



COMMUNICATIONS PREPAREDNESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR DISASTER RESPONSE

Vanuatu Scoping Report June 2018

For the Joint CDAC Network and Ground Truth Solutions Project
on:

*'Operationalising Localisation and the Participation Revolution:
Communications Preparedness and Accountability for Disaster
Response in the Fiji and Vanuatu'.*

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About CDAC Network and Ground Truth Solutions

Established in 2009, **CDAC Network** is a growing platform of more than 30 humanitarian, media development, social innovation, technology, and telecommunication Member organisations, dedicated to catalysing the ability of communities to connect, access information, have a voice and leadership in humanitarian emergencies. CDAC achieves its strategic aims on communication and community engagement through the pillars of: Convening and Collaboration; Capacity Strengthening; Advocacy; Research and Learning; and, Innovation. For details, see: www.cdacnetwork.org

Ground Truth Solutions provides humanitarian agencies with direct feedback from people affected by crisis. Using *Constituent Voice*[™] (CV) methodology it amplifies the voices of those affected allowing organisations to systematically integrate this vital information into their programmes. Accurate, unbiased information, collected on the ground and in real time, allows aid agencies to take better decisions and to provide the right support. Those in need of assistance and protection are better served, where their views are fully taken into account. And donors can use the information to track how and where their support is making a difference. For details, see:

<http://groundtruthsolutions.org/about/methodology/>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Regularly affected by cyclones, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, Vanuatu is consistently ranked the world's most vulnerable country to disaster. Particularly since Category 5 Tropical Cyclone Pam devastated the country in 2015, efforts to strengthen disaster preparedness and response have been a key focus of the Vanuatu Government, donors, and humanitarian actors. As a result, disaster preparedness and emergency response systems and resources are in place, and a network of national and international stakeholders are committed to their development.

While many systems and networks are in place to support communication with communities affected by disaster, all of the stakeholders, including the NDMO, agree that the systems do not currently work effectively.

The following is a snapshot of key capacities, opportunities, gaps and challenges:

| Capacities | Opportunities |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination and community engagement systems have been developed • Commitments to information sharing and community feedback exist • Information and some materials are available • Multiple communication channels exist | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need for two-way communication with communities is recognised • Established systems and resources can be built on • Existing communications channels can be expanded • Disaster season is predictable |
| Gaps | Challenges |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not everyone has access to mass communication • Information dissemination in disasters is slow • Lack of capacity to coordinate communications • Lack of cluster coordination on communications • Existing coordination and community engagement systems are not functioning well • Community-based channels for communication need to be expanded and strengthened • Information received by communities isn't understood and informing people's behaviour • Lack of strong community feedback mechanism • Current communications focus on alerts not preparedness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of communications coordination capacity at NDMO • Limited resources pool and the potential for communication to be seen as funding competition • Media information isn't currently prioritised • Technical services can't always be relied on • Public information isn't always trusted by communities • Communities aren't empowered to act and communicate |

Recommendations:

Recommendation 1: *NDMO needs a lead role in the community engagement platform.* An NDMO Communicating with Communities Coordinator position should be established to lead the coordination of the platform in Vanuatu. This position could initially be recruited by an INGO such as CARE or other CDAC member on behalf of CDAC and seconded to the NDMO, with the view of this position being taken over directly by the NDMO as the restructure is enacted.

Recommendation 2: *The platform needs to be embedded in the existing emergency infrastructure.* The community engagement platform should be established as a sub group of the ETC, alongside a technical sub group, and mandated to meet regularly in non-disaster times as well as emergency times in order to build communications and community engagement preparedness, including potentially facilitating a community feedback mechanism in future.

Recommendation 3: *The platform needs to represent all stakeholder.* All civil society organisations, including media and telecommunications companies, NGOs and INGOs, and community groups, and government departments committed to improving communications with communities should be invited to be part of the platform.

Recommendation 4: *The platform needs to coordinate messaging effectively.* Coordinating messages and materials for community use, including producing templates and materials, should be a key activity of the platform. This could be carried out by a working group of interested platform members to build platform momentum and resourced through activity funding.

Recommendation 5: *The platform needs to involve province/area levels and strengthen systems that already exist.* Capacity building and embedding a community feedback mechanism at the provincial, area and community levels should be key activities of the platform. This could be led by a working group of interested platform members to build platform momentum and resourced through activity funding.

Recommendations 6: *The platform needs to facilitate a continual process of preparedness.* The development and implementation of an annual national community engagement campaign, should be a key activity of the platform. This could be carried out by a working group of interested platform members to build platform momentum and resourced through activity funding.

Recommendation 7: *The platform needs to build momentum as a group.* In order to keep all stakeholders engaged in the group, it is recommended to ask the group to prioritise which 4-6 of these proposed projects should be the focus of the group's initial activities, and for stakeholders to nominate which projects they would be interested to work on. The flexible funding could then be divided among the prioritised projects based on project cost, enabling a series of projects engaging all interested stakeholders to be implemented simultaneously.

1. Introduction

There is growing recognition that in disasters, the right information, at the right time, through the right channels is just as important in helping disaster affected communities recover as traditional forms of aid like food, water and medical care. At the same time, the Grand Bargain agreed at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit has cemented the development community's commitment to two-way communication that enables communities to meaningfully participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

The Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network sees its role in actioning these commitments as facilitating preparedness efforts that ensure consistent and systematic communication and community engagement.

The Joint CDAC and Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) project on *Operationalising Localisation and the Participation Revolution: Communications Preparedness and Accountability for Disaster Response in the Fiji and Vanuatu* aims to assist local and regional organisations to bring the benefits of the Participation Revolution to the programmes they manage by ensuring effective communication and community engagement.

The project seeks to achieve two key outcomes:

Outcome 1: *Building on existing structures, two platforms for communication and community engagement are pre-positioned and lead to better preparedness and response.* It will involve the pre-positioning of a communication and community engagement platforms in Fiji, which will have the potential for regional influence, and one in Vanuatu with a national and local focus.

Outcome 2: *National and local responders are better prepared to systematically listen and respond to the perceptions of people impacted by crises and to adapt programming accordingly.* It involves capacity development on systematic collection, analysis and sense-making of feedback from affected communities on key dimensions of humanitarian performance, aimed at national and local organisations in both Fiji and Vanuatu.

While both outcomes are complementary to the achievement of the overall project goal, CDAC Network will lead on Outcome 1 and Ground Truth Solutions will lead on Outcome 2.

The first phase in the project began with a joint CDAC and GTS scoping mission in June 2018 to consult with key stakeholders to identify existing gaps and opportunities to strengthen communication and engagement with disaster affected communities.

In Vanuatu, more than 20 national and international organisations, government departments, media outlets and telecommunications providers in Vanuatu were consulted to discuss the challenges faced by humanitarian responders and communities in communicating during disasters, the current systems and resources in place, and ways to strengthen two-way communication, including a national communications platform. The GTS team and their local researchers facilitated a half-day scoping discussion in Port Vila on community engagement

and feedback mechanisms. The outcomes of the workshop have been integrated into this report. The full Scoping Workshop Report is available on request.

This report outlines the capacities, gaps, challenges and opportunities identified by Vanuatu's humanitarian and development stakeholders in relation to the two outcome areas. It proposes an approach to implementing a national communication and community engagement platform that is informed by local realities and measures towards the systematic collection, analysis and sense-making of feedback from affected communities. The report also proposes an overall implementation plan (as separate Annex) and a minimum budget for the next 10 months to establish the national platform and embed it into Vanuatu's emergency response infrastructure, strengthening communications preparedness and execution to improve communities' access to information and participation in decision making.

2. Capacities

Regularly affected by cyclones, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, Vanuatu is consistently ranked the world's most vulnerable country to disaster. Particularly since Category 5 Tropical Cyclone Pam devastated the country in 2015, efforts to strengthen disaster preparedness and response have been a key focus of the Vanuatu Government, donors, and humanitarian actors. As a result, disaster preparedness and emergency response systems and resources are in place, and a network of national and international stakeholders are committed to their development.

2.1 Coordination and community engagement systems have been developed

The 2017 [Vanuatu Country Preparedness Plan](#) (VCP) compiled by The Pacific Humanitarian Team summarises the established structures, roles, responsibilities and systems for disaster response in Vanuatu. As the VCP outlines, the National Disaster Committee (NDC) is the government body responsible for advising on disaster response in Vanuatu, the National Advisory Board (NAB) is the government body responsible for disaster risk reduction, and the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) is the government department responsible for coordinating disaster response. In times of disasters, the NDMO is well established in this coordinating function and all response and early recovery work is carried out only with the authority of the NDMO. The NDMO coordinates the National Emergency Operation Centre (NEOC) and prepares national plans such as the Cyclone Support Plan, which is updated annually ahead of the cyclone season (October to April). Within the NDMO, there is a Communications and ICT position, an Information Management position, and a Training and Awareness position (currently suspended). It also coordinates the Vanuatu Cluster System, which comprises eight clusters:

- Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
- Logistics
- Food Security and Agriculture
- Health and Nutrition
- Education
- Gender and Protection
- Shelter

- Emergency Telecommunications (ETC)

Though based on the international cluster model, Vanuatu's clusters are a national coordinating mechanism with strong national leadership. The clusters are activated when a State of Emergency is declared, though some clusters remain permanently active and coordinate on preparedness as well. Each cluster has a government agency lead, which provides resources and personnel, but also brings together expertise from the broader development community, including the Vanuatu Humanitarian Team (VHT), comprised of UN agencies and (more actively) INGOs. The Vanuatu Association of NGOs (VANGO) is in principle also a member of the VHT but has not been actively involved in VHT in recent years due. An inter-cluster group meets periodically in preparedness phases. Each cluster varies in its capacity and activeness, particularly in non-disaster times, but overall the cluster system in Vanuatu functions effectively. Working groups within clusters can also be established as needed. Both an information management group and a communicating with communities group have been established in the past and are listed in the VCPP, though neither group is currently active.

The ETC does not meet regularly during preparedness phases and is not known as a highly active cluster. However, it has a broader range of stakeholders than most of the other clusters, including the private sector, with telecommunications provider Digicel the cluster co-lead alongside the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO). ETC members may include representatives from:

- telecommunications service providers (e.g. Digicel, Telecom Vanuatu Limited, other internet service providers)
- the NDMO
- the Vanuatu Police Force
- the Vanuatu Mobile Force, a para military body
- Telecommunications and Radio communications Regulator (TRR)
- OGCIO
- World Food Programme (WFP)
- VHT
- media outlets.

The ETC can also receive support from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee ETC, which is a global humanitarian cluster led by WFP.

The media's access to information in disasters is closely controlled by the national disaster mechanism in an effort to reduce misinformation. According to the current Cyclone Support Plan, the NDC must authorise any broadcast requests related to "the operational situation" in a disaster. Any media releases on disaster situations must be approved by the NDMO, and media outlets are responsible for requesting updates from the NEOC.

Each of Vanuatu's six provinces also has a Provincial Disaster Committee (PDC), which is responsible for coordinating emergency responses at the provincial level and the Provincial Emergency Operations Centre. The Secretary General of the province is the chair of its PDC and a province-based NDMO staff member, the Provincial Disaster Officer, is the PDC's coordinator. Three of the six provinces so

far have developed a Provincial Disaster Plan. At the local level, Community Disaster and Climate Change Committees (CDCCCs) have been established in over 100 communities across Vanuatu, which means that while this structure plays an important disaster preparedness and response role in those communities, the majority of Vanuatu communities do not have this structure in place.

2.2 Commitments to information sharing and community feedback exist

Where they exist, CDCCCs are tasked with alerting and coordinating their community in responding to emergencies, and providing their Area Council with initial assessment information in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.

The Area Councils are tasked with reporting these assessment to the PDCs, and the PDCs with completing their own initial assessment and reporting their assessment and those received from the Area Council to the National Emergency Operations Centre in order to inform decision making (Cyclone Support Plan 2017). Some KoBo training has been carried out in an effort to move towards digitising this assessment feedback process, and GIS software to analyse geospatial data is in use and stored on NDMO server, but the use of digital tools remains very limited. Several stakeholders highlighted that this system design indicates a degree of commitment to community feedback and information sharing.

2.3 Information and some materials are available

Generally, the information that is needed for effective communication with communities is available in Vanuatu. A number of stakeholders pointed out that Vanuatu has access to real time, international data on meteorological and geohazard threats, as well as extensive, internationally available resources on disaster preparedness, such as disaster risk reduction recommendations for shelter construction (Vanuatu Red Cross, French Red Cross, UNICEF, Oxfam). Some work has already been done to contextualise this preparedness information for Vanuatu. Several of the clusters have developed their own sets of key messages for emergencies, including the WASH, Education, and Gender and Protection Clusters, which have been approved by the NDMO. Some clusters have packaged these messages into information products ready for community use, particularly the WASH Cluster and the Gender and Protection Cluster. Some of these resources have been shared through the NDMO website, and some through the NAB portal, where all content has been approved by government representatives.

2.4 Multiple communication channels exist

Work has been done in Vanuatu to establish communications channels to reach communities affected by disasters.

The NDMO has established a Community Advisory Message System, in which national radio stations are pre-prepared to broadcast pre-recorded cyclone and tsunami warnings for identified areas when the NDMO advises a threat is present. The NEOC also has a backup radio broadcasting facility available that is able to broadcast directly to the national radio network if needed. In practice, it seems that live radio announcements based on warnings issued by the NDMO

are more common (FM107). Similarly, standardised alert mobile phone text messages are sent out through the main telecommunications providers (TVL and Digicel, who are members of the ETC) when advised by the NDMO. Specific alerts are disseminated to different affected areas through this system. Both the media and the telecommunications providers in Vanuatu are very willing to assist with distributing information in disasters, and the media in particular are enthusiastic about assisting with preparedness awareness as well (VBTC, FM107, Daily Post/Buzz FM).

The NDMO has an established website, which the country is directed to check for updates and alerts. This site is updated by the NDMO's information management officer during disasters with information provided by the Vanuatu Meteorological and Geohazards Department (VMGD). The website also includes a resources section, which is updated regularly with information put forward from the clusters, as well as NDMO materials. The NDMO maintains a Facebook page – the most commonly used social media platform in Vanuatu – which has over 1,200 followers and is regularly updated with alerts and information during disasters, as well as photos of relief work being carried out in disaster affected areas, providing one channel of accountability. The NDMO also posts alerts on the Yumi Toktok Stret Facebook page, which has over 96,000 followers and is by far Vanuatu's most widely followed public group. This page is predominately a forum for any news, complaints or opinions, and is one space in which the public can express their views on humanitarian responses and their coordination.

A range of additional emergency communications systems are also available in Vanuatu. According to the VCPP, these include High Frequency (HF) radio (limited availability in provinces due to the cost of licensing but it is currently used by the Vanuatu Red Cross and the Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC) networks), a VHF radio system covering Port Vila, satellite phones and broadband global area networks (BGANs), which are a portable satellite. OGCIO have satellite phones and data terminals BGANs prepositioned in the provinces. A tsunami siren system is also in place covering the Port Vila and Luganville municipalities.

Direct communications channels between the national level and community level are also in place. VHT members are also working in all six of Vanuatu's provinces, and provide an important link with communities. For example, VCC has a network of church champions in some islands who are tasked with distributing community information, including disaster information, through the churches. INGOs and Vanuatu Red Cross who have worked to set up CDCCCs in various provinces have direct connections with the members of those groups. The area of work and communities reached are tracked through VHT's partner mapping, which is scheduled to be updated quarterly. In addition, education and health networks reach into almost every community, where there is a school or a health clinic, and the staff of these posts are connected through their provincial coordinators to national structure (Vanuatu Society for People with Disability (VSPD)). The education network has been a conduit in some provinces for some preparedness projects carried out by VHT members.

3. Gaps

While many systems and networks are in place to support communication with communities affected by disaster, all of the stakeholders, including the NDMO, agree that the systems do not currently work effectively.

3.1 *Not everyone has access to mass communication*

The primary systems that are in place to alert people to impending disasters rely on mass communication channels – radio and mobile phone text messaging. However, many stakeholders highlighted concerns that not everyone has access to these communication channels, particularly vulnerable people, such as those living with disability, and people living in remote communities, which are the majority of Vanuatu’s population (VSPD, Australian Government, FM107, Vanuatu Media Association, Digicel, VBTC, World Vision). The Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC) further noted that even their radio services, as the national broadcaster, don’t reach every community in the entire country, and Digicel noted the same about telecommunications signals.

3.2 *Information dissemination in disasters is slow*

“The common challenge in every disaster is that the community asks for information the government is not yet willing to give.” –
NGO stakeholder

This view was widely expressed by many stakeholders, including the NDMO. NGOs and INGOs broadly felt that waiting for NDMO approval or release of updates and messages, which they agreed was important for consistency, meant that it was difficult to provide communities with the right information quickly. The media consistently voiced concern that information for the media was not prioritised by the NDMO, even when they had dedicated staffing resources to assist with preparing messaging, making it difficult for the media to provide the public with timely information (Daily Post/Buzz FM, FM107, Vanuatu Media Association). As a result, the media typically resorts to finding individual contacts in affected communities, who may not have access to accurate, unbiased information. Key informants noted that when people don’t receive information quickly through official channels, they get it from family and friends and hearsay and rumours spread quickly, particularly through social media. Official sharing of information is in practice often infrequent and hampered by sensitivities about sharing information that could become politicised or in case policy decisions change. Similarly, while there are many channels for communities to voice their concerns and provide feedback on disaster responses, these channels are often subject to politicisation and it is sometimes difficult for the more quiet voices in the community to be heard, in particular the most marginalised, women, children and people with disabilities.

3.3 *Lack of capacity to coordinate communications*

A key reason that stakeholders identified for the slow dissemination of information was a lack of capacity within the roles responsible for communications, from the NDMO to the PDC and Area Council levels. With only

18 staff at the NDMO, including just three communications-related positions, and the position most responsible for messaging indefinitely unfilled due to suspension, there is a need for additional support to enable effective communications at the national level (NDMO). A clearly defined communicating with communities role responsible for messaging and coordination is necessary, held by a skilled and experienced communicating with communities specialist with resourcing and support. The ETC exists as a support mechanism for the NDMO in communications, however its focus is on the “hardware” of communications, like signals and towers, leaving no support for “software” like messaging and knowledge products, although this is also part of its mandate (NDMO). In addition, key members of the OGCIO, the ETC lead, are currently under suspension, leaving some gaps in the leadership. Further, there is a clear need to build the skills of PDC members, particularly in media liaison, and of Area Councils, particularly in community liaison, so that they understand the importance of sharing and collecting information, what information is needed and how to share it effectively, in order to enable them to facilitate community-based communication effectively.

3.4 Lack of cluster coordination on communications

While the cluster system is widely felt to be broadly effective in coordinating the disaster response, many stakeholders agreed that this did not extend to communications. A lack of coordination between the clusters on communications, including sharing information, along with a need for harmonised messages and materials, was widely acknowledged. It was noted that communities are often confused by a barrage of different messages provided by different clusters and/or organisations, sometimes even on similar topics but presented in different ways.

3.5 Existing coordination and community engagement systems are not functioning well

The stakeholders broadly agreed that while coordination and community engagement systems are in place, there is currently a gap between the articulated system and what actually happens in emergencies. For example, many stakeholders raised concerns about initial assessment forms that communities have been asked to complete and return to the Area Council or PDC never being collected, or that communities receive no response to the needs and requests raised in them. It is unlikely that communities will continue to complete the forms and provide feedback if it is not respected or used.

A number of reasons were identified for the breakdown of the established systems in practice. The individuals holding roles with communications responsibilities at the province and area levels don't always have a clear understanding of what they need to do or the skills to do – including, for example, the PDC providing updates to the media. Further, the Area Council is staffed by volunteers, apart from the Area Secretary, and has a wide range of responsibilities, its engagement in the existing system is reliant on individuals' priorities and capacities. In addition, systems that are only used spasmodically, in times of disaster, are not easy to maintain without regular training and

discussion and simulations have only been operated as isolated program activities run by various NGOs. Change overs of key staff can also significantly disrupt systems and systems not being established by locally-embedded actors have also proved unsustainable.

In a particularly relevant example, the Communications with Communities group was established in December 2015 by an international consultant engaged through UNICEF after a request to CDAC to support with communications in emergencies after TC Pam in March 2015. The group included the Shefa Province and UNICEF and was formalised with an MOU with the NDMO, with NDMO's Senior Provincial Liaison Officer appointed as the group's national coordinator. When the consultant's contract was finished, the NDMO didn't have capacity to carry on the coordination role and the project was instead handed to Shefa Province to coordinate.

"After she [the consultant] left the country, I organised a few meetings but then I went on study leave and then no one continued to carry on the work." – NDMO CwC National Coordinator.

The group has not been active since that time. At the time of the Ambae Volcano evacuation, the previous Director of the NDMO asked UNICEF to revitalise the group, however, the NDMO Director was then replaced and did not have knowledge of the group so the proposal did not gain momentum.

3.6 Community-based channels for communication need to be expanded and strengthened

Many stakeholders noted the importance of working through the established community systems, rather than creating new systems and trying to engage communities in them – an approach that several stakeholders felt is commonly taken by NGOs aiming to build community resilience to disasters. These include the chiefly systems, church networks, school and health clinic networks, Area Councils, and CDCCC structures, where they exist. It was suggested that these community-based networks are key to embedding information into communities in the long term, rather than distributing materials with a single training and hoping that it would remain relevant, as also currently happens. DWA recommended including communications in Province, Area and Community Disaster Plans to help achieve this, while Vanuatu Red Cross and Youth Challenge noted that upskilling at these levels was also essential. NDMO's Technical Advisor recommended community level partner mapping to identify key community contacts for communication and enable coordination on disasters, noting that some community-based networks are not currently formally engaged in the emergency response system.

Several stakeholders also highlighted the importance of understanding how communities already receive information and how they would prefer to be communicated with. This was identified as a potential research project.

3.7 Information received by communities isn't understood and informing people's behaviour

“The local norms are prevailing over the technical information right now – we need to be more efficient at influencing people’s behaviour.” – Ministry of Justice, referring specifically to the situation with the Ambae Volcano.

There is widespread concern that community members don’t always understand the information that is shared by the NDMO because it uses technical terms. There is a clear need to “translate” the technical language into information that communities will understand, both in emergency alerts and disaster preparedness. This includes presenting information in formats that will reach vulnerable groups and marginalised groups, like young people. It also includes understanding language use in different communities, and that direct translation to different languages won’t necessarily ensure understanding. Literacy is also likely to be an issue in remote communities, particularly in Bislama, English or French, and the use of picture-based materials may be a useful.

3.8 Lack of strong community feedback mechanism

While some feedback mechanisms exist, such as the initial assessment process and social media forums, effective community engagement that enables a two-way dialogue and community leadership on emergency response programming is not yet established in Vanuatu. In some instances, communities have been asked for feedback without first being provided with critical information needed for household decision-making. In other cases, information from communities coming through currently available channels is very diverse and can be politicised. It is more difficult for more vulnerable community members to have a voice. Several stakeholders felt the commitment to community engagement needs to be stronger and deeper.

“We need to see communities as partners in response, not just recipients of information. Communities need a specific role and a stake in the response.” – DWA Director.

The NDMO also acknowledged that a mechanism to manage the community feedback process needs to be put in place so that information can be used effectively. Another cluster lead suggested that digitising data collection in communities (such as initial assessments) was an important part of strengthening community feedback and enable faster use of the information by responders. Further, it was observed that providing communities with training on what information they need to provide responders in disasters, and clear ways that they can do it, is an important step in enabling two-way communications.

3.9 Current communications focus on alerts not preparedness

The existing communications systems centre on what should happen when disasters occur. However, improving communities’ access to live-saving information in disasters means systems must also integrate preparedness. The media sector in particular felt that there was much more communication that could be done to help communities prepare for disasters, and indicated that they were willing to be a part of work in this area. By the same token, while there is plentiful information sharing during the immediate phase of a disaster (such as

the cyclone and volcano alerts), challenges around information sharing often arise in the response phase of an emergency about what is happening, what support communities can expect, government policy decisions or changes in the situation.

4. Challenges

The gaps outlined in section 3 result in several challenges in communicating and engaging effectively with disaster affected communities in Vanuatu.

4.1 *Lack of communications coordination capacity at NDMO*

The communications position gap at the NDMO coupled with the current leadership gap in the ETC and its focus on communication's hardware means that most information received by communities is the technical alerts and updates distributed via the NDMO's systems, or messaging distributed by individual clusters or organisations. This combination often results in confusion for communities. One stakeholder noted that without someone to coordinate resources and systems, even producing better communications materials for communities wouldn't be effective. The importance of coordinating the messages of the clusters to avoid overloading communities was also highlighted, with an informant suggesting that a collaborative, coordinated set of communications materials that acknowledge the stakeholders who had contributed might be a useful tool to overcome individual organisation's need to release different, branded materials. Media outlets observed that a designated person within the NDMO to prioritise the timely distribution of information to the media and others is crucial, because other responders are restricted in what they can do without that information. The right person with the right skills in that NDMO coordination position is essential for it to be effective.

4.2 *Limited resources pool and the potential for communication to be seen as funding competition*

“This is a small place, and our resources are limited – communications needs to help the response work better, without detracting from the other important things that have to be done in emergencies.” – NGO stakeholder.

The potential for investment in communications to be seen as a threat to other response areas was noted by several informants, noting that it was important to position communications as supporting existing programming responses. A lack of resources was also identified by NDMO as a reason why communications has not been prioritised in the past.

4.3 *Media information isn't currently prioritised*

“The media will never work for the government, but it can help the government achieve its aims to reach people with information.” – Media outlet stakeholder.

The media all spoke of the significant challenges they face in obtaining timely official information in emergencies. One informant observed that all relevant

positions, in particular the Secretary Generals of the PDCs as the only authorised media spokespeople, need to understand the importance of providing the media with information and make it a priority. They suggested a coordinated press conference or media release that providing all media outlets with the same information at the same time would be useful. Another media outlet proposed including media in clusters to enable them to stay updated in emergencies, observing that this would require building trust but could be effective in improving outcomes for communities.

4.4 Technical services can't always be relied on

While technology offers many opportunities for communication with communities, it also has restrictions, particularly in Vanuatu. Lack of internet reliability, speed, coverage and affordable were all issues raised by stakeholders, both in sharing resources between responders (as Bangladesh's Shongjog does) and in sharing information with communities, and the need to design any online tools specifically for a low bandwidth was highlighted. Not all communities have access to internet, radio, or mobile phone coverage, even in non-disaster times, and many stakeholders agreed that it is important to put systems in place that enable communication with communities that don't only rely on technology, particularly as it often breaks down in times of disasters. However, stakeholders also noted the importance of technical systems in enabling people to connect with their loved ones in disasters and cluster representatives proposed putting systems in place that enable technical infrastructure to be directed by government coordinators in times of emergency, for instance for one company's mobile phone towers to be used by all mobile phone carriers, so that systems can be made functional again as soon as possible after a disaster.

4.5 Public information isn't always trusted by communities

“People always trust someone they know more than an announcement on the radio.” – NGO stakeholder.

Stakeholders agreed that finding trusted channels to distribute information to communities was a key challenge, especially since the official disaster systems (such as alerts being passed through PDCs and Area Councils) are not always the way that communities prefer to receive their information. The need to build trust in the official information and channels was considered critical by stakeholders. The importance of establishing formal complaint processes and providing action and feedback in response to complaints was noted, and several stakeholders highlighted the importance of creating alerts with clear and understandable language and using them carefully and consistently to avoid complacency.

4.6 Communities aren't empowered to act and communicate

Recognising that technical systems break down and local people are more trusted sources of information, stakeholders agreed that community-based communication systems were important. However, community-based people currently don't have the information they need to provide their community with good disaster preparedness information and initial response information in times

of disaster, and they don't know who to ask or share information with through the disaster systems. The CDCCCs, where they exist, are a good community-based structure to enable this kind of information sharing, but in other communities, other people connected to national networks, such as school teachers, health workers, church representatives or others, need to have preparedness messages, materials and an understanding of the disaster system and how to work with the Area Council/PDC. Reaching this community level will be challenging but is important for real improvement.

5. Opportunities

Though there are challenges that need to be overcome to improve community engagement and communication, there are also some important opportunities in Vanuatu – most importantly, a broad willingness to make the system better.

5.1 *The need for two-way communication with communities is recognised*

Having come through the devastation of Cyclone Pam in 2015 and experienced a series of cyclones and volcanic eruptions since then, Vanuatu responders, including the NDMO, recognise there is value in good communications with communities and are open to improving the system in this regard.

“The experience of Ambae has proven how important communications is. People weren't drinking the water because it looked and smelt different to usual, but our specialists found it was safe to drink. Until we could tell people that, they were going thirsty, even though there was water right there to drink.”
– NDMO Director.

A dedicated communications position has been included in a proposed NDMO restructure, and the NDMO Director expressed a willingness to ensure the responsibilities of that role focused on messaging, media and community engagement, to complement the current ICT and Information Management roles. It's unclear when this restructure will be finalised, however, the NDMO Director also expressed a willingness to have a communications specialist seconded to the organisation to enable work on strengthening communications and community engagement to begin without delay.

5.2 *Established systems and resources can be built on*

The structures and information needed to enable good communications with communities already exist. The ETC is mandated with communicating effectively with communities in disasters and helping them to prepare for emergencies. Cluster groups already have the information that communities need to be better prepared to respond to emergencies and the NDMO and its partners have the information and updates needed when disasters approach. Community networks, mobile phone and radio systems, and an online NDMO presence to share that information are already established. An initial assessment system to enable communities to provide some information for decision makers and recommend action are already in place.

These systems and structures need to be strengthened. A more comprehensive approach to communications can be taken within the ETC. Cluster information and materials can be packaged, coordinated and distributed through community networks, which can be strengthened with training and support, media partners, who can be provided with more timely information and also assist with content production, and systems, which can be expanded beyond their current use for alerts. Alerts and distribution systems can be refined. Community feedback loops can be closed by ensuring that information collected from communities is actually used to inform decisions at the national level and that the community receives a response to their requests and recommendations.

5.3 Existing communications channels can be expanded

Several of the established communications channels that have been established could be expanded to improve communications. Social media provides one area of opportunity – the NDMO Facebook page could have more timely and understandable disaster updates, as well as engaging, locally relevant, image-based preparedness information. Consistent messaging posted on other prominent Facebook groups including Yumi Toktok Stret, Daily Post, FM107 and Digicel could also be a useful way of reaching a broader audience.

The local media is also very willing to help distribute both emergency and preparedness information, and to help resource efforts to improve communications channels through producing information templates for radio, online, etc, and potentially training of community system staff at the province and area levels. A greater understanding of radio coverage and how local communities use radio (eg. times of listening) could also improve effectiveness of radio broadcasts in emergencies.

Existing HF radio networks may also be able to be utilised to provide community feedback after disasters when other channels are down.

5.4 Disaster season is predictable

Cyclones are the most common disasters and the cyclone season is relatively predictable. This could enable a yearly schedule of communications activities that focus on seasonal needs. For example, long term preparedness/resilience building messages could be the focus of campaigns carried out from May to October, with messages about cyclone and alert awareness the focus of activities from November to April (subject to direct emergency messaging replacing it if required). Focus topics could be changed from year to year, with resources constantly updated and refined as they are tested. A schedule of campaigns like this could also be useful for keeping community communications focal points engaged and maintaining preparedness for times of disaster.

6. Recommended implementation approach

Based on the capacity, gaps, challenges and opportunities identified by Vanuatu's stakeholders, several elements are considered key to an effective implementation approach that enables local leadership as well as the involvement of government, civil society organisations and communities.

6.1 *NDMO needs a lead role in the platform*

The first recommendation of the CDAC Policy Paper (2017)¹ is that international humanitarian organisations recognise and use existing local and national mechanisms for collective communication and community engagement mechanisms. Both international and national stakeholders in Vanuatu agreed that this was the ideal approach, recognising that the NDMO is the body mandated to coordinate disasters and preparedness in Vanuatu and that a communications function with authority to act in emergencies would need to be led by the NDMO.

However, it was also recognised that if a communications and community engagement platform were to be successfully led by the NDMO, the NDMO would need a dedicated staff member with the skills and capacity to coordinate the group and that there is currently a gap in this area within the NDMO. This role would also need the support of other stakeholders to function effectively, but should also be empowered to coordinate the timely approval of messaging and information release on behalf of the NDMO in order to improve the timeliness of updates.

It is recommended that a NDMO Communicating with Communities Coordinator position is established and leads the coordination of the community engagement platform in Vanuatu, initially recruited by an INGO such as CARE or other CDAC member on behalf of CDAC and seconded to the NDMO, with the view of this position being taken over directly by the NDMO as the restructure is enacted.

6.2 *The platform needs to be embedded in the existing emergency infrastructure*

Stakeholders were concerted in their belief that a communications platform should not involve creating another working group, but should instead work within existing structures or groups. A number of existing groups were suggested as potential foundations to build on to embed the communications platform. The Vanuatu Communications Network is a group of communications and community engagement specialists predominantly from INGOs who would have the skills to provide useful support to an NDMO coordinator, however it was felt that the group doesn't have a disaster and preparedness focus and that it currently has few members from national organisations. The Disaster Risk Reduction working group through the NDMO was another proposed foundation.

However, most stakeholders agreed that the ETC was the most appropriate structure to build a communication platform into. The NDMO Director said that the ETC is already mandated to coordinate communications with communities, and that this should include community engagement as well as the current hardware focus. Embedding the group in the existing cluster system means that it would have a recognised role in disaster response and authority to play a coordinating role for other clusters' communications. The clusters are also established as an important system for government and civil society

¹ CDAC Network, (2017), [The Role of Collective Platforms, Services and Tools to support Communication and Community Engagement in Humanitarian Action](#)

organisations to contribute to, which is likely to facilitate engagement in the platform from all stakeholders.

It is recommended that the community engagement platform is established as a sub group of the ETC, alongside a technical sub group, and mandated to meet regularly in non-disaster times as well as emergency times in order to build communications and community engagement preparedness, including potentially facilitating a community feedback mechanism in future.

6.3 The platform needs to represent all stakeholders

In line with CDAC Recommendation 8 (CDAC Policy Paper, 2017), stakeholders agreed that recognising the role of the media and telecommunications providers inside the platform was important, alongside other existing responders, such as NGOs and INGOs and government agencies. Several stakeholders also highlighted the importance of the platform connecting with representative community groups, such as the Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs, the National Council of Women, the National Council of Youth, or the Vatu Mauri Consortium, which includes representatives from chiefs, women, youth, local government and civil society.

It is recommended that all civil society organisations, including media and telecommunications companies, NGOs and INGOs, and community groups, and government departments committed to improving communications with communities be invited to be part of the platform.

6.4 The platform needs to coordinate messaging effectively

Given that the lack of coordinated and accessible messaging was identified as a key gap in Vanuatu, stakeholders agreed that harmonising messages and materials, making them easily accessible and promoting their use through the clusters and member organisations should be an important focus of the platform. It was noted that supporting and resourcing the platform lead to manage this process would be critical.

It is recommended that coordinating messages and materials for community use, including producing templates and materials, is a key activity of the platform. This could be carried out by a working group of interested platform members to build platform momentum (as recommended in the CDAC DEPP Evaluation 2018) and resourced through activity funding.

6.5 The platform needs to involve province/area levels and strengthen systems that already exist

Several stakeholders highlighted the importance of maintaining and strengthening the communications channels that have already been established through the Provinces and Area Councils, especially since these community-based channels offer alternative communication channels to technology-reliant communication. It was suggested that this should involve training communications focal points at the province (often the PDO or other provincial government staff member), area and community levels to have the skills and information they need to be the first responders, information sharers, and media

liaison in disasters, as well as understanding how communities would prefer to receive information and using this to inform communications systems in the future. Embedding ways for communities to feedback information and be part of decision-making through the established communications systems should also be an important part of this capacity strengthening, and could potentially incorporate the activities being undertaken by Ground Truth Solutions through this project and the work of other actors in building community disaster preparedness capacity, such as through the DFAT funded Disaster Ready Project.

It is recommended that capacity building and embedding a community feedback mechanism at the provincial, area and community levels are key activities of the platform. This could be led by a working group of interested platform members to build platform momentum (as recommended in the CDAC DEPP Evaluation, 2018) and resourced through activity funding.

6.6 *The platform needs to facilitate a continual process of preparedness*

As noted in the CDAC DEPP Evaluation (2018), keeping platform members and community communications focal points engaged from the time that the group is established or training takes place until disasters actually occur can be a challenge. Stakeholders agreed that the success of the platform would hinge on its ability to facilitate a continual process of preparedness that enables the platform members and community-based focal points to effectively enact systems in disasters and to continually improve community preparedness for disasters over time through engaging awareness campaigns and communications.

It is recommended that development and implementation of an annual national community engagement campaign is a key activity of the platform. This could be carried out by a working group of interested platform members to build platform momentum (as recommended in the CDAC DEPP Evaluation 2018) and resourced through activity funding.

6.7 *The platform needs to build momentum as a group*

In other countries where CDAC has established communications platforms, collaboration between platform members has been fostered by a flexible funding mechanism to support proposals put forward by partnerships between members (CDAC DEPP Evaluation, 2018). A number of potential projects were suggested by stakeholders during the scoping, in addition to the messaging materials package, the province/area/community capacity building and communications research, and the annual communications campaign outlined above, including:

- Strengthening connections/systems between national level, province level and area/community level by building communications and community feedback process into disaster plans
- Establishing a searchable database of the resources/materials produced
- Digitising community feedback by developing apps and kobo tools for assessment forms and other data capturing at area level

- Establishing an emergency communications policy/protocol to enable rapid reconnection with communities through all available telecommunications infrastructure
- Strengthening social media use by the NDMO, including updating the NDMO Facebook page and strategy and developing an engagement strategy for Yumi Toktok Stret and others.

In order to keep all stakeholders engaged in the group, it is recommended to ask the group to prioritise which 4-6 of these proposed projects should be the focus of the group's initial activities, and for stakeholders to nominate which projects they would be interested to work on. The flexible funding could then be divided among the prioritised projects based on project cost, enabling a series of projects engaging all interested stakeholders to be implemented simultaneously.

7. Ways of Working

It is anticipated that the platform's national focal person will be the Communicating with Communities Coordinator recruited through an INGO or CDAC member and seconded to the NDMO (with the role to be taken over directly by the NDMO as the restructure is implemented). The Communicating with Communities Coordinator would lead the establishment of the platform as a sub group of the ETC, recruit members, facilitate meetings, establish a Terms of Reference for the sub group, and coordinate the sub group in identifying and initiating its first activities. It is expected that the Communicating with Communities Coordinator will be supported by sub group members, including stakeholders interviewed in this scoping report, as well as the Specialist engaged for phase two of the project.

The Specialist will provide mentoring and advice to the Communicating with Communities Coordinator as needed, including assisting to establish a project monitoring system, as well as through a monthly catch up meeting, where the Communicating with Communities Coordinator will provide a monthly update report. The Specialist will summarise this report into a monthly update for CDAC and contribute to CDAC project reporting.

Annex 1: Stakeholder meetings

INSTITUTION/ORGANISATION

National Disaster Management Office
Australian Government
Department of Women's Affairs
Ministry of Justice
Vanuatu Red Cross
French Red Cross
UNICEF

FM 107
Daily Post/FM98
Digicel
Radio Vanuatu
Vanuatu Media Association
ABC Radio

Vanuatu Christian Council
Vanuatu Society for People with Disability
Youth Challenge
Wan SmolBag / V-Pride
World Vision
Save the Children
Oxfam
CARE
Action Aid
Act for Peace
ADRA Vanuatu