



LIVED EXPERIENCES OF DISASTERS IN VANUATU

Community Perspectives and
a Call for Continuous
Preparedness



*Lady looks over damaged belongings after Cyclone Harold in 2020.
Source: Australian High Commission, Vanuatu.*

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BACKGROUND

As a Small Island Developing State in the Pacific, Vanuatu is bearing the brunt of increasing intensity and frequency of natural disasters due to climate change. Sea surface temperatures in the Southern Pacific are **rising three times faster than the global average**, significantly increasing the likelihood of extreme weather events like storms, droughts, storm surges, floods and landslides.

This increased risk is seen in the number of highly damaging category 3-5 cyclones in Vanuatu which increased **from one in 2003-2013 to eight in 2013-2023**. Alongside extreme weather events, geophysical hazards like earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis continue to affect Vanuatu, and their threat can be amplified by climate-related impacts like sea level rise and precipitation patterns. Annual disaster events leave communities with insufficient recovery time, compounding the devastation and creating a constant cycle of response, recovery and preparedness.

Vanuatu is also particularly susceptible to the impacts of natural disasters. Around **80% of people rely on subsistence farming**, selling remaining produce to much of the 20% in urban areas. This means that when disasters wipe out crops, livelihoods and food supply suffer immediately. The geographic fragmentation of the islands and isolation of communities present additional complexities in coordinated approaches.



Damaged home after Cyclone Pam in 2015.
Source: New Zealand High Commission, Vanuatu.



THIS RESEARCH

With the susceptibility and vulnerability of the country well documented, this research **shifts the focus to community experiences** of natural disasters across response, recovery and preparedness. By **giving voice to individuals, families, communities and organisations** across urban, rural and remote locations, we can better understand **the diversity of experiences**.

The data we collected comes from **household interviews, community observation, focus groups, and interviews with key stakeholders** in disaster preparedness and response. The research team visited 10 communities across the islands of Espiritu Santo (Luganville, Hogharbour, Banban, Teproma) and Efate (Eratrap, Teouma, Ohlen, Etas, Manples and Port Vila) ranging from urban to remote. These communities were selected based on their identified impact of major disasters including Cyclones (Pam, Harold, Kevin, Judy), the Ambae Volcanic Eruption, and the 2024 Earthquake.

We engaged key stakeholders from Community Based Organisations (CBOs), national and international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and government. The stories from **63 households, 8 focus groups, 12 community member interviews, 13 CBO/NGO interviews, and 11 Government officer interviews** were analysed by the research team to inform a report comprising case studies, thematic findings, and a call to action.

CASE STUDIES

This section reports on case studies that highlight a range of experiences across a range of disasters. Case studies provide insight into the people and their experiences behind disaster impact statistics.

A temporary shelter became home for Mark and his family in Ohlen for over two years

In early March 2023, twin Cyclones, Judy and Kevin tore through Ohlen, and the first thing local resident Mark thought about was not his house, his belongings or his work but his children. As the Cyclones approached, Mark and his family ran to Freshwind Presbyterian Church, where they were sheltered throughout the night. When daylight came, they returned home to find their house badly damaged.

The roof had gone. Trees had fallen across the house. Timber and belongings had been scattered across the area. **"We saw the houses were down,"** Mark recalled. **"I saw the children running everywhere. I felt sorry for them."**

With no safe home to return to, Mark quickly began building a temporary shelter. He cut down fallen navel and mandarin trees and used other timber that had fallen during the Cyclones. He put up corrugated iron and tarpaulin and made a small house where his two boys could sleep. **"I had to be quick because the two kids...could sleep in that house,"** he said.

The small shelter was never meant to be a permanent home. But it became one for the family for two to three years. **"The house kept us for two years,"** Mark said. During that period, the family was also dealing with the loss of electricity and water. Their solar panels had blown away, while fallen trees had damaged their water supply. They depended on neighbours for water and received food and other assistance from the Government and organisations including ADRA, the Red Cross and World Vision.

The experience changed the way Mark thought about shelter and preparedness. After seeing his children exposed to the destruction, he became determined to build a stronger home, one that could withstand future cyclones and earthquakes.



Home destroyed by Cyclone Pam in 2015.
Source: Adventist Development and Relief Agency.



Mark Lulu stands outside his temporary shelter.
Source: VANGO.

His sons later helped build a permanent house. **"We also made the house too, for when earthquake comes, and cyclones comes,"** he said. **"But we can survive in it."**

Mark's experience also highlights a wider gap in disaster preparedness in Ohlen Freshwind. During the interview, he pointed out that there is no dedicated evacuation centre in the community. For families whose homes are not strong enough to withstand a cyclone, the options are limited.

"We need a very strong evacuation center," he said. For Mark, an evacuation centre would provide somewhere families could go when their homes were unsafe especially during a major cyclone. **"When a cyclone comes, you can go there to survive,"** he explained. **"When you don't have a house you can go stay there until the hurricane ends."**

His story shows that shelter is not simply about providing a building after a disaster. It is about giving families a safe place to protect their children, maintain dignity and begin rebuilding their lives.

For Mark, that need became personal the moment he saw his children with nowhere safe to sleep. His temporary shelter, built from fallen trees, timber, corrugated iron and tarpaulin, was a simple structure but it gave his family somewhere to survive while they worked towards rebuilding.

This case study shares the experience of Mark Lulu from Ohlen.

“In times of disasters, think about people with disabilities first”

James Bucket, a 27-year-old man with a disability living in Sarakata, Santo, knows how difficult it can be to find safety during a disaster when you cannot move quickly or evacuate without assistance. His experience during Cyclone Harold exposed the challenges people with disabilities face during emergencies, from reaching safe shelter to rebuilding their homes after the storm has passed.

“For me, with a disability, it was not easy,” James recalled. **“If a cyclone comes, those of us with special needs, we cannot move quickly. We need help and support to move us.”** During the Cyclone, a mango tree fell onto James’ house, damaging the roof and forcing his family to leave. Important documents were soaked, and their water supply was disrupted for about one to two weeks.

With their home damaged, James and his family sought shelter on church grounds, where they stayed for about a week. The church became a temporary refuge while they waited for conditions to improve and worked towards repairing their home. But the challenges did not end when the Cyclone passed. The disruption to the water supply made rebuilding more difficult, adding to the pressure on a family already dealing with the loss of a safe home.

James was fortunate to have his father and grandfather to help him through the recovery. They found ways to earn money to buy iron sheets and repair the damaged roof. **“I would like to say thank you to daddy and grandpa,”** he said. **“They found ways to earn money and went to buy a few iron sheets to put back so life could go on.”**

Humanitarian organisations and community leaders also played an important role. James recalled that the Vanuatu Red Cross provided tents, while World Vision assisted with food, canned goods and other essential items. Church elders, pastors and councilors helped families access temporary shelter and other support.



Disaster assesment in Santo after Cyclone Harold.
Source: Vanuatu Society for Persons with Disability

This assistance helped James' household recover. However, he recognises that not everyone with a disability has family members who can provide the same level of support. Some people with disabilities live with uncles, aunties or grandparents rather than their parents. If these relatives are unable to help, moving to an evacuation centre or safe shelter can become even more difficult. **"Before the cyclone comes, I am asking the NGOs to come in to help move those who cannot move to a safe place,"** he said.

James also wants the government to establish designated safe houses where people with disabilities and other community members can seek shelter during emergencies. **"What I want, is not only for me, but for people with disabilities and people in the communities, is to have a safe house,"** he said. **"If the government is able to put a safe house when it is a time for disasters, we know where we can go to be safe."** For James, the issue is not simply whether an evacuation centre exists. It is whether people who cannot move independently can reach it safely.



James Bucket on his mobility device.
Source: Vanuatu Society for Persons with Disability.

His message to government and humanitarian organisations is to make safe shelter accessible, prepare emergency supplies in advance and ensure people with disabilities receive assistance before a disaster strikes. **"All good. I want that please at the time of disasters, think about people with disabilities first,"** he said. **"That is my only request."**

This case study shares the experiences James Bucket from Sarakata who is an active advocate for the needs of persons with disability.

Coordination in a national disaster makes a difference, but gaps still exist

Vanuatu's emergency response was tested when Cyclone Pam struck Vanuatu in 2015. Communications were down, the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) office was damaged, and staff were working in difficult conditions. Yet government departments, clusters, NGOs and humanitarian partners continued working together to coordinate the response.

"We bailed water out, swept the floor to keep the office dry, so that we can continue to do our work," recalled Virana Lini, Australian Humanitarian Program Coordinator and former Education in Emergencies Cluster Coordinator.

Inside the National Emergency Operations Centre, government and humanitarian partners had to work together quickly. The challenge was not only to respond to immediate needs, but to ensure that organisations were working towards the same priorities, sharing information and understanding where they fitted within the national response system.

But Lini says having a coordination system is not enough. Stakeholders need to understand how the system works before a disaster happens. Her experience from more recent disasters is that there is still confusion and a lack of understanding of the system among some stakeholders. When people are unclear about where they fit, who they report to or how information should flow, coordination becomes more difficult at the very time when decisions need to be made quickly.



Virana Lini at her office in Port Vila.
Source: VANGO.

"If you want your reports to be captured by the Government, you have to report to a cluster because it is the clusters that push the reports forward," Lini explained. Government provides the national leadership and coordination structure, while NGOs and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) bring additional capacity, support implementation and maintain close connections with communities. These roles need to complement each other rather than operate separately.

At the time of Pam, Vanuatu had no dedicated Recovery Unit or legislation specifically guiding recovery. Instead, recovery arrangements relied on ad hoc appointments. **“Therefore, when it came to coordinating recovery work, at times it was not very effective because it was based only on ad hoc appointments,”** said Peter Korisa, Manager of the Disaster Recovery Coordination Unit.

Since then, Vanuatu has strengthened its recovery system through a dedicated Recovery Unit and legislation. Korisa says this has made recovery **“more effective and faster”** by providing a clearer mechanism to coordinate recovery. But gaps remain in connecting national and provincial coordination with individual households and communities. **“We acknowledge that there is still a huge gap in ensuring that recovery efforts reach individual households,”** Korisa said.

This reinforces the importance of local leadership and local knowledge. **“We understand our context,”** Lini said. Local leaders, community structures and local organisations can help connect national systems to the realities on the ground. Korisa says Vanuatu needs to strengthen this connection by moving towards a bottom-up approach. **“We want to ensure that we start our recovery plans at the household and community levels,”** he said. Government, NGOs, CBOs and communities all have important roles. But those roles need to be clearly understood before a disaster strikes, not during the confusion of an emergency.

For Vanuatu, strengthening disaster response therefore means ensuring that government and humanitarian partners understand the system, know their responsibilities, communicate effectively and work together from national level through to local communities.



*Peter Korisa (middle) at the Recovery Operation Committee tent following the 2024 earthquake.
Source: Ministry of the Prime Minister – Vanuatu.*

The systems have strengthened since Pam, but the continuing challenge is to make sure that understanding and coordination are just as strong.

This case study shares the experiences of Virana Lini, Program Coordinator, Australian Humanitarian Partnership and Peter Korisa, Manager, Disaster Recovery Coordination Unit at the Prime Minister’s Office.

Cyclone Harold showed us that preparedness and response requires action at all levels

Cyclone Harold, a category 5 cyclone struck Santo on April 6, 2020. Sergeant Mark Donald Bule was sheltering inside his newly built concrete house. Outside, powerful winds and heavy rain swept across the island, tearing roofs from houses and leaving behind widespread destruction. **“I never believed it. I had never seen such a thing in my life since I was a child and growing up,”** he recalled. When the storm passed, the damage was visible everywhere. Houses had lost their roofs or been reduced to walls and posts. Trees were stripped bare, and belongings were scattered or swept away. In communities around Sarakata and Pepsi, flooding added to the destruction, leaving families displaced and roads blocked.



Santo after Cyclone Harold.
Source: Vanuatu Daily Post.

For Sergeant Bule, the immediate challenge was no longer protecting his own home but helping others survive the aftermath. Police officers were called to support the emergency response under instructions coordinated through the NDMO. Teams were assigned different responsibilities, including evacuating people, securing dangerous areas and retrieving household belongings. Transport was a major constraint. At the time, Sergeant Bule said the police had only one or two trucks available for emergency response. Officers were spread across different locations, with some managing roadblocks, others evacuating residents and others trying to recover possessions from flooded areas

This meant that moving people to safety or transporting those who needed medical assistance could take longer than necessary. **“Families had to leave their homes, while those returning after the evacuation often found little left standing. Roofs had been carried away, and household belongings were scattered or swept into the river and sea.”** Sergeant Bule identified cooperation between government agencies and NGOs as an important factor in improving response during the time of crisis. Following the disaster, the Australian Government provided the police with four Land Cruisers and two high-clearance Isuzu trucks, according to Sergeant Bule. He said the additional vehicles gave the force greater hope of responding more quickly to future emergencies.

He highlighted the importance of sufficient staffing and equipment to clear roads blocked by fallen trees. Chainsaws, for example, could help police open access roads and reduce delays when communities are cut off.



*Home destroyed by Cyclone Harold.
Source: Save The Children*

The coordination challenges did not end once people had been moved away from danger. Sergeant Bule said Santo lacked purpose-built evacuation centres, leaving schools to serve as temporary shelters during emergencies. While schools offer space for displaced families, they do not necessarily provide privacy or facilities suited to everyone. Men, women, children, older people, pregnant mothers and people with disabilities may be accommodated together without adequate arrangements for their different needs.

“Getting people out of a dangerous area is only the first step; ensuring that they can remain safe and maintain their dignity during displacement is equally important” he said. He called for evacuation centres to be built close to communities and designed to accommodate different groups. Accessible roads connecting communities to evacuation centres and the hospital would also help ensure that people could be moved before floodwaters made travel impossible.

For Sergeant Bule, Cyclone Harold demonstrated that better disaster preparedness in Santo requires action at several levels. He urged households to listen to warnings broadcast by Radio Vanuatu and discuss what they would do before a cyclone arrives, rather than waiting until roads are flooded and movement becomes dangerous.

His experience also reinforced that recovery cannot depend on one agency working alone. Police, government departments, NGOs and communities each have a role to play, and their efforts need to complement one another.

This case study shares the experiences of Sergeant Mark Donald Bule in Santo.

Volcano evacuation means starting from scratch many times

For families affected by the Ambae volcano, evacuation meant more than escaping danger. It meant leaving behind their homes, gardens, livelihoods, community supports, and a familiar way of life and, for some, starting again on another island.

One participant described the fear of experiencing the volcano for the first time: **“When it erupted a lot of us were afraid because we’d never felt and heard the volcano before.”**

The evacuation from Ambae to Santo brought immediate safety, but also uncertainty and displacement. Some families had to pay for land in Santo, while others struggled to rebuild their livelihoods after returning home. **“When we moved here to Santo we never really settled in. Till this day the ash is still falling.”**

For families with children, the disruption extended to education. Children had to leave their schools and find new places to continue their learning. Ash also destroyed food crops and contaminated water sources, leaving families dependent on purchased water and forcing them to replant gardens. **“The volcano destroyed food crops and water in Ambae. We moved here and had to start our lives again.”**



Volcano Manaro Vui at Alert Level 4 in 2017.
Source: Vanuatu Red Cross Society.



Evacuation from Ambae in 2017.
Source: Vanuatu Daily Post.

The experience was made harder by repeated displacement. Participants said government assistance was provided during the first evacuation, including food, water and transportation, while churches, the Red Cross and World Vision also provided support. However, some said there was little or no assistance when they returned to Ambae and had to rebuild again.

“Since we have been evacuated the government supported us here but moving back to islands, we had no other support. We had to start again to replant.” For some families, recovery meant rebuilding gardens and livestock. For those who remained in Santo, it meant finding work and adapting to a new life away from home.

The continuing ash fall has also made it difficult for families to feel that recovery is complete. One participant explained that repeated impacts leave little time to rebuild before another setback occurs: **“When it’s continuous like this, we won’t be able to move forward.”**

The Ambae experience shows that evacuation does not end when people reach safety. For affected families, recovery can involve years of uncertainty, disrupted education, lost livelihoods and the emotional weight of leaving home behind. The challenge is not only to evacuate people safely, but to ensure they have the support needed to rebuild their lives when they return.

This case study shares the experiences of focus group participants in Banban.

What a small CBO did after Vanuatu's strongest earthquake

The 7.3-magnitude earthquake struck Vanuatu on the 17th of December 2024 without warning. Her daughter was inside her aunt's corrugated iron house when the shaking began. **"The house nearly fell on my daughter. I rushed there and took her out,"** recalled Sabrina Brown, CEO of Young Women for Change, a CBO on Efate. In her community in Teouma, the earthquake damaged homes, cracked concrete water wells and left many families afraid to return to their houses as aftershocks continued. Some people slept outside or gathered in green spaces for safety.

For her small CBO, the challenge was how to respond with very limited funding. Community members, including young men and a local carpenter, went from house to house to assess the damage. They photographed damaged houses and water wells and collected information about what families needed. The organisation used this information to identify priorities and seek support. **"We know that if we do this, the donors that can support will be able to support,"** she said.

One of the assessments focused on damaged water sources. This eventually helped the organisation secure support from a water drilling company. With the assistance it received, the organisation helped rebuild damaged homes and wells in Teouma, Erakor Bridge and Etas. It also distributed dignity packs to its members, providing basic assistance to families affected by the earthquake.

But the organisation did not stop with its own members. When additional dignity packs were available, they were shared with other affected people, including mothers selling produce at roadside markets. For her, this demonstrated the value of having community organisations already operating on the ground. **"CBOs know the community,"** she said. **"They represent them."**



Sabrina Brown at her laptop.
Source: VANGO.

The organisation's response was carried out while it was facing its own challenges. The telecommunications tower at Teouma Shopping was damaged, leaving the area without communication for more than a week. At the same time, accessing emergency funding was difficult. Some donors expected formal proposals before releasing assistance, something she said is unrealistic during an emergency when communities needed help immediately.

"I was shocked with what I went through with the disaster, it was new to me, 7.5, I nearly lost my daughter," she said. **"I thought of my members, how they are, are they alive or dead, and how do I respond to them?"** A breakthrough came when one partner contacted her through WhatsApp. Instead of requesting a lengthy proposal, the partner asked where the organisation was working, what support was needed and for its bank details. The funding was released within days. For her, the experience demonstrated that emergency funding can be delivered quickly when donors trust local organisations and simplify their requirements.

Despite its limited resources, the organisation was able to assess damage, identify needs, mobilise local people, document evidence, secure external support, repair homes and water sources, and distribute emergency supplies. Its greatest asset was not a large budget but its connection to the community. That local presence, she believes, should be recognised as part of the country's disaster response system. She wants her organisation to prepare for future emergencies by having basic resources available in advance.

Her vision includes an emergency storage facility where supplies can be kept and quickly distributed when disaster strikes. She also wants community organisations to have easier access to emergency funding through established networks such as VANGO. CBOs could submit short requests explaining what they need and where the assistance is required during a disaster. She also wants NGOs and CBOs to strengthen mutual support during emergencies.

"If I don't have it, support me. If I have, I will support you," she said. **"We have to learn to support each other during disasters."** The experience of the earthquake showed that small community organisations can play a significant role in disaster response, even when their funding is limited.

This case study shares the experience of Sabrina Brown, CEO of Young Women for Change, a CBO in Port Vila.

Frontline Government Officers face challenges getting help to communities during disasters

Limited transport, poor communication, coordination gaps and community disputes can delay agricultural response, recovery and put frontline officers at risk. When cyclones destroy food gardens in Vanuatu, the Department of Agriculture as the Food and Agriculture Sector Cluster Lead and partners distribute food items including planting materials such as kumala and manioc cuttings and vegetable seeds to help communities restore food supplies and livelihoods.

However, getting assistance to affected communities is not always straightforward. Behind the department's recovery efforts are logistical, communication and coordination challenges that can delay support when families need it most. One of the department's biggest challenges is limited transport. With only one vehicle available for disaster response, officers struggle to reach multiple communities, particularly when they must first collect planting materials from farmers before distributing them.

Ultimately, ensuring that communities can recover after a disaster depends not only on having planting materials available, but also on getting them to the right people at the right time. Improving systems and land conflict in peacetime could mean the officers responsible for delivering assistance can do so without fear of conflict or pushback.

“Sometimes when we don't get the correct data or information needed of a community, we face some problems with the community members where they tend to threaten our officers,” the Department of Agriculture in Santo officer explained. Staff safety is therefore another concern, particularly when misunderstandings arise during field visits.

Coordination between government departments also needs strengthening. The officer described situations where the Agriculture Department was ready to assist a community but was told to wait for another department, even when both were undertaking similar work. Such restrictions can delay activities and create confusion over responsibilities.



Distributing food rations after Cyclone Harold.
Source: Department of Agriculture.

Working with communities can present additional challenges. Although officers may conduct awareness sessions before starting a project, disputes can emerge during implementation. In some cases, communities erect a namele leaf to indicate that work cannot proceed at a selected site. This can halt planned activities and put staff at risk.

Limited supplies can also affect how assistance is delivered. The department assesses community needs and checks available stocks before distributing planting materials. When supplies are insufficient, officers must ration them or prioritise communities with the greatest needs, making difficult decisions about where assistance should go first. These challenges highlight the importance of better coordination, accurate information and early engagement with communities, including respect for customary protocols before projects begin.

The department has taken steps to strengthen preparedness by conducting stocktakes during peacetime rather than waiting until after a cyclone. A new agricultural business permit system is also helping track what farmers plant and when crops are expected to be harvested. However, information management remains a concern. The officer said records are still kept in Excel spreadsheets or on paper, without a central database to track resources and support timely decision-making. The department also needs stronger communication with the media to make its disaster response work more visible to the public.

For agriculture officers, disaster response involves much more than distributing planting materials. They must manage limited resources, overcome transport and communication barriers, coordinate with other agencies and navigate community disputes while helping families restore their food security. Improving transport capacity, establishing a reliable information database, strengthening collaboration between government departments and improving community engagement would help the department respond more effectively.

Ultimately, ensuring that communities can recover after a disaster depends not only on having planting materials available, but also on getting them to the right people at the right time while protecting the officers responsible for delivering assistance.

This case study shares the experience of the Santo Officer for the Department of Agriculture who are the Food and Agriculture Sector Cluster Lead.

When the Disaster Committee was the community's first responder

When Cyclone Pam approached Etas in 2015, Robea Koran knew his community was facing a serious threat. Although warnings had been shared through the media, many people continued with their normal activities. **"Cyclones are not a new thing in Vanuatu so maybe that's why people did not take the warning seriously,"** Robea recalled.

Then, just hours before the Cyclone, Shefa Province came to his home with an urgent message that families living in unsafe houses needed to move to an evacuation centre.

Robea was the chairman of the Community Disaster and Climate Change Committee (CDCCC). He had a huge task of getting the Cyclone warning out to around 5,000 people of his community, within 30 minutes. **"I saw that I wouldn't be able to reach everyone,"** he said.

He began contacting the people he could reach and eventually, around 200 families were evacuated to an evacuation centre. But the evacuation itself revealed another problem: having an evacuation centre was not enough.

The first centre, EXFOL, had not been assessed for safety. Families had to be moved again, this time to Freshwota School. When they arrived, the school was not prepared to receive them. There was no food or water, toilets were not ready, and there was no one to receive or register the families. **"We were all over the place,"** Robea recalled.

Children and families arrived at night without knowing what facilities were available or who they could turn to for help. Robea felt responsible for ensuring that his community was safe. During the Cyclone, some families eventually came to his own home looking for shelter.

The experience showed Robea that a community cannot wait until a disaster happens to decide who is responsible for what.



Church leader examining damaged church.
Source: VANGO.



Robea Koran with his students at Vanuatu Institute of Technology.
Source: VANGO.

After Cyclone Pam, he helped establish a stronger community disaster committee. The committee brought together leaders from across the community and created a system based on 12 zones. Chiefs, pastors, youth leaders, women leaders and disability representatives were involved.

For Robea, this was more than an organisational arrangement. It meant the community knew who was responsible for mobilising people, communicating information and identifying those who might need additional support.

The committee also helped the community understand its own situation. Robea went from house to house, recording damage and identifying vulnerable people, including persons with disabilities and widows. The assessment became a practical tool for connecting the community with government and humanitarian organisations.

When relief supplies arrived, the information helped ensure that assistance reached the people who needed it. **“Our community was the first to present an assessment and when the supplies were distributed, no one was left behind,”** Robea said.

For Robea, preparedness is not something that should begin when a cyclone is already approaching. **“We have to prepare, be more organised, I mean our disaster committee,”** he said.

His experience shows that local committees need to be supported with the right resources and systems such as communication equipment, trained volunteers, evacuation plan and safe and resourced evacuation centres.

The story of Etas highlights that community disaster committees when properly organised and supported can become the community’s first line of preparedness and response – people who know the families, understand the community, identify those most at risk and can act quickly when outside assistance has not arrived.

This case study shares the experience of Robea Koran who is the Chairman of the Etas Community Disaster Committee, and also a Trainer at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology in Port Vila.

In Etas, the dry season is an ongoing disaster: “We weed water to survive”

For families in Etas, on Efate, the dry season is more than a period without rain. It is an ongoing struggle to secure one of life's most basic needs: water. Without a reliable water supply, residents depend on rainwater collected in tanks and large containers for drinking, washing and everyday household needs. When the rain stops, families must find money to buy bottled water or pay to have their tanks refilled with water transported from Teouma.

For one resident, Grace, 1,000 litres of water can cost around VT5,000, a significant expense for households already struggling to make ends meet. Even then, the water may not be safe to drink. **“When there is no water, it really affects us here, especially people who do not have enough income to sustain themselves. It is hard to pay for water, and they would go days without water,”** she explained.

Grace has two 1,000-litre water tanks to help sustain the family and shares water with neighbours when they run out. But if the dry season continues, the household must pay to refill the tanks or buy cartons of bottled water, adding further pressure to the family budget.

The lack of reliable water affects more than household finances. The resident said the health of families and the survival of their animals are also at risk when water becomes scarce. **“Actually, our health is at risk. Water is the most important thing a human needs in order to survive,”** Grace said. Crops also suffer when there is not enough water, with some wilting and dying. This threatens household food supplies and adds another burden for families already coping with prolonged dry conditions.

For residents, the challenge is not simply finding water, but accessing water that is both affordable and safe. **“The water we pay for to get our tanks refilled is very expensive but unsafe to drink,”** the resident said. Despite the difficulties, residents have found ways to support one another. When neighbours run out of water, the family shares what it has.



Grace collecting water from her tank.
Source: VANGO.



Grace with the water she collected.
Source: VANGO.

However, Grace said no sustained assistance had come from government representatives or NGOs to address the community's water shortage. Occasional political assistance, including a carton of bottled water containing 12 bottles of 1.5 litres each, did little to address the underlying problem.

For this family, there is no clear recovery period because the crisis continues whenever rainfall is insufficient.

As Grace put it: **“This is an ongoing disaster. For us, we need to survive.”** The resident is calling on the government to establish a reliable water supply system that will serve Etas not only today but also future generations.

“Please help us bring water to our community. Set up a water system that will last a lifetime for our children and our future generation to have access to.” She also urged non-government organisations to help bring the community's concerns to government and provide training on how to handle and preserve clean water safely.

As the dry season continues to threaten health, crops and household finances, the resident's plea reflects a wider need for lasting solutions that allow communities to live safely and with dignity.

This case study shares the experience of Grace from Etas.



THEMES FROM OUR RESEARCH

While the case studies share individual stories, we analysed all our conversations to find the themes in the areas of disaster response, disaster recovery and disaster preparedness.

DISASTER RESPONSE

Government, NGO, and cluster coordination gaps remain

While earlier National responses (such as Cyclone Pam in 2015) demonstrated structured, government-led coordination through national rosters and direct cluster support, recent experiences have shown increased role confusion, duplication of activities, and communication gaps among government departments, NGOs, CDCCCs, and local communities.

The roles and responsibilities of the Disaster Recovery Coordination Unit (DRCU) and NDMO are not yet clearly understood by all stakeholders, including government departments and response partners, highlighting the need for stronger coordination and clearer role delineation. Without clear processes, some communities established multiple CDCCCs while others remained without one. NGOs also operated outside cluster reporting arrangements, contributing to duplicated assistance in some communities and gaps in support in others.

Community first responders lack adequate support and donor trust

When formal government systems experience delays, local leaders including chiefs, pastors, faith-based networks, church congregations, youth groups, mamas' associations, and CDCCCs, serve as the primary first responders. They identify needs, support evacuations, conduct rapid household censuses, organise relief, and connect communities with external assistance. However, because this leadership is voluntary, its availability is inconsistent, leaving some urban households to rely entirely on individual household response efforts.



DISASTER RESPONSE – CONTINUED

Assessment processes lack coordination

Detailed household, community, and sector assessments are essential for mapping structural damage, identifying persons with disabilities, and prioritising relief. However, current assessment processes are neither standardised nor coordinated, and communities have no way to track if or when assessment teams will return with support. Communities repeatedly report fatigue, frustration, and mistrust when multiple, overlapping assessment teams (from NGOs, government clusters, and municipal officers) visit during the response phase without delivering immediate assistance, such as clean drinking water and emergency food rations, while collecting data.

Logistical bottlenecks slow support delivery

The immediate provision of clean drinking water, food, shelter materials, and sanitation facilities remains a major hurdle following disasters. Contaminated water sources (flooded rivers, ash-polluted catchments, and broken water mains) routinely cause widespread stomach illnesses and health risks. Severe logistical bottlenecks such as exorbitant maritime freight costs, limited vehicular transport at the area council level, damaged road infrastructure, and total telecommunication blackouts, severely delay aid delivery.

Furthermore, the lack of localised storage facilities, pre-positioned relief stocks, and rapid-release emergency contingency funds at national and provincial levels slows down response execution. The absence of dedicated, accessible, and resilient community evacuation centres forces families into overcrowding in unsafe private homes or unequipped churches.



DISASTER RECOVERY

Increasing disaster frequency means continuous recovery

Disaster events striking annually or biennially make recovery an ongoing, cyclical process rather than a discrete phase. Because these events have become so frequent, recovery never truly stops; households must repeatedly restart crop production, housing reconstruction, and infrastructure repair. These repeated impacts cause prolonged displacement, prevent full recovery, and permanently compound household vulnerability. For disasters where the period of displacement is long (as in Ambae), it can become less of a priority for responsible agencies and community's rebuilding needs may be neglected.

Household economics and land rights constrain recovery

Financial limitations represent the primary barrier to recovery. Destruction of gardens, cash crops (coconuts, kava, bananas), and road-market businesses deprives families of primary income streams when cash is required for rebuilding. High material costs force low-income households to build non-resilient shelters from scavenged materials. Additionally, informal tenancy agreements present severe challenges, as tenants remain in damaged homes when landowners refuse to repair lease properties.

Aid mismatches long-term household needs

Post-disaster aid is frequently mismatched with actual household priorities. Relief packages emphasise short-term food rations lasting 1–2 weeks, whereas long-term recovery requires heavy construction materials, water tanks, and solar lighting. Administrative delays in clearing recovery funds through central frameworks leave schools, health clinics, and drainage infrastructure damaged for years. Donors also tend to target specific institutions rather than comprehensive community recovery.



DISASTER RECOVERY – CONTINUED

Food security and livelihoods drive independence

Restoring agricultural production and informal micro-enterprises is vital for sustainable recovery. Rapid distribution of fast-maturing root crop cuttings (kumala maturing in 2–3 months) and seeds alongside technical guidance allows families to regain food independence quickly. Micro-grant initiatives and cash transfer programs effectively empower families to prioritise their own immediate recovery needs, including building supplies and school fees.

Locally driven initiatives yield superior recovery outcomes

Recovery outcomes are strongest when led by local Ni-Vanuatu professionals, community organisations, CDCCCs, and traditional leaders with contextual knowledge. Pairing technical skills training with local partnerships, such as carpentry aligned with building codes, yields resilient rebuilding. Conversely, international technical assistance often fails when external advisors overlook cultural realities or multi-year timelines. Uncoordinated external aid can undermine traditional chief-led support channels, whereas aid routed through local structures produces durable results.

Education disruption and psychosocial wellbeing remain under-addressed

Disasters inflict lasting emotional trauma, mental health strain, and physical disruption. Children face school closures, destroyed classroom materials, and psychological distress, while elderly residents and persons with disabilities experience anxiety and isolation due to inaccessible evacuation spaces. Although targeted psychosocial support projects demonstrate strong positive impacts, organisations lack permanent recovery budgets to sustain mental health and specialised disability care beyond initial response phases.



DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

Community preparedness is reactive and inconsistent

Community preparedness is predominantly reactive, spiking immediately after a disaster but declining over time, leaving communities vulnerable to subsequent events. The increasing frequency of disaster events leaves communities with insufficient time to recover and prepare, compounding overall vulnerability.

Awareness of ongoing risk and levels of preparedness vary widely across households and communities. Informal land tenure and a lack of formal land titles in urban settlements like Etas prevent families from investing in permanent, cyclone-resilient housing structures. In many urban and peri-urban areas, preparedness is severely constrained by the absence of critical infrastructure, including safe evacuation centres, storage facilities, water tanks, and adequate drainage systems.

Capacity building is insufficient

Gaps in community capacity building persist, with remote and rural communities experiencing lower technical preparedness than urban centres. One-off training workshops are widely recognised as insufficient for maintaining long-term readiness, as changes in residents and roles lead to the loss of knowledge and skills over time. Existing capacity-building activities do not sufficiently recognise or incorporate place-based traditional knowledge and practices.

Agricultural preparedness is a critical component to include in any capacity-building initiative; successful strategies include peacetime stocktaking, establishing provincial demonstration plots and seed banks (storing pumpkin, carrot, and cabbage seeds), and maintaining community "food baskets" (root crops like taro, manioc, yam, and kumala) that function as regional food reserves.



DISASTER PREPAREDNESS – CONTINUED

Early warning systems are unreliable

For predictable hazards such as cyclones, timely communication remains a persistent hurdle. Late warnings leave households with inadequate time to secure roofs or evacuate vulnerable family members. Communities face confusion over which channels to trust, preferring traditional communication methods, such as sounding community bells or direct word from chiefs and area administrators, over social media platforms like Facebook.

For sudden-onset hazards where early warnings are impossible, such as earthquakes, communities experience sudden physical damage and severe psychological shock. Strengthening baseline community preparedness and family disaster planning acts as a critical buffer against early warning limitations.

CBOs strengthen fluctuating CDCCC operational capacity

CDCCCs are often reactive, mobilising effectively during response phases but stagnating during peacetime. Where active, CDCCCs establish safe houses, map vulnerable households, and coordinate pre-cyclone evacuations.

However, many communities still lack a functional CDCCC or formal disaster preparedness plan. CDCCCs embedded within CBOs are often more effective due to their year-round presence, community trust and strong understanding of local needs and capabilities. This enables them to better coordinate preparedness and response efforts by drawing on existing community skills and resources. Clear community awareness of the CDCCC is essential to ensure coordinated action during disasters.

CALL TO ACTION TO IMPROVE COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

Our call to action comes directly from community experiences.
Taken together our findings show:



In times of disaster, people want to be safe, seen and supported.



Everyone has a role to care for themselves and each other and infrastructure is key to enable this.



Preparedness capacity is uneven across people and places. Uniform one-size-fits-all solutions leave gaps.



Disasters can create lasting trauma, but they can also provide opportunities to improve the lives of people (through building back better infrastructure, and creating opportunities for leadership and community connections).

In the following section, we have grouped actions thematically and listed relevant stakeholders.

VANGO will take an ongoing role in advocating for these actions, and is also willing to host, or participate in, a community of practice for stakeholders to learn from each other, provide updates and share success stories.



Pillar 1: Strengthen Community Preparedness and Capacity

Shift community preparedness from a reactive, post-disaster spike to a continuous, institutionalised state of readiness through sustained, localised training.

Action 1.1 — Scale Up Preparedness Training for Communities

Calls on: NDMO | Provincial Governments | NGOs

Transition away from one-off, isolated workshops toward regular, refresher-style training programs, supported by an online portal for self-led resources between sessions. To improve organisation and effectiveness, the training framework should focus on three core pillars:

1. Governance and Coordination: Coordinate programs between government and NGO providers, delivering them through CDCCCs to strengthen institutional capacity, clarify first-responder roles, and expand reach to underserved, remote communities.
2. Mindset and Continuity: Shift community awareness from reactive preparedness triggered only by warnings to a continuous, year-round state of readiness.
3. Content and Knowledge Systems: Integrate agricultural preparedness while actively incorporating traditional, place-based knowledge.



Pillar 2: Strengthen and Institutionalise CDCCCs in CBOs

Establish year-round operational viability for CDCCCs by embedding their functions into local CBOs and equipping the CBOs for action.

Action 2.1 – Embed CDCCCs into Local CBOs for Sustainability

Calls on: NDMO | CDCCCs | CBOs | VANGO

Support CDCCCs to embed directly into established CBOs rather than operating them as ad-hoc emergency bodies. This will ensure greater continuity, community awareness of leadership for the recovery phase, and provide a clear communication channel between government and NGOs. Provide ongoing resources and compensation mechanisms during peace and disaster times to recognise and strengthen governance.

Action 2.2 – Strengthen the Role of CDCCCs

Calls on: DRCU | Provincial Governments | Area Councils | Area Administrators | CDCCCs

Expand the role of the DRCU to connect Provincial Governments, Area Councils and Area Administrators. Area Administrators should maintain links with CDCCCs during peacetime, while the role of CDCCCs in preparedness, response and recovery is clearly communicated and supported. This should include maintaining community maps, household and vulnerability data, and preparedness levels.

Action 2.3 – Leverage CDCCCs to Improve Warning System Response

Calls on: NDMO | CDCCCs | Community members

Clearly define the responsibilities of CDCCCs and community members when warnings are issued. CDCCCs should support household preparedness through standardised disaster plans and maintain up-to-date community information to ensure effective communication and response.



Pillar 3: Improve Government–NGO–CBO Coordination

Eliminate organisational fragmentation, redundant reporting, and geographic aid imbalances through pre-disaster institutional clarity.

Action 3.1 – Clarify Roles Between NDMO, DRCU, NGOs, and CBOs

Calls on: NDMO | DRCU | NGOs | CBOs.

Formalise clear operational handoffs and reporting arrangements between the NDMO (humanitarian response) and DRCU and ensure these are communicated to all stakeholders including NGOs and CBOs at every stage (response, recovery, resilience).

Pillar 4: Improve Early Warning Communication and Response

Build multi-channel early warning networks that function during total power and telecommunications blackouts.

Action 4.1 – Optimise Early Warning Systems

Calls on: NDMO | Provincial Governments | Area Councils | Area Administrators | Chiefs

Increase early warnings through trusted, low-tech traditional communication channels such as community bells and direct verbal notices from Area Administrators and Chiefs, reducing dependency on social media or mobile networks. Ensure Area Administrators have contingency plans in case of outages so they can keep communities informed, for example, satellite phones or kits. Long-term, the Government must consider options to strengthen the resilience of communication infrastructure.



Pillar 5: Improve the Speed, Relevance, and Autonomy of Disaster Response

Accelerate emergency relief delivery, safeguard local food autonomy, and mitigate community assessment fatigue through pre-positioned resources, integrated data collection, and resilient agricultural systems.

Action 5.1 – Standardise Joint Assessment Protocols with Integrated Emergency Relief

Calls on: Humanitarian Clusters | NGOs | Assessment Teams

Implement a standardised cross-sector assessment tool across agencies and NGOs to reduce duplicate community visits, with assessment teams distributing emergency supplies during initial assessments (such as clean drinking water and food rations).

Action 5.2 – Decentralise Relief Stockpiles and Pre-Position Contingency Funds

Calls on: Ministry of Finance | Provincial Governments | Donor Agencies

Strengthen the role of regional storage facilities, pre-position emergency supplies, and ensure rapid-release contingency funds at the provincial and area council levels. Pre-positioning resources directly overcomes maritime freight bottlenecks, damaged road infrastructure, and administrative clearing delays.

Action 5.3 – Institutionalise Regional Seed Reserves, Demonstration Plots, and Food Baskets

Calls on: Department of Agriculture | Provincial Extension Services | CDCCCs

Maintain continuous peacetime stocktaking and expand provincial demonstration plots and seed banks (storing cabbage, carrot, and pumpkin seeds). Establish community "food baskets" of resilient root crops (taro, manioc, yam, kumala) to serve as regional food reserves, supported by localised agricultural extension services.



Pillar 6: Drive Sustainable Recovery, Livelihoods, and Inclusive Care

Transition post-disaster support from short-term relief to long-term economic self-reliance, food autonomy, and continuous social wellbeing.

Action 6.1 — Transition Post-Disaster Aid to Long-Term Shelter and Food Autonomy

Calls on: Department of Agriculture | Donor Agencies | Relief Distribution Agencies

Pivot medium- to long-term assistance from 1–2 week food rations toward heavy-duty construction materials, water storage tanks, solar lighting, and rapid-maturing crop cuttings (e.g., kumala maturing in 2–3 months) to foster self-reliance.

Action 6.2 — Deploy Direct Micro-Grants and Flexible Cash Transfer Programs

Calls on: NGOs | CBOs | Donor Agencies

Roll out flexible micro-grants and direct cash transfers post-disaster, empowering households to address self-identified recovery priorities such as purchasing local building supplies, restoring informal micro-enterprises, or paying school fees. CBOs can be used to facilitate or administrate these programs.

Action 6.3 — Establish Permanent Multi-Year Budgets for Psychosocial and Disability Support

Calls on: Ministry of Health | Ministry of Education | NGOs | CBOs

Secure dedicated multi-year recovery funding specifically allocated for continuous mental health care, trauma support for children, and accessible facilities for elderly residents and persons with disabilities.



Pillar 7: Build Resilient Settlements and Infrastructure

Establish long-term physical, structural, and legal security to safeguard communities against recurring disaster impacts.

Action 7.1 – Grant Land Tenure Security

Calls on: Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources | Department of Urban Affairs and Planning | Municipal Governments

Establish formal land titles or secure long-term tenancy frameworks in informal urban settlements (e.g., Etas) to incentivise household investment in cyclone-resilient housing.

Action 7.2 – Upgrade Critical Settlement Infrastructure

Calls on: Ministry of Infrastructure and Public Utilities | Ministry of Internal Affairs | NDMO | Department of Water Resources

Prioritise public infrastructure investments in dedicated evacuation centres, community water tanks, decentralised storage facilities, and resilient drainage systems.

Action 7.3 – Apply a Disaster Resilience Lens to Infrastructure Planning

Calls on: Ministry of Infrastructure and Public Utilities | Office of the Prime Minister

Strengthen policies around new infrastructure, including communication infrastructure, to include consideration of disaster resilience in peacetime and disasters.



GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

CBO	Community Based Organisation
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CDCCC	Community Disaster and Climate Change Committee
DRCU	Disaster Recovery Coordination Unit
NDMO	National Disaster Management Office
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations



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