

A consortium of seven international development agencies including Caritas and led by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) developed the overall programme. Our connections with local NGOs, such as Caritas Tonga, and church networks has facilitated participation from those who would be most directly affected by any disasters.

‘The purpose is to build long-term disaster resilience in the Pacific Region,’ says Mark, ‘in order to reduce loss of life, property and other resources. We’re aiming to build local resilience, strengthen people’s preparedness and their ability to respond to disaster, and also improve the partnerships with all those involved.’

An overall report will be prepared with learnings from the whole programme, and a video produced to help future disaster preparedness exercises.



Debriefing is an important part of the process following a simulation exercise. Photo: Oxfam New Zealand.

Preparedness saves lives

The value of disaster preparedness was highlighted dramatically by the recent impact of Cyclone Phailin on eastern India in early October. One of the strongest storms to hit India, it affected up to 9 million people and destroyed hundreds of thousands of homes across two Indian states.

However, early warning systems and evacuation of more than 900,000 people from low-lying coastal areas to inland emergency shelters kept casualties low.

In that emergency, Caritas was among those spreading the word at the local village level, through parishes and congregations, asking people to prepare with all possible means.

People in the Pacific face natural disaster risks from cyclones, earthquakes and tsunami, and volcanic eruptions. Extreme weather events are expected to increase with climate change. Preparation is vital – it saves lives and helps with early recovery.

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Facing down disasters in the Pacific

This year Caritas has been involved in a major programme to strengthen emergency preparedness and response mechanisms in three Pacific countries. The programme focused on training workshops and a simulation exercise tailored for each of Vanuatu, Tonga and Fiji. It was made possible thanks to your support as well as funding from the New Zealand Aid Programme. This issue of One World Partnership highlights the Tongan simulation exercise through the eyes of our partner Caritas Tonga.

Church bells and lali* will note the sound of warning in Tonga again, as a result of ‘Exercise Piha’ – the disaster simulation exercise which involved four villages on Tonga’s main island of Tongatapu. The exercise tested the responses of local communities in coordination with government and non-government agencies, in the event of a mock tsunami generated by an 8.7 magnitude earthquake 200 kilometres southwest of Tongatapu.

Caritas Tonga Programmes Officer Amelia Ma’afu (right) says the decision to go back to using traditional warning systems was made when early-warning sirens at Makaunga village didn’t go off. The failure highlighted the importance of regular and reliable servicing of the sirens – as well as not relying solely on modern technology. It prompted a return to the use of more traditional tools as well.



Caritas Tonga Director Sister Senolita Vakata takes part in the simulation exercise. Photo: Trish Murray/ CWS.

* hollow logs beaten with sticks

‘The early warning system in that part of Tongatapu is the difference between life and death,’ says Amelia. Consequently, local people use church bells and lali to warn communities of impending danger – as well as sirens that can be triggered automatically and manually.

Amelia says it was just the kind of thing the exercise was intended to uncover.

‘The value for the community is that they had previous training and plans which they were able to implement and see what’s involved in disaster response. They were able to implement their plans, identify gaps, and develop strategies to strengthen their response.’

Ma’ukakala Tangifua chairs the Talafo’ou Village Emergency Committee and is also on Caritas Tonga’s Executive Committee. He said about the exercise:

I didn’t expect to reach the standard that we reached on that day. The ability of the Village Emergency Committee to carry out the plan ... was very successful. ... all of our VEC members understood what is expected of us according to the plan, we each knew what job we would carry out and the goals we were trying to achieve in the plan. ...

I was also told by one of the observers that my Village (Talafo’ou) was the best village in terms of participation in the drill evacuation.

The first drill exercise for his community was back in 2009 – a cyclone drill involving Village Emergency Committee members only. He’s now grateful for having two disaster preparedness plans – one for cyclone and one for tsunami.

As the leader of Talafo’ou Village Emergency Committee – I want to highlight the need for more exercises in the future and also further trainings to educate the people of our village on the importance of disaster-ready communities.

Where I live, it is very low and yet there is very little training on disaster preparedness in [this] eastern district part of Tongatapu, but given that we are a vulnerable part of Tongatapu, we should have more trainings to help us to save our lives.

Amelia appreciated the opportunity to work with other disaster response agencies, particularly other non-government organisations. The programme enabled each organisation to share what services and support they could offer in emergencies. For example, other agencies appreciated Caritas Tonga’s close connection with grassroots communities, through their development programmes and strong network of village committees.

The exercise also strengthened Caritas Tonga’s relationship with the Tongan government. ‘It reconfirmed what Caritas Tonga can bring to a disaster,’ said Amelia, not just at recovery stage, but in the initial response stage as well.

The exercise involved 12 Caritas Tonga staff and volunteers, including Director Sr Senolita Vakata. She ran with the community during the mock evacuation for Talafo’ou village, and was also on hand in the ‘hot debrief’ with the community to review what was done well, and what lessons could be learned.

A report on the event said communities are becoming more familiar with the importance of disaster preparedness and participating in emergency drills. However, there is still a need for a lot more training, especially in regard to



Practising bandaging during the simulation exercise in Makaunga Village, Nuku’alofa. Photo: Oxfam New Zealand.

awareness of natural disaster risks, and for communities to practice evacuation exercises regularly to be familiar with Community Village emergency plans.

For one village, the exercise highlighted the need to ensure all relevant organisations are included and communicating with each other, in particular ensuring that the plans of the Village Emergency Committee were in harmony with those of the local school.

Right and lower right: Children participated from Talafo’ou Primary School. Photos: Oxfam New Zealand.



The simulation exercise came close to reality for school children. Here’s what some said in their ‘hot debrief’:

How did you feel when you participated in the drill evacuation?

- Very scared like it was a real event
- Very angry that the tsunami came to my school
- My heart beat very fast
- Very tired from trying to run quickly to higher ground

What do you think we could do to reduce the risks during a tsunami?

- Pray and sing to God
- Always practice running
- Always exercise

What do you think you children could do to help the teacher during a natural disaster?

- Listen carefully to the teacher
- Obey all instructions



Vanuatu and Fiji simulation exercises

Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand Humanitarian Programmes Officer Mark Mitchell (left) participated in the Vanuatu simulation exercise and says learnings there and in the most recent Fiji exercise were similar. According to the different contexts and players in each country, each exercise has tested plans and systems, identified gaps and improved organisations’ understanding of each other.

This comprehensive disaster risk reduction programme has been the first of its kind – encompassing a range of different countries, and a cooperative approach involving many levels of organisation.