A spate of recent natural disasters – such as the Samoan earthquake and tsunami of 2009, the Tuvaluan drought of 2011 and the Fijian flash floods in early 2012 – have had devastating effects on Pacific Island countries, claiming hundreds of lives, displacing thousands of people and placing considerable strain on struggling economies.

To reduce the vulnerability of PICTs to natural disasters and increase the region’s ability to deal with them, the EU is funding three disaster risk management (DRM) projects implemented by SPC’s Applied Geoscience and Technology Division.

These projects work to increase resilience in communities by improving emergency response coordination and communication as well as access to safe drinking water. They also work with governments to develop joint DRM and climate change action plans; increase regional collaboration; install early warning systems; and improve the use of disaster-related data.

**Resilient communities**

Since 2008, the Disaster Risk Reduction in 8 Pacific ACP States project has been helping FSM, Nauru, Palau, PNG, RMI, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu build their resilience to drought and improve preparedness to respond to natural disasters.

The approximately €9.8 million EDF9 project targets two specific areas: access to safe drinking water; and emergency communications and operation centres.

Interventions such as provision of rainwater catchments directly to communities have increased storage capacity and improved access to clean water, reducing health problems associated with consuming contaminated water.

By increasing the use of rainwater catchment systems and improving distribution of fresh water by upgrading the piped water supply system, the project is helping ensure a more efficient and sustainable supply of clean water, which will be particularly valuable during drought periods.

And to assist countries to strengthen disaster management at the national level, the project is building new emergency operation centres and providing early warning communications equipment, which should ensure communities are better prepared, thereby reducing the risks of loss of human life and property damage in the event of a natural disaster.
Helping OCTs

A second EU-funded project works to strengthen government capacity to prevent and respond to emergencies in four Pacific territories: French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Pitcairn Islands and Wallis and Futuna.

The approximately € 5.7 million EDF9 project Supporting Disaster Risk Reduction in Pacific Overseas Countries and Territories targets two areas: assessing natural disaster risk to enhance mitigation efforts; and accessing safe drinking water and improved sanitation.

In French Polynesia, the project works to reduce natural disaster risk in two vulnerable zones: the Marquesas archipelago, which is highly exposed to tsunami risk, and the Tuamotu archipelago, which faces recurrent storm surges (abnormal rises in sea level resulting from storms, which can threaten life and property in coastal areas).

In the Tuamotus, the project is developing storm surge models and inundation maps and conducting a cost-benefit analysis of housing infrastructure options in coastal areas, with the aim of achieving risk-sensitive coastal planning and improved disaster mitigation.

In the Marquesas, the project is helping strengthen the tsunami alert system through ensuring all warning sirens are working and training technicians to diagnose malfunctions and make minor repairs.

To reduce contamination of drinking water, New Caledonia is receiving project support to develop water safety plans at the municipal level and to make its water storage and distribution infrastructure contamination-proof. The project also promotes greater collaboration between authorities on the management of wastewater and between Northern Province water stakeholders.

The project is improving access to water (for drinking and agriculture) for the people of drought-prone Pitcairn Islands through additional catchment and storage of rain and spring water.

It is helping Wallis and Futuna become better prepared to face natural hazards, particularly tsunamis, through enhanced planning at national and community levels.

Building capacities

Since 2009, the approximately € 1.9 million ACP-EU Natural Disaster Facility (NDF) project has been reinforcing the DRM capacities of 14 PACPs at government, agency and community levels through planning assistance, provision of essential equipment and training.

The project has helped Cook Islands and Tonga develop joint climate change and DRM national action plans and assisted PNG with its programme to mainstream disaster risk considerations into national and sectoral planning and budgetary processes. Additionally, it has assisted PNG’s Morobe Province to draft a provincial climate change and DRM action
plan, and provided 10 high-frequency radio communications stations to improve police emergency communications in this remote area.

The NDF project has assisted Kiribati with the review of its 1993 National Disaster Act, resulting in the development of a new set of DRM governance arrangements and priorities for implementation.

In Tonga, the project has provided training in several areas including psychological support and disaster trauma counselling, climate change impacts on diseases, and entomology (study of insects).

It has also helped Tongan disaster response agencies develop coordinated response plans, and trained community members and health workers on sanitation and food and water safety issues during disasters.

In Fiji, Samoa and Solomon Islands, the project has provided training on the use of http://www.pacificdisaster.net, the largest and most comprehensive information resource for PICTs on DRM.