Vanuatu’s early lessons in recovery from compound disasters

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Government of Vanuatu
• Small island developing country with high disaster risk profile

• Regularly exposed to range of hydro-meteorological and geophysical hazards

• With the backdrop of COVID-19, Vanuatu was devastated by Severe Tropical Cyclone Harold. A new dimension to impacts from compounding disaster events. COVID-19 losses were only accounted for the period of March 2020 – June 2020.

• Total effects combined USD 617 million in losses and damages. Tourism and service related industries hardest hit

• The country was in the midst of an election and transition of power. An ongoing State of Emergency was also in place
Lesson – Assessing impacts

• Initially grappled with whether to do separate assessments and plans for TC Harold and COVID-19

• No international surge capacity to directly support with Post Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) and recovery planning compared to past disaster events

• Reliance now on local and in-country capacities. Mixed absorptive capacity to effectively carry out assessments

• Most sectors have minimal baselines or non existent baselines and effective information management systems

• Excellent remote support from international agencies – UN, World Bank, bilateral donors
Lessons - Planning

- Development of the TC Harold and COVID-19 Vanuatu Recovery Strategy. Endorsed in July 2020
- Recovery Strategy makes explicit linkages to the longer term National Sustainable Development Plan (2016 – 2030)
- Three main objectives:
  1. Restore and strengthen essential social services and protections
  2. Enhance lives and livelihoods
  3. Repair the natural and built environment
- Sectors and donors now aligning activities and budgets with VRS objectives
- At the provincial/subnational level recovery mechanisms and bodies are being established
- Recovery functions at the Prime Minister’s Office are still nascent with a Recovery Coordination Unit recently established in early 2020. Requires more substantive capacities and institutional mechanisms to be effectively established in particularly having permanent staffing.
- Current Disaster Risk Management Act 2019 does not include recovery
Lessons – Financing

• Policy directive for government ministries to reprioritize budgets after TC Harold. Allowed for early recovery interventions by clusters and sectors. However streamlined financial processes are still needed.

• Government economic stimulus package of USD 4 million to support businesses, small medium enterprises and communities. Implemented by the Ministry of Finance

• Over 5000 applications received, 3000 applications processed thus far.

• Businesses especially the tourism entities have been appreciative of the fiscal support. However, there are still remaining frustrations.
Lessons – Financing

• Lack of baselines and proper registration mechanisms, especially at the provincial level, has resulted in substantial number of small or informal businesses missing out on fiscal stimulus

• Timeliness or delays in processing payments

• Aid Coordination Unit is currently working with donor partners where direct financing agreements are concerned.

• Council of Ministers decision to establish a Recovery Trust Fund but yet to be operationalized
Next steps and Ways Forward

- DSPPAC now working with sectors to come up with recovery project proposals for funding.

- Consideration of putting in place a harmonized disaster recovery framework of which pandemic preparedness must become an essential ingredient.

- Need to strengthen sub-national and national level coordination mechanisms for assessments.

- A fit for purpose and accountable streamlined process and regulations for accessing emergency funds and procurement needs to be developed.

- TC Harold recovery projects will be an opportunity for economic stimulus for the next five years.

- Building back schools, health centres, water facilities and focusing on sanitation and hygiene, as well as the skills development and vocational training/livelihood opportunities that will accompany this, will assist in economic recovery from COVID. It will also assist in shifting/focusing the workforce into COVID related skills development and training areas.
Thank you!