

Development: Business Community in Disaster Initiatives

Why it needs to be involved

It is no secret that countries within the Pacific region are prone to a range of natural disasters.

While tropical cyclones continue to be the most commonly occurring natural disaster in the region, with the experience drawn from the tsunami disaster in the Indian Ocean, other hazards have more recently taken the spotlight in terms of their potential to cause devastation in the region.

Tsunamis are of particular concern in the Pacific given the position of several Pacific islands countries within the 'Ring of Fire', a zone of frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions encircling the basin of the Pacific Ocean, accounting for 81% of the world's largest earthquakes.

Less well publicised are the large economic costs associated with natural disasters. In 2004, worldwide costs were reportedly twice that of the previous year, standing at US\$145 billion.

Evidence within the Pacific also suggests that the economic impacts associated with responding to the impacts of disasters upon Pacific islands and territories have been sharply on the rise.

In October 2005, Leaders at the Thirty-Sixth Pacific Islands Forum Meeting endorsed A Framework for Action 2005 - 2015 for Building the Resilience of Pacific Nations and Communities to Disasters.

At the beginning of 2006, a partnership network led by the South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC) and supported by other agencies within the Council for Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP), donors and international agencies, including UN the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), turned its attention to the implementation of the Framework for Action 2005 - 2015.

Moving away from the tendency to concentrate energies on interventions to respond to disasters after they have occurred, the partnership network is seeking to support initiatives that both build the capacities of communities to respond to disasters and where possible to actively reduce the risks of disasters before they occur.

By focusing on mainstreaming disaster risk reduction and preparedness activities into national planning strategies, the network aims to reduce the impact of disasters on Pacific islands communities.

The Regional Disaster Response Adviser to the Pacific for UN OCHA, the UN agency with the lead mandate for the coordination of disaster response and preparedness activities in the region, Charles Bernimolin, says the “partnership is a great platform for regional bodies, donors, NGOs and UN agencies, like UN OCHA to support the initiatives of national governments in the Pacific to reduce disaster risk” .

However, he notes, “there is still a largely unharnessed source of support for disaster preparedness and risk reduction initiatives to be found in our business communities.

“Historically business communities have contributed considerable amounts of financial support to disaster relief globally, however, progress in involving business communities in initiatives that shift the focus from disaster response to reducing the risk of disasters by building national and community capacities to cope with natural hazards has been slow, particularly within the Pacific region”.

As key actors in Pacific islands communities, businesses, whether large or small, have an integral role to play in disaster prevention. If a disaster strikes, businesses may also suffer the impacts whether it be through asset damage, disruption to their supply chain due to infrastructural damage or significantly reduced business as a result of death or displacement or because community members are simply no longer able to afford their goods and services.

Seen in this light, it is within the interests of businesses to invest both in business continuity planning and in disaster risk reduction initiatives that focus on ensuring that communities are better equipped to respond to disasters.

In some countries such as the Maldives, there has been considerable progress in involving the business sector in disaster risk reduction initiatives, particularly in tourism, a sector that stands to lose a lot of business in the face of natural disasters.

One of the biggest challenges for involving businesses in disaster risk reduction initiatives is the perception that national governments should have the sole responsibility for disaster risk management.

While there is no question that national governments should take the lead in development planning that seeks to reduce the risk of disasters by building community and national preparedness, there are many reasons why the business community should work alongside national governments, donors, NGOs, UN and regional agencies, such as those in the Pacific Partnership Network in the development and implementation of disaster risk reduction initiatives.

One example has been the recent involvement of Mobil Oil and telecommunications companies such as Telecom Fiji Ltd and Vodafone in Tsunami Preparedness workshops hosted by the National Disaster Management Office in Fiji in partnership with SOPAC.

“Vodafone recognises it has the necessary technologies to assist in developing warning

systems for tsunami preparedness and sees this as a valuable service it can provide the community,” said a spokesperson from Vodafone.

The spokesperson also commended the National Disaster Management Office in Fiji for being proactive in recognizing the value of involving the business community in planning for disasters at the national level.

Bernimolin from UN OCHA says it is good to see businesses getting involved in disaster risk reduction planning.

However, it is really just the beginning for national governments and all of the partners so there is plenty of room for growth in terms of forming partnerships with the business community.’

Bernimolin also expresses the hope that one of the first initiatives to come out of the partnership network is Pacific Disaster Net. It is an interactive website housing a range of tools and information for professionals working in disaster management. It will be released early next year by four of the partners in the network (SOPAC, UN OCHA, UNDP and IFRC).

Pacific Disaster Net will assist in providing best practice examples of business involvement in disaster risk reduction initiatives into the future.