

Across the divide: how an isolated community stayed connected

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When severe Tropical Cyclone Debbie destroyed the main access road into the small, rural community of Sarina Range in 2017, it left 500 residents physically and socially isolated. The story of how they coped through this period is one of connection to people and place.

Behind the township of Sarina in Queensland, a steep road winds its way up the mountain and levels out across a plateau dotted with cattle properties and hobby farms. The road has had 'slips' before and a recently installed sign commemorates a century of landslips caused by heavy rains.

But no one knows how to design a road to withstand the amount of rain dumped on it during Tropical Cyclone Debbie, reported as approximately 1000 mm in under 24 hours. The equivalent of 10,500 truckloads of soil, trees, rocks and boulders buried sections of the road or washed out from under it. The road would take 18 months to reconstruct and residents would need to travel alternative routes taking an hour and half to get to Sarina that was usually a 20-minute drive.

Lives changed

Several families moved away or split up to be closer to services, education, employment and support networks. Parents quit part-time jobs to transport children to school or to activities. Thirty children attended a primary school at the base of the range. Education Queensland erected a 'pop-up' school building as a satellite campus on the grounds of the local Country Women's Association hall, the only permanent infrastructure in the community.

Social isolation set in. Those who did not need to travel daily changed to weekly trips into Sarina due to time, fear of negotiating the dirt road or cost. Many residents ceased evening activities to avoid travelling in the dark. The elderly and people with disabilities were particularly affected. Additional commute times for workers meant they had less time for social activities. The students at the temporary school rarely saw their classmates further down the mountain range.

Anxiety, fear and cost

Recovery workers identified a high prevalence of depression, as well as anxiety and fear among residents due to increased emergency response times. Locals were deeply concerned that flooding on the alternative routes could isolate them in the next wet season. The

costs of increased fuel use and vehicle wear and tear over this period of the road closure was estimated at \$1.6 million by the Secretary of the Sarina Range Community Association. Newstart recipients missed appointments because they could not afford fuel, leading to financial penalty.

With a mix of funding via the National Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements and philanthropic sources, material assistance was provided (e.g. fuel cards) as well as mental health services and resilience-building activities. Mackay Regional Council supported the development of a community association to represent the community's interests, sourced an emergency medical chest, coordinated recovery activities and delivered social activities. Red Cross trained 20 residents in first aid, increasing people's capacity and confidence to respond to medical emergencies. The Department of Transport and Main Roads kept the community informed of reconstruction works. Queensland Health provided mental health services and the George Street Neighbourhood Centre delivered counselling and financial counselling.

Connections

Artists were engaged to work with the school to commemorate the event in a mural. Children contributed drawings that were digitally stitched together into one image depicting life at the top and bottom of the mountain range with the broken road in between. Sarina Range residents became experts at localised emergency planning. They built knowledge of local hazards, residents' skills and emergency communication and they insisted on close connection with emergency managers. This work bore fruit when Sarina Range was threatened by bushfires. Residents worked with the Local Disaster Management Group to create a detailed (and thankfully, unused) evacuation plan.

Since then, life returned to normal once residents could use the road. But while some 'debonding' occurred as expected, the stronger connections between neighbours means the community association is still going; with a focus on improving local emergency communications, delivering social events and maintaining the collective identity forged over the year and half Sarina Range was isolated.