



CENTRE FOR
HUMANITARIAN
LEADERSHIP



CROSSING THE DIVIDE: THE NEXT STEPS

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We acknowledge the valuable input from local, national and international humanitarian responders to this report. The researchers would like to extend sincere thanks to Ema Vueti (President, Pacific Island Council of Queensland) for reviewing this report. The researchers request the readers to use this brief report as a sequel to our first report, *Crossing the Divide: Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response to natural disasters*, and take this as an entry point to explore ‘the next steps’ in bridging the gap between traditional humanitarian actors and Pacific diaspora actors in humanitarian response.

The authors use the term ‘traditional humanitarian actors’ to indicate the local and international humanitarian responders who are traditionally recognised as legitimate actors within the humanitarian system. We acknowledge that diaspora actors have been responding to calls for help from their local counterparts even before the humanitarian system turned its attention to their contribution.

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Cover image: 12-year-old Unaisi Tanuku lost her home in Nanukuloa Village when Category 5 Cyclone Winston slammed into Fiji on the evening of 20 February 2016 © Robert McKechnie / Save the Children Australia.

INTRODUCTION

This report is the second output of exploratory research carried out by the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership to study the role of Pacific diaspora leaders in localising humanitarian response to natural disasters in Pacific Island Countries (PICs).

The research was initially designed to understand Pacific diaspora humanitarianism based on a comparative analysis of perspectives of Pacific diaspora leaders, traditional humanitarian actors and national disaster management officials. However, it became apparent during the early stages of data collection that a comparative analysis of perspectives cannot be methodologically justified due to the lack of knowledge about Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response and their invisibility in the traditional humanitarian system. Therefore, this standalone analysis of research data from the small sampling size of local, national and international actors engaged in the research is separate from the inputs of our diaspora participants.

This report sheds light on the divide between Pacific diaspora humanitarians and the traditional humanitarian system. It highlights the need to 'cross the divide' by taking 'the next steps'. The report focuses on the following questions:

- 1. What do traditional humanitarian actors know about Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response?**
- 2. How do traditional humanitarian actors perceive the role of Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response?**
- 3. What are the next steps to bridge the divide between Pacific diaspora and the traditional humanitarian actors?**

Methodology

The research used a constructivist approach to inform and guide the researchers and research process. A constructivist approach is based on relativism in the study of realities that are constructed and reconstructed by individuals; it assumes that multiple realities exist. This aspect of constructivism sets the stage for the inclusion of different perspectives on Pacific diaspora humanitarianism.

The primary data of this research was collected through an online survey and in-depth semi-structured interviews from May 2018 to January 2019. Inductive coding and a technique of 'suspicious interpretation'¹ were used for the purpose of analysis and producing recommendations.

Figure 1: Research methods

Methods	
13	Online-survey
3	Semi-structured interview

Figure 2: Organisational representation

Type of organisation	
4	Local/national
9	International

Limitation

The researchers reached out to over 50 international and local humanitarian organisations and national disaster management offices in PICs during the data collection. However, only a few responded to the invite to take part in the research. The findings of this report are, thus, based on a small sample size and not generalisable. Readers are encouraged to treat this report as an entry point to further explore and discuss the role of traditional actors in embracing diaspora actors within the Pacific humanitarian ecosystem.

WHAT DO TRADITIONAL HUMANITARIAN ACTORS KNOW ABOUT PACIFIC DIASPORA IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE?

The research findings suggest that there is a low level of awareness about Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response. The knowledge about Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response is currently dominated by the discourse on sending unsolicited bilateral donations (UBD).

The concept of dignity is at the core of any discussion about UBD in a humanitarian response context. Both international and national participants discussed the problems of UBD and highlighted why cash transfer is the best alternative to UBD. Sending culturally insensitive and contextually inappropriate goods to disaster-affected communities is widely considered detrimental to an effective response. UBD can cause blockages at ports during disaster response and create opportunities for corruption at a national level. In addition, the potential environmental impact of UBD makes them less attractive. Sending cash, on the other hand, is much faster than sending goods, enabling disaster-affected people the dignity to purchase what they decide they need. Cash transfer directly assists individual families, supports local markets, helps the broader community and can provide an economic boost, enabling the country to recover more quickly.

One research participant, who worked with the Tongan government in response to Cyclone Gita, highlighted the significance of communicating with diasporas during disaster preparedness. This personal account of an international consultant strongly indicates the need for including diaspora actors in disaster preparedness, communicating with cultural understanding, and providing alternatives as means to convert diasporas' sense of obligation into a meaningful response.

Diaspora always wants to help in the Pacific, [in a way that is] different [to] other countries that I have worked in ... As soon as something happens, diaspora [of] every country in the Pacific seem to want to help immediately. It's very judicious. We, in preparation for disasters in Tonga, spent a lot of time talking to Tongan diaspora in Australia, New Zealand and US, saying, "Look! Don't fill the container ... Wait until you see what is actually needed." And it was fairly good. They were good ... So the message has reached the Tongan diaspora.

I previously worked in Vanuatu [Cyclone Pam] where they received hundreds of containers of rubbish, [which] cost the Vanuatu government almost \$1 million to dispose [of]. I have seen these containers getting loaded in cruises before sending to Vanuatu and I could see what sort of rubbish that was going ...

We expected in Tonga after Cyclone Gita to get some of these donations. So, in preparation for it, we said to the people, "If you want to send something just send money, transfer money to people's bank accounts." If [they didn't] want to do that—some people told me that's not culturally appropriate—I said, "Okay, if you want to send items, get a drum and fill the drum [with] whatever you want to put in, seal the drum, put people's name on it and send it over, and we as the Tongan government [will] make sure that it is distributed to the right people." So we received about 40 containers full of family-to-family donations. We called over the radio, and families in Tonga came to collect their barrels ...

As he continued, he pointed out how culturally insensitive messages from international humanitarian organisations can cause misunderstanding, and further undermine the relationship with Pacific diaspora.

[The] major problem, which really bothers me, is the fact that an international humanitarian organisation [name removed] was running around the Pacific and telling everyone from the diaspora "Don't send anything". That is insulting. It's culturally insensitive and it's against the wishes of the people in the Pacific.ⁱⁱ

Another international participant, a disasters and emergencies program coordinator of an international organisation, also noted:

As previously mentioned, in cases where government, local and international efforts have not reached affected people for some months, relatives overseas [were] able to ship items to family members, speeding up their recovery in relation to rebuilding damaged homes. Prices were much cheaper than purchasing locally through local providers. This seems to be quite a reasonable action, where other formal actors have failed to deliver.ⁱⁱⁱ

These interesting insights from practitioners emphasise the need for traditional humanitarian actors to understand the nuances of UBD narratives in the Pacific context and trigger thinking beyond 'landfill' messages to diaspora communities. UBD dialogues should not be confused with nor underestimate well-targeted and needs-based goods donations from diaspora communities to local communities.

HOW DO TRADITIONAL HUMANITARIAN ACTORS PERCEIVE THE ROLE OF PACIFIC DIASPORA IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE?

A ‘suspicious interpretation’ of research results produces a list of roles pertaining to Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response as perceived by traditional humanitarian actors:



The role of Pacific diaspora in sending UBD has received more attention than other aspects of Pacific diaspora humanitarianism. It portrays Pacific diaspora as troublemakers who throw rubbish into containers and send it to the ports of PICs, only to end up in landfill. Another facet that supports this portrayal is the question of professionalism. Traditional humanitarian actors strongly believe that adherence to humanitarian principles is a prerequisite for all actors in humanitarian response. The research findings imply, from the perspectives of traditional humanitarians, that humanitarian principles are relevant, important and applicable to Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response. The reasoning behind this perception is that humanitarian principles are universal. Only one participant acknowledged the nuances in the application of humanitarian principles to diaspora actors in humanitarian settings.

They are relevant to all practitioners and responders. The extent to which they are knowledgeable of, and informed by, such principles is a significant gap. At the same time, however, providing assistance to your family or own community ‘back home’ might not be in line with the principle of impartiality, but who can prevent people from supporting their own families? This is why there should be a distinction between diaspora leaders (who should be compelled to adhere) and diaspora communities.^{iv}

Diaspora leaders can be encouraged to adhere to humanitarian principles when they lead a community-to-community response; they cannot be held accountable when they act in their own right as a

member of the diaspora community and make individual contributions. The informality of diaspora actors and the absence of organised efforts are also perceived as challenges for traditional humanitarian actors to work hand-in-hand with Pacific diaspora.

On the other hand, Pacific diaspora actors are also perceived in more optimistic roles—conduits, fundraisers, remitters and volunteer service providers. Pacific diaspora actors can be conduits of information and resources between Australia and affected communities in PICs. They can be resource intermediaries and advocates for disaster-affected Pacific communities. Pacific diaspora communities and organisations can host fundraising events and send the proceeds to where it’s needed. As remitters, they can support their family and villages in building resilience to face disasters and sustain people’s livelihoods. Diaspora professionals, for example, health professionals, builders and electricians, can volunteer to provide services in the recovery and rehabilitation phases of a disaster. Nonetheless, their supply should be demand-driven.

There is a mention of diaspora actors as part of the solution to ‘brain-drain’ in countries that are vulnerable to disasters:

It was hard for expatriate medical professionals to operate in Bangladesh, but [the more] Bangladeshi doctors [we could put] the better. So they are supporting the localisation agenda where the brain-drain has happened. To be honest ... this is the danger of localisation. There isn’t much of it because of the brain-drain, but taking them back, giving them the opportunity to [give] back, yet they don’t have to get the visas and stuff. So it’s potentially quite a quick way of maintaining capacity especially in the acute phase.^v

This interview quote also suggests that traditional humanitarian actors see diaspora actors as a new option for walking the talk on ‘localisation’, especially where emigration has caused a loss of human resources in sectors such as health. However, there is a paucity of understanding in how diaspora engagement can be utilised in humanitarian response.

The survey results validate that Pacific diaspora members have positional advantages in the Pacific humanitarian ecosystem in terms of contextual knowledge, cultural competency and familiarity, links to local organisations, personal ties with the local community and access to the most vulnerable members of the community. Interestingly, survey participants

perceive the incorporation of diaspora actors in planning humanitarian responses as more important to the Australian government and the governments of PICs than to international NGOs. While ten out of 13 participants either strongly agreed or agreed that 'Pacific diaspora leaders are crucial actors in the Pacific humanitarian ecosystem', they noted that their organisations did not have disaster management frameworks inclusive of Pacific diaspora.

The discussion about the perceived roles of diaspora actors shows that the current thinking is dominated by diasporas' portrayal as troublemakers. However, if one can see past this image, diasporas' potential as unique humanitarian partners can be further explored and turned into practice.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS TO BRIDGE THE DIVIDE BETWEEN PACIFIC DIASPORA AND THE TRADITIONAL HUMANITARIAN ACTORS?

The discussion on what traditional actors know about Pacific diaspora and how they perceive the role of Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response indicates an incomplete narrative. Understanding Pacific diaspora humanitarianism from a traditional humanitarian perspective poses a problematic understanding. Traditional actors see that Pacific diaspora can play a positive role by utilising their positional and comparative advantages in the Pacific humanitarian ecosystem. However, there is low-level enthusiasm and high-level caution toward considering diaspora actors as humanitarian partners in humanitarian response. This indicates the absence of flexible institutional frameworks for traditional humanitarians to engage with diaspora actors who operate outside of a highly institutionalised and centralised humanitarian regime.

The report *Crossing the Divide: Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response to natural disasters*, on the other hand, suggests that Pacific diaspora humanitarians are not noticeably exposed to the traditional humanitarian system. Therefore, the critical question is: What is the first step to bridge this divide between Pacific diaspora and the traditional humanitarian actors?

Understanding diaspora humanitarianism from a diasporic perspective.

It is vital for traditional humanitarians to understand other forms of 'humanitarianism' and explore new or different ways of working with non-traditional humanitarians. This requires traditional humanitarians to think outside of the existing normative, regulative and cognitive structures of a highly institutionalised humanitarian regime. Pacific diaspora actors have unique features to offer, and they can enhance the response of existing actors and fill the gaps in the humanitarian ecosystem that cannot be addressed by other actors. As long as the system maintains humanitarian principles and western ideals of 'professionalism' as standard measures to validate the humanitarian actions of diaspora actors, this will limit the chance for complementarity, diversity and inclusivity. Is 'the invisibility of Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response' a result of an inaccessible and inflexible humanitarian system in practice? Diaspora communities have been helping their people and their homeland in times of humanitarian crises longer than we realise. If international humanitarians are strongly committed to transforming the current system to be more effective, adaptive and inclusive, this report emphasises the need and desirability to create alliances with diaspora actors in humanitarian response.

The report *Crossing the Divide: Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response to natural disasters* provides insights into motivations, actions and characteristics of Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response. It offers an opportunity for traditional humanitarians to understand Pacific diaspora humanitarianism from a diasporic perspective. We encourage you to read that report before reading the recommendations given below.

The following recommendations are primarily based on the inputs from local and international actors. Although we have used 'suspicious interpretation' of the text inputs wherever it is needed to deconstruct the dominant narratives of humanitarianism and the power dynamics as a part of producing the recommendations, we have also added our own recommendations based on the research findings. These recommendations highlight the next steps which need to be considered by both traditional humanitarian actors and Pacific diaspora actors to crossing the divide between them in the Pacific humanitarian ecosystem.

Recommendations for traditional humanitarian actors:

- Proactively engage diaspora humanitarians in discussions around what system changes are required to collaborate with them in disaster responses.
- Include diaspora community leaders in disaster coordination meetings.
- Communicate effective, culturally appropriate messages in conjunction with diaspora communities during disaster preparedness.
- Do a mapping exercise with diaspora organisations, groups and individuals in humanitarian response to countries in which you operate.
- Expect to pay salaries and organisational cost for diaspora actors and organisations when you need their expertise.

The current humanitarian system is hardly accessible to Pacific diaspora actors. The humanitarian terminology, exclusion of different worldviews, dominance of mammoth organisations, bureaucracy, mistrust and a lack of communication with diaspora communities pose challenges to bridging the gap between the traditional humanitarian system and Pacific diaspora. This research suggests that understanding diaspora humanitarianism from a diasporic perspective is central to crossing the divide. We strongly emphasise the need for challenging the language of traditional humanitarian actors, for example, "We need to prepare

them, I think, in the sort of operation modality of the international system, so understanding everything from the cost to the principals to the targeting beneficiaries”.^{vi} Diaspora humanitarianism should be acknowledged for its unique way of responding to humanitarian crises rather than assimilating into the ‘international system’ that champions the dominant narratives from the Global North. Our first report highlights:

Pacific diaspora is willing to collaborate with traditional humanitarians. However, they consider creating parallel structures with formal humanitarian organisations as a risk for diaspora organisations. 25 out of 29 Pacific diaspora leaders call for the acknowledgment of diaspora’s unique way of responding to humanitarian crises. (Vivekananthan & Connors 2019, p. 36)^{vii}

Therefore, we recommend traditional humanitarians to explore new ways of working with Pacific diaspora actors whose humanitarian actions are trust- and relationship-oriented, informal, flexible, irregular and variable. Given below are a few existing platforms that emerged as important links during our research process. These can be used as key points of contact to reach Pacific diaspora communities and work on pre-disaster relationships:

- Pacific Island Council of Queensland
- NSW Council for Pacific Communities
- High commissioners and consulates of PICs
- Pacific medias in Australia, for example, social media and ethnic community radio stations.

Diaspora humanitarians and community leaders operate in a voluntary capacity, giving their personal time, expertise and resources to make things happen in difficult times. We emphasise that international humanitarian organisations should be mindful of diaspora volunteerism. These international organisations should not take advantage of diasporas’ obligations to their local counterparts by using them solely for tapping resources, nor should they expect diaspora actors in this space to stretch their volunteer capacity for the organisation’s own purposes.

Recommendations for diaspora humanitarian actors:

- Proactively engage with local and international humanitarian organisations if you would like to collaborate with them in the future.
- Maintain transparency in your humanitarian planning and actions wherever possible.
- Do not send goods which are not required by disaster-affected communities.
- Know what your family, friends and communities really need before planning your response.
- Support and enable a nationally coordinated and locally led humanitarian response.
- Communicate effectively between diaspora communities and other stakeholders to build better coordination before, during and after a humanitarian response.

There is a call for diaspora humanitarian actors to ‘step up’ and make themselves more visible to the traditional humanitarian system.

I think it’s partly on the international actors to sort of step up and make sure it [the system] is accessible, but it’s also partly up to the diaspora and other local actors to put themselves forward.^{viii}

The research findings suggest that diasporas should maintain transparency in their humanitarian actions. They can record and report their actions in response to a disaster, thereby exposing their contributions. It allows traditional actors in a response to learn about diaspora actions and see if working side by side is possible.

There is a strong call for Pacific diaspora leaders to prevent the practice of sending UBD to their communities. The international and local actors overwhelmingly request Pacific diaspora leaders to encourage their communities to transfer money instead of sending goods that are not requested by disaster-affected communities. Contrary to this, an international consultant, who has first-hand experience in managing UBD prior to disasters, suggested diaspora can send certain materials that are difficult to source locally.

There is also a place for sending raw materials (for example, for rebuilding) if and when they cannot be easily purchased in local markets. I have spoken to several people in Tonga who, after Cyclone Gita, received more speedy assistance from relatives in New Zealand, sending containers of planks of wood and other building supplies even months after the cyclone.^{ix}

Placing relief materials in a warehouse (prepositioning of resources) prior to disasters can save diasporas from some of the operational difficulties during the disaster-response phase. Considering the different accounts on the issue of UBD, we recommend that it is always important to ask the local community, as well as the diaspora community leaders who have prior experience in disaster response, ‘What kind of support do you need from us?’, before planning a response. Pacific diaspora humanitarians and community leaders are encouraged to support a nationally coordinated and locally led humanitarian response.

Lack of coordinated activities is a challenge for traditional humanitarians to work with diaspora actors. Therefore, traditional humanitarian actors recommend Pacific diaspora leaders to act in coordination with government agencies and regional bodies, while hinting that diaspora should use its people-to-people connection when governmental and other formal systems are not functioning optimally.

Note: These recommendations are made based on limited inputs. The researchers invite stakeholders to suggest ‘other steps’ to cross the divide between Pacific diaspora humanitarians and traditional humanitarian actors. Please provide your feedback via jeevika@cfhl.org.au

Endnotes

- i 'Suspicious interpretation' seeks to reveal hidden meanings in the text. It allows researchers to go beyond surface meaning and access latent meaning.
- ii Research Participant 2.
- iii Research Participant 8.
- iv Research Participant 8.
- v Research Participant 3.
- vi Research Participant 3.
- vii Vivekananthan, J and Connors, P 2019, 'Crossing the Divide: Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response to natural disasters', https://centreforhumanitarianleadership.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Crossing-the-Divide_Pacific-diaspora-in-response-to-natural-disasters_Full-Report.pdf
- viii Research Participant 3.
- ix Research Participant 2.