

Tuvalu Red Cross Society

Joining forces to tackle climate change

Location: Funafuti, Capital of Tuvalu, Pacific Islands Region, June 2008

Tuvalu Red Cross Society, aided by enthusiastic volunteers and strong partnerships with government and civil society have been taking action through risk reduction and disaster preparedness to lessen the worst effects of global warming and other challenges facing the population.

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. It is home to 4,000 of the country's 11,000 people.

Like the rest of the world, Tuvalu is experiencing rising temperatures. Temperature records reveal a marked increase in both winter and summer temperatures. Rainfall records show a decrease in overall rainfall. Tuvalu's highest point is just 4.5 metres above sea level. A sea level gauge located on the wharf at Funafuti has recorded increasingly higher peak sea level events, escalating the risk of inundation by sea surges.

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 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.

Addressing climate change

In 2005, the Tuvalu Red Cross initiated a pilot project on climate change, in conjunction with the International Federation of Red Cross and

Red Crescent Societies' Pacific delegation based in Suva. To start with, much groundwork had to be done to inform stakeholders of the unique role of the Red Cross, with a view to building future partnerships. The Tuvalu Red Cross now contributes to the climate change country team, as well as to the national disaster management working group. The Tuvalu Red Cross 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.



Figure 1: Tatana Pese of Tuvalu Red Cross explains how to use a satellite phone for emergency communications.

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 newly formed Emergency Response Team (ERT). The Tuvalu Red Cross Society distributed relief materials and housed some of the evacuees temporarily at the Red Cross headquarters in Funafuti while others were housed in meeting halls. To assist in future response efforts, a lockable "response box" has since been built in the main office containing items needed for rapid deployment of the ERT such as high visibility vests, portable radios, torches and assessment forms.

Reducing risks

On World Environment Day the Tuvalu Red Cross, 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. Such activities combine well with messages promoting disaster preparedness and a cleaner, safer environment.

Tuvalu Red Cross uses a regular slot on national radio to broadcast messages on health, the environment, climate change and disaster preparedness 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 assist in addressing communication problems, 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 has been distributing the phones to the outer islands and training branch volunteers in their use. Positioning satellite phones on remote islands increases warning times and reduces response times for climate- and non-climate-related disasters.

While visiting communities the 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. School programmes run jointly by the Tuvalu Red Cross, the Tuvalu Meteorological Office and the National Disaster Management Office have targeted primary school pupils and have proved very popular amongst students.

Project impact

- Response capacity has improved and been put to the test during flooding events.
- Better understanding of the Red Cross role and principles among the general public and national stakeholders.
- Tuvalu Red Cross has contributed to the Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Guide (available at www.climatecentre.org).
- Branches on the outer islands are being revived to enable better outreach.

- Tuvalu Red Cross works with a range of civil society and government stakeholders to reach communities.
- Young people are engaged as volunteers, beneficiaries and as agents for change.
- Eight satellite phones have been distributed to the islands to facilitate emergency communications.
- People in Tuvalu have a better understanding of climate change and are taking steps to address it.

Lessons learned

- Developing partnerships results in less duplication, greater sharing of knowledge, and better funding efficiency.
- Hiring out equipment such as satellite phones in remote locations can be an effective fundraiser for the Red Cross.
- Tapping into existing networks, such as youth groups, can be very effective.
- Technical knowledge in government ministries can be complemented by the use of volunteers to serve as “the legs and the voice” on the ground.
- Dialogue between the disaster management and climate change sectors is important to improve understanding and addressing of climate risk.
- Creative communications including media and drama offer exciting opportunities.
- 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.
- Regular ‘call ins’ from branches to headquarters using satellite phones allows users to get continued practice.

Where to next?

The Tuvalu Red Cross plans to expand its activities further to ensure that disaster risk reduction, preparedness and response reach even the furthest islet. These will build on existing partnerships and activities with their partners including linking communities to expertise and funding sources.

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