



PREPAREDNESS for EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

# DISASTER RESPONSE: AS LOCAL AS POSSIBLE AS INTERNATIONAL NECESSARY

Vanuatu Red Cross Society

Investing in disaster preparedness is worth it - both in terms of human lives saved and economic returns. In this story we learn how the Vanuatu Red Cross National Society's preparedness for effective coordination and activation of international and regional support, enabled their implementation of locally-led, internationally supported, humanitarian response to a natural disaster in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic.



## The pandemic changed the traditional humanitarian response

In early April 2020, Category 5 Tropical Cyclone Harold struck the Pacific, affecting more than 340,000 people in Fiji and Vanuatu. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the provision of international surge assistance was highly restricted which also disrupted international procurement and supply systems.

In the context of COVID-19, international support could only be offered remotely, which meant there was an inherent limit to the extent of international assistance that could be provided, especially in Vanuatu, where there were still no cases of COVID-19 when the cyclone hit.

The response was well coordinated and based on complementary skills and resources between national and international responders: Vanuatu National Society led the response on the ground managing volunteers, organizing distributions and coordinating with in-country partners. Remote technical support from international partners in the Movement supported strategic response planning, resource mobilization and regional coordination. The response enhanced the leadership role and visibility of local Red Cross responders who are at the center of their respective countries' disaster management systems.



Preparedness, length of service, community recognition, enshrinement of Red Cross role and responsibilities in national legislation and disaster law meant that Vanuatu National Society was well placed to respond to a disaster during a pandemic.

## Discussions across regions on epidemics preparedness one year later...

In the first half of 2021 the IFRC organized a session between National Societies in the Caribbean and the Pacific to explore lessons on undertaking preparedness and response activities for COVID within small island states.

PREPAREDNESS AREA & COMPONENT RELATED

OPERATIONAL CAPACITY



Activation of Regional and International Support

KEY STATS



Category 5 Cyclone  
230km/h windspeeds

FIJI

Est. 180,000 people affected  
3,500 houses destroyed or severely damaged

VANUATU

Est. 159,000 people affected  
21,000 houses destroyed or severely damaged



## Keys to success



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- **Long-term investment in disaster preparedness** and institutional capacity development meant that pre-positioned stocks were available; and trained staff and volunteers were ready for assessment, distribution, and coordination at national and local level.
- In Vanuatu and Fiji, National Societies were already well entrenched within their own national humanitarian contexts, and thus **empowered to exercise local leadership**.
- **International support was adapted to the context**, providing remote technical support and access to timely and accessible funding mechanisms.
- The release of the **IFRC Disaster Response Emergency Fund (DREF)** for an imminent disaster before TC Harold struck was critical to a timely and well-funded response.
- The response benefitted from **investments in disaster preparedness** and longer-term and flexible partnerships between local and international actors.
- Vanuatu National Society has strengthened its role in water, sanitation and hygiene and enhanced collaboration with relevant ministries through Harold TC's recovery activities in the construction of community water tanks and latrines.



*"National Societies were prepared and in the driver's seat. We put into practice everything we'd trained for".*

*Local humanitarian actor (Vanuatu)*



For more information:

- Vanuatu Red Cross Society: <https://twitter.com/vanuaturedcross>
- National Society Preparedness: [www.ifrc.org/disaster-preparedness](http://www.ifrc.org/disaster-preparedness)

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