COVID-19 Vanuatu 2020

A Rapid & Practical Response

15 Feb - 9 Apr 2020
The Vanuatu Business Resilience Council (VBRC) was quick to react to the threats presented by the COVID-19 situation. Long before a global pandemic was announced in March, the team had already released guides to support the health of the people of Vanuatu and Business Continuity Planning in order to ensure that the economic disaster is as contained as possible.

This document provides an overview of VCCI and VBRC actions during the period of mid Feb to mid April 2020.

While borders closed and economic effects intensified, on the night of 5th of April a Category 5 Cyclone struck Vanuatu. Affecting over 6 islands and 140,000 people, the cyclone destroyed power and water systems, communications and homes. Assessment on loss of lives has not fully been completed. This second disaster, at a time when the country was feeling the economic effects of the global COVID-19 situation has severely challenged the nation.

Given the COVID-19 situation and the current decisions around external aid being restricted, we will need to scale dramatically to provide this logistical support to deliver the aid that other actors normally would. We need financial resource to deliver, organise logistics and measure impacts.
What we are working on now

Humanitarian support from offshore will be limited so the private sector will need to be heavily supportive and involved in the NDMO response in terms of logistics, delivery and assessments.

The assets in terms of boats, vehicles, helicopters, planes and so on that are vital to respond to the needs of the affected population are privately owned and are either already engaged or stand ready to be invited to support via the NDMO.
Early Evaluation Private Sector

The private sector was first on the ground in the main effected areas. In Santo many of the vital services such as water and electricity are privately owned and as such the teams were instantly engaged in business continuity and disaster recovery efforts as they were already there. Communications companies Vodafone and Digicel were prepared before the cyclone and immediately put into effect their recovery program.

The VBRC advance team who undertook an aerial survey, met with the power company and facilitated the orders of equipment required. We undertook a marine survey of the domestic shipping vessels to compile what ships were still inoperable for distribution of aid. We also undertook a survey of the airfield and runway and reported this back to aviation authorities.

A VBRC executive member is staying in the field doing the west coast of Santo assessment of coastal villages with a Satellite phone.
Very early assessments indicate there are up to 140,000 affected people. Complexities in this situation include our geographical spread. The affected population are widely spread and over at least 6 islands. The principal town in this area was also in the cyclone zone and significantly damaged meaning vesicles that were in that area and could be used to reach the outlying islands were sunk and concerns were grave for airports, wharves and necessary infrastructure.
Catastrophic Storm Hits Islands

Cyclone Harold made landfall in the northern islands on the 5th and 6th of April. With winds as strong as 250km per hour, the cyclone tore a path across several islands including Santo, Malo, Aore, Northern Malekula, Ambae and Pentecost, creating a belt of destruction across the country’s middle.

In Santo, many of the vital services such as water and electricity are privately owned and as such, the teams were instantly engaged in business continuity and disaster recovery efforts. The Port Vila based business community had already put in place a cluster system with representatives for food, health, water and so on effectively connected to the Government National Disaster Management Office. Daily updates are being communicated and once initial NDMO plans are in place, these will be supported by the private sector.
Preparation Prior to Storm

Given the intensity of the forecasted storm and lessons learned from Cyclone Pam that made landfall in Efate and the south in 2015, VBRC and the Chamber was quick to release Cyclone Preparedness Checklists for Business and provide practical advice on readiness in all three core languages.

Cluster system was already engaged due to the COVID-19 situation. All clusters now prepared for tropical storm Harold. This included:

a. Food inventories zeroed in on potentially affected area and more detailed data prepared. Food preservation guidelines provided
b. Logistics cluster prepared private vesicles to fuel up and standby for immediate readiness to respond – especial planes/helicopters
c. Communications cluster engaged local support companies and readied inventories required to repair communications networks
d. Meetings intensified with Government Partners for readiness and rapid response plans put in place
e. International enquiries being received on how best to support the pending situation – NDMO to lead on international response and issue directives to the international aid community.
Focus Shifts to Relief

Following the announcement of the Vanuatu Government’s Economic & Financial Stimulus Package, VCCI partnered with the Department of Finance to deliver support to Employers and Employees on in three core areas:

1. Tax Relief
2. Employment Stabilisation Payment
3. Business Support Program (business license refund and one-off payment)

While financial means are now being put in place for payments by the Vanuatu Government, VCCI is releasing information about the package to businesses and is establishing a hotline for supporting Employees and Employers. Documentation is prepared in English, French, Bislama and Chinese.

Partnership with Business Link Pacific – providing up to 100% subsidies to local businesses

The COVID-19 Subsidy covers up to 100% of services through BLP approved advisors focusing on services that support business continuity, contingency planning and access to available financial packages. Refinancing and renegotiating loans and new working setups, such as IT systems, access to communications platforms and cloud-based software. The subsidy package will cover services for up to NZD 5,000 per SME and further support will be considered on a case-by-case approach.
Invitation to Support Government

Led by trainer Irene Titek, the Vanuatu Business Resilience Council (VBRC) was invited by the Public Service Commission to provide business continuity planning training to senior government officials and heads of departments. These tools and processes were quickly adopted by the Vanuatu Government for their business continuity plans.

Economic Affects Intensify

While initial efforts focused on COVID-19 preparedness and business and health measures, as the situation intensified, it became apparent that the effect on the economy of Vanuatu would be significant. Given that up to 40% of GDP is generated from tourism, the closing of the boarders on 20th of March was an important health measure but also a dramatic blow to the business community. At that stage, liaison with Government increased and discussion moved to one of finding appropriate ways to support the Government with relief response. Key economic advisors were made available to support the Government with necessary decisions.

VCCI initiated a business owner’s survey to gather vital data on affect to businesses. Initial responses indicated that even early on, up to 40% of businesses surveyed were closed or closing and 30% had already made staff redundant. This data was shared appropriately to support Government decision making.

Key Initial Findings Include

- 61% of respondents are Extremely Worried about the affect of COVID-19 on their Business
- Approx. 40% of respondents have now closed their business or are soon to do so
- Approx. 30% of respondents have made staff redundant already
- 77% of respondents have already put staff on reduced hours
- Approx. 90% of respondents wish to see affected staff having access to VNPF funds
Successful Communications

20th March

Local communications company Pandanus Consulting Ltd provided a co-funded solution with both their own funding and support from Business Link Pacific to enable the Chamber to access increased and professional communications services.

The focus has been on achieving effective communication with Employers and Employees and included segmenting the audience and appropriately addressing communications in English, Bislama and French. Increasing social media presence was a very effective means to communicate with more people in a quick and responsive way. This has improved the role of the Chamber as it is now seen as providing timely, important and clear information. Short videos were developed to provide explanations or examples to complex economic matters, in a simple way that could be understood by everyone including those with less literacy.

Activated Cluster System For Co-Ordinated Response

17th March

VBRC Activated cluster system to ensure each of the key areas had a focal representative from the private sector to meet as required with Government and NGO’s.

Implemented specific communications protocols to be able to rapidly share information within groups as required by the situation with electronic reporting to shared Google Drive, dedicated WhatsApp groups and Zoom interactive meeting tools for online meeting access.
Business Continuity Workshops Supporting Businesses

The teams have provided training to businesses in four provinces during 2019 and have supported over 200 businesses with Business Continuity Planning. These workshops took place in Port Vila, Lenekal, Lakatoro and Luganville.

The workshops were quickly adapted to the COVID-19 situation and additional courses for businesses were held.

Delivery of workshop was made possible by the financial support of
Resources Supporting Business

Core guides were released in English and Bislama. These documents included Business Continuity Guides tailored to the COVID-19 situation, Health Guides for employers explaining how to keep the workplace and employees safe and healthy and Business Planning checklists. These were extremely well received and widely used in the business community.