

Residents' perception regarding household preparedness in areas prone to sudden natural hazards

Writer: Christian Dahl & Emil Persson

Many people around the world live with a constant overhanging threat from natural hazards and the need for preparation is high. In order to be better prepared, it is vital to understand what factors are triggering preparedness. Through carrying out a case study, the authors have been trying to grasp how and why people are preparing. The case study was carried out on Koro Island, Fiji, an area which has experienced devastating natural disasters recently and is prone to several natural hazards. The results showed that some of the factors affecting perception towards preparedness are, values and needs, feeling of safety, and previous experiences.

In February 2016, Fiji was hit by devastating Tropical Cyclone Winston. Wind speeds of 300 km/h were reported. Tropical Cyclone Winston is seen as the strongest cyclone on record in the Southern Hemisphere. Koro Island, a remote island with approximately 4500 inhabitants is seen as the ground zero of the cyclone. The devastating consequences of Tropical Cyclone Winston leads to a vital question when considering preparedness towards future natural hazards: *What are residents' perception regarding household preparedness in areas prone to natural hazards?*

From conducting semi-structured interviews with villagers in Namacu, Koro Island, it can be seen that earlier experiences from cyclones have led to an increased preparedness awareness towards these. Despite carrying out few preparation measures on a daily basis, the villagers are planning on preparing once they get a warning. This is something that the villagers did not use to do before Tropical Cyclone Winston. Despite the changed mind set towards cyclones, the general awareness towards natural hazards other than cyclones has remained unchanged and low among the villagers. Through observations, it can also be seen that the recovery phase after Tropical Cyclone Winston has been slow on Koro Island. People still live in temporary houses and have no electricity.

The plans on how to continue life after a sudden natural hazard are few. The villagers seem to live "in the moment". Despite the slow recovering phase, the villagers are seen as having a high ability to cope with the aftermath of the disaster. The content village lifestyle and the behaviour of "living in the moment" is seen as some of the most vital factors describing the villagers' high ability to cope.

The villagers clearly see themselves accountable for preparing and managing their households during a natural hazard. However, if necessary, they expect external help in the aftermath of a disaster. This would especially be the case if the farms on the island would be destroyed during an event.

In the sense of Koro Island still being deeply affected by Tropical Cyclone Winston, the area is unique compared to many other remote areas that are prone to natural hazards. The study has clearly shown how the concerns on the island were few before the devastating event and that the villagers' awareness regarding household preparedness tended to be lacking. Post the event; it is clear that the villagers' perception regarding risks and preparedness towards cyclones have changed. This combined, indicates how the perception in similar places might be, both before and after a devastating event.