



# **Children in Disasters and Humanitarian Settings in Fiji**

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**A Supplement to the Alternate Report to the UN  
CRC Committee on the Rights of the Child in  
Accordance to the Fifth Periodic Report of State  
Parties of Government of Fiji**

**By the Fiji Council of Social Services**

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## Overview

Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS) is a civil society organization (CSO) in Fiji that was established in 1957 as a charitable trust.

It was initially formed by rural teachers and community workers who saw the need to ensure better education facilities in rural schools and over its 60 years operation grew to become an umbrella body for NGOs in Fiji in the mid 1980s to the 1990s with a history of grant management and infrastructure development in rural schools.

It has since evolved into a multicultural, intergenerational national CSO platform organisation with over 75 community based organisations and 5 national NGOs as members present in every administrative division of Fiji. Member organisations and groups are clustered according to locales and organised at the sub national level into 15 District Councils of Social Services whilst a 13 member secretariat runs two offices in the capital, Suva City and Lautoka City in Fiji's western division.

FCOSS flagship program is the Microfinance Unit which is also Fiji's longest running microfinance institute serving over 800 clients across Fiji's main island, Viti Levu.

Its key focus areas are coordination, advocacy, networking and CSO capacity building and these FCOSS has been able to do with some degree of success owing to its position on the National Disaster Management Council as per the 1998 Natural Disaster Management Act, its membership of the National Employment Centre board and the National Substance Abuse Advisory Council.

FCOSS is a member of the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO), CIVICUS, HelpAge, Forus International and the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness - platforms on which the NGO has to leverage persistent development issues it has encountered at national level for regional and international solidarity and support.

As such it has worked to foster CSO solidarity and participation at regional and international levels on Sustainable Development Goals, Effective Development Cooperation, Trade and supported CSO initiatives to participate in international periodical reports on human rights.

As one of only two NGOs that are members of the National Disaster Management Council, FCOSS and its members have often been expected to support national humanitarian response in disasters and more recently Covid 19.

The multiplicity of natural disasters coupled with the devastating impacts of Covid 19 on Fiji's tourism reliant economy in the last 13 months has had profound impacts on Fijian communities particularly the elderly, women, people living with disabilities and children.

This report seeks to supplement the Alternate Report to the UN CRC Committee on the Rights of the Child in Accordance to the Fifth Periodic Report of State Parties of the Government of Fiji prepared by a consortium of Fiji based and Fijian NGOs led by the Save the Children Fiji.

It spotlights the situations of children in disasters and humanitarian settings in Fiji and examines legislative frameworks that guide the state's responses in disaster situations.

So whilst FCOSS work contributes to all Articles of the CRC, this report will mostly focus on Articles 1 to 6, 9, 10, 18 to 20, 23, 24, 26 to 28, 36 and 39.

## Issues

The Committee on the Rights of the Child's Concluding Observations on the Combined Second to Fourth Periodic Reports of Fiji dated 13 October 2014, outlined comprehensive recommendations for the Fijian government but for the purpose of this report, FCOSS wishes to address only the following;

*42. (c) Pay particular attention to the urban/rural divide and ensure that all children enjoy the same access and quality of health services, including in remote and rural areas, and take specific measures to reduce the disparity in service access;*

*44. The Committee urges the State party to undertake research on suicide risk factors among children, including the root causes of depression, and use the results of such research to develop a comprehensive system of services specifically addressed at children, including stress management services and mental health promotion and prevention activities, with a view to ensuring the effective prevention of suicidal behaviour. Furthermore, the Committee urges the State party to:*

*(a) Ensure that all children, in particular children in remote areas, children living in poverty, children in street situations, children who are out of school and children being cared for out of the home, have equal access to social workers and psychological counselling services;*

*56. The Committee recommends that the State party:*

*(a) In developing policies or programmes to address the issues of climate change and disaster risk management, ensure that the special physical and psychological vulnerabilities and needs of children, as well as their views, are taken into account, and that children are fully involved in the policy dialogue on climate change ;*

*(b) Finalize and implement national legislation and policies for sustainable safe water supplies and sanitation, with a view to increasing access to sufficient safe drinking water and providing adequate sanitation, in particular on the outer islands;*

*(c) Strengthen social protection systems to ensure that children and families affected by climate change will receive sufficient and adequate support;*

*(d) Increase children's awareness and preparedness for climate change and natural disasters by incorporating it into the school curriculum and teacher training programmes;*

*58. The Committee recommends that the State party take all the necessary measures to provide support and material assistance to economically disadvantaged families and undertake structural changes in order to address child poverty. Particular focus shall be placed on:*

*(a) Taking prompt measures to ensure that all families living in informal settlements are provided with adequate and affordable housing and have access to safe drinking water and sanitation;*

*(c) Ensuring that social workers are well trained to identify families and children at risk, manage the social schemes effectively and follow up on their implementation and assess their impact.*

*60. In the light of its general comment No. 1 (2001) on the aims of education, the Committee recommends that the State party:*

*(a) Increase its budgetary allocations for basic and secondary education and make sure that all indirect and hidden costs are eliminated;*

*(c) Allocate sufficient financial support to ensure that all schools are provided with the infrastructure necessary to provide for an effective learning environment;*

*68. The Committee recommends that the State party:*

*(c) In coordination with civil society, provide children in street situations with the necessary protection, including access to nutrition and shelter, a family environment, adequate health-care services, the possibility to attend school and other social services.*

### **National Legislative Frameworks and Policies on Children, DRR and Humanitarian Efforts**

FCOSS acknowledges Fiji's progress in recognising and realising the development of children and the realisation of their rights as key to the nation's future through the

- a) Education Act
- b) Constitution of Fiji
- c) Child Welfare Decree

which are direct and tangible measures of the domestic implementation of the CRC since 1993.

In relation to disaster risk reduction and resilience, FCOSS commends the work and effort of the Fijian government to ensure the effective management of natural disasters in Fiji through the ongoing comprehensive review of the 1998 Natural Disaster Management Act. This review process has also involved NGOs over a two year period.

Further to this, FCOSS lauds the 2017 National Humanitarian Policy and the 2018 - 2030 National DRR Policy as state initiatives to ensure better humanitarian responses and coordination as well as to foster a whole of system approaches that should have far positive impacts on the wellbeing of children in disasters and humanitarian settings.

Also of relevance to this particular submission is the Water Authority of Fiji Act, the Public Health Act and policies such as the 2015 Fiji National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Policy, the 2014 Education in Emergencies and School Safety Policy and Minimum Standards on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) in Schools Infrastructures.

## **Education in Emergencies**

The frequency of as well as the intensity of natural disasters in Fiji has posed serious challenges for children's education in Fiji. In 2016, when Category 5 Tropical Cyclone Winston ravaged the country, an estimated 120,000 students were left without an education when *at least 240 schools were damaged or destroyed, whilst many others served as evacuation centres for people who had lost their homes.* ( UNICEF Pacific, 2016)

After Fiji's first Covid 19 case was announced in early 2020, schools around the country were closed for over 2 months. Barely a month after this, TC Harold, a category 4 tropical cyclone left more than 123 schools, schools equipment and teaching materials damaged and unusable. (Care, 2020)

Arrangements made to ensure children's continued education through home based educational activities and online classes by the Ministry of Education proved challenging as teachers struggled with restrictions of movements and students from poor socio economic backgrounds lack access to the internet. (Care, 2020)

NGOs such as Save the Children Fiji, Fiji, Council of Social Services and its sub national platforms including the Lami District Council of Social Services (Fiji Times, 2020), Global Compassion Fiji, Katalyst Foundation and other private sector groups have also worked since 2016 to support efforts to ensure continuity in education across Fiji particularly in schools hard hit by natural disasters, some of these in coordination with the Ministry of Education and the National Disaster Management Office.

The Fijian government is acknowledged for its efforts on the Education in Emergencies policy and the Education in Emergencies and Disaster Risk Management component of the Assets Management Unit of the Ministry of Education.

However, what is apparent from the experiences of TC Winston in 2016, Tc Harold and Covid 19 in 2020 is that the multiplicity of disasters resulting from climate change and humanitarian events have served not only as major disruptions to the delivery of quality education for Fijian students (Article 28 - Right to education)but moreso the inadequacy of the Fijian's government's measures to anticipate and respond to these situations proactively.

For instance; after working with FCOSS to conduct monitoring of UNICEF's TC Harold Response in Fiji 2020, the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO) and FCOSS monitors found that in rural Kadavu Island;

- There were some discrepancies with what were confirmed to have been received or not received by the schools with the distribution list by the Ministry of Education. In addition, there are some mismatches with what the schools need with what were actually received.

- Some schools have not used the tents as classrooms and intended to use them as staff quarters and more so, some schools did not receive training on how to set up the tents

More importantly; students continue to face difficulties in attending schools because classrooms, walkways and roads have not been repaired despite the looming cyclone season. Some students had to walk for long hours or travel by boat to reach their schools because of damaged roads while boarding schools sent their students back home as the school buildings were not safe to live in. Home study was difficult with insufficient lightning in most homes. All these have impacted learning results. (*Third Party Monitoring Report in Fiji Phase 1 & Phase 2, 2020*)

The use of schools as ideal and convenient evacuation centres in disaster times may have been necessary in the past, however Article 4 and Article 28 compels the Fijian government to consider other alternatives such as communal halls or churches so that disruptions to the delivery of quality education for Fijian students can be minimised. The Fijian government is reminded that they must do all they can to make sure every child can enjoy their rights by creating systems and passing laws that promote and protect children’s rights(Article 4).

### **Health, WASH and Nutrition**

The vulnerability of children in emergencies is often attributed to disruptions in access to adequate health services, clean drinking water, proper hygiene and nutrition. The risks and level of vulnerability is often higher with children from impacted communities such as in informal settlements, rural areas, single headed households, families providing care for people living with disabilities or parents without a regular source of income.

In Fiji, hunger was an issue for students from lower socio economic backgrounds studying at home during the lockdown periods, particularly for children living in informal settlements and those whose parents had lost jobs or business due to the pandemic. (Fiji Times, 2020, 1)



(Fiji Times, 202, #)

In assessing UNICEF's WASH interventions in cyclone ravaged Kadavu which included surveying 184 children of primary and secondary school age, PIANGO and FCOSS found the following discrepancies in the process for delivering WASH kits in communities;

- Communities along the road, and therefore easily accessible, received more assistance than interior communities which were more affected
- Some communities waited long for relief assistance; some had to personally make requests on behalf of their communities to the concerned government offices.
- Some communities did not receive the full contents of the WASH kits but only water containers and purification tablets .
- Some water containers were shared between two or more families which was a difficulty for accessibility purposes. While the objective was to provide access to safe water for all, communities have had to locate a centralized catchment which at some point created a lot of community disputes.
- On average, a toilet is shared among 3 families

(Third Party Monitoring Report in Fiji Phase 1 & Phase 2, 2020)

### **Safety and Protection**

Fiji's ongoing economic recession due to the Covid 19-imposed national border closures and its impact on the tourism industry has resulted in thousands of job and income loss and food insecurity amongst other issues. (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN, 2020)

These were compounded by the impacts of three Tropical Cyclones between April 2020 to January 2021; TC Harold, TC Yasa and TC Ana.

When FCOSS collaborated with Save the Children Fiji to roll out the Fiji National Philanthropic Trust Cash Assistance Program (FiNCaP) to assist families enduring the economic impacts of COVID-19 (Fiji Times, 2021), it was able to refer over 10,000 potential beneficiaries.

- Of the 10,765 potential beneficiaries referred via the online Kobo platform utilised by FCOSS, 7719 reported having children. *(Refer to figure 1 below)*
- Of the 20,303 children identified as potential indirect beneficiaries, 5522 were those between 0 to 5years old, 9721 were 6 to 13 years old and 5049 were those aged 14 to 18 years. *(Refer to figure 2)*

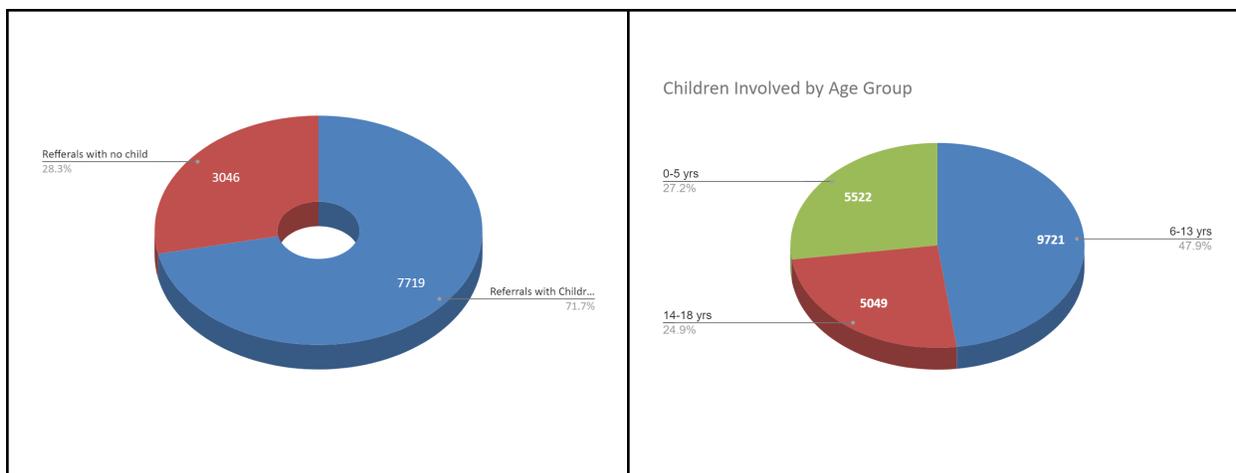


Figure 1: Referral involving children

Figure 2: Age Breakdown of Potential Indirect Beneficiaries: Children

Majority of those that sought assistance and registered in the FCOSS referral process were:

1. Unemployed - 8,164;
2. Self-employed - 750;
3. Employed or earning but in the Informal sector - 1,365;
4. Formally employed but reductions in earnings - 486.

It must be noted that FCOSS referred a total of 3,029 potential beneficiaries who reported being part of a single parent family. Of these 2,322 are single mothers and 707 single father families.

In addition, 75% of the potential beneficiaries referred by FCOSS for this cash transfer Covid 19 support reported having had their income negatively affected while 58% reported a drastic decrease in their savings after COVID19 and TC Harold for 58%.

Whilst the Fijian Government was able to roll out two major fiscal stimulus packages in public health, social security support payments through Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPf), tax and tariff reductions, loan repayment holidays, majority of those referred through the FinCAP program were unable to access these support.

FCOSS found that 62% of the potential beneficiaries of FinCAP did not have FNPf accounts whilst the other 38% have FNPf accounts but were not qualified under the government specified conditions for withdrawals.

The risks associated with loss of parental income, coupled with lack of access to social security support jeopardises the gains made in eradicating child labour, child sexual abuse and increased exposure of children to violence against women or in homes. (UNDP Pacific, 2020, #)

# Conclusion and Recommendations

Resilience of Fiji’s future remains inherently in the wellbeing of her children and in the full realisation of their rights. These efforts are made more challenging in the context of humanitarian events but rather than engaging in repeat crisis management mode; the Fijian government must

- a) Accelerate its efforts to mainstream its implementation of the provisions of CRC into legislations and policies governing national disaster management, pandemic response and humanitarian practice.
- b) Reactivate the National Coordinating Committee for Children as a stronger, more credible platform for a whole of system approach to safeguarding children in vulnerable populations during disasters and humanitarian events in Fiji given the limitations of the coverage and the Safety and Protection Cluster under the Fiji National Cluster System.

Finally, in light of the challenges highlighted above: FCOSS poses the following questions to the state:

1. How has the state ensured that the national disaster response systems and practices/protocols particularly that of government agencies such as the Republic of the Fiji Military Forces, the Fiji Police Force align to global humanitarian and child protection standards?
2. How has the Water Authority of Fiji collaborated with humanitarian organisations working for and with children, youth and their carers to ensure access to clean drinking water particularly in areas impacted by cyclones?
3. What specific strategies does the Fijian government have to better target social security support for parents or carers of children living in rural areas, working in the informal sector or unemployed, living with disabilities and vulnerable to natural disasters?
4. What systems of accountability to impacted populations does the Fijian government use to systematically give feedback to donors, NGO partners, communities and children about its humanitarian efforts and improve its practices?

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