

Country profile

Vanuatu

GEOGRAPHY

Vanuatu is a 900 kilometre-long, volcanic archipelago that consists of more than 80 islands. Most of these islands are inhabited, and around half are mountainous and densely forested with narrow strips of farming land on the coasts. Five volcanoes are still active and volcanic eruptions are not uncommon. Vanuatu is the most cyclone prone nation in the South Pacific, with two to three cyclones entering its territory every year. The country also experiences earthquakes and resulting tsunamis.

Vanuatu has a tropical climate with regular, sometimes heavy, rainfall. Temperatures average between 26°C and 34°C.

PEOPLE

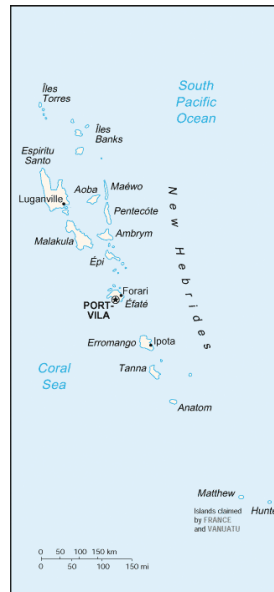
The majority of Vanuatu's population are Melanesian, known locally as ni-Vanuatu. There are small communities of French and British people, due to its colonial history, as well as some Australians, New Zealanders, Vietnamese, Chinese and people from other Pacific Islands.

There are over 100 indigenous languages with English, French and Bislama (the local form of Pidgin English) recognised as the official languages. All of Vanuatu's towns have both French and English names. Almost 80 percent of the population live on the twelve largest islands and the two main cities are Port Vila (30,000 people) and Luganville (11,000 people).

All major Christian denominations are represented in the community.



Getting your hands dirty is the best way to learn! These girls are helping to look after their school's veggie garden which was established thanks to World Vision's agricultural education program.



Map courtesy of The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

HISTORY

In 1774 Captain Cook named the islands "New Hebrides" and this name remained until independence. French and British missionaries, sandalwood traders and 'black birders', who took large numbers of people to work as virtual slaves on plantations in Australia and Fiji, changed life for Vanuatu's indigenous population. These 'visitors' brought new diseases such as measles, influenza and the common cold which killed large numbers of indigenous people due to their lack of immunity.

In 1906 Britain and France agreed to jointly administer the New Hebrides. The move for independence began after occupation by the United States during World War II. When independence was eventually achieved in 1980, Vanuatu was born. However, through the 1990s the nation suffered a great deal of political instability.

ECONOMY

Vanuatu's economy is primarily agriculture-based. More than three-quarters of inhabitants live in rural areas and rely on traditional subsistence farming methods.

Unfortunately, Vanuatu's economy has been unable to grow quickly enough to meet the needs of its expanding population. A significant consequence is a high rate of youth unemployment. The main exports are copra (35 percent), coconut oil, cocoa, coffee, kava root, cattle and timber. The country's tax haven status and unspoilt natural beauty has led to a growing reliance on the finance and tourism industries. Overseas aid from Australia, New Zealand, France and Britain is also important.

In 2002, Vanuatu began the process of drafting a National Poverty Reduction Strategy. Major challenges include rural development and delivery of basic services to remote communities on the outer islands.

LIVING CONDITIONS

Root vegetables such as yams, manioc and taro are Vanuatu's most important subsistence crops. In places where there is plenty of water, taro is grown in complex terraces that are hand built from earth and rocks. Taro, wild spinach and grated coconut are ground together to make the national dish, laplap. Pork, beef, fish, poultry, seafood or bush meat like flying fox may be added, and the mixture is wrapped in banana leaves and baked in an underground oven. Seasonal fruits like breadfruit are important. Kava, the 'anti-anxiety herb', is the national drink.

Bush-materials, such as thatched coconut leaves and woven bamboo, are used for housing in the villages. Electricity is generated using imported fuel and is only generally available in five urban centres. Roads link major settlements but few are sealed.

Vanuatu's health system suffers from a lack of facilities and qualified staff, especially midwives, doctors and specialists. There are two hospitals – one in Port Vila and the other in Luganville. Those with serious conditions are flown to Australia, New Zealand or New Caledonia for treatment.

The most common illnesses include malaria, respiratory infections and influenza. Poor water quality and accessibility contributes to skin and water-borne diseases. High rates of sexually transmitted disease and the rising incidence of HIV and AIDS in neighbouring countries make Vanuatu vulnerable to a potential HIV and AIDS epidemic.

EDUCATION

The illiteracy rate varies markedly between villages. Some people, especially women, speak only their local language and therefore cannot communicate outside of their local language group.

Although 93 percent of all school age children enrol in school, retention rates are as low as 15 percent across the six years of primary school. Over 75 percent of all school children receive no secondary education. The main problems are that schooling is expensive and it is often difficult for children in remote rural areas to travel to school. There are large gender disparities in education, with more boys than girls in school.



Literacy is empowering. World Vision Vanuatu incorporates a literacy component into all of their programs, and especially focuses on children in correctional facilities and mothers.

Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	VANUATU	AUSTRALIA
Population	215,000	20.3 million
Urban population (as % of total)	23.5%	88.2%
GDP per capita (PPP US\$)	\$3,225	\$31,794
Population with sustainable access to an improved water source	60%	100%
Adult literacy rate (% age 15 and above)	74%	99%
Net primary school enrolment ratio	93%	97%
Life expectancy at birth	69.3 years	80.9 years
Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	38	6
Internet users (per 1,000 people)	38	698
Cases of tuberculosis (per 100,000 people)	84	6

Source: United Nations Development Programme 2007 Human Development Report, Oxford University Press, New York.

WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN VANUATU

World Vision Australia supports World Vision Vanuatu in the following sectors:

- Early childhood development and education
- Literacy
- Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)
- HIV and AIDS awareness and prevention
- Income generation and governance projects.

These activities have been on the islands of Efate and Espiritu Santo, but after July 2008 will also include the islands of Tanna and Pentecost.

