

The World Bank

East Asia & Pacific Region



Contact:

In Sydney: Elisabeth Mealey

Tel: 61-2-9235 6551

emealey@worldbank.org

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ADAPTATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE PACIFIC DOES NOT MEAN SURRENDER, SAYS NEW REPORT

2 February, 2006 - A report released today by the World Bank says Pacific Island countries that plan ahead and act early to avert the impacts from climate change-related and other natural disasters, will do far better in the long term than those countries that wait for disasters to hit and then repair the damage.

The policy note, *Not if but when: Adapting to natural hazards in the Pacific Islands region*, calls for urgent action to reduce the risks facing Pacific Island countries from more intense and more frequent cyclones.

One of the report's 14 international expert authors, Mr Alf Simpson – a former head of the South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC) – said over the years many Pacific Island governments had opted to deal with natural disasters by relying on international donor support once the damage had been done. This approach had been reinforced by the willingness of donors to provide generous post-disaster funding.

“While humanitarian interests are clearly paramount, donors need to also consider the incentives for countries to be more proactive in managing risks and less reliant on external support,” Mr Simpson said. “The Pacific Island countries which have faced up to the need to factor risk management efforts into their economic and investment planning are beginning to see the benefits.”

The policy note highlights the efforts of some Pacific Island governments, such as Samoa and Tonga, which have been proactive on risk management of natural hazards.

The Government of the Republic of Kiribati has been a global leader in laying the groundwork for dealing with the threat from natural hazards since the mid-1990s. The country – made up of 33 low-lying atolls and with a

population of around 98,000 people – decided it could not afford to wait for the effects of the changing climate to intensify. Adaptation measures are now being mainstreamed into national development plans, policies and budgets.

“Environmental issues and in particular climate change and sea level rise constitute security issues for low-lying coral atoll countries such as Kiribati,” said Ms Teaa Tira, a spokeswoman for the President of Kiribati.

“It is an issue of security in the short to medium term and a question of survival in the long term,” she said. “In practical terms our program has served to inform our people of the reality of the threat and provided them with response options thus removing somewhat the sense of hopelessness.”

Mr Zhu Xian, Country Director for the World Bank’s Pacific Islands operations said with the Pacific cyclone season well underway, the report was a timely reminder for governments, regional agencies and international donors that a region-wide, integrated approach to risk management was urgently needed.

“With commitment from the community and all levels of government, it’s possible to put very practical measures in place that reduce risks, save lives and insulate the economy.” Mr Zhu Xian said. “Governments and donors wanting to take immediate, practical steps now have this very useful report to guide them.”

The policy note will be discussed next week in Suva, Fiji at a meeting about risk management of natural hazards to be attended by representatives of international donor agencies and key regional organisations.

Under climate change forecasts, the Pacific is facing:

- Changes to rainfall patterns and increased temperatures
- More intense cyclones producing much larger waves
- Inundation of low-lying inhabited areas
- Economic impacts from cyclones ranging from 60 to 100 per cent of GDP
- More people being impacted due to higher populations and urbanization

Practical steps towards adaptation:

- Get the community involved in hazard mapping of local areas
- Ensure key infrastructure is built to design standards which take account of the need to withstand cyclones
- Protect coral reefs and mangroves as natural barriers to storm surge and erosion
- Bring community representatives and all government agencies together to identify coping strategies to deal with major threats
- Ensure high level leadership, funding and coordination of the nationally agreed program
- Review the program to make sure agreed actions are happening.
- Improve public awareness of disaster risks and provide training in implementing local strategies.