



CASE STUDY

No more missing the boat

By Marie Toto + Elissa Webster

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

CARE International in Vanuatu has been working in Erramango, south Vanuatu since 2008. Currently, CARE's WASH, Resilience and Gender programs are working with communities across the island. South River is one of the communities impacted by these programs.

The story of South River

In South River, a village in southern Erramango, life revolves around boats. Boats are the only way to access the outside world, because there are no roads to South River, tucked as it is between the mountains, a big river and the ocean. Even mobile phones signals can't bridge the gap. So boats carry the people of South River to schools, and health centres, and work, and other villages, and boats carry supplies into the village, and crops and fish out to market.

Apart from the challenges of transportation, South River's isolation also exacerbates the risks that go along with landslides, tsunamis, flooding and cyclones – all of which are regular threats that the village has to contend with. But for the people of South River, that's nothing new. They have centuries of tradition, or kastom, to guide them in dealing with whatever disasters come their way, and they have Chief Steven, who has led the village for more than two decades. And of course, they have their boats.

In 2013, CARE International, with the help of the National Disaster Management Office, the Tafea province and its area representatives, identified South River as a vulnerable community. CARE offered the village training in Basic First Aid as well as help to prepare for disasters and the effects of climate change. South River accepted, and CARE ran both a First Aid and Disaster Risk Reduction training session in the village and assisted them to set up their own Community Disaster and Climate Change Committee to lead the local planning efforts. During the training, CARE staff talked about the natural hazards South River faces, how climate change is causing them to change, what can be done to reduce the risk, and how everyone – both the men and the



South River lies between the mountains, the river and the sea. © Marie Toto/CARE



According to kastom, South River's boats would usually be moved to higher ground when it rained heavily during flood season, but this flood took the community by surprise. © Marie Toto/CARE

women – have a part to play in preparing for disasters. Chief Steven and the other leaders were interested in hearing the new ideas, but ultimately, they were confident that the kastom ways would still be the best way to protect their community.

In November 2016, CARE International staff visited South River for refresher training. While it was Chief Steven and the other men who had represented the community in the first round of training, this time, half of the people joining in were women – for the first time in the community's memory, they had left the children with their fathers and come out to learn. And learn they did – that evening, outside houses all around the village women could be seen crouched

over their First Aid manuals and Disaster Risk Reduction handouts, explaining to their husbands all the things they now knew.

It was later that night that heavy rain began to fall – unexpectedly and out of season. Traditionally, the people of South River would move the boats inland when it rained heavily during the flood season, to make sure they wouldn't be damaged or lost if it flooded. But it wasn't flood season, and the village leaders believed that kastom was their best guide. And so the boats stayed in the river, and everyone went to bed.

When the village woke in the morning, disaster had struck. The river had broken its banks through the night, sinking three of South River's precious boats – including Chief Steven's boat. Without the boats, the people of South River had no way to get to school, work, markets, or anywhere beyond South River. Everyone was devastated – especially Chief Steven, his wife and their nine children.

The village got to work and two of the three lost boats were recovered that day. But not Chief Steven's; the river was just too strong. It was a huge blow to South River, but there was a silver lining to the cloud – the village and its leaders realised that climate change can impact South River and that new methods will have to be added to kastom ways to deal with it. Next time disaster strikes – even a disaster worse than losing a boat – they will be better prepared.



Construction of South River's evacuation centre has begun – and the whole community is getting involved to make it happen. © Marie Toto/CARE

“The things the CARE people told us are true – the weather is different now; the seasons aren’t the way they used to be,” says Chief Steven. “Now we know we need to be ready for disasters at any time of year. Our Community Disaster and Climate Change Committee is ready to help our village decide how to prepare and we have new ideas about things we can do.”

The clean up from the flood is just the beginning for South River. Chief Steven and the Community Disaster and Climate Change Committee have expanded their action plan, deciding to move the entire village to higher ground. An evacuation centre, to be used as a refuge from flooding, cyclones, tsunamis and other disasters, has since been constructed on the mountain behind the village. Everyone, men and women alike, worked together to build the safehouse and the women took the lead in fundraising for the project, cooking food to sell at the local market to raise the money they need for materials. But now Chief Steven is planning for the long term as well emergencies, and has asked every household to begin constructing a house on the mountainside near the evacuation centre. The community’s shift won’t be fast, but it will be well planned. And when the next disaster strikes, South River will be ready – they won’t miss the boat again.

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