

# **Disaster aid and transformational change**

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- This presentation examines whether disaster related humanitarian aid, can act to transform the affected society, or at least create the space for transformation.
- Related questions of whether aid simply recreates pre-existing vulnerabilities, and/or creates dependency, are also examined.
- Another important question concerns the role of resilience.
- The presentation draws on examples from the South-west Pacific island nation of Vanuatu.

# Vanuatu as “Paradise”



# South West Pacific Island nation of Vanuatu as an example

## Ranks # 1 on World Risk Index

- #131 HDI, and is a “Least developed country”;
- **Average of two cyclones a year, + volcanoes, earthquakes, etc;**
- Consists of a chain of about 80 islands spread over 1300km of the South Pacific,
- Some 80% have subsistence or semi subsistence livelihoods – limited food markets;
- Very limited infrastructure – except mobiles since ~ 2009;
- **DRR is integrated with climate change adaptation for reasons of capacity and practicalities (same across the South West Pacific);**
- **Melanesian politics, & languages;**
- 90% attend church every week;
- Highly communal society – the “wantok” system, functions as safety net and can also inhibit development.

# 2015 Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu

- **Category 5 Cyclone Pam – one of the strongest ever in the South Pacific** (wind gusts to 320km), but no major storm surge;
- **about 80% of houses were damaged or destroyed, 11 deaths, food crops destroyed/damaged.** Many communities without potable water after their supplies were contaminated by the sea;
- **Massive HA effort – water was dealt with, govt wanted to withhold food aid for 2 weeks;**
- **Local institutions overwhelmed,** but the Vanuatu Humanitarian Team (~48 NGOs) and govt cluster system worked in some areas.











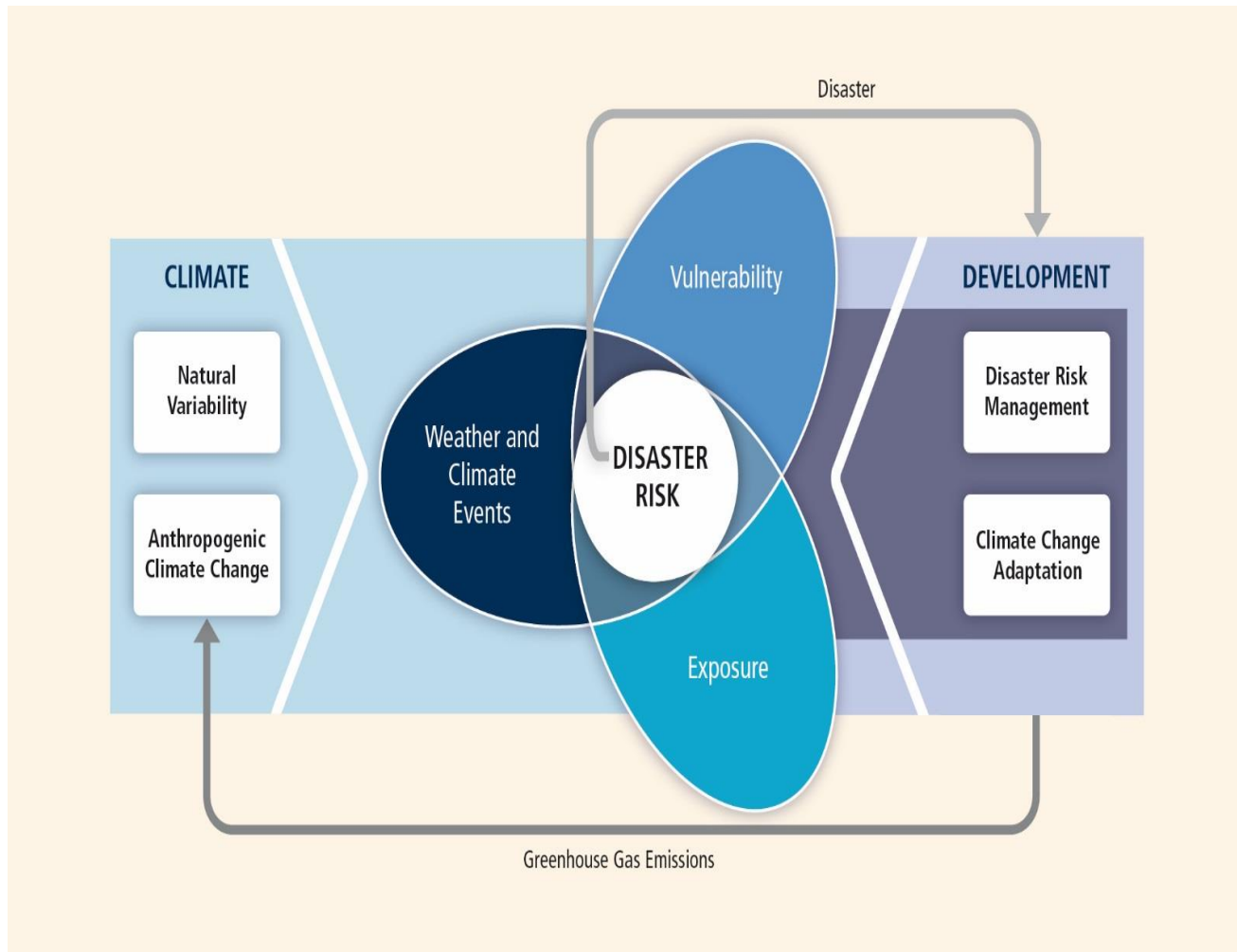
# Recreating or worsening vulnerabilities?

- We draw on the IPCC- SREX (2012) definition of risk to help examine what is being recreated;
- HA can and often does recreate pre-existing conditions – we want people to survive so that they have a future & the option to transform;
- Related criticisms are that HA does not tackle the root causes of vulnerability, and that it creates dependencies.



# The components of risk (IPCC – SREX 2012)

## **RISK ~ Hazard + Exposure + Vulnerability**





## **EXPOSURE GROWTH – development in high hazard areas for wildfire**





**The location (exposure) is not the main problem here. The vulnerability to wildfire of the flammable roof is the problem.**





# Recreating vulnerabilities & exposure

- Aid can recreate pre-existing conditions, eg in Vanuatu by people rebuilding on the same sites so their exposure is unchanged. There is often limited choice and relocation risks making people homeless, landless and depriving them of livelihoods;
- In Vanuatu (and Melanesia) relocation can be especially problematic. All land is communally owned and land markets are very limited. People from the Carteret Islands PNG, were relocated to Bougainville due to climate change issues, but are now returning;
- **Exposure remains the same, but vulnerability can be reduced, eg through effective warnings, or improved housing “build back better” – but no agreement re best housing post Cyclone Pam;**
- Private interests are building/promoting cyclone resistant housing however;
- Positive cases of exposure change: temporary relocation, esp. for youth – people can move temporarily to a major town but often young people can be reluctant to go back .

**Traditional housing on the left.  
Damaged housing near Vila after Cyclone Pam**





**Informal housing in Vila post Cyclone Pam**











# Dealing with underlying causes

- “Root causes” - if we are confident that we can ID them, can make a positive impact, and that it is politically, ethically and culturally possible (HA vs govt);
- It may be that treatment of causes is not possible or practical, and instead the focus can be on alleviating symptoms, as mentioned above;
- We could work to create the space for transformation through HA – esp as climate change is seen as a major threat. **Easier to argue for major change via adaptation which is the future than DRR.**



# Humanitarian aid and delivering transformation

- Most HA is delivered by a handful of major aid groups who also decide the priorities for that aid – 0.4% goes to local & national NGOs (GHA Report 2016).
- Transformation is usually defined externally – the “UN transformation agenda” is about the HA sector itself.
- A frustration of national authorities In Vanuatu and Solomons Is is that they feel they have limited input to development and HA priorities; and how often are the affected people asked directly? (cf “self directed care”) (Nalau et al. 2015). **Without this it is not clear how we engage with “local knowledge”;**
- A few HA groups reject – at least implicitly - both the aim of transformation, and of integrating HA with the other major goals of DRR, CCA, SDG, Habitat;
- **But minor changes can sometimes transform outcomes**

# When has transformation occurred?

## What has been the role of HA?

Considering transformations - In Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, it can be argued that:

- the **missionaries** changed the lives of everyone, brought schools and changing clothing esp for women;
- 100 years ago **indentured labor** changed many communities;
- the **cash economy** can be transformative for those in it. Note that for most it is recent change and that many are still on the margins of the cash economy;
- **WW II created much infrastructure..**
- decolonisation – still being played out;
- **Since 2008/9, mobile technology and social media have become widely accessible in the islands and have changed/ are changing lives, esp of young people >60%. E.g. in Tanna villages, before messages by walking, now mobiles, before children were not sent to school, now sent as need to read to use mobiles. This has little to do with HA. The communities have been/are being transformed, but further reducing traditional knowledge. Cyclone Pam - texts made free to spread warnings.**
- **Chinese aid is building a road** in Tanna – much liked by locals.

# Dependency in Cyclone Pam

- After a cyclone in 2008 (in Moto Lava, Vanuatu) local food issues were partly blamed on previous post cyclone food aid in 1939 and 1972 (Warrick, 2012).
- Changes in food preferences and declining interest in traditional contingency food gardens are an outcome of modernity (as well). **There is also an argument that crop disease, theft and land disputes have been more imp.**
- Without food aid there would almost certainly have been famine after the historic events.
- **After Cyclone Pam in 2015, govt tried to withhold food aid for two weeks. NGOs disagreed. Many communities needed immediate help with water supplies.**
- Is modern resilience all about local village isolation?



# What can be done?

Transformation pathways:

## **Commerce – could offer entry points for transformation:**

- Gender - women own nearly 30 percent of all businesses in Vanuatu;
- New Zealand post Christchurch EQ Maori business program;
- Livelihood diversification via remittances – Australia?
- Some possible successes, incl building back better, but mainly from private sector or individuals as donors. Kustom?

## **Mobiles & social media:**

- Major transformation occurring through mobiles and social media, no connection with DRR, CCA or HA;

## **Humanitarian Aid:**

- Pre event training as with TC Pam seen as a success but not necessarily transformative;
- Empirical evidence for value of preparedness versus recovery?
- Temporary relocations can transform through young people.
- Sport as transformative...School rebuilding in Mele village.

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