



- ✓ To fight poverty, we must understand it.
- ✓ To help children living in poverty, we must understand how poverty affects children.
- ✓ Poverty cannot be measured by cash income alone.
- ✓ Vanuatu's widespread islands and diverse regions have complex and sometimes conflicting needs – there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

How can we ensure a better future for Vanuatu's children living in poverty?



1. Understand the problem.
2. Take a multidimensional approach.
3. Take a child-centred approach.
4. Identify the greatest needs.
5. Recognize what works.
6. Build on what works and move forward to fill needs.

Vanuatu's success stories point the way.

Vanuatu, like most Pacific Island countries, has a long tradition of mutual support within family and clan; churches and NGOs are strong as well. These supports – along with continued access to subsistence livelihoods such as agriculture and fishing – have helped to ensure that the absolute poverty seen elsewhere in the developing world for the most part spares this country. Many Ni-Vanuatu told a recent survey that destitution (*no gat samting*) didn't exist in their country, although hardship (*laef I had tumas*) certainly did, its chief challenge being lack of access to basic services (ADB 2002). Almost half of Vanuatu's rapidly growing population is under the age of 20. Among the problems facing these young people are vulnerability to illness and abuse, and lack of access to education and jobs. Over 15 per cent of the population falls under the national Basic Needs Poverty Line.

Vanuatu's 65 inhabited islands are scattered across 650 kilometres of ocean; these distances make communication and transport a significant challenge. At high risk from natural disasters, Vanuatu is ranked number 1 on the Commonwealth Vulnerability Index, which considers both external shocks and internal resiliency (Easter, Atkins and Mazzi 2000). Its remote islands face different challenges than its urban areas. Provinces have different strengths and weaknesses when it comes to filling basic needs like shelter and health care, and families have widely varying abilities to provide for their children. Children are not just miniature adults – they are vulnerable to poverty in different ways. All these factors make the challenge of helping children to overcome poverty a complex one that requires careful study and flexible solutions.

Understand the problem

Ensuring Vanuatu children's well-being requires an evidence-based approach. This policy brief is based on the *Vanuatu Child Poverty and Disparity Study*, which adopted the methodology of UNICEF's (2007) *Global Study on Child Poverty and Disparities* and drew on data from Vanuatu's 2006 Household Income and Expenditure Survey and 2007 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey. The findings and recommendations presented here demonstrate both the relevance of this evidence-based approach and the need for further study and child-centred analysis.

Two key challenges in poverty research are understanding the many elements that make up the broad experience we call 'poverty' and knowing how this experience affects children.

For more information

Find out about the Global Study on Child Poverty and Disparities online: www.unicefglobalstudy.blogspot.com

Take a multidimensional approach

Especially in a country with a strong tradition of mutual aid and wide availability of subsistence opportunities, money is only one aspect of wealth and poverty. Equally if not more important is access to essential goods and benefits such as decent housing and a good education – whether these are provided by the family, the community or the state. (All the money in the world won't provide balanced nutrition if you don't know what to eat, or good health care if there is no clinic or hospital.)

Lack of money could be called 'expenditure poverty', and lack of essential goods and benefits could be called 'deprivation'. Expenditure poverty depends, in turn, on the cost of goods and services in a given location and on the size of a household (two can live more cheaply than one). Deprivation (or its opposite, well-being) depends on a wider variety of factors, since access to life's essentials could depend on oneself, family members, community groups, government agencies, foreign donors, and even the weather.

In a country of far-flung islands, it is not surprising that regional differences arise, and rapid urbanization is creating its own set of problems and opportunities. To target problems effectively, it is essential to understand them in all their range and complexity. Thus this study drew on the two surveys mentioned earlier, one focusing on expenditures and the other on basic needs, and paid close attention to the differences between provinces and between urban and rural areas.

Take a child-centred approach

The preponderance of young people in Vanuatu's rapidly growing population means that any effort to promote social development and economic progress must take them into account. Not only their own rights but the health of the country depend on it. Because children are still developing, unmet needs could affect them and their future prospects in ways that can't be made up for later.

Thus, an adequate picture of child poverty in a country or region has to look beyond the overall picture of poverty. One way to begin to home in on children's experience of poverty is to focus a study at the household level, and limit it to households with children. Even such a study, however, if it concentrated exclusively on expenditure poverty, would fail to capture a child's reality. The best approach is to supplement household income and expenditure measures with a close look at some essential components of children's well-being: food, shelter, sanitation, drinking water, health, education, and access to information.

Many of these needs are relevant throughout childhood; some (such as health care) are arguably more urgent for very young children; others (such as education and information) become more important once a child is old enough to interact with the world outside the home.

Identify the greatest needs

While children across Vanuatu suffer deprivation in all the categories listed above, among the most widespread and urgent needs are in the areas of nutrition, health and education.

Nutrition

Good nutrition is critical to every child's physical and mental development. With subsistence farming and fishing available to so many Ni-Vanuatu, severe malnourishment is not a widespread problem. But a significant number of children suffer from moderate malnourishment: a fifth or more are moderately stunted or underweight. For some families that rely on subsistence farming, lack of protein may be an issue, though others are able to fill this gap through fishing or raising poultry.

Children under six months have the fewest nutritional problems, probably because many of them are breastfeeding and thus receiving adequate nutrition. Children in rural areas, who are often breastfed longer, also stay better nourished longer.¹

Health

About a fifth of Vanuatu's population does not have access to health care; this is a particular problem in rural and remote areas. Vanuatu has a shortage of doctors and nurses; and even though health care is subsidized, the modest fees are too much for many families to pay.

Infant and under-five mortality are 25 and 30 per thousand, respectively; both rates dropped significantly in the early to mid 1990s, but improvement has stagnated since then.

Communicable diseases – especially malaria, respiratory illness and diarrhoeal diseases – remain a threat. With increasing urbanization and changing lifestyles, diabetes, high blood pressure, and other non-communicable diseases are also becoming an increasing problem.

Education

Education is not compulsory in Vanuatu. Its school attendance rates are among the lowest in the Pacific, and it has the highest proportion of children who have never attended school. Early childhood programmes reach, at the most, half of Vanuatu's children. Primary education is of uneven quality, and secondary school places are severely limited. For students who do enrol, dropout and absenteeism rates are high. There is a teacher shortage.

Barriers to children remaining in school include long travel distances, unaffordable fees, sometimes poor quality teaching or facilities, and families' need or expectation for children to work in subsistence agriculture. The Government's recent moves to abolish primary school fees by 2012 and extend primary school through year eight are grounds for optimism that Vanuatu's children will soon enjoy better access to education.

Regional differences in deprivation

Torba and Tafea, Vanuatu's northern- and southern-most provinces, are disadvantaged in many ways by their remoteness from the capital and from markets and amenities. The two main cities, Port Vila and Luganville, do well in many categories but poorly in the areas of nutrition and health. Access to more jobs in the cash economy is overshadowed, especially in Port Vila, by a high cost of living that undermines any economic advantages the cities offer.

The pattern of individual provinces' economic strengths, weaknesses and needs is highly complex and needs further study, but it is safe to say that antipoverty interventions are likely to be more successful the more they take local realities into account. Balancing the needs of urban

¹ The Government of Vanuatu and UNICEF advocate exclusive breastfeeding up to six months and continued breastfeeding with complementary feeding up to two years of age.

and rural children and their families is likely to be a key challenge, along with finding ways to deliver services across long distances to a dispersed population.

Recognize what works

Vanuatu does not need to start from scratch in tackling child poverty; it has taken some important steps on which it can build further. There are at least two signposts to the way forward: family characteristics that are closely associated with positive outcomes for children, and successful programs that show what can be accomplished when policies are implemented effectively. We can build on our successes.

Family characteristics

In the survey that offers the most recent and comprehensive information on the non-expenditure aspects of poverty – the 2007 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey – the factor most closely associated with children’s well-being was parents’ (especially mothers’) education. For example:

- Children’s nutrition status was tied more closely to mother’s education level than to any other factor – including wealth.
- Infant and under-five mortality rates, somewhat better in wealthier and urban families, were significantly better (less than half) for children of mothers with a secondary school education.
- Mothers’ level of education appears to have a strong influence on whether their children stay in school.

In terms of expenditure poverty (as measured by the 2006 Household Income and Expenditure Survey), education again played a strong role, with an almost four-to-one difference in per cent of households below the poverty line depending on whether the household head had no formal education or was a secondary school graduate.

Another important factor influencing expenditure poverty was size of household; the smaller the household, the less likely it was to fall below the poverty line. The pattern for the poverty gap (how far below the poverty line each household fell) was the same.

Policy success stories

While the following programs have not achieved total success, they have made great strides and are expected to continue their progress.

- **Malaria eradication:** Vanuatu introduced the rapid diagnostic test for malaria to all health facilities in 2008 and, with funding from the Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, has distributed long-lasting, insecticide-treated nets. Distribution of the nets reached 85 per cent by 2009. Annual parasite incidence decreased from 23.3 per 1,000 people in 2007 to 13.3 per 1,000 in 2009.
- **Access to information:** The Telecommunications Act of 2007 opened the telephone market to competition and led to a rapid rise in coverage, especially in rural areas. Nationwide, 76 per cent of Vanuatu households had mobile phones by 2009. Radio Vanuatu, which reached only 15 per cent of the country in 2007, now has 100 per cent coverage (Pacific Institute of Public Policy 2009).

In both of these examples, a good policy effectively implemented has made a major, rapid, measurable difference in people’s lives.

Build on what works and move forward

While these success stories are heartening, the challenges facing Vanuatu remain great. The country has a number of pro-child policies in place – notably the National Children’s Policy, Breastfeeding Policy and Nutrition Policy – but it has not always found it easy to take the next step from high-minded policy to practical implementation.

The Government's decision to phase out primary school fees is an excellent example of just the kind of practical steps Vanuatu needs. Given the criticality of education to nearly every measure of wealth and well-being, this decision is likely to make an enormous positive difference in the lives of children, perhaps less rapidly but even more deeply than the two policy success stories described above.

An education-related issue on which there is agreement in principle but no such practical movement so far is support for and inclusion of disabled children.

Other steps that the Government, together with civil society and foreign donors, can take to improve child well-being and alleviate poverty, include the following:

- Complement formal academic education with community education initiatives that reach out to parents on the importance of immunization, nutrition, birth registration, hygiene, and prevention of HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases.
- Strive to balance the needs of rural and urban citizens, address the diverse problems and strengths of different parts of the country, and find solutions to the challenges to service delivery imposed by distance.
- Seek ways to meet the growing need for health care of an expanding population, the new threats to health (from depression to diabetes) that accompany increasingly urban lifestyles and the chronic problem of underserved remote areas. Donor funding will likely remain an important part of the solution to Vanuatu's daunting health care challenge.
- Scale up protection for child rights – particularly in the prevention of domestic violence and physical, mental and sexual abuse; the prevention of child marriage; and the harmonization of Vanuatu laws with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.
- Continue conducting the research and analysis that are essential to keeping pro-child and antipoverty efforts focused, evidence-based, and practical.

Past experience gives grounds for both hope and concern. Vanuatu's children deserve nothing short of our best efforts to ensure that the hopeful note prevails.

This policy brief summarises the findings and recommendations of the *Vanuatu Child Poverty and Disparity Study*. For the complete study, contact the United Nations Children's Fund, 3rd and 5th Floors, FDB Building, 360 Victoria Parade, Suva, Fiji Islands. Email: suva@unicef.org. Website: <http://www.unicef.org/pacificislands/>.

The following sources were cited in this brief:

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