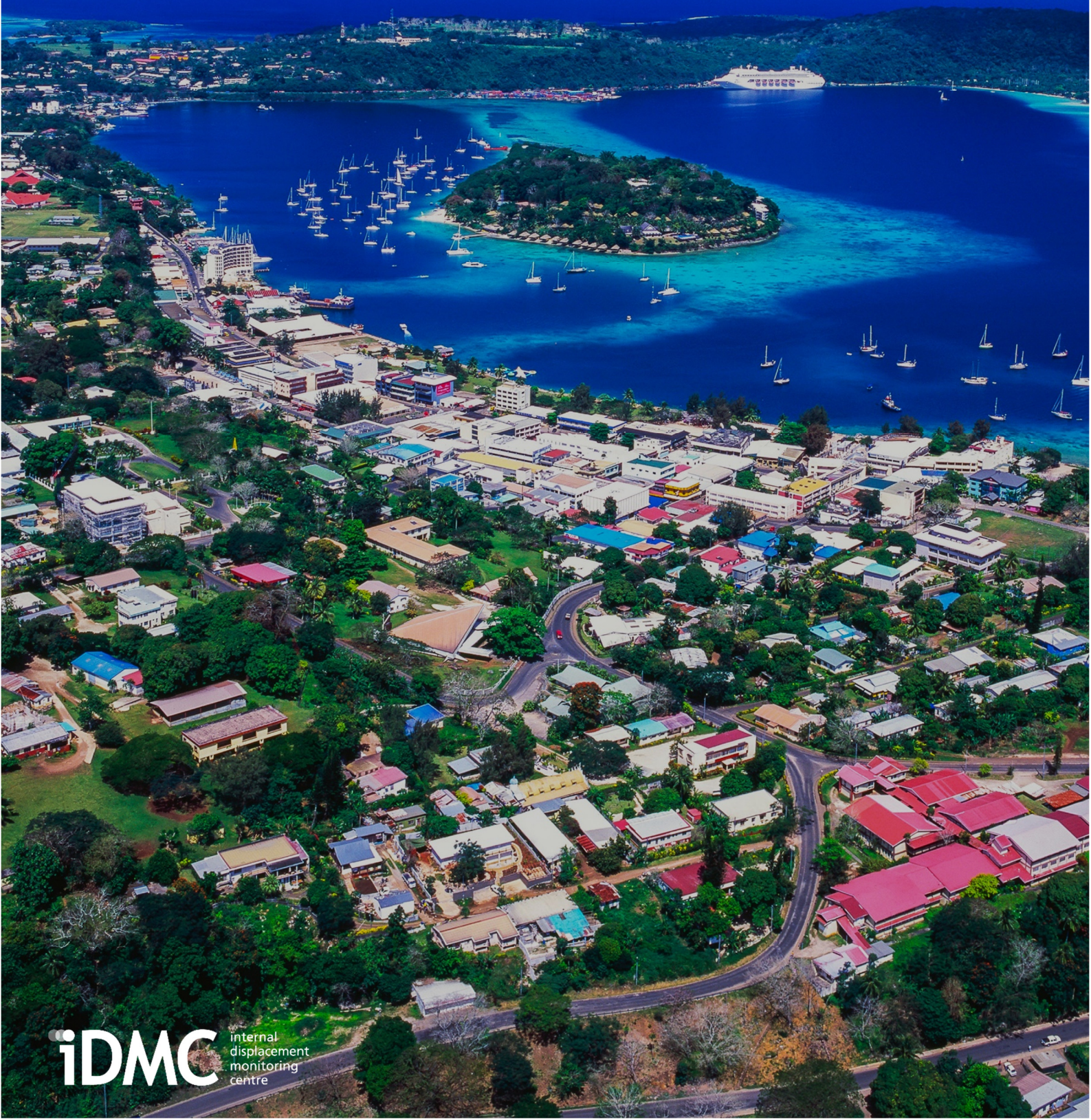


Pacific response to disaster displacement

Urban case study: Port Vila, Vanuatu



Acknowledgements:

With funding from the European Union, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) is collaborating with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD) to generate new evidence to help governments better understand, plan for, prevent and respond to disaster displacement in the Pacific region. The Pacific Response to Disaster Displacement (PRDD) project will contribute to better policy responses, planning and operational tools.



Introduction

Vanuatu has the world's highest disaster risk.¹ Its capital, Port Vila, has been ranked the world's most exposed city to natural hazards.² As informal settlements continue to expand in the face of rapid urbanisation, vulnerability is rising.³ Around 13,000 of Port Vila's inhabitants live in informal settlements characterised by high population density and poor-quality housing.⁴

Since IDMC began systematically monitoring disaster displacement in 2008, disasters have triggered almost 175,000 displacements in Vanuatu.⁵ Port Vila's combined exposure and vulnerability to hazards translate into repeated and widespread displacement: in 2015, the widespread damage occasioned by Tropical Cyclone Pam, in particular in informal settlements, left around 65,000 people in need of emergency shelter.⁶

To increase the country's resilience, the government of Vanuatu launched a National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction in 2015, resulting in the development of a National Policy on Climate

Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement in 2018.⁷ To support these efforts to better prevent and respond to disaster displacement, this paper draws upon the results of a recent study to examine the drivers, patterns, and impacts of internal displacement linked with disasters in the greater Port Vila area and surrounding communities.

Methodology

Data collection was carried out by IPSOS in September-October 2021. A total of 307 survey interviews were conducted in Port Vila with households who had been displaced by natural hazards in the past year. The findings do not claim to be representative of the displaced population of the greater Port Vila area. In consultation with local authorities, interviews took place in the communities of Prima, Blacksands, and Teouma. A random walk technique was used to select households, supplemented by a modified respondent-driven approach. The survey was supplemented by five key informant interviews. All names in the report have been changed.⁸

Key findings

Displacement drivers

Many peri-urban areas are exposed to natural hazards

While the entire population of Vanuatu is exposed to natural hazards, unmanaged rural to urban migration and the concentration of new migrants in informal settlements in hazard-prone peri-urban areas is a core driver of internal displacement.⁹

Port Vila is thought to experience some of the highest population growth rates in Pacific Island countries, and much of this growth is concentrated outside its official municipal boundaries, in the city's rapidly expanding peri-urban areas.¹⁰ Many of the settlements in these peri-urban areas are located on land deemed unsuitable for urban development as a result of exposure to climate hazard risks.¹¹ Flooding is a particular risk, especially in the wake of tropical cyclones.

Poor quality housing contributes to exacerbating displacement risk

In exposed areas such as Teouma, Prima, and Blacksands, poor quality housing heightens vulnerability and exacerbates the risk of displacement. *"People who were displaced from their houses are mostly from informal settlements,"* said Marie, a women's representative in Teouma, *"whereas people that are not displaced are people who build permanent houses."* According to Robert, a member of a local NGO, *"most of the houses are just made up of a few timber posts, iron sheets for walls and roofs, and sometimes – if they get lucky enough to find money – a cement foundation."*

Peri-urban areas of Port Vila, which are growing at twice the rate of the city itself, also suffer deficits in critical services and infrastructure.¹² Among households interviewed in Teouma, Prima, and Blacksands, 38.8 per cent currently

have neither water, sanitation, or electricity in their homes, and 92.2 per cent are lacking at least one of these three services - most commonly water.

This combination of exposure and vulnerability has resulted in repeated displacement: 77.2 per cent of survey respondents had been displaced more than once, including 20.5 per cent who had been displaced three times or more.

"I left a lot of times. It might be over 10 times. [...] I've been here for so long that I've studied the water levels to know when it is time to leave [...] To actually 'live here' is a hard task because we keep leaving. We leave then we come back, we leave then we come back. It's an endless cycle." – John, community leader in Teouma

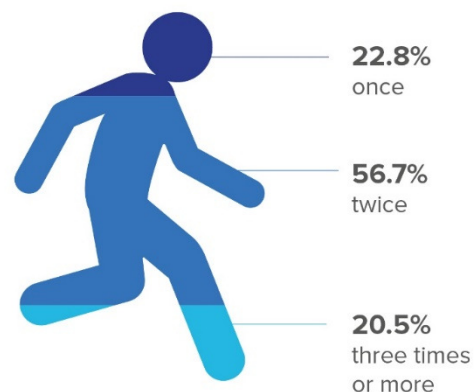


Figure 1. Number of displacements

Tenure insecurity can discourage the construction of permanent housing

It is estimated that close to four per cent of the population of Vanuatu have informal land tenure arrangements, but those living in informal settlements are thought to be disproportionately affected.¹³ At the time of displacement, nearly 72 per cent of respondents surveyed in Teouma, Prima, and Blacksands did not have any official documentation for their housing.

Vanuatu’s National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster Induced Displacement recognises insecure land tenure arrangements as a driver of displacement in peri-urban areas.¹⁴ This recognition is an important first step, but solutions are needed. For now, tenure insecurity discourages households from investing in the construction of permanent structures.¹⁵ According to Robert, “people are afraid that if they build a permanent house then one day there is some sort of land dispute, we will not be able to recover costs for building the house.”

Displacement patterns

Host families often shoulder a disproportionate burden

When hazards hit, many people seek shelter in permanent structures such as churches, schools, or the houses of more fortunate neighbours. Less than 13 per cent of survey respondents sought refuge in an evacuation centre during their most recent displacement.

Family and friends are the most important source of support. Assistance from governmental or non-governmental organisations is limited, increasing the burden on host families: “when the government did not step in to provide food for the people I sheltered, [...] the money came out of my own pocket,” says Simon, a community leader in Eratap village.

Displacement is rarely protracted, but erodes resilience

The duration of displacement is generally influenced by the severity of the hazard, but it is rarely protracted. Given the limited impacts of cyclone Harold on the greater Port Vila area, key informants report having been displaced for shorter periods than during cyclone Pam in 2015. “No massive destruction occurred so the families did not have to stay away for long”, explains Robert. Among survey respondents, the last time they were displaced, 89.3 per cent were away from their home one week or less.

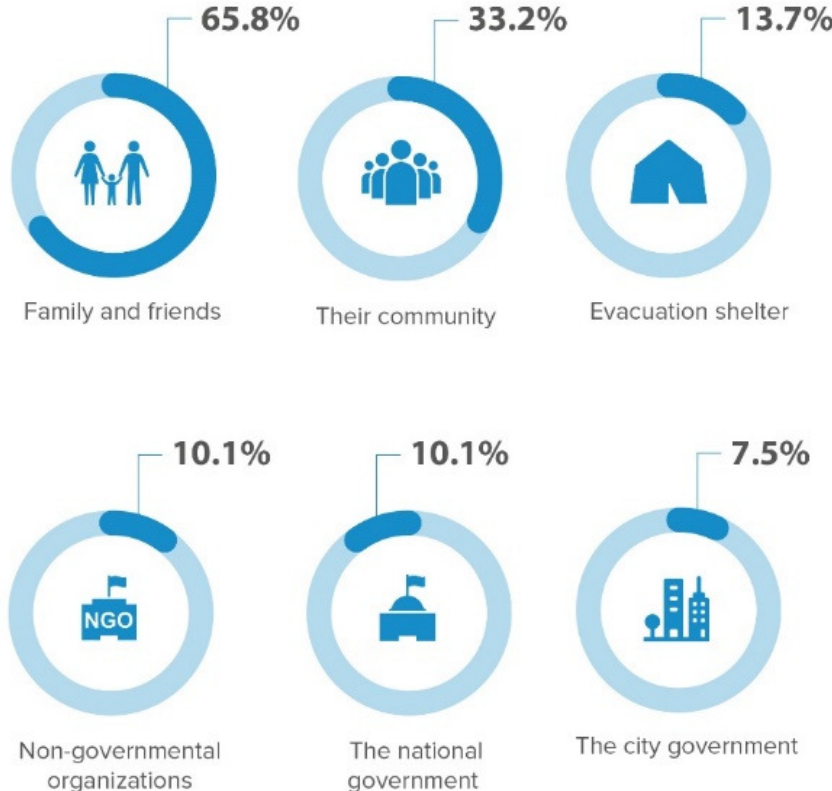


Figure 2. Sources of support

Even short-term displacement, however, contributes to eroding resilience. As discussed below, survey results suggest that the risk of being unable to recover lost income increases with every displacement.

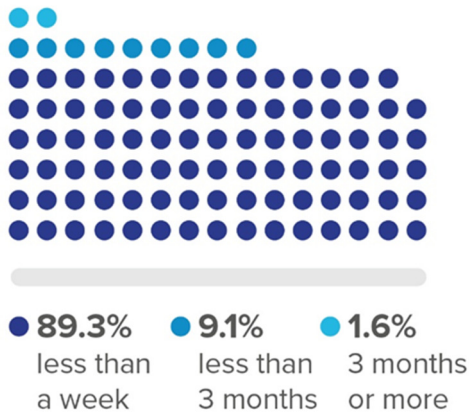


Figure 3. Duration of displacement

Displacement impacts

Additional resources are required to protect homes from hazards

Nearly three quarters (73.6 per cent) of respondents indicate that displacement had a negative impact on their housing conditions. “When my family and I got back from the cyclone we only stood up some posts then put one piece of corrugated iron as our roofing and used tarpaulin as our wall,” explains John. “We lived in that small shelter and slowly rebuilt our house again.”

Aware of their exposure to hazards, 57.7 per cent of respondents have attempted to protect their homes by strengthening the building. Resources, however, are key: 82.6 per cent of those who have not taken steps to protect their homes cite lack of money as a key factor. Although over a quarter of respondents have received information on how to protect their homes from natural hazards, just 5.9 per cent reporting having received any material or financial support to do so.

Farming households are in need of alternative income and food sources

Around 83 per cent of the population of Vanuatu is engaged in subsistence or small-scale agriculture.¹⁶ Recurrent natural hazards and resulting displacement disrupt livelihoods, threatening food production and undermining prospects to save for future disasters. A majority of respondents report that their latest displacement had a negative impact on their income.

“When the disaster ends, the garden has been destroyed, meaning our main source of revenue perishes,” says John. Until the next harvest, households who depend on agriculture are in need of support. “If relief supplies are not provided within two weeks, people will not be able to sustain themselves,” says Marie.

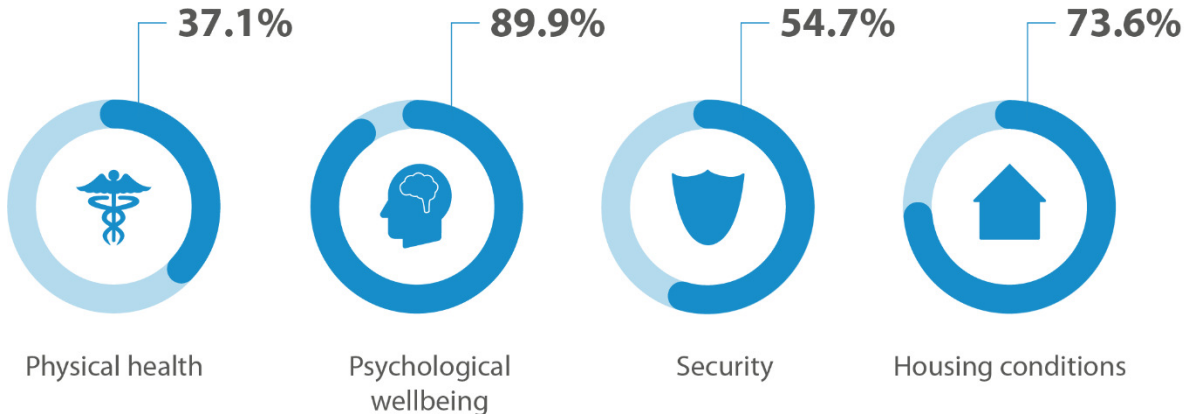
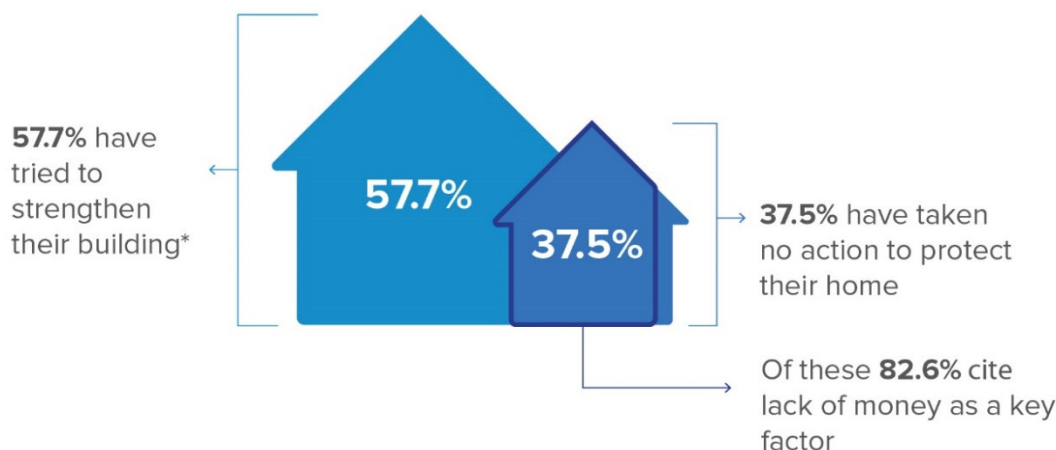


Figure 4. Negative impacts of displacement



*This was the most common step taken to protect homes from hazards. In addition, 3.6% of respondents invested in local soil protection and 5.2% reported taking other steps.

Figure 5. Actions taken to protect homes from natural hazards

Although loss of income was mostly temporary, 16.6 per cent of respondents still did not earn an income at the time of data collection. While this was the case for 11.4 per cent of those who had been displaced only once, the percentage of respondents unable to recover their lost income increases to 17.2 per cent among those displaced twice, and 20.6 per cent for those displaced three times or more.

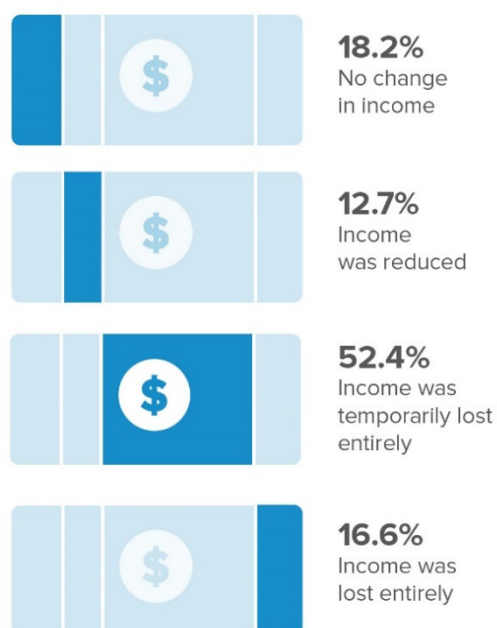


Figure 6. Impact on personal income

Support is needed to keep children in school

Although school premises sometimes become a temporary shelter for displaced people, most children are able to resume their education once schools reopen. Others, however, are held back: among respondents with children of school age (N=237), nearly 95 per cent noted that their children's education had been interrupted while they were displaced, including 12.2 per cent whose children have yet to go back to school.

In some instances, children are expected to support their families during displacement. Marie recalls that following cyclone Pam, some children did not immediately resume their education "because the parents thought it would be best to use their kids to go and rebuild their homes".

Education can also be undermined by loss of livelihoods. Some parents are unable to send their children to school until they recover their income. Children whose parents are themselves less educated may be particularly at risk: respondents with little or no education were more likely than those who had completed schooling to report that their children had not gone back to school following displacement.

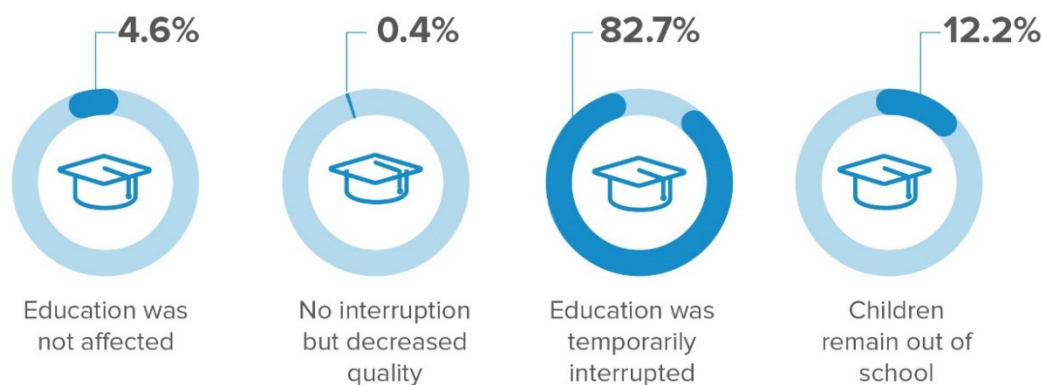


Figure 7. Impact on education

Interruptions to education can undermine IDPs' future ability to secure paid employment; as experienced elsewhere, this may restrict today's displaced children to similarly insecure housing in the future, transferring displacement risk to the next generation.¹⁷

Healthcare interventions should target the most vulnerable

As well as its toll on housing, livelihoods, and education, disaster displacement in Vanuatu can have a negative impact on health. "There are some people who were sick [...] after the flooding", notes John. "The mud is dirty so people have gotten sick from that." As seen in

other settings, this may further exacerbate IDPs' vulnerability by undermining their ability to work.¹⁸

Despite efforts to provide health services to those affected, 89.9 per cent of survey respondents report a negative effect on their psychological wellbeing, and 37.1 per cent note that displacement negatively impacted their physical health. Elderly people appear most at risk: close to two-thirds of respondents aged sixty and above report a negative impact on their physical health, compared to around a third of younger respondents.

Ways forward

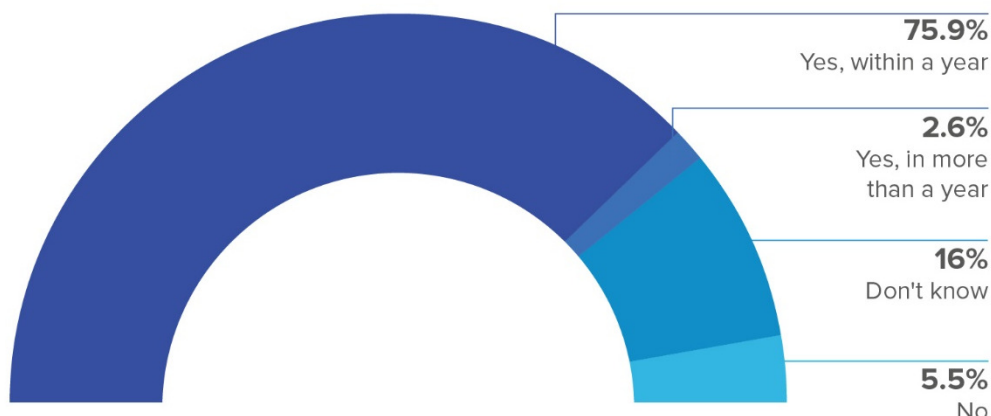


Figure 8. Expected future displacement

Over three-quarters of respondents think they may be forced to leave their homes again because of a natural hazard within the next year. Only 5.5 per cent of those surveyed think they'll never be displaced again, perhaps thanks to housing improvements: "from cyclone Pam we learnt a lot of lessons about where we should be building houses that can withstand a cyclone", says Marie. "So personally, I built my house in such a way that I will not have to flee my home again."

Those who are unable to build permanent housing take other steps to prepare for future hazards. "It has become a routine," notes Robert. "They know that when it is cyclone season, they should start preparing their houses and preparing themselves to leave." Confronted with repeated displacement, some

are reportedly open to relocation. "If the government could find us another area then we would happily go live there and only come back here for gardening," says John.

Appropriate interventions to address the causes and effects of displacement should be identified and carried out in partnership with affected communities, non-governmental organisations, and the private sector, and positioned within Port Vila's Municipal Council and Department of Local Authorities to build upon existing processes and priorities. Pending inclusive consultations, this paper has highlighted the following ways forward, aligned with the aims of Vanuatu's National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement:

National Policy Aims	Proposed ways forward
"Minimise the drivers of displacement" and "Promote access to affordable, disaster-resilient housing and tenure security for all citizens of Vanuatu."	<p>Provide financial, material, and/or technical support for households to protect their homes from hazards, including by building permanent structures.</p> <p>Support tenure security in peri-urban areas to encourage the construction of permanent structures.</p>

<p>“Where displacement or planned relocation do occur, to minimise its negative impacts”</p>	<p>Offer support to host families to promote a sustainable community-led response and strengthen the social fabric of affected areas.</p> <p>Protect farming households from the negative impacts of future hazards through the development of targeted insurance schemes and/or livelihood diversification.</p> <p>Provide incentives for continued school enrolment, with a particular focus on children from lesser-educated households.</p> <p>Ensure that elderly people and other vulnerable groups have access to healthcare during and after displacement.</p>
<p>“Facilitate well-managed and safe migration with dignity, focusing on internal migration as an adaptation strategy to climate change and disasters.”</p>	<p>At the request of communities, facilitate community-led relocation from areas with the highest exposure to hazards.</p>

Endnotes

¹ Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft and Ruhr University Bochum, [World Risk Report](#), 2021

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³ IDMC, [Sudden onset hazards and the risk of future displacement in Vanuatu](#), 2021; Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, [Port Vila, Vanuatu: ecosystems, climate change and development scenarios](#), 2017

⁴ IFRC and Australian Red Cross, [Housing, land and property law in Vanuatu](#), 2017; Kiddle, G.L.; McEvoy, D.; Mitchell, D.; Jones, P.; Mecartney, S., [Unpacking the Pacific Urban Agenda: Resilience Challenges and Opportunities](#), 2017

⁵ IDMC, [Sudden onset hazards and the risk of future displacement in Vanuatu](#), 2021

⁶ Government of Vanuatu, [Vanuatu: post-disaster needs assessment, Tropical Cyclone Pam](#), 2015; IOM DTM, [Vanuatu: Cyclone Pam preliminary displacement report](#), 2015

⁷ Government of Vanuatu, [Vanuatu Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction Policy 2016-2030](#), 2015 ; Government of Vanuatu, [Vanuatu National Policy on climate change and disaster-induced displacement](#), 2018

⁸ Names attributed to key informants are as follows:

Community leader in Teouma: John

Displaced women's representative: Marie

NGO staff: Robert

Indigenous representative: Willie

Community leader in Eratap: Simon

⁹ Government of Vanuatu, [Vanuatu National Policy on climate change and disaster-induced displacement](#), 2018

¹⁰ Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, [Port Vila, Vanuatu: ecosystems, climate change and development scenarios](#), 2017

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¹² Kiddle, G.L.; McEvoy, D.; Mitchell, D.; Jones, P.; Mecartney, S., [Unpacking the Pacific Urban Agenda: Resilience Challenges and Opportunities](#), 2017; IDMC, [Sudden onset hazards and the risk of future displacement in Vanuatu](#), 2021

¹³ Vanuatu National Statistics Office, [National population and housing census](#), 2020; IFRC and Australian Red Cross, [Housing, land and property law in Vanuatu](#), 2017; UN-Habitat, [Climate change vulnerability assessment: Greater Port Vila area](#), 2015

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¹⁵ IDMC, [Could novel approaches to urban tenure help to reduce disaster displacement risk in the Pacific?](#), 2020

¹⁶ Vanuatu National Statistics Office, [National population and housing census](#), 2020

¹⁷ IDMC, [Multidimensional impacts of internal displacement](#), 2018

¹⁸ IDMC, [Multidimensional impacts of internal displacement](#), 2018