acceptance of climate change as an issue worth considering and addressing.

Outcomes

The eventual outcome should be reduced vulnerability of the people served by the Pacific National Societies. While the programme is still in its early days, a range of initiatives are already making a contribution to awareness, preparedness and risk reduction in the face of rising threats, including advocacy and partnerships with government and other actors. For instance:

Samoa Red Cross has identified groups in the urban areas of the capital Apia who are particularly vulnerable to climate risks because of their socio-economic status, the location and conditions in which they live and poor health.

The results of a Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA) are being utilised by the Samoa Red Cross in conjunction with these communities and the Health Department to build their resilience. The National Society produced two documentaries on climate change in Samoa in cooperation with Samoa Broadcasting Corporation and government ministries, which were aired twice on national television. They have also promoted talented young volunteers and used their drama skills to hold community puppet shows and a poster competition, not only to raise awareness of climate change, but also to provide practical solutions such as interpretation of weather warnings and health promotion. According to Tautala Mauala, the Secretary General, “we will assist people to understand the concept and concerns, and assist them to react with relevant adaptation means to reduce the likely impacts of climate change”.



Figure 3. The winning poster from a Tuvalu Red Cross poster competition on climate change and disaster management

Under Step 1 of the Preparedness for Climate Change programme, **Kiribati Red Cross** invited the meteorological office and relevant government ministries to explain the nature of climate change. It was also an opportunity for the National Society to be more aware of programmes that already exist and explore ways it can add to the work being undertaken by these agencies. Activities that have been developed include a school programme where teachers undergo a workshop on climate change with assistance from the technical resource people and the Kiribati Red Cross. The teachers then



assist the school children in the interpretation of climate change and disaster risk reduction literature into another medium such as poetry, songs or plays to be presented in a competition to communities.



Figure 4. A student finds the right answer to a question being posed by Tataua Pese, Climate Change/Disaster Management Officer of Tuvalu Red Cross on Disaster Reduction day, 2007

Tuvalu Red Cross began by strengthening their disaster management capacities which have recently been tested out during a flood. Partnerships in Tuvalu have strengthened significantly through efforts of the climate change and disaster management officer, who is a founding member of the Tuvalu Climate Action Network (TuCAN), a working group on climate change. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) will soon hold climate change adaptation training and projects which Tuvalu Red Cross will attend and assist in implementing.

The officer has been working hard on improving cooperation with government agencies and NGOs, and has undertaken activities on Disaster Reduction Day in schools. The officer has also conducted community information sessions on climate change, disaster preparedness, health and care. A communications program implemented by New Zealand Red Cross and the Federation has ensured that satellite phones have been distributed to all outer islands in Tuvalu with training – increasing warning and reducing response times in these remote islands for climate as well as non-climate related events.

The **Tonga, Cook Islands and Solomon Islands Red Cross Societies** are undertaking all four steps in the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre's preparedness for climate change programme and have dedicated staff working on the project. In response to an increase in the frequency and intensity of cyclones, the Cook Islands Red Cross is proactive in investigating the strengthening of activities on outer islands. It has raised the profile of the Pacific Red Cross Societies in the climate change arena by attending international meetings on the Kyoto Protocol as a representative of their civil society. Tonga Red Cross will be involved in 'talk back radio' shows and have integrated climate change into their emergency response team training.

Lessons Learned

- Red Cross has a very important role in highlighting the humanitarian impacts of climate change as well as providing real examples of how to reduce risk.
- That disseminating knowledge of climate change on its own is not enough. People need to be empowered to take action to reduce risk in their lives.
- Each National Society will find different priorities in relation to climate change depending on the expected impacts, the vulnerability of its people, and its capacities. The roles and responsibilities of other actors, including governments, also need to be considered.
- That interpretation of climate information (including El Nino events and seasonal forecasts) is a priority in the Pacific Early Warning Strategy, an important area for National Societies to work on with communities so that the right information can reach the people who need it the most.
- Drama is a highly effective means of communication that entertains as well as informs. It mobilizes the energy of young (and young at heart) volunteers, while building their confidence.



- Making links with the environment ministry is important not just in relation to climate change but also in the broader context of disaster risk reduction. Many of the contributing causes of disasters can be related to natural resource degradation such as the cutting of mangroves, contamination of water, logging practises, erosion of waterways and reef destruction.



Figure 5. Kiribati Red Cross have gained the support of the Kiribati Meteorological Office and are now working in conjunction with them to assist school teachers implement activities with students

- Experiences by Samoa Red Cross in dealing with people excluded from the traditional village system has lead them to the understanding that migration to urban areas will challenge our notions of traditional village systems and interrupt support structures as well as traditional knowledge
- Changes to the climate system are beginning to threaten traditional knowledge of people living in rural areas; for example there are places in the Solomon Islands where people's livelihoods are beginning to be affected by changes in wind patterns that are traditionally used to plant crops by, posing new and growing challenges

The way forward in the Pacific

Climate change will be a part of the responsibility of National Societies in the region through its impacts on disaster management and health and care. The most effective way to deal with those rising risks is to recognize them and to integrate them into the work of the Movement. In doing so, climate change also provides opportunities to reinvigorate Red Cross Red Crescent work, especially on disaster risk reduction. It forces us to ask the question – what can we do differently, more of or better?

In the Pacific, the Movement is taking these approaches:

- Climate change becomes integrated into the work of the Pacific Red Cross societies by including it in training, community awareness and advocacy
- Supporting National Societies in the implementation of priority activities
- Share lessons learnt between National Societies
- Develop a Pacific version of the VCA toolkit, building on Pacific experiences that incorporates some discussion on climate
- Work with regional and national organizations on implementing the strategy for early warning in the Pacific
- Utilize regional climate change and disaster risk reduction partners at each annual Pacific Red Cross disaster management forum
- Investigate school and community based materials with other regional organizations

© International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Any part of this document may be cited, copied, translated into other languages or adapted to meet local needs without prior permission from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, provided that the source is clearly stated.