

The dynamics and difficulties of disaster recovery

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A Fijian village post-Cyclone Winston, captured during a recent research trip by Victoria University staff and students. Credit: Anthony Mak

A Victoria University of Wellington professor says post-disaster recovery is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and each country faces unique and often unforeseeable challenges.

Professor Regan Potangaroa from Victoria's School of Architecture has

travelled to over 20 countries, including Pakistan, Syria and Afghanistan, to help in the wake of [natural disasters](#) and conflict zones, and his expertise was recently called on by the United Nations (UN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

He was an invited presenter at the UN Preparatory Committee (PrepCom3) meeting held in Surabaya, Indonesia, focused on housing and sustainable urban development. The meeting involved ministers from 33 UN member nations and hundreds of representatives and delegations from 193 countries.

PrepCom3 discussed sustainability goals for small island developing states in the lead-up to a full UN summit in October, says Professor Potangaroa.

"My work for the past 14 years looks at quality of life in small Pacific Island counties post-disaster. I've found that often there are quite low levels of wellbeing, due to many different factors including loneliness, feelings of inequality or displacement.

"For example, on a recent trip to Fiji—which is still recovering post-Cyclone Winston—one of our village surveys showed over 60 percent of families had a significant decrease in their quality of life, and over 25 percent of people felt lonely, most or all of the time.

"This is not uncommon. As we start to get a handle on the post-disaster reconstruction and how to measure it, we can come to understand what the problems are. But we're seeing it in different types and forms in different locations."

Professor Potangaroa says this work demonstrates that although there are frameworks and models to guide post-disaster scenarios, they can't be relied on as a single source of information.

Professor Potangaroa's presentation to PrepCom3 will be published in the Journal of Architecture and Environment.

Professor Potangaroa also travelled to China as an invited shelter expert as part of an APEC workshop to develop a solar powered emergency shelter solution.

He was invited through his membership with REDR Australia, which stands for Register of Engineers for Disaster Relief, who are engineers who are able, at short notice, to go into disasters.

"I gave advice on the design practicalities of incorporating solar panels with emergency tents or shelters. I also spoke about what happens when you roll out a [disaster response](#), and what kinds of interactions or issues can arise," says Professor Potangaroa.

"For example, each shelter would require a solar panel, not just some of them, as this might create social issues and contribute to feelings of inequality. In addition, each member country has different shelter requirements depending on their physical geography, so this needs to be taken into account. Disaster response has to be very dynamic."

Provided by Victoria University of Wellington

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