



*Social Empowerment and Education Programme (SEEP) staff raising awareness on COVID-19 in communities. Photo courtesy of SEEP.*

# Fiji civil society solidarity driving the COVID-19 humanitarian response

**By Nalini Singh and Maryann Lockington**

If there ever were an ideal time to talk solidarity, to practice solidarity and to strengthen solidarity, the time would be now. Recognising the multifaceted

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impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, eight civil society organisations (CSO) and NGOs from across different sectors and locations formed the Fiji CSO Alliance for COVID-19 Humanitarian Response, [the Alliance](#) for short.

The Alliance is made up of the Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises & Development ([FRIEND](#)), Fiji Women's Crisis Centre ([FWCC](#)), Diverse Voices and Action ([DIVA](#)) for Equality, Citizen's Constitutional Forum ([CCF](#)), the Social Empowerment and Education Programme ([SEEP](#)), [femLINKpacific](#), Rainbow Pride Foundation ([RPF](#)), and the Fiji Women's Rights Movement ([FWRM](#)).

The Alliance came into being from conversations between FRIEND, a frontline humanitarian relief NGO based in Lautoka in the Western Division of Fiji, and FWCC and FWRM, both feminist organisations based in the capital city of Suva in the Central Division. FRIEND was in constant communication with FWRM on the intertwining women's rights issues seen on the ground, and concerns on the shortage of food supplies, medication and other essential needs.

While COVID-19 infects people indiscriminately, the unfolding crisis has disproportionate, interlinked, and intersecting effects on different communities. Recognising this and building on existing partnerships, FRIEND, FWRM and FWCC reached out to diverse groups to form the Alliance.

The Alliance was formed as a response to the urgency and increasingly dire situation presented by COVID-19, to improve access to information and to disseminate information from the different partners on the work that is happening on the ground. Creating the Alliance has enabled the partners to better map out opportunities for support and contributions from wider networks, and to ensure a more coordinated approach to the relief and recovery work of members.

An overwhelming number of requests have been coming in for assistance from different communities. FRIEND reported that,

*“... within days of the COVID-19 Lautoka lockdown, food requests started flowing and it soon became very obvious that low-income earners, women-headed households, and hawkers like roti parcel sellers dependent on the city life soon ran out of cash and food for their families.”*

Frontline workers have faced further challenges, with restricted movement and areas with limited access to transport. To make matters worse, Fiji has been in the midst of its declared cyclone season, which saw Category 4 Tropical Cyclone (TC) Harold barrel through the islands causing added devastation and stress on the ongoing national relief and recovery work.

As part of the relief efforts, the Alliance partners are running donation drives for food and essential needs such as clothes, medicine, supplies for nursing and new mothers, and sanitary packs for their respective communities across Fiji, including maritime areas. The partners are also engaging at different levels of the community to raise awareness of COVID-19 and the official advisories that have been released during this crisis.

For instance, DIVA for Equality Fiji - through their Women Defend Commons network - organised urgent food aid, and household and basic medical supplies for women in Kadavu, an island south of the capital city of Suva.

Increased gender-based violence is a pressing concern in Fiji in general, but especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-TC Harold. The lockdowns in Lautoka and Suva and restrictions on movement place survivors/victims in the hands of their abusers and can restrict access to support and justice systems. One of the Alliance partners, FWCC, is working at the frontline to provide 24-hour phone counselling services seven days a week, together with victim support services. FWCC reported a total of 770 new and repeat counselling calls through the Domestic Violence Toll-Free Helpline 1560 and its phone counselling services on issues such as domestic violence, marital rape, child abuse, and financial stress.

Another Alliance partner, FWRM, is carrying out a media campaign to raise awareness of violence against women and girls during COVID-19. The media campaign includes television and radio advertisements broadcast nationwide in English and vernacular (i-Taukei and Fiji Hindi).

Overall, the creation of the Alliance has meant a wider, targeted and more coordinated reach to some of the most marginalised communities in Fiji. It has also meant there is greater awareness and visibility for some of the emerging and existing humanitarian and human rights issues such as food security, job security, access to justice, access to health, education and other essential services. Our shared mandate to uphold the protection of rights and dignity of people continues to be our priority.

*This post is part of the [#COVID-19 and the Pacific](#) series.*

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