

Tuvalu: Joining forces to tackle climate change

Summary

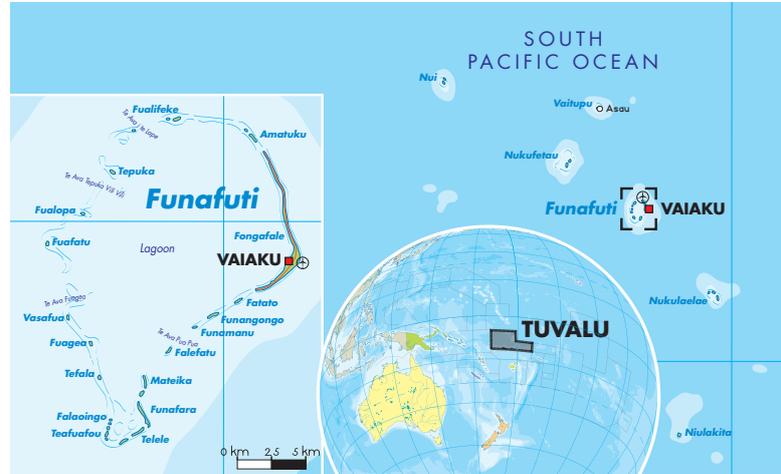
Tuvalu is a remote island nation often associated with the rising impacts of climate change. If, as predicted, sea levels continue to rise, this string of low-lying islands in the south-west Pacific could gradually disappear. However, life must go on in Tuvalu, and efforts are being made through risk reduction and disaster preparedness to lessen the worst effects of global warming and other challenges facing the population. In the vanguard of such initiatives is the Tuvalu Red Cross Society, aided by some enthusiastic volunteers and strong partnerships with government and civil society.

Background

Tuvalu is made up of nine tiny islands in the south-west Pacific stretching 1,000 km from north to south and with a total landmass of just 26 sq km. The capital Funafuti is situated on a coral atoll approximately 7 km long and 400 m at its widest point, bordered by a turquoise lagoon on one side and open ocean on the other. It is home to 4,000 of the country's 11,000 people, vying for space with pigs, vegetable plots, roads, a runway and other infrastructure. Population density for the whole country is 378.9 people per sq km, higher than in Japan or India. Medical and government services are all concentrated on Funafuti, where there is also an outpost of the University of the South Pacific.

Tuvalu is strongly influenced by Polynesian culture. The original settlers came from Samoa and Tonga over 3,000 years ago. Christian beliefs are most common in the country and bring people together in dance, celebration and even competition. Everyone knows everyone else in Funafuti, and there is a tradition of sharing. Youth and women's groups are strong and active. Women's groups facilitate development work by carrying out skills training for women in, for example, screen printing and sewing to increase household income. Young people lend a hand by fundraising for small projects for their island communities and by organizing social gatherings.

Many Tuvaluans rely on remittances sent home by seafarers or on earnings from seasonal work in New Zealand. For others in Tuvalu, fishing is a major source of income. Only 30 per cent of the population have a



wage, mainly those working in the government sector. The rest survive largely on a subsistence lifestyle.

Like the rest of the world, Tuvalu is experiencing rising temperatures. Although temperature records only date back to 1977, a clear trend is emerging, with a marked increase in both winter and summer temperatures. Rainfall records, which date back further, show a decrease in overall rainfall. Tuvalu's small landmass makes it especially vulnerable to any rise in sea level, as is the case for many other low-lying nations and islands in the Pacific, such as Kiribati and the Marshall Islands. Moreover, its highest point is just 4.5 metres above sea level, meaning that there are no inland areas or higher ground to flee to during a storm surge or tsunami. A gauge located on the wharf at Funafuti that measures sea level has recorded that there are increasingly higher peak sea level events, increasing the risk of inundation by sea surges.

Apart from its vulnerability to rising sea levels, Tuvalu is also at risk of cyclones, tsunamis, house fires, drought, and flooding due to high tides and storm surges. The outer islands are very isolated, making communications difficult, if not impossible at times; the country's two cargo/passenger boats operate when they can to deliver essential supplies.

The country's plight has brought it into the international spotlight, with television crews and photojournalists descending regularly on the capital to capture images of the "sinking islands". Predictions of further melting of the ice sheets in the coming decades do not bode well for the country. In the mean time, the Tuvalu Red Cross Society is doing all it can to prepare for and alleviate the adverse effects of these developments.

Addressing climate change

The Tuvalu Red Cross Society was established in 1981 and has branches on each of the country's islands, with around 100 volunteers on Funafuti atoll alone. It is not yet a fully fledged National Society, pending recognition and admission to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. In addition to activities related to climate change and disaster management, its

programmes include HIV/AIDS, blood donor recruitment and life skills training.

With only three permanent staff members, the Tuvalu Red Cross Society relies on volunteers to reach out to the broader Tuvaluan community. Some of the volunteers are very committed, taking time off work to assist with the annual appeal and activities that occur during the week. Tuvalu Red Cross Society volunteers assist with elements of disaster response and preparedness, administration, fundraising and dissemination. In a context of high youth unemployment, volunteering gives young people the opportunity to learn new skills, interact with their peers and contribute positively to society.

In 2005, the Tuvalu Red Cross Society agreed to take part in a pilot project on climate change, in conjunction with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' Pacific delegation based in Suva, making it the first Red Cross Society in the Pacific to address the issue. The project benefited from the financial support of the Japanese Red Cross Society and the Canada Fund and from the technical support of the Netherlands-based Red Cross/Red Crescent Centre on Climate Change and Disaster Preparedness.

The aim of the pilot project was to investigate and tackle the issue of climate change within the national context. To do so, the Tuvalu Red Cross Society looked at different components of the disaster risk management spectrum, from preparedness and response to adaptation to climate change and development. The Society analysed the issues, identified opportunities and solutions, and implemented them with the aid of national and local stakeholders and communities.

To start with, much groundwork had to be done to inform other like-minded groups of the unique role of the Red Cross, with a view to building future partnerships. The Tuvalu Red Cross Society now contributes to the climate change country team, as well as to the national disaster management working group. The Tuvalu Red Cross Society is a founding member of the Tuvalu Climate Action Network (TuCAN), a joint government-civil society body that promotes cooperation in relation to the issue of climate change, by raising awareness and sharing skills and knowledge. The Tuvalu Red Cross Society also has a special agreement with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), which enables it to maintain its independence and neutrality while taking an active part in WWF activities. A representative of the Tuvalu Red Cross Society was nominated as the civil society representative to attend the Conference of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol, which met in Bali in December



2007. TuCAN also reflects a bridging of the climate change and disaster management sectors at the regional level, with collaboration between WWF and the International Federation on a number of initiatives.

Two of the three Tuvalu Red Cross Society staff members underwent regional vulnerability and capacity assessment (VCA) training and will be able to contribute these skills to a number of climate change adaptation projects scheduled by the government and WWF. Rather than potentially duplicate processes in such a small country, Tuvalu Red Cross Society staff will be used as resource people in conducting the participatory work.

The Tuvalu Red Cross Society climate change and disaster management officer received training in the Pacific Emergency Response Team curriculum at the International Federation's Pacific delegation in Suva in October 2006. He in turn trained 17 volunteers in Funafuti in March 2007. When a series of large waves struck a low-lying part of the Funafuti atoll early one morning in April 2007, flooding a number of houses, six families totalling over 100 people were evacuated with the assistance of the volunteer members of the Emergency Response Team. The Tuvalu Red Cross Society housed some of the evacuees temporarily at the Red Cross headquarters in Funafuti while others were housed in meeting halls. Tuvalu Red Cross Society distributed relief materials such as tarpaulins, water containers and cooking sets. The government publicly thanked the Tuvalu Red Cross Society on national radio for its prompt response. To assist in future response efforts, a lockable "response box" has since been built in the main office, containing high-visibility vests, portable radios, torches, forms and other items needed for the rapid deployment of the Emergency Response Team.

Reducing risk

There is growing recognition of the link between environmental degradation and disaster risk: cleaning up



Gloria Dany/International Federation

Tataua Pese of the Tuvalu Red Cross Society explains how to use a satellite phone for emergency communications.

debris can prevent such items turning into missiles in the event of strong winds or cyclones; planting trees in exposed areas can create a buffer from storm surges and erosion; halting marine degradation on reefs can help limit the impacts of climate change. On World Environment Day in 2007, the Tuvalu Red Cross Society, in partnership with youth groups, Alofa Tuvalu, Island Care and the Environment Department, took part in activities such as cleaning up the shoreline and planting pandanus along the coast. They conducted similar activities in 2008, as well as a nationwide quiz among youth groups. Such activities combine well with messages promoting disaster preparedness and a cleaner, safer environment.

For the past two years, the Tuvalu Red Cross Society has had a regular slot on national radio through which it broadcasts messages on health, the environment, climate change and disaster preparedness and promotes its activities. For example, during dry periods, the Red Cross reminds people to use water wisely, offers advice on boiling water and stresses the importance of hand washing. The show has included competitions among schoolchildren and the general public to raise awareness of actions people can take to protect themselves from disaster risks.

To assist in addressing communication problems both during a disaster and at normal times, the New Zealand Red Cross has rolled out a communications strategy across the Pacific in conjunction with Pacific National Societies. The “Talking Briefcase” contains a satellite phone, various types of charger, and instructions on how to operate it, all in a waterproof carry case. The Tuvalu Red Cross Society has been distributing the phones to the outer islands and training branch volunteers in their use. The “Talking Suitcase”, also supplied by the New Zealand Red Cross and containing a portable VHF radio repeater system, provides handheld radios for emergency response and a repeater, which quadruples the area covered by the radio when searching for a lost fisherman in the Pacific.

Positioning satellite phones on remote islands increases warning times and reduces response times for climate- and non-climate-related disasters. During the Pacific-wide tsunami alert in March 2007, some outer islands that had existing communication problems used the Red Cross Society satellite phone system to update the Tuvalu Red Cross Society headquarters and National Disaster Management Office of their situation. Shortly afterwards, lightning cut off communications nationwide. The Tuvalu Red Cross used its satellite phones to deal with emergency cases and rented them out to the public to raise funds.

When distributing the equipment, the Tuvalu Red Cross Society also works with communities to map hazards, such as storms, and find out what coping mechanisms they have that can be built upon. It conducts integrated programmes with communities on disaster preparedness and first aid, in which information on climate change is incorporated since it is such a major concern for the country. The National Society facilitates discussions on the effects of climate change on the community and what solutions they and others such as the government can come up with to counter those effects.

Young people have also been actively involved in Red Cross programmes Society. School programmes run jointly by the Tuvalu Red Cross, the Tuvalu Meteorological Office and the National Disaster Management Office have targeted primary school pupils. The programmes provide an overview of the role of each agency, tips on survival before, during and after a disaster, and information on climate and weather, and include drawing activities, a question and answer session, and first-aid training. Young people have also participated in a national poster design competition on climate change.

Project impacts

- The response capacity on the islands has improved and been put to the test during flooding events: trained Red Cross volunteers are a valuable addition to the small resource base of the National Disaster Management Office.
- There is a better understanding of the Red Cross role and principles among the general public and national stakeholders, which is an important first step in building future partnerships.
- Branches on the outer islands are being revived to enable better outreach, with “on location” trained volunteers able to respond quickly in the event of an emergency.
- The Tuvalu Red Cross Society is now an active member of the National Disaster Committee and works in partnership with the National Disaster

Management Office and the Tuvalu Meteorological Office, facilitating the sharing of expertise and the pooling of resources.

- Eight satellite phones have been distributed to the outer islands and the isolated islet of Funafala to facilitate emergency communications.
- People in Tuvalu have a better understanding of climate change and what steps can be taken to address it.
- Youth groups know about and are involved in Red Cross activities. They have taken part in workshops on climate change and disaster risk reduction, prompting them to initiate related activities in their own communities.
- In an international exchange, the Tuvalu Red Cross Society has been providing materials to a British Red Cross youth worker who has been highlighting the impacts of climate change in Tuvalu in schools in the United Kingdom; the materials are being used for the development of youth drama based on the flooding event that occurred.

Lessons learned

- Developing working relationships with other organizations and government bodies results in less duplication, greater sharing of knowledge, and better funding efficiency when efforts are pooled.
- Hiring out equipment, with the right provisions in place, can be an effective fundraiser for the Red Cross.
- Media interest in Tuvalu in relation to climate change has provided an opportunity to be proactive and highlight the work of the Red Cross in addressing the risks associated with climate change.
- Tapping into existing networks, such as youth groups, can be effective; young people can be powerful agents of change.
- Technical knowledge in government ministries can be complemented by the use of volunteers to spread information and serve as “the legs and the voice” on the ground.
- Incorporating simulation exercises and conducting regular refresher courses are important in volunteer training.
- In a small country, volunteers can be shared between organizations to ensure that they are not underutilized.
- Sharing experiences with other stakeholders means that a topic or a problem can be viewed from many angles.
- When introducing new technology to the outer islands, it is important to spend as much time as possible training people to use it, or it can be quickly forgotten. The caretaker of a satellite phone needs to be proficient in technology, and a back-up needs to be in place in case that person leaves the island or forgets how to use the phone. To counteract this, the headquarters conducts regular scheduled “call-ins” so that they know when there is a problem and users get practice.

Next steps

The Tuvalu Red Cross Society plans to expand its activities further to ensure that disaster risk reduction, preparedness and response reach even the furthest islet. Some of its specific plans include to:

- Build on existing partnerships and conduct further activities with the National Disaster Management Office and the National Disaster Committee.
- Conduct more of the activities that have been done on Funafuti on the outer islands, including courses in sea survival skills.
- Develop more information materials in the local language. This is a real challenge because standardizing the Tuvaluan language is difficult.
- Raise awareness of the Movement’s structure and international response mechanisms, including of the Sphere standards.
- Continue to improve the work of TuCAN, in cooperation with the government.
- Share VCA skills with the environment department when the department conducts its next vulnerability and adaptation assessments, benefiting both organizations.
- Conduct volunteer induction courses on the outer islands for branch development.
- Carry out more activities with communities, linking projects to funding sources, such as small grants funds.

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