

'I am 61 years old now, but I have never seen such a thing before. It was raining a lot, with very violent winds but it was also as if there was a violent earthquake, moving all the house. Roofs were taken away by the wind. We could find some, but some are lost. Now there is no electricity and no current water in town. The national road is also cut. Goods prices have all gone up. We are feeling at a loss!'

These words were spoken by an MU community co-ordinator in south-east Madagascar, after Cyclone Batsirai hit the region in February 2022.

Madagascar has the most powerful cyclones in Africa, as well as widespread flooding and droughts. Earlier in February, Cyclone Ana caused huge destruction across communities in central and northern regions of the country. Batsirai followed from the west, causing huge damage in eastern, central and southern areas. Later in the month, devastating flooding was caused by Cyclone Dumako in eastern Madagascar, followed by Emnati in the south-west area. This many significant cyclones in the space of one month is highly

unusual and very worrying for the church and the whole country.

Since 2018, MU Madagascar has prioritised building community resilience against natural and manmade disasters. In partnership with Episcopal Relief & Development (ERD), they have worked with some of the most affected communities to help them identify challenges, find solutions and become more resilient to climate change.

Each community has been encouraged to set up their own disaster committee, with a designated person working with local

DEALING WITH DEVASTATION

Naomi Herbert **reports on the situation in Madagascar and how MU is involved**





community leadership to record events and mobilise their community. Each was trained in community mobilisation, risk assessment and disaster risk reduction implementation. For initial training, the church partnered with the local Red Cross to receive practical emergency response skills and knowledge for times of cyclones, flooding and other natural disasters. The idea is for communities to be as prepared as they can be and, therefore, less likely to need much relief after the disaster, as well as building collaboration within communities to ensure no one is left out in disaster response plans.

In the north east, the Diocese of Toamasina is badly impacted by the annual cyclones. The training has helped communities unite to prepare for and respond to cyclones. 'Before this training we didn't work together, we only looked after ourselves,' says Lydie Ermine Ramiarinirina, one of the community leaders in Analamalotra. 'Now we work hand in hand; no one is separate.'

At the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November 2021, the UN declared parts of south-west Madagascar as on the

brink of the world's first climate-induced famine. Dry riverbeds scar the landscape. Some families have to walk at least 10 kilometres to fetch their daily water. Others resort to digging deep holes in the dried-up riverbeds to find water. For many other communities, their chance of survival is to walk tens of kilometres to WFP camps to get food aid. This area of the country has experienced an extended drought for the past 40 years.

In the Diocese of Toliara, where the worst affected communities have been decimated by terrible drought now turned to famine, MU had to offer practical assistance before they could do any resilience training. Many of the households they met were too weak to work due to lack of food. Ambovombe is one such community.

'Before the resilience training came, in the morning, we only drank hot water,' says 45-year-old mother and grandmother Manantena. 'At noon, we went to the forest and looked for cactus to eat. In the evening, we cooked one kilo and a half of rice and ate it with sweet potato leaves or cooked dry beans with maize. These were the meals which the



Madagascar, the world's fourth largest island, is one of the lowest emitters of carbon in the world. Approximately 15% of the population have access to electricity. 90% live below the poverty line, earning less than \$2 per day, struggling to get enough to eat.

MADAGASCAR

17 people in my home shared every day.'

MU helped with immediate food needs, then gave them sweet potato stems which, as a community, they planted. 'As we were so weak, we could not even stand on our feet so, we were given food for a whole week by Mothers' Union members who cooked the rice and brought it to us... Then, we became stronger and were able to move and work,' Manantena recalls. 'We were encouraged by the church. We were given maize seeds and stems of sweet potatoes to plant as they easily grow here, because they do not need much water.' Now her family eats sweet potato leaves with rice and dries the potato skins to prevent their deterioration.

Through resilience training, communities have learnt new agricultural techniques to grow produce that is either drought or flood resistant, depending on where they are in the country. Communities have worked together to clear rubbish from neglected rain channels, which causes disease and flooding in the cyclone season; rehabilitate an irrigation pipe to drive water to rice fields; and lay a new pipeline where cassava, sweet potatoes and other vegetables are growing for the first time in 10 years! Developing new income-generating activities, such as cheese production and duck rearing, has meant households are not reliant on one source of income.

Manantena means 'hope' in English. She says: 'Mothers' Union members supported us, giving us hope and confidence and providing us food first, but afterwards, giving us maize seeds and sweet potatoes stems to grow, for a more sustainable livelihood.'



The impact of climate change is visible and real.

**Bishop Samitiana Jhonson,
Diocese of Toliara**



MAKE A MOTHER'S DAY 2022

Every year members around the world come together to celebrate an important day in the Mothers' Union calendar – Mothering Sunday. To mark this special occasion this year, our Make a Mother's Day campaign focused on Dophine, a Mothers' Union member in Madagascar.

As a subsistence farmer and mother of seven children, Dophine is dependent on the crops she grows to provide for her family and earn an income. However, as this article illustrates, there are many challenges to daily life in Madagascar. Climate change has a serious effect on rainfall and subsequent crop harvests.

Thankfully, Dophine received support for herself and her family from a local group of MU members, who gave them seeds for crops such as sweet potato, which are more resilient to Madagascar's changing climate.

We hope you spent time with loved ones this Mothering Sunday and, like members in Madagascar who gave seeds to Dophine, bought a Gift of Resilience to support women and girls around the world vulnerable to change.

If you gathered in a group to celebrate this day, we would love to see any photos or hear any stories you have to share. Please do send these to communication@mothersunion.org.