

OXFAM NZ SUPPLEMENTARY SUBMISSION SIX: CASE STUDY - GITA

It was around 2:00am on the morning of February 13, 2018, when Oxfam New Zealand received Mause's call. 'The wind is really bad. We're in the worst of it now... my roof is gone.' When Mause finished his sentence, the line went dead.

Mause Halahala is the Humanitarian Coordinator for the Tonga National Youth Congress (TNYC). For years, Oxfam New Zealand has worked with Mause to build up TNYC's national network of youth volunteers, to serve as effective front-line responders to natural disasters in the Kingdom of Tonga – one of the world's most vulnerable countries to natural disasters.

On February 13, Mause was in the eye of Tropical Cyclone Gita – the strongest storm to strike southern Tonga in a generation. The cyclone resulted in **two deaths and over 400 injuries**. Thousands of homes were destroyed and the rain-fed water sources upon which Tongans depend for drinking water were contaminated or cut off. In total, over 70,000 people were affected, including Mause and his family.

In the days leading up to TC Gita's arrival, Mause was busy readying plans and TNYC's volunteer teams to respond once the storm had passed. He knew that TNYC would be a critical piece of the relief effort. Working in partnership for nearly a decade with Oxfam New Zealand, TNYC has extensive WASH expertise and pre-positioned supplies that can be rolled out anywhere across Tonga's vast island network following a natural disaster – for emergency filtration, storage and distribution. According to Mause, "Tonga gets many cyclones, so we know that when a storm strikes, access safe drinking water is always one of the biggest concerns for the population. TNYC has the only emergency water treatment and distribution capacity in the country, so we knew we had to be ready."

On the night Gita struck, Mause returned home from the National Emergency Management Office (NEMO) to ride out the storm with his wife and their infant daughter. By early morning on the 13th of February, part of their family home was destroyed. By mid-day on the 13th, while his wife and in-laws began repairs at home, TNYC had begun distribution of prepositioned emergency supplies - stocks of tarpaulins, blankets, jerry cans and hygiene kits - and was working with the national Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) cluster to assess the water situation.



Mause Halahala of TNYC runs filtration units at a communal rainwater tank

“We saw that the storm did huge damage to people’s homes, including water tanks, wells, cisterns and guttering. Many Tongans use pit latrines, and these had flooded or overflowed, contaminating groundwater sources. With the Ministry of Health, we decided that TNYC would focus on water filtration and storage around Evacuation Centres and other communal sites – churches, schools and disability centres – so that each community would have places to access safe drinking water.”

New Zealand’s aid programme has helped make this locally-led response possible, funding the deployment of Oxfam filtration units in Tonga, and supporting the many hours of training, mentoring, and small-scale responses that Oxfam and TNYC volunteers have undertaken together over the past five years to prepare for this moment. In the weeks after the storm, Oxfam and Government of New Zealand support, TNYC was able to filter over 1,107,000 litres of drinking water at key communal sites, including to 35 schools, 26 disability centres and households, 22 churches and evacuation centres, and 19 additional communal water points reaching over 20,000 Tongans. By providing free and accessible drinking water, TNYC also helped divert an estimated 738,000 water bottles from Tonga’s landfills (the only safe drinking water alternative for many), saving Tongans nearly \$35 NZD a week in the process (10% of the weekly median income).



TNYC volunteers refill school children’s water bottles after TC Gita

Mausa’s story is an example of the delicate balance required for successful localisation in humanitarian action. Mausua and many of his TNYC volunteers were not just responders, but also survivors. They balance their desire to help their community with their own pressing personal and family priorities and needs. As Mausua explains, “family and community is very important in Tonga. After a day of filtering water or distributing relief items in the communities, some of us still had repairs and work to do in our own homes, or helping family, village neighbours or friends from church.”

In the days and weeks following TC Gita, Mausua and his volunteer teams were relieved by youth arriving from Tonga’s other island groups – Vava’u and Ha’apai. In the past, these islands had benefitted from surge support from Oxfam staff and TNYC volunteers in Tongatapu and ‘Eua. Now, it was their turn to lend a hand from over the horizon. Oxfam has been there too, providing technical assistance when needed to Mausua and TNYC, helping ensure that Tonga’s humanitarian responders maintain their fine balance.