Tropical Cyclone Winston Response

- People reached: 25,904
- Communities assisted: 231
- Hygiene kits distributed: 4,027
- Emergency shelter kits distributed: 2,583
- Seed kits distributed: 4,108
- Sanitation facilities built: 253

Tropical Cyclone Winston hit Fiji as a category five storm in February 2016—the strongest cyclone ever to make landfall in the Pacific. More than 350,000 people, or 40% of Fiji’s population, were affected and 31,200 houses were damaged or destroyed. CARE International, and our local partner in Fiji, Live & Learn agreed to launch a joint response—a first for both organisations in Fiji. Both organisations learned important lessons in partnering to deliver a locally-led emergency response.

CARE and Live & Learn: A locally-led response to Tropical Cyclone Winston

Globally, CARE works to achieve our mission by developing long-standing partnerships that build up local organisations. Through these partnerships, CARE is committed to supporting local organisations to take a leading role in humanitarian responses. The emergency response to Tropical Cyclone Winston in Fiji was an opportunity for CARE to put this commitment into action.

CARE and Live & Learn had been working in partnership in Fiji for five years before Winston hit in 2016, working together on disaster preparedness, risk reduction and response. The partnership aimed to build on the joint programming strengths and experiences of both CARE and Live & Learn, maximising CARE’s experience in gender-sensitive disaster risk reduction, preparedness, response and recovery as well as Live & Learn’s extensive community experience and networks.

The existing partnership enabled CARE and Live & Learn to agree on a joint emergency response to Winston within 24 hours. CARE brought extensive humanitarian response and recovery experience, human resources, funds and technical support to the partnership, while Live & Learn contributed 20 years of operational experience in Fiji and established relationships. The partnership also drew on networks including key government departments and civil society organisations like Virgin Australia, Vodafone, University of the South Pacific, Vinaka Fiji and the Fiji Red Cross.

While localisation during an emergency response was challenging, the Fiji partnership was successful and demonstrates valuable lessons for future efforts for locally-led humanitarian responses.

Live & Learn

A learning network of local NGOs from nine countries across the Pacific, South East Asia and the Indian Ocean. Live & Learn works on context-specific, community-based development projects.

CARE International

An international humanitarian aid organisation, with a special focus on working with women and girls to bring lasting change to their communities. CARE works with communities around the world on long-term development projects and emergency relief.
Elements of success

As local as possible, as international as necessary
For an effective response, CARE’s emergency staff had to adjust to playing a supporting and mentoring role rather than directly implementing decisions. In turn, Live & Learn had to be willing to accept CARE’s input and to rapidly adapt and upscale their systems, roles and mission.

Leveraging each other’s strengths
CARE and Live & Learn worked together to develop a response strategy that used Live & Learn’s community-based approach, starting with its core sectors of WASH and livelihoods, designed with CARE’s technical support.

Switching to emergency response mode
Managing the switch to a larger, more time critical workload was achieved through Live & Learn’s ability to make adjustments and CARE’s sensitivity to leave space for local leadership in this process. A clear division of responsibility between the organisations was key.

Sensitivity, respect and open communication
CARE’s efforts to avoid undermining local structures and genuine empathy for the personal challenges faced by local staff, coupled with Live & Learn’s efforts to adapt systems and process to reflect the pace of emergencies set strong foundations for a productive relationship.

Pairing advisors with local counterparts
The focus of CARE’s advisors on coaching local counterparts, transferring key skills, sharing practical tools to enable “learning by doing”, respecting local norms and allowing the locals to make the decisions was essential in enabling Live & Learn staff to build the skills and confidence to successfully lead the response. The most effective pairings were in longer deployments, where trust and capacity could be built.

Challenges navigated

1. Converting individual skills building to organisational strengthening
The skills transfer that people involved in the response experienced must convert to higher level capacity building across the organisations. Linking with local, regional and international networks can multiply the impacts.

2. Negotiating media and communications
Agreement on the expectations of both organisations in communications with the media can be complex but is essential for an equal and accurate representation of the partnership. Building a shared understanding of the pace required to capitalise on media attention during emergencies and creating communication protocols is key.

3. Creating bridges between the emergency response and long-term development programs
A dual mandate of emergency response and long-term development can cause divisions between staff and erode organisational coherence. Collaboration between teams needs to be fostered to capitalise on synergies and safeguard unity.

The way forward is through establishing strategic partnerships, partnerships which are mutually beneficial, encourage a strength-based approach and are based on values, such as respect for each other, honesty, commitment. We had faith in the partnership, that through the challenges, we would find opportunities for growth – growth at an individual level, at programming level, at an organisational level— and shape the partnership for the future here in Fiji and potentially the Pacific.

Doris Susau, Country Manager, Live & Learn Fiji