

## **VANUATU:**

### **Recovering from Cyclone Pam**

*Australian unions have a long history of standing in solidarity with Vanuatu. In the 1970s, we supported the independence movement against French/British rule, which saw a republic declared in 1980. Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA's Pacific Officer recently made the journey to Vanuatu to meet with partner organisations and see the impacts of Cyclone Pam on workers and communities.*

The clean-up of debris was well underway by the time we landed in Port Vila. The trees that had been uprooted were slowly being sawed up, into pieces small enough to be carted away and used for cooking or in the rebuilding of settlements around the town. The air was chokingly full of smoke, as people across the island burnt the debris that couldn't be cleared by any other means.

We met people in the villages that spoke to us of sheltering together in caves or local schools and evacuation centres, listening to the 275km/hour winds for hours while they wondered whether their homes would survive.

The central market, which is usually bustling from early in the morning, filled with people from villages across Efate and neighbouring islands selling their produce, was empty. The cyclone had uprooted banana plantations and root vegetables, and completely destroyed leafy vegetables. These farmers are now reliant on emergency food aid to survive, until they can reestablish their crops, and without the ability to earn income, they will struggle to rebuild their homes after the cyclone.

#### **Workers without homes**

I met with the Vanuatu National Workers Union (VNWU) who represent minimum wage workers, many of who work in the tourism industry. A minimum wage earner in Vanuatu earns approximately \$AUD400 per month, barely a subsistence wage. Sadly many of the VNWU workers have been left without roofs on their houses, and their low wages means that they will struggle to rebuild without external support.

Similarly, the Teachers Union spoke of members on outer islands who had lost everything. Their homes and possessions were completely destroyed in the cyclone. Some of these teachers have been sheltering in the schools, until they can repair their homes.

#### **Community resilience**

80% of Vanuatu's population depend on agriculture and fisheries for their livelihoods. It was very evident that the cyclone had severely impacted on workers and community livelihoods, destroying root crops, fruit and leafy crops and fisheries. The whole experience was traumatic for everyone.

Despite the tragic loss of trees, houses and gardens the people of Vanuatu show an incredible resilience in the face of adversity. People have already begun to rebuild their homes by salvaging materials from the debris to rebuild structures and rethatch roofs.

The next stage is to get their gardens happening again. The bananas will take at least a year to return, coconuts and casava three months. Leafy vegetables will begin providing food faster. They

are still waiting on deliveries of seeds to replant their gardens so remain dependent on emergency food aid.

People come together here to help each other. We visited Alem Mataso, a settlement 20 minutes from the centre of Port Vila. The inhabitants come from Mataso Island, 15 minutes by boat from Port Vila. All 50 households on Mataso Island were destroyed by Cyclone Pam. The women and children have come to stay with family in the settlement while the men have gone back to the island to rebuild their houses.

### **The question of Climate Change**

Pacific lives and livelihoods have become even more vulnerable to extreme weather events due to the effects of climate change. I spent some time with a young climate activist, Noro to get his perspective on impacts of climate change on his country and people:

"We are starting to move all the houses away from the sea because of the rising sea levels. When we go looking for fish we no longer see some the species we used to and the food we grow no longer grows in season, it comes anytime."

"Maybe in 100 years when sea level rise Port Villa will be no more"

Noro, and other climate activists in Vanuatu, are active in engaging communities across Vanuatu and the Pacific in the fight against climate change. They are involved in projects to mitigate against the effects of climate change, and are organising globally to try and prevent catastrophic climate change from occurring. But they believe that for change to happen, it isn't enough to organise Pacific communities - it is critical that countries like Australia begin to act.

**Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA has raised over \$82,000 so far to assist with the medium term recovery in Vanuatu** - but we still need to raise more to assist medium term recovery in Vanuatu. Once the initial emergency has passed, people will need help to re-building of housing and household water supplies, replant their gardens and orchards, replace their lost seed stocks, and re-establish aquaculture production.

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