

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

Five volcanoes are still active and volcanic eruptions are not uncommon. The country also experiences earthquakes and resulting tsunamis. Vanuatu is the most cyclone prone nation in the South Pacific, with two to three cyclones entering its territory every year. In 2015, Cyclone Pam resulted in extensive damage to Vanuatu. The capital Port Vila experienced winds of 270km/h.

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. The majority of people in Vanuatu are Christian.

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 and Luganville.



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. Around 65 percent of Vanuatu's workforce earns their living in the agricultural sector, typically from small scale farming. The main exports are copra (dried coconut flesh), coconut oil, cocoa, coffee, kava root, beef and timber.

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 country's tax haven status and unspoilt natural beauty has led to a growing reliance on the finance and tourism industries. Development support and aid from Australia and New Zealand is also important. 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 also important.

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 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, diarrhoea, respiratory infections and influenza. 26.3 percent of children under the age of five have moderate or severe stunted growth, a sign of chronic malnutrition. High rates of sexually transmitted disease and the rising incidence of HIV and AIDS in neighbouring countries make Vanuatu vulnerable to a potential 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 there is high enrolment of primary school age children, retention rates are lower, as 28.5 percent of children who start primary school do not finish. Only 60 percent of children go on to secondary school. The main problems are that schooling is expensive and it is often difficult for children in remote rural areas to travel to school.

World Vision Australia in Vanuatu

World Vision Australia supports World Vision Vanuatu, including projects in the following sectors:

- Early childhood development, education and literacy
- Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)
- Income generation and governance projects
- HIV and AIDS awareness and prevention
- Emergency relief activities

Indicator	Vanuatu	Australia
Population (millions)	0.3 million	23.3 million
Urban population (% of total)	25.5%	89.5%
Gross National Income per capita (US\$ PPP)	\$2,652	\$41,524
Population living on less than US\$1.25 (PPP) a day	No data	No data
Adult literacy rate (% age 15 and above)	83.2%	No data
Internet users (% of population)	10.6%	82.3%
Population using improved water source (% of total) ²	90.6%	100%
Doctors per 10,000 people	1.2	38.5
Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	18	5
Life expectancy at birth	71.6 years	82.5 years
Human Development Index rank (out of 187)	131 st	2 nd

Sources: UNDP Human Development Report 2014; ² UNICEF <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/> [accessed March 2015]; CIA The World Factbook <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/nh.html> [accessed March 2015]