

Importance of Disaster Risk Reduction in Vanuatu

ABM staff member Jess Sexton told of being in Vanua Lava in the remote Banks and Torres region when Tropical Cyclone Pam hit.

The importance of planning in Disaster Risk Reduction was brought to the forefront of our minds as Tropical Cyclone Pam descended on the outskirts of Torba province, before hitting the islands of Epi, Malekula, Efate, and Tanna.

Rated as a category five cyclone (in a five tiered system), Cyclone Pam caused widespread flooding and destruction throughout Vanuatu, with gale force winds and torrential rain lashing the islands, including Vanua Lava. The normally calm bay on which Sola sits became a brown seething mass, foaming with debris in the strong surges. Fruit trees and village gardens were stripped of their produce, and locals rushed to reinforce their houses with palm branches laid on top of thatched rooves. The Anglican Church Of Melanesia (ACOM) staff moved quickly to evacuate many within Sola after the red alert warning was issued, and the diocesan office became a crowded refuge for nervous families and their belongings.

Evacuation plans such as this are essential in places vulnerable to natural disaster, so communities can act quickly when the need arises. Although Sola was spared substantial damage and there was no loss of life, others in Port Vila and the provinces of Malampa, Shefa and Tafea were not so fortunate. Sixteen people lost their lives, and there was widespread destruction of homes, infrastructure and businesses. ACOM have a renewed commitment to strengthening community awareness and planning, and are working diligently with the new VCPP DRR consultant, Douglas Ngele, and other government agencies.

Several months after Tropical Cyclone Pam, Vanuatu began to experience the effects of the Pacific El Nino. This led the church to focus more on food security as a means of disaster preparedness. Hence the Anglican Church Of Melanesia planned a series of training workshops targeted at ACOM Staff, the Mothers' Union and ACOM's five Rural Training Centres (RTCs) in Sanma, Penama and Torba provinces, as well as at Provincial level disaster committees. These workshops identified key issues that affect communities during cyclones and droughts, and how communities can take charge to reduce these effects.

When disaster strikes, the government agencies and national humanitarian actors such as the National Disaster Management Office and the Vanuatu Humanitarian Team often experience excessive demands. This is why it is important that churches like ACOM have their own disaster committees and prepare their local communities, well before any disaster occurs, ensuring they work in with government plans at all times.

Churches and church-owned buildings such as schools and clinics also serve as evacuation centres during emergencies, and it is important that these buildings are strengthened and fit for purpose when a disaster strikes.



View overlooking Sola on Vanua Lava.
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Jess Sexton with Bishop Patterson Worek.
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Flooding in Sola caused by Cyclone Pam.
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Cyclone damage in Port Vila.
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Locals battle the rains in Sola.
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