Fiji’s Emergency Response to tropical cyclone Winston: A Best Practice for the Pacific Region

Summary

When Category 5 tropical cyclone Winston struck Fiji in February 2016, almost 62 percent of the population was affected with losses estimated around 31 percent of national GDP.

In response to the emergency, the Government of Fiji, with support of WFP, channeled post-disaster assistance through the country’s existing social protection system.

The Fiji Government’s response to tropical cyclone Winston helped to bridge the historical divide between externally-led emergency responses and nationally-led long-term development programmes.

Fiji’s lessons learnt on emergency response will be shared with the wider Pacific community, through a Pacific Regional Social Protection and Emergency Response Workshop.

Challenge

The Republic of the Fiji Islands, situated in the South Pacific Ocean, is composed of an archipelago of 332 islands (of which approximately 110 are inhabited).

In the past few decades, Fiji has been affected by multiple devastating cyclones. Category 5 tropical cyclone Winston struck Fiji on February 20, 2016 with sustained winds of up to 230 km/h. This was one of the most violent storms ever registered in the Southern Hemisphere.

The cyclone-related losses were estimated at USD 1.38 billion (31 percent of GDP), with a total of 44 victims, 30,369 houses, 495 schools, and 88 health clinics and medical facilities were damaged or destroyed. With essential services severely disrupted; and food crops and other vegetation crushed, the livelihoods of 60 percent of the population were compromised. Initial estimates of the humanitarian impact of tropical cyclone Winston indicated significant devastation in over 12 geographical areas, and 40,000 people requiring immediate assistance with food, shelter, water supply, sanitation and health services.

Responding to emergencies is tremendously complicated in Fiji and other South Pacific countries, with their multitude of scattered islands, isolated populations and high vulnerability to extreme events associated with climate variability and changes.

The traditional logistics-based response of bringing in food to distribute to affected people is no longer the only solution.

When assistance has to be delivered to people in need as fast as possible, there are other more cost-efficient or effective alternative ways to consider. Linking national social protection systems with emergency humanitarian assistance and using different transfer modalities, including cash and vouchers, can bring improvement to the food security of thousands of families.

The lessons learnt from the joint emergency response of the Fiji Government and the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) can benefit the broader Pacific Community and can be shared through South-South Cooperation.
Solution

Fiji became the first Pacific country to channel both government and external partners’ post-disaster assistance through its existing social protection system. This demonstrated the benefits of nationally-owned shock-responsive social protection systems in times of crisis. The Fiji National Disaster Management Office led the response with all national government-led clusters activated and with support from the international community, including WFP.

Stakeholders and Partners

The target groups of the humanitarian assistance were those most vulnerable to the cyclone’s impact: in particular, existing beneficiaries of the government’s social assistance and insurance programmes.

The funding agencies who supported the emergency response to tropical cyclone Winston were: the Government of Fiji; the United Nations Flash Appeal; donor governments, such as Australia, Canada, the European Commission, Germany, Belgium, Lithuania, New Zealand, Sweden, the United States, and the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund.

The implementing agencies managing the post-disaster assistance in Fiji were: the Government of Fiji (National Disaster Management Office; the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation), with support from WFP.

Methodology

Fiji’s social protection system built on the following components for the response to tropical cyclone Winston:

a. Scaling up cash transfers

The government topped up cash payments to existing beneficiaries of national welfare schemes. Within a month of the cyclone, all beneficiaries received a lump sum top-up cash transfer, equivalent to approximately three months’ worth of normal payments. This was unusual because in Pacific Island countries, emergency assistance has typically been in-kind. The cash assistance helped mitigate the disaster’s impact on Fiji’s most vulnerable citizens, and injected much needed cash into the local economy.

b. Topping up food assistance

In collaboration with the Department for Social Welfare, WFP topped up the Government’s existing food voucher scheme. This intervention helped approximately 72,000 social assistance beneficiaries in 12 critically affected areas. The Government’s database and mechanisms were used, and distribution was sequenced to follow the Government’s top-up cash payments.

c. Distributing housing vouchers

The Department of Social Welfare provided housing vouchers to assist severely impacted lower-income families to rebuild homes.
Effectiveness/Validation

At the end of the emergency operation, the World Bank conducted an impact evaluation of the Government’s cash top-up intervention. A sample of 700 beneficiaries was screened, including government social assistance beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries (citizens above the eligibility threshold for social assistance), in the identified affected areas.

The World Bank report concluded that the use of the shock-responsive component of the Government’s social protection schemes in Fiji (i) was rapidly implemented and clearly targeted through the existing social safety nets databases, and (ii) helped affected families to cope with the impacts of tropical cyclone Winston. Households acted responsibly and the top-up payments were put to good use, helping beneficiaries to recover faster. 86 percent of households surveyed judged the Government’s response as good, very good or perfectly satisfactory.

The evaluation also showed that both social assistance beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries faced similar threats. This suggests the need to consider an extension of the support to the “near poor” (those just above the eligibility threshold for social assistance), who may have been so affected by the cyclone that could have dropped below the poverty line.

South-South Cooperation

A workshop was organised in Suva (Fiji) in September 2016 with the aim of bringing together stakeholders involved at different levels in the joint emergency response to tropical cyclone Winston.

Approximately 35 stakeholders participated in the workshop, including donors, government agencies, NGOs, multilateral organizations, UN Agency representatives and WFP experts from the WFP Fiji Country Office and the WFP Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau.

Participants of this workshop felt that the lessons from Fiji’s experience would benefit the wider Pacific community, and proposed sharing them through a Pacific Regional Social Protection and Emergency Response Workshop involving different countries from the Pacific community. WFP has expressed the willingness to facilitate such an initiative, also in view of supporting Fiji and other governments in the Pacific community through South-South learning on emergency response and preparedness.

Innovation

The geographic location and structure of the Fiji islands and other South Pacific countries makes emergency response more complicated than in other isolated countries.

Traditional logistics-based responses with in-kind support to affected people, are not always the most effective solutions. Linking national social protection systems with emergency humanitarian assistance and using different transfer modalities, including cash and voucher, can be an effective way to ensure relief to families in need.

With the joint response to tropical cyclone Winston, the Fiji Government, supported by WFP, demonstrated the viability of linking
a national social protection system with emergency humanitarian assistance.

By building and strengthening the shock-responsiveness of social protection systems of governments around the world, you can increase the effectiveness, cost efficiency and timeliness of emergency response and empower governments to manage emergencies independently of international assistance.

Replicability

For a country to effectively use its social protection system to respond to a crisis, the country must have a **strong social protection system**, with shock-responsive measures already in place.

The Government of Fiji and WFP collaborated to provide detailed guidance on specific operational procedures that should be in place to ensure the effective delivery of a crisis response through social protection systems.

These procedures highlight the importance of:

- Development of **standby agreements** and **standard operating procedures** with potential stakeholders and clear definitions of roles, responsibilities and timeframes;
- Development of **communications strategies and tools**; information management and sharing instruments; internal and external **coordination plans and mechanisms** for all stakeholders to become involved at both central and local levels;
- **High quality emergency assessments** and **vulnerability analysis**, and a diversity of assistance modalities and delivery mechanisms;
- **Training** of pre-selected local surge staff;
- Development of a **M&E strategy**.

Resources

To learn more about the Joint Emergency Response of the Fiji Government and World Food Program, please refer to the **Lessons Learnt Report** (April 2017).

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References