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Vanuatu, Factor 16: Education

An Educated Nation is a Strong Nation

Life in Vanuatu

The Republic of Vanuatu is an archipelago residing in between the nations of Australia and Fiji. Roughly 267,000 (United States) Ni-Vanuatu inhabit sixty-five of the eighty-two islands that belong to the Oceanic nation (Peace Corps). The vast majority of the citizens live in rural areas, separated from urban society. Cultural traditions and practices guide the lifestyle of a typical community in Vanuatu. Dances, folk lore, cultural dishes, and coming of age ceremonies are held in high regard in virtually every tribe. Separation, however, has created some distinct differences between various tribes; for example, some communities regard women as equal, while other tribes treat women as possessions. In northern communities, wealth and status is determined by the amount of pigs a citizen owns. Chiefs in the northern communities typically act as figureheads instead of authorities; on the other hand, tribes residing in the central and southern areas of the archipelago are often ruled by one chief who takes on a role similar to a monarch, directing and controlling the actions of the entire tribe.

Agriculture is the primary source of food and economic growth in Vanuatu. The nation's primary economic profits come from its agriculture, which yields several different products such as "copra, coconuts, cocoa, coffee, taro, [and] yam" (United States). Cattle raising and fishing are major industries in Vanuatu as well, the latter of which is under threat due to overconsumption. Large-tusked pigs are eaten and sacrificed in Ni-Vanuatu tribes on special cultural occasions. Furthermore, many tribes regard the pig as a sign of wealth, status, and power. Another notable food in Vanuatu culture is Kava. This plant is mashed up and pulverized into a liquid, then drunk for social gatherings. The social circumstances in communities differ as well. In some tribes, women are beaten for even witnessing their husbands drink Kava and may be treated as possessions. Unlike many developing countries, food shortage is not a huge issue in Vanuatu. Thanks to the extended family system, Ni-Vanuatu who lack foods are often cared for by their communities and families.

Vanuatu may be rich in culture and heritage, but its education enrollment rate is among the worst in the Pacific. According to the Vanuatu Economic Report 2009, only about three-quarters of elementary age children attend school, and only sixty-three percent of those students graduate primary school ("Education Overview" 59). After the age of eleven, or at the end of their elementary education, enrollment in school drops significantly. By the age of sixteen, enrollment is slightly over fifty percent; age 18, less than forty; age 22, below ten (Vanuatu National Statistics Office). Without a large educated populace, Vanuatu will struggle in filling important jobs that fuel economic growth. The migration from rural to urban areas has also taken a toll on the health of Ni-Vanuatu. Unfavorable urban conditions have led to an increase in depression, suicide, and drug abuse. Thanks to foreign aid and skilled doctors from overseas, Vanuatu's health conditions have improved from their earlier years. Infant mortality is relatively low, with only 16.4 deaths per thousand births (United States). At seventy-two years, the average lifespan of a Ni-Vanuatu has risen as well (United States). However, the government's 4.1% devotion of its GDP to health expenditures does not cure all of Vanuatu's health-related issues (United States). Availability to a clean water source, for example, is a major concern in Vanuatu. Manpower is a huge necessity; there exists only 0.12 doctors for every thousand people (United States). Out of all the active doctors that occupy the island; many of them originate from different nations. The Vanuatu government simply does not have the resources to provide medical care for its entire population, especially when that population is scattered among several different islands.

Challenges

The transition from rural to urban life has become a huge obstacle for the Ni-Vanuatu. The urban population, increasing at a fairly large rate of 3.64%, has grown to include nearly a fourth of the entire Vanuatu population (United States). Due to the lack of quality education in Vanuatu, many citizens who move to urban areas and seek out jobs there struggle. The business skills required to succeed in these urban environments are never taught to the children who grew up in a rural area. This becomes a problem when children who leave school early, which is not uncommon, fail to get a job because of their lack of formal education. Furthermore, low wages and long hours await those lucky enough to earn employment. With urban conditions being as bad as they are, it is not surprising that depression, suicide, and other psychological disorders are increasing every year. For a developing country like Vanuatu, having an educated populace makes all the difference. Having children who know how to work in urban cities will decrease unemployment and stress-related disorders. More importantly, Vanuatu requires capable minds to fulfill high-status jobs that increase the economic success of the country.

Another challenging obstacle for Ni-Vanuatu is the scarcity of potable water. Many of the inhabitants unknowingly use unclean, bacteria-infested water for washing their clothes and consumption purposes. This is a critical health concern for the Ni-Vanuatu, especially for those that live in rural areas where it is estimated that a dependable water source is not available to over half of the communities in Vanuatu (“Clean Water”). Health issues accompany the lack of sanitary water as well. Despite their great need, the government does not have the resources to care for its citizens, and when a major crisis arrives foreign aid will be absolutely necessary.

Of all the challenges that Vanuatu must face and overcome, no single challenge could have been more destructive to the nation than Cyclone Pam, a category five storm that struck the archipelago on March 13th, 2015. The catastrophic storm destroyed crop fields, toppled homes, and crippled the citizens’ access to clean, drinkable water. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that over half of the Vanuatu population has been affected by the storm. 75,000 lack proper shelters, 110,000 Ni-Vanuatu live without sanitary water, and over half of the households have been either damaged or destroyed by the Cyclone (“Flash appeal”). Of course, relief efforts and organizations have helped the Ni-Vanuatu tremendously, but the sheer size of the archipelago is far too large for any one, or even multiple, organizations to cover. This is especially true for the multitude of islands that possess no form of communication with the government, rendering them helpless and without a means to retrieve relief supplies. Conditions for the citizens of Vanuatu are difficult, and the problems will not be short term. With much of the agriculture in ruins, the economy of Vanuatu will definitely struggle both in exports and in feeding their own citizens. Infrastructure will not be easy to rebuild either. The President of Vanuatu, Baldwin Lansdale, reported the condition of Vanuatu in an interview, where he stated that Cyclone Pam has hindered the economic development of the nation and its very nature was akin to that of a “monster” (Baldwin Lonsdale).

Education

Similar to many other Oceanic nations, the quality of education in Vanuatu is extremely poor. Due to the nation’s lack of funds, much of a student’s education takes place in community centers. Impoverished communities often have to hold classes outdoors. Those who are fortunate enough to have an established school still lack proper school materials and qualified teachers. Furthermore, children in Vanuatu rarely ever go beyond an elementary level education. There exist two major reasons that school children rarely pursue further education: one, enrollment is not enforced; two, sending a child to public or private school costs money. As one of the poorest nations in the Oceanic region, Ni-Vanuatu families lack the money required to send their children to a school. The lack of education causes severe issues in Vanuatu, especially in the more isolated areas. For example, houses are flimsily built of dirt, grass, wood, and other unreliable materials. A lack of education in water safety spells disaster for a country that is in

desperate need for sanitary, potable water. A villager that gathers water for their family to drink will not understand the consequences of consuming bacteria-infested water without a background in basic health science. Agricultural practices, medical knowledge, business skills, and other essential aspects of Vanuatu living can be greatly enhanced with a greater educational foundation.

The quality of education is not deteriorating. Slowly but surely, more students will enroll in primary and secondary schools. Foreign aid will facilitate this process as well, making it easier for students to earn an education. However, the efforts put into improving education could still be scaled up. If education were to improve dramatically, the country would change dramatically as well. A thorough education about agricultural science may help the country's rural population grow more food. A comprehensive education over business skills would be a great asset to Vanuatu as their urban populations grows. Having educated, professional individuals would be invaluable to the nation's economy as high status positions are filled. Of course, citizens could learn to construct more stable houses, so that if a dangerous storm like Cyclone Pam rampaged through Vanuatu the destruction would not be as severe. The medical field perfectly exemplifies Vanuatu's desperate need for more trained officials. Only a few major hospitals exist in Vanuatu, and only a handful of doctors operate within the entire country. A complete education in medical science will dramatically change the health situation in Vanuatu for the better. Educated doctors can be taught in schools instead of called for from overseas. Hospitals and medical equipment can be constructed and used by not one, but multiple doctors and nurses. These advancements are instrumental in ensuring that Vanuatu becomes a successful and healthy nation.

Solutions: Community Involvement

Vanuatu consists of many separated islands and many different cultures and communities. Due to the diversity that exists within Vanuatu, a single education plan with only one simple curriculum will not succeed in drastically improving the quality of education in Vanuatu. Instead, the education of adults and prominent members of the community should be the focus of educational plans. A community that understands the value of education will undoubtedly pass those views onto their children and other members of the family.

While the plan for parents to become more involved in their child's education is effective, it does not function well when the parents themselves lack a formal education, which many do. Non-profit organizations should help educate both the students and their families. Teaching parents and prominent community figures about how crucial an education is will inspire them to send their children to secondary school or even beyond. The government can collaborate with the UN to release public service announcements that encourage parents to send their children to school. Non-profit organizations may also get involved by teaching the older members of the community about important issues in their environment. An education on agriculture may help Ni-Vanuatu grow more food. Lessons in architecture can help communities rebuild houses stronger and more durable. Most importantly, a thorough education in health and sanitation will greatly improve awareness of harmful bacteria in unclean water and how to treat simple injuries. Of course, as the community grows academically, an education will become both respected and encouraged amongst not only the older members of the tribe, but also the young adults and children. A greater value on education will improve school enrollment rates, motivate teachers, earn more attention from the government, and produce a greater number of ambitious and accomplished students. In order to improve the academic success of Ni-Vanuatu children and adults and non-profit organizations must collaborate to produce an environment suitable for learning.

The heightened level of importance placed on education will raise both the rates of enrollment and the amount of time children spend in school. More students will enroll as long as parents who see the value of education exist and willing members of the community, as well as members of non-profit organizations, work together to send Ni-Vanuatu children to school. Students will also spend a longer time in school instead of dropping out after the fifth grade. First, children would on average receive a

secondary education. Then as time progresses, the rate of Ni-Vanuatu who enroll in universities and colleges will rise too. To expedite this process, special focus must be placed on the chiefs of tribes in Vanuatu, who often dictate the social circumstances of the tribe. If the chief learned of the importance of education, his word of recommendation would compel the villagers to send their children to school. There also exists the possibility that some communities may refuse help altogether, preferring their isolation. Although it is unfortunate, stepping over the line of encouragement to that of enforcement would be violating the human rights of the Ni-Vanuatu. In such a case, the tribes will simply continue to live in isolation. However, the success of neighboring tribes that adopt this program may persuade them to think otherwise.

Solutions: Non-profit Organizations

Improving the education of children is a task being handled by a multitude of organizations. Save the Children and World Vision devote their resources to constructing educational facilities. Other organizations like Kiwanis and Rotary International instead provide books and other learning materials to impoverished schools (Ministry of Education and Training). The organization with the most impact in improving education in Vanuatu is Oxfam New Zealand. This non-profit organization takes an active role in improving the quality of living for every Ni-Vanuatu, primarily through their cooperation with the Vanuatu Rural Development and Training Centers Association (VRDCTA). The cooperation between the two organizations' has helped create forty of these facilities, referred to as Rural Training Centers ("Vanuatu Rural"). The facilities that the VRDCTA creates, referred to as Rural Training Centers (RTC), shelters Ni-Vanuatu when a cyclone hits, provides a place where villagers can access sanitary water, and most importantly gives students a chance to further their education where a lack of funds would have forced them to stop otherwise. The RTCs are especially useful for students like Fenny Tom, a fifteen-year old Ni-Vanuatu who partakes in educational programs at the RTC. Fenny Tom is just one of five hundred students that the RTCs take in annually. However, those five hundred students are just a small portion of the four thousand students that are unable to continue their education every year ("Education: back"). Accommodating for the other children will require both an increased budget and staff, which can be obtained through more influential international organizations such as the United Nations. For the goal of enhancing education, the VRDCTA can cooperate with another education-based program in Vanuatu: The Vanuatu Literacy and Education Plan.

The Vanuatu Literacy Education Plan (VANLEP) and the Family Literacy Program (FLP) are extensive programs that strive to improve the literacy rates of children and parents in Vanuatu ("Vanuatu Literacy"). What separates these programs from others is its persistence in getting parents and other community members directly involved with their children's education; for example, VANLEP utilizes story telling read by parents to enhance both the children's and parent's reading skills. The program has already proven its effectiveness through comparing Vanuatu classrooms that implemented VANLEP classes, and those that did not. On average, the literacy rate of children who participated in classes funded by the program improved by 8.3% ("Programe Impacts"). Despite the program's success, it is limited by a small budget and policy restrictions put in place by the Vanuatu government; however, cooperating with Oxfam New Zealand the VRDCTA can help overcome the program's limits.

Improving the quality of education in Vanuatu is a goal for many non-profit organizations and programs. Both VANLEP and the VRDCTA's Rural Training Centers have made great strides in giving both children and adults a chance to further their education. However, each program could become much more effective if VANLEP and FLP classes were held in RTCs. RTCs often have more available staff than a typical school as well as resources for primary-level and secondary-level school children. The RTCs provide educational programs for secondary-level students to continue their education, but do not cover primary-level school. VANLEP, on the other hand, focuses primarily on primary-level students and their parents. VANLEP classes could be held in the RTCs where both students and parents could attend. VANLEP can continue their literacy programs by teaching children to read and write through their

classes, and they can also get parents involved through story telling read by the parents. Furthermore, RTCs provide a place where staff can train parents and other community members how to be teachers, as well as educate them in agriculture and medicine.

Conclusion

Since 1980, Vanuatu has struggled with emotional, academic, medical, and natural challenges. The world has rushed to the aid of the developing country after Cyclone Pam wreaked havoc on the nation. The world can refill their water buckets, rebuild their houses, and replant their crops; however, nothing can stop another category five cyclone from hitting Vanuatu again. With an education, a nation can prepare for natural disasters, outbreaks of diseases, and environmental issues. However, Vanuatu is neither the only nation in need of quality education, nor is it the only one that faces severe environmental challenges. Several developing countries all over the world struggle with providing their children with quality education, specifically African, East Asian, and other Oceanic countries. With a solid academic foundation, any country can overcome a crisis. All it takes is a little help from those willing to offer it. Education is not a privilege granted to the wealthy. It is an undeniable, indisputable, definite right.

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