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Cultivating Community-Based Disaster Risk Management in Tonga

In February 2018, Tropical Cyclone Gita brought devastating winds of more than 140 miles per hour and extensive flooding to the Kingdom of Tonga, causing widespread damage to the Pacific island nation. According to the Government of Tonga (GoT), the storm affected 75,000 people, or approximately 70 percent of Tonga’s population, with the storm damaging or destroying nearly 2,250 houses and resulting in \$156 million in damage to crops and infrastructure on the worst-affected islands of ‘Eua and Tongatapu.

The Kingdom of Tonga is vulnerable to hydrometeorological hazards, including cyclones, floods, storm surges, and tsunamis. Recognizing its vulnerability, and acknowledging how quickly a powerful cyclone like Gita could overwhelm local disaster response capacity, USAID Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) partner Act for Peace has been working to increase disaster preparedness in the country since 2010 through local partner the Tonga National Council of Churches and in coordination with GoT emergency management officials.

Prior to the storm, Act for Peace implemented the Tonga Community Disaster Risk Management program (TCDRM), which includes community-led disaster management planning and response exercises designed to minimize the impact of natural hazards. Through this program, Act for Peace was able to equip communities affected by Gita with the knowledge necessary to withstand



Photo Courtesy of Act for Peace

the storm. The rapid mobilization of village emergency management committees—groups of citizen responders trained to improve disaster preparedness and resilience within their communities—proved to be an important element of the response. TCDRM also promotes leadership opportunities for women and youth, supporting cohesive and inclusive disaster preparedness and response efforts.

While Gita did result in significant material damages, the storm did not cause any fatalities in Tonga, and many Tongans who found themselves in the storm’s path felt empowered to respond thanks to their involvement or familiarity with TCDRM.

“I was the first one to evacuate to one of the evacuation centers in our village,” reflected committee leader Lolohea Vaka, who resides on ‘Eua. “After settling in the evacuation center, I went to the homes of the elderly, widows, and neighbors, encouraging them to evacuate and offering my assistance as needed.”

“To be honest, all the knowledge I gained from the TCDRM training really helped me survive Tropical Cyclone Gita,” added Lolohea.

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