



Case study: Dillons Bay's preparedness for and response to Cyclone Pam

Between May 2013 and December 2014, CARE implemented a disaster risk reduction project in Vanuatu's TAFEA province. The *Yumi Redi 2* project aimed to increase the capacity of vulnerable communities to prepare for and respond to disasters. This case study of the village of Dillons Bay (on Erromango island) illustrates the impact of this project on the community's practices before, during and after Cyclone Pam. Striking Vanuatu on March 13th 2015, this category five cyclone was one of the worst storms ever to hit the region.

In particular, this case study highlights the impact of the DIPECHO and Australian Aid funded project on the community's capacity to share DRR messages; understand, heed and disseminate emergency warnings; prepare at household and community level; identify and manage evacuation centres; evacuate the community; consider the needs of vulnerable people; conduct needs assessments; develop links between various authorities within and outside the community; develop and support strong leaders and manage the initial emergency response until additional help arrives.

The following story is as told to Giselle Hall by Wilson Umah (Acting CDC coordinator during Cyclone Pam), Jonathan Nelou (CDC coordinator), Jocelyn Naupa (Deputy CDC coordinator), Sabrina Yaviong (CDC member), Mike Naro Tombu (SDC member) and Dick and Mini Natango (community members) on 22nd May 2015.

"I first heard the cyclone warning on Monday [four days before the cyclone] from a phone call from my brother" begins Community Disaster Committee (CDC) member Wilson Umah. "Straight away I turned on the radio that CARE gave us. The radio said that it was a Category Five, and that it was moving towards Vanuatu. I thought it wouldn't come to Erromango, but I heard them say on the radio 'TAFEA province'. The Community Disaster Committee (CDC) coordinator was in Port Vila, and when I realised the coordinator was gone and a cyclone was coming, I knew....ok, me, I'm here. I can look out for the CDC."

"We listened to all the warnings, but when it got to warning number 27 on Friday morning, all communication cut out. No radio, no phones. Since Monday we had been using the cyclone tracking map that CARE gave us, to follow the movement of the cyclone. We put it up at the nakamal [traditional meeting place] and it was very useful. It helped us convince people that the cyclone was really coming, and to prepare early. We prepared almost a whole week beforehand...that's why there was no-one dead or injured, because we really *prepared*" he says proudly."

"We alerted the whole community as soon as we got the warning, telling them to prepare their houses and themselves, and to be ready to spend a day or night in an evacuation centre. Already on Monday, the community started cutting branches near houses, fastening roofs, pulling fishing boats out of the water, and gathering together essential supplies (like food, water, firewood, and torch batteries). These activities continued Tuesday and Wednesday."

“Honestly, CARE’s training really changed the community’s actions. If we didn’t have this awareness...well, it really saved lives. Before, plenty of people didn’t really know what the government ‘blue alert’ or ‘yellow alert’ meant. But this time, everyone knew. If you told one of the mothers ‘we are in blue alert’, she knew what it meant. If you told a school student, he knew. And through the awareness, we can take action. Before, it was only the men’s job to prepare – doing things like fastening the roofs - but this time everyone was involved. The women too were carrying timber to give to the fathers, and the women were getting the children to help...everyone was part of the preparation. We learned this through the simulation exercise that CARE did. It really saved lives, I know it.”

Deputy CDC Coordinator Jocelyn Naupa emphasises that the change was not just about knowledge but also about attitudes: “before, people thought cyclones couldn’t get them.” Jonathan Nelou (CDC coordinator) explains, “Sometimes we heard radio warnings but people discouraged each other, saying ‘no no I think the radio is wrong, we can see for ourselves in the custom way....there is no cyclone coming.’ But the CDC worked really hard on this, trying to explain that even though you might not be able to see it yet, it’s real, and we should take it seriously. They stand up and explain that this is what is happening, this is the preparation we should make....and now people listen. People trust the CDC and they follow them.”

“The CDC is new,” notes Wilson, “but the training we received built it up. It was really important....when you have knowledge, and you have experience, you can be a strong leader. A lot of change came through the leadership training. It helped us understand how we should work, how we should respond when people just tell us ‘no!’, that we have to be patient but also strong. The training helped the CDC become very active in the community.”

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“For example,” says Jonathan Nelou “the CDC members are committed to taking their training and sharing it with the whole community. Every Monday at the chief’s meeting, the CDC gives a briefing. So when the cyclone came, it wasn’t a new something. Every week people had heard an update or some information about what to do in cyclones or other disasters.”

Information was also passed through the school. “We have a big laminated cyclone tracking map hanging in the office” says school chairman and School Disaster Committee (SDC) member Mike Naro Tombu. “The older children know how to use it, and with the younger ones we just point to it and show them where the cyclone is and where it’s moving. With Cyclone Pam, at first it looked like it was passing us, and then it turned and came to get us. The SDC works very closely with the CDC, and when the CDC started giving out warnings, the school followed: “I told all the teachers and children that there

was a cyclone warning, what alert level we were in, and to go ahead with preparations.



Young CDC member Sabrina Yaviong shows off her new kitchen garden, planted after the cyclone.

The students and teachers put away all the books and chairs, and then we closed the school so that the children could go home to their families. We reminded the students not to go out during the cyclone, to stay with their families, and to help their families prepare.”

21 year old CDC member Sabrina Yaviong was a school student not long ago. She became a CDC member when she filled in for her mother one day, and she has been on the committee in her own right ever since. “The CDC is made up of ten people, four of them women” Sabrina explains. “The CDC women work the same as the CDC men” she says “but there are challenges. Sometimes people see me as just a girl, but Wilson [acting CDC

coordinator] supports me and helps get people to take me seriously. Now, they listen to me.” She adds, “I like wearing the uniform...when I put on the CDC uniform I feel good, because I feel I’m helping other people, and I’m helping me too because I am a future women’s leader.”

Wilson explains, “The CDC identified safehouses for people to move to: the school, the church and 3 private houses that were made of concrete. We went house to house, checking them all and encouraging families to move to a safehouse when the evacuation warning came. On Friday afternoon, we started the evacuation. I used the megaphone [from the Emergency Kit] and announced that the cyclone will be striking in the early morning, everyone should go to the safehouse, carry your children and water and food and go inside. Other CDC members went from house to house, spreading the message.”

Jocelyn notes “the CDC helped the elderly and people with disabilities to move, carrying them and their things. If the CDC hadn’t assisted them,” she says “many of these vulnerable people would not have been able to move to the safehouse in time. Even able-bodied people who could have moved themselves, without the CDC they wouldn’t have been so quick, so early, and they would have endangered themselves trying to move later.” She explains, “Evacuation is not a new practice in Dillons Bay, but before some people did move and some people didn’t. Now, everyone follows the CDC.”

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Wilson confirms “almost everyone was able to quickly reach safe shelter. 42 people were sheltering in the school, 38 in the church, and quite a few families sheltered in one of three strong private houses. Others sheltered in nakamals – one nakamal had 39 people, the other two I’m not sure. In the end, only about 30 people [less than 5% of the population] did not move.

Those families didn’t want to move because they believed their houses were strong. If they didn’t want to move, we couldn’t force them, but we did try very hard to convince them. We told people that the cyclone would be very powerful - ‘like a monster’ I told people, to try to explain its strength.”

Dick and Mini Natango, an elderly couple, are one family who did not want to evacuate. As Dick explains “we live away from the centre of the village on top of a hill, and we’ve passed plenty of cyclones in our house. We’ve always been alright up there. One afternoon, some boys from the CDC came to tell us that there’s a very strong cyclone coming, so big that it could pull our house down. I just laughed, and told them that there is no cyclone strong enough to pull my house down. They came back two more times after that, pleading with us to come to the safehouse, but I told them ‘we’re staying in our house’.”



Dick and Mini Natango with their two year old granddaughter, Marinette. The couple thought their house could withstand the storm, but spent the cyclone under a table when their house broke around them.

“Our two adult children came to stay with us, and by 6 or 7pm the cyclone had arrived too. At first, the roof held strong, but then our roof and walls broke. In the rain and wind, we crawled to another house, but that one broke around us too.

We decided to try to move to the nakamal, but that had already gone. We moved to a small grass kitchen-house until it too got blown away. Then there were no more houses to go to. So we – me and my wife with our two grown children - went back to where our house had been, and got underneath a table that was still there.

We held onto the table legs from underneath, and I thought about how I had just laughed when the boy said the cyclone could blow our house down. From under the table we could see huge pieces of wood and metal crashing around in the wind, but we couldn’t hear the sounds of it because the wind was so loud. We couldn’t hear anything over the wind. A branch came down just near us and then blew away. There was no grass around – the wind had pulled it all out and there was just dirt. The table didn’t protect us from the rain, and we were wet and so so cold in the wind. We stayed there like that all night until morning.”

“When the wind finally began to die down, we started down the hill towards the village. We walked using sticks to lean on, but still when the wind came up we fell and our daughter had to pick us up. About halfway down the hill I fell down and couldn’t get up again. I couldn’t walk anymore, I was so weak. My son ran to get help from the CDC, and some CDC members came and carried me to the safehouse. In the safehouse, the CDC gave us medicine, water, biscuits. They really helped us. I think it’s good we have a CDC, because they can help the community in times of trouble, just like they helped us.” Mini adds, “We live far away from the centre but they still came to warn us many times...they really looked out for everyone”.

Another role the CDC took on was managing the safehouses. Wilson explains, ‘We prepared the safehouses with solar lights, torches, blankets and radios [from the emergency kit]. We also put first aid kits [from the first aid training] in the safehouses, but luckily we didn’t have any reason to use them. There was a CDC



Kathline Lovo with her now six-month old daughter Mary Helen, who was carried to safety under her Dad’s raincoat when the building they were sheltering in lost its roof.

member in charge of each safehouse, and they counted everyone in there, and made sure everyone was safely inside and didn’t leave. They also made sure everyone had water and food, especially the children.”

“During the cyclone, I was sheltering with my family and others in one of the nakamals. There were 39 of us altogether. We were in there for a while but when the roof started to come off I thought, ok we have to move. There were two people with disabilities inside, and I directed the young boys to help them. I was carrying my 4 month old baby inside my CDC raincoat to keep her dry. We all moved together very slowly, crouched to the ground. I was holding the torch, and I could see lots of iron sheeting all around that had flown off the houses. The wind was really strong, really loud, and I shouted for everyone to listen to my instructions and move only when I said so. When a gust came we dropped to the ground, and when the wind went down a bit we moved slowly. Eventually we reached another nakamal, and this one was ok. We sheltered there for the rest of the cyclone.”

was broken, one strong private house had lost its iron sheet roof, and the school building had been torn apart. Those who had been taking shelter in the school building had had to move to a nearby teacher’s house during the night, but no one was hurt. In the whole community there were no serious injuries or deaths.”

“People stayed inside the safehouses until around 10am. When people started to move out, the CDC went to collect the forms and exercise books and pens [from the emergency kit] and we called a meeting with all CDC members, the village health worker, and the chief. This was on Saturday morning, straight after the cyclone had passed. We decided that the health worker would share some health messages, and we [the CDC] would do an assessment tomorrow, using the official assessment form [approved by the National Disaster Management Office] CARE had given us.”

Jonathan highlights that “the CDC members did the assessment straight away, even though they too had been through a disaster and had a lot of work to do on their own houses and gardens. They just put on their uniforms, and their families understood that as CDC members they had a duty to the community, and they respected that.”

“When the wind finally went down, the CDC went and checked on all the safehouses. Some had been badly damaged.....the church

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“We worked together with the chief and the Area Secretary [provincial official] and divided the community up so that each CDC member had one area to assess” explains Wilson.

“The area up the top was mine” says young CDC member Sabrina Yaviong. “I assessed the damage to houses, gardens, kitchens and things inside like pots and pans, and collected information on how many women and men there were in each household”.

“This was the first time for our community to make an assessment like this” Wilson explains. “I felt proud to be able to do this, but there were some challenges. Sometimes people wanted me to list their house as fully damaged when it was really only partly damaged. I had to be strong and say no. I showed them the form and explained how I had to fill it out faithfully, and they accepted it.”



Replanting: Ruth Poki, Linda Lovo and Lucy Poki plant seeds they received with food distributions.

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“Once we finished the assessment, we worked on clearing the road to the airport. We didn’t know if a plane would come, but as it happened a plane came just as we had finished clearing the [9km] road” says Wilson. Jocelyn recalls, “When the government representatives landed here they couldn’t believe we were alive. All they could see from the plane was destruction. They came to do an assessment, but the CDC was right there waiting at the airstrip ready to hand them the finished assessment report. This was on Tuesday [2 days after the first assessment was done].”

“After the assessment, we started with the work of cleaning up our gardens and recovering bits of our houses and building temporary shelters” Wilson explains. “Many people had lost everything and stayed in the safehouses or with neighbours until they could build temporary shelters.”

Jonathan says proudly, “The CDC did not stop its work after the cyclone. They advised everyone to help each other, to replant and rebuild, and slowly slowly, help the village recover. The CDC also played a role in sharing information on relief, safeguarding supplies, helping CARE with the distributions, and planning for food security after distributions end.”

According to Sabrina, “the chief thanked the CDC very much, and said that with the CDC’s help everyone is working together as one community.” Wilson agreed: “before, we were all in small groups, but now we are uniting together. Everyone is looking out for everyone.”



Rebuilding houses after Cyclone Pam in Dillons Bay, Erromango.

“The cyclone destroyed houses and gardens, but it didn’t take any lives in Dillons Bay” reflects Wilson. “We are so grateful for the training and support to our CDC. Without CARE...well, we knew a little but not enough. Without CARE this cyclone would have taken lives.” Jocelyn adds, “the CDC is holding tight what CARE has taught them. This knowledge is really here now, it’s here for the future. People look to the CDC and work together with them.”