Disaster and Risk Management: Fiji Experience

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INTRODUCTION

Fiji is a small developing South Pacific island nation located at 15.22°S and 174°E-177°W with land area of approximately 18,272 sq km with a population estimated at 821,000 (2001). It was proclaimed a British colony in 1874 and gained independence in 1970, became a republic in 1987 and is a member of the Commonwealth until October 6, 2006 when the democratically elected Government was forcefully overthrown by the Military. The indigenous Fijians and the Indians are the two major ethnic groups and they make up close to 85% of the total population. The Dry season is from May – October and Wet season from November – April, which is normal cyclone season. The capital is Suva one of only two cities in the country with a population of 77,366 (1966). Tourism is the backbone of the country's economy, other manufacturing and numerous agro-based industries with sugar being the one next to tourism make up the rest of the local economy. GDP has an annual growth rate of 8.2% (2001) and GDP per head of population stands at F$4,064.3(2001).

1. DISASTER THREATS IN FIJI

Natural disasters are specific threats to Fiji and other small South Pacific island countries and are an integral part of life that they will continue to come to terms with.

Our vulnerability stems from the fact that we are potentially exposed to a wide range of hazards, both natural and man-made. These include cyclone, flood, landslide, drought, earthquake, tsunami and other adverse events such as aircraft accident, oil and chemical spills, fire and even civil unrest. Fiji is located within the earthquake belt, the Pacific Rim of Fire. Other factors stems from our geographical, environmental, sociological and economic characteristics, which are unique to our region.

Fiji depends very much on the natural environment for its well being with a fragile tourism-based, and agro-based economy and because our island environments are susceptible to natural and man-made hazards their occurrences often times caused great devastation to the country and its economy.

Fiji has its fare share of natural disasters that have wreaked havoc all over the country with wide ranging implications in social and economic terms and caused serious setback to national development.

2. MANAGING DISASTERS IN FIJI

The strength of the Fijian community in the past however was embedded within its traditional coping mechanism making them resilient to natural disasters; unfortunately this has gradually eroded over the years with the introduction of new technology and cultural and traditional inclinations within Fijian society. This included traditional food preservation techniques, the harvesting of wild foods, the planting of disaster-resistance

crops, traditional forms of housing design and construction and social networks on community support.

Initially in 1970 the emergency service in the country was managed by the ***Emergency Committee (EMSEC)*** within the ***Ministry of Home Affairs*** dealing exclusively with the management of emergency operations, and it was normally activated only in the event of a disaster. Under this adhoc arrangement, government efforts were geared towards the safety of life and property and the provision of immediate relief to the affected communities.

In the country's history, one of the most devastating cyclones that has ever struck the Fiji was "Cyclone Bebe" in ***1972*** during which the Government set up the ***Prime Minister's Hurricane Relief Committee.*** This disaster-management arrangement was in operation throughout the 70s and into the 80s. Due to the dramatically broadening nature of its operation, ***in 1982*** it developed into a government department as the ***Department of Relief, Rehabilitation and Rural Housing*** that later became the ***Ministry of Rural Development and Rural Housing*** and presently the ***Ministry of Regional Development.***

The Fiji Government has progressively developed its disaster and risk management organization and has established a full time National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) to co-ordinate and manage disaster and risk management related activities and programs.

3. STRATEGY AND INITIATIVES TOWARDS DISASTER MANAGEMENT

The Ministry of Regional Development through the NDMO (National Disaster and Risk Management Organisation) as the national coordinating authority has been actively involved in the formulation, promotion and implementation of programs and activities on disaster and risk management. The National Disaster Awareness week conducted in October every year is aimed at raising awareness at all levels and to enhance Government and community state of readiness. This will be reinforced through the ongoing education and awareness program planned for the year that is going to be a permanent feature of the national program. Training programs are being conducted at all levels to develop skills and knowledge of Government and private sector officials and the community in dealing with disasters. E.g. Damage Assessment and EOC Management are two core courses aimed at developing skills of individuals involved in emergency operations and assessment.

The National Disaster Management Office through the support of the South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC) is already working towards the development of a new approach to disaster and risk management with the primary objective of strengthening community resilience and sustainable development.

This new concept is called Comprehensive Hazard And Risk Management or CHARM. It is s development-planning tool designed to provide a systematic decision-making process that clearly defines types and rsiks and the assignment of priorities for treating those risks, to which our communities are most vulnerable. CHARM is also aimed at

integrating risk management into national development planning. This will require mainstreaming CHARM into Government development planning process that calls for an integrated coordinated approach among all stakeholders.

It is envisaged that through SOPAC support, Fiji will play a prominent role in championing CHARM in the region and also in the international arena. It is anticipated that the successful implementation of CHARM development in Fiji would help bring about the following:

[a] Sustainable development planning and community livelihood and also strengthen disaster response capacity. CHARM would also facilitate project identification, prioritization and resources allocation. It would sustain donors' confidence for future funding support.

[b] It will ensure more effective use of available resources through information sharing, collaborative partnership opportunities and less duplication of effort. It will also serve as a useful tool for identifying priority gaps with the development planning needs of the country.

[c] Programmed activities will seek to build national capacity to undertake sustainable CHARM country wide using national resources, thus diminishing the reliance on external expertise and aid.

4. Challenges and Areas of Assistance needed in Disaster Management

4.1 One of the most effective measures for disaster preparedness is well functioning early warning systems that deliver accurate and understandable information in a timely manner. The country has recognized the need to strengthen its early warning systems that respond to specific and urgent needs and the circumstances in our communities. Included here is the need to communicate over a vast ocean distances both within Fiji and with other countries, and of the generally isolated populations.

4.2 The only warning system that is working well in Fiji is the one dealing with tropical cyclone managed by the Department of Meteorology. Authorities responsible for the assessment of threats of national disaster including early warning system is explicitly stated in the National Disaster Management Act. Early warning system weaknesses and deficiencies highlighted in this paper pay particular regard to tsunami and flood.

4.3 Under the Australian Tsunami Warning System (ATWS) project, Australia will allocate A$10.6 million over the next covering technical assistance and purchase of equipment for location around the south west Pacific. Australia will be working with SOPAC to strengthen existing capabilities in Pacific Island Countries to receive and act on tsunami warnings throughout their territories. In addition Australia will contribute A$2.0 million through SOPAC to assist national disaster management organizations to respond to seismic and tsunami information, as well as the establishment of Centres of Excellence for tsunami warnings. Australian scientists are currently considering potential

locations for the tsunami warning equipment in the South Pacific. Appropriate equipment that has been identified includes seismic stations, sea level gauges and deep sea ocean buoys.

4.4 SOPAC working in conjunction with MRD, Meteorology, Hydrology and NDMO had submitted in 2005 a project proposal on Flood Warning as an integral part of a Multi-hazard Early System to the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR). The above mentioned covers the Nadi and Rewa catchments as pilot projects at an estimated cost of US$296,000.00 with a timeframe of two (2) years.

4.5 There is a need to develop similar systems for other specific river basins around the two main islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu that also face severe flash flooding problems. ***Opportunities exist for donor assistance and partnerships to fund such systems and Government needs to explore them as a matter of great urgency.***

4.6 THANK YOU.

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