

REPUBLIC OF VANUATU

**NATIONAL REPORT
FOR THE UN CONVENTION
TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION**

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1. BACKGROUND

Vanuatu is a group of islands in the Southwest Pacific with a total of 12 million square kilometers, which is spread across 107 islands of which 66 contain permanent population. Twelve percent of the rural population lives on small islands of very high population densities of 0.1 and 2.1 hectare per person. Thirty percent live on the larger islands at a much lower density of 18 hectare per person while the rest live in the urban centers. The capital is Port Vila, which is situated on the island of Efate some 2500 kilometers northeast of Sydney. The British and French jointly governed Vanuatu until independence in 1980.

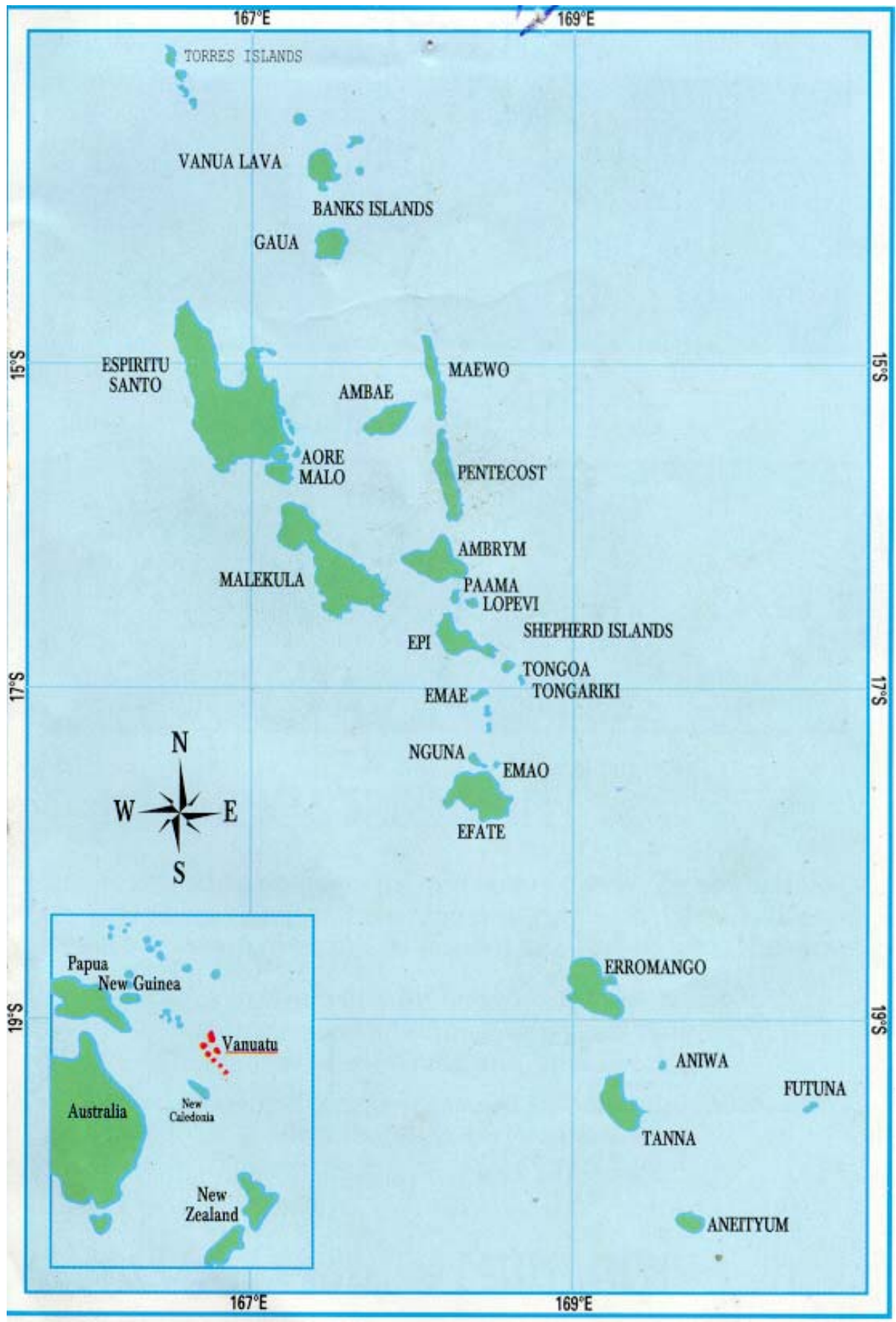
The economic is highly dualistic. Around 80 per cent of the population lives as subsistence farmers. Vanuatu people constitute 97 per cent of the population but receive only 70 per cent of measured GDP, meaning that their income is only 7 per cent of the non Ni-Vanuatu average. In the subsistence sector, basic necessities come with modest work effort as a result of the natural productivity of the land.

Vanuatu recent history is thus one of the ongoing changes characterized by period of population flux and movement in responds to environmental and social pressures. This continues today with urbanization effects on urban centers of the larger islands.

The colonial history significantly changes the pattern of the land use on some islands where large area of arable land were purchased from the natives by European planters for commercial plantations.

Apart from these changes the natives still maintain their old ways of subsistence farming for their daily consumption that by a method of slashing and burning the bushes to prepare the land for cultivation.

After gaining independence in 1980 the country changed its land laws to return a lot of these alienated land to the custom landowners. At the same time it enacted other land laws to allow these planters to occupy their registered land under very long-term lease or have the opportunity to lease more custom land.



2. DECENTRALISATION

In term of policy direction a major recent development has been the government emphasis on a decentralization strategy. The former regional government structure comprises eleven Local Government Councils.

The government recently introduced a new decentralization law that provides greater authority for regional governments. The new legislation was passed by the national parliament in May 1994 Parliament session. According to the legislation, the government established six (6) provinces and each provinces boundary included more than two larger inhabited islands of the group.

3. POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

The policy development and implementation process is seriously hampered by the lack of a rigorous and well-understood framework to develop policies, establish priorities and monitor the performance of policies, programs and projects. The efficiency and morale of the public sector is adversely affected when there is a lack of clarity and consistency in policy directions.

4. SUSTAINABLE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The sustainable Human Development goal reminds that there are two sides to development. The first is the enlargement of individual choices, to live long and healthy lives, to acquire knowledge, and to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living. Without these essential choices, many other opportunities remain in inaccessible. The other side of development is the way people use these individual skills and talents, as for example for leisure activities or for being active in culture, social and political affairs. This second side of development can be termed the nation's social resources. Just like individual skills, social resources grow, develop and refine as they are used.

5. LAND

Land is the foundation of the chiefly system and the basis of social security, and with the fast growth of the economy, land has become the main means of livelihood security as well. The customary sovereignty of land and sea also reinforces community responsibility for maintaining the integrity of these natural resources. As stated, 99% of land is held in customary tenure and cannot be sold or alienated but could only be leased for development.

6. CHANGING PRODUCTION SYSTEM

Three factors about agricultural production today raise concerns as to the security of smallholder systems, and the kinds of interventions, which is need if they are to be developed. First, agriculture's share of GDP has dropped from 26.7 in 1983 to 18.9 in 1993. This represents a serious situation simply from the point of view that over 82 % of the population living in rural areas depend on agriculture for their food security and livelihood. It is serious also because agriculture is the nation's major resources and suggests non-development of these resources may result in more drop in GDP.

7. MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION

The environmental degradation is most evident where populations and economic activity are concentrated together, particularly around towns, and where resources such as timber and minerals are being over-exploited. Demand on resources has increased not simply because there are more people, but also because their individual requirements have increased.

A question often raised is how many people an island can support. Certainly there is an upper limit determined by finite physical resources such as extent of land area. Fresh water, soil fertility, and by what people considers it to be an acceptable quality of life. The key issue, however, is not simply a matter of how many people live on an island, but what they do and how they use the resources.

Identifying below are the following key population and sustainable development issues:

sustained economic growth

provision of an improvements in the delivery of adequate social services, infrastructure support and jobs to meet the needs of a growing and youthful population

integrated national development plans and policies that take social and cultural factors in to account

rural and outer island development

changing patterns of production, consumption and trade and their implications for development

management and conservation of resources

external assistance that supports national development

With limited resources that the country has but, it is developing in a very slow state as not to compare it with other regional nations.

8. NON GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS

The Non government organization sector in Vanuatu is in an early stage of development by comparison with neighboring countries such as Fiji and Solomon Islands. There are over 50 NGOs in Vanuatu but they have very modest resources and part time volunteer staff. Without a secure core budget and no full time staff it has been difficult to develop programs and attract funding. NGOs have been mainly concerned with education, training and health and measures to improve daily living.

A network of rural training centers exists that have provided a range of courses in construction, woodwork, handicrafts, agriculture, cooking, mechanics, nutrition and leadership. These centers have been poorly funded, with many teachers providing services on a volunteer basis or for meager pay. Yet they are potentially a key to improving living condition

9 SOCIO AND ENVIRONMENTAL GENDER IMPACT ON SOCIAL PRESSURES

9.1 Slash and burn for Cash crops

The changes of live stile has exerted pressure to individuals to produce more cash crops, which are sold in the markets while the rest is for daily consumption by farmers. On the same spirit of development, more land is cleared for perennial crops such as cocoa, coconut plantations and for cattle grazing.

With this large tract of land locked up by large plantations, it has forced the people to move on to marginal land. The land becomes too limited for subsistence farming, which result in the farmers to cultivate the same land very excessively leaving very short time to fallow. In doing so, the bushes that was cleared for cultivation especially on islands with very high density population do not have enough time to regenerate to a suitable stade for re cultivation.

During the dry season, which is from August to December, local farmers clear land for new gardens. It has become a habit for the farmers to slash and burn the bushes to enable them to plan new food crops.

While the slashed bushes is burnt to prepare the land for planting but, there are times when the fire gets out of controlled and becomes wild or bush fire. This normally burns large patches of grassland and bush land. This exposes the soil to very hot sun and when the wet season arrives, it brings in heavy rain that causes a lot of soil erosion.

One of the worse situations was the 1997/98 El Nina with almost eight to ten-months with no rain. During that period, the islands experienced a big drought with smaller islands being hardest hit. This forced the national government to provide food aid and water to the most affected areas.

9.2 LOGGING

Natural forests cover approximately 35 per cent of land area, and while not high in biodiversity they are an important economic, cultural and social resource.

The country is blessed with natural trees which has been on the islands for many thousand of years which has attracted a lot of foreign and local logging companies to be set up to export round logs and sewn timber while part to meet the need for local markets. This was on going for a longtime without any monitoring by local authorities or to be guided by any form of logging conduct. Recently as 1998 the government stepped in to put a band on the export of round logs. This came in too late because most of the trees have been taken out leaving only that on marginal land. Those that are left are continually being logged for local markets.

Timber exports grew strongly between 1991 and 1993 – volumes rose by 300 percent and value by 200 percent. Forest is estimated to cover at least 35 percent of Vanuatu, with commercial volumes constituting less than half of this area.

The government controls the issuing of licenses, advises landowners on stumpage fees, provides seedlings for selected replanting and supervises logging operations to ensure compliance with the conditions of issues.

9.3 MINING

Quarrying is the only current mining activity but prospective activities have confirmed the presence of gold on Santo and Malekula. There may also be reserves of petroleum. The government could best facilitate development of the sector by preparing geological maps and surveys for prospectors.

9.4 PASTURE MANAGEMENT

Vanuatu is coming to be recognized in the South Pacific for its organic production of beef. It has come about due to the pasture improvement project that has been introduced in the country. This has encouraged a lot of foreign farmers to lease out large plots of land for cattle farming. However, a lot more of these farms are on custom or tribal land.

It must be stressed that not all farmers are capable of improving their farms. Many of them especially the local ones who are poor and have no or very little pasture managing skills in order to manage their cattle farms properly.

In some large and small cattle farms where pasture management is very poor the cattle normally over graze in dry season which helps to cause a lot of soil degradation that gives rises to soil erosion by wind or rain that causes desertification of the land.

10. NATURAL DISASTER

Vanuatu is very vulnerable to natural hazards, and particularly to tropical cyclones since it is located at latitude Fifteen (15) degrees South and at longitudinal one hundred and sixty eight (168) degrees East. It has a tropical weather, which becomes too hot towards the month of December and becomes cooler from June to.

Being a group of island below the equator it experience cyclones or hurricanes from the month of November to April. This happens when hot air builds up at the equator and flows south to a cooler area forming depression which later turns into cyclones or hurricanes that intensifies and gain more momentum as it moves further down south

Between 1970 and 1985 a total of 29 tropical cyclones hit the country (SPREP, DHA-APPO) and EMA 1994:5), while the conclusions of a recent study were, that in any 20 years period since 1940, any given location in Vanuatu would have suffered around 10 cyclones. The effects of cyclones include loss of life, extensive crop damage, extensive widespread destruction of infrastructure, Soil and sea coastal erosion. In fact cyclones impact negatively on every development initiative.

The other natural disaster that Vanuatu faces are the earthquakes that causes land slide and the ashes that are produced by various active volcanoes located in the country. These causes damaged to water catchments, food crops and infrastructure.

Vanuatu is situated along the Australian plates and experience these earthquakes from time to time with larger ones that have cause a lot of damages.

Recently one struck Lopevi and Paama which are two small islands causing a lot of disturbance in some other outlying island close by.

One of the islands, which have a very heavy population, has a lot of landslides and other damages. During that period the government with the help of outside aid donors provider help to these island communities with water containers and food.



Road infrastructure damage during earthquake in the year 2002.

11. EL NINO IMPACTS IN VANUATU

El Nino is an event that is directly associated with less rainfall in Vanuatu. Its impact may vary with each event in different areas. Recent El Nino that affected Vanuatu were in 1982/83, 1992-1994, and in 1997/98.

Common impacts are:

11.1 Water Shortages

With the event above, there were shortages in water in most parts of Vanuatu, but were apparent in the smaller islands. Such islands are the Shepherds group of islands, Paama, Aniwa, and a host of others. In these cases the government had to transport water in local ships to supply water to these islands.

11.2 Food Shortages

There was food shortage on Aniwa Island in 1982/83 El Nino, and the then local government council had to provide supply of food and water. The food shortage was also apparent on the western part of Tanna, however traditional food exchanges were sought. Other western parts of the bigger islands placed on rain shadow areas face similar problems.

11.3 Death of Animals and Shrubs

Cattle also die due to lack of grass growth during such time. Santo cattle farms reported death of cattle grazing on open pasture in the 1997/98 El Nino. Shrubs and other vegetation with fibrous and shallow root-based also dry out.

11.4 Bush Fire

This is a major problem in Vanuatu especially in remote areas where facilities to extinguish fire are not available. During the dry period of 1993, there were a lot of bush fire incidences around Port Vila while remote islands were more severe.

11.5 Other areas

There are many other areas which are sensitive to rainfall which are affected by El Nino episodes such as the agriculture production (both commercial and subsistence), low river level/discharge, death of coral reefs and other reef species, etc.

12 MANAGEMENT OF NATURAL DISASTER

The government has legislated and set up a National Disaster Management Unit, which manages the disaster relief to affected areas. It has a national action plan that it coordinates in times of disaster with the help of other government departments.

13. SOIL EROSION ON THE ISLAND OF ANEITYUM

Aneityum is a small island in the southern part of Vanuatu with a population of about 600 people. This island recorded a population of 12,000 in the recent centuries but a combination of disease and migration has reduced it to the current level.

The Island is now coming to recover from the population pressure in particular the areas where the people had been burning grassland as a leisure habit and from foreign logging operations that took place on this island in the last centuries.

The recovery was in the form of re planting of pines trees by a New Zealand funded aid project which commenced in 1972 as soil conservation activities but, since then it has ceased. The trees that were planted consist of a few hundred of hectares has rehabilitated this land from degradation.

The community is generating some economic return from the small scale-selective logging operation on trees that were re planted. This is a good example of a community that has achieved maximum biophysical, socio – economic and environmental benefit to a land that was once considered as wasteland.

They not only benefit from the income that is gain by selling of sewn timber but, they have the benefit of building cheap decent houses for themselves and use left over pieces of timber as fuel wood.

A great deal difference can be observed in these areas where the trees have been planted. The soil has been conserved, there is no more mud builds up along the coast, and the sand beach has changed from brown to white, little fishes and other sea creatures could be found on the seashores and on the reef.



Pines planted in 1972 as part of soil conservation and reforestation.

14. NEW FUNDED PROJECT BY NEW ZEALAND GOVERNMENT ON ANEITYUM.

Apart from that reforestation project as part of the soil conservation here on the island there is another on going funded project by the New Zealand government.

This is a project that has a local coordinator who hires women or men from time to time on a community basis to plant vetiver grass to discourage soil erosion.

Nevertheless, the project is having a minimal impact because the area being eroded away by rain every year is very large. This desertification is growing at a much faster rate than the area that is being re planted and conserved by the community each year.

The soil erosion is taking place at a much faster rate on such a large area of land with the flow of mud down the streams to form a heavy build up of mud on the sea coast which is suffocating and killing the reef and its organisms.

What was once clear salt water and white sand beach with life full of sea creatures has now become a muddy shore with no living organism.

The fishing ground for the local community especially on the reef has been damage and is expending further. As a result of the damage of the fishing ground the fishermen have to go a long way or out to deeper water to fish.



Vetiver grass planted to protect soil erosion. (New Zealand funded ongoing small project)

15. CONCLUSION

While some people may consider Vanuatu to be a very beautiful tropical island in the Southwest Pacific with beautiful beaches and clean environment, but the truth is far from reality. This is because there are pockets of areas in this country where communities or individuals are struggling to make a living either due to natural disaster or man made disaster.

Hurricane, earthquakes, erosion, bushes clearing for farming and bush fires are becoming a part of life of this nation.

Although we are not able to control some of the damage that are caused by the above but, with good dissemination of knowledge, information and a little bit of finance as those of Aneityum island then each community may be able to manage their environment and land in a more sustainable manner in order to maintain its structure and fertility for use by current and future generation.

Glossary

Aneityum/Efate/Lopevi/Paama: Name of Islands in Vanuatu

Vetiver: A tropical plant, which grows naturally. In Thailand, vetiver grass can be found growing in a wide range of area from highlands to lowlands in various soil conditions. The species, which is most common in Thailand, is referred to in scientific term as *Vetiveria zizanioides*. The clump diameter is about 30 cm. and the height is 50-150 cm. The leaves are erect and rather stiff with 75 cm. of length and 8 mm. of width.