**Learning from Vanuatu with Nelly Caleb**

***Edited transcript***

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[Lightly rhythmic major key guitar music, with watery/peaceful nature sounds underneath. Music volume fades as Áine talks]

**Áine**: Welcome to Enabling Commons, a place for conversations with activists, experts and scholars at the intersections of disability and climate change. The podcast is produced by the Disability Inclusive Climate Action Research Program based at McGill University. I'm your host, Áine Kelly-Costello. Today, I talk to Nelly Caleb, National Coordinator of the Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association. Nelly knows the compounding impacts of disasters intimately, because in Vanuatu they don't stop. We talk about what Nelly's learned from recent cyclones and years of advocacy in disaster risk response—covering everything from gathering timely data to evacuation, center accessibility and housing insecurity. A quick note that the interview audio is patchy in places. There is a link to the transcript in the show notes—now, here's our conversation.

[Music fades out]

**Áine**: I'm talking with Nelly Caleb. It's great to have you here on Enabling Commons. Welcome, Nelly. Could you introduce yourself for us, please?

**Nelly**: My name is Nelly Caleb, I’m the national coordinator of the Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association—VDPA, for short. VDPA is the only national umbrella organization of people with disabilities in Vanuatu. It has state and local organizations of persons with disabilities in six provinces across Vanuatu. We are a self-help organization; we do not have any co-funding. But our mandate is to advocate for rights and promote abilities for people with disabilities. Our vision is to work towards an inclusive and accessible Vanuatu, where all individuals with disabilities [are] empowered and can participate fully on an equal basis with others. So our office is in Luganville, Santo, the second town of Vanuatu.

**Áine**: Thank you, Nelly. That's great to hear about the Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association. I just wanted to ask a little bit more about that: so what advocacy areas are some of the things that you're focusing on and what strategies are you using to to do that advocacy?

**Nelly**: Okay—thank you, we do individual advocacy, we do self-advocacy, we do systemic advocacy, we advocate in different levels: community, province, national, international and regional. Our advocacy is mainly on the rights of people with disabilities. And also, we are advocating for disability inclusion in all policies, programs, plans for government and also stakeholders, and even the private sector—CEOs—to make sure their plans and policies are inclusive, even the laws as well. We have 301 laws, and 101 laws are not compliant with the CRPD (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities). So, our focus is on the laws that need to be changed, to be in line with the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

**Áine**: Advocating across that huge range of stakeholders and across so many different issues, that it almost feels overwhelming to go through them as the CRPD covers, as you mentioned. So I know that one of the things, being in the Pacific, that is really up there in terms of advocacy priorities is climate change. So I wonder, just to paint a picture—and particularly for listeners who are not familiar with the Pacific context—could you describe some of the realities of climate change for people with disabilities in Vanuatu?

**Nelly**: Pacific is prone to natural disasters and particularly Vanuatu. Vanuatu has all the hazards; I always tell my friends [and] colleagues that if you want to experience some of the hazards, like volcanos, earthquakes or cyclones, come to Vanuatu, we have all of them.

[Áine laughs]

**Nelly**: But in Vanuatu, the National Disaster Management Office, and also the Vanuatu Material Meteorological Department has come up to say that Vanuatu is receiving 7 to 8 disasters every week, in different areas in Vanuatu. So, that means that we are having a volcano here, volcano heavy ash fall here. And in other parts, they are having [indistinct] in all the other parts of Vanuatu, and it really damages … It's really hard for them, you know or for instance, I think before last week we had these two cyclones—TC Judy and TC Kevin, the same week.

**Áine**: TC is a tropical cyclone.

**Nelly**: and it's like Category 4, and Category 3. And then we have a big earthquake happening on that day as well. So, we are having a lot of disasters in Vanuatu.

**Áine**: The intensity of Cyclone Judy and Cyclone Kevin and an earthquake all happening within 72 hours is just unimaginable to me. I really want to just highlight what you were saying there about the compounding effects of all of them, right? Because it's not like you get to recover properly from one of them before the next one comes along.

**Nelly**: That’s right.

**Áine**: So I was wondering if you can talk a little bit about living in such a high level of uncertainty and instability? Like what is that looking like for people with disabilities that your organization's working at?

**Nelly**: For people with disabilities—they face a lot of challenges at the moment. At the moment in Vanuatu has a state of emergency for six months. Because the first time--before, there's a state of emergency, in two provinces across Vanuatu. But now, they found out that the damages, or the disaster, reaches all the islands of Vanuatu. But, you know, the ocean or the high tides destroy their homes, some by, you know, strong winds. They're really in the center of the cyclone; they face a lot of challenges. And we thought of people with disabilities—they are really, really marginalized at this time.

Just this week, you know, on Monday, our members with the Gender & Protection Cluster and other clusters deployed to some of the islands, in the southern province and even in the Shefa province as well, where they did a rapid assessment.

**Áine**: Mm hmm. You know, when disabled people are losing their housing, or maybe they're being displaced from their normal sources of livelihood, what's actually happening on the ground for disabled people? Would you be able to give some examples of that?

**Nelly**: Well, at the moment, we still do not have any funds to do our assessment, to our members. But I have contacted our partner office in Vila, which is Vanuatu site for people with disabilities, they will do a quick data validation in some of the affected areas. Otherwise, with the experience that we had with TC (Tropical Cyclone) Harold in 2020—it's a category five cyclone. Like we did a data validation and we found that many members with disabilities have lost their houses that [were] totally damaged. Even some had to evacuate to their family members, but their family members did not treat them properly: sometimes they [would] eat once a day or sometimes they (the families) gave them very little food. Sometimes, they even chase them out from their homes that they do not even have the food or enough shelter too, you know?

**Áine**: Mmmm hmmmmm.

**Nelly**: So, it's really hard for our members. But then we had some others, like Vanuatu Skills Partnership and came up to to look at our list, our reports—the assessment report and said that building houses for some of our members who are really marginalized. Their homes were blown away and even they don't know where to live because they don't have family members there to go and live with them. The other family’s in another island, and it's not safe. They managed to build houses for our members, and they are very good houses. But, you know, we never know. But yeah, I think one thing [that] was good this year is data collection. During TC Harold, Sanma province—where my office is—was really damaged by TC Harold and we did a data collection in Sanma and also part of [the] Penama Province, and even part of Malampa, all of our members are not left out because they have received relief supplies and also non-food items and even food too—we distributed food to them.

**Áine**: So, you have a good database showing like, these are your members, this where they live and this is how you get supplies.

**Nelly**: Yes. And it was good because different people have different [needs]—it's like one size doesn't fit all. When we do the assessment or we do the data validation, we ask them questions. Okay, they told us that they need this. So of the data validation, we have taken the list. Okay we [saw] that with someone really needs this item, or really needs a house that's when we give them. It means that we cannot give all the buckets to all of the members, but when we do the data validation we find that somebody needs a bucket or didn't need any [of] this, you know? Their needs were met after the data validation.

**Áine**: Hmm. So the data validation is a way of contacting every member that your association would sort of deploy, and asking them “What is it that you need?”.

**Nelly**: Yes. And even, we do snowballing.

**Áine**: Okay.

**Nelly**: And we found out that many who have not come and registered their names. And also, one good thing is [that] they know that we are giving out NFI’s.

**Áine**: So that's relief supplies which are non-food items?

**Nelly**: And also food to people with disabilities. So they just came and surrendered that, “Oh, I have a child with a disability” or “I have an elderly person”, which is really good.

**Áine**: Yeah. So just to explain “snowballing”—for people who might not know that term—so is that basically that you would reach out to members but then you would also encourage them to help you reach more people? Is that how that works?

**Nelly**: Yes. You know, first data validation, it's like, I think because of the attitudinal barriers, parents don't want to, you know, take their babies out or even their family members to tell them "we have a member here". But when our volunteers started giving out items and even food supplies to the members so [that] they could see the importance of the data validation, they just come and just come with their babies, they come with their members to say, “Oh, we have one here.” It really updates our registration.

**Áine**: That's really good insight, I think, into reaching people who, because of cultural attitudes and other barriers perhaps, do not feel like they want to ask for help, maybe? Showing them “Okay, this is what we're able to tangibly do for you.” I also just wanted to touch there on some of the intersections for people with disabilities who are women or minority genders as well—how the effects of climate change might be playing out for them as well.

**Nelly:** Yes, it is true that women with disabilities face a lot of barriers. Like, they are not strong—you know, some are single mothers with a disability. They really find it difficult to, you know, put food on the table at the end of the day. And it was really hard for them. And as I've mentioned, talking about the experiences from last TC Harold, these two criseses took place at the same time: COVID-19 and also TC Harold, Category 5. Most of the the women, like when they they had very little food, they just gave it to their children, and even their husband, and they don't have any left. Sometimes, they just slept at night without food, because they wanted to make sure that their families ate. And most of the women are women with disabilities who have had some jobs in some of the services in towns. And when this COVID came, it really gave them a big challenge because [there was] nobody to put food on the table. And it was really hard—even those who looked after their moms or had diabetes. And it's really hard for them to put food on the table and also buy dignity kids for their mother.

**Nelly:** And it was so difficult—I remember one night when I was sleeping in the middle of the night, I could hear one baby crying like he’s…two years old? He cried a lot. So I had to take my thoughts and walk to their house and ask, “Why is this baby crying too much? And they said, “She's hungry because we ate two bananas—small bananas—each. And she wasn't satisfied.” And mum tried to tell her that we didn't have food, but she insist to cry, he wanted to eat. And so I had to come back and get some food from the kitchen to give one to the baby to stop crying. But otherwise it's really hard—like what I've mentioned. Sometimes some had two meals a day, sometimes they had one meal.

**Nelly:** Yeah, so it's really hard for women with disabilities, you know? But some [of] their homes were destroyed. One is a member of Little People, she has her own home. And then when the cyclone came, her house [was] damaged and she came a couple of times and always said, “Can you find someone to build a house for me? Because my sister-in-law is like, chasing me away every time, because she said, “I need to go and rebuild my house and stay there—there are many people at home.” So she cried a lot. But at the end, we spoke to ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency)—it's an INGO Seventh Day Adventist organization and they managed to build her a home, so she went and stayed.

**Áine**: Thank you for sharing those experiences, and I think it shows really powerfully how, you know, disasters without adequate relief funding lead to food insecurity for people, very immediately, very tangibly. And I just wanted to pick up on there: what would it be that you would be advocating for the Vanuatu government, and perhaps also to donors to be funding in order to alleviate a lot of these barriers and perhaps in the sort of “prevention” area as well?

**Nelly**: I think what we did last time is to advocate to the government, to tell them, “Please, serve our members first--people with disabilities with food first, before serve others". Or even "the elderly, serve them first. People with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, give them food, water before you serve others."

**Nelly**: But what I wanted to say to the government: if they can come up with a social protection scheme in place, or a mechanism in place so that our members won't go hungry when there is a crisis like this, because they will have money. most times we found out that when there's a cyclone or disaster, after 2 to 3 days, people with disabilities hardly find money and even food to eat. It was hard for them. So, I really wanted the government to maybe do a disability disaggregated data to the whole of Vanuatu. If they could collect disaggregated data, so that we know different basic needs that people with disabilities had, and also to know how many people with disabilities live in Vanuatu.

**Nelly**: And to make sure that there’s a self-protection mechanism in place or social welfare benefits in place, so that it goes to people with disabilities who do not have any work or they are unemployed or even they are really, you know, really marginalized in a way that they cannot find a job. So, these social welfare benefits go to them so that even if there's a disaster, they can still survive—they still have money or they still have cash vouchers to go and, you know, find food for them in the shop or in the market.

**Áine**: Yeah, because I'm hearing at the moment, so Vanuatu's Disability Promotion Advocacy Association is able, by the sounds of it, to give some supplies and meet some needs. But, it sounds like you don't have the sufficient funding to meet all of the need out there. Right? And that the government needs to be providing a lot more in the form of social protection.

**Nelly**: Yeah.

**Áine**: Another thing I wanted to ask you about is, I think, your organization was really critical to making sure that one of Vanuatu's core climate policies called the enhanced nationally determined contribution meaningfully includes people with disabilities, because that policy has got a commitment to mainstream the rights of persons with disabilities.

**Nelly:** Well, I would say it's really compliance—the climate change and the disaster risk reduction policy. By itself, it’s really compliant with the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. But very little has, you know, has been done. Even, we started our advocacy way back in 2015 on inclusion of people with disabilities. I remember starting in different classes, plus the meetings in Port Vila to talk about the inclusion of people with disabilities. Then we had an assessment. There we had a survey and we had the findings. We sent them out to the government responsibility and even the NGOs, INGOss. And we could see the difference in 2018 when Oxfam would see the cash transfer program, and even during the heavy ash fall from the Ambae volcano we had to evacuate. And that's when we saw changes, but not too much. But when TC Harold hit in 2020, we could see that this change was going: like there was an increase of people with disabilities.

**Nelly:** But it takes time—we cannot sleep overnight and say, “Oh, this changes.” No; it takes time. For example, we have residents concerned about people [who] have to travel with their assistive device or their personal assistance. But in 2018 in 2018, the members with high support needs were chartered their plane, to fly to Santo. They were travelling to run away from the heavy ash fall from volcanoes. But they left their wheelchairs and their personal assistance behind, saying that “They're blocking the space—cargo space.” So when they're insulted they find it very difficult to help each other, so I had to go and tell the people at the emergency operations center to make sure send their personal assistants and assistive devices to come today, because they are not enjoying their rights like anyone else.

**Áine**: Oh, wow. No, that's terrible. And I just wanted to come back because, yeah, that was a good example of how policy change, over time, can start to lead to changes but not need as much change as you want, right?

**Nelly**: But when there’s any disaster or any activity, we just advocate for VDPA and its members to be a part of the, you know, any activity before last year. Last year, they included us in the DRR day.

**Áine**: That's Disaster Risk Reduction Day.

**Nelly**: They want people with disabilities to participate. But actually, in some of the activities, they exclude people with disabilities. But we always knock on their door and say, “hey, Don't forget us.”

[Brief guitar interlude, theme from from intro/outro music]

**Áine**: At this point in our conversation, Nelly had to leave, and we picked up where we left off on another day. This time, the audio quality is not as good, and Nelly is feeling under the weather. But she shares crucial insights for governments and everyone working in disaster risk management and response. We start off talking about the need for disability-inclusive policy.

**Nelly**: The government or donors or partners need to make sure that they include people with disabilities and the organization in the design, implementation and recovery rehabilitation.

**Áine**: In some provinces in Vanuatu, rapid response efforts are still leaving people with disabilities behind.

**Nelly**: I saw the report yesterday that the distributions went to the communities in different areas, but they didn't even mention if people with disabilities were given some of the cartons of water. They didn't even mention anything; the report wasn’t inclusive.

**Áine**: That’s disappointing.

**Nelly**: They just said that the reports were given to communities, but they didn't even mention. And so my key message is to make sure that the [indistinct] reps or the situation reports, they have to make sure the reports are inclusive, so we know that people with disabilities are not left behind because they're the ones that are really marginalized in those times.

**Áine**: And that sounds like it's, you know, equally important in all countries that governments are paying attention to that, and not assuming that if you just say, like, “We've given it to local communities or we've given resources to marginalized communities” that disabled people actually will be catered for, because I guess we know that usually, if they're not specifically mentioned, then they're not. Right? As alluded to earlier, there's also a huge need for better data.

**Nelly**: Make sure the assessment forms are inclusive of persons with disabilities. Somebody using the Washington Group's sets of questions.

**Áine**: The Washington Group set of questions are designed to gather disability disaggregated data. They ask about difficulties with seeing, hearing, mobility, communication, cognition and self-care. And the difference that this data collection makes cannot be overestimated.

**Nelly**: What we did during TC Harold—because TC Harold hit the province where the VDPA’s offices are in—that’s when we did the data validation activity. And at the end we did enough assessments—at the end, we found out [that] of all our members they did not receive the kinds of needs, or the needs that they wanted, and everybody receives relief supplies from from the government and even their partners in the crowd.

**Áine**: Wow, so what you're saying is that with the better data you were able to actually track, within your province, that the supplies were getting to people?

**Nelly**: Yeah.

**Áine**: Next, we talk about evacuation centers and the detail of how to design them accessibly, and keep them safe and ensure people's privacy is so important.

**Nelly**: Make sure that all the evacuation centers are accessible and inclusive for people with disabilities. Because at the moment, most of our evacuation centers are built like, they're not built for evacuation centers, but their classrooms and also churches, are, not only the ramps because they're the practical changes that we saw is that they do have ramps but they forgot that the person has to go inside the space, in moving around and also those who are blind you know, or those who have low vision must have enough lights in the evacuation centers. And even the space for all to use can move around in sight. And to make sure that in the evacuation center, we need privacy; we need private rooms for people who have high-support needs, and also to make sure that the washrooms are close to the evacuation centers. With the experience that we had before we found out that sometimes there's only one washroom, and all the men and women go in one washroom, and it's risky for women, and even women with disabilities.

**Áine**: A content warning here that there's a brief discussion of sexual violence. If you'd like to skip that, then fast forward one minute, and join us back.

**Nelly**: And there are not enough lights, too, in the washroom. And sometimes there's abuse. And I remember, in 2018, we had this mass evacuation from the Ambae peak, and they came the there was like this rape case. And they said, it's because the bathrooms are a long way, and there are not enough lights. And I think one of the making was is to make sure that those security guards, those security people who are standing outside make sure that it is inclusive for women. Because sometimes they would blame that there's outsiders coming to rape the evacuees, but maybe it's the security men who rape, who you know, are standing outside. So make sure it’s inclusive for women so they know what's going on outside.

**Áine**: So just to recap here, we need disaster policy and rapid response to be inclusive explicitly of people with disabilities. We need the disability disaggregated data. We need evacuation centers to be designed with accessibility and safety front of mind. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is currently drafting a general comment on persons with disabilities in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies, and Nelly says that all of these considerations need to be taken into account in that general comment process as well. And finally, Nelly tells us why social welfare benefits are so important to making sure people with disabilities have their rights met during disasters.

**Nelly**: Maybe social welfare benfits for all memebers because in these times, they’re really discriminated in a way that maybe their homes are destroyed, and they've been living with their families. And now, I believe that their families discriminate them in a way—maybe giving them food once a day, or even chasing them away from home. That's the experience that they have. And it’s really important for these social welfare benfits to be in place to all [of] our members during these times, like they can pay for their own water. And because now, the water systems are no longer used, and people really need water to survive. With these benefits, they can buy their water [or] they can buy their own food and enjoy their rights like anyone else, if the system is in place.

**Áine**: Exactly. Good policy means that people with disabilities have the same access to their rights as everyone else does. That is such a crucial point to finish with. Nelly, thank you so much for your time and insights.

**Nelly**: Thank you so much, Áine.

[Lightly rhythmic major key guitar music, with watery/peaceful nature sounds underneath, same as intro. Music volume fades as Áine talks]

**Áine**: Please help us spread the word about Enabling Commons. Share it with a friend or link to it in your organization's newsletter. With thanks to Rose Paquet for producing transcripts and podcast promotion. The music is composed and produced by Sam Morgan. Audio production and hosting is by me, Áine Kelly-Costello.To find out more about the intersections of disability and climate change, visit disabilityinclusiveclimate.org

[Music comes up to foreground briefly again before fading out]