



**Prepared by the WDP Committee of Vanuatu**

**March 5, 2021**

**“Build on a Strong Foundation”**

**Country Background Information**

The Republic of Vanuatu was founded on its traditional values, Christian principles, and the people’s faith in God as established in the Constitution of 1980, upon gaining independence on July 30, 1980. Vanuatu is a beautiful country of many islands and people of many ethnic groups and languages. The islands have black and white sandy beaches and beautiful coral reefs with tropical colored fishes. The forests are full of lovely birds, flora and fauna, and spectacular cascades.

### **LAND AND IDENTITY**

Land is very important to the Ni-Vanuatu and a crucial resource for production. Land is thought to be the precondition of human culture; the human inhabitants merge with the earth in some sense. Land is not viewed as a thing to be owned but as vital to the existence of humans and animals in sustaining their livelihood. The Honorable retired pastor Sethy Regenvanu, former Deputy Prime Minister of Lands, once stated:

“Land to a Ni-Vanuatu is what a mother is to a baby. It is with land that he defines his identity and it is with land that he maintains his spiritual strength.” (Tor, R. Aug 2004)

### **THE PEOPLE**

The inhabitants of Vanuatu are known as Ni-Vanuatu. Most are of Melanesian descent with a Polynesian minority on the outlying islands. A mix of Europeans, Asians and other Pacific Islanders also live on the archipelago. Studies predict that in 2021 Vanuatu will have 312,000 inhabitants.

Most of the people of Vanuatu live in rural areas, although the cities of Port Vila and Luganville have sizable populations. Port Vila is the largest city with 45,000 inhabitants, accounting for 19% of the country's total population.

Vanuatu is embracing modern technology, but is also proud to retain its cultural identity and traditional values. The traditional attire, food, dances, and songs are beautiful to behold.

Ni-Vanuatu staple foods include yam, taro, banana, coconut, sugarcane, tropical nuts, greens, pigs, fowl, and seafood. Ceremonies typically involve an exchange of food along with a feast. Pigs are exchanged and eaten at all important ritual occasions. The national ceremonial dish is *lap lap*. It is a pudding made of grated root crops or plantain mixed with coconut milk and sometimes greens and meat, wrapped in leaves, then baked for hours in a traditional earth oven. The exchange, preparation, and consumption of kava (a beverage made from kava roots) are integral parts of ceremonial occasions.

## **LANGUAGE**

Vanuatu is a small country with more spoken languages than any other place in the world! It has 113 spoken languages and innumerable dialects. By 2004, less than 100 of these languages remained due to the use of Bislama. Bislama has evolved from broken English, French and the traditional languages. Due to the country's colonial history, the English and French languages have been adopted as the official language of education.

There are strong links between local languages, places, and identities. A Ni-Vanuatu usually speaks the village language and Bislama before learning English or French. The creation of Bislama facilitated communication but also put local languages at risk of disappearance.

## **GEOGRAPHY**

Vanuatu is a Y-shaped tropical archipelago located in the South Pacific Ocean with over eighty islands, sixty-five of which are inhabited. The Solomon Islands lie to the north, New Caledonia to the south, Fiji to the east, and the Coral Sea and Australia to the west. The mostly volcanic archipelago extends 560 miles (900 kilometers) from north to south and has an area of 5,700 square miles (14,760 square kilometers). Espiritu Santo is the largest island. Port Vila, the capital, which was also the colonial headquarters, is on the south-central island of Efate.

The islands are prone to natural disasters including earthquakes, cyclones and volcanic eruptions. There are seven active volcanoes scattered throughout the islands. The island of Ambae erupted in September of 2017 and again in 2018. The entire population of about 11,000 people was evacuated. Rising sea levels threaten to erode the land; and pollution from vehicle fumes, oil from boats, and plastic waste badly affect the environment. In 2018, the Government passed a law that banned the use of plastic bags in the country.

Each year Vanuatu can expect an average of 8 to 10 cyclones. Cyclone Pam, a category 5 tropical cyclone hit the island nation in March 2015. It was one of the worst cyclones on record. Around 75,000 people needed emergency shelter and 96% of the crops were destroyed.

## **RELIGION**

Originally, the people of Vanuatu had their own way of worship, and each island had their own area where the dead were supposed to have gone to rest, as well as their own gods. For example, the island of Torba had Quat, Malo Island near Santo had Tokotaitai, Penama had Takaro, the Shepherds islands in Shefa Province had Supwe, and Futuna had Majikjiki among others.

The Vanuatu people did not worship animals or plants but believed there was a creator somewhere in the heavens, and they offered sacrifices to that being. Every community recognizes important places associated with their ancestry and other spirits. These "taboo places" may be mountain peaks, offshore reef formations, or rocky outcroppings. People avoid these locations and treat them with respect.

Missionaries and explorers, like traders and blackbirders, arrived at about the same time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The islands were distributed among the denominations to bring Christianity to Vanuatu. Missionaries arrived on the southern islands and slowly proceeded north. The Catholic Church went to the south, Presbyterian on Efate, Anglican to the North, and Seventh Day Adventist on Malakula. First the European missionaries arrived and then the Polynesian.

The Presbyterians, which is currently the largest denomination, established their first church in 1852, after the first missionary was martyred upon his arrival in 1838.

Today, Christianity comprises approximately 83% of the total population, while 17% is made up of other religious groups, customary beliefs and cults. Vanuatu churches worship through song and dance enhanced with Vanuatu traditions and cultures. Churches present are Presbyterian, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, and Church of Christ. The Vanuatu Christian Council provides a platform for those churches to work together ecumenically across the islands.

Christianity deeply impacted ancestral culture and religious practices as well as the system of governance and social life. Christianity opposed the practice of cannibalism and the local religion was considered witchcraft. Christianity changed a decentralized system of life in the villages to a centralized form of governance, as the missionaries moved people from their various locations to a central point where they built churches, schools, and hospitals and began teaching them the good news of Jesus Christ. Even though Christianity is said to unite families, it also divides families as there are so many different groups, as well as cults.

### **DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE IN THE VILLAGES**

Vanuatu ancestors lived on their own islands, in their own villages, in thatched houses made from leaves and trees hewn with stone axes. Each island and village had their own name and their own systems of governance. They had their own languages, food, styles of clothing, traditional healers and midwives.

Throughout the archipelago, Chiefs were the custodians of the land, language, and heritage, and determined the norms of the societies under their jurisdictions. There were penalties imposed for disobedience and credit given for obedience. Men and women came together at the Farea (village meeting house) to debate major issues. The Farea was governed by the men but women had ways to bring in their concerns. Though men were generally the decision makers, there were female chiefs, and they ruled their own women's house of meeting, unlike today.

This system of traditional governance was decentralized. The arrival of foreigners, including missionaries, changed that to a more centralized system. Religion put an end to many tribal wars; but it also created some negative issues that need to be addressed in order to reinstate women to their rightful place.

### **EXPLORERS**

In 1606, the first foreign explorer to arrive was a Spaniard named De Quiros. De Quiros arrived on the northern island of Santo and renamed it Australis Del Espiritu Santo.

A Frenchman, Louis Antoine de Bougainville, sailed through the islands in 1768.

In 1774, Captain James Cook came to the islands and named them the New Hebrides, because the islands reminded him of his homeland, the Hebrides of Scotland.

After these explorers, came the blackbirders and traders of knives, guns, alcohol, tobacco and axes. The term "blackbirding" refers to the large-scale kidnapping of people indigenous to the islands in the Pacific Ocean to work as unpaid or poorly paid laborers in countries distant to their native land. Blackbirding was especially prevalent between 1847 and 1904, when South Pacific islanders were kidnapped, tricked or coerced into working on the cotton and sugar plantations in Queensland, Fiji and Hawaii.

Blackbirders and traders also introduced foreign diseases that killed thousands of people and created havoc in Vanuatu.

## **THE CONDOMINIUM GOVERNMENT**

In 1906, the New Hebrides became a colony ruled jointly by Great Britain and France. The New Hebrides Condominium had a Joint Court but each ran separate administrative bureaucracies, medical systems, police forces, and school systems. Meanwhile the natives of the New Hebrides were stateless in their own homeland. They were neither French nor British nor New Hebrides citizens. They had no legal identity, no rights, no passports, and no land rights. They remained stateless until independence in 1980.

Life under the two colonial powers was difficult as they had different agendas; the French wished to annex and rule, while the British wished to prepare the natives to rule themselves. Competition and conflict culminated in the 1970s, when both rulers backed different political parties in the run-up to independence. The main parties in favor of independence were British-supported.

By 1978, the people were calling for independence. In 1979, a government of national unity was formed. Independence was declared on July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1980, and a parliamentary democracy was installed. Father Walter Lini became the founding prime minister, serving until 1991. The country was renamed Vanuatu, which literally means ‘country that stands up’, and a motto was adopted which says “In God we stand.”

## **ECONOMY**

Vanuatu’s temperate climate and arable land is viable for agriculture and the grazing of cattle. In an agriculture-based economy, people depend on subsistence crops for their livelihood. The traditional practice of conservation of the land and sea allows certain areas to be used for fishing, gardening, and hunting while leaving other areas idle either for regeneration or reproduction. This ensures there is always ample food for community consumption.

Yams, bananas, taro, kumara, cassava fruits and nuts may be organically cultivated. Coconut, coffee, sandal-wood, white-wood, cocoa and kava are all cultivated to earn a living. Fresh water is obtained from coconuts, copra for coconut oil for cooking, as well as body and hair lotions. The coconut tree is viewed as the tree of life because all of its parts are useful.

Vanuatu’s economic growth is based on tourism, construction and offshore financial services. Tourism and its related service sectors account for 40% of the Gross Domestic Product and 1/3 of people in formal employment. The government remains the largest employer. Big hotels and resorts are owned by foreigners and these proceeds primarily leave the country. Vanuatu is a tax haven that earns income from company registrations, fees and an offshore shipping registry.

There are minor income earning activities such as the Nagol (land diving) and the traditional weaving of mats and baskets. Women make and sell clothes at the market places to earn money to help support their families.

The government introduced the Regional Seasonal Employment scheme in partnership with the governments of Australian and New Zealand. This provides short-term, skill-based employment with a short term visa to labor hire in the areas of agriculture in those countries. It may increase the current remittances from people already working in Australia and New Zealand.

Manufacturing industries contribute only 5 to 9% of the Gross Domestic Product; this mostly consists of beef, copra, cocoa, coffee, timber and kava for export. Vanuatu’s major trade partners are Australia, Japan, France, New Zealand, and New Caledonia.

## **SOCIAL SECURITY SYSTEM**

The traditional Vanuatu family has a built-in social security system where there is a place for everybody and there is no poverty as people work on their own land, grow their own food, and make their own items for trade or for use in the home. They share and help each other; they care for their old and young.

However, with the current monetized system, and a growing trend of a nuclear family mentality, a huge gap has been created between the haves and the have-nots. People from the islands flood the towns hoping for jobs that are nonexistent or they lack the necessary qualifications to obtain. They often find themselves without enough food, water, or proper housing.

With the introduction of cash crops and cattle, most arable land tends to be used for these purposes rather than food crops, leading to malnutrition. Although there is land available for agricultural development, the education curriculum does not point youth to the areas of agriculture, forestry and fisheries as viable jobs but rather on white-collar jobs. This is an issue that needs to be dealt with urgently in Vanuatu.

### **ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT**

Like all other Pacific Islanders, Vanuatu people love music and dancing. Traditional instruments such as carved slit gongs, slit bamboo beaten with a stick, bamboo flutes, seed rattlers, are used to create a rhythmic sound, along with voices, clapping hands, and stamping feet. There are modern bands as well as local string bands for both males and females.

Vanuatu has many dances, not just for everyone – but also dances that are specific to men and women. They also create sand drawings, play string games, and surf. Some adult games are only played during moonlit nights; and of course, there is story telling detailing the origins of the people and stories of animals.

Nagol (land diving) is practiced by males to display their prowess and as a means to appease the gods for abundance in the farms. Nagol attracts a lot of tourists to the nation including the Queen of England. The frame and vines for the Nagol structure are carefully selected by experienced jumpers; and a traditional healer stays on site in case of accidents.

Children have their own games and dances that teach them moral values, counting, directions and numbers. In contemporary Vanuatu, people enjoy sports such as soccer, volleyball, basketball, and boxing.

### **EDUCATION**

Parents are a child's first teachers before moving on to the education system to acquire the skills for a better life and standard of living.

The arrival of missionaries and the New Hebrides Condominium changed the education system and lives of the people. Christianity changed the social system and the role of men and women, while the Condominium created a double school system - one in English and another in French.

In the first three years of school, children in the towns learn Bislama, while children in the rural areas learn their own local language.

Primary education is not free or compulsory. It is provided by law under three main objectives: access, quality and management. The government assists its schools subsidizing the tuition fees for the first six years to enable more children to have access to education. Many children in rural

areas walk long distances to go to school; some even have to leave home and attend boarding school at a very young age.

Secondary education is only available to those who can afford it. Most families can only afford to educate their firstborn child. If the firstborn is a girl, she may be overlooked and educational opportunities are given to the eldest boy.

### **CHILD HEALTH AND MALNUTRITION**

Since Vanuatu ratified the convention on the Rights of a Child in 1992, women's reproductive and children's health have been key national priorities of the government. Reproductive and child health are defined as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being. However, Vanuatu failed to achieve its 2015 Millennium Development goals to reduce maternal and infant mortality. Most deaths in children under 5 are estimated to be due to malnutrition, and the increase in stunting is more likely linked to improper feeding practices.

It is estimated that 75% of the population live in rural areas with poor transport and communications, less qualified health care givers, fewer human resources and poor health facilities. A major health issue for women, besides reproductive health and maternal mortality, is breast and cervical cancer, since screening and treatment are limited.

Vanuatu's estimated population growth is one of the highest in the Pacific Region. The high fertility rates places a considerable economic burden on people's livelihoods. Because it is a male dominated society, certain attitudes have an adverse impact on reproductive and child healthcare choices and behaviors. The promotion of family planning and service delivery are necessary.

Children suffering from malnutrition do not recover from childhood illnesses, such as diarrhea, pneumonia, or other contracted diseases. Evidence based interventions are necessary to reduce the maternal, newborn and child morbidity and mortality rate. It means to create access to services that provide antenatal care, postnatal care, skilled birth attendance, early essential care, emergency obstetric and newborn care. It is important to educate mothers about early and exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, micronutrient supplementation, deworming, immunization, and prevention and management of childhood illness and malnutrition.

Malnutrition is a concern in both rural and urban areas. Vanuatu's traditional diet is high in carbohydrates and low in protein, and the introduction of processed, western foods has aggravated the wellbeing of a child.

### **WATER AND SANITATION**

Access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation facilities is a big concern in Vanuatu. The population has poor water sources such as unprotected wells, springs and surface water. The major centers, Port Vila and Luganville, have water infrastructures in the town area. However, on the outer islands secure water in villages are in the developmental stage and vulnerable to drought and natural disasters.

Many water sources are far and take 30 minutes to an hour to reach. Sanitation facilities still need a lot of improvements to help combat health issues.

### **YOUTH**

Young people between the ages of 12 to 30 make up about a third of Vanuatu's population. Data shows an increase in movement from rural to urban areas. Young people are migrating to Luganville and Port Vila for better education, training and employment opportunities. The main activity for most young people is producing goods for community consumption, which is unpaid for 1 in 20 youths.

While 16% of young people aged 15-29 in urban areas have some sort of access to the internet, this number drops to 3% in rural areas for the same age group. Most youth in rural areas have access to mobile phones and a radio.

By age 17, 3% of girls are legally married and by 30, nearly two-thirds. For men, 93% are still single at age 19 and by 30 old over half (57%) are married.

## **WOMEN**

In the past 20 years, there have been changes for women in Vanuatu. The gender gap in literacy and education has narrowed. In some provinces, girls outperformed boys in school attendance.

Since independence in 1980, five women have been elected to the National Parliament. Recent reports indicate that women represent just 3% of total senior/executive government positions. More often than not, women are excluded from decision making and are absent from leadership positions.

Women represent 40% of the labor force in both public and private sectors compared to 60% of men. Women are usually full time homemakers caring for children, the elderly, people with disabilities and other family members. However, in terms of subsistence economy more women are involved than men (49% and 41% respectively). This makes them more susceptible to poverty, climate change, disasters and other livelihood stresses.

The opportunity for women to set up businesses is limited as they lack access to capital, financial services and markets. This is particularly the case for rural women. Despite these discriminatory issues, women are participating in the business sector in their own ways. They earn their living selling clothes, vegetables, and fruits at the market.

There are more female-headed, single parent households with children, grandchildren or extended family members compared to male headed households. Even though much of the burden of household chores rest upon women, their life expectancy is higher than that of men.

Gender-based violence is a serious issue affecting women and girls. Approximately 60% of women in Vanuatu have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence in their lives, of which 21% were left with permanent injuries. The Family Protection Act is the legal framework that protects and supports women in cases of domestic violence.

In the current Parliamentary democracy in Vanuatu, there are provisions in the Constitution for gender equity/equality, but no political will to implement it. From a Christian perspective, the Bible also depicts male and female as partners (Genesis 1:26), but religious institutions are not doing their part to encourage women to use their potential. If the government, different religious groups and chiefs cooperated in the effort to address the gender equality imbalance that would greatly improve the fundamental rights of women.

## **WORLD DAY OF PRAYER**

The history of World Day of Prayer in Vanuatu was pieced together through conversations and research by the current committee. The first World Day of Prayer service was reportedly held on March 8, 1946, in the Presbyterian Paton Memorial Church in Port Vila.

World Day of Prayer was introduced by Canadian missionaries, Mrs. Amy Skinner and Mrs. Catherine Ritchie. Mrs. Leimaku Sokomanu was the preacher for this first service. The offering collection of 15 pounds was divided and distributed to different missions: 9 pounds to refugees in China, 3 pounds to refugees in Australia, and 3 pounds was put into an account for the local work of Presbyterian Women's Mission Union. The first elected committee members for World Day of Prayer were President Mrs. Touali and Secretary Salmone Bakokoto.

On the invitation of the Presbyterians, Anglicans and Catholics joined in 1981. Women from Apostolic and Church of Christ congregations remember joining together as young women in the 1980s on the islands of Ambae and Pentecost. In later years, other women from different churches across the islands joined World Day of Prayer.

With the creation of the Women's Desk of the Vanuatu Christian Council, in the early 2000s, collaborations with WDP groups already in existence were developed. The World Day of Prayer International Committee held a workshop in Vanuatu in 2011 to strengthen the connection between those groups. The Vanuatu Committee was recently re-organized ecumenically and confirmed the disposition to develop the resources for the 2021 WDP program. Workshops facilitated by the World Day of Prayer International Committee Executive Director, Chairperson and Regional Representative were held in 2018. Then the Vanuatu working groups continued the yearlong writing process of the materials. More preparations are coming into place as the annual observance approaches in Vanuatu and around the world.

The Vanuatu Committee's prayer is that the ecumenical relationship they experienced during the blessing of working together for the 2021 program will lift up the voice of Vanuatu woman across the world. For many who participated in the writing process, this was their first ecumenical experience. All are confident that this will bring a new assurance to Vanuatu women's voices.

The Committee wishes to develop initiatives to assist young, rural women by creating employment and educational opportunities. They also wish to help with health programs focusing on maternal concerns, children's health and cancer.

The Committee thanks God, for Vanuatu triumphing during key moments in its history such as the forcible removal for free labor (blackbirding) and colonial rule. The Ni-Vanuatu are ready to determine their own future with the guidance of the Almighty, on whom their lives depend. They stand with the women and men of the world and proudly declare that the Vanuatu nation is built on the Rock of Ages, who is Christ the King.

Note: The text used as reference and source the materials listed below.



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Maternal and child health from <https://www.who.int/countries/vut/en/>

Geography and agriculture from <https://vnso.gov.vu/index.php/census-and-surveys/census/2016-mini-census>

This material is part of the worship service and educational resource for the 2021 WDP annual celebration.

For further information, please, contact:

World Day of Prayer International Committee

475 Riverside Drive Room 729

New York, NY. 10115. USA

admin@worlddayofprayer.net - <http://worlddayofprayer.net>