

## Vanuatu Civil Society Organizations (CSO) Report - The Impact of Climate Change on People's Human Rights

### Introduction

Climate Change, caused by enhanced global warming due to the developed world's increasing carbon emissions, has become Vanuatu's reality to which the people are adjusting and compromising their lifestyles. However, there is only so much one can change. The Civil Society Organizations represented in this report have joined in an effort to bring the grassroots perspectives to the attention of the policy making body in Vanuatu with the aim of creating and practising effective and efficient policies for the betterment of all her people. It will delve into specific areas that are affected by climate change like that of food security and health by identifying the issue, the related human rights that have been violated as a result thereof and solutions; the solutions will not leave out the already existing mechanisms put in place by government and will make recommendations for increased accountability. Moreover, this report aims to change the narrative of Vanuatu to show that the people are indeed fighting to help change their situation.

Vanuatu is not a part to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) which contains the right to adequate food and the right to health. However, both of these human rights do appear in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) Article 25: *'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services'*. However, the UDHR is a declaration so it is not binding, but it serves to define the meaning of 'human rights' appearing in the UN Charter, which is binding on all States. Therefore, the UDHR is part of customary international law, thus creates obligations on the international community to, and means that the right to adequate food and right to health do apply in Vanuatu.

Additionally, while the *Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu* Chapter 2 Part I does not specifically mention the right to food, it does recognize the *'rights and freedoms of others and to the legitimate public interest in...welfare and health – (a) life'*. This can be interpreted to include the right to food as food is an essential part of life. On the other hand, the Constitution does recognise the *'rights and freedoms of others and to the legitimate public interest in...welfare and health'*.

#### **1. Food Security**

In recent years, Vanuatu has faced two major climate change effects: increase in strength of cyclones and coastal erosion, which have devastating effects on people's right to adequate food. Climate change poses a direct threat to increasing and extreme weather patterns and changes in

temperature and rainfall patterns, for example, constant, heavy, rainfall and strong winds. These contribute to coastal erosion.

**Effects:** Firstly, increasing coastal erosion affects the right to food because it destroys food crops which are important to sustain and maintain people's livelihoods. The rural population in Vanuatu was reported to be 73.56% in 2016<sup>1</sup> and they, along with a lot of areas in urban parts throughout Vanuatu rely on subsistence farming, commercial fisheries and the harvest of coastal resources as main sources for food security.<sup>2</sup> So, people are unable to grow, obtain or invest in food crops for their daily welfares and health, all of which are essential for their rights to life.

Furthermore, shortages in food supply lead to increases in prices (inflation) which causes hunger and may lead to humanitarian crises. For instance, Cyclone Pam which hit Vanuatu in 2015 affected 64% of the economy and 60% of the population because it destroyed 96% of the food crops.<sup>3</sup> After Pam, the loss and damage to the agricultural sector was about 8% of Vanuatu's total gross domestic product<sup>4</sup>. The main damages in this sector listed in this report were destruction of fruit trees, vegetables, root crops, and decline in population of wild birds and flying fox population and livestock. Also, damage to people's fishing materials and coastal marine habitats.<sup>5</sup> Thus, people's rights to life are detrimentally affected because without food, welfare and the wealth of their health are lacking.

For example, a nine- year old boy from Tanna Island was interviewed in 2015 after Cyclone Pam, and expressed how the aftermath destroyed food in the gardens and brought hotter temperatures and dry seasons which made lives of farmers extremely difficult. "There is no more food in the gardens, the sun is burning everything."<sup>6</sup>

**Recommendations:** Vanuatu should continue to demand accountability for developed countries' compliance with their obligations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), including obligations to provide capacity building and technology transfer to deal with continuing issues like coastal erosion and the aftermath of cyclones. International cooperation should take account of the priorities identified by communities such as coastal erosion and recovery from cyclones.

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<sup>1</sup> This is according to the World Bank collection of development indicators, compiled from officially recognized sources. **Source:** Trading economics, 'Vanuatu – rural population' (n.d.) <https://tradingeconomics.com/vanuatu/rural-population-percent-of-total-population-wb-data.html> (Accessed 17 June 2018).

<sup>2</sup> *Food Security and Agriculture Cluster*, 'Vanuatu Food Security & Agriculture Cluster CYCLONE PAM Medium and Long Term Recovery and Rehabilitation Strategy 2015-2017' [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/VUT\\_TC\\_Pam\\_2015\\_FSAC\\_FoodRec\\_plan\\_draft.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/VUT_TC_Pam_2015_FSAC_FoodRec_plan_draft.pdf) (Accessed 5 June 2018).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations: The permanent mission of the Republic of Vanuatu to the United Nations, 'Climate change' (n.d.) <https://www.un.int/vanuatu/vanuatu/climate-change> (Accessed 17 June 2018).

<sup>4</sup> *Food Security and Agriculture Cluster*, above no 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Food Security and Agriculture Cluster*, above no 2.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Children's Fund New Zealand (UNICEF NZ), 'See climate change through the eyes of a nine-year old in Vanuatu', (2015) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBssR\\_BYwmY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBssR_BYwmY) (Accessed 17 June 2018).

## 2. Health

Pacific Island countries including Vanuatu are among the most vulnerable in the world to the health impacts of climate change robbing them of their right to life and good health. There are several factors that contribute to this vulnerability of the countries such as their unique geographic, demographic and socioeconomic characteristics along with their exposure to changing weather patterns associated with climate change. Such factors have made it difficult for them to gain access to basic needs and services. The health risk involved and the limited ability to adapt and manage themselves in the face of such risks also contribute massively to this vulnerability.

**Effects:** Climate-sensitive health risks in Pacific island countries which is of relevance for Vanuatu include:

*Trauma from extreme weather events* - Cyclone Pam provided classic examples whereby communities especially in the Shefa and Tafea provinces which had suffered greatly from food shortages and had encountered numerous basic accommodation issues left people hopeless and emotionally disturbed in the face of disaster.

*Exposure of food and water to pathogens and toxins* compromised safety and security of water and food. This results in a shortage in food and water, it becomes unsafe for consumption and people resort to fast foods which lead to the rise in non-communicable diseases. The contaminated water allows for the spread of infectious diseases (vector-borne diseases) and the drinking areas become breeding grounds for mosquitoes causing an outbreak of dengue fever, for example. Extreme weather events (flooding) can increase the risks of water-borne illnesses - cholera and typhoid caused by drinking water containing bacteria/virus from animal/human waste. Because the communities are small and so closely knit, the people are more prone to contract such diseases.

**Recommendations:** The main potential health impacts from climate change in Vanuatu tend to emphasise the public health risks that are dominant in a society experiencing the so-called “epidemiological transition”, with relatively high burdens of both infectious and non-communicable diseases. It is important to note that, in the case of Vanuatu, as in many other countries and communities, climate change will not necessarily bring new threats, but rather act as an “amplifier” or “multiplier” of existing health problems (that is, in the absence of effective adaptation strategies).

A major difficulty is dealing with the significant uncertainties. Making judgements about risks to human health is difficult because of the uncertainty from interacting climatic variations and consequential environmental changes. In addition, there are uncertainties about potential adaptation strategies.

Vanuatu should collaborate with other States to ensure that the health risks of climate change are minimised as much as possible, including through measures to limit global temperature rise to

1.5°C and measures to support adaptation and resilience building. Scaled-up financial support from developed countries is needed to reduce risks at the local level. Vanuatu must ensure the effective participation of women, persons with disabilities and marginalised communities in all measures taken to reduce the risks of climate change. Additionally, the activities and requirements of specific sectors will need a greater level of general awareness and increased capacity to more accurately predict the impacts of climate changes on health and to develop and implement effective adaptation strategies.

Furthermore, there needs to be improvements in environmental and health monitoring and surveillance systems across Vanuatu. The health care sector could provide low cost monitoring mechanisms for specific vulnerable groups and hence sentinel data.

At present, relatively little is known about the potential barriers to and opportunities for the introduction of health adaptation strategies and their cost effectiveness. Thus, there is the need for more investigation/research into these issues.

- Paris Agreement (PA) – Global climate agreement in place in 2015. As countries ratify and take action, the right to health which is one of the main goals of the PA will have a major public health policy impact for countries, especially for the developing countries including Vanuatu. Health could be considered in the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) for Vanuatu.
- Global Framework of Climate Services (GFCs) – Under this framework, climate data recorded are no longer used purposely for climatology rather to meet the needs of specialized users such as the health sector.
- As part of the National Climate Outlook Forum (NCOF) Vanuatu Meteorology & Geo-hazard Department and Ministry of Health formed partnership to share and or access climate data as a way to address public health needs in the country.
- Awareness and capacity building activities underway by various agencies including government, civil society and private sector to address climate and disaster risk reduction and health knowledge gap for communities is slowly improving. Recent examples include public & community messaging prior, during and post disaster events for Tropical Cyclones Cook, Donna and Hola.
- Institutionalize analysis of data to inform future planning of agencies or practices
- Identify and resource climate – Health resilient projects and systems; Facilitate access to climate and health financing mechanisms such as with the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and Global Environment Facility to support climate resilient health system. For example, develop and implement public health adaptation programs for Climate Change.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, Vanuatu, other Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are paying the price of climate change. A phenomenon which all the parties to the UNFCCC acknowledge in Article 1 is ‘**a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity** that alters the composition of the global atmosphere...’ The *Fourth Assessment Report* of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2007 warned that the warming of the climate system is accelerating and that there was increasing certainty that the poorer nations will be the worst affected. Additionally, climate change will impact the increase in severity of land degradation, intensity of tropical cyclones and decreases in food security. The *Fifth Assessment Report (2014)* stated that beyond reasonable doubt, the Earth’s climate is warming and that “[h]uman influence on the climate system is clear, and recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are the highest in history”. As a result, we are facing the devastating impacts of climate change.

A result of the unaccomplished goal to stabilize the greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere and the increasing global average temperature which have altered the climate system is now a **real** threat to people’s human rights. At present, it is no longer a time to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Today, we have to adapt to the changes in our environment. Today, we need to ensure that we have the capacity and resilience to deal with more severe and intense changes to our environment: Today, tomorrow and the many more future days to come.