



STRONGER TOGETHER: FIJI AND THE CASE FOR A GLOBAL DISASTER TREATY

Fiji



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1. Summary

In late 2024, the [United Nations General Assembly](#) agreed to elaborate and conclude a legally binding instrument on the protection of persons in the event of disasters (PPED) based on the International Law Commission's (ILC) [Draft Articles on the protection of persons in the event of disasters](#) by the end of 2027. The decision to elaborate a treaty on this topic underscores a concrete commitment by States to enhance the protection of disaster-affected persons. This case study explores how a treaty on the PPED could strengthen cooperation, support disaster risk reduction (DRR), enhance the protection of persons in vulnerable situations, and facilitate external assistance in Fiji. It has been developed in support of IFRC's [proposals on strengthening the Draft Articles](#), developed for the consideration of States ahead of the upcoming PPED treaty negotiations.

The Republic of Fiji is vulnerable to disasters, with particularly high exposure to tropical cyclones due to its location in the South Pacific. Disasters such as Tropical Cyclones Winston (2016) and Yasa (2020) highlighted gaps in the legal and institutional frameworks for disaster risk management (DRM). The government of Fiji has used these experiences as opportunities to address these gaps through developing a robust legal infrastructure around DRM, by passing a new DRM law in 2024 and initiating national DRM simulation exercises to support preparations for disasters and enhance interoperability between first responders and stakeholders.

The proposed PPED treaty, to be negotiated by States, presents an opportunity to build on these positive practices while addressing the remaining gaps. To this end, it could provide a framework to strengthen mechanisms to protect persons in vulnerable situations and enhance cooperation between the government and humanitarian actors, both with respect to external assistance as well as DRM more broadly.

This case study narrates Fiji's journey in disaster law and governance, highlighting both its achievements and specific ways a treaty on the PPED could support lasting progress in strengthening DRM.

33 tropical cyclones within 10 km of Fiji since 1969
16 cyclones made landfall
Tropical Cyclone Winston (2016):
 Affected **60% of the population**
 Destroyed **82% of homes** in affected areas
 Damage equivalent to **31% of Fiji's GDP**
Projected losses: By 2050, disasters could cost **6.5% of GDP annually**, increasing poverty by **25% each year**

2. Background

The Republic of Fiji, made up of over 300 islands and home to around 900,000 people, and is extremely vulnerable to disasters, with a particularly high exposure to tropical cyclones.¹ Its location in the South Pacific exposes it to frequent and increasingly intense tropical cyclones, as well as floods, landslides, and rising sea

“Facing the realities of a changing climate, it has been interesting to see that while casualties may be decreasing from disasters, economic losses continue to mount. The upcoming treaty negotiations provide an opportunity for States to voice their DRM needs and concretely enhance international cooperation in DRM. This is especially crucial for countries that rely on external resources to support risk reduction efforts. A focus on DRR will also help us to draw attention to important resource needs by signifying a global mindset shift towards preparedness.”

*Napolioni Boseiwaqa,
Director, NDRMO*

levels linked to climate change.² Since 1969, 33 Tropical Cyclones have passed within 10 kilometers of Fiji, with 16 making landfall.³ The devastation is often immense: in 2016, Tropical Cyclone Winston, a Category 5 storm, impacted more than 60% of the population, destroyed close to 82% of homes in affected areas,

and caused losses equivalent to 31% of Fiji's GDP.⁴ More recently, in 2020, Tropical Cyclone Yasa, a category 5 storm and one of the strongest tropical storms to ever hit Fiji,⁵ caused widespread destruction of homes, crops, and infrastructure.

These disasters revealed gaps in Fiji's DRM framework. During Winston, affected communities faced significant delays in restoring access to shelter, clean water, and food. While the government did what it could at the time, for weeks, families lived in overcrowded temporary shelters, children were unable to return to school, and rural villages struggled with disrupted supply chains. These experiences underlined the need for stronger preparedness, clearer coordination between national and international actors, and dedicated protection measures for those most at risk.

Fiji has since made significant strides. In 2024, it adopted a comprehensive DRM Act, which covers prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.⁶ The law integrates climate change adaptation, recognises the rights of indigenous communities, and codifies humanitarian principles such as humanity and neutrality.⁷ It also establishes a dedicated unit – the Single Window International Facilitation Team – to manage external assistance, including expedited customs clearance and tax exemptions.⁸ Fiji has invested in early warning systems, evacuation centres, and multi-level DRM plans, while its National Disaster Risk Management Office (NDRMO) regularly conducts simulation exercises for earthquakes, tsunamis, and cyclones.⁹



The Auxiliary Role of the Fiji Red Cross Society

As auxiliary to its public authorities in the humanitarian field, the Fiji Red Cross Society is a key actor in supporting the government's humanitarian interventions and has been legally recognized in Fiji since 1973.

The Fiji Red Cross Society works to build healthy, resilient communities by providing humanitarian aid during disasters, promoting health, and engaging in local community programs that empower volunteers and vulnerable people.



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How a PPEd Treaty Strengthens Fiji

Reduces Risk – Global commitment to DRR as cyclones intensify

Improves Response – Faster, streamlined international aid

Protects People – Stronger safeguards for those most at risk

Despite this progress, challenges remain. Fiji's economy is highly exposed: the government estimates that by 2050, over 6.5 per cent of GDP could be lost annually to disasters, and disaster-related shocks are expected to push 25 per cent more people into poverty each year.¹⁰ These figures alone highlight the urgency of stronger global action and justify the need for a binding treaty that compels States to reduce disaster risks and better protect their populations. Communities in low-lying islands face increasing risks from sea-level rise and coastal erosion, while housing, sanitation, and livelihoods remain vulnerable to repeated shocks. International support following Tropical Cyclones Winston and Yasa was critical, but also highlighted coordination challenges, with delays in customs clearance, difficulties in tracking incoming relief goods, and duplication of efforts between national and international actors.

Fiji's experience demonstrates both the importance of strong national legislation and the reality that no country can face such risks alone. As a member of regional organisations such as the Pacific Islands Forum and the Pacific Community, Fiji has been active in shaping regional disaster resilience initiatives.¹¹ A future treaty on the protection of persons in the event of disasters could complement these efforts by making DRR, protection of persons, and effective international cooperation binding obligations for all states.

“All actors in this space share a common goal: keeping communities safe through preventing, mitigating and preparing for disasters, and ensuring that appropriate aid reaches affected communities as soon as possible when disasters strike. We have to overcome the unfortunate reality that miscommunication is a part of the human condition. This is why the themes of cooperation and DRR contained in the Draft Articles are key. Enhancing cooperation and coordination amongst local and international actors and leveraging local knowledge in DRR initiatives will continue to be a critical piece of the solution.”

*Maciu Nokelevu,
IFRC Disaster Risk Management Manager,
Pacific Country Cluster Delegation*

3. How the PPEd treaty could strengthen DRM in Fiji

As outlined above, Fiji has made important progress through its new DRM law and strong regional engagement, but recurring cyclones continue to reveal persistent challenges. Risk information is often incomplete or fragmented across agencies, and coordination can be delayed, particularly when damage assessments are needed on outlying islands.¹² Funding constraints also remain a bottleneck, limiting the ability to sustain preparedness and resilience measures over the long term.¹³ These gaps can mean that families wait longer for essential assistance, recovery efforts are uneven, and communities remain highly exposed to future shocks.

The proposed PPEd treaty could help address these challenges by making disaster risk reduction and cooperation binding obligations for all states.¹⁴ For Fiji, this could provide a stronger legal basis for ensuring that risk information is systematically collected and shared, that assessments are conducted rapidly and consistently across all islands, and that preparedness and long-term resilience is resourced in a predictable way. The PPEd treaty would also reinforce regional and global solidarity by aligning national laws with international standards, ensuring that when disasters strike, cooperation is reliable and efficient rather than conducted through ad hoc mechanisms.

Fiji's experience also demonstrates the importance of protecting persons in vulnerable situations. Following Cyclone Winston, the government developed a Code of Conduct for humanitarian actors and expanded measures to prevent gender-based violence and protect children. The new DRM law further promotes inclusion by mandating the participation of vulnerable groups in planning and decision-making.¹⁵ Yet challenges remain: people with disabilities still face barriers in accessing shelters and infrastructure, and risk mapping has not fully captured the needs of rural or remote communities.¹⁶

The PPEd treaty could help accelerate progress in these areas by requiring States to give priority to the protection of vulnerable populations in all phases of disaster management. It could encourage governments to collect and use disaggregated data, remove barriers to access, and integrate the perspectives of those most at risk into laws, policies, and response mechanisms. Just as



importantly, a binding agreement on the PPED would signal to international partners that support for vulnerable groups is not optional but a legal obligation, opening pathways for cooperation to strengthen national efforts.

Finally, Fiji's reliance on international support after major disasters illustrates the need for clearer and faster cooperation between domestic and external actors. While Fiji's new Single Window Facilitation Team provides a promising model, international relief operations during Tropical Storm Winston and Yasa were still marked by delays, logistical bottlenecks, and overlapping efforts. The PPED treaty could provide clarity by establishing common

rules for requesting, accepting, and coordinating external assistance,¹⁷ ensuring that customs, tax, and licensing processes are streamlined, and that assistance is delivered efficiently and transparently.

By embedding these principles into binding international law, the PPED treaty would not only strengthen Fiji's own resilience but also ensure that the lessons it has learned are shared globally. Fiji's experience demonstrates what is possible when strong national laws are in place; the PPED treaty would ensure that all countries are held to the same standard, protecting people everywhere from the increasing risks of disasters. ●

NOTES

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- 4 See Government of Fiji: Post-Disaster Needs Assessment, Tropical Cyclone Winston, February 20, 2016 (May 2016) available at [https://www.gfdrr.org/sites/default/files/publication/Post%20Disaster%20Needs%20Assessments%20CYCLONE%20WINSTON%20Fiji%202016%20\(Online%20Version\).pdf](https://www.gfdrr.org/sites/default/files/publication/Post%20Disaster%20Needs%20Assessments%20CYCLONE%20WINSTON%20Fiji%202016%20(Online%20Version).pdf)[https://www.gfdrr.org/sites/default/files/publication/Post%20Disaster%20Needs%20Assessments%20CYCLONE%20WINSTON%20Fiji%202016%20\(Online%20Version\).pdf](https://www.gfdrr.org/sites/default/files/publication/Post%20Disaster%20Needs%20Assessments%20CYCLONE%20WINSTON%20Fiji%202016%20(Online%20Version).pdf)
- 5 IFRC, *Extensive destruction reported as Cyclone Yasa slams into Fiji* (published 18 December 2020), available at <https://www.ifrc.org/press-release/extensive-destruction-reported-cyclone-yasa-slams-fiji>
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- 7 National Disaster Risk Management Act 14 of 2024, section 5.
- 8 *Id.*, section 31-33.
- 9 IFRC, *Celebrating 20 Years of Disaster Law* (published 2024); See also IFRC Disaster Law, *Annual Report 2023* (published 27 July 2024), available at: <https://disasterlaw.ifrc.org/node/1014>.
- 10 IFRC, *Simplified Early Action Protocol, Fiji, Tropical Cyclone* (published 2024).
- 11 IFRC, *Climate Risk & Early Warning Systems, People Centered Early Warning Systems: Learning from National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies* (published 9 June 2021).
- 12 IFRC, *Pacific Week of Anticipatory Action, 28 - 31 March 2023 | Nadi, Fiji* (published 2023), available at: <https://disasterlaw.ifrc.org/media/4304>.
- 13 Director Napolioni Boseiwaqa (Fiji NDRMO), Key Informant Interview in Support of IFRC Disaster Law's Case Study on the Potential Impact of an International Legal Instrument on the Protection of Persons in the Event of Disasters (PPED) on Fiji's Approach to Disaster Risk Management (2025).
- 14 International Law Commission, *Draft Articles on the protection of persons in the event of disasters, with commentaries* (adopted 2016), Draft Articles 7,8 and 9, available at: https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/commentaries/6_3_2016.pdf.
- 15 Bill No. 6 of 2024, National Disaster Risk Management Bill, 2024, sections 68 - 69, available at: <https://www.parliament.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Bill-No.-6-National-Disaster-Risk-Management-Bill-2024-.pdf>.
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