

THINKING ABOUT POST-FLOOD SUPPORT FOR PASIFIKA COMMUNITIES IN TĀMAKI MAKAUURAU

Some early insights and reflections for funders from Pasifika Funders' Network (PFN)

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Extreme weather and natural disasters are not unfamiliar to most Pasifika people. For generations, we have survived cyclones, hurricanes, and other natural disasters. Some of our home islands are especially vulnerable to flooding and other impacts of climate change, and of course Tonga only recently started its recovery from a devastating volcanic eruption last year.

Nevertheless, we were all very unprepared for the floods in Tāmaki Makaurau on 27 January. There is a general feeling that the level of trauma and distress could have been avoided, and that Auckland Council leadership failed to respond quickly and effectively. We can't control the weather – but we can certainly control how we respond to extreme weather events and any situations that pose a serious threat to people's lives.

Our network can't provide detail on the extent to which Pasifika families and communities have been affected – this information is still coming to light. We can only offer some early insights into what we saw, experienced, and heard about in our own networks, along with some reflections on what our communities have told us following previous disasters and crisis events in Aotearoa.

There was a large number of flooded homes in Māngere, Henderson and several other South and West Auckland suburbs in particular – areas with high Pasifika populations. Some of our network members are based in Tāmaki Makaurau, and they have been busy supporting their families and local communities – as well as responding to agencies and organisations, and specialist committees seeking information and advice. Community and cultural leaders are important conduits for information. But in a crisis, we shouldn't forget that they have families and wellbeing needs too, and are likely busy being a source of strength, hope and support to their own communities. Similarly, volunteers are being pulled in several different directions this week – and the risk of burnout is very real. It still doesn't seem to be understood that many Pasifika people are volunteers *all the time*. Volunteering isn't a role we roster ourselves on for once a month. It's part of our lives and gives effect to our cultural values.

Additional volunteering tasks we are loaded with – particularly by paid government and NGO workers – are not unwelcome, but it's about timing and approach. 'What do Pacific communities need right now?' is typically the question we get asked (whether there is a crisis or not). And that question is asked as if there is a simple answer – perhaps in the form of a few bullet points or a checklist. There never is. It's complex, diverse, and always evolving. Of course, our communities need emergency relief and aid in a crisis. Everyone needs the essentials: food, potable water, shelter, warm clothes, and blankets. If our communities are contacting you directly to ask for aid and you want to help, please give that help freely – without conditions. Some of us who were on

the ground this weekend, assisting families and communities, were approached with offers of 'support' – but with strings attached or 101 interrogating questions. Do funders and agencies truly need to collect detailed data in order to provide support in a crisis, while we're still standing waist-deep in floodwater? Is it reasonable to expect us to negotiate funding terms or survey our community at the same time as we're comforting people who've just lost everything to flood damage?

This is not to detract from the incredible generosity, responsiveness, and visibility that we saw in Tāmaki Makaurau – Auckland. However, in addition to emergency responders, most of this positive response came from the local communities themselves, and organisations made up of people who are very present in the community and could therefore 'slot in' to the response effort, rather than add to the already stressful task lists and inboxes of exhausted community and cultural leaders and key volunteers.

Grateful as we are for emergency relief support, what we also usually see is funders and agencies rushing in and over-resourcing relief, and then after that relief has run dry there's... nothing. Yet, there is always a 'long tail' after a disaster or crisis event. If you're a private funder and can freely determine where you want to direct your funding, especially strategically, we encourage you to consider supporting economic development. If we truly want to address inequity, we need to acknowledge that the huge and entrenched equity gaps for physical and mental health are strongly related to equity gaps in income and economic opportunities, which cannot be solved by grants alone. Economic growth requires economic investment – and there are certainly growing aspirations in the Pasifika business and community sector to achieve this with commensurate resourcing and support.

Economic development does not end up being mutually exclusive from community development when you consider the collective nature and values of Pasifika people. Our communities have said, time and again, that they are best positioned to lead out their own long-term solutions. We witnessed how perfectly placed some of our Pacific-led community organisations were to reach local families. It should be noted that these organisations were not limited to Tāmaki Makaurau. We heard of (and some of our members were directly involved in) outstanding response efforts in Ōtautahi – Christchurch for example, where distressed people on redirected flights with nowhere to go were met at the airport by community organisations providing them with food, shelter, and comfort. We'd gladly compile a list of the Pasifika (and other) community organisations we know of who were exemplary in their coordination of response efforts, and hope that there are funders willing to resource multi-year operational grants so that these community organisations can spend less time with cap in hand, and more time having the room to innovate and fully mobilise the communities they have deep, enduring relationships with.

While natural disasters don't discriminate, sadly our social norms and systems do. All the official alerts and updates were delivered or made available digitally – and we already know which population groups in Aotearoa are most disadvantaged already by the digital divide. Digital exclusion (and language exclusion for that matter) is about more than just not getting the chance to Facetime with overseas family members or access remote learning or apply for a job online. In a disaster event, it's the difference between being informed and not being informed – which can end up being the difference between life and death. While some Aucklanders complained about not being able to enjoy Auckland Anniversary weekend because of the rain, or were clogging up

urgent phone lines or message threads demanding to know where they should put their rubbish out on Rubbish Collection Day... other Aucklanders were in life or death situations or major distress, and people around the country (and in the diasporas around the world) were fearing the worst as they waited to hear back from loved ones. Some of our members witnessed the trauma and high emotion of people who barely escaped the floods or landslides with their lives (all the near misses that don't get reported on the news), who were separated from their children or other loved ones and were unable to even check to see if they were alive. We recognise the loss of life and trauma of all people affected by the floods – and our thoughts and prayers are with them all and their families. And we are reminded yet again of how we have to continually educate broader society on the range of experiences of others, to enable compassion, empathy and self-awareness to become normalised. While all Aucklanders – and others – experienced the extreme weather event, we did not all have the same experience. Please gently share this message with those who you think need to hear it.

Thinking about the longer term, we encourage supporting stronger inquiry and collaborative effort into climate resilience; we are fortunate to have mātauranga Māori experts in Aotearoa, whose knowledge base spans many centuries of understanding how the lands, wetlands, and other elements of the natural world here in Aotearoa need to interact and be respected, to create or preserve balance. We as Pasifika people deeply value that knowledge base. We would all benefit from creating more space to learn about how we can bring together mātauranga Māori expertise, government and community relationships and leaders, and our defence and protection systems, to front foot climate change.

We also see endless opportunities to learn from what we've already experienced. As we navigate post-flood realities right now in Tāmaki Makaurau, we are reminded of lessons learned in disaster management and recovery from the Christchurch earthquakes, the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai eruption, and other significant disasters in Aotearoa and the Pacific. From the Ōtautahi earthquakes, for example, we recognise the importance of messaging out to Pasifika women, who are usually the 'heartbeat' of Pasifika families. Supporting Pasifika women will also mean that children are better supported, as they recover and heal from the frightening experiences of the floods. PFN proposes to compile a future article for the Philanthropy NZ magazine about learnings from natural disasters and major crisis events that can help us to strategise for the future.

We are already expecting BAU conversations to resume in local and central government settings – without any opportunity for those most affected by the floods to take a breath or heal. Those conversations will probably focus on budget cuts and other matters in a way that will be removed from caring about real people. Traditional philanthropy is underpinned by love for humanity; perhaps the philanthropic sector can help us to elevate the importance of humanity, compassion, and community leadership and development in cross-sector discussions, so that we might influence a better civil defence system and response, a stronger community climate resilience action plan, and ultimately a more equitable and just Aotearoa overall.

