



CENTRE FOR  
HUMANITARIAN  
LEADERSHIP



# CROSSING THE DIVIDE: PACIFIC DIASPORA IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE TO NATURAL DISASTERS

*A diasporic perspective*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | SEPTEMBER 2019



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**“I experience (feel) a lot of things because I’ve been through this. If you haven’t been through that deal you will not know.**

**I was 24 when I came to Australia. But I’ve seen so many hurricanes, so many floods you know.....what happens in the night if you don’t have a house or roof over your head? That’s what we experienced. So that’s what comes in your mind...”**

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**“Lot of Pacific diaspora believe in having loyalty to understand the next person...having that trust. That’s something you have to work with before entering into their boundary to work with them.”**

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**“What I have been able to do (is to) organize with different Fijian organisation in Melbourne to come together for disaster relief. What I have made it very clear to each and every organisation is that the group that we form is purely to assist for that particular disaster. As soon as the disaster help is done, we all go separate ways. We will only come together as a group when the next disaster happens. There is no committee, no organizational structure set up, it is purely based on voluntary and volunteers come on board.”**

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**“How can someone sitting in a public service office or a politician looks through a lens at the Pacific without also knowing what the Pacific Islanders look through their lens back of Australia? If it goes both ways then I imagine that the diaspora can make a really constructive contribution in the name of Australia to the aid in the Pacific.”**

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The report acknowledges the valuable participation of Pacific diaspora leaders. The researchers would like to extend sincere thanks to the participants for trusting the research process, providing inputs to the research and sharing their perspectives. The researchers request the readers to recognise the ownership of the diaspora participants in the research findings and this report.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pacific diaspora humanitarianism in response to natural disasters in the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) remains largely unexplored and often misunderstood due to the gap in the knowledge of how and why Pacific diaspora engage in the humanitarian response. This report is the first output of the exploratory research carried out in 2018 to study the role of Pacific diaspora leaders in localising humanitarian response to natural disasters in PICs. The research was initially designed to understand Pacific diaspora humanitarianism based on a comparative analysis of perspectives of Pacific diaspora leaders, traditional humanitarian actors and national disaster management officials. However, it became apparent during the early stages of data collection that a comparative analysis of perspectives cannot be methodologically justified due to the lack of knowledge about Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response and their invisibility in the traditional humanitarian system.

The purpose of this report is, therefore, to understand Pacific diaspora humanitarianism from a diasporic perspective. It seeks to answer the following research questions from a diasporic perspective:

- What factors drive Pacific diaspora humanitarianism?
- How does Pacific diaspora respond to natural disasters in PICs?
- What does Pacific diaspora bring to the Pacific humanitarian eco-system?

The report does not include data from international and national actors. It attempts to depict what diaspora humanitarianism is through the worldviews and voices of Pacific diaspora leaders. It does not evaluate diaspora humanitarianism, and it does not compare diaspora humanitarianism with traditional humanitarianism. It is written in a way that is convenient for diaspora humanitarians and other non-traditional humanitarians to read and understand. This report encourages traditional humanitarians to understand diaspora humanitarianism outside of the dominant humanitarian narrative.

The research findings provide insights into what motivates Pacific diaspora to respond to natural disasters in PICs, how they respond, and what makes them unique as diasporic humanitarians. The report presents the characteristics of Pacific diaspora humanitarianism and links them with the localisation agenda. For the first time in Australia, it brings Pacific diaspora perspectives to the sectoral discussions and policy debates in humanitarian assistance.



Methodology

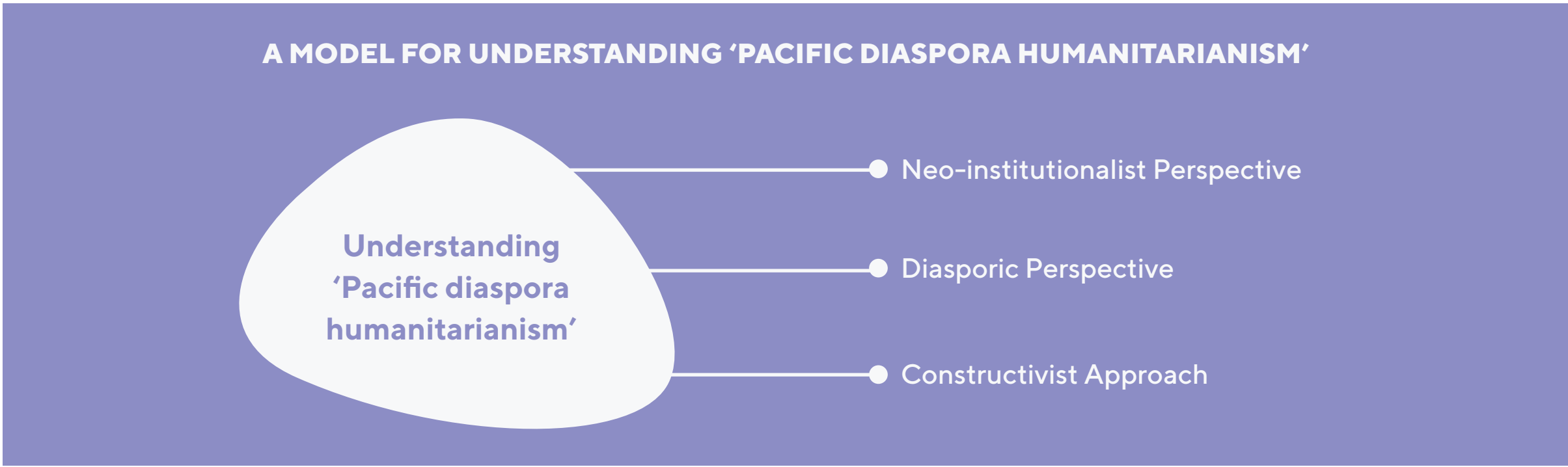
Pacific diaspora humanitarianism is an unexplored territory. This research was designed to be explorative and informative. A large part of the research process focused on learning how to connect with the Pacific diaspora communities in Australia, translating humanitarian jargon and academic terms into a language that could be understood by the diaspora communities and building relationships of trust with diaspora community leaders.

The research used an inductive approach to the qualitative analysis of research inputs since Pacific diaspora humanitarianism has not been previously explored. This report uses as many quotes as possible from the interview transcripts to present the worldviews and voices of Pacific diaspora leaders.

The research targeted Pacific diaspora leaders in Australia. They are leaders of various diaspora organisations, diaspora networks and diaspora communities. This report acknowledges the diversity in diaspora grouping and modes of diaspora humanitarian interventions.

The primary data was collected through an online survey and in-depth interviews. Secondary data sources such as diaspora websites, media releases and Facebook pages were also used to validate the primary data wherever it was available. The report acknowledges that the online survey was not a convenient tool for many diaspora participants. Most of the drawbacks of using online surveys were addressed during the interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. The face-to-face interview was acknowledged as an effective method by the researchers. It is important to highlight that trust and cultural understanding played a considerable role in conducting in-depth interviews.

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DEFINING ‘DIASPORA’ AND ‘PACIFIC DIASPORA HUMANITARIANISM’

“Diaspora is a transnational community whose members live outside of their self-identified homeland(s) on a temporary or permanent basis and remain connected to it (or them) through family, known and/ or imagined community spheres while maintaining a group identity that may change through time and space.”

“Pacific diaspora humanitarianism is a transnational demonstration of solidarity by Pacific diaspora operating in family and/or community spheres to support their homeland(s) and their people with humanitarian needs and recovery.”



Research Findings

What factors drive Pacific diaspora humanitarianism?

Pacific diaspora humanitarianism is driven by multiple motivations, ranging from a sense of solidarity to obligation to families. Sense of humanitarian solidarity tops the list of motivations for the majority of the diaspora participants. This factor highlights that Pacific diaspora humanitarianism transcends the family sphere as well as the geographical boundaries of their countries of origin. There is also a strong indication of communal responsibility that drives Pacific diaspora to support their local counterparts in times of natural disasters.



**FOOD FOR THOUGHT:**

The research findings on factors driving Pacific diaspora humanitarianism indicates the value of families, communal responsibilities and solidarity. They suggest that a narrow focus on familial links cannot solely explain the boundaries of Pacific diaspora humanitarianism. Pacific diasporas, driven by their culture, tend to respond to calls for help from outside of their family sphere. The sense of solidarity outstrips national boundaries, and sometimes the regional boundary. A further discussion on humanitarian

principles, in particular about the principle of impartiality, challenges the assumption of traditional humanitarian organisations that diaspora actors are partial in their responses. Solidarity highlights the various ways for Pacific diaspora communities to mobilise and respond to natural disasters. These findings suggest that helping his/her family in a disaster context does not stop a diaspora individual from extending the helping hand to the broader community. These strongly urge a revisit to the conventional understanding of diaspora in humanitarian response beyond families, political motivation, the concept of a single homeland and partiality.

**How does Pacific diaspora respond to natural disasters in PICs?**

Pacific diaspora mostly gets involved in the response and recovery phases of a disaster. The empirical evidence from this research provides insights into different modes of diaspora humanitarian interventions and suggests that Pacific diaspora humanitarianism is much more than sending remittances to their families. The clear-cut distinction between the practices of sending money to families and sending money to broader communities demands theoretical clarity in defining remittances. Pacific diaspora leaders

have different opinions about cash transfer and providing relief supplies. An in-depth discussion on providing relief supplies adds a different dimension to Pacific diaspora humanitarianism which is often misunderstood, or underplayed, by the reference of their role in sending unsolicited goods. Volunteers are the salient feature of Pacific diaspora humanitarianism. Social media and ethnic radio channels of Pacific diaspora also play an important role in sharing crisis information and mobilising resources.

**Humanitarian Actions**



Cash Transfer and Remittances



Providing Relief Supplies



Cooked Food



Sharing Information



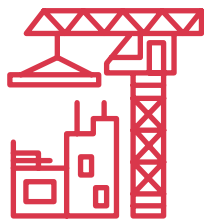
Fundraising



Volunteers



Programs and Projects



Reconstruction



Medical Assistance



Emotional Support



Physical Support



## FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

Pacific diaspora perspectives differentiate between a family-to-family response and a community-to-community response. Participants in this research have primarily discussed the community-to-community response. The report does not use 'individual' and 'collective' response in order to underline that a family response can be a collective response from a family network and that is not what is discussed by 'community-to-community' response.

The discussion of why and why not participants prefer cash transfer or providing relief supplies indicates that Pacific diaspora leaders have diverse opinions and explanations, and thereby, indicates the diversity in practice of Pacific diaspora communities. In discussing the behavioural insights about unsolicited bilateral donation (UBD), the research by Australian Council for International Development (ACFID 2019, p.8) proves that "The behaviour of sending a UBD is largely governed by a System 1 mode of thinking, people do not stop to explore possibilities of how the good will get to the destination, how much money will be required to do this, who will unpack it or where it will eventually end up". Our research findings are suggestive of Pacific diaspora leaders who show a commitment to improving the effectiveness of their actions, respond to needs identified by government agencies, plan from collection to distribution of relief supplies, and open to exploring alternatives. These leaders offer different perspectives on the practice of providing relief supplies as a part of

disaster response. On the other side, the example for 'Clear message from the government' highlights the importance of timely communication between Pacific diaspora communities and relevant authorities of PICs to coordinate diaspora's disaster response. If an island country does not want containers of goods from its diaspora, it needs to send clear messages to its diaspora communities. The island countries also should provide alternatives for diaspora communities to meaningfully engage in disaster responses by other means. The research findings suggest that Pacific diaspora has tangible and intangible resources which could be diverted into more effective disaster responses if properly facilitated within the Pacific humanitarian ecosystem.

Networking between different Pacific community groups and organisations in Australia is essential for the future of Pacific diaspora humanitarianism. Networking can offer a way for Pacific diaspora to facilitate their humanitarian actions across states in response to disasters. The integration of the young people in the community activities will influence how the next generation of Pacific ancestry respond to natural disasters in PICs. The future of Pacific diaspora humanitarianism also depends on how their actions are acknowledged by other actors in the Pacific humanitarian ecosystem and how their enthusiasm to coordinate their actions is shared by local and international NGOs.



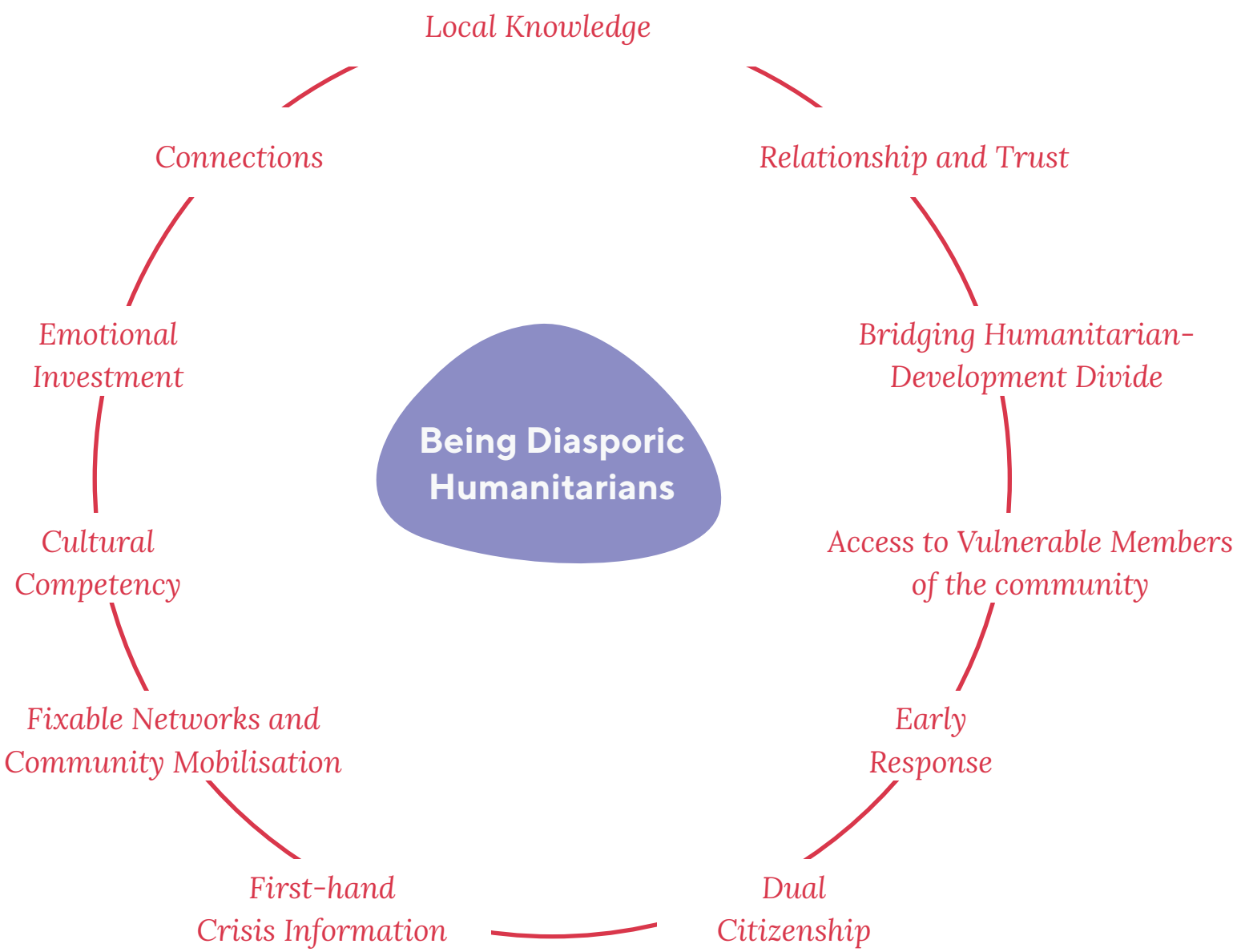




**What does Pacific diaspora bring to the Pacific humanitarian eco-system?**

Local knowledge, cultural competency, relationship and trust, connections, first-hand crisis information and early response are strengths of Pacific diaspora humanitarianism. The diasporic characteristics of this non-traditional humanitarianism provide windows of opportunities for both local communities and traditional humanitarian actors and suggest new (or different)

ways of working in a humanitarian context. The report argues that an appreciation of the unique characteristics of Pacific diaspora humanitarianism and an acknowledgment of their strengths, strong connections and networks can create new alliances and networked ways of working in response to natural disasters in the future.





## FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

This section highlights the unique characteristics of Pacific diaspora humanitarianism and suggests that these characteristics can be harnessed for increasing the overall effectiveness of Pacific humanitarian ecosystem by acknowledging them as the legitimate features of diasporic humanitarianism- the third humanitarian domain.

Our research study of Pacific diaspora in humanitarian response to natural disasters suggests that Pacific diaspora humanitarianism supports a community-led humanitarian response and a bottom-up approach to addressing humanitarian needs. Pacific diaspora is in touch with the on-ground realities, and their decision-making incorporates direct inputs from the local actors at different levels—from families to government agencies. The Pacific diaspora leaders show commitment to local knowledge, local communities and local leadership. The multidimensional networks, flexible ways of working, the ability to mobilise resources as a community-to-community response to a disaster and different forms of solidarity of Pacific diaspora signal the potential of Pacific diaspora humanitarianism in contributing to community resilience in PICs.

However, this research presents only a diasporic perspective of Pacific diaspora humanitarianism. We need to understand how local communities perceive the role of diaspora in humanitarian response in order to see what Pacific diaspora humanitarianism can do for localising humanitarian

action. We need local perspectives on Pacific diaspora humanitarianism to critically evaluate whether it offers local communities with control over resources, decisions and priorities in a humanitarian setting.

This research provides insights based on targeted sampling data into what motivates Pacific diaspora to become involved in humanitarian responses to natural disasters in PICs, how they respond to natural disasters and their unique characteristics as diasporic humanitarians. It presents a model for understanding Pacific diaspora humanitarianism grounded in neo-institutional and diasporic perspectives in a constructivist approach. We argue that Pacific diasporic humanitarianism should be acknowledged for what it is in order to work on the possibilities of creating alliances with them in the future to deliver a better response to the affected communities. Questioning the legitimacy of diaspora humanitarianism within the parameters of traditional humanitarianism only impedes the transformation of the humanitarian sector, which could be inclusive of different humanitarian actors.





# RECOMMENDATIONS

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PACIFIC DIASPORA:

- Find out from the ground what the needs are before you plan the response
- Work along with local authorities
- Do not send rubbish
- Network with other diaspora organizations
- Engage the youth

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT:

- Local knowledge is power. Listen to your diaspora communities.
- Appoint a national coordinator to facilitate diaspora’s humanitarian responses across the states
- A unit within DFAT to communicate and coordinate with diaspora communities
- DFAT could share some instructions, procedures and contacts with the diaspora communities to support/ facilitate their humanitarian actions
- Support diaspora volunteers with transport and accommodation
- Document the diaspora actions on how they respond to disasters so that diaspora groups can learn from each other
- Share a list of legitimate local organizations
- Provide training to up-skill diaspora professionals in the preparation for a natural disaster

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS:

- Investigate the perspectives of disaster-affected Pacific communities on the humanitarian role of their diaspora counterparts
- Series of case-study researches for a detailed study of diaspora organizations, diaspora networks and diaspora community initiatives
- Participatory research to identify how diaspora humanitarian actors and traditional humanitarian actors can complement each other’s humanitarian actions
- Exploratory research studies into the role of governments, both in Australia and PICs, in facilitating the disaster response of Pacific diaspora