



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

**NEW ZEALAND'S PANDEMIC RESPONSE:
A MODEL FOR CLIMATE CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

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*The health of the planet and the health of its people
are inextricably linked.*

— Dr. Margaret Chan, former Director-General
World Health Organization, 2015

Abstract

Amidst escalating global crises, New Zealand's exemplary management of the COVID-19 pandemic stands as an exemplar, offering a model for comprehensive security cooperation in the Pacific and beyond. The chapter examines New Zealand's pandemic response, drawing parallels with the climate crisis to highlight key strategies such as early action, transparent communication, and community engagement. These elements provide valuable insights for addressing the multifaceted challenges of climate disruption. The chapter underscores the importance of integrating Indigenous knowledge, enhancing regional cooperation, and fostering resilience through public awareness and education. By adopting a holistic approach that prioritizes both human and environmental well-being, the Pacific region can develop effective and sustainable security strategies to address the complex, non-traditional threats of the future.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic's stark revelation of global health systems vulnerabilities underscored the importance of effective governance, decisive action, and transparent communication during crises. New Zealand's exceptional pandemic response, marked by

swift decision-making, robust testing, and open public messaging, emerged as a leading example. This chapter examines New Zealand's approach as a case study within a comprehensive security framework, recognizing the interconnectedness of health, environmental, and societal concerns. This study explores how these lessons can inform broader security strategies in the Pacific region and beyond by analyzing key elements of New Zealand's response—such as early lockdowns, widespread testing, and clear communication.

The parallels between the pandemic and the climate crisis are striking, as they both demand coordinated international efforts, strong governance, and open dialogue between scientists and policymakers. This chapter argues that New Zealand's pandemic response offers valuable insights into effective crisis management, communication, and community engagement, applicable to addressing the multifaceted challenges of climate disruption, including rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and biodiversity loss. Adopting early action strategies, community engagement, and intersectoral cooperation can forge a more resilient and sustainable future.

Viewing New Zealand's response through the lens of comprehensive security—encompassing traditional security threats, health, environmental, and societal concerns—underscores the need for holistic approaches that transcend conventional paradigms. This chapter synthesizes insights from existing research on pandemic responses and climate disruption strategies in the Pacific region, focusing on how lessons from the former can inform and strengthen efforts to mitigate and adapt to the latter. By identifying gaps in the current literature, this study proposes a novel framework that enhances our understanding of comprehensive security cooperation, providing actionable insights and practical recommendations for policymakers and practitioners working toward a more resilient and sustainable future in the Pacific.

COVID-19 in the Pacific: Contrasting Experiences and the Imperative of Regional Cooperation

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the global community's profound unpreparedness for a health crisis of such magnitude. The virus's rapid spread, fueled by global interconnectedness, dense urban populations, and frequent travel, overwhelmed healthcare systems worldwide. Delayed responses, inadequate health infrastructure, and fragmented global health governance exacerbated the crisis, while the accompanying "infodemic"—the rapid spread of misinformation or disinformation about the virus—further hindered effective action.¹ Although many countries implemented lockdown and emergency measures, these often came at the cost of individual freedoms, raising concerns about the balance between public health and civil liberties.²

Despite these hard lessons, a 2023 investigative report revealed that the world remains alarmingly vulnerable to future pandemics.³ This lack of preparedness was evident in well-resourced countries like the United States, which, despite advanced healthcare, tragically led the world in COVID-19 cases and deaths.⁴ Similarly, the European Union struggled to mount a unified response due to competing national interests and a phenomenon dubbed "coronationalism"—a trend toward prioritizing national self-interest and protectionism during the pandemic, often at the expense of international cooperation.⁵ The absence of coordinated strategies and political will hampered global efforts to contain the virus and develop essential supplies.⁶

Conversely, the geographic isolation of Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICT) initially shielded them from the worst of the pandemic.⁷ However, the isolation later hindered access to essential medical supplies and vaccines, exposing the unique vulnerabilities of these island nations. New Zealand, uniquely positioned as a Pacific Island nation and a well-resourced country, leveraged its geographical advantage and decisive governance to manage the

crisis effectively. Early lockdowns, efficient contact tracing,⁸ and high public trust allowed New Zealand to minimize the pandemic's impact. Despite facing challenges typical of island nations, such as maintaining supply chains and mitigating the economic fallout from reduced tourism,⁹ New Zealand emerged as a regional leader, providing critical aid and public health expertise to neighboring Pacific nations. This contrast in pandemic experiences underscores the complex interplay between geography, governance, and international cooperation in responding to global health crises. It underscores the critical importance of regional cooperation in the Pacific, where shared vulnerabilities and limited resources necessitate collaborative approaches to preparedness, response, and recovery.

New Zealand's Pandemic Response: A Case Study in Effective Crisis Management

New Zealand's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic is a notable public health crisis management success. Characterized by swift decision-making, transparent communication, and robust public health measures, New Zealand's approach offers valuable lessons for pandemic response and broader security cooperation.

The "go hard, go early" strategy was central to this success, implemented rapidly and decisively. This entailed immediate border closures, mandatory quarantines for incoming travelers, and a nationwide lockdown.¹⁰ These measures, enacted while many other countries hesitated, proved pivotal in mitigating the virus's early spread.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's leadership played a crucial role. Her communication strategy, marked by empathy, clarity, and consistent messaging, fostered public trust and compliance.¹¹ Phrases like "the team of 5 million" resonated deeply, cultivating a sense of collective responsibility crucial for widespread adherence to pandemic measures.¹²

Beyond effective communication, skillful and rapid policymaking was vital. The “go hard, go early” strategy also encompassed strict border controls, comprehensive testing, and an efficient contact tracing system.¹³ These measures worked in tandem, enabling early case detection and rapid isolation of infected individuals, effectively preventing widespread community transmission.

While some attribute New Zealand's success to its geographic isolation and small population,¹⁴ a comparison with the United States reveals that effective strategy, policy, and implementation were paramount. Despite vastly greater resources, the United States experienced significantly higher COVID-19 cases and deaths,¹⁵ demonstrating that even well-equipped nations can falter without a well-executed plan.¹⁶

New Zealand's response had flaws, particularly regarding initial preparedness and post-lockdown challenges. However, the country's ability to adapt quickly and temporarily eliminate the virus underscores the importance of flexible and dynamic policy frameworks that can evolve in response to unforeseen challenges.¹⁷ This agility and a strong emphasis on science-based decision-making and community engagement positioned New Zealand as a global exemplar in pandemic management.

Social Impacts and Māori-Led Prosocial Resistance

While lauded for its epidemiological success, New Zealand's “go hard, go early” strategy had unintended social consequences. The stringent lockdown measures and border controls disproportionately affected marginalized communities like Pacific Islanders and low-income individuals, exacerbating social inequalities and tensions. These groups experienced increased discrimination, economic hardship, and limited access to resources, revealing the unequal burden of the pandemic.

However, the Māori community's response showcased a powerful counter-narrative of resilience and self-determination.¹⁸ Despite exclusion from initial government consultations, Māori leaders leveraged their cultural knowledge and community networks to safeguard their people. They established community checkpoints—where volunteers monitored and controlled access to their territories, drawing on traditional practices of care and protection—and implemented culturally relevant health messaging. Additionally, they provided essential services and spearheaded vaccination efforts, prioritizing the well-being of their communities. This proactive, culturally grounded approach effectively curbed the virus's spread within the Māori communities and underscored the importance of Indigenous knowledge and community-led initiatives in crisis management.¹⁹

The Māori response is a compelling example of how comprehensive security can be achieved by incorporating diverse perspectives and empowering communities. By recognizing and valuing Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural values, and practices, governments can develop more equitable, effective, and resilient responses to future crises. This lesson is particularly relevant in the Pacific region, where Indigenous communities often possess unique knowledge and skills for navigating complex challenges like climate disruption.

Implications for Comprehensive Security Cooperation in the Pacific

New Zealand's pandemic response is a compelling model of how swift action, transparent communication, and cultural sensitivity can effectively address global health crises. However, its broader implications for comprehensive security cooperation, particularly in the Pacific region, require further examination.

Health Security and Pandemic Preparedness

New Zealand's success highlights the critical need for robust health security frameworks and pandemic preparedness strategies at both domestic and regional levels. This includes sustained investment in public health systems, which mitigates health threats and yields significant economic returns.²⁰ The country's emphasis on early intervention, science-based policies, and international cooperation offers a valuable lesson for future outbreaks.

Crucially, New Zealand's experience demonstrates the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives into pandemic planning. Integrating gender considerations ensures that policies address the specific vulnerabilities and needs of women, who often bear a disproportionate burden during crises.²¹ Moreover, the success of Māori-led initiatives highlights the value of Indigenous knowledge and community engagement in achieving effective and culturally sensitive responses.

Beyond domestic preparedness, New Zealand's approach has implications for regional cooperation. Strengthening regional disease surveillance mechanisms, including data-sharing agreements and technology transfer, would enhance the Pacific region's ability to detect and respond to emerging health threats. The pandemic also exposed the need for greater collaboration on medical supplies and vaccine distribution, ensuring equitable access for all island nations. This necessitates a coordinated regional effort to pool resources, share information, and develop joint response plans.

By leveraging New Zealand's experience and fostering regional cooperation, the Pacific region can bolster its health security and pandemic preparedness, ensuring a more resilient and responsive approach to future health crises.

Climate Disruption: An Interconnected Challenge Demanding Integrated Strategies

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of health security and revealed the interconnectedness of health and environmental challenges. With its potential to exacerbate and create new health vulnerabilities, climate disruption necessitates an integrated security approach that prioritizes human and environmental well-being.

New Zealand's pandemic response offers valuable insights into how strategies for one crisis can inform responses to another. The principles of early action, transparent communication, and community engagement, which proved effective against COVID-19, are equally applicable to climate adaptation and mitigation efforts. For instance, the country's experience with contact tracing and testing could be adapted to develop early warning systems for climate-related disasters, enhancing preparedness and response capabilities.

New Zealand Leadership in the Pacific Region

New Zealand's geographic location and strong ties with PICTs position it as a potential leader in regional security cooperation. New Zealand can be pivotal in fostering a more secure and resilient Pacific region by sharing its expertise in pandemic management, health infrastructure development, and climate resilience. This leadership could manifest in collaborative efforts on disaster preparedness, resource sharing, and developing integrated health and environmental policies. By championing a holistic approach to security that encompasses human and planetary health, New Zealand can help the Pacific region navigate the complex challenges of climate disruption and build a more sustainable future.

Lessons from the Pandemic: A Blueprint for Climate Action

While the COVID-19 pandemic has consumed the global stage, the climate crisis is a more profound and enduring threat. Recognized by the United Nations as the defining security challenge of our time, climate disruption necessitates urgent attention and innovative solutions.²² Fortunately, lessons learned from successful pandemic responses, particularly from countries like New Zealand, offer valuable insights for mitigating and adapting to the climate crisis.²³

The parallels between the two crises are striking. Both are global in scale, complex in nature, and demand swift, coordinated action. They expose vulnerabilities in global systems—health in the case of the pandemic and environment in the case of climate disruption—necessitating comprehensive strategies that integrate science, policy, and public engagement.²⁴

New Zealand's lauded pandemic response, characterized by decisive leadership, scientific guidance, and community buy-in, provides a compelling model for addressing the climate crisis. The country's success underscores the importance of an interdisciplinary approach that leverages scientific expertise, effective policymaking, international collaboration, and active community participation. Examining the successes and challenges of the pandemic response allows us to identify strategies and principles applicable to combating climate disruption. These include the importance of early intervention, evidence-based decision-making, transparent communication, and equitable resource distribution. They also highlight the need for global cooperation, technological innovation, and a focus on long-term sustainability.

New Zealand's pandemic strategies offer a valuable blueprint for addressing the climate crisis through several vital approaches:

1. *RAPID AND DECISIVE ACTION*: Just as New Zealand swiftly implemented stringent measures to control COVID-19,

addressing climate disruption requires similar urgency. Immediate actions to reduce emissions and implement adaptation strategies are crucial for mitigating the worst impacts.

2. *SCIENCE-LED POLICYMAKING*: Climate disruption policies must be grounded in robust scientific evidence and research. New Zealand's reliance on scientific guidance during the pandemic is a model for developing effective climate strategies.²⁵
3. *EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT*: Mobilizing public support and understanding is essential. This involves disseminating accurate scientific information, addressing public concerns, combating misinformation, and fostering a collective sense of responsibility.
4. *EQUITY AND INCLUSIVITY*: Climate disruption policies must consider their disparate impacts on different communities, ensuring equitable access to resources and technologies for adaptation and mitigation, particularly for vulnerable populations.
5. *GLOBAL AND REGIONAL COOPERATION*: Like the pandemic, climate disruption demands global cooperation. Sharing resources, research, and strategies is vital. New Zealand's active engagement in international dialogues and willingness to share its pandemic response experiences can be replicated in climate diplomacy.
6. *BUILDING RESILIENCE AND PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE*: Planning for economic recovery and future challenges necessitates developing resilient infrastructure and communities capable of withstanding climate-related adversities.²⁶ This involves investing in sustainable urban planning, agriculture, coastal defenses, and preparing for climate-induced migration.

Analyzing New Zealand's pandemic response reveals further insights into effectively mobilizing resources, coordinating cross-sector efforts, and galvanizing public support for transformative changes needed to address the climate crisis.

Moreover, the pandemic highlighted the interconnectedness of global health and environmental crises. Climate disruption and environmental degradation are increasingly recognized as exacerbating factors in the spread of infectious diseases.²⁷ New Zealand's emphasis on environmental sustainability and climate mitigation measures are integral to a comprehensive security strategy encompassing health and environmental stability.

The parallel between pandemic and climate crisis responses has profound implications for security cooperation, particularly in the Pacific region. The lessons from New Zealand's pandemic management can guide strategies for climate resilience, fostering joint efforts in disaster preparedness, resource sharing, and collective emergency responses.

By learning from New Zealand's experience and integrating health preparedness with environmental sustainability, the Pacific region can develop more holistic and sustainable solutions for future challenges. This integral approach will enhance comprehensive security cooperation and build a more resilient and secure future facing current and emerging global threats.

Policy Recommendations and Implications for Enhanced Regional Security

Enhancing security cooperation in the Pacific region necessitates adopting response models, such as New Zealand's "go hard, go early" approach, which emphasizes rapid and decisive action and serves as a template for other nations. Building upon New Zealand's experience, PICTs must strengthen regional ties and align their health and environmental security goals. This involves coordinating

pandemic responses and addressing broader security concerns like climate disruption and disaster preparedness.

*Establishing a Pacific Health and
Environmental Security Partnership*

A dedicated Pacific Health and Environmental Security Partnership (PHESP) could establish a robust regional surveillance and response system. This concept draws inspiration from the Asia Pacific Strategy for Emerging Diseases and Public Health Emergencies (APSED), a framework developed by World Health Organization (WHO) member states in the Western Pacific and Southeast Asia regions to enhance capacities for managing emerging infectious diseases and public health emergencies.²⁸

Modeled after New Zealand's effective COVID-19 management, a PHSEP would prioritize early detection, efficient contact tracing, and rapid response mechanisms. A governing body comprising representatives from participating countries, including New Zealand, would oversee operations, fostering resource sharing, data exchange, and joint training exercises to enhance preparedness for future health crises.

The PHESP would address immediate health threats and contribute to broader security goals. Strengthening regional cooperation and information sharing would enhance the region's capacity to respond to environmental challenges, including climate disruption and natural disasters. Ultimately, the PHESP could foster a more resilient and secure Pacific community.

Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge into Security Strategies

Integrating Indigenous knowledge into regional security policies is paramount for fostering effective, culturally sensitive, sustainable solutions. Successful initiatives like Canada's Indigenous Guardians program exemplify the significance of Indigenous stewardship in environmental management.²⁹

In New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi and Co-Management Agreements have paved the way for incorporating Māori perspectives into governance and environmental management. These agreements often entail co-management arrangements for natural resources, recognizing Māori as partners in decision-making. The landmark recognition of the Whanganui River and Te Urewera National Park as legal entities, aligning with Māori beliefs, further underscores the profound value of Indigenous perspectives in safeguarding the environment.³⁰

To ensure culturally sensitive and inclusive policies, the Pacific region must acknowledge and respect the invaluable insights that Indigenous communities hold regarding environmental management and health. Establishing advisory panels comprising Indigenous representatives can provide crucial input on policy development, ensuring that policies align with and respect Indigenous cultures and traditions.³¹

The region can tap into a wealth of wisdom accumulated over generations by integrating Indigenous knowledge and practices into security strategies. This approach offers unique insights into health and environmental challenges, fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among Indigenous communities, and leads to more effective, equitable, and sustainable solutions for the Pacific region.

Strengthening Regional Cooperation Through Capacity Building

Enhancing regional cooperation in the Pacific involves bolstering the capacity of PICTs to manage crises sustainably. Leveraging its experience in crisis management, environmental conservation, and sustainable development, New Zealand is well-positioned to spearhead capacity-building initiatives. This can be achieved through knowledge and resource sharing in critical areas:

- *EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE*: Given their vulnerability to natural disasters, New Zealand's expertise in

disaster risk reduction, early warning systems, and emergency response coordination can significantly benefit PICTs. This could encompass training programs, technical assistance, and joint exercises to bolster preparedness and response capabilities.

- *PUBLIC HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE AND SYSTEMS*: New Zealand can leverage its robust public health infrastructure, including its healthcare system, laboratories, and epidemiological expertise, to support the development of similar capacities in PICTs. This may involve sharing best practices, providing technical assistance, and facilitating knowledge exchange.
- *ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY*: New Zealand's experience in environmental management, encompassing its commitment to renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and marine conservation, can be shared with PICTs. This would support their efforts to protect unique ecosystems and biodiversity through technical advice, promoting sustainable practices, and facilitating access to green technologies.
- *CLIMATE DISRUPTION ADAPTATION AND MITIGATION*: Given their disproportionate vulnerability to climate disruption, PICTs can significantly benefit from New Zealand's experience developing and implementing adaptation and mitigation strategies. This could involve knowledge sharing, technical assistance, and support for climate-resilient infrastructure and livelihoods.
- *GOVERNANCE AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT*: New Zealand's expertise in developing effective policies and governance structures for crisis management can strengthen institutional capacity and decision-making processes in PICTs. This could entail training, mentorship, and technical assistance in

policy analysis, risk assessment, and stakeholder engagement.

By sharing expertise and resources, New Zealand can empower PICTs to build resilience and effectively manage crises, fostering a more secure and sustainable regional future. A potential model is the Association of Southeast Asian Nation's Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), which facilitates regional cooperation in disaster risk reduction and response through capacity building and resource sharing.³² New Zealand could lead similar initiatives, emphasizing community-based resilience-building approaches to ensure local populations are actively engaged and empowered in their security and well-being.

*Fostering a Culture of Resilience:
Public Awareness and Education in the Pacific*

Enhancing regional cooperation in the Pacific necessitates bolstering PICT's capacity to manage crises sustainably. Leveraging its experience in crisis management, environmental conservation, and sustainable development, New Zealand is well-positioned to spearhead capacity-building initiatives. This can be achieved through knowledge and resource sharing in critical areas.

Enhancing public awareness and education about the interconnectedness of health, environmental, and security issues is paramount for building resilience in the Pacific region. The success of the HIV/AIDS Global Awareness campaign exemplifies the transformative power of sustained public education in driving behavioral change.

Pacific regional campaigns should prioritize informing the public about the following:

- *PREVENTATIVE MEASURES*: Emphasize the importance of hygiene, vaccination, and healthy lifestyle choices for individual and community well-being, highlighting their role

in mitigating health risks and enhancing resilience to future crises.

- *SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES*: Promote eco-friendly behaviors such as reducing waste, conserving water, and supporting renewable energy sources. These actions can mitigate environmental degradation, directly impacting human health and well-being.
- *INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE*: Highlight the value of traditional ecological knowledge and practices in environmental conservation and sustainable resource management. Incorporating Indigenous perspectives can provide culturally relevant and practical solutions to local challenges.

By leveraging diverse media platforms, incorporating culturally relevant messaging, and actively engaging local communities, these campaigns can ensure broad accessibility and resonate with diverse audiences across the Pacific. A multifaceted approach that combines traditional and modern communication channels, collaborates with community leaders and organizations, and tailors messaging to specific cultural contexts will most effectively foster a culture of resilience in the Pacific region.

*Integrating Pandemic Lessons into Climate Action:
A Holistic Approach for the Pacific*

The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly revealed the interconnectedness of health and environmental crises. Effective communication, community engagement, and reliance on scientific expertise, central to successful pandemic management, are equally crucial for addressing the multifaceted challenges of climate disruption.

These strategies must be integrated into broader policy frameworks to ensure that lessons learned from the pandemic inform

and strengthen climate disruption adaptation and resilience efforts. Adopting a cooperative approach that draws upon successful models like New Zealand's pandemic response, which emphasized early action, clear communication, and community buy-in, can provide a roadmap for effective climate action. Additionally, integrating diverse cultural perspectives, including Indigenous knowledge and practice, can offer unique insights and solutions tailored to Pacific communities' specific needs and vulnerabilities.

By embracing a holistic approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of health, environmental, and social systems, the Pacific region can develop a comprehensive and effective strategy for addressing complex, non-traditional security threats. This approach, grounded in theoretical insights and practical experiences from the pandemic response, offers a promising path to building a more resilient and sustainable regional future. It emphasizes the importance of collaboration, knowledge sharing, and community empowerment in creating a future where human and environmental well-being are prioritized and protected.

From Pandemic to Climate Crisis: Lessons for a Resilient Pacific Future

New Zealand's exemplary management of the COVID-19 pandemic is a model for effective, compassionate, and science-based governance, providing invaluable lessons for health and environmental security cooperation both within the Pacific region and globally. The nation's swift implementation of comprehensive public health measures, transparent communication to foster public trust, and agile response to the evolving crisis underscores its leadership in navigating complex security challenges.

While New Zealand's response was largely successful, it also revealed areas for improvement, notably the insufficient integration of Indigenous knowledge and cultural values into government planning. This highlights the critical importance of inclusivity and a

more holistic approach to crisis management and policymaking, ensuring that diverse perspectives and traditional knowledge systems are valued and incorporated into decision-making processes.

Despite this, New Zealand’s experience—characterized by preparedness, community engagement, and scientific guidance—offers valuable lessons for addressing non-traditional security threats like climate disruption. It underscores the need for a cooperative, interdisciplinary strategy that extends beyond conventional security framework paradigms, encompassing environmental, social, and economic dimensions.

As the Pacific region confronts the unique challenges posed by climate disruption, the lessons gleaned from New Zealand’s pandemic response provide a roadmap for developing resilient, inclusive, and sustainable security strategies. By embracing a holistic approach that incorporates diverse perspectives and prioritizes the well-being of people and the environment, the region can better anticipate, prepare for, and mitigate future crises. This approach not only safeguards human health but also protects the delicate ecosystems and cultural heritage of the Pacific, ensuring a more secure and sustainable future for all.

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