



Australia Assists deployee Daniel Noriega, Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist with International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), conducting an observation of the damage caused by Tropical Cyclone Harold in Nambukalevu-i-Ra village, Fiji. Daniel is pictured here with Simeli Nayacakalou, the village's Turaga, and Peni Gaunimeke, driver for the Reproductive and Family Health Association of Fiji (RFHAF) humanitarian response team June 19.

The Pivot to COVID-19: RedR Australia's early learning, challenges ahead

By Kirsten Sayers

*Article written in British English

The COVID-19 pandemic is redefining our era. It is challenging how we think and behave around issues of public health. It is resetting economic and poverty fault lines and has upended the way humans move, both within and across borders. But, most importantly, it is cutting across race, class and gender divides, affecting all of humanity.

RedR Australia is proud to provide humanitarian

support to our partner organisations globally. Our niche product is our people. Our people offer dignity, compassion and generosity of spirit to those most vulnerable. They embody the spirit of service for the common good. We consider ourselves privileged to be invited to work alongside local communities to plan and prepare for, rebuild, and recover from, crises and conflicts.

Like most of the world's industries, as COVID-19

emerged, it immediately curbed our ability to deliver additional humanitarian assistance to communities facing crisis. Despite having people with in-demand skills – such as disaster risk management and recovery, health and protection – we were largely immobilised as global transportation routes shut down.

The inability to move our people and assets was exacerbated by the world’s insurance providers’ inability to guarantee medical evacuations or emergency extractions. As our globalised world ground to a halt, we realised we needed to change our approach, otherwise we would be watching from the side-lines as vulnerability deepened.

RedR Australia has responded to pandemics, including Ebola, avian-flu and SARS, sending technical experts to assist during times of crisis. We have been committed to working in partnership to help prevent the global spread of COVID-19. This article outlines how RedR Australia has adapted its operations and overcome challenges along the way, focusing on dual disasters in the South Pacific and the Syrian and Rohingya refugee crises, both complex emergencies.

Innovation and Agility

Rapidly evolving travel bans, airspace closures and restrictions on insurance markets all called

for innovative operational problem solving from an early stage. RedR Australia engaged a specialist broker to pave the way for the procurement of additional insurance to safeguard operations, and liaised with the Australian government to identify prospective pathways through the country’s ongoing travel ban.

The significant reduction in global flight options remains one of RedR Australia’s biggest logistical hurdles. Through registration with the World Food Programme’s Common Services Project, a network of scheduled flights for humanitarian workers is offering promise of access. In all cases, clear tasking of specific individuals and internal working groups, coupled with regular reporting on progress to the wider organisation, has assured agility throughout a time of significant disruption.

The Pacific Preparedness and Localisation

While Pacific Island countries have largely been spared from the comparatively high COVID-19 infection and fatality rates found in other countries, they have had to manage the health crisis within existing and new humanitarian crises.

In early April, the Category 5 Tropical Cyclone (TC) Harold cut a path of destruction across the Pacific, affecting 30 percent of Vanuatu’s population



Damage in Vanuatu caused by Tropical Cyclone Harold. Photo courtesy of Unity Airlines Vanuatu.

alone. At the time Harold struck, Vanuatu had no cases of COVID-19 and had strict border controls in place. While tight border controls may have protected the nation from COVID-19, it reduced available paths to provide humanitarian assistance. For RedR Australia, and many others in the sector, this has only served to emphasise the need for strong preparedness in our operations to support locally-led solutions. The Vanuatu Government has been able to lead the response to TC Harold, supported by newly implemented preparedness and response plans, and cyclone-resilient infrastructure developed following Cyclone Pam in 2015.

Through the Australia Assists Program, funded by the Australian Government, we work side-by-side with at least seven Pacific governments, their communities, and local and regional organisations to bolster Pacific national disaster management preparedness and response capabilities. This work has supported the creation of national disaster management plans and procedures, strengthening many South Pacific states' ability to tackle multiple and complex emergencies.

RedR Australia's preparedness work in partnership with the Office of the President of Kiribati supported the drafting and implementation of the Kiribati National Disaster Act. Passed by Parliament in 2019, it now underpins government and civil society coordination in Kiribati in responding to Covid-19 in a way that integrates

social inclusion into the national and sub-national architecture.

RedR Australia had 20 deployees in the Pacific before COVID-19. We now have 24 in place and 11 working remotely. A decision was made early that, where possible, we would support our people to stay and work alongside our Pacific partners. This included finding and engaging talented and experienced Pacific Island nationals to work with us to increase available expertise in-country. Local and pragmatic solutions have included:

- Active recruitment of talented local experts has resulted in rapid access and impact. Their understanding of the context and network they operate in matters during a disaster. One such RedR Australia deployee in Vanuatu is facilitating the movement and clearance of international humanitarian supplies by ensuring the goods meet international and national import regulations and that supplies make it to the right cluster and regional leads for distribution.

- The United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) projects a 20 per cent per annum increase in gender-based violence as a result of increased restrictions due to COVID-19, including lockdowns. For some Pacific countries, these projections are likely to be on the conservative side. Women and girls are also disadvantaged as health systems divert resources from sexual and reproductive health (SRH) care to respond to health emergencies. The closure

Who We Are:

RedR Australia is a humanitarian organisation that provides training and skilled people to work with communities to plan, prepare, rebuild and recover before, during and after disasters and conflict. RedR Australia maintains a roster of more than 750 technical specialists across 76 skill profiles, including disaster risk management, humanitarian response, protection and stabilisation.

RedR Australia is a [Standby Partner \(SBP\)](#) to 14 United Nations agencies. The global network of SBP organisations provide emergency support to UN response efforts in times of humanitarian crises. RedR Australia also provides support to frontline relief agencies and governments, including National Disaster Management Offices.

Where We Work:





Australia Assists deployee Daniel Noriega, Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist with International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) in Fiji, participates in an interview for the Real Time Review (RTR). Daniel is pictured here with Monica Burns, Sexual and Reproductive Health Advisor with IPPF, Dr. Toyin Olawale Jemyo, Principal Medical Officer, and Litiana Mana, Sub-Divisional Health Officer for Kadavu.

of health clinics, and delays or cancellations of community-based services, puts women and infants at an increased health risk. In partnership with the International Planned Parenthood Foundation (IPPF) and UNFPA, RedR Australia's Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Specialist is helping to monitor preparedness and response activities in terms of infection prevention and control in each of the IPPF's nine member association countries. This includes preparing country-specific M&E tools and supporting members to provide life-saving SRH services should health systems become overwhelmed due to COVID-19.

The Rohingya Crisis Coordination and Access

As many as 60,000 to 90,000 people are living in each square kilometre in the world's largest refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Social distancing is impossible. Overcrowding, limited sanitation, and an overburdened health system have made preparing for an outbreak of Covid-19 challenging. With the first Rohingya refugee testing positive to COVID-19 on 14 May and with the second death reported at the time of writing, the camp is bracing for a health crisis that will exacerbate the protracted humanitarian crisis.

RedR Australia has deployed 52 humanitarian specialists to support the crisis since 2017, which represents 22 consecutive years of humanitarian service. Coordination and multi-sector and multi-

partner collaboration remains key to any success in one of the world's most protracted crises. RedR Australia personnel currently deployed have quickly pivoted to focus on COVID-19 preparedness and response in Cox's Bazar.

Compared to the Pacific context, where civilian control remains in place supporting the humanitarian corridor, the increasing rates of oversight by military on the movement of cargo in Myanmar is significantly affecting essential humanitarian access and supply chains. This could increase the COVID-19 risks and corresponding loss of life. Civilian and political leadership, and the relationship between security and law and justice protection services, remains key to enabling or disabling humanitarian relief.

RedR Australia deployees remain focused on what impact we can make despite these challenges, including:

- Our Hydraulic Engineer working with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Bangladesh has shifted his work on monsoonal flood modelling in Cox's Bazar to repurposing camp facilities for Covid-19 isolation and quarantine.
- Our UNFPA Myanmar Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) Coordinator has helped mainstream PSEA messages in quarantine centres, including virtually.
- Our United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Myanmar Humanitarian Affairs Access Advisor is helping gain

access to establish operations, assess needs and move humanitarian supplies, personnel and services to affected populations.

- Our World Food Programme (WFP) Myanmar Protection and Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) Advisor is providing gender and protection advice and training that accounts for the changing needs brought about by COVID-19.

The Syrian Crisis

Access and Protection

The COVID-19 crisis marks the ninth year of the Syrian conflict. Over 13.2 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, including 6.2 million internally displaced people and 5 million people experiencing acute needs. The political will and ability to coordinate humanitarian action has long been a challenge of the Syrian crisis, with COVID-19 further affecting the situation and making it almost impossible for humanitarian actors to operate. Without political will, strong local leadership and concerted multilateral coordination, the humanitarian crisis is set to deepen, further undermining both regional stability and economic and social recovery.

The numbers of people infected by COVID-19 (including Syrian refugees and those internally displaced) in Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Syria are likely to far exceed the official count, with contact tracing and testing both limited. A COVID-19 outbreak would be catastrophic, not only for the dispersed and immuno-compromised Syrian refugee populations, but also for already severely weakened health systems and services. And, as is so often the case, the risks to women, girls and the elderly will be particularly acute.

Understanding this, RedR Australia has prioritised people who have the right skills and experience to find immediate solutions to the challenges posed by COVID-19 where they might exist, including the below.

- Our OCHA Whole of Syria Civil-Military Coordination Officer acts as the link between the UN and all stakeholders required to facilitate the

protection of vital humanitarian facilities and movements. Their work helps to maintain the integrity of humanitarian supply chains into North East Syria, as well as supporting implementation of the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan. This includes assurance of a medical evacuation corridor for humanitarian personnel from North East Syria, to Erbil (Iraq) when required.

- Our WFP Jordan Gender Advisor is supporting training programs, developing sustainable networks, and embedding increased gender awareness into programs to prevent sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment, especially critical at a time of rising gender-based violence.

- Our UNHCR Turkey Shelter Officer is updating pre-existing site planning to ensure infrastructure supports the needs of internally displaced people potentially affected by COVID-19. This includes providing for the unique needs of people with a disability, all genders and the elderly. They are also leading and supporting various site planning and urban design training activities, focused on local actors.

Learning and looking ahead

The unique challenges and opportunities that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented will continue to be revealed over the coming months. This global crisis forced RedR Australia to quickly and decisively charge two parallel paths: to ensure the wellbeing of our personnel dispersed around the world, while simultaneously upholding our commitment to our partners and, by extension, the humanitarian principles of Humanity, Neutrality, Impartiality and Independence.

In many ways, this crisis has validated our efforts in recent years to pre-position disaster preparedness support to communities before a crisis. It has also accelerated our resolve to drive humanitarian reform by seeking local solutions to local problems during disasters. We are buoyed by our successes and humbled by the work we still have to do. In both cases, we are learning. ■

RedR Australia recently engaged a monitoring and evaluation team to help capture, and improve, our real-time learning for what has become an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. This is what we have learned so far ...

1 Doing nothing is not an option. We made a strategic decision early - as long as there was no compromise to the safety of our deployed people and that they chose to remain, we would do all we could to keep them in place. RedR Australia repatriated only those who chose to return home, were at higher risk than others, or whose host agency demobilised. This remains a point of differentiation to many other organisations.

2 Investing in our partnerships, and responding with a unity of effort and spirit, matters. These partnerships are bound by trust formed between our people and the communities and leaders they work alongside. Standing together to face this global humanitarian challenge was our promise. No country was immune.

3 The first rule of first aid is to ensure your own safety. For us, we were responding to the international crisis at a time when our own communities were struggling with anxiety, fear and uncertainty. We activated a team that ensured our Melbourne headquarters and regional Fiji and Jordan offices and staff were safe, secure and resourced appropriately to work remotely and in new ways.

4 In times of crisis, compassionate and accurate communications drives a common purpose, and marshals resources towards a singular organisational purposes. Thankfully, a global staff footprint and a recent tenancy issue meant our staff had recently experienced a dry-run of

working remotely. We established structured staff and deployee communications check-ins. We used phone, email and video communications. We acknowledged that the diversity of our staff meant there would be diversity in their needs. By the end of March, all our staff and many of our deployees were working from home and still engaging with our donors and operationalising our response.

5 Our collective Grand Bargain commitment to increased localisation has been progressed. We focused on strengthening operational and organisational systems capabilities in the Pacific, exploring ways to provide regional and localised emergency preparedness and training, and deepening our RedR International partnerships – including a joint program and deployments with RedR Indonesia and RedR India.

6 It is crucial that communities are able to lead their own disaster management responses and have their call for help answered. The recovery from Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu enabled the country to build back stronger.

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RedR Australia trains, selects and deploys technical specialists before, during and after crises and conflict.