AFAC CONFERENCE | REPORT

Aligning disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation: Pacific perceptions, practice and policy

Sam Quinn
Jess Lees

Humanitarian Advisory Group

Abstract

The climate crisis is compounding disaster risk around the world, heightening the vulnerabilities of communities in disaster-prone regions and increasing the pressure on humanitarian actors to respond effectively to the resulting challenges. The Beyond Barriers research led by Humanitarian Advisory Group in partnership with World Vision Australia, explores ways to strengthen the integration[1] of disaster risk reduction (DRR)[2] and climate change adaptation (CCA)[3] to enhance resilience outcomes for communities in the Pacific region.

Introduction

The Pacific is among the world's vulnerable regions to extreme hazards and the effects of climate change. Of the world's top 10 countries ranked highest for disaster risk, 5 are Pacific nations, with Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Tonga being at the top.[4] Climate change is heightening these risks with increasing frequency and intensity of weather-related disasters. Rising sea levels lead to coastal erosion and saline intrusion, affecting agriculture, fisheries and ecosystems and compromising the resilience of communities faced with disasters.[5]

Pacific leaders have recognised that there is an urgent need to scale resilience efforts across the region to overcome a legacy of siloes between DRR and CCA. While DRR has long been a policy field within humanitarian and development sectors – codified in global frameworks such as the Hyogo Framework for Action and its successor the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-30 – approaches have focused on mitigation and response to the effects of natural and weather-related hazards, with less attention on the

associated risks of long-term climate forecasts and how these affect weather patterns and disaster risk.[6]

Evidence of increasing levels of disaster risk as a result of global warming is becoming more visible. The frequency of climate- and weather-related disasters has increased 5-fold over the past 50 years and 57 million people in Asia and the Pacific were affected by climate change in 2021.[7] The increasingly visible relationship between climate change and amplified disaster risk has accelerated governments and humanitarian actors to integrate DRR and CCA policy and frameworks.

Beyond Barriers research overview

A partnership between the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP) Disaster READY Program[8], World Vision Australian and Humanitarian Advisory Group resulted in research to determine persistent barriers to, and realistic opportunities for, better integration of DRR and CCA to build and sustain community resilience.

Research methodology

The project began by publishing a foundational literature review in July 2021, before proceeding to collect data across 5 case study countries to complete Phase 1 of the research. Case study data collection was led by national researchers in each country and supported by a regional research lead based in Suva. It included a desk review, key informant interviews and community focus group discussions. This phase resulted in case study reports for Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste, all the countries where AHP Disaster READY is active. Phase 2 built on the country-level findings from Phase 1 to explore and elevate opportunities for DRR-CCA integration at the regional level. It began with a Reflection and Learning Workshop in December

2021. This brought together more than 60 stakeholders to share learnings from Phase 1 and observe presentations from practitioners and technical experts working towards similar goals. This workshop served to target and validate emerging themes and opportunities identified by this research and to ensure collaboration in other initiatives. Phase 2 also included an additional study in Tonga. The final report leveraged behavioural science principles to unpack the behavioural barriers and opportunities around integration and put forward a framework for action for implementing agencies. The detailed research methodology is illustrated in Figure 1.

Beyond Barriers aimed to elevate a stronger recognition and understanding of community knowledge around resilience in the Pacific and centre community voices and participation in policy and decision-making processes. This research acknowledges that communities are often the first affected by extreme events and recognises that communities often have the closest connection and understanding of their environment. Community knowledge is a central component to the objective of strengthening resilience.

The research recognises that consistent, resourced and sustainable shifts will require change within prevailing norms, structures and frameworks. This includes governments, regional bodies and intergovernmental structures and processes; actors that are traditionally and commonly central in policy and decision-making processes. Such processes often overlook the voices, knowledge and participation of communities.

DRR-CCA integration progress in the Pacific

The Pacific is one of the world's leading regions in progress towards advancing integration between DRR and CCA action, seen with the design of frameworks that codify strategic guidance to better inform climate-sensitive disaster preparedness programming. Most notably, the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (FRDP), endorsed at the Pacific Island Forum in 2016, is the first regional framework designed to mitigate vulnerability to climate and disaster risk and emphasises the importance of community-based approaches to building resilience.[9] Despite this, the FRDP does not emphasise clear guidelines around who is accountable for strengthening community leadership, while its goals are posited as voluntary guiding principles rather than a set of objectives for stakeholders to commit to, raising challenges towards establishing grounded and consistent shared outcomes for the Pacific.

Since the establishment of the FRDP, a range of other initiatives have commenced aimed at advancing implementation, the goals it sets out and its overarching objective to upscale integration of DRR and CCA and strengthen resilience of Pacific island countries. During the 2017 Pacific Islands Forum, the Pacific Resilience Partnership (PRP) was established and endorsed by leaders. The PRP acts as an umbrella mechanism for the implementation of the FRDP and hosts the annual Pacific Resilience Meeting that is a platform for ideas and shared learnings from a wide-

Figure 1: Beyond Barriers research program methodology.

ranging group of regional actors.[10] In 2018, the PRP endorsed the development of the Pacific Resilience Standards (PRS), which were officially established in 2022. The PRS establishes 4 standards and 'good practice essentials' and provides a progress measurement tool promoting self-assessment of progress and planning to support and guide regional stakeholders to advance effective implementation of the FRDP.[11] Figure 2 provides an overview of the relationship between the PRP and the mechanisms, frameworks and standards that support it.

Barriers to effective integration

The initiatives established to strengthen implementation of the FRDP demonstrate progress and momentum towards effective integration in the Pacific. Despite this, the Beyond Barriers research uncovered systemic structural and behavioural barriers that hinder effective policy integration and community-centred resilience objectives.

1. Community-led decision-making is not the social norm

    Social norms have seen agencies lead decision-making processes while community voices have remained largely absent. Decision-making is largely top-down and community needs are generally not prioritised as policies and decision-making tends to align with donor priorities, while traditional knowledge is generally sidelined from resilience-based programming.

2. The status quo does not facilitate integration as the default approach

Despite the efforts to enhance integration in the Pacific, separate funding and governance structures for DRR and CCA remain the status quo in many Pacific island countries. Embedded systemic structural behaviours have slowed the progress of agencies in shifting their ways of working to prioritise integrated approaches, while government ministries and bodies operate in siloes with limited collective attempts to meaningfully reform the system.

3. Existing structures and approaches are increasingly complex

    While there have been efforts to enhance integration, this has (paradoxically) generated barriers to meaningful change. Multiple frameworks and government structures have resulted in duplicative coordination mechanisms and information-management systems, making the process of streamlining information and information access to communities inherently difficult. Streamlining of frameworks and policy, ensuring the meaningful participation of communities and cultivating and augmenting traditional knowledge into decision-making, can create tangible steps towards a more coherent and effective system.

    Fiji's DRR policy has over 200 strategies [...] what's the point of having great strategies if they are just going to sit there and not actually be implemented?' (Regional actor)

4. Without a common authority promoting and guiding process, agencies have no incentive to prioritise community voices or produce consistent reports

Figure 2: Relationship between the PRP and the supporting mechanisms and frameworks.

The lack of a common authority to drive and promote accountability has hindered efforts to meaningfully integrate community voices into resilience programs and decision-making. Top-down power imbalances remain entrenched within structural frameworks, often marginalising communities from decision-making processes and sidelining their participation. Currently, governments, international non-government organisations and donors hold most of the authority that influences decision-making. Community priorities are often considered secondary to donor priorities. Even in contexts where community groups are active and local leadership is supported, entrenched power imbalances continue to hinder meaningful community leadership.

How to overcome the barriers

The areas outlined capture some of the fundamental and overarching issues that the research identified as the greatest obstacles to effective community-focused integration in the Pacific. While the challenges they present for the sector are by no means insignificant, they provide strengthened understandings around why the vision for integration has not yet been achieved and, more importantly, what steps are required to address these challenges, overcome them and advance progress in the region.

Evidence shows that intention and motivation for change is prominent across the region, demonstrated in the significant progress that has been achieved at the policy level in the form of commitments and frameworks, yet more is yet to be achieved for effectively translating this to the operational level. Further work is needed to understand the contextual differences across Pacific countries to inform integration at the country level. There are 4 pathways shown in Figure 3 that describe the central vision for a resilient Pacific in which integrated approaches are the norm and the core behavioural shifts that need to occur.

Centre community members as decision makers

Pacific-based actors should work to ensure that existing local structures and leadership become the default process for programming. This can be supported through elevating local leadership, knowledge and capacities in planning and design phases and through the promotion of inclusive, community-led resilience planning that incorporates traditional knowledge and practice. Identifying shared priorities with communities and elevating these priorities to donors can break the existing siloed funding structures which currently hinder meaningful progress.

Create new resilience defaults

This can be achieved through advocating for and applying new ways of working, both internally within their own organisations, other partners, national governments and donors. For example, seeking opportunities to harmonise internal approaches or models within organisational structures; promoting integrated governance and funding structures for resilience. Creating opportunities to test, learn, adapt and share approaches that demonstrate that change is occurring by sharing success stories to motivate other actors to shift practices.

Make processes simple and consistent

Actors can better support the accessibility of 2-way information flows and ensure all communication mechanisms are accessible to all stakeholders to enable clear and coherent channels of communication. This can be achieved through streamlining information pathways with communities, leveraging traditional knowledge and supplementing with scientific data. Effective and clear 2-way communication can prevent the duplication of activities and messaging, and better articulate consistent information management pathways for stakeholders across the national, provincial and village levels.

Strengthen authority and accountability for resilience outcomes

Stronger resilience outcomes can be achieved through elevating the central authority of the PRP and the FRDP as the regional guiding framework for resilience. This will ensure that programs reflect the FRDP principles and connect them with community-level actions, and leverage the support of trusted organisations and individuals to lead this shift. Use a common framework and measurement tools to design programs and monitor outcomes to provide consistent approaches and measurement of success. By minimising the number of frameworks and tools used, agencies can reduce inconsistencies and increase confidence and accountability in measured outcomes.[12]

Conclusion

Despite leadership in integrated approaches to resilience, agencies often use siloed approaches to align with existing structures and standard practice. Coordination and information-management systems remain complex and inaccessible to communities and, while most stakeholders aim to centralise communities and ensure meaningful participation and decision-making in approaches, these are often deprioritised in favour of donor requirements. This has seen traditional knowledge and practices that can strengthen resilience programming and support a community-centred approach remain absent from decision-making and policy design processes.

The vision and model presented in this report are a pathway for agencies to better support community-led resilience. The integration of DRR and CCA governance, funding, coordination and information management will be critical but there is also room for implementing actors to shift their own organisational norms and practices in the absence of greater systems change towards enhanced resilience. By understanding and using principles of behavioural science, actors can help to build a future where integration is the default and community-led decision-making is the norm. Actors can build on regional momentum to drive this change home in their own organisations, their own communities and on a greater scale.

This work set out to influence implementing agencies to empower and support communities to understand disaster and climate risk and action measures that strengthen their resilience. By using the proposed framework agencies can lead progress towards empowered and resilient communities in the Pacific region.
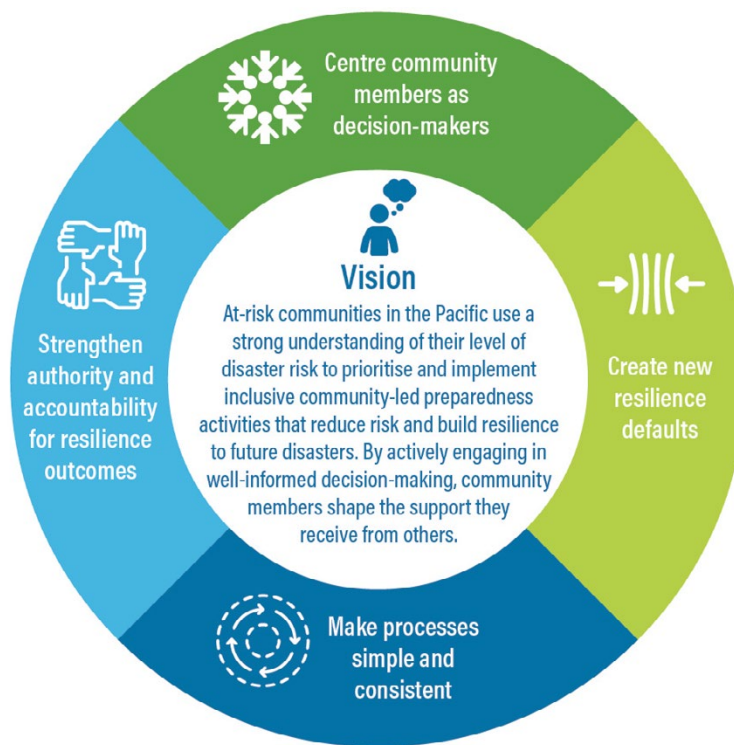
Figure 3: The vision for community-centred integration in the Pacific.

Integration in action: what's next?

A second phase of the Beyond Barriers research will take place under the Disaster READY 2.0 program with leadership from World Vision Australia, implemented by Humanitarian Advisory Group. Phase 2 will build upon the extensive research, engagement and learning from Phase 1 of the research program, while moving from an exploratory research approach to an action research approach.

The objective of Phase 2 of Beyond Barriers is to support the implementation of evidence-based actions that strengthen good practice approaches in enhancing community resilience. We will support key research partners and stakeholders to implement specific components of the framework for driving behavioural shifts at various levels. We will then support ongoing reflection, adaptation and learning on how different approaches can be leveraged and scaled across the region.

Endnotes

1. Integration here refers to the integration of DRR and CCA, meaning the combination of interventions that address CCA and DRR with the intention of improving humanitarian and development outcomes for at-risk and crisis-affected populations. Global Nutrition Cluster (2016), Developing an Integrated Approach to Humanitarian Emergency Preparedness and Response. At: https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/documents/icnwg_developing_an_integrated_response_approach_gfsc_20191128.pdf.

2. Disaster risk reduction is aimed at preventing new and reducing existing disaster risk and managing residual risk, all of which contribute to strengthening resilience and to the achievement of sustainable development. IPCC (2019), Glossary. At: www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2019/01/SYRAR5-Glossary_en.pdf.

3. Climate change adaptation refers to the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate change and its effects. In human systems, adaptation seeks to moderate or avoid harm or exploit beneficial opportunities. In some natural systems, human intervention may facilitate adjustment to the expected climate and its effects. IPCC (2019), Glossary. At: www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2019/01/SYRAR5-Glossary_en.pdf.

4. Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft 2021, *World Risk Report 2021. At: https://reliefweb.int/report/world/worldriskreport-2021-focus-social-protection.*

5. World Bank 2016, *Climate change and disaster resilience: pacific possible. At: https://ppp.worldbank.org/public-private-partnership/library/climate-change-and-disaster-resilience-pacific-possible.*

6. Kelman I 2015, *Climate change and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, International Journal of Disaster Risk Science, vol. 6, pp.117-127.*

7. WMO 2021, *Atlas of mortality and economic losses from weather, climate and water extremes (1970-2019. At: https://library.wmo.int/index.php?lvl=notice_display&id=21930#.YuCkKexBz0p; IFRC 2021, Over 57 million people affected by climate disasters across Asia Pacific in 2021, Press release. At: www.ifrc.org/press-release/over-57-million-affected-climate-disasters-across-asia-pacific-2021.*

8. The Disaster READY initiative is part of the Australian Humanitarian Partnership, a 5-year (2017–22), $50 million partnership between the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Australian non-governmental organisations to improve humanitarian disaster response. Disaster READY was designed to strengthen disaster preparedness and management across the Pacific and Timor-Leste.

9. Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific 2017. At: http://gsd.spc.int/frdp/#:~:text=in%20the%20Pacific-,Framework%20for%20Resilient%20Development%20in%20the%20Pacific%3A%20An%20Integrated%20Approach,and%20disasters%2C%20in%20ways%20that.

10. Pacific Resilience Partnership 2017, at: https://www.resilientpacific.org/en.

11. Pacific Resilience Standards 2022, at: www.resilientpacific.org/en/media/216#:~:text=The%20FRDP%20is%20a%20regional,Resilience%20Partnership%20in%20September%202017.

12. Humanitarian Advisory Group, World Vision Australia & Australian Humanitarian Partnership 2022, Beyond barriers: behaviours to enable a more resilient Pacific. At: https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/insight/beyond-barriers-behaviours-to-enable-a-more-resilient-pacific.