

Niue after Cyclone Heta

*Jon Barnett and Heidi Ellemor report on Niue's recovery from Cyclone Heta.
This report is based on 8 months of fieldwork in Niue in 2006*

Introduction

Nearly three years after Cyclone Heta struck Niue on January 5, 2004 the island is still recovering. Cyclone Heta caused peak wind gusts of 296 kms/hour, and waves in excess of 50 meters in height. These waves washed away whole buildings situated on the Alofi terrace, more than 25 metres above sea level.

Two people were killed by the cyclone, and many people retain a residual level of trauma. Forty-three houses were totally destroyed, and a further 20 have had to be abandoned. The estimated value of these losses is NZ\$4.1 million, but this estimate does not include the loss of personal possessions and records that have no market value, but whose loss is keenly felt. The impact on the private sector, arising through lost buildings and equipment – but not including lost income – has been estimated to be NZ\$5 million (Government of Niue 2004).

Losses to Government have been estimated to be NZ\$25.7 million, reflecting the Government's share of over 50% of GDP, and the fact that the seat of Government and most government departments were based in Alofi, which was the area hardest hit by the cyclone. Included among these losses are the complete destruction of the Huanaki cultural centre, where people would regularly congregate for the cultural displays and dances which are so integral to Niuean culture, and which also included the national museum, which lost 90% of its collection. There were other significant intrinsic losses, such as the loss of many land title and health records, significant (and ongoing) impacts on biodiversity and iconic species such as the native pigeon and fruit bat, damage to sea tracks used for fishing and bush tracks used for hunting, and the loss of the national hospital in which most Niueans were born.

From the 'Golden Mile' to the 'Desert Road': The impact of Cyclone Heta on Niue's administrative and cultural centre

Niue is the world's smallest self-governing country. The 2006 census showed the population to number 1607 people. Because Niueans are New Zealand citizens and have free access to labour markets in that country, there has been large-scale migration from the island



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to New Zealand. There are some 5,300 people born in Niue now living in New Zealand. Its small and declining population, coupled with the magnitude of Cyclone Heta, led many in the international media – and some politicians in New Zealand – to declare that the cyclone would trigger complete abandonment of the island. Like most international reporting about Niue, this was incorrect.

Between the 2001 and 2006 census the population declined by 181 people — little more than a plane load, and less than the number of resident Niueans who are abroad at any time on government travel, for education or medical treatment, or visiting family. It is notable that despite Cyclone Heta this inter-census population change is one of the lowest on record. It is clear from the census data, and even more so from our research, that the Niueans that remain are there to stay; they are, as they define themselves, 'the core' of Niuean society; and they will remain irrespective of cyclones.

Niue is also arguably the world's most aid-dependent country. GDP per capita is approximately NZ\$10,000, of which aid accounts for approximately 70%. Almost all of this aid comes from New Zealand. New Zealand has an obligation under Niue's Constitution to provide economic assistance to Niue, and because Niueans are New Zealand citizens they are entitled to minimum standards of living, at least with respect to health care and education.

With this history of aid dependency, Niue's leaders were very quick to turn to the international community, and

New Zealand in particular, for assistance with response and recovery after the cyclone. Despite this, it was Niueans themselves who did the bulk of the work to secure people's basic needs in the weeks after Heta, organised by the island's various formal and informal structures of governance comprised of the overlapping realms of State, Church, village and family. It was with respect to recovery, however, that Niue was dependent on the will of donors, and the Government worked hard to capture the attention of the international community and New Zealand, principally through its Cyclone Heta Recovery Plan, which identified reconstruction needs and has since facilitated donor coordination.

New Zealand assisted recovery in Niue through a NZ\$9 million grant, much of which was spent on the construction of a new (relocated) hospital. Perhaps triggered by the cyclone, New Zealand and Niue signed an agreement in October 2004 for strengthened cooperation, which includes an allocation of \$20 million over the period 2004–2009. The World Health Organisation and the European Union also assisted with the new hospital. The Government of French Polynesia responded quickly, sending materials for new houses and heavy machinery to assist in clearing of rubble and construction. Australia also contributed, sending supplies and personnel coordinated by Emergency Management Australia. With this international assistance, and the determination of Niueans, Niue is making good progress recovering from Cyclone Heta. There is a new hospital, new houses, a new hall that serves as the administrative centre of the Church and as a new venue for dances and functions (which was 75% funded from private contributions), and a new determination to retain Niue's distinct culture and way of life.

However, much more remains to be done, particularly in relation to disaster management. Disaster management arrangements have improved slightly since Cyclone Heta, largely because of the efforts of the new Chief of Police. The 2006–07 budget for disaster management is small — only NZ\$4,000. Institutional arrangements for warnings and preparedness remain untested and for the most part unchanged since 2004.

The disaster management plan is not available in the Niuean language. Key infrastructure such as the wharf and derrick, sea tracks, and power, water and communications infrastructure remain vulnerable to cyclones, and land use planning — such as it is — does little to mitigate vulnerability to cyclones. There is a pressing need for training in disaster management and dedicated emergency stores. After Cyclone Heta both Australia and New Zealand committed further support for disaster management in Niue. As the 2006–07 cyclone season shapes up to be particularly risky for Niue, Niueans are again worrying and wondering how well prepared they are, and the need for further assistance seems more pressing than ever.

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