

# Katherine 1998: Appeals and self sufficiency—lessons for the future

## Introduction

This paper discusses the relief effort undertaken during Katherine and Daly Region flood disaster in the Northern Territory during January 1998. The paper discusses the means by which the Northern Territory Division of the Australian Red Cross provided financial assistance to those affected by the disaster and how the principles utilised in 1998 can be applied to lessen the financial impact of disasters on affected communities in the future. Several factors that could improve future service delivery became apparent during the conduct of this appeal. These included the importance of keeping the community advised about the conduct of the appeal and, very importantly, a speedy distribution of money and goods. The first distribution occurred within three weeks of the appeal's launch. Two of the most important factors, however, were the use of a transparent, yet simple, distribution system and the necessity of helping local business. A voucher scheme was devised and vouchers issued to all affected persons. This provided a simple, yet virtually fraud free, means of directly helping all those individuals who had suffered loss. The vouchers, by being redeemable only in affected communities, also helped local businesses to re-establish their operations quickly with support from the local community. The single appeal to coordinate all aid, and use of vouchers as a means of distributing aid are recommended as proven, highly successful methods of helping a disaster affected community in the future.

## Background

### The district

The Katherine–Daly region of the Northern Territory is located approximately 300 kilometres south of Darwin. The region (approximately 22,500 km) (Skertchly & Skertchly 1999) encompasses the rugged Arnhem land terrain and low-lying river flats. There are many small creeks and rivers, which feed into the major watercourses of the King, Edith, Flora and Katherine rivers. These rivers, in turn, drain into the Daly and Victoria Rivers. The major communities in the region are Katherine, a regional centre with a

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population of 10,809 and many Aboriginal communities, for example Beswick, Barunga and Nauiui Nambiyu. There are also numerous pastoral properties, a major tourist attraction at Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge) and the Tindal RAAF Base some 15 kilometres south-east of the Katherine Township (Skertchly & Skertchly 1999).

Skertchly and Skertchly (1999) have reported on a number of distinctive features of Katherine, which influenced the response to the flood. First, Katherine is a regional centre, important to the daily lives of people in smaller townships in the surrounding area. Second, it is on both the north-south and east-west transport axis and a major communication centre. When Katherine becomes impassable, Darwin's food supplies are affected, tourism is disrupted and communication links to both Western Australia and South Australia are adversely affected. The RAAF Base at Tindal can also be cut off from Katherine if Tindal Creek floods. Finally, the local member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) is the Deputy Chief Minister, Treasurer, and Minister for Police, Fire, and Emergency services. According to Skertchly and Skertchly (1999) this point ensured there was immediate access to whole of government resources after the flood.

### The flood

In January 1998, the region experienced the worst floods ever recorded. Cyclone Les, which had moved inland from the Gulf of Carpentaria, produced between 300mm and 400mm of rain in the Katherine River catchment area and over Katherine itself during the period 25–26 January 1998. The Katherine River rose rapidly and peaked at 20.4 metres at 7.15pm on Tuesday 27 January 1998, this was more than one metre above the previously recorded high. The peak flow rate was 12,000 cubic metres per second (Tambling 1998). The majority of residents in the older parts of Katherine, including the CBD, were evacuated by 27

January 1998 (Hagger: Reed 1998).

Eventually, the rising waters seriously damaged more than 1,100 dwellings, government offices in the CBD and all the business premises located in the CBD (Tambling 1998). In all, 1,000 square kilometres of country were covered by floodwater and some residents of the nearby communities of Beswick and Mataranka were also evacuated.

The other major community that suffered from flood devastation was Nauiui Nambiyu. In the past at Nauiui Nambiyu, there has always been at least four days warning between the rising of the Katherine River and its eventual effect on the Daly River (Rowlands 1998). This gave residents plenty of time to evacuate in an orderly way. In 1998, because of the cyclonic depression overhead, residents of the small Aboriginal community had a mere four hours in which to evacuate the township. On 27 January, some low-key evacuation commenced because it was considered that there would be plenty of time to relocate the community. This was wrong; the river rose swiftly. On the following day, it became apparent that urgent action had to be taken and helicopters and boats were utilised to evacuate the community (Rowlands 1998). The Nauiui Nambiyu Township became a ghost town with the whole community evacuated to safety; the river height exceeding all previous records peaked at 15 metres (Rowlands 1998). All buildings in the town were almost totally submerged and the majority of the community lost all their possessions.

### The Red Cross response

It became clear, very early in the disaster, that there was significant flood damage to numerous buildings in Katherine itself with many homes and businesses inundated by water. The exact number of people who had suffered hardship from the flood was not immediately apparent but was thought to be in excess of 2000 people. The Nauiui Nambiyu community was almost totally under water. In Barunga, many of the small community's population suffered some dislocation by taking in refugees from Beswick community. In economic terms, this meant that at least

five thousand people were suffering from financial hardship. Not all were insured.

The Executive Director of the Northern Territory Division of Australian Red Cross made contact with staff at the Red Cross premises in Katherine. Their advice was that most people in the older part of the town had lost most if not all their possessions. Many people were traumatised from the effects of the disaster and were seeking aid from the Society in order to rebuild their lives.

Several organisations throughout the Northern Territory, including the Australian Red Cross, proposed undertaking appeals for flood victims and it became clear that the relief effort could possibly be fragmented. There was a danger that with a multiplicity of appeals, the available funds might be concentrated towards one group or another and that some people might not receive adequate relief. The Northern Territory Division of Australian Red Cross was acutely aware of the Cyclone Tracy (Darwin 1974) experience when community anger erupted at perceived injustices in the distribution of relief.

Following discussions with the Northern Territory Division of the Australian Red Cross and other groups, the Northern Territory Government determined a single appeal would be the best method of channelling relief funds to those in need. The Red Cross was chosen as the lead agency for this appeal. Other agencies were requested by the Northern Territory Government and the Australian Red Cross to channel funds through the single appeal. The majority did so.

## Appeal management

### Management committee

In order to ensure the independence of the appeal was not seen solely as being a creature of the government or the Australian Red Cross, a Committee of prominent Northern Territory citizens and Northern Territory Red Cross members was established to oversee the appeal. The chair of the committee was Mrs Josephine Stone, a solicitor and the Chief Minister's wife. Mrs Stone proved to be ideal in the role being able to approach many high profile donors and media organisations. It was largely through the efforts of Mrs Stone that the Channel 9 *Today* program visited Katherine. This event was to be a catalyst in increasing the number of donations received from Australia's eastern seaboard. Mrs Stone had an entrée where most other people did not and used this to great effect. The other members of the committee were: the Chairman and

Vice Chairman of the NT Division of Australian Red Cross, a member from the business community, a lawyer, a banker, a media representative and a microbiologist. The committee worked well together, pooling their expertise and knowledge to the best advantage.

### Donations

Funds exceeding 2.3 million dollars were eventually raised and distributed. Money did not flow evenly, there was an immediate influx of funds from the Northern Territory, then donations came from around Australia but these quickly slowed. The committee members worked tirelessly, and probably lost many friends in their efforts to increase the rate of donations. The third wave of donations came from business and government, both of which contributed significantly to the appeal. Finally, the last trickle of funds came from around the nation, including a second round of funds from the Northern Territory that came towards the end. Some innovative methods were utilised to raise funds. For example, The Northern Territory Lottery Company donated the proceeds of a special lottery to the fund. Businesses donated items as prizes in raffles and goods were auctioned at lunches, the total proceeds of which were donated to the appeal.

### Fund distribution

One of the first decisions taken by the committee was to provide relief by way of a general grant to all residents whose dwelling had been affected by the flood, as soon as funds were received. Agreement was also reached that this initial grant would be free of any means test and be equal, regardless of the size of family or value of the premises that had been damaged. According to the list of donations received and disbursed the Disaster Relief Appeal Committee had distributed \$760,000 by the close of business on 16 February 1998. By 28 February 1998, over \$1.4 million dollars had been received of which \$921,000 had been disbursed within the community (Tambling 1998).

Another early decision was to distribute the funds in Katherine in such a way that local businesses could be assisted to recover without directly providing any of the appeal funds to business. This was critical because businesses in Katherine had suffered financially through the flooding and their survival was crucial to the region's economy. However, the appeal had raised funds for the benefit of individuals only not businesses. In order to meet these twin imperatives a voucher system was devised. In Katherine, the

vouchers were only exchangeable at local businesses. Anything could be purchased except alcohol, tobacco or travel from a travel agent.

The exclusions were designed to ward off external criticism that flood relief was being frittered away on 'grog or smokes' or that 'the neighbours have gone to Fiji on their relief money'. The vouchers were coloured red with the text in black. This prevented frauds being committed by photocopying vouchers. The vouchers were also numbered and a record kept of the names and addresses of recipients. This list was checked against a register of buildings that had suffered inundation to ensure that only those entitled to relief received vouchers. These measures to combat fraud or adverse publicity may be thought excessive. However, the measures were put in place in order to maintain the integrity of Red Cross principles and ensure that the appeal was scrupulously fair and equitable to all recipients.

A small team travelled from Darwin to assist with the distribution of the vouchers. While the Darwin members, under the direction of the Executive Director, formed the core group, local volunteers were sought to augment the team. This had the benefit of locals being highly visible in the voucher distribution system. At the same time, any decision to reject an application was made by a member from Darwin, thus removing any odium from the locals. An initial distribution of \$500 worth of vouchers was made to all eligible applicants. A register was kept by completing the butt of the voucher and this was later checked against vouchers returned for payment. No fraudulent applications were detected.

Publicity was also a vital component of the voucher distribution scheme. Close liaison was maintained with the government officers responsible for the recovery phase of the operation. Notices were posted about distribution times; the same information was published on radio and television so that messages could be passed to those in need. Word of mouth was also a common means of passing relevant information. Members of the Katherine Chamber of Commerce were also briefed before implementation of the voucher system. Above all, keeping the public informed was a vital method of preventing rumours starting and spreading.

The scheme assisted local businesses recover beyond the expectations of the organisers. Because vouchers were only exchangeable locally, Katherine busines-

## Voucher

<p><b>Australian Red Cross</b></p> <p><b>Katherine and District Flood Relief Voucher \$100</b></p> <hr/> <p>Name:.....</p> <p>of.....</p> <p>Address.....</p> <p>Issued by:.....</p> <p>12345</p>	<p><b>Australian Red Cross</b></p> <p><b>Katherine and District Flood Relief Voucher \$100</b></p> <hr/> <p>This voucher is issued to the ..... Family</p> <p>And may be exchanged at any Katherine business for household items, personal items or food, excluding alcoholic beverages and tobacco to the value of \$100.</p> <p>This voucher has been issued by the Australian Red Cross Katherine &amp; District Flood Appeal from funds raised by public donations.</p> <p><b>Please note, no more than \$10 change will be given if this voucher is not fully utilised</b></p> <p>Must be utilised by 30 June 98. 12345</p>
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Figure 1: sample voucher

ses had a unique opportunity to re-establish themselves. The money was there if they started operating quickly. The businesses, having received a voucher, could either submit it to Red Cross immediately for payment or, as many business persons chose to do, use the voucher at another local business for supplies. Anecdotally, there is evidence that some vouchers were used three or four times over in Katherine. This multiple use provided added incentives and support to business. A side benefit, which emerged later, was that the Katherine residents having to spend their vouchers locally helped rebuild confidence in the community.

A second distribution of vouchers was made in April. On this occasion, the distribution was on a basis of family size and actual need. Vouchers issued were valued between \$100 and \$400. Once again, the vouchers went round the community several times before submission for payment occurred.

### Donated goods

During March and April 1998, donated goods with an estimated value of \$1 million arrived in Katherine for distribution. The most useful items received were food and mattresses. Unfortunately, goods are not as useful as cash. Whilst donors give generously and their donations are always welcome, they are not

aware of local situations. In the case of Katherine, for example, winter weight clothing was not appropriate for distribution at the height of a tropical wet season. Nevertheless, all goods received were utilised.

### Aboriginal communities

A number of small Aboriginal communities in the Katherine region also received financial assistance, these included Barunga, Beswick, Binjari, Delye and Kalano. After discussion with community councils, distribution to Aboriginal communities was made in cash direct to the council for distribution, rather than by vouchers to individuals. The community made subsequent distributions to individuals councils' based on individual needs. The councillors assumed responsibility for ensuring the aid was not spent inappropriately. The grants were made on exactly the same basis used for Katherine residents. The assistance was spent in the local store or in Katherine when travel there became possible.

In the Nauiui Nambiyu region the Aboriginal community and the residents from a number of outlying farms all required relief. The Executive Director of the Red Cross travelled to the area to ensure that each family in the scattered farms received vouchers in exactly the same ratio used in Katherine. These vouchers were exchangeable at either

Katherine or the Nauiui Nambiyu store. In the community itself, the President of the local council was invited to offer suggestions about the voucher distribution. A first distribution was made to each family in the same ratio as Katherine. These vouchers were exchangeable at the local store, or at Katherine stores. Once again, the use of vouchers helped the community support their own store and those in the Katherine Township. One touching comment came from a community leader who expressed delight that money from the broad Australian community was being given to an Aboriginal township. A second distribution was made to the Nauiui Nambiyu in May 1998. This was made as a financial grant to the community, based on the same criteria as that used for second grants in Katherine.

### The final distribution

After the two rounds of grants had been made throughout the region, outstanding needs were assessed. A call was then made for special purpose/ special needs applications to be lodged. Over 100 applications were received. These ranged from application to replace text books to a bid for assistance in rehabilitating a club house. The Committee considered all the applications and prioritised them. A lengthy meeting saw the committee members trying to provide funds to as many applicants as possible. Finally, it was determined that several applications were outstanding and these were almost completely met. Another group received a proportion of the amounts sought in their application. Sixty-five applicants received funds to the value of \$540,000 (Australian Red Cross 1998).

All funds were expended by the end of July 1998, thus having achieved the committee's goal of distributing funds as early as possible. A final task was to have the accounts audited and the details published in the local media. This ensured an open, transparent system of fund distribution and kept the public advised of the process.

### Lessons learnt

Following a debrief of the appeal and method of distribution the Northern Territory Division of the Australian Red Cross determined that the operation had been successful (Katherine and District Flood Appeal 1998). The benefits were:

- Conducting a single appeal meant that administrative overheads were reduced and more money was available for distribution. Using a broad committee rather than one from a single charity

helped attract increased donations.

- The initial distribution on an equal rather than selective basis meant that distribution was undertaken quickly. It also reduced tensions amongst the affected community.
- The use of vouchers enabled controls on the use of the appeal monies.
- The vouchers helped the local business houses re-establish themselves quickly. They were also a means of indirectly channelling funds to businesses through individuals.
- Keeping the community informed and involved reduced rumours and arguments about entitlements.

The less successful aspects of the operation were:

- Accepting donations in kind was labour intensive and resulted in some inappropriate donations being received.
- Additional staff had to be hired to cope with the volume of donated goods and warehouses had to be hired in the local community, throwing a strain on

already overtaxed resources.

- Broader charity representation on the Committee would have improved liaison.

In conclusion, according to Mr Shane Stone, MLA and the Mayor of Katherine Mr Jim Forscutt (1998) the use of vouchers as a means of providing aid to communities was highly successful. The use of a single appeal also ensured that there was no overlap in the distribution of funds. Both mechanisms are highly recommended as a means of helping the community to help themselves after any future disaster.

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## Conference Announcement

### Natural Hazards Management Conference 2000

#### Interpreting and Applying Natural Hazard Information

16-17 August 2000, Napier, New Zealand

The Institute of Geological & Nuclear Sciences Limited (GNS), Hawke's Bay Regional Council and Ministry for Emergency Management invites natural hazard mitigation practitioners, emergency managers, utility managers, natural hazard researchers and scientists to participate in the Natural Hazards Management Conference 2000.

Conference 2000 is about natural hazard information and its interpretation and application for practitioners. Practitioners and researchers/scientists are aware of the difficulties of applying natural hazard information and this conference will further build on the work of the previous conferences by:

- highlighting how to overcome the difficulties of compiling, assessing, interpreting and applying hazard information
- examining methods used to successfully apply hazard information for solving practical planning, development and construction problems, as well as emergency preparedness and response.

The Conference will feature keynote addresses, case studies from practitioners, formal presentations from scientists, panel discussions and poster sessions.

The Natural Hazards Management Conference will be run in

Napier, New Zealand on the 16-17 August 2000.

The Conference venue is Napier War Memorial Conference Centre located on the beach of Napier's famous Marine Parade. The Centre offers stunning views of the Pacific Ocean and well located amenities being 5 minutes walk from the centre of Napier City. Closely located motels/hotels will provide accommodation, including standard and premium, twin and double rooms plus suites.

A one-day optional field trip is planned for Friday 18 August 2000. The trip will visit sites around Hawke's Bay where successful hazard mitigation strategies have been implemented.

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