An innovative Disaster Risk Management program developed by Caritas Australia has armed some of the most vulnerable people in our region with nursery rhymes and simple actions to minimise the damage in this year’s cyclone season.

The South Pacific cyclone season begins in November which sees our region exposed to more cyclones and floods until April 2013.

Globally, developing countries suffer the greatest costs when a disaster hits – more than 95% of all deaths caused by natural disasters occur in these countries with least resistance. In our region this burden is exacerbated due to the number of small island states, some of which do not rise far above sea level.

Caritas Australia’s Disaster Risk Management project in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu has a primary aim of getting the most vulnerable people in disasters, young children, to safety as quickly as possible. Children are taught nursery rhymes with accompanying actions that contain memorable and simple emergency response information.

Watch the video

Adam Elliott, Caritas Australia’s Solomon Islands and Vanuatu Program Manager, says: “We wanted to help local teachers work with their students to be more aware of emergencies and to have a sense of what they should do in the event of an emergency. The activity targets children in kindergarten and lower primary school however we have seen youth up to early secondary age involved in the activity.”

In 2009 a violent earthquake and tsunami struck neighbouring Samoa and killed over 190 people, many of whom were children. In January 2007 an earthquake and tsunami struck Gizo in the Solomon Islands destroying over 200 homes and killing more than 50. It was these specific disasters that sparked the ideas for this unique and successful program.

Mr Elliott explains: “These upheavals cannot be prevented and are extremely difficult to predict, so it makes sense to forearm people. We were particularly concerned about the children. At many times of the day children are away from their parents and it is possible they will panic or make the wrong decisions as they respond to emergencies. We wanted to develop an innovative project that was able to deeply ingrain this potentially life-saving information into children. We knew that in a frightening situation the information had to be immediate to recall, indelible and natural. We discovered that simple and familiar songs and actions ticked all of these boxes.”
“We are extremely excited by the level of participation and engagement of the teachers in the project. They have really taken it and made it their own, writing the songs in their local languages and diligently, even passionately teaching them to their classes. As a result whole communities are experiencing a sense of ownership over the project.”

The success of the project does not end there, rather, it is expanding in unanticipated ways.

“The reach of the program goes beyond our target participants. The songs have spread! Youth and children in communities outside of the target areas have been found to be singing the nursery rhymes. This is such a great thing, the children are obviously taking the songs home, singing them to their families and to other children — there is a viral nature to the spread. The project is currently running in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands but due to its success and interest across the South Pacific we are planning to adapt and extend the program’s reach.”

The latest development in the project is the production of a training DVD for Early Childhood Educators in the Pacific which is a cost effective way to spread the reach of this disaster risk management tool. The DVD was produced with the assistance of AusAID and is already proving popular in the region and with Disaster response specialist agencies.

The initiative is simple and effective; “A trainer works with a group of teachers to identify simple and memorable tunes. The group then work together to develop words and simple actions that go with popular tunes and nursery rhymes.”

“Nursery rhymes break down the fear associated with natural disasters, and also help children memorise the rhymes (and the emergency response) - they enjoy the singing. But the most important part is that in follow up visits they are able to answer questions about what to do in an emergency.”

Extreme weather events are part of natural cycles, but this season, the people - and especially the children - of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are better prepared, they will be a little quicker to register and respond and that could make the vital difference.