CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACT CASE STUDY:
Vanuatu and Migration

SUMMARY

This case study explores climate change impacts in Vanuatu, including being a driver of internal migration.

BACKGROUND

- The Republic of Vanuatu is located in the Melanesia region of Oceania, consisting of over 80 islands. The population of Vanuatu is around 300,000 (2019) and around 80% of the population reside in rural areas. (Chapman et al., 2021)
- Vanuatu is vulnerable to natural hazards including floods, droughts and tropical cyclones as well as earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions. (Government of Vanuatu [GoV] & International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2018)
- A large percentage of the population is exposed to natural disasters and climate risk due to their proximity to the coastline.
- Climate change has sparked internal migration in Vanuatu. Six villages on four of Vanuatu's islands have been relocated because rising sea levels have made water supplies too salty for drinking. (Sengupta, 2023)
- Citizens on smaller islands are also moving to the capital, Port Vila. This recent wave of urbanization is occurring as mostly younger people on the outer islands are moving to Port Vila for economic as well as environmental reasons. (Henson et al., 2020)



Ipota Secondary School. From photo album: Vanuatu: A disaster called Cyclone Pam 2015. Photo credit: EU/ECHO, 2015, Flickr.
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CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS

- Climate change impacts that Vanuatu is experiencing already include sea-level rise, coastal erosion and ocean acidification. (Permanent Mission of the Republic of Vanuatu to the United Nations [UN])
- Rising ocean temperatures resulting from climate change will also have a big impact on marine fisheries. Vanuatu's main commodity is tuna, however tuna are reportedly increasingly moving away from the country's waters due to ocean warming. (Sengupta, 2023 & Permanent Mission of the Republic of Vanuatu to the UN)
- Climate change impacts are a risk to food security and for tourism, which for Vanuatu as well as many other Pacific Island nations are a significant sector of their economy and thus a threat to sustainable development and the eradication of poverty. (Permanent Mission of the Republic of Vanuatu to the UN)
- Cyclones and warmer ocean waters have destroyed coral reefs. Coral bleaching from climate change is a significant risk to the country's ecology and economy. (Sengupta, 2023 & Chapman et al. 2021)



Vanuatu Warrior Day of Action: We are not drowning. We are fighting.
Source: 350.org, 2013, Flickr. (*https://flic.kr/p/e27VaP*) CC BY 2.0.

KEY POINTS

- According to a World Bank (WB) report, Vanuatu is recognized as one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to climate change impacts, ranked 132nd out of 182 countries in the 2020 ND-GAIN Index. The ND-GAIN Index calculates a country's vulnerability to climate change and other global challenges as well as readiness to improve resilience. According to the Index, the more vulnerable a country is, the lower its score. (Chapman et al., 2021)
- Natural disasters in Vanuatu cost on average an estimated 6% of GDP annually. Many of the natural hazards that affect the country are expected to be exacerbated by climate change. (Chapman et al., 2021)
- Tropical cyclones can cause significant damage to infrastructure, agriculture and livelihoods. Cyclone Pam, which hit Vanuatu in 2015, affected 64% of the economy and 60% of the population, as well as destroyed 96% of food crops. (Permanent Mission of the Republic of Vanuatu to the UN, n.d.). Many expect the frequency and intensity of cyclones to increase due to climate change, however, the WB report cautions that the frequency and intensity of cyclones in the future may be hard to determine at this point. (Chapman et al., 2021)
- The sea-level near Vanuatu is projected to increase throughout this century. Long-term sea-level rise, in combination with tectonic movements, will threaten coastal livelihoods and infrastructure, according to the WB study. (Chapman et al., 2021)
- Two types of drought may affect Vanuatu, meteorological and hydrological, according to the WB report. Meteorological drought is expected to increase in frequency, and this represents a major risk as there is very high dependence on rainwater for survival. (Chapman et al., 2021). The frequency and intensity of these natural hazards (e.g. drought, sea-level rise, cyclones, etc.) worsened by climate change are all likely to contribute to migration.
- Climate change is expected to impact livelihoods and food security in Vanuatu, including the agriculture and tourism sectors, both significant contributors to the country's economy. Several climate-exacerbated hazards threaten agriculture, such as tropical cyclones and saltwater intrusion, as much of the land being cultivated is in coastal areas (Chapman et al., 2021). Threats to food security and loss of livelihoods are also likely to contribute to future climate-induced migration.

Climate Change and Migration

- Vanuatu can be seen as having a successful internal migration structure due to its "National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement (2018)" which includes planned "internal displacement" as a response to climate change, says a report by Henson et al. (2020).
- The National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster Induced Displacement is a follow-up to "Vanuatu's Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction Policy (VCCDRRP)," which called for the "development of a national policy on resettlement and internal displacement." (Government of Vanuatu & IOM, 2018)
- While the government acknowledges that its responsibility is to reduce displacement through adaptation measures and other preventative practices, it also recognizes that "planned relocation is an option of last resort…[and] that movement takes place with dignity and with appropriate safeguards and human rights protections in place." (Henson et al., 2020)
- While the document can be viewed as an effective adaptation policy, there are some challenges. Vanuatu only has a limited amount of higher elevation space available, and this space is contingent upon migration and adaptation of climate change practices. (Henson et al., 2020)
- As with other Pacific Island nations, limited space will hamper migration, while the increase in urbanization and informal settlements may result in increased socio-economic tensions.
- Half of the urban population in Vanuatu live in informal settlements, according to the report by Henson et al., (2020). An increase in population in urban centers will probably increase the number of informal settlements and thus, the government will likely find it challenging to support those populations.
- While Vanuatu's islands are typically higher above sea-level than some of its Pacific neighbors, climate displacement may still present a risk, according to the WB report. Communities likely to be the most affected are the poor whose homes and livelihoods are vulnerable and at risk. (Chapman et al., 2021)
- Within the Pacific region, New Caledonia and French Polynesia have agreed to serve as hosts for Ni-Vanuatu for intra-regional migration. Both of these countries, and Fiji, are the primary destinations for most intra-regional migration. (Henson et al., 2020)
- As the other potential host within the region, Fiji has offered two migration options to other countries in Oceania, including Tuvalu and Kiribati, according to Henson et al. (2020). In Fiji's capital, Suva, there is a Tuvaluan population and there have been talks about other Tuvaluans joining this population if forced migration due to climate change occurs in Tuvalu. The other option may be through the purchase of land in Fiji, which Kiribati did in 2014.
- Migrants from Vanuatu may find themselves moving even further. According to the report by Henson et al., (2020), the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security states that five of the most at-risk nations are Vanuatu, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Fiji, and the Marshall Islands. The countries were chosen for the risks they face from increased natural disasters and phenomena and for socioeconomic factors that may drive movement and displacement. The report finds that these countries "…are the most likely 'sending' nations for migration and, due to their historic ties with larger nations, the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Western Europe are the most likely recipients of these long-term migrants." (Henson et al., 2020)

SOURCES

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