

# BARELY A DROP TO DRINK: VANUATU'S PROBLEM WITH WATER SANITATION

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*More than half of Vanuatu people lack access to proper water supply, while 50% of people lack access to adequate sanitation facilities.*

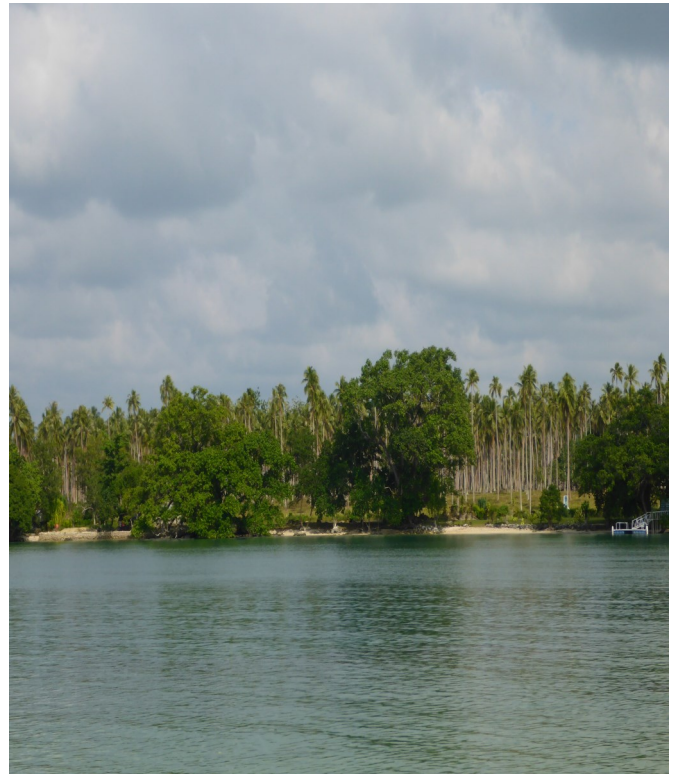
*Thankfully, Australians are reaching out to help the Pacific Island Nation.*

In March this year, Vanuatu experienced one of its most devastating natural disasters. Cyclone Pam caused more than 250 million dollars damage, affected 130,000 people, killing at least 15. Its impact on a country with a population estimated around the 260,000 mark was widespread, and brutal.

The aftermath of the cyclone has been long and arduous, causing many new environmental issues for the pacific island nation. For a country made up of more than 80 islands, the scope for such issues is granted, large. But what if one of those issues caused by Cyclone Pam had already long since existed?

Situated just over 3 hours east of Australia, Vanuatu has had a long standing environmental issue in regards to water sanitation and hydration, with the effects felt across the region. In a country made up of many islands, some extremely small, some areas have little access to proper water sanitation systems, with people forced to drink from nearby rivers or lakes in order to remain hydrated.

More than half of Vanuatu people lack access to proper water supply, while 50% of people lack access to adequate sanitation facilities. Many people who live in rural areas do not have access to health services, meaning many of its people are unable to be treated for water borne diseases such as diarrhoea, Hepatitis A and Cholera.



**NOT AS GRAND AS IT SEEMS:** A river in Northern Vanuatu. Many of the local people are forced to drink from rivers such as these, and while they might look clean, they are far from it. Picture supplied by DJ Waghorn.

## FACT FILE: VANUATU

**Location:** Oceania, South Pacific Ocean.

**Population:** 266,937 (2014 census)

**Climate:** Tropical

**Languages:** English, French, Bislama.

### FLAG



**Statistics:** The World Factbook.

**Image:** Wikimedia Commons.

On top of the physical devastation of Cyclone Pam, both to those injured and to areas of land, its aftermath has been felt in regard to clean drinking water.

Many areas have had fallen trees and other debris diluting the water supply, leaving large portions of water unsafe to drink. It's a case of 'damned if you do, damned if you don't.' Drink the water and risk becoming sick and contracting water borne diseases, or don't drink the water and risk becoming dehydrated.

This issue existed long before the cyclone was felt, but has become even more prevalent now in the wake of the disaster.

For a country with a tropical climate, Vanuatu's average rainfall per year is significantly higher than here in Australia. Its wet season falls from November to April, but during the dry season water supplies can quite often run thin.

With water scarce as it is and climate change playing potential spoilsport to chances of rain, it makes the country's task of providing equitable water sanitation systems that little bit harder.

Thankfully though, there are people both in and out of Vanuatu willing to help address this growing problem.

The Anglican Board of Mission is the national mission agency of the Anglican Church of Australia. In partnership with the Anglican Church of Melanesia, the ABM is helping supply the people of Vanuatu with improved water sanitation facilities, through water tanks and toilets.

Titled the Vanuatu Water and Sanitation (WASH for short) program, it began in 2010 with the first phase of work seeing 50 ventilation improved toilets (VIP) installed in rural areas, as well as 21 poly tanks and two wells. On top of that, four pre-existing tanks received much needed repairs.

The first phase of the program ended in June 2013, but the program continued in to a second phase in July of last year, with a need seen to identify particular WASH needs.

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Jess Sexton is the programs officer for Vanuatu for the Anglican Board of Mission.

Ms Sexton is in charge of overseeing the WASH program while working in conjunction with the Anglican Church of Melanesia to support their goals of installing clean water and sanitation facilities and providing education to the Vanuatu people.



**NO WATER TO BE SEEN:** It might be a water bottle, but there is no water in any of these bottles.

Photo supplied by DJ Waghorn.

She identifies one of the main keys to the program being a success was the continued education of how to use the facilities in the areas that the tanks and toilets were being installed. "Often towns don't have the resources or the level of local knowledge on how to maintain the tanks," she said.

"You often find quite good systems that are unusable in their current state. The teams that we have will go in there and determine whether their tanks can be rejuvenated, or whether a new poly tank is required."

As part of the second phase of the WASH program, eight communities across 5 Vanuatu islands were identified in the Torba and Sanma provinces as having insufficient clean water and/or no sanitation facilities. Sexton said the setting up of 'water committees' in these areas were being established to help establish improved water facilities on these islands.

"This water committee (s) are the point of contact for any projects that are run, and they are also responsible for any maintenance following the project, so we don't have a situation where there is a tank that falls in to disrepair because no one is equipped to be able to maintain it or doesn't have the appropriate materials or skills," Ms Sexton said.

"There is a lot of investment that will go in to the water committee to be able to maintain the facilities that are installed. "

Ms Sexton mentioned the long term goals of the organisation included reaching out to all Vanuatu communities, in particular to those in rural areas as the Vanuatu government tended to provide good enough water and sanitation in the urban areas of the country.

Our plan is to really reach the isolated community groups that are disadvantaged and don't have access to clean water or appropriate sanitation and to really work with them and partner with them in achieving that." She said.

Deborah-Jayne Waghorn is an occupational therapist who has devoted a large part of her life to helping underprivileged people.

In June last year she travelled to Vanuatu as part of a therapy program to help people with disabilities, provide therapy equipment and to try to up-skill the disability workers.

While there, she noticed the lack of clean water being drunk by the local people, suggesting that it was leading to other medical issues apart from water borne diseases.

"Diabetes is absolutely rife in Vanuatu," she claimed. "You have Australians and Chinese people owning shops, and what tends to happen is a lot of the food, like the dodgy white rice and super sweet juices is then sent and sold in Vanuatu," she said.

"This is because water isn't that accessible, and you see people buying these sugary drinks because it is easier to purchase. You see more people drinking that than you do water."



**MAKING A DIFFERENCE:** Occupational Therapist Deborah-Jayne Waghorn (pictured front left) during her trip to Vanuatu to help local people with disabilities in June last year. Picture supplied by DJ Waghorn.



Ms Waghorn called on the governments of both Australia and Vanuatu to work together to open up more opportunities to educate and teach people how to better manage not just water sanitation, but also other issues.

“We need to get Vanuatu people over here (to Australia) and teach them. Teach them how to manage businesses and put them through university so they can become water engineers and manage these programs and put things in place where they are actually teaching people how to do these services. Offer scholarships to the Vanuatu people.” She said.

Ms Sexton however said that the ABM’s work with the local people in Vanuatu in improving water sanitation and hygiene was beginning to pay off, having seen the personal gains made by remote rural communities in her time in the country.

“I was in northern Vanuatu two months ago; I went to this very isolated rural community on the island of Vanua Lava. The community were very proud in showing me the toilets they had helped build and showing me the poly tanks they had installed. It was a small community, probably 120 people there. The way they had maintained the toilets, they were very clean, they were dressed with flowers. You could tell they were very proud of them,” she said.

“While I was there you could see they were being used all the time, so it was a really good indication of how this program is actually quite successful. “

Despite the clear effects Cyclone Pam have had on the country, Ms Sexton said that the WASH programs put in place by the ABM had allowed for people to be better prepared and equipped with better skills to handle the aftermath of the disaster.

“Just having a disaster like Cyclone Pam go through and decimate areas and actually having a lot of traditional water sources polluted, the communities that had a WASH program such as ours go in there actually had tanks of clean water that they could rely on in those times,” she said.

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**SIGNS OF IMPROVEMENT:** A VIP toilet in Sola (Vanua Lava) with previous WASH coordinator, Joses Togase. Photo provided by Jess Sexton/ABM.



“Without that they would be forced to drink dirty polluted water. And that’s when you have what I call the second disaster; you already have one but then another disaster of water borne disease goes through and it really makes it difficult for communities to recover from disasters.”

While one unavoidable disaster has affected an entire nation, the Anglican Board of Mission’s WASH program, along with the Australian and Vanuatu governments are well on their way to stopping a disaster of the avoidable kind.

*With thanks to Jessica Sexton, ABM and Deborah Jayne Waghorn.*



**PICTURESQUE:** A view of the ocean in Northern Vanuatu. Thankfully with improved water sanitation systems, locals won’t have to venture to places like these for water anymore.

Photo supplied by DJ Waghorn.

