

Live to tell - #Stronger than Winston

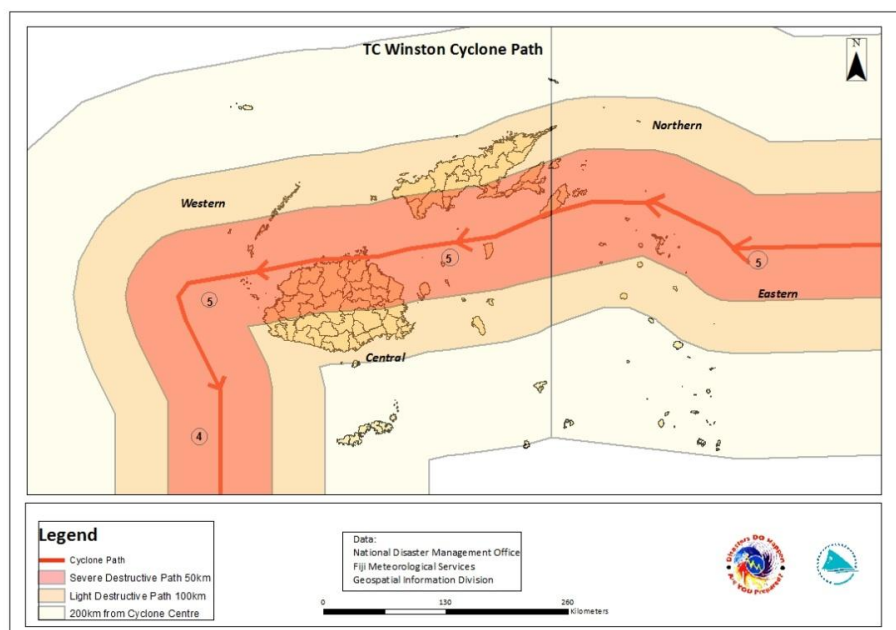
The 13th October each year marks International Day of Disaster Reduction, when globally the 27-year old UN initiative encourages individuals and communities to reduce their exposure to natural disasters and raise awareness of the risks that they face.

This year the theme was 'Live to tell', a telling title indeed, following just one week after the strongest Atlantic cyclone for almost a decade, Cyclone Matthew, ripped through Haiti, causing more than a thousand deaths and impacting the lives and livelihoods of over a million people.

In the worst-hit areas of the Caribbean nation, 100% of crops were destroyed, leaving whole swathes of the population without a food source. And in the immediate aftermath of such destruction, when every bit of normality has been turned upside down, all must seem hopeless.

Cyclone Winston

This appeared the case in Fiji earlier this year, when Cyclone Winston, the first category five cyclone to hit the South Pacific nation, wrought devastation to the outer Lau and Lomaiviti group of islands in the east, before crossing northern parts of the main island, Viti Levu. Saturday, 20th February 2016 will live long in the memories of those who survived – 44 lives were lost, and 40% of the population affected severely.



"I knew it [Cyclone Winston] was coming, cyclones seek deep water and Bligh Waters is the deepest channel in Fiji. Bligh Waters was calling Winston", said Faranisese Maisamoa, a resident of Rakiraki Town in northern Viti Levu. Having watched on YouTube the damage that Cyclone Pam, a category-five cyclone, had caused neighbouring Vanuatu in 2015, Faranisese was prepared: "My husband went onto the roof and removed the Sky dish on the Friday evening, and I made my three children empty their school bags of books and put in two lots of biscuits and tinned fish, and two change of clothes each. I then wrapped all the appliances in tarpaulin and put them in the empty deep freeze, before wrapping that in tarpaulin... I couldn't move the freezer, but Winston moved it 10ft across my kitchen when the kitchen roof went. It wasn't a wind, it was a devil," said practicing Seventh Day Adventist, Faranisese.

Yet, few people in Fiji understood the classification of cyclones, with most believing that Winston, a category-five cyclone, would be just another storm. The assignment of a category to a cyclone is based on wind strength, and the maximum, sustained ten-minute wind speed at the peak of Winston was an incredible 145mph (gusts topping 200mph), making Winston one of the most powerful cyclones ever recorded anywhere in the world.

Australian and South Pacific Tropical Cyclone Categorisation

Category	10-Min Mean Wind	Maximum 3-Sec Gust
1	63-87 km/hr (39-54 mph)	Less than 125 km/hr
2	88-117km/hr (55-72 mph)	125-169 km/hr (destructive winds)
3 Severe	118-157 km/hr (73-98 mph)	170-224 km/hr (very destructive winds)
4 Severe	158-200 km/hr (99-124 mph)	225-279 km/hr (very destructive winds)
5 Severe	Over 200 km/hr (Over 124 mph)	More than 280 km/hr (very destructive winds)

Messaging

Messaging, telling the right story, is so important in early warning. Coastal inhabitants knew little of the coastal inundation - storm surge and increased wave heights - that would accompany the cyclone. Waves of up to 12m (almost 40ft) were reported off Vanua Levua island, and even the normally tranquil Savusavu Bay turned into a tumultuous sea. A quarter of the fatalities resulted from coastal inundation, with people living along the coast not knowing to evacuate.

A photo of the effects of Winston on Savusavu Bay, pinned to the notice board of a Savusavu lodgings, and the view more usually...



Stories of survival

Stories of sheer terror and incredible survival abound in Fiji, a nation known for its orators: children rolled in mats, or stuffed into kitchen cupboards; individuals sharing hillside caves with billy goats, both mutually-reluctant, temporary visitors; whole families squashed under floorboards, the only remnants left of their homes; and an entire village surviving by each family sheltering in their newly-constructed outside toilet, while every house was destroyed.



Akisi Bale back selling home-grown produce at Suva Market

On the Saturday of Winston, casual vendor, Akisi Bale was selling at Suva Market as usual. She left the market at 4pm: “Very late [...] The people in the village couldn’t believe that a cyclone was coming, and we all got a shock – we were not very prepared”.

When her community carrier reached the nearest town, Korovou, the police stopped them, and they were told that they could go no further. Instead they, and the passengers on the Vatokoula Express bus, had to stay at an evacuation centre, Tailevu North College, until the Tuesday. Akisi had left her four children, aged 3, 4, 7 and 9, with her husband. She was unable to phone them, as the signal didn’t catch, and she was understandably extremely worried.

Of the 37 houses in her *mataqali* (clan) only 4 survived, everything else was destroyed. “We were lucky no one died”. Akisi only returned to selling produce at Suva Market in July, five months after Winston.

Sharing stories is a way for people to come to terms with their experiences, as, although counselling was a recognised need post-Winston, with few qualified therapies, and so many people affected, communities looked to one another for support. For instance, vendors in many of the markets in Fiji recall, that with no produce to sell, they spent days just talking through the events with each other: “Oh my God, everyone was talking about Winston. This time it was very bad – flooding and hurricane came together,” said Nadi market vendor, Shabnam Sameena. “No one expected it to be so strong”.

Children were particularly affected. Some of the youngest refused to communicate for several days after the cyclone, and even now, much older children still run inside at the slightest indication of strong wind, shouting: “Mummy, Mummy, hurricane”.

Many schools were either destroyed or used as evacuation centres after the cyclone, and most children had at least two weeks away from formal education, and the opportunity to share stories with their school friends.

Two of the most respected boarding schools in Fiji, Queen Victoria School (QVS), and St John’s College, were so badly damaged that they were closed for many months – QVS currently remains closed.

Stories of recovery and hope

The Prime Minister of Fiji, Voreqe Bainimarama, launched an Adopt a School programme to encourage international donors, companies, communities and individuals to support the rebuilding process. The Indonesian government adopted QVS; and the U.S. Navy assisted in the rebuild of St John’s - marines and sailors both sharing engineering skills with the Fiji Military Forces to strengthen military to military relationships.

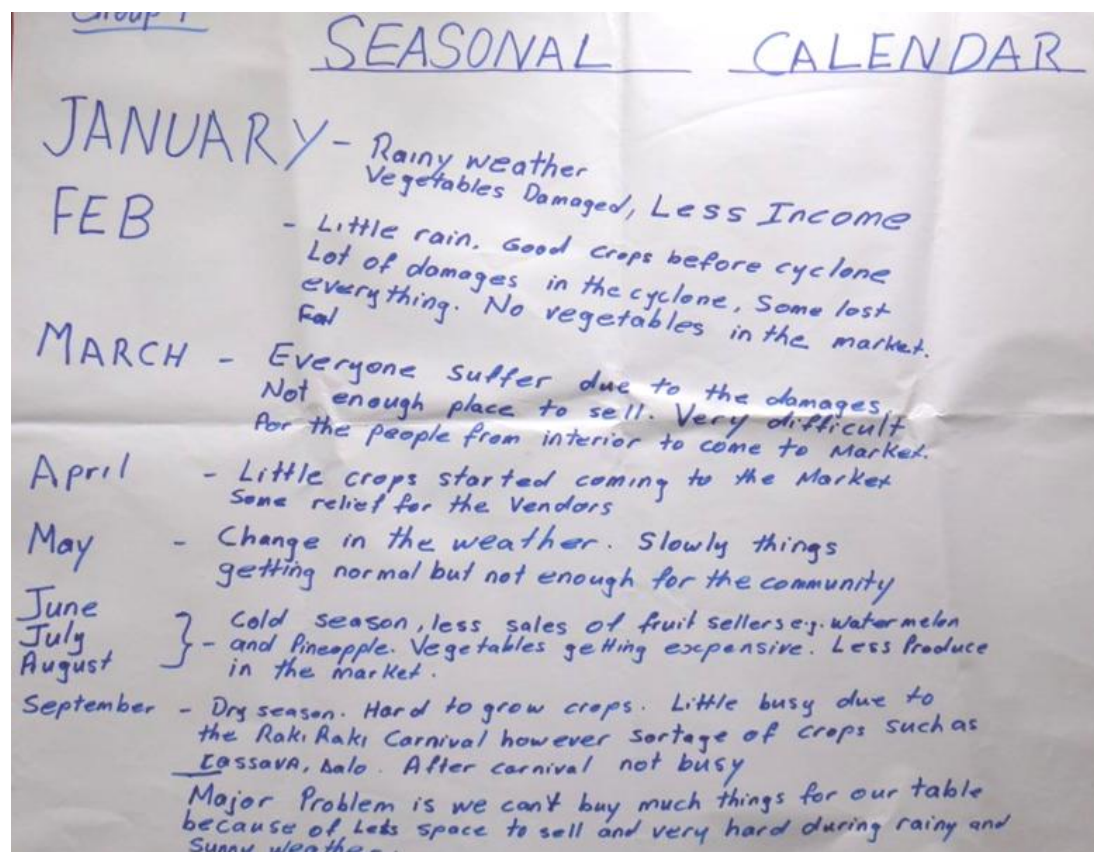


St. John the Baptist Church, St. John’s College, Ovalau Island: still showing the destructive force of Cyclone Winston

Prayer Points:

- Pray for the people of Haiti, many of whom were still recovering from the devastating earthquake of 2010, as they piece their lives back together after Cyclone Matthew; pray especially for those who lost loved ones.
- Give thanks for the post-disaster relief efforts of governments, international aid agencies, communities, individuals and the Church, as each tries to respond as best they can in difficult circumstances, and often with limited resources.
- Pray for the people of Fiji as they continue to recover from the effects of Cyclone Winston; pray especially for those who still live under tarpaulin, awaiting materials to rebuild their homes.
- Given thanks for organisations such as UNWOMEN who assist in strengthening the resilience of communities to the risks of natural hazards.
- Consider how prepared you and your family are to the risks of natural hazards? How can you learn more about disaster risk reduction?

Asked about the year, 2016, so far, one market vendor replied: “worse, worse and worse”. Market vendors, often the most affected following a natural disaster, are also some of the most resourceful, and they turned their hand to sell other produce when fresh food supplies ceased post-Winston. Most initially sold windfall fruits, and then after a couple of weeks, some took to the sea to catch seafood to sell, while others made *roti*, Indian-filled breads, from the flour and tinned-fish rations that families received immediately after the cyclone. But the first few months were very hard, as can be seen in the Rakiraki Market vendors’ summary of the year to date.



Under the six-year, UNWOMEN *Markets for Change* project, that works to economically empower market vendors of Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, most of whom are women, a component looks to further strengthen the resilience of markets and market vendors to natural hazards and climate change.

Vendors already contend with flooding, cyclones and drought, but each market will devise and implement a disaster risk preparedness and response plan, led by the vendors. The message is: natural hazards need not turn into natural disasters.

#Stronger than Winston was the hashtag used on social media in the immediate aftermath of the Fiji cyclone - a resolute stance that points to the resilience and resourcefulness of Pacific people. And now alive to tell, and with so many stories to share, for once the storytelling will not be disproportionate to the events of 20th February 2016. “Life and dry clothes, that’s all that matters,” said 74-year old President of Nadi Vendors’ Association, Lia Saqacala. Long may we listen.

#Stronger than Winston, but not larger than life