SUCCESS STORY:
The Asia Foundation Mitigates Disasters in the Pacific

The clear blue waters, lush greenery, and sunny skies provide a tranquil setting for daily life on the Pacific Islands. However, the calm can also prove deceiving—the Pacific Islands are prone to numerous natural disasters, including cyclones, tsunamis, droughts, floods, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. Exacerbating the effects of natural disasters in the region, local communities have gradually abandoned traditional coping mechanisms, which has taxed government, community, and environmental resources.

To improve government capacity for disaster preparedness, mitigation, and response, USAID/OFDA has supported The Asia Foundation disaster management trainings in the Pacific since 1995. By incorporating the knowledge and skills acquired during the Foundation’s trainings into national disaster response planning, island nations have significantly improved disaster management throughout the region.

The Asia Foundation: Training New Leaders in the Pacific

The Asia Foundation operates the longest-running disaster management trainings in the Pacific. Through the trainings, The Asia Foundation has strengthened national response capacity, facilitated the creation of a regional network among responders, and improved coordination among local, national, and regional stakeholders. In the process, the Foundation has identified skilled participants to become trainers, developing a base of trainers that are also stakeholders in disaster response. Trainers include directors of national disaster management offices (NDMOs)—the lead government agencies in disaster preparedness and response—who also act as valuable resources by incorporating local practices and knowledge into the trainings.

The Asia Foundation trainings, supported by USAID/OFDA, include Introduction to Disaster Management (IDM), Initial Damage Assessment (IDA), Emergency Operations Centers (EOC), Exercise Management (ExMan), and Training for Instructors (TFI).

Cook Islands: Emergency Operations Centers Training in Action

In 2005, a total of five cyclones battered the Cook Islands. According to Cook Islands Emergency Management (EMCI), the NDMO in the Cook Islands, poor communication and lack of coordination by local agencies significantly hampered response efforts. To improve local capacity to respond to future disasters, The Asia Foundation conducted several trainings, including EOC and ExMan, with Government of Cook Islands authorities and disaster management stakeholders in the years following the intense cyclone season.

In January 2008, strong wind gusts and sea surges caused by a tropical depression in the vicinity of the Cook Islands forced government authorities to close roads and government buildings. Although the
tropical depression caused minor damage in comparison to the events of 2005, the EMCI reported that government agencies mobilized immediately and prepared to implement newly developed standard operating procedures based on the EOC management training, while the EMCI simultaneously prepared to activate the national EOC. The mobilization of response efforts and newly developed procedures demonstrated a transformation from a less-efficient model to a systemized response effort.

**THE FIJI RED CROSS SOCIETY: TRANSFORMING STANDARD PRACTICE IN THE PACIFIC**

The 1998 Fiji National Disaster Management Act mandates that the Fiji Red Cross Society (FRCS) provide non-food items during a disaster to complement Government of Fiji distribution of food commodities, placing FRCS at the forefront during a national response. FRCS relies on a large volunteer base dispersed throughout the country to act as the first responders and distribute life-saving relief supplies. Poor response capacity during the 2003 cyclone season highlighted the need for improved training of volunteer staff by FRCS personnel. Based on The Asia Foundation’s trainings, FRCS developed disaster response trainings for volunteers and Initial Damage Assessment (IDA) forms. Red Cross societies throughout the region have since adopted the FRCS IDA format for use in respective countries.

In January 2009, flooding in Fiji claimed 11 lives, damaged homes, and destroyed agricultural land. With USAID/OFDA and additional donor support, FRCS acted as the first responder to the disaster, assisting more than 41,000 individuals in more than 400 flood-affected villages. FRCS volunteers utilized the IDA forms during damage assessments, improving the response capacity of field staff throughout affected areas. USAID/OFDA provided support to FRCS for response activities and benefitted from the results of improved capacity of an implementing partner.

**DISASTER MANAGEMENT: CHANGING OPERATIONS IN THE PACIFIC**

The Asia Foundation continues to train additional individuals, particularly targeting the younger generations, or future responders. The Foundation receives ongoing requests from countries throughout the Pacific for additional trainings, indicating an ongoing need for capacity building and also speaking to the acknowledged quality of the trainings. The trainings change the way participants conduct daily operations by introducing new ways of approaching routine situations. The Asia Foundation trainings have provided participants with a new and broader set of tools with which to respond, a more systemized way of conducting operations, and the ability to evaluate and respond rapidly and effectively to save lives.