**EPWG MEETING NOTES**

**Ad-hoc meeting: Emergency Preparedness for Response in the COVID-19 Context**

Meeting Date: April 30th, 2020

Co-chaired by ICVA, IFRC and OCHA

**Part 1: Lessons learned responding in a COVID-19 Environment - TC Harold Response**

**Scene setting:**

**OCHA Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific**

OCHA started by confirming that the COVID-19 crisis has posed many fundamental challenges to standard practice of emergency relief. TC Harold put focus on both how to deal with a crises, the need to enhance localization and maximize the use of all capacities on the ground.

OCHA introduced the session and underlined that the aim was to share experience from UN Agencies, the Red Cross Movement and NGOs involved in the response to TC Harold. In order to focus the discussion, three challenges linked to the impacts of COVID-19 would be at the center:

1. How has COVID-19 shifted the response?
2. Areas where flexibility was evident?
3. Areas where additional constraints were experienced?

**UNOCHA Regional Office for the Pacific**

In terms of Coivd-19 shift on the response OCHA underlined that there is a new operating environment;

* Many places are hard to reach due to COVID restriction and the impacts of the TC. Therefore, operations are heavily relying on exiting staff in the affected locations. Other COVID-19 specific constraints include fears over the possibility of getting infected through imported relief goods for example.
* The collection of assessment data has been slowed down as many places are hard to reach. It takes longer to get the information, transfer it to the capital and ensure that the government has triangulated it.
* The UN has managed to contribute with staff to most of the assessment teams deployed by the government and NDMO in Vanuatu and the general interagency cooperation is working well.
* Access will increase as the authorities in Vanuatu intend to ease the COVID-10 related restrictions (some restrictions like domestic and sea transport are being eased).

**International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent - Pacific Office**

IFRC opened by underlining that the expectation is that the relief operations will continue for some time and as such the presented reflections, focused on Vanuatu and Fiji, were based on the initial impressions. IFRC stated that the COVID-19 restrictions had had limited impact on operations to date, but this may change.

IFRC had identified five key elements of operationality in the current context:

1. *The importance of having local organizations with strong capacity, geographic coverage, local preparedness and stocks in place.*

For IFRC he main partner is Vanuatu Red Cross (VRC) which is the National Society implementing the operations. The earlier investments VRC had made are evident in the current situation. The fact that there are branches in the affected areas, trained volunteers, stocks prepositioned and SOPs in place have all enabled VRC to start the relief in the early onset of the disaster.

Since last year, IFRC started to support **core funding** for VRC and Fiji Red cross to continue to exist and respond. IFRC sees this as a clear link to the organization preparedness which is a prerequisite for a strong locally led response.

Fiji Red Cross (FRC) does not have volunteers/branch presence in some of the affected island which hamper their assess. As such, assessments, information gathering and distribution at local level are harder to carry out. The operation has to go through the government in some areas in order to distribute food which is not usually the case.

1. *Pre-existing partnerships and relationship*.

The importance of having preexisting partnerships has become even more clear as COVID-19 restrictions forces us to support remotely in certain aspects and areas. Therefore, having a preexisting partnership and relationship greatly facilitates this in the emergency phase. As an example IFRC is providing support through a shelter coordinator is working remotely to assist the shelter cluster but who has worked in Vanuatu before. As such, the relationships and connections were already in place and could easily be reignited.

1. *Immediate Funding.*

For the first time, IFRC released an imminent Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) for Vanuatu. IFRC made a revision last year to allow the DREF to make a pre-financing before a disaster. $50,000 was released ahead of the TC. The amount was adjusted to $657,000 based on initial assessment. Some governments have pre-allocated funding directed to COVID-19 response, making it harder now to raise funding for other disasters.

1. *Legal framework and coordination.*

After TC Pam in 2015, which was a devastating storm and where the international response overwhelmed the national authorities, the government of Vanuatu undertook a revision of its disaster legislation. As a result, the Ministry of Health leads the COVID-19 response and the response to TC Harold is led by the NDMO. However, it still took a bit of time to clear out which authority in charge when the two overlaps.

In Fiji, the new legislation has not yet been passed but the government has learnt some lessons from TC Winston and has now recognized NGOs role in the disaster council.

1. *Operational constraints*

There have been several challenges related to international procurement and shipping. In addition, some loads have not been released because of COVID quarantine.

This could however be used as opportunities for local suppliers rather than brining in goods from outside and strengthen the local economy.

As for funding, many donors “reallocated” humanitarian funding to COVID and therefore funds are limited for disasters like tropical storms, particularly in the recovery funding.

One way of mitigating this gap could be to enhance interagency coordination and planning to help share the limited resource and maximize the efforts.

**NGO Perspectives: PIANGO**

PIANGO started by underlining that COVID-19 and TC Harold has reinforced the importance of localization and gender responsive operations.

TC Harold has brought up several aspects around the humanitarian structures and mechanisms; *Cluster mechanism and legal frameworks are in place to support humanitarian work but COVID-19 disrupted this established system*. However, local actors are still reaching communities through their traditional ways and in TC Harold took the role in response (security, protection) without waiting for directions at national level. Therefore, it’s important **to recognize the traditional system and how to support them** along with the existing systems.

The NGO-association in Vanuatu was also advanced in terms of supporting hard to reach communities while national level institutions were still looking for collective solutions respond.

PIANGO continued by underlining that we are still yet to see the real socio-economic impact of COVID-19, such as job loss as tourism industry was hit hard. In terms of preparedness, there is a need to see what kind of policy change need to pick up in order to influence. PIANGO works particularly at this level to ensure that localization and community driven leadership are incorporated.

**NGO Perspectives: Australian Humanitarian Partnership**

Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP) is a partnership of the Australian government through DFAT with six Australian humanitarian NGOs including Can Do (Caritas), WVI, Save the Children, Plan, Care, and Oxfam. Each of these have extensive consortium in the Pacific.

AHP has a multiyear program in the Pacific called Disaster Ready operating in Fiji, Vanuatu, PNG and Timor-Leste. The program has been running for two and half years. The program aims to encourage local leadership; enhance decision making, building strong disaster response and preparedness network. The approach to building communities and collaboration between partnership has been front and center for both COVID response and TC Harold. DFAT has funded response in all countries including Fiji and Vanuatu that are Disaster Ready funded.

Lesson learnt from the program:

1. *Much less competition, but rather collaboration during response time.*

Challenges are that things are slower; TC did see some restrictions (relief goods need 72 hrs-six days quarantine in Vanuatu for example) that challenges traditional surge. The need for enhancing the ongoing resilience programming. But the program is a good investment.

1. *The importance of social inclusion.*

Have strong relationship with people-focused organizations and shared services on gender, child protection and other social inclusion issues.

1. *The links between CSOs and government authorities at national and local level seem to be stronger.*
2. *Adaption*

Quick pivoting of traditional ways of working to adapting within local regulations regarding COVID-19. Real time monitoring on social inclusion and localization.

**Cash Programming Perspectives: Oxfam Vanuatu**

Oxfam is supporting multiple networks with a broad outreach including Vanuatu Humanitarian Team, climate action network, and gender, justice and youth livelihood network, and governance and leadership network.

Oxfam is leading the cash working groups. Majority of stakeholders supports cash as a modality of response. Under the Australia AHP program, Oxfam has done a lot of evidence-based preparedness activities and assessments, market system and pilot; cash transfer teams building etc. These have come into use now.

Oxfam is looking at fully localized responseusing in-country staff and local expertise.

* the rapid assessment of NDMO and cluster was not very reliable. The data needs for building cash programs are different, and specific data was not collected by the clusters. Another way to adapt to the situations, by pivoting both COVID-19 funding and response funds is by taking a remote delivery approach- a nation wide assessment using mobile phone and calls to look at vulnerable livelihoods and income impact with a split analysis between COVID-19 and TC Harold will begin in May. This also helps to put in place an architecture to help roll out cash as a modality. Collecting data is critical especially in terms of understanding no. of ppl impacted, income and vulnerability level, informal sector/market etc.
* Oxfam also have funding to roll out technical support on how to carry out a cash program (tools, systems, learning material, etc.). With partners including UN agencies, government agencies, banks and civil society, Oxfam is planning a large consortium-based cash response (when the market recovers in 2-3 months) to roll out full technical assistance package for 2-3 weeks. Meanwhile, also doing a system upgrade on Unblocked cash project, which is ane-voucher delivery platform on Blockchain-a single payment system attached to a trust fund held in the Vanuatu national bank where donors can pool funds. SMEs and informal workers are the focus for the e-voucher system, but also it can be use for micro economic stimulus.
* The key constraint was identified to be funding. There is internal impact within Oxfam and other partners affecting technical capacity and global support. Financial services providers’ capacity is also affected, e.g. capacity for paying out to the national project fund; credit, loan, etc. are no longer coming to the bank.

**Gender and Protection Perspectives: UN Women Pacific Office**

A number of lessons learnt were highlighted

1. key partnerships are central to workin in protection clusters and mechanisms and supporting Government; there are protection cluster members in all the assessment teams in Vanu and Fiji after TC Harold;
2. flexibility and timing: need to immediately come up with solutions to make sure central service can continue remotely, together with Government and civil society partnership towards shared system around protection topics; The service delivery protocols and were discussed well before TC Harold, hence enabled an immediate response to the disaster.
3. local technical capacity and solutions on the ground. Locally driven solutions are in place with technical capacity to address challenges with the COVID-19 situation and TC Harold without waiting for international support.

**Part II: Participant inputs and comments**

**Plan international Australia- Response in Fiji** (On behalf of AHP country committee)

The investment in preparedness produced valuable results in response time:

* Fiji Council of Social Service working with Government to coordinate civil society; Fiji disabled people federation operating its own emergency center for the first time ever - needs of sign languages are incorporated into gov’t messaging, etc. Rainbow Pride Foundation focusing on LQBTQI rights be part of joint assessment team led by Government.
* For COVID-19, the AHP country committee received funding for risk communication, community engagement needs, movement restrictions, etc.
* Local partners of AHP joined force with Government to distribute non-food items, joint assessment and work planning, endorsement by the government on AHP’s country response activities, food distribution of disability specifically under lockdown, provision of psychosocial support, etc. More recently in TC Harold response, also there was focus on resourcing from local partners while being cautious of not overwhelming the local system.
* Working closely with Government helped to gain access and use Government assets to supplement what is available to civil society.

**ADRA- Pacific**

Lessons learnt:

1. importance of preparedness. Local staff were able to coordinate effectively and respond fast.
2. having pre-positioned stocks ready in multiple locations meant these were able to be distributed as soon as the green light was given.
3. pre-existing relationships were key: with local government and clusters; also, between local staff and remote support who had been working in the context (personal level relationship)
4. localization. churches play a key role in local disaster resilience and also inclusion of whole communities. e.g. churches in Vanuatu had done a community mapping and vulnerability mapping beforehand, so they know immediately whom to get to during a disaster.
5. Mapping of evacuation centers helped to make informed decisions of NDMO in terms of which shelters to open.
6. Flexibility- utilizing local staff and volunteers in leadership positions while providing remote support for writing proposals and resource mobilization. Using local communities to make emergency kits and equipment also was helpful.

**Questions and interventions**

**On Shelter**: *How strong is the response to rebuild those homes destroyed or at least temporary shelters for ppl hit by TC Harold?*

**PIANGO:** Pacific Resilience Partnerships has convened a technical working group meeting to discuss about influencing the Government to rebuilding new housing that could withstand cyclones. In Tonga, when it comes to rebuilding, land issue has to be considered as there are lots of women who not own land and could be shut out of the rebuilding support process.

**OCHA**: There's a Vanuatu Shelter cluster guideline on rebuilding; also, there is CERF fund for shelter projects that going through IOM. There is currently uncertainty on what can be procured locally and what should be imported; how to manage restrictions and what therole of cash will be in this case and there will probably need to be a phased approach from in-kind to cash for shelter needs over the next several months.

**UN-Fiji:** approx. 6,300 households need shelter. There is considerable assistance going in already. IFRC as cluster lead has been providing shelter kits. Tents given are not family tents but school tents. The UN is working with national cluster and IFRC to see how to close the gap for shelter needs.

**On question “*what is being done in addressing Micro-economic level losses due to cascading shocks of COVID and TC Harold”***

**AHP Australia**: There is a need to take a look at longer term impact. Bali’s tourism sector was severely impacted for a long time after the Bali Bomb incident. Need multi-faceted assessment of the long-term prospects for the tourism industry particularly.

**GIHA (Gender in Humanitarian Action) Working Group Intervention**

* It is important to understand gender in connection to preparedness, including to review contingency plans from the lens of protection and gender. E.g. in the context of sudden onset of emergencies;
* A one pager on integrating gender into preparedness is available to circulate.
* Consolidated data for advocacy briefing looking at good practices on COVID-19 and disaster together
* GiHA members are happy to engage in gender assessment and working groups at country level

**Closing:**

The EPWG Co-Chairs advised they will continue to hold similar events. The revised guidance on emergency preparedness was released at global level and may be of interest to some people in sensitizing the guidance.

The EPWG also has plans to engage donors and experts on funding mechanisms globally and regionally to better understand on how they intersect.