



VANUATU: RESPONDING TO DISASTER

Vanuatu is regularly ranked as the [world's most vulnerable country to disaster](#), located on the “ring of fire” earthquake zone and the Pacific cyclone belt. Every year, Vanuatu faces the threat of cyclones. Many of these cyclones are damaging, but sometimes they are devastating. It took Vanuatu years to recover from 2015's [Tropical Cyclone Pam](#), which caused destruction worth 64% of its GDP. Tropical Cyclone Harold, which slammed into Vanuatu's northern provinces on 6 April 2020, proved to be almost as devastating – and hitting in the middle of a national state of emergency to prevent an outbreak of COVID-19, the response is even more challenging.

When it comes to reaching Vanuatu's remote islands, it's not only tarpaulins and food supplies that are difficult to transfer – so is information, both to and from affected communities. In previous disasters, providing communities with timely, detailed information about the response and receiving systematic, actionable feedback from communities is widely acknowledged to have been a gap in the national humanitarian response. And yet awareness is growing, internationally and within Vanuatu, that communication is just as critical as food, shelter and water in a disaster.



“Radio, text messages, Facebook – we had enough time to prepare because it is a Cat 5. This is new for today’s generation” –
A community member in Pentecost

TROPICAL CYCLONE HAROLD

Tropical Cyclone Harold made landfall as a Category 5 storm with winds of more than 200km/hour and tore through Sanma, Malampa and Penama provinces. Some 123,000 people, most living in traditional housing in dispersed, rural communities and reliant on subsistence farming for their livelihoods, have been severely impacted by the cyclone. Food crops, water systems, homes, health centres and schools across the three provinces have been damaged or destroyed.

The Communications and Community Engagement (CCE) Sub-Cluster was established with support from the CDAC Network in partnership with CARE Vanuatu and Ground Truth Solutions with funding from the Australian Government in 2019 with a mandate to address this gap. Co-led by the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) and the Vanuatu Red Cross with a National Coordinator supported by CARE Vanuatu, the CCE Sub-Cluster brings together representatives from government, media, telecommunications, and non government organisations and is tasked with providing long-term disaster preparedness and response support to the national disaster response system. TC Harold was the first time the CCE Sub-Cluster was activated in an emergency, and its preparedness work put to the test.



The affected areas have challenging logistics, limited services and infrastructure, making the emergency response complex. COVID-19 restrictions are also in place, reducing access to relief supplies and technical support, and at the time of the cyclone the country was in a state of political transition following a March 2020 election.



H2H responded by providing fast funding to CDAC to enable the CCE Sub-Cluster – already on the ground – to do what it was pre-positioned to: promote, prioritise and coordinate two-way communications between communities hit by TC Harold and the national responders

“The CDCCC [Community Disaster and Climate Change Committee] told the church [the cyclone warnings], and they told everyone. We also got it from mobile phone messages, radio, a call from family and the [nearby] Falibur CDCCC. The CDCCC rep has told everyone in the community to share information – cut down trees, collect food and water for after the cyclone” – A community member in Ambrym



THE RESPONSE

Through a multi-faceted approach, the CCE Sub-Cluster Coordinator and sub-cluster members worked both inside and alongside the NDMO to keep communications and community engagement on the agenda and integrated into every element of the TC Harold humanitarian response.

Coordinating information

Within hours of Harold’s landfall, work was underway to assess the damage and the needs of affected communities. The CCE Sub-Cluster’s National Coordinator played a key role in assisting to coordinate and share the information gathered during the rapid assessment, liaising with the National Emergency Operations Centre, Cluster assessment teams and other responders.

Information for the masses

The CCE Sub-Cluster’s National Coordinator has been a key member of NDMO’s communication team, working around the clock to utilise mass media channels to reach affected populations with critical information in preparation for the cyclone as well as about the response. By producing press releases for radio, television, digital and print media as well as regular Facebook posts, the NDMO provided a new level of visibility into the national response that helps strengthen accountability.



Targeting communities

From the CCE Sub-Cluster's National Coordinator accompanying the Prime Minister's visit to affected communities to talk with survivors, to CCE Sub-Cluster members providing development, translation and distribution support for information, education and communication (IEC) materials, Community Field Officers engaging with community chiefs and church leaders to discuss relief distribution priorities and plans, and providing communities with noticeboards to share information on the response as well as COVID-19 and other community issues – the CCE Sub-Cluster's work meant that affected communities have received targeted information and been able to input into decisions that impact their recovery.

Maximising partnerships

By harnessing partnerships with other on the ground responders, the CCE Sub-Cluster was able to maximise the reach of information. Organisations distributing relief items, including another H2H partner Field Ready, which has built handwashing stations with H2H's support, also distributed IEC materials printed and provided by the CCE Sub-Cluster to complement their distributions. CCE Sub-Cluster members CARE Vanuatu and Vanuatu Red Cross also facilitated delivery of the CCE Sub-Cluster noticeboards in conjunction with relief distributions in their focus areas, enabling cost effective and broader reach. COVID-19 awareness materials targeting families developed by CARE Vanuatu with the CCE sub-cluster and Ministry of Health were shared widely with government and non-government partners, and World Vision adopted the materials, re-printed them and incorporated them into their TC Harold distributions.

Facilitating feedback

At the request of the NDMO, the CCE Sub-Cluster has led the development of a community feedback mechanism specifically for the TC Harold response. This feedback mechanism uses the network of humanitarian responders working across the affected provinces to promote among communities the ways to provide feedback, gather feedback from communities they are working within, and share that feedback with the NDMO and CCE Sub-Cluster for analysis and distribution among other responders so that it can inform the national response and recovery plans. This feedback mechanism, which is first being piloted in Pentecost, will also form the foundation of a standardised feedback system that will be finetuned in preparation for use in future disasters.



THE IMPACT

Before TC Harold even hit, the CCE Sub-Cluster was in action, and that action has helped deliver a response in which communicating and engaging with communities has been prioritised more than ever before. For people who have lived through cyclones – and their responses – their whole lives, communication makes all the difference.



“Me and other chiefs are very happy that the government is concerned about the people. When I see the moves that the government is making, it gives me hope. I know I can give feedback through the Area Administrator.” – A community chief in Pentecost