

Wokbaot Wetem Kalja: Working with Culture in Disaster Risk Management in Vanuatu

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“Climate displacement of populations is the main feature of our future. We have to be ready for it and plan for it now,” Vanuatu’s former Minister and now Special Envoy for Climate Change, Ralph Regenvanu said when he took office in 2022.¹ The reality of any relocation in Vanuatu is that it is mostly done in the context of *kastom* (community-based culture), as 97% of land in Vanuatu is under customary tenure. The state’s role in managing disaster-induced displacement is nuanced due to its overlap with customary institutions serving a similar function. Cultural systems must therefore be effectively integrated if disaster risk management is to be successful.

In Vanuatu, one of the world’s most vulnerable nations to natural disasters,² disaster-induced displacement is increasing as climate change-induced tropical cyclones get stronger and extreme rainfall events become more common.³ Volcanic eruptions also cause displacement, for example during the eruptions of the Manaro volcano between 2017 to 2019, when the entire population of

Ambae island was evacuated twice, and also on Ambrym and Tanna islands, where volcanic ashfalls forced communities to migrate to commercial centers or neighboring islands.

Culture Is Central to Community Resilience

Communities’ responses to local natural hazards were developed over generations and are woven into cultural knowledge and practices. However, this traditional environmental knowledge (TEK) is now under duress due to the increasing severity and frequency of weather and climate events. The Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs (MNCC)’s CEO, Chief Jean-Pierre Tom, notes that “there is an urgency to document traditional knowledge as it relates to disaster risk management. This also extends to issues of traditional architecture, food preservation techniques, inter-community food sharing, temporary relocation sites based on family networks,

¹ <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20221201-climate-tragedy-vanuatu-to-relocate-dozens-of-villages>.

² Radtke K., and D. Weller. 2021. *The World Risk Index 2023 – Focus: Diversity*. Ruhr Universitat Bochum.

³ https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf.

and anything that enhances community resilience in times of disaster.”

Moving ‘With Culture’ in Displacement Contexts

From 2021 to 2024, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in partnership with the Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs and the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, delivered an applied research project called *Wokbaot Wetem Kalja* (Moving with Culture)⁴ to assist Vanuatu Government stakeholders to understand culture-centric strategies in displacement management. With a focus on the experiences of the double evacuations of Ambae island between 2017 and 2019,⁵ the project identified ways for government and humanitarian agencies to support and promote the role of customary institutions in displacement management, to foster culturally-sensitive approaches that maintain social cohesion and TEK even when communities are relocated away from their ancestral lands. This work expands on the Vanuatu Government’s 2018 *National Climate Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement Policy*,⁶ which commits to respect for custom and protection of TEK.

The project identified the following key strategic areas that enhance the positive use of culture and *kastom* in disaster risk and displacement management strategies:

1. Customary institutions must be empowered to lead discussions and cultural negotiations to host

⁴ See: <https://www.iom.int/project/wokbaot-wetem-kalja-strengthening-use-traditional-knowledge-and-social-and-cultural-systems-displacement-management-vanuatu>.

⁵ See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44978132>.

⁶ See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/vanuatu/vanuatu-climate-change-and-disaster-induced-displacement-policy>.

displaced persons, including to support inter-generational recognition of assigned customary authority to incomers.

- In Vanuatu’s context, while state commitment to work with chiefs is well-received and maintained, there is still considerable work to be done to maintain public understanding of the role of customary institutions in these disaster-related contexts, and therefore build inter-generational respect of these systems of humanitarian response and peacemaking.
- 2. Greater public awareness and appreciation for traditional environmental knowledge and cultural systems is essential to stem the tide of rapid cultural change.**
- Embedding TEK across the school curriculum maximizes exposure to the traditional knowledge systems that underpin community resilience in times of disaster and relocation.
- Targeted socialization programs with key policymakers builds a deeper, more comprehensive appreciation of the value of cultural systems to state activities, where sensitive management and leadership enables spaces for cultural knowledge holders to work in tandem with state policy.

3. The government must play an enabling role for cultural mapping and incentivize relocation away from hazardous areas.

- Cultural mapping underpins any role that the state plays in displacement, to ensure that selected responses are founded, where possible, on the existing cultural and kinship links between islands and communities. To be sustainable and pragmatic, state interventions must be sensitive to the sociocultural dynamics of communities and do not undermine social cohesion or cultural priorities and protocols during community relocation.
- This would include hazard mapping as a fundamental step to identify safe relocation zones, followed by service provision to targeted relocation zones as per Vanuatu's decentralization policy. State support for services like water and power can incentivize household relocation away from hazardous zones.

The enduring presence of customary institutions in facilitating community resilience cannot be overemphasized. The international policy environment for displacement recognizes the importance of risk-informed decision-making that draws on traditional knowledge, through the apex *Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction*.⁷ So too does the *Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific* (FRDP)⁸ which recognizes the importance of “incorporating traditional coping mechanisms and local knowledge [to]

enhance individual and community resilience.” At the national level in Vanuatu, the 2018 *Displacement Policy* encourages mapping of TEK as it relates to disasters, to inform future government planning for future displacement scenario events.

What is evident from the research is that it is essential to work with customary systems and respect cultural knowledge and priorities in Vanuatu, reaffirming a key principle of the *Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility*.⁹ Pragmatic practices such as sharing information and lessons, securing ‘second homes’ for backup shelter and food gardens, are as much TEK as they are risk reduction techniques. Mainstreaming this understanding across Pacific Islands Countries’ systems will make positive strides towards a more contextualized, culturally resilient, and less disruptive way of addressing climate security through the lens of displacement and mobility.

⁷ See: <https://www.undrr.org/publication/sendai-framework-disaster-risk-reduction-2015-2030>.

⁸ See: <https://gsd.spc.int/frdp/>.

⁹ See: <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Pacific%20Regional%20Framework%20on%20Climate%20Mobility.pdf>.