



## Summary

Vanuatu is an island country located in the South Pacific Ocean. It is highly susceptible to natural hazards, such as floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and cyclones.[1] In April 2020, Tropical Cyclone Harold, which is the most powerful storm to hit Vanuatu in the last two years since Cyclone Pam in 2015, ravaged Vanuatu's islands and caused significant damage to the communities while the country was on COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Thousands of families were severely affected and displaced, buildings were damaged and flattened cutting off electricity and water. Through Vanuatu's government combined efforts and engagement with several private sector members, the Vanuatu Business Resilience Council (VBRC) successfully implemented its response and recovery plans throughout the affected islands.

## About Vanuatu Business Resilience Council (VBRC)

The Vanuatu Business Resilience Council (VBRC), established in **October 2017**, is a standing committee of the Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) and a network member of the Connecting Business initiative (CBI) and Pacific Islands Private Sector Organizations (PIPSO) Pacific Business Resilience Network.

One of the primary roles of VBRC is to **coordinate the activities and strengthen the engagement of the private sectors** with the government in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery activities, including climate change adaptation and mitigation within Vanuatu.

VBRC's Executive Committee comprises of local business owners and private-sector leaders fully engaging with the government, civil society, donors, and development partners to work closely together to meet the organization's mission and goals.

## DISASTERS AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The cost of disasters to communities worldwide is increasing, and Pacific Island countries are considered some of the most vulnerable. According to the World Risk Index, Vanuatu is the world's most at-risk country for natural hazards. For example, with roughly 250,000 inhabitants, earthquakes place, on average, 90,000 per year at risk. The same holds for storms or rising sea levels of one meter, putting about 30,000 people at risk. Sixty-four (64%) percent of Vanuatu's citizens are exposed to natural hazards every year.[1] When a disaster hits Vanuatu, the entire country is affected - including the capital. Vanuatu is a unique example of understanding disaster vulnerability holistically.

In 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic added complexity to preparedness efforts and severe challenges to how countries respond to sudden-onset disasters, such as tropical cyclones.

In this regard, whole-of-society collaboration and coordination are critical. That is, to be more inclusive in expanding the role of local aid organizations and private sector networks, recognizing that these partners have a deep understanding of context and culture and a solid capacity to leverage local networks. Countries have placed restrictions on movement to contain widespread COVID-19 impact. In this new reality, delivery of aid has been disrupted, including challenges with the movement of disaster-response workers. Another challenge is that local communities may view aid workers potentially carrying the virus from their home country, highlighting the need for engaging local actors in the delivery of response and early recovery efforts.



Houses destroyed by Tropical Cyclone (TC) Harold (top) and assistance to the Northern Islands by the private sector (bottom). Source: CBI VBRC TC Harold and COVID-19 Vanuatu 2020 Report and [VBRC Social Media Page](#).

[1] [Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery \(GFDRR\)](#).

## TROPICAL CYCLONE (TC) HAROLD TIMELINE OF EVENTS



April 1, 2020

- a tropical cyclone formed between the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea



April 2, 2020

- the cyclone caused a storm surge which hit a passenger ferry in the Solomon Sea



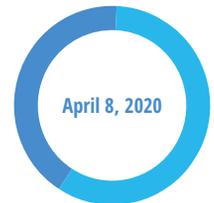
April 5, 2020

- it had strengthened into a Category 5 severe tropical cyclone, which is the highest rating of the intensity scale



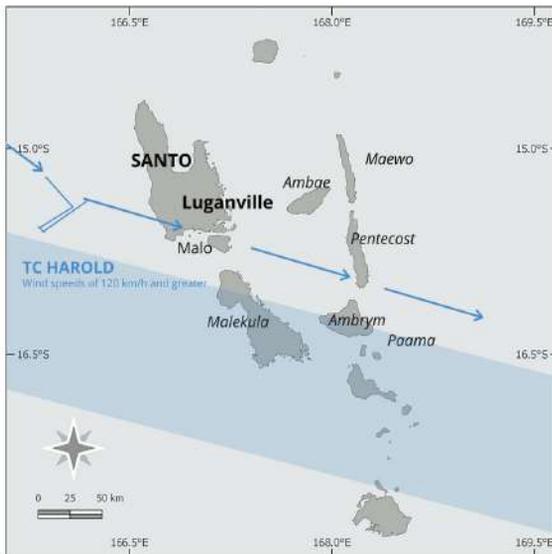
April 6, 2020

- 7 fatalities and 21 people are still missing across Solomon Islands
- Vanuatu was hit by TC Harold as a category 5 cyclone with sustained winds of more than 200 km/h



April 8, 2020

- the cyclone hit Fiji as a category 4 cyclone



In April 2020, a tropical cyclone (TC) formed between the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. The cyclone caused a storm surge that hit a passenger ferry in the Solomon Sea. It strengthened into a Category 5 severe cyclone, the Vanuatu tropical cyclone intensity scale's highest rating. On April 06, around 0:00 UTC, Vanuatu's National Disaster Management Office (VNDMO) anticipated the landfall of TC Harold. It moved southeast over the Coral Sea and made landfall on the southwest coast of Espiritu Santo (north Vanuatu) with maximum sustained winds up to 215 km/h.[2]

TC Harold hit Vanuatu's center, directly impacting Santo's large island with its second-largest city, Luganville, and many number of populated islands. As estimated by the VNDMO, around 160,000 people were affected by the cyclone in the country. With at least 95% of houses destroyed, a total of 10,000 families were affected. Overall, the VNDMO projected an estimate of US\$100 million worth of damages to the agriculture and tourism sectors.[3]



**160K**  
people affected



**70%**  
of structure in  
Luganville damaged

**USD 100M** damage to properties, tourism, and agriculture

**10,000 families**

In some areas in the northern islands of Espiritu Santo and Pentecost, at least 95% of houses were completely destroyed

[2] [Vanuatu Meteorology and Geohazards Department \(VMGD\)](#)

[3] [Aljazeera News](#)

## VANUATU BUSINESS RESILIENCE COUNCIL (VBRC) ACTIVITIES

### Preparedness Activities

Before the landfall of TC Harold, VBRC and the VCCI released Cyclone Preparedness Checklists to provide practical advice on readiness. Business Guides and Business Continuity Planning How-To Guides were also released in Bislama, English, French, and Chinese to support Vanuatu's health and to ensure that the economic disaster was as contained as possible.

In anticipation of the impact of COVID-19, VBRC assigned focal representatives to lifeline clusters. Many of Vanuatu's essential services, run by the private sector, were already prepared before the landfall and immediately implemented their disaster recovery plans.

VBRC, with the help of its member companies, provided financial and logistical support and conducted impact assessments in several affected areas. Notably, they responded to the disaster using their existing human and system resources under global COVID-19 pandemic lockdown conditions despite limited assistance from international responders because of the border closure.



Cyclone Preparation Checklist for Businesses from the [VCCI website](http://www.vcci.vu) (left) and initial deployment of the ProMedical team in Santo from [VBRC Social Media Page](#) (right).

## VANUATU BUSINESS RESILIENCE COUNCIL (VBRC) ACTIVITIES



*A village damaged by TC Harold on Pentecost Island, Vanuatu. Source: Australian High Commission, Port Vila.*

### Response Activities

VBRC activated the private sector cluster system in February due to COVID-19 and in April 2020 due to TC Harold, providing a rapid and practical response to support businesses and the Government clusters, NDMO, and the COVID-19 Advisory Committee. Additional activities supporting VBRC's work included:

- Shooting of videos using business representatives and providing updates on the private sector response shared via social media, reaching an audience of up to 12,000 viewers;
- Production of business resilience materials for training workshops and general distribution, including guides on how to prepare your workplace, your staff, direction on revised HR policies, in three languages;
- Creation of an easy-to-use visual guide on the virus itself and how it spreads, in three languages; and
- Support the production and distribution of a video that explained the impact of closing the borders and no tourism would be having initially on the economy of Vanuatu.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and TC Harold, VBRC organized the private sector to engage with the government and other actors to address both emergencies.

The network successfully mobilized telecommunication teams, relief, and recovery efforts that reflect their preparedness measures. VBRC undertook detailed technical damage assessments in the worst-hit villages and conducted aerial, ground, and marine assessments to provide the VNDMO with recommendations on accessing remote settlements and organizing the logistics of distributing immediate response items.

## VANUATU BUSINESS RESILIENCE COUNCIL (VBRC) ACTIVITIES

### Response Activities

VBRC, in partnership with the private sector, delivered 35 tonnes of food and non-food items to over 1,000 households in Southwest Coast Santo. VBRC also secured support from the government in addressing the impacts of TC Harold, conducted critical early reporting from West Coast Santo through aerial assessments, and mobilized logistics through private sector providers. A local climate consultant and VBRC executive member undertook detailed technical damage assessments in 14 of the worst-hit villages on West Coast Santo immediately after the cyclone. They also prepared business-focused emergency response recommendations and actions, accessible routes, and immediate logistical support for the VNDMO.

VBRC also formed a suppliers hub and vessel logistics hub, and transport operators linking shops and retailers in Vanuatu to those in need of locally bought materials for the TC Harold response. VBRC offered to support a business/private sector representative being placed into the VNDMO during the initial TC Harold response. Having a strong logistics background and experience in Emergency Operations Center (EOC) operations was of great assistance to the VNDMO. More important was the information coming back to the private sector to enable the business to run in line with new rules and regulations as effectively as possible.



*Dr. Christopher Bartlett, VBRC executive member, delivered the first food items to SW Coast Santo (top) and undertook technical damage assessment (bottom). Sources: [VBRC Social Media Page](#) and CBI VBRC TC Harold and COVID-19 Vanuatu 2020 Report.*

## VANUATU BUSINESS RESILIENCE COUNCIL (VBRC) ACTIVITIES

### Early-Recovery Activities



Extension of the Oxfam Unblocked Cash Transfer program to Shefa. Source: [VCCI Website](#)

As part of the recovery programs, Oxfam, in partnership with VBRC, implemented cash solutions named Unblocked Cash Response. The recipients receive ways to pay for the goods and services that best suit their recovery needs via a "tap and pay" card system.

VCCI has registered, trained, and supported over 370 vendors in the three provinces to join this program. These vendors include pharmacies, market vendors, hardware stores, buses and boats, small community shops, utility providers and more. In SHEFA Province, the team has also set up a special free bus service to assist the beneficiaries living with disabilities, allowing them access to go and do their own shopping and freedom to choose what they need.

VBRC via VCCI also launched its Business Support Centre in April after announcing the Economic Stimulus Package and Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) grant initiative. The team supported over 2,000 businesses in three provinces (SANMA, TAFEA and SHEFA) to access these funds since an agreement with the Ministry of Finance and Economic Management (MFEM) was reached about how VCCI could support their business members and assist MFEM with its rollout.

In 2020, VBRC also received its third and final year of donor funds from the Green Climate Fund readiness project to develop resilience and business support workshops and training materials appropriate to the Agriculture and Tourism sectors. This included a tool kit based on the CANVAS methodology in Bislama and English. They also provided training to 117 Agritourism businesses in Business Resilience in Sanma, Efate, Tanna, Luganville, and Port Vila.



The Oxfam's "tap and pay" card using a smart phone's app. Source: [VCCI Website](#)

In 2020, VBRC received funding from the USAID Climate Ready program to develop appropriate training materials to assist Vanuatu businesses in creating their business continuity plans or business preparedness plans and running workshops in Business Preparedness Planning COVID-19 awareness with over 200 businesses in Santo, Sola, Tanna, and Efate. In addition, the following workshops were facilitated by the Vanuatu Government request:

- Business Preparedness Planning and COVID-19 awareness to 36 public servants, who are members of the Public Service BCP Committee.
- Business Preparedness Planning and COVID-19 awareness to 10 senior management staff of Department of Customs and Inland Revenue.
- Briefing on business formalisation benefits to 19 Government counterparts and partner agencies in Santo, Tanna and Port Vila.

## VANUATU BUSINESS RESILIENCE COUNCIL (VBRC) ACTIVITIES

### Early-Recovery Activities



The Phoenix Project organized by VCCI and VBRC as support for local women business owners to accelerate economic recovery. Source: [VCCI Website](#)

In addition, VBRC has received funding from the United Nations Peace and Humanitarian Fund for the Phoenix Women in Business Program. The program's core focus is accelerating economic recovery by providing targeted support to women small business owners who, in turn, will lead the economic recovery of their communities.

VBRC has engaged with VCCI to implement the program by providing specialist support to these women-led businesses over 12 months, beginning in January 2021.

The approach includes a mix of life coaching sessions, one-on-one business mentoring, business skills workshops, and leadership skills development. The program is tailored to the specific needs of these women and their businesses.

The mentoring will focus on support at the client's workplace by mentors experienced in running their businesses in Vanuatu. VCCI has found this to be a proven approach and essential to building confidence and implementing the learning in real-life situations. The successful candidates come from all walks of life and represent a range of industries. VCCI carefully selected women who were already in business, met the program criteria, and demonstrated a willingness to evolve and grow and focus on their leadership roles in their communities.

### CURRENT STATUS AND ACTIVITIES MOVING FORWARD

Due to the shortage of human resources, limited financial means, and continuous struggle and shortage of resources for relief and recovery efforts following the effects of the coronavirus pandemic worldwide, VBRC is appealing for monetary assistance that will go primarily to human resources, the establishment of in-country logistics, procurement, and items distribution.

### CHALLENGES

Main challenges in 2020 during TC Harold and COVID-19 border lockdowns were:

- Reduction of international assistance and capacity;
- Border closure affected the timeliness of the response;
- It was clear that a lack of MOUs between VBRC and VNDMO, donor partners and international NGOs affected the implementation of the response as there were no clear mandates of who was expected to do what and where; and
- The need for capacity building within VBRC with a focus on localization so that we are prepared to respond to disasters in the future (with the new normal post COVID-19).

## VANUATU BUSINESS RESILIENCE COUNCIL (VBRC) ACTIVITIES

### LESSONS LEARNED

The private sector was the first responder in both getting on the ground and doing the initial assessment. Organizations like the VBRC need more agreed standby funding with the large donor partners to more broadly deploy and assist the government responders as the private sector is the backstop when others cannot assist.

In smaller developing nations like Vanuatu, the infrastructure, planes, shipping, and logistics are all owned by the private sector, and effective coordination is essential.

The lack of an MOU in place with the VNDMO also hindered coordination and response efforts. This is a priority for VBRC going forward.

“ **Localize all response efforts, and use the in-country resources where you can when responding. It is the smarter thing to do** ”

*Vanuatu Business Resilience Council (VBRC)*



Photo credit to Stephen Aelan Walkabout. Source: [VBRC Social Media Page](#)

VBRC is the first on the ground to respond in most instances. They move faster than most other responders and are vested in the communities that they operate. They are local, know the country and the languages, and have the trust of those they are supporting. They can mobilize at a far greater speed than outside responders. Other considerations include:

- Have pre-response agreements in place;
- Have capacity agreements;
- Know the resources in-country and have an understanding that using local private sector to support a response is ensuring a faster response; and,
- Tap into local skills and resources as much possible.

Private sector participation is essential in crisis management throughout preparedness, response, and recovery activities. Working hand-in-hand with the government, VBRC, and other private sector organizations delivered efficient and fast preparedness, response, and recovery efforts that positively contributed to the affected communities.

### RESOURCES AND OTHER USEFUL LINKS

[Connecting Business initiative: TC Harold and COVID-19 Vanuatu 2020](#)

[Pacific Risk Resilience Programme – Vanuatu Country Brief](#)

[PCRAFI Risk Assessment Methodology](#)

[Vanuatu Recovery Strategy 2020 – 2023](#)