

Recovery planning with communities at the heart

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Recovery from the cyclone looks like preparing and resourcing our communities/marae to be the first responders as they have been over the last few years through cyclones, floods, drought, and COVID. My dream is that this event prompts investment into roading and infrastructure so sorely needed in our region. – ‘Whangaruru Whānau’



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This paper contains some words in Te Reo Māori, the indigenous language of Aotearoa New Zealand. Te Reo does not easily translate to English; much can get lost in translation and the ‘will to translate’ can be a colonising act. The *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* respects the indigenous languages of countries and, for international readers, has included some (but not all) translations within the paper. Following the oral kanohi-ki-te-kanohi (face-to-face) ways of learning, the author has used translations as the meanings offered to him by elders (not dictionary definitions) and as he understands them. It is understood that other people may have different ways of translating these kupu (words).

The largest emergency in a generation

On 8 February 2023, Cyclone Gabrielle formed in the Coral Sea. New Zealand’s meteorological service issued a severe weather warning for Te Tai Tokerau Northland, including severe rain and wind warnings. On Sunday 12 February, a Regional State of Emergency was declared, which was escalated to a National State of Emergency on 14 February. This was the third time a National State of Emergency had ever been declared in Aotearoa New Zealand. The cyclone hit the northern parts of Northland, increased in intensity further south, and then lashed Northland’s west coast in its wake, with flooding causing evacuations over 3 days.

Major effects of the cyclone were damage to the state highway between Northland and Auckland and access to the region was significantly restricted. There were also interruptions to supplies, power, and communications as well as damage to 86 Northland schools (Northland Civil Defence Emergency Management / Te Rākau Whakamarumarū o Te Tai Tokerau 2023).

Northland farms were significantly affected with nearly 70% of the region’s kūmara (sweet potato) crop destroyed, more than 250 dairy farms lost power, and at least 150 dairy farmers dumped milk. Some stock animals were killed and fruit and vegetable crops damaged.

Measuring the recovery effort for Northland

A critical part of recovery is the ongoing compilation of data. Often, the full picture is not available at the point of transition from response to recovery. The data that emerged in the year following the cyclone showed that:

- nearly 4,000 householders filed insurance claims relating to property damage

- 23,727 Civil Defence hardship grants were paid to Northlanders
- more than 300 Mayoral Relief Fund grants were paid to Northlanders, totalling more than NZ\$1 million
- economic downturn in Northland during the event was estimated to be hundreds of millions of dollars
- geotechnical assessments showed some coastal properties were at risk of falling into the ocean in a future similar event
- the cost of rebuilding public infrastructure, including some basic resilience for the future, would total at least half a billion dollars (Trüdinger 2023).

While Northland was not as affected as other regions in Aotearoa New Zealand, these statistics are a reminder of the extent of this event and why it was the largest emergency in Northland in a generation and the largest recovery that Northland Civil Defence Emergency Management (CDEM) has ever coordinated.

Community consultation for recovery planning

The main guideline for recovery planning in New Zealand, *Strategic Planning for Recovery* (New Zealand Government 2017) states: ‘Communities lie at the core of recovery. Every recovery vision, outcome, relationship and activity should have the community at the core of its purpose’. Within 2 months of the cyclone, Northland CDEM produced the Regional Recovery Plan for Northland (Northland Civil Defence Emergency Management / Te Rākau Whakamarumarū o Te Tai Tokerau 2023). This was completed within a very tight timeframe, but one proposed by community members themselves.

Put simply, a recovery plan asks, ‘what just happened?’ and ‘what should happen next?’.



Northland's Kaipara District experienced extensive flooding.

Image: Kristin Edge, New Zealand Police

Previously, recovery plans in New Zealand have comprised tables of actions the government will take to rebuild infrastructure. This is important and our plan also included those lists. But we asked an additional question: 'how can we keep the people who are at the heart of the work at the heart of the work?'. In other words, if communities are at the heart of recovery, how might we demonstrate this? How might we hear from them?

Northland's Regional Recovery Plan therefore included community voice throughout. The first words in almost every section of the document are the community's words, which set the context for the content that followed.

The community consultation led to another stand-alone document, *Cyclone Gabrielle and Tai Tokerau Northland: Stories of community resilience and messages of support for the rest of Aotearoa New Zealand* (Trüdinger 2023). This document contained stories and voices from communities across Northland, in which community members could see their experiences reflected. It also contained messages of support for others in affected areas around the country. In this way, the community consultation had a wider and important purpose – to be a piece of community work in itself.

Our approach to community consultation

To find out community visions for recovery and community mahi (work) already occurring, Northland CDEM ran a whakawhiti kōrero (community consultation) project in March and April 2023. Consultation asked questions via community settings, face-to-face interviews and in an online survey. The idea behind this community kōrero (discussion) was to give people a chance to 'take a step back' and reflect on their circumstances and those of people in the wider area, networks, communities of concern, schools, workplaces and social groups.

Our approach was based on the idea that community consultation can be a site for relieving social suffering. Rather than extractive, or re-traumatising, it can be healing of people and their communities. Community consultation can also bring to light solutions, not only for the current event, but in preparation for future events that might otherwise be lost. In this way, we can 'rescue' people's lived experience and turn it into actions that benefit communities and help increase resilience.



Members of the Enhanced Task Force Green team with a Northland farmer. Enhanced Task Force Green was a key component of Northland's cyclone recovery and worked with more than 130 farmers across the region.

Image: Freda Walker, Enhanced Task Force Green team

To do this, we asked 4 sets of questions:

- How were you and your community affected by Cyclone Gabrielle?
- During the cyclone, and in the days that followed, what did you find most helpful? What were you thankful for? What examples did you see of people helping each other? What is helping your community get through this?
- What are your hopes and dreams for your community in the coming months after Cyclone Gabrielle? What does 'Recovery' from Cyclone Gabrielle look like to you?
- Some other areas of Aotearoa New Zealand were affected pretty badly. What message of āwhina (support) or encouragement might you have for them at this time?

From over 300 responses, people reflected the diversity of Northland communities. Respondents were Māori, farmers, mums, business owners, people with disability, young people, retirees, deaf people, community groups, emergency services workers as well as people of different faiths.

'Recovery' means different things to people. Beyond the facts of an event, what constitutes recovery will depend on how people and communities experience the event and the meaning they attribute to the experience. Recovery will also depend on what people and communities think should come next based on what they give value to. This means that the stories we heard during the kōrero differed. The visions for recovery efforts, and wider visions for communities' futures, also differed.

Collective narrative practice

The above questions were informed by a community-work approach known as collective narrative practice. Narrative practice is based on the idea that stories are shaping of people's lives, and that people make sense of their experiences in broader cultural contexts (White 2007). Narrative practice is a non-pathologising approach. Rather than undertaking 'needs assessments', evaluation and analysis and then providing a prescription for what others should do, narrative approaches ask questions about people's skills, knowledges and preferences for living. It links these to what people give value to, their histories and cultural practices.

Collective narrative practices that informed this community consultation included:

- a **'de-centred, yet influential' orientation**: When working with people and communities, how might we keep those people at the centre of the work, yet still influence the outcome in a direction that they find helpful?
- **'experience-near' accounts**: How might we elicit accounts of events in people's own words, based on their own experiences (not just an external source's facts, statistics and analysis)?
- **'double-storied' accounts**: How might we ask not only about the real effects of an event, but also how people responded, or made sense of the events?

- **‘landscapes of action’ and ‘landscapes of consciousness’:** How might people be invited to reflect not only on who they ‘are’ but how they might like life to be? For example, we could ask what else might they imagine themselves doing (landscape of action) and what that would mean to them (landscape of consciousness).
- **‘enabling contribution’:** How might the tough times experienced by some people (e.g. in a disaster) contribute to relieving the social suffering of others?
- **‘unity in diversity’ (after Paulo Freire):** How might we create documents, testimonies and historical records that weave together individuals’ identifiable words into some kind of collective whole? (Denborough 2008).

Narrative practice uses other concepts and approaches. For other examples, see Arulampalam *et al.* 2006; Denborough 2008, 2012, 2018; Trudgeon 2022 and White 2007.

The following sections show how these ideas were woven into the questions we asked. These questions were simple, but not simplistic. They are in everyday language such that people of various ages and cultural backgrounds could find them relevant. However, behind the simplicity, they are highly crafted, just as the collected answers were highly curated.

How were you and your community affected by Cyclone Gabrielle?

This question invited people to express their experiences of Cyclone Gabrielle in their own words to provide ‘experience-near’ accounts rather than ‘global’ accounts of statistics and impact analysis.

By purposefully asking about ‘you and your community’, we heard about personal experiences and about people’s wider circles of family, friends, neighbourhoods, workplaces, faith communities and villages. This helped shift the stories about the event from being singular, individualised accounts, to ones that come from concern for others and the concerns of others.

During the cyclone, and in the days that followed, what did you find most helpful? What were you thankful for? What examples did you see of people helping each other? What is helping your community get through this?

This suite of questions is based on the practice of ‘double-storied accounts’ to elicit accounts of hardship, loss and tough times as well as how people responded. These questions were designed to invoke personal and collective or community responses.

Asking what people were thankful for helps orient them in relation to help that was received and creates a context of gratitude. In an emergency, no formal emergency management response is perfect. By asking about what people found helpful, we heard positive accounts of the efforts of police, fire, ambulance Civil Defence, and local government as well of the actions of community organisations, social service providers, neighbours, marae (communal or sacred places) and sports clubs.

By asking ‘what examples did you see of people helping each other?’, we created a chance for other community members’

actions to be witnessed and acknowledged, rather than just casually noticed (or seemingly go unnoticed). We have since learnt that this question – simple as it is – led to people making contact with neighbours, friends, family and even strangers and thanking them for the help they offered.

We were careful to ask ‘what is helping your community get through this?’ as we didn’t want to assume that people had ‘got through’ the event already. Asking about ‘getting through’ acknowledged that personal and community recovery after events can take time. To ask ‘what is helping’ also brought forth what was working, rather than just accounts of impacts or what hadn’t worked.

What are your hopes and dreams for your community in the coming months after Cyclone Gabrielle? What does ‘recovery’ from Cyclone Gabrielle look like to you?

Asking about people’s hopes and dreams allows them to traffic in both the future ‘landscape of action’ and ‘landscape of identity’; what are they hoping might happen next? What would that mean to them? This orientation creates a sense of possibility, hope, preferred direction and ideas for personal, community and government action. The answers to this question showed an array of steps people wanted to take towards their readiness for future events and projects they wanted to do with their neighbours, family or community. They also had practical ideas for things that government could do, which directly informed the Regional Recovery Plan and led to region-wide projects.

Asking ‘what does “recovery” from Cyclone Gabrielle look like to you?’ provided ideas of what the future might look like, but it also did something more profound. It handed over the definition of recovery to community members. While ‘recovery’ is defined under New Zealand legislation, and we included that in the Regional Recovery Plan, we prefaced it with community members’ definitions of recovery. In this way, we were true to the Strategic Planning for Recovery, Director’s Guideline for Civil Defence Emergency Management Groups, which states that communities are at the centre of recovery, while also allowing for multiple definitions of ‘recovery’, in community members’ own words.

Some other areas of Aotearoa New Zealand were affected pretty badly. What message of āwhina (support) or encouragement might you have for them at this time?

This question is based on the narrative practice of ‘enabling contribution’ by creating messages from one community (or, here, a collection of communities) and providing them to others as messages of support, acknowledgment and encouragement. Some responses focused on sharing empathy, love and compassion for others’ experiences. Some moved more into advice offered by community members who had experienced a similar event. *Cyclone Gabrielle and Tai Tokerau Northland: Stories of community resilience and messages of support for the rest of Aotearoa New Zealand* included these messages and was circulated to other regions in Aotearoa New Zealand to share with community members at community meetings and home visits.

The Regional Recovery Plan: some innovations

Based on this community consultation, Northland’s final Regional Recovery Plan set 4 recovery priorities:

- Community wellbeing: given that many people were personally affected.
- Critical infrastructure: due to the damage to all forms of infrastructure.
- Rural support: given the widespread impacts on farmers across the region.
- Marae preparedness: marae (cultural hubs in New Zealand) play a crucial role during emergencies and can do so more easily with marae preparedness plans and resourcing.

The plan also included lists of tasks that each of the 4 councils in the region would undertake as part of the recovery, as is standard practice. However, the plan included:

- integrating community voice throughout the plan
- allowing communities to give their definition of ‘recovery’
- a list of critical infrastructure commitments by the Lifeline Utilities¹ to rebuild infrastructure and increase resilience
- a list of primary industries recovery issues and opportunities, produced by the Northland Adverse Events team, comprising representatives from CDEM, the Ministry for Primary Industries and rural peak bodies and member groups.

As far as we are aware, these things had not been included in recovery plans before in New Zealand.

One year on from Cyclone Gabrielle, a lot of work has occurred within households, workplaces, sports clubs, religious settings, marae, Northland CDEM and government agencies. Much has been achieved, and much work remains.

1. Lifeline Utilities, at www.civildefence.govt.nz/cdem-sector/lifeline-utilities.

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