

Cyclone Gabrielle: the Torere experience

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On 5 February 2023, Tropical Cyclone Gabrielle struck the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand and affected parts of Vanuatu and Australia. Torere Marae Controller, Kelvin Tapuke, provides some personal reflections of a marae-centred community response to the cyclone, actions taken by marae and lessons learnt for future events.

Torere is a small coastal settlement located 20 km east of the of Ōpōtiki in the Bay of Plenty area in Aotearoa New Zealand's North Island. It is linked by the bay waters of Te Moana nui a Toi and connected by the steep Raukūmara ranges. Torere faces the 2 volcanic islands of Paepae Aotea and Whakaari. Since 1924, there has been a consistent population of around 180 people. Torere is a marae-centric community and, in recent times, has been affected by colonisation, urbanisation, emigration, technology and transportation.

Cyclone Gabrielle 5 February 2023

Cyclone Gabrielle reached Tairāwhiti on the 13 February 2023 with devastating effect on the region. For only the third time in New Zealand's history, a national state of emergency was declared.

Kelvin's interest in cyclones comes from previous experiences as a cadet in hydrology with NIWA¹ in Gisborne and as a surf lifesaver during Cyclone Bola in 1988. Kelvin attended an environmental team training session with Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Porou and Joint Centre of Disaster Research, Professor David Johnston and PhD student, Jon Mitchell, in January 2023. The training covered the Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS)² and the development of a local contextualised systems. Roles were discussed and were enacted through a scenario situation the following day.

This was the first time that the community had used the full CIMS model. In the past, the

community had only been asked to complete the welfare function of the model, which was successful. There were initial challenges around legitimising the new functional roles. Once each role was explained fully, they adjusted to their normal leadership tangihanga roles.

Torere experience

During the cyclone, a 23-year-old Torere rangatahi [young person] passed away. His tangi [funeral] was held at Torere marae on 13 February 2023. Whānau pani [bereaved family] and the tūpapaku [deceased body] were present during the Torere activation. During tangi, it is customary for the family to stay with the tūpapaku until the conclusion of tangi, which usually occurs over multiple days. Some whānau pani chose to participate in the marae activation and response activities.

On 6 February 2023 at 1pm, the local iwi gathered inside the marae whareniui. A whaikorero [formal speech] was given by Kelvin to explain the context of the cyclone and the potential risks to the community. Iwi leaders correctly identified that the cyclone was immediately over Mayor Island. Iwi members identified a threat of the whipping winds from a south easterly direction rather than the north westerly cyclone eye. An additional potential risk to the local community was the recently logged Torere 64 Pine Tree Block. The area is situated on the steep Raukūmara ranges and the area had a large amount of pine debris left behind after harvesting the trees.

This presented the potential for landslides in the forestry block. There also existed flooding risk from the Wainui River that had potential to block roads and damage houses and Torere marae.

To effectively prepare and respond to the cyclone, the recently learned CIMS was operationalised by iwi members at Torere marae. Kelvin was mandated by the iwi to be the Cyclone Gabrielle Torere Marae Controller and roles were explained and allocated to the group. The decision was made to adapt the traditional CIMS categories into 9 thematic functions that were of particular concern for the group. These were: public communication, food security, intelligence, evacuation centre, communication, road security, power, energy sources and whānau pani [bereaved family].

Plans for each of the functions were drafted and taped to the 2 central tables. Function leaders were checked on throughout the activation to ensure they had a good understanding of their roles. Only the mandated Torere CIMS function leader would communicate to the Marae Controller. This was to avoid confusion caused by duplication and misinformation.

Public communication: Communication to the iwi was regularly updated inside the wharenuī at 7pm, 10pm and 7am. Communication via Facebook was sent out to quell nerves of relatives living outside the iwi rohe [region].

Food security: A refrigerated trailer was hired from Ōpōtiki and all the food for the tangi was transferred to the trailer. The chiller trailer and some multi-gas cookers were attached to utility vehicles and were ready for evacuation. Multi-gas cookers were offered by individual whānau.

Intelligence: An attendance register was collected and housed at the marae. Further information of the households was gathered by 2 female leaders in the district of Hinahinanui, Torere and Hawai. Houses were surveyed for individual needs and impending notice. Poverty in this area meant that most residents do not have communication outside their homes. Notices were issued through the intelligence team that Te Kura o Torere would become the evacuation centre if people required accommodation and shelter. Animals were moved to higher ground. In total, 129 people were housed at Torere marae with tangi attendees making up most of this number.

Evacuation centre: A centre was set up at Te Kura o Torere [local school]. Mattresses, linen, toilets, first-aid essentials and food were provided. An attendance register was established. The evacuation centre leader stayed throughout the night to welcome evacuees. A classroom fire was lit to provide warmth and lights were left on and the school doors were open to indicate that the space was open and ready.

Communication: The community was informed that the Torere marae wharekai would act as the main

communication centre. Updates would be held at the marae wharekai if needed. If the marae complex had to be evacuated, this function would move to the Torere school. Social media communication was not acted on as all households were in motion. The Ōpōtiki Council radio system had been moved without mandate to the Assembly of God building. The return to Te Kura o Torere was requested by the intelligence team. The new Ōpōtiki District Controller has been informed.

Road security: State Highway 35 bridges were monitored hourly by Kelvin throughout the night from Hinahinanui to Hawai. Flash flooding from the Raukūmara River arrived with little warning. Culverts were cleared by local people. Knowledge of the aftermath of Cyclone Bola informed Tapuke actions.

Power: Downed power lines in Waiotaha interrupted electricity supply in the Ōpōtiki District from around 8.30pm to 10pm.

Energy sources: Alternative sources like firewood and gas bottle supplies were identified.

Whānau pani: Whānau pani decided to stay at the low-lying wharenuī.

Preparations: A utility vehicle was stationed immediately outside the wharenuī to evacuate the tūpapaku [deceased body]. All other vehicles were prepacked and turned around for speedy evacuation to the school. All who stayed were aware of the risks.

The weather was relatively calm through the night with the last check on leaders at 10.30pm. Due to Kelvin's knowledge of the speed of flash flooding he continued to check conditions throughout the night.

The Ōpōtiki District emergency ceased at 7.30am the following morning. The tangi continued the following day. Kelvin and the other tangihanga attendees in the area saw a New Zealand Airforce C130 flying by at low altitude doing a site check of the Tairāwhiti region.

Lessons learnt

The main lessons taken from this experience is that there is a need for further CIMS practice in the Torere community to prepare for emergency events. Of importance is the immediate need to establish the Ōpōtiki District radio at Te Kura o Torere (the Torere School). Preparation and practice need to be undertaken on a Ōpōtiki District-wide basis.

Endnotes

1. NIWA at <https://niwa.co.nz/climate-and-weather/regional-climatologies/gisborne>.
2. Coordinated Incident Management System at www.civildefence.govt.nz/resources/coordinated-incident-management-system-cims-third-edition.